

Volume 2 - Interlude: Keeps

“When people talk about *Legacies*, they tend to romanticize the whole thing—like we’re some kind of noble houses of old-Terra chosen by fate to carve our names into the halls of the UHF.

“That’s nonsense.

“A Legacy is exactly what the name implies: A continuous passing-on of knowledge, sharpened and polished across generations. There is nothing mystical about it.

“A Legacy exists because one generation of Marines trains the next, who then trains the next, and so on—until the knowledge stops being a pile of good habits and becomes a system; a method. A *tradition* strong enough to survive the shifting tides of doctrine, politics, and the very Galactic War itself.

“In theory, any retired Marine who takes the time to teach their child about the Corps—its culture, its tactics, its way of life—counts as a Legacy. A generation can pass on a great deal.

“But there’s a difference between handing over a few lessons and handing over more than six generations’ worth of refined doctrine, training structures, and hard-won insight.

“One generation is practically nothing, in the grand scheme of the Allbright System’s complexities. Two is fragile. Three is promising. Only after at least six generations do you really get the beginnings of something *worthy* of the title of a Legacy.

“That is where the divide between Minor and Major Legacies sits.

“Minors are those families in the early stages—less than six generations deep. They may be talented, even exceptional, but they have not existed long enough to burn away their inefficiencies. Their teachings still wobble, their results are still inconsistent by the very nature of their lack of refinement.

“A Major Legacy has endured long enough for its methods to become sharpened, tested, and, most of all, *proven*.

“Now, don’t mistake this for misplaced arrogance. The Prime Legacies likely say the same about us—perhaps with good reason. Every rung of this ladder believes the ones above are overrated and the ones below are unpolished.

“Tradition builds pride by necessity; and pride inevitably builds blind spots. That, too, is part of our Legacy: To impart the knowledge of this danger onto our children as well.

“There is however, one truth we all agree on: The Allbright System does not *allow* for perfect preparation. No Legacy—Minor, Major, or Prime—can *guarantee* its children will follow the exact path you imagined for them.

“We can shape them. Guide them. Give them every advantage our ancestors and we ourselves carved out.

“But the System *always* introduces its own chaos.

“So, what truly matters? The only thing that has always truly mattered in the UHF: Personal merit.

“The drive to carve out what is rightfully yours with your own two hands, the drive to be the best with your own blood, sweat and tears, and the drive to use whatever knowledge you are given, or can get your hands on, to your best advantage.

“Legacies, in this dance, simply tilt the battlefield heavily in our favor, giving our children a head start toward this very excellence.

“After that, it’s up to them to claw their way into history and leave even further improved foundations behind for their own children.

”*That* is what makes a Legacy.”

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[Excerpt from an interview recorded for the Vespera System Historical Initiative (VSHI) – Raymond Oleaven Masters, Patriarch of the Masters Major Legacy, PFC927]

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PoV: Rachel Veronica Masters

“Victory!” rang the female announcer’s voice through the arena, before Rachel’s avatar disintegrated and she found herself back in the booth inside one of the Sovereign’s arcades.

It had been over two hours since her irritating conversation with Callahan and McKay, most of which she had spent grinding through training exercises in Terra’s games, trying—and failing—to burn off the lingering frustration.

Yet Callahan’s complete and utter disregard for her very existence clung to her like an oil film.

“How fucking *dare* he...” she muttered through clenched teeth, wiping the sweat from her forehead. The VR-Dive-Helmet always made her run hot, and her long golden hair stuck messily to her damp skin. “Asking ‘*Who are you again?*’ like he didn’t fucking know! Piece of shit!”

There were a few mistakes she could already pick out during her time in the UHF Marine Corps—ones that would undoubtedly haunt her for a long time.

The first, and most obvious, was her reaction to Major Quinn’s devious trap—painfully clear in hindsight, especially when no other Award had gone to more than one Marine at a time.

