

Arc 1 - Chapter 129 - Maintenance

Watching Selene disappear through the door and hearing it click shut behind her, Thea felt a wave of exhaustion crash over her, unlike anything she had ever experienced.

Her legs wobbled beneath her as she stumbled back to the armchair, collapsing into it with a heavy sigh. The weight of everything that had transpired in the past hour pressed down on her like a physical burden, leaving her utterly drained.

The emotional rollercoaster she had been on, from the moment she had been respawned in this room, had taken a toll that she was only beginning to comprehend.

So much had happened in such a short time—revelations, negotiations, and the overwhelming offers from Councillor Lumis.

The promise of resources and opportunities that seemed far too good to be true, after feeling so abandoned by the UHF, left her with a confusing mix of gratitude, suspicion, and something else she couldn't quite name.

Her thoughts swirled in a chaotic mess as she tried to make sense of it all.

Thea slumped deeper into the armchair, her body refusing to obey her commands to sit up straight. She muttered to herself, trying to shake off the fog of exhaustion, "So the assessment is truly—finally—over, huh?"

But even the relief of that thought did little to revive her.

She could barely muster the energy to right herself in the chair, instead lying back, defeated.

"I'd kill for a hot shower right about now..." she mumbled, her voice trailing off as she imagined the soothing heat washing away the tension in her muscles.

"That could be arranged," came the sudden, disembodied voice of the Sovereign, startling Thea so much that she leaped out of her seat before finally remembering that the AI was always watching, always listening.

'Right... Forgot about that for a second...' she thought, feeling a bit foolish.

Tentatively, she responded, "Ehh... Sure? If you would be so kind...? What do I do?"

She took a few hesitant steps towards the centre of the room, unsure of how to proceed.

Talking to the Sovereign always felt strange to her—addressing a presence without a face, without a direction. She found herself glancing upwards, as if expecting to find a camera or some sign of where the AI was focused.

But before she could dwell on the oddness of it all, the room around her transformed.

In an instant, the psychologist's office vanished, replaced by a lavish, opulent space that took her breath away.

The room was massive, far grander than any shower she had ever seen, with rich decorations that spoke of luxury beyond her wildest dreams.

The warm, humid air was filled with the faint scent of floral body wash, and the promise of a hot, soothing shower enveloped her like a comforting embrace.

"Fuck me..." she whispered, eyes wide as she took in the sheer extravagance of the space around her.

Gone were the broken, frozen remnants of the office, replaced by a haven of warmth and indulgence. It was as if she had stepped into a palace, a place so far removed from her reality that she could hardly believe it was real.

But as the warmth began to seep into her tired bones, Thea allowed herself to believe, if only for a moment, that she had earned this small respite.

Eager to explore this magical place, she started walking around and taking in her surroundings.

The walls around here were made of a shimmering, iridescent material that seemed to shift in colour as she moved, reflecting soft hues of gold, silver, and deep blues, creating a mesmerising, almost hypnotic effect.

The floor beneath her feet was radiating a strange warmth, a seamless expanse of a sleek, glass-like substance that seemed to pulse gently with each step she took and give ever so slightly, as if responding to her very presence.

Everywhere she looked, there were details that screamed excess and luxury.

The showerheads, if they could even be called that, were sleek, metallic, pyramid-like structures that seemed to defy gravity, suspended in mid-air with no visible support.

They glowed faintly, and Thea could just make out tiny, intricate circuits running through them as she got closer to inspect them, hinting at technology far beyond anything she had ever encountered.

As she wandered even deeper into the room, she noticed a row of cabinets built into the walls, each one seamlessly integrated into the shimmering surface, similar to the ones used for the respawn chambers across the entire UHF.

The cabinets opened with a soft hiss as she approached and gently put her hand onto the iridescent wall, revealing neatly folded towels made of the softest fabric she had ever touched, their texture more like tactile air than anything physical.

Alongside them were robes that practically glowed with the same ethereal quality as the walls, embroidered with patterns that shifted and changed depending on the angle from which she looked at them.

'Where do I even begin with all of this...?' she wondered, feeling more than a little overwhelmed by the sheer scale and luxury of everything.

She hesitated for a moment, unsure of where to change out of her clothes, before noticing a small alcove off to the side.

Moving towards it, she quickly realised that it seemed to be a dressing area, complete with a plush, cushioned bench and a mirror that, upon closer inspection, wasn't just reflecting her image, but also scanning her.

The mirror projected a holographic interface with a selection of clothing options she could change into afterward, each one more lavish and comfortable-looking than the last.

Gingerly, Thea stepped into the alcove, feeling a bit out of her depth as she began to undress.

