

Volume 2 - Chapter 31 - Social Expert

"Have you ever *heard* a supermassive structure die, Major?
It's not silent, like space should be.

The Ravenhearst was so massive, the sheer amount of atmospheres inside rivaled that of entire planets.

When it burst open... In that moment—just that brief, *terrible* moment—it wasn't silent *at all*.

I felt it first; my ship was rattled and tossed about as if gripped by the Emperor's own hands.

And then it hit... The *screams*.

Two hundred million voices merging into one wave of desperation and unadulterated terror, tearing through the vacuum of space itself as the air rushed out to fill the void when it was split open.

It wasn't the explosion.

It wasn't the metal twisting or fuel igniting that terrified me.

Not even what losing the Ravenhearst meant to the UHF; our very future.

No... It was those *screams*, Major.

The way they tore through my ship's hull, reverberated from every surface like the metal itself was possessed with the two hundred million souls I was watching die...

They only lasted for an instant, but each one felt like an eternity.

Screams in the very vacuum of space. Sound where no sound should be possible...

They *still* echo in my head. I haven't slept in weeks.

They echo even now, Major.

In any silence, I still *hear* the Ravenhearst dying..."

— Scout Pilot Elara Torwin, sole survivor of Scout Unit *Echo-119*, Ravenhearst Incident Log, 941 PFC

=====

Thea stayed seated at the dining table for another few seconds, replaying the strange encounter in her mind before finally getting up and heading over to Karania's room.

She knocked once, and the door whooshed open instantly, revealing a smiling Karania who greeted her with a casual, "Hey there."

"Don't '*hey there*' me, Kara! You just left me alone with Desmond! What was that about?"

Thea immediately complained, her lips twisting into a pout as she crossed her arms.

"I had to," Karania replied simply, shrugging like it was completely obvious why she had done what she did.

"What do you mean you *had* to? You could've stayed and helped me figure out what to say!" Thea retorted.

Karania let out a sigh, gently shaking her head before looking back at Thea with patient eyes. "Thea, if I had stayed, Desmond would've never said what he needed to say—whatever it ended up being. He needed privacy so he could save face."

Thea blinked slowly, her brows furrowing as she tried to understand what Karania meant.

'What does that even mean...? Save face? But... It's not like I won't tell Kara everything anyway... He didn't even ask me to keep it a secret, so why go through all that trouble...?'

Seeing her confusion, Karania added gently, "Listen, Thea, some stuff people do just... doesn't make a lot of sense, okay? It's like..."

She paused for a moment, thinking hard before suddenly her eyes brightened, "Imagine you mess up on a mission, and Corvus needs to talk to you about it. You'd prefer him telling you privately first, right? In case you have questions about it or need a more in-depth discussion. Before he uses it as an example for the rest of the squad? It's kind of the same thing here. Desmond needed that one-on-one so his message would get across *properly*. Talking in front of other people, who could jump in at any moment, makes things harder and could easily derail or misconstrue the actual message."

That clicked a little more.

Desmond *had* looked like he was chewing glass the whole time.

'Not to mention the whole, "Days of thinking" part he was muttering about at the end there...' She remembered overhearing. *'He probably thought about this for a while, huh?'*

Satisfied that Thea was starting to get it, Karania leaned forward slightly, her perfume suddenly filling the air between them, "Now that we've settled that, tell me—what *did* he actually say? I want all the details!"

"Right, okay, so..." Thea started, then stopped herself.

Thinking about it for a moment, she quickly added, "How about we talk while we head to the shops? I'm dying to get some new gear."

Karania eagerly nodded in response, following Thea out of her room as they both headed off toward the Sovereign's commercial deck, Thea launching into a full retelling of everything Desmond had just said earlier...

—

"So I think it makes sense why he kept the Ability secret. With all those different ways he could get himself out of trouble—especially if someone tried to betray him—I really can't

blame him,” Thea finished explaining as they stepped through the giant bulkhead doors leading into the busy commercial deck.

Karania let out a soft sigh beside her. “You know, I bet Desmond would’ve been quite a bit happier if you showed more appreciation for him trying to make things right, instead of just his Ability, Thea.”

Thea immediately looked at Karania, eyes wide with surprise. “What? But I *said* I thought it was nice!”

