

Volume 2 - Chapter 4 - Weight

Following Major Quinn through the hallways of the Sovereign's DDS, Thea couldn't help but wonder what could possibly warrant the Major fetching her personally.

It wasn't standard procedure, at least not in her limited experience.

If she was expected somewhere, the Sovereign itself typically handled the logistics, providing a direct route and ordering her attendance. That was how things had worked for the pre-Assessment classes, so this sudden personal touch felt... *odd*.

Before Thea could fully ruminate on the possibilities, however, Major Quinn broke the silence with a tone that seemed downright casual, catching her slightly off guard.

"I hope the morning wasn't *too* traumatic for everyone involved," she said, her voice echoing lightly in the empty corridor. "The DDS suffering such a catastrophic outage has never happened before on the Sovereign. It would be understandable if people were a bit... rattled."

Thea hesitated, unsure if the Major was talking to her specifically or just voicing her thoughts aloud.

Deciding it was better to respond than risk being seen as inattentive, she cleared her throat.

"It was... quite traumatic, if I'm allowed to be honest, Ma'am," she replied carefully. "Seeing everyone around me turn into nothing but red mist with no idea what was happening wasn't exactly how I pictured my first day of break."

Major Quinn stopped abruptly, and Thea almost collided into her back, her heart skipping a beat.

'Did I overstep? Was I not supposed to speak after all?'

The Major turned, her piercing gaze meeting Thea's, before letting out a long, weary sigh.

She palmed her face with one hand and shook her head.

"*Right*... Of course you survived," Quinn muttered. "Your Psychic Powers warned you about it, didn't they?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Thea answered, her voice steady but unsure of where this conversation was heading.

Lowering her hand, Quinn fixed Thea with a stern look. "Drop the 'Ma'am' while we're alone, Recruit. I already feel ancient enough as is, and hearing it from fresh Recruits like you just makes it worse."

Thea blinked, caught off guard by the unexpected request, but quickly nodded. "Understood."

Major Quinn resumed walking, her boots tapping steadily against the floor, and Thea hurried to stay in step.

"I apologise for the trauma this whole mess caused," Quinn continued, her tone softer now. "I don't know if there's anything we could have done to prevent it, but I'd like to think we'll do better in the future. Once I've handed you off, I'll be diving headfirst into a mountain of meetings about this entire incident..."

Her words trailed off into another, deeper sigh, one that seemed to carry the weight of the entire ship. Thea glanced at her, the usual stern composure of the Major tinged with a sheer exhaustion she had never noticed before.

"Anyway, let's get to the reason why I'm even here, shall we?" Major Quinn said, her voice cutting through the air with a tone of finality.

She wasn't looking at Thea directly now, her gaze fixed somewhere ahead as though addressing the Sovereign itself. "I've called in a favor. A rather expensive one, mind you, but one that I believe to be worthwhile. My old mentor has agreed to take you on as their new pupil at my behest, and, as luck would have it, they arrived aboard earlier today."

Thea's steps faltered slightly. Before she could ask a single one of the dozens of questions that immediately came to her mind, Quinn pressed on, her stride never breaking.

"You are to meet him and spend however long he deems necessary to understand who you are, what you're capable of, and—more importantly—what you need to learn. He will be in full control of your curriculum in all regards. For all intents and purposes, I'm transferring you out from under my command and into his."

Quinn's tone sharpened, almost daring Thea to misinterpret her next words. "But don't think for a second that this is some kind of penal assignment or punishment, Recruit. It's quite the opposite."

She stopped abruptly, her boots clanging against the floor as she turned to face Thea fully.

Her piercing gaze locked onto Thea's, demanding attention and ensuring her words landed with weight.

"Rune priest Vedun is *the* most powerful individual in the *entire* UHF, that I know of," Quinn said. "And he's a phenomenal mentor—if you can prove to him that you're worth his time to teach. He doesn't waste energy on lost causes or people who aren't willing to work for it."

Quinn's eyes narrowed slightly, her tone lowering as if speaking directly to Thea's core.

"*Don't* fuck this up, Recruit. I don't have another Rune priest hidden up my sleeve to give you a proper Psychic education. *This* is it. You're not just being handed an opportunity here—you're being handed the best possible chance you'll *ever* get. Do you understand me?"

Thea's mind spun, trying to piece together the full scope of what she'd just heard.

A Rune priest—his pupil? She didn't even know what a "Rune priest" was!

