

Volume 2 - Chapter 56 - Melting

“Humanity’s greatest asset is oft debated.

“It is in our nature to consider why and how we ended up being in the position that we are in, for the debate has been raging for thousands upon thousands of years.

“A lot of philosophers across time have argued that adaptability is our greatest asset. The ability to keep rolling with the punches until we’re back on our feet or die trying.

“Some have argued that it is not adaptability, but bravery, that is our greatest asset. The ability for us to look death in the face and overcome the most basic, primal instincts of fear and terror.

“Others again claim tool usage as our greatest asset. The ability to pick up different objects, use them for entirely alien purposes when compared to other animals. A stick, no longer just a random part of the environment, but a weapon, a staff to assist in wandering, an extension of your own hands.

“Frankly, none of these are the whole truth. They are merely fanciful lies, that we tell ourselves to make us seem more than what we are. More than simply advanced animals; something *more*.

“But therein truly lies our greatest asset: The ability to lie.

“Not to each other, but to ourselves.

“Many animals have the capacity for deceiving each other in one form or another, but only humanity has mastered this to a degree that we are capable of lying to *ourselves*. To discard the very truths our eyes, ears and mind are telling us, in order to replace it with an entirely different narrative.

“The most common of all narratives we like to lie to ourselves about, is that of the “other”.

“Once upon a time, it was a truth, which makes the lie all the easier to fester in our minds. When we were nothing but tribal groups of hunters and gatherers, the “other” was an important tool in our arsenal to stave off surprise attacks, disease and similarly catastrophic outcomes.

“But we have long left our tribal heritage behind, yet the “other” is one thing that remains, for it is so incredibly useful to lie to ourselves about.

“Despite the evidence of our eyes and ears that the person that looks like me, speaks like me and has the same fundamental buildup as me, is inherently “other”.

“It is the first thing that any military teaches, even before blind obedience: Make the enemy into the “other” so your own conscience is free of guilt.

“For we are so unbelievably capable in the deceit of our own thoughts, that we can truly make ourselves believe anything, given the right incentive.

“The lie that the words spoken could not possibly be true.

“The lie that the very truths in front of our eyes are merely fabricated.

“The lie that there will be reinforcements on the collapsing front, despite logic dictating there can’t possibly be any.

“Many of the things often attributed to other emotions—disbelief, trust and hope—are merely consequences of this one, greatest asset in our arsenal: Self-inflicted lies.

“Knowledge of this greatest asset, in itself, does not prevent its existence either, for it is so insidious that we can even lie to ourselves about the very nature of the lies themselves.

“That they are necessary. They have a purpose. They are not meant to harm.

“But, fundamentally, they are still simply that: Lies.

“When you call them the “other”, the Freaks, the Undead, the Cultists, the Cancer, the Fairies... You are doing nothing but lying to yourself, that they are somehow different from yourself. That they are not, inherently, the same type of human that you are.

“The knowledge of this is not meant to curb the Galactic War, but merely a reminder of the greater things at stake, that beyond everything happening across this little galaxy of ours, the universe is a large place.

“Yet despite knowing all of this, there is one fundamental truth to be found as well: The War needs to continue until the end; the machine needs to keep churning; the “other” needs to die.

“For all the truths inherent, that is and will always remain simply part of our greatest asset: The Lie.”

—

[Grayson Holund Sairfax – "Humanity's Greatest Asset", PFC712]

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PoV: Corporal Malicia Cintera Plasst

Eyeing the state of her squad as she slid yet another magazine into her battered rifle, Malicia felt a sharp pulse of regret.

‘If only I’d bartered for a Defensive Heavy, we wouldn’t be in this Emperor-damned mess,’ she thought, staring helplessly at the two Marines bleeding out on the trench floor.

Pak and Rallis were only clinging to life because of the one good decision she *had* made during squad formation.

Indra Quelch.

A Squad Medic so competent it bordered on unnerving—steady hands, sharp eyes, and absolutely zero hesitation when it came to making decisions on how to fix her Marines up.

Malicia had snagged Indra the moment she stepped into the locker area at the start of the Digital Mission, her gut instinct screaming that she'd found the strongest medic in the entire lineup.

She'd been right.

Indra was the only reason the squad wasn't already down to just a skeleton crew.

But no one—*no one*—could have predicted this DM would be one of the dreaded upscaled variants.

*'If it had been literally **any** other type of mission getting upscaled, we'd be fine, Emperor damn it...'*

Her plan had been solid.

A heavy-hitting squad built around raw force: Multiple Offensive Heavies—one of them even a Specialized Assault type!—a high-tier Squad Medic, and herself acting as spotter and leader.

It had worked flawlessly for dozens of past DMs, netting her multiple MVP Squad wins with lineups exactly like this.

But here and now? That same composition was the reason everything had gone straight to the Void the second the Hold-The-Line parameters appeared.

'Upscaled Hold-The-Line against the Stellar Republic is a nightmare no matter what squad you run,' she thought grimly, edging closer to the firing slit to gauge how heavy the incoming return fire was before daring to peek.

The Stellar Republic troops had locked onto their position long ago.

