

## Arc 1 - Chapter 97 - Into The City

Brushing away the lingering fog that had momentarily clouded her senses, Thea faced Karania, her expression tinged with slight confusion as she responded, "I was just doing what I could to ensure we make it through this part of the mission, I guess...?"

Her eyes then shifted towards Isabella, who was noticeably staggering, prompting Thea to hastily add, "You should probably check on Ela, Kara."

Karania paused, her eyes locked on Thea for a brief second, seemingly trying to read her condition, before she moved towards Isabella with a sense of urgency.

Isabella, for her part, welcomed Karania's support, allowing herself to be guided to a more comfortable seating position on the ground. Without wasting a moment, Karania began addressing Isabella's numerous injuries with her usual expertise of a seasoned medic.

Thea, still feeling somewhat disoriented from the battle's intense focus and the peculiar state of heightened awareness she had experienced, couldn't shake off the sensation completely.

Yet, remarkably, she didn't feel the usual drain of overexertion that followed such exertions.

Trusting in her instincts to engage the [Sensory Overdrive] had proven to not be a detrimental decision for once, even though she always had to be mindful of her Focus reserves after the last incident.

With a flicker of concern, she summoned up her Status window, which immediately appeared before her inner-eye. She scrutinised it carefully, seeking reassurance that her recent actions hadn't inadvertently pushed her close to being beyond her limits.

[Status, Attributes & Currencies]:

Thea McKay - Level 7.81 - Contribution Points: 474 / 586 - Unspent Attribute Points: 4

HP: 131 / 131 - Stamina: 104 / 165 - Focus: 97 / 225 - TBD - TBD

Class: None - Specialization: None - Title: None - TBD - TBD

Thea pondered, a hint of amazement colouring her thoughts, *'I must've tapped into my Psychic side at some point, because those Stamina and Focus numbers just don't add up otherwise.'* Yet, she found herself at peace with the outcome.

Remarkably, she hadn't come anywhere near to depleting her Focus reserves, despite briefly delving into her Psychic Abilities. This was a significant improvement over her rare past attempts, where maintaining even a shred of control while in that mysterious state of flow had often eluded her, leading to severe exhaustion.

Now, it seemed as though this enigmatic combination of abilities was gradually weaving itself into the fabric of her capabilities, becoming a more familiar, if still unpredictable, element of her arsenal—something she could potentially rely upon, should the need arise.

Refocusing on the more immediate priorities, Thea decided to postpone any further reflection on her recent experiences until Alpha Squad was safely out of the immediate danger.

She turned her attention to Lucas and Desmond, instructing them with clear urgency, "Scour the area for anything valuable. We'll hold here until Kara's done tending to Ela, but we've got to keep our stay short."

She then directed a specific request to Desmond, "Try to locate that ADS and the audio disruptor. If they're not too cumbersome or rigged, we could repurpose them for our own usage later. I have no idea what we might need them for, but better to be safe."

Desmond and Lucas acknowledged with swift nods, springing into action without delay.

Lucas methodically, yet quickly, sifted through the fallen Stellar Republic soldiers, searching for and collecting any ammunition, grenades, and communication gadgets that could provide tactical advantages or crucial intelligence. Meanwhile, Desmond embarked on a meticulous search for the specialised tech equipment, keenly aware of the potential benefits—and risks—associated with salvaging such devices from the battlefield.

As Thea methodically reloaded her Gram and prepared to sling it over her shoulder, her gaze unexpectedly caught on an unusual feature of the weapon. Right next to the trigger, where her fingers had tirelessly worked throughout the fierce exchange of fire, an intricate layer of ice had unexpectedly formed, shimmering with a deep, almost ethereal sparkle.

Puzzled, she thought to herself, *'What the...?'*

Curiosity piqued, she used her fingertips to scrape at the frosty accumulation, watching in fascination as tiny shards of what appeared to be crystallised air flaked away from the gun's surface. *'Is this some sort of anomaly from firing too rapidly or something? Maybe the weapon's cooling system overcompensated...?'*

Leaning in for a closer inspection, she quickly dismissed the notion that the cooling system was to blame. Having devoted considerable time to poring over the Gram's technical manuals during the quieter moments of their assessment so far, particularly the lengthy patrol-downtimes prior to the assault on the wall, Thea was well-acquainted with its inner workings.

