

## Arc 1 - Chapter 78 - A Different Hell

The tense silence hanging over the gathered Alpha Squads was suddenly shattered by the unmistakable, jovial tone of Hammr, his voice slicing through the stillness as effortlessly as a hot knife through butter. "Now that we've all assembled, all we have to wait for is Staff-Sergeant Venn, isn't that right?" he asked with a twinkle in his eye.

Corvus responded with a firm nod, his voice carrying a note of agreement. "I believe that is correct, yes. Staff-Sergeant Venn's message did indicate he would see us off personally," he said, his nod echoed in unison by the other squad leaders, each with a distinct manner reflective of their unique personalities.

Hammr's face broke into a wide, toothy grin, the kind that was infectious in its enthusiasm. He gestured expansively towards the various squads, his large frame turning in a slow, inviting circle. "It seems we have some time to mingle then," he declared, his voice inviting camaraderie.

This invitation elicited a variety of reactions.

Most notably, Hammr's own squad members collectively shook their heads and rolled their eyes, a shared, good-natured exasperation at their leader's antics. However, the rest of the squads seemed to be caught up in the infectious enthusiasm of Hammr's invitation.

Members from different squads, specifically those more socially adept, Thea figured, began to break away from their groups, walking up to members of other squads and making introductions in a buzz of friendly chatter.

Amidst this Thea stood somewhat apart, her gaze laser-focused on the custom Gram gripped in the hands of squad leader Kar'al.

Her thoughts raced, *'I need to speak with Kar'al about his gun. That custom Gram could offer some crucial insights for my own equipment!'* But the question of approach nagged at her. *'How do I approach him amidst this crowd, though? I can't just walk up to the group of squad leaders and interject now, can I...?'*

Observing the unfolding scene, Thea noticed Desmond, Isabella, and Lucas quickly becoming the centre of attention for a few members from other squads. A lively, kind-spirited exchange ensued, their conversation peppered with laughter and animated gestures, reflecting the camaraderie among them.

Desmond, with his tech-savvy nature, seemed particularly engaged, discussing drone tech with the marine wearing the Forge armour from Hegemon Alpha, while Isabella, straightforward and brash as always, shared animated anecdotes of her close-combat experiences. Lucas, with his characteristically docile demeanour, listened intently, occasionally chiming in with his insights.

Karania, however, seemed to follow a different path.

Like Thea, she had remained somewhat detached from the main group up until this point.

But then, with a purposeful stride, she approached a marine from Empyrean Alpha.

The marine, clad in medium-type armour that was less bulky yet similarly sophisticated in design to Karania's own, appeared startled at her sudden approach. His initial surprise slowly morphed into visible tension as their conversation progressed, his posture stiffening noticeably.

Thea's curiosity was piqued. *'What could Karania possibly be discussing to elicit such a reaction?'* she wondered. Karania, who Thea knew for her slight eccentricity and exceptional medical expertise, often dove into topics with an intensity that could be overwhelming. As Thea focused more intently on their interaction, however, the puzzle pieces quickly fell into place.

*'Oh, Kara...'* Thea thought, a grin spreading across her face.

Karania, in her usual animated manner, was using her hands to articulate her points. However, she had seemingly forgotten to transform her hand back from the "War-Kara" form.

*'You really should've removed that claw before starting to try and articulate your points with your hands,'* Thea mused internally, the scene before her tinged with a mix of amusement and fondness for her friend's unintentional, yet unmistakably intimidating, faux pas.

Thea's surprise only intensified in the moments that followed.

She watched, bewildered, as Karania started mimicking exaggerated cutting and ripping motions with her clawed hand. Thea's eyes widened in disbelief.

*'Kara, what the fuck are you discussing with this guy?!'* she thought, her mind racing to comprehend the bizarre scene unfolding before her.

Yet, what astonished her even more, and made her question the general disposition of medics, was the marine's reaction.

Contrary to what one might expect, his tension visibly melted away as Karania began her graphic re-enactment. The marine's demeanour transformed completely; his face lit up, and he engaged with Karania with an enthusiasm that was almost palpable, as if her vivid, horror-movie-esque description had flipped a switch in him, igniting a lively and animated conversation.

Shaking her head in disbelief, Thea decided to distance her focus from Karania's peculiar interaction. "I'm sure now, all medics are utterly insane," she muttered under her breath, a mix of amusement and bewilderment in her tone.

Her attention then shifted to the rest of the gathering.

Scanning the area, Thea noticed she was one of only a handful of marines—precisely five, including herself—who remained detached from the socialising groups. The other squad members had seamlessly integrated, each finding either a specific individual or a group to converse with, their conversations a blend of military banter and shared experiences.

