

## **Arc 1 - Chapter 106 - Admonishment**

Locating her squad's room within the barracks was straightforward for Thea, thanks to the digital display in the entrance hall that neatly catalogued the squads and their assigned rooms.

Pausing momentarily outside the designated door, she inhaled deeply, steeling herself for the encounter.

Upon opening the door, Thea was immediately met with the unconventional yet familiar sight of Karania, intently focused on her task at the communal dining table. The table was her makeshift lab, where she meticulously bled into a vial, surrounded by an array of other vials and canteens in various stages of being filled.

It was evident Karania had been at this for a while already.

The room's atmosphere shifted at Thea's entrance, drawing all eyes to her.

"Thea!" Karania greeted, her face lighting up with an uninhibited smile. Without missing a beat, she dove straight into conversation. "Welcome back! How did everything turn out?"

Isabella's greeting came from the floor to Thea's right, her voice strained yet warm as she didn't interrupt her workout routine. "Welcome back, Boss," she managed between exercises.

Lucas and Desmond acknowledged Thea with nods, their expressions a mix of curiosity and concern, clearly anticipating the details of her mission report.

For a moment, Thea allowed herself to bask in the comfort of her squad's presence.

The solitude of navigating the FOB alone had felt unnatural, and being reunited with her team was a palpable relief. Yet, the looming task of conveying their mission's outcome hung over her.

With a gathered sense of purpose, she prepared to share the grim details of the rest of their previous mission.

"I... I didn't make it. I tried... I really did... I'm sorry. I gave it everything I had, but after the clash with the Psykers, I was pretty much on my last legs. I only got about halfway to the Control Station entrance when Arrow Squad showed up, offering their support, but..." Thea's voice faded into silence as she grappled with the right words to convey the next part of her story.

How could she accurately paint the picture of the overwhelming fear and the stark realisation of their disadvantage? The palpable difference in power between their Psychic Gates was not just intimidating; it was a harbinger of certain defeat.

In the end, she opted for simplicity. "Arrow Squad wanted me to slightly open my Gate to pinpoint the enemy Ace's location since they had trouble tracking him down. When I did..."

Well, it didn't take long to locate them. Or more accurately, *they* found *us*. Everything happened so fast, I barely had time to alert Arrow Squad before I found myself back here in a respawn pod."

Pausing, Thea weighed the extent of what she should reveal about Arrow Squad's ultimate fate. She knew omitting details would only lead to more questions and speculation.

Transparency was essential in her mind; and they were Alpha Squad, after all. They deserved to know the truth and she was certain they could handle it—that the Ace had decisively overpowered Arrow Squad and wiped the floor with them.

"The moment I arrived back here, my first action was, naturally, to report the Ace's location to command. Unfortunately, I was already a step behind; Morin had beaten me to it, thanks to some respawn protocol... Arrow Squad was decimated, all except for Viladia. She's still out there," Thea's tone was heavy, each word laden with the grim reality of Viladia's situation.

"Still out there? You mean she got captured?" Isabella interjected, halting her exercises abruptly, taken aback by the news. "But isn't she trained as an assassin? How did that happen?"

Thea could only offer a helpless shrug, her own understanding incomplete. "He's a Psyker of immense power. I'd guess she was likely taken by surprise by one of his Powers or maybe straight up overwhelmed; that's the only explanation that makes sense to me."

The room fell into a sobering silence as the squad digested the implications. The thought that even someone as skilled as Viladia could be captured underscored the perilous nature of their mission.

"She's probably being tortured as we speak... and there's nothing we can do. Morin had already asked Staff-Sergeant Venn if there was anything, and so did I, but there's nobody even remotely close enough to her last known location to try and assist; not to mention the enemy Ace easily being able to take care of anyone attempting a rescue of some sort," Thea added, her voice tinged with an anger she couldn't suppress. She had intended to keep her report clinical, but the mere idea of her friend enduring such torment ignited a fury within her.

