

Arc 1 - Chapter 115 - All-Out Assault

Stepping up behind the rest of the squad, keeping a few metres behind each of them to ensure errant gunfire or explosions wouldn't simply rip through the entirety of the squad in one go, Lucas, Karania, and Thea got into position.

"What's the plan, boss?" Lucas asked over the squad comms, his Havoc and Stalwart at the ready.

Thea and Karania took a few shots at Soldiers in the compound who had gotten a bit too eager to try and shoot at the rest of the squad, while they waited for Corvus to reveal how they were going to cross the street in front of them.

The street itself had likely been a main thoroughfare inside the city before, being easily twice as wide as the little streets they had passed before, or the one that Lucas and Thea knew the asphalt all too intimately.

Aside from its size, the only other main difference, which ended up being one of the big problems they had identified in assaulting the compound, was that unlike the smaller streets, this main thoroughfare had apparently been cleared out from any major debris or abandoned cars at some stage—it was a completely empty stretch of flat ground; exactly the kind of area you did *not* want to have to assault a fortified position through.

"I want you to use your [Remote Detonation] to lob at least three smokes right in front of the building; aim for the third floor and up, try to place the centre somewhere between the fourth and fifth floors," Corvus explained in detail, taking another couple of shots at enemy Soldiers peeking out of their cover inside the compound.

"Apart from that, blanket the roof with whatever you got and shield us from anything on the lower floors. We'll need the full shield for this, so it'll be a bit exhausting. Sorry for that in advance, but I see no other way we'll get through this otherwise."

Lucas simply gave him a double-click of his comms, not bothering to argue or ask for clarifications—his job was very clear-cut.

"Desmond, I need you to put three of your drones on [Overwatch]," Corvus continued, addressing the drone operator of the squad. "Don't bother trying to be precise, just lay down as much lead as you can. We need suppressive fire, not marksmanship. Focus on the areas Lucas' smokes don't cover and plug any gaps enemy Abilities might create."

Desmond hesitated, his concern evident. "I doubt they'll survive that. I only have four drones for this whole assault. Are you sure we're good even if I only have one left? I don't want another Psyker situation."

The run-in with the Psykers during the Control Station 1 mission had decidedly left its mark on Desmond.

Over the past week, Thea had noticed he had been more cautious with his drones, refusing to go below two unless Corvus explicitly ordered it.

Not having a drone to scout or distract the Psykers had cost them dearly—Desmond especially, as he had been killed by the first attack thrown at him with no way to retaliate or preempt it.

“It should be fine,” Corvus replied after a few moments of thought. “We have Thea to warn us if any Psykers are nearby, and Lucas’ new Ability gives us more time to adjust and figure out what’s going on if it comes to a head-to-head. We’ll all be huddling behind his shield anyway, so even if they have Psykers nearby, we should be fine.”

Corvus’ response was thoughtful, considering Desmond’s concerns rather than dismissing them outright. It was a trait Thea had come to appreciate in Corvus over the past few weeks.

He rarely ruled the squad with an iron fist, insisting on his orders without entertaining other ideas. Whenever he did, it was usually for a very good reason, such as the pressure of time not allowing for any in-depth discussions or second thoughts.

This openness to other ideas and willingness to compromise was likely why none of the members of Alpha Squad had ever protested Corvus’ implicit bid for Squad Leader.

While they had never officially agreed or voted on who should lead the squad, Corvus had taken the role upon himself from the very first day. Sure, there had been some tension early on, as everyone in the squad was the best in their respective fields, and pride was a natural side effect.

But by now, the squad had thoroughly accepted him as their leader without reservation.

“You got it,” Desmond replied, huddling behind cover as he launched another drone. The two he had already deployed during the onset of the assault had returned over the last few minutes and were now hovering behind the squad, ready to jump back into action at his command.

“Isabella, Thea, I need the two of you to thoroughly destroy whatever is in our way; don’t hold back. We can’t afford to get bogged down in a firefight in the middle of the street and risk losing the element of surprise before we’re on the other side,” Corvus addressed Isabella and Thea.

“Do whatever you need to do to scythe through any resistance. Don’t worry about conserving Resources right now; we can recoup some after we take control of this side of the compound. Once we’re inside, we should have an easier time. I doubt there are many squads that could beat us in a head-to-head.”

“That’s what I fucking like to hear!” Isabella roared, her Devastator spitting round after round towards the compound’s fifth floor. Her bullets ripped through walls, white-foam, cubicles, and anything else in their path, leaving behind a trail of destruction. “You got it, boss. I’ll tear ‘em a new one—or five!”

