

Volume 2 - Chapter 65 - Squad Time I

UHF Command has confirmed mixed progress across both primary fronts as the Galactic War enters its next operational phase.

On the western front, UHF forces have secured three systems along the Eltaris Corridor, including full control of the Rhyx Belt and the outer worlds of Verin and Lasker-7.

These gains have come at a steep cost.

Two full UHF battlegroups have been declared combat-ineffective following sustained fleet actions near the Kade Expanse, with one additional battlegroup withdrawn after taking heavy losses during a failed push toward the Republic-held industrial hub of Tarsis Prime.

The Iter Sector remains locked in heavy fighting on all fronts, with neither side showing any clear signs of gaining the upper hand.

Meanwhile, Stellar Republic counterattacks remain aggressive, and analysts warn that the western front is likely to stay fluid for the foreseeable future.

The eastern front paints an even harsher picture within the last month.

UHF forces have been forced to abandon the Myridian Spur after coordinated Dominion strikes collapsed local supply lines. Four worlds have been evacuated under fire, and three battlegroups were confirmed destroyed or missing during the retreat, including the veteran 17th Hammer Group.

However, UHF Command has reported a major strategic success in the same theater as well: The capture of the Ashkel Rift Gate, cutting Dominion reinforcement routes into two adjacent sectors.

Dominion losses have been described as “severe but unverified,” with intelligence suggesting at least seven enemy battlegroups shattered during the ongoing battles.

High Command has emphasized that while territorial lines continued to shift, neither front showed signs of decisive collapse or victory.

“This war is being fought tooth and nail,” a spokesperson stated. “Don’t misunderstand: Every system taken or lost feeds directly into the long game. The UHF remains fully committed across all theaters and our Marines, Navy and Armoured Division are putting their entire backs into every fight.”

Further updates are expected following the next fleet rotation cycle.

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[UHF News Net: Strategic Update – War Fronts, PFC 943]

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It had been a thoroughly thrilling experience to watch Corvus' recorded DM with the rest of Alpha Squad—Thea couldn't deny that.

The leader of Alpha Squad gave steady, play-by-play rundowns of his thoughts as they followed his point of view through the sped-up recording, slowing things down for the important or especially tense moments.

One thing that really stood out to her was how Corvus interacted with the world around him, just from the way he looked around and seemed to perceive things.

'It's so different from how I fight... He's watching his teammates more than the enemy. I barely even check what the rest of the squad is doing—I just assume they've got it all handled properly.'

That constant awareness wasn't born from any lack of trust, though.

If anything, it showed how well Corvus understood both his squad and his own role within it.

Throughout the DM, he kept adjusting positions, giving short pointers here and there, and tightening their responses to enemy movements—which, in a Point Assault, was absolutely critical.

Unlike her own DM, Corvus had been forced to push an enemy position alongside Marines he had never worked with before, much less *seen* until that very mission.

And yet, he handled it smoothly, downright effortlessly.

The part that struck Thea the most came in the latter half of the DM.

Several of Corvus' original squadmates had already died, and what remained of his group had linked up with a few other battered squads in a temporary safe zone in front of the enemy lines—a crater left behind from a large munition gone astray.

They had watched as Corvus quickly struck up a rapport with the only other surviving Squad Leader and, in under two minutes, folded the remaining Marines into their two squads.

Then they moved out together as two oversized units to continue the push.

'That's... honestly kind of crazy,' was the first thought that came to Thea's mind. *'How did he manage to get all of that done so fast...? And how did he know to fold them into the squads instead of just making a third and fourth?'*

When she had asked him about that moment, he had explained, "We knew the position was only safe for a short time, so we couldn't sit around waiting for reinforcements—like more Squad Leaders—to show up. But we also couldn't just let the other Marines form their own new squads, since they didn't have the command structure for it.

“Especially during an assault, you need a clear chain of command. Orders have to move cleanly, up and down. Without someone trained to lead—or at least someone with a basic, natural grasp of it, like you, Thea—a ‘rogue’ squad that close to enemy lines is more likely to cause problems than solve them. And none of the Marines there seemed able to take charge like that. The way I could tell was fairly simple: Nobody had taken charge. If somebody has a natural aptitude for it, they will take charge when they realize that nobody else is doing so.”

Thea had been a bit taken aback by his claim that she had an inherent knack for leadership—she very much disagreed, considering that the only two times she had ever led squads so far, they had *all effectively died*—but his explanation still made sense.

