

Arc 1 - Chapter 117 - Fledgeling Infiltrator

“You’ve got two broken ribs. I’ve just given you an injector that will help stabilise them so they don’t end up dealing more damage. Don’t get hit in the same place again, but aside from that, you’re good to go,” Karania reported, patting Thea on the shoulder to indicate she was free to move.

Inching closer to the stairs leading up, Thea tried to get a better grasp on the situation. Lucas was still slightly wobbly on his feet, standing next to Isabella, Desmond, and Corvus on the other side of the stairwell.

The Stellar Republic forces were surprisingly defensive, considering they had gotten the jump on them. Given that they would win any prolonged attrition-based engagement, it wasn’t actually too surprising for Thea in the grand scheme of things.

There was no real way for them to know that she and Lucas had been hit pretty badly by the explosion, after all. With the breadth of System Abilities available, there was not an insignificant chance that one or both of them had an Ability to reduce the damage that such an explosion would deal to them.

As a matter of fact, Thea actually *did*.

‘I’m fairly sure if it wasn’t for [Silver Respiration], the shockwaves would have done a lot more damage to me... Both here and back in the office building too...’

It had been a stroke of luck, in hindsight, to get such a useful Passive Ability from one of her earlier Accomplishment rewards. While it hadn’t initially looked all too useful except for some specific diving situations or chemical attacks, where holding your breath might be the difference between life or death, the actual pressure resistance it provided had proven surprisingly useful throughout the assessment.

Isabella’s Devastation roaring to life once again and sending a burst of high-calibre rounds up the staircase ripped Thea from her thoughts. Shaking her head to clear some of the remaining haze, likely a combination of her earlier dizziness from the explosion and the strong painkillers that Karania had administered, Thea focused back on the task at hand.

The intense sound of gunfire echoed through the stairwell, and the staccato rhythm of return-fire striking the rock-crete surfaces near Isabella’s position only added to the chaos.

Thea took another deep breath, feeling the stabilising effects of the injector Karania had administered. Her broken ribs were no longer an immediate concern, but the memory of the explosion kept her cautious.

She knew that simply pushing forward recklessly would lead to more than just broken bones.

“Desmond, any new intel?” Corvus’ voice cut through the comms.

“Negative. The enemy is holding position. It’s like they’re waiting for us to make the next move,” Desmond replied, his frustration evident.

"I only have these two drones left. The next one's eight minutes out, so my combat capabilities are limited right now," Desmond reported, his frustration evident.

Corvus nodded in acknowledgement before addressing the rest of the squad. "Lucas, Isabella, you guys need to create a serious distraction if we want to get out of this alive. Thea, are you up for a risky play?"

A smile spread across Thea's face. Being asked to go for a risky play by Corvus, of all people, tickled her fancy in just the right way. "Absolutely. What did you have in mind, bossman?"

"There's no chance we'll win a straight confrontation, not with that rocket launcher up there," Corvus explained, outlining his plan. "So we need you to get around them and take out the heavy weapon before we can actually start fighting back. Use your grappling hook to come up behind them; there should be windows above us. Lucas, Isabella, Karania, and I will create as much chaos as we can to give you the opportunity to sneak up and take them out."

He visually confirmed that everyone had heard his orders before adding, "Best use something quiet. You might have to shoot more than one heavy, so maybe use your Icicle instead of your Gram to ensure you aren't found out immediately."

"Can do," Thea replied immediately, feeling that Corvus' tactical acumen was spot-on as usual. There wasn't much else they could do without getting shut down by the explosive expert atop the stairs. Neutralising the main threat before the squad pushed up was their best bet.

'Better channel my inner Vi for this one... I'm not exactly an assassin or infiltrator, but I'll just have to do my best,' Thea thought as she made her way past Karania toward the shattered windows on the far-right side of the staircase lobby.

Carefully looking out and up, she confirmed that there were indeed large, shattered windows above her, directly behind a portion of the enemy's position.

"Should be doable. But there's no way they won't have at least one or two people looking out for stuff like this," Thea comms'ed in, trying to visualise the best path to take.

She considered whether a straight grapple upwards would be best, or if manoeuvring further left or right to get a different angle on the enemy might be more effective.