The moment they'd counter-fired on the enemy Offensive Heavy teams—right after that unholy laser-gatling incident and Platoon Leader Kalt's all-fire order—they'd painted a massive target on themselves.

'And without a Defensive Heavy, we can't hold any alcove for long. Once the plating outside the embrasure gets chewed through, we move again or we die...'

The only sliver of hope she had left was Platoon Leader Kalt's recent transmission: A Battlefield Ace was soon being deployed.

*'Where in the Emperor's name did he even **find** one? It's definitely not the pretty boy all the Squad Leaders were swooning over—he's Support-type, totally wrong for the role of a Battlefield Ace for this scenario... So one of the other three MVMs then... But how? Did they*

just walk up after realizing the front was collapsing? Why now, after we already lost the first line? Why not earlier...?

There were too many questions, and absolutely no time to think about any of them.

The Stellar Republic was pushing their line harder by the second.

A quick glance through the slit confirmed the worsening situation—rolling smoke screens were creeping across no-man’s-land, thicker and thicker, drowning the battlefield in black-gray to combat the red glow of the flares lighting up the night sky.

A sure sign the UHF casualty rate had spiked high enough for the Republic to start prepping for yet another attempt at a close-quarters push.

“Sweepers, now!” Malicia snapped into squad comms.

The last two standing Marines—Felice and Naro—instantly ducked down behind the embrasures, swapping their rifles for the Sweepers stored at their feet.

The Sweepers were UHF-issued, the same way they would be on real battlefields—not flashy or powerful weapons, but essential ones.

Designed to blast out concentrated bursts of force and compressed air, they cleared smoke, gas, particulates, chemical aerosols—anything meant to blind or suffocate the defenders.

Every second or third squad in a platoon got assigned Sweepers at random, and today, Malicia’s squad had been one of the “lucky” ones.

That meant it was their responsibility to keep their section of the trenchline clear. If they failed, the squads to either side of them would lose line-of-sight and the whole line would start collapsing inwards.

They had been doing this since the opening minutes of the battle, keeping the air clear every time the Stellar Republic tried to flood the trenches with smoke.

The pattern was always the same: The Republic threw smoke only when they were probing for a close-quarters push.

Even with their Void-rotten Duplication Trait, their soldiers still had to stop firing to pull the canisters and throw them—or shoot them from an underbarrel launcher—and wasting too many for no gain was pointless.

But as casualties mounted and UHF sweepers went down, the enemy kept trying again and again—waiting for the moment when there simply weren’t enough Sweepers capable of being wielded to hold back the wave.

‘And that moment’s coming fast, Kalt...’ Malicia thought, jaw tight. *‘We need your Battlefield Ace to do something big—and soon. We’re **drowning** out here.’*

She risked a glance over the embrasure and fired semi-blindly down-range in their general direction.

The Stellar Republic forces were still two-hundred meters out—too far to see their eyes through their visors but definitely close enough to feel the mounting pressure.

Two hundred meters wasn't safety. It was practically nothing.

At their enhanced speeds, that was *seconds* at best. Practically fall-back distance already.

Standard UHF trench setups spaced their main lines five hundred meters apart, with fallback lines only one-fifty to one-twenty-five meters out.

Malicia kept low, peering briefly through her magnified optic as her rifle barked in sharp, controlled bursts, bullets cutting into the advancing tide.

The Sweepers started firing beside her, sending concussive waves rumbling through the alcove. The blasts rattled her ribs, the shock shivering through her bones in those all-too-familiar pulses as Felice and Naro swept the smoke and canisters away from their immediate surroundings.

Almost immediately, as expected, the Stellar Republic's return fire intensified, a brutal surge of focused shots aimed straight at the sweepers.

They always tried to kill the Sweeper teams first and foremost.

Malicia hated smart opponents like that.

It was downright unfair that the enemy got to use their brains too.

After all, basic trench doctrine was simple: If the smoke held, the trench would fall.

So Malicia focused her fire on the densest clusters of enemy shots, trying to draw heat away from Felice and Nato. But alone, with only her rifle to work with and no Defensive Heavy to additionally bolster the line, her suppressive fire barely made a dent.

Her gun gave that familiar, hollow click very quickly—yet another magazine running dry.

She ducked immediately, slamming her back against the inner wall of the alcove.

"Break!" she snapped into squad comms.

Felice and Nato dropped at once, clearing the embrasures and making their alcove appear empty from the enemy's vantage.

This was the rhythm of Sweeper squads—the push and pull of attention, taking the enemy's focus for a heartbeat, then vanishing before the return fire erased you.

Over and over.

Until you couldn't anymore.

Malicia watched as Felice placed both armored gauntlets against the packed dirt of the embrasure wall.

A faint ripple pulsed out from her hands, spreading through the earth like a slow breath.

One of the few pleasant surprises from squad assignment: Felice wasn't just an Offensive Heavy. She had a Combat Engineering Specialization.

Her build wasn't designed just to break things—it was also designed to *create* and *hold* them together as well.

The Ability she was using now wasn't flashy, but Malicia had rapidly learned to appreciate it.

Some kind of analytical reinforcement reading—the kind that told you exactly how close your cover was to collapsing. Felice had done it back in the first trenchline too, saving Malicia from having to eyeball structural failure on her own.

