

Volume 2 - Chapter 30 - Socializing

The fourth and final day started off in a way Thea would've happily skipped—several rounds of deeply uncomfortable injections straight into her jaw and hand.

According to the medics, they were essential to halt the accelerated biological growth, preventing any unintended extra fingers or jawbone extensions from forming.

By now, her regrown parts were fully functional again.

The final round of motor-function and speech tests had confirmed everything worked as it should. She could move her fingers, clench her jaw, and—*most importantly*—talk properly again.

The sensation of being fully organic again was oddly unfamiliar by now.

Not bad, of course, just... *different*.

The only real reminder that something had changed was the itchy sensation crawling along her jawline, a lingering side effect of the final medication. It wasn't painful, merely annoying—like having a permanent fuzz from a nonexistent beard she couldn't quite scratch... Or so she liked to imagine, what a beard-fuzz would feel like, at least.

Still, she was officially cleared and subsequently discharged by the medics.

It was high time to finally leave the medical wing and return to something resembling normalcy.

She'd wanted to leave together with Karania the previous day, but apparently, her jaw had taken longer to finish growing than Kara's entire arm. So her best friend had already returned to the dorms without her.

'Makes sense why this option is the cheapest now... The time cost's brutal,' Thea thought as she stepped through the medical corridors and into the hallways of the Sovereign proper.

She exhaled quietly, pulling her thoughts back to the rest of the week.

'Psyker lesson's out of the way. Medical stuff's wrapped up. Only about two days of our break left now, not counting today... Why does time off always feel like it lasts half as long as it should...?'

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When she finally reached Alpha Squad's dorms, it was quiet—eerily so.

Only Karania was around, already parked at the dining table in the kitchen, leisurely working through a bowl of fruit and protein puffs, with a cup of the same steaming, very smelly, beverage next to it that she always liked to drink. She looked up as Thea stepped inside, her eyes sweeping over her friend in quick assessment.

Then came the grin and a casual thumbs-up—clearly deliberately raised with the arm that had been mechanical the last time they had seen each other.

“Looking good, Thea,” Kara said brightly. “I definitely prefer your jaw when it’s not half robot.”

Thea chuckled, walking toward the kitchen. “Thanks. Same goes for your arm, honestly. Maybe now you’ll stop freezing me to death in the middle of the night.”

She paused for half a beat, realising that there wasn’t really a guarantee that they’d do that again. “Ehhh... assuming we end up with a sleepover again at some point.”

The words came out a little too fast, and Thea winced internally at the awkward stumble. But Karania just giggled and waved it off with a flick of her spoon.

“I’m sure we can arrange that one day or another,” she replied with a wink, as casual as anything.

With the pleasantries out of the way, Thea made her way toward the food printer, already set on what she was going to get—her current favorite: Pancakes. The printer gave a gentle whirl as it assembled her order, the scent of the rapidly assembling pancakes and sauce already lifting her mood manifold.

“Those again?” Karania asked, not even looking up, though the smirk was plain in her voice.

Thea turned with mock indignation. “Hey, don’t hate on my pancakes, Kara! I’m not saying anything about your stupid *bean-juice*, am I?”

Karania finally looked up, eyebrows raised. “Bean-juice...? It’s called *coffee*, Thea. And I’ll have you know it was once a luxury good across the *entire* galaxy. So, in a way, I’m simply indulging in the refined delights of human civilization having successfully spread throughout the stars. Thank you very much.”

Thea rolled her eyes. “Yeah, whatever. Bean-juice drinker.”

She stuck out her tongue for good measure, then immediately caught herself and turned away, face warming.

‘Stupid reflex!’

She cleared her throat and busied herself with retrieving her finished pancakes from the printer before Karania could say anything else—which thankfully, she didn’t.

Sliding into the seat next to her, she noticed Kara was already absorbed in whatever she was reading on her datapad—some mix of medical notes, science fiction trash, or strategic breakdowns, knowing her.

“So,” Thea began, cutting into the first fluffy bite of pancake and popping it into her mouth, “what’s the plan for today?”

The moment the food hit her tongue, she almost melted in her seat.

'Ahhh... Finally some real food again!'

