

Volume 2 - Chapter 85 - Public Leaderboards

Vonn: "For the record—Could you start by walking me through what that word, 'Psyker,' meant to you before you ever deployed?"

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Mrek: "It meant the thing on the holo-screens when I was seven, watching *Sons of the Void* with my dad: Vareth holding a dropship in the air with one hand.

Cool movie stuff.

You close the screen, you go eat dinner, y'know?

Then you enlist and they give you the briefings—classifications, Paths, Inheritances, probability statistics.

Professor at the front of the room, very official tone, whole datascreen presentation and all.

And you're sitting there half paying attention because you're tired and your bunk smells like someone else's feet, and the whole time your brain is just filing it under the same drawer as Vareth and the dropship.

You hear the words, y'know?

You even think, "sure, I'll keep that in mind."

But none of it's *real* yet. Nothing *makes* it real.

—

Vonn: "When did it become real, then?"

—

Mrek: "PFC 931.

Six weeks into a push on a moon that I will never willingly revisit, heading for a settlement called Tauven Crossing.

We were third in the column.

Ahead of us were two squads—Thirteenth and Sixth, good people, nothing to worry about.

[Long pause.]

I was complaining to Sergeant Oresh about the mud—genuine Emperor-damned moon-mud, up to the knee, heating element in my left boot had been dead for two days—and she was ignoring me completely, as usual, y'know? And—

And then Thirteenth Squad just *stopped*.

And I mean, like, not like the column slowed or they hit a wall or took fire or anything.

They just stopped... *being*. Mid-stride.

There was no sound, no flash, *nothing* I could point to afterward and say I saw *that* and then *this* happened.

One moment they were there—seven people I knew by name, knew their card-playing habits, their favourite foods, moving through the grey light of early morning—and then *suddenly* the column had a gap in it, and the gap was filled with things that *used* to be people.

I don't want to be too specific about what it looked like, y'know?

I'll just say—there was no *inward*. Everything went out—all at once.

My... My legs stopped working, then.

I'm not gonna sugar-coat it, and I'm not trying to be poetic about it either—they *literally* stopped working. My knees *went* and I went down in the mud with them.

I just sat there, and I remember thinking, *very* clearly, the exact same thought I'd had a hundred times watching Vareth on the holo-screen when I was seven—

"Oh. Cool movie stuff."

Like my brain refused to even categorize it any other way, y'know?

Refused to let it be *real*, even though I was sitting in the mud watching the evidence of it not even fifteen meters ahead of me.

Like the only way *it* could survive the next thirty seconds was to pretend it was still fiction, and whatever input it had just received was nothing but, y'know?

Sergeant Oresh hauled me into cover before I'd even registered she was moving.

The whole engagement was maybe... four minutes.

The Psyker was gone by the time we pushed in. Just straight—*gone*.

It was just suddenly quiet again at some point: Same grey light. Same mud. Same cold in my boot.

Just without Thirteenth and parts of Sixth..."

—

Vonn: "What changed after that?"

—
Mrek: "What changed?"

[Quiet laugh, no humor in it]

"Well, I suddenly became *very* interested in Resolve, y'know?

Which every veteran who's been through something like that will tell you too—and which is both completely rational and also, in practice, almost entirely a waste of time.

Because then you don't see another one.

Not for two years, not for four.

You run into precogs on your side here and there, maybe hear about a Telekinetic a few sectors over, and the whole time it's just *normal-ass* war.

People shooting at other people with things that make physical sense, y'know?

But even the friendly ones—even the precogs saving your squad from an ambush—there's something *wrong* about standing next to them.

Not bad wrong, y'know, not dangerous. Just *wrong*.

Like... You grow up with the bones of the universe underneath you—cause and effect, objects don't move unless something moves them, the floor stays where it is, y'know?

You don't *think* about any of that consciously. You just stand on it.

A Psyker doesn't need it the same way you do.

They're just politely using it because it's more convenient than not. And your brain *knows* it, somehow, even when they're just eating rations and complaining about the same mud you're complaining about.

