

Volume 2 - Chapter 86 - Shock

A conversation with Colonel Ires Unadin Tavath, UHF Marine Corps (Ret.), on the structure, philosophy, and purpose of the integrated fighting force.

Interview led by Senior UHF Correspondent Sela Bourne.

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Bourne: “How would you describe the Marine Corps to someone who's never encountered it up close?”

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Tavath: “The short version? The sharpest instrument the UHF has ever built.

And the reason for that is *Integration*.

Every single Marine is Integrated. Every single one.

From the moment a Recruit steps onto a training ship, they have access to the Allbright System, Abilities, Attributes that grow with them, and a Deep Dive Simulation environment that gives them *thousands* of hours of effective combat experience before they ever touch a real Battlefield.

The other branches *can't* have that—there simply aren't enough Integrated individuals to fully staff a Navy fleet, an Armored Division, and a Marine Corps all at once.

So the other branches supplement with Unintegrated personnel, which they do very effectively, mind you.

But that means there's a ceiling on what those personnel can become.

The Marines don't have that ceiling.”

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Bourne: “The training structure—could you walk us through how a Marine's first year actually looks, in terms of who's involved?”

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Tavath: “It's a lot more collaborative than most people likely realize.

The common image is Marines training Marines—some grizzled veteran teaching Recruits how to shoot and move and survive.

And that's part of it, of course. But only *part*.

Liaisons from every branch come aboard the training ships directly.

The Navy covers Zero-G operations, boarding actions, ship-to-ship combat—the specific mechanics of fighting in an environment with no floor and no consistent orientation.

Things a ground-combat instructor simply cannot teach from theory alone.

The Armored Division sends their own people to cover working alongside heavy machinery in active engagements, identifying weak points in enemy vehicles, positioning infantry relative to armor so each covers what the other can't.

Get that wrong in the field and Marines become a liability to the very assets they're supposed to be protecting.

Even the Civilian Auxiliaries send instructors, which surprises people.

But a Marine on the ground needs to understand logistics networks, infrastructure, how to read a building compromised by bombardment before putting a squad inside it.

Not glamorous subjects—but they save lives with remarkable consistency.

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Bourne: “What do the other branches get out of it?”

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Tavath: “More than people credit them for.

The Marines staff the ships they train on—and a Marine who understands shipboard operations is genuinely useful to the Navy, not just as a body filling a post. When the Navy runs a boarding action, the Marines are the ones going through the breach. When a ship hits a Void corridor and Daemons come through the break points, the Marines are the ones keeping the crew alive. Unintegrated personnel simply don't have the capability to contend with that.

The AD benefits equally. Heavy machinery is enormously powerful and deeply vulnerable to close-range infantry pressure. A Marine squad moving alongside an armored column and engaging enemy infantry is what allows those vehicles to operate at all in certain environments—urban fighting especially. In return, the AD provides the fire support and breaching capability that Marine infantry can't sustain indefinitely.

For the Civilian side, the Marines provide the most important thing of all: keeping the war away from the population. Without them, every city becomes a Battlefield within hours of an enemy landing.”

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Bourne: “The slogan, “Always outmanned, never outmatched”—what does it mean to you?”

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Tavath: “The UHF does not have enough Integrated personnel to match the Stellar Republic or the Celestial Dominion in raw numbers—not on the ground, not in space, not *anywhere*.

Their combined fighting forces, featuring both Integrated and Unintegrated soldiers en-masse, is simply not something that the UHF can match.

That is simply the reality of the war.

We are *always* going to be outnumbered in some context, on some front, in some engagement.

That's not a failure of logistics or planning, but the galactic scale of the conflict we're fighting.

What the Marine Corps represents is the UHF's answer to the problem of “How can we catch up to every other Faction in this conflict, when we’ve started centuries behind?”

You cannot win a numbers war with numbers you don't have.

So, you build something that doesn't *need* numerical parity to win.

You take every Integrated individual you can find, you put them through the most comprehensive training framework ever devised, you give them the combined expertise of *every* branch of your military and civilian apparatus that you have, and you build something that the other side simply *cannot* replicate at any volume.

Because that same advantage—numerical superiority—is what would break them, if they ever tried to emulate us. If they tried the same level of education and training for their vastly larger contingents of soldiers, their entire Faction would collapse under the weight of it all.

So... Outmanned, yes.

Consistently. Structurally. By the very design of the conflict we are fighting itself.

But *never* outmatched.

To illustrate the point a bit more: We consider a Marine to be at the bottom of the UHF-internal boards, when simulations show that they would be incapable of handling at least a five-to-one encounter with Unintegrated personnel.

