

Volume 2 - Chapter 3 - Break

Consciousness ebbed and flowed for Thea like a tide she couldn't control, each wave dragging her further into darkness.

Her chest heaved as she fought for breath, the shattered remnants of her lungs barely functioning. Each inhalation was a battle, and each exhalation came with a wet, rattling sound that spoke of blood pooling where air should have been.

Her body convulsed in another coughing fit, hot blood spewing from her mouth and staining the floor beneath her. The coppery taste was overwhelming, the sharp tang a cruel reminder of how close she was to death.

"...Sov—" she tried again, her voice a broken whisper, the effort tearing at her already raw throat. The single syllable barely escaped her lips before the strain sent her spiraling into another bout of coughing.

Pain shot through her chest like daggers, and for a moment, the world blurred to red and black.

It had been what felt like an eternity—a minute, maybe two—since the catastrophic deceleration had ripped apart the room. The force had vaporized most of the space, taking Lucas and Isabella with it, their bodies obliterated in an instant.

The aftermath had left Thea sprawled on the floor, bloodied and broken, barely clinging to life.

And yet, the Sovereign—the omnipresent AI that had always been there since the very moment she had arrived aboard the ship—was terrifyingly absent.

Since the moment of impact, there had been no movement aside from her own, no answers to her questions, nothing to even indicate the AI's continued existence.

Thea's mind struggled to comprehend the silence.

Why wasn't the Sovereign responding? Why wasn't it fixing this? This entire DDS environment was all supposed to be under its governance, so where was it now?

But no answers came, only the deafening roar of her own ragged breaths and the occasional grotesque squelch of her blood pooling beneath her.

She tried to move, but the agony was unbearable.

Her limbs were like lead, her body a veritable tapestry of fractures and bruises where the enormous pressure of the deceleration had won over her own body's toughness.

There was no first-aid kit within reach, and Karania—Karanja, who could fix *anything*—lay motionless just a short metre away. But Thea hadn't dared to check if she was even still

alive, both because she could barely move and because she couldn't do anything for her friend; whether she was alive or not.

All she could do was lie there, her broken body trembling, and *hope*.

Hope that the Sovereign would return. Hope that it would fix everything, somehow.

Her thoughts fragmented, pulled apart by the pain and the creeping edge of unconsciousness.

She tried to piece together what had happened, tried to understand what could have caused such a catastrophic event. But each time her mind tried to probe for an answer, another searing pain dragged her back to the hellscape that was her current situation.

Her face hit the cold floor again, the metallic taste of blood and vomit filling her mouth.

She gagged, choking on the mixture before her body managed to expel it in a violent spasm.

She turned her head slightly, desperate for any clean air, but her chest refused to cooperate.

'Please...' Her thoughts were faint now, a whisper in the chaos of her own mind.

'Somebody... anybody... **help**...'

As if to answer her unspoken pleas, the room suddenly erupted in an ear-shattering digital screech, a cacophony of distorted static and fractured soundwaves that rattled through Thea's skull like a hammer against glass.

She clenched her teeth, her bloodshot eyes squeezing shut as the noise bore down on her, a mind-numbing assault that left her body trembling in response.

The screech persisted for what felt like an eternity before the lights overhead flickered back to life. A dim, cold glow flooded the space, casting harsh shadows over the wreckage that was once Alpha Squad's communal room.

Thea barely had time to register the light before a startling sensation coursed through her—a sudden, full breath of air surged into her shattered lungs, the alien fullness both relieving and disorienting.

She gasped, coughing violently as her lungs expanded completely, the reflexive motion jarring but exhilarating. The once-searing pain in her chest was completely absent, like it had never existed in the first place.

She inhaled again, this time more deeply, her body flooding with oxygen for the first time since the deceleration. Her muscles, previously tight with agony, began to loosen, her entire frame buzzing with a peculiar, weightless energy.

"What...?" Thea whispered, her voice clear, strong, and whole.

She froze, the sound shocking her.

Her throat, which had been raw and broken, was now pristine, carrying her words without the rasp or strain she had grown used to just moments earlier.

With renewed strength, she easily pushed herself up from the cold floor, her hands and arms no longer trembling with the effort.

She instinctively wiped at her face, her fingers coming away sticky with drying blood and bile.

