

Arc 1 - Chapter 102 - Losses

The chaos of the moment around Thea transformed into a vivid tableau, each detail magnified and each sound a distinct thread in the fabric of her heightened awareness.

Desmond's wounds, pulsing grotesquely slow; Karania's whispers, a focused stream of medical jargon as her hands fluttered over Desmond in a frantic bid to save him; Lucas's heavy, measured movements as he repositioned his battered shield.

This deluge of information was initially overwhelming, but Thea quickly corralled her focus, honing in on the crisis unfurling around them.

Yet, in this hyper-aware state, she stumbled upon two startling insights that threw her into a deeper realisation of their peril, her eyes widening as the gravity of their situation became chillingly clear.

The first emerged from deep within herself.

'It must have opened at some point,' she concluded, her thoughts racing at an unfathomable speed. Directing her heightened awareness inward, she observed her Psychic Gate with unprecedented clarity. There, a minuscule opening, no larger than a pinhole, the iris-like Gate's thirteen blades showing a clear hint of violet in the centre, facilitating a direct pathway to the void.

'This explains their ability to track me... to track us,' she surmised with a hint of self-reproach. *'I definitely overlooked this when I first sensed their presence. If our Gates are somehow linked, that connection would have made us directly detectable to them.'*

This insight highlighted a critical oversight on her part, her heart feeling heavy at the realisation. *'I should have been more cautious. If I can detect them, it's only natural that they can detect me too; likely even better than I can. I should have realised that there had to be a reason for this connection... Otherwise, Psykers would simply be unable to infiltrate or be stealthy, pretty much ever, if Gates simply connected to other Gates that were around.'*

Before she could really worry about that issue any further though, she had to address the second realisation.

The oppressive atmosphere around her was intensifying, a clear sign that the enemy Psyker's assault was not only continuing but escalating.

The attack's scope had broadened alarmingly, enveloping her within a zone of danger so vast that escape seemed impossible. Her heightened Perception alerted her to imminent peril from all sides, leaving no path unthreatened.

Her Psychic Senses were screaming of imminent danger, regardless of which avenue of escape she tried.

The message was clear: Regardless of her next move, this attack was too extensive to avoid for her completely...

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PoV: Myka Kendal

Bent intently over the shimmering 3D hologram that meticulously mapped out their building, Myka honed in on the distinct psychic signature radiating from their prey.

Beside her, Feldis, ever the stoic, was meticulously preparing what he affectionately termed his "pressure bomb," ready to unleash it on the precise location Myka had pinpointed.

Their dynamic, albeit occasionally contentious due to Feldis's overly stoic demeanour clashing with Myka's more spirited approach to combat, had nonetheless cemented them as an unparalleled force on the field. Despite the occasional bickering, stemming mainly from their differing attitudes—Feldis's gravitas against Myka's penchant for revelry—their synergy in harnessing Psychic Powers had time and again proven to be nothing short of formidable.

Myka's attention was razor-sharp, attuned to the faintest rustlings from the undead positioned above them, ensuring that not a single sound went unnoticed.

In that moment of heightened vigilance, Feldis unleashed his pressure bomb. The distinctive sound of its activation, a soft yet unmistakable "pop," resonated within her, signalling its execution.

They exchanged a quick, knowing glance, their expressions reflecting a shared realisation.

"I felt it too," Myka voiced out without hesitation, addressing the silent question in Feldis's gaze. "Let me double-check," she added, intent on confirming their suspicion.

The psychic signature of their quarry, which had been a constant presence up until then, vanished the instant Feldis's pressure bomb was detonated.

This sudden absence left them with a few speculative scenarios to consider.

It could mean the enemy Psyker possessed an Obscuritas Inheritance, previously unused against them, had entirely sealed their Psychic Gate, or—and Myka found herself quietly hoping for this outcome—their foe had been killed by Feldis's attack.

