

Arc 1 - Chapter 118 - Reflection

Thea's eyes opened sluggishly as she came to, her body aching in ways she never even knew existed. The world around her was a blur of indistinct shapes and muted colours, everything swimming in a hazy fog.

"Uggghhh..." she groaned as she tried to move and look around, her mind slowly recalling the dire situation she had been in before passing out. Her hands grasped aimlessly for her weapons, her fingers brushing against cold metal as she attempted to get back into a combat-ready state.

"You back with us, sleepyhead?"

Thea stiffened at the voice, her brain too mushy to immediately recognize it. A mixture of adrenaline and the desperate urge not to end up like Valeria—captured alive by the enemy—spurred her on to blindly grab for her weapons again.

"Thea, stop that—Hey, stop!"

A set of hands pinned her to the ground, nullifying her meagre attempts to regain some agency. She started headbutting whatever was in front of her, but in her weakened state, it ended up being more like gentle nods brushing against somebody's armour than anything dangerous.

"Thea, it's me, Kara," the strangely familiar voice said intently close by, as Thea felt herself continue to be restrained. "Take a deep breath. You nearly bled out before I managed to get to you. Stop thrashing around like this, you're not in a state to handle this much right now."

Thea's vision slowly began to clear, the fog lifting just enough for her to make out Karania's concerned face hovering above her. The sounds of battle still echoed faintly in the far distant background, but for the moment, they felt irrelevant, as if coming from another world.

She tried to focus on Karania's words, taking deep, ragged breaths to calm herself.

Karania gently loosened her grip as Thea's struggles ceased. "Good, just breathe," she said soothingly. "We've got you. We managed to get to you just barely in time, but the area is clear now. Just rest up for a little while longer."

Taking her friend's words to heart, Thea closed her eyes once more, trying her best to recoup as much energy as she could. The rough texture of the ground beneath her, the coolness of the air, and the distant sounds of combat faded to the background as she centred herself.

A few minutes later, she had managed to regain enough coherency to remember where she likely was, what they were doing there, and what was going on, to the point that she felt moderately like herself again.

Her limbs felt heavy, but the throbbing pain had dulled to a manageable ache.

'Gotta rest up more or I'll just be a deadweight...' Was the first fully coherent thought that managed to coalesce inside her mind, which prompted her to focus intently on options to hasten her recovery.

She took a brief inventory of her surroundings, noting the makeshift triage Karania had set up and the literal pool of blood and mountains of soaked bandages mere metres away from her.

'Is... is that all mine? It better not be. I don't think humans are meant to be able to bleed this much,' Thea thought, taken aback by the sheer quantity of life-giving liquid in sight.

'Kara already gave me meds, there's no shot she wouldn't have. That probably explains why my pain is as manageable as it is, considering the beating I took. So just resting is probably my best bet right now...'

There was a certain Ability she had never really gotten much use out of in the assessment so far that seemed tailor-made for this exact situation in her mind. Deliberately focusing on her breathing, Thea tried to get her thoughts and body into alignment again.

Surprising even herself, she managed to fall into a meditative trance in a matter of moments, letting her Passive Ability [Meditation Focus] help her recover as best she could.

The world around her turned almost imperceptible as the Ability kicked in, further deepening her connection to her body and thoughts.

She had only used the Ability once or twice before to test it out but never for its intended purposes as most situations in which she would have needed it hadn't allowed for a secure enough area for her to recover in. The Perception limiter imposed by it made it almost impossible to use if she wasn't within the secure confines of her squad's embrace.

As the Ability fully took hold, Thea felt her heartbeat steady, the throbbing pain in her body diminishing further.

Her breathing became rhythmic, each inhale and exhale harmonising with the pulses of her blood, her consciousness drifting to a place of serene focus.

The sounds of distant battle outside the triage area faded into an imperceptible murmur, replaced by the rhythmic beating of her heart and the gentle rush of blood flowing through her veins.

With her senses honed to a razor-sharp focus and fully locked into her own body by the Ability, Thea began a methodical self-assessment.

She started with her arms, feeling the numerous scars and bullet holes that had been expertly tended to by Karania.

Her left arm had a particularly nasty gash near the bicep, where it had likely been cut open by one of the countless shrapnel during the last few moments before she blacked out, which had been neatly stitched together but was still raw even now.

Several fractures had been set in her right arm and hands, the bone knit back together but still tender.

