

Arc 1 - Chapter 108 - Grahkies

Thea felt a surge of excitement as she prepared to finally get some answers to the questions that had been plaguing her over the past week.

Without hesitation, she launched into her most urgent inquiry.

"This Gate thing, how dangerous is it really, and how can I prevent it from straight up killing me or driving me insane? Specifically, I need to know if I can safely upgrade my Resolve and Perception with the Attribute Points I've saved up, without causing the Gate to open again and thrusting me back into that nightmare-zone thing."

Zach's expression shifted rapidly as he processed her question, his face displaying a quick succession of emotions—understanding, surprise, then confusion—before he posed a question of his own with a hesitant tone. "You... You have Attribute Points saved up...? How have you managed to unlock your Gate before reaching Tier 1, while still holding onto some of your points...?"

A brief, awkward silence filled the space between them. Thea felt a bit at a loss, unable to provide a clear explanation, while Zach looked at her as if trying to decipher a puzzle.

"Ehh... It just kind of happened...?" Thea began uncertainly, trying to recount the sequence of events as best she could. "I allocated some points into Resolve and Perception, and then, all of a sudden, this whole... nightmare-zone event unfolded. I nearly lost my mind, but it all turned out to be some bizarre dream-like experience, I guess?"

Thea's earnest attempt to share her severely strange experience was aimed at maintaining Zach's goodwill and ensuring that their conversation would continue to yield the crucial guidance she needed to safely manage her psychic capabilities.

Her somewhat disjointed explanation seemed to snap Zach back to the present, as he briefly shook his head—almost as if shaking off a physical constraint—before bowing slightly in a gesture of apology. "My apologies. I didn't mean to come off so direct with that. It's just really surprising to hear that you've unlocked your Gate without using up all your Attribute Points; you must be in a thoroughly unique situation. No need to go into details."

With a more relaxed and friendly smile returning to his face, he redirected the conversation back to Thea's pressing concerns. "Now, about your question: The Gate can be both extremely docile and non-threatening, and at the same time, it can be the most dangerous thing in existence."

He paused to let the gravity of his statement sink in, taking a deliberate sip from his tea.

Thea, almost reflexively, mirrored his action, her mind racing with the implications of his words.

“When handled properly, the Gate poses no danger; however, if mismanaged, it can be lethal. It could not only end your life but also shred your Soul, and potentially cause devastation to those around you—up to and including the destruction of entire planets or solar systems, depending on the severity of the mistake.”

Thea’s eyes widened dramatically at the stark contrast in outcomes Zach described.

She opened her mouth to bombard him with more questions, eager to understand how to avoid such catastrophic scenarios, but Zach raised a hand to pause her inquiry. He seemed to sense the urgency and fear behind her brewing questions and gestured for a moment of patience, indicating that he would address her concerns comprehensively.

“Let me elaborate further: The Gate is your direct connection to the Void. It exists within *everyone*; whether they are full-on Battlefield Psykers, merely Psy-Sensitive, or even Nulls. Everyone has a Gate; although those of Nulls function quite differently from ours. Instead of channelling energy *from* the Void, they absorb energy *into* the Void—which makes them incredibly dangerous to us as Psykers.

“If we get too close, our Gates will link, creating a forceful pull of energy from the Void through our Gate and into the Gate of the Null. This interaction sets off an infinite feedback loop that forces our Gates wider open, as they try to satisfy the insatiable hunger of the Null’s negative Gate. Eventually, our Gate reaches its limit, and well, we pop.”

To illustrate his point, Zach made an exploding gesture with his hands, which, despite its simplicity, effectively conveyed the catastrophic end he described.

Thea nodded, understanding the gravity of his explanation and the inherent danger posed by such interactions.

Internally, Thea reiterated the key point for clarity and caution: *‘Nulls are dangerous. Stay far away from them ‘cause otherwise, I die—hard. Got it.’* She committed this crucial piece of information to memory, recognizing its importance for her future safety and effectiveness as a Psyker.

Zach leaned forward intently, locking eyes with Thea as if to ensure her full attention. “This is something you’ll learn in Psychic 101 too, but let me be the first to tell you: If you ever find yourself close to a Null and you can’t neutralise them quickly, *kill yourself*. This isn’t a joke or cruel advice. It’s a harsh reality—death is far more preferable to the alternative. Trust me on that. If you can’t kill the Null quickly, you should kill yourself. It’s for your safety and the safety of everyone around you.”

