

Volume 2 - Interlude 103.5 - Access

There is an old saying among the dock crews of the Ravenhearst, passed down through enough generations of shipwrights that nobody remembers who said it first:

"A ship is named thrice: Once when she is initiated, once when she earns it, and once when the galaxy itself takes notice of her."

Most civilians assume it is poetry. I assure you, it is not.

It is one of the most literal descriptions of UHF naval administration you will ever encounter—the Navy thinks of its Troop Transporters not as mere *vessels*, but as living participants in the same career ladder their crews climb alongside them.

The First Name

Every Troop Transporter begins its life—or gets reinitiated—with a baseline name, determined by the quadrant of UHF space in which she serves.

The South-Western quadrant—Driftspire, Halcyon, Krynnal, and Kuigon Sectors, among others—names its Transporters after figures of authority and the pinnacles of old: *The Sovereign. The Empyrean. The Ascendant. The Monarch.*

The North-Western quadrant, by contrast, names its Transporters after the great storms of its worlds: *The Tempest. The Aurora. The Torrent. The Thunderhead.*

Where the South-West looks upward to thrones, the North-West looks outward to the sky.

The principle is universal across all quadrants, with a different scheme for each, and so is the rule that gives the system its peculiar character: **There may only ever be one of each baseline name in service at a time.**

There can only be one *Sovereign*. One *Tempest*. The name is an office, held by a single hull, vacated only when the ship holding it dies—or when she is promoted.

The Second Name

A Troop Transporter's first year of any cycle is spent as a Recruit Ship, carrying her baseline name plainly, the way a Recruit holds a rank that is barely a rank at all.

Then comes the ceremony.

When the Recruits aboard are promoted to Private, the ship is promoted alongside them—a formal naval ceremony in which the vessel receives her Suffix and her elevation to a proper Ship-of-the-Line.

The South-Western quadrant appends an uncountable, undefined vastness: *The Empyrean of Stars. The Empyrean of Sands. The Empyrean of Seas.*

The North-Western quadrant grants its storms not a domain but *permanence*—a single word of *endurance* set after the name like a vow: *The Tempest Unending. The Tempest Unbroken. The Tempest Everlasting.*

The moment the Suffix is bestowed, the baseline name is freed, and somewhere in the shipyards a new—or reinitiated—hull takes up the vacated office.

The newly named Ship-of-the-Line, meanwhile, goes to *war*—deploying with the same Marines she trained, for years or even decades, until her Marine complement falls below critical strength.

Then she is called back, her survivors merged into other Ships-of-the-Line of the same baseline heritage, and the ship herself is formally demoted—stripped of her Suffix and restored to her baseline office to await a new generation.

The cycle begins anew.

The Third Name

Lastly, there is the naming no ceremony can schedule.

The Prefix is the rarest honor in the UHF Navy—bestowed only for feats of galactic significance, earned jointly by the hull, her governing AI, and most often the long-serving Captain whose career became inseparable from hers.

"Indomitable," for ships that have very rarely lost a Battlefield they were part of.

"Elusive," for ships that have slipped the enemy's grasp so often that opposing fleet doctrine names them specifically.

"Galactic," for ships that have helped create at least one Major Strategic Asset for the UHF and ferried them where they were needed most.

There is one major difference between the way this honor works, compared to the baseline promotion carrying the Suffix: **The Prefix *never* comes off.**

It survives demotion, recycling, and every return to the shipyards.

A Recruit Ship carrying a Prefix is not a contradiction in any way. She is merely an old, experienced veteran, teaching the new generations everything she knows.

The *"Indomitable Empyrean"* collecting her wide-eyed Recruits from a Sector station is the very same Soul that held whatever line earned her that word, and the Navy sees no reason a new generation shouldn't know it from the moment they first step aboard.

It ends only with the destruction of the hull or the expiration of her governing AI.

For the Prefix, as the commissioning liturgy has it, is not merely attached to the ship.

It is *fused* to the heart and very *Soul* of her.

