

Volume 2 - Chapter 77 - Relationships

"People see an Ace carrying Ace Equipment and they think: *Reward*. They think the UHF looked at someone extraordinary and decided to give them something extraordinary in return. That is, with all due disrespect, one of the dumbest and most naive things you can possibly believe about how this entire process actually functions..."

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Let me tell you what Ace Equipment *actually* is.

It is not a gift. It is not a reward. It is not even, strictly speaking, a recognition of merit—although merit *is* what gets your name into the conversation to begin with.

Ace Equipment, at its very core, is nothing but a political settlement.

Before a single designer is contacted, before a single slot is debated, before anyone so much as *sketches* a rough concept on a datapad, years—sometimes decades—of internal wrangling have to reach a conclusion.

Every Sector-Cluster with something to gain and something to lose enters that debate swinging—and that's quite literally all of them, as the resource pools that fund an Ace Equipment commission are shared across the *entire* Faction.

What gets drawn from them to build a suit of armour for an Ace in the Mirega Sector is material that will not be going to the front lines in Verant space. It will not be reinforcing a supply chain in the Mid-Reaches. It will not be sitting in reserve for *anyone*, anywhere else.

This is not a trivial consideration by any stretch.

The UHF does not have infinite resources—no Faction does. And so every single Ace Equipment commission is, at its core, an argument about where the Faction believes its future lies—and a simultaneous argument about whose future matters *less*.

Understand *that*, and you begin to understand *why* the process takes as long as it does.

Once the politics have been resolved—once the shouting has ended and the memos have stopped flying and the council votes have finally landed somewhere—what you end up with is not an Ace with their equipment.

What you have now is the mere *permission* to consider beginning the process.

That's when the real work starts.

The first question is, naturally, one of category: An entire suit of armour. A singular weapon, or a matched set of them if the function demands it. A gadget—and the range of what qualifies as a "gadget" in this context is *genuinely* staggering, from personal cloaking fields to miniaturized fabricators capable of producing proprietary ammunition or explosives on-site, mid-engagement.

There are pieces of Ace Equipment that blur the line between technology and something else entirely as well; the one codenamed "Pastor" can teleport its owner at the clap of two hands, functioning less like a device and more like a System Ability you can equip at will.

And then, of course, rarest of all, there are the *Artefacts*—commissions made in direct collaboration with the Allbright System itself, where human knowledge stops being the ceiling and something far harder to define takes over.

Those are greenlit perhaps once a generation, if that.

Each category carries its own design philosophy, its own lead times, its own consortium of companies that need to be brought into the process, consulted, and eventually coordinated.

And *none* of it can be printed.

That last point is the one most civilians fail to grasp.

In an era where almost everything a Marine carries can be produced at scale, reprinted on demand, and sourced from a UHF-licensed design file, Ace Equipment stands entirely outside that system—deliberately.

Every piece is handmade. Every component, every fitting, every calibrated surface.

The skills required to produce them are kept alive specifically because the moment a design file is uploaded to the System's print network, every Faction with deep enough pockets can theoretically license it—if they know how to look for it.

The Allbright System does not play favourites; it does not protect our secrets.

It sells to the highest bidder, for the right Contribution and Merit, always.

Handcraft in the UHF is not tradition for its own sake or as a statement of artistic integrity.

It is, at its very core, one of the highest levels of counterintelligence we have access to.

The first commission of any Ace Equipment piece is, of course, the hardest.

Processes have to be established from scratch, tolerances tested, designers and craftspeople brought into alignment with one another across specializations that rarely interact. Subsequent builds, should the piece ever need to be remade, are easier—the institutional knowledge exists, the relationships are in place.

But "easier" is a relative term.

Nothing about this is easy, and nothing about it is ever fast.

And, Emperor forbid, if any of the craftsmen in the supply chain happen to get taken out by enemy operatives? Your entire, carefully crafted Ace Equipment pipeline buckles and breaks, if there is no suitable replacement trained up and kept at a secure location.

