

Volume 2 - Chapter 83 - Malthazar Oranis III

"Look, I'm going to say what every single Emperor-damned Factory Manager in the Outer Industrial Belt has been thinking for the last six years but has been too smart—or too scared—to put on record.

And since I am apparently neither of those things today, let's get fucking into it.

The UHF Military Complex *does not fucking understand* how factories work.

And I don't mean that as an insult, truly.

I mean it as a precise, technical observation that I have submitted—in fucking writing—to the Strategic Logistics Division on fourteen separate occasions, acknowledged on exactly *zero* of them.

They don't understand how factories work because nobody in that Emperor-forsaken building has ever stood on a production floor in their life.

They have looked at numbers on a spreadsheet—which is not the same fucking thing, mind you!—and I would very much like them to explain that to my floor supervisors the next time we get a Priority Reclassification at 0200 on a rest cycle.

Let—Let me just walk you through what an actual fucking Priority Reclassification *means* at ground level, since nobody in the UHF's vast and apparently factory-illiterate military complex seems interested in asking:

It means the Class-7 Composite Plating we were producing—eleven-hour pour cycle, which *cannot be fucking interrupted* once the secondary alloy mix is introduced without scrapping the entire Emperor-fucked batch—is now suddenly secondary.

The new priority is Mk. IV Thruster Housing Assemblies, which need a *completely different materials configuration* and fourteen hours of line reconfiguration before we can even begin.

So: Eleven hours of plating, scrapped. Fourteen hours of reconfiguration. Eighteen to thirty-six hours of Thruster Housing production before the next Reclassification arrives.

That is not a fucking production schedule! That is a running document that describes what *we were going* to produce before Command changed their minds a-fucking-gain!

And the economics of it—Emperor's bleeding fucking asshole, the economics of it...!

Every scrapped batch goes into the quarterly report, which means I submit—every quarter—a report that makes me look like I'm running this facility into the ground through sheer and utter *incompetence*.

I have had weeks with nine Reclassifications. *Nine*.

My senior accounting officer eats lunch in the storage annexe because it's the only room where her comms signal is too weak to reach the Logistics Division.

And frankly, I've started considering joining her!

Then there's transport.

We hit the targets, we have product staged and ready—aaaaand the window moves.

It moves because the transport wing runs its *own Reclassification system*, completely independent of ours, synchronized with fucking nothing or the Void or whatever!

So the product sits in our staging area taking up space we need for the next run.

A colleague of mine calculated that completed product spends over *forty percent* of its facility time waiting for collection. Forty fucking percent!

I submitted that figure to the Logistics Division in PFC922. It was *acknowledged*.

It is now 937 and the numbers have gotten worse.

I am not asking for your sympathy here.

I am asking for *one synchronized scheduling system* that talks to both production and transport before sending down a Reclassification at 0200.

I—I will help build it. Truly, I will!

I will fucking fund it myself if that's what it takes.

It's not a complicated request, is it?

It just *apparently* really feels like one."

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[Shortened Excerpt from: Crucible-class Heavy Fabrication Complex, Mourne Secundus Transcript piece, Edran Polk, Facility Manager — Independent Industrial Correspondent Series, "The Weight of the War Economy", PFC 937]

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Thea spent the next half-hour—the window they had before the rest of the UHF troops arrived and the outpost got busy again—talking with Ash about the signature Ability of her *Hollow Barrel Class*.

It was, mostly, just her working through every question she'd have asked if the Ability had been hers—trying to establish the *exact* edges of what it could and couldn't do, the same way she'd just stumbled onto the recoil mechanic by accident.

They found quite a few things Ash hadn't found before.

'And that's exactly why you test your Abilities properly,' Thea thought—admittedly quite a bit smugly—as she watched Ash's expression do something that was downright animated by her usual blank-face standards. *'Or at the very least think them through thoroughly, if testing isn't immediately feasible...'*

One of the bigger ones: Ash couldn't swap while the bullet was still in the barrel—only the instant it cleared the muzzle.

Thea had immediately pointed out that it also meant that there was no Ability queuing for the Class Ability, which had prompted Ash to ask what that even was, which had led to an even longer explanation than Thea had expected about what Ability queuing actually meant and why it was both useful and a problem depending on the exact situation.