She couldn't help but feel a little self-conscious under the high-tech scrutiny of the mirror, but it didn't take long for her practical side to take over.

This was far too good an opportunity to waste by being shy for nobody.

She neatly folded her uniform and placed it on the bench, then reached for one of the robes, marvelling at how the fabric seemed to conform to her body immediately, adjusting itself for a perfect fit before she even tied the belt.

Once she was ready, she stepped back into the main room and approached the shower area.

The controls, if they could even be called that, were unlike anything she had ever seen—there were no visible buttons or knobs, just a smooth, glowing surface embedded in the wall.

Tentatively, she reached out and touched it, feeling a slight tingle in her fingertips as the surface responded to her touch.

Instantly, a holographic interface sprang to life, displaying an array of options that made her head spin: Temperature settings, water pressure adjustments, different shower types ranging from normal water over steam to more exotic things that Thea didn't even know how to pronounce, as well as options for different scents and types of cleansing agents, all controlled with a simple wave of her hand.

Taking off the robe again and setting it aside on a stool that had magically appeared next to her, she started fumbling with the settings for a few moments, feeling a little out of her depth, until she found something that seemed somewhat familiar, but even more importantly, comfortable.

The water—or whatever it was, as it didn't quite feel like the water that Thea knew—began to flow, cascading from the suspended, hovering shower heads that slowly rotated around her in a soft, warm rain that enveloped her in instant comfort.

The sensation was unlike anything she had ever felt—gentle yet invigorating, soothing her sore muscles while also waking up parts of her that had felt deadened by exhaustion.

The water was more than just warm too—it seemed to carry a subtle electric charge, a gentle current that tingled against her skin, leaving her feeling revitalised in a way that was almost magical.

Thea let out a contented sigh as she stood under the stream, letting it wash away the imaginary grime and very real stress and exhaustion of the past hours and weeks.

The Sovereign had provided her with an oasis of peace and relaxation, and for a brief moment, all the chaos and uncertainty of the past few weeks faded away, leaving her with nothing but a sense of profound contentment.

Inundated with the comforting heat of the hot water massaging her weary bones and muscles, Thea's mind finally had a moment to reflect.

'I'll need to check in with Kara about all these concessions and remuneration offers... Her insights will be invaluable on what to do with all of this.'

The thought of her friend brought a wave of both comfort and concern.

She couldn't help but wonder how the rest of Alpha Squad was faring. According to Selene, the assessment hadn't quite ended yet, but it would in the next few hours or days.

Had they managed to pull through without her?

Were they able to eliminate the Psyker that had taken her by surprise?

Had they avenged her, or had they fallen victim to the same ambush?

The uncertainty gnawed at her, a persistent ache that even the soothing water couldn't wash away. The worry simmered beneath the surface, refusing to be ignored.

But what could she do? She was isolated here, with no direct line to her team, no way to figure out what was going on.

'...Unless...?'

Directing her voice toward the ceiling, Thea asked, "Sovereign, can you tell me the status of the rest of Alpha Squad and how they're doing in the assessment?"

The AI's response was swift and, unsurprisingly, guarded. "I am sorry, Thea. I am not at liberty to disclose that kind of information while the assessment is still ongoing."

A heavy sigh escaped her lips, and her shoulders slumped slightly under the weight of her disappointment.

'Of course, that would've been too easy,' she thought, resigned to the limitations placed upon her.

But then, unexpectedly, the Sovereign continued, "However, I *could* attempt to connect you for a brief conversation with any members of your squad, provided they are not currently

engaged in the assessment. They would, of course, be unable to respond, given that they would be undergoing psychological debriefing.”

Thea’s eyebrows shot up in surprise as she stared at the ceiling, processing the Sovereign’s words very carefully. *‘Did... did the Sovereign just give me a way around its own restrictions on disclosing information? Is that... is that even legal? I mean, it **must** be, otherwise, it wouldn’t offer it, but still... What the fuck?’*

She was flabbergasted by this unexpected twist.

It was a loophole—subtle, but there—and one that the AI had all but handed to her on a silver platter. Thea couldn’t help but marvel at the simple cleverness of it, the way the Sovereign had navigated its own limitations to provide her with a solution she hadn’t even known to ask for.

Shrugging, not seeing any reason to refuse the opportunity, Thea spoke up again, “Sovereign, please connect me to any members of Alpha Squad for a conversation.”

“Very well,” the AI responded promptly, and within seconds, a holographic window materialised before her, displaying a group call with five members.

Thea’s heart sank as she noticed the number—five members.