“About thirty percent left,” Felice reported. She set the Sweeper aside and scooped her heavy machine gun back into her arms with practiced ease. “Two more, maybe three. But I'd recommend we move after the next one. If they land anything explosive, we're done for.”

Malicia gave a wordless click of acknowledgment over comms.

‘One more round, then we shift alcoves. They've already shown they'll happily throw explosives the second they think they've pinned down an annoying part of our trenchline, like with that laser-gatling...’

The fire from the Stellar Republic's lines tapered off over the next minute or so, shots thinning until only scattered bursts cracked across the no-man's-land.

Malicia and her squad stayed low, catching their breath, swapping out magazines, and steadying their hands for whatever came next.

The brief quiet felt thin—like stretched wire ready to snap.

She leaned back toward the firing slit after a minute, just enough to get a sense of the battlefield and decide whether they needed to sweep again—

—when the Priority Command Channel crackled to life for the third time this mission.

Her heart skipped a beat at the sound.

“This is a priority notice for all Marines,” she heard the Platoon Leader say, his deep-set voice ringing in every Marine's ear across the entire battlefield. “Squad designation Alpha has now been deployed to the battlefield. To all of you: Kill the Freaks with everything you got. That is all.”

When the comms cut, the familiar surge hit her—Sergeant Kalt's platoon-wide Ability flooding the alcove like a shot of ice and fire.

The energy tightened her muscles, focus sharpening to a blade as her Attributes soared.

Her eyes snapped to Felice and Nato; both were frozen for a heartbeat just like she was, faces behind their visors hardening at the expected but somehow still unexpected words.

Her eyes went to Indra.

Indra's hands had paused over Pak's wound for a moment, then she reached instead for the nearest rifle, sliding a fresh magazine home with a quiet, practiced click as she stepped up beside Malicia.

There was no uncertainty in any UHF Marine's mind now.

The meaning of the announcement was simple and absolute: All hands on deck.

A Battlefield Ace would need cover to do their work, and cover was something you bought with bullets, sweat, and, if it came to it, blood and bodies.

"Let's fucking kill them all!" Malicia barked into squad comms, the adrenaline from the Ace deployment announcement and Kalt's buff turning the words into a physical thing in her chest.

"For the UHF!" Felice answered, bracing her heavy machine gun on the embrasure and opening up, hot bullet streaks carving into the cold night.

"For the Emperor!" Nato cried, shoulder slamming the grenade launcher as it spat a chain of explosions into the advancing mass, shredding the midline of the Republic's front-most push.

Indra said nothing—just braced her rifle and fired, each shot precise and unhesitating, her motions calm in a way that somehow made the chaos feel even louder.

Their combined fire tore into the advancing tide, and Malicia saw the front of the Stellar Republic's push buckle almost instantly under the sudden, utterly vicious surge of UHF fire.

Pride swelled hot in her chest.

The entire trenchline had come alive—guns roaring, grenade launchers thudding, the last remaining fortified machine gun nests cycling back into full-auto fire, every Marine who could hold a weapon pouring everything they had into the open field.

No one paced their shots. No one cared about saving ammunition for later.

There *was no later* in moments like this.

Such was the doctrine when a Battlefield Ace entered the field.

You gave them the world on a platter of suppressive fire—forced the enemy to pick between shooting back or ducking for cover, buying the Ace seconds of freedom—and dared the Stellar Republic to turn their backs toward the one person they *couldn't* afford to ignore.

And then, as if in answer to all those bullets and shouted prayers, the night ahead of them burst into neon-crimson.

A flood of laser-fire lanced out from the eastern-most section of the trenchline—not scattered, not sporadic, but a sweeping, continuous torrent, like someone had drawn a burning line across the battlefield with a ruler.

For a breathless heartbeat, it looked like a single solid beam, carving into the enemy's ranks.

Then the glow vanished, plunging everything back into the familiar, flare-illuminated night that now looked downright dark by comparison.

Malicia's eyes widened—delight and cold, unadulterated terror threading through her chest all at once—as she watched more than half a Platoon's worth of Stellar Republic Soldiers drop where they stood. The entire eastern front of the Republic's push simply *collapsed*, bodies sagging like wheat being cut down in a field.

Two heavier beams followed—a pair of sharp, cannon-like bursts—slamming directly into two Defensive Heavies who had begun to shift their shields to cover the breach.

Their armour didn't even have time to blacken.

They were just *gone*; their upper bodies completely vaporized by the laser cannon.

'So the laser-gatling is the Battlefield Ace and they got themselves a laser cannon Offensive Heavy to boot...' Malicia realized, lips curling into a sharp, humorless grin. *'No wonder they went quiet after the rocket barrage. They must've sprinted straight to Kalt for support so they wouldn't almost get turned into paste again, the next time they fired.'*

She slammed in a fresh magazine and rose back up to the embrasure, firing into the momentarily stalled enemy advance—the first stall she'd seen in what felt like hours.

'We can win this...! If the Ace keeps going—'

Her thought was cut off as neon-crimson washed across the battlefield again—another harvest, another scythe stroke. Soldiers dropped in swaths once more, another section of the Stellar Republic's push simply crumpling into nothingness.

