

Volume 2 - Intermission 84.50 - Grand Viewing Gala II

"The Legacy system is, depending on who you ask, either the UHF's most elegant piece of institutional design or the most sprawling, ungovernable headache ever created.

The answer is probably *both*—and the UHF has long since made its peace with that.

To understand the Legacies, you have to understand what they actually are, which is something a surprising number of people—including, occasionally, the Legacies themselves—get wrong.

They are not noble houses. They are not political parties. They are not corporations either, though they share characteristics with all three.

What they are, at their most fundamental, is institutional memory encoded on living flesh—families that have been producing Marines for long enough that the knowledge of how to do so has become structural, woven into the way they raise their children, allocate their resources, and understand their own purpose.

Everything else—the crests, the Galas, the centuries of tradition—is downstream of that.

The categories are simple on paper:

Minor Legacies cover the second through fifth generation.

Major Legacies, the sixth through ninth.

Prime Legacies, the tenth and beyond.

What the categories *don't* convey is the gulf that exists not just between them but *within* them as well.

A newly promoted Major Legacy looks at one approaching its ninth generation and sees nearly twice the accumulated experience, tradition, and quietly held information—before accounting for the fact that none of those things scale linearly.

Time compounds.

A network nine generations deep is not merely *three* times more valuable than one six generations deep. It is potentially *hundreds* of times more valuable. Perhaps *thousands*.

Most newly established Minor Legacies discover, somewhere in the second or third generation, that knowing how to produce good Marines and knowing how to navigate the political landscape surrounding the Legacy system are two entirely separate bodies of expertise.

The politics exist in the very *texture* of things—which families take whose calls, which invitations arrive and which don't, the difference between being introduced to someone and being introduced by the right person at the right moment. Resources flow along relationship

lines that took decades to establish, and a new Legacy trying to access those flows without the relationships to support them will find the door technically open and practically very difficult to walk through.

Most don't make it.

The majority fizzle out in the second or third generation—not from lack of ability or drive, but from the weight of navigating an unfamiliar system while simultaneously raising children who can actually compete.

Those that reach the fourth generation tend to reach the fifth and beyond.

The attrition is front-loaded, and brutally so.

And yet the UHF doesn't merely *tolerate* this churn—it almost *relies* on it.

Even a Minor Legacy that produces nothing but solid mid-tier Marines for three generations before quietly disappearing has fed the UHF's ranks with people who arrived better prepared than they would have been otherwise.

Woven through the Legacy structure as well are the Thals and the Grand Thals—where the system's relationship with the UHF's administrative apparatus becomes most visible.

A Thal is, in practical terms, a System Lord: A figure granted tentative military and civilian oversight over a cluster of systems, working alongside existing planetary governors and UHF structures.

It is not absolute authority, nor was it ever designed to be.

It exists because a Thal family has skin in the game in a way a rotating administrative appointment never quite does.

They *live* there. Their *children* grow up from there. Their *Legacy* is built there.

When things go wrong, it is *their* name, their Legacy, attached to it.

The Grand Thals operate at a higher level still—appointed directly by the O-13 Council, drawn almost exclusively from Prime Legacy families, holding authority over entire Sector Clusters as the civilian counterpart to the regional Proprietors.

Two figures of substantial authority, overlapping jurisdictions, different primary obligations, expected to function as partners. In practice, it works about as well as you'd expect—sometimes excellently, sometimes not at all.

Yet perhaps the most consequential function the Legacies serve—and the one the UHF is most careful never to state explicitly—is as a research and intelligence apparatus the military complex could never fund at the required scale itself.

Knowledge of rival Builds, undocumented System mechanics, Ability interactions, Tier progression patterns—all of it researched, compiled, and quietly traded by families with the resources and motivation to do it *properly*.

When the UHF wants access to that research, it offers favours, introductions, and early access to Command decisions in return.

Neither side discusses the arrangement directly. Both sides understand it completely.

It is not a clean system.

It was never meant to be.

It simply *works*... Until it doesn't."

