

Volume 2 - Chapter 67 - Competence

“Bounty Hunters are not our allies. They are not our enemies either. They are a problem that occasionally solves another problem.”

— General O. Unara, Strategic Assessment Briefing

“From the UHF’s point of view, Bounty Hunters occupy an uncomfortable space in the Galactic War. They are a necessary evil: Useful, effective, and *deeply* irritating.

As non-Faction combatants, Bounty Hunters fall under the “Non-Affiliated” classification on a Battlefield. That status grants them full access to the Battlefield Ruleset, just like any other Major Faction would have; including the deployment of Battlefield Aces.

On paper, this makes them “neutral.”

In practice however, it makes them completely *unpredictable*.

Most Bounty Hunters never rise above the first Tier. They die quickly, or learn to stay small.

But the rare few who reach Tier Two—and the even rarer Tier Three—are something else entirely. When one of those Hunters accepts a contract, the hiring Faction effectively buys itself a max-deployment-Tier Battlefield Ace.

Not permanently, of course, and definitely not cheaply.

But long enough to remove a singular problem.

And that is the key point: Bounty Hunters do not fight *wars*. They erase *obstacles*.

A Hunter is never interested in territory, morale, or momentum.

They do not hold lines. They do not push flanks.

They do not care who wins today nor tomorrow.

They appear, claim a single bounty—an Ace, a vehicle crew, a ship—and then they’re gone.

They carve straight through the lines to reach their target, leaving devastation behind them, the collateral damage not seldom outweighing the loss of the Ace itself.

But, that is precisely why they are called in: When a Battlefield Ace becomes too dangerous to face head-on, and the Faction calling them in sees no other viable option.

The UHF has lost more than a few promising Aces to that kind of intervention.

Talents that would have shaped entire campaigns, ended by a third party with no flag and no stake beyond payment.

That loss stings—and Command does *not* forget it.

But the ledger cuts both ways.

For every Ace taken from us, we have killed many, many more Hunters.

We study them. We bait them. We burn their networks and collapse their support chains.

And, when it suits our objectives, we also hire them ourselves—because denying a weapon to the enemy is sometimes less effective than simply pointing said weapon in the other direction.

But this, ultimately, leads us to the real danger in regards to Bounty Hunters that Command watches out for:

A Battlefield Ace so terrifying that the enemy Faction refuses to face them does not merely win the Battlefield they appear on—no.

They simply start to attract Hunters.

And once that happens, that Ace stops being *just* the enemy's problem.

They become *ours* too.”

—

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“—basically the end of the DM. Let me just fast-forward this part...” Thea muttered, feeling anxiety crawl up her chest as they arrived at the one part she really wished she could hide.

They were watching the replay mostly from her own perspective, only having opted into third-person view once or twice for specific situations, so once she stopped shooting and the two remaining Squad Medics of the temporary Alpha Squad started freaking out about her, everything sped up a lot.

“I just had a small medical issue, but we figured it out and everything was fine in the end,” Thea summarised, very deliberately not looking at the rest of her squad—especially not Karania next to her. “Just a tiny problem involving... *overheatingandmeltingmyownbrainandultimatelykillingmyself*, but we won like right after, so it was totally fine! And I had Squad Medic approval to go through with it! And I made a bunch of connections on the Friendlink system as a result, including Sergeant Kalt, so that's really cool! And we won! But—I guess I already mentioned that...”

A heavy silence settled over the common room as she ran out of things to add on, while everyone's heads slowly turned towards her.

After a few moments, the quiet was broken.

"You... melted your own brain... and killed yourself?" Corvus repeated slowly, lifting his gaze from the datapad he'd been taking notes on.

'I swear, why does everyone have to have superhuman Perception... I can't talk fast enough for them to miss anything!' Thea groaned internally.

The worst part was that it had been a direct question from Corvus, her Squad Leader. And it was in relation to something *directly* relevant to their jobs.

There was no way she could just lie to him.

With all eyes on her, she squirmed under the weight of it and offered a weak, "Maaaybe...?"

