

Arc 1 - Chapter 112 - Final Mission

Gram in hand, Thea quietly pushed into the room on her left, while Isabella took the one on the right.

Scanning the area quickly and attentively listening for any potential enemies, Thea signalled the all-clear to the rest of the squad. As Isabella stepped out of her side room and signalled the all-clear as well, Thea felt the day's tensions crash down on her shoulders all at once.

"Haaa... Finally," she sighed heavily, leaning against the wall of the apartment they were in.

Lucas, Desmond, and Corvus had already walked past her, moving further into the apartment to claim their rest spots for the night. Karania gave Thea a gentle pat on the shoulder.

"You've done good, Thea. High time to relax a bit now, huh? Tomorrow's going to be even more exhausting, I think." With those words, she also went further down the hallway towards the other rooms in the apartment they had cleared out earlier, leaving Thea and Isabella behind.

"Ungrateful pricks," Isabella complained with a clear hint of amusement in her voice. "Can't believe they'd just leave us here to claim the best spots. Unbelievable... Let's go, Thea, before we're forced to sleep on the stairs or something."

Giving the offensive heavy a quick nod, the two of them hurried down the hallway to catch up with Karania and the rest of the squad.

It had been a thoroughly exhausting week for Sovereign Alpha.

Thea and Isabella especially had felt the strain, as they had finally breached the Wall and entered the city of Nova Tertius proper. Their urban expertise—Thea focusing on navigation while Isabella handled most of the combat preparations and battle planning—had been invaluable for the rest of the squad to get through as smoothly as they had until now.

The apartment they had found themselves in was dimly lit, the only light coming from the occasional flickering bulb or the faint glow of distant fires outside.

The silence was broken only by the extremely distant sounds of combat within the megacity and the quiet rustling of the squad settling in.

The rooms were small but offered enough space for everyone to find a spot to rest.

Lucas had claimed a corner near a window, his grenade launcher within arm's reach. Desmond was already tinkering with one of his drones, checking its systems before turning in. Corvus sat against the far wall, methodically cleaning his weapons.

By now, they were part of a six-squad strong advance team tasked with clearing out one of the initial staging grounds for the assault on the SADD—their final mission for this assessment and one that nobody in the squad wanted to fail.

Having already failed their first mission of destroying or disabling the Control Stations in the lead-up to the main assault on the Wall, they all felt it was paramount to ensure this mission would be completed successfully.

No self-respecting Marine, much less an Alpha Squad member, would be content with a mission success rate of 0%.

While they had accumulated a significant amount of Credits, CP, and Merit, and completed numerous minor Faction Missions, Objectives, and a host of combat-related milestones, they hadn't made significant progress on the assessment-specific Mission Objectives.

This realisation had dawned on them after the gruelling and downright mind-boggling main assault on the Wall just five days ago. Seeing the sheer scale of the battlefield in such visceral clarity had jolted even the most stoic and individualistic among them into realising they were just small cogs in an unfathomably large machine.

It was time to start spinning properly.

For Thea, the past week had also been one of thorough experimentation.

With her four Active Abilities, barring [Sensory Overdrive], having reached their Minor Alteration milestones, she had spent considerable time testing each of them to ensure she fully understood what each Ability offered and which alteration would be the most beneficial for her at the moment.

One thing had also become quite clear during this experimentation period: She would *definitely* swap out at least one or two of them once the assessment was over.

She had a couple of Gold-rank Accomplishments and quite a number of Silver-rank ones as well, that she could crack open in order to replace the Abilities she currently had.

It was definitely something on her to-do list, but doing so in the middle of the assessment always struck her as exceedingly awkward. It was always better to learn how to use the options at your disposal to greater effect than to try and cram new options in at the last minute—this was something that had been true all her life when it came to gaming, so it only made sense that it would be true in real life as well.

When she had prepared for some of the galactic tournaments of AoC, she'd always go over her most-used moves and her mix-ups for her warmups, rather than try to learn one super high-damage but difficult combo she had never used. Similarly, she would avoid learning how to use a particular Ability of her character she had never touched.

That said, after spending around a week forcing herself to use the other Abilities at her disposal, she was certain that there were better ones out there.

