

Arc 1 - Chapter 96 - Confidentialia

While aiding Karania, Thea observed the medic's expert handling of Lucas's severe leg wound with a mix of admiration for her friend's work and concern for Lucas' wellbeing.

Karania's concentration was palpable, her expertise evident in every precise movement, yet her tone remained light-hearted, aiming to ease the tension, "This looks pretty dire, Lucas. Next time, try to dodge the bullets instead of just eating them all, will ya?"

Despite the pain, Lucas managed a pained chuckle, acknowledging the jest with a weary, "I'll keep that in mind."

As Karania meticulously cleared away the makeshift blood-clot bandage she had initially applied, the true extent of the injury was laid bare. Thea watched, like a silent apprentice, as Karania's hands, now morphed into her usual tools of bone, worked with surgical precision.

She delicately removed the remnants of flesh, bone, and muscle that were damaged beyond repair, as well as fragments of Lucas's shattered armour embedded in the wound. Her movements were swift and unbelievably confident, sculpting the damaged tissue into a cleaner surface for what Thea assumed would be further medical treatment.

Thea, still assisting Karania, couldn't help but marvel at the medic's ability to manipulate her strangely transformed hands. The fingers, now resembling bone sprouts of different shapes and sizes, more so than actual fingers, moved with such fluidity and precision that they seemed to be an extension of Karania's very will.

'I struggle when I wear gloves that aren't just about skin-tight and here she is, just wielding those strangely formed implements and stuff as if it's her own flesh and blood... Well... I guess they technically are, but the point still stands,' Thea mused silently, feeling both amazed and slightly out of her depth in the presence of such medical skill.

As she stood by, ready to assist, Thea's thoughts were interrupted by Desmond's first report.

He conveyed the status of the drones as they navigated the underground labyrinth. "Drone one is now progressing through corridor 58, having entered from junction T17. All clear so far," he informed them, his eyes never leaving the drone controls. "Drone two is about to reach junction T17 to move into corridor 53 shortly. ETA around a minute. I'll update on any findings." His words were concise, as his focus was entirely on directing both of the drones simultaneously.

Thea nodded with a quiet sound of affirmation, acknowledging Desmond's report without wanting to disrupt Karania's focus or his own critical drone operation.

She was on the sidelines now and that was something she recognized would have to learn how to do properly. She couldn't always be the main character in this game, so remaining in the background was a skill she would need to properly cultivate.

"Hit him with two blue ones, Thea," Karania's order abruptly ripped her from her brief reverie.

She carefully retrieved two blue injectors from the medic's well-organised side-pouch, their contents designed to provide a quick boost of energy. Gently, she administered them to Lucas, noting the immediate effect as he seemed to regain some of his vitality.

"Next: One green, immediately followed by a red," Karania instructed with calm precision, guiding Thea through the process.

Thea handled the injectors with care, ensuring she followed the sequence exactly as Karania had directed. She had no idea what these specific injectors did, as they looked slightly different from the colour-coded ones that she and the rest of the squad had gotten for self-medication, but she fully trusted the squad medic to know *exactly* what she was doing.

Karania's methodical process, though unusual, had a certain air of confidence to it that Thea couldn't help but trust. She carefully positioned the boot against Lucas's stump, her movements deliberate to ensure the height matched his uninjured foot. Thea's mind was rife with questions, but her actions were guided by faith in Karania's expertise.

As she held the boot steady, Karania began to pour her own blood into it. The sight was unsettling, yet fascinating. The blood seemed almost alive, responding to Karania's will as it filled the boot.

Karania's innovative methods were often beyond Thea's own comprehension, yet they had proven effective time and again. This instance, bizarre as it was, carried the same promise of ingenuity and results, as strange as it was starting to look.

Her curiosity peaked as the liquid started to swirl and dance unnaturally within the confines of the shoe, some of it lapping up Lucas' stump and clinging to it.

