

Volume 2 - Chapter 51 - Aspectus

Ten minutes later, they were already on the move again, forced out by the increasingly sharp and punishing counterfire raining down from the Stellar Republic lines.

The enemy had closed the gap to roughly a hundred and fifty meters now—a brutal reminder that the UHF's first trenchline was bleeding out of time, and fast.

"Wellis Two, clear," Chester's voice crackled through the comms, tight with strain as he hauled Falks into place two slots down from Thea's position.

Falks wasn't in great shape.

He'd taken the worst of it back at the last trench, when a sudden explosion punched through a weak spot in their reinforced embrasure. The blast had ripped a chunk of stone and metal free, collapsing it straight onto Falks and Marie.

Marie had been lucky—her position at the far western wall spared her anything worse than a nasty set of bruises.

Falks, though, hadn't been so fortunate. He'd ended up half-buried under debris, his left leg mangled by the weight before Chester, Marie and Thea had dug him out.

"Thanks," he grunted now, leaning hard against the trench wall as he brought his rifle up. His jaw was tight, his voice low and sharp with pain.

A second later she caught the mutter under his breath, bitter and quiet. "*Just my fucking luck, huh...*" And then, without another word, he opened fire into the endless tide of enemy soldiers, forcing himself back into the fight.

Thea pushed her attention inward, trying to shake the image of Falks' crushed leg out of her head.

Her [Resources] screen flickered up.

[Resources]

Focus: 243 / 225

'Ninety-five percent... That seems to do the trick!' The small victory lit a spark of relief inside her chest.

For three minutes straight, her Focus hadn't budged from 243.

She had been methodically widening her Gate in careful increments during the previous firing position, checking her counter over and over until she finally found the balance point.

It wasn't perfect, but it was close enough to equilibrium for her [Glimpse] to run without draining her dry—and that was more than she'd dared hope for without going all the way to one-hundred percent.

Thea's eyes stayed fixed on the swarm below, her finger steady on the trigger, but her mind had already started working two steps ahead. She finally had her passive [Glimpse] under control—close enough to an equilibrium that she wasn't leaking Focus dry anymore.

That meant she could afford to think about the next step: Using it actively.

She had avoided it so far.

Too much fire, too many enemies pressing closer every second, and too much of a risk to overdraw.

The thought of pulling her attention away from shooting, even for a heartbeat, felt reckless.

But that was the thing—this was what Digital Missions were for, wasn't it? Trial and error, pushing limits, finding out what worked when it counted.

If she couldn't risk experimenting here, *where else* was she going to learn?

Her jaw tightened as she fired another burst into the mass of bodies clawing up the slope.

'Focus will take a hit, no doubt. But now that I know the baseline drain, I won't end up overdrawing by accident. It's safe enough... and if I can figure out how to make [Glimpse] snap faster, even just a fraction, then it's worth it.'

She had just about convinced herself when the squad comms lit up with Wellis' voice, strained and clipped. "Chester, we need you. Mike's hit—bad."

"Fuck," Chester muttered under his breath.

He spun toward them. "Marie's in charge until I'm back. Don't die, and fuck them up as much as you can."

Without another word, he vaulted deeper into the trench network, sprinting off to the other half of Wellis Squad.

Thea exhaled slowly, her grip tightening around the rifle stock until her knuckles brushed white against the metal. *'Guess it's not really looking much better on the western front either, huh?'*

The storm of red tracers and the muffled crack of explosions in that direction only confirmed it further.

Locking onto a Duplicator moving between two chunks of broken foam cover, she raised the barrel and let her focus narrow to a pinpoint. A three-round burst snapped out, timed exactly the way her [Glimpse] had confirmed would work from her previous intentions.

The first shot struck high on the right shoulder plate—off-angle, glancing, the round sparking away uselessly as the enemy staggered from the impact.

The second slammed into the chestplate seam exposed by that twist, the force shoving the armour slightly loose but still failing to pierce through.

The third shot screamed straight into the sliver of opening created by the last, tearing into the soldier's chest and rupturing his heart.

The man dropped instantly.

At the same moment, scattered copies of him across the slope froze mid-step and collapsed like puppets cut from their strings, leaving sudden gaps in the enemy's firing line—only to be filled instantly by even more enemy soldiers.

Thea didn't waste time lamenting that fact; it was the exact same spiel she had seen for half an hour now.

Her aim was already sweeping onward, skimming across helmets and chestplates, hunting for the subtle twitch in reality that marked another Duplicator.

'Guess now is as good as ever...'

She turned her focus inward, past the noise and chaos, to the familiar knot of psychic pressure lodged deep in her chest—dense, waiting, like a coiled spring behind her heart.

[Glimpse]

The pressure behind her heart flared, spilling outward like a surge of ice-water through her veins. Thea's breath caught as her vision dulled—the battlefield's chaos bleeding into muted shades, tracer fire and explosions paling until the world looked washed in ash and light.

