

Volume 2 - Chapter 36 - Names

“It’s not the Marines on the front line that win us wars. It’s the faceless clerk punching in license codes on a three-shift rotation. It’s the hauler pilot who hasn’t left their rig in two months. It’s the refinery tech who doesn’t even know what a Mag-Rail casing is, but still ships out ten billion of them every week. That’s where wars are fought. In bulk orders and unpaid overtime.”

— Marshal Renk Tavros, Strategic Oversight Division, PFC 933”

The UHF economy runs on three things: Credits, Contracts, and Compliance.

While the Integrated Marines bear the weight of UHF glory, the very spine of the war machine remains firmly in the hands of the Unintegrated members of our society.

They are the clerks, the loaders, the miners and machinists—contractors who signed their names onto dotted lines with the same weight as blood.

The best example of this? The very weapons sold to our Marines are rarely UHF-made.

They’re produced by mega-corps operating from fringe-worlds, manufactured in facilities run by civilians who’ll never know their name was printed onto a crate that changed the outcome of the galactic war.

*Every railgun, every smart-mine, every chassis stamped with a part number—born from a line of laborers barely protected by law, but **absolutely** bound by contract.*

The ammunition we fire? A small percentage is printed, yes, but the vast majority is created by factory crews who’ve never seen a battlefield.

Supply routes? Kept running by freight-jockeys who’ll never know if the crates they hauled fed soldiers, fueled dropships, or just kept a data-server online for another week.

The store clerks offering loadout advice, selling prototype licenses, and cataloguing power cell shipments in the dead of night? They’re the unspoken engine.

Most are Unintegrated, bound to their employers through exploitative contracts written by corp-lawyers fluent in loopholes and ironclad clauses.

They cannot leave. They cannot negotiate.

They cannot even ask for help, because the contracts they sign with the Allbright System prevent them from speaking about their work to anyone not similarly initiated.

Many don’t even finish their terms—“premature termination” is a tidy euphemism we use to describe abandonment on a random station, disappearances, or worse.

These Unintegrated workers exist in a legal grayzone.

Once hired, they often can’t leave their stations. And yet they still aren’t guaranteed work.

Corporations terminate early. Contractors vanish mid-shift. And no one checks.

*Not because we don't **care**, but because we **can't** care.*

The UHF simply lacks the capacity to monitor every logistics hub across our space. We'd collapse under the weight of oversight before a single gun left port.

*And yet, we **need** them.*

*Without the exploitation—without the **mandatory evil**—the war stops.*

No shipments. No replacements. No munitions. No victory.

Would we prefer better treatment for our Unintegrated contractors? Absolutely.

But hope doesn't ship plasma cores. Good ethics don't keep the front supplied...

*"Freedom is a luxury bought by the shackled. Never forget who paid your fare."
— Stenciled graffiti outside UHF Supply Hub 4B, Toran IV*

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"...And right here is where they honestly messed up with the design, if you were to ask me," the clerk said, her voice animated as she pointed to a seemingly harmless weld seam along the rifle's internal chassis. To Thea's eye, it looked perfectly fine—clean even—but the clerk shook her head. "Welds are fine, don't get me wrong. But *this section*? It should've been accounted for in the initial frame mold! Instead, they slapped it on as a patch-job. That creates stress concentration points. Over time, with repeated thermal cycling and recoil pressure? Microfractures. Guaranteed."

She grabbed her data-pad again—her fingers already moving in muscle memory after how many times she'd done it by now—and pulled up another set of schematics, incident logs, and defect stats.

With a practiced motion, she handed the pad over to Thea.

"Check this out. Seventeen percent of all reported defects on this model originate in *this exact zone*. Not the weld itself, mind you—but the surrounding alloy. Heat-affected zone wasn't properly normalized post-weld. Poor metallurgical follow-through. That's seventeen percent of breakdowns that literally wouldn't exist if the design was just finalized as a unified chassis to begin with. Classic case of modular laziness."

Thea couldn't stop grinning. She hadn't stopped for the past hour.

It wasn't just the info dump—it was how *passionately* the woman delivered it.

There was a spark in her tone, that nerdy mix of frustration and excitement only someone who *really* cared could conjure.

And she *got* it. Not in some half-baked, surface-level way.

She *understood*. Deeply.

This was what Thea had been missing all this time back on Lumiosia.

No one to talk shop with. No one who'd get excited over thermal load distribution, capacitive recoil dampeners, or the dumb design decisions of mid-tier weapons manufacturers.

They'd been at this for over an hour now—jumping between different rifles, breaking down hybrid weapons, disassembling internal assemblies with the clerk's practiced ease. Every part, every discussion, every shared glance over a particularly idiotic design choice had just made Thea more absorbed.

And the clerk... she wasn't just knowledgeable.

She was *brilliant*.