Thea couldn’t hide a big smile at Isabella’s enthusiastic reply but opted for a more low-key double-click confirmation herself.

'No need to conserve Resources, huh? I can definitely work with that,' she thought, excitement bubbling up inside her. 'I shouldn't go too far, though. I still need to keep some in reserve for any potential Psykers that might show up. There's no shot we'll be able to capture and hold this compound without one of them making an appearance. Not this close to the enemy lines...'

Finally, Corvus addressed Karania with a slight chuckle, "And for our Medic... I guess just do your thing; I really can't tell you anything at this stage. You probably know where to be and when better than anyone else in this squad, so just keep doing your thing."

Thea shook her head as her eyes met Karania's, the medic giving her a big, smug smile in return.

"Copy that," Karania replied over the squad comms.

The plan was ready to go.

With a clear smile audible in his voice, Corvus said, "Let's show 'em what we're made of, Alpha Squad. Oo-rah?"

"Oo-rah!" the rest of the squad replied in unison.

"Lucas, whenever you're ready."

The squad abruptly turned quiet, preparing themselves mentally and physically for the next few minutes. Thea rolled her shoulders lightly, warming up her arms and gently flexing her fingers before properly taking the Gram in hand, ready for action.

Lucas visually confirmed everybody's readiness once more, then raised his Havoc grenade launcher high. The dull thumps of the three smoke grenades being launched in a high arc across the street signalled the rest of the squad to get moving.

Immediately, Lucas charged forward, the Stalwart unfolding in his hands to full size as he fired the rest of his grenades as high up the compound as he could manage. Desmond's drones shot past them at a quick pace, darting into the sky and zigzagging out of sight before a series of rapid-fire cracks rang out from different locations to their left and right; the drones moved erratically and unloaded their guns into the compound.

Isabella sprinted alongside Lucas, firing her Devastator mid-run with seemingly no actual effort, as if the massive rotary machine gun were some kind of SMG designed for running and gunning.

Thea couldn't help but be impressed by the other woman's sheer level of Strength and comfort with the weapon, knowing she would likely have issues firing the Devastator while standing still without getting rocked around.

Refusing to be outdone, Thea took her place between the two heavies and fired her Gram at any targets foolish enough to push towards the glass-covered fronts of the compound in an attempt to get a quick shot at their surprising charge.

The lasers of her weapon ripped through the air again and again, finding their marks with terrifying ease and precision, never missing or failing to get the desired effect.

Their sudden assault had clearly caught the Stellar Republic's Soldiers off guard, throwing them into utter chaos.

Dozens of enemies positioned around the bottom of the building, behind pillars or other solid parts, desperately fired their guns and lasers, trying to keep Alpha Squad at bay. Grenades flew through the air, their explosions only adding to the cacophony of the battlefield.

But there was no unified response, no proper line to hold them back yet.

It was merely individual Soldiers or smaller pockets of Squads trying their best to react to the unexpected situation.

"Move, move, move! Get us into the compound, that's a [Direct Order]!" Corvus shouted over the comms, his voice cutting through the chaos like a knife as he activated his signature Ability. The surge of energy filled the rest of the squad, their Attributes further increased by their leader's System Ability.

Isabella turned even more into a whirlwind of destruction as she felt the boost, her Devastator roaring as she mowed down anyone foolish enough to show their face. A manic grin plastered on her face, the roar of her weapon drowned out all other sounds except those piped through the squad comms.

The high calibre bullets ripped through enemy combatants, leaving a trail of gore and devastation in their wake as the weapon continued to spit death with unrelenting fury, each round tearing through the enemy's defences.

Pillars of reinforced rockcrete were simply covered in a hail of gunfire, exploding in dangerous shards of debris and tearing straight through them with terrifying ease before the Soldiers seeking cover behind them were turned into nothing but red mist.

Those hiding behind more solid areas, such as low walls or separate segments, ducked down and refused to peek out again. The first half dozen who had tried to take a shot were met with Isabella's fury, her massive machine gun swinging around like it was nothing but a toy, all the while paying out death and destruction wherever it was aimed.

Thea felt similarly invigorated, her Perception skyrocketing further as Corvus' Gold-rank Ability took hold with multiplicative scaling.

The world around her became sharper and more defined, her legs moving with newfound ease to keep up with the two heavies leading the charge.

'*Time to follow the squad leader's orders. Time to shine,*' she told herself with a predatory grin. She had gotten permission to go all out; so all out she would go.

