

Arc 1 - Chapter 71 - The Storm IV

With methodical precision, Thea's gaze shifted from one target to another.

Each motion was a dance, honed over countless hours of rigorous training. The gentle squeeze of the trigger, the brief, near-silent hum of the Gram's energy discharge, and the lethal impact that followed were actions she had repeated a thousand times over during Basic—this was just another part of her training, another shooting gallery to high-score in.

The power and precision of each one of her Gram's shots was unmistakable.

Every shot she released met its mark with devastating results, vaporising vital areas of her foes in an instant. Chests, heads, and other key points of the Stellar Republic soldiers were turned into crimson mist in rapid succession. The grim sight of a life being extinguished in the blink of an eye, their forms toppling even before the next shot was fired, became a repeating tableau, one that Thea did not even recognize.

Driven by instinct rather than conscious thought, Thea became a whirlwind of destruction, her focus narrowing solely to the enemy figures that presented themselves.

But even the most finely tuned machines needed a momentary pause.

The Gram's familiar warning beep snapped Thea back to reality, indicating the dwindling energy in the capacitor mag. Swiftly, she ducked into the protective confines of the trench, replacing the spent mag.

While she was momentarily shielded, her keen eyes took in the broader scope of the battlefield, absorbing the chaos around her as she caught her breath, preparing to re-engage.

From the relative safety of her domed trench, Thea surveyed the expanse of the battlefield with the keen perception that had become her trademark. Her fellow marines, lined up in the trench network alongside her, were firing towards the wall with relentless determination.

The vast distance, however, was their enemy just as much as the figures manning the defences high above them. Most shots arced toward the wall only to miss their intended targets, instead striking the impenetrable rockcrete or disappearing into the sky.

Yet occasionally, a shot rang true. A marine's aim would converge with luck, and a burst of debris would signal a hit. A turret might explode in a shower of sparks, a silhouette of an enemy soldier would jerk and fall, or a chunk of the fortifications atop the wall would crumble.

Each successful strike was a small victory, a fleeting respite in the relentless exchange of death.

Above, the return fire from the Stellar Republic's guns was just as erratic, though no less threatening. The plasteel domes echoed with the impact of projectiles, the din inside the trenches akin to the relentless drumming of rain on metal during a furious storm.

The sound was deafening, especially when added to the roars of gunfire, the explosions of the artillery above and the constant violent eruptions of massive ordnance being shot back and forth, a constant reminder of the lethal storm they were enduring.

Through the cacophony, Thea could see the tell-tale signs of heavy weaponry unleashing their fury. The enemy's larger guns would sporadically adjust their aim, trying to counter the marines' strategy, sending explosive shells that turned patches of the battlefield into fiery hellscape.

Even the sturdy plasteel domes would shudder, buckle and break under the more powerful impacts, a stark reminder of the imminent danger they were all in, despite the specialised squads best efforts to fortify their location as much as possible.

Thea resettled into her vantage point, her thoughts racing as rapidly as her pulse. The wall, teeming with the enemy's forces, seemed like a stubborn bastion mocking their efforts from afar.

Her mind whirled with tactical possibilities, lamenting the limitations of their current strategy. *'If only we had the Quick-Swap Faction Trait,'* she mused, the idea igniting a spark of longing in her tactical mind.

Such an advantage would revolutionise their approach: A phalanx of snipers, each one with a Gram laser-sniper rifle in hand, could decisively pick off the wall's defenders with lethal precision, turning the tide of this attritional slog into a swift surgical strike.

The thought of facing an enemy with such an ability was chilling; it would be an encounter with potentially devastating consequences.

Pushing the strategic fantasies aside, Thea refocused on her role in this grand tapestry of combat. She peered through her scope once more, only for her trained eyes to catch an anomaly that sent a surge of disbelief coursing through her veins.

Her steady breathing hitched, and a guttural, incredulous "What?!" tore from her lips, breaking her usually unshakable composure.

With swift, almost frantic movements, she panned her Gram across different sectors of the wall, double-checking, triple-checking her initial observation. The weight of her weapon felt alien as her usual rhythm gave way to urgency.