Relief mingled with concern as she realised that Karania and Isabella were still in the assessment. A sigh of both relief and worry escaped her lips as she pondered the situation.

*‘So Karania and Isabella are still inside... I’ll **definitely** need to ask them what happened after I died. How the fuck did the two of them end up being the last ones standing? I would’ve expected Lucas, with his heavy armour and shield, or even Desmond, given his role. Isabella, on the other hand... She was the first one I thought would go after me, considering she’d have to take on even more attention from enemies after I was out of the fight. Very odd,’* Thea mused as the call displayed a large, glaring red “NO REPLIES” before the window vanished.

“Thank you, Sovereign,” she offered with a small, contented smile.

Thea found herself liking the Sovereign.

Though it was just an AI, it was the first she’d ever interacted with, and she had to admit, it wasn’t a negative experience in the slightest. The Sovereign was always polite, quick to respond, and provided her with everything she could ask for—and more, as evidenced by the luxurious shower she was currently enjoying.

As she leaned back into the warm spray, Thea’s thoughts wandered.

She wondered if there were significant differences in behaviour among ship AIs or if they were all essentially the same. A curious thought, but she hesitated to ask the Sovereign directly, sensing it might be a bit too intrusive.

After all, nobody liked being questioned about their true nature, especially in comparison to others. While the AI might not have emotions, Thea certainly did, and she had no desire to impose that kind of uncomfortable introspection on herself.

Instead, Thea decided to drown those thoughts in some overdue System maintenance.

She had not really looked at her System Notifications since the main assault on Nova Tertius over a week ago; there was quite a lot queued up and it was time to deal with it—it definitely wasn't an excuse to simply continue soaking in the electrifying, hot water.

Definitely not.

With a simple mental command, Thea allowed the deluge of System Notifications to prattle down on her like the hovering showerhead-pyramids around her.

[System]: You have **successfully** completed Faction Mission "Assist with the Main Assault on Nova Tertius".

[System]: You have received 50 Contribution Points, 100 System Merit and 200 System Credits. (Mission)

[System]: You have received 21 Contribution Points, 27 System Merit and 41 System Credits. (Combat)

[System]: You have received 13 Contribution Points, 19 System Merit and 26 System Credits. (Objectives)

[System]: You have **successfully** completed Faction Mission "Push towards Sector 3 with the Main Army".

[System]: You have received 25 Contribution Points, 40 System Merit and 85 System Credits. (Mission)

[System]: You have received 16 Contribution Points, 21 System Merit and 37 System Credits. (Combat)

[System]: You have received 8 Contribution Points, 15 System Merit and 31 System Credits. (Objectives)

[System]: You have **successfully** completed Faction Mission "Push towards Sector 4 with the Main Army".

[System]: You have received 25 Contribution Points, 40 System Merit and 85 System Credits. (Mission)

[System]: You have received 12 Contribution Points, 17 System Merit and 26 System Credits. (Combat)

[System]: You have received 11 Contribution Points, 19 System Merit and 34 System Credits. (Objectives)

[System]: You have **successfully** completed Faction Mission "Push towards Sector 5 with the Main Army".

[System]: *You have received 25 Contribution Points, 40 System Merit and 85 System Credits. (Mission)*

[System]: *You have received 19 Contribution Points, 28 System Merit and 45 System Credits. (Combat)*

[System]: *You have received 14 Contribution Points, 23 System Merit and 48 System Credits. (Objectives)*

[System]: *You have **successfully** completed Faction Mission "Infiltrate the Staging Ground as one of the Advanced Squads".*

[System]: *You have received 100 Contribution Points, 250 System Merit and 435 System Credits. (Mission)*

[System]: *You have received 42 Contribution Points, 94 System Merit and 143 System Credits. (Combat)*

[System]: *You have received 36 Contribution Points, 76 System Merit and 108 System Credits. (Objectives)*

[System]: *Armour of Resolve has reached Level 5.*

[System]: *Armour of Resolve has reached Level 6.*

[System]: *Armour of Resolve has reached Level 7.*

[System]: *Silver Respiration has reached Level 5.*

[System]: *Silver Respiration has reached Level 6.*

[System]: *Meditation Focus has reached Level 6.*

[System]: *Meditation Focus has reached Level 7.*

[System]: *Inspect Target has reached Level 6.*

[System]: *Sky Step has reached Level 6.*

[System]: *Sky Step has reached Level 7.*

[System]: *Improved Sprint has reached Level 6.*

[System]: *Improved Sprint has reached Level 7.*

[System]: *Agile Stealth has reached Level 6.*

[System]: *Agile Stealth has reached Level 7.*

[System]: *Detect Weak Spots has reached Level 6.*

[System]: *Detect Weak Spots has reached Level 7.*

[System]: *Penetrative Shot has reached Level 7.*

[System]: *Penetrative Shot has reached Level 8.*

[System]: *You have reached Level 10.*

[System]: *You have gained 4 Unspent Attribute Points.*

[System]: *"Class Selection Interface" unlocked.*

[System]: *You may now select one of the Classes presented to you, or continue to improve your Skills, Abilities and earn more Accomplishments to unlock further choices.*

