

Arc 1 - Chapter 136 - Eyes On

PoV: Rachel Veronica Masters

Excitement buzzed through the assembly hall, an electric energy that was contagious, surrounding every Recruit present.

Of course, excitement *always* followed Rachel, but this was different.

This time, the charged atmosphere of the post-assessment award ceremony was almost unbearable for her.

For Rachel Veronica Masters, there was little room for excitement.

Only simmering contempt.

Her eyes drifted to the left again, as they had several times during Major Quinn's speech, locking onto the focus of her resentment: *Lucas Callahan*.

The disgusting slab of meat who had somehow taken her *rightful* place as the defensive heavy in Alpha Squad.

It didn't make sense. It had to be some Void-born miracle, paid for in blood; a cosmic *joke*.

Rachel was the first-born daughter of Raymond Oleaven Masters and Veronica Balira Masters, the fourth-generation legacy of the prestigious Masters family from the Vespera system.

She had received the best of everything—the finest training credits could buy, access to the deepest levels of pre-integration education, the most cutting-edge gene alterations, and the most advanced training stimulants that could be sourced outside the Core Worlds.

Her spot in Alpha Squad had been guaranteed. She was *meant* to be there.

When she woke up in the respawn chamber and saw her impressive Base Attributes, she had felt that familiar rush of triumph. A Silver-rarity Ability right from the start had only cemented her certainty.

Her parents had told her this was as good as a golden ticket into Alpha Squad.

They hadn't been able to say it outright, of course, but the Masters family hadn't thrived for three generations in the UHF Marines by playing by the System's rules.

They'd found loopholes, workarounds.

They knew how the System operated and how it tried to enforce its secrecy on people, so finding ways to still impart important System-related knowledge onto Rachel had been as simple as smashing through a Freak's helmet and pulverising the weak bones underneath with her Glassbane.

For someone like Rachel, who had both the looks and the brains to match her power, translating her family's long years of veiled System-tutorship into tangible, actionable System-knowledge after Integration had been easy.

She'd been prepared for her place in Alpha Squad.

So when the ceremony arrived, and instead of her name being called, it was Lucas Callahan—the nobody from some backwater planet that had stooped as low as to worship some gutter-trash pagan gods—who was introduced as an Alpha Squad member, her world shifted.

Her rightful place, taken by this utter *nobody*.

Who did he think he was, stealing her position like that? The thought burned inside her every time she saw him.

Alpha Squad. That was supposed to be *hers*.

And now, instead of standing on that podium where she belonged, above the rest of the worthless Recruits inside this room, she had been relegated to *Beta Squad*.

The second-rate squad.

An afterthought, a consolation prize, like a cheap, off-cut slice of Orinur steak.

Who did he—

“You think you're gonna have a spot in this, Rachel?” Her internal fuming was abruptly interrupted by one of her squadmates. Patrick, of course—Who else?

Her perfectly practised smile never wavered, even as the contempt inside her simmered hotter. She'd been taught better than to let others see the turmoil beneath the surface—don't hand people a weapon whose sole purpose it was to be used for backstabbing.

“Ahh... I don't really know... I don't think I did that great, honestly,” she replied, her voice soft with faux modesty. She played the part perfectly. In reality, she knew she'd be called up for multiple awards.

She hadn't spent the last month pushing herself beyond the breaking point for nothing.

Her parents' voices echoed in her mind, reminding her of the one golden rule she had been taught before Integration: The first assessment determined *everything*.

Set yourself apart now, or spend the rest of the year having to drag herself through the commoners. And Rachel had no intention of being left in the dust like that.

She'd fought, bled, and died out there—sometimes literally—and she knew she'd left a few notable marks on the battlefield, ones that couldn't be ignored, no matter what kind of UHF political fuckery was going on behind the scenes that had kept her from being called up to Alpha Squad from the get-go.

“Ha, always with the modesty... Name a more iconic duo, eh?” Patrick chuckled, clearly unconvinced by her self-effacing words. His laughter was mirrored by Mayra, who jumped in almost immediately.

“Yeah, I betcha gettin' at least one of them awards, Rachi!” Mayra's voice grated on her nerves, that lazy drawl a constant reminder of just *how far* beneath her these people really were.

