

Volume 2 - Chapter 58 - Signs

“... Repeat that for me. Just *one* more time.”

A beat. Then a sigh.

“I said: It has an Ability inside it. The System recognizes it; even has an Interface and a heads-up description. If you use it, you get the Ability—then the shard dissolves, or so it says.”

Silence stretches.

“...*Fuck.*”

Another pause. Heavier this time.

“I don’t think we have *any* precedent for that. Where did you even fucking get this?”

Wild gesticulation towards the shard in question.

“A System Mission near Liurnia Septis. Dominion and Accord both on site. Big Emperor-damned mess. Pretty sure I’m the only one who made it out with one. Came straight here, Sir.”

More silence.

“I don’t... I *genuinely* don’t know what to do with this. That *shouldn’t* exist. But it’s right here. I can see it. I can scan it. I just—this is above my weight class. Like several orders above, really.”

Typing, fast and frustrated, fills the room for several minutes.

“Nope. *Nothing*. No precedent, no protocol, no chain-of-command routing for ‘*oh hey we found Galactic War-breaking System artifacts today*’.”

“So... what now, Sir? Do I just—use it? And we forget it existed?”

“If you use it, you’ll get Zero’d. *Instantly*. Do *not* even *think* about triggering it. I do not have the kind of clout to delete the logs of your existence in my lab, nor the recordings of what is being said right here, right now. They *will* find out.”

The Legate exhales, shaky.

“R... Right. Okay. So... what do we do, then?”

“I flag the ship AI and hope it knows who to wake up. That’s all we’ve got. The AI should have direct lines to people we don’t even get to know exist.”

“You’re telling me we’re just handing this off to the *ship*?”

“Yes, Legate. Because I don’t want to be the idiot who tries to report this manually and ends up on a damn dissection table. This is... potential Galactic War-altering—nay, *winning*—information. The kind of thing that’s going to wake up the entire O-13 Council and not let them rest for several weeks, if not *months*. If the wrong branch thinks this is too important to leak, we’re both dead by tomorrow.”

A beat of stunned quiet.

“S...*Sir*?!”

Another sigh. Longer. Resigned.

“If this gets classified as too dangerous or too valuable to leak, we disappear. That’s it. Simple as that. We suffer an accident; maybe a Void-leak on the ship. Maybe get sent to a death-world. Who knows. Point is, there’s no exceptions for that. I don’t *think* that’ll happen, since it’s System-origin and not our meddling—but get your personal affairs sorted anyway. I’ll give you twenty-four hours before I push the alert.”

“T—Thank you, Sir. I’ll... I’ll leave it with you then. I... I’ll... go, then?”

“Yes. Do that. And thank you for reporting it. If things go well, your career is about to become very interesting. If not... well. Let’s hope we don’t both get called up by the ship AI in the next coming days. If you receive a summon, ask if there’s any debriefing officers going to be present. If not; send your last words to whoever you trust most.”

The Legate freezes momentarily, then rushes out. The door hisses closed.

The research officer stands alone for a long, heavy moment.

“...The System just *had* to throw a curveball again, didn’t it,” he mutters, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Damn Allbright’s waking up. And we’re all going to bleed for it, even more than usual...”

—

[UHF Excerpt: Initial Ability Shard Investigation, Unknown Researcher, PFC935]

=====

=====

The Digital Mission Deck phased in around Thea, the world snapping into place like someone had just flicked a switch.

Dozens of Recruits moved through the space—some clustered around datascreens setting up their own DMs, others laughing and chatting in small groups, and a few standing still, staring up at the massive datascreens showing live feeds and recordings from ongoing missions.

For a moment, she just stood there, blinking.

She hadn't walked here—or at least, she didn't remember walking here.

The Sovereign hadn't asked her to exit through a door, as she usually did, or follow any sort of alternative transition protocol. The AIs weren't *supposed* to be able to move people directly... or at least, that's what the Sovereign itself had claimed once.

