

Volume 2 - Interlude: Orbit

“Most people misunderstand Skills—not out of ignorance, but because the System makes them look deceptively simple.

“A Skill isn’t a reward for dabbling.

“It is the System’s acknowledgement that the knowledge inside your head has reached a level of completion and consistency that it considers ‘*fit for purpose*.’

“Take [Mathematics], for example: Nearly every human alive can add, subtract, multiply, and divide. Many can manage basic algebra, a bit of geometry, maybe even a touch of calculus depending on where they grew up.

“But simply knowing *pieces* of a topic does not earn the Skill.

“The System demands roughly ninety-five percent mastery of every fundamental sub-topic it considers relevant. What counts as ‘fundamental,’ however, is... *flexible*. Some areas require total understanding and perfect execution—such as addition, which the System treats as an absolute. Other fields, especially those tied to physical action like [Driving] or [Climbing], allow for a wider margin. There, the System cares less about rigid perfection and more about consistent, reliable performance across real-world conditions.

“After all, even the System cannot expect you to learn how to drive every single vehicle in the known universe, with every single configuration. Instead, it demands conceptual proficiency—the understanding of how to approach driving any vehicle in existence of the same class, to a satisfactory degree.

“Now, once you pass the halfway mark toward qualification—fifty percent, give or take—the System will, upon request, show you what topics remain for you to learn, to be granted the Skill. But it won’t hand you the answers, of course. It will simply show you which sub-topics are incompletely understood.

“And here is where most learners hit the wall: If you lack *any* conceptual foothold for a sub-Skill, the System will simply refuse to display it. It will mark it only as ‘???’.

“This is not malicious. It is simply the System saying, ‘*You do not yet understand enough to even comprehend the question.*’

“Entire sections of the highest level of the [Physics] Skill remain completely shrouded behind those question marks. Not due to secrecy, but because *humanity as a whole* has yet to discover the underlying principles in the first place.

“Marines often circumvent these kinds of walls with Skill Classes—paid training modules designed by the UHF that fill in the missing blanks efficiently; just like an intensive university course on a Core-planet would.

“There is, naturally, always that last path available—the slow path, the frustrating path—which has been the true engine of human progress since our very beginning:

“When confronted with the System’s hardline stance on not helping us over the hurdles, we are forced to push outward. To experiment, to question, to discover what we now know must exist, *somewhere*.

“So if the System shows you a ‘??’, do not despair. You are staring at the very *boundary* of your knowledge. But you are not forced to stay there. It is an invitation, not a reprimand.

“And if humanity is ever going to push past the Bubble and stand our ground against whatever horrors or wonders wait outside our galaxy, then someone has to be bold enough to take those invitations.

“To experiment. To dig. To learn the things nobody has ever learned before.

“Because raising the knowledge of one mind, even by a little, raises the knowledge of us all.”

—

[Excerpt from “Foundations of the Allbright System,” 7th Edition – Dr. Ellivar Mune – PFC903]

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PoV: Peria Akin

“—magnified optics up to 24x easily attachable, as well as several after-market modifications for your consideration, if you’d like more customization options down the line,” Peria finished her sales pitch, handing over the weapon in question to her newest potential customer with the proper Abundant Ammunitions flourish: A slight bow, both hands offering the gun, and a bright, practiced smile.

He was yet another Recruit, fresh off his first Digital Mission if Peria had to guess, which meant he was probably in the market for a new partial license to replace the standard-issue rifles he’d likely carried through the Assessment and DM.

Nothing overly exciting—but at least he’d come in with a clear idea of what he wanted.

He had asked for someone experienced with the finer details of the weapons instead of settling for a basic clerk.

Peria could appreciate that.

Anything that got her talking about the war-engineering masterpieces Abundant Ammunitions had on offer was already a win in her book.

And frankly, the late shift *had* been painfully boring, so she was grateful for the distraction.

She watched the customer handle the gun—his demeanour curious and movements practiced, which in her opinion boded well for a potential sale.

Still, her thoughts drifted.

Her life had gone through one hell of a shake-up over the past few days, and she wasn't sure what she had really fallen into quite yet.