'In this case, problematic, as it makes the recoil-cancel harder to pull off... If Ability-queueing was active for it, she could just use the Ability the instant she pulled the trigger and the System would insta-swap the weapon the very moment it became "viable" to do so. But alas...'

That entire discussion had, eventually, led Thea to wondering whether the lack of Ability queuing was a System-wide mechanic or something that varied per Ability—which she'd tentatively landed on as *"probably per-Ability,"* based on her own experience with [Sky Step] and [Sensory Overdrive].

She'd always tried to avoid overlapping them as much as possible, of course, to keep the duration clean and the resource cost down, but she was fairly sure she hadn't managed it perfectly every time—yet she'd never felt like she was losing usage time because of it.

Which suggested that both of those Abilities had *some kind* of queuing built in, buffering the next use automatically until the current duration—or in [Sky Step]'s case, the current usage count—had fully run out.

'That'll need proper testing at some point, just to be sure...'

Several other discoveries—each one having landed with what passed for truly emotional uproar on Ash's face, meaning her eyes widened slightly more—included the fact that she could use her Class' Ability on other people's pistols as long as she'd had her hands on them at some point.

While she'd actually known that particular tidbit already, she *hadn't* known that there was a brief window—roughly a tenth of a second—where she could still swap a weapon she was no longer directly "in possession" of.

Thea had pushed to figure out exactly what counted as "possession" for the Ability's purposes, and in doing so had found what looked like a deliberate deadzone built into the mechanic—probably to make holstering, drawing and swapping feel smoother, Thea had guessed—which was what had led to them finding the window existing in the first place.

The other one that had genuinely stopped Ash mid-sentence was simpler, but bigger in practice: The Ability had no issue with pistols being removed from her possession and returned during “runtime”, so to speak.

Thea had tested it directly—taken one of Ash's pistols, reloaded it, slotted it back into Ash's holster while she was swapping out her other ones—and Ash had been able to pull it straight into the rotation without ever needing to touch it again herself.

Just being on her body, inside one of her holsters, was enough.

It didn't matter that someone else had taken it, handled it, changed things about it, and put it back. The Ability counted it as hers regardless the moment it touched her holster and the other person let go—interestingly enough, *without* the one-tenth of a second of delay.

Thea, for her part, had gotten just as much out of the conversation as Ash had—maybe more, if she was being honest with herself.

For one thing, she'd learned that Class Abilities could apparently have next to no cost attached to them at all.

She'd been quietly wondering how Ash had been throwing out hot-swaps the entire mission without visibly dipping into anything, and when she'd finally asked, Ash had said that it was because the cost was downright negligible—five Stamina *or* five Focus per swap, her choice.

Which was itself the second thing Thea noted down with interest.

‘Mono-Hybrid costs exist after all, huh?’

She'd only ever seen mono costs *or* hybrid costs in standard Allbright Abilities up to this point. *Hollow Barrel's* signature Ability was the first Ability she'd encountered that confirmed mono-hybrid—as in, either Stamina *or* Focus rather than a fixed one or a split of both—was actually a thing.

The third thing was less a discovery and more a suspicion that had been quietly forming the whole time, and that she couldn't quite shake once it had settled in.

‘A whole Class built around one or two distinct Abilities that are clearly doing something very specific and very impactful...?’ She turned it over, looking at it from a few different angles. *‘That's what I'd do if I wanted to test how a new Ability slotted into existing Builds and metas without just dumping it into the general pool... Is that what the System is actually doing with Classes like this? Using them as a testbed before they're added to the System as a whole...?’*

She filed it away without landing on an answer—she was missing way too much data to draw any real conclusions from it yet—but she had every intention of coming back to it once she did.

Their testing period ultimately came to an end when the first of the UHF reinforcements crested the mountain path and started filing into the outpost.

Which meant things were about to get busy again.

With just the six of them holding the position, a two-person watch had been more than enough—quiet outpost, everyone accounted for, nothing moving that shouldn't be.

But with several dozen Marines now pouring in to reinforce the place for the inevitable counter-offensive, that math changed fast. More bodies meant more noise, more movement, more gaps in coverage, and a much harder time catching anything that didn't belong.

