

Arc 1 - Chapter 75 - Return

Thea's expression was a complex tapestry of emotions as she tried to process Karania's nonchalant revelation. It was only a couple hours or so since they had parted ways, and yet, here was Karania, sporting a new cybernetic arm and moving about as if nothing extraordinary had happened. Thea felt a warm flutter at being called "bestie" by Karania, but it was quickly overshadowed by a surge of concern and a barrage of questions.

"Kara, what the fuck happened?!" Thea asked, her voice tinged with worry.

Karanja, seemingly unfazed, began to recount the events with an almost casual air. "Oh, it was when the IgT-Shells started falling. I was out there, helping with the wounded. I managed to duck for cover just in time, but one of the marines near me wasn't so lucky. A bit of the compound got onto his arm," she explained, her tone surprisingly light.

Thea listened, her eyes locked on Karania's cybernetic arm, as her friend continued, "I had to act fast. Using my [Surgeon's Toolkit], I amputated his arm to save him. But in the process, a little of that nasty compound got on my hand." Karania gestured to her new arm, her grin never faltering. "So, I did what any sensible medic would do—I cut off my own arm with the other hand. Quick thinking, huh?"

Thea was taken aback by Karania's matter-of-fact recounting of such a drastic self-amputation.

It was as if Karania viewed the loss of her arm and the subsequent fitting of a cybernetic replacement as just another day at the office. It was both admirable and slightly unnerving how Karania could maintain such a nonchalant demeanour in the face of what was, undeniably, a life-altering event—at the very least until they left the assessment.

"How long ago did all of this happen?" Thea asked, her concern growing.

Karanja glanced at the newly attached limb. "Oh, it's only been about half an hour since I woke up from the emergency surgery. The UHF was prepared for this scale of assault, so they brought loads of these cybernetic replacements," she said, almost cheerfully. "You should come see one of the storage chambers, you'd probably love it! They're completely filled with some crazy cybernetics!"

Thea's confusion deepened.

No one, no matter how resilient, should be functioning at Karania's level so soon after such a significant surgery.

It was then that Thea's heightened Perception picked up on subtler clues in Karania's behaviour: A light, almost imperceptible swaying, her pupils slightly more dilated than usual, and a subtle, nervous twitch in her movements. The pieces of the puzzle started to come together in Thea's mind—Karanja was heavily medicated.

"Karanja, are you on pain meds right now...?" Thea asked, her voice laced with concern.

Karania's response was a bit delayed, her voice a tad too cheerful for the gravity of the situation. "Hm? Oh, yeah, loads of them! Utterly and completely smashed, really! They had to keep me pretty doped up for the surgery, and, well, I guess it hasn't worn off yet!"

Thea's eyebrows shot up at that brazen confirmation, confused about a great manner of things in front of her right now.

Hesitantly she asked, "How come you were discharged so quickly then...? Shouldn't you be resting, at least until the majority of meds and stims wear off?"

The second she saw Karania's smirk, however, she got a bad feeling about the coming answer. Karania stepped up slightly closer to her and lowered her voice conspiratorially as she answered, "Did you know that your credentials don't actually get disabled when you're put under in the middle of a battlefield? Too many things going on—not enough time for bureaucratic stuff like that."

With a playful, albeit slightly wonky wink she continued, "I discharged myself, Thea! I am a medic, after all! I gave my bed to another marine, so any staff or medics won't be surprised about an empty bed all of a sudden. Pretty smart, huh?"

Thea's expression shifted from concern to disbelief as Karania's words sank in. "You discharged yourself? Karania, that's... that's not how it's supposed to work," Thea stammered, her voice a mix of worry and incredulity.

While she wasn't particularly aware of how the medical side of the UHF worked, she was fairly certain about that fact. Surely, discharging yourself while heavily drugged up didn't seem like something that should be standard procedure.

Karania, still maintaining her mischievous grin, leaned in closer. "I know, I know, but hear me out. In the chaos of the battlefield, the medical protocols can be a bit... flexible. Especially when it comes to us medics." Her voice, although hushed, carried a hint of pride.

Thea shook her head slightly, her concern not abating. "That's incredibly risky, Karania. You should be resting, not running around... What if you make a mistake? I saw you work on at least three marines since I first entered the ward!" She admonished softly, her eyes scanning over the cybernetic arm.

