

Arc 1 - Chapter 79 - Rumors

In the ensuing minutes, Thea and Kar'al delved further into the Gram's specific upsides and differences with other DMR's of similar make, each of them offering insights from their unique experiences and experiments regarding the different equipment. As they wrapped up their discussion, Thea carefully handed the modified Gram back to Kar'al.

"Thank you, Kar'al, for answering all my questions and letting me examine your Gram so closely. It definitely helped me gain a new perspective on my own loadout," Thea expressed her gratitude, her voice tinged with genuine appreciation for the opportunity to learn.

Kar'al responded with a deep, rumbling chuckle, a sound that resonated with warmth and camaraderie. As he took his weapon back, he replied, "Don't mention it. We're all adapting to life with the System, learning as we go. It's only natural we share what we discover, right?"

Thea nodded enthusiastically, her previous anxiety now replaced with a sense of connection and shared purpose after the, comparatively, lengthy discussion on the ins and outs of the modified Gram.

This mutual understanding seemed to encourage Kar'al to delve into a more personal topic.

"Say, I've been hearing some whispers among the other marines," he began, his tone indicating a shift to a more curious inquiry. "I heard that you and your squad played a key role in the first and second ambushes in the Azure Forest. Is that right?"

"Yeah... it was quite an introduction to the planet, to say the least," Thea responded with a light-hearted tone, her newfound confidence from the shared interest in the weaponry and tech evident in her ability to maintain the conversation. She felt increasingly at ease with Kar'al's presence, the initial barrier of unfamiliarity having steadily diminished.

Kar'al's interest seemed piqued as he leaned in slightly, his volume lowering slightly, almost conspiratorially. "I've heard stories. You, in particular, took down a stealth field generator, didn't you?" His question was probing but respectful, showing a keen interest in the details of her experiences, but with a surprisingly juvenile grin on his face.

Thea paused for a brief moment, weighing whether to divulge the full extent of her knowledge. Considering Kar'al's openness about his Gram and its modifications, however, she felt a sense of reciprocity was in order. Furthermore, it wasn't like he wouldn't be able to learn all about it once the assessment ended anyway, so there was no real reason in her mind not to share.

"Ahh... Well, yes. I did use my secondary weapon to target and destroy the generator from a distance, right before the second ambush was set to begin. I like to think it made a difference, but..." Thea's voice trailed off, her smile fading into a more pained, sombre expression as she recalled the incident, "Right after I took the shot, I blacked out—Focus Overdraw. It's a... dangerous condition. Happens when you deplete your Focus Resource and keep drawing on, way below zero. And it's not just any threat either; it can be fatal even here, *permanently*."

Kar'al's reaction was immediate and intense. His eyes widened in shock, a mix of concern and disbelief evident in his expression. "Wait, what?! It can cause permanent death?! With "even here", you mean the DDS? How does that even work? I thought we were supposed to be perfectly safe inside the simulation?!" His voice conveyed a sense of supreme urgency, reflecting his heightened alarm at the revelation.

Realising that Kar'al was just as unaware of this danger as she had been initially, Thea took the time to explain the concept of Focus Overdraw in detail, keeping her explanation as clear and succinct as possible. She described how this perilous condition could arise, especially in Psykers, and the risks it posed within the dynamics of the DDS.

Kar'al exhaled deeply, his tension easing as he processed the information. He then pondered aloud, "I guess that's not too bad, then. I doubt I'm even close to having enough Resolve to cause that to happen..."

Seemingly latching onto something else that Thea had said during her explanation, he asked, "So, you must be some sort of Psyker, right? You mentioned this mainly affects them?"

Thea hesitated, considering how to define her status.

She had been identified as a Wielder by Viladia, which indeed suggested innate Psyker abilities, but she hadn't fully embraced or understood the extent of her powers. She remembered her encounter with the Psychic Gate and Viladia's explanation that Wielders were *natural Psykers*, not bound by the System's conventional classifications or Attribute-based permissions and unlocks.

'So, in a way, I am a Psyker already,' Thea reasoned internally. *'I might not have an official class or recognition as such, but being a Wielder, as Vi explained, inherently makes me a Psyker... I think.'*

Thea nodded slightly, affirming her own understanding of her unique abilities.

Her gaze then refocused on Kar'al as she elaborated, "Yes, I suppose I am a Psyker, in a way. I've been identified as a Wielder by another, vastly more experienced, marine. It's apparently something like a natural Psyker. It gives me intuitive insights. I can sense the trajectory and effectiveness of my shots, and I can even feel when someone is taking a shot at me, before it lands. It's incredibly useful in combat, as you can imagine! The only real issue is that these instincts often consume my Focus without me realising it... That's kind of what led to the Overdraw incidents."

