

Arc 1 - Chapter 140 - Awards IV

PoV: Tiberius Soren

The award ceremony had been far more engaging than Tiberius anticipated, even though none of the categories so far had *truly* held his personal interest.

The atmosphere in the assembly hall had drastically shifted, however; the once-annoying chatter around him had morphed into a buzz of excitement, punctuated by cheers and laughter.

The heightened energy had an almost contagious effect, drawing Tiberius in despite himself.

He primarily attributed it to the fact that Major Quinn had done an excellent job at keeping things interesting; particularly with that Defensive Heavy award and revealing the fact that there might even be *two* winners for any given category; something Tiberius hadn't even thought possible.

The way Major Quinn had awarded it too, had been something that had surprised Tiberius.

'Almost like she had planned to showcase that Alpha Squad is still waiting in the wings...'

Presenting the award to a Beta Squad member first, only to then practically rug-pull everyone and announce that Alpha Squad had *also* won the same award, had seemed downright intentional—although Tiberius couldn't quite guess *why* Major Quinn might have done that.

His best guess was that she wanted to remind everyone who they were up against; that they should never be content with their awards, thinking they had beaten Alpha Squad until the entire thing was over and done with—something Tiberius was going to pay close attention to going forward.

The Gold Medal awarded to Alpha Squad's Drone Operator had surprised him as well, though for different reasons.

While his interests were rooted in combat and the absolute art of demolishing his enemies, he wasn't so shortsighted as to miss the significance of the award given to that Drone Operator.

It was notable for two reasons.

First, Drone Operators were famously underpowered early on, with limited access to equipment and Abilities. They often struggled to keep up with roles that brought immediate advantages to their squads.

He'd heard it directly from his squad's Scout, Jackson—no, that wasn't right. Jeremy?—ahh, Jonas...? His squad's Scout had mentioned his interest in eventually transitioning to a Drone Operator role but had initially focused on broader Scout attributes and Abilities at the advice of their progression counsellor, to avoid the same early-career obstacles.

So the fact that the Drone Operator had shown up at all was a testament to the skill of him, rather than anything else; something Tiberius could respect, regardless of role difference.

But more importantly, and even more telling in Tiberius' eyes, was the complete and utter absence of Alpha Squad's Scout from the awards *altogether*.

That omission could only mean one of two things: Either the rumours he had heard about the midworld Cyan were greatly exaggerated, *or* they were dangerously understated.

If it was the former, then that girl's days in Alpha Squad were numbered, which would be a surprising development.

An opportunity he hadn't anticipated might even open up—a slot that he could vie for.

Although his primary targets were the positions held by the Itoku woman and Sylarion, Tiberius wasn't one to ignore an Emperor-given opportunity if it fell into his lap.

If Alpha Squad's Scout/Sniper *had* truly underperformed, his own sniping skills might just be impressive enough to get him noticed by the higher-ups. Though he wasn't a dedicated sniper, he could pivot to that role if it meant a chance to secure a place in the top squad.

'But that's only if she underperformed,' he thought, his mind running scenarios.

'If the real reason she's not mentioned is that only one award per category can be given to a single individual...' The thought made his fingers tap rhythmically on his knee, a habit he had when processing new information.

If that was the case, then she wasn't just good—she was *exceptional*.

It would mean she had outperformed practically *all* of the other Recruits, not only on the Sovereign but potentially across the entire Assessment. The next tier of recognition beyond the current Sovereign Awards, after all, was the Recruit Awards, which included *all* ships in the drive.

If she actually *did* end up with one of those top spots, he knew that he stood no chance of claiming that elusive third slot whatsoever.

While Tiberius prided himself on his skills and confidence, he was realistic enough to recognize when the playing field was beyond his reach.

He had witnessed some of the most formidable Snipers from other recruitment drives—fellow Marines whose precision and ingenuity had left even him impressed.

If the Cyan girl had managed not only to meet but *exceed* those high standards, then vying for her spot would be beyond foolish.

'But that's more than fine,' he told himself, shifting his focus back to his primary targets. The third slot might be out of reach, but his ambitions were still firmly set on the other two.

This ceremony had reminded him of one important truth: In the UHF, there was always someone better, always someone just out of sight, waiting for their moment.

His ruminations were thankfully cut short as Major Quinn took the stage once more, her voice carrying the same magnetic authority that had held the room in thrall all evening.

“Now, moving on from the Eye in the Sky award to something a bit more... let’s say, *direct*,” she announced, her smile flashing with a gleam that Tiberius found surprisingly engaging, even charming. “This next award is for those of you who embody raw, unstoppable force on the battlefield. The juggernauts. The ones who haunt the enemy’s nightmares, the very shadows that keep them awake at night, knowing you’re out there.”