Karania's grin faltered for a moment, but she quickly recovered, her tone turning slightly more serious. "You should know me better than that by now, Thea. I would *never* risk a patient's wellbeing, no matter the circumstances. I might be drugged and stimmed up, but I know what I can handle better than anyone else. I've only been doing the routine checkups and the easy stuff. No surgery or anything," she elaborated, which, surprisingly enough, did put Thea's mind at ease somewhat.

"I couldn't just lie there knowing I could be helping, Thea. There are marines out there, and in here, who need every hand we can spare, even if one of them is... well, not exactly flesh and blood anymore," she finished while waving her new cybernetic arm in front of herself, giggling intoxicatedly at the sight.

Thea struggled to articulate her concerns.

Karania's self-assured attitude was both admirable and slightly alarming.

She knew Karania would never knowingly compromise a patient's safety, but this was different. Thea's own experience with the side effects of medication after her Focus Overdraw flashed through her mind. The choices she had made under the influence were far from ideal, and she had been fully conscious, yet not entirely in control.

She remembered one incident in particular, in which she had used her Psychic Powers to penetrate Viladia's veil. At the time, it hadn't seemed wrong, but in hindsight, it was a glaringly rash decision. Karania might be better equipped to handle the meds, but Thea couldn't shake off the unease at the thought of her friend wandering the med station in this state.

Yet, there was little time to dwell on these worries. They had a mission to attend to, which, thinking about it now, was the perfect excuse for Thea to make sure Karania didn't end up making any mistakes she would later regret.

"Kara," Thea began, her voice tinged with a mix of concern and authority, "Corvus wants us for a new mission. We need to gear up and meet him in command room 11, *once we figure out where that is.*" She added the last part to herself, anticipating the need for some guidance.

Karania's expression shifted, a blend of exasperation and excitement playing across her features. It was as if Thea had just taken away a beloved toy, only to dangle the prospect of another equally enticing plaything in its stead. With this mix of emotions evident on her face, Karania momentarily lingered before finally seeming to make a decision and turning to gather her gear.

Watching her friend, Thea shook her head with a mixture of affection and mild frustration, thinking, *'How can she be so incredibly smart and proficient at whatever she does and then also be so childish sometimes... Haaa... That's Kara for you, I guess.'*

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After about ten minutes of navigating through the underground maze, with the help of numerous marines they had stopped along the way, Thea and Karania finally arrived at command room 11.

Thea had braced herself for a rudimentary setup, recalling the makeshift command area Corvus had used during their patrols—a simple space that was more functional than formal. To her surprise, however, the command room was far more elaborate than she had anticipated.

It was a well-organised, deeply entrenched facility beneath the battlefield, its structure fortified with pre-fabricated rock-crete walls and sturdy pillars. A robust plasteel auto-door marked the entrance, suggesting a high level of security.

This feature, Thea surmised, was probably intended to safeguard the command staff from any unexpected breaches, providing a critical delay for the destruction of sensitive information if needed.

The stark contrast between this well-equipped command centre and the rudimentary setups she had seen before during Sovereign Alpha's partols was striking, underscoring the importance and scale of the ongoing operations.

Hesitant to disturb the evidently critical operations within the command room, Thea reached for the squad comms, her voice cautious yet clear, "Corvus, we've arrived. Should we come in, or would you prefer we wait here?"

A brief silence followed, during which Thea anticipated a response over the comms. However, it was Corvus himself who emerged from the command room, his face wearing a smile that seemed to carry the weight of the world's exhaustion.

"Good to see both of you in one piece... The situation outside is pretty dire. We've got a mountain of tasks ahead," Corvus began, his voice fading momentarily as he seemed to gather his thoughts. Regaining his composure, he continued, "Our role on the battlefield here is wrapping up, however. Staff-Sergeant Venn has summoned us to the new FOB. We're moving on to the heart of our mission: Nova Tertius itself."

His words hung in the air, evoking a complex blend of emotions in both Thea and Karania. Corvus then set off, signalling for them to follow.