Like Karania, but instead of blood and bone, it was carbon-alloys and capacitor stacks. A walking archive of field reports, design revisions, and obscure prototype specs.

*'She's like the Kara of weaponry...' Thea thought again, not for the first time. 'No wonder they called her in when I asked for specifics. There's **no way** this is normal—she's gotta be the best they've got. I wonder if other stores have someone like this... or if this is just an Abundant Ammunitions thing?'*

They were already in the wrap-up phase of their deep-dive by now—Thea had squeezed about as much intel out of this as she realistically could in the time she had.

Between the spec breakdowns, hands-on demos, and the clerk's almost encyclopedic knowledge, she'd managed to build a solid foundation to start figuring out her next steps.

With the clerk's help, she'd narrowed things down to three hybrid weapons that hit the right mix of functionality and design. All three had elements she wanted to study more in-depth—features that might influence what her future weapon loadout would look like, depending on how she chose to adapt her style.

They went over the last weapon in front of them for another ten minutes, trading thoughts on chamber tolerances and trigger latencies, before the clerk clicked it back together with that same easy flow she'd been showing all day—like she'd taken this exact rifle apart in her sleep thousands of times.

With the session wrapped up, Thea let herself be guided back to the front of the store.

And of course, right on cue, the regular crew of robot clerks had returned, standing in perfect symmetrical rows behind the counters like nothing had happened. She felt a small, mixed twinge about it—part elation at how lucky she'd been to get a proper one-on-one, part annoyance that the timing had worked out in this way and she had been *forced* to interact with people at all, when all she had wanted was to read some spec sheets.

'Figures... Maintenance cycle ends the second I'm done shopping. But I can't really complain. If the bots had been running earlier, I'd have missed out on the lesson entirely...' she thought, sneaking a glance at the small woman walking beside her.

As they approached the front desk, Thea recognized the same guy manning it from earlier—though she hadn't exactly bothered to remember his name.

He gave a polite nod as the clerk beside her spoke up.

"So, would you like to secure some of the licenses for the models we looked at, Thea?" she asked, peering up at her.

"Yeah, I think so," Thea replied, voice steady. "I really think the laser-refraction assemblies on the VH-02 '*Viron*', the ballistic chambering and firing flow on the PH-55 '*Phora*', and the magnet synchronization network of the MH-1 '*Maltek*' are the best starting points for me. I want to dive into those more before making any major changes to my own setup."

She'd mulled it over while they talked, cross-referencing the clerk's insights with her own experiences—by now, she was solid on the decision. That confidence, however, wobbled a little as she saw the clerk's expression twist into one of deep, thoughtful concentration.

"Hmm..." she hummed, pulling out her data-pad again and flicking through files at rapid speed.

Out of the corner of her eye, Thea caught the guy behind the counter shoot the clerk a look that practically screamed, "*What the fuck are you doing?!*" before smoothing his expression back into customer-service neutrality so fast it was downright impressive.

"Honestly, I don't think those would be your best options, Thea," the clerk finally said, after a thoughtful pause. She handed the data-pad back to Thea, who immediately leaned in to see what the clerk had prepared instead.

"While you're definitely correct that those three would offer some great insights into their specialized functions, I think the selection I just gave you might actually be a better fit overall," the clerk continued, already swiping through the data-pad screens to bring up two entirely different weapons. "First is the IH-333 Ingam, made by Dominion Armoury. It's a Laser-Ballistic hybrid sniper rifle. The second is the NH-XE Nilfar from Vanguard Armaments, a Gauss-Ballistic hybrid DMR."

The clerk paused briefly to point out key features on each weapon's spec sheet. "You'll find basically all the important features you wanted to look at from the other three right here—and for *significantly* fewer Credits. You might not get quite as deep of a dive into every single little detail, but at your current skill level, focusing your attention on fewer areas in depth might be a better way to approach things. Once you really have a solid grasp on these, you'll know exactly what questions to ask the Sovereign's database if you still need more details."

Thea nodded slowly, the clerk's reasoning quickly clicking into place in her mind.

Checking the data-pad again, she saw that the weapons suggested really *did* have everything she wanted to learn about.

"You know what? You're right," Thea finally agreed, quickly adding the two recommended weapons to her shopping list alongside the Gram variants and attachments already waiting there. "Thanks for pointing that out. Definitely would've missed that on my own. Really appreciate you taking the time to help me out."

The clerk gave a polite bow, making Thea wince a little on the inside.

That whole overly-formal '*you are the honored one*' act still felt damn awkward, no matter how common it was in customer-facing roles and she replied warmly, "It was my pleasure. If there's anything else you need, please don't hesitate to ask."

Thea briefly considered if there was anything else, but quickly realized she'd accomplished everything she came here to do. "Nah, I think I'm good. Thanks again for all the help."

She glanced at her shopping list again and immediately balked at the total price, though she swiftly rationalized it away.