For a heartbeat, she felt herself slip free of her own skin, her limbs moving without conscious thought.

Her rifle rose, steadied, then swept across the enemy ranks in a smooth arc, like some unseen hand was guiding her sightline. Dozens of soldiers blurred past her focus until, suddenly, one burned sharp in her vision.

Her finger squeezed the trigger—though she wasn't sure it was her finger at all.

A single shot cracked and the man's body folded like paper.

The vision splintered immediately, shattering like the glass of the Duplicator's visor, and Thea gasped as full colour and weight came rushing back.

She found herself right where she had started—rifle aimed at the same sector of battlefield she'd been covering before activating the Power.

Without hesitation, she yanked the barrel toward the figure her [Glimpse] had marked. One round lanced straight through the enemy's visor, bursting glass and bone in a sharp spray.

The soldier crumpled instantly, and with him half a dozen scattered duplicates folded into the dirt around him, collapsing like mirrored shadows finally broken.

'Confirmed Duplicator,' she thought, a sharp grin tugging at her mouth.

Pulling up her [Resource] interface immediately, she could barely believe her eyes.

[Resources]

Focus: 241 / 225

‘W...What?!’ Thea’s mind jolted, her finger freezing over the trigger as she stopped firing or working towards the next target for the first time since the mission began.

Her eyes were glued to her Resource counter.

*‘That just cost **two** Focus! How... How is that even possible...?’*

Her entire understanding of how [Glimpse] should work buckled under the weight of that discovery. She had been certain—*absolutely certain*—that the active portion of her Power would chew through her Focus like a starving beast.

That was how things worked in every game she had ever played.

Passives were cheap, subtle, sometimes boring. Actives were stronger, flashier, and always came with a price tag that felt like punishment for daring to press the shiny button.

It was common sense. Even the Allbright System’s Abilities worked that way.

And yet here she was, staring at the counter that had only ticked down by two.

Yes, the cost had technically gone up compared to the constant drain of her passive use, but it wasn’t the bottomless sinkhole she’d been bracing for.

It was... more than manageable.

‘Maybe this can actually work, then...’ A grin tugged across her lips despite the chaos around her, the thought sparking like fire in her chest. The active [Glimpse] hadn’t been much faster than her passive sweep, but the difference was in the time it saved.

She didn’t have to painstakingly search for the Duplicators in real time—the Power dumped the work onto some future version of herself and fed the answer back to the present.

Her grin faltered for a half second as the thought twisted in on itself. *‘Wait... how does that even make sense? How can I precognitively figure out who the Duplicators are by precognitively watching myself... figure it out in the future... With precognition? Isn’t that some kind of recursive precognitive loop or some shit...?’*

Thea shook her head, forcing her rifle back onto target, but the question lingered at the edges of her mind. *‘I’ll have to ask Kara about this later—she’s smart enough to make sense of it. And if not, maybe the Rune priest will know what kind of broken logic this Power is running on.’*

She exhaled sharply, focusing again on the advancing horde, the grin creeping back despite herself. *‘Doesn’t matter. If it works, it works.’*

She ran the process again. Twice.

Each time she forced the [Glimpse] into its active state, lined up her shot, and dropped another Duplicator. Each time, she paused just long enough to glance at her Resource interface, triple-checking she wasn't screwing up the math.

Both times, the same result: Exactly two Focus gone for every kill.

[Resources]

Focus: 237 / 225

It confirmed her numbers, but something else was off. A strange thrum rolled through her chest, her heartbeat hammering far quicker than it had any right to. Not the steady, elevated rhythm of combat adrenaline—faster, sharper, almost like her body was trying to outrun itself.

'I don't remember the Runepriest ever mentioning this kind of thing...' Thea frowned inwardly, her rifle already sweeping to the next target on the back of her passive [Glimpse].

A controlled squeeze, another body hit the dirt.

Her heart didn't calm immediately, but after a few breaths it eased back into its usual pace, the unnatural spike fading.

The lack of information gnawed at her.

During the Assessment she hadn't really been able to do anything about the lack of knowledge due to the fact that she'd been stuck with Recruits like herself most of the time—no one in Alpha Squad had had the training or the answers she had been looking for.

But here? Now? She was surrounded by people who had been through different lectures, different instructors, different briefings.

Privates who had been in the real world fires of war.

They might know something she didn't.

She made the decision quickly.

"Hey," she called over the chaos, voice steady even as her rifle spat another burst into the swarm, "do any of you know if there are... physical side effects to using Psychic Powers? My heart kicked into overdrive just now when I used mine. Anything ring a bell?"

For a moment the only reply was the relentless stutter of weapons fire from her left.

Then Falks yanked himself back behind the wall, slamming into the reinforced plating with a grunt as he swapped mags. He barked out a short laugh, though it twisted quickly into a grimace when his gaze dropped to his ruined leg.

