

Volume 2 - Chapter 35 - VIP Consultation

“Economics: The Quiet Engine of the Galactic War

“The victor of a war is not the one with the most firepower, but the one who can afford to keep firing.”

In a war where every single ship costs billions and a single batch of Marines can run the price of a mid-world’s capital-city’s annual GDP, the real battles aren’t fought with rifles, tanks or orbital bombardments—they’re waged on ledgers, budget tables, and fiscal projections.

For every Marine on the frontlines, there are a hundred others back home ensuring they’re fed, armed, equipped, deployed, healed, rearmed, and shipped back out again.

Logistics may move armies, but Credits are what allow logistics to exist in the first place.

Fuel is bought. Ammunition is manufactured. Ships are built from alloys mined by laborers paid in wages, secured by investors, insured by financial arms of Faction-run megabanks.

Every pull of a trigger is an invoice sent down the supply chain.

Every Marine that Zero’s is a cascade of spreadsheets being updated.

Every volley of missiles is a transaction—ultimately approved or denied by an algorithmic calculation deep in UHF High Command’s infrastructure.

No wonder then, that sectors rich in raw resources, energy production, or economic throughput are oftentimes more heavily defended than military outposts, is it not?

Losing a manufacturing hub hurts more than losing a thousand Marines—because the Marines can be remade, but the Credits needed to do so cannot be conjured from sentiment.

Ammunition is cheap. War is not. If you want to win a war, forget the rifles. Instead, make damn sure your accountants are better than theirs.

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

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PoV: Peria Akin

Lounging comfortably on the worn-out but cozy couch in her corporate-provided room aboard the Sovereign’s DDS, Peria lazily enjoyed her day off, scrolling through the rapidly expanding collection of clips, highlights, and detailed breakdowns of the latest UHF Assessment.

This had become one of her favourite pastimes whenever a big Assessment came to a close.

The UHF propaganda machine was working overtime as always, flooding internal channels with the newest, most heroic, and action-packed moments from the recently concluded Assessment—making sure everyone within the UHF got their fill of excitement, inspiration, and good-old fashioned hero worship.

Being stationed directly aboard one of the Recruitment ships came with a significant perk here; Peria was among the first to get access to all the new videos, highlights, and updates.

The rest of UHF-space would have to impatiently wait until the Sovereign made its next scheduled stop at a supply outpost to properly upload everything.

‘Shame we can’t just beam it all straight onto the GalNet,’ Peria thought wistfully. *‘Would be great to chat with Marsha and the others about some of the insane stuff from this Assessment...’*

She shook her head, quickly pushing away those melancholic thoughts.

Realistically speaking, she had little reason to complain about her current assignment aboard the Sovereign.

Being one of Abundant Ammunitions’ senior inventory specialists came with plenty of advantages: Phenomenal pay, outstanding benefits, and complete access to all the luxuries the Sovereign’s DDS had to offer—without needing to participate in the brutal and dangerous missions that the Marines had to endure on a daily basis.

Plus, with just two more years left on her current contract, she was getting closer every day to that massive final payout and a guaranteed, cozy transfer to one of the company’s premium Inner-world branches.

‘All it costs is a little NDA and a couple years cut off from the outside galaxy,’ she mused idly. *‘Honestly, could be a lot worse... Marsha always says I’m the luckiest damn person in the whole galaxy for landing this gig, heh. And honestly? She’s kinda right...’*

Growing up on some forgettable mid-world wasn’t exactly the best way to end up with a comfortable job aboard a UHF Recruitment ship, after all. But somehow, one lucky break after another—combined with her natural talent for tech, logistics, and inventory—had slowly carried her here.

Even now, she still sometimes had trouble believing just how it had all happened.

‘Best part?’ she thought with a smirk, *‘The job’s not even hard! All I gotta do is remember some basic weapon specs and be able to explain them without sounding stupid. Anyone could probably manage it if they actually just gave a shit.’*

Sure, maybe she could build most of the weapons from Abundant Ammunitions from scratch, given the right parts and equipment—probably a little more skilled than your average store clerk—but it really wasn’t anything special.

‘Easy stuff once you get used to it, really...’

Shaking her head to clear those wandering thoughts, Peria refocused on the giant datascreen on the wall of her room.