Then, as her mind caught up with the sudden shift, realization dawned: She hadn't *moved* at all. She was standing in front of the exact same datascreen she'd used to accept the mission in the first place, as if she'd never left the same exact spot from the very moment she had confirmed her participation.

'Wait... I wasn't just standing here the whole time, right?' she thought, an uneasy twist running through her chest.

Her question answered itself when another Recruit nearby blinked out of existence right after confirming their DM, and a few seconds later, a different one appeared in that exact same spot.

'Ah. So, phasing, not movement. That... makes more sense, I guess?'

The Sovereign must've been able to phase Recruits in and out of the same physical space without overlap, instead of transferring them directly. Probably some spatial compression trick—or whatever absurdly advanced tech made all this possible in the first place.

'I should ask Kara about it later,' she mused. *'Though, unless it's biological or medicine-related, she probably won't have a clue either.'*

Shaking her head to clear the thought, Thea stepped away from the datascreen to make room for the next wave of Recruits. She moved toward a quieter section of the deck but kept close enough to watch the big screens flicker through different battlefields—each one its own little war.

There was still one thing left to do before meeting up with Kara.

Calling up the System Interface again, she let the remaining, albeit very small backlog of notifications roll through, that she had curtailed from earlier, to get out of the debrief as quickly as possible.

[System]: *Psychic Reversal has reached Level 1.*

[System]: *Quick Draw has reached Level 1.*

[System]: *Focus Retention has reached Level 1.*

[System]: *Focus Capacitor has reached Level 1.*

'Huh. Only one level each... Guess even a brutal DM like that doesn't give much EXP unless you're really leaning on those Abilities,' she thought, cupping her chin. *'Then again, I barely even touched my Allbright-related stuff this time, so yeah... I guess that tracks.'*

With a small nod to herself, she swiped open her Abilities List next.

[----- Abilities: 5 (5) | 8 (8) -----]

[Active (Silver) - Sensory Overdrive | α - Level 9]
[Active (Silver) - Sky Step | β - Level 7]
[Active (Copper) - Improved Sprint | α - Level 7]
[Active (Iron) - Penetrative Shot | γ - Level 8]
[Active (Gold) - Psychic Reversal - Level 1]

[Passive (Silver) - Armour of Resolve - Level 7]
[Passive (Silver) - Meditation Focus - Level 7]
[Passive (Silver) - Silver Respiration - Level 6]
[Passive (Iron) - Agile Stealth - Level 7]
[Passive (Gold) - Detect Weak Spots - Level 7]
[Passive (Silver) – Quick Draw – Level 1]
[Passive (Silver) – Focus Retention – Level 1]
[Passive (Iron) – Focus Capacitor – Level 1]

‘Hmm, [Sensory Overdrive] is getting close to Level 10... That’s gonna be exciting. A Major Alteration, huh? I wonder what’s actually gonna be available for that. No clue what kind of options there’ll be, but if it’s called “Major” Alteration, it’s probably a lot more impactful than the ones I’ve seen so far. Hopefully something that cuts down the Focus cost—that’d help a ton.’

Satisfied that she had a good handle on her current Abilities and their progress, Thea gave a small nod to herself and closed out of the System Interface, her attention shifting back to the bustle of the Mission Deck around her.

Making her way through the crowd of Recruits was surprisingly easier than expected.

Most people seemed to notice her immediately—and then made sure to give her plenty of space, stepping aside like she was some kind of live-wire that needed to be avoided at all cost.

“Haaa...” she sighed, the sound halfway between amusement and exhaustion.

Part of her was honestly glad she didn’t have to deal with small talk or elbow her way through the crowd, but another part—the one that preferred not being the center of attention when she didn’t explicitly choose to be—was already growing tired of it.

This kind of reaction was seemingly starting to become normal, and she wasn’t entirely sure how she felt about that quite yet.