'It's an investment, Thea. Unspent Credits are worthless. "Credits not invested into something might as well not exist," like the Old Man used to say.'

Still, she decided to be smart about it, applying two of the 60%-off Vouchers from the Assessment Awards to the hybrid weapons, and her 50%-off Voucher to one of the Gram variants.

After all, while unspent Credits were worthless, wasting them unnecessarily wasn't exactly smart either.

'Unspent Credits are future investment Credits too,' she reminded herself.

[Full Licence: IH-333 'Ingam' - ~~6,545~~ 2,618 System Credits.] - 60%-Off Voucher Applied.

[Full Licence: NH-XE 'Nilfar' - ~~5,825~~ 2,330 System Credits.] - 60%-Off Voucher Applied.

[Full Licence: X-27R-G 'Gram' - ~~4,615~~ 2,308 System Credits.] - 50%-Off Voucher Applied.

[Full Licence: X-27R-R 'Gram' - 4,485 System Credits.]

[Collapsed List: Attachments for X-27R line weaponry - 2,985 System Credits.]

[Collapsed List: Attachments for X-27R line weaponry: 9 Entries.] [[Expand?](#)]

[Total Price: 14,726 System Credits.]

[Accepting this transaction will automatically deduct the System Credits from your profile and grant the listed items to it.]

Thea double-checked the list one last time, expanding the list of attachments for the Gram variants as well, just to make sure she wasn't missing anything important, before mentally confirming the purchases.

[System]: 14,726 System Credits have been debited from your profile for your purchase at "Abundant Ammunitions".

'Surprisingly cheap, all things considered,' she thought with a smirk, watching the final tally process. *'Those vouchers really came in clutch. Glad I snagged a bunch from the Awards... absolute lifesavers.'*

She handed the data-pad back toward the ever-helpful clerk and gave her a nod. "Thanks again for the help. Really appreciate it. I ended up learning way more than I expected to, just walking in here."

"It was my pleasure, Thea," the woman replied with another polite bow—store policy, as Thea suspected by now.

With the transaction done and her haul secured, Thea turned to head for the exit... only to hesitate mid-step as her eyes caught the reflection of movement through the glass near the front.

A small crowd had gathered just outside the store.

'Oh, come on. What is it with stores and crowds today...?'

Before she could even decide how to navigate around it, the clerk smoothly stepped into her path, arms spread slightly as if to physically block the way forward.

"Ah! If you'd be so kind as to follow me one last time, Thea," she said, tone calm and practiced. "I'll show you to the side-exit—so you don't have to deal with all *that*, if you'd prefer."

Thea blinked, then let out a short laugh. "Yeah. That would be great, actually."

She followed as the clerk led her back through the same rear corridor they'd used earlier, this time turning down a narrow branching hallway tucked behind a nondescript maintenance hatch.

They emerged through a security-marked door into a tight service alley wedged between Abundant Ammunitions and whatever store sat next to it—she didn't bother checking.

"Appreciate the detour," Thea said, giving the clerk a small nod before stepping fully into the alley.

She pulled her hood up over her head, tugging it low enough to cast her eyes into shadow. Universal law: people didn't question hooded figures.

Unless they were cops.

Or gangers.

Or just the sort of people who had a bad habit of getting into other people's business.

Still, it helped.

'Alright, time to get to the System Store and meet up with Kara... Hope she's not too angry I'm late,' Thea thought with a slight worry in her chest, before darting out of the alley...

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“I Augmented my armour—that’s an option, by the way—added a new Module Slot and the Auto-Injector for the Focus Boosters we talked about. Also grabbed a few weapon licenses to mess around with. Nothing too fancy, though; I’ll need some experience before I really settle on what I want,” Thea recounted eagerly to Karania, who was busy scrolling through a data screen at the System Store.

Karania smiled warmly, clearly attentive despite her multitasking. “Glad you managed to find what you were after, Thea. Did some shopping of my own too. Got Full-Licenses for all my gear, a bunch of medical supplies—including a ton that *a certain someone* required a whole lot of during the Assessment—Oh, and I grabbed those Focus Boosters you asked for.”

She handed one of her bags over to Thea, giving her a pointed look. “Remember, no more than two at a time. We talked about this, yeah?”

“Promise!” Thea nodded enthusiastically. “Honestly doubt I’ll even use them at all. But with the new Ability I picked up, it’s better to have them ready if things go south than get stuck without any options.”

“Fair point,” Karania chuckled, satisfied. “So, what’s first on your list here?”

“Abilities. Want to fill my slots properly first. Got a few Passives left open and I definitely wanna replace one of my Actives. I’ve got ideas, but we’ll have to see what’s actually available here... And Skills, obviously—oh shit! Kara! I met someone super cool!” Thea suddenly blurted out, remembering her time spent with the clerk at Abundant Ammunitions as a result of her talk about Skills. A good chunk of the Skills she wanted to work on were directly related to what she had learned over the past hour-and-a-half, after all.

