

Arc 1 - Chapter 63 - Tantalising Revelations

In the subsequent two hours, Karania guided Thea through the process of obtaining replacements for all her missing gear.

This included a fresh copy of her Spectre armour, Gram, the specific grenades she'd employed on her last mission, and ammunition for her still-functioning weapons—Caliburn and Icicle.

The wait at the specialised resupply station was understandably long and sluggish.

Unlike battlefield stations that quickly produced standard UHF equipment, this one was capable of custom-printing each marine's unique set of gear on demand. It was a vastly slower process than the one Thea had encountered before during her Cube Trial years ago, as she had visited a typical battlefield resupply station back then instead.

The silver lining was, however, that these custom pieces came at no credit cost—assuming you owned a full licence for the piece of equipment you were planning to have printed—, as they were designated for immediate field use, rather than for storage in the respawn pods.

Finally re-equipped, and with her legs gradually regaining their strength during the lengthy wait, Thea stashed her newly acquired gear in Karania's personal quarters.

She learned that the rest of Sovereign Alpha was currently on a scouting mission at the frontlines, so they didn't have a designated space.

However, due to Karania's medical expertise, she had been allotted a small, private room within one of the hastily erected barracks to rest and recuperate when she was at the forward operating base assisting the wounded.

She had also learned that they were going to rejoin Sovereign Alpha the following day, continuing in line with Karania's recent routine.

Thea had gleaned from their idle conversations during the long wait at the resupply, that Karania had been working exhaustively to support the UHF's push toward the city.

The level of commitment and skill Karania exhibited left Thea deeply impressed.

Not only had her friend saved dozens upon dozens of marines right at the front lines, but she also joined the last med-evac at the end of each day, returning to the FOB to perform surgeries and tend to those with more severe injuries throughout the entire rest of the day and night.

All this she managed on just a few hours of sleep before heading back to the front lines at dawn to repeat the arduous cycle.

'I really need to step up my game if I don't want to be outclassed by Kara in this assessment,' Thea mused, feeling her competitive spirit reignite. This drive to compete seemed to flare up whenever Karania was around, and Thea welcomed it. Having someone

to push you and share your ambitions was precisely the sort of thing a gamer like her craved.

As Karania led her through the Forward Operating Base for a much-needed leg workout, Thea suddenly remembered something crucial. Pausing near one of the numerous barracks in the FOB, she turned to Karania. "Hey Kara, do you know what happened to the rest of the temporary 'Strike One' squad? Einor, Morin, and Viladia?"

The mention of Viladia's name triggered a weird sensation in her chest.

'Why does that keep happening?' she wondered internally. It was clear to her that it wasn't a medical issue immediately, otherwise she would have asked Karania, but she couldn't quite place the strange twinge any time Viladia's name was mentioned.

Karanja responded, after a short moment of consideration and checking some information on her data-pad, "Privates Einor and Morin are already back at the front. As for Viladia, she's still here in the FOB. She was pretty banged up when we found you two back in the Azure Forest. Not as badly as you, of course. You still hold the record there, as seems to be your forte."

Noticing Thea's concerned expression at the mention of Viladia's injuries, she quickly added, "Don't worry, she's been fine for a couple of days now. Staff-Sergeant Venn just hasn't cleared her for duty yet."

Seizing the opportunity to both thank Viladia for saving her and explore the peculiar feelings she had, Thea inquired, "Do you know where Viladia is staying? I'd like to speak with her before we return to the frontlines."

Karanja simply nodded and motioned for them to continue walking. She led the way, directing Thea toward the barracks where Viladia was staying.

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Ten minutes later, they found themselves standing before one of the large barracks within the FOB.

"This is the place," Karania affirmed, pointing to the open doors.

As Thea and Karania stepped through the open doors, they were greeted by a surprisingly comfortable interior that belied the building's utilitarian exterior.

Constructed from modular, prefabricated reinforced rock-crete components, the barracks were designed to be quickly assembled and just as swiftly disassembled, keeping pace with the ever-moving frontlines.

