

Arc 1 - Chapter 132 - ???

PoV: Corvus Leander Sylarion

"I got another trap here, one second. Stay back," Thea's voice crackled through the comms, keeping the squad updated on her progress.

Corvus watched her intently, anxiety gnawing at him as he saw his scout crouched ahead without any cover—a direct consequence of his own orders.

Thea's unusually erratic behaviour up until now had only added to his unease.

Ever since that bizarre vision had gripped her, she'd been off her game. It was painfully clear how shaken she was, no matter how hard she tried to mask it.

Tripping over a tripwire earlier—a rookie mistake she would *never* normally make—was a glaring sign that her mind was elsewhere. Her downright frightening focus and sharp instincts were severely dulled by whatever haunted her thoughts.

They had been lucky so far—too lucky—and Corvus knew their streak wouldn't hold forever.

He needed to rethink their strategy, and fast. Leaving Thea exposed like this was a disaster waiting to happen, but the unsettling warnings from her vision had paralyzed him with indecision.

'I can't jeopardise the final mission of the assessment for the whole squad just because of her... but there has to be a better way than this!' Corvus thought, frustration mounting with every second. He had been wrestling with the choice to put Thea out front ever since the call had been made, but no alternative seemed any better under the circumstances.

From his vantage point behind Lucas, Corvus could just make out Thea's form, crouched low as she worked on disarming whatever trap lay hidden near the corner.

The tension in his chest tightened like a vice; everything felt like it was hanging by a thread, teetering dangerously close to disaster.

He opened his mouth, half-tempted to call her back, to order Lucas to give her cover, to pull the squad into a safer, more controlled formation—but before he could make such a decision and voice his command, Thea's head snapped up, her eyes wide with sudden realisation.

A wave of dread and guilt washed over Corvus, freezing him in place.

The orders he knew he needed to give now to protect the rest of the squad stuck in his throat as he hesitated, torn between his duty and the icy grip of guilt grasping at his heart.

"Shield!" Karania's sharp command cut through the tension, before anyone else even realised what was happening. Lucas snapped into action instinctively at the order, not bothering to question or doubt the medic's command, slamming the Stalwart onto the ground with a heavy thud, the shield anchoring and expanding in a seamless motion.

“Enemy Psyker, activate your Ability when I say so!” She added towards Lucas mid-motion of shouldering her Ruin to take a shot.

Corvus, meanwhile, was stuck watching on in horror as Thea desperately tried to dodge, her body twisting in a frantic attempt to evade whatever unseen threat she had detected.

But she was far too close and without any cover.

He could only stare, helpless, as a flash of light burst from the right-hand side and Thea’s head exploded in a gruesome spray of blood and bone, her lifeless body crumpling to the ground, a mere dozen metres from the squad’s protection.

Before the horror of Thea’s death could even fully register, the ambush was fully sprung.

At the far end of the hallway, a full squad of Stellar Republic Soldiers materialised as if conjured from the very shadows themselves, each flanked by two identical clones.

The sudden appearance of nearly twenty enemies threw Alpha Squad immediately onto the backfoot, the deadly timing of the attack leaving no room for hesitation.

Lasers and bullets filled the air in a storm of light and sound, slamming into Lucas’s Stalwart shield with a relentless fury, just as it finished fully extending.

The shield’s surface flared with impact sparks as it absorbed hit after hit, barely holding under the sheer volume of incoming fire, despite Lucas’ best efforts to help the grav-lock keep the shield upright.

The sharp hiss of energy bolts and the deafening bark of high-velocity rounds cracking past the shield, ricocheting off of it and impacting the walls and ceiling around them created a symphony of destruction, an unrelenting barrage that threatened to overwhelm them in mere moments.

Isabella, having taken up her position at Lucas’ far side as per usual, was hit almost immediately as part of her body was not behind cover when the shooting began.

The majority of the bullets and laser fire was caught or redirected by her heavy armour, but even Lucas’ ultra-heavy one would have struggled to make him come out unscathed.

A laser seared through a gap between the plates on her shoulder, a burning streak of pain that tore into her flesh and left her armour smoking from the inside out. A second round punched into her thigh, the armour having cracked and broken open from a previous hit, sending her staggering.

“Suppressive fire, now!” Corvus shouted as the cacophony around him finally rattled him out of his stupor, his voice barely audible over the thunderous clash of weapons.

Gritting her teeth, Isabella refused to back down, even as blood soaked through her armour and uniform. The Devastation roared to life in her hands, the massive rotary gun spinning up and spewing a continuous stream of bullets down the hallway, as she leaned heavily against the Stalwart to keep herself upright.

