

Arc 1 - Chapter 130 - Memories

Startling awake, Thea sprang to her feet, her senses on high alert until she realised where she was.

The warm, comfortable shower room had been just a bit *too* relaxing, lulling her into an unintended nap as she had leaned against one of the soft, slightly springy, shimmering walls on the comfortable bench.

With a heavy sigh, Thea shook off the last remnants of sleep, made her way to the nearby changing room and began dressing in the fresh UHF uniform that the Sovereign had thoughtfully provided. The fabric felt crisp and clean against her skin, a sharp contrast to the languid comfort she had just been enjoying.

'Guess that's it for relaxation... Back to business,' she thought with a twinge of reluctance.

It had been far too long since she'd had a chance to truly unwind like this—years, in fact.

The brief rest, coupled with the lavish experience the Sovereign had conjured for her, felt like a rare luxury she hadn't realised how desperately she needed.

The shower room itself had been a marvel beyond words, a place of such comfort and opulence that Thea knew she'd struggle to describe it accurately if asked to do so—her learned vocabulary didn't exactly include a lot of ways to convey opulence and luxury.

Turning her gaze toward the ceiling, as she always did when addressing the ship's AI, Thea asked, "Alright, Sovereign. I'm ready for... whatever's next, I guess? I'm not exactly sure how to proceed from here; is there some protocol I should follow? Anything I need to know?"

The Sovereign, always ready and waiting to be of service, answered in its usual immediateness, "There are no specific protocols that require your attention, Recruit Thea. You are free to enjoy the next 41 hours and 43 minutes as you wish. I cannot transport you directly to your room, as I am incapable of moving personnel within the DDS. However, I *can* create a door for you that will lead straight to your quarters, or if you prefer, I can guide you through the hallways back to Alpha Squad's dormitory."

Thea didn't have to think long before making her decision.

"The door, please," she requested, her voice determined. The thought of wandering through the Sovereign's DDS hallways held little appeal at the moment.

While her curiosity about the technology behind it all was undeniable, she knew that being inside the DDS wasn't the place for such exploration. That kind of investigation would have to wait until the month of ship duty that she and Alpha Squad would eventually undertake later in the year.

Almost instantly, a shimmering, golden door materialised before her.

Without hesitation, Thea stepped through and found herself back in the familiar confines of her room—the very one she had left over a month ago.

Everything was exactly as she remembered, down to the smallest detail.

She moved to her bed and sat down, letting her eyes wander over the somewhat barren room.

It felt strange to be here again, with nothing pressing to do.

This was the first time in years that she had truly free time without a specific goal or task hanging over her head—since she had left Lumiosia over two years ago, to be precise.

Even during basic training, though there were days off, Thea had never felt like she had time for herself. There was always another benchmark to hit, another skill to master.

Even in her so-called downtime during those years, she'd usually spent it working out or studying, constantly preparing to meet the rigorous standards expected of her at the end of the two-year period.

Now, for the first time, she was confronted with an open stretch of time and no immediate goal to work toward. The sensation was both liberating and thoroughly unnerving, leaving her unsure of how to fill the void.

Feeling uneasy with the thought of simply doing nothing, Thea decided to dive into something productive.

She pulled up one of the technical documents she had acquired for her equipment—this time focusing on her Spectre-type armour set—and began reading. If nothing else, she figured it would bolster her understanding of how her armour functioned, even if she doubted the knowledge would ever come into play during her missions.

She read for a few minutes before realising that sitting in her uniform wasn't exactly conducive to relaxation.

Tossing it off, she opted for something more comfortable—her favourite purple hoodie, one of only two keepsakes from her home planet she managed to bring, adorned with the image of a beloved character from her favourite game.

The fabric was soft and familiar, instantly making her feel more at ease.

With a contented sigh, Thea climbed into bed and began constructing a cosy little reading nook out of pillows and blankets. The Sovereign, ever accommodating, provided extra pillows at her request, allowing her to settle in even more snugly. Once she was nestled in, she began to truly devour the technical documents she'd been putting off for so long.

