

Arc 1 - Chapter 88 - Sidetracked

Navigating the increasingly industrial terrain, Thea continued to confidently guide Alpha Squad through a maze of deserted factories and warehouses.

This environment felt even more “home” to her than the previous outskirts, as the undercity that she had lived in for the vast majority of her life, had similarly been a more industrial-focused sector during the Golden Age.

Their path led them unerringly westward, ever closer to their critical objective: One of the control stations for the wall's defensive mechanisms.

These control stations, five in total, served dual purposes. Not only did they operate as crucial nodes for wall defence, but they also functioned as Forward Operating Bases for the Stellar Republic forces that were stationed in the city. This dual functionality meant the stations were heavily fortified, yet they also presented valuable targets for strategic infiltration.

Thea understood the complexity of their mission.

With only six members in their squad, a direct assault on such a well-defended target was out of the question. Their role was more subtle, requiring finesse rather than brute force. The plan was to converge with other infiltration squads, combining their efforts for a more coordinated and impactful operation.

Their immediate goal was to reach the densely populated urban areas of Nova Tertius.

Amidst the bustle of civilian life, their communications would be harder to track, providing them the necessary cover to coordinate with the other units. Thea's navigational prowess was crucial in this phase, as she carefully balanced the need for stealth with the urgency of reaching their rendezvous point deep behind the enemy's lines.

But before steering Alpha Squad into the bustling urban core of Nova Tertius, Thea knew she needed a comprehensive understanding of the situation they were about to enter. It was crucial to assess the level of activity, the nature of military traffic patterns, and the general dynamics on the main thoroughfare. Such intricate details couldn't be discerned from simple briefings or secondhand reports; they required direct observation.

Their immediate task was to position themselves within a suitable range for Desmond's drones to conduct an in-depth reconnaissance of the area. Thea needed detailed information to strategize their movement through the city's intricate landscape and to plan the infiltration of the control station effectively.

The squad's success hinged on Thea's ability to interpret the gathered intelligence and craft a viable path forward. With this in mind, she guided them cautiously, yet purposefully, towards a vantage point that would provide Desmond's drones the opportunity to gather the vital data they needed.

Navigating the decaying industrial landscape required a deliberate restraint from Thea.

The abandoned factory buildings and sprawling industrial parks, despite their more recent usage and lack of utter disrepair, resonated deeply with her. They were reminiscent of her own roots—the undercity she had grown up in.

The labyrinth of openings, expansive windows, spiral staircases, suspended metal walkways, and conveyor belts beckoned to her instinctively, tempting her to traverse this terrain with the agility and speed she had honed since childhood.

These elements, so familiar and inviting, urged her to ascend for better vantage points, to leap and parkour across structures, promising a swifter journey through the industrial maze.

Yet, she found herself needing to curb these impulses.

Corvus had reminded her thrice already—the rest of Alpha Squad, except perhaps Isabella, struggled to match her innate pace and acrobatic inclination.

Heeding Corvus's admonitions, Thea consciously suppressed her natural instincts. She opted for a more conventional approach, one that involved less of the instinctive, industrially influenced parkour she was accustomed to.

This meant choosing routes that were more direct and less physically demanding, ensuring that the entire squad could maintain cohesion and move at a unified, manageable pace. It was a challenge for Thea, a balancing act between her innate abilities and the operational needs of her team, but something she fully recognized the importance of.

They could not afford to get separated or accidentally run into an ambush when not in full squad cohesion.

Signs that they weren't entirely alone started appearing subtly, as Desmond's drone spotted a group of fresh tire tracks leading from the northern section of the industrial zone, past a long row of warehouses towards the southern side. The moment he had spotted them, he had called for a brief break and discussion.

He was pointing them out to Thea on his wrist-display, explaining how he had found them, "I set up my drone to highlight anything out of the ordinary in the area. With the amount of warehouses we've passed, it was able to create a bit of a picture of how things should look like and managed to spot that something wasn't quite right with the ground around these warehouses. The area marked in red," he pointed towards long lines of red marks heading from north to south, "are the tire tracks. What do you think?"