Yet, despite these stringent requirements, the inside did not feel hastily put together at all.

The floor was covered with rubberized matting, providing a comfortable surface to walk on.

Rows of bunk beds were neatly aligned along the walls, each with a personal footlocker at its base for storing gear. Contrary to what one might expect in a temporary structure like this, there were also communal spaces with a handful of tables and chairs.

A small kitchenette at one end boasted a collection of appliances, such as food printers, heating elements and even a liquid dispenser—amenities that seemed like small luxuries to Thea, given the proximity to the frontlines.

Even the lighting was softer than the harsh, glaring lights often found in the military settings that Thea had come to know within the UHF station she had absolved her Basic training in, casting a warm glow that made the space feel more like a home than a transient housing unit. The entire barracks was also fully climate-controlled, offering a refreshing contrast to the muggy atmosphere outside.

"I have to admit, this isn't what I had in mind when I thought of 'barracks,'" Thea commented, prompting a laugh from Karania.

"You're telling me," Karania responded, her tone maintaining its usual blend of professionalism and detachment, even while discussing a personal topic.

"When I was a medic back on my home planet, I dealt with some genuinely *sketchy* conditions. If I'd had a place as comfortable as this, I might have gone hand-to-hand with an entire battalion of Stellar Republic freaks to keep it."

Karanja continued, "You should check out our medical facilities here in the FOB. The level of cleanliness and organisation is remarkable. And I mean, see it from *my* perspective, not as a patient. You've had more than your fair share of that experience during this assessment."

Thea quickly nodded in agreement. "You're not wrong," she said. "I've had my fill of being on that end of things, that's for sure."

The duo spent a few more minutes inquiring about Viladia's whereabouts; the barracks were expansive, making it impractical to locate someone solely by sight. Fortunately, Viladia was well-known among the residents of the 32nd company, which occupied the building, helping to speed up their search.

When they finally located her, she was casually sprawled on a couch in one of the barracks' common areas, engrossed in her data-pad. Her legs dangled off the edge of the furniture as she read. "Who are you and what do you want? If it's about Venn's idiocy, spare me," Viladia snapped as they approached.

Thea hesitated before speaking. The enigmatic sensation in her chest intensified as she eyed Viladia. She took a moment to collect herself, then broke the silence. "Hey, Vi. You seem a little on edge?"

Viladia whirled around at the sound of Thea's voice. "Patches?!" she exclaimed. Her eyes widened in disbelief as they roamed over Thea's face and body. "Wait, you're actually adorable? I assumed you were some UHF experiment gone awry with your skin all messed up, but look at you—absolutely cute!"

Thea's cheeks flushed at Viladia's unabashed exclamation, which had caught the attention of several nearby marines who turned to see what the commotion was about.

Karania subtly moved forward, as if bracing for a confrontation. Viladia's eyes twinkled with a blend of amusement and mischief at her movement, that Thea couldn't quite interpret in the moment.

Sensing tension between Karania and Viladia, likely because Karania felt her medical skills had been slighted, Thea quickly intervened. "Eh—Kara did her best, you know? I apparently had a bit of a run in with a severe Focus Overdraw, so my face and bones kind of... melted? Kara tried fixing me as best she could, but we were in the middle of the field. Not exactly a lot to work with..."

Viladia's gaze shifted from Thea back to Karania, confusion briefly flickering across her eyes before she uttered a simple, "Ohh..." and erupted into laughter. Puzzled, Thea looked between her chuckling friend on the couch and Karania, who stood half a step ahead, seemingly ready to shield Thea from Viladia.

After her laughter subsided, Viladia spoke up. "Haaa, you're something else, Patches. I'm sure 'Kara' did her best. No offence intended. I was just taken aback by the transformation—you're utterly adorable!"

At that, Karania huffed, exasperated. "I'll wait outside," she announced curtly, exiting the room and leaving Thea alone with Viladia, whose laughter resumed.

Thea was once more left bewildered.