It had been over a month since she'd had the time to properly delve into them, and now, with nothing else pressing on her agenda, it was the perfect opportunity. Technology had always fascinated her—ever since James had shown her the first pieces of new-tech equipment she'd ever seen: His com-pad and his old UHF badge.

The com-pad had been straightforward enough, serving as both a communication device and a sophisticated data-pad.

James had kept it with him, even in the remote sector of UHF space where they lived, just in case any of his old comrades needed to reach him.

But the UHF badge was a different story altogether.

It was a mystery that had swirled in Thea's mind for the past few years.

James had always claimed it was standard-issue, but over time, Thea had come to realise that this wasn't entirely true—much like many things James had told her.

There were *always* layers to everything he said, and rarely did he give a clear or concise answer.

The badge, however, had always remained an enigma; but especially now, that she, herself, had joined the UHF and failed to spot even a *singular* similar one.

It was unmistakably new-tech, something James had demonstrated during that fateful day when he had saved her from certain death in that cursed alley...

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It had been an especially miserable, rainy week, the kind that turned the already grimy streets of the undercity into treacherous paths slick with sludge and overflowing with the stench of clogged canals.

Thea had been just four years old, newly evicted from the orphanage that had been her only home. She had seen this happen countless times before, of course, to other children who had reached the ripe old age of four—an age when the orphanage deemed them too old to keep.

Every year, hundreds of children were unceremoniously dumped in front of the orphanage's towering doors.

For the luckiest among them, adoptive families would be waiting—a rare occurrence, but not entirely unheard of. Maybe one in a hundred would find themselves taken in, offered a chance at a proper life, though still likely bound to the undercity's suffocating grasp.

The less fortunate, but still somewhat lucky, were scooped up by gang enforcers.

These gangs ruled the undercity in place of a government that saw no profit in managing a decaying wasteland. The gangs acted as judge, jury, and executioner, imposing order with an iron fist, ensuring that the undercity didn't descend into complete anarchy.

They were feared and hated by many, their names cursed in the capital city of Lumiosia.

Yet, for those who truly *knew* life in the undercity, the gangs represented something else as well—opportunity.

For the children who had no other options, the gangs offered survival.

It wasn't exactly about choice for these kids either; it was about necessity.

What choice did a four-year-old really have? They could either accept the gang's offer—a roof over their head, a full belly, and a semblance of safety—or try to survive on their own in the unforgiving undercity.

Most chose the former, if it could even be called a choice.

About eighty or eighty-five out of every hundred children found themselves in this group, taken in by the enforcers, considered fortunate by the undercity's grim standards.

Then there was the last group—the truly unlucky ones.

These were the children for whom there was no family, no enforcers, no one at all waiting for them when their meagre belongings were tossed out onto the street. They were left utterly alone, with nothing and no one to turn to.

Thea had been part of that unlucky group.

She had begged, cried, screamed, and fought to stay—desperate to cling to whatever semblance of a “family” could be found within the crumbling walls of the orphanage. But, like thousands of others before her, she had been denied.

Thrown out like she was nothing.

Naturally, she had tried to prepare for the day she knew was coming, expecting to be taken in by a gang.

Her older “brothers” and “sisters,” those who had left the orphanage before her, had promised that an enforcer would come for her on her birthday.

But when the day came, she had been left all alone.

No one else shared her birthdate, and so, it was only her who was thrown out that day—likely not enough of a “catch” to warrant an enforcer's attention.

With nothing but the torn clothes on her back and a stomach half-full from the previous night's dinner—a pitiful half-portion of nutrient sludge, served in a rare nod to her upcoming birthday—she was cast out into the cold, muddy streets.

She lasted longer than she expected, though eventually, the days blurred together as hunger, fear, cold, and sickness took their toll.

She stole whatever she could, fought off rabid dogs, and even ate their raw flesh in a desperate bid to survive—vomiting for days from the resulting illnesses but somehow clinging to life.

It wasn't really living, of course, and even at four years old, she knew that.

