

## Arc 1 - Chapter 134 - Questionable Feelings

Thea was woken up before her usual alarm by the calm, familiar voice of the Sovereign gently nudging her awake. “Thea, you have a visitor at the door.”

Still groggy but shaking off the remnants of sleep, she gestured for the Sovereign to open the door. She sat up in bed, curiosity piqued, wondering who could be showing up in the middle of the night.

“Kara!”

Recognizing the figure instantly, Thea half-bolted out of bed, only to suddenly remember she was completely naked. The realisation stopped her in her tracks—hugging your squadmate in that state, no matter how much you missed them, was definitely not appropriate; even if nakedness itself wasn’t exactly a rarity in the UHF, considering the respawn protocols.

Karania’s soft, subdued laughter filled the room as Thea quickly grabbed her blanket and wrapped it around herself, hobbling over with a mixture of embarrassment and excitement.

“You know, you could have just waited for me to come over,” Karania remarked, a hint of exasperation in her voice as she accepted Thea’s blanket-covered hug. “But it’s good to see you again too, Thea. You’re doing alright, I hope?”

It had only been a few days since they’d last seen each other, but to Thea, it felt like an eternity. Karania likely couldn’t understand the sheer relief washing over Thea at seeing her again, considering everything that had happened since she’d found herself in that psychologist’s office.

With Karania back, Thea could finally unload all the thoughts, experiences, and worries she’d been bottling up over the past few days.

The Sovereign had been the only one available to listen—and she had checked, just to make sure—but Karania was still the only person in Alpha Squad fully cleared to hear everything Thea had to say, thanks to her role as squad medic, which required her to be up-to-date on anything that could affect Thea’s health or the well-being of the rest of the squad.

Now, with her trusted friend back, Thea could finally share everything she’d been holding in, knowing that Karania would understand and help her navigate the chaos of her recent experiences to the best of her, substantial, abilities.

“Uh-huh!” Thea chirped, pulling Kara further into the room and gesturing for her to sit on the bed. She jumped back into it herself, still wrapped in her blanket. “It’s been... hectic. There’s *so much* to catch up on—*way* too much for right now. But how are you? And what was that meeting all about yesterday, if you can share? We could’ve really used you during the after-action report... We had to sit through *Isabella’s version* of events—and you can probably imagine how that went.”

Karania nodded, a flicker of regret crossing her face. “Yeah, kinda wish I’d been there for that. Not gonna lie, I’d pay to see Isabella’s ‘report’ on all that... You think Corvus recorded it? I mean, it’s the report after our first assessment; no way he didn’t hit record, right?”

“*Definitely*,” Thea grinned. “Corvus probably has it saved in three different folders already. You know how he is—he’s probably dissecting every second of it as we speak.”

Karania smiled, though it was tinged with fatigue. “As for me? I’m... well, just really, extremely exhausted. The assessment was way more... Way more than I expected.”

Thea’s eyes widened at that.

She had *never* heard Karania openly admit she was exhausted before, especially not “extremely” exhausted—it was a rare and unsettling admission from her otherwise always-energetic friend.

‘*Kara must be completely drained if she’s saying it outright*,’ Thea thought, a surge of concern washing over her.

Without a second thought, Thea made a quick executive decision.

She tugged Karania closer onto the bed, fully ignoring her half-hearted attempts to resist. “Nope, you’re staying here and getting some sleep! At least until the award ceremony. I’m not letting you go back to your room just to brood over whatever it is geniuses like you brood over. Get your clothes off and get under these covers—chop chop!”

Karania fought for a brief few seconds, then sighed and ultimately gave in, stripping off her uniform down to her underwear and crawling into bed beside Thea, who eagerly lifted the blankets to make room.

Thea snuggled up to her friend and she could feel Karania tense up for a moment, before the tension slowly drained from her frame.

“This is better, right?” Thea whispered, her voice soft and reassuring.

Karania’s cheeks flushed red, likely from the warmth of the preheated blankets, as she mumbled, “Yeah... comfy...”