"That's where we come in," Corvus replied with surprising confidence, as if he already knew it would all work out. "The rest of the squad will create enough of a distraction to give you a clear shot. Trust in us, Thea."

Directing his next words at the rest of the squad, he added, "For this next gunfight, go all out. No need to hold back. If we can't get past these guys, we fail the mission anyway, so throw it all on the line."

Affirmative clicks came from each member of the squad.

Thea slung the Gram over her shoulder and drew her Icicle—much like Corvus had said earlier, stealth was going to be paramount if she wanted to destroy the heavy weapons before anyone realised she was there.

“I’m good whenever,” Thea reported, positioning herself as close to the edge as possible.

She would have to jump out the window to get a good shot with her grappling hooks.

‘The longer the assessment goes on, the more I seem to rely on absolutely crazy moves like this... Is that just how war goes with the System or is that just Alpha Squad...?’ she wondered as she watched the rest of the squad get into position.

Karania, stuck on her side of the staircase, readied her Ruin with zero doubt in her mind that she would get to use it.

Lucas was setting up with his Stalwart, which had been retrieved by one of Desmond’s drones from the pillar near the centre of the staircase earlier—the drone operator had definitely used one of his abilities to enhance the drone’s mobility; otherwise, it would almost certainly have been shot during the attempt.

Isabella fed a new belt into her Devastation and stuffed additional ones from her backpack into the belt-feeder attachment of her armour.

Meanwhile, Corvus seemed almost lost in thought as he stood behind the rest of the squad, but Thea knew better than to think he wasn’t 100% on the ball.

The moment everyone signaled readiness, Corvus gave the go-ahead, “Lucas, Isabella; fuck them up. Thea, go at your own discretion.”

Karania immediately lobbed a white foam grenade and a blue foam grenade around the corner up the stairwell at Corvus’ orders. Lucas’ Havoc launcher thumped repeatedly, blanketing the staircase in smoke, blue foam, and white foam grenades at the same time.

He stepped forward as the Havoc fired and planted the Stalwart close to the wall on the left-hand side with one hand, grav-locking it in place to create a firing position for Isabella.

The offensive heavy stepped forward with her Devastation and started unloading blindly up towards the Stellar Republic’s forces, blanketing the entire stairwell in high-calibre bullets, ripping the weapon from right to left and trying to cause as much chaos and mayhem as possible.

The grenades began exploding, filling the entire area with rapidly congealing rock-crete foam, some in blue splodges that went everywhere, others in white walls or platforms, creating a chaotic mess of obstacles and breaking up the open line of sight.

Smoke from Lucas’ grenades started to fill the entire staircase as well, further adding to the confusion.

Return fire rained down on the squad immediately.

A cacophony of gunfire and lasers prattled down, the sounds echoing and intensifying in the confined space. Multiple explosions started ripping through the newly formed rock-crete foam, sending debris and dust flying everywhere.

The walls shook with each blast, and the air was thick with the smell of burning rock-crete and the metallic tang of discharged weaponry and superheated ozone.

Thea, seeing the chaos unfold behind her, moved swiftly.

She could feel the vibrations of the explosions and the gunfire through the floor and the air around her, her high Perception keeping her acutely aware of every shift and movement in the battle.

She leaped out the window.

'Sky Step.'

Taking two large steps towards the left-hand side, Thea put as much distance between herself and the fighting before firing her grappling hooks up at the rock-crete exterior of the building above.

She let herself get pulled up quickly but stopped just short of coming into view of the next floor, taking it slower as she carefully approached the jagged remnants of the shattered windows.

Meanwhile, the scene below was one of pure pandemonium.

Lucas braced himself behind the Stalwart, its surface absorbing a relentless hail of bullets and lasers. Occasionally, explosions hit their mark, sending balls of fire against the wall to his left. The shield sparked and dented at spots under the explosive assault, but Lucas held firm, providing crucial cover for the rest of the squad.

Isabella's Devastation continued to roar, its high-calibre rounds ripping through the smoke and foam, creating chaotic swirls of debris. She aimed in the general direction of the return fire, and the intermittent cries of pain and the splattering of flesh spoke of her plan's efficacy.