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[Shortened Excerpt From "*The Emperor's Game: Legacy, Power, and the Politics of the UHF Marine Corps*", Dr. Seren Vael, published in the UHF Academic Press, PFC 931]

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PoV: Veyra Lindra Sylarion

The next ten minutes passed in much the same fashion as the last—a steady, unhurried circuit of the ballroom's entire breadth and length, Madam Sen leading her towards certain clusters of guests.

Six more Minor Legacies. Six more introductions, each one landing with the same quiet, recalibrating effect on the recipients.

Veyra managed them all the same way—absorbing names, cataloguing faces, saying the right things in the right registers to the right people—while some part of her attention remained permanently fixed on the woman beside her, watching for any indication of what, exactly, Madam Sen's plan with her was.

Despite all her best efforts, however, she still couldn't find any hint.

She was beginning to wonder if she was simply not seeing the right level of things—the way you could stare at a piece of terrain from ground level and see nothing but individual trees—just as Madam Sen changed direction with the same wordless purposefulness she applied to everything, and Veyra dutifully followed.

'Whatever she has planned,' Veyra thought, letting her eyes drift briefly across some of the faces she'd already been introduced to that evening, 'it's worth playing along with. All these contacts—decades of slow and gruelling work otherwise, compressed into a single evening... And she's simply giving them to me—effortlessly. She barely does anything at

all—just stands there, says my name, and the room rearranges itself around it. I just hope that whatever price she intends to ask for tonight, we can actually meet it...

She brought her eyes forward again and when she saw where exactly they were heading, her stride almost *faltered*.

She recognised the woman before she could place exactly *why*.

The immaculate posture was the first thing that caught her eyes—that particular set of shoulders that spoke of someone who had spent *decades* being the most composed person in every room they'd ever walked into. Then the woman turned slightly, and the deep, rich green of her dress caught the light, and that settled it entirely for Veyra.

'Dravain Green...!'

It was an old colour. *Very* old and *very* specific, a shade that didn't exist *anywhere else* in the Legacy system because the Dravain family had been using it for long enough that it had simply become *theirs* by attribution.

Veyra had just enough time to compose herself before they were close enough that composure became a stark necessity.

The woman turned fully as they approached, and her eyes moved to Madam Sen first.

"Thal Sen," she offered, her voice warm and perfectly measured in equal parts. "I was wondering if you'd make it across the room tonight, or simply hold court in your pockets all evening."

"I never hold court, Serava," Madam Sen replied, with a softness that somehow contained an entire raised eyebrow. "I simply move to somewhere pleasant and let the evening organise itself. You know this."

"How truly convenient then, that it just so *happens* to keep organising itself toward the most useful conversations," Serava Linh Dravain said, and her mouth curved slightly—not quite a smile, but definitely the shape of one.

Her eyes moved then, deliberately, to Veyra.

The question in them was not unkind—but it *was* thorough.

"Veyra Lindra Sylarion," Madam Sen said, with the same easy warmth she'd used for every introduction tonight. "Sylarion Legacy. I find her *quite* worth knowing."

Veyra kept her expression neutral and inclined her head with exactly the degree of respect the moment called for—enough to acknowledge the Dravain Legacy's standing worlds above her, not so much as to suggest she had nothing of her own to stand on.

"*Sylarion*," Madam Dravain repeated, with the particular quality of someone cross-referencing a name against a mental archive. "Minor Legacy—coming up toward the fourth generation, if I'm not mistaken?"

"Third, currently," Veyra agreed. "The fourth is what this evening is about, for us."

Something in Madam Dravain's expression settled into something warmer at that.

"Then we have that in common, at least."

She gestured toward the space beside her, a small and unhurried invitation. "Your child is aboard the Sovereign then, I take it?"

"My son. Corvus." The name came naturally, and with it the quiet, practiced steadiness of a woman who had learned how to talk about her children in rooms like this without letting anything she actually felt about them show too plainly. "I'm hoping he's made a reasonably good impression on the UHF so far. Though I'll admit the last communication we had was close to a month before Integration, so my information is regrettably quite dated."

Madam Dravain exhaled through her nose—a sound that carried more feeling than she'd probably intended. "A month before. Yes. It is the same for me..."

