

Volume 2 - Chapter 103 - Windows

[Forum Thread: "MMM – Anything And Everything We Know"]

Page #5981

Thread Start Date: Month 4, Day 12, PFC 935

Current Page Date: Month 5, Day 5, PFC 943

[Twelve_Gauge_Sommelier]: Uh. Guys... Have you seen this?

[Image Attached: Screenshot — Wildmaws Player Profile: "MissyMoonlightMayhem" — Last Login: Month 5, Day 1, PFC 943]

That's ***four days*** ago.

[RecoilReaper]: @Twelve_Gauge_Sommelier That's edited. That's so ***obviously*** edited. Do you know how many of these "MMM LOGGED IN!!" edits I've seen over the years? I could paper my damn hab-unit with them. Get the fuck out.

[Twelve_Gauge_Sommelier]: *[Link Attached]* It's the real profile. Check it yourselves. I literally just went to look at the old match history like I do every couple months like the sad bastard I am and the login date was ***CHANGED***.

[HexaBladeX90]: holy shit it's real??! I just checked! It says Month 5 Day 1 for me too???!!

[Cr1tFetish]: It's a relative, guys. Come on. Someone in the family logged in to look at the account. Happens all the time with dead people's profiles. Y'all are so thirsty for a resurrection arc it's actually fucking ***embarrassing***.

[DirgeBox]: @Cr1tFetish "dead people's profiles"—MMM is not confirmed dead you actual blank-ass ghoul

[NanoFish32]: Is there any match data attached?? Login means nothing without match data. Check ranked, check casual queue, check EVERYTHING!

[HexaBladeX90]: @NanoFish32 Nothing. No matches. No queue history. Just the login date.

[PulseHawk]: So somebody opened the account, touched ***nothing***, and logged out? That's the least MMM behaviour imaginable... That account was an Emperor-damned ***machine***. If MMM logged in there'd be forty match histories just for that ***one day***.

[QuietStorm]: You people fall for this every single month. EVERY month. It's nothing. Bookmarking this page so I can laugh at all of you later; again.

[WraithNull]: It's *EchoLimn*!!! He has the credentials. Mentor keeps the keys. I've been saying this for ***years***!!!

[**SandDagger7**]: @WraithNull I swear to the damn Emperor's left testicle if you bring up EchoLimn **one** more time...!

[Pages 5,982 – 6,007 omitted from excerpt: 26 pages of dispute regarding screenshot authenticity, Terra database migration schedules, six separate moderator interventions, two users permanently banned for impersonating a Terra employee.]

Page #6008

Current Page Date: Month 5, Day 5, PFC 943

[**Lowest_Bidder**]: Long-time lurker, made an account for this:

One of my closest friends is a community admin for Wildmaws—actual staff, not just a volunteer mod. I asked him to verify through internal tools and...

It's accurate.

The login is real.

The part that makes it weird though: The last login *status* updated properly, but the actual *login duration* was logged as one server tick—just one.

According to him, that's indicative of a **private session**. One not hosted on official Terra servers. The one-tick login is effectively just a handshake—the private server pinging Terra's infrastructure to check account authenticity, license validity, that kind of thing.

And, apparently, the handshake can be *delayed*, sometimes by days or weeks, if the server in question was already holding older cached information about the account.

So... MMM's account logged into a private server somewhere.

That's all I got.

Do with it what you will, I guess.

[**HexaBladeX90**]: **I'm going to be sick**

[**Cr1tFetish**]: It's STILL a relative!! Family member logs in from some rich person's private server. Nothing about this requires MMM to be **alive**.

[**Autoweld42**]: @Cr1tFetish Actually... no. Think about it.

If MMM was *confirmed* dead, there'd be a death notice filed with Terra. And the moment there's a death notice, Terra **LOCKS** the account—full memorial freeze. No logins possible,

period. Family would have to go through the estate process, which produces a completely different login signature.

The account is NOT locked. Terra has no death notice on file.

Which means, as far as the single most information-rich entity in the galaxy is concerned...

MMM is alive.

[DirgeBox]: BY THE FUCKING EMPEROR

[Brainracked]: ALIVE AND PLAYING WILDMAWS ON A PRIVATE SERVER?! TWO YEARS OF SILENCE AND THEY'RE JUST... CASUALLY GAMING SOMEWHERE?!