Karania turned fully toward Thea now, her eyebrows raised with obvious interest. “*Oh?*”

“This clerk at Abundant Ammunitions! Kara, she was awesome! I went in to find hybrid weapons with specific specs, right? But there were no Robot Clerks anywhere—maintenance time for all of them, apparently. Lucky me, huh? So I had to talk to the human front-desk guy, who called in an expert for me. And she was seriously so fucking smart! Like, imagine a version of you, but for weapon tech instead of medical stuff!” Thea eagerly recounted the experience, enthusiastically describing how they’d spent more than an hour tearing apart weapons, discussing design details and tech specifics.

“That *does* sound pretty amazing,” Karania agreed when Thea finally slowed down enough to breathe. She tilted her head slightly, a curious expression forming. “Though you keep calling her ‘*woman*’ or ‘*clerk*’... Does she not have a name...?”

Thea froze at the question, her excitement instantly replaced by confusion and embarrassment. “Ehh... She didn’t mention one...?”

Karania’s gaze sharpened into a pointed stare, making Thea shift uncomfortably. After a few seconds of silence, she finally spoke again. “And... you didn’t bother to ask...?”

"I..." Thea stammered, scrambling for an excuse. "It didn't seem important at the time!"

Karania let out a long, exhausted sigh and palmed her face. "You *do* realize you could've just asked for her again next time you visited, *if* you knew her name, right? Saying 'that woman who helped me' isn't gonna cut it in a store that sees tens of thousands of Marines pass through. They're not gonna remember who 'that woman' is, Thea."

Thea's eyes widened as the obvious realization hit her like a truck. "Fuck..."

She hadn't even thought about that.

"And let's not forget," Karania added with a raised eyebrow, twisting the knife, "you *could've* just asked for her contact ID as well. You know, so you could actually reach out during your own research? Ask questions, bounce stuff off her. Unless she didn't want to, sure—but from how you described her? Sounded like she'd be thrilled to talk shop with another full-blown tech gremlin like yourself."

A knot twisted in Thea's stomach. That was a massive opportunity she'd just let slip.

"I... I can do that? Just *ask* for that kinda stuff...?" she muttered, looking at Karania like she'd just revealed some ancient secret.

Another long sigh. "Yes, Thea. Yes, you can. You can literally just ask people their names and contact IDs. It's not illegal, it's not weird, it's just basic social interaction. Worst-case scenario? They say no. That's it. You don't spontaneously combust or get court-martialed or anything. It's really not that hard or big of a deal to people."

Thea had never done anything like that before—her default was to quietly absorb and vanish or answer when asked herself—but thinking about it now, it did sound kind of... *obvious*.

Other people did literally ask her about this kind of stuff, after all, so why wouldn't she be able to do the same? It made complete sense.

And it wasn't like Karania had ever lied to her about this kind of stuff before.

"You think I can still run back and ask...?" she ventured.

"Sure, why not?" Karania shrugged. "As long as you don't wait, like, two days or something. But considering how many Credits you just dumped there, I'd bet they remember you. It's only been what, half an hour?"

"!!!" Thea practically bounced on her toes at that. "Kara, don't move! I'll be back in five minutes! Don't. Move." She shouted the last bit over her shoulder as she bolted out of the store, almost plowing through a squad of Marines heading in, but twisting out of the way just in time—leaving a trail of startled curses behind her.

She could've sworn she heard Karania mutter something like, "Why is she such an idiot sometimes..." but she was already gone.

She had a mission.

—

“Hi, yes—it’s me again,” Thea announced as she marched up to the front desk of Abundant Ammunitions, giving the store clerk her best sheepish smile. “I was wondering... would it be possible to speak with the clerk that helped me earlier?”

The man blinked once, then nodded with professional efficiency. “Of course. I’ll notify her right away. Please wait just a moment.”

Thea nodded eagerly, already feeling the weight lifting off her chest.

‘Might not have completely fucked this up after all. Saved...!’

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PoV: Peria Akin

Having waved goodbye to Thea at the side-exit and just stepped back into the store, Peria finally let everything out.

“Yeeeeeeeeeeeeessss!” she shouted, the sound echoing off the metal shelves and workbenches in the backroom workshop.

The nerves, the anxiety, the sheer *rush* of having not only handled a high-tier VIP but actually *nailed* it? All of it hit her at once. She’d been as jittery as a faultily screwed on actuator at first, sure—but the second she got Thea talking about the weapons, really digging into the systems and specs, everything had clicked. Like flipping a switch.

Tech-talk was her happy place.

‘I can’t believe someone like that actually exists... A top-level Marine, probably worth more than every single clerk on the ship combined, geeking out over laser refraction and magnet synchronization with me? That’s fucking crazy!’

It still didn’t feel real.

