

Arc 1 - Chapter 64 - A Rousing View

"Go ahead, you can pick it up. Take a look," Viladia offered, gesturing towards the shard that Thea was still mesmerised by.

Gently, almost scared of what might happen if she touched it, Thea reached out for the alien construct on the table in front of her and picked it up.

It felt surprisingly mundane to the touch, almost as if the strange geometry that her eyes were telling her existed, was merely an illusion of sorts. But every once in a while, she could feel a slight tingle in her fingers, that hinted at that not quite being the truth. There was definitely something odd about this shard's physical existence, of that, there was no doubt in Thea's mind.

As she brought up the shard towards her face to more closely inspect it, a System Window suddenly manifested next to it, as if she was looking at an item within one of her RPG-style arcade games back on Lumiosia.

Slightly startled by it, she looked at Viladia as if to ask, "Are you seeing this?", but the stealth expert simply smiled and nodded knowingly, as if this type of reaction was exactly what she had expected.

Focusing back on the window, Thea began to read.

[System]: *Gold-rarity Ability Shard detected. Displaying information of contained Ability.*

[Active (Gold) - Shadow Step - Level 0]

Description: Allows the Participant to expend a certain amount of Focus and Stamina to swiftly dash to a selected location. The target destination must have a vertical elevation difference of no more than 2 metres from the starting point and be within a set distance. A shadow, large enough to accommodate at least one foot of the Participant, must be present at the destination for the Ability to activate.

This Ability requires Line of Sight and Line of Effect to activate.

Cost: 30 Stamina + 30 Focus - Distance: 4.0 Metres

As Thea shifted her gaze back to Viladia, the stealth specialist launched into an eager explanation, as though she'd been holding her thoughts in anticipation.

"I know it might appear straightforward at first glance, but trust me, the versatility of this Ability is absolutely invaluable. Whether I'm closing in for a stealthy takedown, navigating hazardous terrain, making a quick escape, or evading incoming strikes, this Ability is my go-to. Its simplicity is its strength; it's adaptable to a multitude of scenarios.

"Thanks to it being such a 'simple' Ability, its costs are actually very manageable. If it had a bunch of bells and whistles to go along with it, it would be more around the 100-120 total Resources for each use. Remember that, rookie—sometimes, simplicity harbours immense utility!"

Thea mentally filed away this new insight—that the cost of an Ability was determined by its complexity rather than its rarity alone.

It was something she'd suspected but hadn't been able to verify until now.

"That does seem incredibly versatile," Thea conceded, her mind already evaluating which of her existing Active-type Abilities she could sacrifice for [Shadow Step].

Seemingly in tune with her thoughts, Viladia quickly snatched the shard from her hands, offering Thea a mischievous smile. "Hold on there, rookie. You haven't upheld your end of the deal yet. Once you've discerned your Path and Inheritance, and let me know about them, then—and only then—will this shard be yours. Understand?"

Nodding in agreement, Thea felt it was a fair exchange.

The opportunity to acquire an Ability like this might not come around again for a long time. She needed every advantage she could secure if she hoped to make even the smallest impact on the greater conflict—a realisation that seemed to crystallise a deeply buried aspiration within her.

Where this newfound desire originated, she couldn't be sure, but she had a hunch.

What greater glory could there be for a dedicated gamer such as herself than to achieve renown across an entire galaxy? If she could make a name for herself through exceptional feats in this chaotic, Emperor-sanctioned war, then in essence, wouldn't she be conquering the ultimate galactic leaderboard?

The aspiration might seem straightforward, but like the [Shadow Step] Ability, its apparent simplicity could mask a web of complex motivations. Thea wasn't entirely sure what those underlying reasons might be, but she was certain she'd discover them in due course. For now, her focus lay on taking steps toward that nebulous but compelling goal.

As she pondered her own objectives, another question bubbled to the surface of her thoughts. Why was Viladia here instead of on the frontlines? All reports indicated she had fully recovered, and her current appearance supported that claim. Opting for the direct approach, Thea turned to Viladia, who was seated next to her on the couch.

"Vi, if you don't mind me asking, why are you here at the FOB rather than on the frontlines? I heard you were fully recovered. Is that not accurate? Are you still hurt somewhere? If so, I could ask Karania to look you over. She's a genius with this sort of stuff, trust me."

Viladia sighed, her face morphing into an expression of visible annoyance.