Corvus let out a long, tired sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Noted."

Then he calmly lowered his gaze back to the datapad and started writing again, stylus moving a little faster than before.

Desmond, on the other hand, didn't even try to hold anything in. He snorted first, then broke into full-on laughter, leaning back in his chair. "I'm sorry—" he managed between breaths, "—you literally cooked your own brain to death? That's insane."

Isabella slammed a fist against her thigh and roared with laughter right along with him.

"HA! That's so fucking good!" she barked. "Went out with a bang, Princess! I can respect that. And the enemy didn't get any kill credit on you either! If you're gonna die, that's the way to fucking do it!"

Lucas, meanwhile, shifted awkwardly in his seat, brow furrowed. He opened his mouth, closed it again, then glanced between Isabella and Thea. "...I mean," he said slowly, "that's impressive? But also kind of concerning? I'm not sure which one I'm really feeling here..."

Then Karania's arm came down around Thea's shoulders.

Thea went stiff instantly.

The sounds came first—wet tearing, sharp cracks of bone breaking far too close to her ear.

She flinched with every change, shoulders tensing as warm droplets splashed against her pants. She stared straight ahead at the datascreen, watching the DM replay crawl toward its end, doing everything she could to pretend none of this was happening.

Then something pressed into her cheek.

An elongated bone—Karanja's index finger—pushed until her head was forced to turn.

Thea swallowed and looked at her best friend.

Karanja smiled a sweet, dangerous smile.

“Thea, my dearest,” Kara said calmly, tilting her head slightly, “what is the *one thing* I have asked you about—repeatedly—since basically the first day of the Assessment? And *especially*, what have I told you about using your Focus? And using all your Psyker stuff?”

Thea’s voice came out small. “...To not overdo it?”

Karania raised an eyebrow.

“...and to be careful,” Thea mumbled.

Karania slowly gestured with her free hand toward the datascreen, where Thea’s on-screen self was leaning dead against the wall of the trench.

“...*Were* you?” Kara asked.

Thea hesitated briefly, considering.

Then she nodded slightly. “Yeees?”

Karania facepalmed hard enough to make a sound and let out a long, suffering groan.

Isabella laughed even harder, to the point where she had to lean forward, one hand braced on her knee, the other on her chest as she struggled to catch her breath.

Karania tightened her arm around Thea’s shoulder.

“Dying to self-inflicted injuries,” she said flatly, “even inside a DM, is *not* being careful, my dear Thea. I don’t care *how many* Squad Medics sign off on it or how untouched your Blueprint comes back. You still shouldn’t be literally killing yourself at *any* point.”

Thea swallowed and stared straight ahead at the replay as it wrapped up.

“You start doing that and you build bad habits. Bad expectations for yourself. You get used to pushing past limits because you think there’s always a reset button. There *isn’t*. Not out there.” She jerked her chin toward the wall. “You don’t just ‘turn off’ DM-brain once we’re deployed for real.”

Another wet sound came close to Thea’s ear—flesh tearing, bone snapping as Karania flexed her hand seemingly without even thinking about it.

“And what if one of the medics misjudged their Focus?” Karania pressed. “What if they overestimated their reserves? Or underestimated *your* drain rate? In that replay, you didn’t even *consider* that they might fail you, did you? Was that *being careful*?”

Before Thea could even consider her own answer, Corvus unexpectedly interjected.

“That’s *exactly* what she should assume,” he said, not looking up as he added another note to his datapad. “She was in there with her fellow Marines. Her designated squad. Why would she ever assume they’d fail her?”

Karania’s head snapped up. “Because people make mistakes.”

“And *Marines* know their roles,” Corvus shot back, finally meeting her gaze. “Medics know their Medic work. Offensives know their offense. Defensives know their coverage. That trust is the whole *point* of the Roles we have inside each squad.”

Karania scoffed. “Trust does *not* replace personal responsibility. You don’t gamble your own life on the assumption that *everyone else* is going to act perfectly.”

“And you don’t fight like you’re alone,” Corvus replied, voice uncharacteristically firm now. “You hesitate because you *might* not be supported, and people die. That’s not how an army works. Not how the Marines work.”