'[Inspect Target] is definitely going to go,' she thought to herself as she prepared the sofa she had managed to claim in one of the rooms of the apartment. *'I'll recommend it to Desmond, though. It would be a lot more useful on him than on me if he could use it through his drones...'*

She had come to this conclusion a few days earlier, after trying her best to use it on what seemed to be high-priority targets, only to realise that there really was no point in the Ability in her arsenal. If somebody was eligible for the Ability to work on them, they were, by the very nature of the restrictions on the Ability, in the line of sight of her gun.

As a sniper, she could just take out the target immediately, rather than try to figure out what their Abilities did, what Level they were, or anything of the sort.

While undoubtedly great for infiltration and information-gathering missions, this wasn't really what Thea was moving towards with her current build. She was good at stealth, and infiltration was definitely something she didn't mind at all, especially considering that it had been the majority of what she had done in this assessment so far.

However, [Inspect Target] had proven useful exactly *zero* times in the entire, almost month-long battle.

As for her other Abilities, she was quite happy with where they were at, but both [Sky Step] and [Improved Sprint] were potential candidates for replacement. While they both served an infinitely more useful purpose than [Inspect Target], that wasn't exactly a high bar to clear.

[Improved Sprint], in particular, was something she wasn't particularly keen on.

It simply allowed her to run faster and keep pace with the rest of her squad, but more often than not, she was the one leading it. The stamina costs were too high for the Ability to be active all the time, so it really only helped her in those very rare situations where she needed to dash from one cover to the next.

'Viladia's [Shadow Step] should do the job a lot better,' she mused, thinking about the Gold-rank Ability Shard that her friend had promised her in exchange for intel on her Psyker journey. *'[Improved Sprint] will definitely be replaced by it, if not earlier.'*

[Sky Step], on the other hand, was undoubtedly cool and had its uses.

Thea had used it quite a number of times in recent days to scale obstacles or get thoroughly unexpected shooting angles at unsuspecting targets, but she wasn't *too* attached to it overall.

If something better came up, she wouldn't be too sad to see it go.

This was in stark contrast to [Penetrative Shot], which had proven its worth many times over and had become a major staple of her arsenal. The main issue with it was that it didn't work with Gram—an oversight Thea intended to rectify after the assessment, if possible.

Her remaining, and first, Active Ability required no second thoughts whatsoever.

[Sensory Overdrive] was, had always been, and would likely always be, her main signature Ability. She had long lost count of how many times it had saved her life or those of her squad members.

The incredible scaling of raw stats it provided, further enhancing other Abilities, made it the perfect foundational Ability to base her build on—something she had especially realised in the past week after her conversation with Zach.

But for now, before she could finally crash and pass out for the rest of the night—the rest of her squad having agreed to let her and Isabella get a full night's sleep—she had to lock in those Minor Alterations she had finally decided on.

With a few simple mental commands, she rapidly locked them all in before arraying them to take a proper look at their descriptions again.

[Active (Iron) - Penetrative Shot | γ - Level 7]

Requirements: Ballistic, Ranged

Description: Allows the participant to use up a certain amount of Stamina and Focus in order to drastically increase the penetrative power of their shot(s). However, this augmented shot is incapable of penetrating materials beyond a predetermined tier.

Alteration γ : When the Ability's charge is used up, immediately accelerates the projectile by 100%.

Cost: 30 Stamina + 30 Focus - Factor: 5x -> 8.733x - Maximum Material Tier: 1 - Effect

Duration: 1 shot(s) or 1 -> 1.933 second(s).

[Active (Silver) - Sky Step | β - Level 6]

Description: Allows the participant to use up a certain amount of Focus and Stamina to temporarily create a solid plane below their feet, up to a certain number of times. These planes are 1cm thick, 20x20cm wide, and can sustain a maximum amount of weight before breaking. The planes will break if enough force is applied to them, based on a factor of their maximum weight allowance.

Alteration β : Lowers the Focus and Stamina cost of subsequent uses by 25%, if used within at most two seconds of one another.

Cost: 30 Stamina + 30 Focus - Duration: 1 -> 1.66 second(s)

Maximum Planes: 1 -> 2 - Maximum Weight: 150kg -> 180kg

[Active (Copper) - Improved Sprint | α - Level 6]

Description: Allows the participant to use a certain amount of Stamina to briefly boost their movement speed, based on a percentage of their baseline, up to a maximum speed.

