

## **Arc 1 - Chapter 98 - Navigation**

Thea's gaze swept the narrow alleyway meticulously, ensuring their entry hadn't drawn any unwanted attention.

The towering buildings on either side loomed over her, their immense structures cutting off much of the daylight and plunging the space into a cool, dim serenity that contrasted sharply with the potential chaos just beyond their confines.

This shadowed corridor between the giants of steel and glass offered a strange comfort, a brief respite that Thea found surprisingly welcome. The quiet and the comparative darkness were a stark relief after the relentless vigilance the forest had demanded of her, where danger could lurk behind every leaf, trunk and shadow.

Despite the comfort, Thea's mind was elsewhere, fixed on the urgent need to secure a safe location for Alpha Squad.

Karania's medical expertise was crucial now more than ever, with Isabella's condition precarious at best. Time was of the essence, and Thea was acutely aware that their presence in the service tunnels wouldn't remain unnoticed for long. The Stellar Republic's forces were efficient and thorough, and it was only a matter of time before they traced the squad's path to their current hiding spot, once the breach of junction T16 had been detected.

The alleyway, with its high concrete embrace, might have felt like a sanctuary, but Thea knew it was nothing more than a temporary haven, a brief stop in their flight from danger. The real task lay ahead: Navigating the dense, sprawling urban labyrinth of Nova Tertius to find a secure location where Karania could work her medical miracles without interruption.

Thea's senses were on high alert, her eyes scanning every shadow and corner, her mind racing through their options. The city offered countless places to hide, but also just as many risks and uncertainties. Especially with the sheer number of people they were bound to encounter, they would have to be swift and seem like they belonged, otherwise any attempts at staying under the radar would be impossible.

Thea's thoughts raced as she navigated the alleyway, her mind set on finding a suitable hideout for the squad. The idea of an abandoned hotel flickered through her mind, seeming like a reasonable option for both concealment and comfort.

With cautious steps, she approached the alley's end, ready to scout the surrounding area for any potential refuge. The plan was clear: Proximity was crucial, yet remaining in their current location was not an option. Safety and discretion needed to balance perfectly in their choice of hideaway.

However, as she reached the alleyway's mouth and cautiously peered around the corner, a wave of realisation mixed with dread washed over her.

The city's vast, bustling streets lay before her, teeming with life and activity that far exceeded her worst expectations.

The sheer scale of the urban landscape, with its endless rows of interconnected buildings, crowded walkways that snaked through, past and underneath each other, and the constant cacophony of city noise, momentarily overwhelmed her senses.

Nova Tertius was a megacity in every sense of the word, and the complexity of its layout made Thea acutely aware of how much she had misjudged the challenge ahead.

Finding a place to hide amidst this sprawling urban expanse suddenly seemed like a downright impossible task. Thea understood that blending in would require more than just finding an empty structure—she even doubted there were any abandoned buildings to begin with; they needed a location that offered both security and a degree of anonymity.

With a deep breath, Thea steadied herself. *'I can't afford to lose focus now. Ela relies on me to find her a place to rest up in.'*

Thea's focus narrowed as she absorbed the overwhelming sights and sounds of the megacity. The dense weave of urban life unfolded before her, a vivid tapestry of movement and noise that was both fascinating and intimidating.

The towering structures around her were not just buildings; they were vertical cities within the city, each a self-contained world teeming with life. The streets, far from the quiet, orderly lanes of Lumiosia she was accustomed to, were alive with a constant flow of people, each moving with a purposeful stride that spoke of the unrelenting pace of megacity life.

Food stalls, emitting tantalising aromas, jostled for space with small shops and service outlets, while above them, the residential apartments stacked skywards to unfathomable heights, their balconies and windows a patchwork of personal spaces carved out of the urban expanse, while frequently interspersed with walkways that connected with unseen paths within the giant structures themselves.

Thea couldn't help but feel out of place, a stranger in a landscape that operated on principles and rhythms she had yet to understand. The frenetic energy of the crowd, the cacophony of sounds from conversation, traffic, and the hum of machinery, all painted a picture of a city that never slept, where life was lived in the fast lane with no room for hesitation.

Her observation led her to quickly reconsider her initial plan.

