

Arc 1 - Chapter 83 - Infiltration II

Time seemed to slow as Thea's Perception sky-rocketed, her world seeming to enter a surreal state of arrested motion. Every detail around her became acutely vivid, each moment stretching out as if she was falling through thick, resistant molasses.

She watched, almost in a detached manner, as she descended past the first members of the second group. The faces beneath their visors were blurred streaks in her hyper-aware vision, but she could see the shock and concern etched on their features.

Medic Johnsen's face came into view, his head turning in a slow, almost laborious motion as he tracked her falling form. His expression, a mixture of surprise, fear and helplessness, was etched clearly in her mind.

Thea's brain raced, processing her situation with incredible speed.

*'I need to do something, **anything**, to break my fall,'* she thought urgently.

The idea of reactivating her GravS crossed her mind, but she quickly dismissed it as too risky—the devices might not reengage in time, could malfunction due to the shock of the impact, or worse, actually engage and abruptly halt her stop, utterly shattering both of her legs and her back from the extreme forces of an immediate halt.

She scanned her surroundings, desperately looking for something, anything, that could help. *'Can I grab onto someone? No, that would just pull them down with me. Is there any protrusion on the wall I can grab?'*

Thea's eyes darted frantically over the smooth surface of the rock-crete wall as she continued her perilous descent. The rock-crete wall was as smooth as ice when it came to providing any sort of grip or ledge to arrest her fall. The featureless expanse offered nothing—no cracks, no outcroppings, not even the smallest irregularity that she might use to her advantage.

It was a sheer and unyielding barrier, offering no quarter to her desperate plight.

In the midst of her frantic search for a solution, another idea sparked in her mind. Her Spectre armour was equipped with grappling hook modules; the very same one she had used during the final part of the 'Strike One' mission earlier in the assessment.

'Could I use them to latch onto the wall?' she wondered.

But almost as quickly as the idea formed, doubts followed. The extreme forces exerted by her rapid descent would be immense. Even if she managed to fire the hooks and they successfully attached to the wall, the likelihood of them simply ripping out of the rock-crete was high.

While rock-crete was incredibly durable in large structures, its composition also made it brittle when subjected to concentrated, high-impact forces. It was likely to shatter or crumble rather than provide a reliable anchor point for her grappling hooks.

Thea's mind raced, her thoughts a whirlwind of calculations and scenarios, each more desperate than the last. The cold realisation that she might not find a viable solution in time was terrifying, yet she refused to succumb to panic.

Every option presenting itself to her seemed fraught with risk, but doing nothing was not an option either. She knew she had only moments to act before hitting the ground with a potentially fatal impact.

In the midst of her frantic mental scramble, Thea's eyes caught a rapid movement from Karania, who was positioned towards the bottom of the second group. Even amidst her accelerated Perception, Karania's actions unfolded with astonishing speed.

Thea watched in awe as her friend's left hand underwent a rapid transformation. Bones morphed and extended into large, scalpel-like claws, reminiscent of the ones Thea had experienced firsthand during their sparring session.

With a swift and decisive motion, Karania plunged her newly formed claws into the rock-crete wall. The claws sliced through the material with an ease that belied its hardness, embedding themselves firmly. Almost simultaneously, Karania extended her right hand towards Thea.

The offer of aid was clear, a lifeline in the literal sense, but it was also a moment fraught with critical decision-making. Thea had to quickly determine whether to trust in Karania's ability to arrest her fall without endangering them both or risk pulling her best friend down with her.

As she rapidly approached Karania, Thea's mind raced with doubts and calculations.

'There's no way she can catch me by herself, not with just her arm embedded in the wall...' was her initial thought. But almost immediately, she reconsidered. *'But Kara... she's not just anyone. She's a literal genius. She wouldn't risk this, wouldn't risk both of our lives, if she hadn't thought it through. So, what am I missing here? What's her plan?'*

Time was a luxury Thea didn't have.