As she made her way toward the lounge—and *definitely* not to distract herself from the hushed whispers radiating out from her position like a virus—she pulled out her datapad and typed up a quick message to Karania, letting her know she was done with the DM and on her way, just like she’d promised before they had parted into their respective missions.

Just as she slipped her datapad back into her pocket, Thea had to stop short—nearly walking straight into another Marine.

“Ah, woops, my bad,” she said quickly, shifting her weight to the side in an attempt to swerve around them. She hadn’t really been watching where she was going; up until now, everyone had just moved out of her way on their own.

But before she could step past, the Marine spoke up.

“Uh... Uhm... Actually, could I bother you for a second, please?”

Caught off guard, Thea froze mid-step and finally gave the person in front of her a proper look.

Thea blinked, taking in the person who’d stopped her—a young woman, roughly her own age, maybe two or three years older at most.

Her dark auburn hair was cut short, just brushing her shoulders, slightly disheveled but clearly well kept. It wasn’t messy so much as unstyled—like she’d run her hands through it a few times and called it a day.

A faint scar cut across her fair skin, just beneath her left eye—the only other detail that stood out to Thea’s high levels of Perception right away.

It was more than just a little unusual to see a scar on a Recruit.

Most people came out of Integration spotless; only scars they personally deemed essential to who they were got carried over into their initial Blueprint. Thea remembered Karania explaining that to her during their stay in the medical wing after the Assessment, after asking about some of Isabella’s that she had seen during their shared training sessions.

Something else about the girl tugged at her memory, however, though Thea couldn’t immediately place why.

That strange familiarity grew stronger the longer she looked—until her eyes met the forest-green ones of the girl.

And then it *clicked*.

The girl *didn’t flinch*. Not even a miniscule twitch.

Thea’s breath caught for a second as the realization hit her.

She remembered her now—the same Recruit who’d met her gaze earlier, just a few hours back, when Kara had been using her to clear a path through the crowd in front of the Digital Mission terminals.

The same one who’d locked eyes with her for a brief moment before being swallowed by the sea of bodies that had surrounded the area.

It wasn’t something she would forget easily.

People simply *didn’t* hold eye contact with Cyans—instinctively or otherwise. Most looked away within a heartbeat, like it was built into their wiring to avoid that telltale cyan glow.

Outside of Karania, who seemed downright fascinated by Thea's eyes whenever they spoke, there hadn't been anyone else who reacted like that in the Recruit-corps so far.

And even the ones that decided to make an effort in meeting her eyes, like Corvus often did, instinctively flinched or twitched at the contact regardless.

But this girl *hadn't*.

Not then, and not now.

"I'm kind of in a rush to meet up with a friend, but... sure, I guess," Thea said, her tone noncommittal. She wasn't exactly sure where this was heading, but the girl looked like she might fold in on herself if Thea said no.

"I—I promise it won't take long!" the girl blurted, nodding quickly but clearly uneasy. "I just wanted to ask if... um, if it would be okay to ask you for something?"

Thea raised an eyebrow, silently urging her to continue.

She'd never really understood that whole "asking for permission to ask a question" thing—if you wanted something, just ask. A no was still going to be a no, no matter whether you got permission to ask beforehand or not.

"C-could you maybe sign this?" the girl stammered, fumbling with the strap of her bag before pulling out a rolled-up poster and offering it along with a marker pen.

"Ah... *What?*" Thea blinked, completely thrown off by the request. It felt like she'd just been blindsided by something out of a completely different universe.

She took the poster slowly, still trying to process what was happening, and began to unroll it—only to freeze the moment she saw what was printed on it.

Thea stared down at the unfurled poster, her mind tripping over itself. Freya.

Her favorite character from *Ashes of Centuries*—frozen mid-roar, one boot planted on the mangled remains of a Fel'Keza, battle-axe raised high, streaked in blood and triumph. The art was raw, loud, and beautifully brutal, capturing that perfect blend of savagery and victory that had always drawn Thea to Freya in the first place.