Alteration α : Improves the Boost Factor by 20% of the usual level curve.

Cost: 30 Stamina - Effect Duration: 10 -> 11.5 seconds - Boost Factor: 50% -> 56% →

67.2%

Maximum Movement Speed: 30m/s -> 39m/s

[Active (Iron) - Inspect Target | γ - Level 6]

Description: Allows the participant to use up a certain amount of Focus in order to inspect another participant's basic profile. The full basic profile lists a rough estimate of the Level, Attribute spread and the most used Active- and Passive-type Ability of the inspected target. This Ability relies on the participant's Perception Attribute to overcome resistances.

Alteration γ : If Resistance is broken by at least 200%, Advanced Profile will be displayed instead. (Advanced Profiles include the top 2 Active and Top 3 Passive Abilities, as well as the Class of the Target)

Cost: 60 Focus - Maximum Targets: 1 -> 2 - Perception Scaling: 20 -> 26%

Nodding to herself in satisfaction at her choices and the updated descriptions for her Abilities, she slumped onto the sofa and closed her eyes, falling asleep immediately...

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The very next morning was filled with last-minute reminders by Corvus about their mission parameters and the overall plan for the coming hours and days.

They had convened in what appeared to be the living room of the random apartment they had commandeered for the night, with everyone simply lounging and finding space where they could.

The apartment had a musty smell, a mixture of old furniture, dust, and the faint, lingering scent of mildew. The occasional distant rumble of massive explosions could be heard, a reminder of the ongoing battle for the megacity outside their temporary sanctuary.

Isabella was splayed out on a couch, clearly enjoying the soft comfort it provided.

Lucas and Desmond had found some chairs to sit on, while Karania had decided to sit on the floor next to a coffee table. The reason for her choice became apparent very quickly as she pulled out her blood-letting utensils almost immediately and began filling more and more of her blood into vials for the “ready-to-use-Kara-sealant,” as she liked to call it.

Thea had ended up on the same couch as Isabella, taking up about a sixth of the entire space as she had pushed herself up against the armrest on the opposite side to give the offensive heavy all the space she needed to enjoy the short rest.

Corvus was positioned centrally, using the other side of the coffee table—the small portion not taken up by copious amounts of canteens and vials filled with crimson liquid—to place his data-pad, displaying holographic maps and scans of the upcoming field of battle.

“Our upcoming mission is to fully clear out this compound,” Corvus explained, gesturing towards the holographic scan of an urban complex. The hologram showed a massive rectangular behemoth of rockcrete and glass that looked like it could easily accommodate thousands of office workers. “It’s a large office area, interconnected through skywalks and features a pretty sizable central park where our forces can make camp.”

He zoomed in on the scan, highlighting different areas within the compound with various colours. Red, yellow, green, blue, and purple sections painted the hologram in a rainbow of colour. “It’s far enough away from the main army’s current trajectory to not be considered a viable defensive position for the enemy, but close enough for us and the rest of the advance squads to quickly break off and lead a decisive strike against it. Our intel estimates around one to two hundred enemy soldiers stationed inside.”

“Two hundred at most?” Lucas interjected, eyebrows raised. “That sounds downright manageable, compared to the Control Station Mission.”

“Manageable, yes,” Corvus nodded with a terse smile, “but don’t get complacent. We’ll still need to be on high alert; wouldn’t be the first time Intel was wrong on things this Assessment.”

Corvus switched the hologram view to show the numerous entryways and exits of the compound. “The compound itself features more than two dozen entryways and exits. We’ll decide on how to get in based on what we see when we get there—we’ll play it by ear. It’s six stories tall all around with a flat roof, which is one of the main reasons Command is interested in this specific compound for the staging ground. It will allow our forces to not only commandeer a great number of sightlines but also allow us, as a squad, to hold down the fort fairly easily until the rest of the army arrives.”

“So... Clear out and hold? We’re just playing watchdogs until backup comes and then we’re done?” Isabella asked, a smirk on her face.

“Essentially, yes,” Corvus replied with a chuckle. “But remember, we’re not entirely alone on this, either. We have another five squads with us—two other Alpha Squads as well as three Beta Squads, one of which is from our ship. So let’s show them what Sovereign Alpha is made of. We don’t want to end up performing worse than our Beta Squad, do we?” There was an underlying tension in his words, emphasising the seriousness of their mission’s success despite the light-hearted jab.

