

Volume 2 - Chapter 72 - Routine

"You never hear them coming.

The first notice you receive of their presence is the request for permission to arrive—minutes before they are simply there.

Not that you can deny.

Not that you would dare.

Not that you could ever stop them.

They wear no symbols.

They carry no creed beyond loyalty.

Their weapons and armor are nothing but a single seal.

When one of them arrives, Generals forget how to breathe.

Priests suddenly pray to nothing and everything at once.

Admirals reread orders with shaking hands and cold sweat on their backs.

Proprietors stare into the deepest void that space has to offer, desperately trying to remember where they might have gone wrong.

They do not ask who fired first.

They do not ask about intent or meaning.

Justice. Intent. Meaning...

Words that are nothing but noise to them.

One word from them, and entire fleets are erased from the galactic equation.

Another, and whole sectors are reassigned as if they were nothing but pieces on a board.

They do not hate you.

That is the worst part.

None of their actions come from malice, spite, or rage.

They do not raise their voice.

They do not negotiate.

They do not threaten.

They only measure.

They only judge.

When the scale tips—

Run, if you like.

Hide, if you want to try.

Fight, if you believe yourself foolish.

Plead, if you want your last moments remembered as a joke.

Cry, if you must, for history is already written the moment their word is spoken.

Because when Terra itself knocks, it does not knock twice.

And when an Arbiter delivers their verdict, the galaxy does not argue.

It simply *obeys*.”

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[Terran Imperial Library Excerpt: “The Terran Arbiters”, Laeria von Kunin, PFC756]

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Thea’s morning on this particular Sunday—the last day of the fourth month—came and went much like almost every other morning aboard the Sovereign so far.

A quick workout, a shower, then throwing on her clothes for the day, applying a bit of makeup while slowly working her way through the ever-growing list of techniques and ideas from the tutorials that had come with the anonymous gift, and finally bracing herself mentally to step out of her room for another day.

She was still busy with the makeup step, simply following the instructions in the tutorial video, when her thoughts drifted to the previous day’s endeavours.

*‘Yesterday’s training session with Lucas was **very** necessary... And really good! Having Evelyne around was a huge boon, too,’* Thea couldn’t deny, still a little surprised at how lucky they’d gotten to even run into the girl during the lecture like that to begin with. ***‘And she didn’t even ask for her first payment. What a nice girl...’***

Toward the end of the session, when it had become clear even to Thea that Lucas was hitting the absolute limits of what his body and mind could handle, they had taken longer breaks at shorter and shorter intervals.

So, not wanting to waste the time, Thea had offered Evelyne her payment in the form of a one-on-one conversation, while Lucas dealt with the Sovereign’s recreation of Thea’s emulation of Masters’ build and fighting style.

But Evelyne had refused outright.

“I—I already caused way too much trouble at the start of today’s session. I don’t think it’s right for me to get rewarded for that,” she had muttered, still unable to hold Thea’s gaze for more than a moment at a time.

That had been completely fine by Thea—she had offered the payment and it was refused, nothing to be done about it.

‘Any time I don’t have to pay her is one guaranteed extra session with Lucas where she’s around and we can prod her for information. Massive win in my book.’

The best part about having Evelyne around, though, was that for once, Thea didn't feel like the least socially capable person in the room. Compared to the nervous wreck of a girl, even Thea felt like she had a bit of an experience advantage—and definitely quite a lot more of it in terms of being grounded as a whole.

'She's really cute when she has a breakdown like that. A bit like one of those overexcited puppies back on Lumiosia,' Thea chuckled to herself as she applied the makeup. *'Some fans are just like that, I guess... Still can't wrap my head around the fact that she's **that** crazy about me, all because of one stupid spur-of-the-moment decision during the Awards Ceremony...'*

She cringed a little at the memory of standing up there, in front of the whole Drive, basically *yelling* at everyone. But then again, it had clearly led to some good outcomes, so it hadn't been completely pointless, at least.

The rest of yesterday, Thea had spent with her new OmniTool, locked away in her room and exploring the many different functions it offered.

