

Arc 1 - Chapter 110 - New Orders

"When it comes to countering the influence of the Call of the Void, there are several effective strategies," Zach started off answering Thea's question.

"Firstly, in most cases, you can simply overpower it. It's similar to those intrusive thoughts you get when you're standing at a high place, feeling the urge to jump but you choose not to and just move on with your life. For Psykers, as you continue to strengthen your Resolve, dismissing these simple Calls becomes increasingly straightforward."

He paused momentarily, lost in thought, before shifting the topic slightly to give Thea a more comprehensive understanding. "Actually... Let's talk about Resolve for a moment. You've only had the initial System 101 lecture, which only quickly glossed over each Attribute and tried to pack Abilities, Classes, and everything else into a single day, right?"

Thea nodded, prompting Zach to continue with a slight sigh. "I figured as much... So, Resolve, as it was briefly introduced to you, probably seemed like just a defence against Psyker Abilities and something that enhances your own Psyker capabilities. But there's much more to it, as you might be starting to realise."

"Resolve is arguably the most complex of all Attributes because it directly interacts with your core self—your identity," Zach elaborated. "It enhances your ability to withstand not only the Void's influences but *all* forms of intrusive thoughts. Over the past 900 years or so, this has been a hot topic among scientists and researchers. Many believe that intrusive thoughts as a whole aren't just random but are in fact influenced by the Void's existence itself."

He leaned forward, emphasising his next point, "This train of thought *implies* that Resolve is essentially your defence mechanism against the Void—as originally described—but that's obviously an entirely different beast than simply defending you against Psykers, as is usually taught. This theory is mainly supported by anecdotal evidence, of course, but the general consensus is clear: Resolve fortifies you against unwanted thoughts that arise not from your conscious mind but from deeper, unconscious impulses, desires, or even those reflected from the Void itself."

Thea found herself struggling to keep up with the more philosophical and psychological aspects of Zach's explanation. Her expression must have conveyed her confusion quite clearly, because Zach quickly noticed and shifted gears to simplify the concepts for her.

"Let's break it down a bit," he said with a reassuring smirk. "Think of Resolve as your mental anchor. It helps you stay focused on your goals and ignore those pesky, distracting voices in your head that try to lead you astray. That's the basic gist of it."

His demeanour then shifted to a more serious tone as he delved deeper into the implications of Resolve. "*However*, there's a catch—as always. Increasing your Resolve *also* enlarges your Gate and enhances the amount of power you can channel from the Void, which in turn strengthens the Call of the Void. These elements are bound together by the very nature of the Attribute, so gaining one aspect inevitably enhances the other. It's believed that better

control over your Gate is what actually helps resist the Call, but this is still largely conjectural.”

Zach paused to let that sink in before continuing. “Essentially, managing your psychic abilities is a constant balancing act. The wider you open your Gate, the more power you access but the stronger the Call becomes. Conversely, the more you close it, the weaker the Call, but also the less power you have at your disposal.”

He raised two fingers, emphasising his point. “This leads us to another defence strategy against the Call: Shutting your Gate completely. It’s essentially foolproof but *drastically* limits your capabilities. Whenever the Call feels overwhelming, you can forcibly close your Gate. This action immediately cuts off the Call but reduces you to the capabilities of a regular Marine—or less, given that a Battlefield Psyker's Class functions are entirely dependent on their Psychic abilities...”

He leaned forward, stressing the importance of this tactic. “It’s not ideal, but sometimes it’s the *only* viable option. *Remember* this, Thea: You can always shut your Gate to stop the Call instantly. But be aware, that the Call *will* resist you and keep the Gate open; it’s like trying to snuff out a flame that fights to stay lit. Expect a battle whenever you attempt to close your Gate completely. Nothing’s eager to die, even something as intangible as an impulsive thought.”

Zach raised a third finger, indicating another point as Thea listened intently, ready to absorb more of the crucial information. “The last and final option might seem counterintuitive, and it should only be used as a last resort or a *carefully* calculated risk. Always think of this as a worst-case scenario, just to be safe, alright?”

