

Volume 2 - Interlude 76.5 - Speculum

The garden had always been her favorite place.

Artificial sunlight filtered down in warm, golden sheets, soft enough to kiss the skin but never burn.

The air smelled of fresh petals and faint sugar. Flowers in every color imaginable stretched endlessly in neat rows—crimson, cobalt, lilac, gold—each one sculpted to impossible perfection. Bees hummed lazily between blossoms that glowed faintly with internal light.

Her mother held her hand as they walked down the winding stone path.

“You’re growing so quickly,” her mother said gently, her voice warm and proud. “Six already. I can still remember when you were barely larger than my forearm, honey...”

They passed beneath an arch of incandescent flowers, their petals shimmering like glass caught in sunlight, and stepped into a pagoda at the center of the field. The structure was carved from pale wood and gold inlay, wind chimes ringing softly in the artificial breeze.

Inside, seven figures knelt in a perfect row.

Their hands were bound behind their backs.

Their ankles were fastened to durasteel loops set into the polished floor.

Dark hoods covered their heads. Their breathing came quick and ragged. When they heard footsteps, they began to squirm, muffled cries pressing against the fabric over their mouths.

The girl tightened her grip on her mother’s hand.

Her mother knelt in front of her, smiling sweetly.

“Congratulations, honey. You are old enough now to learn the first true steps of the family business.”

From within her sleeve, she produced a knife.

It was not one of the dull, balanced training blades the girl had practiced with since she could stand. This one was ornate—iridescent filigree along the hilt, a polished black grip, and a blade so clean it mirrored the colourful flowers behind them.

She placed it into the girl’s hands.

“Now,” her mother said softly, a large smile on her face, turning her toward the kneeling line, “let me teach you how to kill a man.”

The hooded figures began to thrash harder, desperate sounds pushing through their gags.

Her mother’s tone remained calm and clinical as ever. But most importantly, loving.

“There are many ways. If you cut here—” she guided the girl’s small hand toward the side of the first captive’s neck—“the carotid artery. It’s quick and efficient. Blood loss is rapid. The drawback? It’s very messy and has a bit of a habit of spraying.”

She tilted the girl’s wrist slightly.

“Alternatively, under the arm. The axillary artery. Harder to access. Slower bleed but grants more control.”

She traced down to the inner thigh.

“The femoral. Very reliable. But you must be precise. Too shallow and they linger. Too deep and you lose control of the blade.”

The girl listened.

Her mother leaned closer. “Do not worry, honey. These are all criminals. Every one of them. You are not doing something wrong. You are helping make the universe a better place.”

The girl nodded.

She obeyed.

The first cut was hesitant but clinically accurate, just as she had been taught. Her mother did not even need to correct her grip.

The second was cleaner still.

By the third, the girl’s hands were fully steady.

Her mother explained nerve clusters. Explained shock. Explained the balance between speed, silence and mess. Pros and cons of vertical versus lateral incisions.

How long each method would take. How to prevent, hide and mask arterial spray.

The cries grew weaker with each lesson, the hooded things stopped squirming as much—accepting.

Petals drifted in the artificial breeze.

The girl obeyed again.

And again.

Until only one remained.

Her mother stopped her before the final hooded figure.

She wiped the blade gently with a cloth and smiled.

“Perfect form,” she murmured, wrapping her daughter in a tight embrace. “Not a single missed cut. I’m so *proud* of you, honey.”

The girl leaned into her, breathing in the familiar scent of jasmine.

“As a reward,” her mother said lightly, “I saved something special for last.”

She stepped forward and pulled the hood away.

The girl blinked.

The captive’s eyes *glowed*.

Her mother chuckled softly. “I had this one imported from the Midworlds. Rare. *Very* rare, this far in. But nothing we cannot afford. A treat for my favorite little girl.”

The bound figure trembled, breathing shallow and fast.

“Be careful when looking into its eyes,” her mother added, adjusting the girl’s grip on the knife. “They are not human eyes. They belong to a beast. They can be... deeply unsettling.”

The girl stepped closer. She hesitated, her mother’s words making her apprehensive.

But curiosity won out—she looked.

Her breath stocked. Not because she was scared. But because she did not see a beast.

She saw *beauty*.

Galaxies spiraled within an infinite void. Nebulas bloomed in silent color. Points of light flickered like gemstones suspended in endless darkness.

It was not unsettling in the least. It was the most beautiful thing the girl had ever seen.

Her mother’s voice reached her then, patient and encouraging.

“There is one more technique I haven’t shown you yet. This one is delicate. Step forward, honey. Place the blade just here—”

The girl did not move.

The knife felt heavy in her hands.

The cyan-coloured eyes held hers, tears streaming down the thing’s—person’s face.

Her mother’s voice sharpened, only slightly. “Go on, honey. *Finish* your lesson.”

The girl did not obey...

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[*Memory Excerpt: “First Lesson in Bloom”, PFC930*]

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PoV: Karania Faulkner

Karania's laughter faded on its own, the sound trailing off naturally as her gaze landed on someone she recognized instantly—despite never having properly seen her in person before.

'*So this is her...*' She thought and her mind did what it always did in moments like this: It captured the instant like a photograph.

The world around her seemed to pause as she immediately slipped into her memory vault out of pure habit. She opened the last half second of her perception and replayed it, watching the moment unfold again from her own eyes.

She was finishing the last of her laughter—head tilted slightly, shoulders loose as the sound died down—when movement flickered at the edge of her vision. The motion alone had been enough to hook Karania's attention, dragging her focus sideways a heartbeat later.

A figure stepped into view. Evelyne, apparently.

Their eyes met again in the replay, just like they had a moment ago in reality, as the memory froze on that final frame.

Karania's mind immediately went to work.

'*Eyes first. Always the eyes...*'

Her focus tightened on Evelyne's pupils, studying the dilation, the tiny shifts around the iris, the faint tension in the surrounding muscles.

Looking for signs of surprise, anxiety, maybe even startlement. Most people would show *something* when they suddenly found themselves facing nearly the entirety of Alpha Squad.

Evelyne did as well.

