

Arc 1 - Chapter 101 - Despair

Desmond, being the first to manage to shake off the initial shock of the situation, voiced his concerns with a mix of incredulity and dread, "Shit! Psykers?! What's our plan for that? Anyone got any training against these types?"

Their exchanged glances spoke volumes, revealing a mutual lack of preparation for combating enemy Psykers. This acknowledgment hung heavy in the air, underscoring their precarious situation.

"Great, just what we needed..." Desmond's frustration was palpable as he threw his hands in the air, his tone laced with sarcasm and resignation, "With my luck and bottom-of-the-barrel Resolve... Guess I'll just die. Fantastic. Let's hope you figure something out afterwards, wishing you the best!"

Thea, recognizing the need for leadership, immediately stepped up, her voice cutting through the uncertainty with clarity and purpose. "Enough, Desmond. We don't have time for this. I need you to use your drones to scout for those Psykers; they're likely still outside. Find them," she directed firmly, redirecting the squad's focus towards more actionable steps.

While she didn't have any idea about how to fight Psykers either, doing anything was likely better than worrying and doing nothing.

Thea's gaze shifted to Lucas, imbuing her next words with urgency, "Lucas, put your shield back to the stairway immediately. If they're coming for us, that's their most likely route. It's our best chance to fend them off. Remember, despite their abilities, they're still flesh and blood. A well-placed shot can stop them just like any other enemy."

Though she voiced this with conviction, internally, Thea harboured doubts, her mind replaying the dramatic unveiling of Psychic abilities by Major Quinn.

The notion that Psykers might actually be able to effortlessly halt bullets in mid-air, just like Major Quinn had suspended the Recruit mid-air before breaking her arm, lingered ominously in her thoughts.

Yet, she chose to withhold these fears, keenly aware of the critical role morale played in combat—a lesson she had learned from Corvus, who always prioritised the spirit of his squad.

Shifting her focus to Isabella and Karania, Thea outlined her next directive, "Ela, Kara, I need you two to rig this floor with explosives we can trigger remotely. If a retreat becomes our only option, I want the capability to obliterate our position. Be cautious not to compromise the building's integrity, but prioritise lethality. Should the worst come to pass, we'll ensure it's not a one-sided affair, so the rest of the squads can finish this mission without enemy Psykers skulking about."

Determined nods followed as Sovereign Alpha sprang into action.

Thea herself, meanwhile, focused her attention down onto her own body, trying to figure out how to get more information out of that extremely vague feeling of the Psychic Gate's call.

'Alright... Without touching the thing, how do I get more information about where they are...? Is that even something I can do?' She pondered as she started probing her internal world very carefully, making sure not to directly pay any attention to the Psychic Gate itself. The last thing they needed was a repeat of what happened when she returned to the frontlines.

Thea tried her best to figure out what exactly the strange feeling was trying to tell her, but outside of a vague sense of "there are other Psykers around and they are closing in," she didn't manage to get any information at all from it over the next few minutes.

'If I touch the Gate... Maybe I can get more information...' she mused, the thought dangerously looming in her mind.

It was something she wanted to avoid at all costs, but simultaneously, she didn't want to leave the rest of the squad out to dry, with no information to work with.

The urge to take the risky step and experiment with the Psychic Gate within her grew with every passing second, as Thea's desperation grew. *'Without any form of intel, we're bound to take heavy losses...'*

It was a decision she knew she'd have to make; and fast.

Wasting any more time was not an option, as the vague sense of distance had shrunk to what felt like a minimum that the Psychic Gate could tell her, indicating that the enemy Psykers were likely to be extremely close by now.

She inched closer towards the Psychic Gate with her feelings, edging around it and prodding closer and closer, desperately wanting to open it even a little, to potentially glean that important piece of information they were missing...

But she refrained.

Karania's stark warning and the promise she had made to her friend, to not open the Gate under any circumstances until she received proper training, was the beacon in the dark that allowed her to remain in control.