She *had* been warned about some of the Proprietor's habits by her teachers, but she hadn't expected to be on the legendary Major's radar from the very beginning.

"A stupid assumption, Rachel," she chided herself, leaning back heavily in the seat and staring at the ceiling. "You're a Masters; you always talk about how much you've gained from your family—knowledge and training most of all—and then you ignore that exact legacy the moment you actually need to remember you are one? Stupid. *Beyond* stupid."

It should have been obvious that Major Quinn—as well as the other officers, professors, and command staff aboard the Sovereign—would keep a close eye on her every move.

She *was* a Masters, after all. And that came with *two* sides, not just the favorable one.

Her reaction and the blowup at her squad had cost her a lot of the goodwill she'd built up—some of which was likely never to be repaired.

'Won't matter if I make it into Alpha Squad—when I make it into Alpha Squad,' she told herself, but cracks had already begun to form in that certainty—cracks large enough that even she couldn't ignore them.

Those had mostly come from her second mistake—the one that had probably given Callahan enough confidence to mock her so openly.

"I really should have upgraded my Attributes, filled out my Abilities, and prepared my equipment properly before facing Itoku that day," she muttered, running a hand through the damp strands of her hair.

Losing that fight had been a mistake, and shocking in more ways than one.

Not only had it given Callahan—and the rest of Alpha Squad—a real reason to believe they could win; after all, Itoku had already beaten her once, so why wouldn't the others think they could do the same? But the most shocking part had been her own lack of knowledge.

'That damn [Redundant Organs] Ability...'

She had searched frantically for answers after her defeat, trying to figure out how Itoku had survived a blow that should have been fatal, only to eventually get an answer through an anonymous message.

A message she hadn't known the source of—until earlier today.

"A damn *Sen*, of all Legacies, in the same Drive, huh...? At least she seems to be on my side for now, giving me information like this," Rachel muttered. "Whatever her goals are for Callahan, it doesn't look like she's trying to help him beat me—or help Alpha Squad as a whole, really. Major Legacies should stick together like that, after all. Only makes sense."

That had probably been why the *Sen* girl—Evelyn, as Rachel had learned—had given her the details on Itoku's Ability days ago, after her own attempts at gathering the information had failed repeatedly.

The reasoning behind Evelyn's actions was clear as well: It wouldn't do for a Major Legacy to embarrass themselves against some mid-world grunt, as spectacular of a specimen as Itoku inarguably was.

Rachel had even prepared a long, strongly worded letter to her teachers back on Vespera Prime, to very *kindly* inform them that their lack of knowledge on powerful low-grade Abilities was dangerous for a young Marine's early career.

"It's probably not something mum and dad ever had to deal with, considering how stacked this Drive is compared to any others before," she sighed. "So I get why it probably didn't appear important to them... But they still should have known! The Drives have been getting more and more high-roll every year, they even said so! Someone should've given me a primer on the best Abilities to grab right after the first Assessment, so I don't have to swim through the sludge myself!"

But that was the nature of the System.

She'd been warned about that—the possibility that she'd still be missing information.

That she'd have to do her own research, find her own path through all the chaos.

And she *had* been prepared for that, honestly.

She just hadn't expected it to literally punch her in the face several times, then crack her skull and splatter her brain across the training grounds, despite the amount of training and knowledge she had ahead of everyone else.

*'I'm ready next time, Itoku... I know your one trick now, and I've picked it up myself, so... what do you **really** have to threaten me with anymore?'*

A wide, sharp grin stretched across her face as she imagined her next chance to face Alpha Squad's Offensive Heavy.

'I should honestly thank you, Itoku. [Redundant Organs] should have been part of our Legacy ages ago. I have no idea how my parents, teachers, and ancestors never thought of it as a staple, especially early on. You've shown me something genuinely valuable that I can pass down as well...'

She was now more than ready to take on Callahan and whatever support Alpha Squad threw at her.

She was going to play for keeps...