Her [Sensory Overdrive] was buying her precious moments, slowing her perception of time enough to observe, process, and strategize. Yet, even this extraordinary ability had its bounds, and Thea was hurtling towards the point of no return. If she delayed any longer, she would miss her chance to grasp Karania's outstretched hand.

In the fleeting instants before reaching that critical juncture, a realisation dawned on Thea, cementing her decision in an instant. *'Kara alone can't stop my fall, but she's not expecting to! She's relying on me to play my part too, to be an active participant in my own rescue.'*

This insight into Karania's likely calculations spurred Thea into action.

With a swift motion, Thea reached out with her cybernetic right hand to clasp Karania's own cybernetic arm. Simultaneously, she activated her grappling hooks, firing them towards the wall.

As Thea's metallic fingers started wrapping themselves around Karania's cybernetic wrist, she was acutely aware of the limitations of her own equipment and Karania's physical capabilities. Individually, neither of their actions would suffice; her grappling hooks were not designed to arrest such a high-velocity fall and would likely rip out of the rock-crete under the strain, while Karania, despite her anchored position, could not physically halt the momentum of Thea's descent alone.

Yet, Thea was banking on the combination of their efforts to create a synergy that could *just* save her life. This was more than a mere hope; it was a calculated risk based on her understanding of Karania's intellect and her own quick assessment of the situation. The brief window of time dilated by her [Sensory Overdrive] had given her just enough leeway to formulate this plan.

Now, as her body committed to the action, Thea knew there was no turning back.

Any modifications to her plan were out of the question.

Her heightened Perception allowed her to observe, process and command at incredible speeds, but the physical reality of her body's capabilities and the laws of physics were unyielding. Her body couldn't possibly adjust its actions as rapidly as her mind could conceive of new strategies while under the influence of [Sensory Overdrive].

As her metallic fingers finished wrapping around, secured a grip on Karania's wrist and her grappling hooks embedded themselves into the wall, Thea felt an abrupt, jarring deceleration.

The combined forces of Karania's anchored arm and the grappling hooks engaging with the wall began to counteract her descent immediately.

However, the sudden decrease in velocity came at a cost.

A piercing, unbearable pain erupted from the left side of her torso. The sensation was unmistakable—the sharp agony indicative of multiple broken ribs, a direct consequence of the collision with the tumbling body that had precipitated her perilous fall. She could almost feel the shattered bones pressing dangerously against her internal organs as her body was abruptly slowing down.

Despite the intense, overwhelming pain that threatened to consume her focus, Thea forced herself to cling to the sliver of hope that her desperate, split-second plan might yet spare her from a fatal impact.

Her mind, still racing with the heightened awareness provided by her [Sensory Overdrive], was acutely tuned to the precariousness of her situation. Thea understood the gravity of her injuries and the narrow margin between life and death she was now navigating.

This plan, a fusion of her quick thinking and Karania's rapid response, was all she had. She held tightly to Karania's arm, the physical connection a lifeline in more ways than one.

Thea's hope, however fragile, was shattered in an instant.

There was a sudden, heart-stopping lurch as Karania's arm dislocated from its socket, her face contorting in an expression of acute pain. Remarkably, despite the agony, Karania managed to stifle any outcry, maintaining a stoic silence.

Thea, still in the grip of her heightened Perception, saw with painful clarity that her continued momentum would only exacerbate Karania's injury, possibly causing irreversible harm.

She noticed, with a sinking heart, the blood pooling around Karania's other arm, the one embedded in the rock-crete wall. The material around the claws had already begun to crumble under the strain from the initial impact.

It was a clear, unmistakable sign that Karania was reaching her physical limits.

With a silent, heartfelt expression of gratitude towards Karania, Thea made the difficult decision to release her grip. Much to her surprise, Karania seemed to anticipate this decision, releasing her cybernetic grip at the same moment. Thea had braced herself for a struggle, for Karania to stubbornly hold on, but reality unfolded differently.

A bittersweet scoff escaped Thea as she fell away, her mind racing with a mixture of admiration, resignation, and self-reproach. *'I just wasn't clever enough to understand your entire plan, Kara. I'm sorry,'* she thought apologetically, her respect for her friend's intelligence mingled with a tinge of regret for her own misunderstanding.

