

Arc 1 - Chapter 139 - Awards III

"It's alright, Thea," Karania's calm voice broke through the fog of Thea's thoughts, pulling her back to the present.

Surprised by the unexpected reassurance, Thea looked over at her friend, eyebrow raised, only to see Karania's face set in a rare, serious expression.

As if to explain, Kara simply lifted her right hand—the one still clutching Thea's own.

Her friend's hand was still wrapped around hers, and only now did Thea realise how visibly chilled Kara's skin had become, far cooler than it should be in the warmth of the assembly hall.

"Ah...!" Thea instinctively tried to pull her hand away, caught off-guard by the realisation that Karania had noticed her extra minutes of skin-to-skin contact.

It had been a small comfort, a subtle way to ground herself, though she hadn't considered Karania would pick up on it. But there was something else too—a flicker of guilt, knowing she might have caused her friend discomfort; potentially even hurt her.

Karania's grip only tightened as Thea tried to pull away.

"*Like I said*, it's alright, Thea," she murmured, her voice steady and reassuring. "You're not as stable right now, and that's okay. Lean on me if you need to; I'm not going anywhere. I'd rather you do that than... you know, go off like a bomb, yeah?"

Thea hesitated, struggling with her instinct to downplay her emotions, but she couldn't deny the truth in Karania's words. Ever since leaving the assessment, she had felt on edge, like she was standing on a hair-trigger without even understanding *why*.

In truth, she couldn't even pinpoint what exactly had her riled up at the moment.

But her mind kept circling back to Rachel Masters.

That girl had somehow stolen herself into a spot at Lucas's well-deserved award, tarnishing the recognition he'd earned.

Her behaviour—both the sneering look she'd shot Thea on her way up and the surprising, barely restrained explosion after she returned to her seat—seemed beyond toxic, like she didn't even belong among the rest of the Marines inside the hall.

Though she'd definitely tried to keep her fury quiet, Thea's far above average Perception had picked up on every venomous whisper and clenched fist from Masters with ease. With Beta Squad seated just one row behind them, she had seen and heard it all with unfiltered clarity.

Taking a deep breath, Thea finally let herself lean into Karania's grip, feeling the warmth slowly return to her friend's fingers as it tempered the sharp edges of her anger.

“Major Quinn is a ruthless one, isn’t she?” Karania whispered, a slight smile on her lips as if she was sharing a secret, perhaps trying to distract her.

Thea couldn’t have been more grateful for the shift in focus.

“What do you mean?” she replied, genuinely confused but intrigued.

Keeping up with Karania’s lightning-fast mind was something Thea always struggled with.

There was an unspoken worry that her inability to follow her friend’s thought process would one day put distance between them, a thought that gnawed at her consistently. She did her best to learn from every conversation, to pick up on every hint, hoping it would help her keep pace in the future.

Karania’s eyes gleamed mischievously as she leaned in closer.

“Think about it,” she said, her voice barely a whisper. “Major Quinn could have just handed out the awards without all the build-up. Call them both up at the same time and hand them out together. But she *knew*—*knew*—what it would do to someone like Rachel. Letting her think she’d taken the top spot for a moment, only to shatter it by announcing that Lucas was also going to receive the very same award?”

She raised an eyebrow, clearly impressed. “It makes no logical sense to structure an award like that, unless you’re explicitly trying to mess with the first recipient; otherwise it would simply be unfair. That kind of underhanded slap on the wrist takes a certain kind of precision, don’t you think?”

Thea’s eyes widened slightly as the pieces clicked into place.

A smirk tugged at her lips as she finally saw what Karania had noticed all along. “So, you’re saying Quinn set her up to fall? Let her think she won, only to kick the leg out from under her and present Lucas as an equal...?”

Karania grinned and nodded. “It’s a ceremony, sure, but remember: It’s also a reminder and a teaching moment. Major Quinn *specifically* uses each recording and each Award to teach us *something*. This instance is no different; just a bit more subtle. Except that this time, it was meant to teach the Masters girl rather than everyone. Major Quinn was essentially saying: “There’s no ‘better’ here, no status that can’t be levelled.” And Rachel... Well, she clearly needed that lesson more than most.”