And she also couldn’t deny that she would have stepped in and taken charge if she’d realized nobody else was doing their job properly.

Still, that didn’t exactly make her a natural leader.

‘Yeah... I really wouldn’t want to worry about a rag-tag squad with bad comms while trying to shoot at the enemy.’

Corvus’ DM ended with him taking a shot to the chest, a clean hole blown straight through his torso during one of the final pushes.

“Haaa... So yeah, that’s how this disaster of a DM ended for me,” he said, offering the squad a tired smile. “*Great*, huh?”

“You went out like a boss,” Isabella shrugged, surprisingly the first to speak. “Can’t really ask for more than that. You helped a ton of Marines do their jobs better than they would’ve otherwise, so... that’s a win in my book.”

Thea nodded along. “Honestly, I’m not sure what else you could’ve done differently.”

The rest of the squad seemed to agree, offering their own words of support, but Corvus still looked mildly unconvinced.

“There are a lot of things I could’ve done differently, honestly. But... it’s hard to put into words. I know where I went wrong now, though. So I can fix it next time,” he said, and there was enough steel in his voice that Thea didn’t try to argue.

“Now... as for the friendlink system, I didn’t really run into anyone particularly noteworthy during my DM. I did make a few connections with people I worked well with, though. So nothing earth-shattering to report there. Still, we should all keep an eye out for promising Marines. Those kinds of contacts can become useful later on—trust me on this. My parents drilled that into me early.”

That made everyone perk up a little, and Karania asked the question they were all thinking.

“What do you mean by that, exactly?”

Corvus exhaled, leaning back into the cushioned armchair and running a hand through his slightly ruffled auburn hair. “The DMs are galaxy-wide. We all know that from UHF 101. That

means the Marines we run into there are real people, out there somewhere, already fighting the same war we'll be joining in less than a year."

They all nodded.

"So if we find people who are particularly competent," he continued, "we can learn from them. Group up a few times, ask about their experiences, get advice, tips, even build-related insight. There are limits, of course—no specific deployments or sensitive details. Basic OpSec. But the rest? That's fair game."

He pointed at Thea, catching her off guard. "Especially you. It'd be really useful for you to link up with other Psykers. You've got the Rune priest now for personal lessons, sure, but even he won't have time to cover everything. And for someone at his level, the basics might be so far removed from his own experiences that he skips right over them without intending to. Talking to people closer to your own level can fill in those gaps."

Then he gestured toward Desmond. "And you too."

Desmond groaned and waved him off. "Yeah, yeah. I get it. More intel from other Drone Operators and Support-role types would help lock down my build. Fair."

Corvus just grinned at him with an unmistakable I-told-you-so look before turning back to the rest of the squad.

"And I'm sure the rest of you can find some interesting Marines to learn from too—and if nothing else... If they find you competent as well, there's a real chance that once we're promoted to Private, we might end up on their ships at some point. Or on the same Battlefields. Maybe even get invited into their squads, companies, or platoons, if you leave a strong enough impression."

He raised his hands slightly, as if to stop any protests—which was probably for the best, as Thea had absolutely been about to blurt out something along the lines of, "We're staying together as Alpha, what do you mean *their* squads?"

"Don't make the mistake of thinking we'll always stick together as one squad," Corvus continued, the words hitting Thea like a slap across the face. "I *hope* we will for a long time, but don't assume we're invincible. I hate to bring that kind of talk into a celebration, but you all need to remember this is a *war* we're joining. And not just any war, but *the* war. I gave each of you a box to keep mementos in—I didn't do that just for show."

His eyes met Thea's for a brief moment, the familiar flinch tightly controlled but still there, before he looked at the rest of Alpha Squad. "There's a good chance some of our names will end up in *someone's* box. So don't waste the chance to network during these DMs. Having options matters, if the worst ever happens. We all hope it won't—but that doesn't mean we shouldn't at least plan for it."

Then the seriousness eased from his face, replaced by a grin, as if he couldn't help himself.

Thea had started to notice that about him in the past days—Corvus never liked leaving things heavy for too long unless he *absolutely* had to.

“And hey, if things *do* go according to plan,” he added lightly, “we can always poach them for our own squads, companies, or platoons later. I’d much rather have hand-picked Marines than randoms. So either way, it’s a win-win, right?”

For a moment, a heavy silence settled over the room.

Then Isabella scoffed, leaning back with her arms crossed.