She flexed her fingers slowly, testing each joint and tendon, satisfied with the range of motion despite the lingering discomfort. Her hands, while steady, bore similar signs of recent trauma, with cooling compression bandages covering several cuts and bruises.

Moving to her torso, Thea's perception zeroed in on the myriad injuries there as well.

Her chest had borne the brunt of multiple impacts, the ribcage a mosaic of bruises, fractures, and broken bones. She started focusing on each rib, feeling the painstaking work Karania had done to set them back in place and get them to heal back together in record time in order to allow her to continue on with the mission.

Her lungs, while still functional, had suffered severely from both the countless shockwaves of the explosions and shrapnel that had narrowly missed puncturing them created by the numerous grenades that had been thrown her way. Her breathing was steady and even but undoubtedly more shallow than usual, a clear sign of the trauma they had ended up enduring.

The dull ache around her diaphragm also indicated to her that Karania had likely used a regenerative injector, repairing what could have been fatal damage, as the organ itself was practically in pristine condition, despite the utter warzone of torn, bruised and cut flesh around it.

Her lower abdomen revealed more of the same: Superficial cuts and deeper wounds that had been carefully bandaged.

Her liver had taken a hit, the organ bruised and tender but still working. Thea could feel the subtle, internal ache of her kidneys, a reminder of the multiple blunt force traumas from being thrown around like a ragdoll as she had searched for cover behind the reception desk.

Her stomach, surprisingly, had come through relatively unscathed save for a few minor cuts and bruises. The area around her spleen, however, felt oddly warm and tender—another sign that Karania had likely administered another regenerative injector there as well, fixing what could have been catastrophic internal damage.

Finally, Thea focused on her legs.

Her thighs still bore the scars of the many shrapnel that had managed to pierce through her armour as the reception desk's rock-crete had continuously been shaved away at by the Stellar Republic's downright fanatic attempt at killing her.

Her right leg had a fractured femur that had been expertly set but was still fragile, while the left leg had managed to make it out with only its own fair share of bruises and cuts.

Her knees ached, but were surprisingly without any real damage, the aches likely simply being leftovers from the various impacts of her landings after being blown away.

Her calves and ankles were swollen, but nothing seemed broken or irreparably damaged here either.

She noticed that the muscles in her legs felt unusually tight, however, probably from the strain of her earlier, severely desperate evasive manoeuvres and the subsequent explosions that had continuously thrown her around the room.

As she completed her self-assessment, Thea couldn't help but marvel at Karania's incredible level of skill.

*'She managed to fix up this much damage in the middle of an active war zone with nothing but her own supplies at hand in what... a couple of hours at best? She's an absolute monster... But I'm glad to say that she's **my** monster, if nothing else. I'd absolutely hate having to face off against an enemy medic that could simply fix up someone as damaged as I seem to have been in the middle of an extended firefight...'*

Thea took a deep breath, feeling the oxygen suffuse her body as it streamed through her lungs and into her bloodstream, energising each part of her body as it continued its cycle.

Each breath felt like a rejuvenating wave, washing away the exhaustion and pain bit by bit.

She decided to summon up the System Interface to check on how she was doing in the System's eyes.

[HP: 104 / 131 - Stamina: 44 / 165 - Focus: 97 / 225]

'Really not too bad then,' she concluded. *'Though I'll still need some extra time to really get back in on the action; better not overdo it, otherwise Kara will probably kill me, if the enemy doesn't get me.'*

She let her thoughts wander away from actively assessing herself, allowing them to roam freely as she focused on the meditative trance within.

Over the next few minutes, her inner world sharpened into focus, providing a rare moment of relaxation since her integration into the Allbright System.

For the first time in weeks, she had nothing to do but wait for her body to recover.

Her thoughts drifted to a place of comfort and safety—the little house she had shared with Old Man James back in Lumiosia's Undercity.

It was her mental refuge.

She imagined stepping through the remarkably solid door into the all-too-familiar living room, absorbing the sights and smells of her old home. The musty scent of old books, the faint aroma of James's presence, and the creak of the worn floorboards under her feet created a sense of nostalgic serenity.

'It feels like a lifetime ago that I was here...' she mused.

Although only a little over two years had passed since she had said goodbye to her home planet, her life had fundamentally changed in ways she could hardly express.

With her integration into the Allbright System a little over a month ago, even more aspects of her existence had transformed irreversibly.