Even more unbelievable was the casual way Thea had thrown down nearly fifteen thousand System Credits—on testing material. Not for a mission. Not even for testing purposes.

Just *research*, based on the way Thea had talked about them.

“That’s almost a year and a half of my salary... just gone, like it’s pocket change...” Peria muttered, still stunned. “And she wasn’t even sweating it.”

But that was the divide.

The UHF Marines—and a mega VIP like Thea McKay herself—operated on a whole different level than someone like her. They had access to the levels of resources and perks most Unintegrated couldn’t even dream of in their wildest imagination.

And even after serving aboard UHF vessels for over three years now, Peria still couldn't.

Still, the part Peria appreciated most—the real cherry on top—was the fact that the store had *had* to call her in for the consultation. She hadn't been just a lucky tag-along; she was the official point of contact. That meant one thing: Commission payout.

An unbelievably fat one.

'She even used three UHF vouchers...?! This is fucking huge!'

Peria practically buzzed as she paced the backroom, hugging her data-pad to her chest.

Early in her career, she had learned how commissions were calculated.

On a UHF ship like this one, a decent portion—usually around 30%—of any sale made to a Marine was automatically rerouted back into the UHF coffers. The rest got split between the manufacturer and the store, and then the store's slice got split again between corporate and the selling clerk. End result? Not exactly much left over for the clerk in question.

But when a Marine used UHF Vouchers? Whole different ballgame.

Vouchers meant the UHF paid the listed percentage *directly* to the store. So instead of the usual 30% getting pulled out of the transaction, that entire chunk funneled right into the store's pool. And *that* meant her commission cut just ballooned.

Two 60-percent-off vouchers and a 50? On full licenses and prototype-grade hybrid weapons?

'It's like triple commission day. That's practically a whole extra salary drop, maybe even two. Holy shit!'

She was so overwhelmed with excitement she didn't even know where to put it. She was already planning how she'd budget the payout when her data-pad chimed.

A low, ominous *ping*.

Peria glanced down, and her stomach plummeted straight through the floor.

A black-enveloped notification.

Her entire body froze.

She knew there was only one singular instance a black envelope would show up: Corporate Review.

'No no no... please no... Not like this...!'

Her heart spiked, blood roaring in her ears as panic started to creep in from every edge of her mind.

'I didn't do anything wrong! The VIP was happy—she smiled! She bought so much stuff! She looked relaxed when she left! There's nothing they can blame me for... right?'

Her fingers moved on autopilot, tapping open the message. She barely registered the text as her eyes scanned it.

Immediate presence requested. Backroom office. Corporate Review. Attendees: Store Manager. Local Franchise Owner. Regional CEOs.

'CEOs?! Of the Kuigon Sector?! This is bad. This is so fucking bad...! Why the fuck are the regional heads involved?! I didn't—there's no way I—'

She moved like a ghost toward the backroom office, barely feeling her legs under her. She scanned her ID without thinking, the door clicking open with a heavy finality.

One single chair. A wall of glowing datascreens blinking to life one after another, faces appearing on each one.

She sat, barely managing to keep her hands from trembling.

She couldn't even look up.

'Am I going to get terminated...?'

—

"...seventeen verbal interruptions during direct VIP communication," one of the middle screens droned, the voice cold and clipped. "Twenty-six physical contact instances initiated without explicit authorization. One hundred and seventy-four uses of informal language or colloquialisms while engaging the VIP. This includes terminology such as 'yeah,' 'kinda,' 'fucking,' and direct analogies unsanctioned by corporate comms protocol—"tech gremlin" being particularly egregious."

Another face took over, the camera angle slightly tilted upwards so the woman on the screen looked down at Peria with thinly veiled contempt.

"Failure to maintain standard physical distance protocols. Clerk remained within the one-meter radius bubble for over ninety percent of the consultation without explicit consent, violating Paragraph IV-C of the VIP Behavioral Guidebook," she continued, each bullet point hitting like a dull hammer to the chest.

"Nonstandard emotional conduct noted," said another, almost bored-sounding voice. "Several moments of uncontrolled enthusiasm, including several vocalized outbursts in the presence of the VIP, which triggered three separate internal sensor alerts for excessive decibel levels in the staff-only area."

A third screen lit up with a new speaker, male, rotund, lips pursed as if he were sucking on a lemon. "Let us not forget, colleagues, the egregious breach in post-request conduct. The employee in question failed to immediately excuse herself from the interaction once the initial request had been dealt with. Instead, she proceeded to engage in unsolicited

educational dialogue, weapon disassembly demonstrations, and prolonged conversation beyond the standard engagement time frame.”

Peria stared at the floor. Eyes wide. Hands numb.

Not once had anyone looked at her.

Not once had anyone asked a single question.

Nobody had even asked for her name or even mentioned it once.

She was certain they didn’t even know it, at this point. Nor that they even cared for it.