Thea’s anger faded slowly, replaced by a quiet admiration for both Quinn’s methods and Karania’s ability to see through them.

Still, one thing continued to nag at her thoughts.

“Did Major Quinn use Lucas specifically for this, then...? I mean, he had way more impressive feats in the Assessment than that one. He could’ve easily been considered for something in the Recruit Awards, or maybe even the Assessment Awards. Doesn’t it seem unfair to use his award just to teach this girl a lesson?”

Karania was quiet for a moment, her brow furrowing slightly as she chose her words, leaning in close so as not to interrupt Major Quinn's ongoing announcements for the current awards.

"I doubt she had anything to do with it directly," Karania said thoughtfully. "You have to keep in mind the *specific* rules laid out for each award. While you and I saw Lucas accomplish a lot more impressive things, if they don't fit the exact criteria, then they don't qualify for that specific recognition."

Thea listened carefully, her curiosity piqued.

"For the *Valiant Defender*, for instance," Karania continued, "only certain moments count—specifically *unplanned* situations where the Defensive Heavy, on their own initiative, went above and beyond. Moments where they acted independently to protect their squad or objectives. Given the number of downright suicidal plans we cooked up during the assessment, it's honestly kind of impressive that Lucas even *had* a qualifying moment for this one. I honestly think we can be happy with him getting this one—Remember, it's an award just for *him*, not for the squad's tactics or strategies."

Thea's eyes widened slightly as realisation dawned on her.

She'd been looking at Lucas's actions through the lens of *everything* he'd done for *Alpha Squad*—every heroic moment, every defensive stand.

But, of course, that wasn't what the award was meant to recognize.

Any time Lucas had acted on a direct order, or had been a piece in one of their, more-or-less carefully, laid-out squad plans, those moments simply didn't count.

They weren't examples of *his* initiative but rather contributions to a larger strategy.

It was only those few rare instances when he'd gone out of his way, on his own terms, to protect his team that could qualify for an award like this.

She turned to Karania, a small, grateful smile forming as she nodded. "Thanks, Kara," she murmured. "I didn't really get it until now."

Karania gave her a supportive squeeze, her eyes warm. "Anytime, Thea. We all want to do well in this, but sometimes... it's good to step back and see the whole picture."

Thea returned the squeeze before finally turning her attention back to the front, a new understanding settling over her.

Meanwhile, Major Quinn was busy introducing the next set of awards: The *Spiritus Machina Award*.

The title flashed across the screen in bold, metallic lettering as she explained its purpose.

The award was given to the software specialists who had managed to hack into enemy databases, either to extract crucial intel or to disrupt enemy defences in creative, game-changing ways.

It was, essentially, a recognition of technological prowess on the battlefield.

Thea had no doubt that this was an award Desmond would be craving, though they all knew he had no chance of winning it.

Alpha Squad's route through the assessment hadn't allowed for much in the way of hacking.

Desmond's toolkit, designed in large parts for infiltrating networks and disrupting enemy comms, had gone largely unused, as most of their missions had required stealth and combat rather than high-level system breaches.

The only real time he'd been able to flex his skills was when he'd blinded a few cameras during their infiltration into the service tunnels of Nova Tertius' inner wall. Useful, yes, but hardly the sort of feat that would impress the brass or stand out to the other Recruits.

Glancing over at Desmond, Thea tried to do so subtly, not wanting to draw attention to his disappointment.

Sure enough, his shoulders were slumped, and he looked visibly deflated, staring at the floor with a look she recognized all too well.

'We'll get you a shot at this award next time, Desmond. I'll make sure of it,' Thea silently promised, vowing internally to make sure to take his aptitude with software into consideration whenever the opportunity presented itself in the future.

She knew all too well what it felt like to be good at something, only to have no chance to show it and earn recognition. Too many times back at the Golden Arcade, she'd been overlooked for MVP points, all because the role she'd played in the game wasn't set up to win them.

