

## **Arc 1 - Chapter 89 - Overthinking**

The squad absorbed the weight of the silence, each member immersed in their thoughts until Corvus decisively broke the stillness. He addressed them with clear authority, yet a hint of consideration, "Given the unusual nature of this situation, which is clearly more than a mere transportation routine, we should delve deeper into this. With over three days remaining to infiltrate the city and establish contact with the rest of the squads, we can afford to dedicate a single day to this investigation."

Thea felt a sense of relief wash over her as Corvus reclaimed the leadership role. His keen perception of her reluctance to make this high-stakes decision was a clear testament to his leadership skills. He added firmly, "If our investigation tomorrow doesn't yield significant results, we'll refocus on our main mission. It's imperative we don't lose sight of our primary objective, but this could be a lead worth pursuing."

Then, turning his focus to Thea, Corvus inquired, "Your insights have been invaluable so far, Thea. What's our next move? How do you suggest we proceed?" His seamless transition in handing the lead of the squad back to her was similarly subtle and effective.

Inwardly, Thea marvelled at Corvus' adeptness in handling the dynamics of leadership and social dynamics. *'His ability to navigate these social things is nothing short of impressive,'* she mused.

She admired his skill, yet felt a twinge of self-doubt, questioning if she could ever reach such a level of social finesse, regardless of how much she tried. It seemed to her that Corvus possessed some form of innate talent that she simply lacked, a natural flair for leading and connecting with people that went beyond mere training; something she would never achieve.

Thea took a moment to gather her thoughts, her gaze sweeping over the squad before settling on Lucas and Desmond. "Lucas, can you revisit the last scan for me? Check if the vehicle made any prolonged stops, or if there was any indication of offloading. It's crucial to understand their operations. They might have some kind of a base somewhere around here, if we're lucky." Lucas nodded, already turning towards the data on his screen.

Then, turning to Desmond, she added apologetically, "Desmond, I need you to trace the vehicle's path as accurately as possible. We need to locate that Mativ. We're somewhat in the dark without a specific target." Desmond acknowledged, his expression determined despite his exhaustion.

"Kara, hit him up with a stim if he needs it. We need this Mativ found today, at best. Tomorrow at the latest, or all of this time spent will have been for nothing," she addressed the squad medic, who quickly gave a thumbs-up to confirm the order.

After issuing her instructions, Thea felt the weight of their mission press upon her. She took a deep breath, refocusing her energy on the task at hand. Corvus lingered nearby, and as the squad dispersed to execute their tasks, he approached her.

"I hope I didn't overstep, Thea," Corvus began, his tone carrying a blend of concern and leadership. "I sensed your hesitation. Decisions like these often fall on the squad leader, especially when things could go south. It's part of the job to shoulder that responsibility. I didn't want to put you in a spot where you felt overwhelmed. A leader's role is to take the heat, so the team doesn't have to."

Thea listened, appreciating Corvus' intuition and the support he offered.

"Thank you, Corvus," Thea replied, genuinely thankful for his assistance. "This whole leading thing is a lot more difficult than I even wanted to imagine. It's not for me, that's for sure..."

Corvus nodded, understanding in his eyes. "Honestly? I think you're doing exceptionally well, considering this is your first time leading a squad. You've managed to get us all into a relatively safe position, led us through the outskirts and into the industrial sector without incident and even managed to find us some kind of clandestine military operation. And all that without anyone getting hurt."

He paused, letting his words sink in. "You need to recognize your own strengths more, Thea. Sure, the social aspects might not come as naturally to you, but in just about every other aspect that makes a marine? You're outstanding. You're already an exceptional marine, way above what even the rest of us in Alpha Squad can claim right now."

Corvus' voice turned more forceful, as if to hammer home the point. "*Don't* let this self-doubt of yours cloud your potential like this. It's very frustrating to see, you know? You've got what it takes to be an *Ace among Aces*, in my eyes. It's that self-confidence you need to work on. Once you harness that, there's no telling how far you'll go."

Thea stood there, stunned, a maelstrom of emotions swirling inside her. Corvus' words had struck a definite chord within her, yet she found it difficult to reconcile his perception with her own.

In her mind, she had always been racing to catch up with her squadmates and all the other marines around her, not leading them.