'Simple numbers, really,' Thea thought, scanning the scant treeline alongside Ash as the first squad pushed through the gate. *'One extra person you don't recognise in a group of six you know very well? Sticks out immediately. One extra person you don't recognise in a group of fifty people you also don't know? Nearly impossible to catch. Crowd's the best cover there is.'*

They had set up near the eastern wall where they had decent sightlines on both the treeline and the main gate, and watched the Company roll in.

They got to work fast.

Within the first ten minutes, a team had already started cutting into the frozen ground near the outer wall, throwing up the beginnings of a trench line that a handful of Marines with obvious Strength-based Builds were deepening at a pace no standard shovel work could explain.

Further along, someone was doing something with their hands that kept producing short, dense bursts of what looked like superheated air against the prefab barricade panels—softening the joins, maybe, or fusing them together, because the sections they touched stopped rattling in the mountain wind in a way the others didn't.

A third Marine, working alone near the supply building, was moving stacked crates with a casualness that made the weight involved completely unclear—each one landing exactly where he wanted it, no adjustment needed, the whole process looking less like labour and more like he was tidying a desk.

Thea watched all three of them for longer than was strictly necessary for guard duty.

'I want to ask all of them so many questions,' she thought, with a hint of genuine despair. *'What Class is that? What's the Ability you're using? Is it a Passive or an Active? What does it cost? Can you—'*

She stopped herself and forced herself to stare back out at the treeline.

'Guard duty. Boring-as-all-fuck, can't-talk-to-anyone guard duty. Completely unfair. I'm surrounded by interesting Builds and I can't ask a single person about any of them...!'

She scowled at a pine tree that had done nothing to deserve it...

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The trench was already knee-deep by the time she heard the familiar sound of large, armoured paws crunching through the snow behind her, and turned to find Duke picking his way along the wall with Drim a step behind, hands in his pockets, looking like a man who had recently made a deliberate decision to be somewhere other than wherever he'd just come from.

He stopped next to her and Ash, glanced out at the treeline, then back at the outpost's growing network of barricades and earthworks.

"Checking in," he said. "How's the eastern approach?"

"Clear," Thea reported immediately. Then, after a beat added slowly, "You... could've commed for that...?"

"Could've," Drim agreed with a nod, without elaborating.

Duke sat down next to Thea with the air of someone who had decided this was a reasonable place to be, and she felt some of the boredom of the last twenty minutes dissolve almost immediately.

She gave it about four seconds before she couldn't hold out any longer and blurted out, "Can I ask you about *Silverfang*?"

Drim glanced at her sideways. Something in his expression suggested he'd been expecting this moment was coming since approximately their first meeting inside the locker room.

'But surely he couldn't have known, right...?'

"Go ahead," he sighed with a smile.

She went ahead.

The statistics came first, because that was the most immediately obvious question—Duke was *enormous*, and size like that didn't come from nowhere.

Drim confirmed it without much fuss: Duke's stats scaled based on his own, but Drim also got a small separate pool to invest specifically into Duke on top of that. Didn't come out of his own allocation. The tradeoff was that his BGR and VGR were technically a bit lower than they'd be on a similar Class without a Companion—not drastically, but noticeably.

"So the Companion is effectively the missing portion of your own statline," Thea said.

Drim considered that for a moment. "More or less."

"Abilities?"

"Two active, one revival."

"Revival first! How does that work?!"

He shrugged. "Simple mechanic, I guess. Duke goes down, I can bring him back. Costs a significant amount of both Stamina and Focus, cooldown is *very* long. Probably so Companions aren't used for any suicide-bombing shenanigans... System hates those."

He said it with the flatness of someone describing a failsafe they'd rather never use. "Not particularly complicated. Just expensive and slow."

"And he just shows up next to you when you use it...? Like poof?"

Drim chuckled, then nodded and said, "Pretty much. It's a bit more than a mere poof though. It has a whole lightshow-thing going on. Hard to describe, but you definitely wouldn't wanna use it in the middle of the night on a stakeout or anything. Would give you away immediately."

"And the teleport I saw during the opening strike—can you reverse it too? Send Duke to your position instead?"