It was downright *infuriating*.

Considering her own feelings, she was genuinely impressed with Desmond's restraint. If it had been her, she wasn't sure she'd have been able to stay as composed as he seemed to be—especially considering her already unstable mental state at the moment.

The Platinum *Spiritus Machina* Award was ultimately given to a recruit named Talon Pierce, from Glass Squad—a squad name that caught Thea's attention as well.

She wondered briefly if it was meant as a jab at their resilience or perhaps a hint of irony in their strength. Either way, she hoped Glass Squad knew how lucky they were to have a tech specialist who'd had the freedom to shine.

The ceremony continued to roll forward smoothly, with Major Quinn seamlessly introducing each award without allowing any dead air to spoil the energy in the room.

She wove lessons and reminders into each recording, just as she had with the *Valiant Defender* awards, and Thea found herself paying closer attention this time, thanks to Karania's earlier insights.

With a new appreciation for Major Quinn's social finesse, Thea briefly wondered if she could ever hope to reach that kind of mastery—before quickly dismissing the thought.

'There's absolutely no way...' she almost immediately concluded. Public speaking wasn't her strong suit, and the idea of commanding the attention of thousands like Major Quinn did, effortlessly and with confidence, felt as distant to her as winning in a straight fist-fight against Isabella.

But before her thoughts could wander too far, Major Quinn's voice broke through, catching her attention once more as she introduced the next award.

"For our third major award," Quinn began, her voice carrying a hint of pride, "we honour those among you who were essential to strategic planning, careful advances, and ruthless ambushes. This award goes to the scouts and information gatherers—the ones who kept our forces informed and always steps ahead of the enemy. We recognize the Marines who not only gathered intel, but whose insights *shaped* engagements and had a lasting impact on the battlefield as a whole."

Thea's interest sharpened, her heart pounding slightly faster. Major Quinn continued, "Whether you sniffed out an ambush, uncovered a hidden enemy HQ, or provided crucial intel that allowed our forces to advance unimpeded, this award celebrates you. So without further ado, let's introduce the *Eye In The Sky Award*."

As the title glowed on the screen behind Major Quinn, Thea felt a surge of excitement and a flicker of hope.

'This could actually be a category for me... maybe,' she thought, her pulse quickening. From her left, she felt a light squeeze and turned to see Karania giving her a knowing nod, her gaze full of encouragement. It was as if Karania were saying, *"You've got this one in the bag."*

Thea, however, wasn't nearly as certain.

She knew her efforts had made a difference in certain moments, but she was less sure that they had shaped the battlefield in any truly lasting way.

Her mind immediately drifted to the first day of the assessment, when she'd warned the 32nd Company about the meticulously planned Stellar Republic ambush. But that warning had come only moments before the ambush was actually launched; barely enough time for even a fraction of the Company to react to her warning.

'Does something like that really count?' she wondered.

Then there was the seeker minefield she had sniffed out during their special mission with Arrow Squad a few hours later.

While they'd managed to step around it and continue on their path, the mission itself hadn't felt particularly large-scale in hindsight. They'd merely avoided the mines and carried on, with little overall impact—or so she believed.

And then there were the countless other moments where her perceptiveness had helped them avoid smaller traps or sniff out danger before it struck.

But in her mind, each of these moments felt small, like tiny pieces of a puzzle that might not add up to anything award-worthy.

Doubt gnawed at her, especially in light of what had happened with Lucas earlier.

'If Lucas didn't get a Recruit or Assessment Award despite his nonstop, stellar performance, then what chance do I have with these mid-level, at best, scout feats...?'

Still, she could hope.

Maybe, just maybe, she could win a Silver or even a Gold.

Just the thought of being recognized, even a little, filled her with anticipation.

Anything was better than being left empty-handed, like poor Desmond—his talents unnoticed simply because the Assessment hadn't given him the opportunities he needed to shine.

Major Quinn's voice rang out over the hall.

"Now, let's take a look at our Silver *Eye In The Sky* Award recipient," she announced, and the screen behind her lit up with the first recording.

