

Arc 1 - Chapter 66 - Innocent Mistakes

Still reeling from the inexplicable events she'd experienced on the way to the front, Thea carefully stepped off the transporter.

Her thoughts felt disjointed, like fragments of a shattered mirror, causing her to stumble as she tried dismounting. Just in time, Karania's steadying grip saved her from falling.

"Thea, are you alright?" Karania's concerned voice cut through the mental fog.

"Not sure. I might need—" She was interrupted by a surge of anxiety, underscored by the haunting visions she'd had during their journey. Recollections of asking Karania for assistance, only to be shot by her in return, flooded her mind.

Briefly locking eyes with Karania, Thea took a moment to centre herself.

*'You've just navigated through this exact kind of issue with Vi, Thea. Get a grip. Nightmares or visions, they aren't always showing the truth. You can trust Kara, you **know** that,'* she reassured herself internally.

Gathering her resolve, she finally said, "Could you give me another check-up? I had these unnerving dreams on our way here—But they felt fucking real, Kara! They were downright *insane*, but I can vividly remember them, although somewhat disjointed. You think this is some kind of side-effect of being in a coma...? I've never been in one before."

Karania nodded without a moment's pause. "Of course, let's get you checked out. We should find you a place to sit down."

She quickly guided Thea to one of the makeshift shelters—calling them 'tents' would have been overly generous, as they were essentially angular rock-crete barricades offering overhead protection. She gestured toward one of the scattered metal chairs that dotted the area underneath the empty 'tent'.

As much as Thea wanted to absorb her surroundings and acclimate to the area, her mind was still cluttered with the perplexing memories of their recent journey, making it impossible for her to focus on the environment around her.

Karania interrupted her thoughts as she retrieved her data pad from her backpack. "I appreciate you letting me know you're not feeling well, Thea. That means a lot."

Thea responded, somewhat absent-mindedly, "It's no big deal, right? We're friends, and friends trust each other."

Or so she had read on that article before their shopping trip. It had been the guiding light in her first friendship with Karania and it hadn't led her astray so far, leaving little reason to doubt it now, of all times. It was definitely more relevant to her life than whatever strange visions had caused that anxiety in her heart, when she had tried asking for Kara's help.

That much was a given.

Thea remained seated, attempting to gather her thoughts amid the mental fog, while Karania busily tapped away on her data pad. After a few minutes, Karania's annoyed expression suggested that the pad had yielded no useful information.

She put it away and refocused her attention on Thea.

"So, can you describe these visions to me?" she asked, as her hands gently examined Thea's head, presumably searching for any external injuries or anything that might be 'off'.

Thea took a deep breath, her eyes narrowing as she tried to string together the fragmented and surreal images from her visions. "In one, I saw the driver of the transporter—a marine named Ryan, if I remember correctly—get a sudden order to check the back for something. When he did, everyone was already dead. They were killed by this... bizarre, seven-legged dog-like creature. It somehow got out completely unscathed. The vision ended with Ryan also dying to that creature..."

Her eyes met Karania's before she continued, "It was fucking terrifying, Kara. That *thing* literally tore him apart as if he was made out of paper. Even Isabella can't do anything like that!"

She paused, her face going a shade paler. "Then there was another where I looked up at the sun, but it wasn't the sun anymore. It was like a strange, violet eclipse. And the scariest part was seeing my own eyes staring back at me, impossibly massive beyond belief, behind that sun. When I looked at it, it was simultaneously like looking back at myself from impossibly far above, like two viewpoints superimposed, looking—"

As she tried to articulate the sensation of observing herself in the vision, a wave of dizziness washed over her, nearly causing her to tip off the chair. Karania's quick hands steadied her.

"Hey, take it slow," Karania cautioned, her voice tinged with concern. "These visions, or nightmares, or whatever they are, they're clearly messing with your head. Remember, you just woke up from a coma yesterday. Don't strain yourself too much, even if I did ask you to describe what you saw."

Feeling reassured by Karania's words, Thea continued, albeit more cautiously.

"In another vision, you were trying to help me. But I cried these weird, violet tears that defied gravity, floating up and then... everything just evaporated as they touched the ceiling of the transport."

Thea hesitated, her eyes locking onto Karania's, which remained steadfastly focused yet infused with concern.

