

Arc 1 - Chapter 65 - Fragmentum Excitat

The world around Thea seemed to freeze, as if time itself had simply stopped; as if the very idea of it had ceased to exist.

The signals sent by her body had no way of reaching her brain, for in a place without time, nothing could progress—no thought, no feelings, nothing.

An eternity, yet only an instant, passed.

THUMP

Suddenly, a forceful jolt pushed her away from Karania, as if an unseen barrier had violently repelled her.

Panicking thoughts swirled as her mind was inundated with a deluge of sensations, causing her vision to blur and a piercing headache to throb mercilessly.

One thing was abundantly clear amid the chaos—something was grotesquely wrong. The marines around her, including Karania, seemed ensnared in time's embrace—or lack thereof, frozen and lifeless.

THUMP

“Fuck me, what is happening?!” she whispered, her voice quaking with dread, as she trudged towards Karania. The air around her felt viscous, like moving through a morass of thick gel, each step an agonising struggle. Slowly, she inched her way, bridging the seemingly endless space between her and her friend.

But as she neared her destination, another wave of change pulsed through.

THUMP.

Thea found herself standing five metres away from Karania, sweating profusely from the intense effort she had just exerted to get closer, but this time around, the marines and Karania herself seemed to be back to normal.

She observed as Karania continued her focused medical treatment on the patient in front of her, as if nothing had changed. She saw how the marines around her continued their conversations, previously frozen mid-sentence, as if they had never stopped speaking.

THUMP

Dread gnawed at the edges of her mind.

‘Why does everything feel so...disconnected?’

The world around her felt like a distorted reflection, the gulf between her consciousness and her surroundings ever-widening.

It was as though she was trapped in a nightmarish echo, watching her own actions unfold from a distant vantage point. Determined to breach this chasm, she willed herself forward, one step at a time, trying desperately to reach Karania, trying to get answers that she *knew* Karania wouldn't be able to provide.

THUMP

A baritone, chilling rhythm echoed in Thea's ears, momentarily interrupting her thoughts. As she tried to comprehend her sudden shift in location, a marine's voice, laced with clear annoyance, reached her ears. "What's the matter with you, *Cyan*?"

'When did I get here?' She thought to herself, as she realised she was now less than two metres away from Karania.

She turned to face him, taking in his posture of impatience. From his perspective, she probably appeared lost, or maybe even suspicious. While she could understand his irritation, the cold, dismissive way he addressed her by "*Cyan*" set her teeth on edge.

THUMP

Wait, how did that random marine even know she was one...?

Scrutinising the marine, who was simply sitting on his assigned seat and waiting for her to reply, Thea couldn't find anything off about him. He looked like a normal UHF marine to her.

'I could kill him before anyone could stop me,' Thea thought to herself, feeling the familiar weight of her Icicle inside the holster at her side.

'Wait... what? Why would I even think ab—'

THUMP THUMP

A barrage of voices erupted around her, creating a maelstrom of sound.

Karania's voice pierced through the clamor, laced with alarm, "Thea, what the fuck are you doing?!"

"Put the weapon down, Private!"

"Stand down, now!"

"Damn it!"

"Are we under attack?!"

Thea felt as though she was submerged in water, the voices muffled and distant.

'What weapon? What the fuck are they talking about...?'

THUMP

Thea's awareness sharpened with chilling clarity, and she found herself gripping her Icicle tightly.

Its low hum vibrated in her hand, suggesting a recent discharge.

She followed its aim and was confronted by the horrifying sight of a gaping hole in the head of the marine who had previously spoken to her.

"What... What did I do?!" she gasped, a tremor of shock overtaking her voice.

The atmosphere in the transport was electric. Marines had sprung to their feet, weapons trained squarely on Thea, their eyes filled with a mix of fear, confusion, and anger.

Amidst the tension, Karania lunged in front of Thea, positioning herself as a protective barrier between her friend and the marines, her voice sharp and frantic as she attempted to defuse the escalating situation.

"Everyone, calm the fuck down! I'm a medic, let me see what's wrong with her! I will—"

THUMP

'...that noise?' Thea heard herself think, which confused her even more.

Why was she hearing herself think, without being able to actually know what she thought...? Was that even possible...?

Karania's desperate voice cleaved through the dissonance, "Thea! Why?! Why did you shoot him?!"

THUMP

Bewilderment clouded Thea's understanding.

'I shot a marine... But why?'

Attempting to respond to Karania, her words came out distorted, sounding distant and fractured as if spoken through a shattered mirror, "I... I can't... Something's... not right, Kara."

THUMP

'That sensation... Why does it keep happening?' Thea's thoughts seemed amplified in her own ears.

"Private, drop the weapon NOW!" The urgent command from a marine behind her resonated, underscored by the unmistakable presence of a rifle's muzzle aimed directly at her.

'He's annoying. I could take out half this transport before anyone could fire off a shot...' Thea thought, with a confidence in it that spoke of knowing the *truth*.

THUMP

With a jerking motion, Thea forced herself to lower the Icicle that she'd been pointing at the now lifeless marine.

"Kara... my mind is... Something in my chest, I can't..."

'No. Not half. I could kill them all.'

THUMP THUMP

"Thea!" Karania's voice cut through the fog enveloping Thea's mind, a beacon of clarity in her confusion.

"What's up, Kara?" She replied nonchalantly, feeling slightly more in control than before.

Looking into Karania's eyes, a mix of disbelief, shock, and a trace of genuine terror stared back—a terror Thea never imagined her steadfast friend could display.

Despite the chaos around her, Thea felt an unsettling, icy calm settle within.

