

Arc 1 - Chapter 105 - Revival

Wrong.

It was the first feeling that came to Thea's mind as she found herself abruptly inside of a narrow tube.

Before any thoughts of her recent experiences could even manifest, the single most pressing concern was that there was something inherently wrong with this.

Her body didn't feel right, as if it belonged to somebody else.

As if her legs and arms were too long; yet too short at the same time.

As if her body didn't weigh the proper amount; yet too accurately weighed exactly the amount it should.

Nothing felt right, from the tip of her head to the bottom of her feet.

A thorough feeling of disgust and self-loathing raptured through her as she tried moving the limbs that weren't hers, to try and figure out what exactly was going on with that body that didn't feel like she should inhabit.

Her attempts at movement were interrupted by the System's voice echoing in her mind.

[System]: *Soul link with Shell initiated... Soul successfully linked.*

Abruptly, she felt like herself again.

The body she currently inhabited was *definitely* hers, with the correct length of limbs, the right weight and even the cybernetic hand she had gotten used to over the past couple of days attached exactly where it should be.

A shudder ran through her, that felt as if it was washing out the last dredges of whatever strange feeling of wrongness had momentarily overcome her.

'That was fucking weird... Is that just how it is when you respawn or did the System just have a weird error again, like that first time it tried attaching me...?' Thea couldn't help but think, as she began to move to unlatch the door of the pod she found herself in.

The pod's lid opened with a soft hiss, releasing warm, sterilised air that seemed to infuse

Thea with an unexpected vigour. Immediately, however, an odd, unsettling scent permeated the air, an aroma slightly reminiscent of newly born babies, yet strangely more mature, striking her senses sharply and making her momentarily cease her breathing in disgust.

'That's fucking rancid... It's like freshly born adult babies or something, what the fuck?'

As she stepped out of the pod, Thea found herself inside one of the respawn bays of the UHF, with dozens upon dozens of pods lining up on either side of her.

Each one was practically printing marines, as naked men and women stepped out of the pod, got their basic uniforms from the nearby wall-cabins and moved on, only for the sight to repeat around a minute later.

Thea herself was quickly grabbing the standard-issue uniform from a nearby rack and throwing it over, trying her best to ignore the fact that she was stark naked in the same room as dozens of other people.

Luckily, she had a more pressing thought that occupied her mind, keeping her anxiety at bay.

'I need to get to command as fast as possible...! The Ace is at CS1 and Arrow Squad is going to need some serious help!'

She had barely put on her pants, shirt and boots, as she started running towards the nearest exit, passing dozens of other marines on the way out. Mid-run, she continued putting on the rest of the outfit as best she could, but her report had to take priority over proper attire.

Reaching the door, she was abruptly stopped by a group of marines; these ones fully armoured up and clearly in charge of the area.

An armoured hand was barring her exit from the respawn hangar, the towering woman trying to calm Thea down, "Woho, wow. Calm down the—"

"I need to speak to command, immediately!" Thea interrupted her briskly, not wasting any time. The woman's face, front and centre as she didn't wear a helmet, looked a tad taken aback by the abrupt and rude interruption. "I have an urgent report to make about one of the enemy Aces!"

Immediately, the woman's face changed into a severely serious one, her focus locked in.

"Follow me," she briskly ordered, before turning around and storming off.

Thea did her best to follow, while still throwing over the rest of her uniform, struggling a bit with the jacket as it had become slightly jumbled up in her efforts to quickly leave the hangar.

As Thea passed the door, she found herself in a second, even larger area, filled with hundreds of marines in standard-issue uniform, who were going about their business with vastly varying degrees of urgency.

Some were running, others slowly meandering towards the different stations that Thea could spot throughout the area. There were various printing stations, equipment handouts—for those wanting the standard-issue gear and leaving immediately—, as well as lockers that Thea figured likely held the pre-printed copies of gear that you could pay for.

"Staff-Sergeant Venn 's the command officer. Takin' ya' to him. That good enough?" The tall woman asked backwards, as she mowed them a path through the throng of respawned marines that filled the second room of the hangar.

“That would be perfect, actually!” Thea replied, speaking a bit louder as her head was momentarily stuck inside the jacket, hoping the tall woman could hear her regardless; the noise level inside the resupply hangar—as Thea decided to call it—was extreme.

The two of them continued through the masses with relative ease, Thea thankful for the tall woman to have immediately taken her word as gospel, that she had an important report to make.