"There was one more vision, the first one actually, according to what I can piece together, at least," she began cautiously. This particular vision had left the deepest impression on her, so much so that it had instinctively made her reluctant to seek Karania's help earlier.

"You don't have to share if you're not ready, Thea. Again, don't strain yourself. It's fine. I was merely wondering if we could figure out some kind of clue about what might have caused it, but nothing so far seems to ring any kind of bell. Don't force yourself," Karania said gently,

interrupting Thea's train of thought but offering a comforting tone that eased some of the tension in the air.

Gathering her thoughts, Thea took a deep breath and continued, "In this first vision, there was this strange... entity, or something, behind my heart that suddenly 'opened,' for lack of a better term. After that, time itself seemed disjointed, fragmented. I kept trying to walk toward you to ask for help, but I was essentially teleporting around the transporter."

Pausing to ensure she had Karania's full attention, which she did, Thea added, "Then I appeared in front of this random marine. For some inexplicable reason, a thought flashed through my mind: I could kill the marine before anyone could react. And then—next thing I knew—I was standing there, Icicle in hand, and the marine was dead. Kara, I swear, I didn't intend it. There was a complete loss of memory between the thought and finding myself there!"

Karania simply gestured for Thea to go on, her calming demeanour helping Thea stay grounded.

Encouraged, Thea continued, "After that, in the vision, you tried to protect me. But that sinister thought returned, suggesting I could kill everyone. Suddenly, everyone but you and me was dead, and the entire transporter was *frozen* over. I...I don't have any kind of ice-based weapon, Kara. The Icicle shoots some strange crystal shards, not actual ice. And then...you shot me in the head. That's how the vision ended..."

As she finished recounting the deeply unsettling sequence of events, Thea looked visibly shaken. Seeing her friend's distress, Karania moved quickly to embrace her.

"It's okay, Thea. It was just a strange vision, even if it felt as real as anything. You know I'd never actually do anything like that, not to you. Even if you were to take down the entire UHF leadership, I'd never harm you. After all, we're friends, right? You said so yourself," Karania reassured her, her words tinged with conviction.

Hearing those comforting words, Thea felt a wave of relief wash over her as she enjoyed the warm, grounding embrace for a few seconds, that seemed to dispel some of the haze inside of her head. Karania eventually pulled away but continued to look her over, her eyes searching for any lingering signs of distress, before she ultimately stilled.

Karania's focus momentarily wavered before her gaze sharpened, locking onto Thea's eyes. "Can you elaborate on this *entity*? The one behind your heart that you say '*opened*.' Is it still there now?"

Heeding her friend's question, Thea turned her attention inward, concentrating on the mysterious presence that had featured so prominently in her vision. She felt it there, dormant and unobtrusive, as if it had never been the source of her mental turmoil.

"Yes, it's still there," she confirmed, "I can sense it when I focus. It's about this big." She sketched a circle in the dirt with her boot, approximately 10cm in diameter.

"It's present but inert, as if it's in some sort of dormant state... or dead. I can't really describe the sensation any other way; it's there, but it's also like it's not?"

"That's all right, hold on for a moment," Karania said, lifting a hand as if to pause the conversation. Her eyes unfocused, her attention turning inward or to some information only she could access.

Watching her friend, Thea marvelled at the breadth of Karania's expertise.

'She's so incredibly knowledgeable. I can hardly keep pace with her even on an average day, but when she gets like this, it's like she's on another level entirely,' Thea mused.

Moments later, Karania's eyes snapped back to focus, widening as they met Thea's. "Did you Level Up during the journey here? Spend your Attribute Points on Perception and Resolve like you were planning?"

"Yeah, I did. I wanted to be prepped for when we reached the frontlines, just in case there wasn't an opportunity later. You know how unpredictable—"

Karania cut her off, her tone suddenly grave. "Thea, I believe the mysterious sensation you're describing might be your Psychic Gate."

"My... Psychic Gate?" Thea repeated, the words feeling foreign on her tongue as she tried to wrap her mind around the concept.

"Yes, Psychic Gate. It's the first step to unlocking your Psychic Attribute, that you should start feeling around that 30 Attribute mark you see on the [Status] window. I doubt, however, that even *you* are close to that 30 yet, right?" Karania explained. She paused for Thea's nod, confirming her suspicions, before continuing.