And ‘*Rachi?*’ The nickname made Rachel want to swing her Glassbane right into that stup—She loathed it.

But she swallowed her irritation, as she had done a thousand times before.

It wasn't as if Patrick was much better, however.

His single-minded obsession with becoming "the greatest sniper in the UHF" was downright laughable. The guy thought he could someday rival that absolute *monster*.

The sniper—the one in Alpha Squad.

Rachel had seen the recordings of that shooting trial in Bullseye's Rifles, recordings that the UHF had tried to keep under wraps. Connections had, as always, trumped everything.

That sniper? That midworld cyan? It had put Rachel on high alert from the moment she'd seen it pull off those impossible shots.

Patrick didn't stand a chance, not in a thousand years.

It had initially been unthinkable, the idea that some midworld trash—worse, a *cyan*—had taken one of the Alpha Squad spots that was rightfully Rachel's.

But after Major Quinn's presentation right at the Integration ceremony, after seeing the thing's brutal ferocity in the CQC class and the cold precision in that shooting trial? She had to begrudgingly admit the UHF had made the right choice.

That sniper wasn't a diversity hire or some feel-good political move to appease the midworld savages and keep them from rioting.

No, that *thing* was dangerous.

Likely the most dangerous Recruit on this entire ship; possibly even rivalling Rachel herself, as much as the very thought of admitting it made her stomach turn.

How could someone from such a low-tier planet, a *Cyan* no less, even compare to her? The mere idea of it was offensive.

But reality had a way of cutting through her hard-earned pride, and the truth was staring her in the face. If there was one thing her parents had always imparted upon her, it was that pride had no place in the world of truths; regardless of how much she wanted to deny it.

“Ahh, I’m sure we all did great together. There’s a reason we’re Beta Squad, after all, right? If we’re not giving Alpha Squad a run for their credits, then who else would?” Rachel chimed in with her usual sweet tone, masking her inner thoughts with a well-practised, exaggerated giggle behind her hand. Every word was carefully placed, every movement rehearsed—she had perfected this facade since childhood, after all.

Her squadmates grinned, falling into their predictable responses.

Patrick, as usual, was quick with his overly familiar backslap, the touch of which almost made Rachel wince. She hated how handsy he was, his attempts at camaraderie always coming off as clumsy and forced.

But she didn’t let it show.

Instead, she smiled through it, pretending that Patrick’s crude gestures were just part of the fun. Her perfectly polished mask never slipped, even as her mind wandered elsewhere.

‘Just a few more weeks and I’ll never have to see these savages again,’ she thought to herself, eagerly counting down the minutes until the awards truly started to be handed out.

Soon, she would be up there, her highlights playing on the screen for everyone to see—the culmination of all her hard work and superior breeding on full display.

The thought of it filled her with a sense of righteous vindication.

She could already imagine Lucas Callahan’s listless face when her name was announced, instead of his. The confusion, the shock, maybe even a flicker of fear as he realised that his spot in Alpha Squad was on borrowed time.

He’ll know it’s over for him, she thought, her chest warming at the image of his downfall.

For the first time that day, a small, genuine smile tugged at her lips, revealing a hint of the sharp, gleaming teeth beneath...

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PoV: Tiberius Soren

The noisy chatter around Tiberius was of no real concern to him.

He didn’t care about the other Recruits milling around, their voices blending into an indistinct hum. None of them mattered—not really. They could be as loud as they wanted, because none of them could even attempt to stand their ground if he ever decided to shut them up.

The only person that actually held his attention, the one who currently filled his laser-focused gaze and the only one that could stop him from doing what he wanted, was Isabella Itoku—Alpha Squad’s Offensive Heavy.

She was the only one worth watching, the only one who mattered.

He had aimed for that spot himself, convinced that his Silver-rarity Ability right at Integration would be enough to secure him entry into Alpha Squad.

It should've been a guaranteed victory—until he heard her name called.

A *midworlder*, much to his surprise, but he didn't give much of a damn about politics or where anyone came from. What mattered to him was simple: Itoku had beaten him to the punch, and he couldn't help but bristle at it.