"Yup. Both directions," Drim confirmed. "Range has limits, of course. Cooldown's fairly low, but the cost is pretty steep. So it has some serious combat potential, but I'll run dry quickly if I use it for that."

Thea nodded. "And the third one?"

Duke's ears shifted at that, almost imperceptibly. Drim was quiet for a moment in a way that felt less like hesitation and more like mild amusement he wasn't going to let show properly.

"Temporary buff," he said. "Duke gets significantly larger. More feral. Offensive stats increase substantially."

A brief, awkward pause as he side-eyes Duke. "He becomes a bit... *difficult* to reason with, for the duration."

Thea looked at Duke, who looked back at her with his usual calm, silver-eyed composure, and tried to picture what *difficult to reason with* looked like scaled up from something already this size.

"That sounds absolutely *incredible*," she ultimately breathed.

"It has its uses."

"I *really* hope I get to see it during the defense... Please?"

The corner of Drim's mouth moved. It was a small movement, but it was definitely there. "No promises. It's usually not without risk—he doesn't get significantly tankier in that form. Primarily offensive. Duke isn't bulletproof on a good day."

"More Assassin than Brawler?" Thea offered.

Drim looked at her with something that might, on another person, have been mild surprise. "Exactly that."

She looked back down at Duke, who had at some point during the conversation leaned approximately thirty percent of his body weight against her leg without her fully noticing.

'Absolutely incredible,' she thought, and stroked the big wolf's fluffy ears...

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Drim headed back to the command area not long after, Duke peeling away from Thea's side with what she chose to interpret as reluctance, and the outpost settled back into the steady, grinding noise of construction and organisation.

The trench line had deepened considerably—reinforced now with prefab panels that a team was bolting into the frozen earth, the whole structure starting to look less temporary by the hour. The barricades along the main approach had been doubled up and anchored, with a third layer being started further down the slope.

Someone had rigged a rudimentary watchtower frame onto the outpost's highest building using materials Thea couldn't immediately identify the origin of, and it was already occupied.

She watched all of it from the eastern wall and tried to find it interesting.

She managed, approximately, for the first twenty minutes.

After that, the treeline was just the treeline—dark, still, and completely devoid of anything worth reporting.

Ash stood beside her with the same quiet patience she applied to everything, which Thea found simultaneously admirable and deeply unfair, because she herself had started shifting her weight between her feet somewhere around the forty-minute mark and hadn't really stopped since.

'I could be talking to that Marine with the barricade Ability right now,' she thought miserably, watching said Marine work from across the outpost. *'Or the one with the crates. Or literally anyone doing literally anything over there.'*

She looked back at the treeline.

Still trees.

'I hate waiting for things to happen... War sucks...'

An hour passed. Then a little more.

Then, finally, *something* at the far edge of the forest moved.

It was subtle—one of those things that registered somewhere at the back of her Perception and refused to un-register. Thea's eyes snapped to it immediately regardless, and she had the Gram to her shoulder and her eye to the scope before she'd consciously decided to do either.

She caught Ash's attention with the abrupt motion, the shift in her posture enough of a signal.

Ash's eyes moved to her face, an unspoken question sitting there plainly.

"Movement," Thea said, keeping her voice low and flat. "174 East. Just coming out of the forest."

Ash had her hand-scope out a second later, and they both looked.

Eight Stellar Republic Soldiers.

Stealth-oriented builds, from the look of them—adaptive camo across most of the group, light or medium armour across the board, moving slowly and using the rock formations along the slope to break up their profile.

They were doing a reasonable job of it, individually. Their technique was solid enough, some of them likely even better than Thea's, if she was being entirely honest.

The problem was that they were doing it as a *group of eight*, all at once.

'Why,' Thea thought, genuinely baffled by what she saw, *'would you ever cluster up like that?'*

Basic stealth logic—the larger the group moving together, the larger the shape it made.

One person moving through rocks was nearly invisible. Eight people moving through rocks was a shifting, vaguely human-shaped mass that her Perception had flagged from over a hundred meters out.

'Move one at a time. It's not complicated. It's literally the first thing you ever learn, what the fuck...?'

"Negative," Ash said.