"Wait, *tortured*?!" Desmond's outcry rang through the room. "What do you mean, *tortured*? I thought this was an assessment? Why the fuck would the AI-controlled enemies torture our marines? What the fuck is the point of that?!"

Thea didn't really have a concrete answer for that either, so she remained silent, thinking about what she did know about the setup of the assessment instead and how that could lead to this situation.

"Actually, the structure of this assessment's enemy allocation is quite intriguing, from what I understand," Karania began, her eyes lighting up with the opportunity to dissect the complexities at play. "Try to visualise it as a hierarchical pyramid where processing power and thus, operational complexity, escalates across different enemy tiers."

She gestured with her hands, outlining the base of her imaginary pyramid. "Down here, we encounter the common infantry—those we engaged with on the Wall and within the service

tunnels and the like. Their processing power is minimal, rendering them little more than basic simulated soldiers. Their strategic capabilities are rudimentary, barely surpassing that of standard routine AI, albeit a bit more advanced as they can independently adjust their behaviour to specific situations. Essentially, they're programmed for simple combat scenarios, lacking in any overarching or nuanced strategic thought. They are just about tailor-made for single-encounters, where their small-scale tactical acumen can shine, without requiring any major processing of large datasets."

Karania's expression grew more intense as she described the next tier. "As we ascend the pyramid, there's likely a tier designated for Squad Leaders and other high-ranking entities. These units are endowed with a greater share of processing power, enabling them to orchestrate the movements of the lower-tier AI, infusing the battlefield with a higher degree of complexity. This includes advanced decision-making trees that far exceed the algorithmic depth typically seen in commercial gaming. Emotions, too, are simulated but strictly in contexts relevant to combat dynamics."

She stopped for a moment, making sure that everyone was still paying attention to her explanations so as to not waste her time explaining things that nobody cared about.

But seeing that Desmond, as well as the rest of the squad, were paying close attention, she happily continued. "Proceeding further, we encounter specialised units, such as the Psykers. These adversaries are allocated a significantly larger portion of processing power. They're not only elite combatants but also necessitate a sophisticated simulation to authentically replicate psychic abilities. The intricacy involved in bringing such entities to life within the assessment is non-trivial."

Reaching the apex of her pyramid with a flourish, Karania's tone took on a note of solemnity. "And at the pinnacle of this pyramid are the Aces. These figures likely consume a substantial fraction of the assessment's total processing resources. Their simulation is comprehensive, encompassing their full spectrum of personality traits and emotional nuances. Essentially, they're as close to their real-life counterparts as the UHF's data allows, augmented by a degree of speculative reconstruction."

She paused once again, allowing her audience to digest the information before addressing Desmond's concern directly. "The motivation behind the Ace's actions, particularly the torturing of Viladia, hinges on their real-world persona. They're simulated based on UHF's encounters with them during the historical, real conflict at Nova Tertius. The information gathered *then* informs their digital persona *now*, embellished by the UHF to bridge any informational voids. It's not a perfect replication but a melding of factual behaviour and conjectured elements to fill in the blanks. Thus, if the Ace is engaging in torture, it reflects not just their strategic inclinations but also their inherent malevolence, as understood and extrapolated by the UHF."

Desmond, along with the rest of Alpha Squad, listened intently to Karania's detailed exposition, trying to piece together the implications of what was just shared. As the last word of Karania's explanation hung in the air, a momentary silence enveloped the room, each member processing the depth and gravity of the situation.

Desmond, always one to cut through complexity with blunt simplicity, leaned forward, breaking the silence with a half-question, half-statement. "So... that Ace is an absolute piece of shit even in real life, is what you're saying?"

His attempt to distil Karania's comprehensive breakdown into a single, digestible takeaway was met with a nod of affirmation from Karania, her agreement punctuating the atmosphere with a mix of grim acknowledgment and a slight sense of camaraderie in shared disdain.

