

### **Arc 1 - Chapter 70 - The Storm III**

In the wake of Legate Kuan's directive, Sovereign Alpha and the surrounding marines marched toward the nightmarish fray with disciplined focus.

To say that they weren't apprehensive, nervous or scared would be a lie, of course. But that did not change the fact that they would do what needed to be done. That they would do what had been ordered.

And the order was clear: Get into Nova Tertius

And the first formidable barrier to that goal was the wall that loomed menacingly before them. Undeterred, they advanced, resolute in their mission to breach the wall and seize the city beyond.

Lucas seamlessly transitioned to the squad's vanguard, his role now crucial in the anarchic theatre of war that lay ahead. The need for Thea's scouting skills had diminished down to nothingness in this cataclysmic battlefield where a single scout's observations were bound to be inconsequential.

What they required was a bulwark against the incessant barrage, and in that realm, defensive heavies were unmatched.

As they advanced, Lucas expanded the dimensions of his Stalwart shield—ordinarily, a feat reserved for when the shield could be anchored securely. But given the relentless gunfire already raining upon them, even before fully traversing the boundary of the SADD's dome, Lucas made the decision to absorb the initial onslaught on his shield.

It was a gamble, as the enlarged shield became substantially more unwieldy to manoeuvre.

Yet, the immediate need for cover outweighed any concerns for mobility, and Lucas plowed forward, his shield becoming both a literal and metaphorical bastion for Sovereign Alpha's advance.

Thea took note of the defensive heavies in adjacent squads, who seemed to have arrived at the same tactical conclusion as Lucas. They too deployed their shields prematurely, expanding their protective barriers even before crossing the perilous line demarcated by the SADD's dome.

It was as if a collective decision had swept through the ranks; a tacit understanding that waiting until they were within the SADD's killing zone to deploy their defences could prove fatally tardy.

Their shields blossomed into place, becoming sprawling ramparts that inched forward, a procession of mobile fortresses designed to safeguard those behind them. The act was synchronised, almost ritualistic, revealing the unsaid but deeply ingrained doctrine among the heavies: When uncertainty reigns, fortify the line, then push it up.

Not all squads were fortunate enough to have defensive heavies equipped with massive solid-cover shields like Lucas' Stalwart, however.

Yet, the variety of defensive measures activated by the different heavies was nothing short of staggering, a vivid demonstration of the wide array of System Abilities at their disposal.

In some instances, defensive heavies would grow in size, some by a full metre or two, effectively transforming themselves into living barricades. Their enlarged forms acted as human walls, their heavily armoured bodies designed to absorb or deflect incoming fire and shrapnel.

Others employed more esoteric methods.

Thea saw some activate a mysterious shimmering effect in front of their smaller, one-handed shields. This strange energy field seemed to reduce the velocity of any projectiles or debris that entered it, turning lethal bullets and fragments into slower-moving, less deadly objects that could more easily be handled by the light and medium armours of their squad mates.

One particular heavy drew Thea's attention as well, showcasing an ability that was a truly strange sight to behold.

His armour appeared to morph before her very eyes, unfolding like some intricate origami project into a dynamic barrier that moved along with him. Weirdly enough, once his armour had transformed into this barrier, his sides and back were fully exposed, revealing only the standard-issue UHF Private Uniform he wore underneath.

He had effectively shifted his defensive focus entirely to the front, an audacious move that could prove either utterly brilliant or stupendously foolhardy.

The sheer diversity of defensive mechanisms, all activated in anticipation of crossing into the SADD's deadly zone, was awe-inspiring. It was a patchwork quilt of individual skills and technologies, woven together by the common thread of purpose that all defensive heavies within the UHF Marine Corps shared: Protect the squad, at all costs.

The awe-inspiring showcase of System Abilities around her would have been a captivating spectacle under different circumstances. But the looming reality of crossing the SADD's outer perimeter stifled any enjoyment Thea might have derived from it.

As she stepped over the invisible boundary, the mysterious sensation coursed through her once again—a feeling akin to an ethereal brush against her soul—that sent a cold shiver cascading down her spine. She wasn't alone; marines in her vicinity had similar, palpable reactions. The momentary lapse in posture was corrected quickly, however, as they reverted back to proper marching formation behind their respective defensive heavies.