She was just *there*. Witness to her own autopsy.

The next one was clearly reading from a tablet.

“Improper referral protocol in pre-sale redirection—‘Let me grab you a spec-sheet’ is not within the approved phrasing library. Official phrasing should’ve been, ‘Please allow me to retrieve the technical information package for your convenience.’”

Then came the voice that always made her flinch—the Chief Regional Executive of Customer Integration Standards, Mr. Valencrux, whose data screen always displayed in harsh monochrome for reasons no one understood.

She had met him a few times before, during initial training and scheduled corporate reviews—he was not an enjoyable person to have around.

“Who,” he said slowly, the word stretched like a rubber band about to snap, “was responsible... for assigning a *Mid-Worlder*... to a Tier-One VIP of this magnitude?”

The way he said “Mid-Worlder” always sounded more like a slur than anything else to Peria.

Silence answered for a few heartbeats before the store owner, a balding, beady-eyed man named Cerson, cleared his throat nervously, dabbing away beads of sweat on his forehead.

“That would’ve been the head-clerk of the day shift, sir. Jordan Holman. He made the call to redirect the VIP to our specialist consultant based on—”

“He goes on the list,” Valencrux snapped.

The command was immediate. No room for discussion.

Another executive—this one sporting sleek black implants along his jawline—nodded solemnly and began tapping something on his personal interface.

Peria sat frozen in her chair. It felt like her Soul had already left her body, watching this all unfold from somewhere high up near the ceiling.

This was it.

They weren’t even reviewing her performance. They were *cataloging* it.

Preparing the file that would be used to justify her termination. Every second that passed felt like another nail in the coffin, another damning number on a spreadsheet somewhere.

And still, no one had spoken to her. No one had asked for her version. No chance to explain.

No mention of the VIP's clear satisfaction. No acknowledgment that the sale had been a resounding success by every metric *except* the ones that apparently mattered to the people on these screens.

She wasn't even angry. She just felt... *hollow*.

The rotund man spoke again, tone dripping with smug certainty, "I don't believe that—"

He didn't finish.

Peria's datapad lit up in a harsh crimson glare, a sharp siren bursting from it like an alarm klaxon in a munitions depot. The sound was loud—intentionally so—and instantly drew every pair of eyes in the room toward her.

Her own head jerked to the side, staring at the device in disbelief.

Her throat felt dry, but she still managed to croak out, "M... May I?"

"You *may* not. You *must*," Mr. Valencrux snapped from his screen, voice like a slap across the face.

Her fingers, shaking and numb from the cold pit in her stomach, fumbled the datapad into her hands. The display burned red against her vision as she registered the short, simple message.

[VIP Consultation Request: Thea McKay. Reason: Unknown.]

Peria blinked at it.

'No way. No way, no way, no way—'

"What are you waiting for, Miss Akin?" Valencrux growled. "A crimson request isn't that difficult to understand, is it? Move it."

That jolted her back to life.

She shot out of the chair so fast it scraped against the floor, bowing repeatedly toward the wall of screens as she stumbled back toward the exit. Her knees were weak, her head spinning—but she didn't stop.

The second the door shut behind her, the suffocating corporate air lessened, but not by much. She felt like she was walking underwater as she tried to process what just happened.

'She requested me? Again? Why now...?'

Her legs carried her forward automatically, feet moving on pure memory toward the customer-facing area.

Her thoughts, meanwhile, spiraled in every direction at once.

'I can fix this. Maybe. Maybe she wants to return something? No, she wouldn't need a VIP Consult for that... She wouldn't use that for a complaint, would she?! What if she changed her mind and now hates everything...? What if she realized I screwed something up—'

She stopped just short of the last aisle.

Slapped both cheeks lightly. Focus.

"Alright, Peri. Come on. She asked for you. That means she *doesn't* hate you. Probably. You made it this far, don't fuck it now," she whispered, bracing herself as she rounded the corner with a deep breath and the fakest confidence she could muster.

"Holman, you requested my assistance?" she said crisply as she approached the front desk, posture perfect, voice locked into corporate tone.

Holman turned to her with that practiced smile that never quite reached his eyes. "Ah, yes. Our recent client, Thea, wanted to speak with you. I'll leave her in your capable care."

He gestured grandly behind him—like she somehow hadn't noticed the towering Marine already standing just two meters away, looking awkwardly out of place amidst the pristine shelves and sterile lighting.

"Thank you, Holman," Peria said smoothly, before shifting her attention fully to Thea.

Something was immediately *off*, she realised.

The giant of a woman—who'd just minutes earlier radiated sharp focus and precise intent—was now visibly fidgeting. Her stance was off-balance, her fingers twitched near the hem of her sleeve, and she kept shifting her weight like a kid caught sneaking snacks before dinner.

'What the fuck happened to her...?'

