

Arc 1 - Chapter 68 - The Storm I

When Thea stirred awake in the pre-dawn hours of the assessment's tenth day, several things immediately stood out to her.

The first was the absence of anyone rousing her from sleep.

'Command must still be confused about what to do with us,' she mused, sinking further into her bedroll.

The squad had collectively agreed that she should maximise her rest at night, given her role in leading them throughout the day. This arrangement conveniently freed her from night watch duties, a fact she greatly appreciated, as uninterrupted sleep was something she relished.

Secondly, she noticed the peculiar, euphoric yet foggy haze that had permeated her mind over the past few days had finally lifted. From the moment she had awakened from her coma, something had felt amiss—the Psychic Gate incident during her journey back to the front lines definitely not helping in that matter.

Now, at last, she felt like her old self again.

Seizing this rare moment of solitude and relative lucidity, Thea decided to tackle some long-neglected administrative chores that had been repeatedly postponed amid the whirlwind of events following her coma.

She pulled up her System interface to review the accrued rewards from the past forty-eight hours.

[System]: *You have received 34 Contribution Points, 61 System Merit and 92 System Credits. (Combat)*

[System]: *You have received 8.45 Contribution Points, 13 System Merit and 29 System Credits. (Objectives)*

[System]: *You have received 49 Contribution Points, 72 System Merit and 106 System Credits. (Combat)*

[System]: *You have received 11 Contribution Points, 24 System Merit and 35 System Credits. (Objectives)*

[System]: *Meditation Focus has reached Level 3.*

[System]: *Inspect Target has reached Level 3.*

[System]: *Sky Step has reached Level 3.*

[System]: *Improved Sprint has reached Level 3.*

As she examined the rewards from the last two days, Thea noted with curiosity, *'No Mission rewards for the past couple of days... I wonder what the criteria are. It seems like only major engagements yield those bonuses, which is logical, I suppose.'*

Her eyes then moved to the experience rewards allocated to her Abilities.

*'The XP gains for my Abilities are impressive, to say the least. It looks like the points are either distributed evenly from a central pool or each Ability gets a fixed amount. Hard to tell at this point. What's crazy is **how much** of my Ability progression has come from these assessment rewards alone... Oh, that reminds me! I should prioritise unlocking that Gold-rank Ability so it can start levelling up through general experience in the upcoming engagements, along with my other Abilities.'*

With a quick mental command, she opened the corresponding [Accomplishment] interface and navigated towards her only Gold-rarity one and claimed the rewards while reading through the information provided by it.

[Unseen Death (Gold) Accomplishment]

Successfully neutralise over 20 enemies at least one Tier higher than yourself within 15 minutes, without being detected and without using area-of-effect Abilities or weapons.

Rewards:

- 1x Stealth- or Assassination-tagged Ability [Gold-rarity or below] (Claimed)
- 5,000 System Credits (Claimed)
- 500 System Merit (Claimed)

[Passive (Gold) - Detect Weak Spots - Level 0]

Requirements: 8 Perception, Line of Sight

Description: Allows the participant to identify vulnerabilities on a target upon focused observation for a certain duration. The time required for identification depends on the user's Perception Attribute and the clarity with which they can observe the target. Striking these vulnerabilities enhances the penetrative and destructive capabilities of the attack.

Base Identification Time: 5 second(s) - Perception Scaling: 10% - Enhancement Factor: x2.0

[System]: Do you want to accept this Ability or trade it in for: 1x Accomplishment-Store Passive Ability Voucher (Silver-rank or lower)?

Thea poured over the Ability description yet again, her excitement so palpable that she couldn't contain a soft, giddy chuckle.

'This Ability is completely overpowered, what the fuck,' she thought, shaking her head in disbelief.

For someone whose dominant Attribute was Perception, stumbling upon a Passive Ability that not only supercharged her capabilities but also scaled off her Perception felt like unearthing an ultra-rare treasure in a high-level dungeon.

Heavy armour had definitely been her main issue during the assessment so far.

The one time she absolutely *had* to deal with heavily-armoured foes during the first day of the assessment had forced her to rely on her Caliburn, a choice that had ultimately led to the loss of her right hand.

With [Detect Weak Spots], however, that dilemma would become a thing of the past. No more painstakingly scanning every inch of an enemy's armor to find a chink; this Ability would point it out for her.

Her existing Psychic Powers, which provided a sizable chunk of her precision and deadliness, similarly had their limitations.

Specifically, her strange short-term precognition powers could only forecast the efficacy of her attacks or whether her shots would make contact. Against armoured foes, the best it could do was confirm whether or not her shots would simply ricochet off the armour.