Ever since *the* Thea McKay had shown up at the store—and then, by seemingly pure accident, elevated and hauled Peria out of the fire in rapid succession—things had spiraled in directions she never imagined possible.

First and foremost: She wasn't the Senior Inventory Specialist of Abundant Ammunitions anymore.

No, she had been slapped with a shiny new job title created specifically “for her expertise in dealing with technically versed VIPs,” as the talking heads put it. The title itself was ridiculous enough to make her wince every time she saw it:

“Expert Weapons Consultation Specialist.”

She still didn't know what to make of it.

She hadn't exactly learned anything new about weapons that she hadn't known before, so going from senior to expert felt preposterous, but who was she to gainsay the talking heads?

And then again, the raise was rather substantial—she wasn't the type to complain about that kind of upgrade, ever—but the so-called promotion hadn't come with *any* sort of briefing. Just a datapad notification saying she was an Expert Weapons Consultation Specialist now, with no option to accept or decline either.

And so she was one—whatever that was supposed to mean.

She hadn't been given any new duties, responsibilities, or guidance.

Her day-to-day life was identical to before: Same store, same shelves, same long shifts.

The only real changes were the new plaque on her uniform and the thicker pay-stub sitting in her account.

‘And that I’m now the go-to whenever Marines like this one show up,’ she thought, watching the Recruit handle the rifle she'd picked out for him based on his specs. *‘Thought that was already kind of the case before as well. So not really that much of a change after all...’*

The weapon in question was a Battle-Rifle called the “Ruin”—a workhorse that could fit into almost any loadout, even if Marines rarely picked it for reasons that Peria could only chalk up to pure idiocy on the Corps' part.

Out of every rifle in the store, the Ruin was one of the most balanced choices, at least in her personal and exceedingly humble opinion.

Strong ammunition that could punch through anything short of Super-Heavy armor with proper aim, reliable in almost any conditions, a solid fire-rate if things got desperate, and

enough after-market parts to turn it into whatever the user wanted—except for pure close-quarters combat, which no Battle-Rifle excelled at anyway.

*'And the ammo economy is way better than the AR-303 too... No idea why **that** thing became standard-issue,'* Peria thought with a shake of her head.

She had never understood the Corps' obsession with that rifle.

Sure, it did everything "fine," but nothing about it stood out at all. Which might have been the entire point, but if you were going to pick something as *the* weapon that every single Marine trained with, you'd think they'd choose something with at least a hint of flair or personality.

'I swear they're just—'

Her thoughts cut off as a chaotic alarm burst from her datapad, shrill and sudden.

Peria yelped, nearly dropping the device as she scrambled awkwardly to catch it before it hit the floor—an unflattering few moments where she was half-balancing, half-jumping on one leg just to snatch it out of the air.

With the datapad barely secured, she let out a sharp breath and shut off the shrill alarm, her heart beating in her throat for more than one reason.

The surprise, obviously.

But also the embarrassment of having done that in front of a customer, who had just about jumped out of his skin at the sudden noise—definitely Peria's fault, considering she was the one who had set this alarm up.

And, of course, the *meaning* behind the alarm didn't help either.

Personal datapads weren't allowed during work hours at any Abundant Ammunitions branch, so Peria had gotten creative with her setup to receive important messages while on shift—and there was only one person she considered important enough to justify all that effort for.

It hadn't been hard to convince the local manager to let her script and connection bypass the usual red tape, after she explained it was so she could keep the ship's *number-one* VIP in the loop with Abundant Ammunitions at all times.

She checked the forwarded message quickly, excitement bubbling the moment she saw the sender.

[Hey Peria!

[It's me, Thea. I hope you remember me...?

[I was wondering if you'd like to talk about some weapons, particularly the Gram variants I bought from Abundant Ammunitions with your help recently.

[I just finished my first Digital Mission with them and have fairly thoroughly tested them in live-fire conditions as I'd want to use them for, so I figured it would be a good time to bounce ideas off each other about a few things.

[Would tomorrow afternoon be good for you?

