

Arc 1 - Chapter 67 - The Calm

As the serrated teeth of the Decimator revved perilously close to her, Thea's thoughts spiralled in a regret-fueled haze.

'You've really outdone yourself this time. A friendly-fire death because you wanted to be a joker—what a way to go,' she berated herself, half-expecting the feeling of cold metal biting into her helmet at any second.

Then, with a startling abruptness and without losing any momentum, the lethal trajectory of the Decimator shifted. The fearsome weapon bit into the trench wall beside her, mere inches from her head, splinters of dirt showering the air.

Her heart skipped a beat—Isabella had redirected her strike at the very last moment.

Before Thea had the chance to process her unexpected reprieve, she found herself lifted off her feet and slung unceremoniously over Isabella's broad shoulders, her backpack still clinging to her frame.

"Ah—Ella, it's me, Thea! Let me down!" Thea protested, her voice tinged with disbelief and a hint of embarrassment.

Struggling against Isabella's vice-like grip, Thea was given an immediate, humbling lesson in the disparity of their physical strength. It was akin to fighting the gravitational pull of a crashed 100-ton shuttle; her efforts were utterly futile. Isabella's arm was an unyielding clamp, holding her in place with a firmness that rendered her wriggling utterly pointless.

"Sorry, stranger," Isabella responded, her voice dripping with both amusement and annoyance. "The Thea I know is an exceptionally capable and level-headed marine. She wouldn't pull something as monumentally idiotic as trying to prank a fellow marine during a patrol—especially when we covered that in Basic Training. So, whoever you are, you're going straight to the boss for a debrief."

The layers of sarcasm in Isabella's voice hit Thea like a ton of bricks.

'I've seriously angered her, haven't I? And for what? A cheap laugh? What the fuck was I thinking?' Her thoughts stewed in self-reproach as she resigned herself to being carried like errant baggage to face the judgement of "the boss"—whom she assumed she knew all too well.

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Within a couple of minutes, Thea was ungracefully deposited onto the unforgiving floor of a command hole—a fortified depression in the ground, slightly larger than a typical foxhole, equipped with a communications station and a compact table. The sudden impact knocked the wind out of her, her lungs clawing for air as she lay sprawled on the cold dirt.

Isabella's voice cut through her daze: "The intruder has been apprehended, boss. She's all yours." With those curt words, Isabella pivoted on her heel and exited, her footsteps brisk and purposeful.

Raising her eyes from her supine position, Thea found herself locking gazes with the one person she had both anticipated and dreaded seeing in this moment: Corvus. His face was an intricate tapestry of conflicting emotions—annoyance, amusement, and disbelief were all interwoven there. The sting of disappointing Corvus gnawed at her more deeply than the physical discomfort of her ungraceful landing.

"I'm sor—" Thea started, trying to utter an apology, only to be summarily cut off by Corvus, the authoritative squad leader of Alpha Squad.

"We lose sight of you for over a day, fearing you were grievously wounded or taken prisoner, only for you to resurface in a state worse than death," he began, his voice tinged with a bitter edge.

"We spend agonising days worrying about you while you lie comatose. Karania practically kills herself healing you on top of her enormous efforts in propelling this campaign forward. And when you *finally* rejoin us, you flout every conceivable rule of conduct, disregard months of basic training on operational behaviour, and nearly get yourself killed by your own squadmate."

Corvus paused, his disappointment hanging heavy in the air. "Does any part of your recent behaviour strike you as befitting the star recruit of the Sovereign? A core member of what is undoubtedly the greatest Alpha Squad in the history of the United Human Federation?"

The weight of his words settled on Thea like an anvil, their impact amplified by the raw emotion in his voice. The disappointment in his tone was a haunting echo of past reprimands she'd received from James back on Lumiosia, and it cut deeply. Worst of all, just like those earlier reprimands, Corvus was unequivocally correct.

She had messed up. Bad.

"If it wasn't for Karania's timely comm, you would be in pieces right now, courtesy of Isabella's Decimator," Corvus continued, pacing back and forth in the confined space of the command hole. His boots crunched on the dirt floor, each step resonating like a judge's gavel.

"We're nearing Nova Tertius, which means we're up against an increasingly well-trained and well-equipped contingent from the Stellar Republic. Do you grasp the gravity of that, Thea?"