He paused, ensuring Thea understood the gravity of what he was about to explain. She nodded sharply, signalling for him to continue.

“You *follow* the Call,” he stated plainly, locking eyes with her to emphasise his point. “You give in and let the Call of the Void guide your actions.”

Thea’s eyebrows shot up in surprise, her expression a mix of disbelief and curiosity as she awaited his explanation. By now, she knew that she didn’t have to ask for elaborations on these points, as Zach seemed more than willing to make sure she truly understood what he was talking about.

It didn’t take long for him to continue and prove her right, “Each Call typically influences just a single moment; a single decision or instance. So, following it once doesn’t *necessarily* doom you or those around you. Sometimes, yielding to the Call to satisfy the Void’s need for control is the *only* way to progress, especially in combat situations. Fighting the Call isn’t always feasible, nor is shutting your Gate if your Psychic Powers are crucial for keeping your squad alive or suppressing an enemy.

“In such cases, following the Call—if it seems relatively controllable in nature—can be a strategic gamble, intended to buy you some peace for the time being. It’s not a foolproof strategy, mind you, and it doesn’t *guarantee* that the Void won’t tempt you again soon, but historically, giving in to a Call often leads to a brief respite from further Calls for a short time.”

Zach recapped the three strategies for dealing with the Call of the Void, counting off on his fingers for emphasis; as if to really drive home the point for Thea. "First, you can overpower the Call; second, you can close your Gate; and third, you might follow it," he outlined.

"There are more esoteric methods as well, but those are best left for a long-term mentor to explain, as they are *significantly* more complex. I hope what we've covered today suffices for the remainder of this assessment."

Seeing the concern on his face, Thea rushed to express her gratitude and reassure him. "No, no! You've been incredibly helpful! This has been massively beneficial, for real! Thank you, Zach. Seriously! I didn't expect to learn even a fraction of what you've taught me today, so I'm more than grateful!"

Zach responded with a rueful smile, his voice carrying a note of frustration. "I really wish the UHF would stop keeping new Recruits in the dark as much... Especially Psykers, really. It doesn't help *anyone*. You'd think they'd be more open to changing their approaches, especially with the deadline looming. It's clear they haven't prepared you enough for what's at stake whatsoever."

Thea could only nod in agreement.

She had been contending with a significant lack of information from the start of her assessment; a dangerous gap in her training that nearly resulted in her death during an episode of Focus Overdraw—a risk she hadn't been warned about, or even knew existed, beforehand.

If not for Karania's timely intervention, she might have suffered a permanent death in what was *supposed* to be a safe training environment like the DDS.

Tremendously grateful for Zach's comprehensive guidance, however, she felt a strong sense of indebtedness. "Thank you once again, Zach. Seriously. If there's ever anything I can do to help you out, just let me know," she offered earnestly, a sincere offer of assistance.

Then, a realisation sparked in her mind in the broader context of the assessment, which she had missed to address with prior contacts she had met so far. "And just so you know, I'm from the Sovereign. If you need to get in touch after this assessment, I'm there. I'll be ready to assist you with anything, assessment-related or otherwise, to pay you back." She wanted to make absolutely sure that the lines of communication would remain open, even if Zach didn't get a chance to ask for her help in this assessment.

Zach responded with an easy smile, "Like most of the more experienced T1s in this assessment, I'm stationed at the Apex right now. I'll definitely remember your offer of help if I ever need assistance. It wasn't my intention to have you owe me a favour when I accepted this request, but given your unique circumstances, I admit it's reassuring to know that I have it available to me in the future. You have a lot of potential, assuming the UHF manages not to blunder your training and put you in undue danger... I really hope they don't," he added with a lighthearted chuckle that drew a small laugh from Thea.

“Me too,” she replied sincerely. “Really hope the UHF doesn’t get me killed for no reason either. Would *really* hate that, honestly.”

As their conversation seemed to be drawing to a close, Zach shifted slightly in his seat, preparing perhaps for their final exchange. “Is there anything else you need to know now? Any pressing questions? I think you’re about as prepared as you could have been for entering this assessment, especially with your understanding of the Gate and the Call of the Void,” he said, pausing thoughtfully. “Though I would have preferred to give you more preparation time. Is there anything else you’d like to ask while we’re here?”