‘I’m actually surprised that worked so smoothly... But then, withholding crucial information could land you in serious trouble, even leading to a court-martial depending on the gravity of the situation. On the flip side, causing a false alarm would likely land me in similar hot water,’ Thea pondered, finally managing to slip into the last part of her uniform mid-walk.

Now fully equipped, she finally had a moment to look around the hangar.

To the east, a series of printing stations stood like sentinels, around a dozen in total, flanked by supply officers who oversaw the creation of specialised gear. A significant number of marines clustered here, awaiting the printers to fabricate the custom equipment vital for their upcoming missions. The air buzzed with the sound of machines and the muted conversations of those in line, a cacophony of anticipation and readiness.

Opposite, on the western flank of the hangar, was the standard-issue gear requisition area.

This section catered to marines who either lacked the Credits for specialised prints or whose roles demanded no such tailored equipment. Here, the process was brisk and efficient, with marines swiftly grabbing their gear and making way for others, a continuous flow of newly respawned marines being turned into battle-ready ones.

Heading south, Thea and her tall companion approached the supply lockers, an area frequented by only a select few.

These lockers housed the pre-printed gear, allowing a quick bypass of the bustling lines at the printing stations and requisition area. Located conveniently by the exit ensuring that those who planned ahead—and had the requisite Credits to pay for the prints—could leap back into the action without delay.

‘I have some gear in the lockers as well... But it’s not the right time to retrieve it. I can’t exactly teleport to the control station or anything, so I’m stuck here for the foreseeable future anyway. Better to save it for another time,’ Thea thought as the two of them passed the lockers and got to the southernmost exit.

There were quite a few exits located all around the resupply hangar, but this one was what could be considered the main-exit, as it featured the largest opening and, judging by the tall woman’s brisk pace at getting Thea to the command building, was also facing the main part of the FOB.

With several determined shoves and loud, echoing calls of “Passing through. Make way!” the woman forcefully cleared a path through the dense crowd of marines bottlenecking at the exit. She firmly gripped Thea’s hand, dragging her along, before a squadron of fully armoured marines, stationed to guard the exit, waved them through without hesitation.

It seemed that normally, everyone was subjected to a thorough check before being permitted to exit, but the presence of the female guard meant that Thea bypassed this procedure entirely.

“Really hate having to squeeze through ‘ere... Too crowded, ya’ feel me?” The woman grumbled to Thea, her voice a blend of annoyance and resignation, as they emerged into the open air.

Thea responded with a silent nod and a low grunt of agreement, her sentiments mirroring the woman’s. Crowds were far from her preferred environment, after all.

The forward operating base was exactly as Thea remembered it, unchanged from her last visit just a few days prior. The familiar sights and structures brought a sense of *deja vu*, with the stark difference being her solitude this time around, in contrast to her previous visit accompanied by the rest of the members of Alpha Squad.

The journey to the command building was swift, with the bustling environment of the base fading into a quiet intensity as they approached.

Upon reaching their destination, the woman stopped, a casual yet firm gesture indicating it was time for Thea to proceed alone. “Here ya’ go. Good luck!” she offered with a brisk, supportive tone.

Immediately after, she spun on her heel, her stride quick and purposeful as she retreated back towards the sprawling maze of marines inside the respawn hangars.

Thea was left standing, a bit dazed by the swift shift in company, a silent wish to have expressed her gratitude lingering in her thoughts. ‘*Damn, I didn’t even get to thank her...*’ she thought regretfully, feeling a mix of appreciation and sudden solitude.

Taking a deep breath, Thea stepped across the threshold of the command building for her inaugural visit. The last time around they had been at the FOB, Corvus had been the one to venture inside, leaving Thea without firsthand knowledge of what to expect.

This direct reporting was uncharted territory for her, adding an edge of anticipation to her current plans. As she entered, Thea’s eyes darted around, seeking an attendant or any sign that might direct her on where to go to deliver her report.

Inside, the command building of the FOB contrasted starkly with the chaotic energy outside.

Constructed from rock-crete, the structure presents a spartan interior, embodying the utilitarian essence of military efficiency. It spanned two floors, with Thea finding herself in what served as a makeshift reception room on the ground level.

The amenities were sparse, with a few metal folding chairs as the sole seating opportunities leaned against a nearby wall, underscoring the building’s transient purpose.

Despite its purpose, the building was not teeming with personnel.

The marines present, however, exuded a constant air of urgency.

They navigated the corridors with purposeful strides, datapads clutched in their hands, likely engrossed in the task of delivering reports or relaying critical updates to higher-ups.