She shook her head slightly. "My son is on Eonon Station, which is why my husband is in the other ballroom this evening rather than this one. I assume the same applies to you, no doubt. Having a good grasp on the competition is always important in these early days..."

Their eyes met momentarily at that, before she continued. "He's a difficult case, my son."

Veyra kept her expression open. Beside her, Madam Sen said nothing, but there was a quality to her silence that suggested to Veyra she was listening for something *specific*.

"Difficult in what way, exactly?" Veyra asked, moving her body ever so slightly closer—the natural movement of a mother comforting another.

Madam Dravain considered the question for a moment with the look of someone who had been asked it before and had several answers available, and was now selecting the most fitting one.

"Bored," she finally offered. "By everything, and consistently. We spent *years* trying to find an approach that would actually reach him—his father and I. There were periods where simply getting him to take his training seriously required a level of *negotiation* that I found frankly undignified."

A dry, tired amusement moved across her face. "*Bribes*, if we're being honest. Substantial ones, at various points."

Veyra thought of Corvus at twelve, systematically dismantling every training programme she and Orvyn put in front of him not because he found them too hard but because he found them too *simple*, and felt something dangerously close to kinship move through her.

"I understand more of that than I'd like to say," she admitted with an exasperated nod.

"Corvus was very similar, earlier on. The difficulty wasn't capability, of course—it's *never* capability. It was simply getting him to *care* enough to apply it."

Madam Dravain looked at her with something that sharpened slightly. "And did that change?"

"The last few years before the Cube Trial," Veyra nodded. "He came into himself, I think. Matured into it. By the time he left, he was *exactly* the officer I'd hoped he would be."

She added, quieter, "It just took longer than I'd planned for."

Madam Dravain was quiet for a moment.

Then she sighed, and it was a genuine one—the kind that came from somewhere deep. "I could wish for that. Truly. If anything, my son grew *more* disengaged as he got older, not less. No matter *what* we tried. Every approach we took seemed to compound the problem rather than solve it."

She shook her head. "A true travesty, if I'm speaking plainly. All that potential, and nothing has seemed to light it yet..."

"The Corps might change that," Veyra offered carefully. "In my—arguably short—experience, there's a stark difference between someone who is genuinely bored by *everything*, and someone who just hasn't encountered anything worth their attention *yet*. And the range of what newly made Marines have to contend with is—considerable."

Madam Dravain looked at her for a moment, face unreadable.

Then, for the first time, something in her expression relaxed into something that genuinely, unguardedly, looked like a smile.

"No," she agreed quietly. "I've never heard of anyone managing to be *bored* by the Corps. Not genuinely, at least."

She glanced toward the far end of the ballroom and the direction of the Eonon reveals, as though she could see through the wall to whatever her husband was doing. "I suppose that's the hope."

The three of them agreed on that and the conversation settled briefly into the comfortable silence of a mutual understanding reached.

Veyra used the moment to let her eyes move, just slightly, across the rest of the ballroom.

She traced back the path she and Madam Sen had taken since they'd arrived—the clusters they'd visited, the introductions made, the specific sequence of it all.

There was *something* in the shape of it, she was certain—a logic she could *almost* see the outline of. But without a drone's eye view of the entire room and the web of connections between every person in it, she just couldn't parse it...

She brought her attention back to the present and kept her expression composed.

Madam Sen, she noticed, was watching her with quiet amusement.

'I'm glad there's at least one person here enjoying themselves...'

The brief silence between the three of them was interrupted by a shift in the room's ambient energy.

A set of side doors along the ballroom's eastern wall had opened, and through them came a steady stream of men and women in formal gala attire that didn't match even the Minor Legacy dress around them in the particular way that press attire never *quite* did, no matter how well it tried—or maybe that was on purpose.

There were over two dozen of them.

The room responded almost instinctively—Legacies drawing incrementally inward on their side of the floor, press filtering along the other, the invisible line between them establishing itself within seconds with the unspoken ease of two groups that had done this dance before and knew their respective positions in it.

'Integrated press,' Veyra thought immediately. *'System-Liaisons at minimum, to be in this room...'*

Here, same as everyone else, for the first real information the newest Recruitment Drive had produced—and what it might mean for the UHF as a whole, and the Galactic War in the years to come.