So the next time you see an Ace standing in their special Ace Equipment, consider what you are actually looking at:

You are not looking at a reward.

You are looking at a political argument that someone won.

You are looking at a resource allocation debate that concluded in one Sector-Cluster's favour, at the cost of all others.

You are looking at the output of thousands—sometimes tens of thousands—of skilled hands, working without the safety net of automation, in service of a *single* result.

You are looking at a bet—the second most expensive kind the UHF knows how to make—that the person wearing it is worth every Credit, every point of Merit, every point of Contribution and the hundreds of thousands of man hours worth of work to get them there.

Whether that bet pays off is, naturally, the only part of the process that remains entirely outside anyone's control—anyone but a single person's...

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["The Weight Before the Weight" — Drevon Hale, Military Systems Correspondent, The Helion Strategic Review – PFC911]

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Kara had lied to her.

There wasn't a doubt in Thea's mind about that fact.

It wasn't a particularly problematic realization, as it wasn't the first time, nor would it be the last. But it reframed the last few minutes in a way Thea couldn't quite let go of.

The spike in Kara's heart rate had been far too obvious, and the excuse she'd given for leaving with Evelyne had been transparently thin—thin enough that even Thea had clocked it immediately, and Kara was usually so much better than that at these sorts of things.

'What has her that rattled...? And what does it have to do with Evelyne? They've never even met properly—so what's actually going on here...?'

Lucas and Desmond were talking beside her, mostly Desmond asking questions about what the two of them had been up to in training. She caught fragments of it without really absorbing any of it, her attention preoccupied with trying to decipher what her best friend was up to.

The problem was she didn't have the tools to take it further than pretty much just that: Kara had lied and she was dealing with something that Thea couldn't even venture a guess on.

Social analysis had never been her strong suit, and trying to decode someone else's hidden motives without more to work from was a good way to end up going in circles.

She knew that about herself all too well.

'I trust Kara. And she trusts me.' She leaned back against the bench cushion and cupped her chin. *'A lie doesn't mean there's actually a problem.'*

The Old man had been clear on that, more than once.

"White lies, missy," he'd said, "are one of the most trustworthy things you can rely on when it comes to others. They're lies meant to shield you from uncomfortable situations, or truths you aren't ready to learn yet. I've lied to you too—quite often, even. Not because I don't trust you, but because I do. I trust that you trust me enough to know when something is important to bring up, and when it would simply be a nuisance that isn't worth discussing."

That breakdown had made sense at the time. It still made sense, in principle.

It was just seemingly far harder to apply cleanly when the dynamic wasn't as straightforward as it had been between her and James.

'I'll ask her about it later,' Thea ultimately decided, letting the thread drop.

There was probably a lot she could dig into emotionally—with herself, with Kara, even with Evelyne, who'd been slightly off today in a way she couldn't fully name yet. But without anything concrete to reason from, logically, it would just become a spiral.

And that, really, wouldn't lead her anywhere.

"Say, you guys think Evelyne has a boyfriend?" Desmond's question pulled her back into the conversation—it wasn't something she had ever thought about, really.

Lucas, mid-sip, somehow managed to choke on his drink at that very moment, and Desmond slapped him on the back a few times to help.

'Kara mentioned once that's not actually effective unless they're bent forward too...'

"I don't know," Thea answered, finding herself genuinely wondering about it now. "She's very cute, so I could definitely see it. But she's never seemed particularly busy whenever we've tried to set up these training sessions, so... maybe not?"

Lucas' coughing dissolved into a long, pained groan. He pressed his palm over his face. "I really can't with you two right now."

He took a deeper, ragged breath, before adding, "No. She *obviously* doesn't have a boyfriend."

"*Obviously?*" Thea leaned forward slightly, now very interested.

*'This sounds like one of the **exact** kinds of social insights I've been missing in my toolkit...!'*

"How is it *obvious?*"

Lucas turned a dead stare on her, flinching at the eye contact for just a moment before holding it. "I honestly don't even know how to *begin* explaining this to you, Thea. I'm very sorry."