A round of nods and agreements followed from the rest of the squad. None of them wanted to risk losing their status as Sovereign Alpha 01 anytime soon.

“As for where we can expect the most resistance,” Corvus continued, his voice steady and authoritative, “the red sections are confirmed enemy contacts by Intel. The areas marked in yellow are hypothesised to hold additional forces. Purple indicates areas where we should expect auto-turret setups or other automatic defence systems, so we’ll have to manoeuvre around those extremely carefully.”

He paused, his eyes scanning the squad before landing on Lucas and Thea. “Lucas, Thea, I trust that you two are ready to take out any potential areas like that? It seems you have some level of experience with auto-turrets,” he addressed them directly.

Lucas gave a confident nod, and Thea replied with a firm, “Absolutely.”

“Perfect,” Corvus said with a sly smile. “It’s honestly kind of a cheat to have the ability to just fight auto-turrets head-on like that. I doubt any other squad in this assessment can just decide to go straight through auto-turret defences like we can.”

Isabella chuckled, “Always nice to have an edge.”

“Indeed,” Corvus agreed, then continued, “Now, the green sections are potential supply caches. If we can secure these, they’ll give us a significant advantage, not just in terms of equipment, but also in terms of denying those supplies to the enemy. If we can’t secure them, they might be viable areas for explosives as they will likely include a not-insignificant amount of ammunition themselves.”

Desmond raised a hand, “What about the blue areas?”

“Good question,” Corvus acknowledged. “The blue areas are structural weak points. If we need to create new entry points or even cause sections of the building to collapse to block enemy movements, those are our targets. Desmond, I want you to coordinate with Isabella

on that—your drones can help identify and target these weak points without us having to just run up to every single one and manually check them. Though, naturally, it should go without saying that we will want to avoid any massive structural damage to the complex itself, as the UHF is intending to use it as a staging ground. You can't exactly stage much of anything on a pile of rubble."

"Got it," Desmond replied, seemingly falling into deep contemplation immediately about how to best direct and use his drones for this task.

Karania, still seated on the floor, chimed in, "What's the plan if we encounter civilians?"

The room turned a bit more tense at her question, and Thea couldn't help but think back to the one incident involving civilians during the Control Station assault.

'I figured Kara would still be upset about that... Even if it was necessary, I can't exactly fault her. She's always been all about saving everyone she could,' Thea mused as she waited for Corvus to answer—luckily, it wasn't her call, this time around.

"Good point, Karania," Corvus replied, his tone deadly serious. "If we encounter civilians, our priority is making sure they're not in the line of fire. We'll secure them in a safe location within the compound, forcibly if we have to, and continue with our mission—we can't afford to waste too much time trying to negotiate or argue with them. If they end up threatening us, they are to be considered enemy combatants; you should know what to do in that case. Any questions on that?"

The squad members shook their heads, even if both Lucas and Karania had a sour look on their faces as they did, understanding the necessity for such clear-cut lines.

"Alright then," Corvus concluded, his voice filled with his typical, all-encompassing determination. "We move out in ten minutes. Make sure your gear is ready, get some food in you, and be prepared for anything. This mission is critical, and I know we can pull it off. So let's finish this assessment with a bang!"

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Half an hour later, the squad led by Thea navigated the alleyways and streets of one of Nova Tertius' corporate districts. Towering skyscrapers and monumental office complexes loomed over them as they made their way through the urban jungle.

The rare thumps of extremely distant explosions from the main armies clashing dozens of kilometres to the south echoed faintly, adding a tense backdrop to their mission.

"Let's break off into the alley on our right here," Thea ordered quietly through their squad's comms. The massive battle raging to the south made the threat of detection through comm usage practically non-existent.

The squad followed her into a nearby alley, a damp and dark passage between two residential buildings.

Taking cover behind the outcrop of an indented entrance, Thea stopped and gestured for the rest to huddle up.

“Desmond, get us some eyes on the complex. We should be close enough now to give you some good angles,” she addressed the drone operator before turning to Corvus.

“Any plans on how to move forward? I can get us right on the opposite side of the street from the complex, but we’ll have to cross the street somehow. Do we want to smoke it out, go in guns blazing or...?”