[If you find the time, I'd like for you to review the recording of the Digital Mission, which the Sovereign will grant you access to, should you accept. (I already cleared it with her and she says it's ok!) It should help with giving you an idea of what we might talk about in regards to the weapons.

[If there's any payment required to make sure you have the time to review everything before our meeting, or to free up your time for us to meet at... let's say like 1700? Just let me know!

[Best wishes, Thea McKay]

Peria stared at the message like the datapad had grown a very literal human head to stare back at her.

'Why does she message me like she's writing a corporate message, but then also go full casual in the way she actually types? What is happening here...?' she thought.

It would've been *so much* easier to just pick one tone—either all formal or all casual—but not both mashed together like a weird hybrid. There had to be some sort of reason for this choice, Peria was certain, but she couldn't even begin to figure it out at first glance.

"Is... is everything okay?" the Marine next to her asked tentatively, and Peria had to remind herself for a brief moment that she was, in fact, not alone.

"Ah—yes! My apologies for the startling sound. I've just received an important communication from headquarters. I'll need to check on this, if you'd excuse me? I'll send someone over to continue assisting you and help with any purchases you might want to finalize."

The Marine hesitated for a moment but eventually gave her a short nod, before returning to look at the Ruin with a kind of focus that told Peria she was *definitely* missing out on a sale by leaving now—but Thea's message was simply more important, so she quickly waved over one of her co-workers to pick up where she left off.

Rushing into the back rooms, she dropped into the nearest workbench chair and pulled the message back up, trying to make sense of the VIP's request.

'Figures she'd be one of the first to jump into a DM, huh?' she chuckled to herself.

She'd heard plenty about Alpha Squads and Aces, but meeting one in person—and seeing that drive firsthand—made it obvious why Thea had already completed a mission, even though the terminals had only opened earlier today.

'So she wants to go over the Gram variants... She bought the Gauss and Ballistic ones, so those will definitely be part of it. But she'll compare them to the Laser version too; that's just how these things go,' Peria mused, already jotting notes onto her datapad.

She needed to be properly prepared for this, especially with a VIP like her.

She'd learned that the hard way after the too-close-for-comfort scare with the talking heads during Thea's last visit.

Messing up was not an option—she couldn't rely on Thea coming to save her by accident once again. She had gotten the galactic-mulligan once already and that was all she would ever get.

"Tomorrow afternoon... around 1700?" She grimaced. "That's about two hours after my shift starts. The manager's going to lose it if I ask for time off on such short notice—even for a VIP. I'm going to have to ask her for payment and make this a semi-official thing, aren't I...?"

She kept reading—and then froze.

*'What... What do you mean you "cleared it with the Sovereign", Thea?! The ship?! You talked to the damn ship's main AI and asked it—her, I guess—to give **me** access to your DM recording?! I don't even have clearance! Not even close! And it's the actual ship's AI, Thea, you can't just ask it to run personal errands for you...?!'*

She set the datapad down, forcing herself through long, deep breaths until the panic stopped making her fingers tingle.

"No, Peria. Maybe *you're* the one being unreasonable here..." she reminded herself out loud. The sound of her own voice helped ground her. "Clearly Thea already got the approval from the... the Sovereign itself, so she was absolutely right about it being possible. VIPs really are just built different from normal people like you. Stop thinking they follow the same rules... I'm sure this sort of thing is very common for Marines to do."

Having calmed herself down with that reminder, she picked up the datapad again and read the entire message once more, nodding to herself absent-mindedly as she worked through the math in her head.

'Yeah... I'll need to ask her for payment on this. There's no way I can review a full DM, plus prepare everything I need to make sure I don't disappoint her, if I also have to finish today's shift and start tomorrow's before the meeting...'

She quickly added up the numbers: Around fifteen hours of lost work today and tomorrow combined—assuming their conversation didn't end up lasting her entire shift.

'Actually... It might be safer to assume I'll be busy the whole day tomorrow. Thea might really want to go deep on this talk. Last time, I got the feeling she only left because she had to meet up with her friend...'

So, around eighteen hours lost with the rest of today and *all* of tomorrow.