Myka's anticipation for a confrontation with the UHF Psyker had been high, hoping for a worthy adversary to test her skills against.

Initially, she sensed a weak link between their Psychic Gates, leading her to believe she was facing a master of concealment. However, it quickly became apparent that wasn't the case.

The UHF Psyker seemed to hardly engage their Psychic Gate at all, hinting they might be specialised in a support role, poorly suited for direct confrontation, especially trapped two floors above with no escape.

This realisation had dulled the excitement for Myka excessively.

The encounter had devolved into a simple exercise of pinning down their prey, with Myka using her abilities to mimic voices and draw out their foes, while Feldis deployed his pressure bombs based on her cues.

Their strategy had been effective yet unchallenging, leading to the incapacitation of at least one enemy combatant, with the UHF Psyker potentially being the second.

To Myka, the operation had unfolded with less excitement than she had hoped for, bordering on monotony given the straightforwardness of their approach.

She concentrated on the sounds echoing from above, attempting to match each set of footsteps and noises with members of the UHF squad.

'The heavy thuds must belong to their defensive heavy. The other heavy seems poised to follow my direction any second now, making her our next, easy target... The medic's position is by the injured, indicating she won't be moving far, so we can get her last,' she deduced, her ears tuned to the cacophony of battle.

Although her auditory surveillance was sharp, it lacked the precision to identify individuals based solely on the sound of their movements, especially without significant noise to guide her.

Myka recognized her limitations; pushing her abilities too far would deplete her Psyfocus too quickly, a risk she couldn't afford amidst a battlefield like this, where the end of combat was hard to foresee.

Her surveillance skills, while potent, were still developing, and the high demand of Psyfocus for increased resolution was a constraint she had to navigate carefully.

Determining the fate of the enemy Psyker proved trickier than Myka had anticipated. "It's like they've vanished into thin air. You might've flattened them completely," she remarked, a playful smirk directed at Feldis, who only offered a casual shrug in return.

"You could stand to show a little enthusiasm when you rack up kills, especially with Psykers. They're a big deal," Myka half-jokingly scolded, her face morphing into a playful pout.

Feldis had always maintained this demeanour; stoic and pragmatic, ever since Myka first met him.

His grounded seriousness was precisely why they had been paired up by their superiors.

His steady presence acted as a counterbalance to Myka's more impulsive tendencies, and conversely, her energetic approach encouraged him to take more initiative in combat scenarios. This dynamic had shaped them into an exceptionally efficient team, leveraging their contrasting styles and Psychic Abilities for strategic advantages.

As Myka honed back in on the auditory surveillance from two floors above, her anticipation heightened for the heavy's response to her deceptive command. Her fingers poised over the hologram, she was ready to signal Feldis the moment any sound betrayed the heavy's position.

But the silence that followed was unnerving.

"Why the delay...?" she whispered to herself, a knot of worry tightening in her chest. The enthusiastic agreement from the undead Heavy to her previous command hadn't suggested any suspicion, yet the expected noise hadn't materialised.

Instead, she heard strange shuffling and movement that she couldn't quite visualise. When she heard a short metallic shrieking at the top of the stairs, she was certain.

Something was amiss.

"Something isn't right," she concluded, locking eyes with Feldis, who shared her concern. He faced the nearby squads, his decision clear.

The time for games was over.

"Flush them out," Feldis commanded, his voice firm. The navy squad leaders immediately disseminated the orders, and the Soldiers sprang into action with renewed vigour. "Kill them all, if possible."

As the ten Stellar Republic Soldiers prepared for their advance; twenty additional soldiers materialised, each Original doubling their numbers before ascending the stairwell with precision, their movements almost perfectly synchronised and deliberate.

The vanguard was composed of four heavies, each equipped with robust, solid-cover shields, pointed in the front, upwards and to the sides, creating an effectively impenetrable barrier to prevent any attacks from coming through; even the pesky grenades that they had bounced off of the walls, they had plans for, Myka knew.