A hungry grin tore across her face.

*'That's fucking insane... I've never actually **seen** a Battlefield Ace before—but... I get it now. I get all of it. The doctrine now makes perfect sense. Emperor above, I will never doubt the damn Doctrine again, I swear...'*

Two more, smaller sweeps followed before the Stellar Republic's Soldiers finally managed to hunker down and throw up overlapping shields and fortified cover, reinforcing their eastern flank to stem the bleeding.

Just in time for the command channel to click back on—breaking the long, heavy silence that had followed Kalt's earlier announcement on the priority command channel.

A young woman's voice came through and Malicia couldn't stop the grin that spread across her face at the words she heard. The Stellar Republic's frantic attempt to reinforce the eastern flank had just been rendered utterly pointless—the *UHF* would win this.

"Alpha, moving."

—

The sound of her own heavy breathing was the only thing Thea could hear as she dropped another spent capacitor magazine to the floor, the almost-empty casing clattering against the growing pile at her feet.

She reached into the ammo pouch again, slotting in a fresh capacitor and coolant canister with practiced movements, then lifted the Gram back to her shoulder and aimed out toward the front.

The night had only grown darker.

Flares were fewer now, rising slower and burning shorter, as fewer hands remained to launch them. Every passing minute meant more dead on both sides.

This was the fifth alcove Thea and what remained of Alpha had cycled through.

They had lost almost half the squad in the last hour—their sole Offensive Heavy, one of the two Defensive ones, and one of their Medics—gone to the constant pressure of fire, rockets, and attrition.

Their path had taken them from the far eastern flank, then two alcoves toward center, then out of the trenches entirely for a single push to draw fire away from the collapsing trench line.

It had worked—but the cost had been steep.

Hinder, the Medium-type Offensive Heavy, cut down outside the trenches.

Quent, the Medic, taken seconds later trying to drag him back.

And Lantr—the second Defensive Heavy—killed during their stop in W12 when the Stellar Republic finally got a clean read on their position and buried the entire alcove in rockets.

If Lantr hadn't held the front to the very last second before the final round of blasts brought down the entire alcove on their heads, there wouldn't have been an Alpha left to save.

Ruri—the final Defensive Heavy—was killed by a stray shot that perfectly managed to hit her in *just* the perfectly wrong part of the armour.

A freak accident, one-in-a-billion shot, just minutes ago.

Now it was just Thea, Chester and Dan, the only remaining Medic besides Chester.

Dan had told her only minutes ago that he was nearly dry on Focus.

Thea had pushed every drop as far as it could go.

She knew she'd wasted time earlier—testing weapons, pacing herself, treating the DM like it was just another practice run. If she'd realized sooner what an upscaled Hold-the-Line against the Stellar Republic *truly* meant, she would've saved the testing for another mission.

But hindsight wasn't worth anything right now.

Somehow, against the impossible odds, her work as a Battlefield Ace had stopped the Stellar Republic's advance. Not moved them back—just stopped. And the UHF's second trench line was held together by threads thinner than the pockets of smoke cover hanging in the air.

If she stopped pushing, even for a minute, the entire line would collapse.

The only thing keeping the Stellar Republic at bay now was her beyond-hoarse voice, her sore trigger finger, and the burning strain inside her head of repeatedly tearing open the future with [Glimpse].

Her nanobots swarmed out again—far fewer now, the swarm looking thin and ragged after the catastrophe at W12—to amplify what little strength was left in her voice. She drew in a breath that felt like it scraped against the inside of her throat.

“[GLIMPSE]!”

The world washed into monochrome.

The now-familiar pressure slammed into her mind as she forced every angle, every target, every movement into memory.

Shot placements. Armor seams. Timing. Positions of cover. Return fire vectors.

Everything.

Then the vision shattered, as always, and reality rushed back.

She fired exactly where she remembered—just as she had seen herself do—cutting into the Stellar Republic's ranks once more, another jagged tear in their endless tide of bodies. A few moments of work, a dozen kills, maybe more.

It didn't matter.

It never felt like enough.

Automatically, she flicked open her [Resources] Interface.

[Resources]

Focus: 95 / 225

Enough for a few more uses. Barely.

She pushed herself to the left side of the alcove as counterfire started hammering into their position again—louder this time, closer, sharper.

Her legs wobbled as she moved.

She hadn't noticed when they stopped responding properly.

It was like moving through water that thickened by the second.

'My legs are starting to give, huh...?' The thought came slow and syrup-thick, dragged out of a mind running on fumes, not really pulling any consequences with it.

She leaned her weight against the wall to stay upright—only to immediately feel the familiar hand plant itself firmly on her back for the [Focus Link]

Before she could even think to activate another [Glimpse], however, she was abruptly grabbed and spun—hard.

Chester's face filled her vision, the medic looking exhausted and thoroughly concerned.

His hands were moving, his mouth was open—he was saying something—but her ears just hummed. The world was muffled, like someone had stuffed cotton into her entire head.

'What is he saying...?'

Her first instinct was to check her helmet. Not cracked.

Comms were still active. No damage warnings.

And yet... there was only silence.

She tried to pull away—there were still Duplicators to kill, there were still shots to align—but Chester's grip tightened, surprising in its strength. His eyes hardened.