Thea unscoped and looked at her. Ash had her hand-scope lowered, expression unreadable.

"There's *eight* of them," Thea said slowly. "Like... *right there*."

She pointed directly at the position now, easy enough to indicate even without the scope.

"Moving up through the rocks."

Ash raised the hand-scope again. A brief pause.

"Negative," she repeated, with a slight frown this time.

Thea scoped back in to confirm. They were still there.

All eight, same position, continuing their slow crawl up the slope.

"I don't know what to tell you, they're *definitely* there..." She paused, something clicking.
"Actually, *wait*."

She moved her hand from the trigger to the scope's side panel, cycling through the controls until she found the function she was after—a feature she'd noted when she'd bought the damn thing, but never actually used.

She framed the shot, then captured the image through the scope's own lens, and pushed it to Ash's comms.

"See?"

Ash looked at the image. Then looked at Thea.

Her face was completely unreadable, which by now Thea had learned was different from her normal unreadable—this one had something sitting behind it.

The stare continued long enough that Thea started fidgeting slightly, genuinely unsure what she'd done.

"There's *nothing* in this picture," Ash said finally, her brows creasing—*actually* creasing, which on her face registered somewhere between a frown and genuine annoyance. "Is this a joke? I didn't take you as someone that made jokes like this during watch duty..."

Thea immediately pulled up the image she'd sent.

Then she *froze*.

Rock formation. Mountain slope. Nothing but empty air where eight Stellar Republic Soldiers *absolutely* were, because she could still see them right now through the scope she was holding.

She looked back through it.

Still there. Still moving.

Still completely unbothered by the fact that they apparently didn't exist to anyone but her.

And that was when she finally felt it—the faint, barely-there pressure just behind her eyes, so small she'd completely missed it until she subconsciously knew to look for it.

'*Oh... Oh, I see...*'

Her [Eyes of the Void] was working.

Quietly, almost passively, burning through whatever stealth or illusion tech the Soldiers were using with so little effort she hadn't even registered the cost.

'*It used to be a lot more noticeable than this, no?*' She wondered, still watching them move through the scope. '*Is that because I understand the nature of Veritas better now? My Skills*

feeding into it somehow? Or is whatever they're running just lower-grade than what it's been up against before...?'

She packed the question away for later and hit her comms.

"SL—I've got eight Soldiers coming up the eastern flank from the forest. They're running some kind of stealth or illusion tech, Ash can't confirm visuals, moving as a cluster, slow advance through the rocks. Orders?"

The comms stayed quiet for a moment after she finished reporting.

When Drim came back on, the usual flatness in his voice had a particular quality to it that Thea was starting to recognise as him being on-edge.

"Probably not tech... Small-scale stealth or illusion gear that covers a full group isn't exactly common. Personal full-stealth tech is expensive enough—something that extends to eight people at once would be quite rare and rather obvious to source. More likely that it's an Ability. Could be a whole Class built around it... How did you find them?"

"Part of my Power-set," Thea said. "Psyker Power."

She'd told the squad about her being a Psyker at the start of the mission this time around—a lesson thoroughly learned from the last DM's admonishments by Chester.

"Can you identify the Ability user? Any tell you can pin down?"

She scoped back in and swept slowly across the group, looking for anything that stood out—a shimmer, an uneven edge to the effect, someone positioned differently to the others in a way that suggested they were the source of it.

Nothing.

All eight looked identical in terms of how thoroughly they weren't giving anything away.

"Negative," she reported. "No tell I can find."

Drim cursed briefly—the kind that wasn't meant for the comms but made it through anyway. "Alright. I'll see if I can pull a Heavy or two together with some area coverage to deal with them before they get any closer. Keep me updated on their position every minute, I'll let you know when—"

"I can do it right now," Thea interrupted, cringing immediately at the breach of protocol.

A beat of silence followed.

"...What do you mean, exactly." It wasn't quite a question—it was the tone of someone making sure they'd heard correctly. "Last I checked, your loadout doesn't have area weaponry."

"It's just eight of them," Thea said easily. "Clustered together, moving slow. I can take care of all of them before they get a chance to use their Ability—or their Faction Trait even, if that's what we're worried about. Just costs me a bit of Focus."