Compared to the half-liquid sludge she'd been stuck with in the medical wing, these pancakes tasted like a five-star meal. The restriction to soft food during her jaw regrowth had turned mealtimes into absolute chores.

Now, though? Now it was back to heaven.

"I was thinking about going shopping today," Karania replied casually, eyes still glued to her datapad as she continued to devour whatever had caught her attention. "Pick up some new equipment, check what's been released over the past month while we were stuck in the Assessment—there's bound to be some interesting new developments in the medical field."

Thea's face immediately brightened, and she quickly chewed and swallowed a massive piece of pancake, almost choking in her eagerness not to miss this golden opportunity. "I was thinking the exact same thing! Well... Not the medical stuff exactly, but shopping in general! I've got tons of things I want to check out and buy. With how many Credits we earned from the Assessment, it feels like a total waste to just sit on them, right?"

Karania gave a small nod and hum of agreement, though she didn't lift her eyes from the datapad.

"Oh—and I was actually going to ask you for a favour," Thea continued, her voice turning just a bit more careful.

That seemed to finally catch Karania's attention, her eyes lifting from her screen, raising an eyebrow in silent question. "I need some Focus Boosters. I heard medical personnel get a discount, so I figured... you know... you might buy some for me so I can save a bit of cash?"

The request hung in the air, with Karania clearly savoring the moment as Thea squirmed under her questioning gaze.

"Hmm. Yeah, that sounds reasonable enough," Karania finally replied, leaning back in her chair with a shrug. "But depending on how many you actually need, it might cause *some* issues. We're limited to a certain number per mission, and I have to make sure I've got enough to cover the rest of the squad and any Marines I might run into in the next mission."

Thea rapidly nodded her understanding, "Right, absolutely. Totally understandable. I'll only need like... Three, at least for now."

Karania raised both eyebrows this time, leaning slightly forward, her voice taking on a sharper tone. "And what, pray tell, are you planning to do with them exactly, my dearest Thea...? You're not conveniently forgetting about that Focus Overdraw incident and starting some dangerous new experiments again, are you...?"

Her voice dripped with an unspoken threat.

Thea immediately dropped her knife and fork onto her plate with a clatter, raising her hands defensively and waving them around wildly in a panic. "No, no, no! I swear it's to prevent Focus Overdraws from happening again! No experiments! I did the math! I got a new Ability,

and it costs a ton of Focus—and with my other Abilities already using so much Focus too, I don't want to end up in a situation where I can't use the new Ability because I'm out of Focus! The Focus Boosters are just to make sure I can use everything when I need to, without overdrawing my Focus again—I promise!"

Thea's words spilled out uncontrollably, her face heating up as she desperately tried to convince Karania, suddenly painfully aware of just how many times she had repeated the word "Focus."

Karania kept her eyes locked onto her for another few excruciating seconds, clearly savoring the way Thea squirmed under her intense gaze.

Then, finally satisfied, she leaned back into her chair and turned her attention back to the datapad. "I'll hold you to that. Don't mess it up again."

Thea quietly breathed a sigh of relief, relaxing slightly as she picked up her knife and fork again. She returned her attention to the pancakes, shoving another large bite into her mouth.

Yet despite her successful explanation, a nagging awkwardness still hung in the air.

She hadn't actually asked Karania if they wanted to go shopping *together*.

Sure, Kara planned on shopping, and Thea herself wanted to shop, but she'd totally missed her chance to bring up the idea of going together, rather than separately.

'How do I bring this up now...? Why did you forget to ask the most important part in the first place?'

The more she thought about it, the more anxious she got, repeatedly glancing up at Karania while trying to come up with some natural way to reopen the conversation.

Eventually, the tension became too much. Without thinking, she blurted out, "You wanna go together? Ehhh—to the shopping, I mean!"

Her voice came out louder and far more panicked than she'd intended.

Karania paused, looking up from the datapad, her eyes catching Thea's with an unreadable smile slowly forming on her lips. She held the gaze for another heartbeat, then replied in a gentle tone, "Yeah. I'd like that. Let's go together."

"Great! After breakfast then!" Thea moved on to nail down a time to finish the planning phase, to which Karania simply nodded.

Relieved and happy to have successfully navigated this issue, Thea stuffed another forkful of pancake into her mouth, savoring the sweet taste as she silently celebrated her little victory...

