

Arc 1 - Chapter 103 - Mortalis

Breathing heavily, Thea approached Isabella and noted the heavy's evident strain.

She knew the answer, but felt that she had to ask anyway, "You good, Ela?"

Despite Isabella's attempt to downplay her condition, the visible signs of exhaustion and pain were unmistakable.

"Couldn't be better, really," Isabella's response was clearly laced with irony, her posture slumped against the wall indicating the opposite, barely able to hold onto her Decimator that was still dripping with the blood of the last enemies she had felled.

Turning her attention away from Isabella, Thea raised her voice, seeking information from the other remaining members of her squad.

"Kara, Lucas. Status report?" she called out, hoping for some sign of their condition. The silence that followed was telling, deepening the sense of urgency.

Navigating through the destruction caused by the enemy Psyker's Sonic Scream, Thea moved towards where she knew Lucas and Karania should be.

The devastation was palpable, with the once solid structure now fractured and torn, a harrowing reminder of the raw power unleashed upon them. The absence of any response weighed heavily on Thea, the silence amplifying her concern for her teammates' well-being.

While amplified, she also realised that she felt somewhat detached from everything—an early indicator of her getting close to her limits in terms of Focus.

She had used a lot of it, both as a result of her System Abilities and relying on her Psychic Senses while her Gate was closed—something she now realised was likely a trade-off for being stealthy; no passive regeneration of any Psychic Resource.

Thea was very aware of the thin line she walked, nearing the limit of her capabilities without overextending herself just yet.

This profound awareness stemmed from her previous, terrible experiences with overdrawing her Psychic Resources, making her wary of the signs of fatigue and the potential dangers of pushing beyond her limits.

As Thea navigated through the aftermath, the sight of Karania tending to Lucas confirmed the gravity of their situation.

Approaching quietly, Thea's voice was low but urgent. "Kara? What's his status?"

She avoided pressing Karania about her own state, knowing all too well her friend's inherent selflessness.

Karania's reaction was heart-wrenching.

Turning to face Thea, her expression was a tumultuous mix of sorrow and determination, tears carving clear paths through the grime on her face. "He's not going to make it..."

Her voice broke as she slammed a fist into the debris-strewn ground, the sound echoing their collective despair. "I... I can't help him. If we weren't so far behind enemy lines..."

Her voice trailed off, choked by the overwhelming sense of helplessness.

Thea's heart sank at the sight, feeling the weight of her decisions crashing down upon her.

The choice to prioritise strategic movement over immediate aid for Desmond now seemed to compound their losses as well. Karania's visible struggle to accept the situation deepened Thea's sense of responsibility; not only had Desmond's chance for survival been sacrificed, but now Lucas's fate seemed to be sealed as well.

At Thea's silence, Karania offered a clinical assessment of Lucas's condition with an almost detached professionalism that belied her inner turmoil. "Lucas has sustained direct cranial trauma from the Psychic Attack, resulting in intracranial haemorrhage, with substantial blood accumulation pressing on the brain tissue from every angle. Given his current state, even the most advanced medical equipment back at the forward operating base might prove inadequate for any level of intervention. His thoracic cavity presents with multiple comminuted fractures and some segments of the ribcage are essentially completely disintegrated, obliterating any chance of physiological thoracic stability. This, combined with multiple organ lacerations of the lungs, liver, kidney and heart, has led to catastrophic internal haemorrhaging."

Her explanation painted a grim picture of Lucas's irreversible state. "Essentially, his vital functions are deteriorating at an exponential rate due to these compounded injuries and there is nothing I can do to stop it..."

Karania's conclusion was delivered with sombre certainty. "There's only one thing left that can be done for him..."

It was a declaration that held weight, coming from someone as determined and skilled as Karania, who had previously contested every decision to leave a squad member behind.

Understanding the implied question in Karania's words, Thea gave her consent with a heavy heart. "Understood. Go ahead."