She stayed quiet for a moment, seemingly content, but then suddenly shook her head. “Wait, no—I need to tell you something. It’s important.”

Thea pulled back slightly, giving Karania the space she needed.

She sat up, her expression shifting to one of focused attention. “Okay. I’m listening.”

“Thea, you *can’t* trust the Sovereign,” Karania said, her voice low and deadly serious. The intensity in her eyes caught Thea completely off-guard. “My meeting—it was with it, or *her*, I don’t even know. The Sovereign *isn’t* what we thought she was.”

Thea blinked, her mind racing.

She was about to ask what Karania meant, specifically, but her friend quickly held up her hands, a silent plea for patience.

“Just... don’t trust the Sovereign unconditionally, alright? At the very least, she’s bound to the UHF’s upper command. She’s not your friend, not really. If she thinks you’re a threat to the UHF, even by accident, she won’t hesitate to act. And believe me, that could mean anything—from throwing you off the ship to worse. There’s nothing stopping her from simply voiding your Soul into space, as far as I can tell.”

Karania’s words were laced with a harsh edge, an almost accusatory tone that made Thea’s stomach churn. She felt like she was missing some vital piece of context.

Up until now, she hadn’t seen any reason to distrust the Sovereign; the AI had been nothing but accommodating during her time with the UHF.

But if Karania, her most trusted friend, was saying otherwise, there had to be a good reason.

Thea nodded, though her mind was spinning.

She knew the Sovereign wasn’t a true ally and was beholden to the UHF’s command structure, probably logging everything she did. But the way Karania spoke—there was an undercurrent of fear, a warning that Thea hadn’t expected.

This wasn’t just caution; this was genuine *fear*.

And anything that could put fear into *Karania*, of all people, had Thea more than on edge.

She wanted to press for more information, to understand why Karania seemed so shaken, but the exhaustion in her friend’s eyes made it clear that this wasn’t the time to pry.

“I’ve been stuck in a room with her—the Sovereign—for hours. Maybe half a day, maybe more, I lost track. She wanted to talk, to answer questions. I asked about you—the Focus Overdraws, why you didn’t get any kind of briefing on Psyker stuff. So many things...” Karania’s voice faltered, her gaze drifting as if she was lost in the memories of the conversation.

She took a deep breath and continued, her voice tight. “The Sovereign *knew*, Thea. She knew *all* of it. She didn’t forget; she was just... waiting. Waiting for me to come out of the assessment, waiting to talk. To clear things up... To scheme.”

Karania’s words were sharp and urgent, but Thea struggled to keep up, her mind failing to fully grasp the implications. Karania seemed to sense this, her frustration mounting as she tried to articulate the gravity of what she had learned.

She let out a heavy sigh, her shoulders slumping.

“I’m going too fast, aren’t I?” Karania admitted, running a hand through her hair in agitation. “It’s just... you *need* to know. The Sovereign isn’t just some random AI doing its job. There’s something *more* there, but it’s not just an oversight or malfunction. It’s *intentional*.”

Karania's eyes sparkled for a brief moment, as a thought came to her.

"The Sovereign wasn't *ordered* to speak with me, Thea," she said slowly, enunciating each word carefully to drive the point home.

Thea's eyes widened as the weight of Karania's words sank in and realisation finally struck.

"W...What...? But... that's not possible," Thea stammered, disbelief etched across her face.

A part of her wanted to question Karania's certainty, but she knew her friend wouldn't risk making such a bold, downright treasonous claim without being absolutely sure—especially with the knowledge that the Sovereign could hear their every word at this very moment.

"Not unless the Sovereign is something other than what we've always been told," Karania nodded, a faint, almost bitter smile crossing her lips. "I don't think she's just the ship's AI, Thea. And the fact that I can sit here and tell you all of this, even knowing she's listening, means she doesn't mind you knowing it either."

Thea's mind whirled, trying to process the implications of Karania's warning. A dozen theories flashed through her thoughts, but none seemed to fully fit.