The surrealness of the entire sequence of actions prompted Thea to finally voice her confusion, "Kara, what's the plan here...? This feels more occult than medical." Her tone was laced with a mix of intrigue and scepticism, the scene before her resembling something out of a mystic blood ritual more than anything that could be considered a field medical procedure.

Before the medic answered, she pulled out a series of four plasteel braces and carefully positioned them around the stump, sinking them deep into the liquid within the boot, making sure they touched the bottom as Thea felt Karania's pressure against the boot.

Her following explanation was as straightforward as it was innovative. "I don't have the time to get any sort of prosthetic fixed, so we're building our own," she stated, securing the final brace. Her focus then intensified, instructing Thea, "Keep it steady, or the whole thing could fail."

In the next instant, Thea watched as Karania closed her eyes, deep in concentration, before the boot abruptly started to harden from the inside-out.

Thea's eyes widened as the blood congealed into one solid mass, before drying further and further, creating a cohesive mass of congealed and scabbed, System-enhanced blood that firmly held the stump, boot and metal bracing rods together as if connected with hardened rock-crete.

Without hesitation, Karania urged Lucas to his feet, her actions swift and decisive. "Let's get you up, big man. Come on, we gotta see how it holds," she instructed, not pausing to delve into any of the mechanics of her makeshift solution.

Lucas, entirely caught off guard by the rapid progression from treatment to test, balked at her promptness.

"Whoa, whoa! Hold on a second!" he objected, his voice laced with disbelief as he was pulled up to his feet. He refused to touch the ground with the newly fitted prosthetic, a curious blend of Karania's medical ingenuity and System-enhanced blood, instead standing on one foot, hovering the other just above the ground. "Is this really safe...? This feels even more bizarre than the usual stuff you come up with, Karania."

Karania offered a nonchalant shrug, her grin mischievous. "It's a toss-up, really. Fifty-fifty chance it works out," she quipped, her confidence undeterred by the unconventional nature of the procedure. "With enough blood, I've managed to block bullets, so why not a prosthetic? Should hold up just fine, I guess. Just try not to get shot in it again, okay? I don't have *that* much blood saved up."

Thea blinking rapidly, caught between awe and utter, unadulterated confusion, struggled to grasp the full implications of everything Karania had just said. '*Wait, what? Kara's blood can stop bullets...? When did she—How did she even figure this out...?*' she wondered, baffled by the revelation and its casual delivery.

Karania, however, was not one to dwell on explanations or wait for the squad to process the shock. She nudged Lucas forward, guiding him back towards the path they had come from.

The initial contact of his blood-prosthetic with the ground elicited a visceral and audible reaction from Lucas. "Ugh! By Xagis, that's so fucking disgusting!" he exclaimed, dry heaving and recoiling at the sensation of his blood-solidified leg making contact with the floor. "It feels like I'm walking on a giant fucking scab that's like... grabbing onto my leg at the same time. Seriously, Karania?!"

With a gentle push, Karania observed Lucas's tentative steps, a mix of medical curiosity and satisfaction on her face. "Looks like it's holding up well," she concluded with a nod, turning to Thea with a ready-to-move forward gleam in her eye and a confident thumbs-up. "We're all set, Boss. Let's keep moving. Where we goin'?"

Immediately shifting focus from Lucas's unconventional recuperation to the task at hand, Thea retook her role as the main character. "Desmond, give me an update," she demanded, her tone indicating the urgency of their situation.

Desmond was prompt in his response, his attention divided between his two drones exploring the tunnel system. "Drone one is smoothly navigating through, encountering no obstacles. Drone two has just entered corridor 53, with a similar lack of resistance. T16 will be within drone one's reach in about two minutes, while drone two will require four minutes to approach T19," he reported, his voice betraying no surprise at Thea's request for an update.

Thea, processing this new information, began to map out their next steps.

