

Arc 1 - Chapter 109 - Overdue Answers

Thea awoke not long after her ordeal, her vision a blurry mess compounded by an absolutely splitting headache.

"Uuggghhh..." she groaned, struggling to right herself in her chair.

She had been half sprawled across the table she had previously shared with Zach, and as she moved, remnants of the shattered teacup underneath her tumbled off her armour.

"Welcome back," came a similarly strained voice from across the room.

Turning her head with effort, Thea saw Zach standing by a mirror, gingerly applying first-aid to his right hand. Each movement was punctuated by wincing and sharp intakes of breath.

"What... What happened?" Thea managed to ask, each word a struggle as the headache throbbed relentlessly, threatening to overwhelm her senses. "Fuck... My head's killing me..."

"Honestly, that's what I'd like to ask *you*," Zach replied, his voice tinged with disbelief and a light chuckle, though his face showed concern. "Just what the actual fuck happened in there? I've never seen anything escalate as horribly and quickly as this just did."

Thea attempted to piece together the events, but the moment she tried to recall the vivid details of her encounter after enhancing her Attributes, the headache intensified.

She suddenly felt a warm trickle from her nose.

"Ah, fuck!" She exclaimed, hastily cupping her hand under her nose, desperate for something to stem the flow and avoid making a mess in Zach's room.

Noticing her distress, Zach quickly finished bandaging his hand and walked over with a pack of tissues. Thea could now see his hand and forearm were wrapped in thick bandages.

"Here, take these," he said as he handed her the tissues, his movements careful and measured, reflecting the caution of someone who had just tended to his own wounds, "Take it easy, Thea."

Heavily, Zach sank into the chair opposite Thea with a defeated sigh, his gaze drifting over the broken shards of porcelain scattered across the table. His look was distant, almost lost, as if he was seeing far beyond the immediate chaos of their surroundings.

As Thea pressed the tissues against her nose to stem the heavy flow of blood, she gradually felt the pounding in her head begin to ease.

It seemed as though the blood loss was somehow flushing the triggering cause of her pain from her system. Yet, she still hesitated to probe too deeply into her recent memories; the physical backlash had been nearly overwhelming, and she knew she had narrowly escaped more severe consequences.

"I... I can't remember anything after I hit confirm... What happened after I did?" Thea asked, her voice low and fraught with concern as she glanced apprehensively at Zach's bandaged arm and hand.

Zach took a deep breath, steadying himself before he began to recount the events. "Well... The moment you confirmed, it was as if your Gate sensed an opportunity and expanded aggressively, like a starving animal finding a fresh corpse. I was hoping you'd manage to control it, but the surge of energy was so intense, I couldn't even be sure you were still alive. I've never witnessed anything like that," he explained, his tone sombre.

His eyes seemed to look through Thea, focused on some distant point as he spoke.

It was as though he was recalling a harrowing battle from his past, the memory leaving a deep and indelible mark on his psyche.

"And then...?" Thea prodded after a prolonged half-minute of silence, sensing that understanding the full account could help her avert similar crises in the future.

"Huh?" Zach looked up, momentarily disoriented, then quickly regained his focus. "Ah, right. What happened next."

He locked eyes with Thea, ensuring he was focused and prepared for what he was about to disclose. "I didn't hesitate to use the knockout injector. I had it at your neck less than a second after you hit confirm, but your Gate... To say that it was spiralling out of control would be putting it mildly. When I tried to inject you, it was like reality itself just... *paused* around you. About twenty centimetres around your head, everything just froze; like instantly. The injector turned useless—the liquid inside it froze solid and shattered the entire thing."

Zach managed a rueful smile as he concluded, "The headache's probably from me having to knock you over the head—that last resort I mentioned earlier. There wasn't time to think of another way, so I had to make a quick decision and slammed your head down on the table. I'm really sorry about that, but trust me when I say—"

"No worries. I really appreciate it. Much rather have a bit of a headache than deal with whatever psychic nightmare might have happened," Thea quickly interjected, not wanting Zach to feel guilty about his split-second decision. She would take a physical knock over the terror of her Awakening any day.

"I'm... I'm really sorry for all of this," she added, her voice tinged with defeat. "I tried my best to resist, I *really* did. I don't remember much, but I remember the feeling—I was fighting so, so hard to resist, but it felt like none of my efforts or desires even mattered... Like I was just walking into it without even pausing..."