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PoV: Peria Akin

“No. No, *really*. It makes complete sense she’s also a fucking Psyker,” Peria muttered for what felt like the tenth time in just as many minutes. “Why *wouldn’t* she be. It’s not like she can’t already crush my skull in one hand like it’s pudding. Why wouldn’t she also be able to control fucking reality itself or whatever the living fuck it is that they do? It’s actually *very* sensible, if you think about it.”

And, in a strange way, she actually really believed that, deep inside.

There had been a full moment of panic, of course, right after watching the recording of the Digital Mission the girl had sent her—right at the point where she finally understood what kind of absolute monster had somehow chosen *her*, of all people, to be the contact for her weapons needs.

She had already known bits of it from the recent Assessment highlights still trickling out of the UHF MC’s media division, of course.

The newest showcase had featured an impressive assault run by Alpha Squad.

The context for what they were actually doing was vague, but the part where Thea launched herself halfway into the sky through a series of jumps and what had appeared to be some form of air-platforms, just to get a cleaner angle on a few targets?

That had been *everywhere*—the Sovereign’s internal clerk forums were still buzzing with edits and replay loops of the moment.

But none of that had prepared her for watching Thea through the lens of an entire, almost unedited, Digital Mission from start to finish. And *definitely* not for the fact that she had been able to jump straight into Thea’s own point of view and see everything exactly as the girl must have seen it, whenever she wanted to.

What came after the sheer, unfiltered terror of realizing the girl was the Sovereign’s Ace for a very good reason... was a surprising moment of clarity and relief, on more than one front.

First and most obviously, she would never be facing the girl on a battlefield.

That alone took a huge weight off her shoulders.

‘Being a simple store clerk isn’t so bad, not when it means you don’t have to worry about something like her ending up across the field from you,’ she thought, a crooked smile tugging at her lips.

The second reason was... strange, but somehow comforting.

It was the realization that, if Thea really wanted to kill her, she wouldn’t need to crush Peria’s skull with her bare hands—her main fear up until now.

A simple thought would probably be enough, since the girl was a damn Psyker.

Not that Peria believed Thea would ever do something like that, of course.

The girl was extremely polite and downright adorable in how awkward she appeared at times, but given the sheer difference in power between them, it was not something that Peria had managed to fully set aside as a recurring possibility in her mind.

‘Everyone seems reasonable and downright cute at times when they’re not angry about something in the moment,’ she reminded herself.

She’d learned that one early in life—the hard way.

And the third reason was the most practical of all: If Thea saw value in her, then Peria had that monster on her side in any future calculations.

‘As long as I can somehow keep her happy,’ she grimaced.

That part had been the hardest over the last twelve hours.

Trying to make sense of what Thea had been doing inside the DM had been tough enough—Peria barely understood what the Marines’ objective even was, much less why the girl was hauling all three Gram variants around inside the trenches at once. But trying to predict Thea’s questions and requests on top of that? It had nearly driven her mad.

Thankfully, help was on the way.

She checked the time on her datascreen again—for the twentieth time in two minutes—and right on cue, the moment 04:15 hit, her datapad chimed with an incoming call.

“Bless you and your punctuality, Jonas,” Peria muttered, snatching up the device and accepting the call right away.

Her own sleep-deprived, messy reflection appeared beside the face of a slightly older man, his short, rumpled black hair contrasting against pale skin.

His red eyes and raised eyebrow said everything without a single word.

“Thanks for taking the time, Jonas,” she said quickly. “I know it’s late, but I really need to pick your brain on this.”

“So you said in your messages,” he replied, tilting his head. “So... what exactly has you this rattled, Peri? You’re not the type to practically *beg* anyone for help. Should I be worried? You’re not dragging me into something I’m going to regret, right...?”

“It’s nothing bad for you, I swear!” She said quickly, lifting her free hand as if to ward off the suspicion he hadn’t even voiced yet. “Really. I’m just... stressed about work. Well—semi-work, semi-personal contacts, I guess? There’s... this client, and they’re going to ask me questions about things, but I can’t prepare the answers ahead of time because I don’t even know what the questions *are*.”