Before she could fully process these thoughts, however, another wave of agony tore through her body. It was a jolt of pain so intense and all-consuming that it dwarfed all previous sensations.

Thea's descent was abruptly halted by her broken left arm, the same limb that had been severely injured along with her ribs from the initial impact with the falling body.

The sudden stop was agonising, the force of her halted momentum exacerbating her already severe injuries. Under normal circumstances, the intense pain would have been enough to render her unconscious, but the adrenaline flooding her system kept her grimly aware.

Her vision, clouded, blurry and tear-filled by the sheer intensity of her suffering, failed to discern what had arrested her fall. All she knew amidst the haze of pain was that her rapid descent had fully ceased. A small, almost inconsequential part of her mind registered this fact, providing a scant moment of relief in the ocean of agony she was drowning in.

As her heightened state of Perception from the [Sensory Overdrive] began to wane as well, the elongated moments of her fall, which had felt like an agonising eternity, started to recede.

Her Perception was returning to its normal state, the world around her gradually, yet quickly accelerating back to its usual pace. The brief respite her ability had provided was fading, leaving her to confront the grim reality of her situation without the buffer of slowed time.

She was left hanging, battered and in pain, clinging to the precipice between life and death, as the world rushed back to its usual, relentless rhythm.

Thea was suddenly and unexpectedly hauled upward by the arm that had miraculously caught her mid-fall, a fresh wave of excruciating pain surged through her body. The intensity of the agony was such that she could barely muster the strength to react.

Involuntary groans of pain slipped through her clenched teeth. Despite the overwhelming pain, a part of her mind remained acutely conscious of their covert mission. She made every effort to suppress her cries, keenly aware that even within the relative safety of Viladia's veil, they were not completely shielded from detection.

Moments later, additional hands were upon her, swiftly but carefully examining her condition.

Then, almost as suddenly as she had been caught, Thea felt a dramatic shift in her orientation. The GravS, seemingly reactivated by her rescuers, pulled her firmly against the wall. The abrupt change in gravity, though disorienting, was a small mercy compared to the free fall.

Being finally secured against the wall, Thea mouthed a weak, silent "thank you," directed at the vague figures of her saviours. Her gratitude was genuine, though she could barely focus on who they were through the haze of pain and dizziness.

Desperate to regain some semblance of clarity, she blinked rapidly, trying to dispel the tears and blur that obscured her vision.

As clarity gradually returned to Thea's vision, she found herself looking into the faces of two unexpected individuals: Desmond, Sovereign Alpha's drone specialist, and Medic Johnsen.

The sight of Desmond, nursing his own arms with evident pain and discomfort, immediately helped Thea piece together the events of her fall.

The realisation hit her with a mix of gratitude and guilt. *'Desmond caught me when Karania let go. It wasn't a random snag my arm got caught on; he grabbed my arm in time. He's the one who saved me.'*

While she was still processing this, Medic Johnsen was already at work, examining her injuries with a professional yet somewhat brusque manner. His methods, while effective, were not gentle, causing Thea to wince as he prodded and tested her injured arm and ribs.

Each touch sent fresh waves of pain radiating through her body, but she understood the necessity of his rough examination.

Soon after, Medic Johnsen paused and shot her a look, one that seemed to mix inquiry with a touch of annoyance. It was clear he was assessing whether she was capable of continuing the mission under her own power. Thea, despite the pain, quickly nodded in affirmation.

She didn't want to be a further burden and was determined to push through her injuries.

Thea couldn't help but reflect on her situation with a sense of self-reproach. *'This is the second time I've needed Medic Johnsen's help in just as many encounters. I've somehow managed to turn each mission we're on together into a disaster for myself. I'm not exactly making a good impression.'*

The thought weighed on her, adding a layer of frustration to her already troubled mind.

She was keenly aware of how her repeated injuries might be perceived, especially by someone whose job it was to tend to countless marine's health.