The conversation's focus then shifted back to Thea, who felt the weight of her earlier admission intensify under the gaze of her squad. The technical breakdown of the enemy's capabilities seemed momentarily to divert attention from their failed mission, but the underlying issue remained unresolved.

Sensing the need for transparency and closure, at least for herself if nobody else, Thea gathered her thoughts, her resolve firming.

"I need to say this," Thea began, her voice steady yet laden with an unmistakable edge of remorse. "I'm sorry for not being able to complete our mission. I know I let you all down."

Her eyes met each of her squad members' in turn, seeking not forgiveness but understanding. "I understand if you're disappointed in me—I am too. But I promise, I did everything within my power out there... I would love to blame the Ace's appearance on it all, but fact is, I wouldn't have made it even if he hadn't shown up. I fucked up. I'm sorry."

The silence that followed Thea's heartfelt apology was profound, not uncomfortable but contemplative. It was clear to everyone in the room that the failure of the mission weighed on her more than anyone else.

Isabella, never one to mince words, shattered the heavy silence with her usual directness.

"Thea, what the fuck are you even talking about?"

Her question, sharp and unexpected, caught Thea by surprise, leaving her momentarily unsure of how to respond. She had believed her apology was clear, but Isabella's reaction suggested a misunderstanding, or perhaps a different perspective altogether.

Before Thea could clarify her statement, Isabella pressed on, her tone firm yet supportive. "Listen, why are you acting as if this whole mess was somehow *your* fault alone? This was *our* mission, a team effort. It wasn't just you out there. We all got taken down by those Psykers, didn't we? It took everything *we* had; *our* collective push at the very end, to even stand a chance in that fight. Without that, none of us would have made it out in one piece."

Taking a brief pause, Isabella's gaze softened slightly, acknowledging Thea's leadership in Corvus's absence. "Since Corvus handed the reins over to you, you've stepped up in ways I didn't see coming at all. Honestly, you've exceeded any expectations I might've had for you as an interim squad leader. I'm not sure even Corvus could've navigated us much better through this, especially once we were at the control station itself."

She leaned forward, emphasising her next words with a mix of frustration and admiration.

"So cut this shit with this whole 'I'm sorry' stuff. It doesn't make any fucking sense. Worse: It honestly feels downright insulting; though I know it's not what you mean. But it sounds like you're saying that without you, we had no chance to do this at all; like that's why it's your fault, cause *you* failed, somehow. But that's fucking nonsense.

"You *have* been leading us with everything you've got, and we have *all* been giving it our all. Sometimes, that's just how things go. We didn't make it this time, and that's fine. It sucks that we failed the mission, but that's just part of fucking life. This is a Platinum-ranked Assessment, after all. We're not really *supposed* to win at every turn in this one, if I understand anything about the ranking system."

Isabella's mood visibly lightened as a broad grin took over her face, her earlier intensity melting into a more playful demeanour. "And let's not forget the silver lining here," she chimed in, her voice tinged with a hint of excitement.

"We might have missed the main mission objective, but taking down two Psykers a Tier above us? That's got to count for something, right? The bonuses from that alone are huge. I mean, I have no clue what rewards the other Alpha Squads managed to snag, but I'd say we made out like bandits on this one. Anyone else here think differently?" She cast a glance around the room, meeting the eyes of her squadmates.

Thea's gaze followed Isabella's, only to find unanimous agreement. The room was filled with nods and equally broad grins, a silent acknowledgment of the unexpected boon their hard-fought battle had yielded.

Isabella, unable to resist another jab, continued with a playful scoff. "And here I thought I was the stupid one in the squad, but Thea, you're really outdoing yourself today." She shook her head, her tone a mix of amusement and exasperation. "Will you ever stop being such a moron and thinking you gotta somehow shoulder and take responsibility for everything yourself? I'm sure that Corvus would rip you a new one if he heard this kind of talk out of you, after what we just went through... Or at least, he'd chew you out a lot. He's not really the physical-type, I guess..."