'What just happened? Kara walked out even though Vi apologised. Am I missing something obvious? Again? Did Vi do something to her...?' Frustrated, Thea mulled this over as she watched Viladia double over in laughter, tears streaming down her face.

Suddenly, the twinge in her chest multiplied manifold and Thea snapped, "Why did you do that?" at Viladia, before she even realised she had opened her mouth.

Viladia stopped laughing immediately, her face marred with a mixture of shock, surprise and intrigue. "I'm sorry, Patch—No, Thea, right? Patches doesn't really fit anymore now, does it... I'm sorry, Thea. I've been exceedingly bored sitting around the FOB recently and your friend made such a prime target, I couldn't help myself... I just thought you weren't quite aware of what was going on."

*'I really **don't** know what is going on...'* Thea mused internally, utterly confused about everything that had just occurred, including her own outburst.

"I promise, I'll make up with her, okay?" Viladia offered, her hands put together in a pleading motion, as if to assuage Thea. It worked.

"I'd like that. Thank you," Thea replied, before refocusing her thoughts on why she had actually come here in the first place.

"I wanted to thank you for saving me. I heard that you were the one that carried me out; kept me alive at the end of that suicide mission. Thank you, Vi. I really appreciate it."

Viladia dismissed her thanks with a wave of her hand, "Ha, nonsense. We both saved each other! Without your Spectre's cloak, we would have both been found and killed by the remaining Stellar Republic soldiers that were hot on my heels from the compound."

She paused, looking Thea over with a tinge of sympathy. "To be honest, when you dropped on top of me from that tree, I thought I was a goner... Not to mention, it's a downright miracle you survived, considering the state you were in."

At that, Thea tried thinking back to what she remembered of the end of that mission, but past the explosion that had finished it, she could only remember vague flashes of murky images.

"What... What exactly happened at the end there? I don't really remember anything past the explosion," Thea posed, unsure of whether she even wanted to hear the answer to the question.

Viladia mustered her for a moment, before gesturing towards the couch, "Sit down, this might take a bit."

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Thea found herself engrossed in Viladia's vivid recounting of the mission, gaining insights into aspects she had missed while perched in her sniper's position.

One revelation was that Viladia had eliminated over a dozen duplicators who were concealed behind the compound's structures, completely out of Thea's line of sight.

Equally fascinating was Viladia's description of her narrow escape from the compound before its obliteration.

She had utilised her [Umbra's Veil] to approach the line of duplicates guarding the breach in the wall. Quickly stabbing one, she activated her [Shadow Step] to retreat just as the duplicates began shooting at her last known location. This tactic created a brief gap in their formation, which she seized upon to use her remaining stamina for another [Shadow Step] and break through.

However, her escape wasn't without setbacks.

The duplicates, being more sophisticated than regular, unintegrated soldiers, thanks to the fact that they shared the Attributes of the original duplicator, sensed her as she moved past and took their shots. Viladia had been wounded fairly badly by that breakthrough, but because the duplicators had created so many duplicates to literally body-block the breach itself, each individual one did not have a lot of agency, which ultimately had allowed her to escape back into the forest.

She was currently in the process of retelling the final moments of the mission from her perspective, which captivated Thea even more, as she had no idea what had happened after the explosion.

"...and that's when suddenly, out of fucking nowhere, this dude falls on me from a fucking tree!" Viladia exclaimed, acting out the sensation of being knocked to the ground by an unexpected force.

"How did you get out of that?!" Thea interjected, her pulse quickening as she got swept up in the story's momentum.

Wearing a self-satisfied smile, Viladia paused for effect before admitting, "I didn't."

A moment of palpable tension filled the air until Viladia broke it with a hearty laugh. "That 'random guy' who fell out of the tree? That was you, Thea! My darling Patches!"

Feeling utterly duped, Thea couldn't believe how Viladia had drawn her into the narrative, only for it to conclude in such an anticlimactic fashion.

"You're cruel, Vi, you know that?" Thea half-joked, pouting as she absorbed being the punchline yet again. She wasn't genuinely upset, but she silently vowed to get her own revenge on Viladia one day.