As Medic Johnsen completed his brief assessment of Thea's condition, he turned his attention toward the rest of the group, who had halted their ascent the moment Thea began to fall. With a practised hand signal, he indicated that it was time to resume the mission.

Almost immediately, his directive was acknowledged with a series of coordinated gestures from the various members of the unit, signalling their understanding and readiness to proceed. In a synchronised manner, the group resumed their vertical journey, each member methodically moving up the wall.

Thea, meanwhile, focused on retracting her grappling hooks.

The first hook had come loose during her fall, its failure a stark reminder of the close call she'd just experienced. The second hook, though it had managed to hold, was barely clinging to the wall, its grip tenuous at best. It was clear that without Desmond's timely intervention, her situation would undoubtedly have been much worse. As she dealt with her equipment, a surge of frustration and self-reproach welled up inside her.

'That was way too close... I can't believe my precognition failed to give me adequate warning about the body falling. If it had, I could have avoided this entire mess,' she thought bitterly.

The idea that her own abilities had somehow failed her at a critical moment was infuriating. *'Instead of dodging the danger, I ended up looking like a fool and getting seriously injured. What's the point of having these powers and dealing with all of this Psychic Gate shit, if they can't even warn me about something like this?'*

Thea's thoughts were a tumultuous mix of anger, frustration, and disappointment.

She had always relied on her abilities to give her an edge, to keep her one step ahead of danger. This incident, however, had shaken her confidence in her psychic prowess.

The realisation that her abilities might have limitations or blind spots was a bitter pill to swallow, and it left her questioning not just her precognition but her reliance on it.

As Thea methodically made her way up the wall alongside the rest of the unit, her mind was a whirlwind of thoughts, grappling with the recent failure of her precognition.

'Why didn't it give me enough warning this time? The alert was so brief, there was no chance for me to act on it...' she pondered, her movements almost automatic as she trailed behind the unit, with only Corvus now below her.

The more she thought about it, the more she began to piece together a possible explanation.

'Could Viladia's veil be interfering with my Psychic Powers? It's the only plausible reason I can think of for my precognition to falter like this...' Thea's mind flashed back to their

previous mission together, recalling how her precognitive warnings had also been uncharacteristically brief then.

*'Even during the gunfire incident in the middle of the no-man's-land, my warning came **just** in the nick of time. If I hadn't acted on pure instinct, we might not have made it. It seems like every time I'm under the influence of Vi's veil, my psychic abilities get muddled or delayed.'*

The realisation that Viladia's veil, while a powerful tool for stealth, might also be hampering her psychic abilities, was both intriguing and concerning. *'The veil definitely does obstruct my ability to see through stealth... so it's not a stretch to think it could be affecting other aspects of my Psychic Powers too.'*

This line of thought opened up a new avenue of consideration for Thea. The interaction between different Abilities and their potential to influence each other was a complex and largely unexplored territory for her.

Thea's understanding of synergistic and antagonistic interactions of Abilities was well-grounded in her experience with arcade games, where such dynamics were a common feature. However, she hadn't fully considered how these principles applied within the broader context of the Allbright System and the ongoing galactic conflict.

As she methodically climbed, her mind was deeply engrossed in unravelling the nuances of this new understanding.

The revelation that Viladia's Ability could counter her Psychic Powers, despite Viladia not being a Psyker, was a significant insight. *'If someone like Vi, without psychic abilities, can inadvertently affect mine, then it's entirely possible that others, including enemies, might possess similar capabilities. This is a game-changer. My current reliance on my Psychic Powers could be a vulnerability in certain situations.'*

'Before the Cube Trial, I depended more on my own skills, the strategies and tactics that James taught me. I need to rediscover that balance—to trust in my Psychic Powers, yes, but also not to forget the importance of my own inherent abilities and the instincts honed through training.' This thought process marked a shift in Thea's perspective.

She realised that while her Psychic Powers were a formidable asset, they should not overshadow the fundamental skills and instincts that had been the bedrock of her capabilities back on Lumiosia, the very same capabilities that had carried her through a large portion of the Cube Trial, before her latent Psychic Abilities started taking over.

