

Volume 2 - Chapter 44 - Friendship

Program: “*In Formation*”

Host: Laurel Naya

Guest: General Atora Fields, Strategic Development Liaison, UHF Marine Corps

Laurel Naya:

“Welcome back, viewers, to “*In Formation*”. I’m Laurel Naya, and today we’re diving into one of the most quietly controversial decisions the UHF has made in recent decades—not about weaponry or strategy, but about something far more human: *Friendship*. With us today is General Atora Fields, a longtime architect of the Digital Mission structure and a strong proponent of its current social integration systems. Welcome, General.”

General Fields (nodding politely):

“Thank you, Laurel. It’s a pleasure to be here.”

Naya:

“Let’s jump right into it, then: There’s been a lot of buzz surrounding the latest updates to the Digital Mission framework—especially the new ‘*Friendship Integration*’ program that was quietly rolled out last cycle. What prompted that change?”

Fields (smiling faintly):

“Well, Vela, believe it or not, it wasn’t driven by any technological advance or tactical reshuffle. It came from feedback—millions of comments, from Recruits and Privates all the way up to Generals like myself, believe it or not. The message was simple: ‘*Let us stay in touch.*’ So, after considerable analysis, we finally decided to stop resisting something that was already happening unofficially.”

Naya:

“Even though Digital Missions are designed to be run solo—without your usual squad, without your usual comfort zone?”

Fields:

“Precisely *because* of that. When you throw a Recruit or a Private into a Digital Mission, you’re not just testing their fire discipline or their ability to execute. You’re testing their adaptability, their communication, their emotional resilience. And friendships—genuine, *earned* camaraderie—help reinforce those things. Especially when you’re fighting alongside someone you’ve never met and still come out alive together.”

Naya (raising an eyebrow):

“But isn’t there a risk? Emotional entanglements. Morale crashes when a friend is Zero’d. The long-distance communication barriers. Isn’t there concern that Marines might form attachments that end up becoming liabilities?”

Fields (nodding slowly):

“There are risks. Absolutely. Losing a friend *can* fracture someone—especially when they

can't even say goodbye. And yes, it's hard when you haven't seen someone in months because they're on another end of the galaxy. But our psychologists and tactical analysts ran the data, and the outcome was clear: Marines who felt connected to *something*—to *someone*—performed better. They fought harder. They survived longer. They stayed in the Corps longer. The risk is real. But the reward? Far greater and, frankly, definitely worth the efforts and risks involved."

Naya:

"And so the '*Friendlink*' system was born."

Fields (nodding):

"That's right. If two Marines find themselves paired in a Digital Mission and enjoy working together, they can add each other to their Friendlink roster. That roster lets them keep tabs on one another—what Digital Missions they're queuing for, when they're active and what they're training for. If the DM Grade isn't too high and the timings line up, and if they haven't exceeded their monthly join limit, they can even jump into each other's lobbies pre-launch to reconnect occasionally. It builds a sort of web of relationships across the entire Faction."

Naya:

"But not a full Squad, right? You've limited the number of follow-up joins per month?"

Fields (firmly):

"Correct. The point isn't to let people reform cliques or recreate their squads. We want *connections*, not crutches. You get three follow-up joins per standard month, per friend. Enough to maintain and encourage those bonds, but not enough to become reliant on them. You should be growing your network across the Corps, after all. One friend in every unit, not five best friends in the same bubble."

Naya (softly):

"So it's not just about fighting better. It's about belonging."

Fields:

"That's what it's always been about, Laurel. We're not training machines here—we're forging people into something *greater* than themselves. And people... Well, they need people."

[GalNet Channel 5 | Interview Snippet: General Atora Fields, Strategic Development Liaison, UHF Marine Corps, PFC 796]

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Back inside Alpha Squad's dorm, Thea and Karania were holed up in Thea's room, surrounded by the results of their most recent shopping spree—neatly folded tops, layered jackets, and an impressive amount of pants and skirts in varying tones and cuts.

After the UHF 101 lecture had wrapped, they'd come straight here, mostly because Thea had gotten a message back from the Rune priest in response to her earlier request for help.

It hadn't been quite the response she was hoping for, but definitely far better than she had feared.

"Sit tight and wait," he'd written. "I'm going to get someone to watch over you. No amateurs, promise. Somebody I'd trust my life on in a situation like that."

So essentially... She was grounded for an unknown amount of time.

And if she had to be stuck in one place for who-knew-how-long, she figured she might as well be productive. Or at least... stubbornly distracting.