[PulseHawk]: Okay everyone breathe. "Not dead per Terra's records" and "alive" are not technically the same—actually no. I re-read what I just wrote. Terra knows everything. She's alive. HOLY SHIT SHE'S ALIVE!!1!!!!11!!

[NanoFish32]: GUYS! What if the two years of silence is **cook-time** for the newest Build?! What if Tidal Core wasn't the ending, but just a CLIFFHANGER!!!

[RecoilReaper]: Just gonna point back to what I said on page 5973. "If MMM farted near a digital terminal this forum would implode." LADIES AND GENTLEMEN: THE IMPLOSION.

[CreepingModem]: I joined this thread three months ago asking who MMM even was and I am now *emotionally compromised* over the login handshake latency of a stranger's gaming account. What has this community done to me...

[HexaBladeX90]: So it's *real*. It's actually fucking **real**... She's out there! Come home, MMM! The meta's gone to absolute shit without you, please!!!

[Shortened Excerpt from Forum Thread "MMM – Anything And Everything We Know," Pages #5,981 & #6,008 — Official "Archion" Community Forums, PFC 943]

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The hallways of Deck E were dead quiet.

The corridors Thea shuffled through were vacant in both directions, the usual background hum of foot traffic, conversation, and distant training-hall noise—that she assumed should normally be common in this area of the Sovereign's DDS—entirely absent.

Just the low, omnipresent thrum of the Sovereign's simulated systems, and the soft, tired scuff of her own boots against the deck plating.

She was, quite frankly, extremely grateful for it.

She was not entirely sure she could have handled *people* right now.

Her whole body felt like it was operating at about twenty percent.

The Soul Burn sat in her chest like a deep bruise—duller now than it had been before the healing the Staff had managed to put out, but still very much constant, pulsing faintly with every heartbeat, radiating that low-mid grade wrongness that had no location and no name.

Her limbs were *heavy*, but her thoughts were even heavier. Every few dozen metres, she caught herself drifting toward the wall and had to consciously correct her course.

'Just get to the dorms for now... Take a shower, then deal with literally everything else.'

It was undoubtedly a good plan.

Her brain, unfortunately, had absolutely no intention of cooperating with it.

Because there was simply *too much*.

No matter how she tried to sort it, stack it, or shelve it for later, the session kept spilling back out over everything else—a flood of information and implications that her exhausted mind kept picking at anyway in a downright compulsive way, like an old scab.

The stuff she'd actually gone in wanting to achieve? She'd gotten all of it, technically.

The big questions around her cold-and-ice phenomena. The [Glimpse] discussion, and the whole "do I need to yell my Powers?" aspect. And, of course, the absolute pancake of the bunch: The secret command to finally have the long-overdue conversations with Kara about everything that was going on, without the Sovereign—or anyone else—being able to listen in.

But then there was also just *everything else*.

'The mini-Delve. The Warren. The throne room. Grah—'

She flinched away from even *thinking* the **Name** too directly, the fresh, hard-earned instinct slamming the thought shut before it could fully form.

'—the entity. The second Path. The Origin Rune currently sitting somewhere inside my Soul like an unexploded shell. The whole damn Gold Lock situation...'

Then there was also the fact that she had died, what, like sixty times? And the fact that her mentor had vaporised her head *as a safety measure* and she had *genuinely*, upon reflection, come around to agreeing it had absolutely been the right call.

*'And the whole second Generic Power thing, too... Sorry, the second Path **and** a second Generic Power. Two of each of everything, it seems.'*

Thea's sluggish thoughts snagged on that.

'...It must be because of Æht, no?' She concluded.

It was the only through-line that made any sense at all.

Æht's presence inside her mind—for better or worse, *whatever* she actually was—seemed to be giving her *twice of everything*.

Two Paths. Two Generic Powers. Two—

She stopped dead in her tracks in the middle of the hallway.

'Wait.'

Her eyes went wide.

'Wait, wait, **wait!** Didn't the Allbright System have the same fucking issue?!'

It felt like a lifetime ago now—buried under months of training, DMs, Assessments, and everything since—but she remembered it distinctly, now that the thread had been pulled.

During her Integration. The strange hiccup right at the very start of it... The System stuttering, glitching, doing *whatever* the technological equivalent of a double-take was—

—and spitting her out with *both* [Sensory Overdrive] *and* [Meditation Focus] as starter Abilities.