She simply observed, a bystander to the solemn ritual of mercy only medics could administer.

Karania's hand, much to Thea's surprise, trembled as she prepared the euthanasic agent, her professional facade momentarily wavering for the first time since they had met.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, her voice barely audible as she pressed the black auto-injector to Lucas' neck.

The quietness of the act was jarring—no dramatic departure, just a serene passing, a silent end to suffering facilitated by a medic's compassionate decision. Lucas's final moments were

dignified and solemn, creating a stark contrast to the utter chaos and carnage that had led them here.

Oddly enough, Thea felt somewhat detached from watching the defensive heavy die, likely due to the overall detachment she felt as a result of getting closer to her Focus limit, but it was a strangely fortuitous happenstance, as it allowed her to remain more alert to everything around her, rather than getting emotional over losing yet another squad member on this mission.

Simultaneously, it also allowed her high levels of Perception to quickly realise that something else wasn't quite right.

"Kara... Are you hurt?" She asked, intently fixating on the squad medic.

As Thea's inquiry hung in the air, Karania responded with a weary yet professional demeanour, her medical expertise evident even in her own diagnosis.

"Observant as always," she began, her voice tinged with mirth. "My current status? I've sustained a traumatic brain injury with associated cerebral haemorrhage, leading to hemiparesis on my left side. Additionally, multiple fractures along the left hemi skeleton, including compound fractures in the humerus and radius, and comminuted fractures in the ribs, have compromised my motor functions on that side."

Karania shifted slightly, the pain of doing so evident in her expression. "I've already stopped all of the internal bleeding, but the neurological impairment from the intracranial pressure caused by the scabbing is irreversible without immediate neurosurgical intervention."

She sighed, a mix of frustration and resignation in her voice. "In essence, my left side is completely non-functional, with no chance of recovery out here. I'm basically out of this one, Thea. Continuing in this condition would not only endanger myself but also compromise the squad's operational capacity going forward. You'll have to leave me behind, if you still want to work on getting this mission done."

Thea simply listened, processing Karania's clinical assessment with a heavy, albeit somewhat detached, heart.

The medic's ability to self-diagnose with such precision only served to underscore the severity of her condition. It was clear that Karania, despite her general resilience and medical skills, including the Ability to stop any and all of her own bleeding practically instantly, was as vulnerable as any of them when caught in the crossfire of such a powerful attack.

"And honestly," Karania's words cut through the heavy silence, pulling Thea back to the grim reality they faced. "You're not in great shape yourself. That Psyker did a number on you too. I'm not sure how much longer you can hold up..."

Karania's observation was a bitter pill to swallow, yet undeniable.

Thea was acutely aware of her own precarious state.

The fallout from her last-ditch effort to counter the Psyker's onslaught had left her severely injured; her arm was gone, vaporised in the psychic maelstrom, and her ribs were a fractured mess. Had it not been for Karania's quick thinking and her unique healing ability, Thea was certain the situation would be dire.

The conversation shifted as Thea, determined to focus on the mission, asked, "Can you check on Ela?"

She sidestepped Karania's concerns about her own wellbeing.

Admitting defeat was not an option. Corvus had entrusted her with leadership, sacrificing himself so they could continue.

Failure was *not* a consideration.

Karania exhaled deeply, a mix of resignation and resolve in her response, "Alright, let's see to her. Can you bring her over here?"

Despite the bleakness of their circumstances, Thea clung to a stubborn hope.

The mission was far from over; it couldn't be.

As Thea navigated the debris-laden floor toward Isabella's last known position by the stairwell, her resolve did not waver.

"Ela, it's time for a check-up. Kara will patch you up, and we'll move—," she began, but abruptly stopped upon seeing Isabella slumped against the wall, unmoving.

No medical expertise was needed to see the finality of Isabella's state.

An involuntary "Ah." escaped her, a simple acknowledgment of the unbearable truth before her.

