

Arc 1 - Chapter 72 - The Storm V

Lucas' muscle fibres tensed as he anchored the shield, preparing for the inevitable backlash that came from toppling a prime asset of the Stellar Republic's defences.

Breaking the tense silence, Lucas, admiration lacing his voice, remarked, "I just can't get enough of you shooting that thing. That Tier-Up Voucher was put to good use. Must admit, I'm slightly envious of it." As his words hung in the air, they were quickly drowned by the symphony of returning fire, the kinetic force nudging Lucas and the Stalwart deeper into the foxhole's embrace.

Amidst the clamour, Thea discerned the metallic twang of bullets colliding with the Stalwart and the sizzling sound of laser shots fizzling out against its formidable surface. "I've said it before, and I'll say it as many times as necessary: I owe you, and this shield, big time. Without the both of you, I could never do this kinda stuff," she yelled back, laughter barely peeking through her words.

Suddenly, their communication devices crackled to life, delivering Corvus' voice, tinged with an unexpected glee, "Thea! You've outdone yourself! That cannon's gone! And trust me, they're *not* happy about it. Confirm you two are alright?"

Without breaking their focus, they clicked their comms in response, a shorthand for 'all clear' that required no words and spared them the split-second distraction that could mean life or death on the battlefield.

Riding the high of their achievement, Corvus continued, "Thea, it looks like your theory was spot-on. You're greenlit to take out more of those cannons. The more havoc you wreak, the better. Lucas, I'm counting on you to keep her safe. Understood?" His spirited command ended with the comms falling silent once again.

The two of them looked at each other with a mixture of confusion and elation at their squad leader's uncharacteristically enthusiastic words.

Thea noted that Lucas had purposefully put his visor into the transparent setting, as long as they weren't actively engaged in a firefight, which she definitely appreciated. She struggled enough with understanding people as is, even if she could see their faces.

Having to talk to people that had their visors completely blocked was much more of a challenge for her than fighting in this war—of that, she was absolutely certain.

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The initial return salvo had dug the Stalwart into the ashen-laden wasteland around them, the raw kinetic energy imparted on it too much for the semi-solid ground to take. In the aftermath, as the barrage eased, Thea and Lucas found themselves entombed in a makeshift bunker of their own inadvertent design, the Stalwart, their unwieldy guardian, sealing the entrance.

Lucas heaved against the weight of the Stalwart, muscles rippling under the strain, as the shield seemed to dig into the ground with its own stubbornness. Each push upwards left a clear trail of grit and sweat on his brow.

"I hope none of those other cannons catch wind of our actions. I have pride in the Stalwart—it's top-notch T1 tech—but even it has its limits. Up against an anti-armour cannon, this baby will absolutely be torn apart," he remarked, his voice laced with a cocktail of anxiety and reverence for his treasured gear.

Thea, checking over the Caliburn in her hands, responded, "Considering the ruckus we're causing, it's just a matter of time before we draw more attention. Initially, I brushed off the Republic's strategic command—during the ambushes, they operated with all the finesse of a street gang. But ever since we arrived at this wall..." she trailed off, allowing the memory of the impressive fortifications they were facing to underscore her point, "...it's evident that there's a more tactical mind at play behind these defences. It's infuriating, but I can't help but tip my hat to them: This wall's a real problem."

Lucas grunted an affirmation as he pushed the Stalwart up a slight bit higher again and again, causing ash and spent ordnance from the rim of the foxhole to drop into their little hideout with every push.

'I wish my Strength wasn't so utterly underdeveloped... I could help out instead of just sitting around, trying not to get in the way,' Thea thought to herself as she watched the hulking heavy next to her try to free them from their self-created prison. *'Also, next time, we need to build this with a slight angle in mind, so pushing the Stalwart back upright doesn't end up with Lucas powering himself out.'*

With nothing else to do but wait, Thea simply watched as Lucas, one centimetre at a time, pushed the Stalwart out of its earthen mould above them.

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Finally, after about two to three minutes of laborious work, Lucas let out a relieved breath. "Haa... Alright. I think we've got some room to manoeuvre now. I'll lift the Stalwart—give you the protection you need to move out for the next target," he declared, his voice a blend of exhaustion and determination.