[System]: *You have completed **Gold-Rank** Accomplishment "**Speedrun**".*

[System]: *You have completed **Gold-Rank** Accomplishment "**Without Equal**".*

[System]: *You have died. Automatically initiating [Soul Transfer] Faction Trait...*

[System]: *Shell Creation Initiated... Shell Creation Completed... Transferring Soul... Affixing Soul to Shell...*

[System]: *[Soul Transfer] completed.*

[System Note]: *Transfer distance for [Soul Transfer] Faction Trait below minimum threshold. No System Merit will be deducted and Faction Trait will not be taxed.*

Thankfully, the System had once again grouped the notifications and streamlined much of the information, making it easier for Thea to navigate the overwhelming flood of updates.

As she scrolled through the alerts, a small smile tugged at her lips.

'Level 10, huh? Councillor Lumis did mention that, now that I think about it,' she mused, her mind briefly wandering back to the conversation. 'That's pretty good for a first assessment, isn't it? Level 10's the target for the entire first year, but I hit it in just over a month. Is that what those Accomplishments are for...?'

Her curiosity piqued, Thea opened the [Accomplishment Interface] to explore the rewards and recognitions she had earned so far.

The screen displayed the full list of all her Accomplishments in the eyes of the Allbright System, each more impressive than the last.

There would likely be more notifications trickling in as the assessment wrapped up over the next few hours or days, but for now, she had a moment to delve into what she had already achieved.

[System]: *Accomplishments are ordered from newest -> oldest for the user's ease of reading. This setting can be changed at will.*

["Without Equal" Accomplishment]

Stay the highest PV member of your Faction at your current Tier and Level for at least one month.

Rewards:

- 1x Ability Choice Voucher [Gold-rarity or below] (Unclaimed)

["Speedrun" Accomplishment]

Reach Level 10 before the end of your 2nd month of Integration.

Rewards:

- 1x Random Ability [Gold-rarity or below] (Unclaimed)
- 5,000 System Credits (Unclaimed)
- 500 System Merit (Unclaimed)

["Psyker's Bane" Accomplishment]

Defeat two or more Psykers in direct confrontation, without the use of any Active Psychic Powers or Psychic-related Abilities.

Rewards:

- 1x Psychic-related Ability [Gold-rarity or below] (Unclaimed)
- 5,000 System Credits (Unclaimed)
- 500 System Merit (Unclaimed)

["Fledgeling Arms Dealer" Accomplishment]

Have at least 100 Integrated enemies killed by your weapons, without you being the wielder.

Next Rank: Have at least 1,000 Integrated enemies killed by your weapons, without you being the wielder.

Rewards:

- 3x Skill Voucher [Silver-rarity or below] (Unclaimed)

["Unseen Death" Accomplishment]

Successfully neutralise over 20 enemies at least one Tier higher than yourself within 15 minutes, without being detected and without using area-of-effect Abilities or weapons.

Rewards:

- 1x Stealth- or Assassination-tagged Ability [Gold-rarity or below] (Claimed)
- 5,000 System Credits (Claimed)
- 500 System Merit (Claimed)

["Fledgeling Infiltrator" Accomplishment]

Successfully infiltrate and complete a Faction Mission deep behind the enemy lines three times in one Battlefield.

Next Rank: Successfully infiltrate and complete a Faction Mission deep behind the enemy lines five times in one Battlefield.

Rewards:

- 1x Stealth- or Assassination-tagged Ability [Silver-rarity or below] (Unclaimed)
- 3,500 System Credits (Unclaimed)
- 300 System Merit (Unclaimed)

["Fledgeling Scout" Accomplishment]

Successfully lead a squad as a scout and detect traps, ambushes and dangers that would lead to failure of a mission three times in one Battlefield.

Next Rank: Successfully lead a squad as a scout and detect traps, ambushes and dangers that would lead to failure of a mission five times in one Battlefield.

Rewards:

- 1x Perception-based Ability [Silver-rarity or below] (Unclaimed)
- 3,500 System Credits (Unclaimed)
- 300 System Merit (Unclaimed)

["Knack for Sabotage" Accomplishment]

Successfully destroy two mission-critical objective targets in one Battlefield.