Internal resolve hardened, Thea silently vowed, *'It's down to me now. The squad has given their all; it's my turn to uphold our mission. Time to be the carry for once.'*

This self-pep talk fortified her, readying her for the path ahead, one she'd now face alone.

"Kara, I'm heading out. Ela is KIA. You're relieved of duty as well; rest now. I'll see you on the other side," she conveyed over the squad comms, a method of communication she remembered was now reinstated with the Psykers' threat neutralised.

Karania's response, tinged with a blend of resignation, came through her helmet's comm unit, "Alright, Thea... Good luck and don't overdo it. See you on the other side."

Pushing through the debris and chaos, Thea's resolve was as ironclad as ever, despite the overwhelming odds stacked against her. The burden of leadership had never been heavier upon her shoulders, nor the mission more critical.

Yet, her spirit refused to bow to despair.

Even though she was down to her last operational arm, gripping her Icicle with grim determination, and with only three magazines to her name—her backpack, along with additional ammo, having been left behind in the frenzied bid of jumping through the window—she remained steadfast.

Her objective was clear: Just destroy the control station.

This singular goal propelled her forward.

Thea clung to the belief that, despite her severe limitations, she could still make a decisive impact on the mission at hand.

'Just reach the control station. That's all that matters,' she mentally reinforced, as she slowly made her way down the stairwell of the half-ruined building that had cost her the entirety of her squad...

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Stumbling towards the control station's outer walls, Thea was engulfed by a profound sense of solitude.

Throughout her life, solitude had been a familiar companion, yet the recent weeks with Sovereign Alpha had unexpectedly bridged a gap in her existence she hadn't acknowledged before.

The absence of her squad now, however, left a void, a quiet echo of camaraderie lost, at least for the moment.

'We'll reunite once I've taken down this control station,' she tried to console herself, each step fueled by the memory of her team and the realisation that she needed to do her best to make them proud.

Before departing the wreckage of their last stand, Karania had briefly assessed Thea's condition, a farewell gesture laden with unspoken understanding.

The dire prognosis was clear: Thea's time was dwindling, marked by the aftermath of the psychic onslaught that had ravaged her body.

These unseen wounds, untreatable in their hasty preparations for the desperate attempt at turning the tables against the duo of Psykers, now throbbed with every movement, making the mere act of moving a struggle.

Despite the pain and the creeping shadow of mortality, Thea pressed on, driven by duty and the silent promise of a squad reunited in purpose, if not in presence.

As Viladia's voice suddenly broke through the silence in her helmet, Thea felt a jolt of surprise that momentarily distracted her from her physical pain.

After a brief coughing fit, courtesy of her punctured lung, she managed to compose herself enough to respond, "Yeah. SA01 is still pressing on with the mission."

The unexpected check-in from Viladia provided a fleeting sense of relief amidst the solitude of her walk.

“Ahh! Did you manage to escape the Psykers?! Great work! Can you tell me where they are? We’re finally free to go and take them out. We should be a good matchup against them, all things considered. Be as precise as you can be!” Viladia’s enthusiasm was palpable over the comms, her readiness to engage the Psykers evident.

Thea couldn't help but let out a weary chuckle at the contrast between Viladia’s energy and her own battered state.

“No need. They’re dead,” Thea simply informed her.

A brief moment of silence followed before Viladia spoke up again. “Come again? The Psykers are dead?”

“Yes. SA01 killed them. Two Psykers, both dead,” Thea reported with a hint of pride overlaying her sheer and utter exhaustion.

More silence followed, before a more soft-spoken version of Viladia’s voice came back, “Thea, where are you right now? You don’t sound so good. We’ll come and help you guys out.”

Looking around, Thea gave the best description as to her whereabouts that she could, not able to truly think about anything at all. Things were turning hazy faster than she’d like to admit.

“Roger that, we’ll be there in a few. Make sure not to shoot us, alright?” Viladia’s voice faded, leaving Thea with the promise of assistance on the way.

