

Arc 1 - Chapter 131 - Squad Dynamics

The next thirty hours of Thea's off-time flew by in a blur, as she buried herself in the technical documents for all the gear she had access to.

Immersed in the intricate schematics and detailed descriptions, she found herself lost in the world of specifications and functions, absorbing everything she could about the Spectre-type armour, her Caliburn, and the countless other pieces of tech that fascinated her.

The only breaks she took were the ones mandated by the Sovereign, when the AI gently—and then not-so-gently, after Thea had ignored it multiple times—reminded her to eat, urging her to leave her cosy little corner to grab some meals, or when she took the occasional nap when fatigue became unavoidable.

The Sovereign had even nudged her once or twice to stretch her legs, its ever-watchful presence ensuring she didn't completely forget her basic needs.

The setup reminded her of her time in the undercity, those rare days when the Golden Age Arcade was closed, and she would spend hours upon hours at home, engrossed in whatever books, devices, or scraps of knowledge she could get her hands on.

It felt like a simpler time—just her, her thoughts, and something to keep her mind occupied.

There was a comfort in the solitude, a sense of peace that she hadn't realised she was craving. It was a luxury she had forgotten, to let herself unwind completely, without the constant looming threat of battle or the pressing responsibilities of her squad.

For once, she was just Thea—no squad-role, no mission, no expectations—just a girl with her thoughts and the infinite possibilities of the technology she was remembering to love.

But even this peaceful time came to an abrupt end as a sudden chime broke her concentration.

This time, it wasn't the Sovereign reminding her to take care of herself; it was the pad in her hands, the one she'd been using to read the technical documents.

Her eyes widened as she recognized the sender, and she sprang from her cosy blanket fort, scrambling to make herself presentable while reading the message on the run.

[Corvus: "Assemble in the squad room for post-assessment debriefing with the rest of the squad."]

The rest of Alpha Squad had finally finished the assessment, and now they were all set to gather and debrief on everything that had happened over the past month.

Thea's heart raced with excitement—she couldn't wait to see her squad again.

More than anything, she was desperate to find out what had gone down after she had died toward the end of the mission. The uncertainty of those final moments gnawed at her, and she needed answers.

But it wasn't *just* that.

After spending almost an entire month together, day in and day out, facing insurmountable odds and watching each other's backs, Thea had grown unexpectedly attached to the group.

It was a strange feeling for her—this sense of camaraderie and belonging.

She'd spent so much of her life pushing people away, keeping herself guarded, and yet, these few weeks had chipped away at those barriers. There was a part of her she hadn't even known existed before, a quiet craving for the company of those she'd fought beside, for the banter and shared glances that had become as natural as breathing.

For perhaps the first time, she found herself genuinely looking forward to reconnecting with them—not just out of duty, but because she'd honestly missed them over the past few days.

Having fixed her messy hair and swapped her cosy blanket for proper clothes—since lounging in nothing but her oversized hoodie had felt more than appropriate at the time—Thea stepped out of her room and made her way into the squad room.

Unlike before, it was bustling with activity, a stark contrast to the quiet solitude she'd grown used to over the past thirty-odd hours.

Her gaze immediately and inevitably landed on Lucas, the human tank of the squad and the largest among them all, hunched over the kitchen table, devouring his meal with an intensity that bordered on feral.

Beside him, Isabella, the squad's other mountain, was equally engrossed in her own plate, shovelling food into her mouth with a speed that could only be described as ravenous.

For a brief moment, Thea almost mistook their actions as a competition—two hulking titans battling over who could eat faster—but their focused stares at their own plates suggested otherwise. They were simply starving, inhaling their food with the kind of urgency that comes from days of non-stop combat.

Her eyes wandered further until they found Desmond, who stood out not just because of his comparatively smaller frame but also his noticeable struggle. He was hobbling awkwardly from the Nutrioven, balancing a tray of food with a frustrated expression plastered on his face.

Thea's stomach twisted in surprise when she noticed *why*—Desmond was missing the lower half of his right leg, the limb cut cleanly away with no prosthetic in sight. It wasn't just the sight of the injury that stunned her, but the implications of it; he had *respawned* like this, clearly not having been patched up properly yet, for whatever reason.