As he spoke, his hands gestured sharply, slicing the air for emphasis, each movement a visual punctuation to his words. "We can't afford the slightest hesitation or distraction in the field. We've already lost good soldiers to Republic assassins. When a threat appears, we have to react swiftly and decisively. There's no time for us to consider whether someone's in the mood for juvenile pranks."

Throughout the sermon, which stretched into an agonising half-hour, Thea remained on the ground, a pitiable heap on the unforgiving earth.

But she wasn't exactly static; her body seemed to sink lower and lower into the ground with every rebuke. It was as if she were trying to meld into the soil, hoping the earth would mercifully swallow her whole to escape the relentless onslaught of Corvus' words.

And yet, as much as she wished it, the ground remained solid, indifferent to her self-inflicted shame. Corvus's voice echoed in the small enclosure, each sentence deepening her humiliation. Every chiding word, every disappointed glance from him, felt like another layer of dirt on the grave of her self-esteem.

She'd never felt so small, so irresponsible, so utterly unworthy of her position in Alpha Squad.

Finally, Corvus ceased his pacing and sighed, as if even he had tired of speaking. But the room remained heavy with the weight of his disappointment, a burden Thea knew she'd carry for a long time to come.

The atmosphere suddenly shifted as Corvus' stern expression melted away, replaced by a genuine, warm smile. Extending a hand to Thea, he offered her a lifeline both literal and emotional. "That said, I'm incredibly relieved to have you back with us, Thea. It's heartening to see you in good shape—more or less."

As his fingers closed around her cybernetic hand, pulling her up from her place on the unforgiving earth, it felt as if he was also lifting a portion of the weight of his disappointment off her shoulders. Despite the severity of his earlier words, the sincerity in his smile now made it clear: She was still a valued member of Alpha Squad, mistakes and all.

As Thea found her footing, her mouth opened to usher out an apology, but Corvus raised his hand, preemptively cutting her off.

"No need for apologies, Thea. Among Marines, apologies don't hold much weight. What we need is a promise to do better, to be better. Can you give me that?"

Her eyes met his, searching for any lingering traces of disappointment. Instead, she found understanding and assurance. Taking a deep breath, she nodded firmly. "I promise, Corvus."

He gestured toward a rudimentary wooden table situated behind him. "Take a seat. We have a lot to cover."

The table was a standard-issue, foldable plasteel model, a ubiquitous staple that appeared to be distributed to every squad leader and commander across military history. It was unremarkable in design but utilitarian in purpose, designed to withstand the rigours of field operations while providing a, mostly, uniform surface to plan on.

As Thea sat, Corvus circled around to the other side of the table and eased into his own chair with the air of someone settling into a well-worn groove. His fingers navigated deftly through a data-pad before setting it down in front of her.

The screen displayed a complex digital map of the surrounding region, grid lines crisply dividing territories and geographic features annotated with precision. Blue icons indicated UHF forces, while red markers suggested known or suspected Stellar Republic activity.

Corvus pointed at a particular section of the map, the pixels lighting up under his touch. "We've been advancing steadily, but resistance is growing stronger the closer we get to Nova Tertius. We have to be absolutely on point, Thea. No room for errors or pranks."

His eyes met hers, as if to drive home the point once again, before he continued.

Corvus' voice started out steady, but as he delved into the complexities of their recent operations, his frustration became palpable, each word tinged with a simmering annoyance.

"Look, the first couple of days were manageable. We encountered mostly unintegrated soldiers, and sure, the occasional T1 Duplicator from the Stellar Republic. We were making good progress—until day three," he emphasised, gripping the edges of the data-pad as if willing it to change the situation.

His brow furrowed deeply, eyes narrowing. "That's when things took a nosedive. We think they finally managed to get their act together, pulling their deployed orbital troops out of the city to challenge us. Since then, these Duplicators are not just an occasional problem; they're a constant bloody menace."

He slammed his hand onto the table, making the data-pad jump.

"In open fields, we can manage—catch them in crossfire, blast them with explosives. But this forest," he gestured around, exasperated, "it's a labyrinth, a perfect setup for these Duplicators. We can't root out the originals. It's like fighting fucking ghosts."

Corvus leaned back, running his hands through his hair, the tension almost radiating off him. "The reality is we're bogged down day-by-day. Fighting what feels like at least three or four times the enemy numbers we should be facing. The tanks and transport vehicles from the UHF AD?"