Her pupils widened just a fraction, the muscles around her eyes tightening for a heartbeat.

Not in panic or outright alarm—just a brief, very human flicker of surprise.

The sort of reaction someone might have when walking into a room and realizing there were far more people waiting than expected.

A natural reaction.

Controlled almost immediately, but a flicker of it remained around the girl's eyes regardless.

Body language came next.

Karania rewound the half second again, slowing it further as Evelyne stepped into view, studying the way the girl moved through the moment frame by frame.

The motion remained smooth throughout, her step flowing naturally into the space without the smallest hitch or break in rhythm even as her eyes visibly registered how many people were waiting for her. Her shoulders stayed surprisingly loose, her posture upright, and her center of gravity balanced in a way that suggested comfort.

That alone was a *very* interesting reaction.

Karania had specifically arranged this little ambush, asking the rest of the squad to arrive early so Evelyne would walk straight into a wall of unexpected faces the moment she arrived. She had not disclosed that this was the reason for them arriving early, of course, but that *had* been the intent from the start.

Most people would falter for at least a fraction of a second—slow their pace, shift their weight, glance around as their brain scrambled to reassess the situation and re-evaluate the social dynamics of the room.

Evelyne hadn't.

Aside from the brief reaction in her eyes, the rest of Evelyne's movement flowed forward smoothly, without the slightest hesitation.

That made her briefly consider another possibility.

One in which Evelyne might simply be doing what Karania herself did in most social situations—carefully controlling her reactions and presenting a version of herself that looked natural enough to pass without question.

'Or maybe I'm just looking for ghosts,' she thought dryly as the idea formed, well aware that she had approached this meeting already *expecting* to find something off about the girl, and that expectation alone could easily poison an otherwise clean analysis.

Another explanation pushed itself forward immediately to counteract the bias: The girl might simply be a naturally extroverted person who didn't see an unexpected crowd as something worth hesitating over.

'Corvus would have walked into this exact situation with the same ease,' Karania had to admit, and she knew for an absolute fact that he was nothing even remotely close to an infiltrator—just a natural social butterfly.

Her attention shifted downward to continue her analysis regardless, moving on from posture and movement to the next obvious source of information: Clothing.

Evelyne wore a form-fitting outfit, though not in a way that felt particularly aggressive or attention-seeking in any way. The lilac top followed the line of her torso without actually clinging to it, the fabric soft and slightly loose around the waist, while the beige pants mirrored the same design philosophy—tailored enough to define her silhouette but relaxed enough to pass easily as casual wear.

For a meetup like this, it was undeniably a sensible, if more stylish than baseline choice.

Karania replayed and slowed the memory further, then began examining the details mid-movement.

Her attention moved across the fabric, tracing the creases where the cloth folded around Evelyne's hips and thighs as she moved, searching for the small mistakes people tended to leave behind when they dressed in a hurry—uneven pulls in the fabric, twisted seams, careless bunching that most people never even noticed.

There were strangely few of them.

A couple of faint wrinkles ran along the pants, subtle lines that suggested the clothes had been worn for a while rather than freshly adjusted just before coming around the corner and into view, but nothing that actually spoke of long-term wear besides.

The top, meanwhile, sat slightly off at one shoulder, and when Karania's head slowly moved towards the girl inside the memory by a few degrees she noticed that, from certain angles, a narrow sliver of violet bra fabric became visible beneath the collar.

'Not too careful with her clothes, then,' Karania concluded.

Her attention shifted upward again.

The braid running down Evelyne's back was *immaculate*, woven so tightly and evenly that not a single strand had slipped loose. Karania's thoughts—and the memory itself—paused as she studied it, because that level of precision simply didn't happen by accident.

It took a lot of time, effort *and* skill.

Yet the hair framing Evelyne's face told a very different story about the level of care.

The dark strands forming a neat box around her features were far less controlled, with a few small locks sitting slightly out of alignment as though they had slipped free during the walk over.

It was a strange, unnatural combination that Karania earmarked for later review.

She moved on to examine the makeup.

And that was when the *entire* analysis ground to a halt.

It was *incredible*—not in an obvious or flashy way, but in how carefully restrained every detail was. Nothing about it jumped out immediately; there were no heavy lines, no dramatic colours, no elements that tried to dominate the face.

Instead, every brush stroke was subtle enough that it effectively disappeared and melded.

Which, of course, was *exactly* what made it stand out in Karania's eyes.

A faint violet shade rested around Evelyne's eyes, adding just enough colour to make them stand out without ever becoming the center of attention. The blending was literally flawless, the contouring so smooth it was practically invisible unless someone already knew *exactly* where to look—or had all the time in the world to do so.

'Perfect, down to the smallest detail...' Karania breathed in quiet awe before catching herself. The thought made her mind stall for a moment, and then her entire analysis collapsed and began rebuilding itself from the ground up.

The clothes weren't *sloppy*, but deliberate.

That occasional glimpse of bra fabric wasn't an *accident*—it was bait, a tiny controlled slip meant to catch wandering eyes and hold attention for just a fraction longer while simultaneously making her seem more approachable and down-to-earth.

The faint creases in the pants weren't signs of longer-worn *carelessness* either. Instead, they were subtle cues that made the outfit feel natural, worn, and comfortable in a way that lowered other people's guard.

Just like Karania's guard had lowered just a moment ago.

Even the misbehaving strands of hair framing Evelyne's face suddenly looked different when viewed through that lens. They weren't messy at all, but carefully arranged imperfections designed to look that way.

Which also cast her reaction to the surprise of Alpha Squad being there in a different light.

Evelyne had probably been genuinely surprised when she walked up, but she might have decided in the same instant that the best response was to let a small hint of it show in her eyes while keeping the rest of her movements steady—becoming the perfect image of a social butterfly to throw off anyone watching closely.

Just like Karania herself would have.

The only elements that seemed out of place in that performance were the braid and the makeup, both of which were simply *too* precise and *too* flawless to truly belong to the casual image Evelyne was presenting.

The real question now was *why*.