It was more than she could process in the moment, but her instincts kicked in before her thoughts could paralyze her.

“Yes, Ma’am—uh, yes, Major!” she stammered, her heart racing with uncertainty.

Quinn gave a satisfied nod, her demeanor shifting back into motion as she resumed her pace down the hall. “Good. Then let’s not keep him waiting.”

As they continued down the corridor, Major Quinn’s tone softened slightly, the edge of formality in her voice giving way to something more personal.

“I should take a moment to congratulate you, Thea,” she began, her stride as measured and steady as her words. “Your performance during the Assessment was nothing short of impressive. The awards you pulled in? That doesn’t happen by accident. You’ve got the raw talent, the instincts, and clearly the drive to back it all up.”

Thea blinked, caught off guard by the unexpected praise.

She didn’t have time to form a proper response before the Major continued.

“*That said*,” Quinn added, her voice sharpening ever so slightly, “don’t let it get to your head. You aren’t the first Recruit to have a stellar start. I’ve seen plenty come out swinging, snagging every accolade they can get their hands on, only to crash and burn once the real challenges start coming their way.”

Thea could immediately tell that Major Quinn’s words weren’t meant to sting, but they hit with the weight of truth nonetheless.

“It’s good to be proud of your accomplishments,” Quinn said, glancing at Thea out of the corner of her eye. “But keep a cool head. Stay humble. Early victories don’t guarantee a career worth remembering. The ones who make it? They’re the ones who keep their focus sharp, their heads clear, and their drive relentless.”

Thea nodded firmly. “Understood, Major. I’ll keep my head down and make sure I don’t disappoint.”

Quinn gave her an approving nod, a faint smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. “Good. You’ve got potential, Thea, but it’s all about what you do with it from here on out.”

She hesitated for a moment, then added with a chuckle, “Oh, and that Challenge? That was a nice touch. Bold. Reckless, sure—but it got *everyone’s* attention. And I get *why* you did it; I do. But people will be watching you now, so make sure you live up to the expectations you’ve set.”

Thea flushed, the memory of her impulsive challenge during the ceremony rushing back to her.

“I... I guess I got a little carried away,” she admitted sheepishly, rubbing the back of her neck.

“A *little* carried away, huh?” Quinn laughed lightly, the sound more amused than critical. “Just remember: *Confidence* is good. Blind *arrogance* will get you killed. Keep that in mind, and you’ll be fine.”

“I will, Major,” Thea said earnestly, meeting Quinn’s gaze with determination.

The Major’s faint smile grew slightly, but she didn’t reply, instead focusing her attention forward as she continued to lead Thea through the hallways.

For Thea, walking alongside Major Quinn like this, having what bordered on a semi-casual conversation, felt utterly surreal.

This wasn’t just anyone—this was *the* Major Quinn.

Ever since Thea could remember, every aspect of her life on Lumiosia had seemed tied to the Major in one way or another, deep down. Her influence was omnipresent if mostly hidden, woven into the very fabric of the Kuigon Star Sector.

As its proprietor, everything within its borders was hers to command, should she wish it.

Lumiosia itself, the planet Thea had once called home, was nothing more than a speck in the vast domain under Quinn’s authority. The Undercity, where Thea had grown up alongside James, barely registered on the galactic stage—a forgotten corner in a portfolio that spanned countless star systems.

The Major’s face was a familiar one from her time on Lumiosia, though she’d never imagined seeing it like this.

Advertisements for the UHF plastered her image across every level of society, casting her as a symbol of strength and unity.

To the government of Lumiosia, Major Quinn was a rallying cry, a figurehead to inspire recruitment drives and planetary pride.

Yet, in the shadows of the Undercity, among the disenfranchised and angry, her name had often carried a bitter weight as well. She was seen as the embodiment of the UHF’s crushing indifference for Midworlders, the face of the machine that perpetuated their struggles.

And now, a mere month after stepping aboard the Sovereign, Thea had received a personal award from this very same mythical figure. More than that, she was walking alongside her, discussing matters as though they were simply having a stroll through a park.

The Major wasn’t just taking a passing interest in her either, it seemed; she was bringing Thea to meet her own old mentor, entrusting Thea’s future growth to someone of unparalleled renown.

The sheer reversal of her circumstances left Thea staggered.

Merely a little over two years ago, she had been just another Undercity rat, eking out an existence in the shadows of Lumiosia’s glimmering skyline.