Thea, her earlier thoughts having coalesced into an actionable plan, seized the moment. "Before that, let's reshape this foxhole. We need a better angle of egress. Can you extend the Stalwart for cover while I excavate a bit more?"

Lucas responded with a decisive nod, forgoing any verbal confirmation. It was his signature way—a pure embodiment of his action-first mentality.

He hoisted the Stalwart with a grunt, standing it up as the surrounding air crackled with the renewed intensity of incoming fire. Without a moment's delay, he lunged out of the foxhole, driving the Stalwart outward about a metre, then locking into position against it, his entire being put into making sure the Stalwart was not going to give in one centimetre.

The characteristic glow of the grav-lock engaged, cascading over the shield in a wave of reassurance. Its activation visibly lessened the strain on Lucas, his posture shifting from one of extreme exertion to a more sustainable stance, though the tension of his jaw, visible through the transparent visor, betrayed the effort still required.

"You're good to go," he managed, his words strained yet resolute.

Thea couldn't help but be impressed; the force exerted against the shield was monumental—vastly beyond what they had encountered in any of the past skirmishes. The grav-lock did its part, but it was the Stalwart's T1 materials and Lucas himself that truly bore the brunt of the onslaught.

With a determined glint in her eyes, Thea sprang into action, keenly aware of the immense pressure Lucas was under to keep them shielded. Each moment Lucas held the line was bought with grit and tenacity, and she refused to squander it.

Gripping one of the trench-shovels they'd come prepared with from inside the foxhole, she set to work.

Thea plunged into her task with the precision of a seasoned machine, her early-life lessons with James and the Basic Training with the UHF resurfacing as she reworked the landscape.

Her understanding of physics, a cornerstone of her education to understand bullet trajectories, now guided her hands in a different manner. She methodically sculpted the foxhole's edges, creating a gentle incline leading towards Lucas's position.

Her actions were informed by the core principles she had learned: The behaviour of projectiles, the importance of angles in deflection, and the dynamics of force distribution — knowledge that was fundamentally vital for a scout/sniper such as herself.

Thea's design didn't doubt the resilience of the Stalwart's T1 material. The shield had proven its worth time and time again, deflecting lethal assaults that would have spelled the end for any marine.

Her main concern was the unforgiving terrain they found themselves in.

The semi-solid ashen wasteland had a tendency to act like a mire, swallowing up anything that exerted significant force upon it. Her modifications aimed to work in harmony with the Stalwart, ensuring it remained a movable barrier rather than becoming an accidental tombstone.

Under the relentless barrage of the Stellar Republic's distant guns, each shovelful of dirt Thea moved was laden with palpable tension. The myriads of bullets whizzing past and lasers crackling in the air was almost rhythmic in its intensity.

Several times, her Psychic Foresight flashed a warning, prompting her to dart out of harm's way, narrowly avoiding incoming projectiles.

The high stakes and razor-thin margins for error made the task feel like an eternity, but after a few fraught minutes, the foxhole was reshaped to her satisfaction.

Drawing a deep breath, Thea shifted her focus back to their primary mission: Neutralising the menacing anti-armour cannons built into the wall itself.

"I've got it set up! Pull back when you're ready, I need to prep the Caliburn for the next cannon!" Thea relayed to Lucas through their comm link, doubting her voice would carry over the uproarious din of the ongoing firefight, even if she screamed as loud as she could.

The battlefield's cacophony, while slightly diminished compared to the start of the battle, remained oppressively loud.

She quickly reached for her Caliburn. As she racked the bolt, a burst of pent-up heat erupted in a fiery plume from the weapon's vents. *'Can't afford another melted hand. I made that promise to Kara,'* she mentally chided herself, nodding with determination.

Suddenly, she detected the familiar clang of the Stalwart as it thudded into the ground beside her. She glanced up just in time to see the shield glow with the signature grav-lock hue. Lucas, moments later, let out a pronounced exhale.

"Phew, missions with you are never dull. But by Xagis, they wear me out," he quipped, a hint of mirth lacing his words. Thea found herself laughing lightly at that, having only recently realised that she was indeed ending up in taxing situations more often than might be prudent.