Jonas blinked once. “...I’m going to need more than that, Peri.”

She let out a thin, exhausted sigh. “It’s a Marine. Obviously. And the questions are going to be combat related—more specifically about the weapon variants I sold them a few days ago. I need to pick your brain about the models, about the configurations, about what you think they might ask. I basically need to simulate the whole conversation before it actually happens, so I know what kind of stuff they might ask and what I don’t know I don’t know about yet.”

Jonas sat back in his chair, taking that in.

Then, slowly, he nodded. “Okay... but why not just ask the client what they want ahead of time?”

Peria made a pained sound. “Because that would be *horrible* form. They’re a VIP, Jonas. An important one. I can’t just ask them to pre-submit their questions like I’m sending them homework. It’d make me look completely unprofessional—and probably violate several hundred rules.”

That got his full attention.

His eyes sharpened; the raised eyebrow dropped in favor of a more serious look.

“A VIP Marine,” he echoed. “Alright. That explains the panic.”

“Yeah,” she muttered.

He rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Alright then. What else can you tell me? Start from the top. Everything you’ve got. Let’s figure this out.”

Peria exhaled a long-held breath, slumping a little as she muttered, “Thank you, Jonas. You’re a damn life-saver...”

Then she straightened up again, drew in a steadying breath, and launched into the full rundown—twelve hours’ worth of jumbled observations, worries, and notes spilling out in a fast but surprisingly organized stream.

Jonas listened without interrupting, his expression unreadable.

She kept things careful, leaving out Thea’s name, squad, and anything else that could identify her. She only covered what mattered for the upcoming conversation: General combat style, the fact she was a Psyker, how she used the weapons in question, the mods she’d made both in and outside the DM, and a few details Peria had picked up during their first meeting.

Everything else stayed firmly off the table.

The whole explanation took almost an hour—Jonas only chiming in with the occasional sharp, targeted question—before Peria finally sank back into her couch and let herself breathe again.

Jonas stayed quiet, eyes distant, clearly processing everything she’d just unloaded.

At least, Peria hoped that was what he was doing and he hadn't simply fallen asleep with his eyes open.

Jonas eventually leaned back in his chair, confirming he was not in-fact asleep, arms folding loosely as his eyes drifted off in thought. He stayed quiet long enough that Peria started to worry she had overloaded him, but then he let out a slow breath and nodded to himself.

"...Alright," he said, voice steady. "I think I've got enough to work with for now."

Peria perked up a little, tension easing from her shoulders.

Jonas continued, "We can start sorting through what this VIP might actually be after. If their combat style looks anything like what you described—and since they're the one who bought those variants from you—we can narrow down the likely angles of questioning pretty fast. There's only so many things someone like that would want to know—even if they sound deeply interested in the matter as a whole."

He rubbed his stubbled jaw thoughtfully, the faintest hint of a grin tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"So. Let's dig into what they might be planning to ask you and play this through a couple of times, to see where it leads..."

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They spent another five hours going back and forth on different ideas, running mock-meetings and working through every angle they could think of.

By the end of it, Peria was sprawled across her couch, head pounding with a brutal mix of sleep-deprivation and too much thinking.

"I think that about wraps it up, Peri," Jonas said, yawning hard. "And if all that prep doesn't make the VIP happy, then it's not on you. You've got the logs to prove you did your homework, and I can vouch too."

That made her perk up.

She reached for the datapad she'd abandoned on the coffee table two hours earlier when her arms couldn't keep holding it up.

"Listen, Jonas," she said. "This isn't about work... not really. This VIP... I... They saved my life. It's more than just wanting to do a good job. I *really* don't want to disappoint them."

His red eyes widened, and he leaned forward. "*Saved your life...?*"

"Didn't have the time to talk to you about that yet... Was planning on it, the next time we met up for drinks," Peria sighed heavily. "The first time I met them, I ended up in a room with all the talking heads—every single one. Regional sector manager included. I was being terminated. Guaranteed."