Internally, Thea grappled with a sense of unfulfillment, her thoughts echoing her frustration, *'I've barely scratched the surface of what I could do here...'* Her gaze shifted to Karania, whose demeanour mirrored her own feelings of discontent.

They both understood the importance of their primary mission, and had from the very beginning, yet the abrupt withdrawal from the battlefield, especially after enduring such personal losses and sacrifices, felt jarringly unsatisfying.

'Karanja's lost an arm, and we're just retreating? Lucas, Desmond, Isabella... they gave their lives in this assault, and now there's no chance for retribution? They'll just join us at the FOB and have to suck up their deaths...?' Thea's thoughts churned with a mix of disappointment and a deep-seated desire for justice. The abrupt shift from the frontline to their primary mission left a bittersweet taste, a mix of duty and unavenged losses.

Despite the whirlwind of emotions swirling within them, Thea and Karania remained silent, acutely aware of the weight of their original orders.

The battle at the wall, as monumental as it was, was never meant to be their primary battleground. Their true objective lay within the confines of Nova Tertius, a mission crucial to the UHF's overall strategy.

Without their specialised task being completed, the main forces would remain hopelessly stymied at the city's formidable defences.

Observing Corvus, Thea couldn't help but notice the subtle signs of his increased stress.

The burden of leadership, especially in the aftermath of losing squad members, weighed heavily on him.

His responsibility extended beyond the battlefield; it encompassed the very lives and decisions of his team. Every loss was a personal blow, each decision to move or stay fraught with the potential for irreversible consequences.

To Thea, it seemed clear in the way that he had spoken and his strained demeanour as he led them through the tunnels, that if circumstances had allowed, Corvus would have undoubtedly preferred to stay, granting them all a chance for vengeance.

But his role as a squad leader bound him in ways that went beyond personal desires or the collective need for retribution. His adherence to orders and the broader strategy was not just a duty but a necessity, critical to the success of their mission and the safety of his squad.

This unspoken understanding connected the three of them.

While none of them relished the thought of withdrawing from the immediate battle, they all understood that it was necessary for the bigger picture.

They were bound by duty and orders, a reality they faced with a shared, albeit reluctant, acceptance...

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For thirty minutes, Thea and Karania followed Corvus through an intricate network of tunnels carved beneath the battlefield. Corvus navigated with a confidence that suggested deep familiarity, his steps sure and unhesitating.

Thea couldn't help but wonder if he had memorised the route or was simply adept at reading the subtle markers that guided their way.

Corvus had explained that their current route was a strategic choice: They would bypass the ravaged surface entirely, remaining under the relative safety of the earth.

The tunnels they moved through were part of a supply corridor, one of the first excavations completed by the UHF's specialised squads even before the onset of the battle itself. The entire advance of the UHF's armour and infantry on the surface had served a dual purpose, not only engaging the enemy but also concealing the establishment of these critical subterranean routes.

This revelation cast the entire operation in a new light for Thea.

The UHF had *anticipated* a protracted siege, requiring a sustainable and secure method of supply and troop management. The intricate network of tunnels and underground facilities served as lifelines, ensuring a steady flow of resources and a haven for recuperation right at the edge of the battlefield.

The strategic positioning of the new FOB had advanced closer to the battlefield to ensure quick accessibility to the respawn pods. But it was the immediate availability of supply depots and medical stations adjacent to the battlefield, seamlessly integrated into the underground network, that truly gave the UHF forces a fighting chance.

This setup was not just for convenience; it was a critical lifeline, providing instant resupply and medical attention that kept the UHF's forces in the fight.

This underground system underscored the necessity of such infrastructure in a siege of this magnitude. The UHF had clearly understood that to engage in a protracted battle against the Stellar Republic, they needed more than just manpower and weaponry; they needed a sustainable support system that could match the relentless demands of such a siege.

The Stellar Republic, with the entire mega-city of Nova Tertius at their disposal, had a nearly inexhaustible supply chain and numerous safe havens for their troops to recuperate. This gave them a formidable advantage, allowing their forces to sustain prolonged engagements and rotate troops without losing momentum.

In contrast, without their elaborate underground network, the UHF's forces would have faced insurmountable odds. Any prolonged confrontation without these essential support systems would have inevitably led to the UHF being overwhelmed and worn down. This strategic foresight in logistics and supply management was, therefore, not just an advantage but an absolute *necessity* for the UHF in maintaining their presence and effectiveness in the siege.