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“...Well, I’m not sure if that’s actually that useful, though. If we consider—” Karania suddenly stopped mid-sentence. She’d been busy offering her usual detailed rebuttal to the ideas Thea had brought up toward the end of breakfast, their conversation having naturally drifted toward what they had both done during their medical downtime.

But her pause wasn’t from lack of arguments; it was because someone else had unexpectedly entered the living space of Alpha Squad’s dorm, catching her attention.

Thea followed Karania’s gaze and immediately spotted Desmond stepping inside the room, moving smoothly on what she assumed was his fully regrown leg.

He glanced briefly at the two girls, giving them a quiet nod of greeting as he walked over.

“Good morning, Desmond,” Karania said with her typical, neutral smile.

“Morning, Desmond!” Thea added cheerfully, her eyes instantly darting downward, hoping to catch a glimpse of his leg to see how it had healed. Much to her frustration, however, the uniform pants he wore neatly covered it, revealing absolutely nothing.

She felt a bit silly after a second, realizing that there probably wouldn’t even be much to see.

A fully regrown and healed leg likely wouldn’t look any different from Karania’s new arm or even her own hand. And besides, Desmond had already finished his full treatment two days ago, having gone straight to the medical wing on the first day of their break instead of waiting an extra day like she and Karania had done.

Still, curiosity lingered, and she couldn’t quite help the small pout of disappointment that formed on her lips at the missed potential.

Thea quickly noticed something different about Desmond’s behavior.

He seemed more restless than usual, his eyes constantly darting toward her. That alone was odd, considering that he usually went out of his way to avoid even looking in her direction.

Yet today, he was openly glancing at her repeatedly, making no effort to hide it.

Even stranger, instead of heading straight to his room or busying himself elsewhere, Desmond made his way over to their table, quietly pulling out his datapad and swiping at it aimlessly for a few moments.

The silence stretched awkwardly until he suddenly let out a heavy sigh—almost as if preparing himself for something particularly unpleasant—before lifting his eyes up to meet Thea’s, flinching slightly at the contact but surprisingly holding her gaze regardless.

Thea just stared back at him, thoroughly confused and *more* than just a little surprised.

Before either could say anything, however, Karania suddenly broke the silence.

“Actually, I just remembered something I need to check in my room,” she announced abruptly, swiftly standing up and leaving the dining area before Thea had even processed what was happening.

“Huh?!” she uttered, eyes widening slightly at being left alone with Desmond for the very first time since joining Alpha Squad.

An awkward silence immediately settled over the table again, neither really knowing how to navigate the unexpected moment.

‘What the fuck is going on here?!’ Thea’s thoughts raced in confusion, unsure what to say, until Desmond finally spoke up.

“Jaw’s looking good,” he offered stiffly, clearly trying to find something neutral to break the tension. “Much better than the metal one.”

“Oh! Thanks,” Thea replied quickly, relief washing over her as she found something to latch onto. “Your leg seems fine too. How’s it holding up?”

Desmond shrugged slightly. “It’s... Alright. Much better than I thought it would be, honestly. Glad to be able to walk without assistance again, that’s for sure.”

The conversation stalled immediately, both of them falling quiet again.

After a few seconds, Desmond took another deep breath, visibly uncomfortable, before finally deciding to push forward with whatever was on his mind.

“Alright, listen, Thea...” Desmond began, his voice stiff and uncertain, like he was forcing each word through a filter of hesitation. “I’m... really bad at this. But... it needs to be said. I think.”

His eyes dropped to the table for a moment, jaw tightening, like he was still debating whether to actually go through with it. Then he met her gaze again—just for a second—and flinched slightly before looking away.

Still, he didn’t stop.

“I was an asshole,” he said suddenly, causing Thea’s eyes to widen in surprise. “Not that—like, what I mean is... I was unfair. Completely unfair. You never really did anything to me, and I just... assumed things. Said things. Like that whole *‘I don’t trust Cyans’* stuff back when we first met. It was dumb. I don’t—”

He stopped abruptly, visibly frustrated at his struggle to express himself. Thea recognized that feeling far too well, so she kept quiet, patiently waiting for him to continue.

“It’s not really an apology,” Desmond finally said, shaking his head and glancing away again.