The notion of finding an abandoned hotel, or anything abandoned; really, seemed increasingly naive in this bustling environment where space was clearly at a premium and every corner teemed with activity.

Yet, she also knew they couldn't linger in the open for long. The need for a hideout was urgent, a place where they could regroup, and Karania could attend to Isabella's injuries in relative safety.

Thea's gaze followed the city dwellers, each step and gesture a clue in the vast, living puzzle of Nova Tertius. She scrutinised their faces, their pace, and the subtle cues in their behaviour, attempting to decode the rhythm of life in this sprawling metropolis.

This observational exercise wasn't just about understanding; it was about survival, about Alpha Squad seamlessly merging into the urban flow without drawing undue attention.

Her analytical mind worked overtime, piecing together the fragments of daily routines she witnessed.

People darted from one shadow to the next, their expressions a mix of determination and the weariness that comes from living in a place where the scale of everything magnifies the challenges of daily life.

Thea noted the stark absence of leisurely strolls; every step seemed purposeful, every glance calculated. The megacity's heart beat with a rhythm of efficiency and urgency, a tempo Alpha Squad needed to mimic in order to vanish among the masses.

But as she delved deeper into this urban tapestry, Thea hit a wall of architectural ambiguity that thwarted her efforts to categorise the structures around her. Each and every building she saw defied easy classification, blurring the lines between living spaces, workplaces, and areas of recreation.

The monolithic, towering designs, while awe-inspiring, left little room for the untrained eye to discern their primary functions. This architectural uniformity posed a unique challenge, rendering her usual methods of orientation nearly obsolete.

The realisation dawned on Thea that in Nova Tertius, the concept of space was radically different; here, a *single structure* could encapsulate the essence of an *entire city*, serving as an entire ecosystem all on its very own.

Thea's mind churned with frustration as she faced the bewildering maze of Nova Tertius.

*'How does anyone navigate this place?'* she questioned internally, her usually reliable sense of direction and array of urban navigational skills rendered ineffective against the overwhelming complexity of the megacity.

Every strategy she had learned, every trick up her sleeve for orienting herself in new and challenging environments, seemed to falter in the face of this urban behemoth. The city's sprawling expanse, its towering structures, and the ceaseless flow of its inhabitants created a labyrinth that defied her attempts to decipher it, leaving her feeling momentarily adrift in a sea of rock-crete, steel and people.

A realisation dawned on her as she embraced the shadowed refuge of the narrow alleyway once again, allowing her a momentary escape from the overwhelming stimuli of the megacity. Pressing her back against the cold, unyielding surface of the nearest building, she allowed herself a moment to gather her thoughts and reassess her approach.

The vastness and verticality of Nova Tertius, she acknowledged, defied traditional navigation methods. *'If each towering structure is akin to a self-contained, fully realised city, then the notion of separating this place into manageable districts is completely nonsensical. Nova Tertius is far beyond anything that could possibly be quantified in such a way. That must also mean, however, that the Stellar Republic's gaze can't penetrate every crevice, every*

*shadowed corner of this urban maze,'* she mused internally, her frustration gradually giving way to a strategic epiphany.

This intricate architecture, while initially a source of consternation, could very well be their best ally.

"In the heart of complexity lies the greatest obfuscation," Thea muttered to herself with a growing smile, repeating a certain phrase that James had often used. The realisation that their safety might not hinge on finding the perfect hideout, but rather *any* hideout within the chaotic embrace of the megacity, was liberating.

*'The denser and more complex the environment, the more challenging it necessarily becomes to maintain any level of adequate surveillance. This has to hold true even here,'* she concluded, pushing herself off the wall with renewed purpose.

Thea understood now that their path forward didn't require meticulous selection but rather decisive action. *'Let's find the nearest building that offers a semblance of shelter and hide out in there. Once we're inside another building, the sheer size and complexity of it should give us all the cover we need to disappear from sight entirely.'*

With this newfound strategy, Thea returned to the storage room and signalled her squad to follow her out, ready to lead them into the heart of Nova Tertius, relying on the megacity's inherent complexity to obscure their presence from the prying eyes of their pursuers.