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[Shortened Excerpt from "Hulls and Hearts: An Informal History of the UHF Navy's Living Traditions" — Fleet Archivist (Ret.) Cha'Relle Bun'Da, Ravenhearst Navy Academy, PFC 929]

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PoV: Private Amara Farren

Amara sipped her coffee slowly, and let her eyes take in the small Marine standing in the middle of the common room.

The girl did not, she noted with some amusement, seem to want to meet her eyes.

Not directly, anyway.

Her gaze kept landing just slightly to the side—the cheekbone, the ear, a fascinating patch of wall somewhere past Amara's shoulder—always orbiting, never touching. Which wasn't necessarily bad, given all she'd heard about meeting a Cyan's eyes, but she couldn't deny that she was very curious about the whole experience.

*'So this is **her**, huh...'*

She looked a lot smaller in person.

Smaller, and considerably more demure than she'd seemed in the recordings of the first Assessment's Awards Ceremony—the ones half the fleet this side of the UHF had undoubtedly watched by now.

Standing there in the doorway with her somewhat lax posture and her wandering eyes, she looked less like the Voidstorm that had detonated across the UHF Marine Corps and more like a tired teenager who'd wandered into the wrong dorm room.

'Downright cute, even.'

But Amara knew far better than to let a first impression like that taint her read on the girl.

Because she'd *seen* the award tally. And a Two-Star Crysium MVM was not something that just *happened* to a Recruit. That did not fall into *anyone's* lap.

The small, exhausted-looking thing in front of her was an absolute Void Daemon in sheep's clothing at the best of times, and Amara had every intention of staying firmly off her bad side, if it could at all be avoided.

Frankly, she hadn't expected to meet the most famous Cyan in UHF history—by everything she knew, anyway—as a result of her little stint here.

Sure, the girl was the squadmate of the big hunk of a man she'd hooked up with last night. That connection existed, she'd been aware of it from the get-go, as she was just another member of the Recruitment Drive's Alpha Squad.

But every Recruit aboard was *supposed* to be sitting in the Psychic 101 lecture right now—it was the entire reason Lucas had told her she could take it slow, enjoy a few hours of Alpha Squad's amenities before heading out.

And Amara was not a woman who said no to *that* offer.

'Big man has some good bedside manners, offering that...'

Trading a bit of knowledge about the Defensive Heavy Role—her old Role, from her own Recruit days—plus some training time at the arcade where she'd found the large puppy-man, in exchange for a thoroughly enjoyable night and a morning of Alpha-Squad-tier amenities?

That was a *phenomenal* trade.

One she had definitely not expected to land.

'Lucky me, that he couldn't sleep well and walked straight into my hunting grounds...'

Stopping mid-sip, Amara walked a few steps further into the kitchen to get further out of the other girl's way, and invited her deeper into her own dorms with an open-armed gesture.

"Don't let me ruin your morning. I'll be gone in a bit here. Your Defensive Heavy let me use the amenities this morning—I hope it's not too much trouble."

A varying range of emotions flashed over the girl's face at that, in rapid, unguarded succession, and Amara couldn't help but grin into her mug at the sight of it.

*'She has **no** idea what's going on, does she...'*

"Ehh... *Lucas*? You know Lucas?"

Amara nodded, briefly considering teasing the poor girl—the material was *right there*—but deciding against it.

She really did not want to sour any potential future relationships with this Drive's Alpha Squad. Especially not with the Cyan Princess herself, who *very clearly* enjoyed some insane level of freedom aboard this ship that Amara hadn't even known *existed*.

Back in her own Recruit days, more than two years ago now, her Alpha Squad had absolutely not been exempt from mandatory lectures. This girl, however, clearly was—or the Sovereign would have long since sent a Lieutenant to collect her.

"Met him last night," she answered easily, taking another sip and enjoying the air-conditioned chill of the kitchen across her bare skin.

The girl's face was an open question at that admission.

Amara answered it. "He was at one of the arcades on the entertainment deck, and I ran into him there. Traded a bit of knowledge on the Defensive Heavy Role for some early-morning amenities. Again, apologies for taking up space here."

