

Arc 1 - Chapter 107 - Sidegrade

Lost in a sea of considerations, Thea wrestled with the choices laid out before her regarding the potential alterations to her Abilities.

'This is going to require some serious thought... How can I possibly decide when I've barely even used something like [Inspect Target]?' she pondered, her concern deepening as she contemplated the implications of each possible upgrade. 'Without really using it, how am I supposed to gauge which upgrade might be the most beneficial?'

Her internal debate didn't stop there, however. Even her more frequently used Abilities, like [Penetrative Shot], presented a complex dilemma.

'[Penetrative Shot] has been crucial so far, and I've used it a fair bit, but choosing the right modification is tricky even for it,' Thea mentally debated.

'Alpha could be perfect for bypassing cover like Lucas's Stalwart, while Gamma might be better suited for dealing significant damage to larger obstacles, like those massive cannons we encountered on the Wall.'

Each option seemed appealing and useful in its own way, making the decision far from straightforward.

As she mulled over her choices, it became clear that a simple choice, almost akin to a dice-roll, wouldn't suffice.

'This isn't just about picking the most attractive option on a whim, is it? It's more like strategizing in AoC; I need to really understand the mechanics and outcomes to properly adjust things to my build and play style,' Thea concluded, resolving to step back from the alterations interface. *'I'll need to really **experiment** with each Ability more—say, a dozen times each—to really get a feel for them before making any final decisions.'*

Shifting her focus from the internal deliberations back to her surroundings, Thea was momentarily startled to find the eyes of her entire squad fixed on her, filled with anticipation.

Thea blinked, taken aback by the sudden shift in focus towards her.

"Huh...? Ehh... Did I say something weird?" she asked, a tinge of embarrassment colouring her voice. She was well aware of her tendency to mutter to herself when deeply engrossed in her thoughts, a habit that occasionally surfaced at inopportune times.

From Isabella's corner came an exasperated groan, highlighting her frustration, while Karania let out a triumphant "Ha! Told ya!" in response to Thea's obliviousness.

Feeling increasingly perplexed, Thea scanned the room, trying to piece together the puzzle of their reactions.

"Can't you just be wow'd even a *single* fucking time, Thea?" Isabella grumbled, her expression sour. "We got a huge Accomplishment and you're not even gonna give us a reaction? Just nothing? Not even a "neat" or something?"

Karania chimed in with a smug, victorious grin, her tone teasing. "I *told* you that's exactly what would happen. I bet she completely forgot about it and got distracted by two dozen other rewards or notifications immediately," she declared. "You owe me 500 Credits, Isabella."

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever," Isabella replied, her voice tinged with resignation as she waved dismissively, then returned to her workout that she had only paused to gauge Thea's reaction. "You'll get it once we leave this damned assessment..."

Overhearing their exchange, Thea felt a sting of realisation. '*Damn, Kara's completely right. I did get immediately distracted, didn't I...?*' she thought, feeling somewhat called out by Karania's accurate prediction.

Wanting to rectify her oversight and engage with her team's excitement, Thea quickly spoke up, "Ahhh, but the Accomplishment is very impressive! I'm guessing you all got it too, then? That's what you were referring to earlier?"

Her voice carried a mix of genuine interest and a slight rush to make amends for her earlier detachment.

"Yes, Thea. We did," Karania responded, her tone slightly patronising, much like one might address a child proudly showing off a mud pie. "That's why we've been trying to tell you not to beat yourself up over things beyond your control. We all got a massive Accomplishment; it's like securing a guaranteed Gold-Rank Ability for *each* of us. That's likely worth far more than whatever the Accomplishment Mission would have offered in terms of Credits, Merit, or CP. So maybe ease up a bit on the self-loathing and blame, yeah?"

Thea felt herself shrink slightly under the weight of Karania's words, the admonishment striking a sensitive chord. Her shoulders slumped as the truth of the observation settled in.

Karania continued, her voice firm yet caring, "Let us worry about when and how we are upset, and with whom and why. You fretting over whether we're upset won't help—*especially* if we are. It just wastes your energy. We're all Marines here; we can speak up for ourselves if we feel slighted by someone, alright?"

Thea offered a hesitant nod, feeling like she was squarely in the spotlight, her cheeks burning with embarrassment. On one hand, her instincts pushed her to defend herself against the criticism, but the rational part of her mind acknowledged the validity of Karania's points.

This humbling moment, though uncomfortable, was perhaps exactly the necessary jolt she needed to truly absorb and reflect on her squad's perspectives; and her own.