When everyone—everyone—was only supposed to get *one*.

She'd kind of written it off at the time. She'd been a fresh Recruit with a thousand-billion more immediate problems, questions and things to focus on, and "*the magic military system gave me a free extra Ability*" had not exactly ranked high on her list of things to question or interrogate.

But now?

'Two starter Abilities. Two Paths. Two Generic Powers... If that ain't a pattern, then I don't know what the fuck patterns look like.' Her heart picked up speed despite the exhaustion. 'Was that also because of Æht, then...? Or was this because of something else? It has to be related, no? Too much of a coincidence otherwise.'

The thought that made something cold crawl up the back of her neck—

'If so... how did the System know about her? The Allbright System must have registered her, somehow. Then gave me double because of her? Which means... **Whatever** she is, she's not just some hallucination or trauma-thing living in my head. She's real enough that the most advanced piece of technology in the entire universe looked at me, saw two of **something**, and adjusted accordingly... So... What the fuck IS she, exactly?'

She had so *many* questions.

And Æht, of course, refused to answer practically any of them—on the grounds that she didn't trust Thea to keep her mouth shut about the answers.

Which...

'...okay, that's probably **somewhat** fair,' Thea admitted grudgingly, resuming her slow walk down the corridor. Because she *did* want to tell somebody—desperately, even.

The pressure of sitting alone on a secret shaped like "*there is an entire second person living inside my head and she's far more knowledgeable about my Powers than me and I don't know what she wants*" was not a pressure that human beings were designed to carry solo.

She needed a second brain on this—preferably a large one. And a damn sanity check of somebody looking at the whole picture from the outside and telling her whether she was handling this correctly or sleepwalking into a Void-damned *disaster*.

'Which has **got** to be Kara.'

That conversation was long, *long* overdue by now, and after today it was actually possible.

But also—

'...Maybe Selene would be a good choice too?'

The thought surfaced slowly, and the more she turned it over, the less stupid it seemed.

Selene was a psychologist, after all.

'Voices inside your head are, like... supposed to be their entire thing, right? Their actual professional wheelhouse and stuff?'

Sure, Thea was reasonably confident that "*the voice in my head is actually some kind of **real** entity with her own throne room who catches me when I fall through metaphysical Gates*" was several *lightyears* outside the standard clinical playbook—but of everyone she knew, Selene was probably the person best equipped to at least *have the chance* to provide some actionable advice.

'... But I'm gonna have to figure out how much I can even say, with the whole Gold Lock situation going on. Fuck's sake, man... I need to read that parameter rundown the Sovereign sent me before I talk to **anyone**, actually.'

And she wanted to meet up with Selene again anyway, so it was a good excuse.

Needed to, honestly. Because there was also the *other* thing.

'How did she even end up like **that**?'

The image rose up unbidden—Selene, the last time Thea had seen her.

The sheer reduced state of her.

'She's an Auxiliary... Major Quinn even said so during the announcement. And Auxiliaries don't rotate onto Active Battlefields anymore—that's the **entire point** of the classification, last I checked. So... what the fuck happened? Where was she? What did she—'

Thea caught herself spiralling and physically shook her head, dragging her focus back to the hallway in front of her.

'Nope. No. Definitely not answerable in the middle of a corridor at whatever-o'clock with a burnt Soul. Add it to the damn pile.'

The ever-growing, teetering pile of *"Things Thea Needs To Deal With"*, which had roughly tripled in height over the course of a single training session—instead of getting substantially smaller, which was what she'd secretly been hoping for.

She let out a long, slow breath and kept walking.

The corridors *crawled* past her.

Junction after junction, bulkhead after bulkhead, the semi-familiar route back toward Alpha Squad's dorms stretching out far longer than it had any right to—every step heavier than the last as the exhaustion settled deeper into her bones.

The Soul Burn throbbed its dull, patient rhythm in her chest.

Her eyelids had started making unilateral decisions about how open they needed to be.

To distract herself—and to give her eyelids something to actually do—Thea called up her System Notifications.

She'd heard them chime at some point during the session with the Rune priest, but there had been exactly *zero* opportunity to actually check what was going on at the time.

The backlog was mercifully short.

