

## **Arc 1 - Chapter 144 - Awards VIII**

*PoV: Jin Shi'Zon*

Watching Corvus step down from the podium, Platinum-medal in hand, Jin felt a pang of envy gnaw at him. The light gleamed off the medal in an undeniable, physical example of what recognition looked like—something that felt so close, yet completely out of reach.

“Looks like we won’t be getting any medals today,” he muttered, just loud enough for Yonbu to catch.

His friend shifted slightly in his seat, a muscle in his jaw tensing before he responded with a resigned grunt. “Unlucky categories,” he echoed.

They had both been hoping that at least one of the awards would acknowledge the kind of smaller, tight-knit teamwork they specialised in. But it seemed the UHF wasn’t interested in that, at least not for Recruits at this stage.

Jin could unfortunately follow their logic and knew that it made an infuriating amount of sense.

Early in their careers, the UHF prioritised raw, standout talent over cohesion.

Recruits were expected to adapt to constant changes, reshuffling squads and learning to mesh with new members again and again. By the time they earned their stripes as Privates, most would find themselves on different ships all together, scattered throughout the UHFs entire territory. So tight-knit groups weren’t exactly a priority for them to create.

The UHF instead valued individual brilliance—the kind that shone through in moments of crisis or led squads to victory through sheer force of will or skill.

Teamwork, while essential, was something they saw as secondary at this level, a trait to be nurtured later, but only noted down for now; not celebrated.

“We still have the leaderboards, at least,” Jin added, managing a small, hopeful smile.

Yonbu raised an eyebrow, the hint of a smile finally reaching his usually stoic face.

The leaderboards would give a fuller picture of their contributions across the entire assessment, showcasing not just the peak moments but the steady performance from beginning to end.

Medals like the *MVM* focused on stand-out achievements, spotlighting individual brilliance that could overshadow the quieter, consistent work that Jin and Yonbu prided themselves on.

But the leaderboard? That was bound to reflect more than just a few high points; it would reward consistent effort, something Jin felt they truly excelled at.

"You don't need a medal for every little thing if your squad knows you're there for the long haul," Jin said, his smile widening as he glanced at his friend.

Their partnership might not shine under the glaring lights of the podium, but he was confident it would still find its place among the best through their collective consistency and grit.

Now, was Jin envious of the fact that other Recruits had snagged medals he thought he might have had a shot at, like the *Eye In The Sky* award? Of course he was.

But he wasn't the kind to see it as an affront or some grand injustice.

He simply hadn't been good enough to make the cut; that's all there was to it.

Still, his eyes wandered to the front row, landing on Alpha Squad—and more specifically, Desmond.

"I still can't believe he actually ran three drones at once during the very *first* assessment..." Jin muttered, his tone a mixture of awe and disbelief.

Next to him, Yonbu groaned, shaking his head. "I'm going to hear this another four hundred times before the ceremony's over, eh?"

Jin shot him a withering glare, but Yonbu had a point.

This wasn't the first time Jin had brought it up since the award was handed out, but it wasn't just idle jealousy. Desmond's performance wasn't something to dismiss lightly, not if the guy was capable of handling three separate feeds, manoeuvring drones independently, and feeding critical intel to his squad, all without proper equipment, and more importantly, without dropping the ball when shit hit the fan.

That wasn't just impressive—it was *exceptional*.

Desmond was a Recruit to watch, whether you liked him or not.

Thankfully, Jin's swirling thoughts and Yonbu's quiet exasperation were cut short by Major Quinn's commanding voice reclaiming the room's attention.

"Now," she began, her tone brimming with anticipation, "with all the Sovereign-specific Award categories completed, we'll be moving on to the higher tiers of recognition: The Recruit Awards and the Assessment Awards."

The screen behind her shifted with her words, the familiar category emblems glowing as they transformed to denote their new, loftier status. Each category gained a star for the Recruit tier, and then a second star for the Assessment tier.

"For the Recruit Awards," Major Quinn continued with a sharp, precise gesture toward the screen, "the medals are as follows: Gold, Platinum, and Palladium."