She deflated. "But no—Evelyne does not have a boyfriend. And Desmond, I'd *strongly* recommend not even trying. It's not going to end well."

"I've got a lot going for me though, haven't I?" Desmond pushed back, clearly building a case. "I'm Alpha Squad. I'm pretty decent-looking. I can be a nice guy—and I *have* been getting better at the whole being amicable thing lately, yeah?"

'He's not wrong.' Thea nodded along, glancing at Lucas. *'There are definitely worse-looking guys around. And he really has improved on the social front—especially with me, which I very much appreciate. It's pretty unlike Lucas to just write him off like this...'*

Lucas put his second hand over his face, fully covering it, and slowly leaned forward over the table like a migraine had just arrived without warning. "Just... *don't*. Please, Desmond. I know Thea isn't going to get this, but you too? Come on, man."

Now getting seriously frustrated, Thea chimed in directly.

"At least *try* to explain it, then," she said, her voice coming out sharper than she'd intended. "All I ever hear is '*Thea isn't going to get it.*' How am I supposed to get *anything* if nobody ever actually explains things to me? I can't divine it from the damn stars! Help me out here—or at least try. Please?"

Lucas held the position for another few seconds, then visibly gave up.

He lifted his face out of his hands, turned more toward Thea, and squared his shoulders like a man about to do something he already regretted.

"Okay. Fine." He paused. "Let's start simple. What is a boyfriend? Or even broader: What is a relationship? Define it for me loosely, Thea."

She thought about it for a second.

It wasn't a hard question—she'd played enough romance games back on Lumiosia to have a solid handle on the concept.

The mechanics were pretty consistent across most of them.

"They're people you talk to a lot," she said, with reasonable confidence. "Spend a lot of time with. Build a closer connection to once you've put in enough shared events and given them the right gifts. Eventually the relationship becomes closer and you unlock additional events like marriage and having children."

Now Desmond was also just *staring* at her. Not the kind of stare that came with a follow-up.

The kind that came from someone who had just heard something so fundamentally stupid that they needed a moment to locate the beginning of it.

"*What?*" she asked, already feeling herself getting defensive. "What's wrong with that definition?"

"Like *everything*," Desmond said immediately.

"Technically," Lucas cut in, in a considerably more measured tone, "there isn't technically anything wrong with it at a fundamental level. The elements are there— time, shared experience, emotional closeness—"

"It's from a game," Desmond said flatly.

Lucas paused. "...What?"

"That's a game definition. That's literally how romance works in games. Relationship meters and stuff." He looked at Lucas. "You don't know about romance games?"

"I—no, I didn't know that was even a thing... How does that work, exactly?"

"They absolutely exist. There are entire games where the whole point is just to—" Desmond caught himself and redirected, pointing at her. "The point is, *her* whole framework is built on that. The description she just gave is just her experiences playing those games. Nothing actually based on actual real-life experience or understanding."

Lucas turned back to Thea with a newly recalibrated expression, then looked back at Desmond, then appeared to silently revise his earlier position. "Alright. I'll... adjust my statement, then. There are *technically* some correct elements in what you said, Thea, but your overall understanding of the concept is—apparently very gamified. In a way that makes it not particularly useful as a real-world framework. The whole thing is quite warped."

'But Terra's games taught me everything I know about the Allbright System's Builds, too,' Thea thought, frowning at the two of them. *'And **that** all turned out to be accurate. So why would this be different? Sure, romance games aren't made by Terra—but games clearly **can** reflect real-world things and teach people about them. That's been proven. So what's the problem here...?'*

She couldn't find the flaw in her own logic, which was either a sign that she was right or—considering that both Lucas and Desmond were utterly convinced she was wrong—a sign that the flaw was somewhere she wasn't quite understanding.

"Okay, then..." She ultimately said, setting her arms on the table and leaning in. "Then what *is* the real definition?"

Lucas and Desmond exchanged a brief glance.

"It's..." Lucas started, then stopped. "It's a mutual emotional connection between two people that goes beyond regular friendship."