It was surprising for Thea to hear Desmond so readily ask for her opinion, considering their history together, but at the same time, she felt that the assessment so far had definitely done a lot of heavy lifting in getting both of them to accept each other's expertises more. The fact he had saved her from certain death during the wall ascent had also definitely put him into her better graces, for now.

"I'm gonna have to go there and take a closer look, I think," Thea replied with a thoughtful gaze. "We should check whether or not we can make out anything from the tracks; how heavy the load was they were transporting, whether they stopped along the way and similar. We'll need to be careful when approaching as they might have dropped off some troops

somewhere around the area. You can't see any footsteps with your drone, can you?" Thea asked, playing the question back to Desmond as the rest of the squad sat by and watched the exchange with rapt attention.

Desmond shook his head, elaborating on the drone's current capabilities. "I could send it in closer, get a better look. But the current highlighting mode isn't precise enough to find something like individual footprints from the height it's flying at, unless I specifically tell it to search a particular area. I could set it up for one of the areas, see if it can find something, but it'll take hours to follow the entire tire-marks towards the north and south to check for potential footprints."

He went on to show her the radius the drone could likely handle in the next roughly half an hour, which was admittedly impressive, but nowhere near enough to cover the entire section that Thea had in mind.

Thea weighed the options, aware of the squad's attentive gaze.

As the de facto leader for this urban phase, she felt the responsibility of decision-making keenly. While Corvus maintained his authority as squad leader, he had given her free rein over navigational and tactical decisions while inside the confines of the city limits.

She pondered the best course of action, considering the potential risks and benefits of Desmond's drone delving deeper into the mystery of the tire tracks or whether they should go and investigate themselves. The decision she made next would not only impact their immediate safety but could also influence the success of their broader mission objectives.

'Is this the kind of thing Corvus usually has to consider...? I don't envy him at all. This sucks...' She thought to herself. The dilemma before her was clear, yet complex.

Her natural inclination was to investigate the tracks further, driven by a blend of strategic necessity and personal curiosity. Such a move, however, carried significant risks.

The recent activity in the area indicated a definite enemy presence, a fact that put them at an advantage for now, as their adversaries remained blissfully unaware of Sovereign Alpha's infiltration. Venturing out to scrutinise the tracks could potentially compromise this advantage.

Thea tried to weigh the risk of exposing their position against the potential intelligence they could gather. A single misstep in this abandoned industrial zone could alert the enemy, transforming their covert operation into a perilous encounter.

Her decision would not only impact their immediate safety but also influence the broader strategy of their mission in Nova Tertius. After all, should they be found out, it was likely that their continued progress and attempts to link up with the rest of the infiltration squads would be in trouble as well.

Thea felt the eyes of her squad on her, their trust in her judgement both similarly empowering and daunting. This was the kind of decision that defined leadership—balancing curiosity with caution, the immediate gain against long-term strategy; something Thea was inherently bad at.

"We're going to find a secure location to lay low for a while. Desmond, I want your drone to give us a detailed analysis of those tire marks. We need to stay under the radar, but we also can't ignore the potential information those tracks could provide," Thea decidedly ordered, trying her best to sound certain about this decision. "The presence of enemy vehicles in this area doesn't really make much sense, especially considering the main thoroughfare's proximity. I feel like there's definitely something here that demands our attention."

With her decision made, the team rallied behind Thea.

She confidently led them back through the industrial maze, retracing their steps to a previously noted industrial office-like structure. The building, a few blocks to the east, had caught her attention earlier.

It was a relatively nondescript structure, one of many in the sector they had passed through, blending into the industrial landscape, yet its office-style layout promised better cover and a more comfortable waiting area than one of the abandoned factory complexes.

The office-style structure of the building would offer them a better decent vantage point to observe any further developments, thanks to the myriad windows and blinds, guarantee they had a lot of ways in and out of it, should their location become compromised, while also providing a more hospitable environment should their stay be prolonged...