A brief, weighty silence filled the air before she finally spoke, her voice tinged with frustration. "Staff-Sergeant Venn put me on 'timeout,' as if I were some misbehaving child. Apparently, I acted 'unlike myself' during the Strike One mission."

Confused by this vague explanation, Thea sought clarification. "What do you mean by 'unlike yourself'?"

Viladia paused, considering whether to delve into the details. "Do you really want to know? Because it specifically involves you."

Eagerness coupled with a rising sense of guilt propelled Thea to respond. "Yes, please tell me! If I've done something wrong, I'd like to know. Especially if it's caused you trouble."

Drawing a deep breath, Viladia continued, "Wasn't your fault, really. The strike one mission was simply *supposed* to end with no survivors, Thea. Venn was livid when he found out I'd returned, carrying you on my back. Knowing that he couldn't reverse the mission's outcome, and how instrumental you were to its success, he pulled every string he could to get you the best medical attention and replacement parts possible, given the limited resources of the assessment's medical facilities. But that didn't stop him from punishing *me* for not just killing you when it was clear that you wouldn't be able to make it out on your own and, well, going out with a bang to expedite the mission's conclusion and my own return to active duty."

Thea was stunned, struggling to wrap her head around the revelation.

The concept of being punished for surviving was utterly foreign and deeply unsettling to her. She felt a complex mix of emotions—shock, confusion, and a strange kind of gratitude that Viladia had defied expectations, even if it had resulted in her being penalised. She also felt a newfound resentment towards Staff-Sergeant Venn.

Until this moment, she had regarded him as competent and effective in his role. But the notion that one should be penalised for doing everything possible to survive a mission struck a discordant note with Thea's own values.

Before Thea could spiral further into her thoughts, Viladia interjected, "Look, I get it. Venn's decision rubs you the wrong way, but you have to understand his mindset. The man's a strategic genius. When it comes to planning and executing missions, he's unmatched in minimising resource expenditure, including manpower."

Viladia leaned back, her eyes narrowing as she continued. "Say a mission conventionally requires 20 marines. Venn will send just five, because he knows that four can do it. It's not recklessness, but calculated precision. He'll give you just enough leeway to complete the mission, thereby freeing up more resources to tackle other problems. This is especially true during assessments."

She paused, clearly choosing her words carefully. "In assessments, suicide missions are, paradoxically, often the most rewarding under Venn. You might lose points for dying, sure, but Venn sets it up so you can regain those points and more in subsequent high-value missions. The man even tries to balance out the final score for each of his subordinates to ensure equal reward distribution."

Viladia sighed, frustration lacing her voice once more. "So, when I survived that mission carrying you, I threw a wrench into his carefully orchestrated plan. Not only did it mess up the mission timeline he'd set up, expecting me to be available for the next mission almost immediately, but it also skewed the point distribution he'd calculated in his head."

Thea was at a loss for words. This explanation did nothing to mitigate her sense of outrage at Venn's expectations, but it did make her realise the complicated mechanics of leadership at play—decisions based on a macro-scale that she had not considered.

She started to grapple with this new layer of complexity, a mixture of awe and lingering resentment colliding within her, as Viladia once again cut in.

"Look, I get it—I'd rather be in the field than benched. But from Venn's perspective, I understand why he's keeping me back. It messes with his strategy and the fairness of the point system for everyone else. I busted my ass to get you out of there; I know I earned those points. But I can't expect to be rewarded for upending his plans," Viladia explained, her tone a mix of resignation and acceptance.

"So don't worry your pretty little head over it, Thea. I'll be back out there soon enough, and then you'll have me breathing down your neck for that top spot."

Thea felt a warmth rush to her cheeks. She quickly shook it off, her voice laden with genuine appreciation. "Viladia, thank you. Really, you've been invaluable to me, not to mention saving my life. I owe you big time, and I promise I'll make it up to you."

Viladia's face broke into a wide grin. "Just get me that info on your Path and Inheritance as soon as you can, and we'll call it even. Seriously, don't overthink it."

She leaned back, her eyes twinkling. "Now, if I'm not mistaken, a *special* friend of yours is probably waiting for you outside. Go on, catch up. And save some action for me when you get to the frontlines, okay? Otherwise, you'll be the one to have an angry Viladia to deal with!"

With a knowing nod, Thea rose from the couch and Viladia followed suit. They locked eyes for a moment, and in that instant, an unspoken understanding passed between them.