Thea's heart rate spiked, anticipation bubbling up—only to plummet when she saw the footage wasn't hers.

The Marine in the video wasn't her, nor was it anyone she recognized from her missions.

She tried to keep her disappointment from showing, but doubt had already begun to creep in.

'Was it stupid to think I'd make it into the awards...?'

She pushed the thought aside, hoping maybe, just maybe, her name would still be called in the later rounds. Yet, as the video continued, her mind kept circling back to her own moments in the assessment.

The instances that had felt significant to her—warning the 32nd Company about that ambush, sniffing out the seeker minefield—were all small in comparison to the battlefield-sized impact that the brass was looking for.

"What if they just weren't impressive enough...? What if I never really made a difference with my actual role-specific actions...?"

Before she could sink further into her doubts, a sharp squeeze on her hand yanked her out of her thoughts. She glanced over, intending to shoot Karania an irritated look, but one look at her friend's face stopped her short.

Karania's eyes were blazing with intensity, her grip firm and insistent.

"You have *nothing* to worry about, Thea," Karania murmured, her tone leaving no room for argument. "While you might not be up here at the *Sovereign Awards*, you're practically guaranteed a spot in the *Recruit* or *Assessment Awards* for the *Eye In The Sky*."

Thea opened her mouth to protest, her doubts still simmering, but Karania's expression was unyielding. There was something almost fierce in her gaze—an intensity that told Thea she wasn't about to let her friend spiral into self-doubt.

Her eyes held a manic gleam, as if to say, "*I swear to the Emperor, I will end you if you disagree.*" And somehow, Thea didn't doubt *that* for a moment.

Swallowing her objections, she sighed, feeling a bit of her tension melt away.

Karania was probably right; her friend's confidence alone was oddly reassuring. She turned her attention back to the stage, trying to relax and take comfort in her friend's certainty.

Onstage, Major Quinn had just finished announcing the Silver Award, the applause swelling as the recording finished.

Thea watched Quinn step forward, a warm smile spreading across her face.

"And now, for our second honour in this category: the Gold *Eye In The Sky Award*." Major Quinn paused, letting the room quiet down. "For excellence in intelligence gathering, battlefield disruption and stepping up when more eyes were needed..." She took a breath, her eyes gleaming with excitement. "Desmond Reimart, from Alpha Squad!"

Thea's eyes widened, her mind taking a split second to process what she'd just heard.

'Desmond?!'

Thea whipped her head around, meeting Desmond's gaze just as his stunned expression melted from disbelief to pure, unrestrained excitement.

He looked at her, almost as if asking her for confirmation that this was real—almost as if he were asking her *permission* to revel in the moment; like he didn't want to upstage her in her own category, of sorts.

She couldn't help but break into a wide smile, her earlier doubts vanishing in a rush of pride and joy for him. She was, honestly, surprised at how much she celebrated his win.

Part of her had felt uneasy about the idea of someone as talented as Desmond going unrecognised, despite her mixed feelings about him.

Their history made her cautious about feeling too happy about it, but his talent and dedication were undeniable, and the thought of him leaving the ceremony empty-handed hadn't sat right with her at all.

Desmond, still clearly processing the moment, rose slowly from his seat, glancing at each member of Alpha Squad with an incredulous grin.

When his eyes landed on Corvus, the squad leader gave him a steady nod, pride and certainty in his expression, as if he'd never doubted that Desmond would be recognized.

Thea could tell that Corvus's vote of confidence steadied him—Desmond straightened his posture, took a deep breath, and finally began making his way toward the stage.

With each step, the applause grew louder, Alpha Squad's cheers ringing out above the crowd as their teammate walked into the well-earned spotlight. As Desmond approached the podium, Major Quinn gave him an approving nod before turning back to the crowd.

"Now, let's take a look at what secured this award for Recruit Reimart, our Drone Operator from Alpha Squad," she announced, gesturing to the screen.

The recording flickered to life, showing Desmond leading almost the entirety of Alpha Squad through a sprawling, partially demolished compound.