Jonas' eyes practically bulged at that.

"I didn't exactly behave like an Abundant Ammunition clerk should around a VIP—tons of violations of that *stupid* manual. You know how it is. But the VIP... they're a big one, Jonas. The kind you cannot afford to mess up with."

He nodded slowly.

"So the talking heads were furious I broke protocol. They listed every little thing I did wrong, right to my face, building the case in real time like my presence didn't even matter. I was done. *Truly done*. No wiggle room, nothing. And I just sat there, because what else could I do? Clerks like us mess up, we get terminated. That's it."

She rubbed her forehead, feeling the memory settle back in like a weight.

"But then—Jonas, I swear I still get chills—the VIP *came back*. After they'd already gotten their gear, paid, everything. Mid-termination meeting, I get another VIP request ping on my datapad. The talking heads kicked me out instantly, because even they can't ignore a VIP summon. And then... they asked for my personal contact. Asked for *me, specifically*, to be their personal weapons tech going forward."

Jonas let out a long, low whistle, sinking back in pure disbelief. "And suddenly the talking heads couldn't afford to let you go, huh?"

She nodded hard. "One-eighty, instantly. Massive promotion. Larger room—" she moved around the datapad to show it, "—but most important: No termination. The VIP is the only reason I'm still here. I owe them, Jonas. And they're actually... really nice. Personable. Easy to talk to. So I really don't want this to go wrong. This is the only thing I can do to repay them for their kindness—intentional or not. They literally saved my life. You get me?"

"I get you," Jonas said gently, the tired edge in his voice softening. "And don't worry, Peri. You're *not* going to disappoint them. You've put more work into this than most full research teams do in a month. If anything, they'll be impressed you took their request this seriously."

Peria let her head sink back into the couch cushion, eyes closing for a moment as the tension finally eased out of her shoulders.

"Yeah... I really hope so," she murmured.

Jonas gave a quiet, thoughtful hum. "Just remember: Whatever else happens, you're not walking into that meeting unprepared. You've done everything you possibly could."

She nodded, even if he likely couldn't see it clearly from her slumped angle. "Thanks, Jonas. *Really*. And... sorry for keeping you up all night. I know you had a long day already."

"Anytime, Peri. And don't mention it; I know you'd do the same for me if I needed you," he said, and the sincerity in his voice made her smile despite the pounding in her head.

Jonas was good people—the first real friend she'd made aboard the Sovereign, and probably the only one she'd ever actually call that.

A few pleasantries and a wish for a restful night later, Peria ended the call, letting the room fall into a comfortable silence.

She sat with it for a few breaths, then forced herself up from the couch.

She shuffled into the small kitchen area and grabbed one of the injectors from the counter—the boosters she'd bought after her shift had abruptly imploded yesterday, knowing she'd need something to keep her sharp for the lengthy prep.

She pressed it to her neck and released the dose, feeling the cool rush spread through her veins. Her headache thinned out almost instantly, replaced by a sharp, almost jittery clarity.

"Haaa... These things are pure poison, aren't they," she muttered with a tired chuckle. "Only for today. If I get hooked on these little bastards, I'll end up drowning in debt instead of heading home with a nice fat savings account."

Shaking off the last of her grogginess, she collected herself and left her room, heading straight for the virtual firing range she'd booked out for the entire day in the store's backrooms.

Inside, an array of weapons sat waiting for her—three Gram variants and the two Hybrid-types she'd sold to Thea just days prior.

She reached for the first gun, the Gauss-variant Gram, slid in a magazine, and settled it against her shoulder.

"Alright," she murmured, lining up her first shot. "Let's see how these things really perform. First-hand experience always beats staring at second-hand data..."

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It was early afternoon, and after a long, relaxing shower, Peria was now fiddling with the sixth outfit she had tried on in the past hour.