Sovereign Alpha, with Lucas at the helm, manoeuvred swiftly but cautiously, taking advantage of the cover provided by the nearest massive-shielded armoured vehicle. Known as Mules, these medium-type vehicles bore gigantic plough-shaped shields designed to bulldoze a path toward the enemy fortifications.

Their shields would form a semi-uniform line of cover for the advancing marines, a bulwark behind which they could find temporary sanctuary.

The plan was straightforward but audacious: Use the Mules to establish an initial foothold, allowing the marines to advance in relative safety until they could dig trenches and erect additional fortifications.

This tactical approach offered a modicum of protection, yet it felt like a fragile comfort.

The stakes had changed the instant they stepped within the SADD's effective range, where artillery could rain down from above and shatter even the best-laid plans. No longer encased in the protective canopy of the Azure Forest, they were vulnerably exposed to attacks not only from the front but also from above.

Simple trench lines, effective as they might have been in earlier battles, were insufficient here; they offered no safeguard against the skyward threats, not least because the Stellar Republic's elevated positions atop the wall would allow them to easily shoot down into any trenches.

Acknowledging this multi-dimensional threat, the UHF had devised myriad sets of contingency plans for on-the-fly fortification, plans that would come into play once the UHF Armored Division had fulfilled their role as the initial spearhead.

Yet, even with these plans on standby, the immediate reality was a scramble for cover behind the massive, plough-shaped shield of the leading Mules for all the marines on the battlefield.

Sovereign Alpha as a whole put their entire trust in Lucas, who continued to bear his Stalwart with iron muscles and resolute commitment, absorbing a medley of stray bullets, scattering debris, and the occasional well-aimed shot aimed in their direction.

And then, as if orchestrated by some malevolent conductor, the skies erupted anew with a tumultuous symphony of sound.

From the verdant canopy of the Azure Forest behind them, hundreds of smaller UHF ships burst into view, their engines roaring against the backdrop of the already saturated soundscape. Their entrance was both breathtaking and jarring, adding a new layer of intensity to the discordant ambiance.

Almost instantly, the Stellar Republic's anti-air emplacements on the wall—and, as Thea quickly noticed, even within the city behind it—sprang to life.

Streams of gunfire arched skyward, seeking the newcomers with predatory accuracy.

Within moments, dozens of ships were transformed into roaring fireballs, plummeting to the ground in a cascade of flame and shrapnel. Some unfortunate squads on the ground below became unintended casualties, their campaign for Nova Tertius ending in an immediate, devastating and fiery conclusion.

Yet the surviving ships broke formation, skillfully dodging the anti-aircraft fire as they unleashed their own payloads. Blue-flame rockets streaked towards the wall's apex, incinerating and suffocating hundreds of soldiers, high-explosive rounds targeted the Republic's fortifications, ripping into and tearing them apart, and rocket-propelled bombs were deployed to blast gaping holes in the very fabric of the wall itself.

Thea couldn't help but notice how perilously low these ships were flying.

She knew that this was not some artistic choice or a cavalier display of skill, however—it was a tactical necessity. The dome-shaped field of the SADD required them to come in low; if they'd approached from higher altitudes, they'd have been decimated the moment they entered the effective range of the defence dome by the Stellar Republic's pre-aimed anti-air emplacements.

Their best chance for surprise and effectiveness had come from using the cover of the Azure Forest to mask their advance. Yet, even with this surprise, the ships were turning into fireballs and scrap at an alarming rate.

In a span of seconds that felt like an eternity, the UHF ships had executed their daring fly-by.

The cost was steep; nearly a third of the ships that had burst forth from the Azure Forest were now smouldering wreckage. As they darted back out of the SADD's dome, the anti-aircraft rounds chasing them simply vanished upon contact with the invisible barrier, leaving a brief, eerie calm in their wake.

Yet their sacrifice had yielded dividends.

The momentary diversion had afforded the ground forces and armoured vehicles the opportunity to advance, if only slightly, under a lessened hail of enemy fire.

To Thea, it felt as though they had been slogging through this apocalyptic terrain for an endless span of time. Every step she took seemed to crush shrapnel and unspent ordnance into the ashen soil, the remnants of artillery barrages that had failed to find a living target or had been shot down by the seemingly infinite stream of tracer rounds pouring out of the gatling platforms.