Lucas wasn't known for being particularly talkative either, which made his light-hearted quips all the more surprising. It appeared that the heat of battle had brought out a playful side in him. She recalled a recent memory of Lucas playfully ribbing Corvus alongside the other squad members shortly after her return. Perhaps the recent events had fostered a closer bond among them, allowing Lucas to feel more comfortable around all of them as a result?

It was a dynamic she intended to observe and understand better, but for the time being, her immediate priority lay in one simple, albeit vastly more important, task: Firing a big gun at even larger cannons.

With the Caliburn now perched on the ledge formed by the foxhole, just behind the relative safety of the Stalwart, Thea paused to survey the battlefield for her subsequent mark.

The tally of cannons floated through her mind: *'Fifteen total... Six eradicated by the UHF AD, four neutralised by the offensive heavy units, and one by my hand. That leaves a quartet yet untouched on this stretch of the wall.'*

Her strategy took shape; it would be prudent to target those nearest to her and Lucas first, ideally mitigating the risk from the others who might be lulled into a false sense of security due to their relative distance away from them, potentially overlooking their danger.

However, each time she dared to sneak a glance beyond the shield for a better vantage point, her Psychic Foresight flared into overdrive, prompting her to narrowly evade a barrage of incoming fire—four near-misses in a matter of heartbeats. As the battle had continued to escalate in its intensity for her, Thea now realised that she had been relying more and more on her Psychic Powers to keep her alive.

She once again briefly thought about Karania's earlier words and couldn't help but agree. Without her Psychic edge, she likely would have already found a bullet earlier rather than later.

It was apparent now, however, that the enemy had them dialled in, the sharpshooters and heavy gunners fixing their lethal attention with unerring focus.

'The approach we took for the first one won't work a second time,' she acknowledged silently, *'These gunners are lying in wait, and they're not going to just let us do as we please...'*

A brief moment passed in which Thea tried to find a solution and her eyes were inadvertently drawn by Lucas' form, still bracing the Stalwart against the continuous barrage of heavy weapons and sniper fire, his grunts of exertion echoing in her mind.

'I can't just sit around. Let's do it the hard way,' she resolved, taking a deep breath before deciding on a target.

"Lucas, this one's gonna be a bit more dangerous than the last one. Get ready to jump into cover, alright?" She commed to the hulking figure, who only gave a single acknowledging click.

'Alright, Thea. Time to try out yet another idea in the middle of the largest battlefield you've ever seen. No biggie. Just keep your head in the game, it'll be fine,' she pumped herself up while working through the motions of her plan again and again. She didn't have the luxury of a second attempt, so she wanted to make sure everything was as thoroughly planned in her mind as possible.

Finding no errors in her plan, aside from the extremely slim margins of error and high likelihood of injury or death, Thea breathed one final, large huff of air, before focusing down on her target: One of the wall-mounted anti-armour cannons, around 2.5 kilometres away.

With a flurry of motion, she hefted the Caliburn's sizable body and barrel into the open, aimed directly at the cannon, before activating its grav-lock—locking it to the planet's gravitational field, rather than simply relying on the unsteady ground below them—and activating her Abilities.

'Sensory Overdrive.'

'Penetrative Shot.'

As Thea activated her [Sensory Overdrive], the cacophony of the battlefield transformed.

Time seemed to dilate around her, every second stretching into infinity, her Perception sharpening to an otherworldly keenness. The relentless thud of artillery fire in the distance turned into discernible rhythmic beats, each explosion, each shot down shell a distinct echo resonating across the field. The staccato of gunfire, once a relentless torrent, now became a series of isolated events, each bullet's path clear as day.

Her heightened senses picked up the subtle shift of dirt displaced by distant boots, the mechanical whir of servo-motors in Lucas' ultra heavy armour bracing against the Stalwart, even the faintest change in the wind's direction—carrying the war's acrid scent through the ashy air.

She could see the slight wavering heat radiating from a marine's barrel, the miniscule glint off an enemy sniper's scope trained on her position that would have been missed in the commotion—a world alive with details previously shrouded by the fog of war.

However, her entire focus was immediately directed towards her true target.