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Once they had settled into their temporary hideout on the penultimate floor of the office building, Thea began to outline to Desmond exactly what she needed from him and his drone.

The tracking and scouting lessons from Old Man James came back to her like she had just received them yesterday, "Desmond, I need detailed scans of the tire tracks at specific points," she instructed, pointing out locations on the drone's overhead view displayed on his wrist-screen. "Check these three spots around this warehouse—they're where the vehicles are most likely to have stopped, if they ever did. Get me a detailed scan of the tracks, so I might be able to give us insights into the weight and type of cargo they were carrying. Once we have that information, we can plan our next move."

After briefing Desmond, Thea turned her attention to the squad's immediate security. "Let's secure this floor," she directed, her tone firm and clear. "We need to barricade the staircases and create enough barriers to slow down any unwanted guests. Be ready for quick reactions, whether to engage or retreat."

She gestured toward the access points to their floor. "And don't forget to secure the route from the floor above us. We might need a quick escape upwards. Set up the barricades so we can easily break them down from our side if necessary." Her instructions were precise and clear, quite different from the leadership she had done before, but this was something she was confident in.

Thea's thoughts drifted to the countless hours spent with James in the long-abandoned parts of Limosia's undercity. His rigorous training sessions, which she had often found extremely tedious and repetitive, were now once again proving invaluable.

"Remember, Missy," James's voice echoed in her memory, "you may not like these drills now, but they'll save your skin one day. Urban combat is likely going to be one of the things you'll be best at for a while, considering the environment we're living in, so it's *imperative* you have an understanding of how close-quarter-combat works around here. That includes fortifying a position and keeping your options open as long as possible."

A small grin appeared on Thea's face as she recalled his stern yet caring admonitions. It was almost as if she could hear his gruff voice saying, "I told you so." There she was, applying his teachings in real-world scenarios, something she hadn't fully anticipated needing so acutely.

Shaking her head slightly, she whispered, "Damn you, Old Man," her words carrying a mix of gratitude, mirth and mild frustration. His foresight and instruction had prepared her for much of what she faced, yet there was an odd sense of predestination in how accurately he had predicted the challenges she would encounter. "I wonder if he's a precog psychic as well...?"

As Thea joined her teammates in reinforcing the office's entry points, Desmond focused intently on surveillance.

At some point, she found herself working alongside Corvus, who, in a rare moment of quiet, leaned in to offer some encouragement. "You're doing an excellent job, Thea," he said softly, his tone sincere. "Leading isn't easy and I know it's not really your thing, but you're handling it very well so far. Keep up the good work."

Thea felt a rush of pride at his words. Leading really wasn't what she was made for, so hearing that she did a good job was exhilarating, and it buoyed her spirits. She channelled this newfound energy into meticulously double-checking their defensive setup, ensuring every barricade was as secure as possible.

Once satisfied with their fortifications, which primarily were a mix of office desks, chairs and a hefty amount of white-foam, Thea encouraged the squad to take a much-needed break.

They had been walking, climbing, scrambling and sneaking their way through Nova Tertius' industrial outskirts for the better part of half a day and exhaustion had slowly started to kick in by the time they got done here, so it had been high time for a break anyway.

Lucas and Isabella had strategically placed themselves near the main hallway leading to the office. This positioning was tactically motivated; in the event of an assault, the combination of Lucas' Stalwart shield and Isabella's Devastation would create a formidable defence in the confined space. It was a setup few enemy soldiers could hope to overcome, providing a significant advantage to Sovereign Alpha in holding their ground, should they be found.

Thea's mind was caught in a whirl of contemplation as she surveyed their fortified position in the office.

They had invested considerable time and effort in securing this temporary refuge, yet she couldn't help but wonder if this time might have been better spent advancing towards their primary objective.

The mystery of the tire tracks they had discovered loomed large in her thoughts, however, an enigma that stubbornly refused to be ignored. There was something undeniably compelling about those tracks, a puzzle that whispered insistently for resolution.