He shook his head, disappointment flashing in his eyes. "They're as stuck as we are, inching forward like snails, because we have to be hyper-vigilant against Duplicator ambushes."

His jaw clenched as he resumed. "And let's talk about that Emperor-damned Faction Trait. It's a downright nightmare, Thea! These Duplicators can clone their *entire* equipment loadout. Do you realise what that means? One of them, just *one*, can take out an *entire* hover tank if we're not vigilant. They arm themselves with something like an RL-02 rocket launcher, duplicate, and then it's fireworks from multiple angles with no chance of survival."

As Corvus reached the crescendo of his rant, the energy in the room felt like a storm about to break. "It's absurd, Thea! Their Trait it's not just a thorn in our side, it's a damn tree trunk! It completely undermines any conventional strategy we could employ in this environment. And what's worse? Command's as stumped as we are. The Stellar Republic's mastery of guerilla warfare is making fools out of us!"

He paused, letting out a sharp exhale, his voice tinged with the grit of desperation. "We're inching closer, every day, like snails trying to cross a marathon track. And don't think it's just us. Every unit, even the main force and the wing on the other side, we're all stuck in the same quagmire. So, in a twisted sort of silver lining, yes, we're still on track for a simultaneous assault—if we ever manage to reach that Emperor-damned city, that is!"

Corvus took a moment, his chest heaving as if the weight of his words was a physical burden. "I apologise for the rant, Thea. The stress of the past few days is wearing on me; on all of us. We've had too many close calls, too many losses.

"Desmond and I have both died twice," he let that sink in, "Isabella went down on the first day but has been pulling through ever since, despite some hellish injuries. That [Redundant Organs] Passive of hers has been worth its weight in gold. So much so, I'm considering getting it myself."

His eyes softened, the intensity melting into concern. "And Karania, she's a fucking machine. She's patching up every marine she can get her hands on. I worry she's on the verge of burning out, but try telling her to slow down. Her life-saving spree is as awe-inspiring as it is terrifying."

Finally, his gaze met Thea's, a teasing spark lighting up his eyes as if to puncture the heavy atmosphere. "So far, you and Lucas are the only ones in Alpha Squad who've managed not to die. Though, given your recent escapade, I'm wondering if we should include you in the tally." His eyebrows shot up comically, lightening the tension for just a moment.

Thea couldn't help but feel that was a fair assessment, especially given her own dance with death during the Strike One mission. She hadn't just survived; she had miraculously clawed her way back from the brink.

"But let's not get carried away; you haven't died yet, so we're not counting it. I'm sure the official assessment will agree. That means those extra points are still yours—as I'd wager there are penalties for anyone that does manage to die and require a respawn," Corvus quipped, his eyes narrowing slightly as if savouring the next words he was about to deliver.

"Now that you're up to speed, why don't we reintroduce you to the squad? And let's do it properly this time, shall we?" He paused for dramatic effect, a sly grin unfurling across his lips.

"After all, you wouldn't want to incur any *more* penalties for blatant disregard of UHF regulations on this assessment, would you?"

The implication hit Thea like a bolt of lightning, and her eyes dilated with unbridled horror. An icy feeling of dread knotted in her stomach.

Did she really just lose points on her assessment score for that little joke?!

"Wait. You're not serious, are you? They wouldn't dock my score for an innocent mistake like this, right?! Corvus, stop walking away from me! Tell me you're joking!"

Ignoring her frantic questioning, Corvus chuckled softly, a gleam of devilish amusement in his eyes, as he led her out of the command hole towards the rest of Alpha Squad inside the trenches.

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Minutes later, Thea was still mentally wrestling with the idea that her assessment score could be compromised. So preoccupied was she that she nearly collided with Corvus, who had stopped in his tracks.

"Turns out, this little moron right here is actually our very own Thea, would you believe it?" Corvus announced theatrically, stepping aside to reveal Alpha Squad arrayed before her. Their eyes were all trained on her, but their expressions varied widely.

Lucas broke the tension with his usual warm, enveloping smile. "Welcome back, Thea. Good to see you in one piece. You've upped your stealth game a lot."

His warmth was like a balm to her frayed nerves, and Thea felt herself relax a fraction. But then came Desmond's sardonic tone.

"Never thought I'd see the day when our little scout would manage to ruffle the unflappable Corvus. What a time to be alive," he said, shaking his head. His tone was enigmatic, leaving Thea unsure of how to read him.