Corvus observed her struggle to respond, a knowing look in his eyes. "Thea, from day one, it's been evident to all of us in Alpha Squad that we've been trying to catch up to you. Mind my words: *Catch up*, not keep pace. We're so far behind you, that even thinking about keeping pace is an insult to you. And frankly, we're falling short. Well, all of us except for Karania, but she's a genius," he said with a light chuckle. "She's the only one somewhat keeping up with your rapid growth. You should be more proud and confident in yourself, not weighed down by self-doubt."

His tone then became more serious. "But make no mistake, we aren't going to just sit around waiting for you to sort through your insecurities. We will continue to strive and continue to improve at the fastest pace we can. If you let your self-doubt consume you, if you implode under its weight, we'll have no choice but to move ahead, past you. It would be a tragic waste to see someone with your potential fade away, but ultimately, it's a battle only you can fight."

Thea stood there, feeling as if the ground beneath her had shifted.

Corvus' words had opened a floodgate of emotions and thoughts she had long tried to suppress. Stuttering, she managed a weak, "I'll... I'll try my best."

Corvus gave her a reassuring nod, the corners of his lips curving into a supportive smile. "I *know* you will, Thea. That's just who you are," he said confidently, before returning to his desk to resume reviewing the mission documents.

Left alone with her swirling thoughts, Thea grappled with the dissonance between her self-perception and the seeming reality that Corvus had laid bare. The idea that her squadmates, whom she regarded so highly, were actually struggling to keep pace with her was almost inconceivable.

Wasn't she the one always playing catch-up?

Sure, she had the highest PV amongst them, but that was simply due to the lucky purchases she had been able to make, right?

She couldn't shake off the feeling that much of her advantage so far was due to luck rather than hard work. How much of what she had achieved was *truly* her own doing?

These conflicting thoughts—her self-doubt versus Corvus' unwavering belief in her capabilities—created a tumultuous storm in her mind, leaving her more confused and uncertain about her place in the squad and her path forward.

*'It's not like Corvus to have such a forceful heart-to-heart with somebody, unless he thinks it's necessary...'* Thea thought to herself, trying to make sense of the conflicting thoughts in her mind. *'I still lack so much, though... There's no way I'm ahead of them all, is there? Isabella is an absolute monster in combat. Desmond knows tech better than anyone. Lucas is downright immovable, physically **and** mentally, and his knowledge in vehicles is second to none. And Corvus... Well he's Corvus. I can't even begin to break down how much of what he does I couldn't even get close to.'*

Yet, a nagging realisation tugged at her—Corvus wasn't one for empty platitudes. His words were deliberate, intended not for comfort but to provoke thought.

In the squad, he was the compass that ensured everyone's mental readiness; however, this conversation had felt *different*. It wasn't about reassurance, like it usually was; it was a catalyst for introspection. Corvus, she knew, wouldn't stir such inner turmoil without reason, especially not during a critical mission.

That much was indisputable.

*'Then, where does my perception fall flat on this?'* Thea questioned herself. *'The evidence of their abilities is undeniable. Lucas is meticulously analysing tire tracks at this very moment.'*

*Desmond has not only repaired but enhanced his drone to a degree beyond my comprehension. Isabella's prowess in combat is proven, her feats in close quarter combat against the Stellar Republic soldiers on the very first day a literal fact. What am I missing in my self-assessment that Corvus perceives so clearly?*' Her mind raced, seeking answers in the complex puzzle of her own self-worth and capabilities.

Ultimately, it would be impossible for her to see herself through the eyes of others.

The only thing she could do was decide on whether to trust Corvus' words or not. She had no reason to distrust him, as he had done a phenomenal job as their squad leader so far, but she still struggled with the idea of taking his words at face value.

*'I'll try to better myself in this department... but how?' She thought, trying to figure out a way to move forward while keeping Corvus' words in mind. 'I need some kind of universally applicable statistic that either proves or disproves his statement. Something that isn't outdated, like the Cube Trial, and doesn't have anything to do with luck, like my PV...'*

The answer was as obvious as it was simple, she realised. *'The assessment rankings... That's got to be it. Leaderboards are exactly meant for this purpose, aren't they? To objectively measure somebody's entire skill at a certain thing. If I manage to get the top spot, then it's clear that Corvus' words were right, isn't it? I can then also compare myself to the rest of Alpha Squad, see where they end up!'*

A plan was formulating in her mind, to get a more objective take on her own performance. A plan that lined up with her previous goals perfectly: Reaching the top of the leaderboards for this assessment.