Why would a truck deviate from the direct thoroughfare to meander through an abandoned industrial sector? The more she pondered it, the more Thea felt drawn to uncover the truth behind this anomaly. To her, it seemed illogical for any vehicle, especially one unconcerned with stealth, to choose such a route unless it bore a clandestine purpose or precious cargo.

These thoughts ebbed and flowed in her mind, mingling with a tinge of doubt. Had they diverted their focus unnecessarily? Was this detour a strategic misstep? Thea wrestled with these uncertainties, trying to quell the second-guessing that gnawed at her.

In the end, she consoled herself with a pragmatic thought, a mental shrug that acknowledged the wisdom of caution. *'Better safe than sorry,'* she thought, attempting to find solace in the notion that, in the uncertain world of infiltration and intelligence, erring on the side of caution was often the wisest course.

The Old Man's teachings continued to resonate in her mind, putting her at ease, slowly but surely. "Always remember: If you're uncertain; become certain. Don't walk into things without proper intel. Simply spend the time, however much is required, to make sure you know what you're getting into. If you absolutely have to go, due to time restraints, take the safest route and have escape routes in your mind at all times. As a marine, staying alive is your first and most important job. A dead marine is not just a waste, but a downright liability," he had always said.

With a more confident nod, she thought to herself, *'I'm just becoming certain. That's all,'* before she sat down near Desmond, Corvus and Karania in one window-less corner of the office they had claimed, to wait for any updates on Desmond's mission.

Alpha Squad and Thea herself had done all they could.

Now it was time for Desmond and his drones to shine...

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As the hours passed during their respite, Desmond remained diligently focused on the task Thea had assigned him. Engulfed in his own world, his figure, still and statue-like, was shrouded by the Forge's helmet. His body might have been motionless, but it was evident that he was engaged in a meticulous and silent battle, orchestrating the movements of the two drones he had deployed.

His task was just as critical and challenging as the physical manoeuvres they had performed earlier throughout the day.

Although drones offered a slightly subtler presence compared to ground troops in an ostensibly deserted area, Desmond still faced the delicate challenge of ensuring their relative invisibility to enemy detection. They needed to be stealthy, avoiding any tracking, pinging, or even prolonged visual identification in order for them to seem as natural parts of the environment, should they be briefly spotted.

Thea observed him periodically, contemplating whether to suggest a break for him, recognizing the mental toll of such an intense focus.

However, she repeatedly decided against it, acknowledging his expertise and the unique role he played in their mission. *'Just as they supported me through my tasks yesterday, it's his turn to carry this weight,'* she thought. *'We'll ensure he gets the rest he needs tonight, and we'll cover his watch duty to compensate for his exertion today.'*

She started to understand the balance of responsibilities within the squad and the importance of allowing each member to fulfil their role without undue interference more and more, as she had been thrust into the temporary position of squad leader during this time. There were certain tasks that nobody else could do, which is why they operated in squads to begin with.

Each one of them had to bear a certain weight at some point and there was no use trying to push brakes on somebody in the process of doing exactly that.

As they settled into a brief period of rest, the rest of Sovereign Alpha found their own way to unwind while remaining alert. Corvus was engrossed in the mission documents, his eyes scanning the pages with a focused intensity, as if trying to glean every bit of intelligence they could offer.

Lucas and Isabella had positioned themselves strategically near the entrance.

Lucas, his back resting against his trusty Stalwart shield, seemed to be asleep, his breaths deep and rhythmic. Yet, Thea had noticed his keen awareness, his eyes opening abruptly every once in a while; he was in a state of alert relaxation, ready to spring into action at a moment's notice.

Isabella, meanwhile, was lounging nearby, splayed out on a couch she had found in a nearby break-room and had pulled into their office, her eyes closed, but Thea knew better than to think she was completely off guard.

Karania, on the other hand, presented a more startling scene. Thea couldn't suppress a shake of her head as she observed her friend engaged in an unusual task.

'What the fuck, Kara...?'