Grimacing, she moved away from the horrific puddle, her body moving with an ease that felt impossibly good given her previous state.

“Sovereign?” she called, hope blooming in her chest, replacing the despair that had gnawed at her moments before. “Is that you...?”

But instead of an answer, she heard a ragged, desperate inhalation of air from her right.

Thea’s head snapped toward the sound, her heart lurching as she saw Karania’s eyes fly open, wild and unseeing. A series of violent coughs wracked her body, each one punctuated by frantic, shallow gasps as she struggled to fill her lungs.

Without hesitation, Thea scrambled to her friend’s side, kneeling beside her and placing steadying hands on Karania’s trembling shoulders.

“It’s okay, Kara. You’re okay,” Thea said, her voice a mixture of reassurance and relief. She held Karania upright as the coughing fit gradually subsided, her breaths becoming deeper and less frantic.

Karania finally stilled, her chest rising and falling in even, steady breaths. She looked up at Thea with a weary but grateful smile, her voice slightly raspy from the coughing but carrying its familiar tone.

“Thanks for the attempt,” she said, her humor surprisingly intact despite the grim circumstances. “Though, let’s be real—I don’t have the kind of Vitality required to survive something like this, even with the best possible starting scenario, it seems...”

She extended a hand, silently asking for help to stand.

Thea grabbed it without hesitation, pulling Karania to her feet.

Karania wobbled slightly but steadied herself quickly, her eyes scanning the wreckage around them. Her gaze lingered for a moment on the bloodied splashes on the far wall—the remnants of Isabella and Lucas—and her expression darkened.

“Sovereign,” Karania called out, her voice sharp and demanding, “what the *fuck* happened here?”

Thea shook her head, cutting in before the AI’s silence could disappoint her friend. “I’ve already tried. Sovereign’s been entirely unresponsive. At least... until now.”

Karania's mouth opened, likely to retort, but she froze mid-sentence.

The sound of ragged, gasping breaths filled the room once again, this time coming from the far side near the counter.

Both women's heads snapped toward the sound, and their breath hitched in unison.

There, standing unsteadily next to the dining area's counter, were Isabella and Lucas. Their bodies were whole again, pristine in ways that defied the gruesome aftermath Thea had seen moments earlier.

Without hesitation, Karania darted toward Lucas, her medical training seemingly having kicked in as she moved to assess him.

Thea didn't think twice before rushing to Isabella's side either.

Her hands hovered uncertainly for a mere moment before she steadied Isabella, who was coughing violently, her eyes wild with confusion.

"It's okay, Ela," Thea murmured. "I've got you."

Isabella's coughing gradually subsided, but her wide eyes darted around the room, taking in the wreckage, the blood-smeared walls, and the shattered countertop.

"What the fuck happened here?" she rasped, her voice thick with disbelief. Her gaze shifted to Thea, pleading for some kind of explanation. "One second, we're talking about sparring and pancakes, and the next... I'm here, coughing my lungs out?"

Lucas, equally unsteady, looked between the three of them, his brow furrowed deeply. "Yeah... I don't remember anything past Thea lunging out of her chair...?"

Thea exchanged a quick glance with Karania, who gave her a subtle nod, encouraging her to try to explain. Taking a deep breath, Thea gestured toward the destruction surrounding them.

"It wasn't just you two. Something... *happened*. There was this insane lurch—like the whole ship slammed into a wall at full speed. I jumped because..." she hesitated, glancing at Isabella, "...because my powers were screaming at me that we were all about to die. I didn't have time to give a warning or anything, I'm sorry..."

Karania stepped in, her voice steadier but laced with an edge of disbelief. "And it wasn't just a near-miss, either. Look around."

She pointed toward the shattered counter, the jagged edge glinting under the dim lights.

Then, her finger moved to the blood splattered across the far wall. "That isn't just random damage. That's you two, if I had to guess."

Thea nodded in response to Karania's unspoken question, confirming that it was indeed Isabella's and Lucas' remnants at the far-side wall. She was the only one that had remained conscious during the event, so she was the only one that had seen some of what happened.

Isabella's eyes widened in horror as her gaze followed Karania's gestures.

Her trembling fingers hovered over the unmarred skin of her arm before making contact, as though she needed physical confirmation that it was still there, still real.