'And it was pure, damn bliss... I'm really going to miss you, OmniTool,' she thought fondly, glancing over at the beautiful piece of new-tech lying neatly on the makeshift workbench to her right. A half-disassembled version of her Laser Gram rested on top of the bench as well—her current medium-term project.

She had started using the schematics function of the OmniTool to get a clearer look at how the weapon fit together, inside and out, which had already boosted her understanding of its design by a huge margin. The session with Peria, where the clerk had laid out the damn *original design documents*—which Thea still had no idea how the clerk had even gotten her hands on—had also played a major role in that growing understanding, of course.

'Really need to schedule another meeting with her soon,' she thought happily, already looking forward to spending a few more hours—or maybe even a full day, if time allowed—with the enthusiastic and knowledgeable clerk.

But all of that would have to wait.

More training sessions with Lucas, more experimenting with the OmniTool and its schematics, more work on the Laser Gram to truly understand it, more Peria-time... all of it would come later.

Because today, Kara and she had a date.

They had agreed to meet early in the morning to head to their respective Skill Classes together. It was the first day in a while where neither of them had anything else planned—and the Skill Classes were officially available to be taken—so they wanted to get a head start on the long list of Skills they'd need to pick up during their first year as Marines.

While only a single day would pass for Lucas, her OmniTool, or Peria, nearly three months would fly by for Thea as she entered a time-dilated Skill Class to master the knowledge behind [Basic Physics]—the first of many Skills she'd acquire in the future.

She finished up the last touches of her makeup, then leaned a little closer to the mirror, tilting her head side to side to make sure everything she wanted to sit right actually did.

‘Nothing smudged, nothing uneven...? Good. That’ll do.’

A quick check of her clothes came next: Dark, fitted pants with visible, reinforced seams at the sides, a simple utility top tucked in cleanly, and a lightweight jacket with just enough structure and contrast to the rest of her outfit to look intentional rather than simply thrown over because she felt a bit chilly in just a top.

She nodded to herself, a small smile creeping in.

‘Yeah... getting better at this. Definitely getting better.’

With one last glance at her reflection, she stepped out of her room into Alpha Squad’s shared living space. The smell of food hit her almost immediately, and her eyes went searching for Kara—finding her already waiting at the dining table to eat their breakfast together, just as they had agreed.

After that, it would be off to the commercial deck together, Credits in hand, to pay for their Skill Classes and figure out exactly what they even needed to do and where they needed to go to start them.

The routine of it all—being a Marine, figuring out what to do each day during this initial Recruit year, juggling all the different things that needed taking care of—was slowly starting to sink in for Thea, and it felt *right*.

Comfortable, even, in a way she hadn’t really felt since she had left the Undercity...

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“So, what are you going to go for first?” Thea asked Kara as they headed toward the System Shop in the shopping district of the commercial deck.

The Medic took a few seconds to answer, humming thoughtfully before replying, “I was thinking of going for [Advanced Triage] right away, but I think I’ll start with [Basic System Medicine] instead, just to ease into it. Advanced Skill Classes take twice as long, so starting with the three-month Basic one feels safer. I don’t *think* time dilation will mess with me in any weird ways, but better safe than sorry, right?”

“Absolutely,” Thea nodded at once, then added with a small grumble, “Also makes me feel a bit less like a complete idiot when you aren’t jumping straight into super advanced stuff while I’m over here learning [Basic Physics] like a kid.”

Kara bumped her hip into Thea’s. “Hey, none of that. [Basic Physics] is really important for you in a whole *bunch* of areas, so it’s just as smart for you to take that as it is for me to not go too wild with time dilation right away. It’ll help you understand all that weapon stuff you’ve been talking about with Peria, and it’ll probably help with your Psychic side too, right? The Rune priest himself recommended it for you. So don’t act like you’re wasting your time just because you didn’t get Inner- or Core-World schooling.”

She shot Thea a pointed look. “*And* honestly, most people from fancy Inner or Core-World schools still end up taking that Skill Class unless they’ve already unlocked it naturally, which will be very rare. Just because I’m a bookworm and rushed a bunch of Skills after Integration doesn’t mean everyone else did, too. I doubt even the Masters girl has more than a handful of Skills so far—and she doesn’t exactly strike me as the science type either, so [Basic Physics] is probably beyond her anyway.”