Karania, with a deep cut on her forearm, was methodically collecting her own blood into several ampules and canteens, her actions meticulous and deliberate despite the oddity of the situation.

Approaching Karania, Thea was met with the medic's usual cheerful demeanour, a stark contrast to the strange activity she was engaged in. "Ah! Hey, Thea! How's it going?" Karania

greeted her with an infectious smile, seemingly unfazed by her own self-inflicted wound. Thea, taken aback by the peculiar and slightly alarming sight, knew there had to be a logical explanation behind Karania's actions, yet it was hard not to feel a mix of concern and curiosity about her friend's unconventional methods.

Still grappling with the unusual sight in front of her, Thea managed a response, her tone a mix of bewilderment and curiosity. "You... You wanna tell me what exactly it is you're doing?" She couldn't help but fixate on the rhythmic pulsation of Karania's wound, a sight both unsettling and mesmerising alike.

Karania, with her characteristic nonchalance, replied, "Collecting blood," as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Her casual demeanour and lack of elaboration were typical, yet it always left Thea feeling like she was part of a private joke.

Knowing that she'd need to be more direct to get the full story, pressed on, "What for?" She was accustomed to Karania's quirkiness, but this was certainly a new level.

"For my Abilities," Karania began, holding up an ampule filled with her blood. "After I lost my arm during that little 'IgT-shell bombardment' incident, I did some accidental experiments. Turns out, my blood doesn't need to be in my body for my Abilities to work at all! As long as it hasn't coagulated, it's usable." To illustrate, she gestured at the ampule, which suddenly started bouncing up and down in her hand, animated by one of her Abilities.

Karania continued with a playful gleam in her eye, "I'm collecting some extras, cause you never know when you're gonna need some extra Kara blood, y'know? Might wake up one night and think to yourself, 'If only I had some of Kara's blood right now' and boom! I can swoop right in and hand you a canteen full of it. Awesome, huh?" Her tone was light, downright jovial, underscoring the casualness with which she approached her own Abilities.

Thea contemplated the stark differences between her own approach to Ability usage and Karania's more innovative, free-form methods. Where Thea reserved her Abilities for critical moments, Karania's creative experimentation opened up a whole host of possibilities. It was unconventional, certainly, but Thea couldn't deny the practicality behind her friend's actions.

The memory of one of Karania's Abilities surfaced in Thea's mind—the one that allowed her to modify her blood into a universal donor type during transfusion. Stockpiling her own blood could be a lifesaver in dire medical situations. It wasn't just a quirky habit; it was a strategic reserve. If any of their squad members were severely injured, having Karania's blood on hand could mean the difference between life and death.

'I should experiment more with my own Abilities as well... After the assessment's over, I need to seriously get my shit together. Equipment, Abilities, tactics... I'm so far behind everyone else when it comes to this stuff. I'll have to work harder to make sure that I don't entirely rely on my Psychic Powers to carry me through everything like they are right now...'
She thought to herself.

Thea's attention swiftly shifted as Desmond's voice broke through her thoughts. "I've finished the scans you requested," he announced, his tone indicating an equal measure of satisfaction in his work and sheer exhaustion.

Eager to dive into the task at hand, Thea quickly approached Desmond, peering at the detailed scans displayed on his screen. The quality of the imagery immediately impressed her. Desmond had not only met but far exceeded her expectations, capturing even the minutest details of the tire tracks. The high-resolution scans, complete with 3D imaging, offered an in-depth analysis that she likely couldn't even have achieved on-site.

The scans provided intricate measurements, including the depth and width of each tire imprint, and various other specifics that would have been difficult, if not impossible, to discern in person, especially under the constant threat of discovery.

Thea's eyes widened in surprise as she scrutinised the intricate details of the tire tracks Desmond had captured. "These are exceptional..." she murmured, her focus deepening as she examined the scans of the locations she had instinctively selected for surveillance.