Her heart hammered against her ribs, each beat echoing the urgent swivel of her rifle as she sought to confirm the sight that had so thoroughly derailed her focus.

With a cold certainty settling in her chest, Thea realised the daunting truth: Every enemy soldier she had taken down was a mere phantom, a duplicate spawned by an unseen Duplicator tucked safely away from her line of sight.

"Dammit!" she hissed, the weight of her realisation coiling tightly in her stomach. The battlefield became an elaborate, nightmarish game of whack-a-mole, where every enemy she eliminated simply spawned anew, rendering her efforts almost entirely futile.

Her mind raced, recalling the countless skirmishes with the Stellar Republic in the past.

In those encounters, Duplicators, though often concealed, were situated close enough to their duplicates for her unique Psychic Ability, coupled with her high levels of Perception, to detect.

She would intend to take a shot at what appeared to be an ordinary soldier, but her Short-Term Precognition, which granted her fleeting insights into the immediate aftermath of her shots, would sometimes reveal an unexpected result.

Instead of watching the duplicates around her target collapse, they would remain standing, a clear indication that her bullet hadn't found the elusive Duplicator. This gift of foresight had been invaluable, allowing her to discern and eliminate Duplicators more efficiently than just about anyone else she had met so far.

But now, the sprawling wall posed a different challenge.

Isolated targets, spaced apart with no clear indication of being duplicates, meant her Psychic Ability couldn't offer its usual guidance. Without that split-second premonition, Thea was shooting blindly into a sea of clones, with the real orchestrator of this endless wave hidden from her grasp.

This new reality was maddening.

The thought of her efforts, her shots, her expertise being rendered essentially pointless, gnawed at her determination. She had to adapt, to find a new approach if they were to have any hope against this incessant tide of duplicates.

Taking a brief pause, Thea steeled her resolve, unwilling to squander the sacrifices of her comrades that had enabled her to be in this critical sniping position. Her Gram thundered, each shot methodically striking down another enemy, only for them to be replaced in a seemingly endless cycle of duplication.

Even amidst her efficient killing, she felt the rising tide of futility, but she couldn't let it dampen her spirit. Switching on her non-priority communication line to keep the vital channel free for Corvus, she reached out to Sovereign Alpha, her voice a cocktail of frustration and urgency.

"They're all fucking duplicates. Every single one atop the wall. I've killed dozens of them by now, but they just keep coming back. What the fuck do we do about this?"

The channel was silent, save for the distant sounds of battle, a pause that stretched just a moment too long. An amused, slightly breathless retort from Karania crackled in her earpiece.

"Surprise, surprise! It's almost like this is the *exact* nightmare we've been facing from the very beginning. Only you've been lucky enough not to notice, thanks to your Psychic advantage. This is the literal essence of their Faction Trait, Thea.

“But here's the thing: They can't keep this up indefinitely. Their resources, much like ours, aren't limitless. Each duplication costs Merit, as every Faction Trait's usage does.

“We wear them down, force them to deplete their Merit, and then they can't produce any more duplicates. If there was a silver bullet solution, Thea, you probably wouldn't have scored as incredibly as you did in the Cube Trial. So, take a breath, find that rhythm, and rain hell until they've got nothing left to clone.”

Thea's thoughts raced as she processed Karania's biting truth.

A stark realisation hit her: She had indeed been shielded from the stark reality of the Stellar Republic's Faction Trait, her psychic foresight a veil against the brutal psychological warfare her comrades had endured.

She had been playing on easy mode this entire time, without even realising.

This was a waking nightmare—not just for its operational nightmare but for the morale-draining horror of facing an enemy that simply refused to stay dead, something that was likely true for their own Faction Trait as well.

She felt the weight of their struggle, a sobering revelation that each soldier they took down might just be a hollow victory, a duplicate.

And yet, within this bleak epiphany, Thea found a strengthening bond. This harrowing experience, shared by her brothers and sisters in arms, was a battle scar they all wore. It unified them, and as Karania's words sank in, Thea's smile became one not just of wry acknowledgment but of resolute solidarity.

For if the UHF had truly been at a disadvantage against such odds, they would have fallen long ago. Instead, they had persevered, adapted, and overcome. Karania's words weren't just meant to chide — they were a reminder of the unyielding spirit of the UHF.