Thea absorbed this grim directive with a serious nod, recognizing the gravity of Zach's words and the stark necessity behind them. She internally processed his advice, *'He didn't even mention respawning at all... He's probably implying that even true death might be preferable to avoid worse fates, preserving my Soul, even if it results in being Zero'ed...'*

After seeing the weight of his words reflected in Thea's sombre expression, Zach leaned back, seemingly reassured that his message had been conveyed effectively.

Yet, his next comment unexpectedly shifted the tone. "Your eyes are quite striking. You're a Cyan, huh? Can't say I've had the pleasure before. It's strange... Your eyes give me a similar feeling to being tangentially close to a Null. It's like there's something in them trying to grasp at my Soul..."

Thea recoiled, startled and confused by his startling comparison. "Wha... What?!"

Zach quickly realised his blunder and bowed slightly, apologising. "Ahh...? Sorry. My bad," he said. "Just some errant thoughts slipping through, don't mind them too much."

Thea, still reeling from his words, thought indignantly, *'How the fuck can I not mind them?! You just compared my eyes to Soul-suckers or something!'*

Despite Zach's apologetic tone, Thea remained deeply unsettled.

His comment echoed in her mind, stirring a whirlwind of questions. *'Kara never mentioned anything like this. Though, Desmond hinted at something, didn't he? And Corvus... he did too. Is there actually something off about my eyes...?'*

Before she could delve deeper into her concerns, Zach smoothly transitioned back to addressing her original query about the Gate, drawing her focus back to the matter at hand.

"Now, regarding the Gate, it's not problematic to have it open; that's actually its natural state," Zach clarified, his tone educational. "If you choose to close it, you're essentially using your Resolve to actively restrain it. This does place some strain on your mind, but it's generally manageable. However, there are a few critical aspects about the Gate's states you should be aware of."

Zach began to list these aspects, ticking them off on his fingers to emphasise each point.

"First, there's a maximum limit to how far the Gate can be opened. If you exceed this limit, the Gate will overwhelm and ultimately destroy you; that's the 'pop' scenario I mentioned earlier.

"Second, the degree to which the Gate is open affects your Psychic Resource recovery rate. The more open it is, the quicker your resources regenerate; the more it's closed, the slower

the recovery. If your Gate is completely closed, you won't regenerate any Psychic Resource at all, relying solely on any reserves you've previously accumulated and your Focus to tide over any excess usage costs.

"Third," Zach continued, counting off another critical point about the Gate, "when your Gate is closed, you become practically invisible to other Psykers, unless they possess specific abilities like an Aerae Psyker's [Eyes of the Void] Power. This ability allows them to detect your Psychic Resource, not just the Gate itself. So, even if your Gate is closed but you have Psychic Resource accumulated, they can still locate you. However, they would need a direct line of sight to do so, which makes it more challenging for them to track you down."

"Fourth, and most pertinent to your initial question," Zach added, emphasizing the importance of this point by pointing at his four outstretched fingers with his other hand, "the Gate *requires* either a conscious or subconscious, continuous interaction to remain opened or closed. It responds very quickly to commands, which can be risky, especially around Nulls. But with proper Resolve-scaling, you can control the Gate to open or close at extremely slow rates as well.

"I've known Battlefield Psykers who have managed to keep their Gates gradually opening over multiple days without reaching their maximum limit or causing any instability. This slow manipulation might seem pointless, but it's a valuable control exercise and something you'll likely learn as you progress in your Psyker training."

Zach's comprehensive explanation helped illuminate the complex nature of the Gate, giving Thea a clearer understanding of how to manage her newfound powers safely and efficiently.

Yet, one crucial aspect of his explanation puzzled her, particularly regarding how the Gate functioned in unexpected scenarios; such as the first time it had ever opened for her.

"If the Gate can't open unless I want it to, then how did the whole nightmare-zone scenario happen? I'm fairly sure I didn't *want* that whole stuff to happen," Thea asked, her brow furrowed in confusion after a few moments of silent contemplation.