So the Resolve then just *sits* there, and the years go by, and slowly it stops feeling urgent, y'know?

And you've almost forgotten all about it.

Almost.

My old man—ninety-three now, grows things outside Rein-Casset, most settled person I know—I mentioned Psyker activity near my sector once, offhand, and he went *very still*—not frightened or anything.

Just *still*, the way a person gets still when something old moves in them, y'know?

"You don't forget, kiddo," he said, then. "You *think* you do. You *don't*."

I believe him.

I haven't forgotten yet either..."

—

[Shortened Excerpt from "The Long March Back: Conversations with Veterans of the Galactic War", Vol. 4 — Serath Vonn, Veshan Academic Press, PFC 941]

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Walking into the assembly hall with the rest of Alpha Squad, Thea felt like this was starting to become a bit of a repeating scene.

Alpha Squad, arrayed in their usual lineup with all the medals they had gained from the first Assessment, walking into the room and whispers and rumours starting up around them... It really was just like the Grand Assembly, or even the Awards Ceremony itself—although they didn't have any of the medals on that one yet, of course.

While the whispers, murmurs and rumours were pressing on Thea's Perception from all sides, she was actually already pre-occupied inside her own mind.

Two-fold, even.

First, the question of the Major Alteration for [Sensory Overdrive] was still actively running through it. She had not come to a conclusion on which one she considered the best yet, so it was an ever-present thought ruminating still.

And second, Karania was with them again.

Since the decidedly odd way that the last Lucas Challenge preparation session had gone, in which *something* had happened between Evelyne and Kara, Thea's best friend had been... distant, to say the least.

She had, effectively immediately, decided to jump into an advanced Skill Training without as much as a quick discussion on what, exactly, had happened between her and Eve.

Thea hadn't gotten a single chance of talking to her about it all, before Kara had simply disappeared for two days straight.

But, as Kara had promised, she was back just in time for the Public Leaderboard reveal—and she looked the same as always.

Her demeanour seemed fixed again, her heartrate was normal and everything else around her seemed to be back to how she had always been around Thea.

'But that's not true, is it...?' Thea thought, eyeing her best friend from the side as they took their seats in the front row. 'Something happened with you and Evelyne and it was important to you, in some regard. You'd never behave like that otherwise. So... What is it that you can't talk to me about...?'

She had quietly considered consulting Corvus about it all, but had ultimately decided against it for one simple reason: If Kara didn't want to talk to *her* about it, she almost *certainly* wouldn't want Thea going off and looping in even more people about whatever issues she might be dealing with.

'At least that's what I wouldn't want if I was in her position...'

Karania turned toward her then.

"How many points you think you'll have on the rest of us?" she asked, and Thea pushed the troubling thoughts aside for now—she'd have to figure out how to navigate all of that later.

"Haaaa." Thea sighed, almost wanting to deny that she'd be first—but she would be.

She was practically guaranteed it, unless she'd *thoroughly* misunderstood how the whole thing worked. After all, the best Recruit of the Drive belonged at the top of the leaderboard, and she had very publicly claimed that spot during the Awards Ceremony.

"I have no idea, honestly," she finally answered. "We don't even know if they'll use the same points from the Assessment—I kind of doubt it, actually. My score there was already over 100,000. If the UHF wants to keep these leaderboards running for the whole first year, there's gotta be some kind of compression happening, otherwise the numbers would spiral out of control pretty fast and just look ridiculous when displayed."

For some reason, that made Kara chuckle.

Thea looked at her, raising an eyebrow.

"Only *you*," Kara said, "would start working through the logistics of displaying your own absurdly high leaderboard numbers without even blinking."

The amusement softened slightly. "I'm glad you've finally accepted your place at the top, though. I was half-expecting you to deny it. Took you long enough to get there."

Thea had no idea how to respond to either of those things, so she settled on a pout—which only made Kara chuckle more.

'It's good to see her like this again...' she thought warmly.