Her voice dwindled into a murmur as she pondered just how Corvus might articulate his frustration with Thea's self-imposed guilt. This left Thea momentarily adrift in the centre of attention, surrounded by her squad's varied reactions.

Some looked on with bemused expressions, others with a blend of sympathy and mild reproof, all united in their concern for her well-being but equally puzzled by her propensity for self-criticism.

Thea, caught in the crossfire of Isabella's blunt observations and the squad's collective gaze, felt a mix of embarrassment and a dawning realisation of her tendency to internalise the squad's collective challenges; just as Corvus had mentioned back in the abandoned area of the city, shortly before handing over the reign of the squad to her.

She mulled over Corvus's words, realising their truth ran deeper than she initially understood.

'*Maybe Ela's on to something,*' Thea considered, scanning the faces of her squad mates.

Even Desmond, whom she had pegged as the most likely to voice dissatisfaction with her leadership due to their more complex history, seemed to be in agreement.

Just then, Karania interjected, breaking Thea's train of thought with a mixture of curiosity and a slight tease in her tone.

"Thea... When exactly was the last time you checked your System Notifications?" she asked, her voice a blend of curiosity and playful admonishment. "You haven't glanced at them since you respawned, have you? Maybe give them a look before you go on about how you've single-handedly doomed us all. There might just be a few surprises waiting for you there."

Karania's suggestion sparked a flicker of curiosity in Thea, prompting her to reconsider her stance. The possibility that she had overlooked something crucial—something potentially positive—on her System Notifications added a layer of anticipation to the moment.

It was true; she hadn't checked her Notifications in a long time.

Pretty much ever since the mission had started, with their ascent of the Wall, she had kept them on mute so as to not get distracted. Especially after Corvus had handed over the leadership of the squad, she hadn't even spent a single second thinking about any form of Experience Points, Credits or Merit whatsoever, having been fully focused on trying to lead the squad as best she could.

"I guess you're both right..." Thea admitted meekly. "I'll check the Notifications now, then. I haven't really looked at them in quite a while..."

She voiced those thoughts, as she didn't want the rest of the squad to worry while she was interfacing with the System. Considering the amount of time she had left it on mute, it was likely that there was quite the backlog she'd have to work through, before she could consider herself caught up again.

Opening the System Notifications, she was immediately inundated by a torrent of text.

[System]: *Messages have been grouped by related content for streamlined reading. To revert to the raw format, Participant may adjust settings using the standard procedures.*

[System]: *You have **successfully** completed Faction Mission "Infiltrate The Greater Area Of Nova Tertius".*

[System]: *You have received 100 Contribution Points, 150 System Merit and 300 System Credits. (Mission)*

[System]: *You have received 23 Contribution Points, 31 System Merit and 65 System Credits. (Combat)*

[System]: *You have received 11 Contribution Points, 16 System Merit and 33 System Credits. (Objectives)*

[System]: *You have reached Level 8.*

[System]: *You have gained 4 Unspent Attribute Points.*

[System]: *You have received 64 Contribution Points, 81 System Merit and 211 System Credits. (Combat - Assist)*

[System]: *You have received 265 Contribution Points, 512 System Merit and 1,104 System Credits. (Objectives - Assist)*

[System]: *You have completed Silver-Rank Accomplishment "Fledgeling Arms Dealer".*

[System]: *Penetrative Shot has reached Level 5.*

[System]: *Minor Alterations unlocked for Ability: [Penetrative Shot].*

[System]: *You have received 54 Contribution Points, 73 System Merit and 233 System Credits. (Combat)*

[System]: *You have received 13 Contribution Points, 19 System Merit and 38 System Credits. (Objectives)*

[System]: *You have **successfully** completed Faction Mission "Infiltrate The Heart Of Nova Tertius".*

[System]: *You have received 200 Contribution Points, 250 System Merit and 500 System Credits. (Mission)*