"I know, I'm just that irresistible," Viladia quipped, flicking her jet-black hair for added emphasis.

"But in all seriousness," her tone shifted on a dime, returning to the gravity of the story, "if you hadn't dropped out of that tree and covered me with your cloak, I would've been toast within minutes."

Thea was reminded once again that investing in the Spectre had been one of her wisest equipment choices—well, aside from the Caliburn, perhaps.

"I don't recall that final part, but I'm relieved I could help," Thea confessed, sincerity lacing her voice. The memories of feeling helpless as she witnessed Einor and Morin's deaths from her vantage point still haunted her. Knowing her actions had at least saved Viladia brought a glimmer of solace.

"So, what happened after I dropped in on you?" Thea inquired, curious about how they had managed to escape.

Viladia paused, her expression crinkling as if tasting something bitter. "First off, you were in terrible condition, Thea. I mean, *genuinely* awful. If it weren't for your unmistakable eyes, I wouldn't have recognized you. I won't get into the gruesome details, but you were covered in so much blood and had such severe injuries that I initially questioned whether you were even human."

Thea's eyes widened at the grim depiction, grateful that Viladia opted not to elaborate further. Her prolonged coma had already given her a good enough idea about the extent of her injuries.

'What in the world happened to me to end up in that state?' she wondered.

Almost as though she'd tapped into Thea's inner monologue, Viladia picked up the thread again. "Look, I'm not sure what led to your condition before we met up. But I did hear a ton of gunfire in the forest, which I assumed was from your location. I sped over, thinking I'd be the one pulling you out of the fire. Ironically, you ended up saving me!"

Her eyes met Thea's, a heartfelt smile gracing her lips, before she delved back into the story. "When I saw the state you were in, I was floored. With those gruesome injuries and all that blood, I thought you were a goner. And the pain—you could see it, practically radiating from your eyes. They were so filled with agony, I wasn't sure if the person who fell on me was you, or some sort of animal, driven mad by pain."

She paused, letting the weight of her words sink in. "Honestly, at that moment, I was less concerned about dying than about what was happening to you. Look, as UHF marines, death isn't the end-all, be-all for us. We fight tooth and nail to avoid it, sure, and we would never try to walk towards it with open arms, but if all else fails, we still got our Faction Trait as a last resort. Losing your own sense of self, though? That's irrevocable, Thea."

The gravity in Viladia's voice seemed aimed straight at Thea's core, and she sensed that this wasn't just a broad cautionary tale, but rather a heartfelt plea.

"Listen, take better care of yourself. Of all the new Re—Privates I've met during my time in the UHF, you're by far the most promising. It'd be an absolute waste to see you fall apart like this. Don't push your limits to the breaking point, *especially* not in a mere assessment. Just because it's your first doesn't mean it should be your last, understand?"

Taking a deep breath, Thea mulled over Viladia's heartfelt admonition. To simply nod and agree without giving it due consideration would be an affront to the sincerity behind the warning.

Had she really overextended herself during the assessment? Thea thought hard about the first day of the assessment, to figure out where she might have gone wrong.

Well, she had unintentionally drained her Focus, for starters. Managed to liquefy her own hand with the Caliburn, too. Then she joined a high-risk mission with seasoned Privates, each more skilled than she was, to obliterate a pivotal enemy facility deep in hostile territory. Naturally, she was also pumped full of drugs at the time.

On top of all that, she had actively activated her Psychic Powers for the first time, led her squad through a minefield, scouted the enemy compound, and provided sniper support—all while her medication wore off and excruciating pain kicked in.

And if that wasn't enough, it seemed she had single-handedly taken on a full squad of integrated soldiers in the forest in a close-range engagement, with her main weapon essentially fused to her palm.

'Viladia could be onto something... Did I really go overboard on my first day out? The extensive coma I ended up in should be a pretty clear sign, shouldn't it?' Thea mused internally before refocusing her gaze on Viladia.