[System]: *Silver Respiration has reached Level 7.*

[System]: *Meditation Focus has reached Level 8.*

[System]: *Armour of Resolve has reached Level 8.*

Thea stared at the three lines. Then her eyebrows began a slow, steady climb toward her hairline as the implications truly settled in.

Because being inside the DDS came with massive experience penalties, she knew. And that was already the case for *combat instances*—a non-combat area like a simple training hall sat at the absolute bottom of the experience barrel, where Abilities were lucky to gain a *sliver* of progress over an *entire day* of rigorous use.

The fact that all three of those Abilities had levelled anyway—despite the harsh penalties, their already relatively high levels *and* the correspondingly brutal experience requirements that came with them—meant that the actual strain placed on each one of them had to have been truly *monstrous*.

'...But then again.'

Being ragdolled across a Training Hall by the Rune priest's [Telekinesis].
Being utterly crushed under his Presence for what had subjectively felt like several weeks.
Being rendered completely unable to breathe as a result of all of the above, over and over,
for extended periods of time, all while trying to maintain her faculties...

*'That... actually **does** check out, huh?'*

[Silver Respiration] had been fighting for her life every time her lungs got emptied. [Armour of Resolve] had been holding back a tide the size of an ocean for the better part of an hour, and provided her with much needed resistance against the Rune priest's rough [Telekinesis]. And [Meditation Focus] had dragged her into a working trance while a damn *mountain* had sat on her back.

'Freebies earned in the worst possible way.'

Ultimately, though, while Thea was genuinely happy about the levels and the surprise progress she'd been awarded by the System—she would have much, *much* rather not had to deal with everything that had produced them.

Three levels was not a fair exchange rate for *that* session.

But she wasn't one to complain about freebies, either.

The positive surprise had done its job, at least—a small spike of energy cutting through the sluggishness—and she quickly moved on to the next point on her mental agenda before the Soul Burn could re-emphasise itself and knock her energy levels right back down again.

'Okay. How do I best talk to Kara about all of this... With the Rune priest's command in place, there's practically no one that can listen in anymore, except for Æ—'

She almost stumbled mid-step as the thought hit her.

'—except for Æht.'

Her eyes went wide.

'But she's in hiding right now... Because she was hiding from the Rune priest...! There's a chance she's not going to be able to listen in for quite a while—not until she feels safe enough to come out again!'

The pieces assembled themselves rapidly.

Based on everything Thea had picked up about Æht's situation so far—especially when she thought back to the *last* Rune priest session, after which Æht had been conspicuously absent for a long stretch, despite undoubtedly being worried sick about whether Thea had revealed something to the man despite her pleas, as she'd all but admitted during their conversation in the following DM...

There was a real chance Æht *wasn't* going to be around for a few more hours.

Maybe even *days*, depending on how she perceived time inside the Warren.

*'I need to talk to Kara **right now**. This can't wait.'*

The realisation landed heavy—and was immediately followed by a problem, as Thea cupped her chin mid-walk: Because Kara was inside the Psychic 101 lecture right now.

As was every single Recruit aboard the Sovereign, barring Thea herself.

'...How do I talk to her as soon as possible?'

Thea mulled it over for a few moments.

Options crawled sluggishly through her tired brain—wait until the lecture ended, send Kara a message with an urgency flag, ambush her in the corridor afterwards—but before she could properly evaluate any of them, she felt the Soul Burn reassert itself, the dull ache across her entire body swelling back up in a slow, patient wave, dragging her energy levels down with it.

'No, no, no! Not losing this train of thought!'

This opportunity was *too* rare.

Æht was guaranteed to still be in hiding, especially after the whole Ice-Shard-situation. There was absolutely no way to force another situation like this, where she'd be gone for who knows how long, in fear of being detected by the Rune priest.

She spoke aloud, directing her voice toward the ceiling.

"Sovereign. Can you get Kara to come back to the dorms? I have something very important to talk to her about."

"Recruit Karania Faulkner is currently attending the Psychic 101 lecture," the Sovereign replied immediately, in its usual dispassionate tone, "and would be unable to comply with such a request."

"*Fuck*," Thea cursed underneath her breath.

She'd *known* that, of course. She'd literally thought as much thirty seconds ago.

But she'd kind of hoped the Sovereign would be able to just, like... *make* Kara able to leave early, or something. It wasn't as though attendance was actually super important unless you had specific questions you wanted answered—every lecture got ultimately archived on the Sovereign's intranet the moment it concluded anyway.