'Well, at least I'm not the only outcast, huh?' Thea mused to herself, a wry smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

Her gaze, once again, shifted to Kar'al and his uniquely modified Gram. She contemplated her approach, recalling a past success. *'Maybe I should just take a page out of Kara's book again, just like I did back when we got digitised. Mirroring her during social interactions worked wonders then. She's definitely an expert at this sort of thing.'*

With a renewed sense of purpose, Thea began to formulate a strategy.

She envisioned herself confidently approaching the group of squad leaders, her posture relaxed yet assertive. *'Just walk up to them, respectfully request a moment of Kar'al's time, and then subtly guide him a bit away from the others—not too far, just enough to have a private conversation without arousing suspicion. Then, dive into a discussion about the Gram. Simple, Thea. You've got this. Just follow these steps, and you'll manage just fine.'*

Despite her internal pep talk, a knot of anxiety tightened in her chest. The thought of initiating this interaction sent a wave of unease through her.

She steeled herself, mentally bracing for the task ahead.

*'I swear, I'd rather face the assault on the wall again than go through with this... Why does social interaction have to be so fucking hard?!'* she lamented inwardly.

Yet, determined to overcome her reluctance, or more precisely, determined to glean information on the specific alterations made to the Gram, Thea took a deep breath and prepared to put her plan into action, stepping forward with a mixture of apprehension and resolve.

As Thea cautiously made her way towards the group of squad leaders, deeply engrossed in their own conversation, she mentally rehearsed her planned introduction.

*'Squad Leader Kar'al, may I ask for a moment of your time? I couldn't help but notice the customizations on your Gram, and I'm really curious to learn more about them.'* She repeated these words in her head, over and over, like a mantra, trying to calm her mounting nerves.

However, mid-repetition and utterly absorbed in her thoughts, Thea's focus was solely on the squad leaders ahead. She was oblivious to the bustle around her, creating a blind spot for anything not directly in her path. This inattention led to an unforeseen interruption: a marine unexpectedly stepped in front of her, breaking her stride.

"Ah, hello. I was—" the marine began, but Thea, caught off guard and still entangled in her internal mantra, responded instinctively, "...your Gram!" The words tumbled out in a raspy, anxious tone, more a reflex than a coherent greeting.

The effect on the marine, who had removed their helmet in an attempt to appear friendly and approachable, was immediate and dramatic. Their face drained of colour, turning a ghostly pale at Thea's unintended, guttural outburst.

With a look of sheer bewilderment and something that Thea could only peg as fear, they quickly retreated, almost sprinting to the far corner of the multi-squad assembly.

This left Thea standing alone, her initial anxiety now compounded by a deep sense of embarrassment. She watched the marine's hasty retreat, feeling more isolated than ever in the bustling assembly of squads. The stark contrast between her intention and the actual outcome left her momentarily frozen, grappling with the awkwardness of the situation.

*'What just happened? Why did he run away like that?'* Thea pondered, bewildered by the marine's abrupt departure.

While she acknowledged that her words had come out in a way that was both incomprehensible and more aggressive than intended, she couldn't fathom why it would provoke such an extreme reaction from a fellow marine.

*'Is there something wrong with me?'* she questioned internally, her mind racing as she discreetly moved towards a more secluded corner of the assembly. Fortunately, it appeared that her awkward encounter had gone largely unnoticed by the others, offering her a small relief.

Thea examined herself, searching for any anomalies that might have contributed to the marine's reaction.

Her attire consisted of her standard Spectre armour, which, while being designed for stealth and efficiency, was decidedly nice to look at. Nothing to get frightened about, really. The Spectre's full mask was in place, its visor set to translucent, a feature intended to highlight her eyes and create a sense of connection and openness in conversations.

The only deviation from her usual appearance was the Spectre's hood she had drawn over her head.

She considered this for a moment, *'a hooded figure might indeed seem less approachable, but could that alone have triggered such a dramatic response...?'*

Considering the issue from a few separate angles, Thea doubted it. *'The hood has been a common aspect of my gear for the entire assessment and so far, hasn't caused such visceral reactions before. It should be fine.'*

Perplexed, Thea stood in her isolated spot, her mind still grappling with the encounter.

She couldn't shake the feeling that there was something she was missing, some crucial detail that had caused the marine's flight. Yet, as she stood there, nothing immediately obvious came to mind.