The sound of Devastation was deafening—a relentless, pounding rhythm that filled the hallway with a bone-rattling roar.

It was the only thing keeping the Stellar Republic's onslaught at bay, the furious hail of bullets ripping through the air like a storm of metal death. Isabella's rounds tore into the advancing clones with brutal efficiency, shredding their flesh like flimsy synth-weave and pulverising their armour into fragments.

The first retaliatory burst alone tore through half a dozen clones, leaving behind a chaotic mess of dissected limbs, broken bodies and shattered armours.

The Republic soldiers and their clones scrambled for cover, darting to the sides of the junction as they desperately tried to reset their offensive. They ducked behind walls and alcoves, regrouping after their initial strike had failed to decimate the squad outright.

In response, grenades arced overhead, their trajectories erratic but dangerously precise, bouncing off the walls and rolling ominously toward Alpha Squad's position.

One grenade detonated early, just shy of Lucas's Stalwart shield, its shockwave rippling through the squad like a sledgehammer. Shrapnel sprayed in every direction, razor-sharp fragments tearing through the air.

Isabella staggered, her body rocked by the blast, and she let out a grunt of pain as a shard pierced straight through her left arm. Blood seeped down her arm, but she didn't falter; her grip tightened on Devastation, and she continued to rain fire down the hallway.

Lucas gritted his teeth, his muscles straining to keep the Stalwart steady.

The grav-lock struggled under the onslaught, its faint purple glow flickering with each impact. The shield was their only lifeline, and he was visibly struggling to support it enough to keep it upright, his body vibrating and rocking with every explosion.

Desmond's drone, meanwhile, zipped overhead, darting through the chaos like a silver bullet.

It fired precise bursts of bullets at incoming grenades, detonating or shredding them in mid-air before they could reach the squad, its agile movements crucial to keeping Alpha Squad from being completely overwhelmed.

Despite their combined efforts, the clones and soldiers pressed on after their brief repositioning. The battlefield was a tapestry of destruction, with every second pushing Alpha Squad closer to the edge.

Corvus's mind raced as he took in the scene, the sheer scale of the ambush weighing heavily on him. His thoughts flickered to Thea's lifeless body, and guilt gnawed at him—a painful reminder that he had made the call that left her vulnerable.

'If only I hadn't thrown Thea out to die like that...'

But before he could linger on his mistakes, the sharp bark of Karania's Ruin echoed beside him, jolting him back to reality.

Corvus shook his head, forcing himself to focus on the present. This wasn't the time for regret—he needed to lead, needed to find a way out of this mess; if nothing else, then at least to make his call to send Thea out to keep the rest of the squad safe not for nought.

He cycled through the emergency plans he had come up with for a situation like this, settling on the one that seemed most likely to succeed in a mere moment. There was no room for hesitation now; they had to hold their ground.

“Stand your ground and kill them all!” Corvus shouted, his voice cutting through the chaos. “This is a [**Direct Order**]!”

At the same time, he grabbed two frag-grenades from the compartments on his armour, primed them and tossed them over the shield in the direction of the enemy.

One was almost instantly intercepted by a stray bullet ripping it apart, almost back-firing on him and the rest of the squad, but the other landed against the wall at the end of the hallway before sending a spray of shrapnel in all directions, eliciting cries of agony from the enemies unlucky enough to get hit.

The moment Corvus's command echoed through the hallway, a surge of power coursed through the squad, their Attributes boosted by his [Direct Order].

Lucas felt the immediate difference; the strain of holding the Stalwart upright lessened significantly, his muscles no longer burning with the effort. The shield, which had been struggling under the relentless assault, now stood firm, a near-impenetrable wall between them and the incoming fire.

Isabella, similarly feeling the rush of enhanced Attributes, straightened up, taking a few steps to the side. She no longer needed to lean on the Stalwart to keep herself upright; her legs felt solid, her pain dulled to a distant throb as adrenaline and the enhanced Vitality pumped through her veins.

The Devastation continued to roar in Isabella's hands, each burst of gunfire steady and precise, her aim sharper and more unyielding than before.

She didn't hesitate at any point, firing the moment she had even an inkling of an enemy daring to peek around the corners. Her rounds tore through clones and soldiers alike, picking them off one by one in a relentless barrage.

Occasionally, she even allowed the rounds to shred through the rock-crete corners themselves, eliciting cries of agony from any enemy foolish enough to think they were safe behind a mere dozen centimetres of solid material.

The squad's coordination tightened, their movements synchronised as if they were a single, cohesive entity.