The look said enough: Stop.

Remembering Kara's lessons—*don't fight your medic*—Thea stopped resisting and let him push her down into a seated position against the left wall, just outside the firing line.

The world tilted slightly when she settled.

Her arms felt weightless and heavy at the same time.

Her helmet came off with a sharp click just moments later—the Medic override forcing the lock open—cool air hitting her sweat-drenched skin. Chester's hands moved from her skull to her jaw, to the back of her neck, to her temple—checking for... *something*.

Something obvious. Something *wrong*.

His glove came off without her even noticing. Cold skin touched her forehead—

—and he jerked back instantly, eyes going wide, face draining of all color.

“Thea! What the fuck?!”

She heard him scream—but the sound felt distant, warped, like it came from behind a wall.

She blinked up at him, slow, confused.

Everything hurt. Everything was loud. And yet she couldn’t hear anything at all.

She felt something drip down her chin and tried to look down to see what it was—only to realize, after several long moments of confusion, that she *couldn’t* actually look at her own chin.

Eyes simply didn’t work that way.

She lifted an arm to touch her nose, but Chester immediately pushed her hands back down, firm and unyielding. Dan dropped to a knee beside them, several injectors already in hand.

‘What are those for...? Is Chester hurt...?’

Her gaze moved over him, checking for wounds.

Aside from bruises, cuts, and the layer of dust and grime covering him, he seemed fine. No bleeding. No burns.

So why—

She didn’t know when it happened, but there was suddenly an injector in her neck.

Chester and Dan were arguing—fast, clipped words—while Chester tore into his pack and Dan swapped injectors again, replacing the one he’d just emptied.

‘Wait... am I hurt?’

The realization came slowly, seeping in like cold water beneath a door.

She tried again to look down at herself, but her eyes wouldn’t leave the center of her vision.

Her own body felt... distant. Wrong. Blurred at the edges.

Then, as more injectors stabbed into her skin and the argument beside her escalated, sound finally began to sharpen again, cutting back through the fog.

“—she’s going to *die* if we don’t cool her down somehow!” Chester’s voice, sharp and frantic, finally cut through the haze.

“Can we crack a coolant mag and use that?” Dan asked, gesturing toward the magazine pack at her waist.

“Not unless you *want* to kill her,” Chester snapped. “That’ll drop the temperature too fast, if it doesn’t just blow up entirely. Emperor—dammit, I *knew* I should’ve brought the other kit!”

He swore again, low and vicious, then leaned close—practically nose-to-nose with her—checking her pupils.

He only flinched once. Barely.

“Thea,” he said, voice steadying into something controlled. “Can you hear me?”

She nodded. Slowly. Her head felt as heavy as her entire body combined.

He exhaled in relief—only for his expression to harden again.

“You’re killing yourself, Thea. You’re not Overdrawing—thank the Emperor for that—but you’re *overheating*. Your brain is *literally* cooking. It’s already been damaged—we managed to repair some of it with regeneration injectors—but if we don’t cool you down, you’ll *do it again* in mere minutes. Do you understand?”

She nodded again—slow, heavy—her mouth refusing to shape even a single word.

“We’re working on it, alright? Just stay with us,” Chester said, tone gentler now, though the strain behind it was obvious.

He didn’t wait for her response.

He turned immediately back to Dan, their voices dropping to low, urgent murmurs as they began rifling through packs, arguing quietly over whatever few options they had left. Neither of them had brought anything against heat, as the mission hadn’t seemed like one where it would be necessary, Thea learned from overhearing their discussion.

Her thoughts dragged, thick and heavy, like someone had poured tar through the inside of her skull. She tried to think—*really* tried—but every time she caught a thread of an idea, it slipped, broke, or simply vanished into blank nothing.

She stared at Chester’s hands, moving fast. Dan’s mouth, moving faster. Their voices were muffled, like she was listening from underwater.

Sometimes she forgot what she was trying to remember halfway through remembering it.

Sometimes she forgot she was even *thinking*.

Her head tipped forward, then back.

‘...*why... why is this happening...*’

The thought flickered, dim and fading.

Then Chester’s voice—echoing—replayed in her head, ‘*You’re cooking yourself. Your brain is overheating.*’

'Overheating, right.'

She needed to cool down. Cool down.

Cool down.

Her mind stalled again. Blank and silent.

Then, slowly—like someone restarting an ancient machine—her thoughts lurched back into place.

Cool down.

But the coolant mags were a no. Chester had said no. No coolant.

No... *something*.

She couldn't remember the details—but "no" stuck.

So... something else. Something she *could* do.

Blankness again.

Then a voice—smug, sly, familiar—curled through the fog of her skull.

*"That frost crawling beneath our skin, that chill radiating outward when you strain yourself? That isn't mine, darling. That's **yours**."*

Thea blinked.

Slow and hard, as she tried her best to hold onto the thought that was trying to form.

'Ice.'

Her mind latched onto the word. Held it. Didn't let go.

She was an Ice-based Psyker.

Obviously.

There had never been a doubt. Everyone knew that. *She* knew that.

She was overheating—so she *just* needed to use her powers to cool herself down.

The solution was perfect.