Thea paused, considering her next words carefully.

It felt crucial to utilise this opportunity to its fullest, knowing that after this conversation, she might not have another chance to delve into these topics until after the assessment had finished.

Her internal list of burning questions was dauntingly long, however.

She sifted through them, prioritising urgency.

‘What’s truly crucial for the immediate future?’ she pondered.

After a few moments of careful consideration, she realised that the most pressing issues had already been addressed by their discussions up until now.

She had primarily been wondering about her Attribute increases, the Gate and Resolve as a whole, as well as how to get around the Call of the Void from taking over and ruining her.

Zach had managed to address all of it in an extremely efficient manner.

Turning back to him, she said, “I don’t think there’s anything else right now... I am extremely curious about this whole Path and Inheritance business, but based on everything I’ve understood about it up until now, it seems to be one of those “That’s going to take a while” topics that would better be covered post-assessment, yes?”

With a nod that spoke volumes about the complexity of the topic, Zach confirmed her suspicions.

“Then I guess... That’s about it. But if there’s anything else *you* think I should know or any advice you can give, I’m all ears. I have countless questions, but we’ve covered the essentials for surviving the assessment. Still, if there’s something you think I shouldn’t overlook, please tell me.”

Zach paused thoughtfully before responding, “I can’t really think of anything else right now. I’m sure something will come to mind the moment you leave, as it always does, but at this moment, I think we’ve covered the essentials. You’re about as prepared as you can be under these circumstances.”

Thea and Zach rose from their chairs, and Thea bowed deeply, her gesture of respect making Zach visibly uncomfortable with such a formal thank you. “Thank you so much, Zach.

You've quite literally saved my life today, and I won't forget that. I'll find a way to repay you one day," she promised, her voice laden with sincere gratitude.

Zach seemed on the verge of brushing off her thanks with a casual wave but stopped himself. "No worries," he replied, a genuine smile touching his lips. "It was no big deal, and if it helps keep you alive, then it's all worthwhile. Just remember to use your Powers wisely, but don't be too *afraid* of them either. It defeats the whole purpose of being a Psyker if you're too scared to tap into what you're capable of. And honestly, I'm looking forward to hearing about the kind of impact you're going to make. I have a strange feeling your name will pop up in the after-action reports, and not just in a small way."

While she had been a part of some seriously intense missions so far, this was an assessment with thousands upon thousands of Marines; many of which were vastly higher level than her. The chance that *her* actions, specifically, would be featured in the after-action report were slim to none.

But at the same time, she didn't want to deny what was essentially her mentor's opinions. With a respectful nod, she acknowledged his words as the best response she could muster.

With one final thank you, she turned and left the room quickly, keen to avoid prolonging the farewell or spiralling into another cycle of gratitude and reassurances.

As the door closed behind her, a wave of relief and elation washed over her.

'Searching out a Psyker to guide me was definitely the right move. A+ decision, Thea. Well done,' she praised herself mentally. Her initial doubts about finding a mentor who could truly enlighten her in the middle of the assessment had been completely dispelled by Zach's generous and insightful guidance.

Resolute in her promise to herself, Thea vowed, *'I'll definitely repay him. No matter what.'*

With that firm commitment in mind, she headed back to her own barracks, eager to rejoin her squad and share some of the things she had learned over the past hours...

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Thea's walk through the FOB felt odd and uncomfortable to her. As if everything around her had suddenly turned up its saturation and noise levels by a large factor.

It had been quite a while since she had experienced this level of improvement in her natural abilities; as she had kept her Attribute Points locked away in fear for quite some time now.

'This new Perception is definitely going to take some time to get used to,' she thought, realising the influx of sensory information was too much. She toggled a desaturation mode on her armour, hoping it would help reduce the overwhelming stimuli.

'Should be fine over an hour or two, I hope,' she reassured herself, feeling the relief as her armour began to filter out the excess noise and brightness.

As she continued toward the barracks, her thoughts drifted back to the advice she received from Zach.