THUMP

'Huh?'

Thea realised she was in pain. Looking down at herself to check for the reason, she realised with abject horror that she was riddled with holes, her left arm torn off, her legs perforated.

Her legs...?

THUMP

She found herself collapsed on the cold metal floor, a scant metre separating her from a petrified Karania.

"Kara, what is happening?! Help me, please!" Thea implored her friend, her words trembling in the inexplicable chaos enveloping them.

As Thea's vision slowly sharpened, the sight before her was beyond belief.

The interior of the transport was once again frozen—this time quite literally.

It was as though space and time had paused, plunging everything to a temperature nearing absolute zero in a heartbeat, with ice crystals adorning every available surface.

The marines, who had previously pointed their weapons menacingly at her, had been reduced to fragile ice sculptures — and then shattered. Their remnants lay scattered, transformed into minute, icy fragments littering the frozen floor of the transport.

THUMP

"I... I don't know what's going on with you... I'm sorry, Thea."

THUMP

She found herself looking up at Karania, who was pointing a gun at her face.

'Why is Kara threatening me...?'

Karania's voice was laced with confusion and emotional torment as she muttered, "I don't know how else..."

THUMP THUMP

"Kara, wait! I... I can—"

THUMP THUMP THUMP

Karania tightened her grip on the trigger, the bullet from the pistol she had retrieved from a nearby marine, obliterating Thea's brain within a fraction of a second, causing her friend's body to slump lifelessly onto the cold, hard ground.

Tears cascaded down Karania's cheeks, the emotional burden of her actions and the sheer confusion of what had just transpired too immense to bear. With a grim determination, she angled the weapon at her own temple and squeezed the trigger.

THUMP

From somewhere, two cyan-coloured eyes watched the moment unfold.

THUMP

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- POV: Private Ryan Ocart -

With the night vision mode activated in his helmet's visor, the azure trees around him took on a shimmering, silvery hue, bathed in the soft light of dawn. This fleeting blend of colours never failed to bring a smile to Ryan's face.

'Could be worse gigs than shuttling marines to the frontlines—especially during the mesmerising shifts between dusk and dawn in this T1 material zone,' he mused, appreciating the small moments of serenity.

His heart had nearly stopped when he first learned his assigned assessment was of Platinum-ranked difficulty.

"Why do I always get the short end of the stick?" He had lamented. However, the universe had other plans. He found himself in a comfortable role, and he was certain he was racking up substantial Credits and Merit.

After all, ferrying troops efficiently contributed significantly to the UHF war machinery.

Driving the hover-transporter, particularly the coveted "Sidoreno Mk3" variant, was the cherry on top. It was a model he'd dreamt of piloting, but his position in the lower rungs of the UHF AD didn't provide him the privilege of choice. Owning one was out of the question as well; their licensing fees were astronomical.

But fate had a way of evening the scales, and in this assessment, luck seemed to be on Ryan's side for once.

As he smoothly navigated the Sidoreno, adjusting the wheel minutely to bypass an uncleared section of the forest track the UHF carved out, the world around him abruptly *changed*.

The familiar palette of his night vision transformed into an overwhelming wash of violet, as though every other hue had been erased from existence.

Only years of rigorous training, which included an intensive month-long session of maintaining vehicular control amidst sudden environmental anomalies, kept the Sidoreno from veering off course.

"What in the... Jona, are you seeing this?" he exclaimed.

"Yeah, just toggled off my night-vision, and everything's still bathed in the same shade. Why's everything looking... pink?"

"It's more violet than pink, Jona, pink is more—" Ryan started, attempting to inject some levity, his usual coping mechanism when things didn't go quite as planned.

However, before he could dive into nuances of colour, a shrill emergency chime sounded in his head, making Ryan's heart jump to his throat.

'*Not now*,' he internally groaned, deftly navigating his interface to pinpoint the source of the alarm. His seasoned navigation quickly pulled up the corresponding message, leading him straight to the [Mission] tab inside his interface.

His pulse quickened; he had never been directly assigned a mission from the UHF, especially not a critical one.

But the directive staring back at him was clear—and gravely serious.

[UHF Faction Mission]

[Criticality: Prime]

[Details: Check the state of Private Thea McKay from squad designated 'Sovereign Alpha' at the earliest possible moment.]

[Time Limit: 5 Minutes.]

[Rewards: 50 CP, 100 Merit, 15,000 System Credits.]

[Failure: Immediate Termination of UHF Marine Corps Membership.]

Ryan's gaze darted over the mission details, shock evident in his widening eyes. He couldn't help but mutter a series of expletives, "Damn it, why did I have to feel so content just now?!"

Jona, sensing the rising tension, asked, "What's happening, Ryan?"

"You didn't receive that Prime criticality mission alert just now?" Ryan responded, a tremor in his voice.

"Prime criticality?! By the Emperor's sacred visage, Ryan, what the fuck have you gotten us into?!"

"I swear, Jona, I haven't done anything!" Ryan exclaimed, his fingers deftly manoeuvring to send a halt command to the rest of the convoy. He then sharply steered the Sidoreno off the designated track.

"The mission must relate to someone in my transport, specifically; otherwise, this alert wouldn't make any sense," he reasoned to himself.

In a swift motion, Ryan released his safety harness and hit the release for the driver-side door, letting it hiss open. He turned to Jona, his tone dead serious, "If things go south and we're under fire, you get us the fuck out. Understood?"

Jona, swallowing hard, gave a hesitant nod.

Both knew this was far beyond what they'd signed up for.