"Sure, I get that. But what does that *actually* mean?" Thea pressed. "What makes it different from a close friendship? Because by that definition, Kara and I would qualify, no?"

Lucas coughed, once again—apparently still not having quite gotten rid of the previous issues—before he opened his mouth. Then closed it again.

"It's the romantic part, really," Desmond offered, seemingly amused by Lucas' continued issues. "There's a romantic element to a real relationship. Like you're attracted to the person."

"*Attracted*, how?"

Desmond blinked. "What do you mean, *attracted how*? Just—attracted. You know."

He gestured vaguely with his hands—it did not draw any accurate picture of Thea at all.

"I don't. Be more specific."

"You want to be around them," Lucas tried. "More than other people. And it feels *different* from how you want to be around friends. It's—warmer. More *intense*."

"So it's qualitatively a step up of the same thing friendships are made of?"

"No, it's qualitatively different—" Desmond tried, but Thea interrupted. "*How*?"

Another glance between the two of them. Less confident this time.

"I guess... You think about them," Desmond said. "Like, randomly. When they're not there."

"I think about Kara when she's not there," she threw in. "I was just thinking about her before you started talking about Evelyne's potentially-non-existent boyfriend earlier."

"That's... *different*," he argued.

"You keep saying that."

Lucas pressed two fingers to his temple and breathed out through clenched teeth.

"There's a... physical component," he said carefully. "A physical *awareness* of the person that you don't have with friends. You notice them differently."

Thea considered that. '*Physical awareness, huh?*'

"Like how I notice when someone's heart rate changes?"

"That's—wait, *what*?" Lucas stopped, his head visibly recoiling as his brain caught up to what she'd just said. "That's something you can actually do?"

She nodded. "Yeah. I could hear yours spiking when you were suppressing those coughs earlier. I can hear it spiking right now, because I said I can hear it spiking. And I can hear Desmond's speeding up because he's starting to find your reaction funny."

They both stared at her wide-eyed.

"That's—that's actually fucking terrifying. What in the actual Void?" Desmond muttered.

"No kidding." Lucas gave a single, grave nod. "Xagis protect me from the Perception monsters out there..."

A short pause in which he appeared to be genuinely collecting himself. "But—to get back on topic, and hopefully move past this horrific revelation as quickly as possible—that was not quite what I meant, Thea, no."

"Then what *did* you mean?" Thea pushed again.

Desmond dropped his head onto the table with a quiet thud, while Lucas stared up at the ceiling, seemingly at a loss for words.

'They clearly know what they mean. Even have a mutual understanding of it,' Thea thought, genuinely frustrated with the whole conversation. *'They just don't know how to say it in a way that actually translates into anything I can work with... Is this another one of those things that's just supposed to be instinctively understood by everyone except me? Would Corvus be able to help on this...?'*

The booth door slid open before the conversation could go any further, and Karania and Evelyne filed back in.

Karania had a small square box tucked under one arm, carried easily in one hand. Evelyne was behind her, wrestling with something considerably larger and far less cooperative.

"We're back," Kara announced, moving to her seat next to Thea with the small box set neatly on the table in front of her.

"Welcome back," Lucas said, with Desmond echoing it a beat behind and Thea giving a quick nod.

'Kara's heart rate is back to normal.' Thea clocked it automatically.

Evelyne's, on the other hand, was running noticeably faster than usual—though given the size of the box she'd apparently been asked to carry, that wasn't particularly surprising.

Evelyne set the box down on the floor in front of the table with a grunt that communicated her feelings about the whole experience clearly enough, then straightened up, smoothed her clothes, and settled back onto the bench to the right of Lucas.

Perfect timing, as it turned out.

"Actually," Thea said, catching everyone's attention—especially Evelyne's, as she looked across the table at the other girl, "Do you have a boyfriend, Evelyne? Are you single?"

The reactions inside the room were immediate and varied.

Desmond and Lucas both went rigid at exactly the same moment—the specific kind of rigid that happened when someone was fighting *very* hard not to completely lose it—twin expressions of mortified disbelief with laughter visibly building behind their eyes.