Thea rapidly pulled back entirely, returning her focus to the world around her.

She was panting heavily, the exhaustion of pulling back her own senses from what now seemed like a bottomless abyss deep within her leaving her reeling.

*'Fuck me... That shit is **beyond** dangerous. I should not get close to that again,'* she mused to herself, readying her Gram in an effort to calm herself down. The familiar feeling and heft of the weapon provided a much needed solace, as she surveyed the progress of the rest of the squad.

Karania and Isabella had effectively transformed the floor into a minefield with their meticulous placement of explosives, ensuring that most areas could be detonated if needed, while Lucas reassumed his defensive position by the staircase, his shield firmly in place.

Desmond's figure, meanwhile, twitched sporadically, a clear indication of his struggle to control his remaining drone amidst evasive actions, his concentration deeply tied to the visual feedback from the device.

Thea watched silently, her focus divided between the preparations around her and Desmond's efforts. Her patience paid off quickly as Desmond recoiled suddenly, a mix of frustration and resignation on his face.

"Damn it!" he exclaimed, halting abruptly as he realised Thea was close, almost colliding with her in his startled state. "Sorry, really. Lost a drone. Only got one left now, and haven't been able to work on any new ones under these circumstances quite yet..." His apology trailed off, signalling the severity of their situation.

Understanding flashed in Thea's eyes, but she waited for more.

Desmond's next words sparked interest, "Spotted someone that might fit the bill, three buildings north-west. Their gear... it's odd, familiar yet different. Light, kind of like yours, but different... definitely unique. Here, take a look" He extended his arm towards Thea, revealing the last captured images from the now lost drone on his wrist-display, showcasing the unknown figure clad in strange, entirely unfamiliar armour.

While the Stellar Republic and UHF very much differed in their armour designs by default, this was something else entirely. There usually were only subtle differences, maybe in colour or specific patterns used for the plating, but the armour worn by this individual was truly "unique", as Desmond called it.

It was crafted from a clearly light-type material but adorned with an array of peculiar appendages and configurations. Oval-shaped protrusions, some layered in complex, overlapping patterns, formed intricate, abstract shapes across its surface, that Thea didn't even know how to classify.

Its monochrome grey hue mirrored the drabness of rockcrete, yet the armour seemed alarmingly sparse in terms of protective capabilities. Several patches of the standard Stellar Republic uniform peeked through, indicating the armour wasn't even fully enclosed or perhaps was designed with specific, unknown functions in mind rather than sheer defence.

Baffled by the sight, Thea knew she needed a second opinion. "Kara, have a look at this," she said, gesturing towards Desmond's display.

Karania, with her insatiable curiosity and broad knowledge of the extremely unconventional, was the perfect person to consult. Thea hoped against hope that Karania might shed some light on the purpose or origin of such an unorthodox armour design.

As Karania leaned in, her eyes narrowed, scanning the images with a mix of intrigue and concentration. "Hmm," she hummed, her brain ticking away. "This doesn't look like any

standard issue or experimental gear I've read about... and I've dived into some pretty obscure medical tech in my time..."

Her gaze lingered on the strange apparatus built into the armour, trying to decode their potential function or advantage on the battlefield.

"These appendages... could be sensory. They look a bit like... ears? In a very abstract kind of sense. Or maybe it's just something Psyker-related, considering the context." She shrugged slightly, a rare admission of uncertainty. "Without more data or seeing it in action, it's hard to say for sure. Sorry, Thea. I have no clue."

Thea nodded, processing Karania's assessment.

The situation was growing increasingly complex, and with Psykers already complicating the battlefield, this mysterious armour added another layer of unpredictability to their mission.

"Alright, let's keep our eyes peeled for any more clues about what these guys are capable of," she decided, her resolve hardened. "And let's be ready for anything."

"You got it, boss," came Isabella's reply from the back of the room. "Everything's set up on my end as well, just say the words and I'll blow the whole floor sky-high."

Thea positioned herself strategically near the stairwell, her burgeoning instincts as both a leader and a scout dictating her choice.