"No. No way," she muttered, her voice barely more than a whisper. Her eyes darted back to the splattered blood on the walls, her throat tightening. "That's not possible... I don't remember any of that. The Sovereign can't touch our memories! *Right?* It can't do that, right?"

Karania crossed her arms, her expression somber but unflinching. "Right. Memories are part of the Soul—something neither the ship AI nor the System can tamper with, as far as I know. But you're missing the bigger point here, Isabella."

Her voice turned clinical, as she gestured toward the destruction again. "Thea mentioned earlier that the ship stopped like it hit a wall. Do you realize the scale of what that means? The speed we were moving at was beyond anything you've probably ever even *considered*."

Isabella shook her head slightly, still trying to process the implications, but Karania pressed on. "When the ship lurched, you weren't just *thrown* across the room—you were practically shot from a gun with the same insane speed we were traveling through Space. You hit the counter and the wall in practically the same *instant*, disintegrating on impact before your neurons even had time to fire. There was no time for your brain to process it, no chance for a memory to form. *That's* why you don't remember it, Isabella. There wasn't anything *to* remember."

The weight of Karania's explanation crushed the air from the room.

Isabella looked like she wanted to argue, to find some hole in Karania's logic, but her eyes kept darting to the evidence—the blood stains, the shattered counter—and the words died on her lips.

Lucas pinched the bridge of his nose and exhaled heavily. "Alright... Sovereign," he barked toward the ceiling, "what the fuck happened here?"

Before the words were fully out of his mouth, Thea and Karania simultaneously answered in an exasperated tone, "We already tried that."

Lucas and Isabella both turned to them, confusion etched into their faces.

Karania's expression was tight with frustration. "The Sovereign hasn't been answering. Not when Thea tried, and not when I did either."

"Yeah," Thea agreed, her voice carrying an edge of unease that sent a shiver through the tense atmosphere. "It only came back just now, and... I'm not even sure it's actually the

Sovereign. There's been no communication, no acknowledgment—nothing. Something really messed up is going on here..."

Isabella pressed her fingers to her temples, her frustration bubbling over. "So, what, we're just supposed to sit around and act like nothing happened?"

Lucas shot her a look, gesturing at the utter devastation surrounding them. "Honestly? I don't even see a way for us to sit, even if we wanted to."

Thea's gaze followed Lucas's gesture, her eyes scanning the ruined space around them.

She hadn't noticed it at first, but now it was glaringly obvious—none of the chairs had survived the catastrophic deceleration either.

The grav-locks meant to secure them had evidently failed, unable to withstand the sheer, unimaginable force that had acted on all of them. The chairs hadn't merely broken either—they had been completely *obliterated*, reduced to fine dust that now glittered faintly in the harsh lighting.

The sight sparked a question in Thea's mind, a quiet whisper that grew louder as she stared at the destruction. "If even plasteel chairs got pulverized, then how did *I* survive this...?" she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper but loud enough to draw Karania's attention.

Karanja turned her sharp gaze toward Thea, her expression thoughtful.

"Inertia dampeners," she said matter-of-factly, as though the two words alone were enough to explain the unexplainable.

Thea had never heard of those words before, having been planet-locked since birth until the Cube Trial, so they had no actual meaning to her whatsoever.

Her furrowed brows and questioning look prompted Karania to sigh and elaborate.

"Inertia dampeners are systems built into ships to counteract the extreme forces of acceleration and deceleration during flight. They're the reason why ships like the Sovereign can move at insane speeds without turning everyone inside into red smears on the walls like those. Many centuries ago, before humanity had this kind of technology, space travel was supposedly *agonizingly* slow. Accelerating or decelerating had to happen over months—sometimes even multiple *years*—to avoid killing everyone onboard."

Karanja gestured to the counter behind them, now dented and streaked with blood. "But they're not perfect. There's a limit to how much force they can compensate for, especially during something as abrupt as what we just went through. You survived because you were pressed against a bow-facing surface when the ship stopped. Most of the force was absorbed by the counter and the floor before it could reach you. Combined with the dampeners probably running at maximum capacity, that gave you *just* enough of a buffer to avoid dying; and prevented me from being turned into full-on mist."