From, surprisingly, both Karania and Evelyne, in almost perfect unison, at a volume that neither of them seemed to have intended:

"W—*what*?!"

They were both *staring* at her.

Karania's composure had cracked for what was possibly the first time all day—maybe ever, in this particular way. Evelyne, meanwhile, looked like every single thing she knew about how to be a person had simply vacated the premises all at once, her mouth opening and closing without producing anything resembling a word...

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About ten minutes later, once the initial shock and confusion had been cleared up—mostly through Lucas' efforts—Thea finally got her answer.

"N—no, I don't have a boyfriend," Evelyne replied, visibly uncomfortable in a way that had her avoiding eye contact entirely—which Thea had noticed was fairly unusual for her. "We've only had a little free time since arriving... I hadn't really thought about it until just now, honestly. I'm... not exactly *experienced* with any of this..."

"I *fully* understand you on that front," Thea said, with a grave nod.

The sound of two simultaneous facepalms rang through the booth.

'I'm doing this for you, Desmond, you moron!' She shot him a glare. *'A little gratitude for the expert intelligence gathering would be nice.'*

Then, clocking that Evelyne was still very much not looking in her direction, she nudged her head toward the girl and gave him a quiet thumbs up.

Desmond's face lit up immediately as he seemingly realized what she was doing. He shot back a wink and a thumbs up of his own.

A loud throat-clearing from Karania, followed by an even louder "Aaaaanyway," shut the whole exchange down before it could go any further, steering the conversation firmly back on track. "Instead of grilling the girl on her relationship status—or lack thereof—can we focus on the Challenges? That is, after all, why we're all here today?"

"Right," Thea nodded quickly, turning back to Evelyne. "As we were saying before Kara came back with—actually, wait." She paused and looked at Karania. "What *did* you bring back?"

"Biometric calibration patches." Karania pointed at the large box Evelyne had hauled in. "And combat stims."

She pointed at the small square one she'd set on the table.

"C—combat stims?!" Lucas and Desmond replied in perfect unison, apparently having developed some kind of shared frequency over the course of the session.

"What do you mean, *combat stims*?" Lucas followed up.

"Exactly what I said: Stims for combat purposes. I picked up around three dozen for all of Alpha Squad, so it made sense to test them in a controlled environment first," Karania answered, entirely unbothered by the reaction she was getting.

'That seems perfectly reasonable to me,' Thea thought, eyeing the rest of them carefully. *'Not sure what everyone else is so alarmed about...'*

"I also want to see how they behave inside a VR environment," Karania continued. "They aren't designed for that kind of application, but given UHF and System technology, taking one before entering the simulation might still carry the same benefits. And if it doesn't—that's still useful data to have. Hence the calibration patches as well. They'll let me pull direct biometric readings from each of you while we're inside."

"Neat," Thea said, then turned back to Evelynne. "So—as I was saying before all of that. You mentioned during our first session that you had an in-depth rundown on the Challenge System. That's what we're here for today. Anything and everything you've got on it."

Evelynne straightened up almost visibly, the discomfort of the previous few minutes sliding off her as she shifted back into the role she was clearly far more comfortable in.

She folded her hands on the table and met Thea's eyes with something close to relief.

"Right... So. Challenges." She cleared her throat lightly. "As a whole, they're built around a three-act structure. Each part serves a different purpose, and each one matters—so keep that in mind before I go through them."

She held up one finger. "First: The Duels. Best of five, one versus one. In terms of raw weight toward the final outcome, they're technically the smallest of the three parts—but don't let that fool you into treating them as unimportant. They're actually where the proctors get their clearest read on you as an individual. It's far easier to assess someone's true capabilities when they're matched against a single, difficult opponent than when they're lost in a crowd of easier ones."

She paused briefly, to allow everyone to digest that before continuing, "That means this is your *best* opportunity to showcase out-of-the-box thinking and real problem-solving ability. Especially—" her gaze shifted briefly to Lucas, her tone staying even, "—when you're facing someone like Rachel Masters, who is, frankly, head and shoulders above you in raw skill. No offence."