Buying that massive screen had been her first real splurge after getting her first paycheck; the tiny, cramped datascreen the room originally came with had quickly proven inadequate for enjoying the Assessment highlights—something she'd realized during her very first quarterly Assessment aboard the Sovereign.

Her current fascination? All those fresh new Recruits, obviously.

New Recruit batches only showed up once every half-year or sometimes even three-quarters of a year, depending on where the Sovereign was at the time, so the first Assessment for any fresh batch of Marines was always amazing entertainment.

One thing had become crystal clear about this particular Assessment, though: It was an absolute data bloom of a drive. The sheer amount of incredible clips, highlights, and exciting footage from the recent Recruits was far beyond anything Peria had ever seen before—and she was positive that they hadn't even come close to processing most of the Assessment footage yet.

Unlike previous Assessments she'd seen aboard the Sovereign, something was *definitely* seriously different this time around. Usually, the first few days after an Assessment were immediately filled with exciting highlights from the various Alpha Squads.

The UHF propaganda machine always liked to gradually build excitement over the first few days and weeks—usually depending on how long it took to reach the next supply stop—to keep everyone aboard the ship entertained until new entertainment could be loaded.

But there were always some early teasers and clips from the various Alpha Squad from the sector's Recruitment Ships, since there wasn't really enough amazing footage of your run-of-the-mill Recruits to keep that gradual hype up.

This time, though? Not a single Alpha Squad had even appeared in the initial clips for *days*.

Instead, the screens had been completely dominated by clips featuring non-Alpha Squad Recruits. Beta Squads, some of the funky-named Squads that rarely ever saw the light-of-day in the post-Assessment breakdowns, and many more like it.

It wasn't until *yesterday*—five whole days after the Assessment had ended—that she had even gotten to see the current Sovereign's Alpha Squad in action. She hadn't even known their names or faces until just around 30 hours ago!

'Absolutely unreal... Usually it takes just a few hours before Alpha Squad footage hits the screens,' she mused, eyes still glued to the datascreen. *'Taking five entire days? That's fucking unheard of...'*

But honestly? It had been worth every second of the wait.

Just like the rest of the Recruits in this drive, the Alpha Squads had been part of the same insane data bloom.

Especially the Sovereign's own Alpha Squad.

They'd stood out like a beacon in an already overstuffed highlight reel of madness.

Peria had never really cared much for the whole "ship pride" thing.

Plenty of her coworkers loved to argue about whose Recruitment ship had the best Recruits—throwing stats and personal bias at each other like it was a sport—with their fellow co-workers on other ships during supply stops, but she'd always stayed out of it.

Never felt the pull.

Until now.

There was just *something* about this group. Something wild and raw and *stupidly* good.

Watching their first proper appearance during that infiltration op on Nova Tertius had lit a fire in her that she hadn't even realized could be there. The tension in the air during the clip had been *insane*—every second felt like it was dragging her lungs tighter and tighter.

She'd honestly almost passed out from holding her breath too long without realizing.

And then came the escape.

A stolen vehicle. Multiple hostiles in pursuit. Chaos in every direction.

The entire squad leaping from the car—and the Sniper, that absolute lunatic, turned around and *deleted* the chasing vehicles with a Caliburn that looked like it had been ripped out of a damn tank factory.

'Not sure how the fuck she got her hands on a T2 weapon before the first Assessment even rolled around, but fuck me if that shit wasn't hype...!'

It was full-blown cinematic perfection. Peak drama. Real stakes. Real skill. And that sniper?

She'd already become a fan-favorite on most of the internal boards Peria frequented ever since that highlight video had gone live yesterday.

The frame-perfect timing of that shot was still getting clipped, slowed down, and analyzed.

'And two of them are Mid-worlders too...! How could I not root for them?!' she grinned. Watching them felt weirdly personal now—like their wins were *her* wins, somehow.

Thinking about the highlight video made Peria want to re-watch it for the N-th time again, so she quickly navigated to her saved favourites and pulled it up without a second thought.

But just as the clip was about to start playing, her datapad—resting innocently on the coffee table—flared to life with a sudden burst of blinding crimson light. A blaring, warbling siren followed a half-second later, echoing through the room like an air-raid alert.

Peria yelped at the sudden noise and instinctively launched herself backward off the couch, flipping in pure panic and smacking the back of her head against the cold, hard floor with a heavy *thunk*.