"I'm surprised they admitted this many," Madam Dravain said, her eyes moving across the newcomers with an expression that was carefully neutral. "That's... *unusual*."

Veyra glanced at her. "How do you mean, if you don't mind my asking?"

Madam Dravain looked at her for a moment—a brief, evaluating pause—and then apparently decided that it was worth her time to answer, thankfully.

"The Grand Viewing Galas don't typically draw this much press," she said. "Half this number—likely even less—would be more standard. Getting even a dozen admitted to one of these events is considered notable. As mentioned, two dozen is..."

She glanced across the room again. "Highly *unusual*."

"So they know something," Veyra concluded. "Or suspect it, at least."

Madam Dravain hummed in quiet agreement.

"They put together one and one just as well as we did, most likely. Information from the other ships that participated in the same Assessment has been far more sparing than usual—but manageable. The Sovereign's on the other hand?"

She shook her head slightly. "*Nothing*. A complete deadlock, from the very beginning. The press is *at least as*—and if we're being honest, likely *far more*—experienced as we are at reading that kind of silence. It makes sense they'd show up in force, given how *specifically* unusual the Sovereign's situation has been. This entire Assessment cycle has been strange, but nothing as strange as that *particular* ship's complete information blackout."

"It has indeed been quite troublesome to obtain information from the Sovereign or anything in its vicinity, I must admit," Madam Sen suddenly commented as well.

She had said it quietly, her gaze still moving across the ballroom floor with the same unhurried calm it always carried, as though she were simply commenting on the weather.

The silence that followed lasted approximately two seconds, but felt like an eternity to Veyra.

She *sensed* rather than *saw* Madam Dravain's eyes move to hers, and she let herself glance back. The look that passed between them contained and said everything it needed to in the half-fraction of a second it lasted.

Madam Sen had just *volunteered* information.

Madam Sen had admitted, *freely and without any prompting*, that some *information* had been difficult for *a Sen* to obtain.

Neither of them said a word about it.

The shift inside the room came without warning.

Across the ballroom, the molten-metal orbs suddenly began to dim—not all at once, but in a slow, deliberate sequence that moved from the room's periphery inward, each globe suddenly seeming to *grow* a shutter, closing in increments, the warm amber light contracting behind overlapping plates of dark metal until only the faintest glow bled through the gaps.

The effect turned the ballroom from something grand and warmly lit into something theatrical, the darkness gathering at the edges while the central space retained just enough ambient light to see by.

Then a single beam came down from somewhere in the vaulted ceiling, and Thal Masters walked back up several steps of the central staircase and turned to face the room.

His armour caught the light—crimson and gold shining against the surrounding dark in a way that was almost certainly *not* accidental in the least.

He surveyed the room in a single, unhurried sweep, taking in everything without appearing to look at anything in particular. His eyes moved across the floor, the press along the eastern wall, the clusters of Legacies—and then stopped, just slightly, for just a singular moment, as they found Madam Sen's.

Something passed, in that instant, between them that Veyra couldn't read.

Then he began to speak, and his voice moved through the ballroom the way a tide moved—not loud, exactly, but filling every available space without effort, reaching the far corners of the room as clearly as it reached the front row.

Veyra knew enough about Passive-type Ability lines to recognise the effect when she heard it, and she knew enough about the Masters Legacy *specifically* to know that oratory bonuses—leadership bonuses, presence bonuses, bonuses that made a man's voice feel

like it was being broadcast by a hidden sound system even when it wasn't—were something they cultivated *deliberately*, generation after generation.

Which was, of course, very fitting.

After all, what was this evening for the Masters Legacy if not an act of leadership?

"Ladies and gentlemen," Raymond said, and the room was already fully quiet before he finished the first word. "Welcome to the Grand Viewing Gala of the UHF's Recruitment Drive of PFC 943—with specific focus, this evening, on the Kuigon Sector, as well as the IGS Sovereign and the Recruits who have earned their place aboard her."

He let that settle for a brief moment.