Thea couldn’t help but chuckle at that.

It was fun to rib on the annoying, conceited bitch like this, but deep down she knew that was all it was—just ribbing.

After everything she and Lucas had heard from Evelyne about Masters yesterday, she had no doubt the Masters girl was just as smart and capable as the rest of Alpha Squad, if not more—barring Karania, of course. Her best friend was very clearly in a league of her own.

She let out a playfully defeated sigh, then gave in. “Fiiine. I’ll go take my [Basic Physics] and be happy with it...”

“That’s exactly right,” Kara nodded smugly. “And if you handle the time dilation well—which, let’s be real, you probably will, considering your [Sensory Overdrive] and the whole [Glimpse] thing you got going on—you can always take more Skill Classes on any day you’re free. It’s not like you’re hurting for Credits or Vouchers anytime soon.”

That seemed to spark another thought as she turned a bit more toward Thea while they walked and slowed down their pace. “Oh, and remember to use Credits for the first Skill Classes here. Just to get a feel for how much it eats into your savings. We can use our Vouchers later, but I think we’ve been a bit spoiled with how many Credits we earned from the Cube Trial and the Assessment—and, well, your DM too, with that whole upscale thing. Going forward, our income’s going to drop a lot. We’ll only have DMs for the next two and a half months until the next Assessment, so it’s probably smart to get a better feel for the economy now, yeah?”

Thea nodded. “Yep. I remember. Already mentally prepared myself to drop a few thousand Credits on this Skill today.”

Kara answered with a satisfied nod and picked the pace back up to their usual walking speed, clearly done with the topic for now.

A few minutes later, they stepped into the System Store proper, the hum of activity immediately obvious.

A decent-sized chunk of Marines had already gathered inside, spread across the various terminals, some alone, some in pairs, all seemingly focused on deciding on their own Skill Classes for the day.

“Looks like we weren’t the only ones with that idea,” Kara remarked absently.

“Yeah, no kidding,” Thea agreed, her eyes drifting over the room as she scanned for anyone she might recognize. She didn’t... Well, not *really*.

There were a few semi-familiar faces—people she'd shared a lecture or two with before—but no one she actually knew by name.

Which wasn't exactly surprising, considering the only people she really knew by name were Alpha Squad and maybe enough others to count on one hand.

She stepped up to one of the free terminals and pulled up her saved list, the same one she and Kara had put together a while ago, and the same one she'd shown Peria just days earlier.

She selected [Basic Physics] and started reading through the detailed info.

A small hum of surprise slipped out of her.

[Skill Training: Physics – Basic]

[Duration: 3 months (personal-time) / 12 hours (ship-time)]

[Price: 4,000 System Credits]

"Huh," she muttered. "That's... *different*, isn't it...?"

She distinctly remembered the ship-time listed as only a single hour the first time they'd checked, right after Integration.

Kara leaned over to look and nodded. "The time? Yeah, I noticed that too. I actually read up on it after we were here the last time. The time dilation apparently varies a lot depending on where the ship is in Void-space at the time. Some regions of the Void are way more receptive to it than others, supposedly. So sometimes it's closer to an hour, like before, and other times it can be up to a full day."

She shrugged. "But honestly? Whether it's one hour or twenty-four, for three months of learning, it doesn't really matter."

Thea nodded slowly. "Yeah... compared to three months, a day's basically nothing... I wonder if they have Skills on how the time dilation stuff actually works. They must have, right? That's gotta be super interesting..."

Kara fixed her with a look, and Thea immediately raised both hands in defense. "Just thinking! I wasn't going to do it or anything! Just... thought it would be neat, is all."

The Medic rolled her eyes, then chuckled. "They *do* have them. But they're far, *far* deeper in the Physics tree. I looked it up myself, since you're right—it's *really* interesting to think about. Not something I'll likely touch, since my Skills don't line up with it, but your path probably gets a lot closer. Add a few Skills here and there and you'll likely unlock access to those Skills later on."