Missions of Prime criticality were reserved for the elite, the very pinnacle of the UHF ranks, the best among the best of Aces. Ryan, however, was just a regular Private, trying to climb the ranks, make ends meet and enhance his driver's licence in this assessment. He wasn't made for Emperor-damned Prime criticality missions!

Exiting the vehicle and disabling his night-vision, which he had kept on purely to admire the silvery tint the forest took on at dusk, he found himself momentarily paralysed. An all-encompassing violet hue bathed everything in sight.

'Damn it, Jona nailed it. This isn't just our tech glitching,' he internally grimaced.

Baffled about the source of this overwhelming violet spectrum, he instinctively gazed up, searching for the sun, typically the primary light source filtering through the forest's thick canopy. But what met his eyes sent a visceral chill down his spine and made his heart jump into his throat.

The sliver of the sun he could discern through the dense foliage wasn't its typical gleaming self but was almost completely obscured—reminiscent of an eclipse.

But he recalled one thing very distinctly from the mission briefing: Nova Serene had no moon.

And yet, there it was—an eclipse that felt fundamentally *wrong*.

The inky darkness that veiled the sun was profoundly dark, too much so, as if it absorbed all light and hope, allowing not even a hint of the sun's radiance to penetrate. Circling this abyss

was a fiery halo, but not the expected hues of orange, white or gold. Instead, it blazed an unnatural violet, a stark contrast to the shadow it surrounded.

Most unnervingly, from the very centre of this spectacle, a molten streak of the same violet hue seeped downwards in a laser-straight line, bending around the encompassing shadow as if avoiding a physical barrier.

This surreal beam, more than the celestial event above, imbued Ryan with an overwhelming sense of foreboding.

It wasn't merely the unnatural colour or the unerring precision of the beam; it was the way it seemed to defy reality, like a rift tearing open the fabric of existence itself. As the beam extended towards the surface, the world was bathed in its otherworldly glow, casting the familiar into the realm of the uncanny, making Ryan question the very nature of his reality.

Tearing his eyes away from the nightmarish sky, Ryan bolted towards the rear of the transporter, his mind racing and expletives pouring from his lips. "Holy fuck, what the hell is happening? Emperor's balls, this can't be good. Shit!"

As he reached the transporter's rear, he swiftly swiped his hand over the door control. The system recognized his credentials and biometrics from the data chips embedded in his armour, and with a pneumatic hiss, the massive door began its split, sliding open to either side.

His call of, "Which one of you is Private Thea—" was immediately cut off. The acrid, unmistakable scent of blood hit him full force, clogging his senses. On pure reflex, he drew his sidearm, instantly regretting not having his AR303 rifle at the ready. He steadied the weapon, aiming it into the dimly lit expanse beyond the door.

"Who's there?!" He shouted, the edge of panic in his voice cutting through the silence. "Anyone still breathing in there? Speak up!"

The chilling sound of wet crunches, like bones and armour being crushed under ungodly powerful jaws, echoed in the silence. A cold dread settled in Ryan's stomach, making it abundantly clear that something catastrophic had transpired.

Fumbling with his trembling fingers over his wrist, he activated the communication system integrated into his armour. "Sidoreno 4 is compromised! I require immediate backup and medical evac, now!"

His urgent plea was met with nothing more than a haunting static.

A frigid wave of dread washed over him as the door completed its opening sequence.

The eerie violet light from outside filtered in, casting an otherworldly glow over the macabre scene within his Sidoreno's troop compartment. The light seemed to accentuate the severity of the carnage, transforming the intense horror into a grotesque still life of death and destruction.

Ryan's heart pounded in his chest as the grim spectacle unfolded before him, his eyes inexplicably drawn to it, like a moth to flame.

Every single one of the four dozen marines he had transported was invariably dead—he had no doubt about that in his mind, the second he laid eyes upon their remains—their bodies had been gruesomely disfigured, brutally torn apart, contorted into impossible and grotesque shapes.

It was a gruesome mockery of the human form, a sight that could scar one's psyche beyond repair.

Blood splashed, dripped, and pooled in every conceivable corner of the troop carrier.

The metallic tang of iron hung heavily in the air, mingling with the acrid smell of gunpowder and the unmistakable scent of fear. The claw marks, impossibly large and vicious, were etched across every inch of the reinforced plasteel interior. These marks, the size of half a grown marine's body, gouged the metal as if it were no more substantial than parchment.

The sheer force required to create such destruction was unimaginable, and the sight of it was enough to turn Ryan's stomach. Yet, the adrenaline coursing through his veins, combined with the primal terror gripping him, kept the bile at bay.

His eyes, wide with shock and terror, were drawn inexorably toward the source of this massacre. The abomination before Ryan was a grotesque perversion of something resembling a canine, an unholy fusion of flesh and pure, unadulterated terror, standing about as tall as a fully grown marine, despite being hunched over its gnarly meal.

Coated in guts and blood, it was a monstrous chimaera of seven legs and three monstrous arm-like protrusions from its back, each ending in a set of massive, wickedly curved claws. The creature's spine stretched to an unnatural length, defying any known principles of anatomy, culminating in a tail that undulated eerily, as if caught in a spectral breeze.

The end of this tail was armed with a vicious barb, and, much to Ryan's horror, it bore the gruesome evidence of its recent slaughter—fragments of his fellow marines still impaled upon it.

His blood ran cold as the creature turned to face him, revealing its full, horrific visage. Its face, if it could be called that, was a nightmare made real. The eyes—five in total—shone with a chilling, violet light, mirroring the alien luminescence of the local sun.