Given her high base Resolve and her Psychic Senses, she considered herself the squad's best chance at warding off the anticipated Psyker assault. The stairwell, likely the only viable approach for the enemy, was the critical choke point she intended to control.

Lucas stationed himself closely, his grenade launcher at the ready, armed with high-explosive rounds. His eyes were fixed on Thea, awaiting her cue to unleash a barrage over his sturdy shield and disrupt any incoming attackers.

Instructing the rest of Sovereign Alpha to maintain a low profile, Thea emphasised the importance of concealment.

With the capabilities of the enemy Psykers an unknown variable, it was critical to minimise their opportunities to exploit any vulnerabilities. She hoped, perhaps optimistically, that these Psykers would need direct visual contact to exert their influence, offering a sliver of tactical advantage to her team, as long as they stayed out of sight.

As they settled into their positions, a tense silence enveloped the group.

Each member was acutely aware of the gravity of the situation, their focus razor-sharp.

Thea, feeling the weight of leadership more acutely than ever, scanned the surroundings with a mix of anticipation and apprehension, ready to react at the first sign of trouble.

The realisation that they were utterly unprepared to face Psykers gnawed at Thea.

The thought circled her mind, a mix of frustration and incredulity at their predicament. *'Thrown into the fray with not even a hint on how to counter Psykers. Great planning, UHF,'* she mused bitterly, recalling her near-fatal encounters and the glaring gap in their tactical briefing from before the assessment began. *'Nearly killed myself twice and fighting entirely blind against unknown powers, fantastic. Just fucking fantastic.'*

Her train of thought was abruptly cut short by the distant sound of metallic footsteps resonating from the stairwell below, breaking the heavy silence that had settled over them.

"They're here," Thea whispered, her voice low but clear, cutting through the tension like a knife. The rest of Sovereign Alpha stiffened in response, their readiness palpable in the air.

Karania and Isabella, positioned strategically to oversee the stairwell leading upwards, remained vigilant for any sign of enemy movement. They were prepared for the possibility of being flanked from another direction.

Desmond, isolated in his concentration, was huddled next to the window.

His fingers danced over controls, desperately seeking a visual on the approaching threat with his last operational drone. The atmosphere was charged with anticipation, each member of the squad braced for the imminent confrontation, aware of the significant challenge that lay ahead without any form of guidance to help them out.

Thea's senses were heightened, every sound and movement amplified in her mind as she tried to decipher the enemy's approach.

'At least one squad; probably two. I can't tell who the Psyker is, but my Gate is practically screaming at me that they're close, so they're likely somewhere below us now...' she thought, feeling the pulsing warning from her Psychic Gate growing more insistent with each step the enemy took closer.

Her focus narrowed to the sounds of advancing footsteps, the subtle clink of their gear a telltale harbinger of their numbers and proximity.

When the echoes of the first armoured footsteps reached the critical point just below their position, Thea seized the moment.

With precision honed by her unique foresight, she leaned over Lucas's Stalwart shield, firing three quick shots. The certainty that her shots would find their marks was absolute; her Psychic Senses had assured their deadly outcome. Before she even confirmed the kills herself, she ducked back behind the safety of cover.

'Those were definitely just clones to scout us out,' she reminded herself, maintaining her focus. Quickly, she indicated to her squad the elimination of three enemy clones, ensuring they remained informed of the situation. With the little intel they had, to make sure that everyone was fully informed at all times.

The tempo of the battle shifted as another group advanced, their approach more cautious.

At Thea's subtle cue, Lucas sprang into action, unleashing a barrage of grenades from his Havoc. The projectiles arced gracefully, their paths calculated to wreak as much destruction as possible as they bounced off of the stairs and walls down below.

The stairwell erupted in a violent symphony of blasts, the enemy's screams momentarily drowning out the sound of explosions.

Thea's voice cut through the chaos, seeking an update amidst the cacophony of grenades. "Desmond, update!" she commanded, her eyes locked on the drone operator, who was their lifeline to the world beyond their immediate sight.