Thea's grip on her Gram steadied.

With each pull of the trigger, she was not just depleting the enemy's forces but also chipping away at the mountain of Merit that sustained them. Her smile faded into the grim line of a warrior mid-fight, but inside, the fires of camaraderie and shared purpose blazed stronger than ever.

The lasers continued to lance from her Gram, and with each shot, each vaporised soldier, she whispered a silent challenge to the Duplicators: "Run out of Merit, I fucking dare you."

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The sharp click of the capacitor-mag locking into place echoed in Thea's ears, a temporary respite in the cacophony of war. Of course, she hadn't actually heard that miniscule sound, as the deafening sounds of the battle still raged around her, but she had heard it often enough that it had turned into an automatic thing in her mind.

Her breaths were measured, a rhythm set against the staccato of gunfire and the distant, relentless thudding of explosions. As Thea settled into her trench, her sniper's nest within the scarred battlefield, she reflected on the incremental victories that marked her progress.

The once relentless resurgence of foes had started to wane at three of her regular shooting spots that she had started rotating through. The persistent appearance of duplicates had ceased for a moment, before they had been replaced by entirely different soldiers, hinting at the likelihood that the Merit of the original Duplicators stationed at those points had been depleted, forcing them to retreat.

While it wasn't a definitive victory over the Duplicators themselves, such as shooting them right through their stupid heads, the immediate result was similarly tangible: Three fewer sources of seemingly endless enemies to tackle during this encounter.

Her hands worked mechanically, reloading with practised ease, while her mind remained vigilant. Thea's perception, honed beyond the keenness of ordinary soldiers, cut through the battlefield's chaos. In those brief moments of reprieve, her eyes darted about, searching for subtle shifts, signs of unseen threats, or opportunities.

Thea knew that complacency could spell disaster, and so she cast her vigilance like a net, wide and thorough.

The admonishment of Lt. Frost she had received during the Cube Trial more than two years ago rang as a mantra in her thoughts, a call to break old habits and forge better ones. Being absorbed in her scope's singular viewpoint could mean missing the bigger picture, ignoring the flow of the battlefield that was essential for strategic supremacy.

It was a lesson learned under duress, etched deep in her psyche during the gruelling trials that tested more than just marksmanship — they tested awareness, adaptation, and foresight.

With a new capacitor-mag secured, Thea shouldered her Gram once more. She hesitated as a result of her observations, however, realising the dire turn the battle was starting to take.

The foreboding boom of the Stellar Republic's heavy cannons grew more frequent, and she noticed the dark trails of their projectiles descending with ruthless precision toward the trenches. The once intermittent impacts against the plasteel domes were becoming an orchestrated barrage.

With each concussive hit, the domes crumpled like paper, leaving nothing but destruction in their wake.

Thea's heart raced as she realised the implication; the UHF AD's tanks and artillery, which had drawn the enemy's fire up until now, had likely been decimated. The trenches, teeming with marines, were about to become the next focal point for the wall's defences.

The domes, although sturdy, were not invincible, especially not against weapons designed to tear through armoured behemoths.

Snapping into her comms once again, Thea relayed the critical update. "Corvus, the heavy cannons are re-targeting to our positions more and more. The tanks are down—or going down fast. We're about to be next under the gun. Has Command issued any orders about this?"

She waited, her finger poised on the trigger, the weight of impending decisions heavy in the air. If the heavy artillery was not addressed, the trench lines would turn into mass graves.

They needed a plan, and they needed it *now*. Without a swift response, the domes and trenches, their current lifelines, would be nothing more than tombs.

Corvus' response came through with a clarity that cut across the battlefield's cacophony, underscored by the resonant authority that had always made him an effective leader. "Thea, you've got the right of it. Most of our heavy hitters are either out of commission or repurposing what's left of their munitions to make every shot count against their defences. They've inflicted significant damage, but those remaining cannons are turning the tide against us."

Thea listened, her eyes scanning the battlefield, as Corvus continued. "Command's already on it. Every squad with heavy capabilities has been retasked—taking out those cannons is now priority one. Offensive heavies like Isabella are being repositioned for maximum impact."