Before setting out into the megacity's heart, Thea paused, gathering Alpha Squad for a brief, yet crucial, debrief on urban camouflage. "Alright, listen up. We're blending in as soldiers of the Stellar Republic again. The key difference this time is we're unlikely to encounter anyone with the insight to challenge our disguise. Move with purpose, fast, and avoid unnecessary eye contact. However, if someone fixates on you, stare them down or call them out. Remember, in their eyes, we are the guardians of their safety, the Stellar Republic's might made manifest. We have a margin for error here, but let's not push our luck too hard, by allowing random people to just follow us," she detailed, imparting observations gleaned from watching Stellar Republic soldiers along the border-wall—this was the best template they had for mimicking soldierly conduct within urban confines.

Turning her focus to Lucas, Thea's tone shifted to one of practical concern. "Lucas, we need to redistribute the weight of your gear and Isabella's, to mask the extent of her injuries. We can't afford to draw undue attention. An injured soldier can blend in, or even a soldier shaking off last night's excesses. But Isabella's condition could easily betray us if we're not careful, such as if we have two people carrying her. Can you manage her on your own if we lighten your load?" She watched as Lucas tested his weight on the makeshift prosthetic, a grimace fleeting across his face, yet his answer was immediately apparent, despite his discomfort.

Without a moment's hesitation, Lucas nodded affirmatively. "Yes, I can manage. Speed won't be my strong suit, but I'll ensure Isabella's condition remains as inconspicuous as possible."

Reorganising Lucas' gear, Karania took charge of his backpack, while Desmond was entrusted with the shield's temporary custody. Once the adjustments were finalised, signalling their readiness to delve back into the city's embrace, Thea wasted no further moments. She led the squad from the confines of the storage room, re-emerging into the alleyway's comparative sanctuary.

"Take a moment here, if you need. The city is overwhelming—its sounds, its scents, its architecture... It's a lot to take in all at once," she advised, guiding them towards the alley's mouth. Thea herself had felt the city's vibrant assault on her senses keenly; she hoped to offer her team a brief respite to adjust, suspecting they might share her sensitivity.

Yet, as she glanced back, assessing her companions' adaptation, it appeared her concerns might have been unfounded. Her squad seemed completely unfazed, or exceptionally adept at masking any disorientation, as they mirrored her steps with unwavering focus. The moment she had allocated for them to acclimate seemed, at least from their outward appearances, to be an unnecessary precaution.

'*Just me then, huh?*' She thought to herself quietly, before addressing the squad directly, "Alright everyone, game faces on."

With a confident stride in her step, Thea led the rest of the squad out of the alleyway into the more busy pedestrian thoroughfare, mingling with the countless citizens of the city almost immediately, while keeping a close eye on the rest of the squad behind her.

The city streets were alive with the vibrant pulse of daily life, a veritable ocean of humanity that flowed and ebbed around them.

Above, the towering megastructures stretched towards the sky, their facades plastered with bright, flashing advertisements that promised everything from the latest technological innovations to exotic vacations in off-world Stellar Republic colonies. The ground level was a similarly tapestry of sensory overloads, albeit in a different way as they bustled with shops, food stalls emitted tantalising aromas, and small kiosks peddled an array of goods from basic necessities to niche curiosities.

Thea navigated this maze with a practised eye, her attention divided between finding their path forward and ensuring the cohesion of her squad within the dense crowd. Despite the cacophony of sounds—from the hum of conversation to the consistent blare of traffic from above them and the constant background noise of the city's machinery—Thea's focus remained unshaken.

Her gaze eventually landed on a particular building that stood out not for its size—though it was impressively large—but for the steady stream of people entering and exiting its wide, specifically, *unguarded*, doors.

With no visible security presence and an open, welcoming entrance, it seemed an ideal target for their temporary hideout. Communicating her decision through subtle cues, she veered toward the building, the squad trailing seamlessly behind her.

As they crossed the threshold, they were greeted by an expansive ground floor that seemed to function as a massive commercial hub, dwarfing any traditional shopping mall Thea had ever known.

*'Just this base-floor alone is like three golden-age arcades, if not larger... This city is utterly insane,'* she absent-mindedly thought to herself as she took in her surroundings.

The air was filled with the sounds of commerce and leisure, mingled with the scent of a hundred different cuisines, which ended up blending into a mouthwatering aroma. Around them, a multitude of stores and stalls offered everything imaginable, from clothing and electronics to artisan crafts and fast food. Thea could even spot a civilian-esque firearm's store in the distance, further inside the building, sparking her curiosity, which she immediately drowned out to refocus on her task at hand.