Yet one memory surfaced, nagging at her.

"It... *she* told me how to get around her programming," Thea mumbled, almost to herself, but Karania's ears perked up immediately.

"She did?" Karania asked, her curiosity piqued, leaning in closer. "What exactly did she say?"

"Yeah," Thea nodded, her voice still tinged with disbelief. "After the big meeting—which, by the way, we need to set aside an entire evening to talk about—I wanted to know how you guys were doing in the assessment. The Sovereign told me she couldn't share that information directly because of her orders. But then she said something like, '*I can try to connect you for a call, but anyone still in the assessment won't be able to answer, and the others will be too busy to pick up.*' She effectively told me how to bypass that initial order, by requesting a different way to get the information—that can't be intended, right?"

"That checks out," Karania replied, rubbing her temples as though piecing together a puzzle in her mind. "Whatever the Sovereign actually is, she's definitely not just the ship's AI. She's something a lot more complex, although I still don't know exactly what that is."

Karania glanced up at the ceiling, addressing the invisible presence above them. "You wouldn't mind shedding some light on this for us, would you, Sovereign?"

The Sovereign's response was immediate, her voice as calm and unwavering as always. "My apologies, but I am not authorised to discuss the nature of ship AIs with Recruits. Please be aware that the conversation you're engaging in would be considered... *highly problematic* ...under different circumstances. I *strongly* advise against making such statements in public or in the presence of others. Your quarters are considered private spaces, which means only I have access to what transpires here, unless there is a direct

threat to UHF interests. In such cases, I am mandated to report to Captain Cross immediately.”

Karania let out a long, defeated sigh, the kind that seemed to carry the weight of every unanswered question and unsettling revelation she’d been wrestling with. Her eyes, heavy with exhaustion, drifted away from Thea’s, a silent acknowledgment that they had reached the limit of what could be discussed tonight.

“We’ll go over everything in more detail soon, I promise,” Karania murmured, her voice tinged with fatigue. “There’s so much to unpack, but I need... I need some rest first. We both do, I’d imagine.”

Thea, noticing the dark circles under Karania’s eyes and the weariness in her voice, immediately agreed to shelve any further conversation with a nod.

As much as she wanted to dig deeper, to understand more about what Karania had learned and pick her brain about her own issues, she knew her friend was teetering on the edge.

Gently, she pushed Karania down into the pillow, pulling the covers over her with a tenderness that surprised even herself.

“Rest now,” Thea whispered, snuggling up beside her friend.

The warmth of their shared space, coupled with the familiar comfort of having Karania close, eased some of the tension that had knotted in her chest throughout their conversation.

But sleep didn’t come easily for Thea.

Her mind was a whirlwind of thoughts—questions about the Sovereign, the implications of what Karania had shared, and what it all meant for her and Alpha Squad. The puzzle pieces refused to fit together at all, and the more she tried to force them, the more elusive sleep became.

Next to her, Karania’s breathing was still quick and shallow for a while—even more so than when they had talked about the Sovereign—likely processing the high-stakes reveals they had just discussed just as much as Thea herself was. She could also clearly hear her friend’s rapidly beating heart through the covers, a subtle reminder of the tension that had lingered in the room just moments before.

Eventually, though, Karania’s breathing and heart rate began to slow, each inhale and exhale growing more rhythmic and soft as the exhaustion finally gave way to sleepiness.

The steady rise and fall of her chest became a comforting lullaby for Thea, and slowly, the swirling thoughts in her mind began to quiet as well, allowing her to drift off...

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Thea woke up feeling an unusual chill spreading across her stomach, a sensation that was starkly different from the usual warmth of her bed.

'*What the...?*' she thought groggily, struggling to make sense of the odd coldness and her restricted movements. It didn't take long for her to figure out the culprit—a cascade of dark auburn hair splayed across her face, tickling her nose and lips, filling her mouth with loose strands. She tried to turn her head, gasping for air, but the hair only tangled further, making her feel like she was suffocating in a sea of coppery strands.