She had heard enough stories from the elder children, the orphanage keepers, and even the gang enforcers to know that everyone seemed to have a *purpose*.

Everyone but her.

But how could she find purpose when she couldn't even be sure of her next meal? What meaning could there be for someone who couldn't survive on their own, who couldn't rise above the squalor?

After what felt like days, weeks, or maybe even months, Thea found herself at a breaking point.

Three days without food and her energy completely drained, she stumbled upon an elderly woman who had slipped and fallen on the slick, muddy street. Desperation overwhelmed her, and she made a choice—the only choice she felt was left to her.

Dashing from the shadows of the alley, a broken shard of glass wrapped in cloth her only weapon, Thea closed in on the struggling, injured woman.

“Give me your credits!” she demanded, her voice trembling with fear and cold, holding the shard out in front of her with shaking hands.

As Thea held the broken shard of glass out in front of her, the old woman's terrified eyes met hers, and for a brief moment, Thea hesitated.

The woman was trembling, her frail hands shaking as she fumbled inside her cloak.

Thea could see it now—this wasn't an enemy she could overpower, nor someone she could hate. This was just another soul, beaten down by the same cruel world that had driven Thea to this point. The old woman's fear mirrored the hopelessness Thea felt deep inside, and the weight of that realisation nearly broke her resolve.

Her hands wavered, the glass shard growing heavy in her grasp as doubt gnawed at her.

What was she even doing? How could she do this?

The woman was just as desperate, just as broken as she was.

Thea's heart pounded in her chest, a mixture of fear, guilt, and despair clouding her thoughts.

But before she could decide on anything, before she could even process the flood of emotions overwhelming her, everything went black.

When she came to, Thea found herself squatting in a dark alley, greedily tearing into a nutrient sludge package. The thick, sickly substance was barely palatable, but she shoveled it into her mouth with trembling hands, too hungry to care.

The blood on her fingers had dried into dark, crusty streaks, and she didn't know whose it was. Hers? The woman's? She tried not to think about it, focusing instead on getting something, *anything*, into her cramping stomach.

But her terrible day was far from over.

Just when she thought she could find a moment of peace, hiding away in the shadows of the alley, two older girls stumbled upon her.

Street rats, just like her, but bigger, stronger, and far more used to being ruthless.

They sneered at her pitiful form, eyes locking onto the small pouch of credits she had somehow acquired.

Without warning, they were on her, their fists and feet raining down blows as they tore the credits from her hands. Thea tried to fight back, but she was too weak, too tired, too small.

They overpowered her easily, kicking her into the mud, her body curling up defensively as she whimpered in pain.

"Stupid fucking brat," one of them spat, her voice filled with venom as she pocketed the credits. "You should know better than to carry something like this around. Has your *mother* never taught you anything?"

The other girl kicked Thea once more in the head for good measure, a cruel laugh escaping her lips as she stepped back.

"Enjoy the rest of your day, *cyan*," she sneered and spit on Thea's broken form, before the two of them sauntered off, leaving her bleeding and shivering on the cold, muddy ground.

For a long time, Thea didn't move.

The cold rain continued to pour down on her, washing away the spit, blood, and mud, but it couldn't cleanse the pain or the despair she felt. Every drop that landed on her seemed to echo her thoughts, each one a reminder of her mistakes.

If only she had hidden better...

If only she had spent the credits immediately, used them for food, or stored it away safely, instead of trying to foolishly save up for a new set of clothes...

If only she hadn't been born on such a lonely day, she might have joined a gang by now...

If only... *she hadn't been born at all.*

That final thought took hold, a dark, relentless whisper that drowned out everything else.

What even was her *purpose*? She wasn't living—barely even surviving—and all she seemed to do was cause trouble for others, like the old woman that... she couldn't let herself finish that thought.

There was no escape from this life.

She had no options left except to continue in this endless cycle of stealing, robbing, and struggling to survive. But *for what?* The undercity was no place for someone like her—too young, too small, too weak, and utterly alone.