"I think you're right. I may have gone a little bit overboard," she acknowledged, nodding earnestly, lowering her head in apology as she had usually done with James.

In the next moment, she felt a thump on her head.

It wasn't painful, but it sent a shiver down her spine. Looking back up at Viladia, she saw that the stealth-expert had chopped down on her head with one of her hands.

"A '*little bit*' overboard? You're a complete lunatic, Thea! You were on the brink of insanity! I had to administer my most potent non-lethal toxin just to ensure you wouldn't go berserk and try to kill me back there!" Viladia's voice surged with a mix of disbelief and concern.

A sudden surge of rage flared in Thea's chest at the mention of the toxin, a familiar and potent sensation urging her to leap onto Viladia and tear her apart. Fragmented images raced through her mind: looking down at an injured Viladia sprawled on the earthy forest floor, spreading her cloak over the two of them as stray gunfire sprayed their way, hearing footsteps closing in. In these disjointed snapshots, she saw herself using her own body to shield Viladia, only to feel a sharp, stinging sensation in her neck.

As if driven by some ghostly force, Thea's hand clamped onto the spot on her neck where she'd felt the imagined puncture. It was instinctive, a bodily response to a visceral recollection that she realised must be a memory.

Viladia's expression shifted dramatically, her eyes widening with visible concern. "Hey, are you okay, Thea? Should I call a medic?"

Thea shook her head, her eyes meeting Viladia's. "No, don't. I think... you're right. I think I *did* push myself too far... So far, that something instinctual in me took your actions the wrong way. There's this... strange... unexplained rage in my chest directed at you right now, and I don't know why."

Viladia looked relieved but remained concerned, her eyes still scanning Thea's face for signs of lingering distress. Thea took a deep breath, forcing herself to calm down, and thanked whatever part of her had the awareness to pull her back from the brink once again.

"Look, I'm genuinely relieved to hear you say that," Viladia began, quickly raising her hands in a pacifying gesture as she saw Thea's eyes narrow.

"Not the part about you feeling rage toward me, of course, but the part where you recognize it exists. Listen, I'm no expert on this, but it seems like you pushed yourself over the edge. What landed on me in that forest—it wasn't *really* you. It felt like an instinctual, primal version of you that had kicked in, pushing you far beyond your limits."

With an intensity that far outshone the one in the prior conversation, Viladia looked straight into Thea's eyes and continued, "Thea, people do *not* come back from that mental place. So consider yourself incredibly fortunate that the only lingering issue seems to be this residual anger toward me, and that's for— well, incapacitating you. You cannot do that again, you understand?" Viladia carefully sidestepped the use of terms like 'stabbing' or 'poisoning,' and Thea sensed her latent anger begin to dissipate again.

"I get it, I think," Thea replied, nodding earnestly before adding, "I'll do my best not to go overboard again. Given how I am, that's the most I can promise."

Viladia let out a lengthy, weary sigh and sank into the couch, muttering under her breath, "Why did I end up with the wildcard?"

Choosing to ignore Viladia's comment, Thea posed another question. "Do you think this lingering feeling will eventually go away? I don't want to feel like I'm walking on eggshells around you, or constantly be second-guessing myself. After all, we're friends, right?"

Viladia's eyes met hers, filled with a complex blend of genuine warmth and a touch of sorrow.

"To be honest, Thea, I'm not sure. I hope it does. I feel the same way; we make an excellent team, and it would be a shame if you had to distance yourself for your own well-being. I'm no expert in psychology, unfortunately... After the assessment, there should be a psychological evaluation for everyone. Maybe they can provide some insights? Just, please take it easy from now on, okay?"

Nodding once more, Thea made a mental promise to consult the experts after the assessment was over. She wouldn't let this bizarre sensation sever her friendship with Viladia, no matter the cost.

"Oh, speaking of which," Viladia abruptly switched gears, "I promised you that Gold-rarity Ability in exchange for info on your Path and Inheritance, didn't I? Have a look, but don't activate it just yet! You've still got your end of the deal to uphold, got it?"

