

## Arc 1 - Chapter 81 - Angles

As their unit neared the SADD's effective range, a strategic pause was called.

The squad leaders of Sovereign Alpha, Arrow Squad, and Field Squad convened for a subdued strategy discussion. Meanwhile, the rest of the marines from these squads gathered in their respective groups, conducting last-minute equipment checks and tactical reviews.

Although Thea knew that it was too late to return to the FOB for any forgotten items, identifying any gaps in their gear now could mean the difference between a workable solution in the field and a critical mission failure.

She meticulously checked her own equipment, reassessing her backpack's organisation.

Prioritising accessibility, she rearranged her gear once again, deciding that quick access to grenades and stimulants would likely be more crucial than extra ammunition. Her initial setup had dedicated significant space to spare capacitor magazines, but her recent interactions with the members of Arrow Squad had shifted her perspective.

It seemed unlikely she would need as much ammo as she had initially thought.

Thea mused to herself, *'With Viladia's expertise in stealth, we probably won't get caught in a full-blown firefight while crossing the wall... But how exactly are we planning to do that anyway...?'* The thought lingered in her mind.

During the previous assault, the wall had appeared essentially impossible to breach.

The challenge of navigating it, especially under the cloak of stealth, intrigued and concerned her. *'What's the plan for getting past all that defensive firepower? I hope we get a full brief soon...'* she wondered, her thoughts tinged with anticipation and a hint of apprehension about the impending operation.

Thea's internal musings and questions were about to be answered quickly, however as, only minutes later, Corvus and the other squad leaders concluded their discussion and returned to their units. She noticed something unusual in Corvus's possession—a peculiar abyss-black bag that she hadn't seen with him before, stirring her interest.

Corvus began briefing the squad, "Alright, everyone, here's our strategy: Field and Arrow squads will lead the way. Field Squad will create a diversion, while Arrow Squad, with the help of Private Viladia and some kind of stealth Ability that she apparently possesses, will assist us in approaching the wall undetected. The journey there should be straightforward, according to Squad Leader Morin, but the real challenge will only come once we're at the wall itself: The ascent."

Pausing to let the information sink in, Corvus then opened the mysterious black bag. He distributed what appeared to be small disks—two smaller ones and a larger one—to each squad member.

Thea's curiosity was immediately piqued by the items she received.

Their distinctive hue was unmistakable—Tier 1 technology. *'Corvus must have acquired these from either Field or Arrow Squad,'* she reasoned. *'There's no way he had these all along without mentioning them.'*

She scrutinised the disks, her mind already racing with possibilities about what they could possibly be and what their functions might entail. *'If these are standard gear for infiltration squads, they must be incredibly useful. As someone with a hybrid role like Scout/Sniper, gadgets like these are probably going to be invaluable parts of my arsenal. I'll need to remember to acquire some private ones for future missions...'*

Thea continued to closely examine the curious disk in her hands, its design both similarly alien and intriguing alike. Meanwhile, Corvus had finished distributing similar disks to the rest of the squad and resumed his briefing. "These are Grav-Step Disks, or 'GravS' for short," he explained.

Demonstrating their use, he attached the two smaller disks under his boots and the larger one to a central part of his torso, ensuring everyone could clearly see the placement.

"These disks use technology akin to the grav-locks in Lucas' Stalwart and some of our weaponry, but they're designed for more versatile, personal use. They alter the direction of gravity's pull on you... or something along those lines," Corvus continued with a shrug. He looked slightly apologetic as he admitted, "I'm afraid the technical specifics are a bit beyond me," directing a rueful smile towards Thea, who responded with a sympathetic grin of her own.

*'Don't worry, Corvus. I'll read up on it after the assessment is over... Don't you worry,'* Thea thought to herself. There was no way she was going to ignore such an interesting piece of technology.

"Regardless of the technical details, these GravS will allow us to walk up the wall—quite literally," Corvus elaborated. "Your feet will stick to the wall and your body's point of gravity will be perpendicular to it, enabling us to ascend vertically and even fight, if necessary. It's going to feel very unusual, I assume, but it's supposedly the most efficient way for us to scale that wall. Private Viladia will use her stealth Ability to keep us hidden during the climb. If anything unexpected happens, Private Crusher and Lucas, you'll be responsible for protecting the team while we complete the ascent." Corvus' gaze briefly connected with Lucas, who responded with a firm, confident nod.

Thea, observing this silent exchange, was reassured by Lucas' evident readiness. She had no doubts about Lucas' capabilities.