But that wasn't what made her stomach twist; not exactly.

She knew *this* poster. *Exactly* this poster.

Her eyes narrowed as she looked up at the girl, suspicion cutting through her confusion like a knife.

This wasn't just some random piece of merch anyone could buy on a whim.

This was *the* special edition release celebrating PFC937's galactic championship series—the official commemorative poster of the winners' match.

Her match.

The one *she*'d played. The one *she*'d won.

Thea remembered that tournament vividly—the chaos, the exhaustion, the fact that even the Old Man himself had shown up to the Golden Age Arcade to watch the finale...

There'd only been ten thousand of those posters *ever* printed, shipped out as collector's items across half the galaxy.

She *still* had hers, tucked safely in a display case back at the Old Man's house on Lumiosia, one of the few things she'd ever managed to get sent to the backwater planet.

And now this random girl was standing in front of her, clutching the same poster—*that* poster—and asking *her* to sign it.

Her mind reeled.

Did this girl *know* who she was? If so, *how*? And what were the odds she'd not only somehow tracked her down before Integration, but somehow *also* ended up on the *same* recruitment ship, of all places?

Thea's grip tightened slightly on the edge of the poster as she studied the girl's face, suspicion giving way to a creeping, uneasy curiosity.

"What is this...?" Thea asked, keeping her tone as even as she could manage, though a hint of ice still crept in despite her efforts. Something about this felt off—like she was being played, though she couldn't quite tell how or why.

The girl's eyes widened in panic, words tumbling out in a rush. "Ah—ahh...! It's—it's my favorite character from a game! I... I just thought you were really cool... and ehh... and your speech at the Awards Ceremony kinda reminded me of her! So... so I wanted to ask if—if it'd be okay...?"

Thea *immediately* felt bad for reacting like that.

The girl's wide, panicked eyes and awkward stammering made it obvious she hadn't meant anything by it—just some nervous Recruit trying to talk to someone she thought was cool.

"Ah... sorry," Thea said quickly, taking the marker from her before the silence could stretch too long. "What's your name?"

"Evelyne Midra Sen," the girl answered after a brief pause, straightening her posture like she was bracing herself.

She even took the time to spell it out carefully, which Thea couldn't help but appreciate.

"Good," Thea said with a small nod.

It wasn't her first time signing something—not by a long shot.

Back when she'd been more active on the galaxy-wide tournament scene, plenty of the games made by Terra had featured full social hubs tied to real-world merch.

Players could buy posters, get their digital avatars printed, or even request signatures from the top-ranked players after tournaments.

She'd done that more times than she could count, even been asked to sign special edition runs for fans across the galaxy after a few of the bigger championships. She was supposed to get royalties for those too, though those credits had never *quite* found their way to her account.

Still pissed her right off, if she was being honest, despite the whole issue being years past now.

Thea leaned over the poster, careful not to wrinkle the print, and wrote neatly along the bottom edge—out of Freya's way, of course.

"For Evelyne Midra Sen: Don't let others keep you down. Dare them to challenge you, it'll shut them right up. —Thea McKay"

She signed with a small flourish and let out a quiet breath, half amused at how automatic it felt. The habit of signing things had never really left her, apparently.

Suppressing a faint smile at the familiarity of it, she handed both the poster and the pen back. "Here you go. Anything else you needed?"

Evelyne just stared at the signature, eyes wide and sparkling like she couldn't quite believe it was real. "No, no, this is—this is *perfect*. Thank you! Really, thank you so much!" she said, bowing repeatedly, her voice overflowing with emotion.

Thea could feel her cheeks heating up as she noticed the cluster of curious eyes now fixed on them. A few murmurs rippled through the nearby Recruits, which only made her more eager to escape.

"Alright, well—glad you like it," she said, rubbing the back of her neck. "My friend's waiting for me, so I'll, uh... see you around, Evelyne."