The initial few attempts at attacking the Marines on the higher floors had been nothing but cursory intelligence gathering operations, which had given them quite a lot of intel already, all for the price of just two groups of duplicates.

This was the true strength of their Faction Trait: The ability to gather intelligence without putting themselves into harm's way, that made the Stellar Republic Soldiers the greatest in the galaxy.

Both in terms of raw fighting power and cunning, they were worlds above any of the other Factions. Their main downside was their lacking technology, but recent trade deals and innovations had begun to close the gap quite drastically, at least in comparison to the UHF and the Unified Syndicate.

Despite their growing capabilities, no self-respecting Soldier was under no illusion about their standing against The Assembly, whose technological advancements dwarfed not just their own, but practically any other Faction's barring Terra itself. If they went up against that Faction in a head-to-head, even the Stellar Republic's formidable forces would likely struggle.

But luckily, those were on the other side of Terra, far, far away from the SR's sphere of influence and battlefields, and as such, not something Myka needed to concern herself with for a long time to come.

As Myka tuned into the advancing steps of her fellow soldiers, the precision and coordination in their approach were evident.

Unlike the somewhat disjointed manoeuvres of the UHF Marines, Stellar Republic's Soldiers exhibited unparalleled discipline, moving in tight, effective formations that showcased their rigorous training and strategic mindset.

Reflecting on her mentor's teachings, Myka couldn't help but appreciate the wisdom behind the phrase, "Individualism has no place among the rank and file."

This fundamental difference in strategy was what Myka believed allowed them to exploit the enemy's weaknesses so effectively. The UHF Marines' insistence on personal distinction often led to their downfall, as it opened up opportunities for Myka and Feldis to employ their combined powers with relative ease.

The moment the duplicates ascended the stairwell towards the floor harbouring the UHF Marines, however, Myka sensed something had drastically changed.

Previously, the heavy thuds of the Marines' movements had echoed sharply, halted by the robust defensive shield at the stairwell's entrance. Now, those sounds seamlessly flowed into the room above, signalling the absence of the previously stationed barrier.

"They're gone!" Myka quickly alerted her nearby comrades, her tone betraying her worry, as she channelled additional Psyfocus into her powers to sharpen her auditory surveillance further.

At the same time, the duplicates pressed forward, undeterred. If they could simply get on the same floor, they would immediately know what the undead were up to now...!

Myka caught the faint yet unmistakable sounds of movement and the clinking of armour from within the devastated apartment space, two levels up. The alterations in the acoustic environment indicated a significant change in the Marines' defensive setup.

"They've moved back further into the floor! They're at the apartment—" As Myka attempted to warn her team, the building suddenly shook with a violent explosion, knocking her to the ground. The pain that erupted in her head was excruciating, the sound of the explosion amplified exponentially by her enhanced auditory capabilities, turning the it's aftermath into a relentless assault on her psyche.

Feldis' quick reflexes saved her from a harsh impact, his hands steadying her descent. She was silently grateful for his intervention, even as words failed her, her focus entirely consumed by the effort to claw her way back from the edge of overwhelming pain.

In a reflexive move to shield her mind, Myka had instinctively severed her Psychic connection, cutting off the source of her torment but also blinding her to their surroundings.

Aware of the critical need for her abilities in navigating the sudden danger they faced, she cautiously reopened her Psychic Gate. Bracing herself, she tentatively resumed her auditory surveillance, only to be met with the shock of another explosion, closer this time, emanating from a floor above within the residential sector.

A scream tore from her lips as the pain lashed out anew, her mind still raw and vulnerable.

Despite the agony, Myka clenched her teeth and powered through, understanding the urgent need to withstand the onslaught and keep the rest of the Soldiers informed of what was happening on the battlefield.

The UHF forces had somehow managed to turn the tables on them, altering the dynamics of the confrontation with a bold, unexpected move.