"This is crucial, Thea: Under *no circumstances* should you open that Gate until we're past the assessment stage. We need to get you to a proper Psyker who can give you a real understanding of what you're dealing with. I only have some random tidbits of knowledge from a book the UHF gave me earlier in the assessment; the one that was meant to teach me about Focus Overdraws so I could teach *you* about them when you woke up!

"It had a small section on Psychic beginnings and what you described matches its definition of a Psychic Gate perfectly. According to the text, it's a 'meta-physical, spherical entity located behind the heart, detectable only through a specific combination of the Perception and Resolve Attributes.'"

Karania's eyes met Thea's, her gaze intense.

"That Gate is more than just a sensory oddity; it's your link, both physical and metaphysical, to the *Void*. It's essentially a component of your very Soul, Thea. Understand? You *mustn't* open it. If you do, nobody can help you here. Your Resolve should aid in keeping it under control, based on what I've read. Promise me you won't attempt to open it, okay? This is serious, Thea. Even more so than the whole Focus Overdraw business."

Thea was momentarily stunned by the weight of Karania's words, recognizing an intensity in her friend's demeanour that she'd never seen before. Even during the episode with Focus Overdraw, Kara had been relatively composed compared to this.

"I promise, Kara. I won't open it," Thea said, her voice tinged with an earnestness that matched Karania's intensity. "Especially considering that my...experiences—or were they visions?—of what happens when it opens have been nothing short of nightmarish."

Karania sighed in relief, her eyes momentarily fluttering closed as if warding off a headache.

"I can't believe this girl," she muttered under her breath, more to herself than to anyone else. "Focus Overdraw, and now a Psychic Gate? She's not even been awake for a full day!"

Shaking her head, she returned to her professional demeanour and completed her medical check-up on Thea, who was thankful for a few minutes of silence, as she tried to wrap her head around the strange revelations.

'Guess that means I'm making progress on that whole Psyker path the UHF wanted me to explore, huh? It would be nice, though, to get some advanced warning about this stuff for a change...' Thea mused internally, before she rose from her chair, noting that Karania seemed to have concluded the medical check-up.

"You're good to go. I can't detect any abnormalities. Although, as a final reminder, Thea, don't even *think* about that Gate, and *definitely* don't talk to anyone about it. The last thing we need is you getting any funny ideas about exploring what it does, got it?" Karania cautioned.

The weight of her words left no room for Thea to consider disobedience, not that she would have wanted, so she simply nodded in agreement.

Feeling that they had exhausted the topic—and perhaps a bit more emotionally drained than they'd admit—the two friends packed up their gear and set off towards the nearest command area, ready to locate the rest of their squad and hopefully transition into something resembling normalcy.

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As they navigated through what could only loosely be called a base—mostly comprised of odd rock-crete overhangs that passed for 'tents'—Thea finally found the mental clarity to survey her surroundings.

Marines were scattered around, some taking refuge in the oddly structured rock-crete tents, their faces a blend of exhaustion and determination. Others sat in small clusters, quietly munching on rations or engrossed in the intricate task of servicing their weapons and armour.

What captured her attention most, however, was the camp's seamless integration into the natural surroundings.

The entire set-up seemed to nestle discreetly amidst the dense shrubbery, undergrowth, and towering trunks of the Azure Trees. In some spots, portions of the camp were even partially buried in the ground, adding to its unobtrusiveness.

It was clear that although the camp had been erected hastily, a great deal of thought and manpower had gone into its construction.

Every so often, Thea would notice a marine vanish into a concealed underground entrance or emerge from what looked like a simple bush—evidence that the camp extended in ways that weren't immediately visible.

From what she gathered from Karania's earlier explanations, this base served as a staging ground for those not currently out on scouting or reconnaissance missions. It was a hub of preparation and respite, designed with both camouflage and functionality in mind.

The precision with which it was constructed made it clear that this was more than just a temporary outpost; it was a calculated stronghold, ready for whatever lay ahead on their continuous march towards Nova Tertius.

Karania had explained that the camp would advance roughly every two days to maintain proximity to the actual frontlines.

Karania had off-handedly mentioned that the current frontlines were situated about two kilometres to the north, as far as she could remember. By Thea's standards, that was *practically* next door; she'd sniped targets at greater distances than that, with ease.

Upon learning this, Thea instinctively activated her more stealthy movement style, triggering her [Agile Stealth] Passive Ability. She noticed that she was leaving neither sound nor footprints.