It didn't provide the detailed targeting information she needed to penetrate these robust defences or any like them.

She had attempted workarounds, using a technique of 'intending' akin to what she had instinctively started to employ to identify original Duplicators or the time she had navigated Strike One through the seeker-minefield.

But this technique required considerable mental focus and time—almost half a second—to conjure the right intent for her precognitive powers to kick in. As a result, she'd only managed to identify two weak points on one specific type of the Stellar Republic's heavy armour over the past two days—nowhere near enough to build a comprehensive understanding of their makeup and vulnerabilities for her sniping duties.

With [Detect Weak Spots], all of that would change in an instant.

Initially, pinpointing vulnerabilities might take some time, due to the Ability's activation time, but after identifying them once or twice for each type of heavy armour—or any other enigmatic defensive gear the Stellar Republic might throw at her—she would instinctively know where to aim in future encounters.

In a way, this Ability struck a chord with the gamer in her, particularly the part of her that relished fighting games. The new Ability felt like a built-in practice stage, akin to the elaborate test stage in her favourite game, 'Ashes of Centuries.'

That stage allowed players to dissect each character's movesets, frame-timings, and spatial dynamics. Now, she would have a similar toolset, but for discerning the weak points in any enemy's defensive gear!

Immediately, Thea mentally confirmed the prompt, accepting [Detect Weak Spots] as her very first Gold-rarity Ability with a giddy excitement spreading throughout her body.

'This is going to be absolutely amazing!'

To finish up her administrative duties, she quickly pulled up her full [Status], just to make sure nothing strange had happened over the last couple of days.

[Status, Attributes & Currencies]:

Thea McKay - Level 6.98 - Contribution Points: 520 / 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 Credits: 15,600
System Merit: 2,465

Finding nothing else noteworthy, and deliberately ignoring the peculiar changes in the Psychic line of her Status, Thea exited the interface and refocused on her immediate surroundings.

She lay cocooned in her bedroll, nestled within a modest dug-in inside one of the trenches that formed their current makeshift patrol base.

Calling it a 'base' might have been an overstatement, however.

It was more a labyrinth of approximately a dozen trenches, hastily excavated by Isabella and Lucas just the day before. The most distinctive feature of this rudimentary encampment was Corvus' command hole, which was like the nerve centre of the whole patrol.

Situated about a hundred metres away, as the drone flies, from Thea's dugout and the others' sleeping spaces, Corvus' station was strategically placed for rapid communication in case of emergencies.

Given Thea's high levels of Perception, she had grown used to the sporadic chatter and noise emanating from that hub over the last two days, whenever she retreated to her personal dug-out for some rest.

What caught her off guard this time, however, was the tone of Corvus' voice.

It was tinged with exasperation, a sentiment she rarely heard from the squad leader she had come to know primarily for his unflappable demeanour.

"Karanja, listen... I get where you're coming from, I really do. But we have our orders, and—"

His words were suddenly cut off by Karania's own voice, exasperated yet deliberately hushed as though holding back a scream. "The orders are fucking bullshit, Corvus! You know that as well as I do! Venn is just squandering lives by pushing the wing this hard. We have a deadline on this assessment, but this approach is needlessly reckless!"

Corvus' initial exasperation seemed to give way to a more measured, albeit weary tone. "Karanja, what's truly out of line here is your conduct. I understand that you have an aversion to the very notion of sacrificing even a single life that could otherwise be saved. But the Staff-Sergeant no longer has the privilege of prioritising that way... not in the current circumstances."

Hearing the subtle shift in Corvus' voice—a complex mix of concern and sheer exhaustion—Karanja, too, dialled down her emotional intensity. Her voice, which had been a boiling cauldron of emotion just moments before, assumed a more neutral, even-keeled tone. "What are you getting at? Has something happened that I should know about?"

The air was thick with tension, an emotional tinderbox waiting for a spark, and Thea found herself involuntarily holding her breath in her secluded dugout. She briefly toyed with the idea of stepping in, but swiftly ruled it out upon further reflection.

Interjecting would likely complicate matters rather than resolve them.

She was torn, in a sense.

On one hand, Karania was her friend, and her viewpoint was one that she would naturally want to support. On the other, Corvus was unequivocally right in the matter of following orders. They were marines, after all, and the chain of command wasn't a suggestion; it was an obligation for all of them.

Just as her thoughts began to drift, Corvus' voice broke through the silence again.

It was a voice that now carried the unmistakable weight of exhaustion, tinged with an undercurrent of concern. "Listen, Kara. What I'm about to say isn't classified per se, but it's not exactly public knowledge either. The last thing we need is widespread panic, got it? You're a medic, and I know you understand the importance of discretion. Treat this information accordingly, understand?"