Thea stared at her, trying to process the explanation, but her eyes kept drifting back to the craters. The harrowing contrast between the utter destruction and her own survival felt surreal, despite the logical explanations.

“So... what now?” Thea asked, her voice subdued as she broke the silence, hoping someone had an idea to distract her spiraling thoughts.

Her words hung in the air as everyone exchanged uncertain glances, the weight of the moment pressing down on them all.

No one seemed eager to break the fragile quiet.

Finally, Isabella opened her mouth to speak, but before any words could escape, the room was pierced by a jarring, distorted gangle of noise.

The sound erupted from every speaker in the room, an abrasive burst that made them all jump. The noise was brief, clearing up almost as suddenly as it had started, but it left their nerves frayed.

“This is a repeating, ship-wide announcement,” came the voice of the Sovereign, its tone calm but still tinged with an uncharacteristic distortion. Relief washed visibly over the members of Alpha Squad, though their tension didn’t fully dissipate. “The DDS has encountered a brief malfunction as a result of an unlikely and unexpected Void-eruption shortly after returning to real-space.”

The Sovereign’s words hung heavily in the air.

Void-eruption.

Thea’s stomach churned at the phrase, despite the lack of any kind of understanding what it might mean, and she noticed Karania’s expression tighten at the mention of it.

“The malfunction has been addressed,” the Sovereign continued, “and I am in the process of reinstating all personnel lost. This process will take another approximately 37 minutes and 54 seconds. Please remain calm and exactly where you are, as I cannot spare any processing power for any other tasks at the current moment.”

The relief on Isabella’s face flickered briefly into disbelief.

“*Reinstating* personnel...?” she echoed, her voice laced with confusion.

Karania sighed, brushing a hand through her tousled hair as she pieced her thoughts together.

“It probably means *exactly* what it sounds like,” she began, her tone serious. “The Sovereign is likely trying to put back together every Marine inside the DDS. This wasn’t an isolated incident, Isabella.”

Isabella blinked, clearly not quite following. “What do you mean? We’re the only ones in here—”

Karania cut her off with a firm shake of her head, her gaze darting toward the blood-streaked walls and pulverized debris. “No. It means exactly what it sounds like, Isabella. Lucas and you weren’t the only ones turned into red mist. I already assumed our room wasn’t an isolated incident, but if the Sovereign’s announcement is anything to go by, the *entire* DDS was affected. Unless someone had the sheer luck to be pressing themselves against a bow-facing hard surface at the *exact* moment of the ‘*Void eruption*’—and I mean sheer *astronomical* luck—they would’ve ended up just like you two. Maybe worse.”

Lucas swallowed audibly, his brows furrowing as he exchanged a glance with Thea. “You’re saying the whole DDS...”

“Exactly.” Karania’s voice was sharp with finality. “It wasn’t *just* us. The Sovereign isn’t trying to clean up a small mess. She’s reconstructing the *entire ship*’s worth of personnel—thousands upon thousands of Marines who probably didn’t have the Vitality levels and positioning to survive the initial event.”

Isabella’s wide-eyed expression shifted, understanding dawning slowly. “So... everyone else...”

“*Gone*. For now,” Karania said bluntly, though her tone softened slightly as she glanced at Isabella. “That’s why it’ll take nearly forty minutes, even for the Sovereign. She’s reconstructing their bodies piece by piece, trying to fix what happened. Since none of us were in a pre-established training environment, I doubt the Sovereign had any direct backups for just about anyone. So she probably has to individually put people back together, by hand—or whatever the equivalent would be for a god-like being inside a digital environment.”

Thea noticed the way Karania’s voice shifted as she said, ‘*Void eruption*.’

The words felt heavier than the rest, as though she were deliberately singling them out.

A knot of unease twisted in Thea’s chest, and before she could stop herself, she asked, “Do you know what that is? A Void eruption?”

Karania hesitated for a moment, her eyes meeting Thea’s.

“No,” she admitted carefully, though her gaze held a pointed intensity that made Thea’s stomach churn. It was the kind of look that said, “*We’ll talk about this later.*”

Thea nodded faintly, her unease growing. Whatever this “*Void eruption*” was, it was clear Karania had her suspicions—and they weren’t good.