Its mouth—no, it was more of a jagged *tear*, a grotesque fissure splitting its head and upper chest almost in twain. The beast's maw was a chaotic mess of impossibly angled teeth and gnashing darkness. As it opened, a sound echoed forth that defied the boundaries of reality. It was a vibration that seemed to reverberate through Ryan, resonating with parts of him he didn't know existed, producing a ghastly tone and vibrato that set his teeth on edge.

The sound was a cacophony of a primal growl and an emotional undertone that screamed not of rage, but of an almost childlike excitement.

Yet, what truly froze Ryan's blood was the hauntingly familiar tone woven within the sound.

Among the monstrous roars and guttural growls, there was a distinctly *human* note. The uncanny familiarity of it made his stomach churn, and for a moment, the world swayed dangerously around him as he teetered on the brink of unconsciousness.

That momentary hesitation was all the creature needed.

Like a spectre shrouded in nightmares, it lunged from across the transporter, a distance of over twenty metres, with an explosive force that shattered the air. Its massive legs, coiled springs of raw, frightening power, dented and broke the plasteel plating beneath its bulk. It launched itself into the empty space between them, soaring through the air at a velocity that defied the laws of nature for a creature of its massive size.

Ryan fired his pistol in a desperate attempt to fight back, even as he knew it was futile.

The creature had already decimated an entire transporter filled with marines, and it hadn't sustained a single scratch. The shots ricocheted off its thick, scale-like hide, the sparks from the impact illuminating the creature's grotesque form.

The creature descended on him like the embodiment of a cruel, indifferent universe.

Its massive claws, each the size of Ryan's entire arm, opened wide like the jaws of a primordial sea monster. Ryan was snatched up in its vice-like grip, his pistol clattering uselessly to the transport floor. An ear-splitting scream filled the air, echoing off the metal walls of the transporter, as the creature started its horrifying work.

Its claws punctured Ryan's body, shattering bone and rending flesh with sickening ease.

His screams turned into hoarse gasps as blood welled up in his throat, choking him.

It continued its brutal savagery, tearing through armour, muscle and sinew, ripping him apart like a rag doll in the jaws of a mad dog. It was a sight that would invariably haunt any potential onlookers forever—if there had been any.

That horrifying moment seemed to stretch out into an eternity, the gruesome spectacle unfolding like an obscene tapestry of violence and despair.

The creature's roars were interwoven with Ryan's dying gurgles, forming a chilling symphony that echoed through the transporter and the Azure Forest surrounding it, marking the end of another marine's life.

THUMP

From somewhere, two cyan-coloured eyes watched the moment unfold.

THUMP

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- POV: Karania -

'Systolic and diastolic pressures are within normal limits, heart rate is within the euvolemic range, and pulmonary ventilation is unlaboured,' Karania mentally ticked off the vital signs on her checklist, ensuring her patient was fit for duty.

"You're good to go; everything seems to be in order," she announced to the marine in front of her. He acknowledged with a nod before resuming his position in the transport.

Routine post-injury evaluations were part of her medical responsibilities, and over time, they had become a methodical yet comforting task amidst the boring back-and-forth between the FOB and the frontlines.

As the transport continued to rumble towards the front, Karania navigated to her next patient.

He was already positioned on the grav-barge, a piece of technology that compensated for the unpredictable motions of the transport, maintaining a constant, stable platform for medical evaluations.

"Alright, let's get started. The notes indicate your previ—"

A sudden, jarring emergency chime disrupted her flow.

A notification flashed across her System interface. She barely needed a moment to identify its gravity, quickly accessing it and reading it. As she did, her eyes widened in shock.

[UHF Faction Mission]

[Criticality: Prime]

[Details: Check the state of Private Thea McKay from squad designated 'Sovereign Alpha' at the earliest possible moment.]

[Time Limit: 2 Minutes.]

[Rewards: 50 CP, 100 Merit, 15,000 System Credits.]

[Failure: Immediate Termination of UHF Marine Corps Membership.]

'Thea, what the fuck have you gotten yourself into now?! And how?!' raced through Karania's mind as she pivoted and sprinted towards the opposite end of the transport, where she distinctly remembered Thea was seated.

"Thea?!" Her voice pierced through the ambient noise of the transport, desperate for a reassuring response. But there was nothing.

She barely registered the faces of the marines she zoomed past, her sole focus on reaching Thea. A 2-minute, Prime criticality mission notification wasn't sent by the UHF without a severe reason. Every second counted, and she was painfully aware of it.

Reaching Thea's seat, Karania's heart did a tiny flip of relief — Thea was there. She wasn't lost or elsewhere in the transport. But the relief was short-lived as Karania quickly assessed her friend's unresponsive state and immediately set to work.

Dropping to a kneel beside Thea, Karania's practised hands swiftly checked for a carotid pulse, pressing her fingers lightly against the side of Thea's neck, searching for that rhythmic thud of life.

Her armour's gauntlets had specifically been made with this sort of action in mind, amplifying the subtle vibrations enough to feel a marine's pulse even through their armour.

Feeling a pulse, albeit faint and hurried, Karania then quickly brushed her fingertips over Thea's eyelids, lifting them to check for pupil responsiveness. She flashed a small penlight across Thea's eyes, but they were rolled into the back of her head, making it impossible to see her friend's pupils to ascertain any potential brain trauma on the quick.

"Can you hear me, Thea?" Karania gently but firmly questioned, even as she placed her palm near Thea's nose and mouth to feel the warmth and moisture of her breath. She checked the rhythm and depth of each inhalation, ensuring that the respiratory pathways weren't obstructed and that oxygen was reaching the brain.