“I mean, I’m not asking for forgiveness or anything like that. And I still don’t fully trust Cyans in general—I just mean... *You*. *You’re* different, and I didn’t see that at first. I didn’t let myself see it, I guess. But the Assessment changed things.”

He let out another long sigh and met her gaze again, this time holding it with unexpected sincerity.

“I kept waiting, you know? Waiting for the moment you’d stab me in the back. But somewhere along the line, it stopped feeling like you would. Like, by the time we were sneaking through Nova Tertius, I just... I *knew* we were good. That you wouldn’t let us down. And I wanted you to know that—I see it now. I get it.”

Desmond shifted uneasily in his seat, looking painfully uncomfortable. “Anyway, what I’m trying to say is... I just wanted to clear things up. Set things straight, if that makes sense. Since we’re gonna be stuck together in the squad—assuming I survive whatever Challenge they throw at me—I figured... We should at least be cool. Or... Something close to cool.”

Thea opened her mouth, about to respond, but Desmond suddenly interrupted her again, as if worried he’d lose the nerve if he stopped now.

“Oh! Right, that reminds me. I never actually showed you...” He quickly pulled up his System Interface, holding it out toward her.

Thea immediately recognized the window’s layout: An Ability Description.

“I was keeping this hidden,” he admitted, looking sheepish. “Just in case you really *were* gonna betray us—me. It’s stupid, I know, but... Anyway, here it is. No more hiding stuff that’s important for the squad. I’ll try to be... Less of an asshole, I guess. Let’s, uh... Let’s try working together for real, yeah?”

Thea was immediately enamoured by the Ability, almost the entirety of her attention diverted to it.

[Active (Silver) – Redirect Damage (Drone) – Level 6]

Requirement: Line of Effect

Description: Allows the Participant to expend a certain amount of Focus and Stamina to redirect the next incoming instance(s) of damage to (a) chosen allied drone(s) within range for a short duration. The selected drone(s) absorb the full impact of the redirected damage until their destruction. Any remaining damage beyond the drone(s)’s capacity is then applied to the participant as normal.

Cost: 35 Focus + 35 Stamina - Number of Drones: 2 - Range: 220m - Duration: 11 seconds

‘*Whoa... That’s actually insane...!*’ she thought, staring at the Ability Description with wide eyes.

No wonder Desmond had kept this hidden.

If she really *had* betrayed him, something like this would have been a perfect last resort to survive.

Thea quickly dragged her attention back to the moment at hand.

It wouldn’t be fair to Desmond—especially now, when he was genuinely trying to fix things between them—to get caught up in an Ability, no matter how amazing it was.

She forced herself to look away from the Ability and back into Desmond's eyes. He flinched slightly, clearly uncomfortable, but she gave him a firm, serious nod anyway.

"Thanks for telling me. I really appreciate it, Desmond. Let's work together from now on."

A cautious but genuine smile appeared on Desmond's face—maybe the first real smile Thea had ever gotten from him since they'd met. He visibly relaxed somewhat.

"Yeah... let's do that," he agreed, nodding a bit more eagerly than he probably meant to.

For a few moments afterward, a heavy, awkward silence settled between them, neither knowing exactly what to say next.

Desmond eventually stood up abruptly from his chair, almost knocking it back in his hurry.

"Uh, anyway... See you later, Thea. Take care and, um... stuff."

He quickly started walking away, but thanks to her high Perception, Thea could *still* hear him muttering quietly under his breath, clearly thinking she couldn't hear him, "God, that was so stupid, Desmond. Really? Days of thinking and that's the best you could do? Seriously, what the fuck—"

The door to his room clicked shut, cutting off the rest of his grumbling, leaving Thea sitting alone at the dining table in complete silence, blinking at the spot he'd just left.

'Did... did Desmond just make up with me...? That's... That's crazy.'

She stayed stunned in her seat for another few moments, trying to process everything.

But even more than the awkward conversation they'd just had, her mind drifted back to the Ability he'd shown her and all the incredible potential it held.

Ideas started flooding her mind, builds and combinations quickly forming in her imagination. Already she was mentally planning different paths and choices she could suggest to Desmond—and maybe even the rest of Alpha Squad—later on.

"That Ability is actually nuts..." she muttered quietly, shaking her head in disbelief...