Karania's shots became even more precise, her target acquisition honed to near perfection by the clarity brought on by the Attribute surge. Every bullet she fired found its mark, dropping clones before they even had a chance to react.

Corvus almost considered her to be Thea's equal in that moment, if not for the fact that Karania lacked the scout's uncanny foresight and the downright supernatural ability to distinguish between a clone and an original.

Desmond's drone continued to zip through the chaos, pinpointing stragglers and picking off those who dared expose themselves, all while simultaneously dealing with the occasionally incoming grenades. He saw it deftly swerve to the sides at speeds that blurred its exterior in his eyes whenever shots were levelled against it, before retaliating with deadly precision.

The squad began to claw back control, their bullets carving through the seemingly endless waves of clones. The crushing pressure they had felt mere moments ago began to lift as the enemy's numbers visibly dwindled.

For the first time since the ambush began, they had a fighting chance.

But just as Alpha Squad began to reassert themselves, a sudden shift rippled through the air—a strange, disparate wave that rushed toward them like a silent wind.

The temperature dropped, and the few still-functioning lights in the hallway flickered, their glow bending in unnatural patterns.

The bodies of the clones and soldiers at the end of the hall, once a token of their foolishness for attempting to strike at Alpha Squad, now appeared to blur and shimmer as though they were merely reflections in disturbed water.

Before anyone could fully comprehend what was happening, the scene before them collapsed into nothingness.

The clones, the soldiers, and the debris of battle vanished in an instant, leaving behind an eerie emptiness. The end of the hallway was suddenly clear, devoid of any signs that a life-or-death struggle had just taken place.

"Lucas, now!" Karania ordered, her voice sharp as she hunkered down behind the Stalwart.

Corvus only now realised what the medic had clearly recognised the very moment Thea's head had snapped upwards. He felt a profound sense of humility in the face of Karania's repeated brilliance.

*'Not only did she instantly recognize it **had** to be a Psyker that had surprised Thea, but she even set up a trap for them to walk into immediately... Karania's a true fucking menace, isn't she?'* he thought to himself with a mix of admiration and rueful acknowledgment of just how outclassed he felt.

If it wasn't for her having seemingly no drive to be a leader of any kind, Corvus would have long ceded the command of the squad to her. Her moment-to-moment tactics and the sheer

level of spatial awareness she seemed to possess regardless of circumstances, were something he could never even hope to begin to match.

Responding instinctively to Karania's command, Isabella quickly moved behind the Stalwart as well, positioning herself so that most of her body was protected while keeping her Devastation at the ready—the massive weapon still primed to unleash fury at a moment's notice.

In the next heartbeat, a surge of searing heat coursed through the squad as Lucas activated his anti-Psyker Ability—the same one he had earned from their previous battle with the enemy Psykers during the assessment.

Corvus had made it his mission to memorise every detail of his squad's Abilities, so he immediately recognized the telltale signs of Lucas's power taking effect...

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"Mind showing it off to her? I don't think Thea's seen it yet," Corvus said, directing everyone's attention at the table toward Lucas. Without hesitation, Lucas nodded and summoned the System to display his newly acquired Gold-rank Ability.

A holographic interface materialised above Lucas' hand, casting a soft, ethereal glow across the table. Thea leaned forward eagerly, almost seeming like she was ready to climb over the table to get a better look, her eyes wide with anticipation and practically vibrating with excitement.

For a brief moment, Corvus was reminded that, despite everything they had been through, Thea was still just a teenager—full of enthusiasm and curiosity, with the same youthful infatuations as any other person her age.

It was easy to forget that fact when surrounded by the sheer skill and firepower each squad member wielded, but moments like this brought it back into focus; they were all teenagers or very barely adults here.

Especially with Thea and Karania, the contrast was stark.

Ever since their meeting on the stage, when Major Quinn had demonstrated Thea's extraordinary capabilities in that questionable yet undeniably effective display, Corvus had struggled to view her as just another young Recruit. Her consistent overachievement on levels he hadn't even considered possible didn't exactly help to keep her grounded in his mind.

Karania, on the other hand, had revealed her depth more gradually, but equally as drastic.

Initially, she seemed like an over-enthusiastic medic with a penchant for scientific curiosity, but as days turned into weeks, and they shared private conversations about the squad, strategy, and tactics, Corvus began to recognize Karania as likely to be the most intimidating member of the team; even if Thea's combat prowess dwarfed all of theirs.

Yet, in moments like these, the innocence and youth they all shared shone through, reminding Corvus that they were just at the beginning of their careers, despite the weight they already carried on their shoulders as members of Alpha Squad.