“And *then* you talked nonstop about his Ability the entire way here, Thea,” Karania shot back gently. “The only thing you said about the actual conversation was, ‘*he said I was a good Cyan, which sounded kinda racist, but hey, he tried, I guess,*’ and then went right into how useful his Ability is for the rest of the walk.”

Thea hesitated, suddenly feeling awkward. She scrambled to clarify, waving her hands for emphasis. “I mean... He said he’d been an asshole, and he wanted things to be better now. And that he trusted me. That *is* nice, isn’t it? And I really *do* appreciate that.”

She added a bigger-than-normal smile, as if that would somehow sell her words better.

Karania stared at her blankly for a few seconds, then slowly lifted a hand and massaged her temples with her fingers, letting out another heavy sigh. Without another word, she turned and started walking toward the center of the bustling deck.

Thea stayed behind for a moment, wincing as she realized she’d probably messed that up.

She quickly hurried after Karania, determined to salvage the rest of the day—and maybe do better next time.

“Anyway,” Karania said, smoothly moving the conversation along and thankfully brushing past the earlier awkwardness, “what are you planning to go for, Thea? I’m guessing you’ve got something specific in mind? Want to stick together for everything or split up for part of it?”

Thea paused for a second, running through her list mentally before nodding. “Yeah, I’ve got quite a bit planned, honestly. The Assessment really opened my eyes to a few things, and I’ve been thinking a lot about my own Build these past few days as well. I want to hit a bunch of different stores, and they’re probably all over the place, so... It’s probably smarter if we split up for a while. Your medical stuff won’t be anywhere near the areas I’ll be digging through, after all.”

Even though she didn’t *want* to split up—especially not after being the one who asked to go shopping together—she had to admit it made way more sense this way.

Karania nodded, already sliding into planner-mode. “Yeah, I figured as much. I’ll grab your Focus Boosters—three, right?”

Thea gave a quick nod in confirmation.

“I’ll also pick up the rest of the medical gear I’ve been eyeing. Might swing by the armour vendors and finally get my full equipment licenses sorted too. How about we meet up at the System Store after? We can go over Abilities and Skills together. You can give me the full rundown on all those ideas you’ve been hoarding for my Build.”

Thea grinned, visibly lighting up.

Just the thought of finally getting to talk through her notes was a thrill—like prepping a fresh tournament loadout in the final countdown before a match started.

“And we’re also getting you some new clothes. Proper ones,” Karania added suddenly, like it was an afterthought—but the kind she clearly had been planning for a while.

“Huh? What’s wrong with my clothes...?” Thea muttered, frowning as she looked down at herself.

She was wearing the standard-issue UHF uniform that practically everyone on the ship wore and had even layered her favorite violet pullover over it—soft, slightly faded, and one of the few things she had managed to hang onto from Lumiosia.

As far as Thea was concerned, this was her best outfit.

Before she could push the topic further, Karania was already waving a quick goodbye.

“Alright, catch you later then, Thea,” she said with a chuckle, not bothering to explain herself as she walked off toward the medical section deeper into the commercial deck.

Thea watched her go, still squinting after her in mild confusion, one hand tugging slightly at her sleeve. She looked fine... right?

‘Guess she’ll tell me later...’

She turned back to the cluster of gear shops at the front of the deck, eyes scanning the signage and displays as she refocused.

‘Time to get to work.’

—

It took Thea a couple of minutes to decide which store she wanted to visit first, deliberately avoiding the shops she’d already been to before the Assessment unless she had no other choice.

‘Better to see what else there is before going back there.’

She finally settled on an armourer that caught her attention with flashy, holographic advertisements that projected sleek and impressive-looking light and medium armour designs into the air.

There were no bulky or heavy armours anywhere in sight, exactly the type of store she hoped would specialize in gear similar to her Spectre.

Inside, she was casually browsing the various pieces on display, stepping into a small fitting room equipped with a holo-projector.

It allowed her to select different armour sets and see how they'd look over her current clothing, making the decision-making process simpler.

Yet despite the impressive tech, her concentration kept getting interrupted by two loud customers arguing nearby.

"...told you it was too much!" one voice snapped, the rest muffled by the partition walls.

"...not enough Credits for it!" came the other voice, sounding just as frustrated.

They'd been going at it since Thea had arrived, their argument getting steadily louder and more distracting by the minute.