'Why go to all that effort to hide your capabilities,' Karania wondered, *'only to leave such obvious clues in your hair and makeup? That doesn't make **any** sense. If you were capable of doing all this, then you would not miss the fact that your hair and makeup would immediately give you away to anyone paying close enough attention... Am I overthinking this? Does she simply care that much more about her braid and her makeup than the rest of her appearance for some reason...?'*

Seen from that angle, the rest of the picture fit a lot better. If the braid and makeup were simply habits from her upbringing—something personal she cared deeply about—then the rest of the small inconsistencies in her appearance would no longer seem as strange.

But which explanation was the truth? From a purely analytical standpoint, both possibilities carried about the same amount of merit, especially with how little information she actually had to work with here.

Her first suspicion—that something about Evelyne had to be off—could very well be correct, considering the inconsistencies she had noticed so far. Karania could already feel the faint tingling running down her spine, at the thought that her first suspicions might turn out to be right.

At the same time however, the simpler explanation could just as easily be the real one. That she was merely a social butterfly that had a personal attachment to makeup and her braid—not exactly common to have such fixations, but also not unheard of.

Still... Karania didn't like guessing.

Guessing meant assumptions, and assumptions meant mistakes. And mistakes, in her experience, tended to end with blood in places it wasn't supposed to be.

Which, admittedly, wasn't always a bad thing, but still.

She leaned back slightly in the endless mental space of her memory vault, arms loosely folded as she stared at the mental reconstruction of Evelyne she had been studying.

Makeup fixation. Hair braid. Social tendencies.

Nothing conclusive.

"Not enough data," Karania muttered to herself with mild irritation.

Her brain liked patterns. It liked clean conclusions. Preferably with charts.

This was neither.

Which meant the only sensible course of action was gathering more information.

With a small mental shrug, she dismissed the frozen projection entirely. The endless expanse of the memory vault folded away around her like closing curtains, the quiet analytical stillness dissolving as she let herself return to the outside world.

Reality snapped back into motion.

Murmurs of ongoing conversation and the faint noises wafting over from the arcade behind them caught her ears immediately.

Right on cue, the first person noticed Evelyne's approach, which was of course Thea.

Karania didn't even need to turn her head to know that much.

Thea's Perception was frankly unfair most of the time and she had been doing an admirable job of working on her lacking passive spatial awareness in the last few weeks.

The moment Evelyne stepped into view, Thea's head tilted slightly as her attention locked onto the approaching figure. Then she turned fully, her expression softening just a little in that subtle way she did when she recognized someone she didn't entirely mind seeing.

Thea lifted her hand and gave a small, casual wave.

It was the most harmless gesture imaginable—although undeniably cute.

And Evelyne almost ate the floor immediately.

The girl's foot caught awkwardly mid-step, as if the simple act of being acknowledged had short-circuited her entire nervous system for a brief and very unfortunate moment.

Her body pitched forward for a fraction of a second before she corrected it with an impressively sharp shift of balance, catching herself with a quick adjustment of her hips and shoulders that prevented the stumble from turning into a full fall.

Karania's eyes sharpened instantly.

'Oh?'

That had been... *very* interesting.

Before the moment had even fully played out—everything stopped again.

Time froze like someone had pressed pause on reality itself, Evelyne suspended mid-recovery, her weight shifting back onto her heel as she stabilized herself.

The memory vault welcomed Karania back with its familiar sterile quiet.

"Alright," she said. "Let's see what *that* was all about."

The moment replayed.

The space in front of the arcade reconstructed itself around her, every angle perfectly preserved. Evelyne's approach played out again from the exact perspective Karania had witnessed.

Their eyes meeting for a brief second, then Thea realizing that Evelyne had arrived.

Thea turned, followed by the cute wave.

And then—*freeze*.

Karania leaned forward slightly, eyes narrowing as she isolated the exact instant Evelyne noticed the gesture.

She zoomed in closer.

Evelyne's face filled her view.

“There,” she murmured to herself.

Her eyes.

They had widened, and not all too subtly, either.

The dilation of her pupils had followed immediately after.

Karania tilted her head thoughtfully.

“Well isn’t that interesting...”

The recording resumed.

Thea’s wave had continued, and in the split second that followed Evelyne’s brain had clearly failed to process the event in any reasonable way, her posture destabilizing as her step went wrong and turned into a near stumble before the moment froze again.

Karania walked slowly around the suspended projection like a curious scientist examining a specimen under glass, studying every angle of the halted movement.

“Body control correction,” she muttered.

Because Evelyne had caught herself right away—very well, actually. Her hips had shifted instinctively while her shoulders adjusted in perfect counterbalance, allowing her to recover from the misstep before it could fully become a fall. That level of control wasn’t easy nor accidental, which meant the stumble itself hadn’t come from mere clumsiness at all.

It had to have come from pure shock.

Karania replayed the moment again, and again, and again, each time slowing the sequence further while isolating smaller and smaller details: The exact instant Evelyne noticed Thea, the sharp dilation of her pupils, the quick intake of breath that followed half a second later, and the faint tightening of her fingers as her right hand twitched reflexively at her side.

“Ohhh,” she murmured slowly.

That wasn’t admiration, and it *definitely* wasn’t hero worship, nor even the kind of mild social awkwardness people sometimes showed around someone they looked up to.

No—those were even more classical physiological signs.

She ran the clip again one more time just to be absolutely certain.

Pupil dilation. Loss of composure. Motor disruption. Immediate emotional spike.

Karania exhaled slowly through her nose, crossing her arms as she leaned back.

“Well,” she said flatly. “That’s... pretty definitive, I’d say.”

The white space of the memory vault dimmed slightly as the analysis concluded, the reconstructed moment dissolving into scattered fragments of light while Karania rubbed her temple with mild disbelief.

“...*Seriously* though? I mean... I get it. Thea is unbelievably cute, but... *Really?*”

Because there really wasn't much room for interpretation anymore.

Evelyne clearly wasn't just some enthusiastic fan reacting to someone she admired.

The girl had taken one casual wave from Thea and nearly tripped over her own feet like her brain had short-circuited on the spot.