"You really *are* fresh at this, huh?" he said, shaking his head. "Yeah, side effects like that are normal. That's why unlocking the Psychic Resource needs Vitality as much as the weird shit like Resolve and Perception. You're pushing your body in ways it isn't designed for. Heart

racing, muscle spasms, migraines—standard stuff. At the far end? I've seen guys stroke out or their heads pop like a melon. Not common, but it happens sometimes. Basically, it stacks the harder and faster you go. Keep your usage moderate and you'll be fine. Push too far too quick, and you'll end up as a red mist."

"I heard it scales with how much of your Psychic Resource you burn at once," Marie shouted from the western wall, voice cutting through the constant rattle of gunfire and the concussive shock of grenades going off downrange.

She was still firing, barely pausing to breathe.

Thea wondered briefly why Marie wasn't just using the proximity comms, but let it slide—information was information.

"So, yeah, if you're not dumping yourself dry in like two bursts, you should be okay! Still depends on your Vitality though—low numbers, you're going to fuck yourself real quick if you overdo it!"

"Thanks a lot! That helps a ton!" Thea shouted back, grinning despite the chaos around her.

A strange kind of euphoria surged through her chest. She wasn't used to asking people for help—least of all strangers thrown together in the middle of a warzone.

Hell, she couldn't remember the last time she had done anything like it.

But the payoff made it worth it. The information was worth its weight in Two-Star Crysium Medals.

'So the heart racing's normal, huh? Probably one of the weakest backlash effects... Guess that means I can push it a bit further.'

Her mind flicked back to the Rune priest, to that lesson where he'd pressed her to test her limits before their next meeting.

No hesitation, no playing it *too* safe—find out what she could *really* do.

'Intent, Will, and Energy. That's the stuff that shapes a Psychic Power, according to him. I've been coasting on baseline until now. So let's keep it simple—augment with Energy only. No mixing in extra variables. That'll just muddy the waters and screw with figuring things out...'

Her pulse quickened as she zeroed in on the pressure behind her heart again.

This time, instead of just letting [Glimpse] flow out as usual, she deliberately leaned into it, pushing slightly harder, feeding more of that intangible, raw energy into the Power.

[Glimpse]

The world dimmed again, colors washing out into muted shades of grey as [Glimpse] gripped her. That faint sense of disembodiment returned—like she was watching herself move rather than actually moving.

Her vision swept across the battlefield, locking onto one Duplicator and killing them, then another a heartbeat later. Each target took a second to register, that uncanny delay where her mind processed the knowledge of *'who would fall if I killed this one'* before her body acted.

Two kills lined up in front of her like they had already happened.

Then the vision shattered.

She snapped instantly to the first Duplicator, her rifle barking once.

The round punched clean through the enemy's Light-armoured temple, dropping him where he stood. A ripple ran through the clones nearby as they collapsed in unison.

Without hesitation she swung onto the second in one fluid motion.

She squeezed the trigger—

Click.

Her rifle barked, but only after the slightest, maddening hitch in the weapon's cycle time. The second Duplicator dropped, but Thea's tongue clicked against her teeth in frustration.

'I might be able to line up multiple shots in a row—that's huge, in itself—but the mechanics of the weapon can't keep up like this...'

Her heart hammered harder than it had after the last two activations combined, a jittery rhythm thudding against her ribs.

She snapped her [Resource] Interface open with a thought.

[Resources]

Focus: 231 / 225

"Hmm..." she muttered under her breath, letting her aim settle back into rhythm as she slipped into her passive [Glimpse] again, mowing down targets while her mind churned over the math.

'So the enhanced [Glimpse] drains three times the Focus compared to baseline, but it lines up two Duplicators instantly, no delay at all. That's... actually pretty damn strong. Like a cheaper version of [Sensory Overdrive] working in tandem with my passive [Glimpse], just without the insane drain. As long as I can work around the weapon cycle-time, it might be my best option yet...'

Her thoughts drifted immediately to the Laser-variant of the Gram—the one she was most familiar with.

One of the main upsides of it that she had realised over the course of the Assessment, particularly in their mad dash to infiltrate Nova Tertius through the maintenance tunnels, had

been the fact that none of the Laser-type weaponry she had used so far had *any* cycle time at all.

They all seemed to fire as fast as you could pull the trigger, given that the capacitor didn't run dry or your weapon overheated as a result of the rapid, high-energy fire.

"I guess it's worth a shot," she breathed, dumping the last rounds from her Gauss mag in a flurry of fire before popping it free and setting the weapon aside. Her hand reached for the Laser variant leaning against the trench wall where it had sat unused the entire mission.

"Welcome back," she whispered almost affectionately as she haphazardly slung its sling over her shoulder, the familiar weight pressing comfortingly into her arms. For a month it had been her constant companion, and now, with its solid penetrative power and lack of recoil, it felt almost like relief itself.