“He’s right,” she said bluntly. “War isn’t a playground. Hope doesn’t keep you alive out there—plans do. *People die*. That’s just reality.”

She glanced around the group, eyes hard.

“You don’t get to pretend otherwise just because it makes you *uncomfortable*.”

Nobody argued with her words.

They all knew her background, or at least the parts she’d chosen to share about her time as a mercenary.

This wasn’t mere theory to her, like it was for Corvus—not that anybody would think he was wrong on this. But for Isabella, those words came straight from memory.

And that, in itself, made all the difference in terms of weight.

Corvus nodded once at her and Thea caught the motion out of the corner of her eye.

“Alright,” he said, clapping his hands once and letting the tension break. “That’s enough existential dread for one morning. We’ve still got five DMs to go through, and I’d rather not end today feeling like a funeral.”

He gestured at the group with a grin. “So—who’s next?”

A beat of silence.

Then, Lucas shrugged from his seat.

“I’ll take it,” he said easily. “Might as well rip that bandage off.”

Corvus smiled. “Good man. Alright, Lucas, you’re up...”

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Lucas’ DM was, unfortunately, fairly uneventful, leaving little room for any deep breakdowns.

He had chosen a Point Defense mission to ease himself into the DMs, much like Thea had picked a Hold-the-Line for the same reason—even if hers had ended up scaled way up and the whole “easing into it” part had been lost entirely.

Most of Lucas’ DM was spent staring at the backside of the Stalwart, as that was where he had stayed for the vast majority of the mission.

Still, it had been interesting to see combat from his point of view.

'I don't think I could do this,' Thea thought. 'The pressure of being stuck behind a wall like that, without really knowing what's happening on the other side... Sure, he's looking around, firing the Havoc over the top, still interacting with the fight—but being mostly stationary, with such a small field of view? Just watching this is making me feel claustrophobic.'

As the recording came to an end, Lucas commented on it himself.

"Unlike our fearless leader, I survived the entire thing. But I'm still not exactly happy with my performance. I felt like I was barely doing anything for a good chunk of the DM—just standing there as a shield. Which, yeah, is kind of my job, but I feel like I could be doing more, you know?"

To Thea's surprise, the others actually agreed with him.

She had expected a wave of reassurance like Corvus had gotten, but instead, the rest of Alpha Squad stayed thoughtful and honest with Lucas' self-assessment.

'Awesome,' she thought, warmth spreading from her core.

This was *exactly* the kind of team she had always wanted—people willing to speak up when something wasn't working, competent enough to notice it, and determined to improve every step of the way.

"Think you might need to work on your offensive switch there, big guy," Isabella commented, nodding like it was obvious. "Havoc's solid and all, but I'll be honest—if you're not standing next to me, you're pretty easy to ignore."

Lucas nodded slowly. "Yeah. I definitely felt that a lot during this DM. Didn't have anyone even close to your level to draw attention, and it made me feel almost invisible at times."

"You could try taking a page out of Rachel Masters' book," Karania added, casually—and Thea's head snapped toward her, eyes going wide.

'What the fuck, Kara?!' Thea thought, stunned. *'Masters?! Lucas is ten times what she could ever be!'*

The knee-jerk anger made her pause.

Because she knew what she was thinking wasn't true in the least.

'No... No, she's right,' Thea admitted to herself with a quiet sigh. *'Masters is a bitch, but she's terrifying. And she fills the same Role as him. If Lucas could tap into even some of that aggressiveness when it mattered, he'd be impossible to ignore.'*

What they had seen during the Awards Ceremony—and even during the one-on-one fight with Isabella shortly after—left little doubt that Masters was an incredibly skilled Marine, far more so than Lucas, as much as Thea hated to admit it.

"I'm not sure I can switch like she does, honestly," Lucas said with a pained smile. "The movements, the raw... just straight up *skill* she brings as a Defensive Heavy—it's beyond me right now. By Xagis, I don't even know where I'd *start* to reach that level, if I'm being honest."

"Then just ask Thea to help you figure it out," Desmond, of all people, suddenly cut in with something Thea had never expected to hear. "She's our official Build Advisor... whatever thing, right? And I remember Isabella saying she's an absolute menace in the arcade. She can emulate builds and playstyles, no?"

His eyes met Thea's.

She was still caught off guard by him saying it at all, but he held her gaze after the initial flinch and added, "You could help him get something together in time for the Challenge, yeah? He doesn't need to be perfect—just good enough to show the brass he's worth keeping."