The crowd here was dense, even denser than outside, yet it simultaneously flowed more smoothly, the mass of people navigating the space with a casual familiarity, but lacking the more fast-paced movement and directional changes of the people outside.

In the heart of this commercial maze, immediately attracting Thea's eyes, stood a series of massive elevator shafts, their doors opening and closing in a constant rhythm as they ferried countless passengers to the upper levels of the building.

She figured that these elevators were their best chance to ascend into the less conspicuous upper floors, where they could find a quiet corner to regroup and attend to their more pressing needs. Without missing a beat, she guided her squad towards the nearest elevator, ready to blend in with the crowd and disappear into the vertical expanse.

They found themselves in front of the elevators, alongside hundreds of citizens, some of which were eyeing the five of them warily, but backing off the moment any of their squad seemed to notice. There was definitely a certain level of interest in their presence here, but nobody seemed particularly alarmed, Thea noted.

When one of the two-dozen elevators arrived that had enough space for them, the squad moved inside, the door closing behind them.

Thea chose a random floor to go to, landing them on the 43rd floor in a matter of minutes, the elevator rapidly ascending the monolithic structure with ease. They stopped multiple times along the way to off-load and on-board citizens from other floors, which gave Thea a much-needed glimpse into the overall architecture of the building.

*'So there are residential floors in here... I guess that makes sense. All these people have to live somewhere close-by to all of this nonsense, after all. That should make it easy for us to find an apartment somewhere, commandeer it from a random citizen, if we have to,'* she thought to herself, feeling more and more at-ease with the current progress they were making.

Finally exiting the elevator on the 43rd floor, Thea was immediately struck by the stark contrast between the bustling commercial hub below and the relatively serene residential area they had entered.

The corridor was wide, flanked by countless doors leading to individual apartments, and softly lit by overhead lamps, creating an almost tranquil atmosphere compared to the cacophony of the ground floor and especially the one outside the building.

As they ventured down the hallway, Thea couldn't help but notice the curious glances they received from a few residents who happened to be in the corridor or peering out from their doorways, their daily lives momentarily touched by the unexpected military presence.

It was clear they were out of place here, a squad of heavily armed individuals amid the everyday lives of the city's citizens. Yet, the wary looks quickly turned away under the weight of Thea's determined gaze, her self-illuminating cyan eyes peeking out from under her hood, the residents hastily retreating into the safety of their homes without a word.

*'This might work to our advantage,'* Thea mused internally, her mind racing with possibilities. *'If the residents are this easy to dissuade from prying, finding a temporary safe haven should be straightforward. We just need to be cautious and pick the right door.'*

The thought of commandeering an apartment didn't sit entirely comfortably with her, but she recognized it as a necessary measure under their current circumstances. It wasn't like they were going to murder or seriously harm a civilian, after all. They were merely taking up refuge in their place for a night.

Continuing their search for a suitable location, Thea led the squad with a sense of purpose, her eyes scanning each door they passed for any indication of an unoccupied apartment or one that could be easily taken over without causing unnecessary alarm.

The hush of the residential level offered a stark contrast to the clamour they had navigated through earlier, affording Thea a moment of mental clarity. It dawned on her that nestled within the sprawling city, they could now lean on the advantage of blending in, obscured by the sheer volume of daily communications that buzzed through the air.

Turning her thoughts into action, she keyed her comm to connect with Desmond, his startled reaction reminding her of the abruptness of reinitiated communication. "Desmond, can you work your magic on one of these apartment locks?" she inquired, her tone laced with the urgency of their situation.

Her next request was directed at Karania, whose readiness to comply was both reassuring and mildly alarming. "Do you have something to keep a civilian out cold for a while, without causing any permanent harm?" Thea asked, her voice betraying a hint of trepidation at the potential implications of their next move.

Karania's affirmative response came with an eagerness that prompted a brief wave of apprehension through Thea. Despite the unease at unleashing the squad medic on the populace of Nova Tertius, she trusted Karania's judgement and expertise implicitly.