The girl—seemingly quick at *dealing* with unexpected situations, though not quite catching everything sitting in the subtext—simply nodded right away.

"Oh... Yeah, no problem. And, eh—and thank you for helping Lucas out, I guess."

'Girl, he helped me out—all night. Your puppy-man is considerably more of a beast than you'd expect...'

She grinned into her coffee once again, and kept the words firmly to herself.

The girl's face briefly lit up, as she seemingly remembered something else.

"Oh, yeah. Kara—ehh—Karanja, the Squad Medic? She's also going to show up in a few minutes... In case you want to, eh... put on some clothes? Or something?"

Her cyan eyes had, decidedly, stayed exclusively on Amara's face this entire time, and Amara honestly couldn't help but feel for her a little.

She remembered those early, mortifying months of the Recruit year vividly—when everyone had suddenly been expected to strip, shower, and exist naked around each other at all times, and every locker room had been a gauntlet of aggressively averted eyes.

It had become second nature to Amara years ago.

But this girl had been a Recruit for barely two months.

The embarrassment was still very much there and thoroughly understandable.

It was also, however, something she was simply going to *have* to learn to deal with.

And Amara really, *really* did not feel like putting on clothes.

So instead, she just sipped her coffee and held the cyan's gaze—or as much of it as she could hold, given the girl's continued refusal to actually meet her eyes—and said nothing whatsoever in response.

'Interesting that the Squad Medic also gets to skip lectures, though... Why is that, I wonder?'

A moment later, the girl started to get visibly uncomfortable with the silence her offer had earned.

"Ehh... Well then. Okay... I'll just... go, I guess."

And she quickly dashed past Amara, past the kitchen, and through a door into what Amara assumed was her own room.

The moment it closed, Amara finally released the chuckle-turned-laugh she'd been holding in since the second the dorm doors had opened and the damn *Cyan Princess* herself had simply *walked in* on her.

This was, undoubtedly, one of her favourite mornings *ever*.

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PoV: Recruit Karania Faulkner

"—which is *precisely* why the Repulsor-Fields *must* be recalibrated whenever a Psyker of Third Tier or higher comes aboard any vessel of the line. The Gate, you see, does not merely *exist* within the Psyker—it radiates outwards. *Continuously*. And that radiation often interacts with—"

Karania's stylus moved across her datapad in smooth, practised strokes, transcribing the lecturer's words into her steadily-growing notes with approximately fifteen percent of her actual attention.

The remaining eighty-five percent was on her second datapad, currently displaying a dense article on comparative myelination-repair methodologies—specifically, the ongoing debate between accelerated Schwann-cell grafting and synthetic sheath-weaving for peripheral nerve reconstruction in augment-adjacent tissue.

Her upcoming [Surgery] Skill Training was going to hit the relevant module hopefully within the next week, and she had every intention of walking into it already knowing the material better than whoever ended up teaching it.

Pre-loading knowledge made Skill acquisition faster.

That was simply how the System worked.

"Recruit Faulkner."

The Sovereign's voice slid directly into her ear with that *perverse* intimacy it sometimes opted into—pitched low and close, as though the treacherous *thing* were a dear friend leaning in to share a secret rather than a ship-sized surveillance apparatus wearing a voice.

Karania's jaw tightened a fraction.

"Return to the Alpha Squad dorms at once. You have been excused from the Psychic 101 Lecture, as your presence is required by Recruit McKay."

Every trace of her annoyance evaporated instantly.

Thea *needed* her.

Adrenaline flushed her system in a single, clean wave. Her datapads were in her bag within one second, the stylus clipped and stowed on pure muscle memory, and then she was up

and moving—out of her row, down the steps, across the front of the hall—to the visible surprise and confusion of every other Recruit in the room.

She barely registered the lecturer's raised voice assuring the class that everything was quite alright, that Recruit Faulkner had been formally excused; by the time the sentence finished, she was already through the doors.

Then she **ran**.