'Sensory Overdrive.'

The world around her slowed to a crawl as her Perception further skyrocketed, the massive increase from her signature Ability further amplified by Corvus' own.

Focusing her entire attention on her Perception, Thea let her muscle memory and Psychic Senses take full control, reliably shooting and killing any enemy that entered her line of sight.

She removed everything not relevant to the mission from her heightened awareness.

Sounds became muffled, then vanished entirely. The lights from her laser, the explosions around her, and even the sun's reflection on the few remaining shards of glass in the offices above, all turned muted before fully disappearing.

In this monochromatic view of the battlefield, only the enemies appeared in vivid clarity.

Their footsteps, yells, breathing, and heartbeats were beacons in her silent world, waiting to be reaped the moment they stepped into her sights.

The moment they did, Thea did not miss.

In this filtered world, enemies stood out with stark, obvious contrast.

Bright colours, exact contours, minute details, and precise outlines were all vivid against the drab world of her filtered senses. Every subtle movement, every flicker of a shadow, was a clear signal to her heightened perception.

In front and slightly to the left, an enemy Soldier peeked out from behind a half-destroyed, broken pillar. As his head and shoulder appeared in her line of sight, they seemed to practically glow with intensity, sharply defined against the grayscale surroundings.

Thea had long heard the rustle of his uniform and the faint creak of his boots against the rubble, her Gram already pointed where she knew the enemy would appear.

Her muscle memory and Psychic Senses showed not even a fraction of mercy.

The weapon in her hands fired a single shot, the laser cutting through the air and hitting the target precisely between the eyes, cutting right through the helmet's visor. He crumpled without a sound, the vivid image of his fall unseen, for Thea had long switched her attention to the next target.

Another Soldier, more cautious than the first, edged around the corner of a low wall towards the right.

Thea had already sensed his approach through the vibrations of his movements in the ground, his heartbeat echoing like a drum in her focused state, calling out exactly where he would be and when.

As he leaned out to take a shot, his form blazed in her perception, every detail of his armour and weapon highlighted in minute detail. Before his eyes could even refocus from the wall he had hid behind to take in the view in front of him, Thea's Gram fired again, the laser finding

its mark right between two plates covering his chest, destroying his heart and ripping out through his spinal cord, dropping him instantly.

Her movements were seamless, almost entirely automatic, as if her body and mind were fully on autopilot.

Shots fired in her direction were simply side-stepped—their trajectories long predicted and deemed worthless and without meaning—before retaliation struck instantly, killing whoever had dared to take such a terrible shot at her.

Each step she took, each shot she fired, was with purpose, precision, and precognition of their success.

She heard the distinct clicks of grenades being readied two stories above her; her body immediately reacting according to her heavily accelerated thoughts.

'Sky Step.'

A pane of translucent air appeared beneath her angled feet, the extra Strength from Crovus' Ability allowing her to rapidly push herself slightly back and upwards, before a second one pushed her even higher.

'Sky Step.'

One more quick plane allowed her to reach even higher, before she stopped atop the last remaining.

In less than a fraction of a second, she found herself hovering atop a single pane of air in front of the second story of the compound, with targets en-masse now within her sights.

The Gram in her hands screamed as it was brought to its limits, lasers streaking out of it at a rate the weapon had never been designed for, blowing holes through two dozen Clones and Duplicators before they could fully realise what had happened.

The weapon's warning chimes indicated it had run empty in mere moments, signalling Thea to return to the squad. Cancelling the pane underneath her, she let gravity take control, feeling her Perception beginning to wane.

She descended quickly, her feet barely touching the ground as she landed with a thud, immediately moving into a crouch, ducking low on purpose to dodge an incoming shot, while seamlessly pulling the Icicle from its holster and firing its crystal-like projectile right back at the origin; the proprietary ammunition once more reliably penetrating the armour of the Soldier on the first floor and piercing straight through into the heart.

'Improved Sprint.'

Thea pushed up from her crouched state and darted through the battlefield, her armoured feet pulverising debris beneath them with each heavily accelerated step, catching up with the rest of the squad once again in a short second, before taking back her position between the two heavies.

A series of explosions rang out from the second story above them as the grenades previously primed finally detonated. The shockwaves rippled through the air, but Alpha Squad had already made it underneath the overhanging office floors, no longer exposed to the Soldiers above.

Thea's brief foray had been the last risky engagement from the outside; their next confrontation with those particular squads would be inside the building.

"Lost one," Desmond's voice crackled through the squad comms, updating them on the status of his drones. "Pulling the rest in now for close air support."