Sitting down in her usual spot at the tiny kitchen table she used to share with Old Man James during their dinners together, Thea took a moment to internalise just how different she was from the girl who had last sat in that chair. The memories of their conversations, the laughter, and the simple comfort of those evenings seemed like relics from a bygone era.

'For one, I'm definitely a lot stronger,' she chuckled to herself as she flexed her arms.

While there were no muscles particularly apparent, she knew it was simply a trick of the System. Even with her comparatively low Strength score of 3.38, she was literally superhuman compared to any non-integrated person in the galaxy.

'Wouldn't that be fun, to go out and arm-wrestle a couple of super roided-up dudes in a club or something and utterly crush them? Might be worth remembering for the future if I ever need a pick-me-up. I'm not necessarily above some easy wins...'

She thought about the fact that she had somehow managed to find friends for the first time in her life. The whole of Alpha Squad had proven surprisingly amiable and had ended up meshing quite well with her as a person; something she hadn't thought possible before leaving Lumiosia.

While she was still not on good terms with Desmond specifically, the two of them had nevertheless managed to build a rapport of mutual respect for their respective capabilities—or so she liked to believe.

On Lumiosia, she had only really considered Thomas a friend.

Most other people her age, or even those nowhere close to her age, had generally avoided her due to her Cyan background. Even worse, the few that had ended up approaching her had only wanted to leech off her gaming or tech skills.

More than just a few times, she had lost supposed “friends” after realising they only wanted to get carried in whatever the flavour of the month game was that she happened to be good at or wanted her to fix up some piece of old-tech for them that they had found laying around in order to sell it.

Luckily, Thomas had always gladly acquiesced to her requests to get those particular individuals banned from the Golden Age Arcade; something she knew was exceedingly petty but felt all the better about as a result.

'I should definitely check in with Thomas, see how he's doing. I hope he found somebody capable of doing maintenance on the machines... I'd hate to imagine what state they'd be in now without me there to fix them up all the time.'

Looking around the living room one last time, Thea got up and headed toward her old room. Entering it, the musk of the myriad of books and old-tech leftovers from her tinkering suffused the air and entered her lungs immediately.

'I forgot just how pungent it was in here,' she thought with a rueful smile, remembering the many times James had asked her to throw away some of the old stuff she kept piling up in her room—naturally, she had refused each and every time.

Heading over to her bed, she sat down and let her eyes roam aimlessly across the room.

The many posters of various video game characters on the walls were the first to catch her eye, four of which were different renditions of Freya—her main character in *Ashes of Centuries*—while the rest were of varying other characters she had enjoyed over the years in different games.

'I should check if they have a copy on the Sovereign. I could take the rest of Alpha Squad and teach them how to play... That could be a lot of fun.'

As she briefly conjured up that mental image, however, she shuddered at the thought of Karania getting into a video game like that.

'She'd destroy all of us in just a few days, wouldn't she...?'

The room was cluttered but familiar, with stacks of books towering precariously on every surface and piles of old-tech components scattered across the floor. Her tinkering desk was a mess of wires, tools, and half-finished projects, a reminder of her insatiable curiosity of all-things tech and her love for fixing things.

The worn-out rug beneath her feet was covered in grease stains and scorch marks, remnants of countless late-night experiments gone awry.

On one of the far-side walls, a shelf sagged under the weight of an impressive collection of retro gaming consoles and cartridges, each one a cherished relic of her past.

Her eyes continued to roam, lingering briefly on the various stacks of books that James had managed to get for her over the years. Some were purely educational, covering subjects like history, languages, mathematics, and physics, while others catered to her own personal interests and pleasures—technical documentation, manuals, and engineering blueprints.

She knew she had been exceedingly lucky to run into James all those years ago.

There was practically nobody in the undercity as well-stocked with valuable teaching materials as James. Without him, Thea was certain she would never have ended up at the Golden Age Arcade as a part-time mechanic, nor would she have done as well as she had on the Cube Trial.

'I wonder how the old man is doing...' she thought, her heart aching with a mixture of fondness and worry.

She wasn't directly *concerned* about him, knowing all too well that she had never actually seen her father in anything even remotely dangerous. Considering that he was undoubtedly an integrated person, and knowing that he had been part of the UHF for many years, she didn't doubt that he'd likely be able to fend off the entire undercity on his own if he had to.

But she couldn't help but wonder if he missed her as much as she missed him.

While she would never admit it to his face, the steadying presence he had provided was something she had sorely missed in recent years.