That's the Marine Corps.

That's what it is and what it's always been.”

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[Shortened Excerpt from "Always Outmanned. Never Outmatched." — The UHF Galactic Standard, Issue 1,204, PFC 931]

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Major Quinn moved through the introductions of the additional staff and crew with the same efficiency she applied to everything else.

"The following personnel have joined us from the UHF Navy and will be assisting with additional drills and taking over several lectures and classes for the coming weeks."

She introduced them one by one—Fleet Lieutenant Daisuke Farren, a lean, tall man with a sabre visibly strapped to the side of his uniform; Sub-Lieutenant Yusuf Hallmark, younger, with a service record that was notably heavy on boarding actions for someone his age; and Fleet Lieutenant Yuna Forsythe, a broad, heavy woman whose decorations alone told a story that Thea didn't have the naval context to fully understand but which was clearly impressive enough for Major Quinn to mention specifically.

Thea immediately noted, without needing to look at anyone specific directly, the way the rest of the members of Alpha Squad exchanged glances the moment the first Navy title was announced.

'So we weren't wrong with our assumptions,' she thought.

The next Assessment was going to have a space component to it.

It was basically a certainty at this point—the Zero-G classes, the CQC additions, and now three Navy veterans joining the staff for the exact window between now and the next Assessment.

The UHF wasn't being subtle about the direction things were heading, and she was pretty sure that was intentional too.

Give them time to mentally and physically prepare if they were paying close attention, but not announce it publicly nor give them enough time to *fully* close all the gaps. Classic UHF.

She filed that away and allowed her attention drift from the announcements.

'What do I do about Kara?'

The thought arrived easily.

She watched Karania from the corner of her eye, cataloguing everything without really meaning to. Posture relaxed. Attention on the front. Nothing visibly wrong.

Which was, in itself, kind of the whole problem that Thea was dealing with.

'She's fine. She looks completely fine. She looked completely fine earlier today too, and the day before she simply disappeared into the Skill Training as well...'

The thing was, Kara *always* looked fine. That was the baseline.

What Thea had learned to pay attention to over the past months wasn't whether Kara looked fine, but the specific texture of *how* she looked fine. The difference between Kara being

genuinely okay and Kara *performing* okay while running seventeen simultaneous background processes on something she wasn't quite talking about yet.

And something had very clearly happened during that last training session for Lucas' Challenge that Thea still didn't have a clean read on.

She had turned it over enough times by now that she knew the rough shape of *what* she didn't know, at the very least—which was definitely more than she'd had back when Kara had simply disappeared.

Kara and Evelynne had left the room together—Kara with an excuse that was *technically* plausible enough and clearly entirely constructed, given everything else that had gone on around the moment of request.

They had come back later, practically side by side, with the kind of forced normalcy that two people produced when they had agreed, wordlessly or otherwise, to behave as if something important *hadn't* just happened between them.

She had noticed the heart rate variations at odd intervals throughout the session and the specific way both of them had held themselves slightly differently after they came back—and their heart rates no longer doing the odd jumping around as well.

'Something happened. Something personal. And Kara doesn't want to talk about it...'

The question was how to bring it up without making it worse, because Thea felt like she should be bringing it up. Kara had always been there for her, whenever she'd needed her, but so far, the balance sheet was decidedly lopsided in this friendship of theirs.

'Do I just ask her directly? No... She'll probably deflect, say that she's okay, and then know I'm watching her, which just makes everything more awkward. So... Do I wait for her to bring it up herself? But she clearly hasn't so far. And she's pretending that everything's fine, so it doesn't really look like he ever will...'

Thea turned a possibility over, discarded it, tried another.

The honest problem was that she didn't actually know enough about this sort of thing yet—about how to navigate whatever this was—to pick an approach she felt confident about.

She could read a room and the people inside it easily enough, thanks to her high levels of Perception. But knowing what to do with what she was reading—and what, specifically, it all even was that she had picked up on—was a different skill entirely, and she was increasingly aware that she didn't have it.

'I need a second opinion.'

She sighed, realizing that she was going to have to rely on Corvus once again for something that she really should have figured out by now, then pulled out her datapad briefly and typed quickly.

'Hey. Can you link us again? Like at the Awards Ceremony. Got a question.'

A few seconds passed before she felt the strange pressure that came with Corvus' [Private Communication] Ability—immediately followed by the white-noise background acoustic of the errant thoughts, not directed through the link.

"What's wrong?" His mental voice was as measured and attentive as always.