"Haaa, this is why I hate social gatherings... Why does this have to be so complicated?" Thea exhaled a deep, resigned sigh, her frustration palpable in the quiet air around her. She felt completely out of her element, adrift in a sea of social nuances she couldn't quite grasp.

"If only James had warned me about these types of challenges, I could've spent the week before leaving Lumiosia practising this stuff... Damn you, old man!" she muttered under her breath, a tinge of anger in her exasperation.

Of course, Thea wasn't truly angry with James.

Her frustration was directed more at herself, at her own apparent ineptitude in handling social situations. These encounters always seemed to leave her with a trail of unanswered questions or a nagging sense of inadequacy.

It was a stark contrast to her combat prowess, something she was inwardly quite proud of.

Under James' rigorous, decade-long tutelage, and aided by her innate Psychic Powers, Thea had honed her skills in combat to an exceptional level, when compared to others of her age or background.

However, when it came to the lighter, more convivial aspects of a marine's life, she acknowledged a glaring gap in her skill set. Social interactions, with their unspoken rules and subtleties, remained a labyrinthine challenge, one that she hadn't yet learned to navigate with the same finesse as she did in combat.

This realisation only added to her sense of isolation in the midst of the lively assembly.

Thea's initial plan to approach Squad Leader Kar'al had completely fallen apart, her carefully mustered courage vanishing as quickly as the marine who had fled from her earlier. Despite her persistent interest in discussing the Gram and its custom modifications, she felt a sudden sense of powerlessness in initiating the conversation.

Reluctantly, she decided to retreat into the role of an observer, watching the dynamics of the assembly unfold while impatiently awaiting Staff-Sergeant Venn's arrival. She yearned to return to the familiar and comfortable realm of her expertise: Shooting people. The act of waiting, doing nothing but observing, only amplified her sense of frustration and restlessness.

As she scanned the assembly once more, Thea noticed her squad members mingling with ease, an observation that brought her a mix of comfort and annoyance. *'Why can they all just... fit in so effortlessly? As if it's the most natural thing in the world,'* she mused with a tinge of bitterness.

Her gaze lingered on the interactions, noting that even Desmond, who was decidedly the most difficult person to get along with in the entire squad, engaged in lively conversation. *'Even Desmond, despite his... well being himself. I suppose his being not a Cyan might have made it easier for the other guy, but still... This is fucking infuriating!'*

Thea's mood had taken a sharp downturn from the initial excitement she'd felt upon spotting the modified Gram. The sense of being out of place was gnawing at her, threatening to sour her entire day and, more concerningly, potentially impact her performance in any upcoming combat encounters. She knew she needed to find a way to shake off these feelings and refocus on her strengths, but the solution seemed just out of reach.

'*Maybe I should just join Kara...*' Thea contemplated, hoping her friend could provide a safe haven in this social maze. However, a quick glance towards Karania made her reconsider. Karania was surrounded by a cluster of medium-armoured marines, deeply engrossed in an animated discussion. Her clawed hand moved in bizarre, almost grotesque gestures that were both intriguing and thoroughly unnerving.

'*Yeah... Maybe not Kara, then,*' Thea concluded.

Her gaze then shifted to Lucas and Isabella. They were deeply engaged in discussions with a diverse group of marines, part of a large, lively gathering that seemed to encompass most of the marines from all squads.

'*That's just too overwhelming... I need something more low-key.*'

Her eyes then settled on Desmond and his conversation partner, deeply entrenched in some kind of conversation about drones, if their hand movements were anything to go by. The thought of joining them seemed more palatable. Recently, she had begun to develop a professional rapport with Desmond, slowly moving past the initial tension that had been entirely Desmond's doing, of course.

'*I do have an interest in tech, so discussing drones wouldn't be too out of place for me,*' Thea reasoned with herself, inching closer to the idea of joining their conversation.

Yet, despite this logical reasoning, Thea felt a strong aversion to engaging with Desmond.

While Corvus had briefed her on Desmond's background and circumstances, it didn't change her perception of him as intolerant and unpleasant. '*Just because someone has had a bad experience, it doesn't justify their ongoing negative assumptions. It's a ridiculous way to think. He's still an asshole and a bigot, even if he is capable as an operator,*' she mused, her internal conflict evident.

The idea of interacting with Desmond was something she preferred to avoid, unless absolutely necessary, but it seemed like one of the few viable options left to her in the current social landscape.

Thea was on the verge of reluctantly deciding to join Desmond's conversation when she was suddenly caught off guard by a deep, resonant voice close by. "Hello, Thea. Your squad leader mentioned you were interested in my Gram. As one of the few other snipers here, I thought we might be able to exchange some tips and insights?"