Jin's eyebrows lifted slightly as the screen zoomed in to display the new medals.

The one-star designs gleamed, with the familiar Platinum medal now accompanied by a striking white-gold variant that replaced the usual Silver and had taken the spot of the #1 medal.

The addition of a true-rarity metal caught the attention of the entire hall, sparking a flurry of reactions among the assembled Recruits.

Jin observed the crowd with interest.

Some leaned toward their neighbours, whispering excitedly about finally seeing a medal made from such an extraordinary material. Others simply stared at the polished surface on the screen with reverence, marvelling at the craftsmanship.

But the smallest group—those whose eyes gleamed with anticipation—kept their attention firmly fixed on Major Quinn and the evolving display, likely having already pieced together what would come next.

Jin was among that group and knew exactly where Major Quinn's next words were going to go.

"For the Assessment Awards, the medals are: Platinum, Palladium, and *Crysum*," Major Quinn revealed. On the screen behind her, the two-star versions of the medals materialised, their polished surfaces gleaming.

The familiar Platinum medal stood proudly at the top of the stack, accompanied by the Palladium, its lustrous, silvery tone catching the light. But then, with a regal shimmer, a new medal began to emerge—the Crysum.

"*Crysum*..." Jin whispered, unable to stop himself as the light-blue hue of the rare metal fully revealed itself, the glow casting a mesmerising light over the hall. His breath caught, and he could feel the same awe radiating from the Recruits around him.

It was the first time he, or likely anyone else in the room, had seen the metal in person.

They had heard of it briefly during the System 101 lecture, where it had been mentioned as a Rarity descriptor, but that was the extent of their knowledge. Now, here it was, forged into the highest of accolades, displayed before them in all its glory.

"And before anyone asks: Yes, this is *real* Crysum. A semi-rare T2 System Material," Major Quinn confirmed, her sly grin betraying her enjoyment of the room's reaction. Every Recruit's eyes seemed to glint with longing as they absorbed the sight of the medal, their imaginations running wild. "Any winner of a Crysum Assessment Award medal will walk away with a genuine piece of this remarkable metal. The medal is entirely crafted from it."

A ripple of wistful sighs swept through the hall, a collective mix of awe and longing, with Jin and Yonbu no exception.

Though the medal itself was small, the implications of owning even a sliver of Crysum were monumental. Jin couldn't stop his mind from wandering, imagining the possibilities.

"If you melted it down," Yonbu muttered, his voice tinged with a tinkerer's dreaminess, "you could probably coat something small with it... or make a critical part for a larger construct..."

"Or," Jin countered, his tone equally wistful, "you could trade it for an entire set of Blueprints, a Forge-type Armour, and maybe a few Formations on top of that."

Both of them knew they didn't have a chance of winning such a medal, but the allure of the Crysium wasn't something they could easily shake.

It represented more than just a prize—it was a symbol of unparalleled accomplishment, of being among the very best the UHF had to offer.

"Now," Major Quinn's voice broke through the room's quiet reverie, reclaiming the focus of the hall, "I know that many of you are wondering about the Leaderboards as well."

The screen behind her shifted, the medals vanishing to be replaced with a stark black background. The abrupt removal of the Crysium medals drew murmurs of disappointment from the crowd, who had clearly not tired of gazing at the rare metal.

"*However,*" she continued, "we will only be revealing the Assessment Leaderboards at the very end of the ceremony. This is because every Recruit only gets *one* final score. While we will display three separate Leaderboards for easier viewing and comparisons—dividing Ships, Recruits, and other enlisted Marines—they are not *scored* differently. The system evaluates all participants uniformly for the sake of fairness."

Jin's mind quickly filled in the unspoken logic behind the announcement. *'If they revealed the Leaderboards now, it would spoil the suspense. We could guess who the remaining medal winners are if we saw the rankings ahead of time.'*

He nodded to himself, the reasoning sound. It wasn't just about awards—it was about keeping the focus on the accomplishments and stories being shared through the ceremony.

