

Arc 1 - Chapter 99 - Control Station

As the first rays of morning sunlight began to bathe Nova Tertius in a soft, golden light, Thea and her team were already deep within the city's heart, navigating its complex layers and surprisingly countless citizens, considering the early hours.

Their destination lay in the northeast, aiming for the first critical control station that marked their next objective in the ongoing mission.

The last night had been a true show of Karania's unmatched dedication and skill as a medic.

She had laboured without pause, ensuring Isabella was combat-ready by dawn. The process had been intense; Karania's medical intervention transformed the apartment's kitchen into a scene right out of a horror movie.

When Thea had emerged from her own brief respite to check on their progress, the sight that greeted her had been both shocking and awe-inspiring alike. The kitchen, covered in blood, flesh, shrapnel pieces and even parts of the heavies' organs had been strewn about like a giant abstractionist painting, leaving almost no surface untouched once Karania had deemed her efforts a success.

Isabella's condition, while significantly improved from the dire state she had been in, remained precarious. She could now navigate the intricate pathways of Nova Tertius using her own two feet and without anyone's direct help being required.

Yet, her capacity for the kind of valorous acts she had demonstrated within the oppressive confines of the service tunnels had to be put on hold for the foreseeable future. Even just using her Devastator, although feasible, promised to deliver a torment only bearable through sheer determination and gritted teeth—a reality Karania had bluntly outlined, but was gladly accepted by Isabella.

Despite the grim prognosis and the tangible limitations imposed upon her, Isabella's gratitude for the rapid medical response had been profound.

The chance to resume her role, albeit in a constrained capacity, offered her a semblance of normalcy amidst her injuries. Thea observed this resilience with a mix of admiration and concern, recognizing in Isabella a shared distaste for being relegated to the side-lines of the action—a trait that seemed to run deep in those hailing from the mid-worlds.

Ultimately, however, the respite of the previous day had allowed them to recharge some much needed energy and deal with the medical issues that had been stacking up over the previous day, putting them into a much better position to tackle the upcoming parts of their mission.

'We'll rendezvous with Arrow Squad, then head on in for the kill. I really couldn't have asked for a more favourable setup for this first station,' Thea thought to herself, re-playing the upcoming plan in her head again and again, to make sure she wasn't missing anything.

While she had gotten some amount of rest and had received some good pointers from both Nieke and Hammr about her role as an interim squad-leader, she was still feeling thoroughly out of her depth in this role, always worrying that she was going to mess up somewhere along the way and ruining the assessment for the rest of the squad under her temporary command.

Thea had also received the System's Notifications about her recent gains, levels and experience, but had opted to simply defer them until later. She already felt thoroughly overwhelmed with the current situation, so she didn't need any more decisions that needed to be made, even though [Penetrative Shot] was up for promotion with its [Minor Alteration] now available. She'd simply have to decide on it later down the line, when she had a few hours to herself to really think things through and make a decision.

Continuing to navigate through the labyrinthine megacity, Sovereign Alpha manoeuvred through its dense and bewildering network of passageways that led them across vastly varied levels of elevation—from towering edifices reaching far above the ground level to the city's subterranean veins, where life pulsed just as vigorously as it did above.

Their military armors and weapons, conspicuous against the civilian backdrop, were their shields as much as their potential giveaways. Yet, they moved with a confidence that belied their true purpose, mimicking the brisk pace and unyielding purpose of the city's denizens to blend seamlessly into the fabric of urban life.

More than once, they caught a few intense stares here and there, but nobody seemed too eager to engage them; to question their reason for being there or their motives. They were simply accepted as another part of the megacity's ecosystem, as part of the Stellar Republic's efforts to protect the citizens of the city.

Their path also intersected quite often with areas that Thea's instincts screamed to avoid: Precincts of local law enforcement brimming with officers and security zones manned by vigilant personnel. Every fibre in her being tensed as they skirted these hubs of authority, yet to her surprise, their passage continued to remain undisturbed, their presence accepted as a necessity for the current times, if not entirely unnoticed.