But as he had watched her over the course of the week leading up to the assessment, he noticed something glaring. A *weakness*, one *he* didn't share:

She was a melee fighter, a true beast in close combat, sure, but what good was that in a battlefield littered with lasers, explosives, and horrendous stuff like IgT-throwers? What good was all that strength when 99% of the time, you had to engage enemies from a distance?

That was where *he* came in—the perfect replacement.

Tiberius wasn't just another muscle-bound brute swinging fists or wielding a giant weapon.

He was a sharpshooter, someone who specialised specifically in ranged combat as an Offensive Heavy, a niche he had honed from a young age.

His father, a Marine before him—not a good one, but a Marine that had survived long enough to retire nevertheless—had drilled into him the importance of range. He had taught him that in the UHF, versatility was key, but nothing could beat the advantage of eliminating your target before they had a chance to truly retaliate.

That lesson had shaped his entire focus.

While Itoku's prowess in single combat was undeniable, there were limits to her effectiveness in real-world engagements. Tiberius knew that if they were ever matched up face-to-face, he might only win two out of ten fights—and even those would require trickery or exploiting her weaker left-hand side coupled with a good dose of luck.

But in an actual battlefield? Where bullets and grenades flew before anyone could even think of getting up close? That was *his* domain.

Melee-focused Marines didn't truly shine until the higher Tiers when defensive Abilities and high-Tier armors let them close the gap without getting obliterated. Right now, though, at the start of their careers, the UHF was better off with someone like *him*—a ranged specialist who could dominate from a distance; who could cull entire battle lines by himself, so that the rest of his squad could operate unimpeded.

Itoku might've been the right pick for Alpha Squad based on the Cube Trial results, but that was an artificial test—for him, it had even been a close-quarters battlefield where his skills hadn't been fully being able to be displayed.

But the assessment? That was a different story.

The Itoku woman was bound to have struggled to get close enough to really let her expertise shine, as the engagements and firefights with the Stellar Republic's superior numbers had been truly lop-sided in the enemy's favour, almost every step of the way.

Tiberius, meanwhile, had been living the dream: A target-rich environment over medium-long distances. In the open, in real combat where distance was king, where tactics and precision won battles—that was where he had definitely proved he deserved her spot.

His massive Talon rifle had proven the perfect weapon for the assessment too, allowing him to fully showcase his worth. As a fully-automatic, high-calibre battle rifle, it struck the ideal balance between raw power, fire rate for suppressive purposes and precision at range.

He'd racked up kills in the hundreds during the first month alone—far more than most Marines could boast even years into their career.

It was only a matter of time before the UHF took notice.

He was certain he'd be recognized with an award, putting him firmly on the map as a prime candidate for replacing Itoku in Alpha Squad.

But if that didn't pan out, if Itoku managed to somehow eke out ahead of him once again, he did have another path. As much as he preferred the role of Offensive Heavy, he wasn't above eyeing the squad lead position for Alpha Squad.

Corvus Leander Sylarion, in his opinion, was the weakest link—a strategist with little real value in the early stages of a Marine's career.

Sure, Sylarion had his legacy as a second-gen Marine and his already burgeoning reputation for tactical brilliance amongst the Squad Leaders, but none of that mattered at this level.

Recruit-level strategy didn't win assessments. Firepower did.

And Tiberius had that in spades.

He wasn't about to underestimate Sylarion, though. The guy was undoubtedly groomed for leadership, raised with military strategy drilled into his head from an early age.

But, at the end of the day, in the UHF's eyes, who would stand out more: A pure strategist or an Offensive Heavy who was not only a master at ranged combat but also a capable leader when necessary?

The answer seemed more than obvious to Tiberius.

He didn't particularly enjoy leading squads—it wasn't something he craved like some—but he'd forced his way into the role, just in case taking down Itoku proved more difficult than anticipated.

Having a backup plan was always smart.

Better to be prepared and not need it than to be caught off guard.

If he couldn't overthrow her in sheer combat capabilities quite yet, perhaps he could outshine her by proving himself more versatile, more adaptable; taking the long-way around and placing himself directly above her in the pecking order.

The only potential hurdle was getting the rest of Alpha Squad to accept him, but Tiberius wasn't overly worried about that part. He could be easy-going when he needed to be, blending in and letting others warm up to him naturally.