Karania, meanwhile, threw additional grenades, further adding to the tumult. More white foam expanded rapidly to create new barriers, replacing those destroyed, while the blue foam splattered everything in rapidly congealing, solid chunks.

The Stellar Republic forces fought back fiercely.

Their own high-calibre weapons started to answer Isabella's with brutal force. Grenades and rockets from above exploded around the squad, sending shockwaves and fragments of rock-crete in all directions. A series of high-calibre rounds, very much akin to the Devastation's, ripped into the Stalwart mere centimetres away from Isabella.

She ducked and weaved behind the shield, seeking alternate angles to surprise the opposition. However, the sheer firepower levelled toward the sole defensive position of Alpha Squad was quickly proving more than they could handle.

Lucas and Isabella got hit by more than a couple of rounds, some managing to just barely break past their heavy armors, evidenced by the slowly expanding pool of red below their feet.

Desmond's drones strafed the staircase, their rapid-fire adding to the suppressive barrage, trying to keep the enemy pinned down as best as possible. The drones' infrared and heat sensors worked extremely well in the situation created by Lucas' and Karania's consistent grenade bombardment and the dust and smoke cluttering up the staircase.

Finally, as she heard Karania's Ruin bark from below in a rhythmic cadence, Thea decided the situation had progressed enough for her to make her play. She edged closer to the window by reeling herself in with the grappling hooks, her senses on high alert for any sign of movement or attack.

With a final psychic senses check and a deep breath, she swung herself through the shattered glass, landing silently inside the building above.

The landing was an utterly chaotic scene.

Dozens of Stellar Republic soldiers were firing down into the smoke and rock-crete-laden staircase below. Some were hit by errant debris or return fire from Karania, Isabella, Corvus, or Desmond's drones.

Medics were scrambling to drag injured soldiers into safer positions, triaging and stabilising them as best they could amidst the chaos, while other Soldiers were yelling orders or asking screaming in pain upon getting hit.

Thea could immediately make out a significant number of clones at first glance as well, only adding to the sense of confusion and urgency for her part of this battle.

The soldiers were strategically positioned around the giant rock-crete staircase leading up from below.

Directly above where Alpha Squad had been pinned down, soldiers leaned over the railings, unloading rounds into the swirling chaos below. Others had taken up positions to the left and right of the railings, creating a crossfire that made it nearly impossible for anyone to advance without getting hit.

More soldiers were entrenched at the terminus of the stairs, behind makeshift cover fashioned from debris, furniture, white-foam and solid-cover shields, firing heavy-calibre rounds and explosives towards the left-hand side of the staircase where Lucas had planted the Stalwart.

Thea carefully and stealthily advanced towards the nearest pillar, her movements smooth and deliberate. She took cover behind it, taking a few precious seconds to organise her thoughts and scan the chaotic battlefield for the most dangerous targets.

Her mind raced as she identified the soldiers with explosive weaponry at the terminus of the stairs, knowing that neutralising them was critical to her squad's survival.

'Stay calm. Focus on the mission. Take out the heavies and the rest of the battle will fall in place by itself,' she reminded herself.

Her Perception was stretched to the limit as she tried to keep track of every single soldier in the room. There were dozens of them, but she somehow had to remain hidden while methodically taking out key targets and advancing into a position where she could take out the enemy heavies.

She couldn't afford to kill too many original soldiers at once either, as their clones would drop dead immediately and thus potentially blow her cover too early.

She peeked out from behind the pillar, spotting a soldier leaning over the railing, firing relentlessly at her squad below, that was also dangerously close to the path she wanted to take.

She took aim with her Icicle and fired, the silent crystal-like projectile piercing through his armour like paper, dropping him instantly; the three clones near him similarly dropping like puppets with their strings cut.

Moving quickly in order to take advantage of the sudden collapse of a small portion of the enemy's battle lines, she advanced towards another piece of cover further towards the terminus, staying low and minimising her profile behind it.

Her psychic senses suddenly screamed at her, alerting her to somebody being dangerously close to spotting her. She swiftly turned around and took the shot, trusting her psychic senses to make the moment count, the enemy that had moved up from behind her dropping silently to the ground.