His words had provided clarity, but a large, lingering uncertainty still remained.

Thea wasn't sure if she had the courage to freely use her Psychic Powers—to open her Gate at her own leisure—, given that every previous attempt had resulted in chaos, danger, or worse.

The memory of her Awakening still sent shivers down her spine.

She remembered the living nightmare it had become too vividly.

The other instances of trying to access her Gate also only ended up in the close calls with death, and the encounter with the enemy Ace that had ended in her first assessment death.

'Not a great score card there, all things considered...'

But Zach's final words echoed in her mind as well, pushing against her hesitation. He had warned her not to fear her powers but to wield them with confidence and control. After all, it was what she had invested all of her Attribute Points into.

*'It really **would** be a massive waste of points if I didn't at least use what I've already invested in, wouldn't it? Almost like lab-ing a whiff-punish and then never using it...'* she mused, understanding that she needed to face the challenge ahead with *all* of the tools at her disposal.

Arbitrarily limiting herself as she had been out of fear might have made sense up until now, given that she'd been running blind when it came to anything psychic.

But with some concrete answers from Zach, Thea understood that manipulating the Gate wasn't inherently dangerous, as long as it wasn't done with rabid abandon.

With this newfound knowledge, the only thing stopping her now was genuine fear.

'Baby steps, Thea. Don't go too crazy, no matter what you do, and you should be fine,' she reassured herself, deciding that she would start exploring her Psychic Powers, at least a little more freely. Even if it meant taking slow, steady steps, progress was still progress.

Before she knew it, she had already arrived at barracks #7.

With a light heart, she dashed inside and made her way to the room where the rest of her squad was waiting. She could hear Isabella, Desmond, and Lucas having a loud, animated discussion even before reaching the door, which made her smile despite the lingering uncertainties from her recent conversation with Zach.

It was a comforting sound, full of life and energy.

"I'm back!" she announced, opening the door with an exaggerated flourish. It felt like returning home—or something that was beginning to feel like it, at least.

The moment she stepped inside, the three squad members swarmed her, all talking over each other in an attempt to get her opinion on whatever they were arguing about. Their overlapping voices made it impossible for her to understand anything, despite her newly enhanced Perception.

Ignoring the chaos, Thea's eyes met Karania's, who was back to her unusual hobby of drawing and storing her own blood. Karania simply raised an eyebrow as if to say "Well, how are you going to handle this?"

'*What a mess...*' she thought with a quiet laugh at the absurdity of the scene.

Judging by the squad's casual demeanour and lack of urgency, they hadn't received any new orders yet. Thea found herself grateful for the brief moment of peace.

Feeling a sense of ease for the first time in what seemed like ages, she gestured for the three loud-mouths to quiet down with a big grin and pointed at Lucas, asking, "Alright, lay it down. What's this whole discussion about...?"

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The day wound down without further drama for Thea.

She relished the downtime with Alpha Squad, savouring the simple pleasure of resting in an actual bed at the FOB—albeit a stiff, military-grade one. It was a luxury compared to the makeshift beds in abandoned buildings they'd been accustomed to over the past weeks, using only scant padding for comfort at best.

Taking advantage of the quiet evening, Thea shared the wealth of information she had gathered from Zach.

She explained the different classifications of Psykers—Psy Sensitive, Psyker, and Battlefield Psyker—and discussed the ominous phenomenon known as the Call of the Void. She emphasised how crucial it was for the squad to be aware of these concepts, even if they seemed distant realities now.

Given her own recent struggles with lacking critical information, Thea felt it better to overprepare the rest of them than to find them all blindsided at a later date.

Her conversation with Karania went deeper into the night, the two dissecting everything Thea had learned.

She poured out the details, trusting Karania with the nuances of her newfound understanding of their psychic potential. She confided in her friend on just about everything she could, which also led to her getting punched once, as she mentioned how she had gotten her head smashed into a table.

Karania's reaction was as intense as it was immediate upon hearing about Thea's near-concussion experience.

"Why the fuck did you just say that now?! You could have had a concussion—or worse! For hours! What's wrong with you?!" she had said, visibly upset by the over-late mention of the injury.