Still keeping to corporate etiquette, Peria dipped into a slight bow and gave her most professional tone—despite the gnawing curiosity building in her chest.

"How may I assist you, Thea?"

"I... I wanted to ask a really weird question, if that's okay?" Thea started, awkwardly shifting her weight from one leg to another as she spoke. Her voice wasn't quite steady, her words rushing out faster than she probably intended.

Peria nodded without hesitation, eyebrows slightly raised in surprise. "Of course."

"I was wondering what your name is, actually," Thea continued. "It... it never came up. I was talking to a friend, and she pointed out that it'd be way easier to ask for your help again if I

knew your name—which makes a lot of sense. I didn't think about it at the time, but now I feel kinda dumb for not asking. And, well... I think it'd be nice to call you by name, if that's alright with you...?"

The nervous, stumbling explanation caught Peria completely off-guard.

The VIP—*The* Thea McKay—was tripping over her own words, just asking for Peria's name!

But the meaning behind them hit her like a shock charge to the chest.

'She wants me here. She's asking for me, specifically. Future visits... That has to mean they can't terminate me, right?! Not if the VIP depends on me!'

Peria fought to keep her composure, but she could feel the smile tugging at her face before she even opened her mouth.

"Ah! Of course—yes!" she answered, stumbling slightly over her own eagerness. "My name is Peria Akin. It's... nice to meet you properly, Thea."

"Likewise!" Thea grinned down at her, visibly relieved that her request hadn't been shot down. She stood a little straighter now, her shoulders relaxing.

"I was also wondering..." Thea started again, rubbing the back of her neck. "And it's totally fine if not—but would you maybe be okay with sharing your contact ID with me as well? I just thought it might be cool to message you sometimes if I've got questions. Y'know, about tech stuff. Or research. Or weapons in general. I mean, only if you're cool with it—totally get it if not, you're probably busy and—"

"Yes! I would love to!" Peria interrupted, before instantly regretting the impulse.

Somewhere, deep in the corporate back room, she was sure a fresh little red mark had been logged under "*Interrupting the VIP*". But she couldn't help it.

"You can message me *anytime*," she added quickly. "Seriously. It'd be awesome to keep talking. I loved our conversation earlier—I don't really get to talk tech with anyone these days."

Thea's grin turned radiant, and Peria felt a weird kind of warmth in her chest. Not just the adrenaline of narrowly escaping corporate death, but something simpler.

Something more... human. A friendly connection in this terrible series of events.

She quickly flicked open her data menu, sharing her contact ID. And to her complete and utter disbelief, *Thea sent hers back*.

Peria stared at the notification in stunned silence for a moment, eyes going wide before she hastily accepted the mutual exchange.

It felt surreal—like she'd just been handed a direct-call line to the nearest star.

“Thanks, Peria! That’ll help a lot,” Thea said, her tone light, though the awkward way she scratched the back of her head made it clear she still felt a little out of place. “Ehh... That’s really all I wanted. I’m sorry for interrupting your work—I’m sure you had more than enough going on without me randomly asking your colleague to call you over. I didn’t mean to drag you away or anything—”

“It’s more than fine! Really!” Peria jumped in again, her voice a bit too quick. She nodded rapidly, hands half-lifted in reassurance. “You didn’t interrupt anything I couldn’t handle later, I swear!”

“That’s good to hear, then.” Thea gave a sheepish smile, the tension in her shoulders easing. “Well... thanks again for all the help, Peria. And, uh, I guess I’ll message you when I’ve got questions. Feel free to hit me up whenever too, if you ever wanna talk or something—though I might be in a mission or lecture or whatever, but I’ll reply as soon as I can, promise.”

She paused, glancing around the store like she was trying to orient herself. “Oh—and I’ll make sure to ask for you next time I need anything weapon-related. You... Ehh... You just work *here*, right? Like, *this store* specifically? I don’t really know how the whole worker situation works on these ships yet... We haven’t had the Economy & Logistics lectures yet. You’re only with Abundant Ammunitions?”

“Yeah, just here,” Peria nodded, doing her best to sound casual. “Deck 1, Tier 1. Abundant Ammunitions branch. My contract’s still running for another two years, so... I should definitely be around.”

She hated how much that last part sounded like a warning to the people watching her from the corporate side—like she was trying to leverage Thea’s goodwill as a shield.

But she didn’t know how else to secure her position. If there was even a chance that mentioning it could buy her some breathing room, she *had* to take it.

‘I’ll make it up to you somehow, Thea. I swear I will!’

“Perfect!” Thea grinned. “Well... thanks again, and have a great day, Peria!”

With that, she turned and walked out the front door, practically sprinting the second she hit open air—moving so fast Peria barely had time to catch her silhouette through the front window before she vanished again.

Peria just stood there for a moment, frozen in place.

‘Did that really just happen...? She actually came all the way back just to ask for my name and contact ID? That’s it? That’s all?’