"Ouch! *Fuck!*" she groaned, hands immediately flying up to cradle her skull as the siren continued its banshee wail without remorse. Still half-winded and sprawled on the floor, she blinked up at the crimson wash bleeding across her ceiling, heart pounding like it was trying to punch its way out of her chest.

Still rubbing the back of her head, Peria scrambled onto her knees and lunged over the back of the couch, desperately clawing at the datapad to silence its shrieking alarm.

"Shut up, shut up, *shut up*—!" she hissed, frantically swiping at the notification before it finally fell silent. "What the actual fuck is going on...?"

Her eyes quickly scanned the message glowing on the datapad, irritation swiftly replaced by confusion, then disbelief, and finally a deep-seated dread.

It was a corporate alert. From Abundant Ammunitions. Addressed *directly* to her.

"Immediate attendance required at customer-facing storefront, Tier 1 Shopping Deck. Priority: VIP Consultation."

She froze, mouth agape, heart hammering in her chest.

"VIP consultation...? You've gotta be fucking shitting me... Is this a joke...?" She breathed, her voice barely more than a whisper. Her eyes frantically devoured the rest of the message, each line intensifying her growing anxiety.

"Due to the extremely sensitive nature of VIP consultations, you are required to read the attached briefing en-route. Any refusal, tardiness, or failure to comply with VIP-handling regulations will result in immediate contract termination."

Her skin went ice-cold.

Contract *termination* wasn't just some slap on the wrist—it was a full-on wipe of your professional life.

She'd lose all access to the ship, get dragged to the internal "holding area" like a piece of faulty cargo, and be stuck there until the next scheduled supply stop. From there, she'd be off-loaded like trash, dumped at whatever half-forgotten outpost or station happened to be next on the route.

No payout, no compensation for the years she'd already put in, no way to argue her case.

And worst of all—*blacklisted*. Permanently.

No UHF-related corporate job listings, no transfers, no nothing.

She'd be cut off from the entire corporate network like she never existed.

Just some washed-out ex-clerk abandoned gods-know-how-many lightyears from anywhere she recognized, broke, jobless, and stuck with a datapad full of rejection messages—if she even got to keep the datapad, which was a *big* if.

The thought made her stomach turn.

And then there was the whole VIP Consultation thing.

She'd *never* been called in for something like that. Not once. Not even close.

She hadn't even fucking *heard* of anyone who *actually* had—just secondhand stories passed around in breakrooms from veteran coworkers who swore up and down that their roommate's cousin's ex-partner had gotten pulled in one time.

According to those stories, a single VIP consultation could make your entire damn career.

Permanent position offers, promotion tracks, off-world contracts with triple pay and ten times the security clearance.

She always thought it was a bunch of glorified mythmaking.

But now? It was *her name* on the damn alert! *Her* datapad flashing crimson!

"Why *me*? Why *today*?!" she muttered in disbelief, scrambling off the couch and practically sprinting into the bathroom.

She splashed water onto her face in a desperate attempt to erase any trace of lazy-day-off vibes, hastily brushing her hair into a semi-professional ponytail with shaking hands.

"Shit, shit, shit, fuck, shit!" She repeated like a mantra, tugging on her company uniform as fast as her trembling limbs allowed.

She stumbled out of the bathroom, still hopping awkwardly into her boots mid-run.

Snatching the datapad off the coffee table mid-sprint, Peria shot out of her room like a bullet, heart slamming in her chest, adrenaline kicking her system into overdrive. She didn't even bother locking the door—just made a beeline down the corridor, already thumbing through the briefing attachment while her feet carried her toward the instant-access door at the far end of the hallway.

It was a private shortcut, linking the staff dorms directly to the back of Abundant Ammunitions' storefront—effectively teleporting inside the Sovereign's DDS by stepping through a door.

Only a handful of positions in the store had them, and hers was one of the lucky few.

Something to do with the store's long-standing partnership with the UHF or whatever line of corporate speak they'd sold it as.

Peria had never really cared—until now.

As she skimmed the briefing, her eyes caught the name field, and she damn near tripped over her own feet.

“*Her?!*” The sound tore out of her throat like a broken squeaker toy, way too loud and way too high-pitched to be anything close to dignified.

Her gaze darted back to the datapad to double-check, but the name didn’t change.