The megacity further revealed itself to Thea and her squad in a spectacle of technological marvels and architectural grandeur that was alien even to the more well-travelled members among them, such as Desmond.

They witnessed the city's intricate transportation network, a complex system of tubes and magnetic trains that intertwined around and through buildings in a display of pure engineering and logistical mastery. This network acted as the city's lifelines, ferrying thousands upon thousands of individuals across vast distances with an efficiency and speed that left Thea in sheer awe.

The most imposing vista they saw on their trek through the city, however, was when they encountered a shopping mall of such immense proportions that even Desmond and Lucas, both hailing from the inner worlds, which in themselves were often considered amongst the most economically powerful worlds in the entire faction, were momentarily taken aback.

This colossal structure had stretched skyward as well as untold distances to each side, with its truly uncountable number of floors teeming with shops and entertainment venues, presenting itself as a monument to consumerism that dwarfed anything any one of them had ever seen, or dared to imagine existing, before.

Its sheer scale was a reminder of the megacity's capacity to dwarf even the grandest of expectations and how nothing that they had encountered before could truly compare to a megacity, leaving an indelible impression of a world where the extraordinary had become the norm.

As they approached their destination, Sovereign Alpha found themselves transitioning from the overwhelming enormity of the megacity's centre to a more tempered area instead.

The architectural grandeur gradually subsided, replaced by the pragmatic utility of urban warehouses and transportation hubs that sprawled across the area. The change in scenery signalled their nearing proximity to the main highway, a vital artery of the city that promised a decrease in the architectural intensity they had been navigating.

Nestled on the far side of this bustling street lay their target: A military complex discreetly positioned within the urban fabric of the city.

This was no ordinary facility; it was instead a fully integrated military complex within the civilian landscape. Unlike the commercial behemoths they had passed, the complex was surrounded not by malls but by a more "urban" environment—another unique sort of microcosm within the megacity itself.

Apartments, pedestrian streets, and walkways wove through the complex's logistical veins, offering a stark contrast to the wilderness and desolation they had traversed in their assessment so far. Here, the boundaries between military and civilian life blurred, up until the very walls of the complex itself, with the daily rhythms of the city pulsating close to even this fortified and immensely important bastion.

Navigating the balance between proximity and risk, Sovereign Alpha found the military complex's urban setting both advantageous and challenging in their planning.

Its integration within the city's bustling heart meant they could approach their objective with a degree of cover not afforded by a more remote or isolated location. However, this urban closeness introduced complexities previously unencountered: Tight sightlines, a significant military footprint, and the paramount concern of collateral damage.

This last point had been emphasised heavily in their mission briefing by Corvus.

The directives had been crystal clear and irrefutable: Minimise collateral damage at all costs.

The mandate extended beyond the physical structures of the megacity to its inhabitants, underscoring the need to preserve civilian lives with utmost diligence.

As they edged closer, each step was measured, each decision weighed with the gravity of these constraints, marking a significant pivot in their operational parameters now that they

were deep within the city's heart and going to be attempting to outright assault a heavily fortified military complex of extreme import.

As they nestled into the shadow of an urban warehouse, momentarily sheltered from the bustling activity of the main street, Thea called for a brief pause.

She needed to consolidate her observations with Desmond's reconnaissance data, which had become increasingly valuable as they ventured closer to the city's logistical heart.

Desmond's drones had been weaving through the aerial traffic over the past hour, their presence obscured by the sheer volume of commercial and civilian drones that filled the skies like a metallic swarm.

The anonymity afforded by the drone-dense airspace provided them a much needed tactical advantage.

Desmond's drones, equipped with basic spoofing technology by default, effortlessly blended in, circumventing the rudimentary security protocols that monitored the skies in these parts of the city. The automated defences of nearby logistics companies, designed to flag unauthorised drones, posed no threat to their carefully masked signals.

However, the potential encounter with a military drone remained a concern.