Karania sighed in mild disgruntlement.

“Girl's got a massive crush on Thea...”

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PoV: Evelynne Midra Sen

Getting hit with such a vicious psychic attack right from the start had definitely not been Evelynne's preferred way of introducing herself to additional members of Alpha Squad, but seeing the cute little wave from her Thea had still been worth the wave of embarrassment that followed almost immediately afterward.

Having managed to catch herself before she could actually fall over and trying her absolute best to play the whole thing off as nothing more than a moment of simple clumsiness, she returned the wave as well as she could—even if she couldn't quite hide the big, goofy smile spreading across her face at seeing her Thea greet her like this.

'She's the first one to say hi! To me! Exclusively to me!' she thought, struggling to keep her emotions under control and not let the excitement bubbling up inside her show *too* obviously.

A moment later, the rest of the group—specifically Callahan and Reimart—also stepped forward to properly complete the gathering, with the hulking Defensive Heavy giving her a friendly nod of acknowledgment while Reimart seemed entirely incapable of keeping his eyes from roaming in a way that was just a little too obvious.

Evelyne noted the behavior quietly out of the corner of her eye for later consideration, though her main focus remained firmly on Thea, and of course on Karania Faulkner standing calmly at her side.

She had only briefly met the Medic's eyes when she first approached, but that single glance had already been enough to send a faint chill down her spine—and standing this close to her now explained exactly *why*.

The other girl's gentle smile directed her way was fake.

Not fake in the casual way people sometimes forced polite smiles during conversations, but exceptionally well crafted, precise in a way that made Evelyne immediately recognize the effort behind it.

‘She’s like me...!’ Evelyne realized, taking the extra few moments she now had to really observe Karania Faulkner more carefully and letting her senses quietly sweep over Alpha Squad’s Medic.

“Thanks for coming again, Evelyne,” Callahan opened the conversation, his voice drawing her visible attention back toward him—though she kept her primary focus on Karania Faulkner regardless, the realization that the girl was a surprisingly skilled social manipulator instantly skyrocketing her importance in Evelyne’s mind.

‘Was I too late, then...? Is my MMM already spoken for by another legacy...? But Karania Faulkner isn’t listed as one... Who in the Emperor’s name is this woman?!’

“No problem. I’m happy to help,” she answered with an easy smile, carefully drowning the panicking thoughts in the pond of her mind. “I figured that yesterday’s Assembly might be cause for a bit of an emergency get-together, so I’m just glad that I can hopefully be of help.”

Thea was the one who took charge right after that, barely even letting the conversation settle before she spoke up in her usual straightforward manner.

“We should probably get going if we actually want to get done before night time,” she said simply, already shifting her weight as if the decision to get started had never really been up for debate in the first place.

That had Reimart looking slightly confused as he pulled out his datapad and stared down at it, likely checking the time—it was only around 9AM—only for his expression to twist further as he seemed to grow even more confused by what his screen was telling him.

Thea, meanwhile, didn’t appear even remotely concerned with whether the others were following along or not. She had already turned and started walking into the arcade without another word, moving with that quiet certainty she always carried whenever she had decided something was the correct course of action.

Karania Faulkner raised an eyebrow toward Callahan as she watched their scout disappear through the entrance ahead of them, the expression clearly asking a silent question.

Callahan merely shrugged and let out an amused chuckle.

“Yeah,” he said easily, nodding toward the arcade entrance, “that’s arcade-Thea for you. Be ready for quite a bit of a different experience around her.”

Then he turned toward Reimart, who was still staring down at his datapad like it had personally offended him.

“I wasn’t kidding when I said Thea and I have been training *all day* recently, Desmond,” Callahan added casually. “We’re gonna be here for the next fourteen, fifteen hours or so.”

Reimart's head snapped up at that, his eyes widening into absolute saucers.

"Fifteen *hours*?!" he blurted out in disbelief. "What in the fuck would we even be doing for fifteen hours? There's no fucking way that's in any way useful!"

Callahan only chuckled again at the reaction before starting after Thea without bothering to argue the point.

Evelyne decided to tag along beside him as he moved, giving the large man an amused little chuckle of her own and offering him a small, camaraderie-like grin.

"He'll learn the hard way, huh?" she said lightly.

That hit the spot perfectly, judging by the way Callahan laughed again and nodded with mock gravity. "That, he will."

With the small social exchange completed and the obligation of endearing herself a little further to Callahan neatly taken care of, Evelynne allowed her main attention to shift right back to Karania Faulkner, who was now walking along with them on the other side of the big man.

The positioning made it somewhat difficult for Evelynne to properly see the other woman while they moved through the arcade entrance together, but that didn't actually matter all that much.

Even just listening was more than enough.

Her ears picked up the soft rhythm of Karania's steps, the subtle pattern of her breathing, and the steady cadence of her heartbeat beneath it all, giving Evelynne plenty of information to quietly begin assembling a clearer picture of who this Karania Faulkner actually was.

Because Evelynne had expected to meet a genius, sure.

She had *not* expected to find whatever the Medic of Alpha Squad apparently actually was.

"Wait here," her Thea said from just in front of them, not even bothering to check if anyone had actually heard her as she casually stepped up to the reception area like the instruction had already been accepted by everyone present.

That immediately prompted Karania Faulkner to turn toward Callahan again, an odd, disbelieving expression appearing on her face as she watched Thea move ahead of the group.

'So this is very much unlike my MMM, huh?' Evelynne thought quietly as she observed the exchange. *'As her best friend, Faulkner should know more about Thea than anyone else, but apparently she hasn't really seen this "side" of her very much... I wonder what the difference is? It must be a surprisingly big one... But how? When I first met my Thea to ask for the autograph, she was basically just like this. Whenever I talk to her, she's pretty much just as domineering and all-encompassing...'*

"I told you," Callahan repeated his earlier remark with another rumbling chuckle, clearly enjoying the situation more than he probably should, "she's like a whole different person."

"No kidding," the Medic answered right away, shaking her head slowly while sounding just as amused by the situation.