At the same time, Karania deftly manoeuvred her other hand across Thea's form, searching intently for any indications of physical harm, fractures, or concealed injuries. With practised efficiency, she activated the medic-specific override on Thea's Spectre armour—an override that existed on all UHF armour to allow for access to a patient sealed within—, releasing the top-half in an instant. As the armour sections unlatched and sprung open, Thea's standard UHF uniform was revealed beneath.

Swiftly, Karania's hands zeroed in on Thea's abdomen, pressing gently yet deliberately to detect any unusual rigidity or swelling, signs that might suggest internal haemorrhage. Every motion was deliberate, every touch informed by years of experience, as she meticulously ensured no injury went undetected.

"C'mon, Thea, give me something," she muttered, more to herself than to her friend, as she reached for her medical scanner. The compact device would provide her with a more detailed insight into Thea's vitals, allowing her to make a more informed medical intervention.

Through the entire assessment, Karania's every move was automatic, honed from years of training and real-world experience. Her emotions, her shock, her fear — all of it was locked away, compartmentalised for the moment. Right now, Thea needed the medic, not the friend, and Karania was determined to give her just that.

Suddenly, a vivid violet hue bathed the interior of the transporter.

The unexpected change caught Karania off-guard, prompting her to scan for its source. Around her, the marines reacted with a mix of confusion and concern. Some tightened their grip on their weapons, others swiftly tried to activate their comms to try and communicate with different sections of the convoy.

Meanwhile, the abrupt chaos roused those who had been sleeping into an alarmed state of confusion.

Shifting her focus back to Thea, Karania trusted that the other members of Alpha Squad, with their diverse expertise, would handle the situation. But as she was about to tend to her friend's legs, something new caught her eye – something that hadn't been there moments ago.

To Karania's astonishment, she observed luminescent violet tears slowly detaching themselves from Thea's eyes, almost defying gravity as they floated away.

She racked her brain, cycling through her extensive medical knowledge, trying to identify a condition, a symptom, a precedent—anything that could explain what she was witnessing.

But nothing matched.

Determined to get more clarity, Karania decided to repeat her earlier test, checking for pupil responsiveness. She gently lifted Thea's eyelids, but the sight that greeted her was wholly unexpected.

Instead of a passive, unconscious gaze, with her pupils rolled into the back of her head as before, Thea's eyes stared back at her, sharp and alert, as though she was wide awake.

The intense, almost piercing, look in Thea's eyes caused an overwhelming sensation of vertigo to wash over Karania. Before she could comprehend what was happening, her equilibrium was lost, and she stumbled forward, falling onto Thea.

Shaking off the disorientation, Karania propped herself back up, confusion evident on her face. What had just occurred was far beyond any anomaly she'd ever encountered.

Taking a moment to gather her thoughts, she leaned over Thea once more, carefully pulling up her eyelids while softly calling out, "Thea? Can you hear me? Respond if you can."

But as she looked into Thea's eyes again, another baffling sight presented itself.

Around Thea's iris, a strange, segmented ring had formed. It consisted of tiny, black and violet star-like specks that shimmered, almost as if they held entire galaxies within them.

This mysterious, celestial pattern was nothing like *any* eye condition or infection Karania had ever seen or even heard of.

'*I need more time...*' Karania thought, grappling with the whirlwind of changes unfolding before her. It was clear she wouldn't decipher the situation at this rapidly deteriorating pace.

Instinctively, she tried to access her mental library, a repository of every piece of knowledge she had ever gathered. But, to her shock, she was met with resistance. A profound sense of dread gripped her as she found herself locked out. This wasn't just some learned skill or Ability; it was the core way her mind functioned.

Yet now, inexplicably, it was beyond her reach for the first time in her entire life.

The implications of this left Karania completely frozen.

She stared, entranced, as the glowing violet tears ascended toward the transporter's ceiling with eerie precision.

She felt hopeless. Lost.

Without her mental library, she felt bereft—no reservoir of knowledge to tap into, no extra moments to comprehend the unfolding events.

"I'm sorry, Thea... I... I can't understand what's happening to you," she whispered, tears tracing her cheeks, the weight of helplessness bearing down on her.

In that moment, one of the radiant violet tears touched the ceiling of the transporter, and suddenly, everything was bathed in an incandescent violet light. The world around Karania seemed to ripple, like the surface of a disturbed pond. A deafening silence filled the air, punctuated only by the distant echoes of a reality bending and breaking.

The transporter began to disintegrate.

Its atoms, its very essence, started to vaporise, dissolving into the radiant violet that was consuming everything. The very fabric of existence seemed to be tearing apart, fraying at the edges, only to be swallowed by an all-consuming void.

To the outside observer, this cataclysmic event would have seemed to happen in a blink, but to Karania and anyone inside, trapped within this ephemeral eternity, every nanosecond stretched out infinitely.

Thoughts cascaded through her mind, each more frantic than the last. Memories of her life on Vicero, her training to join the UHF, the time she spent with Thea, of their shared moments and Alpha Squad, all played out in slow motion.

Was this the end? What even *was* this phenomenon?
Could anything survive such cosmic obliteration?

A mournful dread settled in her heart as she became acutely aware of her own fragility against the vastness of the universe. The known physical world, her world, seemed like nothing more than a delicate bubble, so easily burst by forces beyond comprehension.

Then, as abruptly as it had begun, the tempestuous sea of violet settled and Karania as well as anyone inside the transporter, finally ceased to exist.