This was not a goodbye; it was a brief pause in the whirlwind of life they found themselves in. They would undoubtedly meet again amongst the battlefield, either in this assessment, another one or the greater war outside the confines of the DDS. They both reached out, sharing a firm, comradely handshake that spoke more of their mutual respect than words ever could.

"See you on the frontlines," Thea said, her voice tinged with an emotion she couldn't quite place—something between gratitude and anticipation.

"I'll be sure to not keep you waiting too long," Viladia shot back, a playful glint in her eyes.

With that, Thea turned and made her way out of the barracks.

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Thea's gaze swept across the outdoor expanse as she emerged from the barracks, quickly locking onto Karania, who was stationed just past the barracks' immediate boundary. Her friend's stance struck a balance between relaxed and vigilant, a reminder of her always-present, innate curiosity and readiness to spring into action.

As Thea closed the distance, she greeted her, "Hey, Kara. Sorry to keep you waiting. I hope it wasn't for too long."

Karania dismissed her concern with a casual wave, prompting Thea to excitedly dive into her next topic. "You should have been there! Viladia showed me this amazing new thing—an Ability Shard! It's relatively recent... System tech, for a lack of better word, just appearing within our galactic bubble, but it simplifies the process of acquiring specific Abilities. We've got to document this in your database, right? She had a Gold-rarity Ability stored in it!"

Karania's eyes lit up at the mention of the Ability Shard, clearly intrigued by the concept. "That sounds absolutely fascinating, Thea! I'll be sure to write everything down back at our barracks. Though," she hesitated, "I didn't want to intrude on your catch-up with your friend."

Thea sensed a brief moment of unease, recalling the odd tension between Karania and Viladia earlier—especially when Viladia had playfully ribbed Karania about her handiwork on Thea's skin during the focus overdraw incident.

"I hope you know that I'm really grateful for what you did, Kara," Thea ventured cautiously. "I know you did your best with the stitching and everything, trying to put me back together after my fuck-up."

For some reason, this seemed to irritate Karania even more, adding another layer to the perplexing atmosphere between them.

"Sure, Thea. I appreciate the kind words," she responded tersely.

Deciding to let it go for the moment, Karania motioned for Thea to follow her. They had their own barracks to return to, after all, and a long list of tasks to complete before rejoining the frontline come sunrise.

The unspoken tension hung in the air, but try as she might, Thea could not figure out what exactly was irking Karania, who seemed unwilling to share her thoughts at the time. Ultimately, she decided to let it rest for now, figuring that her friend would come to her whenever she felt ready to talk.

For now her attention was focused on the task at hand—getting ready for the return to the frontline and rejoining the rest of Alpha Squad.

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The day flew by for Thea as she meticulously checked her equipment, ensuring everything was battle-ready. To her surprise, she discovered that her Caliburn, Throatcutter, and Icicle had already been serviced. It turned out that Karania had taken care of this while en route to and from the frontlines, fitting it in between her medical duties.

This thoughtful gesture only deepened Thea's sense of indebtedness to her friend.

It seemed as though she was continually on the receiving end of Karania's kindness, without having much opportunity to reciprocate—aside from that lunch she'd paid for during their inaugural shopping trip, after Karania had run out of credits. Resolved to be a more active

participant in their friendship, Thea silently vowed to help alleviate Karania's workload whenever possible.

She didn't want the balance of their relationship to tip too far in one direction.

Although she refrained from discussing this with Karania—anticipating that her friend would simply brush off the concerns with a variation of her now-typical “don't worry about it” speech—Thea couldn't ignore her own feelings. In her view, life was about maintaining a certain equilibrium, and that principle applied to friendships just as much as anything else.

With those thoughts in the back of her head, she returned to focus on the mission ahead, directing her attention back to her newly printed Spectre armour that she and Karania had picked up just hours ago.

She examined it with a critical eye, running her fingers over each plate and joint, ensuring they were perfectly aligned and secured. The armour was like a second skin—literally a matter of life and death—and she wouldn't afford any oversight.

Satisfied, she turned to her primary weapon, the Gram. With practised ease, she disassembled and reassembled it, inspecting each part for wear and tear. Its sleek design and intricate mechanisms held up well under her scrutiny.

Next, she counted her ammunition, each magazine laid out in a precise row. She double-checked their counts before nestling them into custom pockets within her backpack.