And once they fought alongside him, once they saw how his precision and tactical thinking complemented their own strengths seamlessly? They'd be forced to recognize that he wasn't just some cocky hotshot but an actual upgrade to their previous leader.

He could bring more to the table than Sylarion ever could—though he did regret having to supplant a pure strategist. Strategists had their place, especially in full-scale wars.

But a strategist without capable pieces was as useless as a rifle with no bullets.

And a Recruitment Drive strategist? That was as piece-less as you could get.

The only thing gnawing at him was the uncertainty.

Had he truly done enough? His kill count was impressive, no doubt. His shots had been accurate enough to earn a handful of Accomplishments, and his squad had performed quite well under his direct command.

But would it be enough to topple the titans in Alpha Squad?

Could he really take Sylarion's place, or knock Itoku off her pedestal?

The thought weighed on him, a nagging doubt he couldn't fully shake.

But for now, there was nothing to do but wait and see how the chips ultimately fell...

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PoV: Jin Shi'Zon

"That assessment was insanely brutal," Yonbu lamented for the fourth time since they'd entered the assembly hall, his voice laced with frustration. "How in the Emperor's name were we supposed to make any headway on Alpha Squad in all that?!"

Jin gave a gentle pat to Yonbu's hand, as he so often did to calm down his brusque friend.

"You forget, my friend," Jin replied in his deep, calming voice. "Alpha Squad was in the very same assessment. None of us had any inherent advantages over one another, aside from what we brought in ourselves. Sure, their Silver-rarity Abilities gave them an edge, but nothing we couldn't overcome with time and effort."

Yonbu sighed, shaking his head. “Still feels like we’re fighting an uphill battle. Those guys are on another level.”

Their contrasting personalities—Yonbu’s fiery, restless energy and Jin’s calm, methodical demeanour—had naturally drawn them together. Where Jin was calculating, prone to detailed plans and long-term strategy, Yonbu was direct, hands-on, always looking for the next fight.

Their bond was further cemented by their complementary roles. Jin had a knack for tech—already angling toward a potential future as a Drone Operator or in Electronic Warfare—while Yonbu handled the more straightforward, physical side of things.

He made sure Jin was always covered in the thick of battle, watching his back so Jin could work his tech-magic uninterrupted.

The assessment hadn’t exactly played to their strengths—Jin’s technical prowess was hard to showcase in chaotic frontline combat—but he was confident that they’d made some solid headway toward proving themselves.

They were rising, step by step, and their sights were set firmly on Alpha Squad.

The problem was just how far away that goal seemed.

And frankly, Alpha Squad was downright terrifying.

Desmond, the tech-wiz of the group, had immediately jumped into the Drone Operator path, despite all the obvious challenges that came with it—primarily, the lack of funds for advanced blueprints and the limited processing power to control multiple drones.

Yet, despite these crippling disadvantages, he’d made it into Alpha Squad right from the start.

Jin still couldn’t quite wrap his head around it.

How had Desmond managed to overcome such steep obstacles so quickly? Was it raw skill? Luck? Some other unseen advantage that Jin had no chance to ever figure out...?

For Yonbu, the path was just as daunting.

He had his eyes set on one of the Heavy positions, but both Lucas and Isabella were in a league of their own.

Lucas, the defensive Heavy, didn’t exactly look imposing at first glance, but you didn’t just walk into Alpha Squad without being exceptional. There was truly little known about him, but the CQC classes had shown him ludicrously resilient, even for a defensive heavy, so he was bound to have a strong Vitality focus in his Base Attributes; something every squad would absolutely kill to have in their Defensive Heavy position.

And then there was Isabella, of course.

Everyone knew her from the CQC classes. She had made no attempts at keeping her prowess under wraps at all, showcasing immediately in the first week just why she deserved to be in Alpha Squad as their Offensive Heavy.

She was a true force of nature, a melee specialist with an unrivalled ruthlessness to her. She wasn't just strong either—she was relentless and extremely smart when it came to leveraging her advantages in a fight.

To challenge her for a spot seemed almost laughable, but Jin was certain that there was at least one path to success for the two of them.