Zach smiled knowingly and nodded, pleased with her question. "Very good. That's exactly the kind of inquisitive mind I was hoping to see!"

He paused to take another sip of his tea, a gesture Thea mirrored, having nearly forgotten her own drink until she saw him take a sip.

Setting his cup down, he continued, "The very first time your conscious mind recognizes the existence of the Gate is what we call the Awakening. During this Awakening, your mind struggles to comprehend this new, metaphysical element within itself. This intense focus inadvertently triggers the Gate, subconsciously commanding it to open, which, of course, it

does—as that’s what it does: Following commands—, expanding further and further until it reaches its maximum. This process is almost always nearly instantaneous,” he explained, his tone blending expertise with a hint of empathy for the overwhelming experience.

“Your Psychic 101 course will delve deeper into what specifically you experienced during your Awakening. Each Psyker’s experience is unique, though they are all influenced by their specific Inheritance and Path. However, what’s crucial to understand is this: During the Awakening, your brain sends a subconscious command to the Gate, urging it to open as wide as possible to understand the Gate better. This intense reaction only occurs the *very first time*; after that, your mind becomes accustomed to the Gate’s presence. That means you can then control the opening and closing of the Gate consciously, without fear of inadvertently triggering the same overwhelming event that occurred during your Awakening.”

Thea felt a profound relief wash over her as Zach’s explanations sank in, a weight she hadn’t fully acknowledged until now lifting from her shoulders. She exhaled deeply, her mind clarifying as if a fog had been lifted, allowing her to stop repressing a significant part of her psyche.

Zach noticed the change and his face lit up with a broad grin. “I see my words are having an effect. That’s good. A relaxed Gate is much easier to manage than one that’s constantly being suppressed,” he remarked, his voice filled with encouragement.

It was then that Thea realised she had indeed been unconsciously suppressing her Gate all this time. Though it had been somewhat open, she had been forcefully keeping it more closed than necessary, driven by an underlying fear of re-experiencing the harrowing events of her Awakening.

Now, however, she allowed her Gate to settle into what felt like its natural state.

To her surprise, she felt no mental strain or pull—an entirely different experience from before, where even slight attention to her Gate had been exhausting.

“Now, another word of warning, however,” Zach continued, returning to his earlier discussion about the nature of Gates. “The Void is an extremely dangerous plane, not solely because of what resides within it, but also because of what it embodies. It represents a form of limitless, unending power. This kind of power, regardless of your identity or the strength of your convictions, can become very appealing under the right circumstances. It’s crucial not to let the Void entice you closer to the Gate or to open it wider than necessary. Your Gate will *naturally* want to respond to the Void’s call, but it’s up to you and your Resolve to resist that urge and maintain control.

“You've likely felt it already, this odd... *fascination* that overtakes you when you focus deeply on your Gate. That's the raw power of the Void trying to seduce you into letting more of it into our world; urging you to open your Gate wider to allow a fraction of its force to filter through. Remember to keep your wits about you and maintain a firm hold on your Resolve, and you can prevent any mishaps. Just never let the Void draw you in like that, alright?”

Thea nodded solemnly, now fully understanding the peculiar allure she had experienced.

'*So that's what that was... It was the Void itself that nearly overwhelmed me,*' Thea realised, finally connecting some of the disparate thoughts that had been floating around in her mind.

“Perfect,” Zach said again, pausing to take another sip of his tea before addressing the second part of Thea's inquiry. “Now, about the other half of your question: Increasing your Perception and Resolve will indeed enhance your ability to both perceive and control the Gate. Each time you enhance these attributes, there's a slight risk that your brain might momentarily revert to that initial state of confusion—like a '*What the fuck is that thing?*' moment—as it might uncover new aspects of the Gate's existence that it hadn't previously comprehended.”

Noticing Thea's eyes widening with concern, Zach quickly raised his hand in a calming gesture. “Wait, wait! It's not as bad as it sounds, really! It's not the same as the *actual* Awakening. The level of curiosity this time is much less intense. Think of it as comparing a puddle to an ocean. Yes, there's a risk that your Gate might open a bit wider than usual when you suddenly increase your Attributes, but unless you're close to your Gate's maximum limit, you're not in danger of triggering another full Awakening event. If you want extra precaution, you could have someone who has unlocked their own Gate monitor you while you adjust your Attributes. They could step in and, if necessary, knock you out should they detect any major spike.”