Likely having enough of Thea's discomfort, Karania tactfully shifted the conversation to a lighter topic. "Poor Corvus is going to be so envious, huh? I hope he snagged something

good for that big bang as well; otherwise, we'll shoot right past him with our fancy new Gold-Rank Abilities."

Her attempt to inject some humour into the situation seemed to ease the tension somewhat.

This remark drew the rest of the squad back into the conversation.

Lucas expressed sympathy for Corvus, who had missed out on both the valuable real-life combat experience and the significant Accomplishment and System rewards.

Desmond, on the other hand, was more focused on the practical aspects, eagerly stating, "I can't wait to show off my new Ability to him!"

Prompted by Desmond's enthusiasm, Thea chimed in with genuine curiosity, "So you've all accepted the rewards for the Accomplishment already? I haven't actually looked at what it offers yet."

Isabella was quick to respond, "Not all of us. Kara and I haven't. The others have, though."

Her words redirected Thea's attention toward Lucas, who offered a simple explanation with a shrug, "I had free Ability slots, what can I say? Also, that last encounter didn't exactly leave me feeling great... Figured I could use something extra for next time; maybe not end up just being a big ol' target."

Desmond's contribution was unexpectedly supportive, which caught Thea off guard. "Same here. I'm nowhere near full on Abilities, and honestly, I was *beyond* useless last time. I literally died the moment that Psyker tricked me. Good call leaving me behind, by the way. There was no real point in wasting our only shot at taking them out by trying to save me, considering the state I was in."

Hearing such straightforward approval from Desmond, especially given the difficulty of that decision, provided Thea with a much-needed reassurance. It was perhaps one of the toughest calls she had made during that encounter, and Desmond's acknowledgment that it was the right move was a comforting affirmation that helped soothe her lingering anxieties about the whole mess of decisions made back during the encounter.

"Not that I don't appreciate everything you did, of course!" She heard Desmond immediately backpedal, directed at Karania, who gave him an icy look. "I'd much rather stay alive, of course! You're a downright magician in terms of getting us back in the action, Karania! A genius; a prodigy; a saint, really!"

The sheer panic in his voice only aided in the hilarity of the moment, causing a round of chuckles from the rest of the squad; even Karania couldn't keep her angry expression as she broke into a wide grin and said, "You're damn right."

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The next few minutes were filled with lively updates, with Thea sharing the limited details she knew about the Ace and the events leading up to her abrupt return. In turn, the rest of the squad filled her in on the brief moments she had missed.

"We respawned, got orders to assemble in the squad barracks until further notice, and that's about it," Isabella summed it up succinctly, pausing only briefly between her ongoing series of crunches. Her dedication to her workout, undeterred even by their current discussion, underscored how the recent challenging days within Nova Tertius had ignited a renewed determination to push her limits.

Reflecting on their next steps, Thea voiced a practical suggestion. "We should probably go and pick up some equipment, then. Ready ourselves for the next part of the assessment," she thought aloud. The squad nodded in agreement; none of them had their gear at the moment, making the need to acquire new equipment for their next task semi-urgent.

They decided they would need to visit the supply stations to get copies of their essential gear printed before any new orders arrived. Given the demanding nature of their tasks so far, it was almost certain these orders would send them back to the front lines.

Together, they left the barracks and headed towards the nearest supply station.

Much to their surprise, the station was absolutely bustling with activity. Thea wasn't sure if this was typical or just a surge in demand, but one thing was clear: A long wait was inevitable.

As the rest of the squad busied themselves with idle chatter or immersed in their datapads, Thea's mind was racing with the immediate priorities regarding her own progression.

'I need to carefully decide which Abilities to upgrade how and when to accept the Accomplishment rewards,' she pondered silently. 'I think it's probably a good idea not to hastily replace a well-levelled Ability for one that starts at zero, even if it could be superior in the long run. Best to stay fully prepared for now, while we're still in the assessment,' she reasoned, meticulously planning her next steps while considering her current resources.

Her thoughts then shifted to another pressing concern. *'I also have to allocate my Attribute Points soon. It was easier to put off when it was just a few points, but now I have 12 piled up. Those points could have made a significant difference during the encounter with the Psykers, especially if invested in Resolve and Perception. I can't afford to delay this until after the assessment any longer; not with this many Points on the board...'*

After some contemplation, Thea devised a practical approach to address her uncertainties.

*'Once I've got my gear sorted, I'll seek out a trained Psyker here for advice. This is the furthest FOB on the eastern front; there **has** to be at least **one** knowledgeable Psyker stationed here. They could clarify this whole Gate concept and help me understand if upgrading my Attributes now could cause any issues. It's almost like looking up a pro-player guide, but instead, it's for optimising myself... That should work!'*

Resolved and with a clear plan in mind, Thea felt a bit more in control of her situation. She knew exactly what her next steps would be once they reached the front of the queue...