Aiming down the scope of her Caliburn, a frisson of exhilaration coursed through her as her new Passive, [Detect Weak Spot], seamlessly integrated with her massively enhanced Perception from [Sensory Overdrive], instantly revealing the weak spots of anything she looked at.

A previously unnoticed flaw near the barrel of the anti-armour cannon shimmered into view, highlighted as if by a beacon. It struck her, the realisation that each cannon bore its unique battle scars, no two vulnerabilities exactly alike—an unfortunate stroke for the UHF, denying them the predictability that could have been exploited.

She steadied her breathing, aligning the crosshairs with the newfound chink in the cannon's armor. With a squeeze of the trigger, the Caliburn came to life.

With her senses acutely amplified by [Sensory Overdrive], Thea perceived the Caliburn's discharge not as the blur of rapid-fire she knew it to be, but rather as a slow-motion showcase of precision engineering. The complex ballet of its internal mechanisms was laid bare for her, each electromagnetic pulse and mechanical shift a note in a perfectly orchestrated, grand symphony.

The ordinarily instantaneous was stretched into a perceivable sequence.

Her tactile senses could feel the minute vibrations as the massive capacitors along the entire weapon's length released their stored energy. She watched as the slug, imbued with the energy from her [Penetrative Shot] Ability, took on an orange, arrow-like cone at its tip, a visual manifestation of the enhanced penetrative force it was about to unleash.

As it cut through the air at hypervelocity, the surrounding dust and ash particles were vaporised upon contact, turning them into a brilliant, glowing trail of plasma. The resulting superheated air itself created an ephemeral tunnel of blue-white brilliance that bisected the battlefield—a fleeting indication of the raw power she had just unleashed.

Just moments after the slug's departure, the Caliburn expelled an eruption of residual energy and the majority of its pent-up heat. This expulsion coalesced at the barrel's mouth, manifesting as what could only be described as a miniature sun—incandescent and blindingly bright.

It was as if, for the briefest of instances, the very essence of a star had been birthed on the battlefield.

This radiant sphere, while short-lived, birthed a forceful shockwave, an outward thrust of raw energy that sent ripples through the environment. Ash, shrapnel, and other debris were swept up in its wake, caught in a whirlwind birthed by pure, unbridled power.

This wasn't a simple recoil; it was an assertive declaration of the might of a T2 heavy railgun.

And then, there was the sound.

The Caliburn's signature boom was not a singular note but a symphony of ruptures. The initial boom—deep, raw, and primaevael—was but the precursor. As the slug tore through the atmosphere at hypersonic speeds, it breached the sound barrier the moment it left the barrel. The breach manifested as a distinct sonic boom, layering upon the initial boom of the Caliburn's discharge to create a cascading reverberation that was felt as much as it was heard.

Together, the visual flare of the pseudo-sun, the palpable shockwave, and the echoing roars of the booms combined to create a sensory spectacle that Thea had never before been able to see—her love and appreciation for the design and technology inherent in the weapon she used skyrocketing even further.

Though the journey of the slug itself was a matter of fractions of a second, to Thea's sharpened gaze, the slug seemed to cruise through the space between the railgun and its target with a slow inevitability.

As it made contact, even time itself seemed to pause for a breath.

The flaw on the anti-armour cannon, once a subtle imperfection, now became ground zero for an explosion of kinetic energy. The orange cone at the tip of the slug burrowed into the cannon's metal, slicing through it with perfect efficiency until it hit a sizable portion of T1 material, rupturing the cone in an instant.

The resultant impact as the armour-piercing slug hit the very same material that disintegrated the [Penetrative Shot], produced a mesmerising eruption of molten metal and shrapnel. Shockwaves emanated from the point of impact, spider-webbing cracks into the surrounding frame of the cannon and dissipating its formidable structure into chaos as it bored its way through to the internals.

It was at this point, that the weak spot Thea had detected thanks to her [Detect Weak Spots] Ability came into play, allowing the slug of the Caliburn to penetrate and rip apart the formidable defensive layers of the anti-armour cannon entirely, before finally delivering its explosive payload inside the cannon's internals.

The detonation was catastrophic.

A fierce explosion erupted from the cannon's core, consuming its internals in a furious maelstrom of fire and force. Metal and machinery were torn asunder, reduced to molten slag and airborne shrapnel, as the cannon's once-imposing structure was blown outwards in a radial display of raw power.