Desmond's response was swift. "One squad is two floors below, sending up clones as a distraction. The second squad is on the move, about to join them in under a minute," he reported his gaze never leaving his controls, fingers moving with practised care.

Thea's mind worked frantically, trying to come up with a solution to their plight, *'Okay, so... Both Psykers should be in the building now, assuming that each one has their own squad for protection. They'll meet up soon; what options do we have...?'*

They had limited ways to deal with enemies that weren't directly deciding to face them, but they weren't *entirely* out of options, she knew.

There was Isabella's Devastation, whose calibre was large and powerful enough to reliably penetrate through rockcrete walls like the building's, as long as they only had to deal with one floor or wall at most. They had Lucas' Havoc that could bounce grenades around corners and, lastly, Thea had her Icicle and [Penetrative Shot] combination as well.

The problem was trying to pinpoint their exact position, as they wouldn't get a lot of tries at trying to take out the Psykers like this.

Remembering something important from the assessment preparation session, Thea quickly dropped her backpack and rifled through it, signalling Lucas to take over the watch for a moment.

'It should be here somewhere... Ah! There it is!'

Quickly, she pulled out the XIR-View that had been included in her urban scout/sniper standard kit from the UHF and connected it to her armour, placing the small screen onto her left wrist. Assuming that the initial description of it provided by the UHF hadn't been lying to her, the device should be able to accurately see through walls up to 5m of thickness, assuming that no T1 Materials or higher were involved.

She turned it on and pointed it downwards, trying to get an idea of how the device actually worked.

It took a second, before it started showing a rough 3D image of the floor below them, that gradually become more and more filled out with details, going as far as to show the dismembered bodies of the clones that were slowly melting into their strange goey-puddles, after they had been ripped apart by Lucas' Havoc.

'Alright... This could actually work!' Thea thought to herself, being somewhat hopeful that the XIR might actually provide her with the chance to counteract some of the Psyker's workings, assuming that they stepped onto the floor below them.

As Thea attentively monitored the XIR-View's display, the next wave of cloned soldiers ascending the staircase became visible. This time, the device's precision allowed her to discern their armaments clearly, marking a significant advantage in their defensive strategy. The revelation sparked a sense of appreciation in her for the UHF's foresight in equipping them with such a tool. *'This thing might just be our ace in the hole,'* she thought, recognizing its critical role in their current predicament.

Quietly, she relayed the incoming threat composition to Lucas, outlining the optimal strategy to maximise the impact of his next barrage. "Four approaching—two meds, one in light armour, leading with one in heavy. Aim for the rear; it'll catch them all," she instructed, confident in the XIR-View's intel.

Lucas responded with a focused nod, his fingers expertly adjusting the settings on his Havoc to predict the perfect trajectory for his grenades. The tension in the air was palpable as they waited for the moment to strike.

With a series of methodical thumps, the Havoc launched its deadly cargo down the stairwell, bouncing off the walls and stairs in perfectly calculated angles to land exactly where Thea had described.

Through the lens of the XIR-View, Thea observed the anticipated destruction, a silent observer to the calculated destruction they wrought.

However, as the grenades found their marks, a sudden flash obliterated the detailed imagery on her screen, replaced momentarily by a stark white "Recalculating..."

The abrupt disruption served as a stark reminder of the device's limitations amidst the chaos of combat. *'So, explosions are a bit too much for it,'* Thea noted mentally, filing away the insight for future engagements. *'Still, it's definitely proving invaluable already.'*

Suddenly, Thea experienced a sensation so bizarre it seemed as if she had been submerged underwater. The atmosphere turned dense, exerting an unusual pressure around her that continued to mount at a rapid pace.

Her heart raced, her Psychic Senses rapidly escalating into a frenzied alert, foretelling of imminent, fatal danger.