"Have you noticed anything off with Kara lately?"

A brief beat of consideration on his part, before he answered, *"Not specifically. But she hasn't exactly been around much in the past few days. Why?"*

Thea laid it out as cleanly as she could—the training session, the heartrate fluctuations she'd caught at odd intervals, the way Kara and Evelynne had left the room together and come back *changed*, the excuse that was just slightly too tidy, the arm-in-arm return that neither of them had acknowledged or explained.

"I don't want to ask Evelynne about it," she added. *"Whatever it was, it's clearly something personal to Kara. But... I also don't know how to bring it up with her **directly** without making it weird, y'know? I don't even know where to **start**."*

"Hmm... What else did you notice during the session?" Corvus asked. *"Beyond everything you've just told me. Like when did the spikes happen, what else was going on, and so on."*

So she went through it properly—the specific points where the heart rates had spiked or dipped, the timing of them relative to what had been happening in the room, the texture of how the two of them had been interacting before they left versus after they came back.

The way it hadn't felt like a fight, exactly. Or even anything resembling a real argument.

"I don't know enough about this girl to work with," Corvus said after a moment. *"What was her name again? I'll look into her after the assembly's finished."*

"Evelynne," Thea thought back. *"Evelynne Midra Sen."*

The link abruptly went silent.

Not quiet, like when Corvus was thinking about an answer, but dead *silent*. Like all errant thoughts that normally came through the link as a sort of white-noise background acoustic had simply ceased to exist.

Thea's eyes moved to Corvus towards her left immediately.

At the same time as she saw his face, she heard his heartbeat stop—*actually* stop, for a single beat—and then accelerate into something she would have flagged as an acute medical event if she hadn't been watching his face at the same time and seeing that he was still very much conscious and very much just—

"Corvus?! What's wrong?! Do you need Kara?!"

He shook his head right away. One singular, short and sharp movement.

"Thea." Came Karania's voice, low and close. She had turned toward her, eyes already doing their quick, clinical sweep over her face. "What's wrong? Everything okay?"

"Ahh—Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine," Thea said, and turned back toward the front with a neutrality she did *not* feel. "Just an errant thought... It went bad for a second. I'm fine though. Thank you."

She could feel Karania's eyes stay on her for a moment longer before finally moving away, also going back towards Major Quinn who was introducing yet another set of staff members.

"*Corvus*," she thought carefully through the link. "*Are you okay? What just happened?*"

She had to wait longer than she would've wanted for an answer.

"*You said her name is **Sen**? Evelyne Midra **Sen**?*"

"*Yes. That's what Lucas said, at least. I'm pretty sure that was the name she used when she introduced herself to me, back when we first met her—my memory's usually pretty good. But... Lucas has been dealing with her mostly though, so he'd know better than me, honestly.*"

Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Corvus *immediately* reach over and tap Lucas on the shoulder, then lean in and say something inaudible.

Lucas nodded.

Corvus went white as a sheet.

"*Do you know her?*" Thea asked immediately—even she could read this kind of reaction without needing a lecture on it first. "*Who is she? I thought she was just some girl?*"

"*Fuck*," was the only thing that came back from Corvus.

Just that singular word with no context and nothing attached to it—and the sheer fact that it was *Corvus* delivering it with absolutely nothing else behind it hit Thea like a slap.

"*I don't even know where to begin*," he finally said after another few moments. "*She's a **Sen**, Thea. And based on her first name—she's **the** Sen. The first-born daughter of the Thal.*"

Every single one of those words went straight past her.

"*Ooookay—slow down, here. What the fuck is a Thal? And you keep saying 'Sen' like that's just somehow supposed to explain everything on its own. It doesn't!*"

"*No, Thea. It **really** does*," he replied immediately, and dropped his head into his hands.

Which immediately caught Karania's attention, because of course it did.

"You okay, Corvus?" she asked, her voice perfectly even and uninterested—but Thea had exactly *zero* doubt that she was now *very* interested in what was happening.

Thea herself acting slightly off was one thing—even Thea knew that she was a bit odd at times. Corvus *visibly* falling apart in the middle of an assembly, however, was something else *entirely*, and not something that would ever get past Kara.

"Thea's throwing memetic hazards at me through [Private Communication]," he said, without lifting his head. "I'll handle it. Thanks, Karania."

Kara nodded and *immediately* turned towards Thea, giving her a look.

Thea produced the most innocent smile she had in her repertoire.

"Like I said. Errant thoughts."

"Errant thoughts that have Corvus looking like *that*?" Kara repeated, one eyebrow climbing sharply.