Now, she was rubbing shoulders with legends, her life unfolding in ways she couldn't ever have *dreamed* of.

It was exhilarating and utterly overwhelming in equal measure.

The prospect of meeting and impressing this "Rune priest," a figure held in such high regard by none other than the legendary Major Quinn herself, was enough to make Thea second-guess everything.

Surely, the Major must have made a mistake somewhere along the way, right?

There *had* to be other candidates—Privates, Corporals, or even Lieutenants—more deserving of such an incredible opportunity.

Individuals with more experience, more polish, more... *everything*.

After all, she was just a Recruit.

Sure, she'd won a lot of awards during the Assessment, but as Major Quinn had pointed out just moments prior, early success didn't always mean much in the grander scheme of things.

It wasn't as though Thea's achievements were completely unheard of.

She was still green, raw, and painfully aware of how much she had to learn.

And yet, despite the self-doubt swirling in her mind, an undeniable excitement bubbled beneath it all. This was what she had always dreamed of, even if she hadn't fully admitted it to herself before now.

A real chance.

An opportunity to prove herself to people who mattered, to become someone who mattered in turn.

Somehow, through what felt like a cosmic alignment of fortune—or sheer dumb luck—she'd ended up here, walking beside Major Quinn toward what was likely the second most important meeting of her life.

To say she wasn't nervous would be a bold-faced lie.

Her stomach churned, and the weight of expectation loomed over her like a storm cloud.

But beneath it all, the fire in her veins burned hotter.

That relentless drive to prove herself, to carve out her place in this vast, brutal universe, was all-consuming. It drowned out the nerves, replacing them with sheer drive to want to impress.

Thea was so lost in her thoughts that she didn't notice Major Quinn slowing down until the Major came to an abrupt stop.

Thea stumbled to a halt, barely managing to avoid bumping into her.

When Major Quinn turned to face her again, Thea's ruminations screeched to a halt, her attention snapping fully back to the present.

The Major's expression shifted, her usual calm authority giving way to something more solemn and introspective.

She met Thea's gaze directly, her piercing eyes softening just a fraction.

"Recruit McKay," she began, her voice quieter than before but no less firm. "Before we go any further, there's something I need to say. I owe you an apology—an apology that should have come from me personally much sooner than this. Unfortunately, my duties have not allowed me to do so any earlier, but that makes it no more right."

Thea blinked, caught completely off guard.

She stayed silent, unsure of how to respond as the Major continued.

"I know that Auxiliary-Legate Selene already offered an apology on my behalf after the Assessment, but frankly, it isn't right for such words to be delivered through a third party. This is something I need to take responsibility for myself."

Quinn's gaze flicked away briefly, as if weighing her next words carefully.

When she looked back at Thea, her expression carried a rare vulnerability.

"The truth is, the UHF—and I, *specifically*—failed you. As your commanding officer, it was my responsibility to ensure you were adequately prepared for the challenges you'd face during the Assessment. Especially when it came to your Psychic capabilities. I have a million and one reasons for why we fell short, but at the end of the day, they are nothing but excuses. A lack of resources, time constraints, bureaucratic nonsense..."

She paused, shaking her head. "But at the end of the day, it's my duty to make sure my subordinates have what they need to succeed. And in that, I failed."

Thea's chest tightened. She could barely comprehend what she was hearing.

This was *Major Quinn*, the woman whose name carried the weight of an entire star sector, practically bowing her head and admitting fault to her.

Quinn inhaled deeply, as though steadying herself, before continuing. "I'm not asking for forgiveness. That would be selfish, and it wouldn't undo the hardships you endured because of my oversight. I simply wanted to acknowledge my mistake and promise you this—I *will* do better. For you, and for every Marine under my command."

Thea opened her mouth, then closed it again, utterly at a loss for words.

Her mind scrambled to process the moment, the image of Major Quinn standing before her, offering such a genuine and personal apology, completely shattering the almost untouchable pedestal Thea had unknowingly placed her on.

"I... Thank you, Major. Sincerely. I... I honestly don't know what to say," Thea finally managed, her voice barely above a whisper.

Quinn gave her a faint, almost wistful smile. "You don't need to say anything, Recruit. Just take this chance I've arranged for you and use it well. That will be more than enough for the both of us, I think."

Thea nodded, still reeling, but the fire in her veins, the one that had been silently simmering since the awards ceremony, flared once more.