And before any more attention could pile on, Thea made a swift exit, weaving through the rest of the crowd and heading straight for the lounge—where she knew Kara was waiting.

It didn't take long for Thea to spot her—Kara was already watching, eyebrows raised, clearly having seen the whole thing from across the deck.

Not surprising, really; the Digital Mission area was well within view of the lounge area.

"So..." Kara began, her tone carrying that infuriating mix of curiosity and amusement. "What was *that* all about just now?"

Thea slumped into the seat opposite her, the table between them cluttered with two open datapads full of whatever Kara was dissecting this time. She let out a long, weary sigh. "A..."

fan, I guess? Some Recruit named Evelyne wanted me to sign a poster for her. She saw the Awards Ceremony and thought I was *cool*...?”

She cringed halfway through, knowing how ridiculous that sounded—and Kara’s grin told her she knew it too.

“Let’s just... pretend that didn’t happen, okay?” Thea said quickly, waving it off. “Let’s talk about the missions instead. Please.”

Kara gave a noncommittal shrug—the kind that said *Sure, but I’m definitely going to have this available as something to tease you with going forward*—and leaned back in her seat.

“The DM was interesting, no two ways about it. The Faultline modifier was *wild*, though. I’d been hoping to get some hands-on experience with crush and compression injuries, but the sheer amount of seismic activity? *Way* more than I expected.”

She launched into a vivid rundown of the chaos—the ground splitting open every few minutes, the battlefield constantly shifting, swallowing both UHF Marines and Stellar Republic Soldiers unlucky enough to be caught mid-step.

Treating injuries under those conditions, she said, had been almost impossible.

“I’m actually kind of glad they cranked it up that high, honestly,” Kara admitted, a spark of fascination in her eyes. “We probably won’t see something *that* extreme too often, but if we ever do, I’d rather have trained for it first.”

Then her mouth curved into a smirk. “Also, you were right. The Digital Missions *are* kind of awesome. I’m definitely going to do more of them—mandatory or not.”

Karania leaned forward, her eyes locking onto Thea’s with that familiar spark she always got when their gazes met. “So... how was yours? Tell me everything.”

Feeling a bit smug now that Kara had admitted she’d been right about the Digital Missions, Thea took a second to gather her thoughts before diving in.

She started with the Upscaling—how it worked, how it had blindsided her—only to realize halfway through that Karania already knew about it. Apparently, it had been included in the full ruleset packet the Professor had sent to all of the Recruits after the UHF 101 lecture.

Something Thea, of course, had *totally* read and fully internalized before signing up for any missions, as the Professor had requested, like any good Marine would... and then just *happened* to forget all about it right before signing up.

‘Oddly *specific*, *short-form amnesia* is truly the bane of every good Marine’s existence...’

She went on to describe meeting Chester, overhearing his little manipulation act to win her over, and her eventual encounter with Sergeant Kalt and his Platoon-wide Ability.

That last part caught Kara’s attention immediately—she even pulled out a datapad and started taking notes as Thea explained what she’d seen.

Karania asked a few pointed follow-up questions, clearly planning to add the details to their growing Ability database, before letting Thea continue.

Next came the weapon testing—which Kara found hilarious for some reason. Something about, “*Of course you’d test guns in your very first Digital Mission, and an Upscaled one, no less,*” which Thea *still* considered a perfectly normal and reasonable thing to do.

Then she moved on to her discoveries about her Psychic Powers.

“So, apparently yelling the Power’s name makes it vastly stronger,” Thea said, sounding equal parts puzzled and embarrassed. “I guess it ties into that whole ‘Will and Intent’ thing the Rune priest mentioned. Still, I can’t imagine someone like Major Quinn running around screaming her Power’s names like she’s in a video game when she’s deployed on a battlefield...”

Karania hummed thoughtfully, fingers brushing her chin.