VIP: Recruit Thea McKay – 2-Star MVM (Assessment #1 – Recruitment Drive PFC 943 Kuigon Sector)

The name glared back at her like it was mocking her personally.

Her brain short-circuited for a full second before kicking into frantic motion. ‘*Why in the Void’s eternal fucking emptiness would Thea fucking McKay need a VIP consult? From me?!*’

It had to be a joke. Some elaborate setup. Her coworkers were assholes, sure, but this was next-level.

‘*This is a prank. This has **got** to be a prank. Kenim’s behind this, I just know it! That smug, troll-faced bastard probably roped Alten into it too—he’d do anything for a laugh if it meant making someone else squirm. They hijacked a notification script or something, sent it to my pad while I’m on my day off... Classic!*’

She clutched the datapad tighter as she raced on, but the name *still* didn’t go away.

‘*Please let it be a fucking prank,*’ she thought again, even as her gut twisted with the certainty that it wasn’t. The briefing was just way too detailed—layered with spec sheets, timestamped logs, and internal routing signatures.

No way Kenim or anyone else could’ve faked that.

Not without getting fired. Or airlocked.

Her eyes kept scanning, and bit by bit, the pieces started falling into place. By the time she hit the last third of the briefing, she finally understood *why* she’d been tapped for this.

“...Also gonna want to review the weapon’s thermal dissipation methods and material composition—carbon polycomposites or lightweight alloys, preferably with vibration dampening if available. And whatever System Material components are inside them as well, if the spec sheets can tell me.”

Peria blinked, then grinned wide enough to hurt.

‘*She knows what she’s talking about!*’

It all made perfect sense now.

Most of the front-facing staff were just there for their looks or their sales pitch—they could recite buzzwords and match a weapon to a general role, sure, but the moment a customer

asked about something like heat sinks, pulse latency, or composite density curves, they'd short-circuit faster than a bargain-bin drone.

*'Of course they called me in. They damn-well had to. Nobody else here reads the damn spec sheets, let alone **understands** them. One customer shows up who actually knows what she's looking for and suddenly the rest of the team's looking around like someone just asked them to solve the universal equation on a napkin... Fucking typical.'*

She skidded to a stop at the instant-access door, barely giving herself a second to breathe before it whooshed open and she stepped through, pulling her straight into the back corridors of the Tier 1 storefront.

The familiar scent of oil, composite polymers and the faint ozone tang of high-energy weapon housing hit her immediately. The backroom wasn't just for storage but also for tune-up and repairs, giving it that uniquely exhilarating smell Peria loved so much.

She inhaled sharply, trying to steady her breath after the sprint, then exhaled slowly to calm the pounding in her chest. Her hands went up to fix her hair again—still damp from her rushed bathroom routine—smoothing down any flyaways she could catch without a mirror.

She was already flipping open the guidelines attachment for the third time before she even realized it, eyes darting through the bullets and highlighted fields.

She remembered most of it from her orientation days—nearly three years ago now—but she wasn't about to rely on half-formed memories when her *entire future* was on the line.

One slip, one dumb mistake—even just one missed greeting protocol—and this whole thing could go sideways faster than she could even realize what was happening.

"No breaking eye contact too early. No interrupting. No slang unless mirrored. Don't upsell unless prompted. Don't assume familiarity. Don't offer handshakes unless initiated. Don't..."

There were a *lot* of don'ts.

She swallowed hard.

"You can do this, Peria. Just an excited tech-nerd like you, looking for someone who actually gives a shit about power supplies and weapon heat profiles. Nothing to get nervous about. Not like the woman you're about to talk to could probably crush your skull in one hand like a damp fruit without even flexing. Not like she owns a weapon that's worth more than my entire life in Credits, one that can vaporize a P-37 Armoured Transport in a single shot. And she's definitely not the single most valuable Recruit the UHF's ever had, right? Just another techie, like you. Totally normal. Totally casual..."

Her voice trailed off halfway through the pep talk, realizing she wasn't doing herself any favors. *'Alright, yeah. Definitely time to stop talking; just get to it...'*

She took one last deep breath, bracing herself, then stepped through the service entrance and into the customer-facing part of the store.

Immediately, she was hit with the change in atmosphere, like she had walked into a solid wall.

No robot clerks in-sight. All gone. As per protocol, every last one had been quietly replaced with real human staff.