"You guys talking about how the Princess is gonna crush everyone again?" Isabella's voice came from Karania's left. "I bet she ends up with double the points of anyone else. Except you, obviously," she nodded at Kara.

"We doing bets? I'm putting down 200 Credits on double, easy," Desmond jumped in from further left. "That first DM she had was absolutely stupid. Probably gave her more points than... Like the rest of our DMs combined! *No shot* anyone else got anything even close."

Thea was already mid-eyeroll when she had to roll them even harder as Lucas, *of all people*, decided to weigh in.

"I'm not sure there's actually anything to bet here," he said, in his usual measured tone. "If nobody's betting against it—which, for the record, I'm also betting *for* her—then there's no payout either way."

Somehow, all eyes ended up on Corvus—the only one who hadn't said anything.

"What?" He raised an eyebrow. "You think *I'm* going to bet against her? The *Squad Leader*? Not standing behind his own squad member? And his second Squad Lead, at that? Do we need to go over the "trust" and "squad cohesion" thing again?"

That got everyone looking elsewhere *very* quickly—Thea included.

The last time Corvus had covered those topics in one of his end-of-day wrap-ups—small sessions he'd introduced after the Assessment, where they all got together, or at least everyone that was available, and he talked through how they could improve as a squad—it had run *several* hours longer than usual and thoroughly wrecked everyone's sleep schedule for the following day.

The consensus landed pretty quickly after that—there was no point betting if nobody was willing to take the other side—and the agreement had barely settled over the squad when the hall itself seemed to shift in a way Thea had come to recognize by now.

Major Quinn had taken the stage.

The room went fully quiet before she'd even reached the podium.

"Welcome back, Recruits," Major Quinn said, her voice carrying through the hall with its usual effortless precision. She glanced briefly across the assembled Recruits, something almost dry flickering at the corner of her expression. "Here we are again... I'll admit—even *I'm* starting to notice how frequently we seem to be doing this lately."

A few chuckles rippled through the hall.

"As of approximately four hours ago, the IGS *Sovereign* completed a full resupply at Kovalsk Station—still well within the Kuigon Sector. We are now en route to Eonon Station. Estimated arrival: One week from today."

The murmurs started immediately—low at first, then spreading outward through the hall the way ripples spread from a dropped stone.

Thea felt it move through her own chest too, something that sat right between anxiety and the particular sharp-edged excitement she hadn't felt since the early days of the Assessment.

More competition. A whole other branch of the Drive, twice the size of what they'd had so far, with their own Alpha Squad and their own Beta Squad and who-knew what else folded in on top of everything they'd already built here.

'Just what kind of people are they?' she thought, even as the murmurs continued around her. *'More like our Alpha Squad... or more people like the damn Masters girl?'*

She was pretty damn sure which answer she was hoping for.

Major Quinn let the noise run for exactly as long as she decided it was going to run, and then her Presence flared—just a microsecond, barely anything at all—and the entire hall went silent like a switch had been thrown, almost a thousand people simultaneously remembering that they were, in fact, sitting in an assembly hall and were meant to listen to Major Quinn.

"Alongside the resupply," the Major continued, without comment on any of that, "we have also taken on three escort ships at Kovalsk Station, which will be flying alongside the *Sovereign* for the remainder of your Recruit year."

She introduced them by name and class, and Thea caught the movement from the corner of her eye—Lucas had gone very still in the particular way he did when something had his *full* attention, which was not particularly surprising, given it was a vehicle the Major was talking about—if in the loosest sense of the term.

What was quite a bit *more* surprising, however, was that Corvus, beside him, had done almost *exactly* the same thing when the ship classes were mentioned.

'Is he interested in ships...?' Thea thought. '*This might be the first time I've ever seen Corvus actually interested in anything beyond squad tactics... Huh.*'

"For those interested in getting a better look," Major Quinn continued, "the entertainment district's relaxation area has been reconfigured. The windows there are currently showing a live reconstruction of the *Sovereign's* real-space environment rather than the usual DDS interior. The escorts will be visible from that area from time to time—access is open."