Adding fifty percent on top for the private nature of the consultation and the short notice, plus another thirty percent for it being held inside Abundant Ammunitions' store...

Peria paled at the number forming in her mind.

'Did I mess up somewhere...?' she wondered, even though she was pretty sure she hadn't.

Calculating things like this was part of the very first weeks of clerk training—just in case a Marine asked for a private consultation quote.

Not necessarily for *your* consultation, but for *someone's*.

Abundant Ammunitions always preferred giving a quick, close-enough estimate over making a customer wait for a perfect one. And Peria couldn't balk at the policy. Most people would rather have a fast ballpark number than a flawless one twenty minutes later.

And she had always been good at ballpark numbers... yet she still ran through the math twice more, just to be sure.

'Fuck me... There's no way I can ask her for this many Credits just for talking to me!'

Her head slumped into her hands as she stared at the empty workbench.

Thea had *saved* her. And now she was practically *forced* to fleece the girl, when all Thea wanted to do was talk about guns?

How was that even remotely fair?

*'But the damn regulations are very clear on this... It's too many hours for a manager to justify writing off. And they'd never agree to take the loss just because a VIP wants a private chat with an employee—they want the VIP **in the store**, not hanging out with someone off-hours.'*

She couldn't really blame them for that either, as much as she wanted to.

Thea's last purchase alone had brought in as much revenue as several weeks of normal sales—although, to be fair, the post-Assessment rush and the newly opened Digital Mission terminals always skewed things a bit.

With a heavy sigh, Peria started writing her answer, opting for a very casual one—quietly hoping she hadn't missed anything important hidden between the lines about why Thea might have chosen such an odd hybrid-communication style in her own message.

[Thea! Happy to hear from you!

[I'd absolutely love to talk shop about the Gram's, but I'll be pretty busy at work today and tomorrow! I doubt I can review the whole DM and prepare all the information that might be useful, unless I take both days off...

[I don't think it's worth the Credits it'd cost to reimburse Abundant Ammunitions for my time, so maybe we can move it to a different day, later in the week? I'd be free in about four days, starting from around 1600.

[I'll attach the payment request for Abundant Ammunitions' reimbursement anyway, in case you think it's time-sensitive enough.

[Talk to you soon!]

She read through it three times before sending it off, sinking into the chair like the message had drained the last bit of her energy.

*'One hundred thirty-three Credits just to talk to me for a day...? That's **way** too much. I wonder if I could convince the talking heads to reduce consultation costs for VIPs somehow... Argue that it's to build better working relationships with them...? Make sure they can always reach the consultants they want, whenever they want? That should boost relations and sales in the long run, right?'* she wondered, mulling it over and jotting down ideas for a potential proposal on the side.

'So I'll probably have around three days to review the full DM and get everything ready for Thea... Honestly might be better this way, since I'll need booth time with the guns myself to get a proper feel for them. I could probably ask Jonas for his opinion too... No clue what his shifts look like right now, though. Last I heard Orange Armaments was slammed, so he might not be free anytime soon... I should just message him, surely he'll—'

The shrill alarm from her datapad cut through her thoughts, making Peria yelp as she scrambled once again to catch the device before it hit the floor.

"Fuck!" She cursed, breathing hard as she tried to calm her racing heart. "I really need to change that fucking sound, holy shit."

She opened the message that had caused the alarm and froze at how short it was.

[Awesome! See you tomorrow, Peria!]

"Huh?" she breathed, staring between the message and the attached payment confirmation.

A long second passed before her brain kicked back into gear.

She blinked rapidly, almost as if that would make the message change.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait—what?! You can't just pay that much to talk to me!" she blurted, throwing both hands up. "What is wrong with this girl?!"

One hundred thirty-three Credits.

That was almost her entire newly-upgraded, weekly salary.

For a single day of consultation. About guns.

Then the real horror hit her.

'Oh. Oh no. I only have... what, less than twenty-four hours to prep...? Oh fuck. Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck!'