Startled, Thea's eyes widened as she turned to face Kar'al, whose presence she hadn't noticed approaching. She took a moment to process his words, her gaze briefly flickering towards Corvus. He was still deeply involved in conversation with the other squad leaders, yet it was clear he had facilitated this encounter.

'*I fucking love you, Corvus. You're the greatest squad leader anyone could ever ask for. I promise I'll never make problems for you ever again!*' she thought, sending a wave of gratitude towards Corvus, though he remained unaware of her silent thanks.

Regaining her composure, Thea responded enthusiastically to Kar'al, albeit with a slight stumble over her words due to the sudden release of her built-up frustration and anxiety. "Ahhh... Yes! Yes, I am! It's great to meet you, Squad Leader Kar'al!" Her excitement was evident, her voice a mixture of relief and eagerness.

Kar'al responded with a friendly, toothy grin, a gesture that instantly put Thea more at ease. "Please, just Kar'al is fine. We're all just Recruits here," he said in a congenial tone. He then carefully took his modified Gram in his hands, presenting it to Thea with a sense of pride and readiness to delve into a detailed discussion about their shared interest in sniper weaponry.

Taking the weapon into her hands with a reverence akin to receiving a sacred relic from the Emperor himself, Thea examined Kar'al's custom ballistic Gram with an expert eye.

The weight distribution was the first notable difference that immediately caught her attention; whereas her own laser-variant Gram had a centre-heavy balance due to the somewhat bulky capacitors and chamber required to produce the bundled-photon payload, Kar'al's ballistic version had a distinct forward heft.

The suppressor integrated into the barrel contributed significantly to this, adding both an appreciable weight and length to the gun. It gave the weapon a more front-loaded feel, something that Thea wasn't accustomed to but found positively intriguing.

*'The weight undoubtedly helps with recoil, that's for sure,'* she thought as she shouldered the gun, aiming towards one of the nearby walls of the compound. *'Yeah, this is definitely not bad. Not bad at all...'*

The suppressor itself was seemingly similarly custom-designed as the rest of the gun.

Unlike the bulky, cylindrical suppressors she had seen on other, comparable firearms back at Bullseye's Rifles, this one was sleek, almost seamlessly blending into the barrel. It suggested a level of custom craftsmanship that went beyond standard modifications. The suppressor's flat and elongated, almost fin-like design hinted at advanced noise reduction capabilities, crucial for a sniper who values stealth and surprise.

The magazine was noticeably bulkier than the sleek, compact capacitors of her laser Gram as well. The weight of the actual bullets added a palpable heft to the weapon's lower-centre, altering the balance and the way it needed to be handled during aiming and firing.

Thea could imagine the different recoil pattern this would produce in combination with the suppressor, a stark contrast to the recoil-less experience of her laser variant.

The grip and trigger mechanism were similarly familiar yet distinct.

The grip had a custom contour, presumably moulded to fit Kar'al's hand perfectly, but it still felt comfortable and natural, even in her own—undoubtedly smaller—grip. The trigger had a subtle but perceptibly different tension, likely due to the mechanical nature of the ballistic firing mechanism as opposed to the electronic trigger system of her laser Gram.

*'This feels somewhat alien, but also distinctly familiar...'* She mused as she went to sum up her thoughts in a concise manner, to file them away for later perusal.

Thea's hands carefully cradled the custom Gram, her mind actively processing the diverse approaches to sniping weaponry. This hands-on experience sparked a deeper contemplation about her own choice of the laser-variant Gram.

Recently, she had begun to question whether this decision might have been premature, especially given the tactical challenges she had faced in the assessment thus far.

In multiple encounters, she found herself at a disadvantage when her Gram's laser betrayed her position. Although she had the assistance of a Nano-Bot swarm, its effectiveness was somewhat diminished with a laser weapon. Moreover, she couldn't always rely on the Nano-Bots; they were not only a limited resource but also highly vulnerable to destruction on active battlefields.

She had reserved their use for particularly critical situations, mindful of their scarcity.

Thea experienced a moment of realisation about her own combat style's continuous evolution. The suppressed weapon seemed to be in greater harmony with the direction her tactics were taking, than the laser-variant she was currently using.

*'A suppressed Gram would undoubtedly enhance my stealth capabilities,'* she thought.

Her current Ability-set, along with the upcoming gold-rarity Ability from Valeria and her selection of other equipment, all pointed towards a more covert approach. The laser variant's benefits—its instantaneous firing and lack of recoil—had always appealed to her for more direct-confrontational encounters, but now she wondered if she had been too quick to dismiss the ballistic-type Gram.