That's how Karania had ended up here, slightly dazed and entirely confused, being bombarded with questions about clothing combinations and fabric weights—while Thea absolutely refused to admit why she had suddenly taken an interest.

She had her reasons.

'Not going to give Kara the satisfaction of having kept the fashion hunting game to herself this whole time without me even knowing...! Now I finally have something that confuses her for once!'

There was just one thing that had been seriously testing her patience over the last couple of hours.

"Kara, can you *stop* turning around already?" Thea grumbled, tossing yet another half-buttoned blouse onto the growing pile of *"I've somewhat understood what this is for now"*-clothing on the bed. "I get that you're trying to be polite, but I have no idea how to put half of this stuff on without looking like an idiot."

Karania, seated cross-legged on the edge of Thea's bed and turned strategically away, didn't even blink. *"Absolutely not! If you don't learn how to do it yourself, how are you gonna handle it out in the wild, huh? You can't expect me to dress you every morning like your personal stylist for the rest of time."*

Thea froze halfway into a pair of tight, high-waisted black leggings. One of the few pieces she'd actually chosen herself, with minimal coaching, and one of the only items she felt moderately confident in putting on without incident.

"I mean... I guess?" she muttered, wriggling them into place. "But it's not like I'll forget how to put on pants once I've done it once."

"Still no!" Karania called, now thoroughly absorbed in whatever was on her datapad. "You learn through struggle, Thea. Struggle builds character!"

Thea let out a very deliberate, long-suffering sigh and pulled a plain white shirt over her head—the kind of shirt she would've called a waste of Credits just yesterday.

Now though? She could... kind of start to see the logic.

Especially when she threw a dark marine-blue sweater over it, left open halfway down to give the white underneath a bold contrast.

She paused in front of the mirror, adjusting the fabric slightly at her hips.

Yeah... that *did* look pretty good.

"The combo's not bad at all," she admitted out loud.

Karania perked up immediately, glancing over. "That's what I've been *saying*! That's why we got you all those shirts! White is the ultimate base—it adds contrast to layers, smooths out chaotic palettes, and works under almost anything. It's a neutral tone miracle, Thea. Write that down. Carve it in stone. Frame it on your wall."

Thea gave her a side-eye but couldn't suppress the small smile tugging at the corner of her mouth.

Maybe this fashion stuff wasn't bad at all, especially when shared with a friend like this.

Before Thea could so much as adjust the sleeves on her sweater, the Sovereign's voice chimed in, soft but unmistakably present—cutting through the quiet like the distant click of a safety turning off.

"A visitor is waiting outside the Alpha Squad dormitory. Requesting entry permission."

Thea shot upright immediately, her eyes flashing to the door.

That was fast.

"Let them in," she said quickly, voice sharp with anticipation. "Please."

Then, without missing a beat, she was already reaching for the UHF uniform she'd carefully laid out earlier. It was folded neatly on the corner of her desk, pristine and ready to throw on at a moment's notice.

Because whoever the Rune priest had sent... it didn't feel right to greet them in casuals.

Especially not when they were someone he'd explicitly "trust his life on."

As she scrambled to change—yanking off the white shirt and sweater and wrangling herself into the crisp, more formal lines of the UHF uniform—Karania glanced up briefly from her datapad, then immediately turned her attention back to it.

"Alright," Thea muttered, brushing down the front of her jacket with a hand. "Ready."

The two of them stepped out of Thea's room together, turning the corner into the dorm's shared living space—only to both immediately freeze in the doorway.

Because standing dead-center in the middle of the dorm's common room, like it was the most natural thing in the world, was one other than the legendary Major Quinn herself.

Thea blinked.

The Major gave them a long, lazy glance before motioning vaguely toward the front door behind her with one hand.

“Sorry about the ambush, I guess... Didn’t exactly feel like waiting on the Sovereign,” she said, her tone dry and unimpressed. “Figured I’d save us all the time. Not every day the literal owner of this entire damn star sector is asked to *‘request permission’*, right?”

Her tone was clipped—still professional, but even easily managed to Thea pick up on the strain underneath it immediately. Something was definitely off.

Major Quinn was *annoyed*. Not raging or furious—but a very specific kind of tired irritation that set Thea’s nerves on edge.

She flicked her eyes sideways, catching Karania’s just as her friend did the same.

Karania gave the faintest shake of her head. Thea understood immediately.

‘Yeah. Definitely not the time to ask for the Skill slips...’