Beautiful. Obvious. Simple.

She reached inwards, searching for the cold she had always known was there.

She was Ice.
Of course she was Ice.
She had *always been* Ice.

How could she possibly forget?

She had never looked for the cold before—she didn't have to.

She knew where it was by instinct alone.

She reached inward, toward that quiet, frost-tinged place behind her Gate, and let a sliver of it bleed through. A thin puff of condensation escaped her lips, barely visible in the dim pulsing reds of flare-light outside.

'Just cool myself down,' she thought, sluggish but intent, letting more of the cold seep in and pushing it toward her skull.

Dan's and Chester's voices started to sharpen, like someone was slowly tuning a radio into the right frequency. Her thoughts, thick and slow moments ago, began to thread together again—clearer and faster by second.

'Wait... What am I doing?'

Sudden clarity snapped back in like a rubber band.

'My Gate is acting... weird. What is this cold? What the fuck am I doing?!'

She shut the flow off immediately, muscles trembling as the last wave of cold crawled through her. The memory of the fog, the confusion, the blank spaces, pressed into her mind in delayed realization.

*'I overheated... so I cooled myself down? I can do that? Since fucking **when**?'*

Confusion was definitely the dominant force in her skull—but also the understanding that sitting here like a lump in the middle of an active battlefield was a very bad idea.

"Hey. Uh—guys?" she croaked out. Her voice was rough, sandpapered raw from the screaming. But loud enough.

Both Dan and Chester jerked their heads toward her like startled animals.

"Thea?!" Chester tore toward her, pressing a bare hand to her forehead—only to recoil slightly. "What the—you're freezing. Why the fuck are you *freezing*? What happened?"

He shot a questioning look at Dan, who quickly shook his head—no, he wasn't responsible for any of this.

"I... figured it out, I think," Thea said slowly, lifting her hand to her face. When she pulled it away, her palm was smeared with translucent, half-frozen snot. "I cooled myself down."

She blinked at her hand. "Guess I really did cook myself, huh."

Chester and Dan stared at her like she had just clawed her way out of her own grave.

“Thea—I— what?” Chester stammered, words failing him entirely.

Dan, somehow managing to keep it together better, swallowed hard and explained, “Thea, you were *dying*. Your core temp was pushing above forty-five degrees. That’s not just ‘this is gonna hurt’ territory—that’s *brain-death* territory. Actual neural death. We kept you alive with regen injectors, but without cooling you would’ve just... melted yourself again.”

“Oof.” Thea grimaced. “That does sound pretty bad. Any idea what caused it? Did I get hit by something? I can’t really remember the last... hour, maybe?”

“That’s because your *brain cells died*, Thea,” Chester answered, voice clipped and evidently controlled. “Short-term memory is nothing but tissue. Tissue you *literally* burned. The regenerators will repair *most* of it now that your temp’s back down—but that time is gone. You’re not getting it back.”

He exhaled, jaw working as he held back frustration and worry.

“As for why it happened... if I had to guess?” Dan added quietly. “You’ve been burning through Focus at a rate I’ve never even thought possible before. I doubt any normal human brain is designed to handle that. Even without Overdrawing, whatever you’re doing with your Psychic Power... it’s not exactly built for sustained use at that level.”

‘Well, well, well. If it isn’t the consequences of my own actions...’

Thea nodded slowly, her thoughts piecing themselves back together one sluggish click at a time.

She *had* been going way too hard.

Back-to-back, heavy [Glimpse] uses, forcing her brain to hold and process far more than any normal person ever could—over and over—no breaks, no pacing.

‘Yeah... that would probably put some strain on the brain, huh?’

She chuckled at the involuntary rhyme as she tried to push herself up, but her knees gave out instantly. Dan and Chester lunged to catch her before she hit the floor.

“You need calories,” Dan said, already digging through his pack. “Your brain burned *fuel* to get *that* hot, *that* fast. If we don’t get something into you, you’re going to face-plant and never wake up.”

He shoved a dense food bar into her hand. “Eat. All of this. I’ve got more.”

Thea didn’t argue. She knew better than to ignore the orders of a Medic, certain scalpel-shaped bones flashing before her inner-eye.

She tore the wrapper open with her teeth and started chewing, the bland block of compressed nutrients suddenly tasting like the best thing she had ever eaten.

“How long was I out?” she asked between bites. “How’s it looking out there?”

Chester and Dan shared a look. Chester sighed and moved to the firing slit, taking a cautious peek.

“Stellar Republic’s still dug in,” he reported. “Waiting for us to pop out again. Our side’s nearly spent. Not much fire coming from the UHF lines. I’d call it... stalled. Stalemate, for now.”

Thea nodded, already ripping open another food bar and devouring it just as fast as the first.

‘Yeah... definitely the brain screaming for calories... These things aren’t supposed to taste like condensed, delicious pancakes, I’m fairly sure.’

“How’s your Focus?” she asked.

The two of them froze for a moment, meeting each other’s eyes, before replying.

Dan was first. “Sixty-seven.”

Chester exhaled, leaning back against the wall. “Twenty-one. I’m basically done.”

“So we’ve got a few uses left to try and hammer this home,” Thea said with a tired smile, already halfway through her second bar.