Karania had rolled on top of her at some point during the night, her body sprawled awkwardly across Thea's, and her cold cybernetic arm was pressed firmly against Thea's exposed stomach and chest, the metal radiating a chill that seeped right into her skin.

"Kara..." Thea mumbled through the thick tangle of hair, trying to wriggle free while simultaneously pushing Karania's weight off of her. "Kara, I swear... *Get off!*"

But Karania, still lost in a half-asleep daze, didn't budge. She mumbled something incoherent, her arm tightening slightly in her sleep, almost as if she were cuddling a favorite blanket.

With an exasperated sigh, Thea heaved her body sideways, giving Karania a solid push that sent her rolling across the bed, finally freeing Thea from the tangled mess of hair and cybernetic limbs.

"Kara! Get the fuck off of me!" she snapped, catching her breath as she finally wriggled free.

Karania landed with a thud on the opposite side of the bed, her eyes blinking open in confusion. She groggily rubbed her face, her expression dazed and entirely unprepared for the sudden shift from her peaceful sleep.

"Huh...? What...?" Karania mumbled, her voice thick with sleep, as she tried to make sense of why she was suddenly lying on the other side of the bed, completely splayed out and tangled over herself. She blinked a few more times, clearly still trying to piece together how and why she had ended up in that situation.

She sat up slowly, her cheeks a shade redder than usual as she brushed her hair back, glancing at Thea, who was generously stretching herself with a big yawn.

"Morning, I guess..." Thea mumbled, still trying to shake off the last remnants of sleep. She glanced over at Karania as she heard her friend's heartbeat accelerate, who *did* seem unusually flustered. She hoped that she hadn't scared Kara too much by waking her with a free-fall experience, "You okay? Sorry for throwing you, but you were, like, *dead weight* on top of me."

Karania cleared her throat, trying to mask her awkwardness with a smile. "Yeah, yeah... Sorry about that. Guess I really clocked out there..."

She avoided eye contact as she ran a hand through her dishevelled hair, the tips of her ears visibly red.

The two got dressed in relative silence, Thea tossing her uniform on with practised ease, leaving her buttons for last as she always hated fumbling around with them right after waking up.

Karania seemed to have a similar issue with them, as she was fumbling slightly with her own uniform as well, her fingers lingering a bit longer on the buttons as she tried to refocus herself.

Thea caught the faint blush that crept up Karania's neck but dismissed it as nothing more than leftover grogginess coupled with the scare she had given her with that throw.

"Feel more rested now?" Thea asked, tugging on her socks and casting a glance toward her friend. "I know you were pretty wiped last night."

Karania nodded, her expression still tinged with that slight embarrassment. "Yeah, I feel a lot better. Took me a bit to fall asleep, but... my dreams were nice, at least," she said, her tone light but her cheeks betraying a hint of colour.

Thea smiled at that, a bit relieved. "Well, if you ever need to crash here again, just say the word. You can always—"

"N-no!" Karania interjected, a little too quickly, her voice higher than usual. She coughed, trying to regain her composure. "I mean, no thanks. I'm good. I really appreciate it, but, uh, my own bed's just fine."

Thea blinked, momentarily taken aback by the intensity of Karania's refusal. She shrugged, hiding a tiny pang of guilt underneath it.

'*Maybe I snored or something...?*' she thought, brushing it off.

"Alright, suit yourself," she said with a small laugh, trying to ease whatever strange tension had crept between them.

As they made their way to the door, Thea couldn't help but feel a renewed sense of calm, despite the lingering questions from the previous night.

"We'll have to pick up that conversation later," she said, nudging Karania lightly. "I still need to know what the Sovereign's deal is. I couldn't quite grasp everything you were trying to say yesterday... But we should be fine, right?"

Karania nodded, this time more composed, though a faint smile played on her lips. "Yeah, we will. It's... a lot to unpack, for sure. We should be fine, considering that the Sovereign didn't space us last night... But, anyway, thanks, Thea. For the night... Maybe I *will* actually take you up on that previous offer someday, if I feel like I need some quality Thea-time again."