There must have been a non-verbal nod or gesture from Karania, for Corvus continued speaking. Thea felt a momentary pang of guilt; eavesdropping on such a conversation felt like a violation of some unspoken ethical boundary. But the tantalising mystery of the situation held her captive, her curiosity too compelling to ignore.

She rationalised the moment to herself.

After all, she was merely lying in her bedroll, lost in her thoughts. She didn't choose to have acute Perception; she simply did. Overhearing a conversation she wasn't meant to hear was, in that sense, not entirely her fault, right?

"Three days ago, every single marine from the 'Monarch,' the Sovereign's sister-ship, went missing. Their bodies inside the DDS just dropped dead, lifeless. What's worse is that none of them have reappeared in the respawn bays. They're simply... gone."

The gravity of Corvus' revelation hung heavily in the air, a stifling weight that stifled even the slightest semblance of conversation. Thea felt as if the air had been sucked out of her dugout, her eyes widening in a mix of disbelief and horror.

The implications of this information were staggering.

Even without being an expert on the Deep-Dive System, she understood that only a few scenarios could explain such a phenomenon, and every single one was deeply unsettling.

Whether the disappearance was due to the Monarch's leadership making an inexplicable decision to disconnect their DDS servers, a catastrophic system malfunction severing their connection, or darker, more ominous possibilities such as sabotage or even outright assault on the Monarch itself, the potential explanations ran the gamut from dire to apocalyptic.

The mere idea that the Monarch could have been attacked, or worse, completely annihilated, sent an unsettling shiver spiralling down Thea's spine, giving life to a myriad of dreadful possibilities.

If the Monarch had indeed been assaulted mid-FTL travel, within the ostensibly secure borders of UHF territory, the implications were staggering. Could there be an advanced, hitherto unknown technology in enemy hands, one potent enough to reach deep into their space?

And if the unthinkable had occurred, if the Monarch—a sister-ship to the Sovereign, a veritable fortress of a transport ship in its own right, primarily focused on defences and transportation—had been completely obliterated to the point that the DDS shut off at once, what kind of apocalyptic firepower would be needed for such a feat?

More importantly, how could such an attack happen without even a whisper of forewarning?

No signs, no alerts, just a sudden, horrifying absence.

The questions bubbled up, each more disconcerting than the last, as she grappled with the potential scale of the disaster. It was apparent to Thea that she wasn't alone in grappling with the enormity of the situation; Karania too had sunk into a disquieting silence.

Thea became acutely aware of this when Karania finally broke her silence, her voice devoid of its usual energy, sounding hollowed out and almost deflated.

"They're all gone? Just vanished? What could possibly provoke something so drastic? The leadership wouldn't sever connections arbitrarily; the assessments are too critical for that."

Karania's observation resonated with Thea's own line of thought.

'She's absolutely right. There's no conceivable reason that leadership would disconnect an entire ship without a monumental justification,' Thea thought, her mind looping back to the grave importance of the quarterly assessments that had been instilled in them.

Not merely a way for higher-ups to evaluate the mettle of new recruits, these assessments held immense value for every participating marine. The Allbright System provided four unique instances annually where Participants could engage in mock exercises or simulations, while reaping a windfall of Credits, Merit, and CP, far beyond the standard rate.

More importantly, these were the only periods when Participants could safely unlock new Classes or upgrade existing ones without the high-stakes gamble of a live battlefield.

These scheduled opportunities were vitally important for the UHF in particular. The leadership had wisely coordinated these assessments with their own data-gathering, gaining invaluable insights into their marines' progress.

What better way to encourage peak performance than by dangling the most tantalising rewards?

Once you committed to such an assessment, enabled by the System's specific four-times-a-year mechanism, there was no turning back without severe repercussions. Missing one of these opportunities could be a significant setback in a marine's growth and potential.

There was no way the Monarch's leadership had made such a weighty decision lightly. The repercussions would stretch beyond a mere court-martial; it would be a scandal of galactic proportions.

Corvus' voice resurfaced, this time carrying a blend of gravitas and fatigue that underscored the urgency of the moment. "Look, Kara, I'm flying as blind as you are here. It's possible Venn's got intelligence we're not aware of. But what's not in dispute is this: We're down by thousands of marines. Vanished, just like that. It's thrown our whole strategy into disarray."

His tone shifted, steeling into something more resolute, as if anchoring himself to the only course of action left. "So listen up, we've got our marching orders, and there's no room for debate. This afternoon, towards the night-hours, we, along with the rest of the UHF forces, will initiate a full-scale assault on the city across the entire front. I suggest you catch whatever rest you can now; once the siege kicks off, sleep will be a luxury we can't afford."