The sounds of war seemed to dull as Corvus detailed the strategic countermeasures. "Fortification squads are reinforcing our positions. Expect the trench lines to harden significantly in the coming hours. Combat engineers are assembling additional heavy weapons platforms, but we can't bring in the materials until the trenches and supply tunnels are secure. That's our engineers' current bottleneck. It'll take time, and we need to hold the line until then."

Thea absorbed the update, her resolve hardening like the fortifications that would soon bolster their defences. The coming hours were crucial, and each squad's efforts would be the linchpin in holding back the Stellar Republic's assault. It was a race against time and firepower, and the UHF forces had no intention of losing.

A notion sparked within Thea's mind, prompting an immediate call to action. She keyed back into her comm, her voice steady, tinged with the urgency of her newfound strategy.

"Corvus, I have an idea that might give us an edge. My Caliburn—coupled with a new Passive Ability I acquired from an Accomplishment this morning, could have the firepower to potentially breach the cannons' armour. It's a combo that I haven't field-tested yet, but the theory is sound. Do I have your permission to attempt it?" She awaited her leader's judgement, ready to bring her railgun's power to bear against the behemoths of steel.

Normally, Thea would have jumped right into action, yet she was acutely aware of the gravity of individual actions in the orchestration of war where lives were the currency of victory and defeat. Thea's recent experiences had underscored the significance of teamwork, especially in a theatre of war of this magnitude.

Independent actions could inadvertently disrupt the intricate strategies set by Command—strategies meant to safeguard the lives of tens of thousands of marines.

She knew she couldn't proceed on a mere impulse. Seeking approval before executing her idea was non-negotiable. She was resolute on this front.

An elongated pause hung in the air after Thea's proposition, as Corvus likely sifted through Command's intricate strategies to gauge the viability of her suggestion. While she waited, Thea continued her relentless assault, cycling through the same dozen targets time and again, her Gram unloading with methodical precision.

Every so often, an enemy sniper would zero in on her, sending a lethal projectile her way. Yet, her unique Psychic Abilities acted as a safeguard, allowing her to foresee the danger and evade swiftly, barely breaking her rhythm before returning fire and taking out the enemy that had dared an attempt on her life.

As the onslaught persisted, Karania's earlier words echoed in the back of her mind.

Realisation dawned on Thea, giving her a newfound appreciation for her abilities. *'It's almost unfair how much of an edge this Psychic Power gives me. No wonder Karania always sounded so frustrated when listening to my retellings of my Cube Trial. The playing field between us isn't even remotely even, and I genuinely have it far easier...'*

The murmur of Corvus's voice interrupted the carousel of Thea's thoughts, clear and authoritative, slicing through the cacophony of the battlefield.

"Go ahead with the Caliburn, Thea. But I want you and Lucas to reposition—get clear of the trenches. We can't risk any potentially return fire here," Corvus commanded with urgency. "Lucas, that means you're on protection detail. Make it your sole mission to cover her. If Thea's hunch is right, we might just turn the tides with what she's packing. But no heroics—you watch each other's backs out there. May the Emperor guide you both."

Thea let out a soft huff, an amused eyeroll in response to Corvus's habitual Emperor-related theatrics. But it was that familiar bravado of his that, in some small way, always brought a glint of warmth in the midst of cold warfare.

Without hesitating, she navigated her way up the serpentine trenches, heading towards its core where Lucas was stationed. She was met with the sight of the hulking figure, already putting away his Havoc, directing the marines that had been shielded behind his Stalwart to safer grounds.

Their current task was too dangerous to involve others, after all.

A quick glance confirmed what Thea already suspected; Lucas's Stalwart would be indispensable for what they were about to attempt. She methodically unhitched her backpack, with the Gram secured to it, placing it at the trench's entrance—a beacon to guide her back, perhaps, if things went south.

Clasping the weighty Caliburn, she shot a confident thumbs-up to Lucas.

It was a silent promise, one of trust and understanding. With no further words needed, they departed from the sanctuary of the trenches.