The documentation had detailed the cooling system's location and operation with precision, making it clear that this mysterious layer of ice was something entirely unexpected and unexplained by the weapon's standard mechanisms.

The cooling mechanism of her Gram was designed to concentrate around the reactor, in order to dissipate as much heat as fast as possible, nestled deep within the weapon's core, quite far away from the trigger where the mysterious ice had formed.

Thea knew that if there had been a leak from the cooling system, she would have noticed immediately. The weapon's documentation had not been subtle about the dangers, featuring bold, dire warnings about the consequences of operating the laser with a compromised cooling system.

It was clear, then, that the frost adorning her weapon could not be attributed to any normal operation or malfunction of the Gram itself.

*'Then what could've possibly caused this...?'* She pondered, her mind racing to piece together an explanation.

Deep down, a certain understanding began to stir, a knowledge she had been reluctant to acknowledge. She made an effort to suppress this insight, preferring to leave such inquiries until after their assessment had concluded.

However, the mystery refused to be sidelined, and the realisation grew increasingly insistent.

*'It's the same type of frost that appeared in those eerie visions I had,'* she finally admitted to herself, a sense of unease settling in.

This was no ordinary occurrence; it was something far more profound, tied to experiences she had yet to fully understand or explain. The frost was definitely not a result of the weapon's technology but seemed to be a manifestation of something far more arcane; something far more dangerous, in her eyes.

During that moment when her Psychic Gate had swung wide open, as she and Karania journeyed back to the front lines, a haunting vision had imprinted itself in her memory.

Now, as Thea stared down at her Gram, the frost clinging to its surface evoked a chilling sense of déjà vu, mirroring the frost from her vision with unsettling accuracy.

Despite her deepest wishes to refute any link between the two, the rational side of her mind couldn't dismiss the similarity as mere happenstance. Thea grappled with the implications, her mind teetering between denial and the unnerving possibility that her Psychic Abilities might be manifesting in ways she had yet to fully comprehend or control and might be more dangerous than helpful, if she were to rely on them more often.

*'Shit... I seriously need to find someone who can explain all this to me. Why does this assessment feel like it's dragging on forever?'* Thea mused internally, a mix of frustration and curiosity bubbling within her. Reluctantly, she secured the Gram back onto her shoulder and mentally added this bizarre phenomenon to the growing list of mysteries she promised herself to investigate once this whole ordeal was over.

It was almost as if the UHF had deliberately plunged them into this chaos without any prior, in-depth briefing, leaving them to navigate through a maze of confusion blindfolded. The number of unexplained events piling up since the start of this assessment was downright bewildering.

From her standpoint, it seemed the challenges they were facing were designed to test limits they weren't even aware existed or had, pushing her understanding and abilities to the brink and beyond.

The lack of information, the unexpected encounters, and now this unexplained frost showing up on her equipment—everything was accumulating into a tower of questions with no

answers in sight, making the whole experience feel like an endless puzzle she didn't even know there were pieces for.

Her train of thought was mercifully cut short by Karania's voice, which broke through the stillness of the now-empty junction, "Lucas, lend a hand with Isabella. She's going to be less mobile for a bit."

Approaching Thea with a more serious demeanour, Karania lowered her voice, adding a layer of confidentiality to her words, "Isabella's situation is not good, Thea. She endured a severe onslaught. Without her [Redundant Organs], she definitely would not have made it this far. I've managed to halt the bleeding and administered all the stimulants she can safely receive without risking an overdose. But, honestly, she's far from being okay."

Her tone was sombre, yet it carried the usual clinical precision Karania adopted when discussing medical matters. "Given enough time, I could extract much of the shrapnel, enhancing the stimulants' regenerative effectiveness. But time is a luxury we don't have. Should you manage to find us a secluded spot within the city, I'll do whatever is possible within the timeframe you can spare."

Thea nodded, her expression sombre, fully grasping the unspoken implications of Karania's words. She recognized her responsibility in Isabella's precarious situation; having ordered the offensive heavy into danger without adequate support. While it had been the best course of action in Thea's mind, in order for them to clear the junction, she also recognized the toll it had invariably taken on Isabella. It now also fell upon her, as the acting squad leader, to ensure Isabella received the best chance at recovery as well.