For them to stand a chance at breaking into Alpha Squad, they'd have to prove that they could work seamlessly together.

That was key.

The UHF wouldn't just be looking for raw strength or tactical brilliance—they'd be judging teamwork. Being a lone wolf had its place, especially for Battlefield Aces, but an elite squad like Alpha required perfect synergy above all else.

That's where Yonbu and Jin had the upper hand.

Their teamwork was their greatest strength, honed not just through training but by a natural synergy that felt almost freakish in how perfectly they complemented each other, despite their short time as comrades on the battlefield. Countless skirmishes during the assessment had only further sharpened that bond.

Jin had little doubt that in a two-versus-two against most members of Alpha Squad, they'd emerge victorious more often than not.

As long as those matches didn't include the other half of Alpha Squad, of course.

Corvus, Alpha Squad's legacy squad leader, was someone Jin would prefer to avoid. The tactical genius that Corvus had shown in the squad leader meetings and classes was already formidable, and going head-to-head with him in something as tactics-bound as a two-versus-two match was bound to end in tragedy.

But even Corvus wasn't the worst opponent in Alpha Squad to have added to either Isabella or Lucas. No, that title belonged to the other two.

Karania and Thea.

They were the true monsters, the ones Jin had no intention of ever facing in a direct confrontation, if given the choice.

Thea, Alpha Squad's scout/sniper, was far more than the rumours surrounding her heritage suggested. While many recruits were fixated on her midworld Cyan background, dismissing her as some diversity hire or a fluke, Jin had seen the truth right away.

From the moment Major Quinn had singled her out during their very first gathering, it was clear that Thea was *different*. A legendary figure like Major Quinn wasn't the kind of person to make such a public display unless there was a purpose behind it—mainly, to put any doubts about Thea to rest and to serve as a warning to the other recruits: *Don't underestimate her*.

Jin had taken that warning to heart. He wasn't a fool, and he wasn't about to make an enemy of someone *the* Major Quinn herself had personally gone out of her way to mark as dangerous.

And then there was Karania, Alpha Squad's medic.

Jin had barely registered her existence before the assessment.

The CQC class where she'd fought Thea had become infamous among the Recruits for its sheer brutality and technical skill, especially the part where Karania had performed self-surgery on her own throat mid-fight; the images of which still sent a shiver down Jin's spine whenever he thought about it.

It was the kind of thing that left people in stunned silence, but even that hadn't fully put Karania on the map—something Jin had recognized later, had likely been carefully planned by the true genius inside Alpha Squad's ranks.

He hadn't even begun to realise just *how* terrifying Karania truly was until his squad had run into Alpha Squad during the eastern-wall assault. It had been pure chance that their paths had crossed, but that brief encounter had been more than enough to put the fear of the Emperor himself into Jin.

The initial assault that had infamously descended into complete chaos and carnage, ending in a rain of IgT-compound that nearly wiped the advancing UHF's forces out—including Jin and his squad.

He had caught glimpses of Karania through the smoke, chaos and gunfire, and what he saw had been enough to make him question the very nature of human limits. She wasn't just another medic—she was something *more*, something downright *mythical* in her actions, darting from one injured Marine to the next with a speed and precision that was almost preternatural.

As bodies hit the dirt and cries of the wounded filled the air, Karania had moved through the trenches like a phantom.

Those who had failed to notice her path had found themselves stepping aside at the last moment, as if guided by an invisible hand, before she weaved past them without so much as slowing down towards her next target.

Her hands, or rather the bone-like tools they had morphed into, had sliced and dug into injured Marines with the precision of a seasoned battlefield surgeon, her focus utterly unbreakable even as bullets and lasers whizzed past her head, missing by mere millimetres.

Jin doubted even the most hardened UHF medics could match the speed, precision and calmness with which she had worked.

To anyone watching, she had seemed more like an automated machine than a person—her every action calculated, every movement perfect, as though her body and mind had been specifically built for this.

He had watched her save Cathy, their scout, from a wound that should have been a death sentence.

A bullet had torn through Cathy's neck, and Jin had thought she was done for.