"Yup. Very errant. Like, *super* errant, really," Thea nodded profusely.

They held each other's eyes for a few seconds. Then Kara let out a long, heavy sigh and looked back toward the stage.

"Please don't break our Squad Leader, Thea. We only have the one."

"I'll do my best," Thea said honestly—even if she had absolutely no idea whether she could even keep that promise, given that she still didn't understand what the fuck was actually happening.

She pulled her attention back to the white noise of Corvus' thoughts, which had gotten considerably louder and more erratic in the last few moments, and deliberately pushed through, "*So... any chance you could break it down for me? I have no idea what's going on here, Corvus. You're throwing words at me that mean nothing to me, but I can tell they're important. It's got something to do with Kara's situation, right?*"

"*Oh, fucking Emperor, Karania—! You're right. Fuck!*"

Thea almost winced at the sheer volume of swearing coming through his directed thoughts. She had never, *not once*, seen or heard Corvus *this* visibly rattled. And that was saying something, given that they had spent an entire month in an active warzone together.

He took a few deep breaths to her left, she could hear the air move through his lungs and his heartbeat slowly calm down—nowhere near base levels, still heavily accelerated, but at least no longer in medical emergency range—before he sat back up straight, squared his shoulders, and reassembled his usual posture and visible composure piece by piece.

"*The Sen,*" he started. "*They're a Major Legacy. Like Masters. Except they—I... I don't know how to even begin to explain this properly, Thea. This is an unbelievably bad situation, and I'm extremely sorry I somehow completely missed it. You've been telling us about Evelyne for a week and I never once—Of course I didn't know! She's a fucking Sen! So, of course she wouldn't have made any obvious moves until now to show up in any scans... But why now?*"

Even his directed thoughts were a tangled mess, one train of thought tripping over the next before either one could finish.

But Thea had caught the part that mattered: *‘Like Masters.’*

“So she’s a bitch, then?” she thought back, and felt the swirl of emotions settle into her before she’d even finished the thought—the same mixture of heat and cold that had moved through her at the Awards Ceremony, watching Rachel’s face.

“Bit—what?! I mean... maybe? I don’t know her personally. You and Lucas are the ones who’ve spent the most time with her, and given that you’ve both only reported good outcomes so far, I don’t think so.” Corvus replied, then added after a half-second pause, *“Listen... Major Legacies aren’t bad by default, Thea. Most of them won’t be **anything** like Rachel. What she did at the Awards Ceremony went against basically everything a Major Legacy is supposed to stand for. I genuinely don’t know what her problem was—hot-headed, immature, something personal, maybe all three or more. But that’s just **her**. That’s not all of them.”*

Thea let that sit for a second, and felt the spike in her blood pressure ease off slightly.

“I guess that’s fair,” she ultimately admitted. “Evelyne’s been nothing but helpful so far.”

“Which is exactly the question,” Corvus came back immediately. *“A Sen—just... take my word on this for now, I’ll try to explain in-detail, when we’re out of this assembly—would **never** do something without expecting a major return on their investment. What, exactly, are you paying her with?”*

Thea went back through every conversation, every exchange, anything that could have been a transaction she hadn’t noted as such at the time... But she didn’t find much.

“She asked to talk to me,” she said slowly. *“One-on-one. We’ve only done it once so far, and she mostly just asked about my general philosophy on how to approach the Allbright System. Some minor Build-related stuff, but I didn’t tell her anything specific. Nothing about my actual plans or anything Alpha Squad related.”*

“Hmm,” Corvus thought back his humming, which felt strange—like it was Thea’s own mind replaying it, making her feel like it was *her* hum, when it wasn’t. *“That’s not exactly the kind of return I would have expected a Sen to seek... There’s got to be—”*

Thea’s attention was abruptly interrupted and completely caught by Major Quinn’s voice filtering in through her ears, losing everything else Corvus was transmitting.

“... Auxiliary-Legate Selene Calla! She will be here aboard the Sovereign to help with any and all mental stress that you might encounter. Many of you will already know her from your various Cube Trials or Post-Assessment briefings—even if most will likely have been AI reconstructions of her—but this one’s the real deal, so you can actually get some personal one-on-one time with her going forward.”

Thea’s eyes were spellbound to the stage.

Specifically, the woman that was unmistakably Selene, yet...

'What—What is this...?' Thea thought, numbly. A massive weight inside her chest plummeting deeper and deeper as she looked up at the woman on the stage. 'What's wrong with—What... happened to her?'