Turning her focus to Desmond, Thea inquired about the progress of their scavenging efforts.

"Desmond, how's the search going? Find anything useful?" She sought an update from Alpha Squad's tech expert, gauging whether they needed to linger in the area a bit longer or if they could proceed immediately.

After a short pause, Desmond responded, his voice tinged with hesitation. "I've secured the ADS, but I'm hesitant about the audio disruptor. Despite its potential usefulness, I can't fully understand its workings or whether it might be equipped with a tracking mechanism. It might be safer to neutralise it before we depart. Permission to rig it for destruction when we leave?"

"Granted," Thea responded without hesitation, trusting Desmond's judgement on the matter.

His expertise in technology was unmatched within the squad, and while Thea was eager to expand her own knowledge in that field, she knew she had to rely on his advice for the foreseeable future.

"Let's get moving. We're finally heading into Nova Tertius," Thea commanded, beckoning her team to follow her lead as she began navigating the corridor at a measured pace.

She was acutely aware of the condition of her team members, especially Lucas and Isabella, the squad's heavies, who had both been severely impacted by the gruelling confrontations within the service tunnels.

Isabella, in particular, was in a dire state, heavily reliant on Lucas for support to move at any significant speed. Her steps were feeble, barely managing to keep her upright, a clear sign of her exhaustion and injuries.

Lucas, too, was facing his own challenges, grappling with the limitations of his makeshift prosthetic. Though it served its purpose better than expected, it was a far cry from the functionality of a genuine prosthetic, whether cybernetic, bionic, or otherwise. It was, in essence, just a hastily constructed contraption made from hardened blood and plasteel braces after all.

Karania was also lending her support to Isabella, positioning herself on the injured heavy's other side. Together, they provided a shoulder for Isabella to lean on, carefully balancing her weight between them as they moved forward.

*'I've really fucked this up...'* Thea's mind raced with self-doubt, imagining how differently things might have unfolded under Corvus's command. *'I bet they wouldn't be hanging by a thread like this,'* she mused, a tinge of regret colouring her thoughts.

Yet, she quickly cast aside these reflections, steeling herself with a stern inner monologue. *'Corvus isn't here, Thea. Pull yourself together. They're your responsibility; your duty is to see them through this, alive. So focus up.'*

With this makeshift bolster of resolve, Thea took the lead with a facade of confidence, guiding her squad through the winding, claustrophobic tunnels that stood between them and the sprawling expanse of the megacity beyond.

Then, breaking the oppressive silence, a muffled explosion reverberated through the tunnel, a sound that was quickly followed by the hurried footsteps of Desmond catching up.

"The audio disruptor's taken care of. And the ADS is secure in my pack, just in case you have a plan for it," Desmond informed her, breaking the silence that had settled over them.

Thea acknowledged him with a nod, her mind already racing through potential uses for the ADS. While no immediate strategy came to mind, the value of a tool capable of neutralising a wide array of grenade threats wasn't lost on her.

Ultimately, it was better to have and not need, than to need it and not have it, if James' words were anything to go by. He had often reminded her of the importance of staying safe and carrying around the proper protection for every circumstance.

It was likely he had meant exactly this sort of situation, considering his almost precognitive levels of foresight that had gone into preparing her for her life with the UHF...

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Fifteen minutes of tense navigation later, without encountering any further obstacles or surprises within the dark, echoing confines of the tunnels, they arrived at the imposing bulkhead that signalled their transition from the underground labyrinth to the sprawling urban landscape of the city above.

Their route had been unexpectedly altered, leading them approximately two kilometres west of Thea's original plan due to an unforeseen detour through junction T16.

Nonetheless, this deviation positioned them squarely within the densely populated sectors of the city, a fact that, if Corvus' mission package held true, meant they were about to emerge into an area teeming with countless lives. The prospect of a full evacuation of such a densely populated zone bordered on the fantastical, a notion Thea found herself reluctantly acknowledging as they approached their exit.

There was practically no way they'd step out into a barren wasteland of an abandoned city, but a certain unease still gnawed at her, as she didn't have a plan B prepared should the city be empty.