Moments later, the two remaining drones on [Overwatch] hovered behind them, strafing and firing wildly at anything that moved.

The sheer amount of firepower levelled against the Stellar Republic's Soldiers had clearly taken them by surprise. Even half a minute into their charge, Alpha Squad had yet to face any properly coordinated efforts to stop them.

A series of thumps echoed from Thea's left as Lucas' freshly reloaded Havoc launcher, courtesy of Karania, blanketed the reception area of the office compound with explosive grenades by firing them over the wall in front of them.

The giant glass windows that had served as the front for the building's interior shattered as one, the shards cascading down like a brilliant waterfall of dangerous debris.

Subsequent explosions wildly threw the shards through the air, causing many of them to pulverise mid-air or embed themselves into the walls, pillars, and even fly out onto the street.

The Stalwart shield rang out with a series of pings as the shards hit it, while Thea took cover behind Lucas' body, fully aware that her light armour was unlikely to protect her from the torrent of dangerous shards.

Cries of pain and shouted orders rang out from the reception area in response, although the area itself was still hidden behind the three-metre-tall wall that segmented it from the outside.

Alpha Squad pressed on with their running assault, reloading their weapons and double-checking their equipment for any problems, having already dealt with all the enemies outside the compound thanks to a combined effort of Isabella, Desmond's drones, and Thea.

As they cleared the wall, moving around its right side, Alpha Squad was met by the disjointed remnants of two squads of Stellar Republic Soldiers. Some of the enemies were desperately trying to pull their injured allies behind cover, while others scrambled at their sight to find defensive positions within the wreckage of the reception area.

Lucas didn't give them a chance to regroup.

He launched another volley of grenades from his Havoc launcher, the explosions ripping large chunks of debris from the ground and walls, sending shards of rockcrete and metal in

all directions. The force of the blast killed the remnants of one squad outright, their bodies flung like ragdolls by the sheer concussive force.

Thea, Isabella, Desmond, and Corvus focused their fire on the remaining squad.

These Soldiers had found more solid cover before they had managed to get around the wall, hiding in the outcrops of the building, the elevators inside the reception area, and behind the fully solid rockcrete reception desk itself.

Clone after clone was sent to try and push Alpha Squad back, but they were met with a relentless barrage of firepower from Isabella's freshly reloaded Devastator, flanked by two of Desmond's drones.

Thea, meanwhile, was angling to try and take out the Duplicators that continuously sent out the clones from behind cover, taking a shot here and there when she knew she would be able to get the kill; but refraining from doing so otherwise.

Corvus and Karania similarly fired into the general direction of the approaching and covering enemies to provide further suppressive fire as they all closed the distance together.

Finally inside the building itself, Lucas moved forward slowly, his Stalwart shield scraping over the debris-riddled ground with a menacing shriek of metal on rockcrete.

His imposing presence drew even more gunfire than usual, the enemy desperately trying to stop his relentless advance.

Isabella and Karania kept up their suppressive fire, their weapons roaring as they laid down a withering hail of bullets. Corvus and Thea broke from behind the cover of the Stalwart, darting toward nearby cover to gain better lines of sight on the hidden Duplicators.

Grenades flew back and forth, the air thick with smoke and the acrid scent of explosives.

Thea shot many of the Stellar Republic's grenades out of the air if she wasn't busy taking out a Duplicator, adding an even more chaotic undertone to the destruction. The explosions created deafening roars and showers of debris, adding to the already intense atmosphere.

Methodically, they pushed up, taking out one enemy after another by forcing them to choose between focusing on Lucas, Isabella, and Karania, or dealing with Thea and Corvus.

Their three-pronged approach was devastating, with grenades used to flush out those who tried to hide behind individual pieces of cover, relying on their clones to save them. Each grenade explosion was followed by a quick surge from Alpha Squad, eliminating any surviving enemies.

As the last rounds from Isabella's Devastator echoed through the now empty, open space, the squad took a brief moment to visually confirm that they were all in good shape.

The massive room was a scene of utter devastation, with shattered glass, splintered furniture, massive craters and bodies, or parts thereof, strewn about.

Simultaneously, the boost from Corvus' [Direct Order] ran out as their order had been fulfilled—they were now fully inside the compound.

“Great work, Alpha Squad. But don't let your guard down, the real work is yet to come,” Corvus' voice came through the comms. “Lucas, take the lead and get to the stairs. Thea, you're behind him; I want you in front in case there are any traps or tripwires set up. Isabella, Karania, Desmond, then me. I'll make sure we're not getting run in from behind.”