Considering their options, she deduced that corridor 58 presented the most viable route. The approaching drone promised a preliminary assessment of any potential dangers that lay ahead. This route offered them the most flexibility to quickly retreat and reassess if the situation proved too perilous. Opting to wait for the drone scouting corridor 53 seemed impractical given their tight time constraints.

'We must act swiftly,' she concluded internally, swiftly devising a strategy to guide Alpha Squad through the imminent challenges. *'Karania has the right idea; as always, really. I need to start relying on my Abilities more...'*

With urgency in her steps, Thea signalled the squad to rally, her voice echoing down the dimly lit corridor. "Ela, back to the group!" she commanded, her tone sharp, cutting through the tension like a knife.

In mere seconds their offensive heavy appeared from the direction of the problematic junction, her breaths measured but quick. "The barrier's barely holding. Those auto-turrets won't be held back much longer without anyone there to reinforce it; they're tearing through the blue-foam damn quick. I'd say we have a minute, maybe two, before it's completely breached," Isabella reported with a hardened resolve, falling into formation behind Thea.

Acknowledging Isabella's report with a determined nod, Thea turned on her heels, her gaze fixed ahead as she led the squad back the way they had come, towards junction T17.

"Follow my lead," she instructed, setting a brisk pace. "Keep a three-metre distance. No room for errors this time." Her voice, a blend of authority and assurance, spurred the squad into action.

Thea's strides morphed into a run, the urgency of their mission propelling her forward.

Time was of the essence, and she was keenly aware that with each passing moment, their window of opportunity at T16 and T19 was rapidly closing. The thought spurred her on, fuelling her every step as they navigated back through the labyrinthine service tunnels, racing against the clock and the ever-increasing threat of the Stellar Republic's forces.

Behind her, Lucas's discomfort was palpable, his discomfort and utter disgust quietly echoing through the tunnel with every laboured step. Karania's soothing whisper-voice followed, offering words of reassurance, "There, there. It's not that bad, I'm sure."

But Thea's mind was elsewhere, her thoughts solely on navigating them safely and swiftly to their destination.

Fully relying on her Psychic Powers, Thea sharpened her Perception to its utmost, tuning into the subtle guidance that her unique capabilities provided.

This was no time for cautious peeks around corners or stealthy manoeuvres; speed was their paramount concern. With Lucas unable to lead with his Stalwart, it was entirely up to her Psychic Senses to ensure their safe passage.

Thea's newfound, unconditional trust and full reliance on her innate skills transformed their approach entirely.

They moved through the tunnels with unprecedented speed, more than five times as quickly as when they had entered, her steps guided by her high levels of Perception and years of experience in navigating narrow hallways and underground corridors.

Every turn was taken with confidence, every decision made with the trust that her abilities would carry her through anything that might occur. There was no time for self-doubt in Thea's mind in this part of their mission, for if she did, they were surely going to get trapped down here and inevitably die.

This intuitive navigation strategy hinged on a simple premise: Any threat that lay in wait would reveal itself by targeting her, triggering her precognitive psychic senses just in time for her to stop and avert disaster. With nobody else to worry about, she could solely focus on getting herself out of harm's way, should anything happen.

Thus, her task was simple: To remain hyper-vigilant, ready to respond at a moment's notice to the silent alarms her Psychic Powers raised. It was a high-stakes gamble, relying solely on her ability to perceive and react, but it was a gamble that Thea was prepared to take to ensure the safety and swift progress of Alpha Squad.

Racing back to junction T17, Alpha Squad wasted no time in veering onto the path leading to corridor 58. Mid-stride, Thea checked in with Desmond for any updates from his drone, which was yet to reach its destination. "Any changes? What's the status?" she inquired, her voice steady yet urgent, echoing slightly in the tunnel's confines.

Desmond, handling his remote controls with practised efficiency despite the rapid and rigorous movements, provided his report with a note of caution in his tone. "Still quiet on the first drone's end. Too quiet, actually. The sensors aren't picking up *any* sounds, which could either be a good sign or a prelude to something we'd rather avoid. My second drone's readings are suggesting the same—unusual silence. There's a chance we might encounter resistance ahead, but it's unclear what form that might take," he explained, the uncertainty of the situation weighing on his words.

