

Volume 2 - Chapter 49 - Action

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“The Freak Problem”

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Private Nash Harkins:

“Thing about the Freaks is... you never really *kill* them.

You drop one, he hits the mud, and you feel good for—what—three seconds? Then there he is again, same damn face, same damn gun, coming at you like you didn’t just burn half a mag putting him down; except now he knows where you are.

First time I fought ‘em, I thought my sights were off. Sure, they tell you in GalPol101, but... It’s different when you’re there, y’know?

Second time, I realized my brain just didn’t wanna really process it.

By the third engagement, I stopped caring if it was the same guy or not. You just shoot ‘til they stop moving and pray they stay stopped long enough for you to move up.”

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Private Raul Avarin:

“You can’t flank ‘em.

You think you got an angle, you think you’re clever—and then another full squad just *exists* there now, right where you wanted to push.

They don’t even have to be good shots; they just have too many barrels on you.

And when you’re pinned like that, your brain starts doing the math on how much ammo’s left in your mag, and how much is left in your *whole pack*, and you start wondering if it’s even worth burning it on the ones you can see...”

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Private Brick Holten:

“My first op against the Freaks? Four hours in, we’d burned through two-thirds of our ammo and my squad leader just kept muttering about the resupply never making it through.

I didn’t get why until later: You can’t win when the other guy can just keep pressing the attack with fresh bodies and fresh guns.

They don’t need to hold ground—they just need to keep *you* from moving forward.

And, unfortunately, they’re damn good at that.”

Private Emeka Dorn:

"The armor helps, sure. You can chew through a few more before they overwhelm you.

But the *real* problem is the ammo.

Our squadron had to abandon an assault last month because we just... ran out.

Couldn't clear the sector, not without more resupplies.

They were still coming in waves when we pulled out. That's the thing—if you can't find the Duplicator, the clones just don't stop.

It's like trying to seal a hull-breach with cotton."

Lieutenant Verren Shin:

"I've commanded over thirty platoons against the Stellar Republic.

The tactical problem is one thing—you plan around infinite numbers, you ration ammunition like it's the most precious commodity, and you accept you'll never get a clean wipe on the field.

But the *morale* problem? That's what *really* kills.

Marines need to feel like they can win.

Against the Freaks, all they see are their brothers and sisters falling while the enemy never seems to truly lose anyone, as they just keep coming.

It eats at them.

You can see it—the fight draining out of their eyes after the third or fourth time they put down the same target.

We've made progress now and then—new scanners, improved tracking, even entire squads dedicated to hunting Duplicators, or special roles in each squad purposefully designed to find them—but they adapt just as fast as we do.

Sometimes faster.

Every battle resets the board, and we're right back where we started.

You ask me? The war's not even about winning ground anymore.

It's about surviving long enough to fight them again tomorrow..."

Closing Note – Lera Han:

"From the greenest Private to the most seasoned officer, one truth apparently always stays the same: Fighting the Freaks isn't a battle of muscle or firepower alone.

It's a war of will.

Every duplicate that steps back onto the field is a reminder that this fight isn't fair, and it never will be.

But fairness doesn't win wars—persistence does.

The Stellar Republic can throw a thousand copies at our Marines, but they'll still have to face the one reality that they can't clone: A Marine never backs down from a fight."

"You can't drown a Marine in bodies—we just learn to swim faster."
— Common UHFMC saying when facing Stellar Republic forces

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The last streaks of sunlight bled out across the treetops before her, the glow fading as the sun slipped fully behind the mountain at her back. Shadows deepened over the slope, and Thea kept her eyes locked on the forest edge below.

Any moment now, the Stellar Republic forces would come pouring out.

Beside her, Chester, Marie, and Falks were busy fiddling with the side panels of their helmets, likely tuning the night-vision overlays in their visors to match the dimming light. The forest still carried that faint twilight haze—more than enough to see without full NV, but dark enough that the settings mattered.