Her grenades received a similar inventory; she verified their pins and safety mechanisms, imagining various scenarios where each type would be most effective. Finally, after every item had passed her meticulous examination, she zipped up her backpack, mentally reviewing her checklist one last time.

It was then that she felt a wave of exhaustion wash over her, reminding her that the next day would be gruelling and she still wasn't fully recovered from her lengthy coma. Karania's room was nearby, as Thea had prepared her equipment in a kind of entryway towards her friend's private room, so Thea made her way there.

Though the room was really only designed for one person, neither of them minded the close quarters, as they quickly figured out. They'd shared the space briefly earlier that day, after they had picked up Thea's new set of equipment and Karania had offered to let her stay the night, so that she wouldn't have to go back to the ICU bed, courtesy of the fact that Thea hadn't really been signed up for any barrack spots yet.

The bed creaked softly as Thea climbed in beside Karania, each adjusting their position to find a comfortable arrangement. Sharing the single pillow and blanket came naturally to them, their mutual exhaustion from the day's events—and from recent days overall—making any struggle or awkwardness a non-issue. Though their fatigue ultimately stemmed from entirely different reasons, it drew them closer in that moment, simplifying the act of sharing a bed down to a simple question of efficiency.

As Thea closed her eyes, she felt a sense of security and warmth envelop her—feelings accentuated by the presence of her first-ever friend. With that comforting thought, she drifted

into a restful sleep, ready to face whatever challenges the frontlines would bring the next day.

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The next morning arrived before the sun had even begun to illuminate the Azure Forest below.

Thea found herself atop a hover-transport, captivated by the soft hum of its anti-grav generators—the most prominent of the sensations greeting her senses. It was a noise that evoked both technological prowess and a sort of ethereal calm.

The forest itself was a beautiful spectacle to behold—momentarily reminding Thea that war was not, in-fact, everything there was to the life of a marine, even if it sometimes felt like it.

Bioluminescent flowers and fluorescent plants came alive in the dark, their otherworldly glow painting the landscape in a palette of stark neon hues. It was utterly mesmerising. Thea had never seen the forest in this nocturnal allure; in fact, she had never experienced anything quite like this.

It occurred to her that this was the first time she had ever been in a vehicle like this hover-transport. Her only similar experiences had been a handful of short-range shuttle rides on Lumiosia with James. But this was different.

The transport, which she and Karania had managed to snag a ride with, belonged to the 4th Legion of the UHF Armoured Division—the specific legion attached to this sub-battlefield. The interior was filled with four dozen marines, focused and ready, their faces lit by the dim lighting within the transporter. Many of the marines and medical personnel seized the opportunity for extra rest during the transport, closing their eyes and dozing off in their solitary seats within the vehicle.

They were one segment of a modest convoy, consisting of four hover-transports, each filled with its own, similarly sized, complement of marines and medics. Leading the way was one of the few medium-type hover tanks available in this sub-battlefield, most variants simply not available due to the specific rule set of the sub-battlefield itself, that restricted the use of more advanced technology.

The tank's turret methodically scanned the surrounding landscape, radiating an aura of watchful security that helped temper Thea's heightened Perception from becoming overly anxious about scouting for threats.

She was grateful for the opportunity to appreciate the stunning vistas outside the vehicle without the burden of being the primary scout responsible for the safety of an entire squad or company for once.

Ultimately, as the first faint rays of morning light began to pierce through the forest's dense canopy, Thea recognized that she had lingering tasks to complete before re-entering the fray. With a sigh that felt weightier than she had anticipated, she shifted her focus inward, allowing the captivating scenery of the retreating, dawn-hued forest to recede from her awareness. She mentally reviewed her to-do list for rejoining the battle.

'Okay, first order of business is to allocate my Attribute Points. I should lock in the new Blueprint as a safeguard in case I die, and grab a boost for my Perception. I'm not sure if I really need the Resolve, but Viladia did mention it's helpful for Psychic Powers.

So maybe it's worth investing in beyond the UHF's need to get me to the magical 30 as fast as possible,' she pondered.

Pulling up and investing her points, then confirming them in one fell swoop, Thea looked at her new Status page with a mixture of glee and apprehension.