Tiberius felt his pulse kick up, each word fanning the flames of excitement in his chest.

‘This is the one.’

“This award is called the *One Man Army*,” she continued, her tone reverent yet fierce. “It’s awarded to those who didn’t just *participate* in the killing of our enemies, but truly became forces of nature, tearing through the enemy ranks single-handedly. For those who, for one reason or another, had to leave their squads and shoulder the battle’s weight alone, turning certain defeat into undeniable victory. The criteria were simple: Destroy the enemy en-masse, rely only on yourself, and have a profound impact on the battle.”

A predatory grin crept over Tiberius’ face. *‘Perfection.’*

This was the kind of award he’d been hoping, praying for, one practically *designed* just for someone of his nature and skillset.

His squad, while useful, had been little more than support for his plans. They served as a means to an end, allowing him to demonstrate his prowess as both a leader and a fighter.

But it was those rare moments when he’d broken away, when he’d been able to fully unleash his power and carve a bloody path through the enemy on his own, that had lit his blood afire.

His eyes invariably crossed over the other members of his squad as they were once again drawn towards the Itoku women as a result of Major Quinn’s words.

They had been chatting merrily away the entire time, paying practically no heed to any of the greater implications of the revealed awards so far; nor did they truly understand the import of this one either by the way that their chatter had only mildly picked up overall.

‘Fools... Kind people; nice to be around, sure. But the lack of drive, of ambition... it’s sickening,’ Tiberius thought, his jaw tightening as he surveyed the carefree smiles of his squadmates. They were undeniably decent, reliable in their own way, but they lacked the fire and will to do what was necessary that he possessed.

If only they’d followed his lead more often, their futures wouldn’t be as bleak; as painfully ordinary...

He let his gaze rest on their faces for a heartbeat longer, a momentary pang of curiosity crossing his mind. What would it be like to live that way? To exist without the constant hunger for more, to be content with the mediocrity of simply getting by? To find happiness in small victories, without the gnawing need to carve out one's name in the annals of UHF history?

A shiver of revulsion coursed through him at the mere thought, and he turned his attention forward, his eyes narrowing as they fell on the Itoku woman sitting in the front row—*always* in front of him, always one step ahead.

She sat with Alpha Squad, where she belonged, her posture impeccably relaxed, exuding an air of composed confidence.

Maybe even *too* composed.

'She doesn't think she'll show up at the Sovereign Awards, huh?' A smirk curled his lips, dark amusement glittering in his eyes. *'Looks like she's certain she's saved her best for the main event and will be in the higher tier awards. That's... intriguing.'*

His grin widened, rekindled after the brief flicker of distaste brought on by his own squad.

Much like the Itoku woman, he didn't expect to make an appearance in the Sovereign Awards himself either.

He had seen the other top Snipers in the drive; he knew their worth.

But when it came to Offensive Heavies? He was confident he could match or surpass them.

While the top-tier Snipers might have edged him out, he knew his skills as an Offensive Heavy had few equals.

Even so, he would watch the Sovereign Awards with interest, keeping a sharp eye on every name and face. The Recruit Awards, however—that was where he intended to dominate.

And as he observed Itoku's calm, almost detached expression as she conversed and joked with her squad mates, he sensed that she was thinking along similar lines.

Her relaxed composure, the subtle tilt of her head, the complete disinterest in Major Quinn's hyping up of the Sovereign Awards for this category—it all pointed to someone who knew they had *far* more to show than would likely to be presented here.

'I wouldn't have it any other way, Itoku,' he thought, a low, simmering thrill coursing through him...

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“I’ll *definitely* be in the Recruit Awards for this,” Isabella repeated, her eyes gleaming with a fierce confidence that seemed to radiate from her core. She nodded, the gesture as much for her own reassurance as it was for the rest of Alpha Squad.

Thea felt a pang of envy twist in her chest, the earlier disappointment of not appearing in the Eye In The Sky Awards still lingering like a bitter taste.

Karania’s assurances that her time would come during the Recruit of Assessment Awards had done little to quell the nagging doubt gnawing at her.

But she couldn’t deny that Isabella had earned every ounce of her confidence either.

Thea had seen her in action countless times—whether it was on the field during the assessment or during their brutal training sessions beforehand.

There was no denying the offensive heavy’s raw power and unparalleled ferocity.

The stories of Isabella’s feats had spread through the assessment like wildfire.

Whether it was the first day’s gruelling chaos or the climactic finish in the compound on one of the final days, Isabella had blown well past expectations, even for Alpha Squad’s, turning what should have been catastrophic defeats into moments of sheer, jaw-dropping victory.

“Question is just: Which one of all the moments are they gonna go with...?” Isabella mused aloud, a mischievous glint in her eyes as she waited for her squadmates’ opinions.