“It’s probably more of a shortcut, in a way,” she reasoned. “For less experienced Psykers, putting commitment into yelling the name might help focus Intent and reinforce the Will of what you want the Power to achieve. It’s a bit like how martial artists shout when they strike or athletes when they lift something heavy—the vocal reinforcement helps coordinate breath, tension, and motion. It pushes the body and mind into sync. But someone with full mastery over their Power wouldn’t really need that kind of crutch to achieve the same results. Unless they were trying something entirely new, maybe...?”

Thea nodded slowly. That actually made a lot of sense—and didn’t contradict anything she’d learned so far. “Yeah, that sounds reasonable. I’ll ask the Rune priest next time and let you know what he has to say about all of that.”

Kara smiled at that, gesturing for her to continue her rundown.

Thea summarized the rest of the Digital Mission in broad strokes—meeting Sergeant Kalt, being upgraded to Battlefield Ace—which had Kara almost bouncing in her seat from excitement, which Thea found utterly adorable, although she kept that fact very close to the chest—and how the mission had wrapped up.

But when she got to the part about her overheating, Karania froze.

“You... *cooked your own brain?*” Kara repeated slowly, her eyes narrowing into slits, that spark inside her eyes now burning dangerously bright.

Thea immediately raised her hands in self-defense, as if the motion could somehow calm her friend down by itself. “It was a *calculated decision*, Kara! Both Medic Dan and Medic Chester confirmed there’d be no long-term consequences! I had Squad Medic approval! I didn’t do anything wrong!”

Karania stared at her for a long, silent moment—long enough that Thea started to feel sweat bead on the back of her neck. Then, she pulled up her datapad and let her fingers dance over it for a few moments, before stilling again.

Then Kara finally spoke.

“You cooked your *own brain*, Thea.” Her voice was flat, but her eyes were already blazing.

“Do you have *any* idea how insane that sounds? Every time I look away for five minutes, you find a new way to kill yourself! What’s next, you gonna set yourself on fire for an Ability bonus?!”

Thea groaned. “Oh, come on, Kara—”

“No, seriously!” Kara cut in, waving a hand in exasperation. “First it’s the near-death experience in the Assessment—*several*, by the way!—then it’s overusing your Gate, and now you’ve *literally melted your brain*! Do you have a death wish, or are you just *professionally bad* at staying alive?”

“I had Squad Medic *approval*!” Thea argued, voice pitching up defensively. “You can’t yell at me for following medical advice!”

“I *absolutely can*!” Kara shot back, leaning closer across the table. “You’ve got this horrible habit of collecting medical incidents like trophies, and I’m the one who has to patch you up every single time you do something stupid!”

“I didn’t even really die this time! The mission ended right away, basically!” Thea protested.

Kara’s voice dropped an octave, dangerously calm. “You *did* die, Thea. It’s in your damn medical records!”

She waved her datapad in front of Thea’s face.

Thea blinked. “Okay, *fine*, but—”

“No *buts*!” Kara threw her hands up, then slumped back in her chair, clearly torn between strangling her and laughing about it. “You’re *impossible*.”

Thea folded her arms, huffing. “I’m *resourceful*.”

Kara gave her a long, unimpressed look. “You’re *reckless*, and if you keep it up, you’re going to make me gray before I hit twenty-five.”

“Bold of you to assume you’re not already halfway there,” Thea shot back.

Kara squinted. “You’re lucky I like you or I’d use you for surgery practice.”

That finally got a small laugh out of Thea.

The tension eased, though only barely, and for a moment the two just sat there, staring each other down like a pair of cats after a brawl.

Finally, Kara exhaled and leaned back, crossing her arms. “Fine. You win. I’ll let it go—*for now*. But I hope you *do* realize this means you’ve forfeited your right to learn about that cozy pancake place I found while you were off trying to give yourself permanent brain damage.”

Thea's world froze. "You—you *what*? You *wouldn't*."

Karania gave her a flat, almost pitying look. "Oh, I *absolutely* would."

Thea looked genuinely horrified, her mouth opening and closing like a fish gasping for air. "Kara. No. You can't—*pancakes*, Kara! That's *evil*!"