Such a scenario could compromise their position if the drone attempted to establish a direct link with Desmond's equipment. Yet, in this sea of airborne machinery, the probability of being singled out was slim. The collective mass of drones acted as a natural barrier, a chaotic yet effective camouflage against any military scrutiny that might venture too close, that allowed them to utilise his drones for much needed intelligence gathering.

Thea turned to Desmond, her gaze fixed and expectant, "What have you found for us?"

Earlier, she had tasked him with identifying the safest route to cross the busy main street, a critical juncture in their approach to the control station.

After a momentary pause, Desmond's response came not in words but through a digital transmission—a detailed map materialised on her HUD, its paths illuminated in carefully chosen hues.

"The yellow-marked paths are all potentially viable," Desmond's voice crackled through the comms of her armour, opting to keep the conversation as private as possible rather than speak openly, just in case, "but the green-marked tunnel is our best bet. It's heavily trafficked, with over ten thousand civilians using it in just the past half an hour. The sheer volume of foot traffic should cloak our movements effectively."

He paused, allowing Thea to absorb the information. "However, there's a catch," he continued, a note of caution in his tone. "The risk of encountering checkpoints is minimal, given the tunnel's high usage rate—any significant checkpoint would severely bottleneck movement, which doesn't align with the observed flow of people. That said, if we *do* encounter security measures down there, our escape options would be severely limited."

Mulling over the details shared by Desmond, Thea considered their precarious situation. The tunnel, bustling with life, presented a promising yet risky path. The prospect of blending in with the throngs of citizens was appealing, yet the potential for entrapment loomed large in her mind.

'The tunnel is our best shot, but it's also a double-edged sword. Getting spotted with no way out would definitely be the end of the line for us,' she thought, her mind racing through scenarios.

However, the alternative paths, while less risky in terms of confinement, did not offer the cover and anonymity provided by the dense foot traffic of the tunnel. *'Lucas and Isabella are tough, but traversing the open and thoroughly busy street is way too risky. Their conditions, despite Kara's best efforts, still limit us significantly in this regard...'*

Acknowledging the limited options at their disposal, Thea reluctantly concluded that the tunnel, fraught with risks as it might be, was indeed their necessary course of action. *'We'll have to rely on stealth and the crowd. It's a gamble, but it's one we have to take.'*

Thea conveyed her decision to the team, directing them towards the tunnel that Desmond had identified as their best passage through the city's divided sections.

The tunnel was as bustling as Desmond had described, teeming with individuals on their daily commutes. The majority were moving in the opposite direction, likely residents from the city's living quarters heading towards their jobs on the side of the thoroughfare Sovereign Alpha had just emerged from.

Thea rationalised the flow of traffic, *'It's logical, given the residential zones that lie across the highway. Our direction might make us stand out slightly, but given our destination is a military complex, our appearance in combat gear should not be out of place at all.'*

This thought provided a sliver of confidence as they moved against the current of people, their military attire blending in with the city's mosaic of life yet moving distinctly towards a beacon of their own kind.

Their journey through the crowded tunnel was marked by the constant brush of shoulders and the occasional disgruntled expression directed their way. The bulk of their armour and weaponry didn't make for easy passage in such "tight" quarters, often leading to unintended shoves and the clatter of equipment against the hurried mass of civilians.

Despite the minor commotions they caused, however, their passage was remarkably smooth, free from the anticipated obstructions of guards or security checkpoints.

This lack of resistance allowed Thea to exhale in relief as they emerged on the other side, continuing their mission with a renewed sense of security. The whole day so far had been full of anxious thoughts, but surprisingly enough, the closer they got to their destination, the less it felt for her like there was to worry about.

Once they got to the complex, the plan was simple, after all: Take over or destroy the control station. No nuance needed, no fancy plans, just straight up destruction.

Directing the squad with a new-found precision, Thea led them towards the designated rendezvous point with Arrow Squad.