Breathing heavily as the adrenaline in her body continued to circulate, Thea waited for a couple of seconds; but when no alarm was being raised and no further soldiers appeared, she breathed out a sigh of relief.

'That was fucking close,' she thought to herself as she peeked out of her cover. *'I'm lucky it was a clone, I guess. Two originals this close to each other, back-to-back would have undoubtedly caused some eyes to be directed my way.'*

Spotting another opportunity to continue onwards, she moved out of cover with strangely precise movements, following her psychic senses' warnings of not moving too little or too much in order to stay hidden in plain sight, further channelling her inner Viladia to eliminate threats as she simply walked up towards the next piece of cover.

Her Icicle fired three more times before she stopped behind the next pillar, taking a quick breather to let her mind recover. She was starting to feel a slight headache make itself known behind her eyes.

'My Psychic Resources are probably running out fairly quickly like this... I don't think I've ever relied on them as much as I have here; but I don't exactly have another choice, do I?'

Every once in a while, she had to take out a clone or an original soldier who was too close to noticing her presence as she recovered; but the silent crystal projectiles did the job adequately.

Once she felt that the headache started to ebb away, Thea ducked out from behind cover again and continued her almost leisurely walk towards the next piece of solid cover; one that was promising to almost be close enough to the terminus of the stairs to allow her to take out the priority targets.

Just then, she spotted two medic clones tending to injured soldiers on the far-right side of the landing. They were hastily moving injured soldiers around and were about to turn back around towards the stairs to retrieve additional ones, which would put Thea right in their line of sight from the other side of the landing.

Immediately, she took them out with two quick shots from her Icicle, before simply dropping herself on the floor as her psychic senses screamed at her—those two dead medics were impossible to be explained away by simple counter-fire from her squad below.

Thea played possum as best she could, waiting for the confused and cautious eyes that were searching for her to pass, trusting her precognitive abilities to inform her when the coast was clear to continue moving towards the next piece of cover.

Thankfully, a series of explosions abruptly ripped through the stairs and threw dust and debris up towards the landing, claiming back the vast majority of the Stellar Republic forces' attention.

'Thank you, Lucas!'

Taking advantage of the chaos created by Lucas' grenade launcher wrecking its namesake, Thea quickly got up and rushed towards the solid cover in front of her, ducking behind it and reloading her Icicle.

While there were still quite a number of shots in the current magazine, she wanted to make sure that she was prepared for any eventuality and reload when she had the space to do so, rather than run out in a moment where it would be life or death if the weapon fired or not.

Looking out from behind the giant piece of rock-crete that she was using as cover, likely from one of the destroyed columns that had been blasted apart at some stage during the shootout by one of the explosions, Thea looked over the array of heavies at the top of the stairs, that were levelling their bundled firepower against her squad.

Based on the amount of return-fire coming from below, she could immediately tell that her whole squad was not doing too well.

Karania's Ruin had long gone silent and there were multiple instances where Isabella's Devastation had stopped firing altogether.

'You better all stay alive down there, or I'm absolutely fucked the second I take out these heavies!' Thea mentally ordered the rest of her squad, as she looked around for the perfect position to fire from.

Her eyes quickly fell on a nearby reception desk with a solid fake-marble, rock-crete slab that would allow her to be perpendicular to the heavy line.

'Perfect...!'

Ignoring the slowly massing headache for now, Thea picked out two grenades from one of her utility belts and lobbed them over the ground towards the stairs. She didn't aim them at anyone in particular, merely wanting them to create even more chaos, dust and debris for her to make her final moves.

The instant before they exploded, she stepped out of cover and sprinted towards the reception desk.

'Improved Sprint.'

She felt the energy of the Allbright System rush through her as it empowered her legs to push faster and harder towards the cover in front of her, just as the grenades exploded; throwing dust and debris in all directions and causing nearby soldiers to stumble, fall and scream in surprise at the sudden, close explosion.

Feeling her psychic senses tingle once again, telling her that she was about to be found out, Thea threw herself on her back, sliding the last few metres across the fake-marble flooring into cover behind the rock-crete slab behind the reception desk.

Breathing heavily, she immediately continued moving towards roughly the half-way point before ducking up, keeping her head as low as possible while still retaining visuals towards the ongoing battle.