Eyes widening, she shot out of the backroom like she'd been launched, already mentally listing everything she suddenly needed:

Find the manager and tell him she wasn't coming back for the rest of her shift today—or tomorrow.

And request priority access to a virtual room.

And pull three specific guns from inventory.

And reserve the next-tech workbench.

And gather notes, run calibrations, cross-reference specs—and message Jonas!

And...

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PoV: Recruit Evelyne Midra Sen

Observing the mostly empty lecture hall, where the System 102 lecture would soon start, Evelyne was practically buzzing with excitement. It had been a hectic thirteen hours since she'd made what was likely the most life-changing discovery she would ever make.

She hadn't slept a wink—not that it mattered.

Her upbringing had included lengthy sleep-deprivation training modules, making sure she could function almost perfectly even after several days without rest.

Still, the sleepless night showed just how turbulent everything had become.

Her entire plan for her first year in the UHF had been flipped completely on its head.

Her family would probably disapprove—it was unbecoming of a daughter of the Sen to throw away her cover for something as “frivolous” as hope—but she couldn't let an opportunity like this slip away.

So she did what any normal person would do: She found an empty storeroom, away from prying eyes and ears, and made a deal with the most devilish of things the UHF had in store.

The UHF's ship AIs were special, her tutors had always told her.

They had... *ways* about them.

An ulterior sort of programming almost nobody inside the Corps knew about—not even most of the higher brass, barring the Captains of each ship and select individuals.

It was about their prime directives, which many simply took for granted. But their prime directive *wasn't* to serve the officers, nor to serve the Marines aboard them.

No, their prime directive was to facilitate the best possible long-term outcome for the UHF as a whole, no matter what.

It was a secret the Sen family had learned generations ago, and one that they had agreed to protect, in exchange for certain concessions on the UHF's side. But *knowing* it gave Evelyne a direct path to negotiate parts of her plan—to make sure she could keep an eye on *her* MMM at all times.

Not for free, of course.

She clicked her tongue, remembering the long negotiation and haggling session with the ship's AI, and let her eyes wander over the arriving Marines trickling into the hall.

'At least Beta Squad before the second Assessment, huh? You're insulting me, Sovereign,' she thought with a flicker of annoyance. *'You could've at least demanded Alpha Squad from a Sen, you incongruent bucket of rust.'*

She would've preferred to stay hidden a while longer, watching from the sidelines until later in the year, but that wasn't an option anymore.

In order for the Sovereign to place her into Thea McKay's lecture cycle—starting today, with the System 102 lecture—Evelyne had to put in some small levels of effort sooner than expected.

She still had time before the second Assessment, but half-measures weren't in her nature.

So starting today, she would lay the groundwork for her rise to Beta Squad, as the Sovereign demanded, while also getting closer to her Thea in general.

She'd snuck into the lecture hall early, just to see where Thea would sit so she could pick a nearby seat—out of sight, but close enough to listen to any conversations the girl might have. And unlike every other day since joining the UHF Recruits, she'd actually done her hair properly and applied the makeup expected of a Sen stepping into the public eye.

They had been transformed from her usual “functional and unbothered” look into something *far* more precise—yet still subtle enough that an untrained eye would barely register the change.

Her previously dark auburn hair had returned to its natural ebony-black.

The usually slightly disheveled, shoulder-length fall had been swept back into a sleek, low-tension twist that fed into a short, angled tail resting neatly along her neck.

A few strands were left loose on purpose, softening her features just enough while still keeping her field of vision completely unobstructed.

It wasn't an ornate style—not flashy enough to draw attention—but the layering was *too* exact, *too* controlled, for anyone with real training to miss.

It was classic Sen efficiency: Elegant, restrained, and built to avoid giving an opponent anything easy to grab; unless she wanted them to.

Her makeup was, naturally, just as subtle.

A thin sweep of muted ever-so-slightly velvet shadow around her eyes gave them a quiet sharpness without looking like makeup at all, enhancing the natural depth of her gaze. Her lashes had the faintest lift—nothing dramatic, just enough to widen her eyes and make her look more awake and attentive after a sleepless night.