In this heightened state, each second seemed to stretch into hours, affording Thea an almost superhuman clarity. Even as the explosion of the first cannon reverberated across the battlefield, Thea was already two steps ahead.

The battlefield's cacophony, which would usually drown out any strategic thought, seemed distant to her, almost as if she was orchestrating the battle from a serene observatory, far removed from the chaos below.

The weight of the Caliburn shifted effortlessly in her grasp as she pivoted, zeroing in on her next target. Before she could even process it, her [Detect Weak Spots] Ability pinpointed another vulnerability in the enemy's defences.

The glowing mark was like a beacon in the sea of metal and warfare, inviting her shot.

Mustering her Focus, she commanded the System to once again use her Ability.

'Penetrative Shot.'

[System]: *Penetrative Shot has reached Level 4.*

The familiar rush of the Caliburn discharging felt hotter this time, the immediate successive firing amplifying the heat exponentially. Yet, even this blistering sensation barely registered in her hyper-aware state.

Time felt like it was snapping back to its usual pace as she deactivated the grav-lock.

She sent a swift click of her comm to Lucas, a predefined signal without the need for words, and agilely retreated to the safety of the foxhole. As she descended, the intensity of her [Sensory Overdrive] continued to wane and run out, the crisp edges of her perception starting to blur, the world around her becoming less sharp, the sounds once again intermingling into a uniform cacophony of noise.

The muffled reverberation of the second cannon's destruction barely pierced the incessant hammering of return fire that rattled against Lucas's Stalwart shield as he swiftly manoeuvred it above their foxhole. The metallic clangs and thuds that echoed around them formed a cacophonous shield just as effective as the physical one he provided, enveloping them in a transient cocoon of safety amidst the chaos—or at least so they hoped.

As soon as their eyes locked, Lucas's face broke into a wide grin, shouting over the relentless symphony of bullets, "Are you out of your mind? Two in one go?!"

Feeling the residual heat from her Caliburn rapidly turning their foxhole into a sweltering oven, Thea responded with a mischievous smirk, "It was probably our last shot at this tactic, so why not go out with a bang? After all, just following the Squad Leader's direct orders!"

Simultaneously, their comms clicked to life as Corvus' voice, a mixture of elation and exasperation, came through, "What the fuck, Thea?! By the Emperor's golden biceps, I know I said the more havoc the better, but can you try not making yourself the main target for the entire section of a battlefield just one single Emperor-damned time?! I'm sending a group of

defensive heavies to your location to help get you two back to the trenches, sit tight. Keep your heads down!"

Lucas and Thea burst into genuine laughter at their Squad Leaders exasperated message, the weight of the adrenaline from their audacious gambit slowly lifting. Lucas still leaned heavily against the Stalwart, but Thea noticed he didn't seem as taxed as before, even if the retaliatory fire hitting the shield seemed more ferocious than their initial encounter.

'The tweaks are doing their job! James' lessons on ricochets and bullet deflection truly paid off. That old man really knows his way around warfare,' Thea mused, a hint of pride in her grin. Memories of the old man swirled in her mind. It seemed like every challenge she faced, James had somehow prepared her for, directly or indirectly.

'Could James have been a Psychic?' she pondered, her own recent experiences with Psychic Powers having opened an entirely new branch of thought for her. 'Did he foresee the specific challenges I'd face, and that's why he taught me those Golden Rules? Or was it simply his way of equipping me for life?'

A curious sensation coursed through her, as if pieces of a puzzle she thought she'd completed were now scattering once more.

Her thoughts continued to race, as her memories started to coalesce into a more complete picture. *'James always **did** seem to have an uncanny depth of knowledge... Granted, he's very old, downright ancient, really, but his understanding of warfare, and especially the UHF, was far beyond what any regular marine should possess.'*

A light bulb moment hit her. *'Could James have been an elite, like a Staff-Sergeant, akin to Venn? That would make so much sense!'*

The violent tremors of a massive explosion directly above them jolted Thea back to the harrowing reality of the battlefield. Lucas, with strained exertion, manoeuvred the Stalwart shield back into place, as it had been knocked off-course by the eruption.