The thought of just waiting, of allowing herself a moment of rest against the cold wall of the control station, was tempting beyond measure.

With a weary nod to herself, she leaned back and closed her eyes, surrendering to the brief respite as she awaited Viladia's arrival, the fog of exhaustion slowly enveloping her senses...

—

The shock of an adrenaline shot coursed through Thea, pulling her from the brink of unconsciousness. Her eyes snapped open, locking onto Medic Johnsen's gaze.

Despite his attempt at light-heartedness, the gravity of his words was unmistakable. "Looks like I won't get to patch you up again, huh?" he said, his tone a mix of jest and solemnity.

"I don't think I need to tell you that this is even beyond my Abilities, right?" Thea understood his implication immediately, her mind sharpening with the rush of adrenaline.

Viladia's voice cut through the heavy air, her urgency evident. "Thea! Where's the rest of your squad?" she pressed, moving closer.

"They're dead. I'm the last one," Thea responded wearily, her gesture towards the damaged building carrying the weight of their sacrifice.

Viladia's reaction, a silent "Oh," spoke volumes of her realisation of the grim situation.

As Viladia conferred with Medic Johnsen, likely seeking to grasp the full extent of Thea's condition, Thea remained still, leaning against the wall where she had awaited rescue.

Returning to Thea's side, Viladia knelt, offering words of admiration and comfort. "You did good, Thea. Really good. Beyond anything we could have hoped for," she affirmed, her praise touching Thea deeply, especially coming from someone of Viladia's calibre.

The promise of recognition for her squad's actions, the elimination of two Psykers, brought a small smile to Thea's face.

Viladia's next request hinted at a final task, yet carried the assurance of completion. "Could you do me one last favour, Thea? We'll take out the control station afterwards together, alright?"

Thea, fully aware of her limitations and the unspoken certainty of not rising again, felt a profound relief at the commitment from Viladia and Arrow Squad to fulfil the mission's objectives.

"Sure, Vi," Thea agreed, the heavy burden of responsibility lifting from her as she accepted Viladia's implicit promise, ready to contribute one last time to their shared goal. "What do you need?"

Viladia's expression shifted to one of solemnity, capturing Thea's attention with the gravity of her gaze. "Your Gate isn't open right now, right?" she inquired, prompting Thea to internally confirm the status of her Psychic Gate, ensuring its closure through more than just instinct, given past missteps.

But Viladia's next question halted Thea in her tracks, "Can you open it?"

Confusion and concern flickered across Thea's features as she locked eyes with Viladia, silently probing for the rationale behind such a risky request.

'Why does she want me to open my Gate now, knowing how much trouble I have with the whole situation...?' Thea pondered, recalling her vow to Karania to steer clear of her Gate's manipulation until the assessment's conclusion.

Viladia, seemingly perceptive of Thea's hesitations, offered further explanation, "Just a very tiny amount. We've failed to locate the enemy Ace, which is making us think that they might be stationed at another control site. Assuming they're a T3 or even a T3 Prime, their Psychic Attribute likely leaves a detectable trace within the Void, as long as they haven't shut off their Gate completely. With the Psykers here neutralised, your Gate could potentially identify their presence, offering us at least a rough direction to follow."

Gently placing her hand on Thea's shoulder, Viladia reassured her, "If it's too much, don't worry. There are other ways to track them down, but this method could swiftly clue us into

their strategy. I'd undertake it myself if I had access to my Gate. I trust you understand I wouldn't ask this of you under any other circumstances."

Thea grasped the gravity of Viladia's request, recognizing it as a strategic move to maximise their remaining strength. Under different circumstances, she would have complied without a second thought.

Yet, the mere idea of interacting with her Psychic Gate again filled her with trepidation.

A deep, instinctive part of her recoiled at the thought, scarred by the havoc it had wreaked twice previously.