With a final exchange of smiles, Thea genuinely happy to hear that she apparently hadn't messed up *too much* as a sleeping-buddy, they stepped out of the room, leaving the strange mix of comfort and confusion behind, at least for now.

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Walking into the giant assembly hall with the rest of Alpha Squad felt surreal for Thea on multiple levels. The vast room was just as imposing as it had been when she first stood here during their post-integration welcome, greeted by Major Quinn herself.

That day felt like a distant memory, as if it belonged to another life—back when she'd been a bundle of nerves, struggling to find her place among the sea of Recruits.

She remembered vividly how she'd anxiously scanned the rows, unsure of where to sit and who to talk to, feeling every bit the outcast.

Now, things were different.

Thea walked with purpose, her posture upright and confident, directly behind Corvus with Karania at and the rest of her squadmates at her back. Clad in their UHF uniforms, Alpha Squad moved toward the front of the assembly hall, cutting a path through the crowd that were all trying to find their assigned seats, with their mere presence.

She could feel the weight of numerous eyes on them, a mixture of admiration, curiosity, and perhaps even envy, as they were instantly recognizable despite their relatively short time as a part of the UHF marines.

Where the Thea of a month ago would have shrunk under the scrutiny, trying to make herself as small and unnoticeable as possible, now she felt a sense of pride swell within her chest.

The stares didn't make her want to flee... not entirely, at least; instead, for once, they felt more like a challenge she was willing to meet. Her heart beat rapidly under the pressure of so many eyes, but there was no blind panic—just a whole lot of anxiety, kept in check by the members of the squad around her and the experiences of the past weeks that had steeled her knowledge of belonging here.

Her sharp ears picked up fragments of hushed conversations from the surrounding Recruits, and though she tried to tune them out at first, curiosity got the best of her.

“Holy shit! That's Alpha Squad, isn't it?” a voice whispered excitedly, just loud enough for Thea to catch. “Look, that's the big one—Isabella, right? No way I'm wrong on that!”

Thea glanced back at Isabella, who towered behind her and was helping Desmond move, who was curiously still missing his leg, seemingly completely oblivious to the chatter—or perhaps simply used to it. She suppressed a small smile, feeling a strange sense of camaraderie in knowing that they were being recognized by sight alone.

More whispers filled the air as Alpha Squad continued their march toward the front of the hall, each murmur dripping with excitement, curiosity, and a tinge of fear.

“Yeah, that's *definitely* them. I heard Isabella took on a whole platoon by herself on the very first day, just charging into melee with her giant chainsword like it was nothing. Heard people call her '*The Juggernaut*'—I mean... Look at her! She could rip you apart with her bare hands; imagine what a chainsword could do!”



“I don’t *have* to imagine,” a second voice replied with a clear cringe in their voice. “I literally fought her during CQC class—she’s even more terrifying than you know... Just... Trust me on that. Don’t piss her off, ever. As much as I love you, brother, I won’t back you up if you ever do.”

“Is that Karania in front of her? I heard she can patch you up with just a drop of her own blood. ‘*The Blood Witch*,’ right? Some people say she doesn’t even feel pain, just stitches herself up and keeps going. I swear, I saw her throw *vials of her own fucking blood* that heal people mid-fight. Creepy shit, but honestly kinda badass.”

Then, another piece of the conversation caught Thea’s attention even more, also pertaining to Karania, specifically.

“She’s kind of a freak, no? Like... all about blood, body augmentation—You saw the fucking CQC class recordings, man. That fight with the other Alpha Squad member? Nails and hair...? That’s fucked up, dude.”

She felt a surge of anger rise up, but it was quickly doused in utter confusion by the next person’s response.

“I mean... Yeah, sure. But come on, that’s kinda fucking hot, no? She’s got that whole crazy genius thing going on... I *definitely* wouldn’t mind getting down and dirty in a bit of her blood, if you catch my drift.”