The tension hung thick between them, sharp enough that even Isabella’s roaring laughter dipped and died out fast.

And yeah... that really was the core of it.

Thea could actually see *exactly* where Karania was coming from.

In every game she’d ever played inside the Golden Age Arcade, no matter how competitive, assuming general incompetence was just smart. You *planned* around people messing up and not knowing how to do things properly.

If they turned out to be good, that was a nice bonus, but never the baseline.

The Old Man, however, had drilled something else into her in regards to the UHF: In the Marines, competence wasn’t optional—it was to be *assumed* at all times.

Complete and utter trust, full reliance.

And so she had.

‘I didn’t even consider this being a potential danger,’ she realised, unease settling in her chest as she struggled with the same question hanging in the room around her. *‘Not for a second. I never thought Dan or Chester would fail me on the Focus front... not one bit.’*

Karania pulled her arm back from Thea and folded it across her chest, leaning forward slightly.

“Trust doesn’t mean switching your brain off,” she said flatly. “It means knowing your limits and not pushing past them just because you assume someone else will catch you. Thea *died*. DM or not, that kind of thing matters!”

Corvus exhaled slowly through his nose.

“And assuming your squad *will* fail you is even more dangerous,” he shot back. “Marines survive *because* they rely on each other. If you start second-guessing every role on the field, the entire doctrine falls apart.”

“That’s easy to say from a top-down perspective,” Karania replied sharply. “I’m talking about individual responsibility here, Corvus. Not Faction-wide doctrine. Focus overdraw doesn’t

care how good a medic is *supposed* to be if you push too far. What good is this blind trust if they misjudge their reserves and I just *assumed* they wouldn't? We still both die—simply because I trusted they'd have perfect capability on their end instead of taking some level of responsibility and realizing it could become a problem ahead of time, so I could stop before draining us both dry. You saw the damn replay, Corvus—she didn't even *consider* that they might fail her!"

"Again, why should she?" Corvus countered immediately. "She was deployed with trained Marines doing their jobs. If Thea has to spend a chunk of her efforts on considering whether or not people around her will fail her, how much worse is her overall performance going to be? Multiply that by the hundreds of millions of Marines inside the Corps, and now we're losing the war. That's just how doctrine works: You need everyone to follow it, or it falls apart. You *have* to trust that."

Isabella shifted, her grin gone now.

She scratched at her jaw, then spoke up. "I get what you're saying, boss. I do."

She glanced at Karania, then back at Corvus. "But Kara's not wrong either. Blind trust gets people killed. I've *seen* it."

She trailed off there, eyes unfocused for a moment. Whatever memory had surfaced, she clearly wasn't keen on sharing it. "Just... yeah. Sometimes trusting too hard fucks you—*hard*."

Lucas cleared his throat, before also joining in.

"If I couldn't trust the people around me, I'd never have made it here," he said calmly. "Rinox hunting literally does *not* work without full, unconditional trust. You keep the beast busy with all of your focus and might, so you *have* to believe the others will do their part. Because if you hesitate for a fraction of a moment, you die. You *have* to trust that they'll kill it while you keep it busy."

Desmond nodded slowly. "Honestly... a month ago, I'd be with Karania and Isabella on this one. No question. Easiest choice of my life."

He spoke carefully, eyes flicking between the members of the squad. "But... I've already been burned once by assuming people in my own squad would screw me over. I'm... not doing that again, if I can help it. I'm trying to give people the benefit of the doubt now. So... I guess I'm team trust? Kind of."

Thea couldn't help but notice that his gaze drifted to everyone at least once—except her.

She evidently wasn't the only one caught off guard by Desmond throwing his hat in the ring for team trust either; everyone but Corvus showed clear flashes of surprise at his words.

Hearing everyone's opinions only made Thea sink deeper into her own thoughts.

'*This is... weird,*' she thought, her brows creasing. '*The Old Man's been right about basically everything he's ever taught me. And inside the Marines, trust is supposed to be a given.*'

But that clearly wasn't the whole picture, was it?