Though she was aware of the overarching strategy, the absence of a clear end-point left an unsettling vagueness to their advance. The Mules would simply push as far as their progress allowed, right until the gatling platforms trailing behind them ran dry of ammunition.

Sovereign Alpha found themselves sharing their Mule and accompanying gatling platform with several other squads, huddling collectively behind these mechanical monoliths as they crawled forward. The vehicles were scarce; there weren't enough to afford each squad its own dedicated protection.

This scarcity ratcheted up the stakes for the marines considerably.

The loss of even a single gatling platform or Mule could spell instant catastrophe, wiping out multiple squads in a heartbeat. Without the suppressing fire from the gatlings or the massive

shields from the Mules, they would be exposed, vulnerable—sitting ducks for the artillery or the hail of bullets from the wall.

Despite the obvious importance of these vehicles, that even a common soldier would immediately be able to point out, they were not immediately destroyed by the Stellar Republic's frightening arsenal.

After all, the Mules and gatling platforms, while pivotal to the advance of the infantry, were far from the only pieces on this deadly chessboard of a battlefield.

The UHF AD had rolled out an array of other war machines, each bringing its own unique brand of havoc to the confrontation. From the formidable battle tanks with their thick armour and heavy cannons, to the mobile artillery platforms raining devastation from a distance, these vehicles served dual purposes.

Not only were they instruments of destruction aimed at weakening the Stellar Republic's formidable defences, but they also acted as high-priority targets designed to divert attention away from the Mules and gatling platforms.

The strategy was as complex as it was simple, designed to drown the enemy in a sea of tactical dilemmas.

Much like the intricate space battle unfolding in the skies above, the UHF's ground assault was rooted in creating an overwhelming number of problems for the Stellar Republic's defenders.

These forces were not infinite; they had a limited number of guns, a finite amount of attention, and only so many decisions they could make in the heat of combat. Every tank or artillery unit that drew fire or was destroyed meant one less Mule or gatling platform taken out of the equation.

In essence, each UHF vehicle acted as both a sword and a shield—striking at the enemy while simultaneously protecting the vital assets that kept the infantry advance alive.

This multifaceted approach rendered the battlefield a swirling maelstrom of decisions for the enemy, each one laced with consequence. For every choice they made, something had to give, and the UHF was betting that this relentless pressure would create enough cracks for them to exploit.

It was a calculated risk that went beyond mere tactical ingenuity; it also leveraged the UHF's unique Faction Trait to its fullest extent, adding another layer of complexity to the battle plan.

It's one thing to ask a marine to risk their life for their comrades—most signed up knowing that danger comes with the territory. But it's a psychological game-changer when you can assure that marine that they might not only avoid being targeted anyway but could also likely be resurrected if they were.

This was the true brilliance of the UHF's strategy for this assault: Their Faction Trait was not just a passive attribute but a dynamic element that significantly altered the equation in large-scale engagements like these.

This Trait transformed what would normally be seen as suicidal moves into calculated gambles.

In a conflict where both sides were expected to incur heavy losses, the UHF had an edge that allowed them to play the long game far better than any other faction in the galactic conflict.

Their soldiers could push harder, take more risks, and force the enemy into difficult decisions, knowing that the cost of a mistake on their part was most likely going to be far less devastating.

This unique advantage offered a psychological boost to the UHF forces as well, instilling a sense of audacity and resilience that could be just as important as any weapon or piece of armour in a conflict this dire. It was a facet of warfare that couldn't be measured in numbers or gauged by technology but could very well tip the scales in their favour.

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Finally, as the UHF ships roared overhead for their second assault run, Corvus's hand signal cut through the sensory overload, indicating that their Mule was preparing to halt and fully deploy its shields.

A wave of relief washed over Thea, mingled with an almost feral need to finally take action. *'Thank fuck. I need to shoot something; this suspense is fucking killing me,'* she thought, her eyes locking onto Corvus's signal as if it were a lifeline.

The slow, nerve-wracking advance behind the Mule had been its own form of psychological torture for Thea, akin to their tense passage across No-Man's-Land with Strike One. She felt handcuffed by her inability to influence the situation, confined to simply hoping that the grand strategy would unfold as planned.