“Definitely the one in the compound,” Corvus answered without hesitation, a knowing smile playing on his lips.

“If you hadn’t stepped up like you did, we wouldn’t have made it out of there alive—or well, you guys wouldn’t have,” he added with a nod at Isabella, Karania and Desmond, recalling the moment he had been downed—which had ultimately killed him after the fact.

Lucas let out a short laugh, nodding in agreement. “Agreed. Xagis was definitely *not* smiling on me that day. If you hadn’t rushed out and destroyed their position, I don’t think anyone would have made it out with me and Thea already dead, and Corvus down for the count as well.”

Surprisingly enough, even Desmond seemed in the mood to chime in. Ever since the Eye In The Sky award he had received, his tepid and depressed demeanour had seemingly done a complete 180, as he excitedly replied, “I’m kind of partial to the initial landing day, honestly. While the compound was epic, if we’re talking sheer awe factor, I don’t think anything tops you charging headfirst into those like what—fifty? A hundred? Ambush troops. While, sure, they were unintegrated, we were also just basic Recruits at the time. It was like something out of a holo vid—no, *better* than that.”

Suddenly realising he’d just accidentally praised Isabella unabashedly, Desmond caught the squad’s amused looks and scrambled to add with an awkward cough, “Ehhh, I mean, for you. It was pretty impressive, *for you*. If I’d done it, of course, it would have been a hundred times more spectacular. Just saying.”

Isabella rolled her eyes but smirked, giving Desmond a light shove—for her—that almost sent him flying as she replied, “Watch yourself, or I’ll make you prove in a training session.”

The squad’s laughter filled the air, a warm, shared moment that even managed to ease Thea’s anxiety a little.

She exchanged a quiet glance with Karania, who squeezed her hand lightly, both of them content to sit on the far edge of the squad, enjoying the banter from a distance.

They didn’t want to be too loud and risk Major Quinn’s sharp glare, especially sitting in the front row where even a whisper could draw unwanted attention.

In Thea’s mind, maintaining some semblance of composure was necessary—this was still a formal event, after all.

As the hall calmed and the Gold Medal winner made their way off the stage, the mood subtly shifted.

A twinge of tension settled over them all, replacing the light-heartedness of moments before.

While Isabella was still confident she’d show up in the Recruit Awards and not in the Sovereign Awards, the anticipation for the announcement in her posture was noticeable.

The nerves were there, hovering beneath her confident facades.

The question loomed, unspoken but heavy: Had they all overestimated Isabella’s performance? Had the moments they’d thought were definitive for Isabella been outmatched by someone else’s feats?

“Next up, we have the Platinum Medal winner for the *One Man Army* award!” Major Quinn’s voice rang out, pulling everyone’s attention sharply back to the stage.

The screen behind her flickered, shifting to reveal a new scene, the anticipation crackling in the room like an electric charge. The recording began to play, showcasing a chaotic urban battlefield, smoke and fire framing the view as the camera zoomed in on a lone Marine moving through the carnage with steady steps.

The Marine, clad in battle-scarred heavy armour, wielded a massive rotary gun—somewhat reminiscent of the Devastation, but with a smaller calibre barrel—that roared as it cut through enemy lines.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the recipient of the Platinum One Man Army Award: Recruit Tobias Malenko from Granite Squad!” Major Quinn’s voice boomed through the hall, met with thunderous applause as Tobias, a towering figure with a stoic expression that could even give Isabella a run for her height-money, rose from a few rows behind them to accept his medal.

He carried himself with the composed confidence of someone who knew the worth of his actions and wasn’t overly vain about them, but Thea’s attention waned as he stepped onto the stage.

With relief and disappointment mixing uneasily in her chest, Thea glanced at Isabella.

It wasn't her.

Major Quinn, after congratulating Tobias and letting the applause die down, made it clear there wouldn't be another tie for this award.

With Isabella's absence in the Sovereign Awards now fully confirmed, Thea's doubts fully evaporated.

Isabella *had* to be part of the Recruit Awards.

There was no other way.

Excitement bubbled up in her, and she grinned at the thought of seeing her friend's wild, fearless actions immortalised on the big screen.

Her mind flashed through all of Isabella's incredible feats, and she wondered which one the brass would choose. Thea could hardly wait.

She glanced at Isabella, who had that confident twinkle in her eye again, as if she too knew the best was yet to come. Their earlier doubts seemed foolish now, and Thea felt her chest swell with pride for her squadmate and friend.