With measured steps, they backpedalled several dozen metres, before building a makeshift vantage point—a miniscule foxhole, just barely enough space for the both of them.

Lucas, every bit the immovable titan, planted the Stalwart to the ground, shielding them from the barrage of enemy fire. His whole body acted as an anchor, each step heavy and deliberate, even as bullets pinged off the shield and zipped dangerously close.

Throughout their slow retreat from the trenches, Thea was constantly reminded of Lucas's remarkable composure, an unwavering bulwark in the swirling tempest of battle. The stillness he brought, even in the heart of chaos, was nothing short of awe-inspiring.

As the squad's defensive heavy, his presence was a constant throughout every skirmish, every operation. In the maelstrom of war, his was the shadow that fell in front, a bulwark against the storm of enemy fire.

He entered the battlefield first, with a resolve that seemed to challenge the very concept of fear, and he would retreat only when the safety of his team was secured—never before.

The squad, and Thea especially, had grown accustomed to the steadfast rumble of his grenade launcher and the steady clang of his Stalwart shield—sounds that were as reassuring as they were indicative of the inevitable battle that lay ahead.

Risky manoeuvres were his speciality; his defensive prowess was not just an asset but a cornerstone upon which the squad's tactics had been built.

Complaints were seemingly just as foreign to Lucas.

They seemed to dissipate before they could ever take form, smothered by a sense of duty that was as innate to him as breathing. From the first day Thea had joined the squad, she had watched him, a silent giant who shouldered his responsibilities with a shrug that belied their weight. Not once did he falter or question. His was the strength that did not roar but instead whispered steadfast support in every ordered step, every protective stance.

To Thea, Lucas's unwavering dedication was a distant summit—a peak of selflessness and discipline she aspired to scale. While her path was one of stealth and precise lethality, Lucas's path was one of unyielding protection.

His stoicism wasn't just a practice; it was a profound testament to his character—a level of commitment that Thea honoured silently in the sanctuary of her own mind.

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Thea shook her head violently and anchored her thoughts firmly in the present, pushing away the tide of reverence that had momentarily swept through her. She was here to fight, to make a difference, and she needed every ounce of concentration for what she was about to attempt.

The makeshift foxhole that they had quickly dug out was crude but functional, a shallow depression in the earth that afforded them a modicum of cover from the relentless onslaught.

Her hands, clad in the reassuring armour of her Spectre's gauntlets, worked methodically to prepare the Caliburn.

She could feel the subtle vibrations of distant explosions through the soles of her boots, a constant reminder of the chaos that surrounded them. Each preparation step was a ritual of readiness, a silent litany against uncertainty.

Activating the grav-lock on the railgun, she felt the weapon stabilise against the unforgiving, ashen and shrapnel-strewn ground, its advanced systems locking onto the terrain like roots. It was a small comfort, knowing the Caliburn would be steady, its barrel a fixed point of certainty in a battlefield full of variables.

Ammo was next, raking in the first massive round inside the sizable magazine into the chamber of the Caliburn, each individual bullet a promise of destruction waiting to be fulfilled.

She checked her scope, her eyes running over the familiar dials and digital readouts, ensuring everything was zeroed.

Everything needed to be perfect.

Lucas was a wall to her left, his presence almost palpable. The Stalwart shield was up, its imposing form a stark contrast against the detritus of warfare. With her friend covering her, Thea knew she could focus entirely on her task.

"Quick shot," she muttered under her breath, the mantra a focus point as she nestled the butt of the rifle against her shoulder. She peered down the scope, her finger poised above the trigger. "Then duck."

She visualised the sequence of movements in her mind, a dance with death where every step was choreographed to perfection. There was no room for error, no second chances.

The Stalwart would hold; it had to.

Lucas would ensure that whatever retribution the enemy hurled at them, they would be ready.

With a deep breath that steadied her pulse and narrowed her world to the singular tunnel of her scope, Thea prepared to unleash the Caliburn's fury on one of the rare, yet absurdly devastating heavy cannons embedded in the Stellar Republic's wall.

'Alright, let's test this [Detect Weak Spots]. Hopefully you won't let me down...' Thea thought to herself as she scrutinised the massive cannon and its heavily fortified exterior.