Lucas nodded with a lopsided smile.

Just like he always did with that particular part of the routine between the two of them.

"The duels are more about what you can *show* than whether you win or lose," Evelyne continued. "Although winning *does* play a part, obviously. Just don't treat it as the only thing that matters there."

Second finger. "After the duels comes the bulk of the Challenge—the Challenge Missions. These run like DM-style missions. The Challenger and Defender are each thrown in with their own squad first—so Lucas goes in with Alpha, Rachel with Beta. Then they're swapped. Lucas takes Beta, Rachel takes Alpha. The second mission is different from the first—different parameters, different location—but the overall objective stays the same for each Role, and it's consistent across both runs. That way nobody can argue the second run has an unfair advantage just because you've already seen the first."

She leaned forward slightly, eyes becoming more intense as she really got going. "For a Defensive Heavy, expect something along the lines of a Point Defense scenario—though that isn't guaranteed, it is fairly likely. The missions always focus on something the Role is imminently suited for. What is *guaranteed*, however, is that teamwork is the single most important thing the proctors will be looking for during this portion. Working with both squads. Making them work *better*. But—" she raised a finger from her other hand in emphasis, "—that does *not* mean your job is to become a meatslab who exists only to absorb damage and protect others. That is *not* what functional teamwork looks like. It means bringing your own strengths to the table. Filling your role. Making use of what the people around you are good at while actually contributing something of worth yourself. Both with Alpha *and* with Beta. The proctors want to see that you can slot into either environment and truly elevate it."

She finally sat back, taking a bit of a breather, before continuing. "That second section carries the most weight of the three. But it does not *conclude* the Challenge—and that's something a lot of people forget, to their cost. The other two parts matter just as much individually. Which brings me to the last one."

Third finger. "The Interview. It's the only portion that isn't publicly broadcast, and it's genuinely not well known outside of certain circles... You'll be asked *very* direct questions. Your intentions, your goals, how you see yourself within your current squad, how you'd see yourself in the squad you're challenging into—or falling back to, if you lose. Things like that. From everything I've been able to gather—" for just a moment something shifted in her expression, "—it's *the* most stressful part of the entire process, and the one where most Challengees struggle the hardest. I can't tell you exactly how much it factors into the final decision, but it is not a small amount. That much I'm confident of."

A brief silence followed as everyone around the table absorbed the sheer breadth and depth of what Evelyne had laid out.

Karania was the first to speak, her expression already having shifted into the focused, analytical mode Thea associated with her working through a problem. "The interview section—do you know if the questions are standardised across all Challenges, or are they tailored to the specific individuals involved? Because the preparation approach is going to be *very* different depending on the answer to that. Based on what you said, it sounded more personalized, but there are surely some standard questions they ask, yes?"

Evelyne considered it for a moment before answering. "From what I could gather, there's a framework—certain categories of questions that come up pretty consistently across all Challenges. But the specifics are tailored, yes. They'll know *exactly* who they're talking to before that person walks in. AI breakdowns, psych-evals from the ship they're on..."

She gave a small, slightly unspecific shrug. "The whole spiel."

Karania nodded slowly, already filing that away somewhere in her gigantic brain, Thea had no doubt on that front.

"What about the duels?" Desmond leaned forward, elbows on the table. "You said they're more about showcasing capabilities than winning or losing, of course—but is there a point where that stops being true? Like, if Lucas goes zero for three, does the '*it's about what you show*' thing still hold, or does the scoreline start to actually matter at that point?"

Evelyne tilted her head slightly. "The scoreline *always* matters to some degree—I don't want to give the impression it doesn't. But a clean three-zero loss where the proctors saw genuine problem-solving, real adaptability, and someone pushing their limits against a significantly stronger opponent? That reads *very* differently than a three-zero where the person just... got repeatedly steamrolled without showing anything interesting."

She paused. "The worst outcome isn't losing, but losing without giving them anything worth writing down."