Her superhuman Strength ate the Sovereign's corridors in long, rapid strides, bulkheads and junctions blurring past as she cut the most efficient route toward the dorms that her mental map of the ship could produce.

Her mind, meanwhile, was racing considerably faster than her legs.

'What did you do this time, Thea?'

The exasperation was reflexive at this point—practically load-bearing, when it came to Thea.

'You were supposed to just learn a bit about Psykers with the Rune priest. Theory, girl! Sitting in armchairs or whatever you Psyker people do. What did he make you do that requires my attention in the middle of a Void-damned lecture?! Or did you just overdo it again, and it wasn't even his direct fault?'

She shook her head sharply mid-stride.

*'No... He is your mentor, Thea. Mentors keep their students safe! He **should** be keeping you safe, damnit!'*

Without breaking pace, she pulled her primary datapad back out of her bag and swiped into Thea's medical records—Squad Medic access privileges opening the full file without complaint—her eyes scanning down the live-feed summary for anything that might tell her what she was about to walk into.

[UHF MEDICAL RECORD — LIVE MONITORING]

[Subject: McKay, Thea || Service ID: UHF-941-041-2138-TM]

[Recruit — Alpha Squad, IGS Sovereign || Kuigon Sector]

[———]

[Age: 18 || Sex: F || Height: 176cm || Weight: 78.3kg]

[Blood Type: AB || DNA 1 | 2 || Rh-Profile: Standard]

[Augment Status: None || Prosthetic Status: None || Implant Status: Standard Recruit Suite (Biotelemetry)]

[Special: Psyker (Wielder) || Inheritance: Veritas || Tier: 1 (0)]

[Flags: Cyan (benign) || Psyker-Active (monitored)]

[Allergies: None recorded]

[Dietary Restrictions: None || Caloric Intake (7-day avg.): 3,840 kcal/day]

[———]

[VITALS — LIVE]

[HR: 68bpm (elev. — post-exertion) || BP: 98/66 || SpO2: 99%]

[Core Temp: 37.7°C || Skin Temp: 35.1°C || Respiration: 11/min]

[Hydration: 91% || Cortisol: Elevated (flagged: within session-adjacent norms)]

[Neural Activity: Elevated — consistent with post-exertion recovery]

[Sleep (last cycle): 6h 12m || REM: 31% || Interruptions: 2]

[———]

[ACTIVE MEDICATIONS]

[1. Compound: Veskarine-Threnodate Solution — 12ml Injection — Administered: 09:44 — Administering Official: Rune priest Anrake Vedun — Status: ACTIVE]

[Listed Constituents: Veskarine-Threnodate (38%), Aurelian Stabiliser Base VII (22%), Neurophyllin-C (11%), Synaptic Buffer Compound NB-4 (8%), Thaloxamide (6%), Kirrenite Suspension (5%), Voss-Elleran Extract (4%), SIZ-Fraction Distillate μ (3%), [UNREGISTERED COMPOUND — NO PHARMACOPEIA ENTRY] (2%), [UNREGISTERED COMPOUND — NO PHARMACOPEIA ENTRY] (1%), Trace binders (<1%)]

[Onset Registered: 09:51]

[———]

[MUSCULOSKELETAL — CURRENT]

[Contusion, right shoulder (minor, fresh — est. <2h)]

[Contusion, left collarbone (minor, fresh — est. <2h)]

[Contusions x4, bilateral forearms (minor, fresh — est. <2h)]

[Microtears, intercostal musculature (minor — consistent with respiratory strain)]

[———]

[STANDING ORDERS]

[Daily monitoring per Squad Medic protocol — Faulkner, Karania]

[Next scheduled physical: 11 days — Faulkner, Karania]

[Psychic-event biotelemetry escalation: ENABLED]

[———]

Karania's eyes found the most recently-added entries immediately—and caught the discrepancy just as fast.

'...She got administered drugs and part of her records were deleted...'

Her stride did not falter, but her expression flattened into pure, cold clinical focus.