Her words trailed off as she grappled with the helplessness she had felt, the profound disconnect between her intentions and the overwhelming force of her Gate.

When Thea had first sought out Zach, she felt hopeful that she was finally beginning to understand and perhaps gain some control over the volatile psychic aspect of herself, which had seemed like a ticking time bomb within her, ready to explode at any moment.

However, the recent ordeal with her Gate had abruptly dashed those hopes; she realised she was still far from grasping or controlling the psychic forces at play.

"Your wounds..." Thea began, her voice trailing off as she struggled to find the right words.

What could she say? A mere "I'm sorry" seemed inadequate for the gravity of the situation.

Although she hadn't caused the harm intentionally, it was evident that her uncontrolled powers had inflicted quite some significant damage on Zach.

"Hm?" Zach glanced down at his arm, then back at Thea. "Ah... yeah. My hand and arm were in the path when everything just *froze*, including them. My Resolve shielded me from the worst, but the injector exploded right in my hand, sending shards everywhere. I'll get it all fixed up after we finish here. Don't worry too much about it. These things happen."

Zach's response, aimed at reassuring her, did indeed help lighten Thea's emotional load. She could tell he was making an effort to keep the atmosphere light, and just knowing that he wasn't holding a grudge against her for the accident was comforting.

His pragmatic acceptance of the situation helped Thea feel slightly better, easing some of the guilt that weighed heavily on her.

"Thank you, Zach. I'm really, really sorry about all of this..." Thea sighed, her emotions mixed as she reflected on the day's tumultuous events. What had started as an opportunity for enlightenment and gaining control had paradoxically left her feeling even more confined and baffled.

"Again, don't worry about it," Zach dismissed her concerns with a wave of his uninjured hand and a reassuring smile. However, his expression soon turned contemplative, his brows knitting together as he pondered the situation. "I do wonder just what exactly happened, though. From everything I know, this kind of drastic enlargement of a Gate shouldn't happen with just a minor increase in Resolve from two or three points... Why was your situation so fucking intense...?"

Thea's attention sharpened at his words.

'What does he mean by two or three points...? I put in six,' she realised, replaying the events in her mind. A sudden clarity about the discrepancy in their understandings dawned on her.

"Two or three points?" Thea echoed, her confusion clear. "You mentioned it would be safe to put *all* my saved points in, so I did exactly that. I allocated six points each to Perception and Resolve. All of my saved up points from the last three levels, just as we discussed."

Zach's face contorted into an expression of sheer disbelief as he absorbed Thea's words.

"*Twelve* points? You had *twelve* fucking points saved up? *How?!'*" He blinked rapidly, the gears in his mind visibly turning as he tried to do the mental arithmetic. "But you're at Tier 0... how did you even manage to save that many without increasing any Attributes along the way and *also* unlock your Gate...?"

Thea simply watched as he stumbled through his thoughts, clearly struggling to align this new information with his understanding of how Attributes typically progressed. She didn't know how to help him, outside of saying "That's just how it happened", so she instead remained silent.

She didn't really get the whole unlock procedure for the Gate to begin with, as she remembered clearly that the Psychic Attribute was at around 30; it was even listed as such in her profile.

Zach's usual composure unravelled for a moment as he faced the enormity of what could have happened based on his advice.

Finally, Zach let out a long breath and facepalmed, a half-mad chuckle escaping him despite the gravity of the situation. "I completely underestimated you, didn't I?" he admitted, shaking his head in disbelief.

"I simply assumed 'all saved up points' meant just a few. Like a level at most, not twelve Emperor-damned points. That was stupid and reckless of me, *incredibly* reckless. I gave you dangerously incorrect advice based solely on assumptions..."

He looked up at Thea, sincerity etching his features. "I am sincerely sorry, Thea. It's my responsibility to ensure your safety, especially in matters like this. You came to me, asking for a mentor and instead, I almost got you killed because I didn't ask to clarify exactly what you meant by 'saved up points.' That's entirely on me..."

Thea opened her mouth to interject, perhaps to lessen the weight of his self-reproach, but Zach raised a hand, stopping her. "Please, let me finish. I'm the mentor here, and I failed to safeguard my pupil. That's not just a minor oversight; it's a fundamental breach of my duties as your guide. I promise you, this will be a lesson I take to heart."