An anchor, of sorts, to keep her feeling safe and cared for.

It was something she knew she didn't deserve, something that nobody in an undercity could ever truly claim as earned, but something she nevertheless had somehow managed to be given by him.

It was a debt she would never be able to repay, and one she would never be able to forget.

Lastly, her eyes fell on the monitors she had spent countless hours in front of, watching videos on the galactic net, playing games, or trying her hand at digital puzzles.

The monitors had been replaced multiple times due to various mishaps during her experiments with the technology that governed their functions. The "newest" ones had been more than four years old by the time she left Lumiosia for the UHF—a record she was quite proud of.

"You know... I wasn't going to say anything, but you're missing something important."

The sudden appearance of another voice inside her head startled her, causing her mental construct to shake violently at the break in her focus as she fell from the bed onto the dirty rug.

"Wha...? What? Who are you?" Thea asked, looking around the empty room and trying to ascertain where the voice had come from.

"Does it matter?" The unknown voice replied, a clear smugness behind every word. "You're *blind*, Thea. And it's going to get you killed."

An involuntary shudder tensed up her entire body at the sheer level of confidence and inevitability in the other person's voice.

Getting up from the floor, slowly and carefully so as not to make any noise, Thea continued searching for this other person, even glancing at the ceiling of the small room she was in, but to no avail.

A tense silence reigned over the room as Thea's eyes darted here and there, carefully studying every shadow, every little nook and cranny of the all-too-familiar space.

Then, finally, her eyes found movement, and she froze dead in her tracks.

The full-body mirror she had used ever so rarely, situated next to the door, was showing an image of herself: Clad in her Spectre armour, she stood smugly looking out from it towards her with her arms crossed.

“Took you long enough... Just shows how blind you can really be, doesn't it?” The reflection sneered, a clear distaste in her voice. “Always so self-absorbed, thinking you're the centre of the universe. The little Cyan that could. The undercity gal to show 'em all up. Isn't that what you're all about?”

Thea was taken aback by the sheer hostility levelled against her by what was, for all intents and purposes, a reflection of herself. She wasn't exactly thinking of herself in that way, but she'd also be lying if she claimed that she had never thought of wiping off all those Recruits' smiles who had left her sitting by herself during the opening ceremony after seeing her eyes. All those Recruits that had given her the stink-eye for being a mid-worlder or an undercity citizen—it had definitely crossed her mind once or twice before, so she couldn't exactly deny it.

“I... I don't know? I guess you're kind of right, to a degree? It's not really what I'm going for, but it would be the end result, and I won't say no to either of those,” Thea answered, trying to defend herself.

Shaking her head as if to clear those thoughts entirely, realising that defending herself here would do no good for anyone, she pressed for answers.

“What did you mean when you said I was blind? What am I missing that's going to get me killed?”

The reflection's Cyan eyes roamed over Thea's body as if to take stock of what she had on offer; to weigh her very being before giving an answer.

“Why would I tell you? What's in it for me, if I save your sorry ass once again?” Faux-Thea asked, clearly not impressed by what she saw.

Confused by the line of questioning, Thea asked, “Ehhh... You should help me because we're one and the same...? Anything that helps me helps you in turn. You're my subconscious or something, right?”

A brief moment of silence stretched into eternity between them as Faux-Thea simply stared, empty-eyed, at Thea before finally erupting in bone-chilling laughter that somehow echoed off the walls as if they were standing in a giant theatre.

“Your subconscious?!” She blurted out between bouts of laughter that sent jolts of tension through Thea's body. Abruptly fixing her eyes on Thea as her laughter died out in a heartbeat, Faux-Thea's face split into a toothy, predatory grin as she added, “Oh, darling, I am so, so much more.”

Abruptly, the mirror cracked and shattered, as two armour-clad hands grasped the outer edges and Faux-Thea pulled herself into the room, leaving the 2D space of the mirror-world behind to join Thea in her mindscape.

Stumbling backward in a mix of confusion and terror, Thea was at a complete loss.

None of this made any sense in her head, even if this was some kind of subconsciousness or nightmare—it felt all too real to be merely a figment of her imagination.

“Stay back!” she ordered, trying her best to sound confident and demanding.

“Oh, darling, why are you so scared? I’m just your subconscious, aren’t I? Surely you won’t mind giving little ol’ me a bit of a hug?” Faux-Thea mocked as she slowly lumbered closer, her steps jagged and almost robotic in nature.