Kara pretended to think about it, tilting her head just enough to make Thea squirm. "Hmm. Maybe I'll change my mind later... But for now, I think it's important you learn about the give and take of winning and losing."

Thea groaned, burying her face in her hands. "You're unbelievable...!"

Kara's laughter filled the space, warm and ultimately victorious.

For a moment, Thea let herself relax. But as the laughter between them died down, her thoughts drifted back—unbidden—to something she hadn't mentioned at all.

Æht.

The memory of that strange mirror-self stirred uneasily at the edge of her mind.

She didn't trust it—didn't trust *her*—but she couldn't deny that some of *Æht*'s words had stuck, digging under her skin like splinters.

Especially the part about James' advice. About not trusting the brass too quickly.

She still had no real idea whose side the UHF brass was even *on*.

The Rune priest, the Sovereign—they seemed helpful enough, but Thea wasn't as naive as to truly believe they were entirely on her side and nobody else's.

If *Æht* was right, which Thea was starting to believe might at least have a speck of truth to it, speaking openly about her might not just be reckless—it could be downright *fatal*. Whatever *Æht* was, it didn't seem like something that happened commonly, nor something that should be broadcast to the world right away.

At least not without gathering more information about what was even going on.

Still, she needed Kara to know eventually.

Just... not in a way that would end up plastered all over some AI log.

She needed privacy, and that meant finding a way to talk without the Sovereign's oversight.

But there was a way to at least start building towards that—one that might even solve a few problems at once.

"Hey, Kara," she said, leaning forward slightly, "wanna go find Major Quinn? We should probably get our Skill Class Passes sorted, since we don't have anything else planned today."

Kara hesitated for a second, clearly thinking something over.

Then she nodded. “Yeah. Might as well. The sooner we deal with that, the sooner we can relax. And maybe she’s in a better mood by now.”

“Hopefully,” Thea agreed, standing. “Would be nice not to get chewed out—or worse—for asking for permission to become better Marines.”

Kara snorted. “Yeah, well. No promises, I guess.”

She paused for a moment, then frowned. “Actually, how do we even *find* her?”

Thea didn’t have to think long—she just asked the Sovereign. The ship’s calm voice replied immediately, giving the Major’s exact location: Inside her office.

“See?” Thea said with a small grin toward Kara. “The Sovereign’s pretty useful for stuff like that.”

Kara rolled her eyes but grunted in reluctant agreement. “Useful or not, still not a fan.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Thea replied, stretching her arms before starting toward the corridor. “You can distrust the talking spaceship later. Let’s go before I die of terminal pancake deprivation.”

Kara muttered, “Not a real medical condition,” underneath her breath, but quickly caught up with a grinning Thea after pulling together her datapads, the two of them making their way to Major Quinn’s office...

—

—

PoV: Recruit Evelyne Midra Sen

Breathing heavily, Evelyne carefully pulled one of the secure cases from beneath her bunk and opened it, hands trembling as she retrieved two of the items she’d brought with her aboard the Sovereign.

It had cost her family a small fortune to convince the UHF to allow her to bring all her most prized possessions aboard, but that was what being a Major Legacy was for, wasn’t it?

A few extra credits in the right hands and some name recognition could buy you a little comfort in these cramped, metal dorms—luxuries that most non-Alpha or Beta Squad Recruits could only dream of.

After double-checking that the room was empty, she gently unfolded two of her treasures: Posters.

Signed ones.

She unrolled her newest acquisition beside them, and her breath caught in her throat.

Her eyes widened, her pulse thundering in her ears.

“He was fucking right...” she whispered, barely able to believe what she was seeing. “She is MMM. *The* MMM. Right here. On this ship. *With me*. We’re in the same fucking drive. It’s *her*...!”

Even without her family’s usual training in skepticism and verification, Evelyne didn’t need to be a cryptography expert to see it—the style of signature was unmistakable.