"Huh," Thea replied, a little surprised. She didn't exactly have many Skills that screamed "time dilation," but then again, most of hers were foundational in a lot of different ways.

'Guess that kind of makes sense... If I keep going and pick up the [Advanced], [Expert], and [Master] versions of stuff like Physics, I'll probably stumble into the prerequisites for the time dilation Skills by accident. Something to think about for the future, then.'

For now, she selected the [Basic Physics] Skill and confirmed the purchase, deciding to forgo her Skill Vouchers for now, as Kara had recommended, and simply paying the cost with her Credit Balance.

[System]: *Do you want to pay 4,000 System Credits to "Commercial Deck - System Store 2" for "[Basic Physics] Skill Training Class"? [Y/N]*

She pulled up her [Currency] Interface right away, just to make sure Kara's idea of "feeling the weight of the economy" actually had a chance to work.

[Currencies]

System Credits: 10,052 (+32,000 Credits from Awards)

System Merit: 7,679

She cupped her chin and thought, 'Yeah... I'm not sure this is really making a dent yet. I spent less than a tenth of my total Credits on this... But then again, this is gone in a single day, and there's no real limit on how often I can do this thanks to Major Quinn's allowance. So, in that sense, I'd be out of Credits in a little over a week if I just keep smashing these out...'

Seen from that angle, she definitely felt the weight Kara had been talking about—not that Thea needed a lesson in being careful with money.

She had grown up in the Undercity, after all.

Money had always been tight there, so she wasn't exactly a spendthrift by nature.

It wasn't like she'd been spending her Credits particularly recklessly so far either.

Almost everything she'd paid for had been important to her in one way or another. The only thing she'd really splurged on for no understandable reason—at the time, at least—was also the one thing Kara herself had more or less forced her into: All the clothes she now owned.

Not that she regretted it.

She was pretty sure she was beating a large chunk of the Marines in the store right now in terms of transmog.

'Hehe... It's like they don't even know,' she thought smugly, eyeing the Marines around her—right before her eyes landed on Kara, who was staring straight at her.

Thea froze.

"Are you making fun of people in your head again, Thea?" Kara asked flatly.

"N—No...?" Thea replied weakly, quickly looking away. "How would you even know?"

“What do you mean, ‘*How would you even know?*’ You’ve got a massively smug, shit-eating grin on your face,” her best friend shot back, exasperation clear in her voice.

“Nuh-uh. Don’t have that.”

She forced her face into something neutral.

“*Very mature*, Thea. *Very mature*,” Kara commented, then thankfully laid off her as she asked, “All good to go?”

Breathing a sigh of relief that she was no longer under scrutiny for her smug thoughts—which, really, was extremely unfair considering she’d won against the other Marines fair and square—Thea nodded, “Yeah. Four thousand Credits. Still got plenty left, but I can definitely see how I might run out if I keep spamming Skill Classes. Probably smart to come up with some kind of schedule, just to make sure we don’t get too overeager.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Kara agreed with a smile, before heading toward the manned counters at the back of the store.

Thea followed close behind.

A quick back-and-forth between Karania and the System Store clerk followed, after which the two of them were gestured to follow and led through a door behind the counter.

They stepped into a massive—seemingly endless—hallway, stretching so far into the distance that Thea felt a bit woozy trying to see the end of it.

“Simply walk down the hallway and locate the door corresponding to your purchased Skill Class, then step through. The Ship’s AI will help you find the correct door,” the Clerk instructed in a calm, professional tone. “Upon completion, you will be returned to an adjacent waiting room, where one of our clerks will escort you back to the deck proper. Any remaining questions?”

Kara shook her head.

Thea asked, “What if we go and enter the wrong door?”

That earned her a *look* from both Kara and the Clerk, but the Clerk merely replied evenly, “You may not enter doors you have not paid for, Miss. The Ship will prevent you from doing so. Please do not unnecessarily stress the system.”

“Got it,” Thea said, quickly stepping back behind Kara, feeling a little silly for asking.