But in what seemed like a mere instant after the bullet had exited Cathy's neck, Karania was already somehow there, bone-tools slicing into Cathy's flesh as she expertly cleared her airways and sealed up the wound with the blood-like liquid she had been throwing around at every patient she worked on.

It was as if time itself had slowed around Karania, her hands moving faster than Jin's eyes could even follow, and before he knew it, Cathy was breathing again and declared stable; already being dragged away towards the underground tunnels to recover by a nearby Marine that Karania had instantly requisitioned.

But what happened next—the moment the IgT-compound rained down upon them—was where Karania had truly transcended from exceptional to something beyond human comprehension in his mind.

When the compound hit, coating the trenches and everything in it with unquenchable flames, panic had completely overtaken the battlefield. The IgT had turned everything into an inferno, consuming flesh and metal alike in an unstoppable firestorm. Soldiers screamed as they scrambled for cover, their armour and skin burning as they were reduced to ash, only for the ash itself to then ignite too.

Yet, in the midst of that hellish scene, Karania had only seemed to thrive even more.

Her movements had become almost transcendent in their perfection, like the Emperor himself was guiding her actions—every step, every reach, every cut was true perfection.

She had flitted through the flaming trenches, dragging wounded Marines half a metre to the side seemingly at random, only for a speck of IgT to land where they had previously been, with an eerie calmness, even as the world around her was consumed by the blazing heat.

Not a single motion was wasted, not a single muscle out of place, as if she had calculated the exact number of steps and actions it would take to save each person, and she executed that plan flawlessly moment-by-moment.

Jin and Yonbu had been desperately pushing toward the nearest underground entrance, their chances of survival shrinking with every second. They had heard the screams of men who had been touched by the IgT, the fire consuming them as their flesh melted away. The smell of burning bodies had been truly overwhelming, and just as they had finally reached the entrance, a tiny drop of the IgT compound had found its way onto Yonbu's arm.

It had, of course, ignited instantly, engulfing his arm in a blaze of death.

In that split second, both Jin and Yonbu knew what that meant.

Yonbu's life was forfeit.

Jin had seen what the compound did to unprotected Marines, and with only a half-sealed T1 armour, there was no chance Yonbu would survive.

Without hesitation, Yonbu had shoved Jin forward towards safety, ready to sacrifice himself to give his friend a few extra moments of life—a small chance to escape the inferno. They'd made their peace the moment the IgT had begun falling, accepting that death was inevitable if it meant giving the other a shot at survival.

But then, Karania had appeared.

She had been a blur, moving through the chaos as though she existed outside of it. Her bone-tools, elongated into jagged blades, had torn through Yonbu's arm without a second thought.

The limb fell to the ground, vaporised mere moments later by the flames.

Some of the IgT had splattered onto Karania's arm, igniting it as well, but she didn't so much as flinch. With the same ruthless efficiency, she severed her own arm in one swift motion, less than a heartbeat later, as if she had known this was going to happen from the very moment she had stepped in to help, before grabbing Yonbu and pulling him along.

Her movements had been flawless as she had sidestepped the rain of fire, guiding Yonbu through the hellish landscape while somehow simultaneously stemming the bleeding from his shoulder.

To this day Jin still couldn't comprehend what he saw.

Karanja had moved like a force of nature, detached from her own pain, as if the fires around her were nothing more than an *inconvenience*.

It was at that moment, when he had watched her drag Yonbu to safety, that Jin had realised the truth: Alpha Squad's true Ace wasn't Isabella or Lucas, and not even Thea with her supernatural reaction speed.

It was Karania.

She was something far beyond what a Marine of her rank should be capable of—or any human, for that matter. Her actions were truly otherworldly, defying what Jin had believed was possible on levels that he wasn't even sure the System itself could provide to anyone below maybe Major Quinn's level.

A chill ran down his spine as he recalled those moments. Karania wasn't just a medic, just a marine—she was a walking nightmare that defied all attempts at logic or reasoning.

'Definitely anyone but that medic in a two-versus-two... I'd take my chances against Thea and Corvus combined rather than face Karania paired with anyone,' he thought grimly, as Major Quinn's voice snapped him back to reality.

The ceremony was finally moving forward again, with the Major gathering everyone's attention once more to introduce the first round of awards...