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“There’s no Solarium left; so we can’t print another one of these,” the quartermaster informed Thea, her tone apologetic but firm. “If you need another one printed, you’ll have to head to the HQ. They might still have some Solarium left. This FOB only had enough for about eight weapons, and it’s all been used up since roughly three days ago. Sorry to disappoint.”

Thea felt a sinking feeling as she processed the news.

The absence of Solarium meant no Caliburn; without the Caliburn, she and her squad would be severely handicapped, missing a crucial element of their arsenal that had proved vital in various situations throughout the past weeks.

“Is there any chance Solarium will be restocked here soon?” Thea asked, clinging to a sliver of hope, her voice tinged with desperation as she attempted to secure even a promise of future availability.

The quartermaster gave her a look that seemed to mix incredulity with sympathy, clearly conveying scepticism. “Listen, Private... There’s no *restocking* for something like Solarium, not unless there’s a major shift in the war dynamics. The material is far too volatile; nobody would risk transporting it during ongoing combat. The only reason we had any at all is that it was included with the initial shipment for building the FOB—protected by the most heavily defended convoys the UHF can organise far from HQ. Unless we’re setting up a new FOB further forward—which is unlikely given the whole Wall situation—there’s really no chance of getting more here. I’m sorry, Private. It’s just not feasible.”

Thea’s heart sank deeper with the quartermaster’s explanation, dashing any lingering hopes she had harboured. The reality of their logistical constraints hit hard, underscoring the harsh limitations they faced on the front lines and the unexpected, heavy cost of Corvus’ self-sacrifice.

Losing the Caliburn had undoubtedly hurt, but now that Thea knew she couldn’t get it back until after the assessment, she couldn’t help but question whether the sacrifice had been worth it after all. The Caliburn had been that much of a boon to her and the squad, in her mind.

With a sorrowful feeling in her heart, Thea left the supply station fully re-equipped—minus the Caliburn, of course—making her way to the command building once more.

Before leaving the squad, she had informed her teammates that she needed to follow up on a personal matter and urged them not to wait for her. She also asked them to relay any new orders that might arrive sooner than expected, emphasising the uncertainty of their current situation.

As she entered the command building, Thea was met once again by the same attendant who had assisted her earlier.

Recognizing her, the attendant gave her a patient nod, waiting for her to state her new inquiry.

"I'm looking for a Psyker—really, any would help, but ideally someone with a lot of experience," Thea began, trying to articulate her request clearly without seeming too urgent.

"I have several questions about the Psychic Attribute and the Gate mechanism that really can't wait until after the assessment. I need some advice *now*. Could I possibly meet with one? If you could just point me in the right direction, I'm sure I can find them from there..."

She hoped her request didn't come off as trivial, fully aware that the attendant likely had more pressing tasks than guiding an impatient Recruit to high-value military assets like Psykers. Thea waited anxiously for a response, hoping her request would be met with understanding rather than annoyance.

"I see. Let me check who's around and available; surely we can find you at least one experienced Psyker..." the attendant responded, his tone reassuring as he began tapping away at the data screen before him.

Thea was taken aback by the smoothness of the interaction.

'Huh... That was a lot easier than expected,' she thought, pleasantly surprised. She had braced herself for a potential pushback, even mentally preparing to plead her case, but it seemed none of that would be necessary whatsoever.

A quiet moment followed, filled only by the soft movements of air, created by the attendant's hands as he navigated an invisible keyboard in front of him and his occasional murmurs as he searched.

Finally, he looked up from the screen, meeting Thea's expectant gaze. "Here we go, we have a pretty great match for what you're asking for, actually. Lucky you! A Lambda Prime-ranked Psyker by the name of Zachary Cal Vemun is currently residing in barracks three. I've double-checked with them already, and they are available for talks," he explained, efficiently sending the information directly to Thea's armour. "Will you require directions on how to get there, or...?"

Taken aback by the attendant's thoroughness and swift assistance, Thea almost missed her cue to respond. "Ah! No, no. I think I'll find my way. Thank you so much; I... I honestly wasn't expecting this to be so straightforward. Is this a common request, by chance...?" she asked, puzzled by how her expectations were so misaligned with the reality of the situation. This seemed to be happening more and more often recently, ever since she had joined the UHF and interacted more with people around her; especially Alpha Squad.