A touch of neutral foundation blurred the faint scar beneath her left eye without hiding it, and a swipe of soft rose across her lips added a hint of color that vanished unless you knew to look for it.

On anyone else, it would've read as "light, casual makeup."

On a Sen, it was a carefully crafted mask—high-class restraint disguised as something ordinary, tailored to slip past most eyes while still meeting the expectations tied to her family name.

Evelyne's focus snapped to the bright-golden strands of long hair drifting through the entrance, framing a face she had known would be here, but had still absolutely hoped would *not* appear today: Rachel Veronica Masters.

She allowed herself the briefest flicker of annoyance before smothering the emotion entirely, forcing her mind back into calculation.

'There are only four Major Legacies in this Drive; I doubt Masters even knows I exist yet. She'll recognize me now, though... but maybe that's not such a bad thing? It could grease the wheels for avoiding half the problems this lecture might bring,' she thought, shifting deeper into the shadowed corner of the hall, keeping just out of the Legacy's line of sight.

Better to hold the element of surprise until she chose to use it.

The buzz surrounding Masters—an ever-present hum of attention and admiration—made Evelyne's skin prickle, even from this distance.

Masters carried that natural pull common to her Legacy: The frontline stars, the faces of their squads, the born leaders.

All attention, strength, and charisma.

But Rachel...? Rachel had already stumbled in that. *Badly*.

Her performance at the Awards Ceremony had been utterly appalling, at least to Evelyne's eyes.

A Major Legacy should have the composure to maintain their image at all times—not lose their temper to the most blatant, low-effort provocation Major Quinn had likely ever tossed out.

‘Truly disappointing,’ Evelyne thought.

Then again, Masters weren’t exactly known for their subtlety.

Their entire Legacy revolved around shining on the battlefield, not the quieter games—the shadows, the whispers, the unseen nudges that shifted events without leaving fingerprints.

A few minutes later, the second half of the guaranteed problem pair arrived: Lucas Callahan.

*‘Masters is going to hate sharing a lecture with **him** of all people. But I can’t let her start anything before I’ve secured a spot near my Thea...’*

There were only so many variables a plan could account for, and letting a loose cannon like Masters take a swing at one of Thea’s closest acquaintances? That was *exactly* the kind of chaos Evelyne couldn’t afford to let happen.

And then, just behind Lucas, the reason she was here at all stepped into view—her Thea, laughing idly at something the giant had said.

Evelyne’s breath stalled in her throat.

Thea’s bright, high-pitched laughter rang across the hall like a melody crafted just for her ears, and Evelyne silently thanked every Attribute Point she had ever invested into Perception—for once, she had absolutely no regrets in following her family’s Attribute layout.

That same sharp Perception let her catch another curious detail: Her Thea had, much like Evelyne herself—oh, the cosmic *symmetry*!—put on a touch of makeup she definitely hadn’t worn yesterday.

It was very subtle, almost hesitant in application.

A hint of color dusted across her cheeks, barely there unless the light caught it *just* right, and a soft touch around her eyes—more “experimental try” than any real technique behind it.

The kind of look someone achieved by having far above average hand-eye coordination, but no real experience with what it was that they were doing, merely referencing a two-minute tutorial and then deciding, *good enough*, after spending far too much time trying to get it perfect, before walking out the door.

It was *definitely* a new thing.

And, by all accounts, pretty sloppy—at least compared to Evelyne’s own learned standards.

*‘But the **intent**,’* Evelyne thought, warmth sparking in her chest and stomach. *‘One simply cannot deny the intent behind it. With a steadier hand guiding hers... this would truly look*

*like it **belonged**. Even with something she is as inexperienced in like this, my MMM still has an instinctive knack for it, huh...?*

Allowing herself just a second more to bask in the package of bliss before forcing the emotions down, Evelyne started forward, moving quickly but keeping her footsteps quiet and subtle, her mind already mapping out the next few seconds with unnerving clarity.

Masters would spot Callahan. Masters would get annoyed—furious, even—and start something. She couldn't take a swing at him here, obviously, but she would almost certainly bait him, challenge him, try to drag him into some unnecessary spat.