'Just because it says 'Nighttime' on the DM screen doesn't mean it's pitch-black from the start... good to keep in mind.'

She gave her own helmet a small adjustment, making sure it sat comfortably. Her visor was set to the same settings as always: Crystal clear.

Right then, squad comms crackled to life, and Wellis' voice cut in.

"Last reminders from the CO: Main ammo depots are in trenchlines two and four. Three each, spaced evenly. Everywhere else—including our trench—only has small stations, so don't burn through rounds like a fucking moron."

There was the faint scrape of movement in the background before he continued, his voice hard.

“With this stupid scaled-up version, we’ve got triple the enemy numbers, fewer emplacements, and lost several depots when they pulled trenchlines. Every shot matters. Make it count.

“We’ve only got two explosive weapons in the squad, both over here on the west side with me. The squads east of you guys on the right have some too though, so you’re not completely without area-of-effect options. Let them take care of the masses.”

A faint pop of static followed as he shifted tone, slipping into a faster, clipped cadence.

“Remember firezones Kilo, Lima, and Mike—leave those to the emplacements when the wave hits. You focus on the ones that slip through.

“For the eastern-side squad: Chester’s got command authority. If he says abandon the trench, you abandon the trench. I don’t want to see any bullshit in the after-action report about someone staying behind when they shouldn’t have.

“That’s it. Keep your heads down. Good hunting, and may the Emperor guide our shots—this one’s going to be rough.”

With a single click, the comms went dead, leaving only the quiet night and the faint hiss of the trenchline’s ambient noise.

Marie, Falks, Chester, and Thea shared a quick round of nods to show they were all on the same page with Wellis’ orders before falling back into their final checks.

Thea glanced down at the Gram in her hands, then out toward the shadowed forest ahead.

‘Hmm... if the ammo’s back in the trenchline behind us, it might be smarter to start with a gun that actually uses ammo. Then when we fall back, I can stock up right away and not worry about it later.’

Her gaze slid to the Ballistic and Gauss variants propped against the trench wall to her right.

‘With these lighting conditions, firing the laser’s basically putting a glowing arrow on my head...’

Decision easily made, she swapped her trusty Laser-Gram for the Ballistic variant, feeling the somewhat unfamiliar weight shift in her hands.

The Ballistic wasn’t the hungriest for ammunition, but its ammo was far bulkier when compared to the Gauss variant’s, which were a lot easier to carry—she had more than twice as much ammunition for it in her backpack than for the Ballistic version.

Still, it made sense for the opening stretch, as she could just resupply once they fell back to the second line—if they made it that far.

She crouched slightly to run through her checks—confirming the suppressor was locked in tight, optics clean, and all attachments powered. They were all brand-new attachments and this would be their first real field-test, so she made sure that everything seemed operational.

She went on to tap the scope's side panel, watching the readout blink as the automatic zeroing kicked in.

Normally, with the Laser-Gram, she never had to think about bullet drop, but with Ballistic or Gauss, it was worth the extra step.

'Not like I'll need it at just over three hundred meters... but better safe than sorry.'

Pulling the rifle close, she popped the magazine for a quick glance—full, of course—before seating it back with a click. Then she slid into position at the reinforced firing port, cheek resting against the stock as her crosshairs settled on the treeline's shadowed edge.

'Any moment now...'

That familiar edge of anticipation crept through her chest, a slow tightening in her lungs.

The mission had officially begun minutes ago, but the forest was still silent. It almost felt deliberate, like the enemy was making them wait on purpose.

Just then, Thea's comms crackled to life again—this time on the command channel.

"The time for preparations is over, brothers and sisters. Pick up your weapons, the Freaks are coming," Kalt's voice thrummed through her helmet.

"I am not one for speeches, so here is my order to you. See to it that it is fulfilled to the last letter. Exert yourselves with every fiber of your being... and when you've given everything, *keep going* until you crumble to nothing but dust, or the mission is done:

"Fire at will. Kill them all."