Chester’s reaction was immediate. He stared at her like she had just committed a war crime.

“You can’t be fucking serious. You just *melted your own brain*, Thea. And your first thought is ‘let’s do it again’? *Really?*”

Dan looked like he agreed, but stayed quiet.

Thea let out a slow breath and looked directly at both of them.

“What’s the alternative?” she asked. “We stop fighting and die? The overheating’s just a physical effect, right? Potentially painful, sure. Could knock me out. Could kill me for *this run*. But it doesn’t carry into real life. No DDS bleed-through. No long-term damage outside the DM. Correct?”

Dan and Chester hesitated—but nodded.

“Then I burn myself down to the last ember,” Thea said plainly. “I’m the designated Battlefield Ace. Kalt bet *everything* on me. *You* two did too. So did Ruri. And Lantr. And Quent. And Hinder... If I stop now, then *all of that* was pointless. Why would I drop the run just because it’s hard now? This—” she gestured vaguely toward the battlefield, the trench, the distinct screams and gunfire—“this is *exactly* the moment where you push until you have nothing left to push with. Otherwise? You *stay* mid-rank forever.”

She shoved another bite of food into her mouth, talking as she chewed.

“It’d be more shameful to stop now.”

She tore open another bar and devoured it as fast as her jaw would move, while Dan and Chester stayed quiet, both of them weighing her words in their own exhausted way.

Mid-chew, she reached for her Gram—the only one left.

The Gauss and Ballistic Grams were long gone somewhere along the line, abandoned with the bodies and dust and chaos of earlier trenches.

Calling the rifle “worn” felt like understatement at this point.

The barrel was scorched nearly black, the trigger gritty with caked dust, and the whole frame was tinted a dull gray-brown from smoke, dirt, and whatever else had blown across them during the march of alcoves.

But when she checked it—she knew.

It still worked.

The barrel’s distortions hadn’t affected the focusing rails. The capacitors were still making clean contact. The cooling reservoir was still intact. The housing was ugly, but functional.

‘Truly a marvelous weapon,’ she thought, finishing the last of the bar, crumbs clinging to her gloves.

A heavy, shared sigh came from Chester and Dan.

“You’re right,” Chester admitted, rubbing a hand down his face. “As much as I hate that.”

Dan nodded once, jaw tight. “I can’t approve of it. It goes against everything I’m supposed to do as a Medic. But I *will* [Focus Link] and give you what I have left—as long as you *swear* not to Overdraw. Burn yourself down to embers if you must, but do *not* go empty.”

Thea nodded instantly. “Did that once. Barely lived. I’m not making that mistake twice. You have my word.”

A moment later, she felt the familiar pull—Focus threading from Dan into her. Then Chester’s Focus came—what little he had—dripping into her like the last drops from a faucet.

Dan extended a hand.

“Then... It has been an honor, Thea. With no Focus left, I can’t help you here. I’ll move to other alcoves. Maybe I can keep someone else standing a little longer.”

Thea almost denied him saying that he was of no use here—almost—but the words caught before leaving her mouth.

‘He doesn’t want to be nearby when I effectively run myself into the ground, does he?’ She thought. *‘It’s not really about helping other Marines, though I’m sure that’s part of it. He just doesn’t want to have to physically stop me, once he realises I’m in danger...’*

A small smile tugged at her lips.

'That's such a Karania-thought,' she couldn't help but think. Her best friend's penchant to keep everyone alive as much as possible, to fight the literal concept of death itself, as she had so brazenly declared during the Awards Ceremony... It was a very Karania-thing to do.

"Thank you, Medic Dan," she said, taking his hand. He helped her to her feet—steady, gentle. *"Truly.* And... yeah. I know someone you'd get along well with. You remind me of her."

"If our paths cross again, I'd be happy to squad up," he said.

"Likewise. Hopefully under better circumstances," she replied with a smirk as he handed her two more food bars. "Each of these is about three thousand calories. You've already eaten four, so maybe slow down a bit? But if you're pushing even harder... What do I know? Go and fuck them up good, yeah?"

Thea nodded and tore one open, eating it right away. She'd definitely need the calories.

She watched Dan slip back into the tunnel toward the eastern front, where most of the UHF lines still held.

Her eyes met Chester's; he flinched, then nodded gravely. "I'll stay with you. Can't have you drop dead from a stray bullet before your embers run out, right?"

She chuckled. "I appreciate it, Chester. You're a good Marine—just a shit person, but I can deal with that."

He blinked, taken aback as if she'd slapped him.

"I hope you're getting your desired points from all this, otherwise that whole locker-room spiel was for nothing," she added with a wink.

For a beat, confusion crossed his face, then understanding widened his eyes. "You... you knew?!"

"Like I said—competence covers a lot of sins. You're competent, Chester. More decent than I thought. You could be an Ace if you put yourself into the right things—maybe not a Battlefield Ace, got the wrong mindset for that, but an Ace, all the same."

She shouldered her Gram, stuffing the last of the bar into her mouth, and started toward the firing slit. "Let's burn the flames, stoke the embers, and see what comes out of the ashes, shall we?"