Being there in person was, functionally, optional if *practically* mandatory.

'If only there was a way to get the Sovereign to take this seriou—'

A thought flashed through her mind.

It was a strange one.

It didn't particularly make much *sense*, on the face of it.

But then again—she'd watched the Rune priest intently this past session. *Very* intently actually, on accounts of not wanting to fucking die.

She'd noted and stored away a particular oddity about his interactions with the Sovereign...

And pattern recognition was one of Thea's strongest suits—or so she'd always liked to believe, anyway.

'Fuck it. Worst she can say is no.'

She turned her voice toward the ceiling again, and chose her words carefully.

"Sovereign. I need to speak with Kara as soon as possible. This is important for the *Rune priest's mentorship with me*—I need to ask her about some things related to this session and it cannot wait."

Surprisingly, the Sovereign did not reply immediately.

Thea was so taken aback by the silence that she stumbled to a dead stop and simply *stared* up at the ceiling—as if she could somehow oracle the Sovereign's inner workings by looking hard enough at the deck plating above her head.

A brief moment later, the Sovereign finally answered.

"Recruit Karania Faulkner has been excused from her lecture and is en-route to the Alpha Squad dorms."

Thea's jaw dropped. *'Wait, what? That—that **worked**? What the fuck? Why?! How?! What does that mean?!'*

The implications spiralled outward faster than her burnt, exhausted brain could chase them.

'Mentioning the Rune priest's name functions as a sort of skeleton key, at least when put in context with his mentorship over me? Does that make any sense? Why would that ever work? Wouldn't the Sovereign just double-check the information with the Rune priest...?'

She shook her head violently to refocus.

'Later. Figure out the whole Sovereign-and-Rune priest situation later. Kara first.'

She put considerably more pep into her step, aiming herself down the final stretch of corridor toward the dorms with renewed energy.

"...Thank you, Sovereign," she added aloud, feeling more than a little strange about it—having effectively *strongarmed* a ship-class AI into doing something through such a thoroughly roundabout method didn't exactly sit *comfortably*.

But it *had* worked. And right now, that was what mattered most.

Then, Thea finally reached the Alpha Squad dorms.

The door unlocked easily with her biometrics, the familiar chirp of confirmation sounding as it swung open—and Thea practically rushed inside, mind already three sentences deep into how she was going to open the conversation with Kara.

She made it about four steps into the common room before stopping dead *yet again*.

Her eyes had fallen onto a woman, simply... Standing there in the middle of the room.

With a cup of—what Thea's nose immediately identified as—coffee in her hands.

The woman in question was *very* tanned—a deep, even, sun-worn bronze—with lean, earned muscle visibly layered across her frame. Not nearly at Isabella's levels, but it was immediately evident that this was not a random store clerk. Her dark, black hair hung loose and visibly freshly-washed, still damp at the ends where it brushed her shoulders, and she wore precisely one article of clothing: A pair of plain panties, and absolutely *nothing else*.

Thea's high levels of Perception had taken in *all* of it before her brain had even finished processing the fact that the woman was effectively naked—and Thea, being a distinct enjoyer of well-built anatomy, needed an additional half-second to remember that staring was not polite *and* what she had walked in here to do.

The woman, meanwhile, had turned to look at her by then.

She made no move whatsoever to hide anything. Not that Thea particularly felt like she *should*, exactly. It was just—

Thea started to slowly retrace her steps backwards out the door, keeping her eyes locked onto the other woman. She looked up at the signage above the doorframe.

Then double-checked it, again.

'Alpha Squad... That says Alpha Squad. I'm one-hundred-percent certain that's what it says right there...'

By all accounts Thea had access to, this was, in fact, the Alpha Squad dorms. Her Soul Burn had not somehow marched her to a random door that inexplicably *also* responded to her biometrics and unlocked.

This was her home.

Which meant the naked woman drinking coffee in the middle of the squad's common room was, *definitively*, the odd one out here, *not* Thea.

She slowly walked back inside, the door hissing shut behind her as she made her way further into the room.

"Ehhh... Hi?" she offered, a bit awkwardly.

"Hi there," the woman returned, visibly *completely* unperturbed, before taking a sip from her coffee...