"In less than two minutes, the UHF's official broadcast will go live across the GalNet on the Corps' own Official Media Channel. We will be watching it together—the highlights and information the UHF has compiled to introduce the new generation of Recruits aboard the Sovereign, as well as their selection of Assessment highlights from the initial month-long endeavour held at the Apex Phalanx Fortress. For those of you who have been waiting some time for *any* information at all on that particular ship—I suspect the wait will feel worthwhile."

A ripple of polite laughter and controlled reactions moved through the room.

Then a smile spread on his face. Slow, certain and just slightly *too* satisfied to be named anything other than smug.

"But that, of course, is not *all* this evening will bring. It would not be a Masters Grand Viewing Gala without some surprises now, would it?"

His eyes moved, and the light beam moved with them—sliding from the staircase across the black ballroom floor in one smooth arc until it found Thal Sen, entirely unsurprised.

She inclined her head. Once. Regal and unhurried.

The beam caught Veyra in its periphery and she held herself *very* still, acutely aware of the number of eyes that had just moved in their direction, and kept her expression composed through an act of sheer will she would *not* be mentioning to anyone later—or ever.

"Thanks to the generosity of Thal Sen," Raymond continued, his smile not fading in the slightest, "we will also be viewing, tonight, the *true* Assessment highlights as shown to the Recruits aboard the Sovereign directly after the Assessment concluded. The *full* leaderboards."

He paused, letting the anticipation build expertly. "And the *complete, unedited* recording of the full Awards Ceremony aboard the IGS Sovereign, as held by *Proprietor Quinn* herself."

The gasp that moved through the room was immediate—and for many of the people in it, Veyra suspected, the first *genuine* reaction they'd shown all evening.

A sharp, collective intake of breath, followed by a rapid surge of whispered conversation and the shuffling of feet as almost the entire ballroom instinctively repositioned themselves to get a better angle toward Madam Sen.

Composed facades, carefully maintained through hours of political small talk and practiced indifference, cracking open all at once in the same instant.

Even the press line stirred visibly and audibly, heads turning, hands and feet moving.

Veyra's own eyes had gone wide before she could stop them as well—but for slightly different reasons.

Madam Sen had walked into this Gala with all of it already in hand.

Had been holding it—for how long, Veyra couldn't even *begin* to guess—and had said *nothing*. Had simply moved through the ballroom, introducing her to Minor Legacies and Madam Dravain and chatting about bored sons and difficult politics, with the entire evening's *main event* sitting quietly in her possession the whole time.

'She's known the outcome since before she arrived tonight...'

The thought landed, and then the next one arrived right behind it, faster and harder.

'Corvus...!'

The thought arrived with the particular quality of something finally clicking into place and her eyes darted towards Madam Sen's impeccable hair, staring at her from the side.

*'She didn't bring me here just to build contacts... That much was obvious. But... She brought me here specifically to be **standing next to her** when this moment happened. Which means Corvus did something. He impressed her—impressed the **Sen Matriarch**—enough that she wanted his mother close when the room found out...!'*

Veyra kept her face perfectly still.

Her heart, however, was doing something *considerably* less still inside of her.

Thal Masters let the moment breathe.

A full minute, perhaps slightly more, while the room did what rooms full of Legacy representatives and press did when given something genuinely unexpected to process—talked, quietly and urgently, heads tilting toward each other, hands moving in small contained gestures.

The press contingent had clustered tighter on their side of the room as well, and Veyra could see at least three of them with their eyes closed in the particular way of people dictating notes to a personal, implanted system inside their heads.

When Raymond finally raised one gauntleted hand, the room quieted with a speed that said something about both his presence and how much everyone *wanted* to hear what came next.

"I believe," he said, "that it is time."

Behind him, up the staircase, the air shifted—a barely visible shimmer at first, then a dense, flowing coalescence of nanobots pulling together from wherever they'd been staged, assembling themselves into a vast datascreen that filled the upper staircase wall from rail to ceiling. The scale of it was *considerable* even by the ballroom's standards, which was, Veyra assumed, entirely intentional once again.

"Years of effort," Raymond said, turning briefly to take in the screen before looking back at the room. "From everyone present—or at least, from those among us with direct ties to the men and women currently aboard the Sovereign."