“I’ll give you two some privacy,” Kara said, with an easy, respectful tone that managed to sound both casual and polite. She offered Quinn a quick nod and a respectful “Major Quinn,” before slipping out of the living room and disappearing into her own quarters, the door hissing softly closed behind her.

That left Thea alone with Major Quinn, as none of the other Alpha Squad members were inside the dorms at the time—or maybe inside their own rooms, Thea wasn’t entirely sure.

She took a breath, then stepped fully into the common room, standing at attention—not stiff, but straight.

“Major Quinn,” Thea greeted carefully, trying to keep her voice calm—even as her pulse thumped just a little too loudly in her ears. “Am I right in assuming the Rune priest asked you to be here, or... is this about something else entirely?”

A sigh, followed by a small nod from the Major, was answer enough—but she confirmed it anyway, casually folding her arms as she spoke. “Yeah. Old—Anrake asked me to help you out with something, though—true to form, as ever—he didn’t give me any real context. Just said you’d know. Wouldn’t be the first time he sets up a meeting where neither party knows why they’re in the same room, though... That’s kind of his style.”

Thea nodded quickly, almost too quickly.

“Ah, Yes. I know why. I, uh...” she hesitated, every word catching awkwardly in her throat.

How in the galaxy was she supposed to say this out loud? To *Major Quinn*, of all people?

‘Hi, I’m scared of leveling up.’

Yeah. Fucking great. Very impressive for someone in Alpha Squad.

The Major raised a single eyebrow—impatient, curious, but not unkind. That subtle shift was all it took to push the confession out of Thea’s mouth.

“I’ve got a problem with my Attribute allocation from level ups. During the Assessment, there was a situation where—”

“*Stop*,” Major Quinn said sharply, voice cutting through the room like a command siren. It wasn’t loud, but it *hit*. All the warmth dropped from her tone like a rock.

Thea went rigid, wide-eyed and suddenly very aware of every molecule in her body.

“Do *not* continue that sentence,” the Major said firmly, tone lower now, but no less serious. “And do *not* speak about this to anyone. I mean *anyone*, Thea. Not your squad. Not anyone, but me and Anrake unless told otherwise. *No one*. You understand?”

Thea nodded frantically, her voice completely gone.

Her heart hadn’t just skipped a beat—it had left this sector of space entirely.

Quinn gave a short, satisfied exhale. “Good. Then I know why he sent me.”

She glanced toward the dorm hallway. “Let’s move this to your room. No need to put on a live show for any of your squad members that might wander through here.”

She paused, a smirk tugging at the corner of her mouth. “*Although*... I’ll admit, the idea of me just casually sitting here and jump-scaring your squad one by one is *extremely* tempting... Might keep that in my back pocket.”

Thea didn’t laugh.

She was still stuck between *is this really happening?* and *what the fuck was **that** all about just now?*

Major Quinn waved a hand. “Relax. C’mon. Lead the way.”

Thea turned stiffly, walking toward her room with the Major’s footsteps trailing behind her like the world’s most intimidating shadow. Panic was slowly creeping back in—not from Quinn, but from the ticking time bomb that was her current room situation.

Before she had left the room, she hadn’t exactly had time to clean up, after all.

Clothes.

Everywhere.

Not organized. Not stacked. Not even folded and placed aside, as per regulation.

She swallowed hard, internally screaming at her past self.

'Oh no, no, no nononono! There's fucking leggings on the floor! And why did I throw that one sock in my charging dock just for a cheap laugh from Kara?! How the fuck do I explain this to THE Major Quinn without getting chewed out?!'

There wasn't even time to whisper a plea to the Sovereign to clean it up, as she was only two steps away from her door, with Major Quinn hot on her heels.

All she could do was grip the doorframe, breathe in once, and prepare herself to walk into absolute social death with the most high-ranking woman aboard the Sovereign—and probably the entire star sector—standing behind her.

Thea pushed open the door, already scrambling through her brain for something—*anything*—to say that might explain the absolute chaos she expected to greet them with.

"Sorry about the mess," she rehearsed internally. "We were mid-outfit planning?"

"I was searching something inside my wardrobe and just tossed stuff around, I was definitely going to clean up later, I promise?"

"Kara had a fashion seizure."

None of them were good. *All* of them were terrible.

But as the door swung open and her eyes fell on the room, every single excuse died on her tongue.

It was *spotless*.