With a cautious gesture, Thea signalled for her squad to hold their positions, taking a moment to harness the full extent of her heightened senses. Her Perception and Psychic Senses flared to life, scanning the immediate vicinity for any signs of danger or ambush.

She then proceeded to engage the first of the heavy doors—a colossal barrier constructed of rock-crete and plasteel, its massive frame designed more like the entrance to a fortress or bomb shelter than the mundane exits of service tunnels she had come to know in Lumiosia. Those had been simple, unassuming metal doors, devoid of any remarkable features.

It seemed these tunnels served a dual purpose, not only facilitating maintenance and service access across the city and its outskirts but also offering a refuge for the city's inhabitants against potential calamities. The heavy, bunker-esque design of the door at their current threshold, or in this case, their entry point into the city, was a silent acknowledgment of the ever-present threat of conflict in the galaxy at large.

As the massive door gradually creaked open under Thea's cautious push, her muscles tensed instinctively, bracing for the blare of alarms or the sudden appearance of a guard detail primed to intercept intruders.

With her trusty Gram at the ready for any immediate threat, she half-expected a confrontation.

Instead, she found herself peering into a small, desolate chamber, greeted not by guards or glaring lights but by the sight of another hefty door mirroring the one behind her, standing unassumingly across the room. With deliberate steps, Thea ventured into the enclosure, which presented itself as a perfectly square space, a feat of precision engineering.

The room was a fortress in miniature, its walls shored up with plasteel panels that gleamed dimly in the sparse light, reinforced further by beams of durasteel crisscrossing at strategic intervals.

Eyes sweeping the room, Thea searched meticulously for any sign of an alarm system, a task she undertook with the thoroughness borne of their precarious situation. They were tantalisingly close to the current mission's end—to infiltrate the city—, having navigated the urban fringe and its hidden veins with a blend of skill, sacrifice and sheer determination.

Yet, despite her vigilance, the room revealed no secrets, harbouring neither threat nor warning, standing as an unremarkable antechamber to the pulsing life of the city beyond its walls.

As Thea approached the second bulkhead, she found herself exerting considerable effort to turn the crank, which seemed as if it hadn't been used in ages. With a determined push, she began to slowly open the door, her Gram now firmly shouldered, poised for any immediate threat that might present itself on the other side.

The moment the door began to part, a rush of distinct scents flooded through the narrow opening—mingling aromas of street food, industrial smog, and the undefinable essence of city life. These smells hit her with unexpected force, momentarily overwhelming her senses and causing her heart to leap in anticipation.

It was a tangible sign that they had indeed finally made it, that the end of their arduous journey through the shadowy fringes of the city outskirts was within grasp.

Snapping her focus back to the task at hand, Thea stepped through the doorway as soon as it was wide enough, entering a small, nondescript shack.

She proceeded with the same meticulous caution that had guided her actions in the previous chamber, sweeping the space for any signs of surveillance or security personnel. Yet, just like before, her search yielded no alarms and no guards to challenge their passage.

With a deep, relieved exhale, Thea quickly retraced her steps back to the tunnel to signal the rest of the squad.

They rallied to her position as fast as they could, Lucas and Karania practically carrying Isabella at this stage, with Desmond methodically securing the bulkheads in their wake, sealing them away from the service tunnels and the dangers they had left behind.

Isabella found herself gently propped against the cool, rugged surface of the shack's wall, her breaths shallow as Karania, with swift and practised movements, began to assess her condition again.

This provided Thea a precious moment to gather her thoughts and map out their immediate course of action.

With a deep breath, Thea mentally braced herself. *'Alright, we're finally inside the city. We need to get away from this shack as fast as possible, they'll no doubt send soldiers here any minute now, once they realise what junction we've managed to break through,'* she reflected, her mind racing.

Activating the holographic display within her helmet, Corvus' meticulously detailed map materialised before her eyes. *'Where can we find some refuge, allowing Kara to tend to Ela's wounds in relative safety...?'*

However, transitioning the map from its simplified, two-dimensional layout to a full 3D representation of the urban sprawl presented an overwhelming challenge.

The previously straightforward blueprint of foundations and potential exit points gave way to an intricate maze of towering skyscrapers, colossal megabuildings, interlacing walkways, and multilayered streets.