As the sun's light faded behind the crumbling remnants of skyscrapers, casting the alley into deep twilight, Thea finally moved again for the first time.

Her body ached with a pain she hadn't felt in months, her stomach cramped from the violence inflicted on her so soon after consuming her first meal in days.

Her swollen eyes caught sight of the glass shard she had lost in the scuffle with the two girls earlier. It lay there, its wet, shiny surface reflecting the rhythmically flickering light of a nearby streetlamp.

The sight of it sparked a grim thought in her mind.

'If there is no purpose... then why even exist in the first place...?'

A part of her violently recoiled at the thought, but the larger, exhausted part of her, beaten down by years of suffering and especially the last few weeks, reached for the shard.

She pressed it against her throat, the glass feeling surprisingly warm against her chilled, parchment-like skin, as if it were welcoming her decision with a gentle, all-encompassing hug.

No tears came. They had dried up long ago.

She didn't lament her life, for there had never been much of it to begin with.

She was born of nothing, had been nothing, and would end as nothing.

No purpose, no impact.

No one would miss her, for no one had ever known she existed to begin with.

She closed her eyes, letting the cold raindrops kiss her skin one last time. For a brief moment, the world seemed strangely beautiful, even vibrant, despite its horrors—a fleeting beauty she had never noticed before. A small smile tugged at her lips as she prepared to push the shard deeper, feeling the sharp sting as it began to part the skin on her neck.

"I'd rather you didn't, girl," a gruff voice startled her, coming from just a metre away.

Her instincts flared to life. She scrambled backward, pointing the shard at the source of the voice with shaky hands.

"I... I will kill you if you get close! Don't fuck with me!" Thea yelled, trying to sound threatening despite the shivering of her frail body, her eyes barely open from the bruising, her malnourished arms trembling as they struggled to keep the shard steady.

“That’s more like it... Seems like you got some fight in you yet,” the voice continued as the lumbering figure stepped closer.

The man stepped into the light, revealing a rough, weathered face marked by deep scars, each one telling a story she had no interest in hearing. His eyes, dark and calculating, scanned her from head to toe, assessing her like she was a piece of meat.

Thea’s heart pounded in her chest, her grip on the shard of glass tightening despite the exhaustion weighing her down. She refused to show weakness, even though her trembling hands and ragged breaths betrayed just how close she was to breaking.

“You look like shit, girl,” the man finally said, his voice gruff but lacking the cruelty she expected. His blunt words cut through the tension, and despite herself, Thea let out a dry, humourless chuckle that quickly turned into a wet, hacking cough.

She spat blood onto the filthy ground, her eyes never leaving the man in front of her.

Her arm, still holding the makeshift weapon, began to waver, the glass shard sinking lower as her strength ebbed away. But she kept it pointed at him, more out of stubbornness than any real hope of defending herself.

“Listen... I just happened to come by here on an errand, and I’d really appreciate it if I didn’t have to see a young girl off herself, alright? That would *really* ruin my mood for the day,” he continued, inching closer with slow, deliberate steps. There was no malice in his movements, but Thea wasn’t about to let her guard down.

Not for a stranger in this hellhole.

“How about...” he started, hesitating as if surprised by his own words. He paused, scratching his stubbled chin thoughtfully before letting out a small chuckle, shaking his head like he was amused by some private joke.

“How about you come with me? I’ll give you some food, a warm bed, and some clothes. We can figure out what to do with you afterward. How about it, girl?”

Thea’s eyes turned cold and narrowed in suspicion.

She had heard stories like this before, whispers in the dark corners of the undercity about men who offered help only to turn on those foolish enough to accept.

Her voice, sharp and tinged with bitterness, cut through the silence. “Cut the bullshit! You think I’m fucking stupid? You just want to get me alone so you can either rape me or sell me off as a slave. That’s what this is, isn’t it? Some kind of sick trap. Fuck off!”

She didn’t care if her words provoked him; hell, she might even prefer that. Better to die fighting than to go back to the same nightmare she couldn’t escape from.