Selene looked like Selene always did, barring one massive, all-encompassing difference that was starkly burnt into Thea's mind as her high Perception did not allow her not to focus on every single little detail that was wrong when she compared it to the picture in her head—the one that she had held onto for weeks now, ever since she'd seen Selene leave that room after the debrief.

She was wearing an exo-suit.

A sleek and beautiful one at that, its frame hidden beneath her clothes so well that most people likely wouldn't even notice it unless they were specifically looking for the faint mechanical reinforcement running along her limbs and torso.

But it was there.

And its purpose had become painfully obvious the very moment Thea had looked at her.

The suit wasn't military-grade armor or some fashionable augmentation—It was support.

A framework built to help Selene stay upright and force the right side of her body to obey commands it no longer properly responded to.

And the worst part was that the exo-suit, naturally, didn't extend all the way to her face.

Nothing hid the damage *there*.

The right side of Selene's face hung slightly slack, the muscles unmoving in a way that immediately brought to mind the aftermath of a medical episode, while the left side still carried that same warm, gentle smile Thea remembered so clearly.

Only now the smile looked incomplete—*broken*.

Thea could barely even make out Corvus' thoughts pushing into her head via their telepathic link, nor Karania's words that were apparently being spoken at her as well.

She could faintly make the latter out as being *insistent*—slightly panicked even.

But she could not tear her eyes from Selene.

'How is this possible? She was fine when she left. She's an Auxiliary—she's not supposed to be anywhere near danger. How—'

She was vaguely aware of her vision narrowing at the edges, her breathing going shallow without her telling it to—

The Presence hit her like a *wall*.

Concentrated, precise and unmistakably Major Quinn's—it rolled through Thea's head and nearly took her with it, her eyes going back, the edges of consciousness briefly becoming very uncertain territory.

"Thea, calm down!" Karania's sharp voice finally broke through.

The Presence pulled back as fast as it had come, and Thea slumped into her chair like something had been cut loose, completely spent.

Karania's hands were on her immediately—pulse check, quick and practiced, kept low enough that most of the hall wasn't looking.

The Marines nearest to them had noticed the commotion, but Major Quinn had continued without a beat on the stage, so the rest of the room had stayed with her.

'I'll have to thank her,' some slow, half-functional part of Thea's mind offered up.

But Kara was there. So it was going to be fine.

"You with me?" Karania asked quietly.

Thea nodded slowly.

"Okay. Good." Her voice dropped further. "I need you to get whatever Psychic thing was happening under control, Thea. Major Quinn is not going to appreciate you flash-freezing the people around you in the middle of her assembly."

That got Thea to perk up immediately—Psychic stuff was *very* problematic.

"W—What?"

She looked down and saw frost coating Karania's right arm and felt her eyes go wide.

"Kara—! Oh fuck, I'm so sor—"

"It's fine." Karania quietly and firmly cut her off. "Really. I get it. You weren't expecting that—I don't think anyone was."

She continued with something gentler moving through her voice. "I know how much she means to you. So... I get it. Just breathe, keep it together, and I'm sure you'll be able to talk to her soon. Ask her yourself."

She glanced briefly toward the stage, then back. "From a purely professional and entirely distant diagnosis based on nothing but a look—she seems to be doing comparatively well. And the UHF wouldn't have someone that severely compromised on active duty if they couldn't function in it. Right?"

Thea turned that over slowly—it sounded sensible.

"So it might even be temporary."

"Yeah," Thea said. "Yeah, that... makes sense."

She still felt oddly hollow, like the shock hadn't fully finished moving through her yet.

She noticed that Corvus' white-noise had gone quiet—the Ability had likely run its duration while she wasn't paying attention. When she glanced over, he was already looking at her, concern sitting plainly on his face in a way he wasn't bothering to hide.

She gave him a nod and a thumbs-up.

His expression eased, slightly, without fully clearing.

When she looked back at the stage, she couldn't make herself look anywhere other than Selene. Whatever had happened to her—given the UHF's medical capabilities, given Selene's rank and standing—there was no version of this where it was something minor.

'If it was minor, she could have just paid to get it fixed.'

And then, right behind that followed immediately, *'Wait... I can **make** the UHF fix her. I still have the requests...!'*

As if Selene somehow heard those thoughts, her eyes—or eye, rather—that had been scanning the assembled Marines found Thea's in that exact moment.

It widened in recognition for a brief moment and the familiar, warm half-smile spread on the functioning side of Selene's face as she nodded to her.

Thea nodded back with a forced smile and waved.

'I'll make them fix you, Selene... Whatever it takes...'