Its potential for stealth and subtlety, characteristics she increasingly valued over the raw shot-for-shot power and speed the laser variant offered, suggested that it might have been overlooked too hastily in her initial assessment. This hands-on examination was not only enlightening but also a prompt to reconsider the balance between the immediate advantages of the laser variant and the strategic stealth offered by a ballistic or maybe even gauss Gram.

Thea's curiosity about Kar'al's Gram was evident in the detailed questions she started assailing him with. "I'm intrigued by the decision to have a built-in suppressor rather than a detachable one. Can you explain the reasoning behind that choice?" she asked, her eyes closely examining the unusual design of the suppressor.

Kar'al nodded, understanding the more in-depth nature of her inquiry without requiring a follow-up. "The integrated suppressor offers a more streamlined design and ensures a consistent balance and weight distribution," he explained. "It's more about reliability and maintaining the weapon's profile. A detachable suppressor can be useful for versatility, but for a sniper like me, consistency in feel and performance is key."

Thea then pointed out the suppressor's unique shape. "It's flat and elongated, almost fin-like. What's the purpose of this design? Why not go with the typical cylindrical shape that most other marines go for?"



Kar'al smiled, appreciating her keen observation. "It's a more aerodynamic design, intended to reduce air-drag and improve stability during shots. Even a miniscule difference in the way that your barrel sways as a result of the suppressor getting hit by a breeze can make or break your shot. We can't always be grav-locked when we shoot, after all.

"The more fin-like design also helps in heat dissipation, which is extremely crucial during extended engagements, especially when we're talking about a built-in suppressor like this. With a detachable one, you can just change it out if it burns out, but this one? Can't do that. So the more heat dissipated by the design the better."

Thea, still holding the weapon, nodding profusely as she took in all the information like a sponge, then asked about its ballistic performance. "How do you manage environmental factors like wind and distance with the ballistic variant? I'd imagine that's more of an issue than with the laser-variant I have, right? And what about the power of each shot compared to a laser-variant?"

"The ballistic Gram definitely requires more consideration of environmental factors, I will say," Kar'al admitted. "Wind, gravity, and distance all play a role. But, I have to add, not as much as you might think. Back on my homeplanet, we used fairly old rifles and their ballistic properties were really bad. We would need to be thoroughly trained on ballistics just to get a shot about a kilometre out. But with the T1 weaponry that the UHF has? It's basically a non-issue in most encounters. They pack a serious punch when they come out of the barrel, so they don't really get affected that much by wind, gravity or the like until five or more kilometres out.

"The ballistic variant also offers greater kinetic impact per shot and the ability to use different types of ammunition for varied situations. Your laser variant has its definite advantages in speed and minimal environmental interference, but the ballistic type has a certain... tactile feedback, stealth and utility that some snipers, I among them, prefer."

Intrigued, Thea immediately asked about the cost and practicality of his custom modifications, completely unaware of any potential faux-pa's that might come with talking about costs. "How much did these customizations set you back? And what's the functional advantage of each?"

Kar'al chuckled lightly at Thea's brazen line of questioning. "Well, I only have a half-licence for the Gram, but I paid for the modifications out of pocket. The custom barrel and suppressor were a significant investment, but they provide vastly improved accuracy and stealth. I didn't like the original barrel on the Gram, as it ended up curving the bullet slightly too far to the right for my tastes. The grip and trigger were tailored to my hand and firing style, offering a more personal and intuitive shooting experience, in my personal opinion."

With a lighter tone, he added, "I'd imagine that most people would skip out of them, but as a sniper, I end up cradling this bad boy for hours on end, so I might as well feel comfortable doing so, right?"

He paused once more, taking in Thea's approving nod, before wrapping up his answer, "Each mod has its purpose. The barrel and suppressor for stealth and accuracy, the trigger for a smoother pull and rapid response, and the grip for comfort and control. It's about

making the weapon an extension of oneself, rather than trying to go for a particular benchmark or another. I could probably get it to have less recoil, fire faster or be lighter, but this is what I feel most comfortable with, so this is what I decided on."

Thea listened intently, absorbing the information.

Kar'al's explanations provided her with a new perspective on the possibilities and limitations of both the laser and ballistic Gram variants. His insights into the customization process and the practical applications of each modification vastly deepened her understanding of the weapon and its potential role in her own combat style.

Having gotten a thorough rundown and the opportunity to hold a fully modified version of the ballistic-type Gram in her hands, Thea couldn't help but think to herself, *'I definitely have to do a more thorough review on my equipment after this assessment...'*