Thea nodded, processing the information with a self-imposed calm. The uncertainty of what lay ahead in corridor 58 added an edge to their advance, but the squad continued to push forward at the same speed regardless, guided by Thea's leadership and Desmond's surveillance.

As they hastened toward junction T17, taking the path leading to corridor 58, Thea's mind raced with tactical considerations, her thoughts punctuated by the steady rhythm of their footsteps.

The silence reported by Desmond's drone was unnerving, hinting at potential countermeasures employed by the Stellar Republic. '*Could they be using an audio disruptor? They've already deployed active defence systems against our grenades,*' she pondered, weighing the implications.

Thea had long realised they needed to adapt their strategy. Grenades were no longer a reliable option, given the enemy's anti-grenade systems that had ruined their attempt at junction T18 and cost Lucas dearly.

Her mind quickly shifted to the next best alternative. *'I might be able to outmanoeuvre the auto-turrets... I'm the only one that could, but not without Lucas's support,'* she concluded internally.

His Stalwart shield was essential for their next move.

Turning to Karania mid-run, Thea inquired about Lucas's condition with a sense of urgency. "Kara, what's Lucas's status for combat? Can he stand firmly and hold his shield steady? I need him to be able to do this without any risk of failure." Thea's query was pragmatic, seeking an impartial assessment of Lucas's capabilities, instead of asking him directly.

She knew well that Lucas was not one to shy away from a challenge, but this was not about bravery; it was about practicality and ensuring the squad's safety. She trusted Karania's medical expertise to provide an accurate evaluation of Lucas's ability to contribute effectively in their current predicament.

Karanja's response was swift and assured, instilling a sense of certainty in Thea that was much needed at the moment. "Yes, no problem," Karania affirmed, her tone unwavering. "Lucas can handle standing and bracing his shield without any issue. Engaging in mobile combat might present a challenge, but he's capable of managing that too."

This confirmation solidified Thea's resolve as she contemplated their approach to the impending junction.

This time, there would be no group strategizing, no on-the-spot decision-making, no elaborate scheme. She decided to lean into the strengths and trust the capabilities of her squad members completely, letting go of the incessant worry about potential missteps.

Thea reflected on her past experiences with team-based games, recognizing a pattern: The most successful rounds were those where she could concentrate on her role, confident in her team's ability to handle their respective responsibilities without needing her intervention.

Convinced by this realisation, Thea prepared to move forward, embracing the core principle that had defined their squad from the beginning. Alpha Squad was not just a name—it was a designation of their collective prowess and unity.

They were the best of this entire drive and the highest PV Alpha Squad in history. If she couldn't trust her squad to do their job, then who could she trust?

It was time to embody Corvus' advice and trust her squad implicitly and fully, allowing them to execute their roles with minimal guidance. This approach would enable her to also concentrate entirely on her own part of the mission, letting go of the fear of failure that had clouded her judgement until now.

As they hurried toward the junction, Thea briefed her team on the strategy.

"Lucas, as soon as we reach the junction, you're with me," she instructed, her voice firm over the sound of their running. "Extend your Stalwart to its maximum, ensuring it seals against the ground. I'll give a countdown, then lift it about fifteen centimetres. Keep it stable; the auto-turrets will be relentless."

Next, she turned her attention to Isabella. "Ela, on my countdown, you need to charge in. Use your Decimator; we'll have to engage them up close. It's going to be rough, but it's our best shot. Kara will prep you with stims and stitch you back together afterwards. It'll hurt, I'm sure, but you can handle it."

With urgency in her voice, Thea turned to Desmond, "Recall your second drone; we're concentrating all our efforts on junction T16. We can't afford any more delays or detours. The moment I fire, I need you to target any remaining auto-turrets that are out of my line of sight. Speed up the drones with your Ability and get them into position. This will create a brief window for Isabella to engage and fulfil her role, even if your drones don't find targets immediately."