The room fell into a tense silence as the four members of Alpha Squad exchanged uneasy glances. Each of them looked as though they were grasping for answers, or at least a shred of normalcy to cling to in the aftermath of the Sovereign’s announcement.

“So,” Thea ventured, breaking the quiet, “what do we do now?”

“Not die again, for starters,” Lucas muttered, running a hand through his hair. He leaned against the far wall, his usually composed demeanor cracking somewhat under the weight of the recent revelations.

Isabella let out a huff, arms crossed tightly over her chest. “Yeah, great idea. Any thoughts on how to do that, Mr. Strategic Genius?”

Karania raised a hand to quiet the bickering before it could escalate. “The Sovereign said to stay put. She’s probably right. If the DDS is as screwed as it sounds, the last thing we need to do is wander into another hot zone. While I doubt there’s any real issues still abound, we can’t exactly be sure of that before she gives her all-clear.”

Lucas nodded reluctantly. “Makes sense. She’s got her hands full as it is. We’d just add to the chaos if we went looking for trouble.”

“Well, that’s just *boring*,” Isabella snapped, glaring at the far wall as if it had personally offended her. “I had *plans* today. I was supposed to be testing out my new Attribute spread—crushing some other Recruits for fun—not getting turned into red fucking mist by a random Void whatever-the-fuck and sitting around doing *nothing*...!”

Thea raised an eyebrow at her, a faint smile tugging at the corner of her lips. “Sitting on the floor with your back to the wall doesn’t exactly scream *unstoppable warrior*, Ela.”

Isabella shot her a glare and jabbed a thumb over her shoulder toward the bow-facing wall she had been walking towards during her tirade. “Yeah, well, *excuse me* for not wanting to randomly die to shit I can’t see. This wall is ‘safe,’ okay? I’ll be here until the Sovereign gives the all-clear. At least this way, if something happens again, I’ll have a chance.”

Thea chuckled softly, but it was without much humor; it was tinged with something morbid.

Isabella’s blunt frustration, however, was oddly comforting in a way—it made the surreal situation feel a bit more grounded. “Fair enough. Guess we’re all just waiting for now.”

After a brief exchange of nods, the squad moved to find their makeshift perches in the kitchen area. The chairs had been obliterated, and the room was a mess, but the counters had survived the devastation mostly intact.

Thea hoisted herself onto the dining counter, scooting over to make room for Karania, who settled in beside her with a heavy sigh.

Lucas leaned against the wall near the food printer, arms crossed as he stared off into the middle distance, clearly deep in thought.

Isabella, true to her word, plopped down on the floor, her back firmly pressed against the bow-facing wall, her posture defiant even as she grumbled to herself about “stupid Void bullshit”.

For a few moments, none of them spoke up, each lost in their own thoughts.

The hum of the food printer and the faint, eerie quiet of the room filled the silence.

Eventually, however, Isabella broke the silence. “I don’t even *care* what this is all about. I just want it to be fucking over already. Next time something tries to kill me, I want to at least be able to punch it in the face...”

A round of grumbled agreements from the rest of the squad followed, before they returned to their semi-comfortable silence.

A minute later, the Sovereign’s announcement repeated, counting down the time until it could potentially give the all-clear for them to go back to living their lives...

—

Seven more announcements followed over the next 35 minutes, each delivered with the same precision—one every five minutes on the dot.

Each update seemed to pull a little more tension from the air, but none so effectively as the final one, when the Sovereign’s voice echoed clearly through the speakers once more.

“This is a ship-wide announcement: All personnel inside the DDS have been reinstated. I will now begin reinstating objects, equipment, and other inorganic matter that was destroyed during the incident. You are now free to return to your daily business. I apologize for the inconvenience and thank you for your patience. Please note that there might be some restricted areas as you traverse through the ship, as not every part of the DDS has been fully reinstated yet.”

“Finally!” Isabella exclaimed as she practically launched herself away from the wall she had been glued to for the past 37 minutes. The sudden movement startled the others, but they couldn’t help but smile at her exuberance.

Stretching her arms above her head, Isabella let out a satisfied groan as her joints crackled and popped audibly. She flexed her muscles with exaggerated gusto, her newly upgraded Attribute spread on full display.

“I’m done sitting around in this dumb room. Come on, Lucas! We had a plan, remember?”