She had made it an immediate habit, from essentially the first week aboard, to dose every member of Alpha Squad each morning with a slow-release, miniscule relaxant—a compound she knew for certain had no meaningful effect on any of them, barring perhaps smoothing over a tense muscle here or there.

It was something she'd always done, for as long as she could remember.

Ever since a particular day, many years ago now, when somebody had forced a psychedelic into *her* without her knowledge and she had lost *hours*—unaccountable hours, with no way to reconstruct what had happened or how much time had passed.

Never again, she'd told herself then, and kept to that mantra ever since.

A slow-release relaxant with a clean, predictable metabolic curve could be traced through the bloodstream with trivial ease.

Which meant that no matter what happened to *any of them*—blackouts, resets, memory gaps, *anything*—she could always, *always* establish exactly how much time had actually passed, no matter what.

Except Thea's live-readings were not listing said relaxant *anywhere*.

'So she's been fully reset at least once. Expected, really, given whatever training that man is throwing at her...'

What had truly made her flag the record, however, was the *other* entry.

A single new drug, listed under Active Medications.

With a time-of-injection stamp that made *no sense* whatsoever.

The record claimed the injection had occurred at 09:44. Yet the *actual* live biochemical readings did not corroborate any injection at that time—instead listing its record for 09:51.

The compound had only *appeared* in her active-medication readings several minutes after it had supposedly been administered.

A flat contradiction, sitting in an official medical record where neither half had been flagged by the Sovereign's systems as such.

Which was effectively impossible.

The Sovereign flagged *everything*, especially medical-related.

'...Which means somebody messed with the Sovereign's recording features.'

Her eyes narrowed as the answer easily assembled itself—there was very little doubt in her mind about any of this.

'The Rune priest decided to expunge parts of the session from the record—undoubtedly for whatever Thea-related-nonsense reason—and the medical records got caught in the

deletion... The injection event itself was scrubbed along with everything else. But he still dutifully listed what he actually injected her with, after the fact, so her file wouldn't be flying blind.'

A slow exhale through her nose.

*'...At least he did **that much**, I guess.'*

Then she actually read the medication entry itself... And *frowned*.

The compound listing ran long—far longer than any standard field pharmaceutical—and as her eyes tracked down the ingredient chain, her frown deepened steadily.

She recognised the stabiliser base. She also recognised two of the neural buffers.

And that was, precisely, where recognition ended.

The remainder of the list—easily nine-tenths of it—was composed of substances she had never even *heard of* before in her *life*.

Compounds that had not appeared in any of her Skill Trainings so far, none of her pre-loaded literature, none of the pharmacopeia she had spent the past two months quietly memorising from A to Z.

They were, ultimately, substances that, as far as Karania Faulkner's *considerable* medical knowledge was concerned, did not exist.

Her grip on the datapad tightened.

'What did you get yourself into this time, Thea?'

Karanja stowed the datapad back into her bag mid-stride, rounding the final corner at speed.

The doors to Alpha Squad's dorms slid open ahead of her—by themselves, before she'd even come into biometric range. The Sovereign's doing, no doubt, smoothing her path.

She would not be thanking the thing, ever.

She rushed straight into the common room.

"Thea?!"

That was when her eyes fell onto a practically naked person sitting at the kitchen table, sipping a coffee.

Karanja immediately entered her memory vault at the sight of her, taking the full image of the last microseconds to analyze what, exactly, was going on here.

'Subject: Female, age visually in the mid-twenties. 186 centimetres tall, likely around 90-95 kilograms, body-fat percentage somewhere in the low teens. Musculature: functional hypertrophy, occupational—trapezius, forearm, and posterior-chain development consistent

with sustained heavy load-bearing. Heavy-type Armour operator, near-certainly; wear-calluses at the collarbone contact points. Deep dermal melanin response—genuine, cumulative UV exposure over years. Planetside service, open-sky postings. Scar tissue: Surgical line, right shoulder, professionally closed, fully matured, two-to-four years or accelerated healing. Assorted minor field scarring, forearms and shins, all well-healed. No visible augments. Hydration good. Resting heart rate, judging by the carotid, low. In superb health, all told.'