“They’re in the apartments!” Myka strained to articulate, her voice heavy with the toll of her Psychic exertions, as she motioned urgently toward the residential section adjacent to their position.

The subtle, yet discernible, sounds of combat readiness echoed from behind the apartment doors—muffled thuds of boots, the metallic clink of armour, and the quiet shuffling of weapons—all ominously converging towards doors leading to the stairwell, now dangerously close to where Myka, Feldis, and the assembled squads of Soldiers had gathered.

In a meticulously timed assault, seemingly awaiting Myka's detection, a series of explosions—less grandiose in scale but meticulously targeted—ruptured the tranquillity, forcefully blowing both the northern and southern door open.

The breaching charges were immediately followed by the disorienting brilliance of flashbangs. Though their helmets and visors scrambled to dampen the blinding light, the milliseconds of disarray provided a crucial opening.

Through the ringing in her ears Myka discerned the ominous thumping sound of two grenades being launched from a grenade launcher. The looming silhouette of a massive heavy framed the shattered northern doorway, his launcher ominously pointed in their direction. As the impending threat materialised, she sensed Feldis' Psyfocus surge—a rapid accumulation of power ready to counter the imminent danger posed by the UHF's surprising offensive.

Blinking through the sting of the flashbang and the sharp ache in her skull, Myka witnessed the havoc wrought by Feldis' precisely timed counterattack.

The pressure bomb detonated with lethal efficiency at the threshold, severing the left arm of the advancing heavy and catapulting him against the wall. His own grenades, slightly thrown off course, detonated on impact, unleashing chaos among the Stellar Republic Soldiers.

Their tightly arranged formation, an asset in most engagements, turned into a fatal flaw as the confined space amplified the explosive force.

The resultant carnage decimated the front line of lightly armoured Soldiers and threw their medium-armoured comrades into disarray, scattering them against the opposite wall. While

these survivors struggled to regroup, a series of deliberate, high-calibre shots pierced the air, courtesy of the UHF's Medic who had taken up position at the northern doorway the instant the heavy had been thrown aside.

Each bullet found its mark, systematically eliminating the disoriented Soldiers who presented themselves as unguarded targets.

To Myka's growing dismay, a new threat burst forth from the southern doorway, a heavy wielding a two-handed chainsword that hummed menacingly with readiness. The aggressive charge aimed to capitalise on the Soldiers' momentary vulnerability.

Myka prepared to unleash her psychic might against this onslaught when she noticed the grenade launcher-wielding heavy, despite his grievous injury, aiming to discharge another round of explosives toward their position.

Recognizing the immediate threat the launcher posed over the melee attacker, Myka redirected her focus back to the northern entrance. Summoning a significant reserve of her Psyfocus, she prepared to launch a devastating psychic assault, determined to prevent any further grenade attacks that could spell disaster for them all.

As the grenade launcher's trigger gave way under the heavy's grip, Myka unleashed her power.

'Sonic Scream.'

The air warped visibly, a tangible distortion radiating outwards as her psychic shriek tore through the confined space.

Two medium-armoured Soldiers, already staggered by the initial explosions and out of their defensive alignment, were caught in the path of this ferocious auditory wave. The intense pressure and bone-jarring vibrations of Myka's attack sent them hurtling across the room like ragdolls, their armours providing no protection against the internal damage wrought by the sonic force. Their bodies crumpled upon impact with the far wall, lifeless, as the close-range vibrations and sonic energy pulverised their internal structures beyond recovery.

The heavy and the medic, the main targets of her attack, were blown back with such violence that they were rendered instantly unconscious, their forms sprawling on the debris-littered floor.

The doorframe and the surrounding wall they had taken cover behind, unable to withstand the concentrated blast of psychic energy, disintegrated into rubble, the materials themselves vibrating apart under the onslaught.

The backlash of her own power struck Myka, staggering her and making her stumble backwards.

She struggled to maintain her balance as the psychic echo reverberated within her own mind, a painful reminder of the sheer force she had just unleashed.