What remained was an immense tear in the very fabric of space itself, a gaping maw of darkness surrounded by an aurora of shimmering violet, evidence of the transporter and its occupants having once existed in that space.

The universe, forever altered, seemed to hum a sombre note in remembrance...

THUMP

From somewhere, two cyan-coloured eyes watched the moment unfold.

THUMP

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- POV: Captain Horatio Cross -

Inside his office within the Sovereign's DDS, Horatio was engrossed in a mountain of paperwork, methodically approving reports destined for UHF command—a routine part of his afternoon.

While many Majors relished the downtime during the significant quarterly assessments, Horatio, with the weighty title of Captain—the navy kind, which came with more responsibilities than a Major—did not have that luxury.

He let out a heavy sigh, reviewing yet another report on the incident between Colonel Thalia and Major Rurix from the assessment's first day.

"That insufferable woman... Why can't she just maintain her boundaries?" Horatio muttered, a wave of unease washing over him at the mere recollection of Colonel Thalia's visage.

Their history stretched back decades, much to Horatio's dismay. He had interacted with numerous diplomancers in the UHF, but few were as skilled in combat and adept in leadership as Colonel Thalia, granting her a unique stature within their ranks.

With a practised flick of his middle and index fingers, Horatio approved the report destined for command. Although he doubted any tangible actions would be taken, he believed in adhering to protocols. He couldn't let that vexing woman exert her undesirable influence over his men unchecked.

The subsequent reports were straightforward, detailing the current status of the Sovereign, its crew, cargo, and various logistical data required by command daily.

"Do these endless reports ever—"

Before he could finish, a sudden jolt threw him forward. Decades of combat training instantly took over, and he swiftly drew his concealed PX-49 pistol from his jacket, steadying himself, ready for any threat.

"Sov, what's happen—?"

"Emergency ejection engaged. Brace yourself, Horatio," chimed a familiar female voice. It was the Sovereign's AI, absent its typical monotonic, robotic tone. Within his office, there was no need for the usual deceptions.

Horatio's eyes widened in realisation and alarm. Just as he prepared himself, his Soul was abruptly ejected from the DDS.

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Suddenly, Horatio was back in his physical form, within his tangible office aboard the Sovereign. Emerging from the specialised DDS pod, designed to keep him combat-ready during emergencies—unlike the standard pods used by marines—he withdrew the actual PX-49 pistol from his jacket.

"Sov, status!" he demanded.

"Emergency detected in Deck C, Section 64. The Repulsor-Field is faltering," replied the same crisp voice of the Sovereign's AI he had just heard seconds ago.

"Faltering?! Elaborate," Horatio responded, a mix of concern and disbelief colouring his tone.

He was intimately familiar with Deck C, Section 64.

It housed a significant part of the DDS' mainframe on the Sovereign and was strategically positioned on the stern side, enveloped by the ship's thickest armour. This section was also equipped with the most robust Repulsor-Field emitters, even outclassing those safeguarding the command room.

How could such a fortified section possibly be faltering?

He contemplated the unpredictable nature of Void travel. Its intricacies remained largely enigmatic; only its foundational principles were understood.

To journey between sectors, a colossal amount of energy was channelled into a Void-Tear-Generator. True to its name, the device would rip open a passage into the Void.

A ship would then navigate into this temporary breach, initiating its voyage through the Void—simple as that.

The primary complication with Void travel, aside from its inherent complexity, was the misconception regarding the Void's nature.

Contrary to its name, the Void was *far* from empty.

In reality, the Void represented an alternate plane of existence—a completely different realm.

Within its depths lurked horrors beyond the wildest imaginings of humanity. These entities were broadly categorised as Void Daemons, despite the vast differences among them. It might have been a generalised term, perhaps even considered racist.

But when a common trait among these beings was their insatiable desire to obliterate you and devour your immortal Soul, such distinctions became trivial to those who encountered them regularly.

While certain academics from the safety of core worlds might debate the terminology, their opinions held little sway on the frontlines. The central challenge of Void travel, then, was these Daemons' appetite for the Souls aboard.

The Repulsor-Field was the primary defence against this threat.

Powered by the same energy that propelled the Void Engines, the shield remained active as long as the ship was in motion within the Void. However, like any defensive measure, its effectiveness was determined by its most vulnerable point.

Achieving a uniformly strong shield across an entire vessel was impossible. And even if somehow feasible, the Void Daemons would simply focus their onslaught on a particular area, rendering the endeavour moot.

An *absolute* defence against their infiltration was impossible.

Instead, a strategic approach had been devised: Create "kill-rooms" with deliberately weakened Repulsor-Fields. These areas would entice the Void Daemons, providing a controlled point of entry. This method had proven highly effective, with only rare mishaps.

It was the best strategy the UHF had developed to counter the looming threat of the Void's inhabitants.

The implications were clear to Horatio: Deck C, Section 64 was the *most* fortified part of the ship. Conventional knowledge would deem any assault on it a fool's errand. After all, once the Daemons were inside the ship, at any point of entrance, nothing would prevent them from wreaking havoc anywhere onboard.

So, what was their objective with trying to get into the most defended area...?

"Repulsor-Field Emitters down to 58% strength. Breaches are imminent, Horatio. Move!" The Sovereign's voice sounded with an urgent undertone, prompting him to address the situation directly.

As he started, the office door slid open automatically, courtesy of the Sovereign. But, before he could step out, the *entire ship* jolted violently.

Horatio was thrown against the wall with such force that his body left a noticeable imprint in the reinforced plasteel.

"Sov?!" He shouted, concern evident, as he pulled himself up without a scratch and dashed from his office at top speed.