'Can't really blame me, considering the shit it has caused so far, can I...?' Thea ruefully thought to herself.

First, when it had opened, it had nearly caused her a mental breakdown with the sheer insanity that had ensued. And now, it had effectively gotten her entire squad, including herself, killed because she didn't realise that the enemy Psykers could just track them down because the Gate had been cracked open by accident.

'The service tunnels...' Thea's mind circled back to their last desperate fight on their way into the city, the moment likely when the Gate had cracked open. The heavy reliance on her Psychic Senses had been a double-edged sword, preserving her Focus at a critical time but at a grave cost in hindsight.

Thea's thoughts circled back to the immediate dilemma.

Reflecting, she realised there wasn't much to lose.

A slight opening of her Psychic Gate, now confirmed relatively safe through her unintended trials earlier, seemed manageable.

With Arrow Squad's presence, becoming bait for enemy Psykers oddly appealed to her.

Traditionally on the sniping end of such strategies, she had to admit that she found the role reversal intriguing.

"And if this is my end anyway, let it be a useful one," Thea silently mused. According to Medic Johnsen's prognosis, her time was limited to begin with.

As long as she didn't fully open the Gate, risks should be minimal, and with Viladia nearby to guide her through any unforeseen issues, there wasn't much that could go wrong.

With a cautious nod to Viladia, her decision was made, "I can do it."

Viladia's response was immediate and fervent. "You're a lifesaver, Thea! We owe you big time," she said, beaming.

Quickly, she went to rally the rest of Arrow Squad.

When Arrow Squad regrouped around her, their pristine condition contrasted sharply with the havoc Thea and her squad had faced.

Thea's surprised expression, likely severely amplified by her general mental state, that was entirely coasting on the short high of the adrenaline shot, did not go unnoticed.

Morin, easily interpreting her glance, offered a casual explanation with a shrug, "We've had a relatively smooth ride, all things considered. Especially after you guys took care of those Psykers. Moira's been the busiest, really, given her ability to support the rest of the Squads inside the control station from outside. Aside from the brief firefight that locked us down earlier, we've mostly been on standby in a building to the north-west, trying to pin down the Ace's location—unfortunately without much success."

As Morin shared his assurance, Thea caught a glimpse of Moira, the mountain sniper, giving her a confident thumbs-up, accompanied by a buoyant, "I really gave it to 'em, you can count on that!"

The brief moment of levity brought a slight chuckle from Thea, momentarily easing the relentless pain and fatigue that had become her constant companions.

"We're all set to go on your signal," Viladia said gently, settling next to Thea. "Just a slight opening, enough to give us a lead. And remember, if it feels overwhelming, shut it down right away. Your soul's integrity is paramount. I'm right here if you need any support."

The reassuring weight of Viladia's hand returned to her shoulder, solidifying her resolve.

Inhaling deeply, Thea prepared to delve into the unknown territory within herself when she paused, directing a solemn look at Morin. "One last thing," she implored, "ensure the control station is neutralised, okay? I'm really sorry that we couldn't contribute more to that end."

Morin's gaze met hers, full of unwavering certainty. "You have my word. Arrow Squad will handle the control station. Rest assured, your efforts weren't in vain," he affirmed.

This pledge, coupled with Viladia's previous commitment, provided Thea with a sense of completion she hadn't dared to expect.

It allowed her to release the last lingering tensions about the mission's outcome.

'This is the end of the line for me...' she acknowledged internally, feeling an unexpected peace as her physical strength dwindled further. *'Time to meet Corvus again. I owe him an apology for not keeping my word...'*

Diving deep within, Thea edged towards her Psychic Gate, treating this venture with an utmost caution she had seldom afforded anything else in her life. The intent to merely graze its surface with her consciousness required a delicate balance she hadn't attempted before.

'No more missteps today,' she counselled herself, determined to execute this precisely.

As she drew nearer, the distinct characteristics of the Gate began to blur into an enigmatic singularity.