The atmosphere was one of focused busyness, with each individual deeply entrenched in their respective duties.

As Thea's gaze swept over her surroundings, trying to piece together her next move, a young man seated behind a desk caught her attention. He appeared somewhat less harried than his counterparts, leisurely tapping on a datapad with one hand.

Noticing Thea's uncertain stance, he gestures for her to approach.

With a calm demeanour, he inquired, "What brings you to the command building? Can I help you?"

His voice, steady and inviting, offered a momentary respite from the building's otherwise frantic and all-business ambiance, signalling a surprising openness to guide Thea through her unfamiliar errand.

"I'm looking for Staff-Sergeant Venn. I have an urgent report to make," Thea stated, closing the distance to the desk with a few quick strides to ensure her voice carried clearly without needing to raise it across the room.

The man behind the desk gave her a brief, evaluative look, his eyes scanning her for a moment as if weighing her sincerity and the urgency of her message. Seemingly satisfied that she posed no risk and deemed her request legitimate, he gestured nonchalantly toward the staircase with a flick of his hand. "Second floor, third door on the right."

"Thank you," she responded with a nod, her gratitude brief as she turned to ascend the stairs, her steps quick and determined, eager to finish her report.

Upon reaching the designated office, Thea paused only briefly to knock before hearing a voice from inside granting her permission to enter.

The room revealed Staff-Sergeant Venn, who was intensely focused on a large, pentagon-shaped holographic table at the centre of the office. The table cast a soft glow across the room, illuminating various strategic points and movements on a section of the battlefield that was foreign to Thea's eyes from her vantage point.

As Venn lifted his head to meet her arrival, a subtle grin edged at the corners of his mouth, an expression that mingled recognition with a hint of curiosity. Interpreting his look as an encouragement to proceed, Thea took it as her cue to begin her report, stepping forward to convey her urgent message.

"Staff-Sergeant Venn, I need to report urgently: The last of the enemy Aces has been spotted at control station 1, within Nova Tertius. I can verify their presence, along with Arrow Squad, who are currently engaged in combat with them. I'm requesting immediate backup for Arrow Squad, and if possible, for all units stationed at CS1. The enemy Ace has taken them by surprise, and they could use the support," Thea explained, her voice steady but tinged with the undercurrent of urgency she felt.

She aimed for brevity in her report, attempting to communicate the critical situation without unnecessary details, yet emphasising the immediacy of the need for reinforcement.

As Thea concluded her report, a wave of nervousness washed over her, more intense than she had anticipated. With the immediate need of delivering her message concluded, thoughts of Arrow Squad's current struggle surged to the forefront of her mind, no longer contained to the background.

Concern for Moira and Viladia consumed her thoughts, alongside the overarching worry for the mission's success and the strategic importance of securing control station 1. The weight of these thoughts pressed heavily on her, as she waited for the Staff-Sergeant's reply.

"Thank you for the report, Private," Venn replied, maintaining a composed demeanour despite the urgency of the situation. "Unfortunately, we're stretched thin at the moment. All other infiltration squads are engaged in operations at the remaining control stations. With CS2 and CS4 already neutralised, our forces are making significant headway across the board. So, there's no spare support to dispatch to Arrow Squad or any team at CS1 for now."

He allowed himself a slight smirk, a contrast to the gravity of their discussion that didn't sit well with Thea. "Also, I wouldn't worry too much about Arrow Squad needing additional help..."

Thea, caught off guard by his confidence, felt a surge of protest bubble up inside her. She was on the verge of voicing a sharp "Why?" but managed to hold back just in time.

A flurry of thoughts raced through her mind as she processed his response. '*Staff-Sergeant Venn might have faith in Arrow Squad's capabilities, but he doesn't have firsthand knowledge of the enemy Ace like I do,*' she thought, the memory of the Ace's formidable aura sending a shiver down her spine.

The gap in understanding the true nature of the threat they faced made her uneasy, questioning the readiness of their forces against such a potent adversary.

"With all due respect, Staff-Sergeant... I just don't see how Arrow Squad can manage this on their own. This Ace, they're a Psyker—and not just any Psyker, but one of seemingly quite exceptional strength. Given that Arrow Squad doesn't have a Psyker among them, I'm struggling to see how—"

Thea's earnest appeal was abruptly cut short by a loud, deliberate throat clearing from her right. The unexpected interruption jolted her, prompting an immediate, sharp turn in the direction of the sound, her annoyance flashing momentarily before she registered the source of the disruption.