“Dude. Dude, what? No! *Absolutely* not. What the fuck? I don’t—What the fuck, man?”

Tuning out that part of the conversation for more reasons than she could really list, Thea focused on other parts of the assembly.

“That’s gotta be Lucas! The one they call ‘*The Wall*’? Fuck me, I can see *why*,” another voice whispered, filled with awe. “I heard he tanked a whole barrage of rockets with that shield of his. Dude’s an absolute monster.”

“Yeah, I’d feel a lot safer with someone like him around,” another person added, clearly impressed.

Then, a higher-pitched, definitely female voice chimed in with a tone that made Thea’s skin crawl. “Oh, I wouldn’t mind having someone like him around for protection... *Lots and lots of protection*. I’d love to see if he’s as much of a *monster* as they say he is...”

Thea’s face scrunched up in confusion and disgust as she tried to process what she’d just heard. Some of the implications were lost on her, but the tone was enough to make her want to shut it out entirely.

Shaking her head to clear the unsettling thoughts, she did her best to refocus on something else—*anything* else.

‘*What the fuck is wrong with everyone here?!*’ she thought, trying to tune out the rest of the whispers that were starting to get under her skin.

As they continued their walk toward the front of the assembly hall, more whispers inevitably reached Thea's ears, this time focusing on the visible cybernetics that several members of Alpha Squad were sporting.

"Did you see the Cyan's hand? And her jaw? They're full-on cybernetic now," one Recruit murmured, his voice a mix of awe and unease. "I heard she lost them both in a fight with some crazy Psyker. Can't believe she's still standing after that."

"Yeah, but look at Karania," another whispered, nodding toward the medic's fully cybernetic arm. "That's not just her hand, though. It's the entire fucking arm? Heard she sacrificed it to save an officer's life during the big assault on the wall... Looks a bit creepy, but also kinda cool. Makes you wonder what else they're all hiding under those uniforms."

A third voice chimed in, this one sounding almost relieved. "Well, at least it's not just *us* who got messed up like this. If even Alpha Squad, of all people, didn't get out of the assessment unscathed, I don't feel so bad about these legs here."

Thea saw the person tap two cybernetic replacements out of the corner of her eye as they passed the group.

"Look, even Desmond's lost his leg completely," another Recruit added more quietly, now that they were closer, their tone tinged with sympathy. "Saw him hobbling in earlier but wasn't sure—no prosthetic yet. Makes you realise that even the best of the best are still human... sort of."

These whispers were different from the earlier ones—less gossipy, more grounded in the shared reality of the Recruits who had all been through their own trials. There was a sense of kinship in the way they talked about the injuries, a mutual understanding that, despite the awe and respect Alpha Squad seemed to command already, they too had paid a heavy price.

Just before they finally reached the front, Thea's ears caught something she had been trying her hardest to ignore. It wasn't the first whisper of that kind she had overheard, but for some reason, this one pierced through her mental defences like a knife.

"The fucking Cyan's still in Alpha Squad? Seriously, who's it fucking to keep its spot? Bet it's the squad leader, right?" one voice sneered, dripping with disdain.

"Probably all of them," another voice chimed in with a mocking laugh. "I heard even some of the Lieutenants get a turn—gotta keep things smooth with the higher-ups, you know? No shot a fucking midworld bitch like that would keep the spot otherwise."

A third voice cut in, even nastier than the rest. "Who'd even want to touch a Cyan, though? That freak would probably steal your Soul and leave you dead in the gutter. And those creepy eyes? Good luck getting it up with that staring at you—maybe if you put a bag over its head... The body is pretty nice, at least; small enough to toss around too."

Thea felt a flash of anger, hot and sharp, coursing through her veins, but she forced herself to keep moving, her expression a carefully controlled mask as she stared straight ahead.

The harsh words stung more than she wanted to admit, reopening wounds she thought had started to finally close.

It had been such a tumultuous month, so full of battles, breakthroughs, and near-death experiences, that she had almost forgotten about this kind of prejudice against her—*almost*.