"Not at all," the attendant answered with a satisfied smile. "But when it comes to Psykers, there's a general understanding among everyone to assist whenever possible. Psykers are extremely valuable military resources, after all. If me looking up something like this for a couple of seconds and sending you on your way can help develop another potential Psyker, or even a Battlefield Psyker if you are so inclined, then it's really the least I can do. Not that I wouldn't have helped you if it wasn't Psyker-related, of course, but it made this whole thing a no-brainer to get done immediately."

Thea absorbed the attendant's explanation with keen interest, realising she was gaining insights into the military's inner workings far beyond what the standard training had provided so far.

This practical exposure to the hierarchy and priorities within the military was enlightening, even if such knowledge wasn't essential, nor really helpful for her immediate tasks whatsoever.

It sparked a curiosity in her about the rarity and valued status of Psykers within the military, however. If they were revered to such an extent, just *how* scarce and crucial were they?

Expressing her gratitude to the attendant, Thea made her way toward the third barracks, mentally rehearsing the name of the Psyker she was about to meet: Zachary Cal Vemun.

As she walked, her mind buzzed with questions she yearned to ask him, ranging from basic inquiries to more complex ones about the nature of their powers.

However, recognizing the need to stay focused on the primary purpose of her visit, Thea consciously redirected her thoughts to the most pressing concerns.

She needed a deeper understanding of the Gate—what it was, why it was considered dangerous, and how to safely manage it.

Additionally, she was anxious about how to strategically invest her Attribute Points.

The last thing she wanted was to inadvertently trigger the Gate as she had previously, a mistake that could potentially kill her permanently, even inside the DDS, if Karania was to be believed—and Thea had no reason to doubt her genius friends' words.

There was another consideration in Thea's head that went hand-in-hand with this request.

With the absence of the Caliburn, Alpha Squad was unequivocally operating at a disadvantage, when compared to before their infiltration of Nova Tertius.

She was hoping that any enhancements to her own capabilities through careful Attribute Point investment might help mitigate the impact of the lost weapon; so as not to reduce the overall efficiency of the squad, simply because she was unable to bring her best. She was hoping to provide something of a sidegrade, rather than a pure downgrade, for this upcoming part of their mission.

As Thea neared the barracks where Zachary was stationed, she glanced around for the data screen that would typically assist in locating someone. However, she halted mid-step, realising with a rueful smile that she didn't need any digital aids this time.

'Right... I never closed my Gate,' she thought. 'It seems that Zachary is either signalling me, or he just keeps his wide open at all times; he's like a beacon...'

This time, the sensation of the open Gate didn't evoke a sense of threat as it had previously.

Instead, it felt more like a guiding force—akin to a lighthouse beacon steering a ship through the tumultuous, dark waters of the sea. Encouraged by this guiding presence, Thea entered the barracks confidently, following the subtle pull of her Gate towards what she presumed to be Zachary's location.

She soon arrived at a room not unlike the one she had just left with Alpha Squad, a familiar military standard in size and furnishings. Ready to engage in what she anticipated to be an enlightening conversation, she knocked lightly on the door.

"Come on in!" came a warm response from within.

Pushing the door open, Thea stepped inside and observed a single marine seated at a table, cradling a cup of what appeared to be tea.

The casual setting and the marine's relaxed demeanour instantly put her at ease, hinting at a potentially informal yet informative discussion ahead. She closed the door gently behind her, following Zachary's gesture to take a seat across from him.

"Hello there," he began, as Thea settled into her seat. "My name's Zachary Cal Vemun, and I'm a Psyker with the UHF; I believe you've got some questions for me?"

His voice carried a surprisingly rich and warm tone, reminiscent of an opera singer from a previous life, perhaps. This vocal quality drew Thea into the conversation effortlessly, soothing any nerves without overwhelming her—an approach she greatly appreciated.

"Ah, yes. Hello Mr. Vemun—" Thea started.

"Please, just call me Zach. This is very informal, and we're just here to share some thoughts; nothing more," he interjected with a broad, inviting smile. "Not to mention, I'm not that much older than you are, unless my eyes are completely off."

"Zach, then," Thea nodded with a smile, adjusting to the more casual tone. "My name's Thea McKay, and I'm currently just a Recruit, but I have some questions regarding the whole Psyker—"

Zachary's expression suddenly brightened, and he leaned in, cutting her off with a burst of enthusiasm. "I'm sorry, *what*? Did you say you're a *Recruit*?!"

His eyes scanned her from top to bottom, as if attempting to gauge her experience level through sheer observation. "But I can feel your Gate...? Are you sure you're just a Recruit? Is this some kind of joke by the brass or something?"