The bed was made, perfectly crisp. Her desk was cleared, all three of her datapads arrayed neatly. Clothes were folded and sorted on the side shelf, and even her charging dock was somehow free of the rogue sock she *knew* had been there just two minutes ago.

She blinked once.

Then again.

No way—

The Sovereign had done it.

Somehow, it had read her panic, her internal screaming, and stepped in like the quiet, omnipresent guardian angel of sanity it was.

'...Thank you, Sovereign,' she thought silently, reverently. 'You beautiful, omnipresent lifesaver of a ship. I owe you!'

Swallowing her surprise and relief, she stepped aside and gestured inward. "Please, come in, Major."

The Major didn't hesitate.

She walked in like she owned the place—and, technically, she literally did—heading straight for the chair by the desk. Without a word, she picked it up with one hand, like it weighed nothing, planted it in the middle of the room, turned it to face her, and gave it a light tap with her hand.

“Sit,” she ordered simply.

Thea obeyed immediately, dropping into the chair before Quinn even finished the gesture.

The Major cracked her neck once, then clasped her hands behind her back, her voice sharp but calm. “Since I’ll be monitoring you during this, I’m afraid I’ll need to smother you with my Presence for the next few minutes here. It’s the only way I’ll be able to keep tabs on your Gate with the level of precision I’d want for this.”

She rolled one shoulder, already adjusting her stance slightly. “I’ll need every bit of my Resolve tuned for maximum sensitivity. Your little Assessment mishap may have been a freak accident—but *if* it wasn’t and there’s any residual instability left... I want to know. And I want to catch it *before* it becomes a problem like it did back then.”

Then she smiled—calm, cold, clinical. “So. Sit back. You won’t be able to stand upright anyway. I’d also say, ‘*relax*’, but definitely don’t do that. ”

Thea swallowed hard, nodding quickly as she planted her feet and straightened her spine. She could already feel the tension building, like the air itself was warning her to brace.

“You should brace yourself. Ready?” Major Quinn asked, voice low now.

“As I’ll ever be,” Thea managed, her throat dry, as she engaged her core muscles.

The Major didn’t say another word.

The pressure abruptly hit her like a tidal wave—like standing beneath a waterfall made of pure, crushing authority. Her lungs stuttered. Her spine locked. And her entire upper body felt like it wanted to fold on itself like a cheap lawn chair.

Major Quinn’s Presence surrounded her like a net of steel threads, invisible but unyielding and seemingly tightening with every moment.

Yet, despite herself, Thea found her thoughts grounding in the odd familiarity of it.

It was heavy. Suffocating, even.

But it wasn’t anywhere *near* the level of the Rune priest’s, despite her drastically closer proximity to the Major. Compared to that mountain of infinite weight that had once held her Soul in place with nothing but a flick of its will, *this*... this was manageable.

Her legs trembled slightly under the pressure—and she was damn glad that she was sitting down for this—but she managed to stay seated upright, breathing slow, but shallow breaths.

She managed to keep her head up, too.

Barely.

‘Okay,’ she told herself, jaw clenched tight. *‘You wanted help. This is what help looks like.’*

“Standing next to you is quite odd, you know?” Major Quinn commented casually. “The first time I met you on stage during Integration, I almost thought you were some kind of weird Null-like. Your high base Resolve is quite impressive, I must admit. For a Recruit to feel this... *Resistant* to everything Psychic... it’s definitely something else entirely. I’m looking forward to watching you grow into whatever it is you’ll be doing, Thea. Don’t disappoint me.”

Thea blinked, startled by the sudden turn in tone.

Major Quinn’s voice—usually sharp-edged and carved from command—held something strangely genuine for once. Not warm, exactly. But honest.

Like that walk towards the first meeting with the Rune priest, a few days ago.

But it was still weird to hear.

Praise.

From *her*.

Thea’s throat felt a little tight, and for a second, all her usual sarcasm, dark humor, and practiced stoicism failed her. The best she could muster was a quiet, “I’ll try my best, Major.”

The Major didn’t respond right away. Instead, she stepped in closer—far closer than Thea expected—before placing a hand on the base of Thea’s skull.

It wasn’t an unkind touch... but there was absolutely *no mistaking* the pressure behind it.

Major Quinn leaned down slightly behind her, voice low and level in her ear.

“Here’s what’s going to happen.”

Thea froze.

“You’re going to open your System Interface. You’re going to navigate to the Attribute section. You’re going to start the investment process—but you’re going to give me a warning before you hit confirm. Understand?”