As Thea spoke, Kar'al's expression shifted from one of curiosity to surprise. His eyes widened incrementally with each revelation, and he blinked a few times in quick succession, as though trying to assimilate the flood of information.

Just as Thea began to worry that she might have overwhelmed him with too much detail, he responded, "That's quite extraordinary... So, you have a sort of future sense? That's an immense advantage, holy shit. It makes me wonder if I should delve deeper into this Psychic aspect myself," he mused thoughtfully.

Then, as if a new thought struck him, he refocused on Thea with renewed interest.

“Ah, right! You mentioned using a secondary weapon to take out the generator. What kind of weapon is capable of that, especially from a distance? It's not your pistol there, is it?” he inquired, pointing towards her Icicle with a mix of curiosity and intrigue.

Thea chuckled at Kar'al's assumption about her Icicle.

“Huh? Oh, no, it's not the Icicle,” she replied, amused by the idea. “My secondary weapon is actually the Caliburn. It's this one here...” Her words trailed off as she reached for the Caliburn, only to remember that she wasn't carrying her usual backpack. With all their gear consolidated for Lucas' demonstration to the other Alpha Squads, her equipment wasn't on her person.

“Ehh... One moment,” she said hastily, excusing herself to retrieve the weapon. She quickly navigated through the crowd to where Lucas, still surrounded by a large group including Isabella, had neatly lined up the squad's gear. Swiftly locating her backpack, she detached the massive weapon that was the Caliburn and hurried back to Kar'al, oblivious to the curious glances her action attracted.

Her focus was solely on returning the favour of sharing weaponry insights with Kar'al.

Upon her return, Kar'al's eyebrows shot up in surprise. He chuckled, “What the... That's your ‘secondary’ weapon, Thea?” His tone was a mix of disbelief and amusement.

Holding out the Caliburn with a sense of pride, Thea responded, “Yep! This is the Caliburn. It's a Tier 2 anti-materiel heavy railgun, and it's been incredibly effective in the assessment so far! Coupled with my abilities, [Penetrative Shot] and [Detect Weak Spots], I even managed to take down some of the anti-armour cannons on the wall during our assault!”

Kar'al carefully took the hefty weapon, handling it with a mix of awe and caution, his eyes reflecting the same enthusiasm that Thea usually felt for innovative technology. As he examined the Caliburn, he suddenly looked up, a realisation dawning. “Wait... You said this is a Tier 2 weapon? How did you get access to something like this?”

Thea proceeded to detail her acquisition of the Caliburn, including the Tier-Up Voucher, her strategic reasoning for choosing it and how she had utilised it so far. Kar'al's interest peaked, especially when the conversation shifted to the Tier 2 DMRs that Thea had tried out, hinting at potential future upgrades for his own Gram.

Their engrossed discussion about weaponry and tactics extended for some time, only to be interrupted by the arrival of Staff-Sergeant Venn. His voice cut through the assembly, surprising more than just a few of the marines, “Good to see that you are all getting along well.”

As Staff-Sergeant Venn began to speak, the chatter among the marines quickly subsided. The squads efficiently reassembled, each group forming a cohesive unit, their attention riveted on the Staff-Sergeant. His presence commanded a mix of respect and anticipation.

"I trust this assessment has been illuminating for all of you," he began, his voice carrying a sense of gravitas. "As members of the Alpha Squads, you shoulder more than the usual burdens. You're tasked with the most challenging, perilous, and crucial missions. You represent the pinnacle of your respective drives, and this assessment is designed to validate that status.

"You are already briefed on your missions. What you've encountered so far is merely the prologue to the real challenge ahead: Urban warfare. Few scenarios in combat are as daunting, as complex, and as deadly as fighting in an urban landscape. Stay vigilant and alert at all times, for there won't be a chance to get back over the wall, should you die inside the city."

His words caused a few concerned glances among the marines that Thea could see out of the corner of her eyes. They were apparently not too confident in their ability to stay alive, given the daunting task of infiltrating a megacity basically by themselves—she could not blame them one bit.

'This whole assessment seems extremely rough for new Recruits... Explains why it's a "Platinum" difficulty, I guess,' she thought.

Furthermore, listening intently to the briefing, Thea couldn't help but notice the stark contrast in Staff-Sergeant Venn's demeanour compared to their previous encounters.