Next Rank: Successfully destroy three mission-critical objective targets in one Battlefield.

Rewards:

- 1x Dexterity- or Perception-based Ability [Silver-rarity or below] (Claimed)
- 3,500 System Credits (Claimed)
- 300 System Merit (Claimed)

["Senior (Silver) Marksman" Accomplishment]

Successfully hit more than 95% of all shots taken.

Next Rank: Successfully hit more than 97% of all shots taken.

Rewards:

- 1x Dexterity- or Perception-based Ability [Silver-rarity or below] (Claimed)
- 3,500 System Credits (Claimed)
- 300 System Merit (Claimed)

["Senior (Silver) Hitman" Accomplishment]

Successfully kill more than 95% of all enemies hit in one shot.

Next Rank: Successfully kill more than 97% of all enemies hit in one shot.

Rewards:

- 1x Dexterity- or Perception-based Ability [Silver-rarity or below] (Claimed)
- 3,500 System Credits (Claimed)
- 300 System Merit (Claimed)

["Senior (Silver) Stellar Republic Menace" Accomplishment]

Successfully kill more than 50 soldiers of the Stellar Republic that are actively using their Faction Trait.

Next Rank: Successfully kill more than 75 soldiers of the Stellar Republic that are actively using their Faction Trait.

Rewards:

- 1x Technology Tier-Up Equipment Voucher (Claimed)
- 3,500 System Credits (Claimed)
- 300 System Merit (Claimed)

Thea's eyes widened in disbelief as she scrolled through the extensive list of Accomplishments she had managed to accumulate.

While she vaguely remembered earning some of them, she hadn't fully grasped the sheer number of achievements now neatly listed and waiting for her attention. A giddy chuckle escaped her as she imagined claiming all the rewards at once, like an epic achievement spree in one of the games at the Golden Age Arcade—a pastime she had always loved.

The temptation to collect everything in one go was strong, but she knew it was smarter to wait just a little longer.

With the assessment still ongoing, there was a good chance she might earn a few more Accomplishments before it was all over, especially if the final leaderboard rankings were as promising as the Sovereign's report had hinted.

If the System remained consistent, there would *undoubtedly* be rewards for placing high, and she was eager to see just how far she had climbed.

As she continued scrolling, her eyes caught on an Accomplishment at the very bottom of the list; the very last one on it.

It was the first one she had ever received from the Allbright System, right at the moment of Integration. *Something* about it had changed, and it made her pause, a feeling of unease creeping in as she took a closer look.

[Apex (Unique) Progenitor]

??? Fragment ??? Human species ??? Integrated.

Next Rank: None.

Rewards: ??? (Claimed)

Some of the question marks had transformed into actual words, but they only made the Accomplishment even more perplexing for Thea.

'It's honestly even more confusing this way... What does 'Fragment' even mean here?' she wondered. The capitalisation indicated it was something System-related, but it was far from clear.

"Human species" was straightforward enough, encompassing all of humanity, and "Integrated" was the state required for the Allbright System to exert its influence.

But the combination of these terms only deepened the mystery.

'What the fuck does any of this mean?!'

Thea considered asking the Sovereign for clarification but quickly remembered that the last time she had done so, the AI had been clueless about the Apex Progenitor Accomplishment—or anything remotely connected to it.

Frustration bubbled up within her as she sighed quietly, the soothing cascade of water from the shower masking her exasperation.

"Haaa... More questions. Always more questions..."

She took a deep breath, gathering every ounce of willpower and strength left in her body, mentally bracing herself for the hardest task yet—turning off the shower.

As soon as the warm water stopped, the blissful relaxation it had brought her began to slip away, leaving her to mourn the loss of the comfort she had just enjoyed.

Regret washed over her like a cold wave, as if all her life's choices had led to this single, painful moment of relinquishing the shower's embrace.

Fortunately, the luxurious towels provided some consolation. The soft, almost ethereal fabric wrapped around her, drying her skin with a gentle caress that brought back some of the comfort she had lost.

'I doubt the Sovereign offers showers like this all the time... It'll probably be a rare treat, if I ever even see it again...' she mused ruefully as she slipped into a robe and sat down on a nearby bench.

The bench, made from the same strange, spongy material as the floor, conformed to her body as she sat, enveloping her in a gentle warmth that reminded her of being cocooned in a fortress of blankets on a cold winter night.

She allowed herself a few more moments of rest, knowing that the moment she asked the Sovereign on how to continue, she was likely not going to see this place and such relaxed tranquillity again for quite some time...