She was aware, at this exact moment, of Ash looking more closely at her.

One eyebrow raising slightly. Not much—but on Ash's face, it was the equivalent of anyone else leaning heavily forward in their seat to get a closer look.

Something in Thea's chest decided then, immediately and without consulting the rest of her, that this was an *excellent* opportunity.

She'd spent a good portion of the DM so far watching Ash do some genuinely cool stuff and getting to ask every question she'd wanted to ask about it. She'd seen the recoil trick, the hot-swap, the massive pistol and its equally massive silencer and how she used it all together... Ash had handed her an incredible look at what an Assassin-Gunslinger Hybrid Build could actually do in the field.

This was her chance to give something back.

"Drim," she said, keeping her voice level. "Remember why you agreed to let me join the squad?"

A pause. She left it deliberately vague.

"*I can do this*. I've done it plenty of times before—it's how I got it, Drim."

A long exhale came through the comms.

She could picture him dragging a hand across his face somewhere near the command area.

"Alright. Weapons free, Thea—do it whenever you're ready. I'll inform Command either way so they can start planning for a potential attack vector from the east."

Thea lowered the Gram from her shoulder and clicked her comms off with a growing smile.

She turned to Ash, who was still looking at her with that single raised eyebrow—somehow looking even more intrigued than before without actually really having changed her facial expression at all, which, fair enough.

Part of Drim's terms for accepting her into the squad had been keeping the medal quiet—no unnecessary friction, no questions, everyone focused on the mission rather than on whatever came with knowing who she was.

Thea had agreed to that without hesitation. She wasn't here to be anyone's hero or whatever.

She was here for the Upscaled Mission—which she hadn't even gotten, much to her chagrin—and the easy squad access that came with flashing the medal was just a welcome side-benefit.

"You're going to want to watch this," she said, slinging the Gauss-variant off her shoulder and setting it aside. She picked up the Laser-variant instead—for what she was about to do, there really wasn't another option.

"I was wondering why you were carrying two of those," Ash said, eyes moving to the weapon. "That one's special, then?"

"Not exactly. Same weapon, just a Laser-variant—still a baseline Gram," Thea replied, running a quick check over it out of habit. Nothing had shifted. *Of course* nothing had shifted, she'd already checked it like four times in the past ten minutes to keep herself busy. "The part that matters is the cycle time. Laser-variants don't have one."

"Huh," Ash said, watching her more closely now as Thea moved back into position on the wall.

'Eight is way too much for a standard [Glimpse],' she thought, settling in and finding the first target through the scope. *'But I really don't want to yell my Power out loud just to get the boost. Not right now. Not in front of Ash... Just the one time. Show off once, that's all. Just this once.'*

She exhaled slowly, crosshair sitting on the first target, and ran a final check over everything.

She absolutely could not mess this up now.

Ash had her hand-scope up and was looking in the right direction, Thea noted from the corner of her eyes, so everything was set.

'Here goes nothing...'

Taking a deep breath, she started.

'Sensory Overdrive.'

'Glimpse!'

Time slowed to a crawl as her Perception skyrocketed, the instant the monochromatic filter arrived to take all unneeded colour from the world.

Colour bled out of everything—the mountain slope, the rocks, the treeline, all of it flattening into clean greys and whites, sharp-edged and perfectly still except for the single point of motion that mattered.

She watched and felt herself move through it in first person, the ghost of her own actions playing out ahead of her in the Glimpse's quiet, airless silence.

[Sensory Overdrive] stretched the vision wider than it used to go—more targets in the frame, more time to read each one before the next, the higher Perception feeding directly into the Glimpse's targeting like two systems that had finally figured out how to talk to each other properly.

She hadn't pushed more energy into the Power. She hadn't needed to—it wasn't the only way to make sure that her Glimpse could cover more targets, after all.

She watched herself find the first—a slight figure using the largest rock in the formation as cover, crouched low, head just visible above the edge. The monochrome version of her own crosshair drifted across and stopped, and she burned the position into her memory without blinking.

Second target, three meters left and slightly lower on the slope, half-turned away.

Third, close behind the second.

Fourth through sixth clustered tighter than they should have been, almost generous in how neatly they'd grouped themselves.