'Ugh... Why does there always have to be people shouting wherever I go?' Thea thought, sighing heavily and trying to block them out.

Doing her best to refocus, she turned her attention back to the armours.

She carefully studied the various designs, noting similarities and differences, especially checking if any of them had extra upgrade options or module slots that the others didn't.

The Spectre had performed extremely well in the Assessment—better than she had hoped for, really—but she knew there was still room for improvement.

Her Nano-Bot Swarm, for example, had barely been used beyond the initial suicide mission with Viladia. Every other time, she'd been hesitant to waste the swarm's limited resources, making its impact minimal overall.

The main problem was clear: The bots were destroyed too easily once deployed, and their regeneration rate was simply too slow to keep up in a prolonged fight.

If she wanted to rely on them more often, she'd need to install a Nano-Bot Forge Module.

Unfortunately, her Spectre had no free module slots left, with the bulky grappling-system that she had installed as well—and there was no way she was going to give that one up.

'So, is there a way to add more slots?' she wondered, chewing her lip thoughtfully. *'And if not... Maybe there's a better type of armour for me out there, as much as I love the Spectre's design... Maybe—'*

Thea's thoughts were abruptly cut off once again by the persistent argument from the other side of the divider.

Her patience quickly approaching its breaking point, she stepped quietly to the edge of the changing room and peeked out to see what exactly was causing the commotion.

Two clearly Recruit-ranked Marines—easily identified by the standard-issue Recruit uniform they both wore, the same one Thea had on herself—stood hunched over a datapad on a nearby countertop, their expressions growing more agitated by the second.

"I'm just saying," the first Recruit argued, frustration clear in his voice, "since I already told you we weren't gonna have enough Credits, I should get to keep my stuff in the cart. It makes more sense. I won the bet."

"Or we could just split the Credits evenly and get whatever we can afford," the second Marine retorted stubbornly. "It's not fair otherwise!"

The first one shook his head sharply. "Look, it's better if one of us gets a complete loadout rather than both of us ending up with half-assed gear. That's just common sense!"

"It's still not fair," the second insisted, growing visibly irritated now. "We agreed we'd both get gear!"

The first Recruit groaned dramatically, pointing accusingly at the datapad. "Well, maybe *you* shouldn't have assumed a few hundred Credits would magically be enough! Now we're almost two hundred whole Credits short of our loadouts thanks to you! And I really don't feel like going through it all again to painstakingly pick out what parts we can maybe throw out for the next four hours again!"

Thea's jaw muscles twitched in irritation as she heard their argument unfold, incredulous at the ridiculousness of it all.

'Seriously...?' she thought bitterly, gripping the divider hard. 'They've been making all this fucking noise over just 200 Credits...?'

It felt weird, thinking that way—especially since just a few days ago, she would've flinched just hearing someone casually toss around a number like 200 Credits.

That had been *a lot*.

But now, after the Assessment, after all the Accomplishments and the bonuses that came with them?

She had more Credits than she really knew what to do with.

Her first instinct was still to hoard them, to spend as little as possible. Growing up in an Undercity hadn't exactly taught her to be comfortable with letting go of money—every Credit back then had felt like it could decide whether she ate or not.

But her Old Man's voice echoed in her head loud and clear, like it always did when she started second-guessing herself.

"If you ever find yourself with a ton of Credits, no matter how you got 'em, Missy, remember this: Spend as much as you can on equipment and training, as fast as you can. Credits not invested into something might as well not exist. You'll be lying there, bleeding out, wishing

you'd bought that upgrade when you had the chance—way more often than you'll ever regret getting something you didn't end up using."

He'd said that every time she won prize money in the Arcade, usually while referring to some flashy gear she'd been too stingy to buy.

And he'd been right.

She'd never once regretted putting real-life Credits into better gear for certain games—or buying extra stuff to smooth out her time in the Arcade.

Every bit had helped her push just a little further, win just a little more the next time around.

So even if every part of her still wanted to squirrel away her Credits for some future crisis, she knew better than that. She wasn't going to get a second chance at preparation and going again; the mission would be forfeit and her potential #1 spot would be in danger.

'I wonder if the Old Man would count this as an investment...?' Thea thought, a small smile tugging at her lips as she stepped out of the changing room and walked straight toward the two Marines.