"T...The Repulsor-Field has collapsed in Section 64! It's completely gone, Horatio!" The Sovereign's voice bore a tone of panic that mirrored Horatio's internal alarm.

"I've dispatched Lieutenants Tiberius, Caelum, Rita, Isolde, Elara, and Bladeborn to the breach. They were the closest officers. Additionally, around sixty marines in the vicinity have been tasked with safeguarding the DDS' mainframe," she added, her urgency growing.

"Stay composed, Sov. We'll handle this," Horatio tried to instil confidence, but the Sovereign cut him off.

"Horatio! I'm completely blind in that sector! I'm operating in the dark! What if I've sent them into a death trap?! We don't know what's going on!"

His pace, already swift, became even more frenzied, driven by the uncharacteristic fear in the Sovereign's voice.

Horatio sped past countless doors and bulkheads, vaulting over gangways and utilising ship components to hasten his progress. Every inch of the ship was etched into his memory, giving him a distinct advantage in navigating its intricate design.

He instinctively knew that the Sovereign was similarly working—hard.

She was clearing every single pathway for him ahead of time, while displaying his active position and best route inside of his left eyeball—a cybernetic replacement he had gotten decades upon decades ago, which had more than paid for itself many times over.

They could not afford any marine to randomly walk into his path, as if they did, they would invariably die from the collision. He could attempt to avoid them, but at the speed he was going, even his monstrous physique would struggle to change vector fast enough to not run into anyone.

His relentless sprint continued.

His office, situated in the ship's front third, was a significant distance from Deck C, Sector 64, nestled close to the ship's colossal sub-light engines at the stern. For a rare moment, he found himself cursing the Sovereign's vast expanse, longing for the DDS's capability to transport him instantly.

But he was acutely aware that such wishes were fruitless; this was reality, not a digital realm.

Horatio's rapid strides took him past multiple decks in mere moments—Deck N, M, L, each becoming a fleeting blur as the urgency pressed him onward. The sensation that his ship and crew were in dire peril fueled his pace.

"Horatio... I... I believe the marines I dispatched are gone. I can't... I can't detect their life signs," the Sovereign's voice, thick with remorse and distress, echoed within him.

"Sov, you mentioned the absence of sensors there. It's possible they're just beyond your detection range for now. Just... Hold on, I'm almost there, okay?" He said, attempting to console, even as doubt gnawed at him. He knew that the Sovereign wouldn't make an oversight like that in such critical matters.

At last, after an agonising stretch of time, he arrived at Deck C.

Drawing his hard-light sabre, he held the PX-49 firmly in his left hand.

"Sov, unseal it," he instructed.

Following protocol, the Sovereign had isolated the entire deck once the Repulsor Field breach was detected—a provisional step to prepare the crew for an impending ship-wide confrontation with any emerging Void Daemons.

The bulkhead slid open with a hiss, revealing an empty space. "Thank the Emperor, some respite," he murmured, slowing his pace, wary of unseen adversaries.

However, his relief was short-lived.

Approaching Section 63, a ghastly sight met his eyes.

The section's bulkhead was violently unhinged, and the makeshift barricades of the dispatched marines lay in ruins. The aftermath was gruesome—entrails, blood, and indiscernible remnants scattered, bearing a silent reminder to the ruthless devastation inflicted by a rampant Void Daemon.

A fiery anger propelled Horatio into Section 63, eyes vigilant for any trace of the assailants.

"Sov, I'm proceeding. Seal all access points to Deck C. Extract *all* the Majors from the DDS. We have our task cut out for us," his voice rang with determination.

"I'll monitor the situation. Be careful, Horatio," replied the anxious voice of the Sovereign.

As he delved deeper into the section, their communication abruptly ceased.

—

Horatio made a beeline for the DDS mainframe. The ticking clock of impending disaster left him no leisure to hunt down every Void Daemon infesting the ship. The mainframe was under imminent threat.

It served as the vessel for nearly 80% of all Souls aboard the Sovereign, excluding those present in real-space. The catastrophic death toll should the Void Daemons breach it was unthinkable.

As he closed the distance, the utter carnage left in the wake of the Daemons' onslaught was a grim reminder of their brutality, stoking the flames of rage within him.

The marines who had laid down their lives in defence of the mainframe—their comrades—were unsung heroes. They were Privates and Sergeants at most, often overlooked in the annals of heroic deeds.

No faction had the means to pay homage to every fallen soldier, but Horatio vowed to remember. He would collect the names of those lost in this battle and immortalise them on the walls of the Sovereign's reactor room, a tribute to his crew who had made the ultimate sacrifice; just as he always did.

Horatio had always known that Void Daemons were humanity's greatest adversary and this simply reinforced his thoughts. After all, they were not merely killers; they were *devourers*.

In the absence of a distraction or a swift death, they would feast on the Soul of the deceased, ending their existence—permanently.

The Daemons not only killed even UHF marines with no hope of revival, but they eradicated the Soul from the everlasting cycle. This annihilation rendered impossible any slim hope of the Soul's rebirth into a newborn, following the cycle's completion.

Based on the blood, gore and complete devastation around him, he was certain that none of the marines that had answered the Sovereign's call would ever return to the cycle.

—

As he neared the compartment housing the DDS' Mainframe, the distant sounds of active combat reached his ears. Evidently, not all defenders had met their doom.

Within moments, his swift advance brought the scene into view, evoking a torrent of emotions within him: Anguish, trepidation, and pride.