Corvus took a moment to contemplate. “Get us closer and we’ll make a decision once Desmond has some more intel for us. I don’t entirely trust Command’s Intel after everything we’ve been through in this assessment so far. Better to spend some extra time to double-check and work off of accurate intel than blindly follow potentially faulty ones.”

“Roger that,” Thea replied, before gesturing for the rest to follow and dashing back out into the alley, not wasting any time.

Desmond started two of his four prepared drones, manoeuvring them through nearby buildings, streets, and alleyways towards the complex to gather the intel they needed.

The abandoned districts of the megacity were eerie and utterly silent.

A huge portion of the city had been evacuated, leaving these areas as complete ghost towns.

Hundreds of cars were piled up on the roads and sidewalks from traffic jams that had been abandoned during the evacuation.

They crossed the next street stealthily, using the abandoned vehicles for cover.

Thea led them through a nearby coffee shop to avoid running alongside the open streets, quickly and quietly manoeuvring them through the deserted establishment and out the back door onto the other side of the building.

Only one more street and building to clear, before they’d be standing right across from the giant office complex that was their mission objective.

“Empyrean Alpha 01 and 02, as well as Hegemon Alpha 01 are in place,” Corvus remarked over their comms. “Sovereign Alpha 02 and Hegemon Alpha 02 are approaching the compound from the west and should be ready by the time we get there.”

Thea nodded, signalling the squad to continue.

Once again, they crossed a street filled with dozens of abandoned vehicles before ducking into a nearby alley and reconvening.

“We will stop here,” Thea announced, gesturing for the rest of the squad to make sure they didn’t move past her—too great was the risk of an enemy soldier looking out of one of the hundreds of windows on the complex and staring down the alley they were hiding in.

The squad crouched behind dumpsters and in doorways, blending into the shadows of the deserted alley.

Catching Thea's implicit ball to take the lead again, Corvus asked, "Desmond, how's it looking?"

Desmond, his eyes focused on the feed from his drones, began his rundown. "The exterior of the complex is, unsurprisingly, heavily guarded. There are sentries posted at each of the main entry points—seems to be around a squad's worth for each entrance. They've got patrols moving in a regular pattern around the perimeter as well. I count about sixty soldiers just on the outside and the entrances."

He switched the view to show the rooftops and upper floors. "On the rooftops, they've set up a couple of sniper nests and lookouts. I have no idea how we'll get close enough to be hidden from them, considering that we'll have to cross that main-road... They also have a few automated turrets, here, here, and here," he pointed out, marking the specific spots in purple on the map that Corvus was providing with his data-pad. "Those will be a massive issue, if we can't take them out somehow. They're practically overlooking every conceivable angle of approach."

Desmond's drones then zoomed in on the windows, providing glimpses inside the building.

"Through the windows, I can see additional troops stationed on the lower levels, probably another hundred or so. They seem to be preparing for an assault, lots of movement and equipment being set up. It looks like they're expecting us—or something like us—, but they haven't spotted our exact positions yet. The other advance squads don't seem to have been spotted yet, either."

Corvus absorbed the information, considering their next move.

"We'll need to take out those auto-turrets first," he said. "Lucas, Thea, you two are up for the two turrets on our side. It should be these ones, here and here. You can take cover inside the building on our right," he pointed everything out on the map.

"Got it," Lucas and Thea replied in unison, already mentally preparing for their tasks.

With a focused look on his face, Corvus continued, "Isabella, Kara, Desmond, and I will be providing covering fire against any potential rapid responses from the alley. Let's get set up, and I'll comms in once the other squads are in position as well. Oo-Rah?"

A whispered "Oo-Rah!" followed before everyone darted off to their positions.

As Thea and Lucas made their way into the nearby building and up to the second floor, she couldn't help but feel a surprising sense of calm despite the daunting task ahead. The building was eerily quiet, the air thick with dust and the faint scent of mold. The distant thumps of explosions from the main armies clashing miles away occasionally vibrated through the walls, a constant reminder of the larger conflict at play.

'Not having to make all the decisions and lead the squad is such bliss... I'll never let Corvus push that on me again, that's for sure,' she mused to herself with a smirk as she double-checked and prepared her Gram for the upcoming firefight...