A brief pause, the smile returning one final time. "Let us see what it has all amounted to."

The beam of light cut out.

In the dark, she heard his footsteps—quiet, even in the armour—descending the stairs and finding a place among the assembled Legacies.

By the time the ambient lighting had adjusted enough to see by, he was simply standing with the rest of them, looking up at the screen, indistinguishable from any other guest except for the massive, three meters of ceremonial armour.

There was a brief moment of collectively held breath.

Then the screen came to life.

The UHF Marine Corps emblem filled it entirely with its golden, crimson and gray bathing the entire ballroom in a similar colour scheme to the Masters own. It was exactly as it always looked at the opening of any official UHF broadcast.

Except, for some reason, there was no fanfare.

No score. No rising tone. No ceremonial audio that every person in the room had heard accompanying that emblem on every broadcast they'd ever watched.

Just the emblem, in silence, sitting on the screen.

The murmur that moved through the assembled mass was quiet but rose rapidly—the sound of people noticing the same absence at the same moment and not quite knowing what to do with it.

Veyra stared at the emblem for a second longer than she needed to, then turned her head slightly toward the woman beside her.

"What is this about, Madam Sen?" she asked, keeping her voice low—not even bothering to ask if she knew. Of course the Sen knew.

A brief, pregnant pause followed her request.

"Unfortunate news," Madam Sen finally answered, apparently deigning her newest investment worthy of that much. "For the UHF. Not for us."

And then she said nothing further, her attention returning to the screen with the same composed, unhurried attention she gave to everything.

On Veyra's other side, she was aware of Madam Dravain having gone *very* still in the particular way of someone who had heard every word of that exchange and was pretending otherwise.

After a moment, the other woman's eyes moved to Veyra's—brief, controlled, and unmistakably grateful that someone else had asked the question she hadn't been willing to break decorum for herself.

Veyra accepted the look with a small, measured nod.

'A minor boon with the Dravain Legacy,' she noted internally. *Accidental, but I'll definitely take it.'*

A quieter thought came alongside it, however: *'I'm already so deep in with the Sen at this point that it doesn't make much of a difference anymore, does it...'*

She looked back up at the silent emblem on the screen and waited with the rest of them.

The emblem held for another moment longer—then it dissolved.

The room's breath caught that very instant and didn't come back for a long time—the particular, unplanned silence of a group of carefully composed people encountering something *none* of them had prepared for, all at once.

Arrayed in front of the camera was a row of particular figures, that every single person in the room could name immediately and by sight alone, in full UHF Marine Corps dress uniform.

Proprietors—every single one attached to the current Drives along the eastern front, every single one that held *any* connection to the specific Drive they had all gathered here tonight to celebrate.

They stood in a precise line, shoulders back, faces forward, and every single one of them bore the Sign of Mourning over their rank badges—the small, stark black overlay that the UHF reserved for its most formal acknowledgements of *loss*.

Veyra's widened eyes moved across the row and found Proprietor Quinn near the centre—stoic, still, exactly as expected. Familiar enough to most of the Legacies in this ballroom that her presence alone would have been enough to hold the room's attention.

But it was not Proprietor Quinn who ultimately stepped forward.

The man who did was tall and broad-shouldered, his dark, ebony skin carrying the particular quality of someone who had spent decades in the kind of light that only existed aboard deep-space vessels—his bearing immaculate in the way of someone holding themselves together through the sheer structural memory of decades of discipline.

'Proprietor Nkosi of the Krynnal Sector,' Veyra's mind immediately provided.

The ballroom around her was *perfectly* silent now.

He looked at the camera for a moment before he began, and even in that pause, Veyra could hear something in the quality of his breath that she recognised from a long time ago, from entirely different circumstances—the particular sound of a person readying themselves to say something they had been carrying for far too long already.

He looked down at the prepared address in his hands.

"On the ninth day of the third month of PFC 943," he began, his voice deep and baritone, yet frayed at the edges in a way that no amount of preparation had been able to smooth entirely, "the IGS Monarch departed Veshan Station on the final leg of its voyage, carrying the Recruits of the PFC 943 Recruitment Drive through the designated Voidlane corridor toward the Apex Phalanx Fortress, to join the wider Assessment within the region."