It was encased in an armoured bulwark, layers of reinforced plasteel and energy-absorbing materials designed to withstand even the most aggressive of assaults. From her vantage point, Thea could see the gun's thick, angular shield plates overlapping like the scales of a draconic beast, deflecting and dispersing the energy of incoming fire.

She knew, however, that this beast was not invincible.

After all, the UHF AD's tanks had already destroyed dozens upon dozens of these cannons.

Thea's attention was inexorably drawn to the cannon's base, where it connected to the wall—a junction of multiple armoured plates and conduits. It was there that any structural weaknesses would be most pronounced, where the incessant vibrations of the cannon's fire would gradually wear down even the sturdiest of materials.

At least, that's what she had thought originally, but as Thea focused, she felt her new Passive Ability stir within her, like a hound catching the scent of its quarry.

A few seconds later, a shimmering overlay began to coalesce in her scope's field of vision, hues of iridescent light that did not obey the natural laws of reflection and refraction.

The patch materialised not where she had initially predicted—at the cannon's base—but instead towards its left-hand side. It was there, amidst the overlapping plates that resembled the interlocked scales of a reptilian behemoth, that her new Passive Ability unveiled a chink in the armor. The strangely coloured area shimmered with an otherworldly hue, an ethereal bulls-eye that whispered of vulnerability amid the otherwise impregnable metal fortress.

This anomaly in her vision marked the convergence of reinforced plasteel plating that, to any ordinary observer, would seem just as formidable as any other part of the cannon's defence.

Even with Thea's exceptional Perception, she could not see any difference herself, yet, the Ability discerned a subtle difference: a structural reliance on the interlocking mechanism that seemingly had resulted in a miniscule vulnerability, invisible to the naked eye.

It was a small target, no larger than a human head, but it resonated with possibility, pulsating slightly as if to confirm its susceptibility. It was more than a target; it was an opportunity, a chance to tilt the scales in their favour with a single, well-placed shot.

Steadying her breath and steeling her resolve, Thea aligned the crosshair of her scope with the spectral mark. Her finger tensed on the trigger, her entire being focused on this singular moment. If her instincts and her new ability were correct, this shot could very well turn the tide of the battle, ever so slightly.

'This is it,' she thought, the Caliburn becoming an extension of her will. *'You better not let me down, Gold-rank! Show me what this Ability can do!'*

And with that thought fueling her actions, she squeezed the trigger, ready to witness the might of her sniper's craft converge with the arcane precision of her newfound Ability.

The world seemed to slow to a crawl as Thea's finger applied the final, decisive pressure to the trigger. A split-second later, a colossal thunderclap rent the air as the Caliburn's barrel unleashed its fury, sending a massive shockwave out that sent the nearby ash and shrapnel flying away from its origin.

The slug was sent hurtling at hypervelocity, its path a blur of ionised air to the naked eye.

In the space between breaths, the projectile unerringly met its target.

With unerring accuracy, it struck the weak spot that only Thea, guided by her new Passive Ability, could see.

The Caliburn's slug, like a meteor wrought from mankind's ingenuity, pierced the formidable armour of the cannon with a screech of rending metal that nobody could hear. It burrowed through the defences and found refuge in the cannon's softer, vital innards before its explosive payload erupted.

The initial impact was silent for a heartbeat, and then reality caught up with violence.

A series of explosions followed, each one a drumbeat of destruction in their own right. The cannon's internals, a complicated mixture of volatile components and munitions, reacted with furious energy. A cascade of secondary blasts unfurled, consuming the emplacement in a conflagration of fire and shrapnel.

The mighty cannon, just moments ago a harbinger of death for the UHF's infantry and armour alike, was violently excised from the wall it had been part of. Its fortifications, designed to withstand outside sieges, crumbled under the onslaught of its own ravaged heart.

Its remnants crashed onto the ashen wasteland below the wall with a heavy thud, whirling up mountains of ash and shrapnel from the ground around it.

Of all this, Thea saw nothing, as she huddled next to Lucas inside the foxhole, the Stalwart protectively laid on top of them, with the valiant defensive heavy bracing it with all his might in preparation for any potential retaliation...