Thea was taken aback by his reaction, realising that her unusual situation might be more immediately apparent to people in-the-know about Psyker things than she had anticipated.

"Ah... Yes. I'm really just a Recruit. This is my very first assessment. I was integrated about what... two, three weeks ago at most?" Thea replied, her voice carrying a mix of uncertainty and eagerness to clarify her situation, unsure what details might be pertinent.

“And you’ve already unlocked your Gate...” Zach continued, his tone filled with a mix of astonishment and concern. “I can understand why you’re here then. Let me guess: The UHF hasn’t provided any guidance at all in this whole Psychic business so far?”

Nodding sheepishly, Thea confirmed his suspicions, feeling somewhat relieved yet anxious about admitting her lack of guidance.

“Haa... This is why a rigid bureaucracy does not work when it’s about individual prowess...!” Zach sighed, his frustration palpable as he threw his arms up in a gesture of exasperation. “I’ve been there, Thea. Trust me, I know how disorienting and frustrating it is to be left in the dark like this.”

He leaned in closer, extending a cup of tea towards her, which Thea accepted gratefully. It seemed this conversation might delve deeper and last longer than she had anticipated, but she was ready for it. The more she could learn now, the better equipped she’d be to handle her abilities.

“So... The UHF has a fairly rigid timeline for things to be taught; even for outliers. It’s a flaw in the UHF’s recruitment and training process, for sure, but there have been only a few cases where this flaw has been addressed,” Zach explained, pouring a crimson-red liquid into Thea’s cup with precise movements.

“For me, I ended up accidentally stumbling into unlocking my Gate, with only a single session of psychic tutoring before the incident.”

Thea nodded, her own experiences mirroring his in many ways, highlighting the risks of such an abrupt awakening to her powers.

“Luckily, it happened during a routine mission that was designed to bolster my credits and merit; we were all inside the DDS. Nobody was ultimately hurt, but during the mission, I accidentally caused significant chaos—blew up three squads’ worth of marines—all because the UHF took too long to recognize my psychic potential and properly guide me...” His tone carried a mix of exasperation and a bit of rueful humour, resonating deeply with Thea, who felt a similar frustration with the whole situation.

“Now, I imagine you’re past the most terrifying part: The Gate’s Awakening, based on the energy I sense from you; but just to be thorough here; you are aware of your Gate and have interacted with it before, right?” Zach’s inquiry sought to gauge her understanding, ensuring they were both on the same page as they ventured further into the nuances of her psychic capabilities.

Thea nodded, then added some detail to clarify her situation, “Yes, it was about a week ago; I had just allocated some Attribute Points I earned from levelling up into my Resolve and Perception. The UHF brass then urged me to advance toward becoming a Psyker as quickly as possible; they mentioned that I could unlock a Psychic Class once I reach Level 10, given my specific Attribute configuration.”

The sudden clatter of porcelain jarred Thea from her explanation; her instincts kicked in, and she momentarily shifted into a defensive stance, only to realise it was just Zach's teacup that had slipped from his grasp.

It landed on the table, a few centimetres lower, spilling some of its crimson contents.

"You... You're able to unlock a Psyker Class at 10?!" Zach repeated, his tone laced with incredulity. "What the fuck is your Attribute spread...?!"

Under his breath, she heard him mutter, "*Holy shit... Maybe this is above my pay grade...*"

Thea's heart sank at those words, fear and desperation swirling within her.

'I can't lose this chance!' she thought, panic rising rapidly.

Swiftly, she bowed deeply, her plea earnest, "*Please, Zach! I really need some answers! Don't turn me away; I promise I won't tell anyone it came from you! I can't keep stumbling through this blindly! When my Gate first opened, I nearly died—for real! I'm scared and confused and lost and...*"

Her voice faltered, overwhelmed by the gravity of her own words and the sheer feeling of helplessness, and tears began to roll down her cheeks.

It was only when she felt a reassuring warmth on her shoulder and saw Zach's empathetic smile that she dared to look up again. "Sorry; I didn't mean to alarm you. I'll help with whatever you need to know, to the best of my ability. It'd be cruel to send you back out there without any answers. I'm not that kind of a monster. I was just shocked—that the UHF is pushing forward with their experiments... It's *exceedingly* rare. I believe you might be the first they've found capable of achieving this, so my reaction was one of surprise more than anything else."

As Thea wiped away her tears, feeling a bit embarrassed by her emotional outburst, Zach's demeanour softened further. "So... What exactly do you need to know about *right now*, specifically...?" he asked, ready to guide her through some of the complexities of her burgeoning abilities...