"So make every round count, even when it's going badly," Desmond summarised, reaching for another salty cracker to flip in his mouth.

"*Epecially* when it's going badly," Evelyne confirmed.

"What about the squad missions, then?" Karania pressed. "You said the parameters change between the first and second run, but the objective stays the same for the Role. Does that mean Lucas and Thea will know the objective in advance, or is it revealed on the day?"

"Revealed on the day," Evelyne said. "But the Role-specific objectives are consistent enough that you can make educated guesses based on what's typical for each Role. Point Defense for a Defensive Heavy is the most common by a significant margin. I don't have the data on Recon/Snipers yet, but I'll get it for the next session, I promise."

She shot an apologetic smile in Thea's direction, who simply waved her off.

It really wasn't a big deal—she would deal with whatever the UHF threw at her anyway. Tiberius was undoubtedly a dangerous opponent, but as long as she did her best, there was no way he was going to outscore her on a simple mission.

She was honestly more worried about the Interview and Duel sections, as she was particularly vulnerable in both of those, given her Attribute set and her lack of social expertise to navigate something like a high-stakes interview.

"So we can prepare for that," Karania said, more to herself than anyone else. "Lucas needs reps in Point Defense scenarios—with Alpha first, then with a squad he's less familiar with."

That second run is actually the more important one to prepare for, I think. Working with Beta is the unknown variable."

"We don't really know Beta Squad's style that well either," Desmond added, frowning.

"Like—we know some of their names and their roles, but that's about it."

"I know a little," Evelyne said quietly.

Every head at the table turned toward her.

She blinked, then seemed to realise what she'd just volunteered, and straightened slightly.

"Not *everything*, of course. But—some. If it would help."

"It would *absolutely* help," Karania said, in a tone that left no real room for disagreement, a sharp glint in her eyes that made Evelyne visibly flinch.

'Wow. Kara, calm down. She was already going to help us...' Thea nudged her under the table to shoot her a look when she glanced over. But, instead, Karania gave the smallest possible shake of her head without turning toward her, eyes staying fixed on Evelyne.

'...What exactly is going on between these two?'

"I—I'll get it all compiled for the next session then, if that's acceptable..." Evelyne replied, her voice noticeably quieter than it had been a moment ago, eyes dropped to the table.

"That would be great, thank you," Lucas said, with his usual easy warmth—either completely oblivious to whatever was passing between Kara and Evelyne, or deliberately choosing to ignore it for the sake of keeping the session on track.

"Alright," Karania said, the sharpness in her tone smoothing out as she set her hands flat on the table and shifted gears. "In that case, let's make use of the time we have today.

Simulation first—we can work out a proper prep outline for the Challenges once we've got a clearer picture of where Lucas actually stands right now. And we'll try out the combat stims later on as well, once we've got a baseline to work with."

Lucas accepted that with a nod, looking mildly relieved to have something concrete to do.

"That sounds reasonable," Thea said, already starting to move toward the VR seats. "We can figure out what we're working with today and build from there."

Desmond, surprisingly, was on his feet before anyone else, seemingly *very* enthusiastic about getting into the simulation, and the general energy in the booth shifted into something more purposeful as everyone started getting settled into their seats.

Thea took hers and began running through the session setup, but her attention kept splitting.

Kara was perfectly composed again—heart rate steady, expression back to its usual baseline, every trace of whatever that had been tucked neatly away.

Evelyne, on the other hand, was quieter than she'd been in any of their previous sessions or even at the start of this one, her usual awkward, anxious energy noticeably absent as she got herself situated.

'Something serious happened between those two in that corridor,' Thea turned it over once, then twice. 'But I won't really get any answers by just asking either of them about it, I feel like... This seems strangely personal, even for Kara. I need more info first...'

She filed it away alongside the other things she didn't have enough to work from yet, and pulled up the simulation interface.

'I'll keep an eye on both of them. Slowly work on it and figure things out for later, to confront Kara with. Focus has got to be on Lucas' Challenge for now...'