The line went dead with a sharp click, leaving the trench in a heavy, unnatural stillness.

Even the usual shuffle of boots and faint clink of gear seemed to vanish for a moment.

Then it hit her—a strange, electric surge spreading through her chest and out into her limbs, sharp and focused like a sudden adrenaline spike.

It wasn't just her getting pumped up—she *knew* this feeling, or rather, something like it.

It was the same undeniable push that came whenever Corvus used his [Direct Order] Ability, only on a scale she'd never seen before.

'A platoon-wide buff...? Holy fuck...' Thea's grip tightened on her rifle, a grin tugging at the edge of her mouth. *'No wonder the Squad Leaders voted for him... And that speech was perfect, Commander Kalt! That's the kind of order I can definitely work with.'*

A sharp, predatory grin crept across her face as she settled back into position, eye locked to the scope of her Gram.

For a few heartbeats, the world was nothing but the stillness of trees, dense shrubs, and the tangled underbrush swaying faintly in the evening wind.

Then—'There.'

The faintest ripple of motion, barely noticeable at first, threading its way between the trunks.

"They're here," Thea reported evenly, her voice low but carrying enough weight that the others in her outcrop would hear. She didn't bother glancing over to check; they either believed her or didn't—it made no difference for her own plans.

Through the staggered, uneven lines of trees, shapes began to coalesce—first a handful of faint silhouettes slipping between trunks, then more, swelling with each passing second.

What had been isolated blurs became a thick, advancing wall of movement, until dozens... then hundreds... of armored figures were surging toward the forest's edge in a relentless tide.

Thea's breathing slowed, the chaos of the treeline narrowing into a tunnel of focus.

She aimed at the heads of the incoming soldiers, intending to shoot each one, but ripping her scope to another one nearby just a moment later, not having fired.

She repeated the same thing several times until finally—she felt it—the familiar weight pressing against her chest, the subtle pull of certainty she'd come to associate with her precognition.

Somewhere in that rushing tide, she'd just locked onto a Duplicator.

She'd been given a simple, unambiguous order and this was a perfect place to start.

Her finger squeezed the trigger.

The Ballistic Gram kicked harder than she'd expected, a sharp shove into her shoulder that reminded her recoil was a real thing—a fact she'd almost forgotten after a solid month of relying on the almost recoil-free Laser variant.

It wasn't unpleasant, but she'd definitely have to compensate for it now.

The round tore downrange, cutting through the dim air of the late-evening battlefield.

Muzzle flash flared briefly in her peripheral vision before fading into the dark.

Half a heartbeat later, the shot found its mark—slamming dead-center into the visor of the advancing Duplicator.

The armored figure jerked violently before collapsing like a puppet with its strings cut.

All around him, the duplicates he'd spawned crumpled as well, their bodies hitting the churned mud for barely an instant before disappearing from view entirely—swallowed back into the surging tide of enemy soldiers as if they had never been there at all.

"What?" someone muttered from her left, but Thea didn't bother seeing what that was all about.

She squeezed the trigger again, dropping another Duplicator and wiping his clones from existence in the blink of an eye.

Then again. And again.

Three sharp cracks rang out in quick succession, each one sending a round through the darkness and punching straight into the visors of her chosen targets. Every kill took multiple enemies with it—but with the flood of armor pouring toward the forest's edge, the effect was like throwing pebbles into a raging river.

"Hey, what the fuck are you doing?" Chester's voice cut in sharply from her left. "We're supposed to be conserving ammunition. Do you not know what the fuck that means?"

Thea didn't look up, her cheek still pressed to the stock as she lined up another shot. "It means making sure our shots count—which is exactly what I'm doing. Is there a reason you're not shooting, Chester? You heard the CO; it's fire at will."

She fired again.

The suppressor's front vented a faint curl of smoke that drifted away in the cold night air, and another Duplicator's body crumpled before disappearing into the forest's underbrush.

