

Volume 2 - Chapter 81 - Malthezar Oranis I

LUMINARY VOYAGES — WHERE HISTORY MEETS PRESENT

Introducing: The UHF Grand Tour — A 38-Day Journey Through the Heart of the United Human Federation!

There are those who see the galaxy from behind a datascreen.

And then there are those who stand on the surface of Orionis Alpha as the twin suns crest the Sovereignty Spire and understand what it means to be *human* in this day and age.

Luminary Voyages invites you to be one of the latter.

Thirty-eight days. Seven systems.

An itinerary refined over eleven decades of premium travel experience into something effortless, memorable, and *utterly* irreplaceable.

Days 1–7 | The Orionis Sector (*Orionis Alpha*)

Your journey begins where all of our futures are decided.

Orionis Alpha is the single most important planet in UHF space—seat of the UHF High Command, home to the Grand Assembly building, the O-13 Council Chambers, and the Terran Imperial Diplomatic Quarter.

We do not simply take you past these landmarks. We take you *inside* them.

Luminary holds one of fewer than forty civilian licenses permitting guided access to the Assembly Viewing Galleries during active sessions.

Beyond the political, the Museum of Human Expansion spans forty-seven floors of artefacts dating to pre-Void-travel Terran history, and the Sovereignty Gardens—maintained by a staff of over thirty-three thousand—have held the title of most beautiful landscaped space in UHF territory for nineteen consecutive years.

Your accommodation: **The Accord**, Orionis Alpha's only seven-star hotel, four hundred meters from the Grand Assembly's northern entrance.

Preferred by senior diplomats, Terran dignitaries, and the occasional off-duty Admiral who values the right kind of discretion...

Days 8–12 | The Vulcanus System (*Vulcanus Prime*)

Some destinations are about scale—the kind that recalibrates what you thought you understood about human capability.

Vulcanus Prime is the UHF's primary Forge World, so thoroughly given over to industrial production that its surface is only visible from orbit as a continuous grid of light.

Current estimates attribute approximately 7% of the UHF's total military hardware output to Vulcanus Prime and its three orbital fabrication rings alone, with roughly 61% of all Void Drive components passing through Vulcanus at some stage of production.

Luminary has secured exclusive civilian access to the **Hearthstone Observation Platform**, from which guests may observe the fabrication rings in operation and attend a formal dinner hosted by senior members of the Vulcanus Fabricators' Guild—the people who decide what gets built, how fast, and for whom.

The conversations at **Hearthstone** do not make it into public record.

Our guests very much appreciate this discretion.

Days 13–18 | The Veranthi Reach (*Veranthi Blue*)

Because you have earned it.

Ranked the second most desirable leisure destination in all of UHF space for sixteen consecutive years, Veranthi Blue is warm, unhurried, and entirely given over to doing nothing particularly *quickly*.

Its oceans cover 79% of the surface; what landmass exists is occupied by resort infrastructure, nature reserves, and restaurants that do not display prices on their menus.

Five uninterrupted days, no schedule beyond what you choose to make.

Four more systems to go.

Days 19–23 | The Caldris Expanse (*Caldris Station & Caldris IV*)

Sitting at the edge of comfortable UHF space, Caldris Station is one of the largest civilian transit hubs outside the UHF heartlands—vast enough to maintain its own internal weather systems across three residential districts, and the last major stopover for any military deployments heading to the eastern front.

You will walk corridors alongside people shipping out and eat in establishments serving Marines for nine generations.

The history here is not archived—it is ongoing and *very* much alive.

Caldris IV itself offers the Ashspine Range, a volcanic mountain chain unlike anything in the core systems, toured in fully pressurized luxury transport and, naturally, included in the package price itself.

Days 24–29 | The Serenthias Cluster (*Serenthias Secundus*)

Home to the most active diplomatic quarter outside Orionis Alpha, the finest private auction houses in UHF space, and a social calendar that simply does *not* stop.

Our visit is timed to coincide with the **Cluster Summit's** opening reception, to which all Luminary guests receive standing invitations.

We make no promises about what follows.

We simply put you in the room with the right people, at the right time...

Days 30–35 | The Theron Worlds (*Theron's Rest & Theron's Watch*)

Site of the Federation's first major inter-system defensive engagement, nearly six centuries ago.

Theron's Rest was built around the preserved ruins of the original settlement—walking its old quarter is the closest thing to time travel the galaxy currently offers.