From afar, the iris-like structure of thirteen blades was discernible, yet upon closer inspection, they fused into a seamless, indescribable barrier—a monolith warding off the unfathomable Void beyond.

With every inch closer, the Gate began to abruptly swell in size, its initial form distorting into something entirely ungraspable.

The monolith expanded, dwarfing Thea's understanding and perception, transitioning from a manageable entity to a boundless, downright celestial presence. It was as if she were approaching a star, its magnitude expanding beyond comprehension, erasing the boundaries of reality within her mind.

This overwhelming expansion threatened to engulf her senses, her focus fraying at the edges as the Gate's immensity seemed to eclipse her very existence.

'Keep it together, Thea,' she sharply reminded herself, halting the disintegration of her concentration.

Regaining her bearings, the Gate realigned to its original proportions under Thea's determined gaze. Finally getting close enough, she touched it with her outstretched hand, feeling an uncanny warmth, a sensation so deeply unsettling it nearly derailed her resolve.

Disregarding the peculiar, body-like temperature and flesh-like texture, she pressed on, her hand guiding the minuscule opening of the Gate with a surgeon's precision.

'Just a sliver, nothing more,' she coached herself, visualising the Gate's blades yielding to her will, opening the iris ever so slowly.

Memories of her first encounter with the Gate's opening and its deceptive allure, which had manifested as two gigantic copies of her own eyes entralling her mind for what had felt like an eternity, prompted her to avert her gaze, wary of being drawn into its depths once more.

With every ounce of her concentration focused on the task, Thea carefully continued nudging the gate, feeling the alien texture shift under her touch ever so slowly.

'Steady... just a bit more...' she reiterated, her mantra guiding her through the delicate operation, determined to fulfil her promise without succumbing to the gate's enigmatic pull.

In that harrowing moment, as the faintest sliver of violet light seeped through the barely parted blades of her Psychic Gate, Thea was thrust into a maelstrom of unadulterated terror.

The fear was so visceral, so potent, that it yanked her back into the tangible world with a violence that left her body trembling and her mind reeling. Instinctively, she shoved Viladia aside, a guttural reaction to the indescribable horror that had brushed against her soul.

Her physical form betrayed her, succumbing to convulsions of terror as she retched, her body expelling its contents in a desperate attempt to rid itself of the fear that had no physical form.

Tears carved paths down her cheeks, not just from the physical upheaval but from the unbearable realisation of the proximity and magnitude of the threat they faced.

"Vi, listen!" she gasped, each word punctuated by spasms of dread-induced sickness. Her plea was a desperate attempt to communicate the imminent danger, her voice a broken echo of fear.

The presence she had encountered was not just threatening; it was an overwhelming force, suffusing her with a dread so profound that her body could barely contain it.

"The Ace...! They're..." she managed to whisper, the horror of that realisation making her voice tremble. Her psychic senses were in similar turmoil, screaming warnings of a threat so vast it seemed to dwarf her very being.

"Thea?! What's wrong?! Johnsen!" Viladia immediately called for the squad medic, but he was already in motion, having kept a close eye on Thea the entire time.

"Listen! The Ace is here! At this station!" She finally managed to articulate, each word a monumental effort against the tide of fear that threatened to engulf her.

Arrow Squad, immediately spurred by her warning, surged into action, their readiness palpable in the tense air.

'They need more...! Just a little bit more intel...!' Thea realised, knowing that the current amount of information was not worth the price of revealing their location.

As Thea fought through waves of terror, pushing against the overwhelming dread to glean any scrap of useful information, she finally caught a hint of movement—a whisper of presence that she clung to with the absolute last vestiges of her focus and composure.

"They're due south! Very close, south-w—" Thea's urgent warning came to a sudden, horrific halt. An explosive projectile, with deadly precision, found its mark, and in an instant, her upper body and head was obliterated, casting a spray of red mist across the wall behind her...