That pulled another wave of energy through the hall, more open this time—collective interest that was hard to keep contained when you'd been living inside a simulation for months and the idea of something from real-space *actually* being visible through a window, even a reconstructed one, suddenly felt like a very significant event.

"We should take a look at them when we get the chance," Corvus muttered quietly, which caught most of Alpha Squad slightly off-guard—except Lucas, who nodded like it was the single greatest idea he'd ever been presented with.

Sensing the surprise around him—or simply seeing it on their faces—Corvus added, "We're going to be taking part in space battles at some point, one way or another. And given that Major Quinn mentioned Zero-G and special CQC classes coming up very soon during the Grand Assembly, chances are the next Assessment has *some* kind of space component to it. Better to get an early look at these ships now, so we actually have some idea of what we're walking into if that turns out to be the case."

Thea's mouth opened slightly before she could stop it.

'*Damn... Corvus is always several steps ahead, huh? I didn't even think of that...*'

Then she caught Kara out of the corner of her eye—nodding along with a completely deadpan, entirely unsurprised expression on her face.

'Well. Almost everyone.'

Major Quinn let the murmurs run for a moment—long enough for Alpha Squad to agree, without much debate, to set aside some time to check out the escorts at some point, no specific date attached.

Then the Presence came again, and the room doused itself immediately.

"We have additionally taken on several new crew members and staff at Kovalsk, in preparation for the operational requirements of the coming months and the significant increase in Recruits that Eonon will bring with it. I'll be introducing a small handful of them toward the end of today's announcement."

Something shifted in her expression then—not quite amusement, but adjacent to it.

"However," she said, "I'm *well* aware that none of that is what you're all sitting here waiting for."

Her gaze moved across the hall, unhurried.

"So I won't waste any more of your time getting to it: The Public Leaderboards."

A large datascreen came into existence behind Major Quinn—courtesy of the Sovereign's AI, if Thea had to guess—and lit up, presenting a large board with 100 empty entries on it.

"First things first, however," Quinn said, clasping her hands behind her back. "The points used for the leaderboard are *not* simply your Assessment score carried forward, nor will they be a direct sum of whatever you earn from your DMs on top of that. They will be a calculation that takes all of it into account—but the resulting numbers will generally be far smaller than what you saw during the Assessment. Don't be alarmed by that."

Thea shot Karania a deeply satisfied look, which earned her a roll of Kara's green eyes.

"The Public Leaderboard will be accessible from any of the public terminals across the Sovereign," Quinn continued, "as well as directly from your personal datapads—there will be a newly added app on your main screen from today onward. You can check it at any point. The leaderboards will update *continuously*. Every time you gain points—or anyone else does—the board reflects it immediately. There is no waiting for a weekly update. There is no grace period. You are on the clock *at all times*, starting from today onwards, and so is *everyone* around you. If you have a particular rival aboard this ship, you will be able to see *exactly* how close they are to you, and exactly how fast they are moving."

Thea found herself already thinking through the implications of that before Quinn had even finished the sentence.

'We can keep an eye on Masters... And Tiberius Soren. That'll be very helpful.'

"The points themselves will also reflect *more* than just your Assessment and DM performance. Lectures, classes, any structured activity within the UHF MC eco-system that you take part in going forward—*all* count. Insightful questions, strong performances in the

more physical-based sessions—all of it will be rewarded accordingly. How you perform *every single day* matters greatly. Keep that in mind."

Major Quinn let that settle with one of her characteristic pauses for a moment before moving on.

"Third—and this is the one most of you will want to pay attention to—the leaderboard is *the* primary avenue for Challenges going forward. While the post-Assessment Challenges will continue to exist across the next three Assessments as well, the *main* body of Challenges available to you inside the UHF MC—the vast majority of them—will come through the Public Leaderboard directly from now on."

She slowly started pacing atop the stage, hands still clasped behind her back.