Without waiting for a reply, she strode over to Lucas and grabbed his arm, tugging him toward the door like an impatient older sibling dragging their little brother out of the house.

Lucas raised an eyebrow at her, his expression torn between amusement and mild exasperation.

“We’re going, we’re going,” he muttered, though there was a faint grin tugging at the corner of his lips.

He glanced back at Thea and Karania with a semi-pleading look that turned into a knowing smirk when he caught their jokingly pained expressions. They watched the scene unfold like parents watching a hyperactive child pull their sibling into mischief.

“Don’t have too much fun without us!” Thea called after them with a grin.

“No promises!” Isabella shot back over her shoulder, already halfway to the door, practically dragging Lucas along in her excitement.

She reached the door and kicked the button to open it with the same energy she’d put into everything else that morning. But the instant it whooshed open, she jumped back as if she’d been hit by a bolt of lightning.

“Oh shit!” she blurted, her hands shooting up defensively.

A heartbeat later, realization dawned on her, and she hastily corrected herself. “Ehhh, Ma’am! I meant, ‘oh shit, *Ma’am!*’”

Thea, curious about what—or rather *who*—had managed to startle Isabella, leaned over the side of the counter to get a better look at the door. And there, standing with the kind of quiet authority that could silence an entire room, was none other than Major Quinn.

“You meant to say, ‘*oh shit, Ma’am,*’ Recruit Itoku?” Major Quinn repeated evenly, one brow raised in a way that suggested she was both amused and entirely unimpressed.

“Yes, Ma’am! I... Ehh...” Isabella fumbled, her usual bravado slipping through her fingers like sand. She looked between the Major and Lucas, her panic growing with each second.

“No, Ma’am...?” she finished weakly.

Without hesitation, she gently but firmly pushed Lucas in front of her like a human shield, as though the Defensive Heavy could somehow protect her from the sheer weight of the Major’s scrutiny.

Lucas, caught entirely off-guard, stumbled forward with a bewildered expression, his arms outstretched as if to steady himself.

“Uh, good morning, Ma’am,” he said awkwardly, his voice a touch too loud in the tension-filled room. Behind him, Isabella peeked out from around his shoulder, her usual cocky grin replaced by a sheepish, apologetic smile that did little to mask her discomfort.

Major Quinn’s eyes flicked between the two of them, her lips twitching slightly as though suppressing a smirk.

“At ease, Recruits,” she said, her tone laced with a calm authority that left no room for argument, “I’m certain we’ve all had enough excitement for this morning already... I’m not here to steal any more of *your* time, I merely require Recruit *McKay*’s presence for a few hours.”

Thea blinked, completely taken off-guard by the Major’s words.

“*Me?*” she asked, sliding off the counter to stand straighter. “May I ask what this is about, Ma’am? I thought we were officially on break.”

Major Quinn's expression didn't waver as she folded her arms across her chest. "Breaks, Recruit McKay, are for those who *don't* create an office's worth of paperwork every single day."

Thea's brow furrowed in confusion, her mouth opening to respond, but it was Karania who reacted first. She let out a small, knowing chuckle and nodded at Thea with a sympathetic smile.

"No breaks for you, I guess," she said under her breath.

Thea glanced at her friend, more bewildered than ever, but before she could press for answers, Isabella and Lucas took the opportunity to make a swift exit.

"Well, you heard her! *Break time!*" Isabella said, her usual bravado returning as she sidestepped past Major Quinn with a casual wave. "Catch you later, Thea. You too, Karania!"

Lucas, still mildly flustered, gave a quick nod of acknowledgment before being dragged away by Isabella into the hallway. Both shot Thea a pointed look over their shoulders that said, "*We want all the details later.*"

Major Quinn's sharp gaze followed the two briefly before returning to Thea. "Shall we, Recruit?"

Taking the cue, Thea stepped forward, glancing back at Karania. "I'll catch up with you later, Kara."

"Sure," Karania replied with a grin. "Try not to make *too* much trouble while you're at it."

Thea managed a weak chuckle before following Major Quinn out the door. As it whooshed shut behind them, she couldn't shake the lingering sense of unease mixed with curiosity.

Whatever this was about, it was clear that her so-called "break" had just been interrupted in a way she wasn't even remotely prepared for...