When she had first been chosen for the "Strike One" mission with Viladia, Venn had been more casual, almost congenial in his approach. Even during Sovereign Alpha's initial meeting with him, he had appeared almost nonchalant, delegating responsibilities to Corporal Phantoal while he seemed to take a back seat.

Now, however, the circumstances of recent battles, or perhaps the responsibility of addressing a fresh batch of recruits, had sharpened his attitude. He exuded a more typical Staff-Sergeant persona: authoritative, commanding, and imposing in his speech and manner.

"Your fellow infiltration squads are positioned about two kilometres east from here, awaiting your integration. You will each join a distinctly different segment of the infiltration operation, meaning that you will not be crossing the wall directly with other Alpha Squads. Remember, though you are divided among different units, you are *unified* as fellow marines under the banner of the UHF. Support one another, collaborate whenever possible, and fulfil your respective missions with efficiency and precision. Is that understood?"

The marines responded in unison, their voices resounding with a strong and synchronised "Yes, sir!" This collective affirmation seemed to have a palpable effect on Staff-Sergeant Venn. His previously taut posture eased slightly, a subtle but noticeable relaxation in his stance.

"Very well. You will receive further instructions en route to the wall from your respective unit leaders. May the Emperor's light guide your path, marines," Venn said, his voice steady and imbued with an authoritative confidence. He offered a firm, encouraging nod to the

assembled troops before turning on his heel and striding purposefully towards one of the nearby command buildings.

With Venn's departure, the atmosphere among the Alpha Squads shifted to one of focused action. The marines began to mobilise, moving towards the eastern exit of the Forward Operating Base within the confines of their own squads.

Thea, along with the rest of Sovereign Alpha, quickly regrouped. They retrieved their gear from Lucas, who had been somewhat safeguarding it during the assembly and subsequent briefing, and formed up to join the rest of the squads.

As they made their way through the Azure Forest towards the eastern gate of the FOB, Thea felt a mix of excitement and apprehension. She was eager to engage in real infiltration and urban combat, experiences that were new and thrilling to her.

However, a thread of nervousness wove through her thoughts. *'I just hope I don't make any mistakes... I've had a few close calls, but I've managed to stay alive so far. Dying during the mission would not only suck in general but is basically guaranteed to also cost me valuable points in the assessment... I can't really afford that after getting that demerit for the stupid prank.'*

A tinge of regret flickered in her mind as well, lamenting the missed opportunity to showcase her full arsenal to Kar'al. *'If only Staff-Sergeant Venn had arrived a bit later... I didn't get a chance to actually show him my Icicle or Throatcutter.'* But these thoughts were quickly overtaken by the more immediate concerns of the mission.

As Thea and her squad ventured deeper into the Azure Forest, her vigilance heightened.

Despite being in UHF-controlled territory, the forest was considered a highly contested zone, still often frequented by the forces of the Stellar Republic. The possibility of encountering enemy troops was extremely low near the FOB, but once they had grouped up with the rest of the infiltration unit, they were going to move into Stellar Republic-controlled territory.

As such, Thea figured it would be prudent to get back into the habit of scanning her surroundings, as the Alpha Squads moved through the forest towards the waiting squads.

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As they traversed the two kilometres through the dense Azure Forest, the FOB gradually faded into obscurity, swallowed by the towering trunks of the massive trees. Despite the seriousness of their upcoming mission, the mood among the squads was unexpectedly light-hearted and relaxed.

The camaraderie within and between the squads lent an almost festive air to their march.

Lucas, seemingly buoyed by the upbeat atmosphere, turned to Thea with a wide, mischievous grin. "So, Thea," he began in a playful tone, "I've been hearing some pretty wild tales about you from the other squads. Care to share the story about how you single-handedly wiped out an entire artillery base?"

Thea, caught off guard by Lucas' exaggerated question, responded with a look of bewilderment. "I'm sorry, what? I didn't... Are you serious?"

Isabella, quick to join the banter, chimed in with her own embellished version of events. "Or how about the time Staff-Sergeant Venn *personally* tasked you with neutralising the enemy command as we advanced towards the wall? That was a brilliant move, Thea, clearing the way for us to approach the wall unopposed. Really appreciate you taking one for the team, there."

Now thoroughly confused, Thea glanced around at her squadmates. Desmond, Corvus, and Karania were all watching her with varying degrees of amusement, their smiles hinting at their enjoyment of the light-hearted teasing.

Karania, always quick to join in on the fun with her own twist of humour, playfully contributed to the growing list of exaggerated tales about Thea. "And we can't overlook the time you single-handedly defeated five squads of Stellar Republic soldiers during our assault on the artillery base on our first day. I can't believe you kept that story from me, Thea!" she exclaimed, her voice dripping with feigned shock and disappointment.