Briefly checking her Resources, Thea tried to find the best position to engage her final-stand from. The second she opened fire at the heavies, she would undoubtedly be blowing her cover, no matter how much she might try to stay hidden.

[Stamina: 31 / 165 - Focus: 104 / 225]

'That's not exactly a lot, but I guess I'll have to make due,' she thought to herself with a grimace, as she considered her options.

From her vantage point, she could clearly see and take shots at the line of heavies that were firing down at her squad. She counted seven of them, although it was clear that there were clones mingled in amongst them.

'Probably three originals. I don't see them pulling together this many heavies for an ambush like this; this whole battle has probably one and a half, two squads at most.'

Looking over towards the rest of the Stellar Republic forces arrayed around the stair railing, she tried finding anyone that seemed like a squad leader of sorts, but failed to make any headway on that front in the few seconds she allowed herself to plan.

'All or nothing then, I guess,' she figured, shrugging absent-mindedly as she got into position, aiming her Icicle right at the line of heavies arrayed perpendicular to her at the terminus of the staircase.

Taking a deep breath, Thea activated her Abilities and took the shot.

'Penetrative Shot.'

'Sensory Overdrive.'

As the world started slowing down around her, the crystal-like projectile of the Icicle shot out from the barrel, an orange hue shaped like an arrow overlaying the tip of it.

The projectile soared through the air with eerie silence before slamming into the first heavy's chest, the orange arrow shattering upon impact. Abruptly, the projectile accelerated, doubling its speed, and ripped through the next four heavies in less than a fraction of a second before finally stopping.

Before anybody could react, Thea had already fired another five shots, one for each of the remaining heavies likely to survive the initial penetrating shot. The crystals slammed into and through their heavy armours, piercing them and shattering inside their bodies.

The line of heavies collapsed in mere moments, and Thea began shooting at everything that moved with rabid abandon.

"Heavies down, need help!" she yelled over the comms, hoping her squad would come to her aid, knowing all too well her position was no longer tenable.

As her Perception started to wane, her psychic senses flared up again and again.

She tried to dodge, duck, and dive away from the incoming enemy fire, a large portion of the remaining soldiers targeting her over the rest of the squad. The rock-crete slab she was using as cover rapidly disintegrated under the Stellar Republic's firepower, the debris and dust making it hard for Thea to see.

She fumbled and crawled behind the desk as fast as she could, trying to find a position where her psychic senses stopped screaming imminent danger. Every time she moved, she had to dodge another grenade, another shot, another potential angle that could get her killed.

She had no time to adjust at all.

Searing pain started radiating through her body as debris and errant shots finally started to pierce through her armour. She kept trusting her psychic senses and dodging as much as she could, hoping for the rest of her squad to bail her out of this dire situation.

Each second felt like an eternity as she desperately fired from cover to keep approaching enemies at bay, trying to avoid more incoming fire with each moment.

Finally, her legs gave out as she tried dodging another incoming grenade and she slipped, careening down onto the floor just as the grenade exploded.

The shrapnel ripped into her armour and flesh below as the shockwave threw her against the rock-crete slab. The world around her spun, her ears rang with an unmistakable cadence, and she groaned in pain, holding her chest with one arm, the other hanging limply and refusing to obey her commands.

A large pool of blood rapidly formed around her as her vision turned blurry and she felt herself slump onto the ground. Desperation clawed at her mind, but she clung to the hope that her squad would reach her in time.

Each heartbeat felt like a hammer blow, echoing in her ears.

She fought to stay conscious, forcing her eyes to focus on the blurred figures approaching through the haze of dust and smoke.

'Just a little longer...' she thought, her grip on her weapon loosening as exhaustion and blood loss took their toll. *'Get up, Thea. You'll get killed otherwise...!'*

Her breaths came in ragged gasps, pain lancing through her with each inhale.

Her body refused to obey as she felt more and more debris get flung on top of her from the disintegrating rock-crete slab taking the shots for her.

Suddenly, it became eerily quiet inside her mind. Her psychic senses stopped giving her warnings, as her consciousness began to fade away.

'Just... a bit... more...'

Everything turned dark as she sunk into unconsciousness...