Her pulse eased just holding it.

She ran through a quick, practiced series of checks—safety, charge indicator, sling attachment points, sight calibration—making sure nothing had gotten knocked out of place during all the frantic movements, tosses, and pickups of the last half hour.

Everything came back clean.

Satisfied, she lowered herself back into her firing stance, the Laser rifle humming softly in her grip, the sound syncing with her breath and calming the thundering of her pulse.

She fired twice, letting her passive [Glimpse] guide her aim, more to reacquaint herself with the rhythm than out of necessity—though she realized almost instantly that there was no need. The rifle felt like an extension of her body, as familiar as her own heartbeat.

"There a reason you keep swapping weapons like that?" Falks' curious voice cut in from her left, the change in sound and the flash of her new shots clearly catching his attention.

"Yeah," Thea answered, eyes narrowing back down her sight before she slipped into her thoughts again.

'I could keep pouring more Energy into it, but I doubt that'll do anything surprising... Intent or Will, maybe? But how the hell would I even go about that? The Intent is already perfect—or at least, I think it is. Unless I'm missing something...'

"Good talk," she heard filter into her ears from the left, but ignored it for a lack of relevance to her current considerations.

She ran it through her head again, picking apart the phrasing of her Power, as far as she understood her current Intent phrasing, like it was a riddle she hadn't solved yet. [Glimpse] already pulled exactly what she wanted—showing her the moments her other self had spotted Duplicators, narrowing her vision to only what mattered.

How could she refine that further? *"Only the stuff my other self can see"* was as precise as it got without defeating the whole point of the Power. Anything beyond that felt redundant.

'So that only leaves Will... but what does that even mean here? How do you "push" Will into something you're already willing with everything you've got?' Her brow furrowed beneath the helmet as the thought gnawed at her, even while her finger twitched on the trigger and the rifle cracked out another beam of light.

It took her almost a full minute of absent-minded shooting into the Stellar Republic lines, her rifle kicking and humming in steady rhythm, before something finally clicked in her head.

A memory—something odd, almost silly, that she'd buried years ago.

Back in the Golden Age Arcades, those old games she now knew had been seeded by Terra as training tools for System Integration, there had always been quirks she never fully understood.

Mechanics that seemed pointless at the time, like some dev's strange obsession with flavor.

One of the strangest? Certain abilities, spells, or skills—depending on the game—would hit harder, last longer, or scale better if you actually... *called out* the name when you used it.

'There's no way that's actually real... right?' she thought, biting back a grimace.

She tried to push the idea away, to find a cleaner, more respectable route for her little experiment, but the more she thought about it, the less and less crazy it actually sounded.

*'I mean... saying the name out loud **would** force you to commit more, wouldn't it? And what are Intent, Will, and Energy if not just layers of commitment?'*

As much as she cringed at the thought of yelling out Ability names like some deranged Arcade kid, she couldn't exactly deny it wasn't already halfway true.

Every time she used [Sensory Overdrive] or any other Ability or Power, the name itself flashed in her head first, like a command-word carved into her mind. She didn't speak it aloud, but it was there—loud, dominant and utterly undeniable—for just an instant.

So maybe the games hadn't been lying at all.

Maybe the mechanic hadn't been pure flavour all along.

'If calling it out really amps up the Will part of the formula... there's no reason not to try. Worst case, I look like an idiot for half a second...'

She bided her time, waiting until the next heavy barrage shook the trench line.

Explosions rattled the earth, dirt rained from above, and the deafening roar masked almost everything else. Timing it with the chaos, she shifted her Intent slightly, telling her passive [Glimpse] to signal her when the UHF Offensive Heavy lines would hammer the field again.

As the next cluster of detonations rolled across the battlefield, she committed.

"[Glimpse]."

Her eyes shot wide at once, the hair on her arms prickling despite the insulated combat suit—she could immediately tell something was *very* different.

Her own voice rang out clean and sharp in her ears, cutting through the cacophony like it had been threaded onto a different audio channel entirely, boosted to perfect clarity no matter how the battlefield thundered.

It was her voice, and yet... *not*.

Distorted, pulled at the edges, like something unseen was ripping through it, twisting the sound into something uncanny and raw.

Color drained from the battlefield in front of her, the constant thunder of explosions sinking into a dull, muffled hum. Her vision swept across the enemy lines in a sharp, predestined arc, movements not her own, yet they were.

Her body felt loose, almost detached, like a marionette tugged by invisible strings.

One.

The first Duplicator's profile lit up in her perception. A single shot, straight through the chestplate—the Laser having enough power to punch right through the Medium-type armour at this range.

Two.

Her aim dragged left. Another, crouched behind a heap of corpses. A single round to the visor—gone.

Three.

Further out, half-hidden in the muzzle-flashes. She lined up, fired, dropped him cold.