"That should do," she muttered, nodding at her reflection. "Yeah. That should do nicely."

It was technically just a VIP consultation—more like a private meeting between herself and Thea—but that didn't mean looks didn't matter. Presentation was half the job when dealing with someone that important.

'If she were a man, she'd definitely be more friendly to me in this outfit,' she thought, brushing a loose streak of hair behind her ear. 'Now whether she's into women or not... guess we'll see. Wouldn't be unheard of, considering she's a Marine. Something about their freakily boosted physiology makes that whole attraction-to-everyone thing way more common, or so people say. Who knows if that's true... But nobody dislikes something pretty to look at during a long conversation, so it's a win either way.'

She put away her makeup and started clearing the outfits scattered around the apartment, since the rest of her prep work was finally done.

Time to head to the store, where she and Thea had agreed to meet for the afternoon.

Peria gave herself one last look in the mirror, admiring how the tailored dark-blue blouse hugged her frame while still looking perfectly professional.

‘Yep. Worth every credit,’ she thought with a smug little smile.

It had been her first big purchase aboard the Sovereign, after several months of working at Abundant Ammunitions at Jonas’ behest. He had extolled the virtues of having something dolled-up-but-professional available for moments just like these, when important VIPs or otherwise interested parties wanted a meeting.

It had come in handy several times over the recent years, so she had definitely gotten her credits worth already.

Then her mind drifted.

‘I wonder if Thea would even be the type to look twice at a clerk like me...? She’s probably drowning in suitors by now, right? Not that I’d be interested—it’s more the muscle-y guys for me. Usually. Though I can’t deny the danger factor with her is... ridiculous. And she still somehow feels perfectly safe and cute. What a nastily alluring combin—’

She froze.

“What the fuck are you even thinking about, Peria? Get it the fuck together, girl.”

She knew the signs immediately: Booster withdrawal.

They always caused people’s thoughts to go absolutely haywire in all the wrong directions—directions that they definitely were not supposed to go in, more often than not.

And her last dose had been three and a half hours ago now.

If she didn’t top up, she’d be a jittery mess before they even started getting into the nuts and bolts of the conversation.

One last shot to top-up with, then she slipped an extra injector into her bag and left the apartment, heading down the hallway toward the Abundant Ammunitions portal.

The route was much shorter now after her promotion.

Stepping through, she moved from the backrooms to the front of the store, settling in near the registers to wait for Thea’s arrival...

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Peria caught more than a few stares from her coworkers and the steady trickle of customers coming through the doors, but she ignored all of it.

Her thoughts kept looping back through her prep, double-checking that she remembered every bit of data she had collected and where she had stored it on her datapad—not that she couldn't just use the search function, but still.

Saying she was nervous felt like an understatement, yet she kept her expression professionally calm, greeting people with a polite smile, listening when spoken to, nodding at the right moments.

Technically she wasn't on duty today—Thea had paid for her full day off, after all—but that didn't mean she could afford to trash her own reputation in the store.

Or Abundant Ammunition's, for that matter.

After a few minutes of lingering near the front, the attention she kept getting pushed her patience to the limit. She politely explained to yet another Marine that she was only waiting for a consultation appointment, then let her eyes sweep the storefront again in hopes of spotting Thea.

'Please show up soon... I know I can't complain about having shown up early on my part, but I could really use some backroom and workshop time right abou—'

"Hi Peria," Thea said right beside her.

Peria jumped so hard she nearly tripped backwards, her heart punching straight into her throat.

"Ahh...! Sorry!" Thea blurted, looking genuinely guilty for startling her.

Peria gathered herself, though not before thinking, with pure exasperation, *'People that tall and especially someone that fucking lethal should **not** be able to appear out of nowhere like that—what the fuck is the Allbright System doing to us?'*

"Thea! Glad you could make it," she said with a real smile after taking a steadying breath. "Don't worry about that, I was just lost in thought and you caught me off guard—entirely my fault. Sorry for the unsightly display."