Thea nodded once, very slowly.

“If I detect even a single spike of Gate activity I don’t like,” Quinn continued, calm as ever, “I will crush your brainstem. Instantly. It will cancel any and all Psychic mishaps from occurring and you won’t even feel it. And the Sovereign’s going to bring you back right away, so no worries.”

Thea’s breath caught.

Being told, in no uncertain terms, that you were going to get instantly killed for something you had no control over, even with the promise of it being fine in the long-run, wasn't exactly something that was easy to swallow.

Thea swallowed hard. Then nodded to show that she had understood.

"Good. Here's how we'll do it." Quinn's voice fell back into mission-briefing mode. "Open your System Interface now. Then start investing your Attribute Points. And again, do *not* confirm anything until I give you the go-ahead. You announce every step before you lock it in. If I tell you to stop, you stop. That simple."

"Understood," Thea murmured, as she opened the System Interface as instructed and started putting her Attribute Points into Resolve and Perception.

"Now," the Major added, casually as if she were suggesting a new lunch option, "purely a recommendation—and I do mean that, no orders here—I'd suggest only investing half your points for now. And all of those into Perception."

Thea glanced up, confused. "Why?"

"Because there's still ten and a half months before Class Selection," Quinn said, tone even. "There's a very real chance you'll need to update or re-record your Blueprint during that time. And while it *is* possible without banked Attribute Points, it's a right pain in the ass. If you hold on to at least one or two, you can easily update the Blueprint again should it become necessary. Especially for someone like *you*, whose Blueprint changes are... more common than the norm, let's just say."

Thea frowned. "And you'd want me to put them all into Perception?"

"It's the one Attribute that gives you the most real-time value right now," Quinn said.

"Resolve will be vital later, don't get me wrong. But until your Psyker abilities mature, it's not exactly super useful for you. While, yes, it does add some extra psychic resistance for you, let's not pretend like you aren't completely overgeared in that department for your Tier already. Perception, though? You'll be able to use all of that *immediately*. And you can't ever get enough of it, especially as a Recon and Sniper."

She could definitely see the logic in those words—and silently kicked herself for not thinking of it on her own. It was so obvious in hindsight, so painfully *common sense*, that it made her feel stupid to have needed Major Quinn's unsolicited advice to avoid screwing up her own future Blueprint updates for almost no immediate gain.

Of course Resolve wasn't giving her much now. She wasn't using any Psychic Powers yet.

And Blueprint updates? Those were going to matter *a lot*.

'Major Quinn's right... Resolve really doesn't do anything for me right now, does it?'

With a sigh, Thea adjusted her planned allocation—two points into Perception, holding the remaining two in reserve. Her mental cursor hovered over the confirm prompt.

She took a slow, steady breath, readying herself.

'No way this just works without something going wrong...'

Closing her eyes, she muttered, "I'm ready to confirm."

A pause. Then Major Quinn's cool voice: "Do it."

She pressed the prompt and was almost immediately greeted by the System Notification she had been waiting for, for so long.

[System]: *The Participant's Blueprint has been updated.*

And then...

Nothing.

No distortion, no surge of pressure near her heart. No abrupt blackness from Major Quinn having vaporizing her brain stem from behind.

Just a subtle sharpening in her hearing—soft ambient details rising into clarity around the room—as the new Perception scores began integrating with her physical body.

Thea opened her eyes slowly, still in disbelief. "It... it worked. I think?"

"I think so too," Major Quinn replied after a heartbeat, her hand still resting lightly at the base of Thea's skull. "Do you feel anything unusual? In terms of Psychic backlash. Gate tension, dissonance, anything? The Call, maybe?"

Thea paused, scanned her own mental space, then shook her head. "No. Nothing. I'm good."

The hand withdrew. And along with it, the invisible weight of Major Quinn's full Presence—finally lifting, like stepping out from under a crashing waterfall.

Thea exhaled with real relief, only now realizing how much tension had built up in her neck and shoulders.

"Wonderful," Quinn said, her voice almost chipper now. "Just as I figured. The Assessment incident was a freak accident."

She walked around to lean lightly on Thea's desk, arms crossed loosely. "You should be more than fine handling Attribute investments on your own going forward. I didn't feel even the slightest tremor from your Gate. And I doubt your lack of investment into Resolve this time around is the issue. While yes, Resolve *does* impact the Gate as a whole, what happened during the Assessment was probably a perfect storm."

Thea tilted her head slightly, listening.