Being Recruits made it simple.

"Names?" she asked confidently, her voice a bit louder than she'd intended.

Both Marines practically jumped at her sudden interruption, spinning around to face her. The startled look in their eyes, coupled with the ever-present flinch as they met hers almost made her regret her choice—almost.

"Uh... J-Jeremy Reinard?" stammered the taller one, clearly unsure what was happening. He quickly elbowed his shorter companion.

The other Recruit blinked, then hurriedly added, "Wilf. Ehh... Wilf Gnat."

Thea opened her System Interface, navigating the menus smoothly—her forced downtime in the medical wing had definitely made her more comfortable with the whole thing.

[System]: *Do you want to transfer 100 System Credits each to 'Jeremy Reinard' and 'Wilf Gnat' with the message: "Get your gear, pipe down."?* [Y/N]

She confirmed with a quick mental nod, then met their eyes again, causing both of them to flinch once more, and gave them both a firm nod before turning back toward the changing room.

As the door slid shut behind her, she returned to examining the armour displays, happily noting that the store was now blissfully quiet.

'I handled that pretty well, didn't I?' she thought, a small grin spreading across her face as she felt a burst of pride. She had managed the whole interaction without causing a scene or

fuss for once. *'I definitely have to tell Kara and Corvus about this. They'll be proud for sure...!'*

—

—

PoV: Recruit Jeremy Reinard

"By the Emperor's golden nutsack, what the fuck was *that?!'*" Jeremy whispered loudly to Wilf as they hurriedly left Levitas' Armours behind. He kept glancing nervously behind them, half-expecting to see the Cyan again, watching from the shadows.

"Dude, I have no idea—that was fucking terrifying!" Wilf replied, his voice tight with anxiety. "Where did she even come from? I swear we were alone in the store earlier!"

Jeremy threw up his hands, still jittery from the encounter. "I don't know, man! Why was there a Cyan just... *There*, listening to us? And then she just tosses 200 Credits at us like it's pocket change? Who even does something like that?"

Neither of them had ever seen a Cyan up close before. Everything they'd heard—the unsettling presence, the sense of danger—was absolutely true.

Even understated, if anything.

Jeremy's stomach still felt like it was doing flips, even several minutes after they'd left.

"Wait!" Wilf suddenly shouted, freezing Jeremy in his tracks. Wilf's voice had the same urgent tone he usually reserved for spotting ambushes in training exercises.

Jeremy's eyes snapped over to his friend, suddenly worried they were in even *more* trouble.

"Do... Do you think she wants us to pay her back?!" Wilf asked, panic rising in his eyes.

Jeremy swallowed hard. "Shit... I hadn't even thought about that."

He hastily opened the System Notification to reread the message, hoping to find some clarification he'd missed.

Then his eyes landed on the sender's name—and he felt the blood drain from his face entirely.

He slowly raised his head to look at Wilf, who flinched at his friend's expression. "What is it, Jer? What's wrong?"

"That... That was Thea McKay, Wilf. *The* Thea McKay," Jeremy said, emphasizing each word as though it might somehow change the reality he was facing. "We owe fucking Thea McKay 200 Credits. She's the number one Recruit in the whole damn UHF..."

Wilf went pale as a ghost. "No. No no no... That can't be right."

His eyes glazed over immediately as he brought up his own System Notification, desperate to confirm or deny Jeremy's claim.

His eyes scanned the message quickly, then went wide.

He staggered back, nearly falling over until Jeremy caught him by the arm.

"Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck," Wilf chanted, his voice rising. "What the fuck do we *do*, man?!"

Jeremy stared back, as lost as his friend.

"I... I don't fucking know, man. Maybe we figure out how those Digital Missions work, grind out some payouts, and... try to pay her back *fast*?"

He tried to calm himself, forcing down the creeping anxiety in his chest.

Surely, the #1 Recruit in the whole drive wasn't going to hold a grudge for them taking some extra time to pay off the 200 Credits she had just airdropped on them out of nowhere, right?

Surely, the #1 Recruit in the whole UHF wasn't going to hold a grudge for some nobodies like him and Wilf, right?

Surely, the #1 Recruit in the whole Emperor-forsaken-Universe wasn't going to hold a grudge, considering the kind of speech she had thrown out there during the Awards Ceremony, right?

'... *Right*...?'