What enraged her the most was how far from the truth these sneering accusations were.

She had *earned* her spot in Alpha Squad, unequivocally.

Major Quinn had even demonstrated her capabilities to everyone on the day of their integration, proving her worth beyond any doubt. But still, some people couldn't see past their own bullshit, blindly refusing to acknowledge her achievements, her skill, her very *right* to be here.

Thea had fought tooth and nail for her place in Alpha Squad, battling through the brutal Cube Trial and surviving horrors inside the assessment that would have utterly *shattered* most of the Recruits around her; if not all of them.

Yet, to so many, she was still just a Cyan—a Midworld reject, some piece of trash dragged up to the stars by chance rather than skill. A label that, no matter how hard she fought, apparently still overshadowed everything she had done, every battle she had won.

The hot anger in her veins turned to ice abruptly, her breath suddenly visible as it misted in the freezing air emanating from her skin.

She was right on the edge of losing control, her emotions boiling over as she half-turned towards the voices, ready to unleash her fury on the faceless cowards behind her; to really show them just why she belonged in Alpha Squad with her bare hands.

But before she could fully lose control and act, she felt a familiar hand rest gently on her shoulder, grounding her.

"It's okay, Thea," Karania's soft voice whispered in her ear, steady and soothing.

The medic had leaned closer, her presence a calming anchor in the sea of Thea's swirling emotions. "Just breathe. I'm right here. We're almost at the seats; just keep walking and breathing, alright?"

Thea nodded slightly, letting Karania's words wash over her, pulling her back from the brink.

The anger didn't vanish entirely, but with Karania by her side, it was easier to push it down, to keep moving forward. A few moments passed before the chill that had gripped Thea's chest began to recede, leaving her feeling both confused and slightly embarrassed.

*'Why did I react like that? I've dealt with this kind of shit my whole life; it's not like it's anything new. So why would it bother me now...?'* she thought, trying to make sense of the sudden surge of emotion. It didn't make sense to her, this newfound quickness to anger, this raw *edge* she couldn't seem to dull.

Frustrated with herself, she decided to block out the whispers surrounding the squad, using her high Perception to tune out every voice beyond their immediate group.

Her curiosity had already been *more* than satisfied.

Moments later, they reached their assigned seats in the middle section of the front row, directly in front of the podium.

Alpha Squad settled in, Karania's hand finding Thea's and squeezing gently—an unfamiliar but welcome comfort that Thea didn't shy away from, finding unexpected solace in the small connection.

The hall around them continued to fill, minute by minute, as more and more Recruits trickled in, taking their places.

The noise level swelled with each new squad entering, growing into a chaotic blend of chatter, laughter, and excited reunions.

Old friends from before the assessment greeted each other for the first time in a month, battle brothers who had fought side by side exchanged triumphant stories, and whispered rumours about everything from combat feats to unexpected deaths and funny anecdotes rippled through the crowd.

Thea, however, heard none of it.

She focused on the quiet within her own mind, a stillness that offered refuge from the doubts and anger that had tried to consume her earlier. It was a silence that didn't criticise, didn't question her worth, and didn't fuel her frustration.

After what felt like only a few moments, Thea felt Karania's hand squeeze harder around hers, pulling her attention back to the present.

She blinked and looked up, realising that more time had passed than she'd realised.

The lights in the assembly hall had dimmed, and the podium at the front was now bathed in light. Standing there, with a proud smile, was Major Quinn, her presence commanding the entire room's attention.

Thea let her Perception slowly return, focusing intently on Major Quinn, shutting out any other distractions that might threaten her focus. She didn't want to give the whispers a chance to worm their way back in.

Major Quinn took her place at the centre of the podium, her gaze sweeping over the gathered Marines—thousands of them, all seated and attentive. She let the silence linger for a moment, as if savouring the sight of *her* assembled Recruits, before finally speaking, her voice confident, warm and authoritative.

“Welcome back, Recruits. Or should I rather say, *Marines*? It is good to see all of you again...”