Four.

Another one buried deeper in the mob. Her other self didn't hesitate, tracing the perfect shot angle between a pair of advancing freaks. Her aim locked slightly above his exposed jawline, wearing only a half-helmet—dead in a blink.

The vision shattered like glass, sound and color slamming back into her ears and eyes.

She didn't think, didn't breathe, just moved.

Her rifle snapped from target to target with machine precision, fingers hammering the trigger in perfect rhythm. Four streaks of incandescent plasma cut across the red-white-hued night sky, each one followed by the collapse of not just a soldier but whole clusters of their identical duplicates tumbling in unison.

No cycle stutter this time.

Just four freaks dead in an instant—her chest heaved like she'd just run flat-out across the battlefield.

Thea sucked in air, the rush of what she'd just done slamming into her all at once, heart pounding so hard it felt like it might punch through her ribs.

"*Holy fuck,*" she breathed, fighting to steady herself, sweat prickling against her brow under the helmet.

"What the fuck was that?!" Marie's voice carried sharp from the far side of the embrasure, shock cutting through the chaos of gunfire.

"No fucking kidding, what in the Emperor's golden toenails was that shit just now?" Fals's voice followed from her left.

Thea tried to sound casual, though the grin on her face and the tremor in her breath betrayed her. "Just... trying things out with my Power. Sorry about that."

Marie barked back almost immediately, **"Did you at least fucking hit something?!"**

"Yeah! Four of them!" Thea yelled over the din, a flash of pride in her voice she didn't bother to hide this time.

"What the fuck?! Then keep doing that, for fuck's sake!" Marie shot back.

Fals slammed a fresh mag into his weapon, then glanced at Thea.

Their visors met across the chaos. He stopped mid-motion.

The mag hung loose in his hand, his movements entirely frozen.

"Holy fuck. *It's you,*" he muttered, half in awe, half in something closer to disbelief.

"It's... me?" Thea asked, utterly thrown by his sudden tone shift.

"Your medal!" Fals jabbed his mag toward her chest like an accusing finger. "You're a fucking *Two-Star Crysium Recruit?!'*"

Her stomach dropped. Reflexively, she looked down at herself—and understood instantly.

When she'd slung the Laser Gram's strap over her shoulder, she hadn't paid any mind to keeping her Spectre's cloak tight across her torso.

In the shuffle, the fabric had twisted just enough to peel back at the center.

And there it was, gleaming like a damn beacon in the chaotic battlefield light: The shimmering blue metal of her Two-Star Crysium Medal, embedded just above her heart, catching every flicker of fiery explosions, laser beams and tracer fire around them.

The shooting from the far end of the embrasure faltered, cut off mid-burst.

Thea turned her head just in time to see Marie lean back from cover, craning around Falks for a better look.

The Marine's helmet tilted, visor catching the faint gleam of the medal on Thea's chest.

The second her eyes locked on it, Marie's knees seemed to vanish from under her—she dropped flat onto her back in the trench dirt, arms splaying like she'd been shoved.

"Holy *fuck*," she kept repeating, over and over, her voice rising in pitch with every echo as if the words alone weren't enough to process what she was seeing.

Thea's throat tightened. Awkward didn't even begin to cover how she felt.

Sure, this had been the plan—well, sort of.

From the very start, she'd wanted the recognition, the respect, the subtle nods of acknowledgment from veterans who knew what the medal meant.

That was why she'd confirmed the display option at the start of the DM in the first place.

Back in her head, she had pictured it working the same way as the arcade games: Let the medal gleam before the action started, draw a few stares, maybe field a question or two about her builds, and walk away looking like the badass she was supposed to be.

But none of that had happened.

Because, of course, she'd been too distracted by trying to figure out how the whole Digital Mission system worked in the first place. Too focused on watching and learning, adjusting her loadout, following Chester's lead—completely missing the fact that her Spectre's cloak had been wrapped tight the entire time, keeping the medal buried out of sight.

Then came the upscale.

The mission had suddenly spiked in difficulty, tension flooding the room as people realized what it meant—and Thea, of all people, had been the trigger for it.

The one responsible.

She'd sat there in silence, listening to Marines groan, curse, and gripe, while knowing full well that if anyone realized it was her fault, the stares wouldn't be admiration.

They'd be *daggers* instead.

It was one thing to be admired as an Ace-in-the-making. It was another entirely to be singled out as the reason the majority of the platoon thought they were about to fucking die.

"Ehh... Hi," she awkwardly offered, trying to smooth things over, her voice cracking just slightly in her own ears.

Falks let out a short, incredulous laugh, shaking his head as he slapped a fresh mag into his rifle. “*Hi?* That’s all you’ve got? You’re sitting here with a fucking Two-Star Crysium on your chest and you didn’t think to mention it before?”