'I can see Kara and Ela's side too. Trusting the Medics this completely on something that could literally kill me if it goes even a little wrong... yeah. Kara's probably right. I should've at least kept an eye on my own Focus and my own limits, no...? Nothing would have actually stopped me from just burning Focus while my brain slowly melted. I was completely trusting Chester to knock me out—or straight-up kill me—if I got too close to an Overdraw. And sure, he stayed with me till the end, so it worked out... but is that really a solid argument?'

She grimaced inwardly.

"It worked out, so I was right" usually doesn't mean shit, does it.'

Karania let out a slow breath and finally eased back, some of the sharpness draining from her posture.

"Listen, I get it," she said. "Second-guessing literally everyone around you all the time isn't viable. I *know* that. We all do, I don't doubt. There's obviously a damn good reason the doctrine exists the way it does. But that doesn't mean blind trust is always the answer either."

She flicked a glance toward Desmond.

"If nobody ever paid attention to the people next to them, how exactly would you ever catch an Infiltrator, for example? We've literally *just* seen what a single bad actor can do. If blind trust was the only thing anyone ever did, one person slipping through unchecked could completely wreck an entire Faction."

Corvus was quiet for a few seconds, fingers still on his datapad.

Then he nodded once.

"There's... some truth to that, yes," he admitted. "Doctrine isn't inflexible. There *is* wiggle room."

His gaze moved across the squad. "That said, especially for young Marines like us, blind trust is still the best starting point. Assuming competence and trusting your fellow Marines to do their jobs is how you get maximum performance. Hesitation and constant doubt does nothing but get people killed."

He paused, then looked back at Thea.

"*But*," he continued, "that competence doesn't just go one way. In cases like this—Psykers, high-risk Focus use, experimental weapons, etc.—personal responsibility is *part* of that same assumption. If you're a potential danger to yourself or the people around you, then part of *your* competence, that other people will be assuming exists, is knowing how *not* to let that happen. Self-control isn't somehow separate from or antithetical to the doctrine. It's quite literally baked into it by default."

The words seemed to settle over the room like a blanket.

Karania studied him for a moment, then gave a small, reluctant nod.

“...Yeah,” she said quietly. “I can live with that. Part of the competence we all assume in each other, involves the competence to not end up killing yourself and others.”

Lucas still looked unsure, arms crossed tight, while Isabella rolled a shoulder and frowned, clearly not fully convinced either. Desmond, on the other hand, had visibly gone thoughtful, eyes unfocused for a moment—then he nodded as well.

Thea let the conversation sink in, replaying the arguments inside her head.

‘...Yeah. They’re probably both right.’

She’d always taken the Old Man’s advice at face value—assume competence, trust the people around you. But she was starting to see the part she’d accidentally skipped over.

That assumption didn’t just apply outward. It applied inward, too.

She’d very much forgotten to consider that *she* was part of the equation as well and what “competence” really implied in a situation where others were counting on you in turn.

‘Dying inside a DM really isn’t as catastrophic as Karania is making it sound though,’ she still believed. ‘But... I did promise Kara to be careful. And melting my own brain, DM or not, is pretty much the exact opposite of that, no matter how I look at it. At the very least, I should’ve kept enough of myself together to not rely entirely on Chester to stop me... If I had, I probably wouldn’t have died at all either.’

Then again... she *had* won.

‘Not sure I would’ve, if I hadn’t gone all the way...’

The thoughts sat heavy in her chest.

There was no clean answer here. No easy rule to follow, beyond what the two brains of her squad had just come up with—but even that one was quite difficult to implement.

It was all just a messy middle ground that required judgment she wasn’t sure she fully had grips on yet.

She exhaled slowly, then broke the silence.

“I’m sorry... I didn’t keep my promise,” she said quietly, looking at Karania.

“You asked me to be careful. And I wasn’t.” She hesitated, then added, more honestly, “I’ll try to be better. I just... don’t really know how to balance all of this yet.”