"They're still *inside* the forest," Chester bit out through clenched teeth. "I don't plan on wasting ammo on the trees—Ahh, fucking whatever. Waste your ammo then."

He shuffled back to his position with a sharp shake of his head, muttering something about "thankless first-timers" and "ammo dumps in human form."

Thea ignored him completely.

Her scope tracked another moving figure, the pull in her chest guiding her aim. One more shot—another sharp recoil—and a Duplicator's head snapped back, helmet shattering as his clones vanished in the chaos.

The first incoming shots started cracking through the night now, streaking from the treeline toward the trenches.

Thea's section caught more than its fair share, tracer rounds bouncing off of the reinforced embrasure in front of her and thudding into the dirt near the outcrop.

Chester's grumbles carried easily over the gunfire. "Perfect. Some dumbass Recruit just marked us for death with their shit fire discipline..."

Thea ignored him, shifting her aim to hunt the muzzle flashes flickering between the trees.

She caught a visor behind a thick trunk, squeezed the trigger, and watched the body slump.

Another flash, further left—one clean shot, another sniper down.

She kept working methodically, cutting down the sharpshooters trying to pin them down in-turn, but none of their shots had even gotten close yet.

Then the treeline finally broke open.

The first Stellar Republic soldiers burst from the shadows, sprinting into the open field—only to be met with an unrelenting torrent of fire from the UHF lines.

What had been sporadic gunshots—just her, a few snipers, and the occasional overeager Marine—erupted into a full-blown storm of bullets and laser fire as if on command.

Beams carved through the night, while rounds sparked off enemy armor in showers of light.

Bodies fell hard into the mud, cut down before they'd made it more than a few steps from the forest, only to be replaced by more bodies right behind them.

For about two seconds, it worked. Then the tide began to push back.

Super-Heavy armoured Defensive Heavies advanced in formation, shields raised high to catch the incoming fire. Behind them, regular soldiers followed tight in their shadow, using the moving wall of armour as cover, while firing back towards the trenchlines to try and suppress the incoming deluge of fire.

Explosions followed from handheld rocket-propelled weaponry or grenade launchers—sharp concussions that sent dirt and debris raining down on the trenchline.

From both sides, almost simultaneously, several flares went high into the sky, lighting up the entire field of battle in a red hue.

Thick jets of white-foam barrier erupted across the battlefield where thrown Stellar Republic grenades exploded, rapidly expanding into jagged walls that gave their troops even more protection as they pushed forward and began returning fire in earnest.

To Thea's left, Chester, Marie, and Falks were now fully engaged as well, their rifles spitting carefully aimed bursts into the mass of advancing troops.

The flow from the treeline didn't slow, however—it thickened.

More and more Stellar Republic soldiers poured into the field, their formations rippling forward like a living tide. Each line that pushed up seemed denser than the last, their advance gaining ground despite the initial losses.

It wasn't until the deep, rattling roar of the UHF's heavy machine guns joined the fight that their momentum finally staggered.

The emplacements along the trenchline lit up in a storm of muzzle flashes, spewing out sheets of high-calibre explosive rounds that shredded the hastily erected white-foam cover and chewed through anyone caught in the open; even pushing back and killing several of the Defensive Heavies that had been seemingly unstoppable so far.

The first salvo of explosive weaponry came at the same time—a rapid succession of concussive thuds and thunderclaps.

Grenades, rockets and shells burst across the Stellar Republic's forward positions, ripping foam barriers apart and blasting the soldiers behind them into chunks of armour and red mist.

Dirt and burning debris rained down over the red-hued field, combining with the Duplicate sludge, body parts and blood into a sickeningly wet mucus.

For a brief moment, the push faltered.

Next to Thea, Marie and Falks had kept firing throughout all of it as well, but their voices carried the edge of fraying nerves.

"Holy shit, they're not stopping," Marie muttered, working her rifle's action faster now, swinging it around as she aimed at easily hittable targets here and there.