Visually confirming everyone's nods, taking it as a sign of full combat readiness, he ordered, “Go, go, go.”

Collapsing the Stalwart back to its original tower-shield size for better manoeuvrability in the tight hallways and staircases they expected to encounter, Lucas took the lead. He slowly moved up one of the four major staircases leading up towards the first floor of the compound.

The stairs were wide and grand, made of what initially had seemed like polished marble, but the pockmarks of stray bullets and debris cracking massive craters into it, revealed the ever-present rockcrete underneath its polished exterior, leading to secondary reception areas for each staircase.

Their elegant design belied the danger they now posed; the open staircases could easily be overseen from above, making Alpha Squad's approach exceedingly risky. The Stalwart could only protect from one side, leaving the squad vulnerable to attacks from above.

Thea moved back-to-back with Lucas, her Gram in hand, scoping out the overhang above them as they ascended.

Each step echoed ominously in the large, empty space, heightening the tension.

The squad followed closely behind the two of them; Isabella right next to Thea, their movements synchronised, every sense on high alert for the slightest hint of enemy presence.

The air was thick with anticipation, every creak and groan of the building making them tense, expecting a renewed attack from the Stellar Republic Soldiers.

Half a minute of tension later, they had somehow managed to reach the first floor without encountering any enemies or traps.

No tripwires had been set, and no ambush awaited them at the top of the stairs.

The silence inside the building was almost deafening, an unsettling calm in the midst of the storm of their assault.

Corvus speculated over the comms, his voice hushed yet clear, “We might have caught them off guard more than we thought. They didn't have time to prepare traps or ambushes, especially with the other areas of the compound also under attack by the other advance squads.”

The squad members exchanged glances, a mix of relief and caution in their eyes.

Thea kept her Gram at the ready, scanning every corner and shadow for potential threats as they moved into the secondary reception area. The large open space was eerily quiet, the polished floors reflecting the dim light filtering through the smoke and dust.

Lucas continued to lead, his shield up and ready and rifle in hand, as they cautiously moved through the reception area. He had swapped out his Havoc for the backup AR-303 that had been affixed to the back of the Stalwart, not wanting to risk firing off high-explosive grenades inside potentially cramped spaces.

They quietly cleared out the secondary reception on the first floor before huddling together in a more covered spot near one of the office bathrooms to discuss their next moves.

“Desmond, get your drones outside and try to warn us of any concentration of enemies. We have to take them all out if we want to claim this entire compound; we’re hunting now,” Corvus ordered. The low hums of three drones darting off into the distance immediately followed his command.

“Lucas, I’ll need you to continue leading us; how are you feeling? The charge couldn’t have been easy.”

“I can go for another couple of hours if I have to, no worries,” Lucas replied with a confident smile, raising the Stalwart over his head with one arm as if to prove his point.

“Wonderful. That’s what I love to hear,” Corvus chuckled before turning his attention to Isabella and Thea. “You two continue doing what you’re doing. Thea, don’t go too hard on your Focus; we might need it for potential Psykers later. We’re inside the building now, so we can let Isabella show off a bit.”

Thea nodded in understanding, quickly double-checking her current reserves with a simple mental command to the System.

[Stamina: 84 / 165 - Focus: 126 / 225]

‘Not bad, but also not great. I definitely went a bit hard back there; but I’d argue I made the best of it,’ she thought to herself with a confident nod meant for nobody but herself.

“You got it, boss. My beauties are ready to rip and tear,” Isabella answered with a broad, toothy grin, showing off her Devastator and Decimator.

“Is it just me, or are none of you taking this whole assault seriously?” Karania interjected with a clearly fake sigh, the big smile on her face being a dead giveaway. “This is our last mission here; pay it some more respect, jeez.”

Corvus couldn’t hide his own smile at Karania’s obvious jest, but he quickly forced it to return to a neutral demeanour. “Karanja’s right. Let’s get back to focusing on the mission at hand: No heroics, no stupid moves. I want everyone to do well on this mission so we can all get good positions on the leaderboards today. Don’t die for stupid reasons and lose out on the Mission Objective rewards.”

A round of serious nods followed before Corvus signaled for Lucas and Thea to take the lead once again.

Standing behind Lucas, Gram in hand, Thea forced her attention back onto her Psychic Senses to ensure she could catch any errant traps or ambushes slightly ahead of time to warn them all.

Their armoured footsteps quietly echoed through the first doorway into the hallway as they began the next part of their mission: Fully clearing out the compound...