Thea could almost hear him taking a deep breath before he continued, "Chances are we'll be summoned by Staff-Sergeant Venn in the middle of the chaos. We'll be infiltrating the city as part of our first official assignment in this assessment. Our mission is the same one presented pre-assessment by me: To neutralise as many of the five key strategic points as possible, allowing our main forces to breach the Stellar Republic's defences. Understood?"

His voice, previously tinged with a sense of exasperation and concern, now carried the undeniable weight of command. The situation might be fraught with uncertainties, but for Corvus, the path forward was clear.

A heavy exhale filled the air as Karania's voice came through, a mix of resignation and weariness. "Haa... This doesn't sit right with me, Corvus, but you're probably right. I appreciate you sharing this intel, despite... Well, everything. I'll try to get some rest. See you in the afternoon."

"Thank you, Kara. I owe you one. This assessment has been nothing short of gruelling for each of us," Corvus responded, his own fatigue evident in his words. Then, the conversation ceased, leaving a tangible sense of weightiness hanging in the air.

Thea tuned into the familiar cadence of footsteps shortly afterward. It was a sound she'd come to associate with her friends—each unique rhythm telling its own story. Today, Karania's steps seemed to carry an extra layer of heaviness as she passed by Thea's dugout, making her way to her own sleeping quarters for some much-needed rest.

The sound of her friend's footsteps seemed to echo long after she was gone, as if reflecting the gravity of their situation.

Thea lay awake in her dugout, her mind racing as she replayed the troubling conversation she had overheard between Karania and Corvus. Her fingers itched to take action, to do something—anything—that could relieve the building tension.

On one side of the mental tug-of-war, she considered going to Karania.

She wanted to offer a comforting presence, maybe help her friend process the disconcerting information they had just learned. Yet, a quiet inner voice advised restraint, suggesting that if Karania needed her, she'd seek her out.

Simultaneously, another part of her pondered visiting Corvus.

Given the upcoming assault planned for that afternoon, there would be ample scouting and preparatory tasks where her skills could be invaluable. However, that same inner voice whispered that Corvus would come to her if her specific expertise were needed.

Since her substantial misjudgment on her first day back on the frontlines—an error that earned her a well-deserved reprimand from Corvus—Thea had been practising a newfound deliberation. She had learned the hard way that acting on impulse could lead to problems, not just for her but for the whole squad.

She was sure that even James, if he were here, would've advised her to grow up and abandon the reckless tendency to follow her whims without due consideration, simply because those whims didn't directly contradict an order.

Thea could almost hear James' voice in her head, chiding her with his typical straightforwardness, "Lack of an order to avoid stupidity doesn't give you a free pass to act utterly stupid, missy."

After several minutes of internal struggle, Thea eventually resolved to heed her instincts and remain where she was. With a deep, steadying breath, she closed her eyes, compelling herself to rest and recharge for the impending afternoon assault—a conflict that promised to strain not just her physical stamina, but her emotional resilience as well.

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Around ten hours later, Thea found herself leading the rest of Sovereign Alpha once again, guiding the squad through a landscape that seemed almost eerily quiet given the tumultuous events that were soon to unfold. They moved in a northerly direction, catching only fleeting glimpses of the city's imposing silhouette through breaks in the treeline and canopy to their west.

It was as if the city were a brooding sentinel, partially concealed yet ever-present, lurking in the shadows of their peripheral vision.

In a calculated move designed to minimise resistance for their upcoming operation, their squad had been repositioned closer to the northernmost perimeter of the impending battleground. Their designated point of entry into the city was as distant as possible, without being problematic, from the main point of conflict, aiming to offer them the path of least resistance.

Just a short half-hour ago, squads from the 16th had relieved them from their patrol base, arriving with a vanguard of motorised vehicles from the UHF AD. This array of reinforcements had been slowly advancing behind them over the past several days, capitalising on the momentum of their unexpectedly smooth progress.

While Thea's primary concern was ensuring her squad reached their new location unscathed, scouting had become almost like a second skin to her over the past few days. This innate confidence had freed up mental space, making it impossible for her not to contemplate the looming conflict that lay ahead.

The sheer volume of marines and the heavy artillery provided by the UHF AD that had relieved them was a clear sign: The upcoming assault was going to be colossal in scale.