The same sweeping loops, the same deliberate placement, set carefully away from the art so it wouldn’t cover Freya or the other characters, the word choices...

Even the little stylistic flourish in the final stroke was *identical*.

Her heart pounded as she compared them side by side.

Thea McKay’s neat, confident handwriting was an exact match to the two posters she owned from the real *MissyMoonlightMayhem*.

Those original posters had cost her family a fortune, but they’d been worth every credit, in her eyes. She’d been an MMM fan ever since her parents had made her study the legendary Build-Creator’s strategies and breakdowns as part of her early training, and had only become more of a fan the longer she had been exposed to the Build-Creator’s works.

And now, through sheer, stupid luck, she had uncovered what must undoubtedly be one of the galaxy’s best-kept secrets: Thea McKay—the UHF’s newest rising star Recruit—was *the* MissyMoonlightMayhem.

And all it had taken was a little act: Pretending to be a nervous, stammering wreck in front of her—well, *mostly* pretending.

The nerves had been real enough—but playing them up had ultimately sold it.

With sympathy points earned from the other girl, her suspicions had been lowered.

Thea hadn’t questioned why anyone would approach her with an MMM-specific commemorative poster... at least, not for long.

Still, the moment Thea’s cyan eyes had narrowed on her, Evelyne had almost *died* on the spot. That flash of suspicion—sharp and cold—had nearly made her blow the whole thing.

What had started as a harmless test to see if Thea even *knew* MMM had nearly turned into her worst damn nightmare.

After all, Evelyne had overheard one of the other Recruits bragging that he’d gone up against the *real* MMM in the ship’s arcade just a few days earlier.

She hadn’t believed him at first—who would, really?—but the way he told the story, every small detail, every description of the fight... it had started to sound a little *too* real to be a lie.

So she'd listened in on several of his retellings, waiting for something to slip, for some obvious exaggeration or mistake to prove it false.

But nothing ever did.

Too many coincidences lined up for it to be just some random tall tale.

The descriptions were too vivid, the mannerisms too accurate—every small detail of how MMM fought, moved, and reacted sounded *right*.

And when Evelyne checked the Marine's records, figuring he was just a Legacy flaunting his family-gained knowledge, she had found he wasn't a Legacy of any kind.

That alone had made it even stranger.

Someone without formal exposure or the in-depth breakdowns that Legacies like her had access to shouldn't have been able to describe MMM's style with *that much* precision.

The descriptions, therefore, had been far too exact to be mere coincidence.

Still, she hadn't actually thought it *possible* that a UHF Recruit could be MMM. Especially not someone as young as Thea. Or as... limited in status, to put it nicely.

Her family had always spoken about MissyMoonlightMayhem with reverence—a shining example of what a Major Legacy could achieve with talent and discipline.

But this? A *midworld cyan* of all things?

It didn't fit the story she'd been told her whole life.

Evelyne didn't know what to make of that truth yet, but one thing was clear: It explained a lot of other things that had been strange with this drive.

It explained, for example, why that same midworld cyan—by all accounts a nobody, with no right to any skill or talent—had blown through the Assessment like it was child's play; had utterly humiliated everyone else, including full-on Privates, Corporals and Sergeants.

It was because MMM had finally stepped out of the shadows of digital arenas and into the real stage—the Galactic War itself.

The thought of her idol joining the Emperor's playground, ready to rewrite the meta of warfare itself, sent a thrill through Evelyne's veins that threatened to make her throw up from excitement.

Her heart pounded rapidly at the idea that she would get to *see it happen*—to watch MMM fight not as a gamer, but as a Marine.

To follow her, learn from her, maybe even *stand beside her*.

A high-pitched, giddy laugh escaped her before she could stop it.

She stared at the new signature, eyes sparkling, then gently lifted the poster and pressed her lips against the place where Thea's name was written.

"Thea McKay... Thea...! *My* MMM... *My Thea*...!"