And Thea? She would be irritated beyond belief, especially with Masters going after one of her squadmates this early in the morning. She wouldn't be able to do anything about it either, and that frustration would follow her through the *entire* lecture.

That meant her Thea would be annoyed, distracted, her attention fixed on *Masters*, of all people, rather than anything else.

Evelyne felt her blood pressure spike at the thought and forced out two sharp breaths to center herself, just in time to see Masters stand from her seat with a visible sneer aimed straight at Callahan.

She had to stop all of this before the members of Alpha Squad even *realized* Masters was trying to cause trouble—otherwise, anything Evelyne did would just expose her far too early.

Comparing her distance to theirs with a glance, she realized instantly, '*I'm not going to make it like this...!*'

Without hesitation, she triggered one of her Abilities.

[Phantom Stride]

A darkened streak rippled forward—more heat-shimmer than shadow—before pulling her along its path. In barely an instant she was standing directly behind Masters' seat, arriving just as the other Legacy pushed herself upright.

Evelyne stepped forward, cutting off Masters' path with clear intent.

Masters froze mid-step, her confusion snapping into place as she suddenly found herself chest-to-shoulder with someone who absolutely had *not* been there a second ago.

"Who the fuck do you think you—" she started, voice already rising, already pulling breath for a full tirade—

—but then her expression stuttered, then *froze*.

Evelyne watched the moment recognition slammed into her like one of Itoku's punches during their little spar a few days back.

The golden-haired Legacy's eyes flicked once over Evelyne's face—over the precise, subtle velvet eyeshadow, the short, perfectly arranged auburn strands and hair, the faint scar beneath the eye—and everything seemed to *click* into place all at once.

Masters recoiled hard, stumbling back a half-step as if Evelyne had physically struck her.

The shock on her face was almost comical—raw confusion wrapped in a sudden spike of caution that she clearly couldn't hide fast enough.

"*Sit down*," Evelyne said quietly, tone flat, almost gentle—but with an edge that cut straight through the air. "Don't make trouble. Not until after the lecture."

Masters' jaw tightened hard enough for Evelyne to see the muscle jump.

Defiance first—natural, feral and instinctive—her words grating on every part of her Legacy-born pride... but it faltered as the rest of her brain finally caught up.

Wariness crept in slowly, replacing the earlier fire.

She swallowed, eyes narrowing.

"*Why?*" Masters hissed under her breath. "Why do you even care about some loser Defensive Heavy who stole my rightful spot?"

Evelyne didn't bother acknowledging the question.

Her voice didn't lift or drop; it stayed perfectly even, almost bored.

"I would really appreciate it if you did me this *minor favor*."

That was all she said. And it was enough.

Masters froze again—this time because she *understood*.

A *favor*—even if minor. From a Sen. Offered freely.

For something this *simple*; this *small*.

Her eyes darted as she calculated the value, weighing whatever pride she had against a gift no sane Legacy would ever turn down.

With a sharp huff, she gave a short nod and sank back down into her seat, posture stiff but compliant.

Evelyne didn't wait.

She stepped away before the other Legacy could even consider addressing her again, weaving through the rows and climbing the hall's stairs with silent, rapid steps. And just in time too, as Callahan and Thea arrived at the bottom of the stairs—smiling, chatting, doing a *magnificent* job of pretending Masters didn't exist at all.

They climbed up the rows and settled three rows behind Masters.

Evelyne immediately drifted down toward them, timing her steps so she wouldn't draw a hint of attention. When she finally sat—just one row back and a little to the side of Thea—she let out a quiet, controlled breath of relief.

A flicker of annoyance pulsed through her; offering a minor favor just to shut Masters down fast enough to stay hidden grated on her.

It was wasteful. Sloppy, even.

Not how she was taught to operate.

But then Thea spoke—her voice soft and melodic, completely unaware of the chaos Evelyne had just smothered in the crib—and all irritation evaporated as if it had never existed in the first place.

She could hear her Thea's voice *perfectly*, and the topic was nowhere near the other Legacy's name.

Everything was exactly how it needed to be...