The air in the room shifted as Major Quinn's voice rang out, drawing Thea back to the present. "Now, before we dive into the final batch of serious awards, let's take a lighthearted intermission to recognize some... well, less-than-brilliant moments from the assessment. I present to you the *Numbskull Awards!*"

The room stirred with a ripple of excitement and chuckles as the screen behind the Major displayed a comically stylized logo featuring a headless Marine searching for his boney skull laying just a few feet away from them and flashing in bright, mock-serious letters: "*The Numbskull Awards.*"

"These awards," Major Quinn continued with a knowing smile, "like the Unlucky Awards, do *not* come with any bonuses or benefits. They're strictly for entertainment and, perhaps, a little educational value. Because while victory and skill deserve praise, learning from mistakes—especially glaring ones—is how we all get better as a whole."

A fresh wave of chuckles rippled through the crowd as different squads started ripping into each other, placing quiet bets on who of their members would show up, and Thea couldn't help but smirk at the idea of some of the ridiculous moments they were about to relive.

"The criteria for this award are quite simple," Major Quinn explained, gesturing to the screen as if inviting everyone to take notes. "These moments must involve a Marine *consciously* choosing to take an action that, let's just say, wasn't particularly smart. The higher the ranking, the more lacking in smarts the decision. And no, pure bad luck doesn't count—those instances were covered by the *Unlucky Awards* earlier in the ceremony. These are for decisions that, in hindsight, were particularly questionable at best."

Thea noticed the rest of the room shifting in their seats, laughter bubbling up as they exchanged looks that were half-amused, half-guilty, probably recalling their own missteps.

But it was Alpha Squad that caught her attention.

Every single member had turned their eyes toward Desmond, and she couldn't help but remember the story Corvus had told her about the final days of the assessment.

A grin, wide and toothy, spread across her face as she caught Desmond's expression—a mix of dread and embarrassment—as he squirmed in his chair, trying desperately to ignore the knowing looks around him.

“Oh *dear me*, I truly wonder if any of us are going to be in it,” Isabella's voice cut through the air, dripping with mock innocence. “But we're Alpha Squad; surely none of us could have made any questionable decisions throughout the assessment, right? We're the shining example of the Sovereign. It would be an absolute tragedy if—”

“Yeah, yeah. *I get it*, alright?!” Desmond snapped, a blend of genuine annoyance and exaggerated exasperation in his voice. “I fucked up, okay? I'm owning it. I'll take the crown on this one; it's fine.”

Isabella's smirk only widened as she leaned forward, eyes glinting with anticipation as she turned back toward the podium.

“Just making sure we, as Alpha Squad, are taking home *all* the prizes,” she said with a playful jab, barely suppressing her laughter.

Desmond rolled his eyes, but a slight grin tugged at the corners of his lips. “Yeah, *exactly*. It was all part of my grand plan to make sure Alpha Squad is properly represented in all categories. To make sure that the rest of the Recruits don't lose hope,” he muttered, quieter this time, earning chuckles from around the squad.

Even Thea couldn't help but join in.

Despite the more than problematic start that she had had with Desmond in particular, Thea felt that it was difficult to truly despise or hate him. It helped tremendously that he was competent enough to hold his own, of course, but even his demeanour had changed drastically since the very first time they had met.

'He's really not so bad after all,' she thought, the corners of her mouth lifting as she turned her attention back to Major Quinn, who was poised at the podium, ready to kick off the much-anticipated *Numbskull Awards*.

Major Quinn's voice commanded attention, a playful edge in her tone that hinted at the entertainment to come. “Alright, let's take a look at our third-place winner for the Numbskull Awards. This Recruit's decision led to a rather... *hot* series of events.”

The screen behind her flickered to life, revealing the chaotic backdrop of an industrial complex with steel beams and scattered, broken machinery.

The focus zoomed in on a Marine with a wiry build, his uniform marked with the emblem of Chair Squad—a wooden folding chair.

His name flashed on the screen: *Recruit Nolan Hayes - Squad Leader*.

In the video, Hayes was seen ducking behind a rusted conveyor belt, sweat trickling down his brow as enemy gunfire ricocheted off of the wall to his side.

“Alright, Chair, I’m going to create a distraction to shift their focus, stay sharp,” he said, his voice tense but confident. He glanced over his shoulder at his squadmates, who were holding their positions, waiting for his next move.

Major Quinn’s voice broke in with dry humour. “Recruit Hayes, in an attempt to create an opening, decided to go with a theoretically, strategically sound move. Unfortunately, theoretical doesn’t always mean *practical* or *applicable*.”

Hayes was shown pulling out an incendiary device, a confident grin spreading across his face as he prepared to ignite it. Without assessing the immediate area or thinking it through, he tossed it toward a cluster of enemy forces that had just taken cover behind a series of walls near some *mostly* non-descript metal drums.

The problem? The only things descript about these drums were the marks with bold hazard symbols and the clearly labelled ‘*Highly Flammable*’ on them.