Four Lieutenants stood firm, entrenched behind a massive T3 shield that was under relentless assault from a Canidae-type Void Daemon—a creature bearing a grotesque resemblance to canines, hence the name.

To Horatio's alarm, there were not one but four such Daemons present, a number unprecedented in his experience.

Each Canidae-type was typically categorised as a T4 threat, demanding a full squad of T3 marines to neutralise—just a single one. The valour of his Lieutenants, who had heeded the Sovereign's summons and staunchly resisted the onslaught of *four* such adversaries, was awe-inspiring.

Yet, among the fallen, he recognized the lifeless forms of several Lieutenants previously dispatched to the scene. The stark realisation underscored the harrowing losses sustained that day.

Overwhelmed by grief and fury, Horatio unleashed a resounding battle cry and launched into the fray.

He aimed his PX-49 at the Canidae Daemon engrossed in desecrating Lieutenant Caelum's remains. The pistol's discharge was a spiralling helix of pure aether, which sailed unerringly, obliterating the Daemon in an instant upon contact.

Its deadly trajectory continued unabated, wreaking havoc upon the Sovereign's inner structures until it finally exhausted its potency, leaving a trail of devastation in its wake.

Without hesitation, Horatio invoked one of his elite combat Abilities.

'Arc Of Aeons.'

With a deft motion, he wielded his hard-light sabre, releasing a luminous arc that traced the trajectory of his blade before breaking free.

The surroundings became surreal as every photon seemed magnetically drawn to the radiant crescent birthed from his swing, bathing the corridor in an otherworldly luminescence.

To observers, the Arc seemed to traverse at a leisurely pace, an illusion of its profound nature.

In truth, it darted forth at light-speed.

The sheer force of the Ability augmented the Perception of those present, rendering even the swift movement of light perceptible.

However, this perceptual anomaly was exclusive to the Arc itself.

The remainder of the corridor's radiance, emanating from the Arc's spectral illumination, persisted unchanged—a manifestation defying the known laws of physics, made tangible by the Allbright System and channelled through Horatio Cross himself.

As the Arc intersected with the Canidae-type Daemons, they weren't cut—they simply *ceased*. Their entire being annihilated on a level utterly imperceptible and incomprehensible.

With one attack, he had wiped out the remaining three Canidae and simply watched as the Lieutenants behind the shield collapsed from exhaustion.

In that moment, the lights in the hallway turned back on and he heard the voice of the Sovereign within his comms unit.

“Horatio! The Majors have all been recalled, they are exiting the DDS as we speak. How did it go?!”

“I dealt with it. Keep your sensors peeled around Deck C, I want to know if anything moves out there. I got Daemons on my ship that need eradicating,” he grunted, his anger still far from abating.

—

The day's events spelled disaster for Horatio, but the full extent of the calamity was revealed only the next day.

The Sovereign wasn't an isolated case.

Every single ship linked to the DDS at The Apex during the incident had endured the same onslaught.

Ships like the Empyrean, Ascendant, Hegemon, Exalted, and Imperator all suffered tremendous losses—Lieutenants, Sergeants, and Privates fallen to the sudden and overpowering Canidae-type Void Daemon incursion that seemingly bypassed the Repulsor-Field with ease.

However, the most heart-wrenching revelation came later from the UHF command.

The Monarch, a sister-ship to the Sovereign, had gone completely dark and unresponsive to any attempts at reaching it after the attack...

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- POV: Thea -

Thea's eyes snapped open, as though she had been yanked from a haunting dream.

Panic-induced breaths escaped her, her system flooded with adrenaline.

'What just happened?!'

She recalled the sensation of being shot in the head by Karania. But as she surveyed her surroundings, she realised she was right where she'd been during their journey back to the frontlines.

She was about to dismiss her experience as an unsettling dream when the peculiar presence nestled behind her heart resurfaced, sending shivers down her spine.

'This is fucking real!'

The realisation catapulted her anxiety levels into the stratosphere.

She jumped up, intending to approach Karania for guidance, but an overwhelming sensation of déjà vu halted her.

'I've been through this. That's how I was shot...?'

An indomitable impulse urged her to exit the transporter immediately. Trusting the same instinct that had navigated her safely through the Cube Trial and the ongoing Assessment, she sprinted to the transporter's emergency exit and slammed her fist against it.

"Private, what are you—" the marine seated nearby began, but his words were cut short.

As the doors blasted off, a blinding violet light filled the space, seemingly arresting time for all but Thea. As she glanced around, a mixture of confusion and recognition washed over her.

'It's like before... yet not quite. There's no odd sound this time... And what's with this violet light...?'

Cautiously emerging from the transporter, led by her instincts, Thea was paralyzed by the sight before her.

The sky showcased what appeared to be a surreal eclipse, defined by a vivid, straight line of violet light descending upon the planet.

Yet, what truly unnerved her were the colossal cyan eyes that loomed beyond the sun.

Their magnitude was beyond Thea's comprehension, their mere existence threatening to unravel her sanity. The sun seemed a mere speck in comparison.

Time seemed to stretch endlessly as Thea remained entranced, locked in a gaze with those vast cyan eyes.

Then, a profound realisation dawned: they mirrored her own eyes.

"Thea, wake the fuck up. We're already at the front, get your shit, we've got to get to the rest of the squad!"

Blinking to clarity, Thea found herself looking into the concerned eyes of Karania, who was shaking her gently. A mix of impatience and amusement danced on her friend's face.

"You're back. Now, let's move. The rest of Sovereign Alpha awaits, and we have a long day ahead!"

With a spry leap, Karania disembarked from the stationary troop transporter, motioning for Thea to join her...