This strategy was a departure from their approach so far.

It was a direct, forceful assault, underpinned by a simple yet potent conviction: Their status as Alpha Squad would carry them through.

Despite the T1 status of their adversaries, Thea was confident in her squad's superiority. They were the elite, and an average T1 soldier was no match for their combined expertise and prowess, when they all were pouring their entire effort into it.

Auto-turrets were dangerous, no doubt, but it didn't matter if they were, when they were already dead.

Thea would personally take care of them.

James had mentioned they were unbeatable by humans, even seasoned marines.

But Thea was not simply either of those.

Thea was a *wielder*.

She had an innate advantage over them, because she could see and feel the future before it happened. *'An auto-turret can identify and shoot at a target fractions of a second after seeing them? Inconsequential. I can do it the instant they come into sight, because I know they'll be there.'*

Her growing confidence was born from necessity; recognising that their mission would inevitably fail if she didn't step up to the plate, there was no other option but to be confident in her own capabilities and those of her squad mates.

As they approached the location of the first drone, halted just short of two turns away from the junction, Desmond swiftly readied it for combat. His preparations seemed straightforward enough, but were no less crucial—he loaded it with additional ammunition magazines,

ensuring it could continue firing if it survived the initial moments of the impending confrontation.

Thea put down her backpack and leaned it against the wall, motioning for the rest of the squad to follow her example. "We'll need to be quick for this one. No unnecessary weight, so we can move freely," she said. "We'll come back for them after we clear the junction."

Isabella got herself ready as well, putting down her Devastator and leaning it against her backpack. Following Thea's orders, she was going in with her sidearm and Decimator only, to be more mobile and hopefully block off a large section of the enemy's line of sight for the rest of the squad to move in on.

While shooting from range was almost always the preferred and sensible choice, when it came to being an immediate threat, nothing really got the same message across as running at someone with a giant, two-handed chainsword revving in your hands.

Karania moved up next to Isabella and administered a veritable alchemy-closet of stims into the heavy, with Isabella looking increasingly concerned with the sheer number and variety of them, but quietly enduring the procedure; much like Thea, she recognized that this was their last chance to break through, so complaints were shelved until a later date.

Lucas was preparing his Stalwart all the way, making sure he could get a good grip on it, despite his makeshift prosthetics, and trying to figure out how to brace it properly despite his injury.

Thea couldn't help but admit that Karania's strange blood ritual had worked exceedingly well, considering that Lucas had managed to keep pace with the rest of the squad throughout their rapid relocation through the tunnels. It was a rare, positive sign in a sea of bad ones; one that was more than welcome for her right now.

Getting herself ready as well, Thea pulled out her Gram and prepared it for the upcoming encounter, putting the output to max once again, having previously turned it down to medium for their trek through the tunnels after every junction. She still preferred firing it on medium, but when it came to taking out an auto-turret and a junction full of soldiers waiting for them, she would need every bit of firepower she could get.

During their run towards the junction, Thea had briefed her team thoroughly on their strategy, mindful of the potential presence of an audio-disruptor that could nullify their ability to communicate once they engaged. It was paramount that everybody understood their roles, even if the more nuanced and moment-to-moment aspects of the plan were entirely up to each individual member to decide on.

They waited impatiently for Desmond's second drone to arrive, which was oddly nicely timed with Karania's final injection into Isabella. "She's as ready as I can make her," the medic offered with a shrug. "She shouldn't die from this... I think."

The last addition prompted a slightly panicked look from Isabella, but other than that, everyone simply accepted it as the cost of business at this point in time. With Desmond

refitting the last remaining drone with additional ammunition as well, they were finally ready to take on the last juncture separating them from the interior of Nova Tertius' proper.

"Let's go," Thea affirmed with confidence, scanning her team for readiness, signalling the commencement of their most perilous phase yet. With a decisive nod, she ushered Lucas to lead, marking the onset of their do-or-die confrontation.