Driven by a protective instinct, she lunged at Lucas, forcefully pulling them both to the floor just in time. A peculiar, muffled pop filled the air, followed by the harrowing sound of metal being forcefully ripped apart.

When Thea dared to look back, her gaze was met with a sight that sent chills down her spine.

There, in the robust metal of Lucas' Stalwart shield, the unyielding bulwark that had provided them with an invaluable amount of protection throughout the entire assessment without as

much as a few chips or cracks, was a perfectly round U-shaped cutout at the top, large enough to fit two of her heads through.

The sudden realisation of their vulnerability as well as the precision and sheer power of the attack left her heart pounding violently.

She opened her mouth to warn the rest of the squad, "Desmond, get over here right now!"

Stunned, Thea hesitated momentarily. *'That... That was not what I said at all?!'*

Trying to renege the order she didn't give, realising how dangerous it would be for Desmond to come to them, she suddenly realised in pure horror that no sound was coming from her mouth, regardless of how much she tried.

Instead, she heard a delayed, "Desmond, hurry the fuck up!" in her own voice echo from her position.

Scrambling to get back to her feet, while frantically looking for Desmond to try and catch his attention, Thea felt another wave of pressure build at her location, prompting her to forcibly push Lucas towards the Stalwart, away from herself as she dove backwards.

'What the fuck is happening?!'

A subdued pop followed once again, this time without any additional metal being torn apart, however.

Frantically attempting to issue a warning, Thea found herself voiceless, a silent scream of frustration as a crouch-running Desmond neared, his expression a mix of confusion and concern as his eyes met her frantics ones.

Desperately, she rapidly signalled for an immediate retreat, the hand gestures for "Compromised comms" underscoring her silent plea. Desmond's eyes, wide with sudden understanding of the danger he was in—the trap he had inadvertently fallen into—, mirrored the urgency she felt as he stumbled backward, trying to escape the invisible danger that loomed.

At the same time, chillingly, Thea's voice, yet not her own, filled the air with a command she never gave once more, "Isabella, make some noise for us! We're going to try to catch them off-guard!"

The eerie imitation of her voice hung heavily, a sinister trick by the unseen enemy Psykers, as Thea now realised.

Despite Desmond's desperate efforts to escape, tragedy struck with a horrifying pop in the next instant.

Half of his body grotesquely collapsed inward as the pressure in the air grew to unbearable levels in a near-instant, reducing his entire left side, including his arm, leg, ribs and parts of his organs into a small, bloody cube that slapped on the floor with a resounding, meaty thud.

Thea, frozen in shock, could only watch as he collapsed, still trying to break his descent with his now non-existent arm, a silent scream of agony marking his fall as the enemy Psyker's powers kept their voices suppressed.

Karania rushed to his side out of nowhere almost immediately, her face a mask of sheer professionalism in stark contrast to the utter chaos around them, as she prepared to administer whatever aid she could amidst the surreal soundscape.

Isabella, deceived by the imitation of Thea's voice, responded with zeal from a distance, "You got it, boss," unaware of the dire situation unravelling just a few metres away.

Their strategy to divide and oversee different sections of the floor had catastrophically failed, isolating Isabella from the sight of the rest of her squadmates.

Frantically, Thea reached for her squad comms in a last-ditch effort to alert Isabella of the situation, yet to her dismay, not a single sound emerged, not even the faintest hiss of static.

The overwhelming sense of helplessness gripped Thea tightly, the realisation of her powerlessness against the unseen enemy Psykers casting a deep shadow over her.

Without the ability to communicate verbally and lacking a direct line of sight to parts of her squad, she felt isolated, cornered with dwindling options.

The urgent need for more time—to think, to plan, to act—pressed heavily upon her.

In the depths of despair, she turned to the one Ability that had always granted her an edge, a sliver of hope in the direst of circumstances. It wasn't a solution to stop time, but it was the closest semblance of gaining some extra moments that she had.

Summoning all her focus and resolve to continue onwards, she whispered to herself the two words that had become her beacon amidst the storm,

"Sensory Overdrive."