The camera caught the incredulous expressions of his squadmates as the incendiary device clattered against one of the barrels, sparking a sudden burst of flames that rapidly spread across the area.

“*Get down!*” someone shouted, but it was too late.

The explosion that followed was deafening, sending shockwaves through the complex and forcing Hayes and the entire squad to dive for cover as torrents of green-hued flames and debris enveloped the entire complex.

The camera focused on Hayes, sprawled on the ground with a look of stunned disbelief as the green-hued inferno consumed their position and even forced the remaining enemies to rapidly retreat in utter confusion.

The room erupted in laughter, the Marines slapping their thighs and exchanging wide-eyed looks as the recording froze on Hayes’ shocked expression, a burning helmet askew on his head, with the caption below reading: “*Think Before You Throw*”.

Major Quinn let the laughter die down before speaking, a smirk on her lips. “For those wondering: No, Recruit Hayes did not make it out; neither did his squad members; it was a complete wipe. So, let this be a lesson, Recruits: Improvisation is a useful skill—often downright *required* for the battlefield—but it only works if you pay attention to your surroundings. An incendiary and flammable barrels don’t mix unless your goal is complete mayhem.”

The whole hall was abuzz with laughter and chatter, the lesson learned by all and immortalised in Chair Squad's fiery mishap.

Major Quinn waited for the laughter to subside before continuing, her tone still light but edged with anticipation. "Now, let's move on to the second spot on our *Numbskull Awards* list. This next one, let's just say, is a prime example of why you don't jump into plans without assessing the full situation."

The screen lit up once more, revealing the dense foliage of a forest, the camera panning to a tall Marine with broad shoulders. His uniform bore the emblem of Helix Squad, and his name appeared at the bottom of the screen: *Recruit Gregor Thorn - Scout*.

The recording started with Thorn peering out from behind a large, moss-covered boulder, eyes narrowed as he scanned the jungle for any signs of movement.

His squad's voices crackled over the comms, tension evident as they whispered updates about an approaching enemy patrol.

"Alright, guys, I've got a plan," Thorn said, determination in his voice.

He glanced up at a cluster of long, vine-like plants hanging from the thick branches above, before adding, "Just follow my lead; it's guaranteed to work."

Without waiting for confirmation or even bothering to explain anything about his plan to the rest of his squad, he leaped up and grabbed hold of the vines, intending to swing out and launch a surprise attack from above.

Major Quinn's voice interjected with a chuckle. "*This*, Recruits, is what happens when you try to be a hero without verifying your footing—or in this case, your grip. Or give your squad a proper rundown so they can tell you how bad of an idea your plan actually is."

The video showed Thorn swinging out, only for the "vines" to snap almost instantly, revealing themselves to be nothing more than thin, fragile tendrils.

The look of sudden realisation on his face was priceless as he plummeted down into the undergrowth, landing in an unfortunate heap and startling a nest of the jungle's local wildlife—a swarm of aggressive, bird-like creatures with sharp beaks and screeching calls.

"Aw, shit!" Thorn yelled, flailing as the creatures descended upon him in a flurry of feathers and beaks.

His squad's muffled shouts could be heard through the comms, panic and disbelief evident as they scrambled to pull him back up into cover with a rapidly deployed rope.

The enemy patrol, now thoroughly alerted by the commotion, began to close in rapidly, forcing Helix Squad to retreat deeper into the forest, giving up their defensive position.

The recording paused on Thorn, eyes wide and tangled in vines, feathers clinging to his armour, the caption underneath reading: "*Heroics Require Planning*".

The room burst into laughter again, Marines leaning over to whisper and snicker.

Even Thea found herself smiling, the sheer absurdity of the situation enough to crack through her other thoughts and doubts.

Major Quinn raised an eyebrow as she addressed the crowd. “Remember, Recruits: If you’re going to play hero, make sure your swing is sturdy—and maybe pick a less angry audience in case it doesn’t work out.”

The room filled with chuckles again, everyone taking the lighthearted warning to heart as they absorbed the lesson.

Major Quinn let the laughter from the previous clip die down before turning to the crowd with a mischievous smile. “Alright, Recruits, now we’ve reached our #1 spot in the Numbskull Awards. But this time, instead of awarding a single Marine for what could be considered the *dumbest* decision on the Sovereign…” She paused, eyes twinkling, “we’re opting for a collection instead. After all, as amusing as it might be to crown one of you the ‘King or Queen of Numbskull Decisions,’ it wouldn’t be entirely fair, now would it?”

The crowd erupted into chuckles and some appreciative sighs of relief, even a few claps.