Thea quickly noticed that she was the only squad member missing from the scene, a realisation that sparked a moment of surprise but quickly shifted to understanding as she watched Desmond in action—this was taken from the very end of the assessment; the assault on the final compound that Thea had only heard about second-hand from Corvus and the rest of the squad after the assessment had already ended.

The feed displayed not only Desmond's perspective but also the live feeds from the three drones he was operating at once. Each feed appeared in smaller windows on the screen, like tiny pictures-in-pictures, and it became immediately clear how difficult it was to keep track of each drone's position, movements, and what they were seeing.

Even Thea, despite her inhuman levels of Perception, felt some serious difficulties in trying to keep track of all four viewpoints at once—controlling multiple drones at once like this, especially under combat conditions, was clearly no easy feat.

In the recording, Desmond's drones moved independently from one another, each taking on a distinct role.

One scout drone manoeuvred down a narrow hallway, gliding close to the ground to stay out of sight. Another ascended to the ceiling, navigating the blown-out floors and shattered walls of the compound, sneaking glimpses of the outside through broken windows.

The third drone trailed Alpha Squad more closely, positioning itself slightly ahead of them to scout around corners and through side corridors, while also ensuring that no threats approached from behind.

"Take note, Recruits," Major Quinn commented, her tone instructive yet clearly impressed. "Recruit Reimart is performing *three* jobs here—scouting, recon, and support—while maintaining situational awareness for Alpha Squad as a whole. A Drone Operator's focus must be *unwavering*; each drone has a distinct role, and each role must be perfectly managed at all times to keep the squad safe and informed."

The scene shifted as Desmond directed his drones through more treacherous parts of the compound, weaving through narrow passageways and avoiding debris.

He sent one of his drones up ahead, scouting the far end of the hallway for any signs of enemy movement, while another slipped through a crumbling wall and peered into an adjacent room through a broken window. The third hovered carefully near the squad's formation, its gun-barrel swivelling and searching for potential threats around each corner.

"Under normal circumstances," Major Quinn instructed, "a Drone Operator works *alongside* the squad's Scout—assuming the squad has one. However, Alpha Squad, operating deep behind enemy lines, had unfortunately lost their Scout during the mission already, forcing Recruit Reimart to shift from a supportive role into a critical one. *This*," she emphasised, gesturing toward the screen, "highlights one of the greatest advantages of a skilled Drone Operator: *Versatility*. Where most squads would have suffered tremendously from the loss of their Scout, Alpha Squad was able to continue unimpeded, thanks to Recruit Reimart's quick adaptation and his high level of expertise."

On the screen, Desmond's drones continued their coordinated movements, each acting independently yet harmoniously. He himself remained laser-focused, his eyes flicking from feed to feed, making small adjustments as he relayed updates to Alpha Squad.

Then, the tension in the video ratcheted up abruptly.

Two of the drones ascended a staircase, the footage capturing the oppressive silence as they flew cautiously forward, their feeds tilting and swivelling to take in every angle of the upper floor. As one drone reached the top, a sudden barrage of gunfire erupted, and the screen of the other showed the first drone shattering into fragments that tumbled down the stairs.

Desmond's reaction was instantaneous; without hesitation, he pushed the remaining drone straight into the ambushers' lines, manoeuvring it past gunfire and between scattered debris to gather as much intel as possible.

He didn't let up until a barrage of shots finally took down the second drone, leaving the remnants of both drones falling around the ambushers.

The feed switched back to Desmond, who, with an impressive calm, was already relaying the exact layout of the ambush waiting at the top of the stairs. He detailed enemy positions, cover spots, and even the angles they were likely to fire from, and he did so with precision and efficiency—as if the loss of his drones hadn't fazed him in the slightest.

The recording ended with Desmond's voice over the comms, coolly giving Alpha Squad the final go-ahead and the tactical layout to counter the ambush, his eyes steady and his voice level even as the last pieces of the drones hit the ground.

The hall erupted in applause, and Thea couldn't help but join in.