"What, exactly, is different about her?" Evelyne asked, tossing the question into the conversation and immediately catching the attention of both of them.

A chortling half-laugh came from behind them as Reimart finally caught up with the group and decided to answer the question before either of the others could respond.

"You mean aside from basically *everything*?" he said with a snort. "She's acting like a damn drill sergeant today. Normally she's just about the last person to ever speak up about anything in the squad dorms. Corvus is trying to make her into our secondary team lead or whatever—and she'd do great, no doubt—but socially? Thea's a complete fucking mess."

He immediately cowed a little and raised both hands defensively, Evelyne catching Karania Faulkner's death-stare aimed directly at him out of the corner of her eye.

"What?!" he protested quickly. "It's the truth! I'm not trying to shit on her or anything, I swear!" he insisted while gesturing vaguely between them. "You're the one giving Lucas all those looks like you can't believe this is the same Thea, not me!"

He had her there, Evelyne had to admit. And apparently Faulkner couldn't deny it either, judging by the lengthy sigh she let out afterward.

'This isn't why you stared at him like that though, was it...?' Evelyne wondered quietly as she listened more carefully to the subtle shifts in Faulkner's breathing and the faint change in the rhythm of her heartbeat. 'You're suspicious of me and don't want him to share this much intel about Alpha Squad—or about Thea, maybe?'

Her eyes narrowed ever so slightly as she continued thinking it through.

'If she's this cautious about me, I need to make absolutely sure not to mess up. She hasn't been paying a lot of attention to me so far, but given that little tip of the hand just now, it's very apparent that she thinks I'm a problem, so it's just a matter of time until she does...'

"Desmond pretty much summed it up," Callahan added after a moment. "Remember what I told you on the lead-up to our first meet here, while we were both waiting for Thea? About how she's super easy going and often doesn't even really pick up on social stuff at all? That's all true. The Thea you're meeting here inside the arcade isn't really the Thea we usually deal with. This is... Arcade-Thea?"

He shrugged, "Like, you know, her competitive side, I guess. She's usually a lot more coy in social situations. *Far* more coy, actually. Think about those first few times she walked up on stage during the Awards Ceremony—remember how much of a mess she was back then? That's the *real* Thea."

“Huh,” Evelyne replied, carefully giving her best impression of someone who was simply taking the explanation at face value.

Internally, however, she felt a brief flicker of anger spark at Callahan’s words.

‘How dare he talk like that about my MMM? She’d never be coy around anyone or anything! This is ridiculous!’ she fumed quietly in her mind. *‘A three-times Galactic Super Champion would not be worried about stupid things like social interactions, that’s absolutely ludicrous. Every time she talks to me there’s not even the faintest hint of any of that!’*

Then a sudden thought hit her.

‘Wait... what if that’s just me...?’

The idea settled into place quickly, spreading through her thoughts faster than she had expected.

‘What if... what if my Thea actually feels comfortable around me already? And that’s why she is so straightforward and confident whenever we talk...!’

Her heartbeat immediately sped up at the realization, forcing her to clamp down hard on the surge of emotions bubbling up inside her so she could get herself under control again—because she absolutely could *not* afford to get too excited while standing this close to Karania Faulkner.

While it was admittedly unlikely that the Medic possessed enough Perception to pick up on the more subtle tells of her emotional state, Evelyne still couldn’t allow herself to give the other woman even the slightest opening to work with.

Her best bet in dealing with Karania Faulkner—now that she had realized just *how much* of a problem the Medic truly was, considering her very surprising, yet clear aptitude at social manipulation—would be to deliberately let one of her masks slip.

But that had to be done with extreme control, a perfectly timed and very brief moment of de-masking that would gently nudge the genius down the wrong path of inquiry and keep her attention focused on the wrong conclusion.

This was exactly why Evelyne always wore several masks at once.

Right now, she was already masking her emotions regarding Thea, keeping those carefully contained beneath a calm and composed exterior—as much as she could, at least.

But beneath that layer, she was even more carefully masking the true intent behind getting closer to Thea in the first place—the quiet, long-term objective of collecting MMM for the Sen legacy’s future, in one way or another.

Letting the first mask slip, just a little—revealing that she cared emotionally about her Thea and the fact that she tried to hide it desperately—would be horrifically embarrassing and downright shameful for someone of the Sen legacy to openly admit.

Yet that exact admission would function as the perfect red herring for the genius to chase.

And it would work incredibly well, because it wouldn't appear staged or artificial in the slightest. Because it wasn't.

There would be no way for even a genius like Karania Faulkner to find anything wrong with that display.

A fan with a crush was all Evelyne would appear to be—perhaps slightly problematic, maybe a little inconvenient, but ultimately something mostly harmless that could be watched and managed without too much concern.

The perfect alibi...

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PoV: Karania Faulkner

Leaving her memory vault for the seventh time since Evelyne's gaze had met hers, Karania's eyes briefly darted over toward the enigmatic girl standing at Lucas' right side, studying her again with quiet intensity.

'She very much cares about Thea in a romantic way... That's problematic, but manageable,' Karania thought calmly as she observed Evelyne's posture and expression in a brief instant. *'What I'm more concerned about, however, is that this still doesn't really add up with the rest of the things going on with her...'*

There were simply too many incongruities in Evelyne's overall persona, little details that did not really fit together when looked at closely.

First, there was the whole appearance issue surrounding her hair and make-up.

While that could theoretically be some kind of fixation as she had figured at first, Evelyne had not displayed a single psychological or physiological tick related to it during the past six minutes, no matter how thoroughly Karania had dissected every single memory of their interaction so far.

Not once had Evelyne casually checked a nearby reflection to confirm that her braid still looked perfect or that her make-up had not smudged. Not once had she idly played with the braid itself, nor had she forced her facial expressions into controlled patterns that would prevent the make-up from shifting or smearing, even in the tiniest and most subtle ways.

None of the typical tells were present that might hint at some kind of obsessive behavior surrounding those two features, nor were there any other explanations that made sense for why those particular details did not line up with the rest of her persona.