Theron's Watch houses the Eternal Registry, containing the recorded name of every confirmed UHF casualty since the Federation's founding.

We allow an unscheduled afternoon there.

No tours, no guides.

Just time.

Days 36–38 | Return to Orionis Alpha — The Closing Gala

You return as someone who has seen not merely the symbol of the Federation, but the very substance of it.

The tour concludes with the annual Luminary Closing Gala at The Accord—attended by past guests, select diplomatic staff, and public figures confirmed closer to the date.

The evening is, reliably, very worth it for everyone involved.

The UHF Grand Tour is available in Standard, Premier, and Exclusive tiers.

All tiers include private Void-transit aboard Luminary's licensed charter vessels, onboard hospitality staff, and a dedicated system coordinator for the full duration.

Luminary Voyages — For those who understand that the galaxy is not a backdrop; but a destination.

—

[Shortened Excerpt from: Advertisement, Luminary Voyages Ltd., Licensed Premium Operator, UHF Civilian Transit Authority, PFC 939]

=====

=====

Finding herself three-quarters of the way up a freezing cold mountain, Thea felt strangely comfortable.

The air was thin, and every breath came shallower than usual, each one carrying a sharp, stinging pain deep in her throat and lungs—far worse than the coldest nights she could ever remember in the Undercity.

But something about it still felt fundamentally *right* to her.

Like she'd somehow been built for this kind of environment.

The air was clean in a way that nothing in the Undercity ever had been, and the blinding white, crunchy snow under her boots had a quality to it she didn't really have a word for yet except "*satisfying*".

It also helped, of course, that she had a large fluffy dog to pet.

Duke was right beside her, though he looked somewhat different from when she'd first met him in the locker room alongside Drim.

He was in his armour now—and what an armour it truly was.

Overlapping plates, like the scales of some kind of massive lizard, covered him from head to the base of his tail. Deep gray as the base colour, blending into his natural silver-gray wherever the plates didn't perfectly overlap—gaps left deliberately, Thea figured, to allow for a full range of motion—with the fur peeking through in between, the whole thing producing a kind of natural camo pattern without even trying.

But that, apparently, hadn't been enough for Drim.

For not only were the plates themselves heavy-looking—heavy enough that Thea genuinely wasn't sure her Gauss-type Gram could punch through them—they were *also* shifting colour as Duke moved, adjusting contrast and intensity to match the terrain around him in real time.

'I never thought I'd see a massive dog in adaptive camo armour...' She thought, continuing to scratch him in the gap between two of the plates. *'And yet here we are.'*

She let her gaze wander over the rest of the squad while they held position.

Seltz was crouched a few meters to her left, light armour, same general weight class as her own Spectre—he moved like someone who'd spent a long time learning how to take up as little space as possible, which she could only appreciate in the best of ways.

Ash was a little further back, medium armour, adaptive camo running across the whole suit.

What had caught Thea's attention back in the locker room and hadn't stopped catching it since were the pistols—four of them, visibly holstered, every single one fitted with a suppressor that was frankly oversized to an almost comical degree. *Almost.*

Thea had also clocked the particular way Ash moved and the slight adjustments in how her weight distributed with certain steps: Hidden holsters.

Probably at least two more, maybe three. Every weapon undoubtedly suppressed.

'Definitely not a coincidence... I wonder if she has some sort of Gunslinger-type Class that focuses on pistols exclusively? Has to be, right...? There's no reason to use pistols over rifles otherwise.'

Then there was Vytalis.

'A Heavy with a stealth focus,' she thought, watching him stand there. *'Didn't think that was common enough a thing that I'd get to see it on my second-ever DM. Back in the arcade, these types of builds were like one in every five-hundred to a thousand or so... Very damn rare.'*

His armour was a Heavy-type—and unmistakably, obviously Heavy in design—but it read less like anything Isabella would have worn and more like someone had taken her own Spectre and scaled it up considerably, then reinforced everything that mattered without giving up the things that didn't have to go.

It even came with yet another splattering of adaptive camo across the whole suit. *And,* most strikingly in Thea's eyes, while every other member of the squad was sinking somewhere around knee-deep into the snow with each step, Vytalis was simply standing *on top* of it.

The heaviest person present, by a significant margin no doubt, and the *only one* the snow didn't seem to have any opinion about.

Thea had been quietly staring at that particular thing for a while now and still didn't entirely have an explanation for it except that it likely had something to do with anti-grav tech—like a reverse of the grav-lock that her Caliburn used.