He gestured loosely with the weapon, disbelief plain in his tone. “Hell, you could’ve saved me half a dozen near-deaths already if we had known about that. We could’ve had some of the Defensive Heavys in our squad, easy!”

Marie, on the other hand, had the opposite reaction entirely.

She scrambled back onto her feet, practically bouncing in place as her words tumbled out faster than the rifle in her hands. “Holy shit, I *can’t* believe this! A Two-Star Crysium! And a Recruit?! In the same squad as me?! This is insane—like, I’m literally standing next to a Battlefield Ace in the making! Oh my god, I’m gonna tell *everyone*—”

“Marie,” Falks cut in sharply, though even he clearly couldn’t hide a grin beneath the strain. He raised his rifle over the parapet again, snapping off a few quick shots before ducking back down. “Back to work, both of you. We’ve still got a job to do. But for the record, Thea? Whatever you need—call it. I’ve got your back, one hundred percent.”

“Yeah! Same!” Marie nodded so hard Thea half-worried her helmet would fly right off.

“Anything at all, just say the word. Two-Star Crysium... holy shit...”

Thea blinked, caught entirely off-guard.

She’d braced herself for anger, maybe resentment—hell, even outright accusations that she’d ruined the mission for everyone by forcing the upscale.

But there was none of that in their voices.

No bitterness, no blame.

Just support.

Something warm pressed into her chest, mingling awkwardly with the gnawing guilt she’d been hit with at the sudden revelation. “Alright... thanks. Really. But, uh—don’t expect miracles. I was mostly planning on using this run for some experiments. That’s... honestly the only reason I didn’t say anything after the upscale. Didn’t even know it existed before.”

“That’s *classic* UHF 101,” Falks chuckled, shaking his head as he lined up another shot. “Keep the rookies blind until they’re knee-deep in shit. Builds character, or some crap like that.”

Thea almost smiled at that as they all settled back into rhythm, laying down fire against the tide of clones pushing up the hill.

Marie, however, couldn’t hold in her excitement.

“We’ve got a Two-Star Crysium Recruit in our fucking squad!” she screamed into the chaos, her voice shrill with joy, as though she were announcing it to the entire battlefield.

Thea cringed so hard she thought her neck might snap, burying her face briefly against her scope even though she knew only Falks and she could actually hear it over comms.

“You’re all *so fucked* now! A future Battlefield Ace motherf—”

Marie’s jubilant cry was abruptly cut off mid-word.

A single, sharp crack split the air inside the embrasure, and her body went rigid—then dropped like a puppet with its strings cut.

Thea’s stomach turned cold as she saw the neat, glowing hole drilled straight through Marie’s visor.

One stray shot, and she was gone...

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PoV: Private Chester O’Neil

“Alright, Mike, you should be good for about two hours. Let me know fifteen minutes before it wears off so I’ve got time for a re-up,” Chester said, patting the Defensive Heavy’s shoulder as he finished securing the last injector port.

“Thanks, Medic,” came the clipped reply. The massive Marine wasted no time sealing his Super-Heavy armour back up, plates hissing into place as he hauled his slab of a shield and heavy weapon into position before trudging back toward the front of the embrasure.

‘Man’s got more lives than a damn cat,’ Chester thought, stowing his tools back into their proper slots. *‘Anti-tank round, dead-on to the chestplate, and it still only clipped him. Half an inch left and I’d be scraping him into a bag.’*

He slung his pack over one shoulder, making ready to head back toward his side of the trench, when Wellis’ gravelly voice called out from the eastern-most firing slit. “Good work, Chester. Keep it up. You got any idea what in the Emperor’s name that Laser gatling is? You see one of the other squads packing something like that?”

“Laser gatling...?” Chester echoed, stepping up beside him and squinting through the haze of smoke, fire and tracer rounds that cut the night into pieces. “I don’t see—”

“Wait for it,” Wellis cut him off.

And then it came.

Seven blazing streaks of plasma ripped across the dark sky in rapid succession, so fast they blurred together like a single incandescent whip. Downrange, whole pockets of the enemy

line crumpled, ripping through Duplicators who collapsed in unison with their scattered copies.

Chester whistled low under his breath. “Only seven shots? Doesn’t really scream ‘gatling,’ but the fire rate fits. Never seen one like that before, though. Definitely not standard issue.”

“Well, whoever’s running it is cutting them down hard,” Wellis grunted. “Every time that thing flares up, it’s like watching a section of the freaks just fold in on itself. Whoever’s pulling the trigger’s got freakishly good luck hitting Duplicators, too. But that kind of lightshow draws attention fast—their side’s getting hammered in return fire. Can’t imagine it’ll hold long.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” Chester chuckled, shaking his head. “Alright, I’ll—”

“Wellis Two, moving,” a crisp female voice broke in over the command channel, making Chester stop mid-sentence.