She blinked several times, barely registering the world around her.

Then, with a sharp slap to both cheeks, she forced herself back into motion.

“Thank you for the notification, Holman,” she said, following protocol as she turned toward the clerk who’d fetched her.

Then, with leaden steps, she made her way back toward the rear of the store, heading for the same back-office she had been so desperate to escape just minutes ago.

The Corporate Review hadn’t ended earlier. It had simply... paused.

The moment Peria sat back down, her spine ramrod straight despite how much she wanted to curl into herself, the room full of data-screens flickered to life again.

The moment her eyes met those of the regional CEOs again, that fragile bit of security she had managed to claw back, completely evaporated. There was something chilling about being judged by people who held absolute control over your life—people who didn’t even know your name until it showed up on a mistake report.

People who might never bother to learn it at all.

But instead of the stern, judgmental silence from before that she had been expecting, there was... chatter.

Lively chatter.

“I mean, *honestly*,” the rotund man from earlier began, voice now laced with cheerful consideration rather than disdain, “we *have* to start acknowledging that *real* adaptability in the field sometimes demands... Well, a certain measure of rule-bending, at times. *Especially* with clients of this caliber. Wouldn’t you agree, Mister Valencrux?”

Valencrux, who had all but ordered her out of the room earlier, now nodded with faux-gravity. “Yes, indeed. It’s true we must hold high standards—but *not* at the expense of customer satisfaction! Perisha here demonstrated excellent initiative. A certain... tactical finesse, if you will, that the Marines of the UHF would no doubt be able to appreciate.”

“*It’s Peria*,” she mumbled under her breath, but nobody heard her over the sudden flurry of agreeing voices.

Another screen blinked to prominence—an older woman with a sharp jawline and clipped tone who’d not spoken up before, but had definitely been nodding profusely at the earlier question of how a *Mid-Worlder* had even ended up near a VIP. “I *have* been saying for *years* that the guidelines could use a flexibility clause. Something to allow for exceptional judgment calls. After all, the clerks on the ground are the ones facing these high-pressure moments—not us.”

The man to her right—an executive with sunken cheeks and that constantly suspicious squint—jumped in almost too quickly. “*Exactly*. Look, this... this *Pareena*—she demonstrated excellent customer management instincts. Engaged the client, anticipated needs, created rapport—textbook excellence, if you ask me.”

“She even secured repeat business,” chimed in another voice, one Peria vaguely recognized as having listed out *one hundred and seventy-four instances of casual language usage*

earlier. “Not just that, but cross-channel communication with the client! She’s already initiated a communication thread with the VIP! That’s the kind of initiative we should be *rewarding!*”

“I think we need to revisit the current script entirely,” the rotund man said, his tone becoming increasingly animated. “And maybe update the training modules to allow for some clerks—like Miss... ah, Pree-uh... to go off-script when dealing with Tier-1 VIPs. As long as their judgement is unquestionable, of course.”

“Exactly! Her instincts were *clearly* well-honed in training!” a younger-looking exec cut in, visibly eager to be part of the new consensus. “Let’s not forget—the client requested her, specifically!”

Valencrux made a grand show of nodding solemnly again. “It’s settled then. A proposal for protocol amendment will be drafted. We’ll call it the ‘Akin Clause’—to honor her contribution.”

Peria blinked.

‘*The Akin Clause...*?’

She sat there, utterly dumbfounded, as one board member after another repeated her name—each one mispronouncing it differently. *Perrah*, *Puria*, *Peerah*, *Peyra*—as if they were trying to make it sound more impressive, like slapping extra syllables onto it gave it more gravitas.

None of them seemed to realize they were getting it wrong.

One of the CEOs even leaned forward into his camera, his face filling the screen. “Just imagine if we had penalized this kind of performance due to a simple misunderstanding...! We’d be turning away talent like *Pireah Aken*. That would’ve been a downright tragedy! I say we offer her a promotion for her exceptional work ethics.”

The rows of heads nodded profusely at that idea.

Peria didn’t speak. *Couldn’t* speak.

She wasn’t even sure if any of this was real anymore—or if she had actually died when she’d fallen backwards off the couch earlier that day, hitting her head on the floor, and this was some kind of cosmic joke-dimension where Souls got sent to be mocked after death.

Less than five minutes ago, these same people were practically sharpening the guillotine.

Now they were falling over themselves to paint her as a model of innovation and customer-centric thinking.

All she could do was sit there, wide-eyed and hollowed out from the emotional whiplash, quietly praying she didn’t throw up before they finished deciding how *inspired* her noncompliance had apparently been.

‘*What the actual fuck is happening right now...*?’

She didn't know whether to cry, laugh, puke or just faint on the spot.

All she knew was that the word "termination" had vanished from the conversation entirely.

And somehow, impossibly... they all knew her name now.

Kind of...