Guiding the squad to a less frequented section of the floor, Thea selected a door at random for Desmond to tackle, after making sure that nobody else was currently in the hallway with a few, tactical, stern glances at random citizens that were nosing around.

As Desmond's fingers danced over his wrist-pad, the door's electronic lock yielded extremely quickly with a soft beep. Karania, ever the professional, slipped inside with a stealth that belied the potential shock her appearance might cause to the apartment's occupants.

Karania had two syringes, one in each hand, ready to inject any unsuspecting civilians with whatever it was that she had deemed as "knocking them out without causing permanent harm."

Thea couldn't help but feel a twinge of guilt, recognizing the terror their intrusion would instigate.

*'This is for Isabella,' she reassured herself, the weight of leadership pressing heavily on her shoulders as she prepared to follow Karania into the unknown. 'But damn, if this doesn't feel like we're the bad guys here; just a little bit... When I imagine just sitting at home and suddenly a fully armoured marine appears in my living room, brandishing syringes and ready to knock me out, I'd probably have nightmares for the rest of my life...'*

The squad cautiously entered behind her, witnessing Karania meticulously attending to an unconscious man. She was compacting him into a manageable bundle with surprising ease, but clearly delicate care.

"He's just unconscious," Karania assured with a mischievous smile, preempting Thea's concern. "He'll wake up in a couple of days, maybe feeling a bit parched and disoriented, but no worse for wear. That is unless I inadvertently harm him in the process... Were human bodies always this fragile...?"

Observing Karania's delicate manipulation of the man, Thea couldn't help but wince inwardly. *'The poor fellow's going to feel like he's run a marathon in his sleep, given how you've twisted him up, Kara...'*

The squad medic deposited the body unceremoniously into a nearby closet, throwing a blanket over the man "just in case," before immediately heading to attend to Isabella. Now inside the, comparatively safe, confines of the apartment, Karania went to enter the medic-specific override into Isabella's armour, the heavy pieces falling off of the woman with loud clunks as they hit the floor.

Karania and Lucas carefully positioned Isabella on the kitchen table, the only one large enough to fit the majority of a person as large as her. The table bore Isabella's weight without complaint, thanks to its unsuspected resilience.

Karania's instruction for the squad to give her space to work was met with immediate compliance, her focus as sharp as the tools she transformed her hands into.

Thea, left to manage the rest of Alpha Squad's immediate needs, tasked Desmond with ensuring their temporary stronghold remained undisturbed. She suggested, more through hope than directive, that Desmond employ his technological prowess for surveillance over more aggressive measures.

*'Let's keep the explosions to a minimum, at least inside civilian quarters,' she mused, trusting Desmond's judgement yet harbouring a very clear preference for subtlety.*



Lucas sought a moment's respite, only to become an unintended test of furniture durability—a chair unceremoniously collapsing under the combined weight of his form and his battle-worn ultra-heavy armour.

Resigned to the floor's cold embrace, he scrutinised the makeshift prosthetic that Karania had crafted. Despite his evident discomfort with the alien appendage, Lucas, much like Thea, had to admit, albeit grudgingly, its effectiveness.

It had indeed been a massively useful replacement, ensuring his continued contribution to the squad's endeavours rather than relegating him to the sidelines, or worse, becoming a liability on their way through the tunnels and the city.

Thea observed Lucas's silent contemplation, a mirror to her own thoughts on their precarious situation.

*'Karanja's genius might just get us through this,'* she acknowledged internally, the realisation that innovation under pressure could make the difference between guaranteed failure and narrow success now fully settling in, that she finally had a moment to relax and think.

After another few moments of rest, Thea opened up the mission-package she had received from Corvus once again, as it was time for the next part of their mission. As the interim squad-leader, it once again fell on her to do the heavy lifting.

Thea adjusted her communicator to the designated frequency, stepping into the quiet of a nearby room for privacy.

She initiated the call with a mixture of hope and trepidation, acutely aware that their mission's success might hinge on the response she received. The absence of a fallback plan weighed heavily on her, a testament to the precariousness of their situation after navigating the unpredictability of Nova Tertius.

"SA1 calling in, reporting with five. Anybody copy?" Thea's voice cut through the static, her call signifying not just a request for acknowledgment but also a beacon of their persistence against all odds.