Her eyes widened in disbelief as they landed on the figure who, until that moment, had been quietly seated near the door, having blended into the surroundings. Her breath hitched, words failing her as she stared at Morin, who looked back at her with an expression of mild amusement and surprise at her astonishment.

"Wha... You?! When...? How?!" she stammered, her finger pointing at Morin as if to solidify the reality of his presence.

A light chuckle broke through the tension as the leader of Arrow Squad, Morin, offered an apologetic grin. "Sorry, Thea. Turns out Elite Squads get bumped up in the respawn queue. I've been back for a bit, about twenty minutes now. Things have, well, turned a bit chaotic since our last chat, barely twenty-five minutes ago."

His tone shifted from casual to grave, a subtle change as his eyes briefly connected with Venn's. Venn responded with a nonchalant shrug, as if all decisions rested in Morin's hands.

"Arrow Squad's been completely wiped out, shortly after the Ace got you. We were completely outmatched," Morin confessed, his demeanour surprisingly devoid of regret. "Facing an Ace, especially a Psyker like him, was the worst-case scenario for us. Your warning gave us a sliver of hope, at least allowed us to face him with some semblance of readiness."

He lowered his voice, prompting Thea to lean in, the air between them thick with the gravity of his words. "Last update I got, Vi was very close to him... But she hasn't returned. No assist points for the Ace's takedown means..." His voice faded, leaving the harsh reality unspoken.

Thea's eyes grew wide, a mix of realisation and dread dawning on her. "She's still out there!"

"Exactly," Morin confirmed, exhaling a weary sigh. "Vi's likely been captured, maybe worse. She wouldn't have had a chance to evade him, not at the proximity we engaged. I've been discussing with Venn here about possible actions, but our options are severely limited."

Seizing the moment, Staff-Sergeant Venn motioned to one of the aides nearby. "Get a trauma team on standby for when Private Sortal returns. Redirect her Shell to pod 43 in the second building; it's spacious enough for the medical team to work efficiently once she's back," he instructed with a tone of authority, ensuring that preparations were set for Viladia's recovery.

He then turned his attention back to Morin and Thea, his expression solemn. "I wish there was more I could do. However, Vi's resilience is not to be underestimated. She's undergone rigorous anti-torture training, a requirement given her specialized role, and I believe, was a pre-requisite for her Class. Honestly, if this had to happen to any of you, Vi's by far the most equipped to handle it," he explained, trying to offer a sliver of reassurance amidst the grim situation.

Thea bit back her initial reaction, understanding the truth in Venn's words.

Having endured her own share of trials and tribulations throughout this rigorous assessment, she was intimately familiar with the limits of pain endurance. She reluctantly acknowledged that Viladia, with her advanced training to withstand torture, was indeed the most suitable member to face such a harrowing ordeal, as much as the thought pained her.

Determined for more information, Thea focused on Morin again. "You mentioned 'he' earlier—so the Ace is male? What else do we know about him?" she asked, urgency lacing her voice. The idea of someone tormenting her friend fueled a fierce need for knowledge.

Understanding the enemy was crucial; not just for immediate action, but to ensure she could exact a precise and fitting retribution in the future.

A brief pause shadowed Morin's expression, a hint of reluctance before he spoke. "I understand where you're coming from, Thea. Believe me, I do. The urge to go out there and eliminate that monster is overwhelming. But recklessly acting on vengeance won't help me, you, or Vi. Against an ordinary opponent, maybe. But this is an enemy Ace we're talking about..."

His voice faded, leaving the gravity of his statement to linger in the air between them.

Morin seemed to gather his thoughts before continuing, acknowledging Thea's desperate need for information. "What I can share, I will," he conceded. His demeanour softened, indicating his understanding of Thea's deep-seated need for action. "He's a Tier 3 Prime Ace, just as we suspected. Most likely holds a Theta or Zeta rank as a Psyker, which aligns with Vi's assessment and, interestingly, was corroborated by your warning. Your insights might have saved us from underestimating him further. So, thank you for that alert. It truly made a difference; even if we didn't win in the end."

As he spoke, Morin's tone shifted, adopting a warmth and sincerity Thea hadn't previously known him for. It was as though the gravity of the situation brought forth a level of candidness rarely seen in him.

"That's pretty much everything we've managed to gather on him. Venn's got a team combing through our archives for any mention of this Ace. Given that Battlefield Aces seldom fall in combat, there's a chance the UHF has encountered him on a different front. If we're lucky, we'll dig up some actionable intel before we run into him again. In the meantime, we've got no choice but to carry on with our assignments. On that note, your team, except for Corvus, is also here. I'm pretty sure they're in Barracks... 7 I think?"