"If your score is higher than another Recruit's, you may approach any Officer of at least Lieutenant Command-rank and request a Challenge Permit. Your Professors can issue them as well. As previously outlined when Challenges were first announced, Leaderboard Challenges operate on a *much* tighter timeline than Assessment-based ones—you will have between one and two weeks to prepare. Plan accordingly."

A few unsettled murmurs moved through the hall.

The Major didn't stop them this time, simply continued over them.

"Alongside the leaderboard, we are *also* opening the Squad Store, effective today."

The datascreen behind her shifted, the empty leaderboard sliding aside to make room for a second display.

"Your Squad Leader will have access to a pool of Squad Points, accumulated by anything any member of the squad does that earns them points—as well as, and *especially*, activities completed as a squad. Squad-based activities are currently limited mostly to specific classes and the Assessments, but that will expand *significantly* after your second Assessment, when Squad DMs become available to everyone."

She turned around and moved back towards the podium, her movements as measured and precise as ever.

"The Squad Store will offer a range of purchasable amenities for your time aboard the Sovereign. If you have ever walked past Alpha Squad's living quarters and felt any *particular* way about the difference—" a very slight pause in which the Major let her eyes dart across the assembled Marines, "—this is your avenue for addressing that. Living arrangement upgrades are locked to the *squad* as a unit, not to any individual. Moving up the Squad Rankings means better amenities across the board—statistically speaking. Exceptions may exist."

Her expression remained perfectly composed, but the dry edge to her next words was unmistakable. "If you are tired of going to bed with the smell of someone else's feet in your face, I would *strongly* suggest either Challenging your way up, or putting in the collective

effort to get your squad out of the barracks. The option is there from now on. What you do with that information is up to you."

She stepped back behind the podium, the Squad Store mock-up vanishing from the screen, leaving only the empty leaderboard behind her.

"Now, without any further preamble—your current Top 15 Recruits for the Drive, and their points, from the bottom up:

"At rank 15, with a total score of 3,014 points—Mirabelle Wenia Veth, Indigo Squad."

The name appeared at the bottom of the board, points and squad populating alongside it.

"At rank 14, with a total score of 3,089 points—Lan Mangin, Buster Squad."

Thea's mind snagged on that one for a moment.

'Lan...?'

She remembered him—the very first Recruits she'd ever gone up against in Lt. Eifang's CQC class, back at the very beginning after the Integration.

'It should feel more recent than that, shouldn't it...?'

It didn't feel recent *at all*.

It felt like *years* ago, not merely two months, and she was pretty sure she knew why—the two Skill Classes she'd taken lately had a way of compressing everything that came before them, pushing older memories back further than they *actually* were.

'Has it really only been two months...? Time dilation is a bitch and a half, damn.'

She was glad, however, to see that he was still pushing hard for improvement. He had never struck her, even then, as somebody that would take a loss like the CQC one laying down.

'I wonder if I can ask him for a re-match? It would be fun to see how much we've both improved from back then—and the Freya Gambit is unlikely to work against him a second time,' she thought with a wolfish grin spreading on her face. *'Maybe worth asking... If I find the time.'*

Major Quinn, meanwhile, continued unabated.

"At rank 13, with a total score of 3,152 points—Mayra Thorn, Beta Squad."

"At rank 12, with a total score of 3,201 points—Sebastian Cole Dunne, Felt Squad."

"At rank 11, with a total score of 3,274 points—Patrick Matani, Beta Squad."

"At rank 10, with a total score of 3,318 points—Yonbu Langri, Arctic Squad."

"At rank 9, with a total score of 3,407 points—Corvus Leander Sylarion, Alpha Squad."

'Corvus is down to 9th...?' Thea thought, looking at the name populating the leaderboard. 'That's not great... But I guess he is still safe because of the MVM Medal. Is he banking on that protection to work on other things, then? What has he been up to anyway...?'

She looked over towards him, ever so slightly and without turning her head too much.

He looked utterly relaxed by this revelation.

'So he has a plan. That's good.'