Despite his stern admonition to himself, there was an underlying warmth in his voice, an earnest desire to make amends and ensure such a misunderstanding never jeopardised her, or anyone else's, safety ever again.

"At least this clears up one thing," Zach continued, managing a rueful smile despite the gravity of their discussion. "You never actually stood a chance against the Call of the Void, not with twelve points split between Perception and Resolve. We definitely should have handled this incrementally. From now on, let's agree to upgrade your Attributes piece-meal, okay? It's better to be safe than sorry, especially given the sheer volatility of your Gate..."

Thea nodded, absorbing his advice and feeling a tinge of relief.

It wasn't so much that she hadn't tried hard enough; it was more that she had never stood a chance to begin with from the very start. This realisation allowed a trace of her earlier optimism to return, warming her spirits slightly—as odd as it was to take a "you never had a chance" as a positive.

Yet, Zach's mention of a specific term caught her attention and sparked immediate curiosity.

"What's that 'Call of the Void' you mentioned? You mentioned it before this whole mess as well. And why didn't I stand a chance against it?" she asked directly, eager to understand more about the forces she was dealing with and to grasp why her encounter had escalated so dramatically.

Zach leaned back in his chair, his eyes momentarily lifting towards the ceiling as he gathered his thoughts. Thea mirrored his posture, leaning back as well, her eyes locked on him, ready to absorb every detail. She knew that understanding this aspect of her psychic abilities was crucial, so she braced herself to remember everything Zach was about to explain.

After a thoughtful pause, Zach began. "The 'Call of the Void' is a broad topic within the study of Psykers and the Psychic Phenomena as a whole. Normally, you'd delve into this during your official Psychic 101 classes, which I'm sure will be scheduled soon after this assessment—assuming the UHF's monitoring AIs aren't *completely* fucking cooked. But let me give you a simplified overview because it's vital for you to grasp at least the basics."

He shifted forward, his hands clasped in front of him, emphasising the importance of his words. "The 'Call of the Void'—or as it's been known historically, 'l'appel du vide,' 'high place phenomenon,' or 'vocatio inanis'—isn't exclusive to Psykers. It's a mental phenomenon that's been part of human consciousness for as long as we can remember. It manifests as an intrusive thought, urging you to do something profoundly dangerous that you normally wouldn't even begin to consider."

He used a vivid example to illustrate his point. "Imagine standing on the edge of a cliff. That's where it gets one of its names—the 'high place phenomenon.' The Call of the Void is that little voice in your head suggesting, '*Jump. You could do it. No one could stop you.*' Of course, you wouldn't actually *act* on it under normal circumstances, but the urge, the *thought*, it's there, whispering in your mind."

Zach leaned in, his voice taking on a more compelling tone as he delved deeper into the mysterious and eerie nature of the phenomenon. "For thousands of years, the 'Call of the Void' baffled everyone—no one could accurately pinpoint a cause... That is, until Psykers began to grow more potent, around two-to-three thousand years before the advent of the Allbright System. As more Gates awakened, reports of these inexplicable, dangerous impulses surged throughout human worlds. It became distinctly apparent that the emergence of the Psychic Phenomena was closely linked to these intrusive thoughts."

He paused for a moment, ensuring Thea was keeping up, then continued with an intensity that drew her in even further. "As it turned out, it wasn't just *random* thoughts intruding on our minds; rather, it was the very Void *itself*, echoing our darkest desires back at us. Over time, this connection became so apparent that people started referring to it as 'The Call of the Void' roughly a thousand years ago."

He leaned in closer, "For Psykers, however, 'The Call of the Void' takes on a different, *far* more sinister meaning. It's not just an odd, fleeting thought—it's an incredibly powerful, compelling force that we have to fight against at every turn."

His gaze further intensified, locking eyes with Thea to emphasise the gravity of what he was about to explain next.

"The Call of the Void is what will kill you," he stated flatly.

His declaration wasn't merely a warning; it was delivered as an unavoidable *truth*, a prophetic insight into the fate of every Psyker.

Taken aback by the grim turn of the discussion, Thea felt a chill run down her spine.