Zach continued, ensuring to ease any lingering fears, “It's actually one of the simplest ways to prevent a Psyker from losing control. As I mentioned earlier, the Gate responds to either a conscious or subconscious command to alter its size. If you're *unconscious*, your Gate becomes dormant. This completely negates the risk of accidentally opening it too widely.”

Another significant concern was finally resolved for Thea, and she realised she didn't need to halt her progression until after the assessment was over.

However, this realisation brought a new dilemma. '*Now the problem is simply... Who do I ask? Nobody in Arrow Squad has a Gate; Viladia being the closest to one. And Alpha Squad is completely out of the question for obvious reasons as well,*' she thought, her mind racing to find a viable solution.

After a moment of contemplation, with no clear alternatives coming to mind, Thea raised her eyes from her steaming cup of tea back to Zach. "Could you... do that for me? I don't really have anyone else in my squad or that I know of who could watch over me while I upgrade my Attributes, someone who could detect this sort of change."

It felt odd to ask someone to essentially knock her out if things went awry, almost like asking someone to punch her in the face to prevent a worse scenario, but she recognized it as a necessary precaution. She couldn't risk enhancing her Attributes without a safeguard, especially now that she was aware of the straightforward preventative measure.

Zach looked slightly taken aback by the request but then nodded, his expression turning serious. "If you trust me to do that for you, I would definitely help you out, yes," he responded, his voice tinged with a mix of surprise and respect. "But you should know, this isn't something you should ask just *anyone* to do. It's a *very* serious matter, Thea. If you don't fully trust the person who's supposed to be watching over you, you could very well end up permanently dead due to their improper reaction. I'm confident that I can manage it, but please, don't trust just anyone with this responsibility in the future, alright?"

Thea nodded, feeling a deep sense of gratitude and relief that Zach was willing to assist her further. His warning also underscored the true *gravity* of her request, reinforcing the importance of careful consideration when involving others in such critical aspects of her development in terms of her Psychic side.

"I'll be in your care, then," Thea said with a deep bow of gratitude, her voice carrying a mix of respect and a slight nervousness. After a moment, she looked up, a puzzled expression crossing her face as she contemplated the logistics of the procedure. "How... How do we do this? Do you just... stand behind me or something and knock me over the head...?"

Her somewhat humorous inquiry made Zach chuckle, lightening the mood.

He finished his tea with one last sip, then set the empty cup aside, shaking his head in amusement. "No, no. Of course not. I don't intend on giving you a concussion. Using physical force is absolutely a last resort, only really used in the field; it's not how we handle things under controlled conditions. We'll use this," he explained.

With a swift movement, he produced a yellow-green tinged auto-injector from his pocket, holding it up for her to see. "This is a knock-out injector. It has some long medical name that I never bothered to memorise, but you can simply ask any quartermaster for a 'knock-out injector' if you ever need to find one yourself."

He stood up, stepping closer to Thea, and handed her the injector, allowing her to examine it closely and read the labels.

“Go ahead, read through all the information on it; just so we’re clear on what I’ll be injecting you with, should things go awry,” Zach said, his tone serious but friendly, ensuring Thea felt fully informed and comfortable with the procedure they were about to undertake.

Following Zach’s instructions, Thea carefully read the detailed description and usage guidelines printed on the injector.

It confirmed that the device was indeed a knock-out auto-injector designed to induce unconsciousness almost instantaneously with minimal side effects—aside from the typical warnings like the possibility of hitting your head during the fall, or the rare allergic reactions ranging from mild rashes to excruciating death—pretty standard for medical devices as far as Thea knew.

“Your squad medic probably carries a few of these at all times, given their broad utility,” Zach pointed out, making Thea immediately think of Karania and her large bag of medicine. “It might be wise to explain to them how Gates work too. They’re likely to get a full briefing after the assessment, but given your unique situation, it would be prudent to inform them sooner. If it looks like you’re losing control, a quick use of this injector could stabilise you,” he advised.

This suggestion struck a chord with Thea, prompting her to mentally note to discuss this with Karania as soon as possible.

‘If she had known about this before my Awakening... could those terrifying visions have been mitigated?’ she pondered.