Having witnessed firsthand his unwavering commitment to the safety of his squad during the harrowing incident with the IgT-bombardment. His resolute determination to shield and protect had left a lasting impression on her. There was a comforting sense of security in knowing that Lucas would be right there with them every step of the way during their ascent of the wall.

Reflecting on those perilous moments, Thea acknowledged the depth of Lucas' dedication.

*'Yes, protecting the team is part of a defensive heavy's role, but his selflessness was what truly saved my life...'* Thea felt a surge of gratitude towards Lucas. She silently vowed to express her thanks in some proper way when the right moment presented itself in the future.

For now, however, she had new technology to scrutinise and equip herself with.

Corvus continued to address the squad, his tone turning more serious as he cautioned them about the limitations of the GravS devices. "A crucial heads-up about these GravS: While they are indeed powerful and versatile, they have a limited operational duration. Similar to most grav-lock systems, the constant engagement and disengagement with gravitational forces, along with countering other physical forces, rapidly depletes their energy. Their unique functionality, automatically adjusting their engagement as you climb, means they'll consume their internal power reserves at a faster rate," he explained, his gaze sweeping over the squad members as they fitted the disks to their gear, ensuring correct placement.

Corvus's message was clear and imperative: "So here's the bottom line: Use them judiciously. They supposedly have more than sufficient power to get us up the wall with quite some to spare, but don't push their limits unnecessarily. The last thing anyone wants is to plummet to their death because their GravS ran out of energy mid-climb," he concluded, his voice firm.

His warning carried not only the obvious concern for safety but also an undertone of concern for the squad's collective reputation. It was evident in his manner that he took the responsibility for the team's performance seriously.

The implication was clear: While the rest of the Alpha Squads might succeed in scaling the wall without any hitches, any failure on Sovereign Alpha's part, especially due to carelessness with the GravS, would not only be deadly but also deeply embarrassing.

Corvus clearly wanted to ensure that his squad upheld their status as the best Alpha Squad the UHF has ever had and such extremely avoidable mistakes were definitely not on the list of things he would allow.

Once everyone had secured their GravS in place, Corvus meticulously inspected each squad member's gear, ensuring the disks were correctly attached.

Satisfied with their placements, he motioned towards a towering tree trunk nearby and instructed, "Let's give these GravS a test run. It's crucial we're all comfortable with how they work before we approach the wall. Remember, this infiltration is a one-shot operation; we can't afford any missteps."

Corvus emphasised the importance of a controlled test. "Don't climb too high right now. The higher you ascend, the more power the GravS expends to maintain your gravitational lock. We need to conserve their energy for the actual climb, so keep this test brief and low." His instructions were clear, blending caution with the necessity of practical experience.

Thea watched as her squadmates, one by one, approached the tree to test out the GravS. Eager to experience this new technology herself, Thea quickly stepped forward to take her turn as well.

As she approached the tree, she remembered Corvus' words: *Simply walk up the wall.*

It sounded straightforward, but she couldn't help but wonder about the mechanics behind it.

Placing her boot against the trunk, Thea immediately felt an odd sensation.

The sensation was surreal—as soon as her boot made contact, she felt a bizarre, almost magnetic pull. Half of her body seemed drawn towards the tree, while her other half remained anchored to the ground. It was a disorienting feeling, as if she was being split between two different gravitational forces.

Convincing herself to lift her other foot was a surprisingly tough mental challenge.

It required overriding her instinctual understanding of balance and gravity. She struggled for quite a few moments, her mind wrestling with the concept of lifting the leg she was technically standing on.

As Thea adjusted to the unusual sensation of being anchored to the tree trunk, a fleeting thought crossed her mind, sparking a connection to a familiar pastime.

*'This feels a bit like StarEngineers, doesn't it?'* She mused, recalling one of her favourite games from the arcade in Lumiosia.

StarEngineers was not just any game—it was a fully immersive experience. It was one of the very few full-dive experiences available at the golden age arcade, complete with physical feedback suits that made the virtual world feel remarkably real.

In StarEngineers, players assumed the role of engineers aboard a space station, tasked with solving a variety of technical challenges. These ranged from patching up hull breaches to fixing electrical malfunctions and, most notably for Thea's current situation, dealing with gravity generators.

The game often required players to navigate the station using magnetic-lock boots, a feature strikingly similar to what she was experiencing with the GravS.

*'The principles of movement are quite similar to what I'm trying to do right now, aren't they?'* Thea thought, reassessing her approach to the GravS.