Just as she gathered enough of her thoughts to query further, perhaps to soften the harshness of his prediction or to seek some kind of reassurance, Zach continued with a sombre tone in his voice, without giving her a chance to speak.

"The stronger you become as a Psyker, the larger your Gate becomes, and the more influence you wield over the psychic energies that surround and inhabit us, the more insistent the Call of the Void will grow. It echoes your darkest desires, nudging you to surrender to those intrusive impulses, to 'let go' and allow the Void to assume control, to navigate whatever challenges you face. That's the real 'Call of the Void' as we Psykers understand it. It's our perpetual adversary, one that, in the end, *always* claims victory."

He clasped his hands together in front of him, his eyes dropping to his intertwined fingers, clearly wrestling with the weight of his next words.

"There have been *no* known Psykers who have died of natural causes, Thea," he revealed, his voice heavy with gravity.

Thea felt her blood freeze in her veins as his words sank in, each one landing like a lead weight in her stomach. His statement felt like a grim prophecy, sealing a fate she was only now beginning to comprehend.

"As you walk further down the path of a Psyker, investing in your Paths, your Inheritance, and the myriad unknowns that lie beyond both of our current understanding, of higher Tiers and Ranks... You're essentially signing your own death warrant. The life of a Psyker is invariably cut short. You might meet your end on the battlefield, with a bullet in your head, or elsewhere, overwhelmed by the Void and causing destruction that consumes not just you, but everything around you. But the one way you will *never* go out, is happily retired on some random UHF planet..."

Zach looked up from his hands, his expression earnest, willing her to understand not just the power, but the peril that came with her gifts. "This isn't to discourage you, but to prepare you. Understanding this is crucial—not just for harnessing your abilities, but for surviving them. Being a Psyker invariably means to forgo a happy ending. There won't be one. Consider this, before you go further down this path, Thea."

Plenty of things suddenly made a lot more sense to Thea, as she slowly internalised his grim words with a mounting sense of dread.

The strange thoughts she had during her Awakening; when she had seemingly shot and killed the random Marine that had talked to her and subsequently frozen the entire vehicle and everyone inside except her and Karania.

She also thought back to Professor Pierce's urgent warnings in her System 101 class, where he had passionately advised—no, *pleaded*—against anyone pursuing the path of a Psyker. His words, once oddly shrouded in an aura of overcaution, now echoed with a chilling clarity.

The scarcity of Psykers, despite the seemingly manageable requirements, suddenly made sense as well. Thea had often wondered why their numbers were so few, and now she understood one of the grim reasons behind it.

She also recalled how the aide in the command centre had spoken of Psykers—how they were treated with a reverence akin to heroes, deserving of every possible support. It was because each Psyker, by choosing this path, was effectively signing their own death warrant, committing themselves entirely to a perilous existence marked by sacrifice.

The realisation hit her with the force of a tidal wave: If what Zach said was factual, then there would be no happy ending for her.

No retirement. No long lived life. No family to grow old with.

She would face a painful and abrupt end, regardless of her future choices; the moment she deepened her investment in her Psychic side upon unlocking her Psychic Attribute, her fate was potentially sealed. However, given her recent harrowing experiences with the Gate, she figured that it might already be too late to alter this future altogether...

Zach gave Thea the space she needed to process everything, not initiating any further discussion. This gesture of quiet support allowed her to grapple with the daunting realities he had outlined, providing a semblance of comfort amid the bleak revelations.

It took several minutes for Thea to truly absorb the implications of their conversation, and when she finally raised her eyes to meet Zach's again, she saw them in a new light.

The UHF was pushing her to become a Psyker, for their own gain; to get data on the Psychic Classes available at the initial selection. But this wasn't really something Thea herself would have been pursuing as hard, especially knowing what she did now.

"Why did you decide to become a Psyker, knowing all this?" she asked, seeking insight into what might drive someone to embrace such a fate.

A rueful smile touched Zach's lips as he leaned back, the weight of her question hanging in the air. "I guess I'm a bit insane? All Psykers are, to some extent," he responded half-jokingly.

He chuckled, a sound more reflective than humorous, then continued, "When faced with the unknown, people generally respond in one of two ways: fight or flight. It's basic human instinct. We either run from it or challenge it head-on. But the Void presents a rare third choice; one that has never existed before for us as a species on such a fundamental level: To understand and harness.