He blinked. *‘That’s not Marie. Was that the Recruit...?’*

“I’m heading back to the other side,” the voice continued, calm but clipped. “I’ll ping once I’m set. Then we should seriously start thinking about pulling to the second line.”

“Just what I was about to suggest,” Wellis replied without missing a beat, turning his attention back to the slit as he loosed another volley into the night.

He gave Chester a short nod.

“Keep up the good work, Medic.”

Chester gave Wellis a quick nod of acknowledgment before breaking into a full sprint, boots pounding against the mud-slick trench floor as he pushed himself harder.

‘Shit... did Marie and Falks both buy it?’ the thought burned through his head, sour and sharp. *‘No reason the Recruit should be calling the shots unless she’s the last one left. And with Precognition? Yeah... wouldn’t surprise me if she’s the one still standing. That’s overpowered as fuck in a meat grinder like this.’*

His mind kept spiraling while he vaulted over stacked crates and ducked under a sparking cable line hanging loose from the trench wall.

As much as he’d written her off earlier as just another shiny new Recruit to squeeze Merit and Credits out of, there was no walking away from the reality of it now—an Awakened Psyker, especially fresh, was a walking hazard if left unsupervised.

One wrong push past their limit, one accidental overdraw, and it wasn’t just the Psyker who suffered. They *told* them in lectures that overdrawing was a death sentence, a one-way ticket to getting Zero’d, but new Psykers never really knew what they were doing.

They simply didn’t know their limits until they crossed them, and then it was too damn late.

The thought alone lit a fire under Chester’s legs, forcing him faster, his lungs burning.

He shoved past a knot of western-side Marines hustling into position, their curses trailing after him as he barreled toward Wellis Two's third fallback point.

Then, just as he rounded the corner, it hit.

“[Glimpse]!”

The word tore through the air like barbed wire dragging across his eardrums, warped and unnatural—wrong in a way that made his stomach twist.

It wasn't just sound.

It was like hearing on another frequency layered over reality itself, one that had no business bleeding into the physical world.

And then the trench lit up.

From the eastern end, where the Recruit was, a storm of laser fire erupted—eight shots in a heartbeat, stitched together so fast they almost merged into a single beam. The sudden flare was so bright it threw sharp-edged shadows across the trench walls, nearly blinding him.

“Holy fuck...” Chester breathed, frozen for half a second, eyes locked on the small figure of the Marine holding that rifle like it was an extension of her soul.

Then movement snapped him back—the crumpled form of Falks, slumped forward against the mud and sandbags, his armour scorched and his rifle lying slack in one arm.

Chester dropped into a skid, sliding to Falks' side. “Falks!” he barked, trying to get the Marine's attention.

The man's helmet tilted just enough for a bloodied grin to peek through. His laugh was wet and thin, flecking his chinplate.

“Heh... hey, doc,” Falks rasped, breath hitching. “Guess they got me.”

Chester dropped to his knees, already reaching for the med-kit strapped to his thigh, hands moving on instinct—stims, clotters, auto-sutures—anything to keep Falks alive long enough to drag him back.

But Falks' gauntlet shot up, weak but firm enough to press against Chester's chest and stop him.

His voice was a strained rasp, but his tone left no room for argument. “*Don't*. No point, doc... can't feel my legs. Can't feel anything. You won't carry me through this, not with the trench breaking like it is.”

Chester froze, staring at him, fingers twitching with the urge to ignore him and work anyway.

But the look in Falks' eyes piercing through the visor up-close—the raw *certainty*—held him there.

“Help her,” Falks whispered, head tilting slightly toward the eastern embrasure where Thea’s rifle thundered. “Thea. She’s the only chance we got of winning this thing.”

“What...?” Chester muttered, caught between confusion and disbelief.

Falks’ grin widened, blood bubbling at the corner of his mouth as a wet cough tore through him. The sound was guttural, half-choked by the gurgling coming from the ragged hole in his chestplate.

He spat crimson, then gave a weak chuckle that ended in another cough.

“She’s *her*,” he managed, voice thin but certain. And then, still smiling like he’d just given away the galaxy’s best-kept secret, Falks’ head slumped to the side.

His chest rose once, shuddered, then went still.

“Fuck...” Chester swore under his breath, a bitter edge to the word as he dropped Falk’s body and forced himself back up to his feet.

He spun, gaze snapping toward Thea—ready to scream at her, ready to demand what the fuck that cryptic-ass message could have possibly meant—

And then he saw it.

The shimmer of deep blue light caught his eyes first, peeking from beneath the folds of her Spectre’s Cloak. Embedded in the armor just above her heart was the glinting metal of a Two-Star Crysium Medal.

It all clicked at once.

The three DMRs slung across her back, something no fresh Recruit should’ve had.

The eerie calm she’d shown when the mission had been upscaled.

The way she’d slid into combat like she’d been born in the trenches.

The timing on every shot, the precision of every move—calculated, exact.