As Lucas bravely stepped forward, his Stalwart shield grinding against the tunnel's surface, a shower of sparks erupted immediately, illuminating his determined and trained effort to hold the shield perpendicular against the relentless barrage from the auto-turrets.

The predicted silence enveloped them, confirming Desmond's warning of an audio-disruptor at play, effectively isolating them in a bubble of silence amidst the chaos.

Thea, now at the forefront of this silent battle, faced the formidable challenge of outmanoeuvring the auto-turrets' superhuman response times. Success in this direct confrontation was imperative; failure would mean the end of their mission in the bowels of Nova Tertius' service tunnels.

With her pulse thundering in her ears, Thea prepared herself for the decisive moment, taking a moment to calm her racing heart with a steadying breath.

She executed a practised roll from the security of the last turn, now fully relying on Lucas' proficiency with the Stalwart to provide the necessary cover as she positioned herself for the pivotal shot.

Aligning her body on the ground to a sideways position, she ensured the rifle's scope and barrel were at equal elevation, a tactical adjustment to reduce the auto-turrets' reaction time to her emergence.

Focusing intently, Thea engaged her psychic abilities to their fullest extent for the first time since the "Strike-One" operation. The world turned slightly wavy around her, as she delved into a vision of the imminent future, just like she had done for the seeker minefield on the first day of their assessment.

She watched an alternate version of herself counting down, with the Gram weapon poised and ready. As the countdown hit zero, her spectral self executed the shot, just as Lucas raised the Stalwart, barely high enough to clear the muzzle of the gun.

In this envisioned future, Isabella, propelled by sheer determination, surged past Lucas and Thea, right as Desmond's drones, massively accelerated by his Abilities, soared above.

Thea witnessed the first drone disintegrate under the ferocious fire of a hidden auto-turret on the right side of the junction. Isabella, amidst a hail of bullets, momentarily faltered, her form illuminated by the relentless assault against her armour. The second drone, unable to swivel around from looking at the left side, met a similar fate, obliterated by the auto-turret before it could unleash its payload, sealing Isabella's grim fate.

The auto-turret, untouched by Desmond's drones, swiftly redirected its lethal intent towards Isabella, who was still reeling from the initial barrage. Thea's heart clenched at the sight, the

reality of their plan's potential failure crashing down on her with the weight of impending doom.

The high-calibre rounds mercilessly tore through Isabella's heavy armour as if it were mere paper, with a gruesome symphony of metal and blood bursting from her back, splattering against the wall of the tunnels and painting them a deep shade of crimson.

She collapsed, a devastating tableau of shattered armour and torn flesh marking her final resting place.

Faux-Thea and Lucas pressed forward, Karania unleashing the fury of her Ruin from their flank, her shots aimed with deadly precision at any Stellar Republic soldiers brave enough to step into her line of sight.

Desmond, not far behind after rushing up once his drones had been taken out, readied his AR-303, his movements sharp and focused.

Faux-Thea motioned for Lucas to advance into the line of fire, the shield bearer stepping forth to meet the barrage head-on. Then, with practised coordination, faux-Thea emerged from behind the cover of Lucas' Stalwart, Gram poised for the critical shot.

Her timing impeccable, she fired through the narrow opening beside the shield and the wall, merely three centimetres of space, the laser beam finding its mark and dismantling the second auto-turret with unerring accuracy.

As the scene sped up in Thea's mind, she observed the aftermath unfurl with a sense of detachment.

Desmond, moving to support, was suddenly struck by a rogue bullet that bypassed the Stalwart's protection, hitting him in the throat, making him go down immediately.

Meanwhile, faux-Thea herself wasn't spared; a stray shot struck her side dangerously, the impact forcing her to stagger, yet she stubbornly remained on her feet, pain etched across her features but unyielding in her resolve.