Morin had wisely chosen a nondescript apartment building as their temporary base, a decision that now seemed prophetic in its discretion and safety for their brief collaboration.

Upon their arrival inside the apartment complex, they found Arrow Squad waiting, with Morin at the helm, inviting them into their temporary base and offering some much appreciated respite.

"Good to see you all. You're looking a bit rough for wear but, honestly, I'm surprised to see so many of you. *Well done*," he began, his voice carrying a weight of camaraderie and a hint of the burdens they all carried. He lifted his canteen in a gesture that spoke volumes, a brief salute to their fallen leader, Corvus. "It's a tough loss, but from what I've heard, he did all of us proud."

Each member of both squads, caught in the shared moment of remembrance, raised their own canteens in response. They hadn't really had the time to truly process the fact that Corvus wasn't with them for this part of the mission, so the brief remembrance by Morin was more than welcome.

Morin shifted the tone slightly, his gaze meeting Thea's as he moved on to the task at hand.

"We're here to back you up at the first control station," he explained, the serious undertone of his words underscoring the importance of their collaboration. "The last Stellar Republic Ace's location remains a mystery, and that's a significant concern for us all."

The gravity of the situation was palpable, the unknown Ace casting a long shadow over their objectives and plans.

Thea, despite the late hour of last night's briefing, had absorbed every detail with the keen focus that had become second nature for her. Empyrean Alpha and Arrow Squad's insights had painted a clear picture of the hurdles they faced, with the elusive Ace representing the most formidable of these.

In the thick of the ongoing conflict, the presence and actions of the Aces played a pivotal role in shaping the battlefield dynamics already.

Early reports from the frontline near the wall indicated that two of the Stellar Republic's Aces had been entrenched there since the onset of hostilities, engaging in a relentless confrontation with two of the UHF's Aces. It was akin to a high-stakes chess game unfolding on Nova Tertius, with all of them acting as pawns to drag out the real actors.

Backing the UHF's efforts was Legate Kuan, a strategic Ace, rather than a battlefield one, whose oversight of the assessment had proved critical, orchestrating moves and counter-moves from a distance with a seasoned hand since the very moment they had landed on the planet.

The whereabouts of the last Stellar Republic Ace, however, remained shrouded in mystery, a gap in the intelligence that added a layer of complexity to their operational planning.

Speculations about their potential location ranged widely, from commanding forces in a role akin to Legate Kuan's, safeguarding the closest SADD to prevent elite UHF infiltrations, or, what seemed most plausible given the strategic importance of the area, lurking within the sprawling urban expanse of the megacity, possibly near one of the critical control stations.

This last hypothesis held weight for several reasons, not least of which was the strategic advantage of overseeing operations where they could exert the most influence.

However, Legate Kuan had passed on an observation to Morin, noting a lack of actions typical of an Ace in command on the Stellar Republic's part, a comment that, while cryptic, suggested the Ace's absence from a purely strategic command role.

Though neither Morin, Hammr, Neike nor Thea could fully grasp the nuances of what being "Ace enough" entailed, they deferred to Kuan's seasoned judgement, agreeing it was improbable for the last Ace to be orchestrating the Republic's moves from behind the scenes.

For the second option, the UHF simply did not have the manpower, unless the Stellar Republic assumed that Legate Kuan was not a strategic Ace, but rather an infiltrator, just waiting for the right time to strike. Much like Legate Kuan's own expertise, however, it was unlikely the Stellar Republic's more experienced commanders would have missed his strategic manoeuvres, giving away his presence on the field as a strategic Ace.

That only really left the final option, that there was a hidden battlefield Ace on the Stellar Republic's side, waiting for infiltration teams to try and assault the control stations.

Whether they themselves were an infiltrator-type, a defender-type or maybe even a saboteur-type, was of no real relevance for the plan, as they were all just varying degrees of "worst case scenario" for them. It didn't really matter if they were the perfect counter to them, just a really good counter or a fantastic counter, for they were a T3 Prime soldier guaranteed, fully equipped with equally powerful weapons and armour.