What unfolded before her eyes and echoed in her ears, however, was an apocalyptic tableau that exceeded any preconceived notion she could have had about large-scale warfare.

She had witnessed countless squads evaporate—either their gatling platforms obliterated by lucky artillery shells that managed to pierce the nearly impenetrable curtains of tracer rounds, or their Mules catapulted into oblivion by the wall's rare, yet massive and formidable anti-armor cannons. Even the disintegrating husks of UHF ships occasionally plummeted from the sky, crushing soldiers and the life-preserving vehicles alike.

After witnessing the 30th tank or artillery platform in her field of view erupt into a fireball, Thea ceased counting. The statistic became meaningless, drowned out by the staggering, unquantifiable loss of life around her.

She had simply steeled herself, focusing only on putting one foot in front of the other, deliberately numbing her awareness to the grim reality surrounding her as she continued her march into the uncertain crucible ahead.

But all of that was about to change.

As the Mules began deploying their shields along the entire frontline, a palpable sense of expectation surged through the ranks of the infantry. It was their time to step into the spotlight, their time to turn the tide.

Entire squads specialised in combat engineering, fortification design, and trench-digging sprang into action.

As each Mule ground to a halt, powerful servos whirred to life, lifting the plough-shaped shields that had been leading their advance. With mechanical finesse, these shields unfolded—much like Lucas's Stalwart—into towering, near-impenetrable barriers that seemed as solid as the very bedrock.

As this transformation took place, a frenzy of activity erupted in the newly protected space.

Isabella, along with every other marine capable of wielding a spade, tore into the ashen soil with a fervour that could only come from those who understood the life-or-death urgency of their task.

Lucas, meanwhile, remained vigilant, his Stalwart shield still raised as a bulwark against stray projectiles and shrapnel that occasionally zipped past the unfolding Mule shields.

Observing this orchestrated dance of survival, Thea was struck by the skill and expertise exhibited by the auxiliary units. In particular, the trench-digging squads caught her eye.

Their work was a masterclass in efficiency and design, making the trench efforts of Lucas and Isabella in the previous week look downright amateurish by comparison.

Thea couldn't help but feel a sense of awe; she'd dug her fair share of trenches and foxholes during Basic Training, but the chasm between her own experience and the hyper-specialised skills of these dedicated teams was staggering.

In the brief span it took for the Mule's massive shields to fully deploy—a feat made all the more impressive by the colossal weight of the steel barriers—the trench-digging teams had already made astonishing progress.

Six distinct trench lines began to take shape in the churned earth: Four running parallel to the looming wall that marked the Stellar Republic's fortifications, and two zig-zagging their way rearward toward the forest. These latter trenches were clearly designed to facilitate swift movement of reinforcements from the Azure Forest behind them.

Almost in tandem, combat engineers and specialised fortification units had sprang into action.

As the crates were torn open, the first items to catch the eye were sizable platseel domes. These robust structures fit seamlessly atop the freshly-dug trenches, a clear countermeasure designed to shield troops from plunging artillery or sniper fire from the enemy on the wall. Their matte finish reflected a thoughtful design, aimed at absorbing and dispersing the energy of incoming projectiles.

Next, the combat engineering teams set to work assembling smaller, prefabricated versions of the gatling guns that had been mounted on the anti-grav platforms. These were the very platforms that had so far shielded the marines from the Stellar Republic's relentless artillery barrage.

Each gun was capable of spitting out thousands of rounds per minute, and was quickly installed in a couple semi-circular arrangements behind the Mule's massive shields, ready to unleash hell at a moment's notice.

The fortification units weren't idle either; they began constructing additional barricades and walls, all aimed directly at the imposing wall of the Stellar Republic. These seemed to serve as a backup layer of defence, ready to absorb any blows should the Mule's primary shields somehow be compromised.

Perhaps most intriguing of all were what appeared to be massive support structures that another squad of fortification experts rapidly put together.

These structures, which seemed to Thea like heavy, industrial-grade scaffolding, were set up to brace and reinforce the Mule's gargantuan shields. Built with quick-connect joints and durable materials, they looked capable of bearing immense loads, potentially adding an extra layer of resiliency to the already formidable barriers.

The synchronisation and skill displayed by the engineering and fortification squads were similarly awe-inspiring as the trenchers, especially because Thea didn't have any first-hand experience with any of the things these squads were doing.