It had been what she had set out as her goal from the very beginning, but now, there was another reason for her to push for it, than simple competitive drive. It was a way of getting an objective self-actualisation and rating, which she could use to hopefully fix her own perception of her capabilities.

After all, the assessment rankings were unlikely to play favourites.

With this new outlook on her previous goal, Thea threw herself into a renewed bout of work, checking the tire-marks of the last scan alongside Lucas. She was fired up and raring to get things done, especially in regards to their current investigation.

If they managed to truly find the Mativ and secure its cargo, it would undoubtedly grant a ton of points for the leaderboard...

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As the hours ticked by, Thea and Lucas delved deep into the scans, meticulously analysing every detail. While the results from the third set of scans were less fruitful than they had hoped, Thea couldn't help but feel a sense of accomplishment.

The fact that they had managed to extract *any* valuable information from her three instinctively chosen locations was remarkable in itself.

Lucas, with his keen understanding of vehicles, shed more light on the characteristics of the Mativ Beta. His insights were valuable, giving Thea a clearer picture of what they were up against.

Recognizing her own limitations in strategizing a full-scale operation, she passed this information to Corvus. His tactical acumen would be crucial in deciphering the strategic implications of their findings.

While Thea and Lucas were engaged in their analysis, Desmond was back in his element, engrossed in the task of uncovering further clues about the Mativ. Thea, though cautiously optimistic, tempered her expectations.

Finding the actual vehicle was a very long shot, but any clue pointing towards its destination would be a significant step forward. They were piecing together a puzzle, and every bit of information nudged them closer to understanding the bigger picture.

She realised that she was slowly inching closer towards another realisation as well: Their collective efforts were vastly more exceptional than anything she could do on her own—each member contributing their unique skills towards a common goal.

Something about this fact tickled the parts of her brain that were still mulling over Corvus' words, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it, yet. But she felt like she was getting closer to an epiphany, regardless.

Tomorrow, they would continue their investigation, armed with the insights they had gained, ready to delve deeper into the mystery of the Mativ Beta's existence in this stretch of Nova Tertius.

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By the time the day waned and the industrial sector was bathed in the amber glow of the setting sun, Desmond's intense focus abruptly reached a climax. With a startling movement, he yanked off his Forge helmet, revealing the strain of his prolonged vigil—bloodshot eyes, and sweat matted hair.

The heavy thud of his T1 helmet hitting the hard rock-crete floor echoed through the office, jolting the squad members into alertness.

Close by, Thea quickly turned towards Desmond, her concern evident. "What's going on, Desmond?!" she asked, her voice tinged with urgency.

Exhaustion was written all over Desmond's face, but his tired eyes sparkled with a triumphant gleam. A fatigued yet unmistakably proud grin spread across his face as he made his declaration, "I found them."

Thea's heart skipped a beat at his words, her mind racing with the implications. She opened her mouth to ask for more details, but Desmond was already ahead of her, the excitement of his discovery lending him a second wind. "There's an entire hidden outpost here, right in the industrial sector. The Mativ was hauling something massive—tech of some kind, though I

couldn't get a clear view. It's big. Whatever they're assembling here, it's not just some small operation. They're building something significant, and it's not yet complete."

The moment Desmond locked his gaze with Thea, the air seemed to shift.

Their eyes met in a direct, unflinching manner, a stark contrast to the careful avoidance that had characterised their interactions since their first squad meeting. The intensity in his stare was palpable as he spoke with a newfound conviction, "We found them, Thea. This is our chance to hit them hard. I can sense it."

Thea was taken aback on multiple fronts.

Firstly, the revelation that Desmond had not only located the elusive Mativ but had also uncovered a complete hidden outpost far exceeded any expectations she had harboured.

This breakthrough was monumental, offering a definite turning point in their investigation.

But it was his deliberate use of her name, rather than the pejorative "Cyan" he'd habitually used, that *really* struck her. It signified a shift, a gesture of acknowledgment and perhaps even respect, which she hadn't anticipated whatsoever.

Overwhelmed by the sudden flood of information and the unexpected change in their dynamic, Thea found herself momentarily at a loss for words. However, before she could gather her thoughts to respond, Karania intervened, breaking the intensity of the moment.

With her characteristic energy, she inserted herself into the space between Desmond and Thea, her medic's instincts taking over as she began to examine Desmond. Initially, he squirmed under her attentive gaze, but as Karania's hand transformed with a series of unsettling cracks and fleshly tears, he froze immediately, "allowing" her to conduct her examination without further resistance.