Every single customer had long been quietly removed from the premises and the store temporarily closed as the VIP had been marked as preferring a “quiet shopping environment at all times”.

She clocked five coworkers posted across the showroom—some subtly pretending to organize displays, others just standing close enough to intervene if needed.

Zandra. Felin. Two others she didn’t even recognize, likely from another shift.

And Kenim, of course. The bastard himself, hauling around a crate of ammo like he had a single useful bone in his body, pretending to be busy, as per protocol.

Peria made a beeline for the front desk, where the VIP was supposed to be waiting, locking eyes with each coworker as she passed.

None of them looked calm.

In fact, every single one of them looked like they were on the verge of pissing themselves.

Zandra gave her a tiny nod and a mouthed, “Good luck, Peri,” which was appreciated—but also made her stomach twist even tighter.

Then there was Kenim. Oh, Kenim. She’d been hoping—*begging*, really—for the finger-guns.

That smug little grin he always wore when one of his pranks landed just right and he was revealing how he had managed to get you once again.

That slight tilt of his head that said, ‘*gotcha!*’

But there was nothing.

No grin. No finger-guns. Just a blank, haunted stare, like he’d just witnessed a good friend get mulched by a miscalibrated loader frame.

‘Thanks for the vote of confidence, Ken. Really. Just... fucking fantastic.’

Turning the corner around the last row of displays that blocked the front desk from view, Peria nearly tripped over her own feet the moment she laid eyes on the VIP.

‘Holy fuck, she’s a fucking giant...!’ That was her first thought—followed immediately by the realization that it was total nonsense.

Sure, Thea McKay *looked* tall right then and there, maybe fifteen centimeters taller than Peria at most, but she wasn't exactly towering compared to some of the other Integrated Marines.

Even Kenim was taller. Zandra too, now that she thought about it. And they weren't even Integrated, like herself.

But none of that really mattered.

'It's the presence... That's what's messing with me, isn't it...?'

In the videos, standing next to the rest of Alpha Squad, Thea had always looked... *small*.

Exceedingly so.

Sharp and lethal, yeah, but small nevertheless. Next to Lucas or Isabella, she practically disappeared. But now, in person, it was completely different.

She wasn't just tall—she *felt* tall.

Like she took up more space than she should've. Like the air bent around her in a weird way.

'She's absolutely massive for a mid-worlder! Fuck me sideways...'

Weirdly, the sheer absurdity of her reaction helped Peria get a grip.

It grounded her somehow—reminded her that Thea was a person, not a System Interface notification or a myth.

Taking a careful breath, Peria made sure to let her boots make just enough sound on the polished floor to be clearly heard—training protocol for approaching customers, especially ones as potentially high-strung as the average Marine.

No sudden appearances. No surprises. That was rule one.

She headed straight for the front desk and threw on her best customer-service smile.

"Apologies for the delay, Holman," she said, keeping her tone polite and level. "I heard there was a customer requiring assistance?"

Corporate theater. That's what this was. There was *one* customer in the entire damn store. No one in their right mind could miss the reason she'd been summoned.

"Ah, Peria. Perfect. Thanks for heading over so quickly," Holman replied, his own smile looking about as real as a wet paper prop. He gestured with just a hint of flair, like they were rehearsing a script for a play no one wanted to be in.

*'We're seriously doing this whole song-and-dance? She's **right there**, like three meters away! What are we even pretending for?!'*

“Peria, this is Recruit Thea McKay, with the UHF Marine Corps,” Holman said, maintaining the charade. “She had a more specific request that I thought fell more into your area of expertise. If you’d be so kind as to handle the rest of the customer’s needs, I’d greatly appreciate it.”

“Of course,” Peria replied, giving a small, respectful bow—just enough to fulfill protocol without going overboard. Then she finally turned to the woman herself.

“Welcome to Abundant Ammunitions, Miss McKay. How may I help you today?”

That was the exact moment Peria’s heart fell into her stomach.

Because she saw it—the wince.

The unmistakable twitch of someone trying *very* hard not to react to something they utterly hated. Thea’s expression had just barely shifted, but the cringe was *real*.

‘Oh fuck. What did I do?!’

In her mind’s eye, she watched her career explode into flames and contract termination letters fall like confetti. Her hands were already clammy.