Before she could fully process this or even consider whether she should offer to help, Corvus appeared from seemingly nowhere, swooping in to lend a steady shoulder. With

practised ease, he wrapped Desmond's arm around his own, helping him navigate the room despite the drone operator's evident reluctance to accept any assistance.

Desmond's scowl spoke volumes, but he begrudgingly leaned into Corvus, letting himself be helped just this once.

Thea's eyes swept the room, searching for the last missing member of their squad, but there was no sign of Karania anywhere. A pang of disappointment welled up in her chest, sharper than she expected, but she quickly shoved the unfamiliar, odd feeling aside, determined not to dwell on it for now.

She hurried over to the squad, taking her usual spot at the table, the sense of familiarity oddly comforting after everything that had happened.

As Corvus and Desmond finally reached the table and settled in, Lucas abruptly choked as he seemed to startle, his face turning a concerning shade of red as a piece of food lodged itself in his throat.

Before anyone could react, Isabella sprang into action, delivering a few hefty slaps to his back that sounded like a sledgehammer hitting raw meat. The force of her blows dislodged the obstruction, and Lucas gasped for air, his eyes wild as he caught his breath.

Still panting, he jabbed a finger in Thea's direction, glaring at her as if she were the culprit.

"Don't do that!" he wheezed, his words broken up by sharp intakes of breath.

Thea blinked, taken aback by the sudden outburst. She raised an eyebrow, genuinely confused. "Huh? Do what?"

"Don't just show up like that, damn it!" Lucas shot back, finally sitting down again and immediately going back to eating but still visibly rattled. He kept glancing at her every few seconds, as if to reassure himself that she was actually there and not some phantom of his imagination. "At least give us a heads-up or something. You scared the shit out of me."

Thea was genuinely perplexed by how her mere presence could startle someone like Lucas, and similarly embarrassed that everyone was now staring at her like this. She mumbled an awkward apology, her gaze dropping to the table as she fiddled with the edge of her sleeve.

"Sorry... I didn't mean to... I'll try to be louder next time...? I guess," she said, her voice trailing off as she glanced up at him uncertainly.

Lucas grunted in response and nodded in satisfaction, his attention already back on his food, but the occasional glance he sent her way made it clear he hadn't completely shaken off the shock.

Isabella, meanwhile, was simply shaking her head at the whole thing.

Before the awkwardness could settle in too deeply, Corvus cleared his throat and took control of the conversation, his voice calm but carrying an undercurrent of seriousness that immediately commanded attention. "Alright, before we get started, I need to let you all know

that Karania's running a bit late. She was pulled into another meeting of some kind, but I'll fill her in on anything she misses when she gets here."

Thea's disappointment flickered again, but she quickly squashed it down, nodding along with the rest of the squad as they acknowledged the information.

She felt a bit more at ease now that Corvus was taking charge; the familiar routine of a debriefing was something she could hold onto, something that made everything feel a bit more normal after that awkward moment with Lucas just now.

But just as she was settling in, Corvus turned his full attention to her, and the look on his face took her by surprise, making her muscles tense involuntarily.

There was a weight to his expression, a heaviness that she wasn't used to seeing from him.

Then, to her utter confusion, he stood up from his chair and bowed deeply, a gesture so out of character that it left her momentarily speechless.

"Thea," Corvus began, his voice thick with emotion, "I owe you an apology—a big one."

Thea blinked, utterly baffled by the sudden display. Her mind raced, trying to piece together what could have brought this on.

"W-What? What are you talking about?" she stammered, completely caught off guard.

Corvus straightened up, his eyes meeting hers with an intensity that made her breath catch. "My decisions during the final stages of the assessment... they cost you your chance to be part of the last mission. I've been replaying that moment over and over, thinking about every possible angle, every other route I could have taken that wouldn't have left you hanging like that... While I haven't been able to come up with anything foolproof, there were definitely better ways to handle the situation, I fully realise."

Thea's confusion deepened as she listened, trying to process his words. She hadn't expected this—hadn't even *considered* that Corvus would blame himself for what had happened. After all, it had all been that strange vision Thea's fault, not his.