Faux Alpha Squad, despite their valour, faced grave outcomes but nevertheless succeeded, resulting in the loss of Isabella and Desmond, with faux-Thea herself teetering on the brink, but successfully clearing the junction.

This grim vision underscored the mission's perilous nature, yet Thea remained unfaltering.

Shaken by the vividness of the foresight, Thea took several deep breaths to steady herself, the vision's toll evident in her effort to refocus. She communicated the impending action to Lucas with a tap, a silent yet urgent cue that the critical moment was upon them.

She then indicated "right," to the rest of the team, informing them of the second auto-turret's position, aiming to alter the grim fate her vision had unveiled. By informing Desmond and

Isabella of its precise location, she fostered some hope that reality might diverge from the doomed path foreseen.

The countdown was initiated, displayed on their HUDs to ensure flawless timing amongst them. The enemy's knowledge of their presence negated the risk of communication detection, rendering their strategic coordination paramount in this decisive confrontation.

Thea trusted her instincts fully in this moment, not bothering to look at the countdown displayed on her HUD.

She felt the twinge of danger in her chest rise to a crescendo and, just before it reached the zenith, squeezed the trigger of her Gram.

The laser shot out and just barely cleared the bottom of the Stalwart as Lucas pulled it up, just as they had planned, striking the auto-turret right between the part where the barrel was peeking out from behind its formidable armour, destroying it instantly.

Thea jumped up immediately, watching as Isabella and the two drones charged forward with all the speed they could muster, the scene reminiscent of what Thea had just seen in her vision, except that the drones were both aiming their barrels towards the right side, instead of splitting their attention to either side.

Desmond had set them up to automatically fire the instant they spotted an auto-turret; so his human reaction time was not going to be a factor for this robot vs robot showdown.

Isabella got stopped dead in her tracks by the barrage of gunfire hitting her heavy armour, some rare shots finding weak spots and penetrating inside, but none of the weaponry levelled against her outright capable of striking true.

The first drone exploded into a small fireball, raining unspent ammunition down from the ceiling as the auto-turret had won its first battle, just an instant before the second drone fired for the first time.

Thea held her breath in anticipation, her nerves taut as she braced for the retaliatory fury of the auto-turret.

Yet, the expected barrage did not happen.

Isabella instead vanished into the tumult of the junction, her advance marked by the sporadic flashes from her pistol, each shot a brief illumination against the overwhelming onslaught of the Stellar Republic's forces.

A brief moment later, Lucas, Karania, and Thea emerged at the junction's threshold.

Lucas adeptly manoeuvred his Stalwart, establishing a protective barrier on their left.

Concurrently, Thea and Karania sought to provide support to Isabella, focusing their efforts on the right flank. However, the intensity of the situation quickly made them reassess their approach; Isabella was far from requiring any of their immediate assistance.

Isabella, swinging her Decimator in grand arcs, carved through the ranks of the Stellar Republic soldiers with relentless fury. Her movements were a blur, her Abilities unleashed in a continuous cascade that saw her Decimator slicing through the air in bewildering and utterly impossible patterns, severing limbs and heads with ruthless efficiency.

Armour proved no obstacle, torn asunder as if made of paper, leaving behind a macabre tableau painted in the blood of her foes.

Amidst this chaos, a daring soldier managed to land a blow, directing their weapon towards Isabella with a hope to halt her onslaught. Yet, in a demonstration of her formidable combat prowess, the chain-axe halted mere inches from her, its deadly trajectory arrested by an invisible force, as she activated her signature Ability.

Without missing a beat, Isabella lashed out with a vicious kick at another oncoming assailant.

Her boot connected with devastating force, her Ability's explosive release detonating upon impact. The soldier's upper body erupted in a gory spectacle, propelling the lifeless form into two others behind him. The trio collapsed in a heap, shrapnel from the exploding torso of the first ripping through the others, underscoring the sheer, unstoppable force that Isabella represented on the battlefield once she got in close.