Her choices had been guided more by intuition than specific reasoning, a skill unintentionally honed from countless hours navigating the labyrinthine industrial sectors of Lumiosia's undercity. This experience gave her a unique insight into the likely routes and habits of those who operated clandestinely within such environments, be they smugglers, gangers, or others with secretive agendas.

Thea managed to quickly discern valuable information from the first set of scans.

The tracks revealed that the vehicle in question had been in constant motion, not pausing at the first location at all. The patterns left by the tires suggested a multi-sectioned transport as well, likely with two compartments connected together. The sharpness of the turns indicated in the tracks suggested a level of manoeuvrability unexpected for a vehicle of its apparent size.

Furthermore, Thea observed the depth and pressure marks of the tires, which hinted at an unusually heavy load. Despite travelling on solid, paved industrial roads typically resistant to imprinting, the weight pressing down on the vehicle's tires had left clear, defined tracks.

Such evidence indicated a substantial burden being transported, something of significant mass that exerted noticeable pressure on the tires during movement. This observation ruled out the possibility of frequent stops and starts, confirming the continuous motion of the vehicle.

This was about the extent of knowledge she could gleam from the first set of scans and James' teachings. She had always wondered why he had made her look at so many different tracks, be it human, animal or vehicle alike, but it all clicked in her brain at this very moment.

She had figured that being part of a military later in life would mean that these types of skills would be completely irrelevant, considering the technology available and the more commonly seen images and recordings of all-out combat. But if this assessment so far had shown her one thing about war already, it was that war had a huge amount more downtime than she had initially expected.

And way more walking on your own two feet, as well.

'I have no idea what kind of vehicle this could be at all... I should have paid more attention doing Warfare 101; looked at the tires and types a lot more intently. That'll have to be something I check up on. At least identifying what type it is, would already help... I'd imagine Moira or Vi wouldn't be struggling to identify this thing as much as I am here,' Thea lamented internally.

She absolutely hated feeling inferior to others, even if she fully understood that there was a vast, vast gulf of experience and time between herself and the other two ladies from Arrow Squad.

Luckily for her, however, she knew somebody that might have paid more attention to these particular aspects during their Warfare 101 lecture.

"Lucas, could you come here for a second?" Thea called over to the defensive heavy, nestled near the entrance of the office. He immediately got up and jogged the few metres towards her. Arriving, he leaned in, examining the images on the display with an interested eye. It was likely that he was surprised to be called over for a scouting mission, considering his expertise lay elsewhere.

"Take a look at these tire tracks," Thea said, pointing to the intricate patterns on the screen. "It looks like a multi-sectioned vehicle, at least two but unlikely to be more than three, probably with 12 to 16 wheels. The weight these tracks suggest is absolutely massive, so I doubt it's just a troop carrier. The track width isn't wider than two metres. Anything you know that comes to mind?"

His eyes lit up when he realised what exactly it was that Thea had called him over for and why his expertise was needed for a scouting report like this. He eagerly went to work, analysing the data the scan and Thea had provided, his forehead creasing up immediately in intense concentration. It was clear that he didn't want to waste this exceedingly rare chance to let his own knowledge shine for once.

Lucas was definitely the de-facto vehicle expert of Alpha Squad.

He was not just interested in owning and driving one, but also just really enjoyed talking about them and learning about them in general, from what Thea managed to gather over the brief period they had known each other.

During the Warfare 101 lecture especially, he had spent a lot of time intently checking and absorbing the exact details of every vehicle that Lt. Jorvik had presented him and Thea with. During the assessment so far, she had also sometimes managed to spot him reading through some assorted vehicle spec sheets during their downtime of the patrols prior to the assault on the wall.

Lucas might have been her only option to figure out what vehicle they might be searching for, but he was definitely a fantastic "only" option for her to have. If he couldn't figure it out, there was no shot that anybody else in the squad would know.

While Lucas was checking the first tire marks, Thea used her data-pad, which she had retrieved from her backpack, to check over the additional scans.

As Thea examined the second set of tire marks on Desmond's scans, her attention was captured by an unexpected detail. Leaning in closer, she magnified the image, revealing faint, overlaid markings that seemed out of place.