Every piece of the separate squad's efforts fit together as though part of a grand design, rapidly transforming the exposed battleground into a miniature fortified stronghold, prepped and ready for the trials of the intense combat that lay ahead.

At last, the moment Thea and the rest of the marines near her had been waiting for arrived.

The Mule's expansive shields, which had served as both cover and bulldozer for their advance, now underwent a remarkable transformation. With an almost inaudible hum that was quickly swallowed by the cacophony of the battle around them, the shields flickered a mesmerising shade of purple.

This visual cue signalled the engagement of their grav-locks, essentially anchoring the colossal barriers to the ground beneath them. The flicker lasted just a second, but its implications were monumental: the shields were now a steadfast wall, bolstered not just by advanced technology but by the very gravitational pull of the planet itself.

With the grav-locks in place, the initial stage of the assault had reached its conclusion.

It was as if the board was set, the pieces in place, and now it was the marines' turn to make their move. The gravity of the moment wasn't lost on anyone; the transition marked a pivotal shift from advance to engagement. The ground they had claimed, now being continuously fortified with trenches, plasteel domes, and anti-artillery gatling guns, had to be held at all costs.



And beyond that defensive perimeter lay the towering walls of the Stellar Republic—an objective that seemed almost insurmountable, yet tantalisingly within reach. The next phase of the battle would not be for the faint of heart, and every marine knew it.

Their time to shine had finally come.

No sooner had the Mule's shields locked into place than a dozen squads of marines, Sovereign Alpha among them, sprang into action.

The previous huddle—compact and defensive—disintegrated almost instantly as marines broke the previous formation with their individual squads, rushing toward various points of the newly fortified front. Some darted to the trenches, making themselves low profiles behind the platseel domes, while others positioned themselves closer to the Mule's massive shields, all of them seeking the most advantageous angles for engagement.

Now, only 1.5 kilometres separated them from the towering defences of the Stellar Republic's wall—a distance they had managed to traverse through 2.5 kilometres of ashen, chaotic wasteland.

The cost had been high, paid in the lives of pilots, tank operators, and Mule drivers who had served as both shield and diversion.

Corvus led Sovereign Alpha in a tight formation toward the nearest trench line to the north. His keen understanding of terrain and engagement strategy guided them unerringly toward what he considered an ideal firing position.

Just as they neared their destination, Karania—always alert—suddenly broke away from the formation. Her eyes, sharpened by her medical training and a natural inclination for detail, had caught sight of a marine from another squad taking a hit the moment he peeked out from behind cover.

Without hesitation, she darted toward the fallen soldier, medical kit already in hand, her every movement a blend of urgency and precision.

As Sovereign Alpha took their positions, Lucas grav-locked his own Stalwart nearby, to allow for additional angles, before he began to set up his Havoc, angling it for maximum impact against the wall's defences.

Thea positioned herself within the trenches, her Gram sniper rifle at the ready. She located one of the shooting holes incorporated into the platseel dome that arched protectively over her.

The design of the dome was such that it shielded her from stray artillery shells and gunfire, offering a modicum of safety as long as the incoming fire didn't directly align with her own angle of engagement.

As she peered through her scope, the gravity of their progress weighed on her. They were close, closer than they had any right to be given the hell they had marched through.

And yet, the wall stood there, seemingly impenetrable, a monolithic challenge that awaited them now. She took a deep, steadying breath, calming her racing heart and bringing her focus to a razor's edge.

Her eyes narrowed as they followed the sight of her Gram laser-sniper rifle, zeroing in on one of the gunners manning an anti-air installation atop the wall.

This was the part of the war she knew, the part she had trained for.

Time seemed to slow as she gently squeezed the trigger.

The highly concentrated beam of photons burst forth from the barrel of the Gram, streaking across the 1.5-kilometer distance between her and the target in an instant.

The beam hit with pinpoint accuracy, its impact instantly turning the targeted area into a smouldering, molten mess of metal and circuitry. The gunner's head was vaporised in an instant, a quick, albeit violent, end.

The anti-air installation faltered, its rhythm disrupted, affecting the wall's overall defence network, if only for a brief, momentary instance.

It was a minuscule victory in the grand scale of the battle, but it was only the beginning...