Her eyes took in the larger picture now.

'Hair: Black, still damp—washed within the last hour, air-drying. Posture: Fully relaxed, spine loose, weight settled, zero social threat-response to a stranger bursting through the door. Coffee: Fresh, held in both hands, savoured. Attire: Underwear, nothing else. In a squad common room she does not belong to... Conclusion: Hookup.'

The candidate analysis resolved itself in similar fractions of a second.

'Corvus—no. He wouldn't. Not now, and frankly not without a diplomatic summit's worth of preamble to make sure the Squad was alright with it. Desmond—definitely out. The man is catastrophically terrible with women. Isabella... maybe. But the most obvious answer is Lucas...'

Because Lucas, per the arrival-and-departure notifications Karania had quietly set up with the Sovereign for every member of the squad, had been the *last* one to leave the dorms this morning.

Which meant he'd have been the one able to tell a guest to make herself at home—likely assuming, quite reasonably, that everyone would be locked into the Psychic 101 lecture for hours, and Thea busy with the Rune priest for just as long.

Except he'd *clearly* underestimated Thea's ability to get herself into trouble.

Karania exited her memory vault, the entire analysis having cost her less than a fraction of a second of real time, and addressed the woman directly—who, from her own perspective, had likely only just now been *seen* at all.

"I don't care about your dealings with Lucas. Is Thea in her room?"

The woman was visibly taken aback by that—but nodded at an adequate speed.

Karania rushed for Thea's door.

"Thea? It's Kara!"

The door opened—and a hand shot out, grabbed her, and pulled her bodily into the room before the door hissed shut again behind her.

"Thank *fuck*," Thea said.

Karania's eyes were already moving—sweeping her friend head to toe on pure reflex, cross-referencing against the medical file still fresh in her mind. Pupils. Skin tone. Posture. The way she was holding her weight, favouring—

"Nothing's wrong, Kara."

Thea cut her assessment off before it could finish.

"Well... at least not a *lot*, I guess. Just... I needed to talk to you. *Right now*."

Karania lifted an eyebrow at her, thoroughly confused as to what, exactly, was going on here.

Because *Thea needing to talk* did not explain the mechanics of *any* of this.

Just because her friend wanted a conversation did not mean the Sovereign would—what, convince the Lecturer and the entire UHF Brass aboard the ship to let two Recruits skip mandatory instruction? That was preposterous, even for—

"I don't need to know whatever happened between you and Evelyne, okay?"

The thought died mid-formation.

"It's fine. But I *need* you to help me, *please*. I can't do this alone. I need someone with a big brain to help me through this shit, alright? So *please* stop avoiding me."

Kara felt like she'd been slapped across the face.

She had thought she'd done a *good job* recently.

The careful spacing of her absences, the plausible scheduling conflicts, the precisely calibrated warmth whenever they did overlap—all of it engineered to be invisible, and doubly so to Thea specifically, given how *abysmally* bad her best friend usually was at the entire social branch of things.

But... She'd clearly been wrong.

Before she could open her mouth—or could even *begin* assembling an answer, an excuse, *anything*—Thea was already continuing.

"I finally have a way to talk to you, Kara. About *everything*."

Thea took a deep breath.

Then she looked up, tilting her face toward the ceiling as though addressing it directly.

"Sovereign, Mentor-Mandated Quiet Time."

Karania simply stared at her friend, *utterly lost* as to what was even happening right now.

But then—almost immediately—her subconscious mind noted the silence.

The Sovereign *had not replied*, despite being *directly* addressed.

Karania had spent the past month cataloguing the thing's behaviours, its response latencies, its little manipulations, and in all that time it had never once, not a single time, simply *ignored* a direct invocation like this.

"... *What...*"

"We can talk now," Thea said. "About *everything*."

And she smiled—openly, brightly, like a massive weight had just fallen clean off her shoulders.

The sight sent frissons down Kara's spine...