Thea, momentarily dazed by the unfolding situation, quickly regained her focus. She addressed Desmond with a newfound appreciation, "Incredible work, Desmond. This is a significant breakthrough! Once Karania is done with her assessment, we need to sit down and delve into the specifics of your findings. The details will be crucial for our next steps."

Meanwhile, Corvus, Isabella, and Lucas gathered around, their curiosity piqued by the unexpected development. Corvus was the first to voice his thoughts, "We need to approach this with a lot of caution. Let's hold off on any direct action until tomorrow at the earliest. Desmond will undoubtedly need some time to recover after today's exhaustive efforts. Plus, we need to ensure we thoroughly plan our next move. If this outpost is indeed a strategic setup by the Stellar Republic, a preparation for a potential breach by our UHF forces, it's imperative that we disrupt their plans as effectively and decisively as possible."

The ensuing hours were dedicated to examining the extensive drone footage that Desmond had captured of the hidden outpost.

His drones had stealthily surveyed the area, capturing detailed images of the Mativ Beta parked within an open garage. Thea was particularly fascinated by the technical capabilities of the drones, which far exceeded her initial expectations.

*'I definitely need to take a closer look at those drones when there's a chance,'* she mused, impressed by their advanced features compared to the more civilian drones she had known from her home planet.

In the meantime, Desmond had retreated to a quieter corner of the office to recuperate.

He had provided a comprehensive overview of his reconnaissance mission, explaining how he stumbled upon the outpost and detailing the significant findings. The rest of the squad had bombarded him with questions, which he answered exhaustively, until Karania stepped in.

Recognizing the signs of extreme fatigue and resource depletion, she firmly insisted that Desmond rest. His admission of running low on Focus and exhausting his Stamina reserves during the operation had promptly led Karania to escort him to a makeshift resting area.

Karanja's authoritative stance on Desmond's need for rest was undisputed.

Her transformation into a menacing, scalpel-handed beast had effectively quashed any potential objections. Not that there were any—the squad unanimously agreed on the importance of Desmond's recovery for the following day's operations. Her intimidating appearance had merely reinforced the necessity of rest, ensuring no one dared to challenge her directive, just in case.

The rest of Alpha Squad had convened in the far end of the dilapidated office, a makeshift command centre, to allow Desmond some much-needed rest in the quietest corner. They huddled around the dim light of a portable screen, voices hushed but filled with a sense of urgency as they brainstormed plans for the next day.

Thea, her eyes intently scanning the drone recordings, broke the silence. "To infiltrate that outpost, we'll need some kind of significant distraction. A direct assault is absolutely out of the question—we're simply too few." She paused, pointing to the figures moving in the footage. "I've counted *at least* 30 soldiers, and that's just those who've actually stepped outside at some point. Realistically, we could be facing upwards of 100 enemies, if not more. Getting close enough to even glimpse that tech seems like a daunting task."

Corvus, leaning against a nearby wall, weighed in with a sceptical tone. "But what kind of distraction could we employ without revealing our presence? Alerting them to any sort of intrusion could backfire spectacularly. It might be wiser to keep them in the dark about us for as long as possible..."

Lucas, ever with a keen eye for defence and vehicles, added his perspective. He gestured towards the screen, highlighting the numerous vantage points. "They've set up multiple overwatch positions. Approaching undetected is near-impossible. There aren't even any nearby structures for cover either. They chose this outpost location strategically—it's a fortress." His finger traced the defensive positions dotting the factory's perimeter, each offering a commanding view of both the inner courtyard and the area beyond the imposing wall. "Not to mention the Mativ itself being completely impenetrable, if we don't find the access codes for it. That thing's an absolute tank of a transport vehicle, with thick full-T1

plating all around. We wouldn't be able to access it without some serious explosives, which means more time and more noise spent there."

Thea leaned closer to the screen, her expression a mix of determination and frustration.

"This is looking like an absolutely impossible mission," she murmured, scouring every pixel of the footage for a weakness, a hidden angle they might exploit.

The situation appeared increasingly bleak; the initial surge of determination and eagerness that had fueled them was gradually being overshadowed by the daunting reality before them.

The Stellar Republic's clandestine outpost seemed like an insurmountable fortress. For their small team of six, the prospect of breaching its defences to gain access to the compound, let alone laying eyes on the coveted technology housed within the Mativ, felt like an endeavour teetering on the edge of impossibility.