"Corvus, you don't—"

But he cut her off, shaking his head with a pained expression. "No, I *do*. I could have tried harder to find a solution, one that didn't end with us losing you the way we did. You were counting on me, as your squad leader, to make a decision that was in your and the squad's best interest, and I failed you. I'm sorry, Thea. You've shown us all an immense amount of trust by opening up about that strange psychic vision, and trusted me implicitly to make a decision on how to proceed; ultimately following it to your very death without question. You didn't deserve to go out of the assessment like that, and that's on me. I could have done better."

Thea's heart clenched at Corvus's words, each sentence weighed down by the guilt he clearly felt.

She wanted to brush off his apology, to tell him it wasn't necessary—because in her eyes, it *really* wasn't his fault.

Hell, she likely would have made the same damn decision he did, given the same information at the time—even now, she wasn't sure what else they could have realistically done better.

If anything, Thea felt *she* was the one who had misled the rest of them with the vision's serious lack of actionable intel and faux-Thea's existence, letting the squad down by dying.

But as she looked at Corvus, saw the earnestness in his eyes and the tight set of his jaw, she realised that dismissing his apology would only make things worse for him.

This was eating him up inside, likely for a while already, and it was clear that he wouldn't find any peace unless she acknowledged his regret.

Before she could find the right words, Isabella spoke up, her voice muffled by the absurd amount of food she was still chewing. "Just fucking accept it, Thea. Please? He's been non-stop about '*his mistakes this, his mistakes that*' since you died. I swear he's driven us all crazy, and I've had to hear about it every damn night. I even took a double-shift that one time so I wouldn't need to be up and about the next night to hear his lamentations..."

Corvus shot Isabella a stern, almost furious glare, his jaw clenching as if to tell her to shut up without saying a word, which just caused the big woman to shrug and continue eating.

Thea couldn't help but crack a small smile at Isabella's bluntness, even as the weight of the moment pressed on her. It was so typical of Isabella to cut right through the tension with her straightforward attitude, even when it was completely inappropriate.

Thea let out a soft sigh, her eyes meeting Corvus's earnest gaze. "Corvus, seriously... listen to me. I trust you. I've always trusted you, and that hasn't changed, not even for a second. I don't blame you for *any* of it. You made the best call you could with what little we knew—fuck, we were practically blind out there. None of this is your fault, and I need you to believe that. I appreciate your apology, and I accept it in the spirit that it was given, but honestly, there's nothing to forgive in the first place."

She hesitated for a moment, frustration simmering just beneath the surface before she couldn't hold it in anymore. "If anything, this whole mess is on the UHF. They dropped us into that assessment without giving me a single damn bit of information about this Psyker stuff, after specifically asking me to become one, because they fucking *forgot* about it—then we're suddenly up against enemy Psykers that are just invisible or something? It's bullshit, plain and simple. How the fuck were we supposed to be ready for that when they didn't even tell us what—"

Thea stopped herself abruptly, realising she had started to vent in front of everyone.

The room had gone quiet, and she felt the weight of all their eyes on her, each of them hanging on her every word. She cleared her throat, suddenly self-conscious. "Uh... sorry about that. Anyway, like I was saying, there's nothing to forgive, Corvus. We're good. Let's just focus on moving forward, alright?"

Corvus nodded, though the guilt hadn't completely left his face, her words seeming to chip away at it little by little. The rest of the squad remained quiet, letting Thea's words sink in for a moment; inadvertently making her feel really embarrassed.

Desmond broke the lingering silence, his voice cutting through the tension. "Wait, what do you mean by '*forgot*'? Are you saying the UHF just... didn't give you some intel or something?"

Thea blinked, caught off guard by Desmond's question.

Of all people, she hadn't expected him to be the one to speak up, but his expression was earnest, filled with genuine curiosity rather than any hint of suspicion. His focus was sharp, and she couldn't help but respect that he'd zeroed in on her slip-up so quickly.

She hadn't intended to drop that bombshell; it had just slipped out in her frustration.

"Ah, yeah... about that," Thea started, buying herself a moment to collect her thoughts.