She decided to maintain a neutral stance, not wanting to tip the delicate balance in one way or another, now that Desmond seemed to not be filled with seething hatred towards her for once.

Isabella was the next to weigh in, her voice stern and unwavering. "You're lucky Karania warned us. I wouldn't have thought twice about ripping your head off, Thea. Don't let it happen again."

But then her tone softened, and a wry smile played on her lips. "That said, it's good to have you back. Corvus here was practically melting down without you. You wouldn't believe the number of times he lamented, 'If only our Emperor-gifted prodigy were here to rescue me from my disastrous decisions.' It was getting old, fast, really."

At Isabella's portrayal of him, Corvus looked utterly perplexed, his brows knitted and his mouth opening as if to object. But before he could even get a word out, Desmond chimed in, his voice tinged with mischief.

"Oh, you have no idea! He even said he was considering adopting a pet plant and naming it 'Thea' just so he could pretend he was talking strategy with you."

Corvus' face flushed a deep shade of red, his eyes darting between his squad members as if to say, "Are you all hearing this nonsense?" Karania, standing quietly until now, couldn't hold back a giggle. She tried to muffle it with her hand, but the twinkling in her eyes betrayed her amusement.

Thea was caught between disbelief and amusement, her gaze shifting to Corvus to gauge his reaction. Clearly, her squad leader was teetering on the edge of exasperation.

Just as Corvus collected himself to set the record straight, Lucas—always the most level-headed of them all—decided to throw in his two cents, to the complete and utter surprise of all.

"You think that's something? I heard him talking to my Stalwart, calling it 'Thea' and asking it to point out the Duplicators around here, so he could relay the information to command," Lucas said, his voice so earnest that for a moment, it was hard to tell if he was joking.

That did it. Any semblance of Corvus' collected, authoritative demeanour shattered.

His eyes widened, his face flushed an even deeper shade of red, and his mouth opened and closed, struggling to form words amid his bewilderment.

The squad broke into laughter, the tension of the past few days lifting like mist before the morning sun. Karania's giggles turned into full-blown laughter, Desmond was clutching his stomach, and even Isabella's stern demeanour cracked, her laughter joining the chorus.

Thea felt her own laughter bubble up from deep within, mingling with the absurdity and warmth of the moment.

Corvus, finally accepting the impossibility of regaining his dignity in this particular conversation, shook his head with a resigned smile. "Well, if you can't beat them," he mumbled to himself before joining in the laughter.

As the laughter died down, Corvus managed to regain some semblance of his composure. "Alright, alright, jests aside, we've got work to do. Thea, glad you're back. Let's make sure you stay that way, shall we? You're with Desmond for this patrol. Hash out the lay of the land together and get your magic Perception working, you got it?"

With a final tinge of mirth in his voice, he couldn't help but add, "Otherwise, I might truly consider replacing you with a plant or Lucas' Stalwart," eliciting a renewed round of laughter, as he turned around to return to his command hole.

And just like that, the complete Sovereign Alpha was back to business, but not without a newfound sense of camaraderie that only such shared laughter on patrol could bring.

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Throughout the rest of the day, Thea found herself in unexpected camaraderie with Desmond, exploring the surrounding forest as he guided her through it via the bird's-eye view of his drones.

She peppered him with question after question, fully expecting an eye roll or sarcastic retort. However, instead, Desmond remained unusually composed, answering her inquiries without a hint of irritation and professional acumen.

'Has he turned over a new leaf, or is he just keeping it professional?'

The thought hovered like a drone itself in Thea's mind. Either way, she was good with it. A competent jerk was just as tolerable as a jerk who'd seen the light.

And, lastly, as had always been the case, even back in her beloved arcade games on Lumiosia, she'd choose a competent jerk over a well-meaning liability any day of the week.

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By the next day, Thea was back in the field for her first combat engagement since emerging from her coma.

In her familiar role at the forefront, she led Sovereign's Alpha Squad through the forested terrain. Half a kilometre ahead, she identified two Stellar Republic soldiers camouflaged amidst the foliage. A quick drone scan from Desmond confirmed they were isolated.

Moments later, her Gram's shots neutralised the threats with surgical precision.

A palpable exhale from Corvus met her actions, as if he'd been wrestling with these very scenarios during her absence. She felt a surge of worth at that, realising just how crucial she apparently was to the squad's safe passage through this treacherous landscape.