[System]: *Armour of Resolve has reached Level 3.*

[System]: *Armour of Resolve has reached Level 4.*

[System]: *Silver Respiration has reached Level 3.*

[System]: *Silver Respiration has reached Level 4.*

[System]: *Meditation Focus has reached Level 5.*

[System]: *Inspect Target has reached Level 5.*

[System]: *Sky Step has reached Level 5.*

[System]: *Improved Sprint has reached Level 5.*

[System]: *Agile Stealth has reached Level 5.*

[System]: *Detect Weak Spots has reached Level 4.*

[System]: *Detect Weak Spots has reached Level 5.*

[System]: *Penetrative Shot has reached Level 6.*

[System]: *Minor Alterations unlocked for Abilities: [Inspect Target], [Sky Step], [Improved Sprint].*

[System]: *You have received 264 Contribution Points, 357 System Merit and 562 System Credits. (Combat)*

[System]: *You have received 85 Contribution Points, 103 System Merit and 162 System Credits. (Objectives)*

[System]: *You have reached Level 9.*

[System]: *You have gained 4 Unspent Attribute Points.*

[System]: *You have completed Gold-Rank Accomplishment "Psyker's Bane".*

[System]: You have **failed** to complete the Assessment Mission "Destroy Or Disable Control Station 1".

[System]: You have died. Automatically initiating [Soul Transfer] Faction Trait...

[System]: Shell Creation Initiated... Shell Creation Completed... Transferring Soul... Affixing Soul to Shell...

[System]: [Soul Transfer] completed.

[System Note]: **Transfer distance for [Soul Transfer] Faction Trait below minimum threshold. No System Merit will be deducted and Faction Trait will not be taxed.**

As Thea scrolled through her System Notifications, her mind buzzed with astonishment.

'That's... *that's a lot of stuff,*' she marvelled internally, her eyes flicking rapidly across the interface to absorb the flood of information presented before her. The notifications seemed to stretch on endlessly, each one packed with details and achievements that collectively marked their recent endeavours. 'Looks like the [Psyker's Bane] Accomplishment must be what Ela was hinting at... If snagging a Gold-Rank Accomplishment is what we got out of this mess, then maybe missing the mark on the first Assessment Mission isn't such a big deal after all,' Thea pondered, as a newfound, albeit small, surge of pride nudged at her initial disappointment and embarrassment. Gold-Rank Accomplishments were nothing to sneeze at, after all.

The realisation dawned on her that the rewards from achieving something as significant as a Gold-Rank Accomplishment likely overshadowed what they might have received from completing the initial mission to begin with.

'Especially since we've got another shot with a second mission on the horizon,' she considered, hints of optimism threading through her thoughts.

Pulling up her [Status, Attributes & Currencies] page next, she wanted to get a rough overview of the total amount of CP, Merit and Credits she had managed to gain.

[Status, Attributes & Currencies]:

Thea McKay - Level 9.45 - Contribution Points: 322 / 710 - Unspent Attribute Points: 12

HP: 131 / 131 - Stamina: 165 / 165 - Focus: 225 / 225 - TBD - TBD

Class: None - Specialization: None - Title: None - TBD - TBD

Strength: **3.38** | 3.18 (+0%) + **0.2**

Finesse: 4.73 (+0%)

Vitality: 2.51 (+0%)

Recovery: 2.72 (+0%)

Stamina: 3.11 (+0%)

Focus: 4.31 (+0%)

Perception: **8.45** | 5.28 (+60%)

Resolve: **9.55** | 5.97 (+60%)

[Psychic: TBD (+0%)] (Locked[?] **24.82/30**)

[TBD: TBD (+0%)] (Locked)

System Credits: 17,798



System Merit: 4,710

As Thea scanned her status on the System, a flicker of disbelief crossed her mind. *'How the fuck am I already level 9? At this rate, I'll hit Level 10 before we even wrap up the first assessment. That doesn't seem right, does it?'* she pondered, her internal monologue brimming with confusion and a hint of concern.