Not luck. Not chance. Not even just raw talent.

This was someone groomed for the battlefield.

A future Battlefield Ace, standing right in front of him.

Chester’s throat felt dry, but he forced the words out anyway, the weight of Falks’ last request ringing in his ears. She was their only way out of this mess.

And he damn well knew it.

“What do you need, Thea?”

Thea's head tilted up at him, her visor catching the light of the battlefield outside for a brief moment.

"Focus," she said simply, voice flat as it had been the entire time since the battle started.

Chester didn't hesitate.

He dropped into a crouch right behind her, pulling up his [Resources] interface.

He hadn't burned much on Mike earlier, but if he was going to give her what she needed, he had to be certain he wouldn't overdraw himself.

[Resources]

Focus: 414 / 455

'Good enough.'

He gave himself a quick nod, before putting his hand on Thea's back, not even questioning what she needed the Focus for. She was a Psyker and a future Battlefield Ace; questions weren't part of the equation—not anymore.

[Focus Link]

The ability snapped into place, a drain surging through his arm like someone had ripped a vein open. He felt his own energy being pulled from him and into her—an endless, invisible siphon that left him feeling utterly hollow and cold in its wake.

"I'm going to try something," she muttered over the proximity comms, the words clipped, almost nervous. "It should be fine, based on everything I've tested so far... but I waited for you because I don't know how much this will cost."

"Go for it," Chester answered, gritting his teeth against the pull. She was already damn near topped off, and he still had half his bar left. Plenty of room to work with.

And then it started.

From beneath the plates of her armor, a shimmering haze began to bleed out—thousands of nano-bots pouring into the trench around them. The swarm glittered faintly in the muzzle flashes and flares overhead, arranging themselves into a shifting web that wrapped the alcove like some half-seen cocoon.

They didn't create illusions. They didn't fly out through the firing slit to trick the enemy.

They just... circled her.

Chester's breath hitched.

'What in the fuck is she doing...?'

"Okay," Thea whispered, almost like she was bracing herself. "I'm doing it."

The next instant shattered him.

Her voice tore through the world.

“[GLIMPSE!]”

But it wasn't just her scream.

It was her scream multiplied a thousandfold, amplifying and shrieking from the throats of every last nanobot that ringed her like a choir of broken angels.

The sound warped, distorted, layered until it was no longer a voice at all but simply noise—raw, psychic thunder that ripped reality itself open.

Chester screamed as his ears ruptured instantly, hot blood flooding his ear canals.

His vision whited out like a flashbang had gone off inside his skull, pain stabbing through every nerve as the psychic resonance caved his senses in.

He was blind from the pain, deaf from the screech, half-conscious, and his body trembled uncontrollably, but everything left him with a single, seared-in thought—

‘Banshee...!’

—

—

Watching the swarm of hybrid nano-bots bleed out of her armor and arrange themselves in orbit around her, Thea couldn't help but wonder just how loud this was about to get.

Each test before had been louder than the last, the volume directly tied to the strength of her results, but she'd never committed to going all the way. Not with her Focus draining in big chunks every recent attempt, not with the uncertainty of how much the tech would even play into the equation.

But now, with Chester behind her funneling more Focus into her than she could realistically burn through, there was no reason to hold back.

No excuses left.

“Okay,” she whispered to herself, the words barely audible over the din of the trench. “I'm doing it.”

She pulled in one long, steadying breath.

Then she *screamed*.

It ripped out of her throat raw, a primal yell, her Power weaving into it and blasting outward.

The sound didn't just leave her—it fractured, split, and poured through ten-thousand nano-bots hovering in a perfect web around her.

Every one of them amplified it, twisting her voice into something alien and utterly wrong.

“[GLIMPSE]!”

The trench quaked with the force of it.

The distorted chorus shredded through the battlefield like reality itself had been split open.

For an instant, the world *broke*. All sound warped.

Reality smeared like an oil painting.

And then it all just *stopped*.

Thea's breath caught in her chest. This wasn't the usual activation.

There was no half-second of disembodiment, no slipping into the detached state she'd come to expect. She wasn't watching her body move without her—she *was* her body.

In control. Whole. Yet everything around her was frozen in place.

‘What the...’

Her eyes darted toward the firing slit. The battlefield lay out before her, locked in stillness.

Bolts of laser fire hung in mid-air like streaks of glass suspended in oil.

The mass of the Stellar Republic had gone silent.

Even the smoke and fire hung unmoving, like a painting come to life and then trapped in time.

‘How is this pos—’

Her thought cut off as she instinctively glanced toward her rifle's scope.

And there, reflected in the glass, was an eye staring back at her.

It was hers. But not cyan...

A glowing violet, burning like neon fire, staring straight back at her with all the weight of inevitability. A voice curled up her spine, smooth and mocking, laced with an intimacy that made her skin crawl.

“You called, *darling*...?”