In the midst of the chaos, Thea and Karania unleashed their own barrage on the Stellar Republic's forces to the left, who appeared utterly confounded by the sudden onslaught of the marines.

Faced with too many soldiers to immediately count, Thea activated her signature Ability as well, trusting that it would allow her to more easily dive into this part of the battle.

'Sensory Overdrive.'

The world around her slowed down to a crawl, her Perception heightened to levels no one else in the junction could even begin to fathom. Every breath, every heartbeat and every individual muscle twitch was revealed to her from every person within her field of attention.

With her Gram in hand, dispatched laser shots with unwavering precision.

Her movements were a dance of battle, weaving through the battlefield, evading enemy fire from behind the Stalwart while never missing a mark.

Fully relying on her psychic foresight and exceptional Perception, Thea's actions were a blend of anticipatory moves and decisive strikes. She seamlessly alternated between surveying the field for potential threats and zeroing in on her targets.

As Thea immersed herself in the cacophony of battle further and further, her actions started transcending mere physical mastery, veering into the realm of pure psychic prowess.

With the Gram in her grasp, she became an avatar of destruction, her movements and shots guided by an otherworldly prescience.

Each laser she fired was a death sentence, executed with a precision that bordered on the supernatural. Soldiers of the Stellar Republic, caught in the whirlwind of her fury, stood no chance, their attempts to counter or evade futile against her uncanny anticipation.

In one fluid motion, she pivoted, her senses tuned to a soldier sneaking an aim at Karania.

Without even looking, she dispatched him with a laser through the throat, the action seamless, as if preordained by the hand of a wrathful god.

The Gram, in her hands, seemed to blur, its firing rate so rapid it mimicked the output of an automatic weapon, yet with the precision of a scalpel. Heads disintegrated, arteries were severed, and chests were hollowed out with ruthless efficiency, all in the span of heartbeats.

What made Thea's combat dance even more extraordinary was her blatant disregard for cover as the fight progressed past the initial stages. She stepped beyond the protective embrace of Lucas' Stalwart, moving through the battlefield with a grace that made the enemy's gunfire seem almost deferential, never quite touching her.

Her dodges and weaves were not mere reactions but premonitions, each movement a step ahead of the bullets or lasers aimed towards her. It was as if she was choreographing the battle itself, her psychic insight casting her in a bubble of precognition where the enemy's intentions were known to her before they even fully formed.

This psychic ballet, underpinned by her heightened Perception's all-encompassing attention, rendered her nearly untouchable, a spectre on the battlefield whose presence was as lethal as it was unassailable.

Thea's display was otherworldly, elevating her beyond the confines of the mortal combatants she faced and into a domain where foresight and lethal intent converged into a singular, unstoppable force, that none could stand against.

In just a few brutal seconds, the junction fell entirely silent, the last sounds being those of Isabella's Decimator revving down and being swung through the air one last time to clear the grime, blood and body parts from its chains.

Isabella was drenched in blood but she was laughing, the expenditure of all of her energy in this one-man-army assignment seemingly having revitalised the heavy's confidence in herself.

Emerging from the trance-like state of combat, Thea gasped for air, her lungs burning for oxygen after being ensnared in the intense concentration brought on by her [Sensory Overdrive]. The surreal clarity that had enveloped her, enhancing every sense to supernatural levels, faded, leaving her momentarily disoriented in the aftermath of the battle.

She found herself inexplicably positioned in the middle of the room, the room around her littered with the fallen adversaries of the Stellar Republic. Her squad members, equally spent, paused to catch their breath, their gazes fixed on Thea with a mixture of awe and disbelief.

The abrupt break in the post-battle stillness came from Karania, who, along with Lucas and Desmond, could only gape at Thea. There she stood, an unyielding figure amidst the chaos, her Gram emitting wisps of smoke, a silent witness to the relentless barrage it had unleashed under her command.

"Thea, *what the fuck was that?!*" Karania finally voiced, breaking the silence...