She continued with a playful glint in her eye, "I even had a chat with some medics earlier, and you won't believe this—they were wondering if you've been genetically modified! They seemed convinced that no ordinary person could survive the kind of feats they've heard about you accomplishing. And honestly, considering some of the shit you've *actually* ended up surviving, I can't say they're entirely off base in their thinking." Her tone was light and teasing, clearly enjoying the tall tales being spun about Thea's exploits.

Thea, feeling utterly bewildered by the whirlwind of tall tales swirling around her, raised her hands in a gesture of confusion and mild protest. "Wait, wait, wait! Hold on a second! What's all this about? What rumours? Why are they all about me? I don't even know these people! How do they know anything about me?!" she exclaimed, her voice a mix of surprise and exasperation.

Corvus stepped in, his voice a steadying presence amidst the playful chaos. "It seems to be a combination of envy and some wild exaggeration," he explained. "I've been speaking with other squad leaders, and word has it that our squad's average Point Value was somehow leaked to them prior to the assessment."

He glanced apologetically at Thea, "And it appears that your exceptional PV has caught everyone's attention. As a result, any achievement by Sovereign Alpha has been largely credited to you, inflating your legend. I'm sorry, Thea, but you've become somewhat of a celebrity here, and with that comes some rather fantastical stories."

Desmond chimed in, his tone carrying a hint of annoyance, "Yeah, it's gotten pretty wild. Jeremy from Hegemon Alpha even asked me if I was the brains behind your supposed heroic acts, thinking my drone work was feeding you all the necessary intel. He was quite taken aback when I told him those stories weren't true."

With a shrug, Desmond added, "Of course, he didn't believe me. After all, he heard these tales from more seasoned marines, and they would never spin tales to a Recruit, right?"

Thea, still grappling with the reality of her unintended fame, protested, "But I haven't actually done any of those things!" Her words were met with sympathetic smiles and gentle chuckles from her squadmates, who seemed to find the whole situation amusingly absurd. Thea's unexpected notoriety had taken on a life of its own, creating a narrative far removed from her actual experiences.

Corvus, in an effort to provide some comfort, chimed in with a soothing tone, "Well, if it makes you feel any better, you're not the only one who's the subject of outlandish stories. Almost all of the members of our squad have their own set of exaggerated tales." He then gestured towards Isabella, "For instance, Isabella here is rumoured to have single-handedly defeated over a hundred soldiers in the first ambush, using nothing but her bare hands."

Isabella simply nodded at that, as if to say, "Yeah, that's what happened."

He then turned his attention to Lucas, "And Lucas here allegedly lifted two of the fallen hover shields during the second ambush, heroically saving many lives. The rumours say he can hoist up to three tons under the right circumstances." Hearing this, Lucas, caught off guard by his own mythical feat, decided to play along. He struck a pose and flexed his muscles, eliciting a burst of laughter from the squad.

Corvus's gaze then shifted to Karania, his expression a mix of amusement and disbelief, "And then there's Karania. According to the grapevine, almost a third of all marines we've spent any appreciable amount of time with have had almost their entire blood replaced by Karania's own. Quite the feat for a single medic, really, but apparently System Abilities can do just about anything."

Karania's response was immediate and enthusiastic. "Wow! They really say that about me?! That's freaking awesome!" Her voice rang out with genuine excitement.

Thea, listening to these fantastical accounts of her squadmates' supposed heroics, couldn't help but feel a mix of amusement and incredulity. '*I... I don't think that's something to be proud of, Kara...*' she thought to herself, trying to wrap her head around the bizarre and wildly exaggerated tales that had somehow become attached to her and her squadmates.

The absurd stories Corvus recounted about the rest of the squad *did* bring a measure of comfort to Thea, though she remained uneasy about the far-fetched rumours circulating about her. While she wasn't one to shy away from showing off her achievements, she definitely did not enjoy fake ones.

A particular question also nagged at her, prompting her to seek clarification from Corvus. "I don't get it, why didn't anyone just come and ask me directly about these rumours?" she inquired, her tone reflecting both confusion and a hint of frustration. "I was literally right there. All it would've taken is for them to talk to me. I could have easily cleared everything up."

Upon hearing Thea's question, a brief silence fell over the rest of the squad, each member seemingly pondering her query.

Then, Karania spoke up, her tone a mix of empathy and humour. “Well, if you think about it, they were probably just too intimidated to approach you. Put yourself in their boots for a second. Imagine trying to ask someone who’s rumoured to be this ultra-marine superhero about the 500 incredible things they supposedly did.