In several of those intense episodes, she remembered how Karania had frantically tried to assist her, often with disastrous outcomes that resulted in death scenarios. While those experiences were technically dreams, they had felt disturbingly real to Thea, leaving a lasting impression that she was determined not to relive.

‘I’ll definitely let Kara know,’ Thea vowed internally before refocusing on the task at hand. She handed the injector back to Zach and gave him a firm nod to show her readiness.

“Let’s do this... Should I invest points gradually, or all at once? And should I start with Perception or Resolve? Or just apply everything?” she asked, eager to get everything right.

Now that she had the opportunity to ask detailed questions about the specifics of her situation, she didn’t want to leave any room for doubt.

“Typically, you’d want to enhance your Resolve first, then your Perception, as it helps in controlling your Gate if your brain starts to react unexpectedly,” Zach explained, considering the options. “However, when you have someone experienced overseeing the process, the

sequence doesn't really matter as much. So in this scenario, you can safely invest all your points at once. I'll be here to monitor and intervene if needed," he reassured her with a confident tone that helped ease some of Thea's tension.

"But ultimately, the choice is yours. You should do what feels safest and most manageable to you. If you'd prefer to test the waters with incremental upgrades, that's perfectly fine too," Zach added, giving Thea the flexibility to decide how she wanted to proceed based on her comfort level and confidence in handling the changes.

"I think I'll do it all at once. Better to experience the feeling of dumping it all while I'm in a safe environment like this, than end up having to do it in the field for some reason," Thea replied, figuring that it would be the best course of action to prepare for the future. "I'm ready when you are."

With a nod, Zach positioned himself behind her, with an easy access to her neck. "Try to close the Gate quite a bit, before you start investing those points. Don't close it entirely, that'll just cause trouble later, when you go to open it again but it suddenly is a lot stronger than before. So leave it open a bit, like a pressure-valve, of sorts."

Thea simply nodded, before diving into her own body and approached the Gate.

With a simple command, this time, she managed to get the blades to move and restrict the Gate's unfathomably large opening bit by bit. When she felt that she had restricted it enough, she returned her attention back to the outside world and called up the System's interface.

'Alright... Here goes nothing, then,' she thought to herself, taking a deep breath in preparation for—she didn't really know what to expect, really. Just in preparation for whatever may happen.

She quickly invested all of her available points, dividing them equally amongst Perception and Resolve, as recommended by the UHF in order to unlock her Psyker Class at Level 10.

[Status & Attributes]:

Thea McKay - Level 9.45 - Contribution Points: 322 / 710 - Unspent Attribute Points: 0 (12)

HP: 131 / 131 - Stamina: 165 / 165 - Focus: 225 / 225 - TBD - TBD

Class: None - Specialization: None - Title: None - TBD - TBD

Strength: 3.38 | 3.18 (+0%) + 0.2

Finesse: 4.73 (+0%)

Vitality: 2.51 (+0%)

Recovery: 2.72 (+0%)

Stamina: 3.11 (+0%)

Focus: 4.31 (+0%)

Perception: 10.03 | 5.28 (+90%)

Resolve: 11.34 | 5.97 (+90%)

[Psychic: TBD (+0%)] (Locked[?] 28.19/30)

[TBD: TBD (+0%)] (Locked)

[Confirm this distribution? Choices are **irrevocable**, unless Full-Profile-Reset is requested.]

[Certain Attribute changes will potentially only come into effect over the next 6 hours.]

It had been a significant period since she last experienced the thrill of enhancing a character's abilities, and especially considering that this time, the improvements were to her very own, real-life Attributes again.

Reaching a milestone by elevating her first two Attributes into the 10+ range only added to the significance of the moment.

With a deep breath and a decisive mental push, she confirmed her selection.

Instantly, the effects of her enhanced Perception swept over her.

The room came alive in a way she had never experienced before. The aroma of the tea Zach had presented her with suddenly filled the air, each scent note distinct and more vivid than she had ever noticed before. Her vision became even sharper than before, the edges of the room and its contents crisply defined as if she was staring through the scope of her Gram.

Most startling, however, was her newfound auditory sensitivity.

For a fleeting moment, she could hear the steady thump of Zach's heartbeat from right behind her—an intimate detail that her mind, recognizing it as extraneous, quickly learned to filter out.