For a moment, Karania just stared at her. Then she sighed, long and tired, and before Thea could brace herself, Kara pulled her into a hug.

Thea stiffened on instinct—then slowly relaxed.

"I know," Karania muttered, chin resting against the top of Thea's head. "This whole Psychic thing, the Focus, and all that... It's a lot. Would be for anyone."

She pulled back just enough to look at her. "I don't really care that you pushed hard. Not even that you died, honestly. It's more about the way *how*. What I care about is that you don't start forming habits that'll get you killed later, just because DMs *feel* safe. That's all."

Thea swallowed and nodded.

"Yeah... I get that," she said quietly. "I won't let that happen again."

A brief silence settled over the room—just long enough to feel heavy—before Isabella's brusque voice cut straight through it from Thea's other side.

"Wow, what's with this mood all of a sudden?" Isabella scoffed. "You two gonna kiss now or what? Should the rest of us make ourselves scarce or do we get to watch...?"

Thea turned beet-red instantly, words tripping over themselves as she tried to respond. "W-What—?! No!"

Karania let go of her just as fast, scowling furiously at Isabella. "Absolutely not! Making sure the squad doesn't develop suicidal habits is *literally* my job," she shot back. "I was merely making sure she doesn't form bad habits, Isabella. That's it. I'd have done the exact same thing if it had been you. You know that."

Isabella just roared with laughter again, clearly enjoying herself far too much.

Karania, obviously done with *that* topic, shifted gears hard. "Anyway. Let's talk about your DM again," she said, pointing at the paused replay.

"Specifically—your deployment as a Battlefield Ace. How was that?"

That quickly snapped Isabella out of her laughter again, as her interest flared.

She bumped her shoulder into Thea's, grinning wide. "Okay, yeah. That part was damn epic. I'm jealous as fuck. Looked like a blast. How did it feel? You had like a whole squad just for yourself!"

Thea felt herself relax, grateful for the change.

"It was really fun," she admitted. "But also... unbelievably stressful. And exhausting."

She gestured vaguely at the screen. "You get so many resources, so much freedom—but the downside is the stupid amounts of responsibility. Every single decision I made mattered so much. It felt like the whole Battlefield was sitting on my damn shoulders the entire time... If it wasn't for Sergeant Kalt handling the planning, movement, and comms, I wouldn't have been able to do anything even remotely useful."

"Maybe you need some Leadership classes," Corvus chimed in, tapping his stylus against his datapad. "I noted it down for the review I want to send you later. I think you'd benefit a lot

from them—not because I want you taking my job, of course,” he added with a dry chuckle, “but you’ve got a natural inclination for small-scale leadership. And if you end up in Ace squads again, having that groundwork would help you not feel so out of your depth.”

Thea grimaced. “I really *don’t* want to lead anything...”

“You did great during the Assessment,” Lucas added unexpectedly, giving a heavy shrug, like it was obvious.

“I don’t know—” Thea started, only to be cut off by Desmond.

“You really did. Not letting you say otherwise,” he said firmly. “I know for a fact that if I’d been put in charge after Corvus left, we’d all have died before getting into the service tunnels. I’m sure it wasn’t perfect, but I honestly can’t point out what you should’ve done differently—I don’t even know if or where things went wrong.”

Thea met his eyes.

He flinched just a bit, but still held her gaze and gave a serious nod.

Deflating with a long sigh, she said, “Haaa... *fiine*. I’ll look into it. But only for emergencies. And Ace squad stuff—because that was damn fucking fun.”

Lucas let out a short huff of laughter and shook his head. “I still can’t believe you ended up as a Battlefield Ace for that DM,” he said.

“It’s kind of insane. But... yeah. Given the scenario, I guess it checks out. You probably pulled a stupid amount of Credits and Merit from that, didn’t you?”

Thea nodded, a grin creeping onto her face. “Yeah. A lot.”

Lucas sighed and leaned back into his armchair, running a hand through his hair.

“Figures. I was busting my ass trying to keep up,” he muttered, then paused. “Which actually reminds me—we still need to do the squad-wide PV update.”