'If I thought the cube trial was insane, this first venture into Nova Tertius is shaping up to be nothing short of apocalyptic,' Thea mused. *'How can I even contribute in an environment like that? Picking off Duplicators here and there is one thing, but facing what could be an army of thousands...? I don't even have enough ammo for that.'*

It appeared she wasn't alone in grappling with the gravity of what lay ahead either; the usual undercurrent of quiet chatter on their squad comms during patrols had noticeably diminished during this change of location pre-assault.

Earlier, she had been somewhat relieved to find both Karania and Corvus returning to their usual selves after her second round of sleep—validating, in a way, her decision to stay put in that particular instance.

However, now that the stark reality of the imminent assault weighed heavily on everyone, she found herself wishing she had sought out some reassurance from either of them. Even a few words could have served as a balm for her mounting apprehension.

But alas, none of that truly mattered for now, as she primarily focused on getting them to their new position along the battlelines in one piece.

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After a laborious trek of over two hours through the dense and enigmatic Azure Forest, flanking the UHF's burgeoning battle formations, Sovereign Alpha finally arrived at their prescribed grid coordinates.

Situated towards the extreme northern boundary of the forthcoming warzone, they were roughly a kilometre from its outermost edge. According to Corvus, this strategic positioning would enable them a swift extraction route to their eventual entry point further north, once Staff-Sergeant Venn gave the go-ahead for the Alpha squads and auxiliary infiltration units to commence their separate missions.

As they settled in, Lucas and Isabella took to the task of fortifying their encampment.

With an uncanny blend of expertise and urgency, they began digging trenches, transforming the raw land into a defensible position at a remarkable speed.

While they did, an itch of curiosity began to gnaw at Thea.

The landscape that lay to the west—toward Nova Tertius—was one she would soon be intimately familiar with, likely drenched in sweat, blood, and the cacophony of battle.

She wasn't the only one consumed by this inquisitive urge, however.

Both Karania and, much to Thea's surprise, Desmond, seemed equally captivated.

Unable to quell their collective curiosity, Thea guided them through the gradually thinning expanse of the Azure Forest, inching closer to the obscured horizon that was Nova Tertius.

As they neared the final cluster of dense shrubs and tangled undergrowth, Thea felt a strange sensation wash over her.

It was as if she had stepped through an invisible curtain of charged air.

A tingling vibration pulsed from her feet, ascending her legs and radiating through her torso, arms, and finally to the crown of her head. For a moment, it seemed as though the very molecules of her being were aligning themselves, leaving her feeling both momentarily disoriented and acutely aware of her surroundings.

The sensation was neither uncomfortable nor comforting, but it resonated with a sense of altered reality, as if she had crossed an unmarked boundary into a separate domain of existence entirely.

Just as quickly as her hand instinctively reached up to signal "halt," Thea's senses sharpened to a razor's edge.

Her keen Perception shifted into overdrive, eyes scanning meticulously through the foliage, undergrowth, and shadowy patches between trees. Her ears seemed to catch the distant rustle of leaves and subtle stirrings of the forest, all while her intuition throbbed like a secondary radar.

Time felt stretched, as if granting her a few extra crucial seconds to make sense of any hidden dangers. Could it be a trap, an ambush, or some hidden surveillance system?

After what felt like an eternity but was likely just a minute or two, she cautiously retraced her steps, moving back away from the invisible threshold she had just crossed.

That same uncanny sensation enveloped her again, coursing through her body in the reverse order, as if unthreading a needle or rewinding a tape. She exhaled deeply, letting her heightened awareness gradually fade, even as her senses remained vigilant.

Taking soft, deliberate steps, she moved close to Karania, coming within mere inches of her ear.

Her whisper was as quiet as the falling of a feather, each word carefully chosen. "Kara, I felt something odd back there. A strange tingling, like a pulse that moved through me from my feet to my head. It was as if reality itself shifted for a split second. Be alert."

Karania's eyes narrowed thoughtfully, her mind visibly racing through explanations before settling on one. "SADD. It's the Stellar Republic's closest SADD, most likely," she finally said.

"While our own version usually doesn't affect us much when we pass through it, except for a quick marker on our interfaces, enemy-deployed SADDs have a way of giving you a slight warning when you're crossing its outermost edge. It's not harmful but designed to alert you that you've entered a protected zone, so you don't end up getting artillery-striked out of nowhere."

Thea nodded, the unease not entirely lifted but certainly lessened.

A thought tinged with relief flickered prominently through Thea's consciousness as she gestured for the group to resume their cautious advance toward the forest's edge, where they would catch their first glimpses of the enigmatic city of Nova Tertius.

'At least this wasn't another strange episode linked to my Psychic abilities,' she mused, silently grateful for a dilemma that could be understood and categorised, rather than yet another inexplicable mental enigma...