The UHF's objectives for their first year had been one of the very few *clear* directives provided: Reaching Level 10 was a milestone, signalling the unlocking of their Classes, a crucial step in a Marine's development.

Yet, here she was, only a few weeks into her own integration, barely at the outset of their inaugural assessment, and already on the verge of this significant milestone.

*'Is this just how it is for Alpha Squads, maybe...?'* Thea questioned herself, trying to reconcile her rapid progression with the expectations set before them. *'Considering the pace at which the rest of the squad is levelling—likely around 7 or 8 by now—it might just be part of the process for squads like ours.'*

This realisation slowly settled in, weaving through her initial shock to form a tentative hypothesis about the accelerated development path that seemed characteristic of Alpha Squads.

Finally, she pulled up the long overdue selection of [Minor Alterations] for her Abilities.

She had unlocked the [Penetrative Shot] one the moment they had set foot into the city-proper, but back then, she didn't have the time nor patience to really sit down with a decision as monumental as making a permanent choice on her Ability selection.

Now, however, she likely had all the time in the world to think about it.

[Minor Alterations: Penetrative Shot]

[Penetrative Shot  $\alpha$ ]: The first target hit does not use up the Ability's charge, assuming that the shot manages to penetrate entirely.

[Penetrative Shot  $\beta$ ]: Lowers the Focus and Stamina cost of subsequent uses by 25%, if used within at most two seconds of one another.

[Penetrative Shot  $\gamma$ ]: When the Ability's charge is used up, immediately accelerates the projectile by 100%.

[Minor Alterations: Inspect Target]

[Inspect Target  $\alpha$ ]: Doubles the Participant's Perception Scaling for the purposes of overcoming Resistances for this Ability. (current 25% -> 50%)

[Inspect Target  $\beta$ ]: Lowers the Focus cost by 25%, as well as lowering it by an additional 25% for subsequent uses within at most two seconds of one another.

[Inspect Target  $\gamma$ ]: If Resistance is broken by at least 200%, Advanced Profile will be displayed instead. (Advanced Profiles include the top 2 Active and Top 3 Passive Abilities, as well as the Class of the Target)

[Minor Alterations: Sky Step]

[Sky Step  $\alpha$ ]: Doubles the Maximum Weight stat of the Ability. (current 175kg -> 350kg)

[Sky Step  $\beta$ ]: Lowers the Focus and Stamina cost of subsequent uses by 25%, if used within at most two seconds of one another.

[Sky Step  $\gamma$ ]: Increases the number of Maximum Planes that can be created at any given time by 2. (current 2 -> 4)

[Minor Alteration: Improved Sprint]

[Improved Sprint  $\alpha$ ]: Improves the Boost Factor by 20% of the usual level curve. (current 55% -> 66%)

[Improved Sprint  $\beta$ ]: Lowers the Stamina cost of subsequent uses by 25%, if used within at most two seconds of one another.

[Improve Sprint  $\gamma$ ]: Increases the Maximum Movement Speed value by 15m/s. (current 37.5m/s -> 52.5m/s)

Seeing the whole list arrayed like that, Thea was a bit overwhelmed with the amount of choices she'd have to make fairly soon. A lot of the Abilities, she hadn't actually used that much so far, which was going to make the decisions quite tough.

*'Choosing between [Inspect Target] and [Improved Sprint] is going to be particularly challenging...'* she mused, lowering herself onto a chair by the table Karania had commandeered for her "scientific" endeavours.

*'[Inspect Target] especially has barely been part of my arsenal at all...'* Thea's thoughts trailed off as she found herself ensnared in the intricacies of each option, weighing their potential benefits against her own combat style and the squad's operational needs.

So engrossed was she in her deliberations that Thea became oblivious to the expectant gazes of her squadmates, all fixed on her with a blend of curiosity and anticipation. They seemed to hang on her every move, perhaps hoping for insights or declarations regarding the Accomplishment they had collectively earned—an accolade Thea had momentarily pushed to the back of her mind amidst the pressing concern of her Ability choices...