Her senses had not just improved; they had been amplified to a level that was far beyond superhuman, allowing her to perceive the world in an even more extraordinarily detailed and nuanced manner than ever before.

As Thea adjusted to the vivid intensity of her heightened senses, she realised that mastering them would require time and patience. However, before she could further contemplate this new reality, she felt an ominous surge within her, as if a monstrous entity was awakening from a deep slumber.

Her improved Resolve acted as a catalyst, forcefully expanding her Gate.

The sensation was alien and profound.

Inside her chest, right behind her heart, it felt as if a vast, eldritch abyss had abruptly opened, its dimensions expanding ceaselessly, threatening to engulf her heart with its chilling, boundless emptiness.

Focusing her mind inward, Thea confronted the growing expanse of her Gate.

The iris-like structure composed of interlocking blades, designed to contain the Void, trembled and rattled violently. They creaked and groaned as they strained against the immense pressure, barely containing the torrent of eerie violet light and the nebulous, terrifying forces yearning to burst forth into the physical realm.

Each pulse of the Gate seemed to stretch the fabric of reality around her, warping everything within her mind's eye into ever-changing sizes, colours and shapes.

As Thea observed, the blades that once formed a precise, orderly iris around her Gate began to distort, warping into loops and spirals that defied geometry. They folded over and into themselves, as well as the Gate in a mesmerising dance of impossible shapes.

The violet light emanating from the Void, which initially threatened to overpower her vision, began shifting unpredictably through a spectrum of both conceivable and inconceivable colours.

With each vibration of the blades, the central aperture of the Gate widened incrementally, each change pulling Thea deeper into a state of awe and fascination.

Her focus was entirely captivated by the surreal spectacle unfolding within her.

Her eyes were wide open, strained to their limits as she attempted to comprehend every detail of the transformation occurring at the core of her being.

The blades' rattling and shifting continued to take on a life of their own, as they once again changed shape, almost turning into unknowable entities of themselves, each blade its own, unique variant of eldritch existence.

This display of transformation held Thea spellbound, as she struggled to maintain her grasp on reality while the very essence of her Gate threatened to unravel the fabric of existence around her.

Unknowingly, Thea extended her hand towards the swirling chaos at the heart of her Gate, drawn irresistibly toward the most imposing of the entities—a seven-headed beast whose immense size defied comprehension. It loomed so large that, by comparison, even the Sovereign itself would appear indiscernible to Thea at the same distance; of that, she was convinced.

Yet her hand seemed to be able to get closer and closer as the beast beckoned; its uncountable, violet-hued eyes locked with her own as the multi-mawed faces of each head snapped and tried to keep the other entities of the iris at bay.

As she neared the beast, Thea paused, a nagging feeling surfacing that she was forgetting something crucial.

'... Wasn't I supposed to be doing something...?' She thought in a haze, unable to break her eyes from the centre-head's own.

*'No... It probably wasn't **that** important.'*

She resumed her approach, watching with a downright obsession as four of the seven-headed beast's heads ripped apart one of the nearby entities, throwing the eldritch shape's dismembered and flayed shape into the violet whirlpool at the centre of it all.

"It's... so... beautiful..." Thea murmured, captivated, as her fingers neared the abyss-black outer shell of the beast.

She could feel its coldness; or rather, the sheer and utter lack of heat, before she even got to touch it.

It wasn't simply *cold*, but as if the very concept of heat, the sheer idea of molecules moving and interacting, simply did not exist in its presence.

There were no words that she could use to describe the feeling, but a singular word suddenly did come to her mind; a word she had never heard of, nor spoken before, that yet felt perfect to describe what she was experiencing.

'Grahkius.'

Her hand, despite the cold that was omnipresent around the beast, continued to move closer.

She *needed* to touch it and learn what it felt like.

What the beast was trying to teach her; she *needed* to know!

But just as her fingertips were about to make contact, Thea stumbled.

Abruptly, the chaotic vision ceased.

The vortex vanished, the beast reverted to its original form as part of the thirteen-bladed iris, and Thea found herself half-collapsed at the table she had shared with Zach, her vision blurring and dimming rapidly.

“That was too damn fucking close...” she heard Zach mutter in frustration and terror, before darkness overtook her...