'Or something like that, maybe... I should ask Peria, next time I see her.'

Betel, the squad medic, she'd only been introduced to a few minutes before the mission loaded in, and hadn't had much time to form a strong impression beyond Medium-type armour, also adaptive camo, and a general orientation toward not being seen for a medic—which fit the squad's theme well enough.

He hadn't said much to anyone overall, which she'd noted that as a point in his favour.

Which brought her, finally, to Drim himself.

Medium armour, one more adaptive camo for the group, nothing that immediately stood out from the neck down—and then the helmet, which was shaped, quite deliberately and with quite enthusiastic commitment, like the head of a wolf.

Stylized, of course, but definitely *not* subtle about it.

"Very on-brand," Thea muttered quietly to herself with a chuckle.

Something cold and damp pressed firmly against the side of her hand.

She looked at it.

Duke had turned his head and nudged her with his nose, his blue eyes carrying the specific energy of an animal that had heard something it didn't appreciate and wanted that noted.

"...No offence meant," she added quickly, holding up both hands defensively.

Duke looked forward again, apparently satisfied with that.

The only thing that really bothered Thea about the group's composition so far was that everyone seemed to have fully adaptive camouflage across their entire armour. Which left her as the odd one out—the Spectre's camo features only extended to the cloak.

'If I'd had the Wraith, at least I'd have proper stealth-tech cloaking...' she thought, with a quiet grimace. *'And as long as I'm standing still, the cloak probably still **does** beat simple adaptive camo anyway, but... it still feels pretty shitty...'*

Drim's voice cut through the cold air before Thea could sink any further into the thought.

"Alright. Quick rundown." He didn't raise his voice—just pitched it to carry across the squad without going any further than that. "Malthazar Oranis. Point Assault. Our job is the first capture point, designated Beta, halfway up the northern face. We're scaling to it alongside two other squads.

"The main force follows behind us at distance. They're a large group, so lots of noise—they're not trying to be quiet and they don't need to be. The Freaks will see them coming and that's the entire point. While everyone's looking downhill at the distraction, we take Beta while another few squads simultaneously take Alpha on the other side. Once it's ours, the main force comes up to fortify and hold while the rest of the operation catches up."

He paused briefly, letting the distinct silence of a snow-covered mountainside do the punctuation for him.

"First phase is stealth-heavy. No engagement unless it's unavoidable, and if it is unavoidable, make it fast and, most importantly, make it *quiet*. Infiltration first, then whatever additional violence the situation actually requires. The point should be ours before the other two squads even become a factor."

His gaze moved across the group. "That's why I picked this particular collection of people. You all looked like you knew what you were doing. I'm expecting that assessment to be correct, so don't muck it up. We're going fast and hard—but *quiet* throughout."

That was, apparently, the end of the briefing.

No route breakdown. No contingency planning out loud. No detailed rundown of individual assignments or escalation protocols. Just the general shape of it, and the implicit expectation that everyone present was more than capable of filling in the gaps themselves.

Thea found that quite interesting.

The SLs she'd been under before had all operated with a certain energy—directive, loud in one way or another, the kind of presence that made sure you knew exactly who was running things and how things were meant to play out, down to the letter.

Drim clearly wasn't like that. He wasn't passive, and he wasn't unclear—the authority was definitely there, nor were there any questions about their mission.

His style just didn't feel the need to announce itself.

He said what mattered, stopped when he was done, and apparently trusted that everyone's competence would extend well beyond what most SLs assumed the word meant.

She pocketed that away for later, filed somewhere between interesting tidbit and potentially useful information to model her own behavior after—if she ever had to lead a squad again, which was hopefully never—and pushed off the rock she'd been leaning against, before readying her Gram.

She chose the Gauss-variant for this first leg of the mission, for stealth reasons.

'*Right,*' she thought, loading a magazine into the gun. '*Time to go capture a point...*'

—

Around an hour after setting out from their initial position, Thea had learned quite a few things.

First and foremost, walking through knee-deep snow up a mountain with no real climbing gear absolutely sucked—even with superhuman Strength and Finesse.

Second, and more importantly in the grand scheme of things, Companion-Classes were damn useful in ways she hadn't fully anticipated.

About ten minutes into the slog, they'd shifted into a new formation with Duke at the front, essentially acting as a snowplow for everyone following in his wake.