She decided to mentally frame the situation as if she were back in the arcade, playing StarEngineers and manoeuvring towards a gravity generator for repairs. This shift in perspective helped her recalibrate her mindset, making the task of lifting her foot seem less daunting.

With this new mindset, Thea tried to lift her “standing” foot once again. After a few more moments of mental adjustment, she succeeded.

To her delight and surprise, she remained firmly anchored to the tree trunk, standing perpendicular to it as if defying gravity itself. The realisation that she had successfully adapted to and embraced the GravS technology for the first time filled her with a sense of achievement and wonder.

It was one thing to magnetically lock yourself to a space station in zero-g, but another thing entirely to switch your entire gravitational pull on the surface of a planet.

The feeling was similar, but very much different when directly compared to one another.

A giggle escaped her as the thrill of the experience took over. *'This is incredible,'* she thought, her excitement bubbling up.

The sensation of the GravS binding her to the tree was unlike anything she had ever felt. It was as if the tree had become the ground, and she could walk around it as easily as if she were on solid earth. She slowly started to move, her steps cautious at first but growing more confident as she circled the trunk.

*'Moving around is definitely easier than the mag-lock boots in StarEngineers, yet I feel even more tightly attached to the tree than I ever did to the metal walls of the space station... This tech is definitely going on my to-study and to-buy lists, no question,'* Thea decided, making a mental note to acquire both the actual piece of equipment, as well as any documentation she could find about it.

Looking around, she saw her squadmates still grappling with the initial step.

As Thea navigated around the tree trunk, getting more and more adept at the strange feeling of looking at the world from a completely different angle than usual, she took a moment to observe her fellow squad members.

Many of them hesitated, their bodies struggling to reconcile with the conflicting gravitational pull. Even Corvus was among them, evidently trying to acquaint himself with the GravS for the first time, just like the rest.

It dawned on her that her avid gaming experiences, particularly with StarEngineers at the arcade, had inadvertently prepared her for this very moment—a realisation that amused and surprised her to equal degrees.

Her contemplation was interrupted by Isabella's voice, tinged with a mix of frustration and disbelief. "How the fuck are you doing this, Thea?! I can't—Trying to lift my leg is *absolutely* impossible. I trust Corvus' words and I can see that it works because..." She gestured wildly in Thea's direction, "But I still can't lift my fucking leg...?!" she exclaimed.

Thea could hear the bafflement in Isabella's voice as she struggled to replicate Thea's seemingly effortless adaptation to the GravS.

Thea approached Isabella, still walking along the trunk with ease.

She sympathised with Isabella's frustration; the sensation of defying gravity was not only counterintuitive but also required a significant shift in one's perception of movement and

balance. She considered how she could assist Isabella and the rest of the squad in adjusting to the GravS.

Her gaming experience provided a unique perspective, but the solution she had in mind gave her pause. *'Can this really work in reality as it did in the game...?'* she wondered, questioning the practicality of her idea.

Reflecting on her early days with StarEngineers, she recalled her initial difficulty in navigating different planes using the mag-lock boots. Like her squadmates, she had struggled with the concept, often disengaging the boots to move to a different surface rather than smoothly transitioning from one plane to another, such as walking directly from a wall to the ceiling.

The breakthrough had come during a multiplayer session, where a more seasoned player had offered a somewhat unorthodox but effective method of teaching.

In a surprising move, the player had kicked Thea's "standing" leg, the one that was on the floor, while simultaneously remote-disabling her mag-lock. This action forced Thea's other leg, which had been attached to the wall, to become her primary support. It was a practical, albeit startling, lesson in adapting to multi-planar movement, showing her that transitioning from one surface to another was not as problematic as she had initially thought.

Now, as she considered sharing this experience with Isabella and the others, Thea weighed the potential risks and benefits of such a direct approach.

Could a similar method even work in the real world with the GravS, or was it too drastic for this situation? She knew the importance of quickly adapting to the GravS for their mission, but she also wanted to ensure that her advice would be helpful and safe for her squadmates.

Observing Isabella's ongoing struggle with the GravS, Thea weighed her options before finally deciding to proceed with her unconventional idea. She rationalised, *'Isabella is arguably the toughest member of Alpha Squad. Though Lucas might have higher Vitality, Isabella is certainly more accustomed to rough-and-tumble situations. She's likely to be fine with this, right?'*

Thea carefully disengaged her GravS from the tree trunk, stepping back onto the solid ground. As she did so, she stumbled slightly, the sensation of shifting gravitational planes feeling just as odd as when she first experienced it. Regaining her balance, she turned her attention to Isabella, devising a quick plan to assist her.