And on top of that, there was the fact that Evelyne was very clearly *extremely* capable of injecting herself into conversations at exactly the right moments, smoothly guiding the

discussion in ways that allowed her to pull large amounts of information out of the rest of Alpha Squad with what appeared to be very little effort.

Taken together, those details were beginning to point more and more toward Karania's original hypothesis.

'Evelyne is not who she pretends to be... She is not just a fan with a crush, is she...?'

But if she wasn't, then how exactly was she portraying those obvious emotions?

Even Karania herself could not fake feelings like that to this degree—not even if she had time beforehand to carefully prepare for it. The small breaks in Evelyn's composure, the tiny slips in her mask whenever Thea was involved, were simply *too* natural and *too* genuine to be some kind of calculated performance.

Was a Diplomancer of that caliber even possible at their age?

'No... that would be too crazy, even for System-Integrated people,' Karania thought grimly. *'This isn't something Attributes can help with. It would require several decades of training at least, and not just the kind of controlled training you could do in isolated environments, but real infiltration missions with real consequences.'*

Her eyes narrowed slightly as the thought continued forming.

'Even my Memory Vault would not be capable of providing the kind of environment needed to learn something like that... She's genuine about that affection. Has to be.'

And that, somehow, made even less sense.

'They only met like a week ago. So how is her affection already strong enough to completely break Evelyn's otherwise considerable social manipulation capabilities...?!'

A part of her still felt extremely uneasy about having Evelyn around at all, no matter how useful the information she could potentially provide might be.

And Karania knew exactly *why* that was.

The real problem wasn't that Evelyn appeared to be a social manipulator of extraordinary talent—likely even more skilled than Karania herself, as unpleasant as that thought was to entertain—but rather the fact that her very existence stirred something deeply uncomfortable inside her.

'I hate her,' Karania concluded quietly, the thought forming with a strange kind of calm emptiness rather than any emotional heat that should accompany it. *'I hate Evelyn. I have barely spoken to her, and she hasn't actually done anything to upset me, yet it's still true.'*

She hadn't hated anyone in a long, long time.

It was a strangely novel feeling, she could not really deny.

A hollow one, though. It hadn't truly taken root yet, hadn't had the chance to grow into something deeper or more consuming.

Her logical mind simply would not *allow* that to happen.

Because there was an emotional core missing for that kind of feeling to properly settle in.

A core that Karania had buried long ago in the deepest parts of her Memory Vault, sealing it away so thoroughly that it was never meant to be taken out again.

And yet, that same buried core—what little remained of it—was also the reason she knew that the feeling was very, very real...

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PoV: Evelyne Midra Sen

A chill ran down Evelyne's spine once more as Karania Faulkner's heartbeat accelerated slightly, the Medic, for the first time since their meeting had begun, looking directly at her for several long seconds without looking away.

'That's... adrenaline?' Evelyne thought with rising trepidation as she listened carefully to the telltale signs of the accelerated heart rate and the slightly faster breathing—both of them masked extremely well by Faulkner, though still not quite well enough to escape Evelyne's sharpened Perception. *'Why is her body reacting this way while looking at me...? Did I mess up somehow...? What is she thinking?'*

Evelyne forced her thoughts to still before panic could take hold.

More than a decade of training had instilled in her the ability to crush her emotions down to the very last speck, and it was that exact discipline that now kept her from reacting outwardly to the Medic's sudden spike of adrenaline directed at her.

She needed a distraction, something—*anything*—that could prevent Faulkner from continuing down whatever path her frighteningly sharp mind might currently be exploring.

Her eyes carefully darted across the surrounding space, making sure to look as natural as possible while doing so, searching for something that could interrupt the moment before it spiraled further out of control.

"Alright, I got our room. Let's go," the crystal-chime voice of her Thea—her *savior*—rang out from the side, immediately catching everyone's attention.

Faulkner's heart rate slowed almost immediately.

'Thank you, Thea...' Evelyne silently sent the thought toward her MMM, deeply grateful for the timely rescue.

At the same time, she was already starting to make plans for how to handle similar situations in the future so she would never end up in the same dangerous position again, all while frantically searching her memories for anything she might have done wrong.

'Fight-or-flight response starting up when staring at me... but why?' she wondered, her mind racing through every detail of their interaction. *'My words were perfect. There was nothing wrong with what I said. My reactions have been exactly as planned, revealing the first mask but not even hinting at the second one beneath it... Even a genius like her should be incapable of drawing conclusions without information...! That's not how any of this is supposed to work!'*

No matter how hard she tried, and no matter which path her mind explored in terms of social dynamics or conversational cues, there was simply nothing that indicated she had made a mistake. Nothing in the teachings of her family suggested that she had slipped up.

'So what then...?' she wondered uneasily. *'What was that rising anger...?'*

They stepped into the private booth of the arcade a moment later, this time entering a room with six VR seats arranged around a larger table along with a comfortable seating layout that allowed everyone to settle in easily.

"Corvus sponsored it today," her Thea explained while gesturing for everyone to sit wherever they wanted. "He said it's basically a squad-wide thing now, so it should really be paid for with squad funds. So I went for sixteen hours and the usual snack and drink refills. Just eat and drink as much as you want, it's covered."

"Sixteen fucking hours...?" Evelyne heard Reimart whisper in disbelief from directly in front of her, the drone operator having chosen to sit directly opposite her at the table.

'He should be easy to seduce, given his utter lack of decorum...' she couldn't help thinking automatically, because she knew exactly why Reimart had chosen that particular seat. Her training had her leaning forward ever so slightly more than she normally would have, allowing her modest bust to become easier to look at from across the table.

It wasn't something Evelyne had consciously decided to do, nor was it something she had any real intention of exploiting in that moment, but her upbringing and training did not really leave her with much choice in the matter.

This was simply how her body moved now. Naturally.

'Let him enjoy himself for giving up that information about my Thea earlier, I guess,' she sighed internally before shifting her focus back toward Karania Faulkner at the opposite side of the table, where the Medic had taken a seat between Desmond and Thea at the far end.

Luckily, the table today was shaped more like a wide circle than a long rectangle, because otherwise Evelyne would have very much protested being seated so far away from her Thea.