"No kidding," Falks answered between bursts. "There's too many of them—"

His words cut off in a scream as a round punched through the narrow opening of their embrasure, catching him high in the shoulder.

The sound was raw and wet, followed by the thud of him hitting the trench floor.

"Shit! Falks!" Chester was on him instantly, kneeling down, gauntlets pressing hard against the wound.

"Keep still, it's not fatal—stop thrashing! You're making it worse!" Chester's voice was firm, but his eyes flicked up every few seconds to check the embrasure.

"Fuck—hurts—" Falks hissed, breath ragged.

"No shit it hurts. Hold on. I've got you."

Through it all, Thea's scope stayed steady.

She tracked movement, found another Duplicator, felt that familiar pressure in her chest, and fired. The round punched through his visor cleanly, and the duplicates around him scattered like smoke in the dark.

'Recoil's still kicking more than I'd like,' she noted calmly as she aimed for the next person.

Another shot. Another Duplicator down.

The sound of Falks groaning behind her was like background noise now, mixing with Marie's rapid-fire curses, worried questions about his status and Chester's clipped medical instructions.

"Keep pressure on it—no, more—stop lifting your damn arm—"

'Attachments are doing good work... for now. Might need spares for a fight like this—suppressor's already starting to make the air shimmer... I wonder if it will last for the whole DM...'

“Aaahhhh! Fuck!” Falks screamed, voice cracking as Chester yanked the mangled remnants of the bullet from his shoulder, the metal clinking faintly as it hit the trench floor.

The smell of burnt propellant and blood was thick in the air by now.

‘Maybe it’d be better not to have the suppressor screwed on at all right now,’ Thea mused, glancing at the heat shimmer distorting the front of her Gram. *‘There’s no real point in trying to be stealthy in the middle of a battlefield like this... probably a waste to keep it on.’*

She exhaled slowly as she adjusted for the next target, and squeezed the trigger.

Another clean hit.

She didn’t bother to watch the body fall before shifting aim, sighting another Duplicator and sending him down a moment later.

That’s when a sudden, sharp pang flared in her chest.

She leaned slightly towards the left, just in time for a laser to slice through the embrasure’s small opening, hissing past her head by mere millimeters and burning a molten groove into the dirt wall behind her.

She didn’t flinch, didn’t dwell on it—just popped back into position and lined up the shot she’d spotted before the precognition had urged her to move.

Another Duplicator down.

His duplicates collapsed into heaps next to him right away.

“They’re never-ending! Fuck! Why are we in this fucking upscaled bullshit mission?!” Marie’s voice cracked with panic as she ducked down, clutching her rifle close. “How are we even supposed to do anything here?!”

The return fire from the Stellar Republic lines was only getting heavier, a relentless storm of rounds hammering the reinforced walls of their embrasure.

Each impact rang out in sharp, metallic dinks or dull thuds, the ricochets sparking before disappearing into the churned-up haze.

Bullets and laser bursts slammed into the sidewalls, tearing into packed earth and sending gritty clumps spraying into the air until a fine dust hung permanently in front of the trench like a dirty fog.

“Just keep firing!” Chester barked back over the chaos, one knee pressed to the trench floor as he jabbed a set of injectors into Falks’ neck.

The suppressed bark of each of Thea’s shots was barely audible under the pounding gunfire from the battlefield.

“Fuck, man, why does this shit always hurt so much?!” Falks groaned, squirming under Chester’s grip. “I need to get me a fucking auto-injector for painkillers after this.”

Thea slapped a fresh magazine into her Gram—the first reload of the fight.

She glanced at the Gauss variant leaning against the wall at her side.