If even Major Quinn, a woman Thea had seen as untouchable and invincible, could admit fault and commit to improving herself despite her immense authority, power, and rank, then Thea had no reason to shy away from doing the same.

Whatever challenges this Rune priest threw at her, she would face them head-on; and she would crush them.

She owed it to herself—and to Major Quinn.

As they continued their walk down the endless corridors of the Sovereign, however, a thought began to form in Thea's mind based on something the Major had said.

She hesitated for a moment, unsure if she should even voice it, but the words slipped out before she could second-guess herself.

"Major Quinn," she started tentatively, catching the Major's attention. The older woman slowed her pace slightly, her posture relaxing just enough to signal that she was listening.

"I was wondering..." Thea's voice faltered briefly, but she pushed through, her nerves making her ramble slightly. "Would it be possible for me to contact Selene somehow? I know it's probably a lot to ask, but I didn't feel like I really got a chance to properly thank her for everything she's done for me. After... well, after everything. I wasn't exactly *myself* the last time we spoke, and it feels like so much has happened since then..."

Her words trailed off, her cheeks flushing as she realised she was rambling in front of Major Quinn, of all people. She lowered her gaze to the floor, bracing for a curt denial or perhaps even a reminder to focus on more pressing matters.

The Major, however, didn't immediately dismiss the question. She seemed to consider it for a moment, her expression thoughtful, before finally shaking her head lightly.

"I'm afraid not, Recruit. At least, not at the moment," she said. Her tone wasn't unkind, but it was firm. "Communication from the DDS to the outside is essentially impossible. You'd have to wait until your month of ship duty to contact anyone who isn't aboard this vessel."

Thea felt her shoulders sag slightly in disappointment, her gaze dropping further as she prepared to voice her understanding.

But before she could, Major Quinn continued.

“*However*,” she said, her tone taking on a faintly conspiratorial edge, “it wouldn’t be too tall an ask to make an exception, considering everything you’ve been through. Unfortunately, it’s still not possible at the moment. Auxiliary-Legate Selene is currently being transferred and is thus, inside the Void. With us back in the Material plane since earlier this morning, communication with her ship is impossible for the time being.”

Thea looked up at that, her curiosity piqued.

“*That said*,” the Major added, a small smile tugging at her lips, “you’re in luck, Recruit. The Auxiliary-Legate is being transferred to this very ship. In a few weeks, you’ll be able to thank her face-to-face yourself.”

Thea’s heart skipped a beat at the revelation. “Really? Selene’s coming *here*?”

Major Quinn nodded. “She is. Captain Cross requisitioned her as an additional psychologist for the Sovereign’s roster. So hold onto those words you want to say. You’ll get your chance to tell her in person—and knowing her, she’ll appreciate it far more that way anyway.”

Thea felt a wave of emotions wash over her, a mixture of anticipation, gratitude, and nerves all tangled together. “Thank you, Major,” she said earnestly.

The Major waved Thea’s gratitude away as if brushing off a speck of dust, quickening her pace slightly—a clear, unspoken signal that their conversation was over.

Thea fell into step behind her, the rhythmic sound of their boots echoing through the hallway.

The silence stretched for another five minutes, and though it might have seemed awkward to some, Thea’s mind was too preoccupied to notice.

She replayed the conversation in her head, mulling over everything she had just learned about Major Quinn, Selene, and even herself.

Finally, the Major came to a halt in front of a large bulkhead.

“This one’s you,” she said, gesturing toward the engraved metal sign that read *Training Hall E-61*. “The Rune priest is already inside, waiting for you.”

The abruptness of the statement caught Thea off guard.

“You’re not introducing us...?” she blurted before realizing how that might sound. “Ehhh, Major,” she quickly tacked on, a bit flustered.

Major Quinn raised an eyebrow, a faint smirk tugging at the corner of her lips before she shook her head slightly.

“No, I don’t think I will,” she replied, her tone a mix of amusement and resolve. “I have thirty-three meetings lined up to deal with the absolute shitshow that happened with the DDS earlier today. Rune priest Vedun is more than capable of handling an uppity troublemaker such as yourself. My presence here would be redundant.”

The Major turned as if to leave but paused mid-step.

She looked back over her shoulder, her expression softening just a fraction. “Word of advice: Stay on your toes. Vedun is eccentric and... *intense*—probably more so than you’re expecting. Be ready for anything, but don’t expect to avoid surprises, either. Keep an open mind, and you’ll do just fine, Recruit.”