“Holy shit, that thing’s awesome! Did you get it from the Psyker’s Bane Accomplishment?” Thea exclaimed after a moment, her eyes wide as she took in the details of the Ability.

Her reaction earned a smug nod and grin from Lucas.

“Yeah, that Ability really saved our asses back there. Would’ve been nice to have it when we faced those other two, but hey... Beggars can’t be choosers, right?” He replied, his tone light but proud.

“Beggars... *Yeah, right,*” Thea shot back, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “That Ability is utterly insane! Remind me to stay behind you whenever we’re out and about going forward, yeah?”

As the banter continued, Corvus took the opportunity to glance at the Ability himself.

Despite already knowing the exact wording, there was something mesmerising about the System’s holographic display that he couldn’t quite put into words. And with the recounting of their recent battles still fresh in his mind, indulging in a moment of admiration for Lucas’ new Ability felt like a brief but welcome respite before diving back into the final mission of their assessment.

[Active (Gold) - Mountain’s Determination - Level 2]

Requirements: 8 Vitality

Description: Allows the participant to expend a certain amount of their Stamina and Focus to grant a surge of Resolve to themselves and everyone under their direct protection based on a certain percentage of the participant’s Vitality. This bonus is doubled if the target is currently under the effect of a hostile Psychic Power.

Cost: 50 Stamina & 50 Focus - Vitality Factor: 50% -> 55%

It really was an incredibly powerful Ability, especially when used in exactly the way Karania had set it up during the ambush, Corvus couldn’t deny.

Watching it in action had been impressive, downright awe-inspiring in its effectiveness, but he couldn’t help feeling a twinge of envy.

He wished he had been the one to recognize the Psyker’s presence and the deadly trap they had walked into, leading to the Ability’s activation at just the right moment.

But he wasn’t going to let his pride get in the way of acknowledging Karania’s quick thinking—it was her tactical brilliance that had kept them from getting shredded by an ambush that was almost too perfectly executed.

His thoughts were interrupted as Thea’s voice pulled him back to the present. “How did it feel to get hit by that Ability? What happened afterwards, Corvus?”

He looked up, noticing Thea still half-perched on the edge of the table, her enthusiasm bubbling over as she eagerly awaited his answer.

Corvus couldn't help but chuckle at the sight.

Despite everything, she still had that fiery, youthful energy that kept everyone around her on their toes.

"Sit down properly, Thea," he gestured with a smirk, motioning her back into her seat. She sheepishly complied, sinking back into her chair while still leaning forward, hanging on his every word.

Corvus took a deep breath, collecting his thoughts for a moment before continuing...

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Immediately, they all felt their Resolve skyrocket, the chilling blanket that had been cast upon them ripped to shreds as Lucas' Ability took hold on everyone hidden behind his shield.

The sudden shift was like a curtain being violently torn away, revealing the grim reality of the battlefield in all its raw brutality. The pristine hallway was gone, replaced by the shattered remains of walls, debris scattered everywhere, and the smoking bodies of fallen clones.

Then, the illusion shattered completely, and the Stellar Republic squad previously hidden from their sight, caught mid-repositioning, was suddenly exposed—staggering, disoriented, and completely unprepared for the sudden shift back into reality.

Karania was the first to react.

The moment the illusion broke, her Ruin was up, the high-calibre barrel aimed towards the Stellar Republic's side. Her eyes locked onto a figure that none of them had noticed before—a soldier wearing slightly more ornate and expensive armour than the rest, clearly a commanding presence.

He was stumbling, clutching his head as if trying to shake off a sudden, massive migraine. Karania didn't hesitate for a second; her finger squeezed the trigger, and the Ruin barked thunderously.

The bullet tore through the air with an audible crack, finding its mark with devastating accuracy. The soldier's head exploded in a spray of gore, fragments of armour and bone scattering in all directions.

Karania's voice, barely audible over the noise, carried a cold edge as she muttered, "That was for Thea, *freak*."

The rest of Alpha Squad wasted no time either.

With the enemy squad momentarily stunned, they pounced like a pack of ravenous wolves, seizing the advantage in a flurry of gunfire and aggression.

Isabella stepped out of the Stalwart's embrace again with her Devastation roaring anew, unleashing a torrent of bullets that tore through the unprepared clones and soldiers alike.

Each round shredded armour and flesh, sending enemies crumpling to the ground as if they were nothing more than ragdolls in the path of a violent storm and punching holes through them in the process that were large enough for Corvus' entire head to fit into.