The glass shard wavered in her hand, but her gaze remained steely, daring him to make a move.

Much to her surprise, however, the man didn't get angry; instead, he seemed almost approving as he nodded repeatedly.

"Yes, yes. Very good," he muttered to himself more so than her. Directing his voice at her, he kneeled down, bringing his face down towards the same level as her own. "Do you really think I'd have to trick you into that, if I wanted to? Look at yourself, girl. You can barely hold that shank, much less actually swing it to any degree that would cause an issue. You think I couldn't just take you, if I really wanted to?"

Thea, of course, knew that he was speaking the truth.

She had no recourse at all to anything this man wanted to do to her and the thought alone sent shivers down her spine.

But she didn't want to give up this easily. The smug grin on the old man's scarred face was pissing her off to no end; the victorious, ever-present smile that everyone always showed her when they towered over her beaten and battered form.

Feeling a surge of energy she didn't even know was left in her, she rapidly snapped the shard around, bringing it back to her own throat, ripping into it ever so slightly, causing crimson liquid to run down her neck.

"Then I'll just ruin your fucking day, asshole," she spat with a vitriol that she hadn't even known she was capable of.

One last "fuck you" to not only the universe, but this piece of shit person as well? That sounded more like the way Thea wanted to go out.

The man froze, staring at Thea with wide eyes as her defiant act caught him completely off guard.

For a moment, there was nothing but stunned silence between them.

Then, to Thea's utter confusion, the man broke into a deep, genuine belly laugh, the sound echoing through the grimy alley. It was a laugh so full of amusement that it shook his entire body, and he had to wipe a tear from the corner of his eye as he finally calmed down.

He held up his hands in a gesture of surrender, still chuckling to himself.

"Well, I really wasn't expecting *that*," he admitted, his voice a strange mix of admiration and disbelief. With deliberate, careful movements, he reached into his jacket, Thea's grip on the shard tightening instinctively.

"Easy now, girl," he said softly, "I'm not here to hurt you."

Slowly, he pulled out a small, palm-sized piece of metal and held it up for her to see. It was smooth and silver, with a symbol etched into it that she didn't recognize.

He made sure to keep his movements slow, his voice calm.

“This,” he began, showing her the metal object, “is my badge. I’m not some creep trying to trick you. I’m a Marine from the UHF—the United Human Federation. It means I’m sworn to protect the citizens of this planet; or any planets of this System, really. I can’t harm *anyone* here, not unless they try to harm me first. That’s the law, girl.”

Thea’s eyes flicked between his face and the badge, her mind racing to process his words.

She had heard whispers of the UHF in the orphanage—stories about them being powerful, *untouchable* even. But she had never imagined meeting one of their soldiers in a place like this, much less one who would offer her anything other than contempt.

But the man’s laugh, his calm demeanour, and the way he held the badge out to her without any sign of aggression—it didn’t match the image of a predator she had built up in her mind.

But still, it couldn’t be that easy, could it?

“How the fuck am I supposed to know this isn’t some fancy silverware, old man?” Thea spat back, though the sharp edge in her voice wavered, the strength of her earlier resolve already starting to crumble.

The man’s face twitched at being called “old man,” a flicker of irritation crossing his scarred features, and Thea caught it with a flicker of satisfaction. But he quickly composed himself, letting out a weary sigh as if she had just reminded him of his age.

“Alright, fair point,” he muttered, his tone resigned. “Let me show you something.” He fiddled with the piece of metal, his fingers moving deftly despite the roughness of his appearance.

After a few seconds, the metal badge hummed to life, and suddenly, a hologram burst forth from it, bathing the alley in a soft, shimmering light. Silver and gold hues danced in the air, casting an almost otherworldly glow over the grimy walls and muddy ground.

The hologram was unlike anything Thea had ever seen, its intricate patterns and glowing symbols mesmerising as they spun slowly in the air.

Thea’s eyes widened, the hostility in her expression melting away rapidly as she stared at the hologram in utter fascination.