Understanding the limitations and interactions of her powers was crucial, not just for her personal growth as a marine, but for the effectiveness and safety of her squad on future missions as well.

Being the squad's scout/sniper, it was her duty to make sure that she was at her absolute best at all times, in order to keep the rest of the squad properly appraised of any situation. She couldn't afford to overlook something, simply because her Psychic Powers claimed that nothing was amiss.

With these thoughts firmly rooted in her mind, she focused back on the mission at hand, continuing to follow the rest of the unit up the wall...

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Approximately ten minutes after their arduous ascent continued, the group finally reached the summit of the massive wall, signalled by Viladia's instruction to halt.

Thea experienced a mix of relief and embarrassment as they made the final approach.

Relief because they hadn't encountered any further horrifying incidents like the one that had precipitated her near-fatal fall. But with that relief came a sense of embarrassment, as her own ordeal stood out even more starkly against the backdrop of an otherwise smooth operation.

As they gathered at the top, Thea watched closely as Viladia received another Focus Link from Medic Johnsen. It was apparent that maintaining the stealth bubble over such a prolonged period and across such an arduous climb was taxing even for someone with Viladia's abilities.

Thea could only imagine the strain Viladia was under, her respect for her fellow marine, and friend, growing even more.

Despite the respite at the wall's summit, Thea was acutely aware of the throbbing pain from her arm and ribs. Medic Johnsen's earlier intervention had helped manage the pain, but the physical damage was done.

The broken bones in her arm rendered her unable to wield her Gram, forcing her to rely on her Icicle for the time being.

Positioned at the rear of the unit, Thea knew her chances of engaging in direct combat were slim, yet she understood the importance of being prepared. Holding her Icicle, she was ready to support the unit in any way she could, even if it meant simply staying out of the way and ensuring her own safety.

As the moment to crest the wall approached, Viladia conducted a silent, visual check with each member of the first group. Their nods and gestures of readiness were all the confirmation she needed. Then, with a subtle gesture, she indicated for Crusher, Lucas, and Morin to take the lead in surmounting the wall's summit.

The manoeuvre at the top of the wall was critical, particularly because of Viladia's stealth bubble. The bubble, being centred on Viladia, required precise coordination to ensure its effectiveness as they transitioned onto the wall's surface. Crusher and Lucas, both equipped with full-cover shields, were at the forefront, providing crucial protection. They had expertly switched the hand holding their shields during the climb, a necessary adjustment considering the daunting task of maintaining their shields overhead throughout the ascent.

As Thea and Corvus finally set foot on the top of the wall, they found Viladia already in position, her T2 Shooting Star drawn back with an impressive display of strength and focus.

The tension was palpable as the unit prepared for the next phase of their operation.

It was Morin's voice that broke the silence of the bubble for the first time since they had entered it, outside of Thea's brief groans of pain during the precarious fall before. His count down was measured and clear, "Three... Two... One... Zero."

At Morin's mark, the scene transformed instantaneously.

Viladia's bubble vanished, and in the same breath, she loosed an arrow from her Shooting Star. The transition from concealed to combative was seamless, the bubble's disappearance synchronised perfectly with her shot.

The arrow, propelled by the advanced mechanics of her T2 compound bow, hurtled through the air with terrifying speed and precision. It sliced through the air with an eerie silence before violently meeting its mark, a Stellar Republic Soldier crouched behind a makeshift barricade aiming towards the eastern-hand side of the wall.

The arrow didn't stop there; its momentum carried it through the first soldier and into another adjacent to him. Two soldiers fell almost simultaneously, each with a clean, eye-ball-sized hole punctuating their bodies where their hearts should have been.

They crumpled to the ground, lifeless, the efficiency and brutality of Viladia's attack leaving no room for doubt or delay.

Simultaneously, Morin unleashed a barrage of gunfire from his array-gun at another group. A spray of flechettes erupted, transforming into a deadly cloud of metal that enveloped the nearest soldiers. In an instant, they were reduced to nothing more than a red mist, the flechettes tearing through armour and flesh with indiscriminate fury.