Approaching Isabella, Thea offered some fabricated tips to help her focus on her legs. "Just concentrate on the feeling in your feet," she advised, trying to sound convincing while moving closely behind her. Isabella, following Thea's guidance, firmly placed one foot on the trunk, her concentration evident as she attempted to lift her other leg.

Thea braced herself, reminding herself of Isabella's resilience and strength, especially recalling their intense sparring sessions. She mentally prepared, knowing she couldn't hesitate if this was going to work.

A few moments later, Isabella said, "I don't know if this is working, Thea. I'm trying but—"

Seeing her chance Thea kicked out Isabella's standing leg with a swift motion.

Isabella let out a yell, a mix of surprise and indignation, but to her astonishment, she found herself standing on one leg against the tree trunk, defying her expectations of tumbling to the ground.

Thea quickly offered an apology for the abrupt action, but Isabella cut her off, expressing gratitude instead. "Thanks, Thea! I didn't think it would be that simple... I guess that a practical demonstration like this was exactly what I needed," she said, a hint of appreciation and surprise in her voice.

Isabella then took her first tentative steps along the trunk, perpendicular to the ground.

Seeing Isabella now confidently navigating the trunk, thanks to her intervention, was both gratifying and a little surreal.

Relieved that her unorthodox method had proven effective, Thea responded with a mix of honesty and nervous laughter. "I'm glad it worked out! I wasn't entirely sure if it would help, but I thought you'd be okay with it, even if it didn't pan out," she said. Isabella, still adjusting to the disorienting new perspective, responded with a thumbs-up, her focus firmly on mastering her movements along the tree trunk.

With Isabella successfully acclimating to the GravS, Thea knew what she needed to do next: Help the rest of Alpha Squad get their feet off the ground—quite literally.

She turned her attention to Lucas, planning to employ a similar approach with him. Given his high Vitality, Thea reasoned that he would be resilient enough to handle a forceful nudge, should it be necessary.

As Thea approached Lucas, ready to assist him in the same manner she had helped Isabella, she quickly discovered that her approach was less effective than anticipated.

"Ouch, ouch, ouch...!" she winced, clutching her shin in pain. Her attempt to kick Lucas's leg had backfired dramatically.

Lucas, unlike Isabella who had only worn her heavy armour, having dropped her backpack and weapons to the side for this test, was fully equipped in his ultra-heavy armour, complete with his fully-loaded backpack and the Stalwart slung over it.

When Thea tried to kick his leg, it was akin to striking an immovable object. It felt as if she had kicked a solid mountain, with a similarly useful outcome as if she truly had kicked one. It had absolutely no impact on Lucas and only provided a very painful outcome for herself.

Lucas, somewhat taken aback by the unexpected attempt, gave Thea a look that was a blend of surprise, amusement, and concern.

He quickly helped her find a spot to sit and rest her aching leg.

After Thea explained her intentions behind the kick, Lucas, while acknowledging the thought behind her strategy, suggested with a chuckle that the execution might need some

refinement. However, he agreed that the concept could potentially work for the other squad members.

He encouraged Thea to continue assisting the rest of the squad while he worked on mastering the GravS on his own for now.

Thea, nursing her sore shin but motivated by Lucas's encouragement, prepared to adjust her tactics and continue helping her fellow squad members adjust to the strange gravity-defying technology they needed to get a grip on for their infiltration...

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Fifteen minutes later, every member of Alpha Squad had successfully adapted to using the GravS, each managing to leave the ground and attach themselves to the trunk of the massive azure tree.

Thea had played a crucial role in this achievement.

After her experience with Lucas, she had adapted her strategy and successfully helped Corvus with a surprise kick. Corvus, having to acknowledge the effectiveness of Thea's unorthodox approach, had then used a similar tactic to assist Desmond in overcoming the initial challenge as well, wanting to get the whole squad ready for the infiltration as quickly as possible.

When it came to helping Karania, Thea quickly realised that her intervention was completely unnecessary. Observing her friend, Thea couldn't help but grin and shake her head in amazement.

There was Karania, effortlessly hanging upside down from a branch, her boots the only point of contact. Karania had not only mastered the GravS on her own but seemed to be experimenting with various orientations and angles, fully embracing the altered gravitational perspective.

'*Typical Kara...*' Thea thought affectionately.

'*Just when I think I might have something to teach her, she's already miles ahead.*' Watching Karania's ease and adaptability, Thea felt a mix of pride and mild frustration. Being friends with someone as naturally gifted as Karania was both inspiring and, at times, a little daunting.