The ensuing silence was palpable, stretching into a tense void that seemed to amplify Thea's growing apprehension. Each passing second without a response seemed to underscore the uncertainty of their position within the larger scheme of the UHF's operations in the city.

She couldn't help but wonder how many of their fellow squads had faced similar ordeals, or worse, had not even made it this far.

Refusing to succumb to the silence, Thea's resolve hardened.

She repeated her call, her voice steady despite the churn of anxiety beneath. "SA1 calling in, reporting with five. Does anyone copy?"

The echo of silence that followed Thea's second call felt like a heavy blow, a stark reminder of the solitude and immense responsibility she now shouldered.

Her heart sank, with the weight of their precarious situation pressing down on her with an intensity that was almost suffocating. *'This is it, then,'* she thought grimly, her mind racing through the myriad challenges that lay ahead, each more daunting than the last.

*'Fuck... Corvus, I swear I'll make you pay for this,'* she thought to herself bitterly, thoroughly regretting the fact that she had let him make the sacrifice play and taking "the easy way out," as it now seemed to her.

Just as she was about to resign herself to the silence, contemplating their next move in isolation, a voice shattered the quiet, bringing with it a surge of unexpected relief.

"HA1 here, I read you, SA1. Good to hear you've made it, we got a bit worried you guys might not have made it. A1 is going to be downright ecstatic to hear you're around," came Nieka's voice, clear and familiar through the static. The sudden connection, like a lifeline thrown in the darkness, washed away the looming despair that had started to take hold of Thea.

Nieka's teasing remark, "Based on the fact you're calling this in, I see that you've finally replaced that squad lead of yours, huh, sniper girl?" carried a warmth that felt oddly comforting.

Thea's surprise was evident, even through the comms, as Nieka's brisk and straightforward acknowledgment of her new role as squad leader cut through the tension. The fact that Nieka had pinpointed her identity and their squad's plight without any kind of prior interaction between them spoke volumes of her deductive skills.

It made sense to a degree, however, Thea had to concede mentally; in the chaos of their mission, the one reaching out on this channel would invariably be leading the squad. The fact that Nieka knew her voice, however, still confused her, but it wasn't anything she had the presence of mind to care about for now.

Losing Corvus had been a blow, and acknowledging his sacrifice felt both necessary and painful. "We lost him in the outskirts yesterday. Took out an outpost, but he didn't make it back," she relayed, her voice steady but carrying the weight of their loss.

Nieka's response, though initially light-hearted, quickly shifted to a more sombre tone. "Hey, don't mind me making a joke, sniper girl. None of the newbie squads made it without losses. SA1 coming in with five is actually impressive, don't get me wrong. Only EA1 has the same headcount. We're down to three ourselves, I have to unfortunately admit..."

The gravity of Nieka's admission struck a chord with Thea.

Despite the casualness of their exchange, the underlying reality was dire—they were all navigating a perilous path, doing their utmost to fulfil the mission despite the heavy toll it exacted on each of their squads.

The news that not a single one of the Recruit squads had made it through without casualties was sobering, but also served as a reminder that this was in-fact a seriously difficult assessment they had been sent on.

Nieka's next words were clear and to the point, as always. "EA1 should be back soon, he usually takes the lead on this type of stuff, so just relax for a bit. A1 will probably chime in at some point as well, they've been asking about you guys for the past two days," her brisk voice conveyed through the comms. "Just relax a bit, SA1. You guys are probably wiped out, but we got a full day to go before we start moving to point CS1, so try to lay low and tank some energy before then, a'right?"

Thea acknowledged the advice with a simple "Thanks, HA1, will do. If I don't answer A1 or EA1's calls, please let them know we'll be in touch. We got a few problems to take care of still, but we should be fairly secure for now," and ended the conversation.

Making her way back to where her squad had settled, she relayed Nieka's message with a brief "I've made contact with the rest of the squads, we're on track for the mission."

"I've made contact with the rest of the squads, we're on-track for the mission," she simply stated, exhaustion crashing down on her like a tidal wave.

It was like Nieka's words had finally managed to break the stoic facade that Thea had built around herself over the past days, that had kept her going with the knowledge that she had to step up for the sake of the rest of the squad.

She sank heavily into the nearby couch and closed her eyes to relax, immediately falling into a dreamless sleep...