Moira, too, demonstrated why she was known as the mountain sniper.

Her Lever-Action rifle, the Vigilant, barked out death with every pull of the trigger. She worked the lever with a practised ease, each action fluid and precise. Her shots found their marks one after another, soldiers falling to her pinpoint accuracy.

Between shots, she rapidly switched out her ammunition, adapting to the cover and positioning of her targets.

For those taking refuge behind sturdier defences, she had special rounds that ripped right through the rock-crete as if it were mere paper, each swap of her ammo rails allowing her to continue her deadly dance without missing a beat.

The sudden onslaught from the members of Arrow Squad was a remarkable sight and proof of their skill and experience as a squad. They had turned the quiet of the stealth approach into a storm of violence and precision in an instant, each playing their part in a deadly symphony of warfare.

Thea, standing on the wall behind the rest of the unit, was filled with a mix of awe and a renewed sense of purpose as she observed the efficiency of Arrow Squad.

The precision and coordination they exhibited were beyond her current capabilities without the aid of [Sensory Overdrive]. *'They move with such precision and synchronicity, it's almost beyond belief. There's no way I would have been able to start at the exact same second as the rest of them without SO. It's quite daunting to consider how far I still have to go to reach their level...'*

Sovereign Alpha stood momentarily idle, witnesses to the swift and brutal efficiency of Arrow Squad as they cleared their designated section of the wall. The aftermath was a reminder of their expertise, the area secured in mere moments after the veil had dropped.

The members of Arrow Squad, Moira, Viladia, and Morin, moved with practised ease, conducting thorough sweeps to ensure no threats remained. As they did, Medic Johnsen approached Thea, accompanied by Karania, Crusher, and Lucas.

His presence was commanding, his focus unwavering as he addressed the situation.

"Sit down, hide behind the shields. We need both of you to be able to do your damn jobs in the city. No more mistakes, is that clear?" His voice, sharp and authoritative, left no room for ambiguity. Thea understood the gravity of his words, the importance of her role in the mission's success.

He then turned his attention to Karania with a gesture signalling her to take a seat next to Thea. "And you, *squad* medic," he enunciated the first portion with a mixture of gravitas and anger, "*Don't* do reckless shit like this again. While it may have worked out somewhat *this time*, such actions will jeopardise not only your own well-being but the safety of the *entire* squad. If others in your squad were to get hurt later, what position would that put you in with your arms like this, huh? Consider the broader consequences before you act!"

With a calmer tone in his voice, his eyes met Karania's, as if to drive home the point, "Sometimes letting one member of your squad die is the best possible outcome, however hard it is to accept. You're a squad medic, not a god. Act according to this knowledge and make the hard choices that *need* to be made. As the medic, you're the *only one* who can make these calls."

Sitting behind the protective bulk of Crusher and Lucas' shields, Thea felt the weight of Medic Johnsen's admonition.

His words resonated deeply with her, highlighting the crucial role each member played in the squad's collective success. As Johnsen worked to treat her injuries for the second time during this assessment, Thea's resolve solidified.

She was determined not to let her squad down again.

'I won't be the reason for Medic Johnsen's intervention a third time,' she silently vowed to herself. This commitment was more than just a promise; it was an acknowledgment of her role and a dedication to rise to the expectations set by her team.

Her gaze drifted past the imposing shields of Crusher and Lucas, extending to the expanse of the wall upon which they perched. The wall, roughly fifty metres in breadth, was a mere precursor to the vast mission that lay ahead.

As Thea's eyes settled on the sprawling cityscape of Nova Tertius, a mix of awe and realisation hit her.

The sheer scale of the city ahead was overwhelming.

Yet, this exact area was the true purpose of their existence in this assessment.

With the section of the wall having been instantly captured by Arrow Squad, thanks to Field Squad's distractions, there was now nothing left standing between them and their assessment objectives, but the urban cityscape of Nova Tertius itself...