As things stood, however, the distance was manageable, and Thea was still easily within reach even though Lucas technically sat directly opposite her instead—directly to Evelyne's left.

'She does not have formal education in any of this,' Evelyne finally concluded as she quietly watched the other woman's brief, casual interactions with Reimart and Callahan, carefully studying every small detail of Karania Faulkner's social behavior. *'This is all self-taught, isn't it...?'*

It was extremely impressive, to say the least.

If it hadn't been for her own upbringing practically *forcing* Evelyne to become capable of detecting even the smallest tells, combined with her heavily invested Perception, she would never have guessed that Alpha Squad's Medic had ever faked a single thing during their conversation.

But now that she had spent several minutes carefully observing the other woman, the truth had become clear.

Karania had not displayed more than a handful of genuine emotions the entire time they had been interacting. Most of her smiles were fake, and yet she had even managed to recreate the slight sparkle in her eyes well enough to sell the illusion almost perfectly.

It was only the combination of everything together—the rhythm of her heartbeat, the subtle shifts in body language, the precise control over mimicry and micro-expressions—that allowed Evelyne to see through the act.

It was... *terrifying*.

'Who in the Emperor's bloody fucking name are you, woman?' Evelyne couldn't help but ask herself again as she tried to make sense of what she was seeing, completely unsure how she should even categorize Karania Faulkner going forward. *'Learning all of this on your own would take **decades**. Several of them. And you definitely worked as a surgeon and doctor before joining the UHF, which in itself isn't exactly something you just pick up on the side. You're not much older than me—you **can't** be—so... how? How is this woman's skillset even possible...?'*

Nothing about Karania Faulkner truly made sense, and the longer Evelyne remained in her presence, the more uneasy she became about that growing discrepancy.

There was something deeply *wrong* with the other woman.

Wrong in a way that made even the fine hairs along Evelyne's neck stand on edge, despite everything she had already endured during the long years of training that had shaped her into who she was today.

"So, Evelyne," her Thea's voice suddenly pulled her out of those spiraling thoughts, Evelyne lifting her head immediately to meet those sparkling, gorgeous cyan eyes. "We were wondering if you could help us understand the Challenge System a bit more in-depth today. With both Lucas and myself having to go into a Challenge soon, it would be great to know what we're actually going to be asked to do. Would you be able to help with that?"

Evelyne swallowed a mouthful of saliva as she struggled to stop staring into those beautiful, endless eyes before finally answering, “Y—Yeah, I think I can. I—I would love to help. Ehhm... I would like to ask for payment today, however.”

She immediately raised both hands defensively. “N—Not much, of course! Just... just what we agreed on last time as well. If—If that’s okay...?”

“Of course,” her Thea nodded immediately, an easy and gentle smile appearing on her perfect face.

It was only then that Evelyne’s heart skipped a beat as her Perception suddenly picked up on Karania Faulkner’s strong, booming heartbeat, a rhythmic pounding that sounded almost violent—like the Medic was about to leap across the table and rip her apart at any moment.

“You okay, Kara?” Thea asked at that exact moment, clear worry showing on her face as she looked toward her best friend.

The Medic turned toward her, offered a gentle smile—one Evelyne immediately recognized as fake—and nodded lightly. “Ah, yeah. I just remembered I forgot to bring something that I wanted to pick up at the reception, actually. Had me angry at myself for a second there. Mind if I go get it?”

Her Thea shook her head immediately and gestured casually for Karania to do as she pleased. “No, of course not. Go ahead. And don’t be angry at yourself, Kara. Even a genius like you can forget stuff, you know? That’s only natural.”

Evelyne didn’t even have time to think about the naivete of her MMM’s response, because she could read the room like an open book and immediately understood what was happening.

She braced for impact.

“Might I take Evelyne with me?” Karania asked calmly. “I could use a second hand, and I’d prefer not to bring either of the guys. You know... girl-talk reasons and all?”

She finished the sentence with a quick wink toward Thea, who simply stared at her for a moment with a slightly blank expression before slowly nodding in understanding.

“Yeah. *Absolutely*. Girl-talk. Yeah, go ahead. Evelyne, you don’t mind, right?” her Thea asked as she turned toward her.

What exactly was Evelyne supposed to say in that situation?

There was no real way for her to refuse.

Thea’s best friend was asking her to come along, and Thea herself had already given her approval, which meant there was no graceful way to decline without immediately creating suspicion.

She was trapped.

“Of course,” Evelyne replied with an easy smile, crushing the mounting panic inside her chest and forcing her body to stop breaking out in a cold sweat.

Evelyne rose from her seat with the same easy grace she always carried, smoothing her posture as she stepped away from the table and followed the Medic out of the private booth without hesitation.

The door slid shut behind them with a soft hiss, sealing them inside the narrow corridor that connected the booth to the wider arcade outside.

The moment the door closed, the atmosphere changed.

The muffled noise of the arcade was swallowed by the nearby walls, the earlier relaxed atmosphere of the private booth replaced by a strange, almost oppressive quiet that made the corridor feel far smaller than it actually was.

Evelyne felt it immediately.

The silence pressed in around her like invisible walls, tightening with every step she took behind Karania Faulkner.

Her mind raced despite her training trying to keep it contained.

That the whole “reception” excuse had merely been a reason to get her alone was painfully obvious.

But why? What exactly did Faulkner think she had on her?

She had done nothing wrong. She had made *no* mistakes. Her words had been *perfect*, she had made sure of that. Her reactions had been just as controlled—except when they weren’t, which had served her purposes just as well.

Every mask had been deployed—and broken—*exactly* as planned.

There was *nothing* to find. Nothing to accuse her of.

‘So what the fuck is this all about?!’

She got her answer only a few steps later.

The Medic slowed her pace, then gradually came to a stop before turning around to face her. And the moment Evelyne saw her face, something inside her stomach twisted.

The mask was completely gone.

There was no smile. No polite expression. No trace of warmth or friendliness.

Only a blank, empty face stared back at her.