“*Just* Thea... please,” the woman said, a little stiff. More hesitant than Peria had expected. Maybe even unsure.

Thea McKay. Uncertain?

Peria blinked, the mental image wobbling in her mind. Maybe this wasn’t going to be what she thought it was.

“Ah, my sincerest apologies!” Peria immediately replied, adding another bow purely out of reflex—which instantly resulted in another barely-hidden cringe from Thea.

‘Fuck! What am I even doing? Does she already hate me?!’ she panicked inside, even though her face remained calm and professional.

“Ehh... It’s okay, really,” Thea replied, shifting awkwardly. “I was just looking for some specific weapons...? They told me you might be able to help?”

The hesitation practically poured from every word, causing Peria’s heart rate to spike even higher.

‘Okay, this is your chance, Peria! Don’t fuck this up more than you already have...’

Taking a quick breath, she tried to regain her composure, desperately hoping that talking about the tech might salvage the entire situation. “Yes! Right. I was briefed on my way here. I believe you were interested in hybrid-type weapons, specifically laser-based combinations, correct?”

Thea visibly perked up at that. “Yeah, exactly. Do you have something like that around?”

Peria's heart soared a little at seeing the genuine spark of interest. *'Maybe there's still hope!'*

"Based on your request to review thermal dissipation methods, vibration dampening tech, and System Material integrations, I'd definitely say we have a few suitable options. If you'd kindly follow me real quick, Thea," Peria said, gesturing warmly and moving toward the back of the store.

She did her best to hurry without looking like she was outright running, as Thea's longer stride easily kept pace with her brisk steps. They quickly reached a more secluded corner marked with subtle, sleek signage designating it as the experimental and prototype section.

With practiced ease, Peria grabbed a datapad and swiftly typed in the code for the first weapon she had in mind, then handed the datapad to Thea with a graceful two-handed gesture.

"I'll bring out the weapon for you right away. In the meantime, I've pulled up the full technical breakdown, including detailed material composition, internal mechanisms, and manufacturing specifications you requested."

Thea accepted the datapad, and within moments, her face brightened dramatically, as if someone had just turned on a spotlight inside her.

'Jackpot!' Peria cheered internally, feeling her confidence immediately return. *'She's a total tech nerd! I knew it!'*

Now practically beaming inside, Peria quickly retrieved the weapon from the rack nearby and carefully handed it over to Thea.

"This is the ARK-004 by Frontier Armaments. It doesn't have an official name yet since it's early in prototyping, but it's a Ballistic-Laser hybrid. Specifically..."

Feeling emboldened by Thea's visible excitement, Peria dove deeper into the weapon's details than she normally would have, recalling everything she'd read from the briefing about Thea's interests.

She enthusiastically described the ARK-004's thermal exchange system, explained its specialized cooling channels, and pointed out exactly how the laser's focusing array was integrated into the reinforced alloy barrel.

The more Peria talked, the brighter Thea's expression became.

Soon they were interacting directly, Thea eagerly leaning in as Peria demonstrated how to switch between firing modes, how the internal cycling mechanism smoothly transitioned from ballistic rounds to laser bursts, and even helping her partially disassemble the weapon to inspect the precision-crafted internal components.

As minutes passed and they spoke animatedly, Peria gradually forgot she was talking to and interacting with a VIP at all. Instead, she felt like she was chatting with someone who *got it*—just another tech enthusiast who genuinely loved geeking out about new equipment and exploring how it worked.

Despite the intimidating height difference, the fact Thea was an Integrated Marine and the literal MVM of the last Assessment, or even the enormous gap in their positions within the galaxy as a whole, they found themselves strangely connected.

They were both mid-worlders who'd somehow landed aboard the Sovereign against all odds. Both genuinely cared more about *how* things worked, rather than simply *if* they worked, a seemingly rare trait aboard the ship.

In that moment, Peria felt less like an employee desperately trying not to ruin her life, and more like she'd unexpectedly found someone who actually spoke her language.

Soon enough, they were both crouched at the weapon bench in the back, partially disassembling the rifle piece by piece. Thea pointed out something interesting about the chamber geometry; Peria responded by showing her a different model that handled venting a bit better.

The back-and-forth continued for almost an hour as both of them got completely absorbed in the joy of taking apart something complicated—just to see how it worked...