Lucas, now freed from the duty of having to support the Stalwart's grav lock, lobbed a series of grenades with his Havoc launcher towards the far-end of the hallway, the explosions ripping through the enemy lines and sending anyone unprepared flying against the nearby walls.

Desmond's drone zipped through the chaos as well, targeting stragglers wherever it found one outside of cover.

They were ruthless, efficient, and unrelenting—a brutal display of coordinated firepower and raw killing power that left the enemy with no room to recover.

Corvus could see the panic in the eyes of the Stellar Republic soldiers as they scrambled for cover, only to be cut down before they could even raise their weapons. One after another, they fell, bodies piling up in the narrow corridor, their armour offering no protection against the sheer ferocity of Alpha Squad's counterattack.

The fighting was over in moments, but it felt like an eternity of violence and noise.

The last soldier dropped to the ground with a heavy thud, the plume of smoke trailing from the bullet hole in his helmet lingering in the air.

His fall was followed by the immediate collapse of the two remaining clones, their bodies hitting the floor with a wet thud as they rapidly dissolved into a puddle of shimmering system fluid, leaving no trace of their brief existence.

For a fleeting second, the hallway fell into an eerie silence, broken only by the faint crackling of the ruined lights above.

Corvus took a deep breath, trying to suppress the adrenaline still coursing through his veins.

"Lucas, Desmond, secure the junction. Isabella, get yourself fixed up," he ordered, his voice calm and steady despite the recent chaos.

He didn't need to give any orders to the medic, as he had already seen Karania rifle through her medic bag for various implements and injectors before the last soldier had even dropped to the ground—she was, as always, on top of her game.

Corvus trailed behind Lucas and Desmond, who were moving with cautious, measured steps toward the junction. Desmond's last remaining drone flitted ahead, scouting the path that Thea would have typically cleared.

Without her sharp eyes and instincts, every move felt riskier, more uncertain, but the two Marines worked together seamlessly, Lucas positioning the Stalwart in a defensive stance to

cover the left-hand corridor, while Desmond's drone took the right, hovering vigilantly and scanning for any remaining threats.

As they secured the area, Corvus couldn't shake the heavy weight of responsibility—and guilt—off his shoulders. He turned his attention to the battlefield strewn with bodies, his mind on a singular mission—finding Thea.

He moved with grim determination, tossing aside the limp, lifeless forms of Stellar Republic soldiers like discarded rags, his eyes scanning for the distinct outline of her Spectre armour.

It didn't take long before he spotted her, slumped among the debris and bodies, her small frame almost swallowed by the chaos.

Gently, Corvus pulled her out from the wreckage, her body feeling impossibly light in his arms.

'She always seems so much larger whenever she's part of the squad. She's downright tiny like this,' he thought, a pang of sorrow piercing through him as he laid her carefully against the wall.

He searched for her helmet, only to remember that it had been obliterated in the attack. Not wanting to leave her like that, he pulled the hood of her cloak over her shoulders, trying to offer her some semblance of dignity despite the horrific circumstances.

As he stood back, staring down at Thea's lifeless form, a surge of regret and guilt washed over him.

He clenched his fists, silently making a promise to her, to himself, and to the rest of his squad. *'I'm sorry, Thea... I should have done better. I will be better. This is the last time I'll let something like this happen.'*

With a determined shake of his head, Corvus turned away, forcing himself back into the mindset of a leader.

There was still work to be done...

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"That's basically how that particular engagement ended," Corvus recounted, deliberately omitting the emotional turmoil he'd felt. He didn't need another round of Isabella's snark, and he certainly wasn't ready to relieve that pain in front of everyone.

Thea, however, was practically vibrating with excitement, her eyes wide with a mixture of awe and eagerness.

"That was fucking sick!" she exclaimed, her entire demeanour reminiscent of an over-excited kid hearing their first war story. It almost seemed to him like she was enjoying war-stories a bit too much; but he honestly preferred it that way.

Corvus couldn't help but smile at her enthusiasm.

It was refreshing—almost cathartic—to see her like this. Especially considering the anxious, uncertain wreck she had been the last time they talked.

“That still doesn’t explain how Desmond lost his leg or why Isabella and Karania were the last ones standing!” Thea complained, her voice tinged with impatience.

She bounced in her seat, clearly hungry for more details.

Rolling his eyes, Corvus held up a hand, signalling her to settle down. “Alright, alright. I’m getting there. Emperor’s breath, Thea, let me finish the story...”

He took a moment to collect his thoughts, piecing together the events of that brutal mission. After a brief pause, he continued, “So, after that whole mess, we kept going with our objective to clear out the building...”