Thea thought about it for a moment, then nodded. "Yeah. I think I could."

She wasn't completely confident, but Desmond had basically handed her a chance to do what she was best at—build planning and fixing playstyles—and she wasn't about to turn that down. Especially since it was the first time he had openly asked for her help—even if for somebody else.

"I'll probably need help from all of you at different times," she continued. "If I need specific enemy types for him to fight. I can emulate a lot of builds, but you'll still be better than me in your own niches. That said... I do have a few ideas on how we could push Lucas toward a more well-rounded build and playst—ehhh combat style."

Karania's eyebrows lifted as she shot Thea a teasing look, which Thea promptly ignored.

The rest of the squad agreed right away to help whenever needed—Isabella most eagerly of all, to absolutely no one's surprise.

"But we were already planning on some of that, weren't we?" Thea tossed the conversation back to Lucas, who nodded gratefully.

"Yeah. I think we could start tomorrow, if you're free then?" he asked.

Thea answered with a simple thumbs-up.

"Works for me."

"I'll let the girl know too, then. If that's okay with you," Lucas added, and it took Thea a second to remember what he meant—until Evelyn and their agreement came back to her.

"Ah, right. Yeah, that makes sense," Thea agreed.

She wasn't exactly thrilled about entertaining a fan, but if Evelyn really had the kind of intel on Masters she claimed, it was a very small price to pay.

"*The* girl?" Karania asked inquisitively.

"Uh—remember that girl who ran up to me after the DM?" Thea said quickly. "We met her during System 102. She said she has some information on Masters that could help with the Challenge."

She shot Karania a pointed look, silently begging her not to mention the autograph or the fan stuff.

Their eyes locked, and with growing dread, Thea saw the sparkle of pure amusement in her best friend's gaze. Kara was *absolutely* enjoying this moment of uncertainty.

"Girl's a real fan of Thea's, that's for sure," Lucas added casually.

Thea's eyes went wide.

Karania snapped her head toward him, then back to Thea, clearly mouthing, "*Wasn't me*," before breaking into all-out laughter.

"A real fan, huh?" Isabella teased, one brow lifting.

Corvus jumped in without missing a beat. "Not exactly surprising, considering our star Recruit over here. #1 isn't just for show. Bound to have a whole fanclub by now."

Even Desmond decided to chime in, rubbing the back of his neck with an awkward half-smile. "I mean... yeah. Kind of checks out. You *are* scary competent. I'd probably be a fan too. Uh... Not like that though," he added quickly, somehow managing to make it worse.

Thea groaned, dragging both hands down her face. "Please. Can we not do this right now...?"

She took a breath and forced herself back on track, pointing at Lucas. "*Anyway*. Your DM. Did you end up friendlinking with anyone you might want to keep tabs on?"

Lucas chuckled, gracefully granting her the out. "Honestly? No. I didn't really bother with it at the time. Was too focused on trying to figure out just how many things I had managed to mess up..." He shrugged. "But after what Corvus and Isa said earlier, *yeah*. I'll start paying attention to that stuff going forward, for sure."

The room settled into a brief lull, the energy dipping just enough for Thea to hope they'd moved on.

They hadn't.

Isabella slowly turned her head toward her, a grin tugging at the corner of her mouth. "So. About that fan of yours...?"

"*Nope*," Thea said immediately, louder than necessary.

She spun toward Karania and jabbed a thumb in her direction. "Kara. Your DM. Show it. Now. You've been teasing it for days and I want to see what crazy stuff you got up to!"

Karania blinked once, then smiled in a way that told Thea she absolutely understood what was happening.

“Wow,” she said sweetly. “Changing the subject already? *Tragic.*”

Thea shot her a pained, pleading look.

Karania laughed and raised her hands. “Alright, alright. I’ll save that for later.”

She leaned forward, already pulling up the recording. “You’re not wrong though. I’ve been dying to show you all this.”

Thea sagged back into the couch in relief as the display shifted, silently thanking whatever force in the universe had convinced Karania to show mercy—at least for now.

As the recording started playing, Karania gave a quick introduction. “So, I picked one of the DMs with a special modifier. This one was called *Faultline* and... yeah, it hit a lot harder than I expected. The basic idea is constant seismic activity—earthquakes, the ground splitting open, chasms forming, all that fun stuff. Except they really cranked it up to like *twelve.*”

And with that, the DM recording kicked off from Karania’s point of view...