'Better safe than sorry,' she thought, as she continued her silent walk beside Karania, who appeared oblivious to Thea's momentary unease. *'One thing's for sure, my Perception still outclasses hers by a lot. At least I got something going for myself...'*

In a matter of minutes, they arrived at what Karania designated as the "Command Room." To Thea, the term felt overly grandiose for what was essentially a large hole excavated into the earth.

The makeshift setup couldn't help but remind her of her Cube Trial days when she and Squad Leader Kellerman had reported GOG-launcher issues to their command. That makeshift command centre had also been less of a "room" and more of a hollowed-out space in the ground.

As they stepped into the earthen command room, a towering figure swivelled to face them.

This was a man built like a fortress, shoulders broad as a doorway and arms like steel cables, that Thea swore would even make Isabella look anorexic. His face was a topographical map of scars, each a relic of some bygone battle, yet his eyes softened and his lips pulled back into a wide, toothy grin upon seeing Karania.

"Ahhh, Red! Good to see ya back. How's the FOB treating ya?" The man's voice boomed through the confined space.

'Red? Who's Red?' Thea wondered internally, but before she could voice her confusion, Karania's response provided an implicit answer of sorts.

"Same old, same old, Scar. FOB is as comfortable as it gets out here. No new updates," Karania said, her voice tinged with humour.

'Red? Scar? Did I miss a memo?' Thea's mind raced, her eyes darting between the two in mild confusion.

The man, now identified as Scar, turned his attention towards Thea. "Who's this rookie ya brought along, Red?"

"That 'rookie,' Scar, is Thea McKay," Karania replied, her voice brimming with a maternal sort of pride. "She's the scout/sniper for Sovereign Alpha and the main reason we've managed to push this far toward Nova Tertius. She just emerged from a coma she's been in since the first day of the assessment, thanks to that ill-advised suicide mission of Venn's towards the artillery. Remember that artillery, Scar? The one that kept you and your 27th Regiment pinned down? She helped neutralise it."

Karania's words carried a weight, a sense of fierce pride, as though she were showcasing a prized pupil to a sceptical teacher.

"Ya don't say?" Scar replied, his voice carrying a nuance of respect that seemed reserved for the words of those he truly trusted.

Thea felt somewhat out of the loop, watching the easy camaraderie between Karania and Scar. '*Did they know each other before all this? They seem unusually comfortable around each other,*' she mused internally.

Looking her over, Scar scrutinised her appearance in a moment.

"She don't look like much, I'll tell ya. I prefer me some more muscle and height." Scar continued, his booming laughter filling the confined space. "Though I wouldn't be minding if ya brought along that Isabella friend of yours next time, ye? A round's on me if ya do, Red."

Karania shook her head, seemingly unamused, but Thea could see the faintest hint of a smile tuck on her friend's lips. "How about you focus on the mission, Scar, instead of trying to flirt with Isabella? We're here to ace this assessment, not scout for new bedding partners."

Scar erupted into laughter once more. "Ah, Red, the irony! I can fucking smell the rookie on you, you damn hypocrite!"

The comment sent a flush creeping up Thea's cheeks. Yes, they had shared a bunk the previous night, but that was *strictly* a matter of practicality! And with the convoy's early departure, there hadn't been time for the niceties of a shower either!

What caught Thea off guard was Karania's reaction. She'd always considered Kara to be unflappable, especially in situations like this. Yet even she seemed momentarily disconcerted by Scar's comment.

"Alright, enough with the banter, Scar. I need to know where Sovereign Alpha is stationed. We're planning to regroup, and it's been a while since we've all been together," Karania said, her voice carrying a hint of tension that was uncharacteristic for her.

With two open-palm hands raised in a disarming manner, Scar replied, "My apologies. Didn't mean to offend, Red. Ya know how I be, sometimes... Listen, Sovereign Alpha's out on patrol today, they're about three clicks out from here. Grid C-A-62 is theirs for the week. We're gearing up to advance towards the city within the next five days. So... get ya med-stuffs ready, alright? There'll be a lot of casualties—on both sides, I'm sure."

"You got it, Scar. We're out," Karania shot back before making a swift exit from the makeshift command centre, leaving Thea and Scar in a brief moment of solitude.