Karania, who had been quietly observing the group's growing dismay up until now, finally spoke up, her voice cutting through the thickening air of defeat. As both a medic and the genius of Alpha Squad, she often viewed challenges from an entirely different angle of approach. "What if we don't have to break in the traditional way?" she proposed, her eyes alight with a spark of mirth.

She laid out her plan, detailing a strategy that none had considered. "The compound's defence focuses on external threats, but what if we present ourselves as something else? What if we disguise our approach, not as an assault, but as something the outpost needs or expects? Like a medical unit, of sorts."

The squad, initially taken aback by the unexpected angle, leaned in to listen.

Karania elaborated on using their medical and technical equipment that they had on hand from the assault on the wall still, to mimic an emergency scenario that the outpost would be compelled to respond to, allowing them access under the guise of delivering critical aid.

They could disguise their more telling UHF armour designs by using the non-descript coveralls that had been given out as potential anti-chemical warfare suits in an emergency, where their own suits had been breached.

The idea was met with a mix of scepticism and intrigue. Thea weighed the proposal carefully.

"It's risky," she admitted, "but it's a level of deception they might not be prepared for. It's not like they're expecting us to be here, especially not this early, when the battle at the wall has just started..."

Lucas chimed in, assessing the logistical aspects. "It would require some seriously precise execution and impeccable timing... but," he noted, "it *could* get us past their initial defences. It might work."

The team continued to deliberate, discussing the feasibility of Karania's plan with a bout of renewed vigour. They examined every angle, from the potential risks of being discovered to



the opportunities it presented for gaining access to the compound and the Mativ. The idea, while unorthodox, offered a glimmer of hope in what had seemed like a hopeless situation.

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Hours later, as the discussion finally seemed to simmer down, Corvus stood up, embodying the role of the leader he often took on in critical moments. He methodically began to summarise the evening's discussion, acknowledging each team member's input.

"Karanja's idea," he started, his voice steady but tinged with the weight of responsibility, "presents a unique opportunity. It's unconventional and risky, but it leverages our strengths in ways the enemy won't expect."

He revisited the key aspects of the plan, highlighting how they would disguise their approach as an emergency aid scenario, exploiting the outpost's likely emergency protocols to gain entry.

"Let's be clear about our chances," Corvus continued, locking eyes with each member of the team. "This is not a guaranteed success. Far from it. The risks are significant, and there's a lot we can't control. However," he paused, allowing his words to sink in, "our odds, while not high, are better with this plan than any direct assault or stealth operation we can muster."

The room was silent for a moment, each member internalising the gravity of the situation.

Then, one by one, they nodded.

Until he got to meet Isabella's gaze, who had remained mostly silent for their discussion, only chiming in to talk about topics that pertained to her expertise: Firepower.

Isabella, who had been a quiet yet intense presence throughout the discussion, wore a troubled look, her brow furrowed in deep thought. It was as though she had been mentally wrestling with parts of the plan for hours, unable to grasp an answer that seemed evident to everyone else.

Finally, in her characteristic brisk manner, she broke her silence, voicing the frustration that had been building inside her.

"Why are we even trying to infiltrate this place?" she blurted out. "What's the endgame here? Once we lay eyes on this tech, what's next? We can't just steal it or reverse-engineer it on the spot." Her voice was tinged with self-reproach. "I feel like I'm missing something obvious here. I'm not a genius like Kara, nor have the strategic background of yourself, Corvus. Help me out here, please?"

Corvus, always poised and ready to explain, responded calmly, "Our goal isn't to *acquire* the tech at all. Given its potential danger for the rest of the UHF troops once they pass the wall, it would be most prudent to ensure it doesn't remain in enemy hands. If we can access it, we'll destroy it."

Isabella's eyes narrowed, as if the explanation only added to her plight. "Am I a complete fucking idiot or something...? I don't get it. If we'll destroy it, then *why*," she asked pointedly,

"didn't we plan to just blow it up from the beginning? What's the point of an infiltration to get close to it and take a look, if we have Thea's Caliburn? It can probably kill the thing from like a click out, if not more. Am I actually too stupid to understand what's going on...?"

Her question hung in the air, a moment of revelation that seemed to stop time.

The members of Alpha Squad looked at each other, their expressions shifting from confusion to utter astonishment.

It was a simple yet profound realisation; in their zeal to formulate a complex infiltration strategy that leveraged as many of their talents as possible to get a high enough potential success chance to seriously consider it, they had overlooked the most straightforward solution: Just blowing it up...