Hearing about his actions and actually seeing them first-hand were clearly two separate things altogether.

She had already been impressed by Corvus' recounting of Desmond stepping up, but actually getting to see the recording and especially his own view-point and those of his drones all at the same time, was on a whole nother level of impressiveness.

Desmond hadn't just proven himself an already surprisingly adept Drone Operator—he'd also managed to highlight *exactly* what kind of unwavering focus and skill were needed in the role as well.

Major Quinn stepped forward, her smile bright as she shook Desmond's hand.

"For his actions, Recruit Reimart is awarded 3,500 Credits and a 50% Sales Voucher for any equipment aboard the Sovereign," she announced, handing him the Gold Medal. The award's emblem—a human eye gazing down at a battlefield from a bird's-eye perspective—gleamed in Desmond's hand, a perfect representation of his accomplishments.

Desmond made his way back to Alpha Squad with the medal in his hand, his face still caught somewhere between disbelief and elation. As he approached, the squad erupted into cheers, each member showing their pride in his win.

Corvus was the first to clap him on the shoulder, his grin wide and genuine. "Well done, Desmond," he said, the respect in his tone unmistakable. "You earned this one. We would've been really screwed if you hadn't stepped up back then; great work."

Lucas nodded in agreement, his expression warm as always. "That was some amazing work. Makes me wonder what you could've done if you'd been given more blueprints to use. But hey," he added with a chuckle, "maybe it's for the best—you didn't even *need* more options to leave an impression, it seems."

Isabella rolled her eyes, crossing her arms with a half-smirk. "Alright, *fine*, I'll admit it—you did a pretty decent job back then," she said, sounding almost reluctant, though her grin gave her away. "Even if you *did* blow yourself the fuck up right afterward," she added with a mischievous glint in her eyes, making Desmond laugh despite himself.

Desmond's gaze shifted to Thea and Karania, sitting a little farther away but both watching him with quiet approval.

Karania gave him an acknowledging nod. Thea, meanwhile, managed a small smile, impressed in a way she hadn't quite expected. To her surprise, Desmond returned both of their nods more than earnestly, his gratitude clear even across the distance.

Just then, Major Quinn's voice returned, drawing the squad's attention back to the stage for a moment as she introduced the Platinum Award winner. The screen behind her lit up with the first images of the recording, and Thea felt her heart skip a beat.

But as the footage rolled, her hope faded—these weren't her recordings.

A pang of disappointment stirred in her, but she quickly refocused as Karania squeezed her hand—honestly quite a bit harder than necessary, Thea found—grounding her before her thoughts could spiral.

She glanced back at her squad, still revelling in Desmond's victory, laughter and bright smiles lighting up their faces. For a moment, she let herself bask in the warmth of the moment, allowing their joy to temporarily push away the nagging thoughts in the back of her mind—the quiet worry that she wasn't going to win *anything*.

The Platinum Eye in the Sky Award ultimately went to a Marine called Enn Mila from New Squad—*'A thoroughly strange name for a squad,'* Thea thought with a smirk.

Mila had been instrumental during the main assault into Nova Tertius, being the first to identify signs of a large-scale ambush that had the potential to devastate the UHF forces.

Thanks to Mila's sharp eye and swift relay of intel, a significant portion of the main forces managed to divert and flank the ambush, turning a potential disaster into a tactical advantage.

It was, undeniably, an impressive feat.

'Did I really do anything better than that?' Thea wondered as she watched Mila descend from the stage, the Platinum Medal glinting in their hand.

Karania's steady insistence that she'd see her name in the Recruit or Assessment Awards had been a source of comfort, but Thea couldn't shake the doubt creeping in.

She'd always believed her actions in the assessment were useful, sure, maybe even important, but seeing the sheer scope of Mila's impact—knowing the kind of people she was being measured against—it made her question things.

*'Could my warnings and overall recon **really** be considered all that impressive when compared to what others accomplished?'* She couldn't help but feel a pang of uncertainty as she waited for Major Quinn to announce the next set of awards...