'Holy shit. Those are fucking boot marks, aren't they...?'

Near one of the abandoned warehouses, she spotted ever so subtle markings of boots smudged over the marks the tires had left. The presence of these footprints, especially near one of the abandoned warehouses, was a significant clue.

Without the distinct tire marks as a backdrop for the boots to smudge in, spotting these imprints on the solid asphalt would have been completely impossible.

"I've got something here," Thea called out, her voice carrying a mix of concentration and urgency. Her discovery could potentially unveil a crucial piece of the puzzle they were piecing together. As the rest of Alpha Squad converged around her to see the findings, Lucas spoke up, his voice cutting through the growing anticipation.

"I found something as well," Lucas announced, drawing everyone's attention. Thea was momentarily taken aback; Lucas had worked remarkably quickly. In just a short span, he had managed to glean valuable information from the scans.

"Lucas, share what you've found," Thea said, stepping aside to give him space.

His insights would likely complement her own discovery, shedding more light on the mysterious vehicle's purpose and contents. As Lucas prepared to divulge his analysis, the squad leaned in, ready to integrate this new information into their ongoing investigation.

Lucas, with an air of confidence, adjusted the screen displaying the scan so the entire squad could view his analysis. "Based on the tire marks' distribution, particularly in these sections," he pointed to two specific areas on the scan, particularly around the tightest curves, "I'd say it's a Mativ-type transport, most likely the Beta variant. It's got a dual-section design, as opposed to the Alpha variant's triple-section setup."

As Lucas elaborated on his findings, Thea couldn't help but feel a twinge of self-reproach.

'I hadn't even considered checking the corners for wheel alignment, to figure out how many sections there were... I had only checked the corners to see whether there were any at all. Of course, you could also check for how many there were if you simply looked at the exact alignment of the wheels!' she chided herself silently. 'You moron, Thea. Why didn't you think of that?!'

He went on, his explanation clear and concise. "Considering the weight distribution indicated by the tire tracks and the design of the Mativ-type Beta, the vehicle was likely carrying a load of upwards of a thousand tons, divided into at least two parts or a single, extremely slim piece. The way it handled the tight corners suggests the cargo must be slim enough to allow for a brief misalignment between the sections or be separated entirely."

Lucas paused, glancing at the team, ensuring they were following his train of thought. "Given its capabilities and the peculiar choice of route through this abandoned area, rather than the

nearby main thoroughfare, raises several red flags. It's definitely suspicious, aligning with Thea's initial hunch."

The squad absorbed Lucas's analysis, each member pondering the implications. Thea's initial instincts about investigating the tire tracks were proving to be more than justified, lifting an invisible weight from her shoulders she hadn't even known was there.

Gathering the squad's attention, Thea held up her data-pad, showcasing the subtle yet revealing details she had uncovered.

"Look here," she began, pointing to the barely perceptible boot marks superimposed on the tire tracks. "There's people near that warehouse. They walked through this area *after* the Mativ had already left, otherwise the boot prints would not be visible. These are also prints of the Stellar Republic's standard-issue soldier boots, as far as I can identify."

She had studied up on the Stellar Republic's uniforms and standard-issue equipment quite a lot before and during their assessment's downtime, for exactly circumstances like this. It was, after all, a scout's job to know these things.

Her thorough preparation was paying off at this moment. "This is clear evidence of a military presence in this seemingly abandoned industrial area. But the real question is *why* they're here, so far from the control station, yet closer to the wall, in a part of the city that's been left deserted."

The squad absorbed the information, each member silently contemplating the implications of Thea's findings. The revelation of a covert military operation in such an unlikely location sparked a mixture of intrigue and concern.

The situation was seemingly quite a lot more complex than a simple patrol or logistic movement—something significant was taking place, and they were on the cusp of uncovering what that might be.

The real question, however, was unspoken, but echoed in their collective minds: Was this something worthy to be pursuing or should they ignore it and move on to their primary mission objective further in the city-proper...?