This intricate network of tunnels provided a crucial escape route for Thea, Karania, and Corvus, allowing them to navigate beneath the perilous battlefield that stretched out in front of Nova Tertius' wall.

After weaving through the subterranean maze for several more minutes, their journey brought them to one of the many designated exit points. Corvus, taking the lead, gestured towards a simple but functional slope that led them from the bowels of the earth back to the surface world.

Emerging into the Azure Forest, they found themselves deep within UHF territory, well beyond the immediate dangers of the front lines.

Thea immediately felt a wave of relief wash over her.

The forest, where she had spent the preceding days, offered a sense of familiarity and comfort, a stark contrast to the claustrophobic confines of the tunnels. The sensation of passing beyond the SADD's range of influence earlier in their travels had been unmistakable, a subtle but palpable shift that marked their exit from its sphere of influence, further easing Thea's mind.

The relentless barrage of artillery and the catastrophic onslaught of the IgT-Shell bombardment had deeply etched themselves into Thea's psyche. The harrowing experience, a nightmarish blend of chaos and destruction, was something she had no desire to endure again.

As she navigated through the serene azure forest, her thoughts drifted back to those moments of terror, contrasting sharply with her current surroundings.

'I think I'm more cut out for the challenges within the city, rather than enduring the absurdity of a sky raining liquid fire,' she mused, her thoughts tinged with bitterness.

Reflecting on the ordeal, she recognized it as the most vulnerable and ineffective moments of her entire military career so far, second only to the bewildering experience she had encountered with her Psychic Gate.

Thea acknowledged, with a sense of sobering clarity, that her survival amidst the IgT bombardment was exclusively owed to the valiant efforts of the defensive heavies and Lucas. Their sacrifice had been her lifeline; without their intervention, she would undoubtedly have met the same fate as Desmond and Isabella during the initial fiery assault.

With a deep breath, she focused her thoughts on the upcoming challenges in Nova Tertius, hoping the urban landscape would offer a more suitable battleground for her skills. She had, after all, been living in an undercity for most of her life.

How different could a megacity really be?

'Let's just hope the city doesn't hold any horrors akin to what we faced here,' she pondered, yearning for a tactical environment that offered clarity and control, far removed from the unpredictable and overwhelming nature of the battlefield they had just left behind.

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After a lengthy trek, Thea, Karania, and Corvus reached the FOB, which struck Thea as both familiar and vastly more imposing than the one she had encountered post-coma. This FOB was bustling with activity, heavily fortified with an array of defensive structures and noticeably larger in scale.

The significance of this FOB was unmistakable, evident in its heightened security and the sheer number of marines moving about with purpose. It was apparent that this base served as the nerve centre for the entire wing's operations, housing the essential respawn pods that sustained the relentless siege efforts.

Navigating through the FOB's security measures was an intricate process as expected.

They traversed through multiple layers of fortified gates, each checkpoint meticulously verifying their biomarkers through an advanced automated system. This multi-tiered security protocol further underscored the strategic value of the base, ensuring that only authorised personnel gained access to its inner sanctum.

Once inside the FOB, Corvus led them towards one of the larger buildings, the pace of his march revealing the urgency of their mission. Despite Thea and Karania being in good physical condition, they found it challenging to keep up with Corvus, who outmatched them in both strength and vitality.

By the time they reached their destination, both Thea and Karania were noticeably more out of breath than Corvus and slightly damp with perspiration.

Corvus paused, turning to face Thea and Karania. His expression shifted, adopting a stern seriousness that had been less evident during their journey to the FOB. It was as if the true weight of their impending mission was settling upon him, his role as the squad leader bringing forth a more pronounced sense of responsibility and resolve.

He addressed them with a firm and commanding tone, indicative of the critical nature of their task, "Alright, I'll inform Staff-Sergeant Venn of our arrival. In the meantime, it's crucial for you two to rendezvous with the remaining members of Sovereign Alpha. Ensure your equipment and gear are thoroughly prepared.