Swallowing her panic as best she could, remembering her father’s words of wisdom about keeping a calm head, especially in situations where one didn’t know what was going on, Thea fixated on the strange being in front of her.

Taking a short moment to gather her thoughts and will, she spoke more forcefully.

“Stop!”

Like a ripple in a pond, a wave of pressure went out from her and Faux-Thea stopped dead in her tracks, surprise painted on her face.

“Oh...? Would you look at that,” she said, her Cyan eyes once again roaming over Thea’s body as if to re-evaluate her prior opinion. “Looks like you do have a bit more backbone if you aren’t in the process of losing your mind. That’s cute.”

Unwilling to entertain whatever this thing wanted from her, Thea pressed on. “Tell me what I’m missing. Why did you say I was blind?”

Clicking her tongue, Faux-Thea shook her head, the motion unnatural and jerking. “You haven’t given me a reason to consider cooperating, darling. Nothing comes free; you should know that better than most, shouldn’t you?”

“I... I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh... But you *do*. You just don’t like it,” Faux-Thea immediately replied with another toothy grin—teeth that Thea now realised were markedly sharper than her own. “How about a freebie then, to show my goodwill in this negotiation: You won’t survive this mission if you don’t pay more attention.”

Thea took a moment to analyse what the being had said.

Had she not been paying extremely close attention to everything since the very moment they had engaged the Stellar Republic’s forces in the compound? She had been hounding her Psychic Senses more than she ever had before, even including the trek towards the artillery installations on the first day of the assessment.

She had followed each and every one of her instincts and warnings provided by them, while also using her Perception on levels she had rarely managed before.

How could she possibly pay more attention than that?

“I don’t believe you,” Thea finally replied with conviction, meeting Faux-Thea’s eyes once more. “I don’t know what you are or why you’re here, but I’m not making deals with you for random words of ‘wisdom’ that won’t help me.”

Faux-Thea’s smile froze as she took a deep breath.

“I really fucking hate this stubborn, thick-headed side of you, you know that? It would all be so much easier, so much more involved, so much more fun, if you’d simply agree to stop being so pathetic.”

Thea looked for a way to leave this situation, but even attempting to break her concentration, to kill [Meditation Focus] and return to the real world, didn’t seem to work.

“Stop trying to run, Thea. You can’t hide from me—I *am* you!” Faux-Thea insisted, her voice positively suffused with annoyance. “But I guess you’re too pig-headed for both of our best interests, so I’ll let you leave with two freebies today. The one from earlier and this one: Open your Gate wide if you want to understand what I was referring to.”

Thea’s eyes widened at that, realisation starting to dawn.

“You’re... You’re the Void?” she asked, her voice almost a whisper despite her best attempt at sounding confident.

Faux-Thea’s face drooped in disappointment and exasperation as she replied, “How could I *possibly* be the Void? Are you fucking stupid? The Void is an entire plane of existence. How could I be an *entire plane*, you dumb-ass harlot? No, I’m not the fucking Void, obviously.”

Palming her face with one hand and shaking her head, she continued, “When I tell you to open your Gate, I mean to quickly open it wide and then shutter it again right after; *not* risk killing us both by letting the Void in. I am still in here with you, after all, so having you rip our Soul apart isn’t going to help me one bit; use your fucking brain for once.”

With a wave of her hand, Faux-Thea shattered the bedroom around them, the room breaking apart and falling around them like the shards of the mirror she had escaped from.

“Now, get out of here. Take my advice or don’t, I really don’t care either way; I’ll be here, watching and waiting. It won’t be long now until you beg me to help and trust me when I say this: I’ll *remember* your pig-headedness today. All I asked for was some *concessions*, nothing large. When the time comes and you need my help, you better be ready to pay the price, darling.”

Faux-Thea’s eyes, still locked onto Thea’s own, abruptly turned a deep shade of neon-violet, replacing the cyan that she had been used to since birth. The change was so sudden and intense that it felt like the air itself vibrated with the shift.

In the next moment, Thea’s mindscape shattered, and she gasped for air as she found herself back in the real world, sitting up straight. Her body was ice-cold, drenched in a torrent

of sweat that clung to her skin, making her shiver uncontrollably. She scrambled for a nearby shard of glass, staring into it with a terror that she couldn't put into words, even if she tried.

Staring back were two neon-violet eyes that rapidly lost their lustre and turned back into the self-illuminating cyan she was familiar with...