To Thea’s left, she noticed Desmond sighing in relief as well, running a hand over his brow with a sheepish grin. She could practically feel his tension easing up and found herself smirking; apparently, he wasn’t looking to be a contender for that particular title, despite his earlier boast.

“*Besides*,” Major Quinn continued, “it’s no small task to pick just *one* winner in this category to begin with. With the countless questionable decisions we see in every drive, it would be impossible to do them justice with a single clip! So, let’s take a look at a few of the best, or should I say *worst*, examples in rapid-fire succession.”

The screen lit up once again, showcasing the first clip.

“First up,” Major Quinn began as the video played, “we have *Recruit Samuel Linde* from *Viper Squad*, who decided that attempting to intimidate a Stellar Republic sentry with a mock charge would somehow both be enough to scare him off and make sure he didn’t get shot.”

The recording showed Samuel briefly debating the merits of his plan with his squad behind cover, ending with the words “Nah, I’d win,” before rushing out into the open with a wild grin, charging forward and yelling at the top of his lungs; by all accounts a wildly intimidating display.

The sentry, unimpressed, calmly raised his rifle and shot him squarely in the chest, sending Samuel sprawling backward into the mud.

The room erupted with laughter as the recording froze on Samuel’s stunned face mid-fall, the caption reading: “*Bravery is Not Always the Best Policy—or a policy to begin with.*”

The laughter in the hall was thunderous, and Quinn had to wait a few moments before the noise died down enough to continue.

“Moving on to another classic,” she continued, suppressing her own chuckle. “Recruit Anika Palomo of Nova Squad decided, in her infinite wisdom, to try out a... *shortcut*.”

The screen showed Palomo glancing around as she climbed over what looked like a waist-high barricade with a ‘CAUTION’ sign emblazoned on it. But as soon as she leapt over, she lost her footing, stumbling into what appeared to be a half-full fuel pit.

Her look of realisation was priceless as the sticky sludge clung to her armour and engulfed her. She tried, unsuccessfully, to pull herself free while her squad doubled over in laughter from a safe distance.

The recording froze with the caption, “*Shortcuts Aren’t Always Short.*”

Major Quinn grinned, waiting for the laughter to die down a bit before introducing another #1 slot.

“And last but certainly not least, we have *Recruit Jesse Meyers* from *Iron Squad*.” The screen now showed Meyers, who was peering into a small ventilation shaft.

His squad could be heard shouting over comms, apparently suggesting another route, but Meyers stubbornly muttered, “I got this,” before trying to wedge himself into the narrow duct, his shoulders almost immediately getting stuck halfway through.

The flailing legs and the grunts of exertion as he tried to free himself were enough to even get Thea to break out in proper laughter; her chuckle-barrier now fully breached.

As his squad arrived, pulling him out from the back with no small amount of effort, Meyers emerged, arms flailing, his upper torso completely covered in sludge and clearly regretting his choice as they dragged him out by his legs.

The caption popped up: “*If You Don’t Fit, You Don’t Fit.*”

The room was still buzzing with laughter when Major Quinn raised her hand, a playful glint in her eyes that immediately commanded attention.

She paused, letting the remnants of humour settle before she pivoted slightly, her expression turning sly. “Now, it would be a disservice to end the Numbskull Awards without a nod to balance. After all, we at the UHF know that greatness and folly often walk hand in hand.”

The crowd's amusement shifted into curious anticipation, heads turning as if collectively sensing what was coming next.

Thea felt a chill run down her spine at the Major's knowing glance directed *straight* at Alpha Squad.

Desmond's laughter died instantly, replaced with a look of wide-eyed dread, and even Isabella, usually unfazed, shifted in her seat with a slight frown.

“*Alpha Squad*,” Major Quinn said, her voice taking on a slightly more serious tone, “represents the *pinnacle* of what every other squad should strive for—a hallmark of skill,

determination, and leadership. That is what being part of Alpha Squad means. *But*,” she added, leaning forward with a mischievous smile, “with great status comes great expectations. And the brass, myself included, make sure those expectations are met—*especially* during assessments.”

The assembled Recruits exchanged glances, murmurs rippling through the crowd.

Thea could practically *feel* the weight of the eyes boring into them, the buzz of curiosity mixed with the schadenfreude of seeing the untouchable taken down a peg.

“With the upcoming serious awards and the even more prestigious tiers to follow,” Major Quinn continued, “it’s crucial that everyone here understands the true nature of the current Alpha Squad ahead of time—they are just like you: Fresh Recruits. The brass and I have decided to feature a special showcase within the Numbskull Awards, highlighting some of Alpha Squad’s less-than-stellar moments. Yes, even the best make mistakes.”

A wave of gasps and hushed whispers swept the room.

Thea’s heart thumped in her chest as she glanced at her teammates.