He glanced at Venn for confirmation, who, with surprising agility, verified the location on his datapad. Thea couldn't help but note Venn's proficiency with the device.

With an affirmative nod, Venn confirmed, "That's correct, Barracks 7. You're free to go, Private. You've done excellent work out there. Continue on this path, and the UHF will undoubtedly value your and your squad's contributions in the days ahead. You've all made quite the impression so far already."

After exchanging a brisk goodbye with Morin and Venn, Thea turned and made her way out of the cluttered office, her steps quick as she exited the command building.

The air outside felt different, charged with the energy of the FOB as she navigated through the bustling activity. Her destination was the barracks section, a maze of temporary structures that housed the recovering fighters of this long and ongoing conflict.

Thea moved with purpose, yet her mind was a whirlwind of confusion and frustration.

As she walked, Thea mulled over Morin's words, phrases like "Immaterial Gravity" and "Projection" echoing in her thoughts.

These terms, laden with significance and mystery, were clearly meant to convey crucial information. Yet, they felt like pieces of a puzzle she was ill-equipped to solve.

Her lack of familiarity with Psyker-related concepts left her feeling disconnected from the vital intelligence she had just received. It was just another reminder of her—and by extension, her squad's—odd position in this assessment, thrust into this world of incredible complexity without adequate preparation whatsoever.

This ongoing sense of being unprepared gnawed at her as she made her way toward Barracks 7.

The UHF's oversight in this regard was not just a minor inconvenience; it was a gaping flaw in their preparation for an operation of this magnitude—for an assessment *this* important.

Thea couldn't help but feel annoyed at the persistent confusion that had shadowed her and her squad since their arrival.

Every step they took had seemed hampered by this fundamental lack of understanding from the very start.

From the very first day's near-fatal overdrawn incident, to the more recent encounters with Psykers to the murky details surrounding the Ace, the feeling of being left in the dark was not just infuriating—it was frankly demoralising.

The path to the barracks was a physical journey, but for Thea, it was also a trek through her own swirling thoughts and uncertainties.

'I'm kind of glad that Corvus isn't here... Facing him after not living up to the promise would be too much,' Thea mused with a tinge of sadness, the weight of their failed first mission pressing down on her. *'He entrusted everything to me, and I just... messed it all up.'*

As she approached Barracks 7 quicker than she had expected, a moment of hesitation froze her steps at the entrance.

The same kind of apprehensions she harboured about facing Corvus extended to the rest of her squad as well. They had placed their unwavering trust in her, executing her orders without question, only to witness their collective efforts dissolve into failure on their very first mission.

Despite Staff-Sergeant Venn's attempts to reassure her of the squad's commendable performance, the truth was stark and undeniable: The mission had been an unmitigated disaster from the very moment she had taken over for Corvus.

'Even without the Ace's interference, we were doomed... I was at my limit when Arrow Squad arrived. Taking down the entire station alone was a fantasy, not just unlucky circumstances.'

Gazing up at the towering, layered structure of the barracks, Thea envisioned the myriad ways her squad might receive her return—none of which offered any solace.

The thought of confronting Lucas and Karania, especially after their disagreement over the handling of civilian casualties, added another layer of dread. Their disappointment and hurt were burdens she would have to bear, alongside the guilt of mission failure.

In the heat of the moment, it had seemed like the most logical order to give, but it was clear that neither Lucas nor Karania had particularly agreed with it.

Yet they had done their duty and followed her words to the letter, only for her to fail them all.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, Thea momentarily tapped into her [Meditation Focus], a technique she hadn't relied on so intensively since the gruelling Cube Trial. This moment of introspection allowed her to quell the rising tide of panic and self-doubt, clearing her mind of any distracting thoughts.

'Remember: The best way to learn is to get beat up, over and over. It's true in Ashes of Creations. It's true in Farside Guns. And it most definitely is true in real life as well; especially for UHF Marines. That's the entire point of our Faction Trait. Keep it together.'

Unaware of how much time had passed as she stood there, enveloped in her meditation and repeating her mantra, Thea eventually broke free from her reverie, a newfound determination etched across her features.

'Let's go,' she silently urged herself, ascending the three steps to the main entrance of Barracks 7 with a resolve hardened in the fires of self-reflection, bracing herself to confront whatever judgement lay ahead with her squad...