"Damn, I think they're seriously pissed at us now, Thea!" Lucas shouted over the din, his voice a mix of grit and determination as he struggled with the shield.

"Anything I can do to help?" Thea called out, her words tinged with the tension of a marine ready to spring into action.

Another explosion thundered above them, forcing Lucas down into the semi-solid ground beneath their feet; his armour groaning against the pressure, a clear indicator for just how terrifying the Stellar Republic's attacks on them truly were. "Just be ready to bolt. Once our heavy support arrives, we make a break for it. The Stalwart isn't built to withstand this kind of punishment for long," he grunted, managing to reposition the shield to the more defensive, original angle, once again.

Observing Lucas, Thea could see the signs of his [Stalwart Stance] Ability, the way his posture had tensed and his form had become an immovable object. It was clear he was exhausting his repertoire of Abilities to keep them both safe, even as the relentless enemy barrage sought to claim them.

Seemingly unable to help, Thea simply hoped that the defensive heavy support that Corvus had promised was quickly getting to their location—Lucas was clearly running on fumes already, as the third explosion pushed him to one knee.

"By the stars, what in Xagis' name are they hitting us with?!" Lucas exclaimed, veins bulging from the exertion of continuously pushing the Stalwart against the unrelenting onslaught of projectiles.

The confined space of their foxhole had become stiflingly hot, a direct consequence of the Caliburn's thermal aftermath. If Lucas hadn't been persistent in expanding their refuge, they'd risk being roasted alive in their own armour.

'I have to release this heat from the Caliburn, or we're toast,' Thea's mind raced.

Retrospectively, she felt trapped by her previous decisions. She hadn't had the luxury to allow the Caliburn to cool down before seeking refuge within the foxhole, yet this realisation did little to alleviate their present predicament.

By the echo of the fourth explosion, their comms buzzed back to life, Corvus' authoritative voice cutting through, "Evacuate that hole, NOW! Fall back here at full tilt! Whatever they're firing at you is packing a serious punch; we've got our offensive heavies on it, but don't bet on them neutralising it soon."

Without hesitation, Lucas and Thea made ready to abandon their sweltering refuge.

Lucas, using all his strength, pressed against the Stalwart, its groans of strain echoing the internal damages it suffered from the relentless assault. For a few heartbeats, all that filled the air were the escalating creaks of the Stalwart, causing Thea to fear an imminent collapse.

But then, the ground around the shield yielded, and a gust of relatively fresher air surged in, expelling much of the stifling warmth. Lucas promptly positioned the Stalwart upright, locked eyes with Thea to ensure her readiness, and then, with unyielding faith in Corvus' command, vaulted out of the foxhole.

Emerging, Thea found herself amidst a protective circle of four other defensive heavies, each harnessing their distinct defensive Abilities to shield them from the continuous barrage. Every second was vital; the heavy artillery targeting them had already shown its lethal capabilities.

Urgency in their strides, they dashed for the safety of the trenches just a short distance away, even as a torrent of rounds hammered against their ultra-heavy armours and defences.

As they neared just a few metres from safety, Thea realised a profound shift in the symphony of war around them. The once incessant drumming of gatling fire, acting as a relentless barrier against the Stellar Republic's artillery, had vanished. The familiar cacophony of disintegrated ordnance and far-off skyward detonations was eerily absent.

The artillery of the Stellar Republic had fallen silent at some point during their stay inside the foxhole.

Amidst their desperate dash, Thea risked a glance upwards, just as the first renewed wave of artillery shells obscured the smoke-filled sky. The true magnitude of the threat dawned on her when the initial shell burst open.

As it exploded, the shell torn apart by the renewed gatling fire of the UHF's defences, the contents dispersed over a vast area, reacting violently with the air, igniting into a monstrous fiery drapery that drifted earthwards, paradoxically serene in its descent, akin to the gentle flutter of winter's first snowfall, yet promising annihilation.

Her eyes widened in abject terror as her vision inadvertently darted past the blanket of fire descending towards her and locked onto the hundreds upon thousands of shells right behind it—shells that were mere milliseconds away from being ripped apart by the UHF's gatling guns in a similar fashion, bound to carry the same type of payload...