“And there you are, standing alone, Gram slung over your back, your hood pulled all the way down, with only your strange, self-illuminating eyes visible between the hood and your Spectre’s full mask. That’s not just cool, it’s downright scary if you’re already half-convinced this person might be some sort of monster-in-disguise.”

She chuckled before adding, “We know you’re more like a cuddly little cub who wouldn’t hurt a fly unless there were points in it, but they don’t know that. And let’s be honest, your current get-up isn’t exactly the most approachable.”

Karania paused for a moment before continuing, “Actually, one marine *did* try to approach you. But you were so deep in your own thoughts that when he startled you, you blurted out something in... I don’t know, some kind of strange tongue?”

“It was probably just you getting tangled up in your own head, as per usual, but to him and everyone else watching, it seemed like you were speaking in some arcane language. Needless to say, that put a swift end to anyone else’s plans to come and talk to you for the rest of the assembly.”

Karania concluded her explanation with a casual shrug, “That’s my perspective on it, anyway. Anyone else think differently?” she asked, inviting the rest of the squad to share their views.

To Thea’s astonishment, her squadmates nodded in agreement with Karania’s assessment, indicating their concurrence with her take on the situation. Corvus then added his insight, reinforcing Karania’s point. “Actually, I had to convince Kar’al several times that you were genuinely interested in his customised Gram before he felt comfortable approaching you. It seems that even the squad leaders had their reservations about you, Thea.”

His words further highlighted the extent of the uncertainty surrounding Thea’s reputation among the other squads.

Thea listened intently, her feelings mixed.

While there was a part of her that felt somewhat flattered by the high regard others seemingly held for her, she was more concerned about the inaccuracy of the rumours.

None of the stories were true, and this misinformation had almost cost her a valuable conversation about Kar’al’s customised Gram. She was grateful for Corvus’s intervention, but the thought of missing out on potentially useful information or connections due to her perceived unapproachability was troubling.

Thea didn’t want to be seen as unapproachable.

She wondered about the possibilities she might miss if someone with valuable insights or resources hesitated to approach her. The idea that someone might have an Ability, tip, or

piece of equipment that could significantly benefit her, yet felt too intimidated to share it, was a risk she wasn't willing to accept.

Turning to her squad, Thea sought their advice. "How can I clear up these rumours or at least make myself seem more approachable? I don't want to miss out on important opportunities because of some ridiculous stories," she expressed her concerns earnestly.

Her squadmates responded with sympathetic smiles, understanding her predicament.

However, the only answer she received was somewhat disheartening. "It's tough to dispel widespread rumours, especially during an assessment like this," Corvus replied thoughtfully. "Real evidence, either supporting or debunking these tales, will only surface after the assessment is over. The other squads are bound to look up our performance and highlights, at which point they'll definitely see that a lot was overblown, I'd imagine. Until then, it's hard to counter what people choose to believe."

Karania, noticing Thea's disheartened mood, quickly offered a suggestion aimed at boosting her spirits. "Hey, why not try something simple to appear more approachable? Just remove your hood and mask for a bit. Let others see your face and expressions. When they observe you laughing and interacting normally with us, they might realise you're not some kind of monster."

She continued with a touch of self-reflection, "You know, I always thought I'd be the one people would find monstrous, especially with how my [Surgeon's Toolkit] Ability works. But it turns out that the [Toolkit] series of Abilities is pretty well-known among medics and their squads. So it doesn't really come off as shocking to most," she concluded, her expression a blend of slight disappointment and genuine surprise.

Watching Karania's reaction, Thea couldn't help but wonder, '*Was Kara actually hoping to be seen as monstrous?*' The thought momentarily distracted her from her own concerns, as she removed her hood and unsealed the mask from her face.

Taking Karania's advice to heart, Thea always found her input particularly useful, especially when it came to social interactions. Karania, after all, had a knack for navigating these situations far better than Thea could ever hope to.

As she removed her mask, attaching it to the side of her backpack where her Gram usually rested when not in use, Thea's attention was abruptly diverted. Her sharp eyes caught a brief, unusual flicker of movement just a few dozen metres away, near one of the dense tree trunks surrounding them.

Instinctively, she reacted.

Her eyes widened in alert, and she swiftly shouldered her Gram while crouching down into a more stable position, pointing it in the direction of the suspicious movement. Without hesitation, she called out a warning to her squad and the rest of the Alpha Squads around them, her voice sharp and clear, "Contact!"