Therefore, the integration of Arrow Squad into their operations, while highly advantageous, served as a temporary solution rather than a definitive strategy to counter an Ace.

Despite their status as an elite infiltration unit, Arrow Squad wasn't *designed* to hunt Aces. In Thea's assessment, backed by Staff-Sergeant Venn's evident and repeated trust in them, Arrow Squad stood out as one of the most skilled and potent forces in the field.

Yet, the prospect of directly engaging a Stellar Republic Ace in combat remained a daunting challenge that even Arrow Squad undoubtedly found overwhelming in the best of cases.

The intelligence concerning the Ace's whereabouts was crucial and demanded acquisition by any means necessary, however.

Consequently, Arrow Squad's role extended to the assault on the first control station not just as backup but as a strategic move to probe for the elusive Ace. This endeavour was aimed at gauging the enemy's strength and, hopefully, uncovering clues to the Ace's location, thereby informing the entire army's subsequent moves with critical insights.

Alongside Arrow Squad, the coalition for the assault on the first control station included Sovereign Alpha, Hegemon Alpha, and Emyrean Alpha, bolstered by five additional squads. These comprised two from the Sovereign, one from the Hegemon, and one from the Emyrean, marking a significant collaborative effort to increase their chances of success as high as possible, without neglecting the other control stations.

There had been lingering hopes for reinforcements from marines hailing from the Ascendant, particularly Kar'al's squad or other non-Alpha groups, yet no communication had been received.

The absence of news from these squads led to the grim assumption that they had either been lost in the perilous journey through the urban outskirts or failed to penetrate the inner city in time for the rendezvous. Consequently, the mission had to proceed without their potential support, narrowing the collective strength to those confirmed present.

The realisation that other Sovereign marines were not just present but assigned the same daunting tasks, including a high-risk solo infiltration mission, came as an unexpected revelation to Thea and her team. While they had, of course, known that other Sovereign squads would be present in the assessment, they had not really paid it much mind until now.

Learning that two additional Sovereign squads had also rendezvoused in time for the operation, however, ended up instilling a peculiar sense of pride within them.

Despite minimal interactions with their fellow Sovereign recruits outside of the brief Practical, the mere knowledge that their drive had outperformed the others by contributing the most operatives for this critical phase of the mission provided a significant morale boost.

Over the ensuing hour, Arrow Squad and Sovereign Alpha seized the opportunity to finalise their assault strategies while sharing some stories and getting some last-minute rest, in the case of Lucas and Isabella, who were still suffering from their earlier injuries. Karania had also opted to take a quick nap, as she had not slept at all since the previous days' rush into the border wall's service tunnels.

Catching up with Moira and Viladia was a brief respite for Thea, offering her a chance to exchange stories since their last encounter post-wall breach.

Arrow Squad's recent undertakings were as intense as Thea had anticipated, with Viladia recounting their strategic acts of sabotage that disrupted the enemy's operations significantly.

They had managed to neutralise over half a dozen critical locations and obliterate two substantial ammunition depots close to the wall. Viladia's recounting of how they exploited stolen communications to bamboozle their adversaries brought a hint of amusement to the conversation.

"Those stolen comms were a complete lithium mine," Viladia boasted, detailing how Crusher's ingenuity secured them military identification codes, which they exploited to requisition supplies directly under the Stellar Republic's nose.

Their ruse, although short-lived due to the Stellar Republic's eventual countermeasures, had wreaked havoc on the enemy's logistical capabilities.

Despite the inevitable crackdown and the scramble of their stolen codes, Arrow Squad's efforts had significantly dented the Stellar Republic's supply lines, demonstrating the profound impact a small, skilled team could have on the broader conflict.

While they wouldn't win the war for the UHF all by themselves, enough acts of sabotage like this were undoubtedly going to tip the scales in the right direction.