In the chaos, the melee heavy, unchecked by Myka's diversion, crashed into the Stellar Republic Soldiers with the fury of a storm.

Her chainsword, a blur of deadly motion, carved through the air and armour alike, its serrated, rapidly moving edge rending metal and flesh with equal ease.

The soldiers, caught off-guard by this new, relentless assault, scrambled to defend against the whirlwind of destruction that had abruptly appeared in their midst.

Myka, dazed yet acutely aware of the unfolding catastrophe, could only watch as the melee heavy's onslaught tore through the ranks, her chainsword singing a grim chorus of devastation.

She saw the heavy's last grenade land next to the furious melee, exploding an instant later.

Initially, relief washed over her, thinking the premature detonation caused by the enemy's own ordinance would bring a swift conclusion to the skirmish.

However, that relief was short-lived.

The sigh of relief got stuck in her throat as the resultant shockwave and explosive force inexplicably halted, hovering ominously close but not touching the UHF heavy, as though a transparent barrier had materialised around them out of thin air.

At that moment, confusion turned to dread.

The scene unfolding before her eyes was beyond comprehension. The heavy, standing at the epicentre of what should have been a devastating explosion, remained unaffected.

Not only did the explosive force not harm her, but it appeared to invigorate her, as if she harnessed the energy from the blast. She then executed a manoeuvre that seemed to defy physics, channelling what appeared to be newfound power into a single, ferociously powerful swing.

With a sudden burst of unholy speed, she advanced, her chainsword humming violently as it cleaved through the air. The blade, moving with lethal precision, was a blur, aiming for the remaining Soldiers with an intent that was chillingly clear.

This act of aggression was unlike anything Myka had witnessed before, showcasing a level of combat prowess and capability that was both awe-inspiring and downright terrifying.

This singular moment, where the ordinary laws of physics seemed utterly superfluous and the heavy thrived in the midst of an explosion one of her own comrades had orchestrated, would be etched in Myka's memory for the rest of her life.

A jolt of adrenaline like none other before it hit Myka like a thunderbolt, sending her senses into overdrive. Time seemed to slow to a crawl as she watched, horror-stricken, the gruesome scene unfolding before her.

The enemy heavy unleashed a devastating blow powered by the redirected energy of the grenade's explosion. With truly unnatural force and speed, it tore through the Stellar Republic Soldiers with terrifying ease, cutting through armour and flesh alike as if they were nothing but air, simply continuing onwards to the next target to do it again and again.

The catastrophic swing left anyone hit lifeless, their bodies brutally bisected before they even had a chance to comprehend their fate.

At the same moment the adrenaline hit her, Myka's heightened senses detected another, new and even more imminent threat.

Myka turned in abject terror, only seeing the six Soldiers fall to the swing from the corner of her eyes, to face the more pressing danger, as the Psychic Gate of the UHF's Psyker was fast approaching from behind her—outside the window.

She opened her mouth to warn Feldis, who was still recovering from being close to her Sonic Scream and his own Psychic Power usage, but the instant she did, she knew it was too late.

The window located behind them, at the top of the stairs leading downwards, shattered just before a single, crystal-like projectile pierced Feldis' temple, his body going limp and crumpling to the floor like a puppet with its strings cut.

Her attention snapped back to the window just in time to see the enemy Psyker make their entrance. With a flourish of agility, they landed gracefully on the floor, the grappling hook's ropes retracting back into their armour.

The grim realisation of her impending doom settled in as she observed the peculiar pistol in the hands of the heavily injured, one-armed Marine, now aiming with deadly precision at her.

Myka's eyes met the Marine's, noting the unnatural cyan glow emanating from within them.

A resigned whisper, "Well played..." escaped her lips, acknowledging the checkmate before her.

In the next heartbeat, the cold, crystal-like projectile found its target between her eyes. The world around Myka blurred into darkness, her last conscious thought acknowledging the end...