"Not everyone is cut out to be a true Psyker. Sure, anyone can unlock their Gate and *technically* become one, but only a small fraction can truly make a meaningful impact as Psykers. Even fewer have the resolve to commit fully and become Battlefield Psykers. I

chose this path because, simply put, somebody had to. In my drive, I was the only one who decided to commit *fully*, to strive to become a Battlefield Psyker starting at Tier 2. The rest were content with maxing out at Psyker at most. But the UHF—and humanity, really—*needs* Battlefield Psykers. Without them, we'd be defenceless when the bubble pops. So, at the end of the day, it had to be done, and I was willing to do it. That's all there's to it, I guess..."

After sharing his thoughts, Zach fell silent, his last words lingering in a thoughtful silence that filled the room. Thea sensed the depth of his conviction and the personal cost of his choice.

She decided to give him the same space he had afforded her, a quiet respect for his introspection and the gravity of his life's choices.

After a few quiet minutes, Zach collected himself and turned his attention back to Thea.

"Sorry about that. I'm sure you have more questions, right? Let's tackle them so we can get back to the assessment."

"No need to apologise. I seriously appreciate everything you're doing for me," Thea responded sincerely.

Zach was the first person, aside from Valeria, who had taken the time to help her navigate the complexities of her Psychic abilities. Without their guidance, she would have been even more lost than she already felt.

Keen to learn more, however, Thea didn't hesitate to dive into another question at his prompt. "What's the difference between a Psyker and a Battlefield Psyker? It sounds crucial, but I don't really understand what sets them apart."

Zach appeared briefly surprised by her question but quickly recovered with a chuckle. "Of course, you wouldn't know. That's my oversight. My bad. It's usually covered in the System 101 lectures, but since you've just integrated, you wouldn't have covered that yet. I keep forgetting how new all of this is to you..."

He picked up a few pieces of the broken teacup from earlier, arranging them thoughtfully on the table as a visual aid. Pointing to the smallest shard, he began, "This represents a Psy Sensitive individual. Someone who has undergone their Awakening and unlocked their Psychic Attribute. They can sense other people's Gates when their own is sufficiently open, and they possess basic Psychic Powers like Telekinesis and the initial powers of their Path. You could almost be considered one, once you unlock the Attribute."

Moving to a significantly larger shard in the centre, he continued, "This is a Psyker. These individuals have progressed beyond the Psy Sensitive stage by further developing their Psychic Attribute and further embarking on a Path, sometimes even multiple Paths. Their psychic reservoir is *considerably* larger, and their potential for danger is significantly heightened as a result. These are the majority of "Psyker"-type enemies you will end up facing out there."

Zach concluded his explanation by gesturing toward the largest piece of the broken teacup, which was almost half the cup itself. "This," he said, "represents a Battlefield Psyker. These individuals have completely dedicated themselves to becoming psychic powerhouses for the

UHF—or for humanity at large. They meet all the requirements of a Psyker but go even further, choosing a complementary Psychic Class from the Albright System itself.

“These Psychic Classes act as force multipliers, essentially. They don't all turn you into a traditional 'mage'-type, hurling mind-bolts or anything, but they significantly enhance your capabilities as a Psyker overall. Battlefield Psykers represent the zenith of Psychic potential. They are the most dangerous presences on any battlefield, often even regarded as Aces, regardless of whether they out-Tier other combatants around.”

With a dramatic flick, Zach sent the large piece skimming across the room, catching Thea off guard. “However,” he continued, his tone sobering, “such power comes at a steep cost. There is no combination of choices you can make, nothing more likely to draw you closer to succumbing to the Call of the Void than becoming a Battlefield Psyker. They burn bright and fast—you know the saying about the brightest candles.”

Thea digested the information and filed them away as imperatively important to communicate to the rest of the Squad. Being able to more accurately differentiate between potential dangers based on the naming scheme of Psykers, considering their recent experience with them, was going to be crucial.

Yet, a pressing question lingered, urging her to seek further clarity. “How do I defend against the Call of the Void?” she asked earnestly. “If it's such an omnipresent threat, how can some Battlefield Psykers manage to survive for decades, or even centuries, while actively participating in the war? How do we keep it at bay, constantly looming over us like that? There's gotta be a way, right?”

A toothy smile played over Zach's face, as he prepared his answer...