[Status & Attributes]:

Thea McKay - Level 6.78 - Contribution Points: 417.55 / 533 - Unspent Attribute Points: 0

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

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

Strength: 3.38 | 3.18 (+0%) + 0.2

Finesse: 4.73 (+0%)

Vitality: 2.51 (+0%)

Recovery: 2.72 (+0%)

Stamina: 3.11 (+0%)

Focus: 4.31 (+0%)

Perception: 8.45 | 5.28 (+60%)

Resolve: 9.55 | 5.97 (+60%)

[Psychic: TBD (+0%)] (Locked 24.82/30)

[TBD: TBD (+0%)] (Locked)

[System]: The Participant's Blueprint has been updated.

'So much invested in this Resolve Attribute, and yet it feels like completely wasted points, compared to what Morin and Viladia were able to do during the mission. I'm practically a blank-slate with my current Attribute spread... Vi better be right about Resolve's utility for my Psyche stuff.

'The UHF's urgency to have me unlock the Psychic Attribute seems to be hindering my early-game build quite drastically... But then again, I'm due to receive a rare artefact for my efforts, so I guess it balances out to some degree,' she mused, allowing the shifts in her Attribute points to gradually integrate into her being as she did so.

As Thea finalised the allocation of her Attribute Points, she felt a subtle yet profound change suffuse her senses. Her Perception, already exceptional, surged to new heights. The world around her sharpened, as if she had been looking at everything through a slightly smudged lens before. Every detail came alive. The texture of the metal walls of the hover-transport became almost palpable to her eyes, each nick and scratch telling a silent story. Outside, the azure forest was no longer just a blend of blues and greens; it was a symphony of shades, each leaf distinct, every dewdrop a tiny prism refracting the dawning light.

She closed the System Interface and looked out over the dawn-hued forest yet again, taking in the vibrant colours that seemed even more radiant now. Her eyes easily picked out subtle movements in the distance, the rustle of small creatures skittering through the undergrowth

or the slow sway of tall trees in the gentle breeze, details that would've required more effort to discern just moments ago.

Her sense of smell had also heightened.

The aroma of the forest—damp earth, the tang of plant life, and the musk of nocturnal animals—mingled and filled her nostrils, each scent distinctly identifiable immediately. It was as if her nose had learned to read the forest like a book, separating each note and recognizing its origin, whereas before it would have taken her at least a bit of concentrated focus to discern the same level of detail.

And her hearing—oh, her hearing was now an orchestra of sounds she'd never fully appreciated. The hum of the anti-grav generators below felt like a constant, calming background score, against which the more delicate sounds—alien birdsong, the rustling of leaves, the far-off echo of water flowing, and even the subtle snoring of her fellow marines—stood out in high relief.

She felt a sense of awe wash over her, as it often did with the downright magical powers that the Allbright System seemed to possess. The world had expanded in detail and depth once again, making her realise just how much she had been missing out on before, despite her already massive Perception Attribute.

All her senses had come alive in a way she had never thought possible, this particular feeling starting to become an ever-present companion to her, and she felt more connected to her environment than ever before. This influx of sensory information was downright intoxicating, akin to stepping into an entirely different world.

She had experienced a glimpse of this level of heightened Perception many times before, through her Sensory Overdrive ability, but those usually had been beyond overwhelming to truly take it all in—a torrent of information all at once.

In contrast, this natural, gradual elevation in her Perception Attribute allowed her the space to truly appreciate each nuanced change that came with every upgrade.

Just as she settled back to savour the newfound richness of her sensory experience during the final leg of the journey, a jolt of adrenaline surged through her. She was gripped by an unfamiliar, disconcerting sensation in her chest—something entirely new and unsettlingly out of place.

Her thoughts accelerated, the sensation intensifying with every passing moment. *'What the fuck is going on?'*

The feeling defied description—it was as if an intangible object had materialised right behind her heart. Simultaneously there yet not, as though it had always existed but only just now made itself known. It felt like both an intrinsic part of her very being and an utter violation thereof, as if it contradicted the very laws of physics that had defined Thea's reality up until this very moment.

With a growing sense of urgency, Thea knew there was only one course of action.

'I need Kara. Now!'

Springing from her seat, she swiftly crossed the distance to where Karania was, attending to a patient since they'd boarded. As she moved to gently tap Karania's shoulder—careful not to disturb the resting marines—she was just inches away from what she felt was certain aid.

'Kara will know what to do. She'll know what's going on, she always does,' she thought in a growing panic. But just as her fingers nearly grazed her friend's shoulder, Thea felt a shift, and instinctively knew it was already too late.

The strange, enigmatic and intangible presence behind her heart... *opened*.