She had never seen anything so beautiful, so advanced.

It was like a piece of the very stars above had fallen into her lap, illuminating the dark alley with its radiant light. She felt the cold drain out of her body at a rapid pace, replaced by a warmth she didn’t even know could exist at the sight of it all.

“See?” the man said gently, his voice pulling her out of her trance. “This isn’t just some piece of fancy silverware, girl. It’s a Federation ID badge. Only someone with the UHF Marines carries one of these, and it’s not something we can just hand out to anyone, as you can very well imagine. They might be standard-issue, but these things *are* quite expensive.”

Thea's grip on the glass shard loosened, her mind reeling as she tried to process what she was seeing. The hologram was proof—*real, tangible proof*—that this man was who he claimed to be.

But after everything she'd been through, how could she trust that?

How could she believe that this wasn't just another trick, another cruel twist of fate?

Her eyes darted back to the man's face, searching for any sign of deception. But all she found was a steady, patient gaze, waiting for her to make up her mind.

Focusing back on the hologram in front of her, Thea was drawn to the intricate design of the UHF symbol, now glowing with a mesmerising blend of gold and silver hues.

The central emblem featured a four-pointed, star-like structure, its edges sharp and precise.

The star was set within a perfect circle, the boundaries of which were defined by interlocking arcs and surrounded by an interlocking band of silver, intricately detailed with geometric patterns that seemed to pulse with an inner light, even within the hologram's own.

Beneath the star was a pair of delicate, wing-like appendages, their six curved tips each reaching out gracefully as if to embrace the vastness of space itself. These wings, etched in a lighter silver, contrasted beautifully with the deeper gold of the star, making them appear almost three-dimensional, as though they could unfurl at any moment.

The medallion's entire outer ring was adorned with complex, almost arcane patterns that Thea didn't even know how to interpret.

She could practically *feel* the history and power radiating from the symbol, each line and curve carefully crafted to convey the Federation's authority and the unyielding strength it represented.

This was clearly not something that any ordinary citizen of the undercity could—or should—possess. While Thea had never seen this emblem before, the very nature of its sophisticated design and new-tech construction lent credibility to the old man's claim—this was indeed a bonafide, real UHF badge.

Her arm finally gave out, the glass shard slipping from her grasp and clattering to the ground.

She sagged backward, exhaustion weighing her down as she gazed up at the old man's scarred face. "Can... Can I leave at any time? You're not going to keep me against my will?"

It was a hollow question, one that carried little weight in a world where trust was a luxury she couldn't afford. The man could lie with ease, and she wouldn't be able to stop him.

But she *needed* to ask, *needed* to hear the answer, even if only to cling to the hope that this time, this one, single time, things just might end up being different.

“Of course,” the old man replied softly, inclining his head in a gesture that felt genuine. “*Whenever* you feel like you don’t want to be around anymore, you can leave at *any* time. I’ll even give you the key to the apartment, so you can go whenever you need to, even if I’m asleep.”

His words were more than she had dared to hope for.

The idea that he would trust her enough to give her the key—a symbol of freedom she had never even imagined possible being offered—was overwhelming.

She wanted to cry, to release the torrent of emotions building inside her, but the tears wouldn’t come. They had all dried up long ago, leaving her hollow and unable to express the raw vulnerability she felt.

With a weak nod, she let out a quiet, broken sob. “O... Okay. I’ll come with you... Please...”

Her memories blurred after that, fading into darkness as she succumbed to exhaustion.

But the sensation of strong arms lifting her frail, battered body from the grimy alley floor remained etched in her mind, a small beacon of hope in a life filled with despair.

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Tears streamed down Thea’s face as the memories subsided, making the screen of the technical documents in front of her an unreadable blur. A sob escaped her throat, her breath hitching as she struggled to regain control of her emotions.

‘I’ve come a long way... I’ll make sure I get one of those badges, however people actually get them,’ she resolved, a mix of determination and emotional turmoil battling for prominence in her mind as she dried the tears streaming down her face and returned to reading the documentation a short while later...