Thea swallowed hard, her nerves bubbling to the surface but quickly tamped down.

“I... Thank you, Major. I’ll do my best,” she said, nodding with more confidence than she felt.

Quinn gave her a final approving nod before briskly walking away, her strides purposeful and unhurried, leaving Thea alone in front of the massive bulkhead.

Being handed off this unceremoniously felt oddly casual, considering the magnitude of what was happening. She, a Recruit from a no-name Undercity, was about to meet one of the most powerful figures in the entire UHF—a Rune priest—who had agreed to mentor her.

And yet, Major Quinn had simply deposited her here like James used to at the Golden Age Arcade when he had errands to run.

The memory flashed in her mind: James’s *reassuring* words of “You’ll be fine” and a quick pat on her shoulder before he left her standing in front of the arcade door with a small handful of Credits and a non-committal promise to *maybe* pick her up later—or not.

Except this wasn’t an arcade, and there were no Credits in her pocket or guarantees about what lay beyond the bulkhead—only this cryptic title, “Rune priest,” which she had no idea what it stood for.

A part of her regretted not asking Major Quinn what it even meant.

The title wasn’t a rank she recognized from the UHF military hierarchy, and yet it seemed to hold immense weight regardless. But between her nerves and the sheer triviality of it, she hadn’t dared to ask the Major.

Now, as the metallic doors loomed before her, she wished she had more to go on.

Steeling herself, she stepped up to the bulkhead. It opened with the typical signature whoosh of giant, well-machined metal gates sliding open, the sound sharp in the otherwise dead-silent corridor.

Inside, Thea found herself in a training hall that was eerily familiar.

It was similar to the dojo where she'd taken CQC lessons a month ago—spacious and seemingly designed to adapt to any combat scenario. The walls were smooth and featureless, ready to project or morph into whatever training environment was required.

The size was comparable to the Golden Age Arcade's interior, though the atmosphere was anything but playful.

Her eyes scanned the room, searching for the enigmatic Rune priest, but she saw no one.

Instead, the air itself seemed to hum with a palpable energy, as though the room were alive.

And as she took her first step inside, she felt it.

A strange, oppressive weight pressed down on her, making each subsequent step feel heavier, like the gravity generators had been cranked up by several magnitudes throughout the entire room.

Her muscles strained slightly with each movement, but that wasn't what made her pause.

What truly stopped her in her tracks was the overwhelming sense of dread that was suddenly clawing at her chest.

This wasn't the sharp, immediate fear that accompanied her Psychic Precognition when it warned her of imminent danger. *That* fear was cold and utilitarian, practically designed to trigger her survival instincts.

This, however, was something else entirely—primal and instinctual, like the terror that seeped into ancient humanity when facing pitch-black darkness in the dead of night.

The longer she stood there, the more the feeling grew, swelling within her like a rising tide.

It wasn't just unpleasant—it was *suffocating*. She took a few more steps, hoping to acclimate to whatever this was, but the dread only intensified, making it harder and harder to breathe.

Her legs tensed, half-ready to retreat. Every instinct screamed at her to turn and run.

But just as she was about to give in and retreat, she realized something thoroughly unusual about this fear: It wasn't right.

It wasn't the clammy, visceral terror she knew from years of scraping by in the Undercity.

The kind that made your heart race, dilated your pupils and readied your every muscle to their utmost, the moment it kicked in. This wasn't the kind of fear that triggered your fight-or-flight response to activate; there was no surge of adrenaline, no cold sweat, no fluttering of nerves.

This fear, instead, felt *detached*, like it didn't belong to her at all.

It was as if she were tapping into someone else's growing, primal terror, feeling it secondhand but with such intensity that it might as well have been her own.

Thea froze, her chest rising and falling unevenly as she struggled to make sense of the sensation.

Was this some kind of test from the Rune priest?

A Psychic trick designed to unsettle her?

It was unlike anything she had ever encountered, and that lack of familiarity left her confused, unsure whether she should fight it, flee from it, or simply endure it.

The unfamiliarity made it all the more disconcerting.

It wasn't just fear—it was downright *alien*.

She forced herself to close her eyes, drawing on a technique James had taught her long ago in the chaotic Undercity.

It was a simple, meditative exercise designed to isolate her emotions and regain control, a skill that had saved her countless times when panic threatened to overwhelm her.

'*Focus*,' she told herself, exhaling shakily.