Thea's first instinct had been that this would be a stealth problem, but on second thought it was probably *the* stealthiest formation they could actually manage.

From any distance, Duke just looked like a very large, very well-camouflaged wolf making its way through the snow—not exactly something that would raise flags on a planet like Malthazar Orionis, which had brought dogs along during its initial colonization hundreds of years ago.

Their footsteps also disappeared completely into the churned path he left behind, only detectable if someone came out specifically to look for them.

The biggest upside, though, was undoubtedly his perception.

Duke's sense of smell and hearing had both proven to be well beyond even what Thea's own Perception could pick up. On more than one occasion, he'd frozen mid-step without warning, the entire squad going still a half-moment behind him, and then a Stellar Republic patrol had come into view several seconds later.

Without him, getting this far up the mountain this quietly would have been significantly harder.

Of course, there were downsides too.

'Like the fact that he's absolutely massive, for one,' Thea thought, sliding a sideways glance at the enormous creature breaking trail ahead of her.

Whatever Drim had done with the armour to try and blend Duke into the environment, there was only *so much* you could really do to hide such a size. Duke, moving at a low crouch and actively trying to keep a small profile, was still roughly a head taller than Thea.

Which put his full size somewhere just below two meters tall and around three to four meters from snout to tail.

As a result, they'd taken a handful of detours that a squad of regular Marines—who were already oversized compared to regular humans, of course—simply wouldn't have needed.

Finally, however, after cresting a particularly nasty section of deep-snow, they reached the start of the rocky outcrop the objective was supposedly located on. And then, the outpost came into view around the next ridge, and Drim raised a fist without breaking stride.

Duke stopped immediately, the rest of the squad taking half a moment longer to react.

He was already low, his armour shifting through two or three shades in quick succession before settling into something that matched the grey rock face they were now pressed against almost exactly.

Thea eased forward, hood of her Spectre's cloak drawn low over her face, until she found a position with a clean line of sight to the outpost and brought the Gram's scope up.

The capture point was built into the mountain itself—or rather, it had been carved out of it, a fortified outpost wedged into a natural shelf in the rock face about two hundred meters above their current position.

Solid construction, good elevation, the kind of defensive position that made attacking it from the front a genuinely bad idea for just about any army that didn't simply outnumber the defender a hundred to one.

The approaches from the south and east were entirely exposed—long, flat stretches of snow with no meaningful cover until you were already close enough to be a problem.

The northern approach, the one they were on, was far better; rockier. More broken terrain.

Still not comfortable nor usable for a larger group, but just workable enough for them.

She quickly counted the defenders she could see.

Four on the outer perimeter, moving in a loose rotation. At least two more she could infer from the patterns—positions that the outer four kept glancing toward, checking in with.

'*Six minimum,*' she thought. '*Probably eight plus...*'

Drim had come up beside her at some point, low against the rock, his wolf-shaped helmet angled toward the outpost.

He didn't say anything for a long moment. Neither did she.

Duke was flat against the snow to Drim's left, blue eyes fixed on the outpost with a focus that was almost unnerving to look at directly.

His tail wasn't moving.

Every line of him was still in the particular way that distinctly wasn't rest—the kind of stillness that was the exact opposite of rest, actually, coiled, ready and just waiting for the word.

Drim moved two fingers in a short gesture toward Seltz without looking at him.

Seltz was already moving before the gesture finished, easing further along the ridgeline to get a better angle on the eastern side of the outpost.

Quiet. Practically no snow displacement nor loosening rocks.

Thea made a mental note about the exact way he moved, '*That seems really useful...*'

Then Drim looked at her.

She held up four fingers, then tapped her eye, then pointed toward the southern approach.

He gave a short nod—he'd seen the same thing—and then held up two more fingers, turned them in a circle and tilted his head toward a position in the rocks slightly above and to the right of where she was currently crouched.

'Take a second look...?' She thought, following his mark. 'Ah... Yeah, I can see that. Far better angle up there.'

She moved.

The new position took her about ninety seconds to reach without making noise—copying Seltz's movement techniques as best as she could—which felt like too long, but nobody below reacted, so she settled into it and brought the Gram up.

From here, she had a clean line on the entire outer perimeter.

Both the defenders she could confirm and the two positions she'd inferred now resolved into three—one of them was tucked behind a supply stack near the outpost's eastern wall, barely visible. She tagged the position on her HUD and pushed the marker to the squad channel without a word.

They acknowledged it with a single click.