Without waiting for an answer, she had insisted on performing a thorough medical examination right then and there, in the middle of the night, claiming she needed to ensure Thea's "brain wasn't damaged beyond the usual amount."

After confirming Thea was mostly alright, Karania handed her two knock-out injectors from her own supply, insisting she add them to her quick-access gear.

"Knowing how to handle a Psyker meltdown could have been lifesaving information—like *three fucking weeks ago!*" Karania grumbled, her frustration echoing Thea's sentiments.

It was one thing to not let a "random" Marine like her know, but to not even include Squad Medics in-the-know? That was beyond ridiculous in her eyes. They were the only type of Marine that was *bound* to work cross-Squad, regardless of whether they were mere Recruits or Privates or whatever else.

The oversight seemed almost negligent, considering Karania's role could have placed her in direct contact with unstable Psykers without any clue on how to effectively intervene.

They had ruminated for a while about the UHF's intentions behind this, seemingly purposeful, lack of intelligence on even crucial aspects, but even Karania, despite her ludicrous intellect, couldn't come up with a satisfying answer; much to both of their chagrin.

Eventually, as the clock ticked past 2 AM, they decided to end their night of vexing revelations and troubling thoughts, settling down to catch some much-needed rest.

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Thea's morning started abruptly as her comms device buzzed her awake.

Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she squinted at the glowing screen, scanning the new orders that had come through.

[=== Orders: Sovereign Alpha 01 ===]

[Objective: Report to Corporal Phantoal at the eastern front.]

[Additional Intel: Transportation to the eastern front leaves at 0930 from the north-eastern gate.]

[=== Signed: Staff-Sergeant Venn ===]

It was definitely short and to the point; but Thea really couldn't complain.

There wasn't really much more that needed to be conveyed, except who their target was and where they were.

The additional intel provided was definitely a nice touch however, as she now didn't have to figure out how to request this kind of stuff—it was Corvus' job to do that, usually.

With the orders fresh in her mind, Thea set about waking the others.

She soon discovered that Isabella had already risen, having taken to the break room for an early morning workout session. The sound of clanging weights greeted Thea as she found Isabella, drenched in sweat, lifting with a focused intensity.

Thea was honestly hoping to engage in a deeper conversation with Isabella, much like the one she had with Karania the previous night, but the ticking clock and their imminent departure pressed on her.

She shelved the idea for a later time, though she was eager to check in on Isabella and ensure that the heavy was doing alright.

Since their ordeal in the service tunnels, Isabella had thrown herself into her physical training with a fervour that bordered on the obsessive.

It seemed as if she was driven by a fear of lagging behind the squad, though Thea knew that notion was far from reality. In a direct confrontation, Isabella could almost certainly overpower the rest of them single-handedly, even if they all tried to go against her at the same time, yet the shadows of recent events seemed to loom large over her.

'I wish I had Corvus' knack for this...' Thea mused silently, lamenting her lack of finesse in handling such personal matters as she sat quietly beside Isabella, who was lost in her rigorous workout.

She waited for the rest of the squad to gather, reflecting on her own recent growth.

While she had made significant progress in many areas, interpersonal interactions remained a severely challenging frontier for her. Corvus had always been the heart of Alpha Squad in these matters, a skill she now realised she needed to cultivate more attentively.

While Thea had learned during their covert operation into Nova Tertius that competing with her teammates in their prime specialties was a fool's errand, this understanding didn't deter her from striving to excel by observing and learning from them.

In her mind, she compared it to when she faced a Zoner in AoC.

Despite her character, Freya, being a Setplay type, that had never stopped Thea from observing and learning about Zoner's playstyles and incorporating aspects of it into her own gameplay.

Mixups that came from other types were her specialty when it came to fighting games; no reason this couldn't apply to her role as a Marine as well.

She would never be as good as the others at their specialty, but at the very least, she could learn how to be second or third best in everything; in addition to her own expertise.

It was a sure-fire way to get the #1 spot on the leaderboard, regardless of mission type they were sent on. This was her new ultimate plan, until new revelations potentially made that plan obsolete in the future...