It was the kind of expression Evelyne had only ever seen once or twice before in her life.

The expression of someone who hadn't just turned their emotions off entirely, but someone who didn't even naturally possess any. The raw natural void of a blank slate.

Her hands started sweating immediately.

The thing standing in front of her no longer felt like a person. Nothing she could read.

"What do you see," the Medic asked quietly, her voice completely devoid of emotion, "when you look into Thea's eyes?"

The question hit Evelyne so far out of left field that her brain stalled completely for a moment.

She blinked. Her thoughts scrambled to catch up.

'What kind of question is that? What am I supposed to—'

She hesitated only for a second. But it was apparently one second too long.

Faulkner moved without warning.

The Medic lunged forward with terrifying speed, one hand grabbing Evelyne by the front of her jacket while the other snapped up toward her throat. Evelyne's back slammed against the wall of the nearby booth with a sharp thud before she even fully understood what had happened.

Cold bone pressed against her skin.

Her eyes flicked downward.

A thin, wickedly sharp bone scalpel had formed from the Medic's hand, the blade resting directly against the soft skin of Evelyne's throat.

'She... she can't kill me. The Sovereign would know...!' Evelyne told herself instantly as the first spike of panic tried to rise inside her chest.

She forced it down immediately.

'Calm down. Calm down. She can't hurt you. She's a UHF Marine. You're inside the DDS.'

One controlled breath.

That was all it took and the panic vanished like it had never existed.

Her mind returned to perfect clarity.

"Answer me," the emotionless face repeated quietly.

Evelyne stared at her wide eyed.

She had no idea what was happening.

None. Nothing about this situation made any sense. Nothing about it fit within the social frameworks she had spent her entire life mastering.

This wasn't manipulation or negotiation. It wasn't even her being threatened.

This was something *e/se* entirely, that Evelyne had no idea how to quantify.

And for maybe the first time in her life... she had absolutely no idea how she was supposed to respond.

Which left her with only one option: Honesty.

She swallowed lightly, careful not to move against the blade at her throat.

"...Serenity," she said softly, the word leaving her mouth before she had even fully decided to say it. "When I look into Thea's eyes... I feel eternal calm."

Her voice grew quieter as she continued.

"They're... *beautiful*," she admitted slowly, struggling to put the feeling into words she rarely allowed herself to use. "It's like... looking into space. Like stars and nebulae and... the whole universe somehow fitting inside them."

She looked down slightly, her voice almost turning into a whisper.

"And every time I see them... I forget what I was about to say. I have to fight myself to look away, to break free of their spell."

Evelyne let out a small breath, hoping this was what the Medic was looking for...

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PoV: Karania Faulkner

Several long seconds passed as she kept the scalpel pressed against Evelyne's throat, the sharp edge resting steadily against her skin while Karania remained perfectly still.

The answer Evelyne had given was exactly the one thing Karania had not wanted to hear.

Someone else who saw what she saw when looking into a Cyan's eyes.

The same imagery. The same strange, quiet feeling.

And just like her own attempts had always failed, Evelyne had also been unable to describe it with perfect clarity, her words circling the truth without ever quite capturing it completely.

'*Why does it have to be her...?*' Karania thought, her mind turning into a raging storm for the first time in decades as thoughts collided and spiraled out of control. She could no longer hold them down with the same effortless precision she usually did.

For the first time in a very long time, the control she always maintained over her mind slipped.

‘*Somebody like her... Why?*’

The silence between them stretched, thick and suffocating, while Karania’s mind began to fracture under the weight of a realization she had refused to allow for even a single second since meeting Evelyne.

Because the truth was obvious—painfully obvious.

And she *hated* it.

Karania refused to acknowledge it even as the thought clawed its way through every carefully constructed barrier inside her mind. Evelyne, standing right in front of her with that calm expression and those controlled reactions, was simply a mirror.

A mirror of what Karania herself would have become if she had never left.

The very reason she knew the hatred she felt for the girl in front of her was real was the exact same reason she knew that realization was true as well.

From the very first moment she had laid eyes on Evelyne, there had been something wrong. Something that had made her stomach twist and her skin crawl in a way she couldn’t logically explain.

A strange connection. One that had immediately made her sick.

Because Evelyne was *everything* Karania had run away from.

Everything she had abandoned. Everything she had sacrificed to escape.

And yet somehow, despite that desperate life, the girl in front of her was still *so similar* to her in so many ways that it made Karania’s head spin.

Why was Evelyne socially manipulating people in the exact same way she herself did?

Wasn’t that the exact life Karania had rejected?

Wasn’t that the *entire reason* she had walked away in the first place?

Then how had she ended up here anyway, using the exact same tools, the exact same tricks, the exact same carefully crafted masks to control the people around her?

Wasn’t everything she had given up meant to allow her to live a *normal* life?

Wasn’t that the point of all of it?

All the pain. All the sacrifices. All the years spent rebuilding herself from the *ground up*.

What had any of that been for if she could now look into Evelyne's face and see the *exact same* person staring back at her?

A different path. But the exact same result.

Too many shared instincts, shared behaviors and ways of thinking.

If that was true... Then what had Karania's sacrifices actually achieved, except to make her miserable and break her in ways she had struggled to piece back together for more than ten years?

The thought tore through her like a blade and she let go of Evelyne as she stumbled backwards away from the girl, as if physically struck.

That was why she hated her—why she *had* to hate her.

Because if she didn't—

If she accepted the truth that Evelyne was simply another version of herself—

Then what did that say about everything Karania had done with her life?

What did it say about every single choice she had made?

The depths of her Memory Vault began to rumble.

Inside her mind, the endless archival halls trembled as something buried deep beneath them stirred for the first time in over a decade. Memories pressed upward against the sealed doors she had constructed around them.

Demanding release. Demanding to be seen again. Demanding to be re-lived.

And she knew exactly which memory was pushing the hardest.

Because it had *a/ways* been the loudest one.

The one she had buried the deepest. The one that had started everything.

Her first meeting with a Cyan inside the garden, the moment that had awakened her to the quiet, overwhelming beauty of life itself...