‘But come on... you can’t tell me nobody else has ever asked that, right?’

After a few more polite exchanges, the Clerk left them alone and disappeared back through the door they had entered from.

They started walking down the hallway together, their footsteps echoing softly as doors slid past on either side.

Thea filled the silence first, casually mentioning Lucas' training from yesterday—and then, with no small amount of pride, added that they had absolutely *nailed down* the Masters girl's Build almost perfectly.

"Pretty much the whole thing," she said, unable to keep the triumph out of her voice. "Attributes, Passives, Actives—most of it. Evelyne had a huge amount of info that I could start off with and that probably saved us double-digit hours—if not entire days."

Karania slowed a fraction, turning her head to look at Thea properly. "Evelyne," she repeated. "That's the girl you ran into outside the DM, right? How *exactly* did she help?"

Thea shrugged as they walked. "She already had most of Rachel's Attribute spread and a good chunk of her Abilities on file. Like... written down somewhere. Ready to go."

That made Karania stop outright for a second, suspicion flashing across her face. "She had all that just *lying around*? About *the* Rachel Masters?"

"Yeah," Thea replied, then paused. "Well—mostly. She said she gathered it for one of her squad mates."

Karania's eyes narrowed slightly. "*How*?"

Thea pointed at her with a finger as they resumed walking. "Exactly! That's what I asked too. Or—well, almost. Lucas asked. Evelyne kind of... answered *why* she had it, but not *how* she got it. And then Lucas didn't push, and... I didn't either. I think I might have missed part of her answer or something, because Lucas seemed happy with it. I'm not sure."

She frowned lightly. "I wanted to ask Lucas about it later, but it just kind of slipped through the cracks so far."

Karania hummed, the sound thoughtful and low, and went quiet for a few steps. Thea hurried to add, "*But* she's been insanely useful. Like, genuinely. And she'll be there for the next sessions too—she also has a ton of info on how the Challenge system works as a whole."

That seemed to tip something over in Karania's mind.

After a few seconds, she said, "I think I'd like to be there as well."

Thea blinked. "Huh?"

"I want to see how the training's going," Kara continued. "Maybe jump in myself for a bit. And," she added, eyes sharp, "I'd like to get to know this Evelyne a little better."

"She's just... awkward," Thea said quickly, feeling like she had to defend her fellow socially awkward nerd-in-arms. "Like, *really* awkward. Worse than me sometimes."

"That doesn't mean *harmless*, Thea," Karania replied calmly, not unkindly. "And I'm just curious about her. Some things don't really add up, from what I'm hearing so far... But I'm probably just being paranoid. Nothing a meeting wouldn't clear up, surely."

Thea hesitated, then shrugged. “I mean... sure. I guess that’s fine. The more the merrier, right?”

And honestly, she meant it.

When it came to Wildmaws training, extra people usually meant better practice—and if Corvus was right, which he usually was about these things, juggling more social interactions at once was probably the fastest way for her to learn anyway.

“Right,” Kara replied with a small smile.

A few moments later, Thea spotted her own door, marked by a simple neon sign above it that read [Physics – Basic].

“That’s me, then.”

“Have fun. Catch you in a few hours—or a few months. Depends how you look at it,” Kara replied.

Thea smiled, then hesitated.

Kara was right.

They *wouldn’t* see each other for three months.

Even if it was only a few hours of ship-time, it would be three very real months of consciousness. Constant focus on learning. Likely major isolation. Not something Thea hadn’t been through before, but still a sharp shift from the last few months...

She took a deep breath and suddenly wrapped Kara in her arms. Kara went stiff as a statue at first, before Thea gave her a quick squeeze and just as rapidly pulled back again.

“Gonna miss you, Kara. See you later!” she blurted out, then slipped through the door before Kara could see how red her face had gone practically immediately.

*‘Initiating physical contact is so damn hard, what the fuck...?! That was awful! I scared her—she **totally** froze, ahhh fuck! What are you even doing, Thea?!’*

The door slid shut behind her just as she heard Kara’s hurried, “B—Bye!”—and the world around Thea *changed*...