It appeared there was scarcely anything Karania couldn't master, often leaving Thea feeling as though she was perpetually playing catch-up. Despite this, Thea appreciated the challenge and inspiration that came from having a friend like Karania, who continually set a high bar in everything she undertook.

Thea watched as Karania expertly manoeuvred from her aerial perch, a determined thought forming in her mind. '*One day, Kara. There will come a time when I'll have something to teach you, or I'll be able to help you with something,*' she silently vowed, her gaze following Karania as she dexterously navigated from the branch, a dozen metres or so above her.



When Karania eventually rejoined the group on the ground and Alpha Squad had regrouped, Thea noted that Corvus had already signalled readiness to the other squads. While Alpha Squad had been mastering the GravS, Field and Arrow Squads hadn't been idle.

They had been conducting reconnaissance, formulating a strategic approach for the imminent infiltration operation.

Morin, taking the lead, began briefing the gathered marines. The three squads sat attentively, listening as he brought out 3D drone scans provided by Field Squad's drone operator. The images offered valuable insights into the terrain and potential obstacles they would face.

Beside Thea, Desmond muttered under his breath, "That's incredible...! I need to get myself one of these scanning drones..."

Thea felt a flicker of unexpected kinship with him at that moment, thinking to herself, *'It seems I'm not the only one picking up new skills and insights on this mission. We'll have to do a big shopping day for Alpha Squad after this assessment is over, no doubt about that.'*

With a practised hand, Morin gestured towards the 3D scan projection of the wall in front of him, pointing out two specific areas highlighted in red and yellow. "Thanks to Private Wells' excellent recon work, we've identified these two sectors as our best entry points: Mark red and mark yellow," he said, his tone indicating the strategic importance of the spots. To Thea, at first glance, these areas appeared indistinguishable from other sections of the wall.

Morin continued, his voice carrying a blend of confidence and authority. "The guards at these locations seem less vigilant than elsewhere. Particularly, mark yellow lacks a dedicated marksman, which is unusual but definitely works in our favour. Our intel suggests they're mostly medium-armoured marines with standard assault rifles, which is similarly unusual. We believe the bulk of their more specialised forces, including snipers and heavy units, are currently engaged in the main conflict to the west. It seems Staff-Sergeant Venn's diversionary tactics are already having a profound impact, far beyond expectations."

He shifted his stance, leaning in slightly to emphasise his next point. "Field Squad will take the lead on mark yellow, ascending stealthily to then engage openly once they reach the top of the wall, drawing attention and creating the necessary diversion. This will pave the way for Sovereign Alpha and Arrow Squad to approach and scale the wall undetected."

Pausing, Morin addressed Sovereign Alpha directly, his gaze sweeping across the members. "A point to note for Sovereign Alpha: Diversion tactics like this aren't standard for infiltration missions. This approach is tailored to your current level of experience. Don't expect such accommodations in future assignments. If you aim to be counted among the elite, you'll need to adapt to more conventional infiltration methods going forward."

Morin's briefing continued as he gestured towards Viladia. "Private Viladia's unique Ability will provide the stealth coverage for your approach," he explained, his voice firm but clear. "This, too, is an exception to the norm. Infiltration squads typically operate independently, each bringing their specialised skills to the table. However, for this mission, we're leveraging

our combined strengths for maximum effectiveness and to get you on the opposite side of that wall for your assessment.”

His tone underscored the importance of inter-squad collaboration, yet also highlighted the need for self-reliance. “Remember, as UHF Marines aspiring to elite status, you must evolve to handle missions autonomously, *without* reliance on external support.”

After a brief pause, Morin's expression softened into a familiar grin, reminiscent of the more relaxed version of himself that Thea remembered from the Strike One mission. “Alright, let's drop the formalities,” he said, his grin widening.

“It's time to kick some freak ass.” The shift from formal briefing to rallying call was marked and deliberate, igniting a spark of competitiveness and determination in Thea and the marines around her.

The reactions of her squadmates, a mix of nodding heads and determined expressions, reflected a collective eagerness and readiness. Thea felt a sense of pride swell within her. *‘This is the kind of team I've always wanted to be a part of. No excuses, no whining, just a shared commitment to excellence and improvement. That's what it takes to reach the top.’*

For Thea, being part of an elite squad wasn't just a goal; it was a *necessity*.

After all, without being an elite, she would never reach the #1 spot on the leaderboards...