Thea then delved into the intricate details of her own harrowing journey through the city alongside Sovereign Alpha, culminating in the poignant account of Corvus' heroic last stand and the subsequent obliteration of the Caliburn outpost, she captured Viladia and Moira's undivided attention.

As she got to the end, detailing the exact way the mission had gone, culminating with Corvus' death and the explosion of the Caliburn, Viladia and Moira's jaws were hanging slack momentarily.

"Wow, just... wow," Moira managed to articulate, the enormity of the event rendering her usually quick wit momentarily stunted. Viladia, equally impacted, added, "That's beyond anything we encountered... I do wonder what that tech was, though."

Viladia, fixing her gaze intently on Thea, sought clarification on a phenomenon that had puzzled them earlier. "So that massive explosion was the work of you guys then? We saw it from a distance. Momentarily thought the space battle was over, possibly an orbital strike. But the absence of any further bombardment and the lack of any warning on the comms channel left us more than a little perplexed. Morin thought it might have been a detonation of some tech hidden away in the outskirts, caused by one of the other infiltration squads, but I guess now we know..."

Moira, showing a flicker of curiosity, interjected, "So, the Caliburn uses Solarium in its design?"

This question opened the floodgates for Thea, who eagerly launched into an enthusiastic explanation about the intricate workings of her favourite toy, glad to finally get the opportunity to share her passion with Moira and Viladia.

However, her detailed exposition was soon cut short by Moira's friendly but overwhelmed surrender, "Okay, okay, that's a lot to take in, Thea! No offence, but I'm not sure what to do with all those details right now. Maybe jot it down for me for later or something?"

Moira continued, her expression shifting to one of contemplation. "Though, the use of Solarium... that's a bit tricky for us. Given our usual assignments from Venn as either suicide squads or high-stakes infiltrators, carrying something that valuable into enemy territory is risky. Losing such a weapon would likely end with us being unceremoniously ejected into space by Venn himself. It's essential for us to have gear that's expendable and easily replaceable in the field, be it T1 or T2..."

Thea's enthusiasm momentarily dimmed upon realising Viladia and Moira wouldn't be adopting their own versions of the Caliburn, yet the opportunity to divulge its intricacies and exchange tales with the two marines had its own merit, which she cherished deeply.

As their moments of respite drew to a close, signalling the looming operation, Viladia leaned in with a mischievous glint and a half-suppressed grin, whispering, "Just between us, better not spill to Johnsen about that explosion being your handiwork. He's been nursing his eyesight back to health for a couple of days now, thanks to his regeneration kicking in. Had to use [Hippocratic Exchange] on most of us so we could see properly again after that blinding light. To say he was irritated would be an understatement."

The revelation from Viladia, laced with a conspiratorial glee, certainly added a lighter note to Thea's thoughts as they prepared for the imminent mission. The thought of keeping the secret from Johnsen, knowing it would save her from falling down his shit-list, that she was undoubtedly on, was a small but significant comfort.

Despite the momentary uplift in spirits from sharing stories and technical passions, the gravity of their next steps weighed heavily on her. The assault on the control station loomed large, marking a pivotal moment in their mission that could very well define the success or failure of their overall assessment's outcome.

With the assault finally upon them, Thea and Sovereign Alpha braced for the assault on the first of five control stations, synchronising their efforts with other UHF infiltration squads targeting two additional stations.

The strategy was clear: Diminish the Stellar Republic's control by seizing three crucial nodes in a coordinated attack, a feat of precision and daring given the limited forces at their disposal. This unified strike represented the culmination of their training and planning, aiming to leave only two control stations in enemy hands by the end of the morning; none, by the end of the day.

Whichever squads finished taking out their control station first, immediately moved on to CS4 and CS5, to fully open the figurative flood gates that held back the UHF's main army from entering the city.

Sovereign Alpha's goals were clear, even without them having to openly talk about it with each other. They all knew what they were aiming for: Taking out at least two stations.

They were the highest PV Alpha Squad in the history of the UHF, so it was only natural for them to shoot for contributing the most. All that was left was to put words into action...