Thea’s eyes lit up instantly.

She straightened in her seat and turned toward Corvus. “Oh—yeah! We absolutely should do that. Lucas and I talked about it during the System 102 lecture. That something you think we could do?”

Corvus didn’t look surprised in the slightest.

He just nodded once, a smug smile tugging at his lips, and turned his datapad toward her.

Displayed on the screen was a neat data table, the header clearly visible:

PV Update – Post-Assessment, 1st DM

Thea blinked. Then blinked again.

“...You were ready for this already?” she asked, genuinely taken aback.

Her gaze snapped to Lucas almost on instinct.

He immediately raised both hands and shook his head with a chuckle. “Wasn’t me.”

Corvus inclined his head slightly, unfazed by her reaction.

“I figured it was a good idea,” he calmly said. “Doesn’t mean others can’t arrive at the same conclusion. Parallel thinking happens.”

He glanced around the room. “Everyone alright with sharing their PVs, then?”

There was a brief pause—then a chorus of nods and casual affirmations.

Corvus nodded once and tapped his datapad. “I’ll start, then. Post-Assessment, first DM—PV: One thousand, two hundred and thirty-three.”

Lucas leaned forward a little. “Alright, then. Mine’s one thousand, two hundred and sixty-two.”

Before anyone else could chime in or react, Desmond let out a sharp, victorious laugh. “Ha! Yeees! One thousand, two hundred and sixty-*four*. Get fucked!”

Lucas immediately groaned, staring at the ceiling. “Ah, damn it. You’ve gotta be kidding me...!”

Desmond grinned smugly, rocking back in his own chair. “Hey, what can I say, numbers don’t lie.”

Isabella snorted and crossed her arms. “Cute. One thousand, two hundred and eighty-six.”

She shot Desmond a sideways look. “Try harder next time, Droneboy. Or, how did you say... Numbers don’t lie, eh?”

Desmond muttered something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like an insult.

Karania, meanwhile, hadn’t said a word. She just waited until everyone’s attention naturally turned towards her, then spoke with her usual casual ease. “One thousand, four hundred and eighty-five.”

Isabella sucked in a sharp breath. “—*fuck*.”

Desmond blinked. “Wait, *how much*?”

Lucas straightened up, eyebrows shooting up. “By Xagis...”

Karania rolled her eyes at the collective reaction. “Relax. It’s not that impressive.”

She tilted her head toward Thea. “I’m probably still worlds behind her anyway.”

Every head in the room turned toward Thea at once.

She froze for half a second—then couldn't stop the smug grin from spreading across her face. This one? For once, she had earned it.

Every damn second of it.

"One thousand," she said calmly, then paused just long enough to be annoying, "seven hundred and seventy-three."

The reaction was immediate.

"*Bullshit*," Isabella said flatly. "Absolute bullshit."

Desmond just stared. "How...?"

Lucas dropped his head back against the chair with a long groan. "I hate this. I *actually* hate this... Not that I figured I would be close to Thea, but then also behind Desmond...? *Come ooon*."

Karania stared at her for a second, then let out a slow breath. "Of course it is," she muttered. "Of course your number's that high..."

Corvus exhaled through his nose, the faintest hint of amusement breaking through his usual composure as he jotted something down.

"Noted," he said. "Very noted."

Thea leaned back, folding her arms behind her head, the grin still firmly in place.

"Hey. Blood, sweat, tears, and extreme levels of brain damage," she said lightly. "All totally worth it for this."

That earned her a sharp look from Karania.

Thea reacted instantly, hands shooting up in surrender. "Just kidding! Just kidding, Kara! It was a joke!"

Karania huffed, shaking her head, but there was no real heat behind it.

"It better was," she muttered, though the corner of her mouth twitched noticeably.

For a brief moment, Alpha Squad simply enjoyed the easy banter that continued for a few minutes—until Corvus cleared his throat, straightened his posture, and tapped his datapad.

"Alright," he said, voice shifting back into Squad Leader mode, "now that we're done measuring egos, let's talk takeaways from the DMs..."