"Listen, Thea. Ya know I didn't mean no offensive, ye? I don't mind what y'all are doing at night, ye?" Scar's deep voice carried a hint of genuine remorse, as if he had unintentionally crossed a line with a dear friend.

"Um, it's alright. You're definitely getting the wrong idea. We're not—"

"Thea, you coming?" Karania's voice, tinged with impatience, cut through the awkward atmosphere.

Thea threw a quick nod toward Scar, who returned it with a wide, toothy grin. She hurried out of the command hole, relieved to escape the awkward situation she had inadvertently found herself in.

As she emerged from the command hole, Thea noticed Karania frantically searching through her backpack. After a brief moment of rummaging, she heard Karania murmur, "Ah, finally," and pulled out a petite bottle of perfume.

Without sparing Thea a glance—almost conspicuously so—Karanja spritzed herself.

Thea's keen senses immediately caught the gentle floral fragrance, a scent she had come to associate closely with her friend.

'So Scar's comment really did get to her, didn't it? I mean, I'm uncomfortable being misinterpreted like that, but Kara seems especially bothered. Could it be some past trauma...?' Thea mused.

Before Thea could decide whether to broach the subject, Karania had already pocketed the perfume bottle and pivoted toward her.

"We're headed to Grid C-A-62. Come on, Thea. The squad's probably dying to see you," Karania declared. Realising her poor choice of words, she grimaced. "Uh, poor phrasing. Let's just say I hope they're not *actually* dying to see you. Or dying at all, really. Anyhow, let's get going."

Karanja promptly headed toward the northern exit of the camp, and Thea followed suit.

As they stepped out of the camp, Thea realised they had essentially entered the frontlines, so she quickly reached for her backpack to retrieve her Gram.

Handling the weapon with her newly acquired cybernetic hand felt odd, and she absent-mindedly thought to herself, *'This is going to take some getting used to,'* as she followed Karania's lead towards the trench lines.

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About half an hour later, after navigating through narrow trenches, weaving their way through underbrush and darting from cover to cover, Karania signalled that they had arrived at the designated grid. From this point on, Thea would take the lead, using her exceptional Perception to locate the rest of Sovereign Alpha within the expansive area.

For most, it would be akin to finding a needle in a haystack, but Thea spotted movement to the northwest in just a matter of minutes. With a subtle hand gesture, she signalled Karania, and they began to approach the area cautiously.

The rational part of Thea's mind thought, *'I should really open a comms channel to let them know we're coming, so they don't shoot us on sight.'* But her mischievous side strongly contested that idea. *'Or, I could give them a little scare by appearing out of nowhere. Safely, of course!'*

Giving Karania a cautionary look, Thea placed a finger to her lips, signalling for silence. Karania rolled her eyes and facepalmed in response but complied, allowing Thea to take the lead.

With soft, deliberate steps, Thea activated her [Agile Stealth] Passive Ability, reducing any noise her movements might make to an inaudible whisper. She felt like a wraith, her form blending into the shadows cast by the Azure Trees, her footsteps leaving no trace on the leaf-littered ground.

Karania followed, a few paces behind, her eyes widening in awe at Thea's uncanny ability to meld into the environment.

Navigating through the dense foliage, Thea spotted Lucas first.

He was hunkered behind his Stalwart shield, his grenade launcher propped up beside him, eyeing the area towards their north-east—further into the forest and towards Nova Tertius.

He made the perfect target for a harmless sneak attack.

Thea signalled Karania to hold her position, took a deep breath to steady herself, and then in one quick, fluid motion, dashed out from her hiding spot and placed her index-finger squarely against Lucas' back, mimicking a handgun of sorts.

"Just a heads-up: Bang. You'd be dead," she whispered into Lucas' ear with a smirk, preparing herself for the look of shock and disbelief that was sure to come.

But before she could revel in her successful operation, a guttural war cry tore through the air.

It was unmistakably Isabella's.

Thea's eyes widened in horror as she saw her squadmate charging toward her, the chain of her Decimator revving menacingly in her grip. Time seemed to slow as Isabella closed the distance in almost an instant, her face hidden behind the full-helmet of her heavy armour.

The damning realisation struck Thea like a lightning bolt—her prank had just triggered Isabella's instincts, and there was a very real, very deadly two-handed monstrosity of a chainsword heading her way at too fast a speed to avoid...