Viladia reached over and delicately placed a small, crystalline shard on the table beside the couch they were sitting on.

The shard was roughly six centimetres long and two centimetres wide, but its dimensions hardly captured its intrigue. The crystal was downright flimmering with refracted light, its surface emanating a spectrum of colours that danced in mesmerising patterns, like oil on water beneath sunlight.

The shard itself seemed to possess a downright alien geometry, with angles and facets that defied simple description and seemed to break common conventions. Even with her high levels of Perception, Thea had trouble focusing on individual parts of the shard, as the geometry simply did not make sense in her brain.

Instinctively and immediately, upon seeing the shard, Thea *knew* this had to be something from the Allbright System, even if Viladia hadn't explained its nature beforehand.

Though utterly captivated by the shard, Thea managed to pull her attention away after a moment, having to exert a non-zero amount of effort to do so, as if she had been hypnotised by the shard itself. She turned her gaze toward Viladia, curiosity filling her eyes.

"What exactly am I looking at here?" Thea asked, still somewhat spellbound by the artefact.

Viladia leaned back, eyes shining as she began to explain. "What you're looking at, Thea, is an Ability Shard. Specifically, this one contains a copy of my best Gold-rarity ability, [Shadow Step]."

Her expression turned serious as she delved deeper into the topic. "Once you go beyond Silver-rarity Abilities, these shards become your main avenue for acquiring new Abilities. They're exceedingly rare, usually awarded for completing highly challenging System-missions, or for defeating individuals of considerable power. Ability Shards also follow the same rarity grades as Abilities, so this one here is Gold-rarity."

Viladia's eyes twinkled a little as she reminisced. "I bought this particular shard years ago, and it cost me a small fortune. See, I had a hypothesis. I wondered if having a second copy of [Shadow Step] would allow me to upgrade the Ability I already possessed. Unfortunately, that turned out to be a fruitless endeavour."

She sighed slightly, her enthusiasm dimming. "There's supposedly a method to upgrade Abilities using these shards, but the exact mechanics aren't public knowledge. Trust me, I've looked into it, but the details are frustratingly elusive."

Thea listened intently, her eyes occasionally drifting back to the mesmerising shard. The world of Abilities was far more intricate than she'd first thought, and every new piece of information felt like a treasure in its own right.

Thea quickly asked a pressing question, "Why would the UHF keep this kind of information a secret? Wouldn't it be more advantageous for everyone to know how to upgrade Abilities using these shards?"

Viladia chuckled softly, her expression suggesting she had once asked the same question herself. "It's not as straightforward as you might think. Even within the UHF Marines, we have to worry about spies, information thieves, and other bad actors. This sort of knowledge is a game-changer in the larger scope of the war. From what I understand, Ability Shards only started appearing about forty years ago. You can probably guess the implications."

Thea's eyes widened, grasping the weight of what Viladia was sharing.

This felt like privileged information, far beyond what a Recruit like her should know, and she appreciated the level of trust Viladia was showing by divulging it.

"So, this suggests that the System is opening up new avenues for us to gain power, probably because we're getting closer to the Galactic Integration...?" Thea ventured.

Viladia gave a thumbs-up, affirming Thea's insight. "Exactly. We don't know if the System thinks we're lagging behind some external standard or if this is just standard procedure. What I can tell you is that these Ability Shards are one of the galaxy's most sought-after commodities right now.

"For that reason, information about them is heavily guarded. No faction wants their research to go to waste. Rumour has it that once you reach Tier 2 or Tier 3, you'll be briefed on how to utilise these shards to upgrade Abilities, but I can't confirm that right now, for obvious reasons."

Thea's eyes were involuntarily drawn back to the alien shard on the table, its mesmerising colours dancing on it in tantalising and inviting patterns.

Only one thought truly crossed her mind as she looked at the shard, however, *'There is still so much about this System that I have to learn, yet I only have around 60 years before everything changes. Can I really grow fast enough to make some kind of impact...?'*