The squad held position and waited while Seltz finished his circuit.

Two minutes passed. Then three.

The patrol rotation below continued, unhurried, the defenders clearly not expecting anything from this particular approach—which, given the extremely difficult terrain leading up to the outpost, was a fairly solid assumption to make, in all fairness.

Finally, Seltz came back over the channel, talking in quiet, hushed tones.

"Eight confirmed. Two near the interior entrance, six on rotation. No heavy weapons visible. Supply-guy looks to have comms."

'That one first,' Thea thought immediately, already finding him in her scope. *'Or last, depending on how this goes...'*

Drim's hand moved again and she caught the movement from the corner of her eye—thankful for her Perception being high enough to see him clearly even from the elevated position she was in.

A series of short, precise gestures laid out the plan: Ash left, Vytalis to the eastern wall's base, Betel back and covered, Seltz wide right. He and Duke up the center. Thea stayed.

Then he looked at her one more time and tapped two fingers to the side of his helmet.

She clicked once in acknowledgment.

'Comm guy's mine,' she thought, and settled her breathing.

They waited while the patrol worked its way into position—long enough for everyone to get where they needed to be, long enough for the rotation below to move exactly where they wanted it.

Thea kept the comm-guy in her scope the entire time, tracking his pattern, getting a feel for his rhythm and movements.

Two clicks came through the squad channel and she pulled the trigger right away.

The Soldier dropped without a sound as the Gauss-accelerated projectile ripped through his forehead, the Gram bucking in her hand—an unusual experience, as was the fact that there had been a miniscule delay between her feathering the trigger and the enemy dropping.

'Definitely not like a Laser...'

She was already moving her scope before he hit the ground, sweeping across the outpost to watch the rest of it unfold.

Seltz took his target from the right, single shot fired and disappeared behind cover again before the Soldier had finished falling—the defender crumpling mid-step without ever completing his rotation. The man clearly knew his business.

Ash had been quite a bit harder to track.

Thea caught the motion more than the details—a shadow moving along the left approach, and then two defenders were simply crumpling on the spot, the suppressed shots so quiet at this distance that she only registered them because she was specifically looking for them.

The silencers were, evidently, not simply an aesthetic choice.

Vytalis at the eastern wall was the strangest thing to watch.

A Heavy moving quietly still looked like a Heavy moving quietly—there was only so much you could do—but he covered the ground to the wall's base faster than she'd expected and handled his target with the kind of efficiency that came from someone who'd clearly thought hard about how to make significant size as irrelevant as possible in a stealthy approach.

His silenced rifle let out two pops—louder than Ash's but not much more than Seltz's—and his assigned target dropped without a head.

Duke had moved the moment the clicks had gone out.

Thea nearly missed him and Drim's actions, trying to keep an eye on everyone and make sure she could clean up any missteps from a distance.

One moment he was flat against the snow underneath the outpost's northern overhang, invisible and completely still.

The next he shot off like a bullet—twenty meters of near-vertical rock face covered in the time it took her to blink, a silver-gray blur that resolved into something enormous mid-air before his jaws closed around the defender's head with a sound she could hear even at this distance.

The crunch was not something she was going to forget quickly.

And then Drim was just suddenly *there*.

Not running or climbing—literally right there, standing next to Duke where he absolutely had not been a fraction of a second before, silenced weapon already raised, and the second defender a meter away dropped before he'd even fully registered that Duke had appeared and killed his patrol-mate.

Thea's eye came off the scope entirely for a half second.

'Teleportation,' she thought, and felt her brain immediately lurch forward into gear. *'Targeted onto the Companion. Has to be. And it was fucking **instant**—no cast time, no visual tell beforehand, nothing...!'*

She pulled her scope back up, checking the rest of the outpost automatically while her mind ran in two directions at once. *'Does it go both ways? Can Duke jump to him as well? What are the range limitations? The cost? Is it a cooldown Ability? What are the cos—'*

She caught herself halfway through composing the question in her head, fingers already moving toward the squad channel.

'Absolutely not,' she thought firmly. *'We are in the middle of an operation. Focus, you idiot!'*

She swallowed the questions with some effort and swept the scope across the outpost one more time, checking for anything that hadn't gone according to plan.

Everything was still. All seven defenders down, no alarms, no signals sent.

With the patrols and the watchers-on-the-wall dealt with, all that was left was clearing the rest of the outpost and planting the UHF's flag on the first objective point...