Seventh further right, picking a better line than the others.

Eighth bringing up the rear, slowest of the group, using a shallow depression in the rock to stay low.

She traced every angle, every adjustment between shots, the exact arc her barrel needed to travel and in what order...

The Glimpse *shattered*.

Colour came rushing back all at once, and [Sensory Overdrive] was still running—the world arriving at a slightly different speed to the one she knew, every detail of the slope dialled up to eleven.

Her heartbeat was slow and even in her own ears.

The wind across the wall felt like it was taking its sweet time.

She found her scope already aligned to the first position.

She fired.

The laser hit the figure behind the rock before the sound of the shot had finished leaving the barrel—a brief, violent bloom of superheated air where the beam connected, and the Soldier dropped without a sound that carried up the slope.

She had already lined up to the second.

Fired.

The beam caught them mid-step, burning straight through the light armour like it wasn't even there, and the figure collapsed sideways into the rock it had been using for cover.

Targeted the third, then fired.

The impact lit up the slope for half a second, a sharp crack of superheated material, and they went down.

She swept right to find the fourth, fifth and sixth—the clustered group.

Three shots in rapid succession, each one landing before the previous target had even truly begun falling, the plasma leaving brief, scorched traces in the air between her and the slope where the beam had passed through the stealth effect and found something real on the other side.

The seventh was mid-movement—slightly, adjusting their line—it didn't matter.

The beam took them low, vaporizing the entire area around their heart before they crumpled against the rock they'd been trying to maneuver around.

She felt [Sensory Overdrive] start to ease on the eighth—the slow dissolution of the Alteration bleeding the sharpness out of the edges of her vision gradually, the world beginning to return to its normal weight and speed.

But that was okay. The last position was already locked from the Glimpse.

She fired one final time.

The eighth Soldier went still in the depression in the rock where they'd been keeping low, the stealth effect flickering once at the moment of impact and then simply *stopping*, like a switch had been thrown.

The slope was quiet.

'Typical... Always the last one you check, huh?'

Thea lowered the scope from her eye in the returning silence of the normal world, already having confirmed what she already knew.

Eight for eight.

She exhaled slowly through her nose as she waited for Ash's verdict.

Ash was simply staring at the slope.

Both eyebrows were up—fully up now, which on her face was roughly equivalent to anyone else's jaw hitting the damn floor. Her eyes were wider than Thea had seen them at any point during the entire mission, including the recoil discovery, and *that* was saying something.

The silence stretched for several seconds.

"What the fuck was that," Ash breathed, her eyes meeting Thea's with the typical flinch.

With a big, satisfied grin, Thea started explaining what she'd just done—after reporting her success to the SL, of course...

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That... Unfortunately turned out to be the biggest highlight of the mission for her.

Which was absolutely gutting, considering she'd specifically joined to get some points on the board before the public leaderboards opened up later today.

The Stellar Republic's counter-offensive came just half an hour later, and it came *hard*—just not from anywhere Thea could actually do anything about.

Instead of pushing up the eastern flank where she was positioned, they'd apparently committed to a full assault from the west, which meant Thea spent the most intense part of the defense standing on the wrong side of the outpost, listening to the sounds of heavy weapons fire, the occasional ground-shaking impact from somewhere she couldn't see, and occasionally catching glimpses of the chaos over the rooftops when something went off big enough to light up the sky.

She'd *tried* to relocate twice.

Both times, Ash had given her a *very* telling look and she'd quickly been waved back to the eastern wall to make sure nothing came up behind them while the western side was occupied.

Nothing did.

The eight Soldiers she'd taken out at range remained the single most exciting thing she'd personally done in the entire DM, outside of the outpost clear—and while *that* had been genuinely good work, kill-based gains weren't going to be the bulk of what she took home from this one.

Most of her points were coming from doing her job correctly and consistently: Scout work, early target acquisition, the comm defender on the opening shot, holding her assigned position without complaint even when her assigned position was *very, very, very* boring.

'Doing your job right is its own reward, as they say,' she thought, with absolutely zero conviction.

She watched the western sky light up again from across the outpost and sighed through her nose as the timer finally hit 0:00:00 on the Primary Mission...