"Most likely," Quinn continued, "it was just too much input, too fast. You had just Awakened, and right after, you dumped a big load of points into an Attribute that directly influences a

still-raw internal organ—your Gate.” She gave a small shrug. “Your mind was still adjusting, your entire being still processing what was happening, and *something* cracked under the pressure. Won’t happen again.”

Thea nodded slowly, the explanation settling neatly into place in her head.

When it was laid out like that, it really did make sense.

And frankly? It was extremely comforting.

“Just to be safe, however,” Major Quinn added, tone shifting back into something a little more clinical, “you should inform Anrake the next time you plan to invest your remaining points. Just to rule out the Resolve theory completely. Even if I’m confident you’re in the clear, we can’t afford assumptions when it comes to Psyker incidents like yours. Not if we can avoid it with a little bit of extra prudence—not again, at least.”

“Agreed,” Thea said immediately. It was the smart call, no question.

“Now, if there’s nothing else...?” Major Quinn looked at her, one brow raised, head tilted slightly.

Thea was halfway through shaking her head when she hesitated—then stopped.

“Actually...” She cleared her throat, gathering up the nerve she needed. “Back when we talked... after everything that happened with Selene... I asked if I could speak to her again. And I understand now why that’s not possible.”

Quinn didn’t interrupt, but her posture stiffened slightly.

“I was wondering instead... would it be possible to talk to a fellow Marine? Someone who helped me. Zach—ehhh Private Zachary Cal Vemun. He was the Psyker who helped me during the Assessment when the Gate surge-thing happened. I never really got to thank him properly, and I just...” Her voice trailed off as her eyes caught Quinn’s expression.

It wasn’t the amused smirk she sometimes wore, or the tight smile she used when delivering sharp truths, or even the dignified expression she had on all other occasions.

It looked... *pained*. Human. And oddly exhausted.

Major Quinn sighed heavily and brought a hand to her temple, rubbing it for a long, quiet moment.

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible, Thea,” she said at last. Her voice had dropped, softer than Thea had ever heard it.

“I’m really sorry, but Private Vemun was declared as being *Zero’d*. A few days ago.”

The words landed like a hammer blow. Thea’s stomach dropped out from under her.

Her mind blanked.

“W...What? How? When? Why? I don’t... *What?*” she managed, her voice a jumble of broken questions as her thoughts scrambled to catch up.

“I hate having to break it to you like this,” Quinn said gently. “But when I was writing up the post-incident report on your situation post-Assessment with Selene, I went looking for Private Venum’s—Zach’s file. Wanted to check in on him myself. I... wasn’t expecting what I found.”

She took a step closer and gently rested a hand on Thea’s shoulder.

The gesture wasn’t heavy, but it was grounding—real.

“I sincerely apologize. But you don’t have the clearance to know more about that report,” Quinn said quietly, then gave a dry smile, her eyes flicking with something that might’ve been sympathy, might’ve even been pain. “Lucky for you, I am *the* Major Quinn. And that means I get to bend rules on occasion.”

Quinn crouched down, eye level now.

The tone in her voice was heavier than Thea had ever heard it.

“Zach was assigned ship-duty the week after the Assessment—standard stuff, just regularly scheduled duty. There was a Void-Breach incident—routine, at first. But one of the Privates in the duty-crew mishandled explosive weaponry against all regulations. Part of the hull was blown out, and before the bulkhead seals engaged...”

Thea’s mind was still stuck on the words *Void-Breach*. The phrase felt like static in her ears.

“Zach and two other Privates who were closest to the breach were thrown out into the Void.” Quinn continued quietly. “Resus ships were launched as fast as protocol allowed. But with how fast things move during Void Travel... the distances involved made recovery impossible. Their bodies couldn’t be found and that means their Souls couldn’t be brought close enough for transfer.”

Thea barely registered the rest.

Her thoughts were stuck on one thing: ‘*He was just helping me a few weeks ago. He was fine.*’

And now he was gone. Just like that.

No goodbyes. No thank you. No chance to ever return the favor.

Zero’d. Dead forever.

“They were declared Zero’d just two days ago, after the Resus ships returned from their renewed trips. The Captain ordered additional searches, against protocol, but they failed to bring up anything... I’m truly sorry, Thea,” Major Quinn concluded.

She stayed there with her for a moment, hand on Thea's shoulder, before getting up and making her way to the door and leaving the room.

Thea heard some muffled conversation through the droning in her ears, but couldn't process anything but the static buzzing in her head...