These complex layers of the city's anatomy were displayed in staggering detail, showcasing the architectural marvels and the labyrinthine networks that pulsed through the megacity's core like a vast, intricate circulatory system.

The sheer scale of the city's layout, packed tightly into every inch of her screen, left her both awestruck and frustrated. *'How did anyone manage to construct such a fucking labyrinth? And why?'* she wondered, her fingers deftly swiping through the holographic display in search of clarity amidst the chaos.

Attempting to make sense of their surroundings, Thea could barely pick out a handful of recognizable landmarks, such as the shadowed alleyways snaking between buildings at ground level and the occasional open street. Yet, the bulk of the map remained an indecipherable tangle of data, a jumbled mess of overlapping layers and interweaving paths that crisscrossed in a dizzying array of vertical and horizontal planes.

Determined to find a way through this digital quagmire, Thea began experimenting with different filters in hopes of simplifying the visual onslaught.

She adjusted settings to thin out the clutter, hoping to isolate useful routes from the dense network of urban sprawl. Each filter change offered a new perspective, yet the task of navigating through the megacity's intricate layout proved to be a daunting challenge, far surpassing any navigational hurdles she had ever faced before.

With an exasperated sigh, Thea finally shut off the map, its complexity proving to be more of a hindrance than a help at the moment.

*'Guess I'll need to tackle this beast of a map later, when we're not pressed for time like this,'* she thought, her determination undimmed despite the setback. She then turned her attention towards the shack's front door, signalling to her squad with a firm gesture to hold their positions. *'Time to resort to the tried-and-true approach of figuring things out the old-fashioned way: A quick recon outside.'*

Thea's hand pressed against the cool, metallic surface of the door, her movements deliberate and cautious as she nudged it open. A rush of air, heavy with the essence of the megacity, greeted her the moment the door cracked open.

Nova Tertius unfurled before her, not through the visual feast she had anticipated, but through an overwhelming symphony of scents and sounds that cascaded over her heightened senses.

The noise was the first to envelop her, a ceaseless roar that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once.

It was the hum of millions of lives intersecting, of machinery and technology interwoven with human existence. The distant clamour of traffic layers above and to the sides, the subtle



buzz of neon signs flickering, and the undercurrent of countless, distant conversations melded into a relentless din that Thea felt through her very bones.

As she stepped out, the realisation dawned on her that what she had assumed to be a shack was, in fact, a ground-level service building, akin to a storage room, now standing as her gateway to the chaotic sprawl of the city.

Her eyes took a moment to adjust to the stark contrast between the dim interior she had left behind and the vibrant chaos of Nova Tertius, despite her stepping out into a simple alleyway.

The air was thick, a blend of alleyway refuse and the pervasive scent of human sweat, a stark reminder to the hundreds of thousands of souls that thrived in the cramped quarters of the megacity.

Layers upon layers of smells competed for her attention; the acrid tang of smog that seemed to cling to every surface, intermingling with the enticing aromas wafting from nearby food stalls. Each scent told a story of life in Nova Tertius, from the struggle for survival to the fleeting moments of joy found in the city's many hidden corners.

Thea's senses were bombarded by this multifaceted assault, each breath she took was a journey through the city's heart. The stench of decay was punctuated by the spicy allure of street food, creating a dissonant harmony that was uniquely odd. It was as if the city itself was alive, breathing through its countless inhabitants and their daily endeavours.

For a moment, Thea stood frozen, caught in the sensory maelstrom that was the megacity, having been completely unprepared for how overwhelming stepping into the heart of the city would actually end up being.

Her training had prepared her for many things, but the raw intensity of Nova Tertius' sensory overload was something *entirely* new. It took her a few solid seconds to gather her composure, briefly stumbling back and having to cling to the solid metal door to find her footing, to subsequently filter through the barrage of information her senses provided, and to adjust to the rhythm of the city that now pulsed around her.

With a deep breath, Thea stepped fully into the light of Nova Tertius, her eyes scanning the immediate vicinity with a scout's precision, even as her mind continued to acclimate to the overwhelming sensory input.

She realised that their survival in this city would not just be a test of skill and strategy but of sensory adaptation and resilience, as well. Nova Tertius was a beast of a different kind, one she had never even dared dream of existing before, and she, alongside Alpha Squad, was now placed right into the middle of its ceaseless, throbbing life...