"Remember, once we enter Nova Tertius, the situation will be markedly different. Prioritise extra medical supplies, ammunition, and rations. We can't predict when or how our next resupply will be once we're beyond the wall. Also, double-check that the rest of the squad is fully prepped and ready."

The two of them nodded in the affirmative and they watched as Corvus briskly made his way towards the meeting with Staff-Sergeant Venn and the other squad leaders, his figure soon vanishing up a staircase within the expansive building of the FOB.

Once Corvus was out of sight, Thea tapped into the squad comms, seeking the quickest method to reunite with the rest of Sovereign Alpha. "Ella, Lucas, Desmond, can you hear me? We need your positions. Corvus, Kara, and I are back at the FOB and gearing up for the main mission."

Karania shot her a puzzled glance, her expression unreadable, just as the comms crackled to life with Lucas' familiar voice.

"Glad to hear from you, Thea," he said, his tone conveying both warmth and relief. "We've been through quite a storm back there, haven't we...? We're set up in barracks A-13. Most of our prep is done, but make sure you're fully equipped before you join us."

Isabella's voice soon followed, adding a crucial piece of advice, "Don't forget to stock up on white-foam grenades. We've all got ours. In urban combat, they're absolute fucking livesavers, trust me on that. Get some extras for Corvus too, while you're at it, he's probably busy with the brass 'n' stuff."

Acknowledging their squadmates' instructions with a simple click on their comms, Thea and Karania set off towards the nearest supply station. Their steps were purposeful, driven by the urgency to be fully prepared for the daunting task that lay ahead in the heart of Nova Tertius.

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Some time later, after navigating the intricacies of the FOB and a somewhat tense negotiation with a logistics officer for access to a T2 printer—a rarity this far up the battlefield, although a very relieving and surprising one to Thea—Thea and Karania, fully kitted out, stood before barracks A-13. Their gear now included freshly stocked backpacks and a supplementary pack of white-foam grenades, as per Isabella's recommendation.

Thea, eyeing the extra pack in Karania's grasp, mused, '*Ella's advice is rarely without merit.*'

Though the grenades had cost a fair few Credits, Thea was confident in their utility. Isabella was the only one with real-life urban combat experience in their squad, so she'd definitely know best. It also wasn't like there were many other avenues to spend Credits on within the confines of the assessment anyway.

Upon entering the barracks, the layout struck Thea as remarkably different from the one where they had first met Viladia.

This structure resembled a single-floor apartment complex more than a traditional barracks. Each squad appeared to have their own private room, identified by data-screens displaying the names of the current occupants.

Thea understood the logic behind this design.

Unlike their previous location, this FOB was not meant for extended stays or rest. It was a hub of rapid resurrection, rearming, and recovery, designed to thrust soldiers back into the fray as quickly as possible. The focus here was on efficiency and mission preparation, rather than communal living spaces.

Though traditional barracks were still part of the FOB's layout, these more specialised rooms seemed to cater to squads with specific, perhaps more complex, mission parameters—indicating that Sovereign Alpha wasn't the only unit with intricate tasks ahead.

As Thea opened the door, allowing Karania, laden with the extra grenade-pack, to enter first, she was greeted with a sight that immediately brought a wide smile to her face. For the first time since the intense and chaotic assault on the wall, she was seeing her squadmates again.

Lucas and Desmond were lounging casually on a couch, seemingly at ease in each other's company, their fully packed backpacks sitting neatly beside them. Isabella, true to form, was engaged in what seemed to be her perpetual pastime: Working out, her actions embodying her characteristic intensity and focus.

As the door swung shut behind them, sealing them in with the rest of Sovereign Alpha—sans Corvus—a sense of camaraderie filled the room. For Thea, the reunion was a moment of respite, a brief pause in the relentless tempo of war.

But as she looked around at her squad, a sense of anticipation, mixed with an undercurrent of uncertainty, washed over her.

For a moment, Thea found herself lost in thought, contemplating the complexities and unknowns of the mission ahead.

A megacity like Nova Tertius would present an environment vastly different from any she had previously encountered. And the task of breaching the city's formidable wall was a daunting prospect in itself. The atmosphere in the room, though filled with the familiarity of her squad, couldn't quite dispel the underlying tension of the challenges that they each knew undoubtedly lay before them...