She glanced around, almost wishing Karania was there to help her explain. Kara knew the ins and outs of her psychic journey better than anyone else in the squad, but she wasn't here, and Thea would have to wing it on her own.

"Okay, so, before the assessment, we all had that little chat with Councillor Lumis about our Attributes and all that, right?"

The squad nodded in unison, their attention now fully on her. Even Isabella had paused her relentless eating, food forgotten for the moment.

"Well, during that meeting, the Councillor—and by extension, the UHF—made it very clear that they wanted me to become a Psyker as fast as possible. You guys know this; we talked about it before the assessment started. But here's where it gets fun: Some of the stuff that went down in the assessment, like my Awakening—that's when a Psyker first becomes aware of their Gate—our run-ins with those two enemy Psykers, the Ace, and especially the last one that got me? All of that could have played out *very* differently if I'd had just a little bit of a heads-up on what to expect."

Her words hung in the air, her squad processing the implications. Their nods were slower this time, thoughtful, as they connected the dots of her experience with their own.

"Turns out, I was actually *supposed* to get all this information before we even went in," Thea continued, her voice tinged with a mix of disbelief and wry amusement. "They were *supposed* to brief me on all this Psyker stuff, give me the basic rundown so I wouldn't be going in blind. But guess what? They just... *forgot*."

She couldn't help the bitter chuckle that escaped her lips, the absurdity of it all still fresh in her mind. Selene's revelation had been a mix of frustrating and relieving—frustrating because of the needless struggles she'd faced, and relieving because it hadn't been some deliberate act of sabotage.

“Yeah, you heard me right on that. They—the entire UHF brass; the leadership on the Sovereign as a whole as well—just... *forgot* to brief me. So everything I went through, all the messes we all had to clean up? It wasn’t some grand plan or secret test. Just pure negligence. A big ol’ administrative oopsie whoopsie.”

She threw her hands up in a resigned shrug, trying to show just how done she was with the whole ordeal. It was ridiculous, but there was a kind of peace in knowing that it was just a colossal mistake rather than anything more sinister.

The squad’s reactions varied wildly as Thea’s words sank in.

Lucas let out a disbelieving snort, shaking his head as if trying to dispel the absurdity of it all. “They just *forgot*? Seriously? We’re out there risking everything, trying to do well in this assessment of theirs, and they just... What? Missed the fucking memo?”

Isabella, mid-chew after shovelling some extra food in her mouth, rolled her eyes dramatically and muttered through a mouthful of food, “Classic. That’s always how it goes with larger military units; shit flies through the cracks no matter how much you try to squeeze the cheeks.”

That earned her a round of disgusted and disbelieving looks, as she simply shrugged and continued chewing her food.

Meanwhile, Desmond’s brow furrowed as he digested the news. “So... all that stuff that was happening—that Awakening thing, the enemy Psykers, the Ace—you had no idea any of it was coming? No idea how to deal with any of it...?”

Thea nodded, trying to keep her voice even. “Yeah. No clue. I was flying blind the whole time. Honestly, it’s a miracle I didn’t get everyone else killed too, considering how little I knew going in. There was a very real chance the Awakening would straight up kill me—like real death; not DDS or Faction Traitable. But that’s what they’re trying to make up for now, I guess.”

Corvus crossed his arms, his expression caught between anger and resignation. “That’s... honestly fucking unbelievable. We were all out there, trusting each other with our lives, and they couldn’t even be bothered to give you a heads-up on something so critical...?”

Abruptly, he slammed the table with his palm; that startled everyone but Isabella who seemed to have seen it coming. “What the fuck?! That pisses me off so much! I’ll be sure to talk to Major Quinn about this; that’s fucking unacceptable!”

Taking a deep breath, he calmed himself and continued, his tone still frustrated but also laced with concern. “So what happened after you found all this out? What’ve you been up to since... Since we were separated?”

Thea took a deep breath, bracing herself before diving into the story of her recent encounters with Selene and Councillor Lumis.

She laid out the surreal sequence of events—the unexpected arrival of Lumis, the awkward confrontation, and the bombshell revelation that her complete lack of information about Psykers had been nothing more than a bureaucratic oversight.