Desmond looked like he might sink into his chair, his face pale.

Corvus, ever stoic, merely raised an eyebrow, while Isabella smirked defiantly, if a bit more crooked than usual, as if to say, “*Bring it on—but maybe not too much.*”

The screen behind Major Quinn lit up with a new title: *Alpha Squad's Numbskulled Moments – A Reality Check.*

The first clip showed a chaotic scene of Desmond frantically controlling three drones at once. One was expertly manoeuvring through a hallway, another sweeping a courtyard, and the third... smashing straight into a low-hanging beam, sparking and fizzing out of existence.

The room erupted in laughter as Desmond on-screen muttered, “Did anyone see that? No? Good,” before tuning into his squad comms and saying, “Shit! The Freaks got one of my drones!”

The caption read: “*Multitasking is Hard; False Reports Are Easy.*”

Thea could see Desmond’s hands go up to cover his face, barely peeking out between his fingers. The tension in the room was electric, the Recruits clearly revelling in the chance to see Alpha Squad’s rare stumbles laid bare.

The screen flashed to the next clip, this time showing Alpha Squad’s leader, Corvus, in what was clearly a heated firefight inside a forest.

He was crouched behind cover, urgently signalling to the rest of the squad to move forward.

His calm, commanding presence was unmistakable—until, as he turned to lead the charge, his foot caught on an errant root. He stumbled, arms pinwheeling, before crashing flat onto his face, his helmet colliding hard with the ground.

The squad, consisting of Lucas, Isabella and Desmond, in the video didn't even pause, too busy pushing towards the enemy inside the Forest, pressing forward as Corvus scrambled to recover his dignity and his helmet, grumbling, "No one saw that. Keep it moving, Corv..."

The screen froze, zooming in on Corvus' bewildered face just as he hit the ground, with the caption: "*Always Watch Your Step, Leader.*"

The crowd erupted into laughter, and even Corvus cracked a small, rueful smile, though he rolled his eyes. "Glad to know everyone finds that hilarious," he muttered under his breath, but Thea caught an easy hint of a grin underneath it all.

The screen cut to Isabella in the middle of a shootout.

She leaned against Lucas' Stalwart, firing into an enemy line with her rotary machine gun, spinning like a whirlwind as she mowed down the enemy soldiers with rabid abandon.

Her unstoppable firepower made her look nearly invincible—until the gun suddenly jammed mid-swing. She blinked, momentarily baffled, then kicked the gun in frustration, forgetting she had a fully functional piece of solid-cover next to her.

The footage showed her face transforming from annoyance to realisation as she scrambled to unjam the weapon, the idea of ducking behind the shield never once coming to mind.

Karania could be heard shouting "Isabella, cover!" but Isabella simply bellowed back, "It's a *personal* battle now!" as she finally managed to fix the gun and resumed firing with furious vengeance; ignoring the hits she took from the enemy in the meantime.

The caption for her moment read: "*When You're Too Stubborn for a Backup Plan.*"

Isabella laughed along with the crowd, her expression unrepentant.

"Hey, I got it working again, didn't I?" she called over the noise, to which the rest of Alpha Squad rolled their eyes, chuckling.

The next clip focused on Lucas, showing him in the middle of an intense skirmish, shield at the ready as he protected the squad from heavy enemy fire. It seemed he had everything under control as he positioned himself, shielding the squad while they advanced through a narrow alleyway.

Then, with one hand still on his shield, Lucas spotted an opportunity to toss a grenade over the barrier to the enemy line.

Deciding to take the opportunity, he quickly unclipped the grenade from his belt—while still bracing the shield with his other hand—and pressed the arming button, intending to lob it over the top.

But things didn't go as planned.

Just as he threw the grenade, he realised he hadn't aimed high enough as he had leaned too heavily against the Stalwart to support it, limiting his shoulder's movements.

The grenade arced upward and bounced right off the top edge of his shield, landing back in the alley at his feet.

The screen zoomed in on his horrified expression.

The video froze just before the explosion, capturing Lucas' look of shock with the caption: "*When Your Best Defence Turns Against You.*"

"Mind you, Recruit Callahan actually survived this one; the Ultra Heavy Armour he invested in ahead of the assessment managing to block out the majority of the damage from the grenade as he just barely managed to kick it a few metres away before it went off," Major Quinn chimed in with a big smile on her face, nodding respectfully in Lucas' direction.

The room filled with laughter, and even Lucas covered his face, shaking his head.

"Yeah, that... that was not my finest moment," he admitted with a small, sheepish grin as the squad members gave him playful jabs, clearly enjoying the moment.

Thea's anxiety prickled at her skin throughout the segment, the playful laughter around her doing little to ease her nerves.