Chester shook himself out of surprise and chuckled. "A Cyan rookie beating my ass—*fair*. I deserve that. Sure. Let's fuck them up, Thea. And thanks. You kept your promise; kept me alive."

"Likewise," she said, laughing.

She peered through the scope, sweeping the mass of soldiers hunkered behind foam walls, shields, and smoke pockets the Sweepers couldn't clear.

She paused, remembered she wasn't wearing her helmet, so she quickly went and got it, snapped it on, and cranked the sound isolation up.

Her Nano-Bot Swarm spread out around the alcove again, humming.

"Alright. Let's end this."

She drew a deep breath and let the power wash over her.

"[GLIMPSE]!"

—

PoV: Private Chester O'Neil

By the time the Recruit—Thea—burned through the last scraps of her Focus, she wasn't really *there* anymore.

She had stopped responding to him long ago—no answers to his questions, no acknowledgment of his voice.

Her mind was probably too damaged to understand words at all by that point.

But somehow, the action of firing—feathering that trigger in that brutally precise rapid-fire rhythm—was still ingrained, deeper than speech, deeper than conscious thought.

Even when she couldn't stand and he had to physically hold her upright, her arms still moved, her aim still snapped perfectly from target to target.

His [Eyes of a Medic] told him the truth long before she finally collapsed:

She was done.

Her Focus was nearly zero.

Her brain was far, far past its limit.

Her body was a heartbeat away from shutting down entirely.

But she had kept her promise.

She stopped using [Glimpse] on her own.

No intervention had been needed. No last-minute struggle to knock her out, before she messed up something that the Digital Mission couldn't simply fix by itself.

And that was the only reason he had stayed.

Letting someone burn themselves out in a Digital Mission was one thing.

But leaving a fledgling Psyker—especially a Cyan—with something to prove, alone and half-brain-dead?

That was how you created ghosts that followed you *long* after the sim ended.

So he stayed.

He held her up while she killed herself—one Power at a time, one spike of heat into her melting brain at a time, one last perfect sweep of laser-fire cutting down Duplicators like wheat at a time—Until now.

She'd completely collapsed.

He removed her helmet, thinking—hoping—there might be something he could still do.

But when he saw her face, he froze.

“Stupid fucking Cyan Recruits...” he muttered, the bitterness sharp in his throat. “Always gotta prove something, huh?”

She was smiling.

She had cooked her own brain alive, forced every last ember of herself into the fight—and she was *smiling* when it had all come to an end.

He wiped the drool and hot snot from her face with the cleanest part of his uniform he could find, then gently placed her helmet back on and gently sat her against the trench wall.

His Interface glowed in the corner of his vision:

[Mission Complete: 4:26:16]

“It’s only been two and a half hours?” he breathed out, laughing once—sharp and tired.

“That’s so fucked. Upscaled missions are terrifying.”

He stood, picked up his gun, and walked toward the embrasure.

‘It’s just like she said, isn’t it? There’s not anything left to do except keep firing.’

He peeked over the slit—aiming—

Then froze.

“What...?”

There were enemies out there—but they weren’t advancing.

They were *pulling back*.

Chester keyed into the command channel, voice steady out of habit rather than emotion.

“Alpha here at W23. Enemy forces in sight are retreating. Confirm?”

Several replies came back, though slower than they should have—most Squad Leaders and their seconds were likely already dead.

“W4 here, affirmative. Enemy is retreating.”

“E15 here, affirmative. Same visual confirmed.”

“E21 here, affirmative. The Freaks are falling back.”

Chester let out a long breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding.

He waited for the Platoon Leader to speak—only to remember that Sergeant Kalt had died pushing back one of the heavy assaults earlier. Around half an hour ago, by now.

He had no idea who was even in charge now.

“Command here,” a young woman’s voice finally crackled through, answering the question he hadn’t asked aloud. “I can confirm enemy retreat... I... I just got the all-clear. The mission is considered... Complete? The enemy has taken too many casualties to continue the offensive... We... We won...?”

Silence followed.

Nobody wanted to believe it.

Nobody *could*.

But the sight was *right there*—Stellar Republic soldiers pulling back, some firing half-hearted parting shots while retreat columns formed behind them.

Their movement was unmistakable.

“We... We won?” someone asked—someone Chester didn’t recognize.

“Command here,” the young woman again. “Yes. Mission success confirmed. I... think we just wait for the Epilogue trigger. I don’t actually know how Hold-The-Lines resolve if you don’t run out the timer. I didn’t even know this was *possible*.”

“I didn’t know you could win without running it down either,” another voice added—command hierarchy and command channel etiquette long since irrelevant, apparently.

“But if Command says we won... then we won, right?”

Another moment of stillness—Then the comms erupted.

“Fuck yeah we did!”

“Long live the UHF!”

“The Emperor smiled on us today!”

“UHF! UHF! UHF!”

“VICTORY!!!”

“Fuck yeah! Take that you *fucking freaks*!”

Chester couldn't stop himself from smiling as he limped back to the far wall of the trench and slid down beside the dead girl.

“Looks like you actually did it... you crazy, stubborn idiot girl,” he muttered.

He let out one more tired laugh, leaned his head back against the dirt wall, and closed his eyes—waiting for the Mission to fade to black...