As she spoke, she watched the emotions flicker across her squadmates' faces: Disbelief, anger, and a touch of pity that she found both comforting and uncomfortable.

She carefully skirted around any mention of her own emotional breakdowns and the subsequent psychic-related incidents during the meeting, deciding to keep those moments private for now.

She'd save that for when she could talk to Karania, who would undoubtedly know how to help her navigate the mess of emotions still simmering beneath the surface.

Thea knew that her genius friend would come up with a way to gently inform the rest of the squad about what she was going through without making Thea look like a thoroughly insane person and exceedingly dangerous, ticking time bomb in their midst.

For now, it felt safer to keep that part of the story tucked away.

She went on to also explain how Lumis and Selene had spent time discussing potential compensations and the unexpected concessions the UHF was offering to make things right; but the exact nature of those concessions she similarly kept to herself for now. "They're basically trying to make up for their fuck-up. I mean, there's no way to change what happened, but they're at least trying to make amends, which is nice, I guess."

At the mention of concessions, her mind snapped back to something she had nearly forgotten. "Oh, and speaking of which, one of the things I specifically asked for was also for all of you guys. We're free from the trade market now unless we *choose* to accept an offer ourselves. So no one can just buy us out without our consent."

Lucas's fork clattered to the table as he looked up sharply. "Wooo, woho. Hold up. *What?* We were... on some kind of market? People could, what, just *buy* us? Like... we're just some fucking rinox or something?"

"I honestly don't know what the fuck a rinox is supposed to be, or where to even start with that," Desmond added, his brows furrowing in utter confusion as he leaned forward, eyes fixed on Thea. "But yeah, seriously, what's this whole 'market' about? How does that even work?"

Thea hesitated, biting her lip as she gathered her thoughts. "Honestly... I don't really know *much* about it myself. Selene hinted at it, and Lumis confirmed it was definitely a thing, but they didn't exactly explain the whole process in detail. From what I can piece together, it's like... A system where high-ranking officers can bid on Marines they want for their squads or missions, or something. But that's about all I know—I'm really just guessing. Selene was the one who heavily pushed me to make the request, saying it would keep us from being separated as a squad. Apparently, it's pretty common for us, because we're Alpha Squad, to be split up if someone high up puts in a bid."

Corvus nodded slowly, his frustration evident as he processed the lack of solid information. Still, there was an underlying appreciation in his expression. "It's not ideal that we don't know more... I'll be sure to research this and get us some more in-depth answers going forward. This whole "not telling anyone anything" shit is really pissing me off... That aside, knowing that you fought to keep us together means a lot, Thea. You could have focused entirely on what the UHF could give you to make up for what happened, but you thought of the squad first. Thank you."

His words carried an unexpected weight, filled with a sincerity that surprised Thea.

It was as though he hadn't expected her to care about the rest of the squad or about keeping them together at all. Thea found herself momentarily stunned by the level of his gratitude; she hadn't realised that her previous actions might have come across differently than she'd intended; she had thought she had been pretty open about enjoying her time in the squad immensely.

'Guess I've got to show them a little more appreciation going forward,' she thought, feeling a small but profound shift in her understanding of her bond with the squad. For the first time, she consciously admitted to herself how much she truly cared about them and made a silent vow to make sure they knew it, too.

Pushing those thoughts aside for now, Thea waved her hand as if brushing away the awkwardness hanging in the air. She leaned in eagerly, her eyes sparkling with curiosity. "Alright, enough about me! Tell me what the fuck happened after I got shot. What happened?! How was it that Karania and Isabella were the last ones standing; from what I could gather? How did *that* happen?! And what the fuck happened to Desmond's leg? Why don't you have a prosthetic?!"

Her questions tumbled out in rapid succession, each one picking up speed as she finally allowed her pent-up curiosity to break free.

The squad stared at her, momentarily overwhelmed by the barrage.

But after a beat, Corvus chuckled, recovering first and motioning for her to calm down and take her seat.

"Alright, alright, one question at a time," he said, smiling at her enthusiasm. "Let's start from where you left off, right after you comm'd in that you were working on disarming that tripwire..."