'Maybe I should try it out soon,' she thought, sliding the bolt forward to load the first round into the chamber with a satisfying click. *'In a target-rich mess like this, I don't really need the penetrative punch of Ballistic. Gauss should do just fine...'*

Thea settled back into her scope, the rhythm of fire and target acquisition flowing as naturally as breathing—it felt undeniably great to be back in the action. Another Duplicator's visor shattered under her crosshairs, his body collapsing and his clones with him.

She spotted another target, exhaled, and squeezed—another headshot.

Then the twinge hit again.

“Hey, Rookie, how are you doi—” Chester's voice cut off mid-sentence as he caught sight of her movement. Without hesitation, she leaned right at the twinge, a pulse of heated air from a passing laser brushing her cheek as it smashed into the dirt wall.

She stayed in that slight lean, eyes locked on her scope, and fired, the recoil thumping into her shoulder as yet another Duplicator dropped.

“Doing good, thanks,” she replied flatly, not once looking away from the sight picture, already lining up her next target.

Chester stared at her for a beat longer before snapping his own rifle up and taking a few quick shots from his own embrasure.

Thea's high Perception caught his low mutter, barely audible under the chaos. “Fucking Wellis was right, these Cyans always overdo it to show they're tough, huh? That was such a lucky reposition, holy fuck. I hope she's not gonna die with the first shot that finally hits... I need those points... especially since we'll all fucking die here anyway...”

Marie cursed under her breath as a streak of energy chewed the top edge of her firing position, continuously forcing her to duck, missing out on opportunities to fire back.

Thea fired again, another Duplicator collapsing into the dirt.

Falks tried to pop up for a burst, only for a flurry of shots to slam into the lip of the trench, showering him with dirt and forcing him back down with a hiss.

Thea shifted her aim and calmly took out another clone-maker before his decoys could vanish into the mob.

Even Chester was firing in short bursts rather than keeping up steady fire, the incoming counter-fire pounding their section hard enough to rattle the reinforced walls.

Between his shots, Thea picked off another Duplicator, watching the ripple effect of their collapse open brief gaps in the advancing lines—gaps that were almost instantly filled again.

'I missed this kind of chaos,' she thought, an easy grin tugging at her mouth as she squeezed off another round.

The Gram's report thumped into her shoulder, the recoil pushing her sight just slightly off for the next target for a split second. *'Ballistic version really isn't bad at all... though I'd definitely be firing faster with the Laser one. Recoil's a bit of a pain for this kind of pace.'*

She flicked her eyes open to the [Resource] tab of her Profile, letting the transparent interface settle into the corner of her vision while she kept scanning for targets.

[Resources]

Focus: 261 / 225

Another pull of the trigger, another Duplicator's head erupting.

She squinted through the numbers floating in her view.

'Hmm... I'm chewing through Focus pretty quick. Only been a few minutes and I'm already down fourteen. Precognition's really draining, even just passively like this, huh?'

"Ah, fuck!" Marie's scream cracked through the din to her left, followed by the frantic clatter of her rifle hitting the trench floor.

Chester was already halfway to her when she waved him off, breath coming fast. "I'm fine! I'm fine! Don't worry—fuck—it's just a ricochet, nothing happened."

Thea's didn't really pay attention. *'Maybe it's time to mix things up... Opening my Gate a bit more should slow the drain. If I can find the perfect balance—enough recovery to keep the passive precog running without bleeding Focus dry—that'd be perfect.'*

She centered her mind on the Gate within her chest, just behind her heart, feeling for that familiar point of pressure and heat. With slow, deliberate care, she eased it open a fraction wider, exactly the way she'd been taught—not forcing it, not rushing it.

'Thank you for teaching me, Zach. I won't waste your lessons,' she thought, a flicker of reverence threading through her focus as she lined up another shot and sent a round tearing into the enemy ranks.

"There's like a thousand of them!" Falks yelled, voice high with frustration, before snapping off another hurried shot and ducking back down. His helmet dipped as he shook his head, muttering under his breath, panic starting to creep in.

Thea's gaze never left her scope.

'Let's see if this is wide enough or if I need just a bit more...'