It was only then that she noticed Thea looked different from last time.

Not only was she dressed nicely—a well-chosen green blouse that Peria immediately approved of as a certified blouse-enjoyer and a pair of tight-fitted pants—instead of her UHF uniform like last time, but she was also wearing some light makeup.

A clean blend of eyeshadow and almost-invisible masking; nothing heavy-handed, but then again, the girl really didn't need anything heavy in the first place.

It showed a good grasp of her own appearance and some solid experience with makeup, which Peria instantly flagged as potentially useful future information.

*'She's good with fashion and experienced with makeup too, huh...? Anything this girl **isn't** good at?' she thought with a quiet spark of amusement mixed with exasperation. 'I guess I'm*

not the only one who figured dressing up a bit for a long meeting was a smart idea. Good job, Peria—looks like you actually nailed that call.'

Thea stood beside her somewhat awkwardly, clearly weighing how to move the conversation forward, so Peria stepped in and said, "Why don't we head to the back? I've got a room prepared, away from all the busy nonsense out here."

The girl's face lit up and she nodded, "That sounds great! I have a lot to ask about—did you have enough time to check out the recording I sent over?"

Peria almost tripped as she led the way, not expecting Thea to just openly bring up personal dealings in the middle of the store with half a dozen customers within earshot—but then again, nothing about her suggested she cared much about professional etiquette to begin with.

So that one was on Peria, really.

"I did, yes. Thanks to your very generous offer of payment for my time," she replied smoothly as she guided Thea through the aisles. "It was... impressive, to say the least. I saw you used all three Gram variants; those are part of what you want to discuss, right?"

Thea nodded a little too eagerly. "Yes! I tried them all out because I wanted to get a better feel for them. I've tried them before, right after Integration, but never in a real-ish situation. So I figured I might as well test them properly since I had to do the DM anyway... well, not *this* one in particular, but a DM. And not necessarily yesterday but any day, really... Ehh... Anyway, I wanted to talk about them, yes."

Peria couldn't stop the smile breaking through her professional mask at the girl's adorable rambling—though the *content* of her words hit her a second later, and the smile twisted into a lopsided mix of bewilderment and deep concern.

She was glad Thea was slightly behind her, so she couldn't see her face.

*'She's talking about killing hundreds of people like it was a simple experiment—nothing more. Like it was just a casual stroll. "Oh, just a little test, no worries," she says, melting her own brain and breaking every gun she brought in. What kind of testing is that?! There are virtual shooting ranges, Thea! You can just go there and fire the guns! You don't need to do... **any** of that other stuff!'*

She wanted to blurt all of that out—and more—but she knew better.

And she couldn't exactly fully emphasize with the realities of being a Marine either.

Killing people was their job, just like repairing and knowing things about weapons was hers, so chiding Thea for doing exactly what her job entailed would be fairly hypocritical.

So instead, she turned slightly mid-walk and gave Thea a bright, professional smile. "That's great to hear! I've prepared some data on all of them, including the detailed spec and design sheets from Starfire Armaments' designers themselves—that one took me a bit to get, but I hope it'll be of use to us."

Thea's eyes widened, lighting up instantly. "You... You got the full, detailed spec sheets from the original designers?!"

Peria nodded, unable to stop the swell of smug pride.

She'd pulled those through a favor from Irisha, another clerk she'd met aboard the Sovereign and helped transfer to a different Abundant Ammunition location on a separate ship around a year back, after certain... unpleasant issues with an overly handsy manager had made staying problematic.

'Calling that favor in was absolutely worth it,' she thought, watching the sheer awe on Thea's face.

"I did. Only the best for you, Thea," she added with a small, playful wink before turning forward again and leading her into the backrooms—toward the private consultation room she had prepared for their long talk.

Her confidence settled a little deeper.

The first reveal had landed perfectly—but she still had plenty more to show.

'Time to earn my keep...'