"At rank 8, with a total score of 3,451 points—Jin Shizo, Arctic Squad."

"At rank 7, with a total score of 3,489 points—Lucas Callahan, Alpha Squad."

"At rank 6, with a total score of 3,521 points—Desmond Reimart, Alpha Squad."

"At rank 5, with a total score of 3,532 points—Isabella Itoku, Alpha Squad."

Each name that landed from Alpha Squad drew a slightly different reaction from the hall—not loud, but definitely present. Thea felt several looks dart in their direction and heard several whispers, that she decided to actively ignore.

"At rank 4, with a total score of 3,912 points—Tiberius Soren, Wano Squad."

A notable jump.

The murmurs that followed were audible enough that the Major gave them a single beat to run.

"That's the guy who Challenged twice, right? No wonder he—"

"He's going up against the monster Cyan. I don't know if those points will be enough to—"

"No other Wano Squad names on the board... Might be worth Challenging into to maybe get a chance to train with Tiberius? That might help—"

She then flared her Presence once more, silencing the room, before continuing.

"At rank 3, with a total score of 4,373 points—Rachel Veronica Masters, Beta Squad."

Sharp intakes of breath and murmurs reached Thea's ears immediately. She couldn't stop herself from clicking her tongue—or from catching pieces of what was being said around her.

"Rachel is *absolutely* going to win that Challenge, no doubt about it. I mean just look at—"

"She's a *Masters*. Let's be real here. *'The Wall'* is cool and all, but she—"

"Callahan, Shmallahan. No fucking way he wins against a Major—"

Thea cut the rest of it off before she could hear more.

'Lucas is going to win and you're all going to look like the complete idiots you are,' she thought, feeling a surprising flare of anger move through her. *'Fuck you people.'*

It felt oddly familiar—like being back in the Golden Age Arcade on Lumiosia and listening to people talk shit about your teammates.

Except this particular version carried quite a bit more weight than that.

Thankfully, Major Quinn's Presence rolled through the room a moment later and drowned all of it out, which freed up a meaningful amount of Thea's mental energy.

"At rank 2, with an astonishing total score of 7,954 points—Karanja Faulkner, Alpha Squad."

The hall reacted to *that* one properly.

The gap between Rachel's score and Karanja's wasn't even remotely subtle, and *nobody* was pretending it was. Thea heard the shift ripple through the room—a sharp intake of breath from somewhere behind her left, a low whistle from even further back.

She was already doing the math on what that number meant for her own when Quinn's gaze found hers—just for a fraction of a second—before moving back to the hall.

"And finally," the Major said, her tone identical to what it had been for every name before it, which somehow made it hit even harder, "at rank 1—which should not surprise anyone in this hall by now—with a truly unbelievable total score of 15,971 points—"

The Major's eyes moved back to Thea's.

"—Thea McKay. Alpha Squad."

She nodded then. Once, almost imperceptible even to Thea's Perception—but it was undoubtedly there.

"Man, we could've made an absolute killing if we'd actually bet on it!" Desmond's despairing voice came from the left.

"Bet with *whom*, you absolute imbecile?" Isabella shot back immediately.

"I don't know—*someone*!" Then, a beat later: "And what do you mean imbecile?! You're the meatslab that only knows how to swing a sword! I'm literally out here building and programming drones and shit—do you have *any* concept of how complicated that actually is?!"

"Apparently less complicated than simply—"

Isabella's voice cut off as she lurched forward.

"*Ouch!*"

Every nearby eye went straight to Major Quinn, who was giving them a *very* specific kind of look.

"Sorry, Ma'am," Isabella and Desmond said together, quietly.

Then Isabella added, quieter still, "Fucking *really*? I get psychic-slapped *twice* and nobody else does? How is that even remotely fair...?"

"Now that *everyone* is paying attention again," said Major Quinn, with a very deliberate emphasis on the word "everyone", "let me close out today's assembly with a brief introduction of some of the additional staff and crew we've brought aboard—as a number of them you will be interacting with quite a bit going forward..."