It was a redemptive moment for her, a chance to start counterbalancing the missteps of her post-coma self.

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The day unfolded into a series of rapid engagements.

Thea and the rest of Sovereign Alpha managed to eliminate more than two dozen Duplicators, pressing forward at a pace that even Corvus' most optimistic estimates hadn't come close to predicting.

Ultimately, he even had to call for a halt; their progress had far outpaced the rest of their wing to a point that begged caution.

Isabella and Lucas efficiently carved out a rudimentary trench system—small compared to what Thea had encountered during her assessment—as the squad settled in for the rest of the day and the impending night.

To Thea's astonishment, Karania had spent not just the previous night but also the current one with Sovereign Alpha. Ever curious about the thought processes of her much more brilliant friend, she had straight up asked Karania about it.

The answer had come as a welcome surprise, especially after hearing about the exhausting pace Karania had been keeping lately—a concern that had been nagging at Thea.

"Look, I've been running on fumes for the past week while you were unconscious," Karania explained. "As much as I might seem like a live wire to everyone else, I'm acutely conscious of my physical and mental limitations. I hit my breaking point a day before you came to. I could have resorted to stims, but I try to avoid them unless absolutely necessary. I pushed my limits just to be there in case you woke up, which, thankfully, you did."

She had continued, "I plan to stay with the squad for at least one more day before resuming my more demanding routine—unless, of course, we finally break into the city by then."

With Thea's curiosity sated and anxious thoughts regarding her friend's well being proven unfounded, the night passed without incident.

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On the following and ninth official day of the assessment, the tactics of the Stellar Republic defenders had taken an inexplicable turn.

Sovereign Alpha found themselves embroiled in full-scale firefights four times before noon, a drastic contrast to the previous day's sporadic skirmishes as the opposition they had faced was in small enough squads to quickly be wiped out or hadn't even known they existed.

Thea's exceptional Perception and Psychic Short-Term Precognition had previously afforded them an invaluable advantage, but clearly, something had changed *drastically* within the enemy ranks.

During the third of these gunfights, both Isabella and Desmond had suffered quite significant injuries.

A Duplicator had somehow managed to thread the needle with his rocket launcher through the abundant tree trunks that made fighting anyone or anything in the Azure Forest a game of whack-a-mole.

Isabella had heroically pushed Desmond out of the way at the last moment, taking the full brunt of the ensuing explosion as the rocket slammed into a tree behind her.

Her armour had cracked, shattered, and partially torn off, leaving her grievously wounded on the forest floor. Desmond didn't escape unscathed either; his medium-tier armour had proven inadequate against the blast of the T1 rocket.

Luckily, however, Karania was quick as ever to help.

It was at that moment that Thea was introduced to an intriguing piece of equipment—the armour-repair spray. Available at resupply stations, this costly quick-fix—a single T1 can ran about 300 Credits and barely sufficed for a single set of heavy armour—could mend armour to its designated Tier in the field.

Though not an instant solution, the spray had succeeded in patching up both Isabella's and Desmond's armors, just in time for the fourth and final firefight of the day, shortly before noon, which ended up leaving them all exhausted and wiped out for the day.

However, it was then that the peculiar troop movements became glaringly evident.

Command had authorised them to proceed towards Nova Tertius, insisting only that they maintain formation with the rest of the wing while scouting far ahead.

After a well-deserved midday respite, during which Karania administered additional medical aid to the entire squad—none had emerged unscathed from the day's heightened conflict—they cautiously resumed their advance, led by Thea.

Yet what they encountered next left them baffled and uneasy: Absolutely nothing.

For the subsequent two hours, they didn't encounter a *single* Duplicator, any of their duplicates, or even unintegrated soldiers.

It was as if the Stellar Republic had completely vanished from their path.

Growing increasingly suspicious of a potential trap, Corvus and the higher-ups decided it was best for Sovereign Alpha to hold position and await the rest of the wing.

This pause provided some illuminating context over the next couple of hours. Resistance had spiked everywhere *except* in the sectors Sovereign Alpha was advancing through.

Gathering to discuss the day's oddities, Corvus floated an intriguing hypothetical: It seemed the Stellar Republic had deemed the cost of stalling their advance too steep, particularly in terms of Duplicator casualties.

Thanks to Thea's Psychic insights and impeccable precision, not a single Duplicator had survived their encounters, a stark contrast to the usual survival rate of 70-80% of the previous days...