With each new clip showcasing a blunder from another squad member, it became increasingly clear that Major Quinn had purposefully selected moments from *everyone*, digging deep to ensure no one escaped the spotlight.

The realisation sent her heart thudding in her chest.

If everyone else had been included, there was no chance she was safe from scrutiny either.

She stared at the screen, holding her breath as the display flickered and shifted.

This time, the scene depicted a peaceful forest clearing, dappled sunlight filtering through the leaves as Lucas stood on alert within a makeshift trench, eyes scanning the treeline.

The camera suddenly shifted focus, zooming in on a small, nimble figure darting from tree to tree with the urgency of a novice predator. Thea's heart sank as she recognized herself, her movements tense and determined as she prepared for what she remembered all too well.

'*Ah, fuck,*' she thought, already bracing for the embarrassment.

It was a moment that had haunted her since it happened—a rash decision made in the wake of her Awakening, a misguided attempt to reassert control over herself and prove that she wasn't just a plaything for whatever Psychic nonsense had occurred with her Gate.

The recording continued, showing her creeping closer until she was right behind Lucas, aiming her hand like a makeshift gun and whispering, "Bang!" with a mischievous grin.

But before she could even process the small victory, the screen showed her spinning around at a sudden noise—only to be met with the massive, incoming swing of Isabella's Decimator.

Thea's eyes in the video widened comically as she realised her horrible mistake, and then, in real life, she felt her cheeks burn.

Laughter erupted throughout the assembly hall, the crowd roaring at the absurdity of the situation. The caption beneath the freeze-frame read: "*Never Play Pranks On The Battlefield—If No Court Martial; Heavy Martial, Instead.*"

"For this one as well: Recruit McKay survived this encounter, thanks to Recruit Itoku's exemplary usage of [Directional Strike] to just barely save Recruit McKay from being split in two—just after returning to the front, mind you," Major Quinn chimed in again with a devious chuckle.

Thea fought the urge to hide her face, but instead managed to crack a sheepish smile.

Isabella and Lucas were throwing her playful side-eyes, their own amusement clearly evident. Thea took a deep breath, relieved that the tension had lifted and was replaced by shared embarrassment.

The laughter subsided as the screen shifted one last time, and Thea's grin softened into curiosity. Just what kind of mistake could Karania have possibly made?

She had never seen her friend even make as much as a slightly suboptimal decision, much less an actual glaring error.

As if to underscore her thoughts, Major Quinn stepped forward, a more serious glint in her eye. "And finally, we come to Recruit Faulkner. Now, let me just say this—it was *exceptionally* hard to find *any* Numbskulled moments involving her. But even she was not immune to the chaos of the first day's surprise ambush."

The recording flickered to life, showing a chaotic scene inside a medical tent.

Blood spattered across the canvas as Karania, sleeves rolled up and hair plastered to her forehead, worked furiously over a completely unrecognisable Marine.

The urgency was palpable; every second counted as she finished stitching, pulling and administering auto-injector after auto-injector, her breathing ragged. Thea felt a pang of admiration seeing her friend's determination, even in the face of complete bedlam.

The video continued, showing Karania finally leaning back against the thin, taut fabric of the tent, her eyes closing as she took a rare moment of respite.

Major Quinn's voice narrated with a tone that carried a tinge of empathy, "The first day's ambush had even the most seasoned and composed among us rattled. Recruit Faulkner, in her relentless drive to keep her squad and others alive, made one crucial mistake—a lesson taught to Medcis even during basic, long before Integration. Never rest against unsecured cover; *especially* medical tents."

The screen zoomed out as a Stellar Republic sniper's scope zeroed in on the slight bulge Karania's back made against the tent wall from the opposite side of the Battlefield.

The shot rang out, piercing through the flimsy material and striking her directly in the chest.

The camera cut to her body collapsing to the ground. The recording ended on a freeze-frame of her fallen form, a caption appearing beneath it: "*Even the Best Need to Rest Smart.*"

A hushed murmur filled the room, mingled with light laughter tinged with respect.

Thea's chest tightened, but she couldn't help the small, wry smile that tugged at her lips.

Even in a moment deemed a mistake, Karania still managed to exude an air of fierce capability.

Thea's eyes naturally gravitated toward Karania's face, expecting to find a rueful smile or perhaps a quiet chuckle of self-awareness.

But her own smile faltered immediately when she saw something she hadn't expected at all.

Karania's expression was stricken, her normally composed features marred by a deep, unguarded *grief* and simmering anger. Her eyes glistened with tears that threatened to spill, and Thea felt the tremor running through the hand clasped in her own.

"Kara...?" Thea whispered, careful not to draw attention from the rest of the room or disrupt Major Quinn's speech as she continued with the ceremony on the podium...