He read the timeline steadily.

The Monarch's route, station to station, system to system—each stop named and dated with the precise, formal cadence of an official address.

The journey through the Void. The approach towards the Apex to get close enough—in Void terms—to connect to the Assessment remotely. The moment of entry into the Assessment range, where the ship had joined the convergence of the wider Drive.

"At an undetermined point during the Assessment period," he continued, "and for reasons that remain, at the time of this address, unknown to the UHF, a *Titanicus*-level Void-entity was drawn to the Monarch's position. The approach of the entity went undetected until contact had already been made. The IGS Monarch was not able to withstand the force of the engagement that followed."

A pregnant pause followed that announcement, but no sound could be heard inside the ballroom—not even a single breath.

"The ship was violently separated into three distinct sections as a result of the engagement. All recovery efforts mounted by the UHF in the period following the incident have not yielded a single recovered Soul. Every person aboard the IGS Monarch at the time—numbering ninety-seven thousand, four hundred and fifty-one established Marines, including all Sergeants, Staff-Sergeants, Legates, Lieutenants, Captains, and Majors assigned to the vessel, every single Recruit picked up for the Recruitment Drive of PFC 943 up until that point, as well as the ship's Captain and the vessel's own AI—has been designated as MIA-Zero."

He lowered the prepared address and took a deep breath.

For a moment he simply stood there, and the camera held on him, and the fraying that had been present at the edges of his voice for the entirety of the address was now visible in his eyes as well—moisture catching the light, not fully formed, but present and undisguised.

"I want to speak now," he said, "not as a Proprietor, but as a mere Marine who knew many of the people aboard that ship."

His voice had dropped slightly, the formal cadence gone. "To every Legacy represented tonight—to every family waiting for news of their sons and daughters, their brothers and sisters, their parents, their friends—I offer my sincerest and most heartfelt condolences. I mean that with every fiber of my being."

He paused briefly, taking another shuddering breath, and when he continued, the words came with a weight that was clearly not prepared.

"I was not aboard the Monarch. I was, at the time, aboard the HQ Station, overseeing the other half of the Drive that the IGS Monarch was meant to pick up following the First Assessment. It is the only reason I am able to stand here and give this account at all.

"I have wished, *every day* since we received word, that I had been there. I know that me being there would have changed nothing. I am not a Knight, nor a Rune priest, nor the Emperor himself. I know this regret helps no one. But I wish it nonetheless—if only to have been *present*. To have provided some measure of comfort to those under my charge in their final *moments*..."

His voice had broken on the last word. Not completely but definitely audible.

He lowered his head and stepped back.

For a brief moment, nothing but silence reigned.

Then Proprietor Quinn stepped forward.

She looked at the camera the way she looked at everything—directly, without performance, without the particular kind of careful blankness that people sometimes mistook for composure. Instead, with actual, *real* composure.

"I'll be brief," she began. "To the Prime and Major Legacies present tonight, and to any others willing to hear it—the UHF will be reaching out for volunteers to join scout expeditions into the Void. The purpose of those expeditions is to locate the entity responsible for the loss of the Monarch, and to *end it*, so that it cannot threaten another Drive, another ship, or another set of families like yours."

She let that sit for exactly one second.

"Current tracking places the entity somewhere within the following Sectors: Virellian, Driftspire, Halcyon, Threnic Spiral, Krynnal, Pidine, and Kuigon. The UHF is committing every available resource to ensuring this kind of tragedy does *not* happen again. If you are

willing to assist—and I know you all have your ways of making contact when you choose to—reach out. We will not turn away anyone who comes to us in good faith. Proprietor Nkosi will be taking charge of these expeditions and bring the hunt to completion, while I take over his responsibilities as Proprietor of the Krynnal Sector in the interim.

"That is all for this announcement. Thank you for being here tonight, and may the Emperor's light guide all of you."

She stepped back into the line.

The screen held on the row of Proprietors and their Signs of Mourning for a moment longer.

Then the broadcast cut out and the ballroom was plunged into pitch darkness...