Her mind worked quickly, compartmentalizing each sensation.

The burning strain in her muscles as they fought against the strange, oppressive gravity, her heart hammering in her chest to pump blood to limbs struggling under the added weight, her lungs pulling in deep, heavy breaths to meet her body's oxygen demand—all of it felt natural, explainable, rooted in her physical reality.

But then there was that *other* feeling.

The oppressive, unnatural dread curling in the center of her chest.

It wasn't pumping through her veins or clawing at her mind like her usual fears.

No, it was something entirely distinct, sitting heavy just behind her heart.

'*No... Not the heart...*' Her brow furrowed as realization struck. '*It's my Gate...*'

She carefully, ever so gently, focused her attention inward, toward the enigmatic presence that had occupied so much of her thoughts over the past month. Her Psychic Gate—the very thing that had nearly killed her during the Assessment with its raw, untamed power.

Thea didn't dare look directly at it within her mind's eye, having learned the hard way how dangerously consuming its pull could be. The last time she had ventured too close, the weight of its energy had threatened to drown her entirely and nearly killed the only person outside of Viladia who had attempted to help her make sense of it all inside the Assessment.

Instead, she approached it indirectly, cautiously brushing her awareness near its presence like a hand hovering just above a flame.

And there, faint yet persistent, she heard it.

A voice, so quiet it felt like it was drifting to her through a thick fog, yet its urgency cut through the haze like a knife.

"Run away. Don't stay," it pleaded, the words laced with an unmistakable sense of desperation.

Though the tone was downright panicked, the volume was barely above a whisper, as though the message itself was being smothered by an unseen force.

"He is dangerous. Don't stay. Run—"

"Well, if it isn't the girl of the month," a deep, resonant voice drawled, abruptly shattering her thoughts and startling Thea back into the present.

Her eyes snapped open, and she immediately locked onto the source of the voice.

Standing a few meters away was a man with a toothy grin that was as disarming as it was unnerving. His dark skin seemed to absorb the dim light of the training hall, and his eyes glittered with something unreadable—an intensity that made him impossible to ignore.

"Welcome to Training Hall E-61, Miss McKay," he said, his voice carrying a weight of authority, yet laced with a strange playfulness. "My name is Anrake Vedun, and apparently, I'm supposed to teach you something. Or so I've been told."

As he spoke, he swept into a deep, theatrical bow. The gesture was almost mocking in its exaggerated elegance, but it was his attire that truly held Thea's attention.

He was clad in armoured robes as black as the void, adorned with countless sigils that shimmered and shifted like living things. They pulsed faintly with iridescent hues so mesmerizing, that Thea struggled to find a way to draw her eyes away from them.

The robes themselves moved with a clear, unnatural grace, flowing like the finest silk despite the unmistakable heft they carried.

Every step he took set the plates of reinforced, plasteel-like material woven into his robes to clinking softly against each other, creating an oddly harmonious resonance. It was like a wind chime, but far more intricate, the sound carrying a subtle undercurrent of power that made the hair on the back of Thea's neck stand on end.

Her breath hitched as she realized she was staring.

Even with the realization, pulling her thoughts into focus felt like trying to wade through quicksand. The Rune priest's very presence seemed to make the air heavier, pressing down on her shoulders and fogging her mind.

"It... It's an honor to meet you, Rune priest Vedun," she finally managed, forcing the words past the lump in her throat.

She made an attempt at a respectful bow but stopped abruptly mid-motion when a wave of vertigo hit her like a hammer. The world tilted alarmingly, and for a horrifying moment, she thought she might vomit on the Rune priest's boots.

Deciding that a slight bow was far safer than risking full humiliation, she straightened herself quickly.

Thea's mind raced with confusion as she realized the strange voice and the mounting terror in her chest had vanished entirely—snuffed out like a flame the moment Anrake had spoken.

Meanwhile, Rune priest Vedun's grin widened fractionally, his gaze boring into her as though peeling away her layers one by one.

"Oh, I'm sure the honor's all mine, Miss McKay," he said, his tone smooth but laced with an edge of mockery. His voice had a deep, almost musical quality to it, as if each word was crafted with deliberate precision. "I can't wait to uncover just what kind of calamity the Harbinger has decided to bless us with this time around!"

His grin sharpened, and there was an unmistakable glint of mischief in his eyes as he added, "I have no doubt we'll have plenty of *fun* together..."