*'Makes sense. They want us to absorb everything, to learn from these highlights, and to understand what it takes to earn such recognition. This isn't just a celebration after all—it's an educational event.'*

Major Quinn wasted no time in steering the ceremony ever forward.

"Now," she continued, her tone steady but tinged with a trace of humour, "before we move on to the next set of awards, let me explain a slight change in how these will be presented compared to the Sovereign Awards."

A ripple of murmurs spread through the crowd, curiosity piqued.

"For the Recruit and Assessment Awards," Major Quinn continued, "we will be presenting the Recruit and Assessment versions of each category back-to-back. So, for example, we'll reveal the Recruit *Valiant Defender* medals immediately followed by the Assessment *Valiant Defender* medals. This is different from how we handled the Sovereign Awards, where we completed all Recruit Awards categories first before moving to the Recruit and Assessment Awards."

She paused, allowing the crowd a moment to absorb the change in format, her expression softening into a small smile.

“And for those of you who might be wondering—no, there will not be any ‘fun’ awards like the Unlucky or Boneskull Awards in these tiers. I know, *I know*. It truly *is* tragic,” she added with a playfully exaggerated sigh, earning a mix of chuckles and groans from the audience.

“The reason for this,” she explained, her tone returning to its usual authoritative cadence, “is simple: These higher-tier awards are focused solely on merit and achievement. The lighter-hearted segments are not carried over here. Additionally—” she grinned slightly, a mischievous gleam in her eye, “this will save us all some time. As much as I’ve enjoyed spending this afternoon with you all, even I must admit this award show is taking a while.”

Laughter rippled through the hall, breaking some of the tension that had been mounting.

“Now, with that out of the way, one final disclaimer,” Major Quinn said, her voice sharpening to a more serious note. “There’s no guarantee that Recruits from the Sovereign will be included in every category—or even in *any* category at all. Remember, these tiers encompass the *entire* drive, not just this ship. So if you don’t hear familiar names, don’t panic. There’s just a *lot* of very talented competition out there.”

The room quieted once more as the weight of Major Quinn’s words sank into the crowd. A palpable tension filled the air, tightening like an invisible cord binding the assembled Recruits to their seats. Everyone was wondering the same thing: Did the Sovereign have any contenders for these higher-tier awards?

“With that said,” Major Quinn gestured toward the massive screen behind her, commanding everyone’s attention, “let’s dive right into the Recruit and Assessment Awards for our first category: the Valiant Defender.”

The screen flickered to life, revealing the emblem for the category.

Jin found himself unable to resist glancing again toward Alpha Squad, curiosity gnawing at him as much as it did the rest of the room.

His gaze swept across the squad members, his mind buzzing with speculation.

*‘Does the Sovereign even have contenders in this tier? Or will the Recruits from other ships dominate us completely...? Our Alpha Squad is supposedly the highest PV one in history, so theoretically speaking they should be in the running...’*

Starting from the left, his eyes landed on Desmond first. The drone operator sat with his usual air of quiet intensity, his fingers drumming lightly against his knee.

*‘Desmond? No chance,’* Jin thought with certainty. *‘He already got Eye in the Sky, and that’s probably the only category he could realistically win in.’*

Next, his attention shifted to Corvus. The squad leader sat upright, his hands steepled in front of his face balancing his *MVM* medal as he studied the screen, his expression calm yet focused.

*‘Corvus... maybe. He snagged the Platinum MVM medal, but nothing for squad leadership so far. If he’s going to show up again, it could be for a Recruit award here. His leadership style is strong enough to warrant it, at least based on the Squad Leader meetings prior to the assessment...’*

Jin’s gaze moved on, landing squarely on Isabella, the squad’s offensive powerhouse.

Even seated, her presence was formidable, her massive arms crossed as she stared at the screen with a faint smirk playing on her lips.

*‘Isabella is practically guaranteed a Recruit medal,’* Jin thought, nodding to himself. *‘She’s practically the epitome of a One Man Army. Then again... Tiberius was similar, and neither of them has shown up yet. Could they share a medal like Lucas and Masters...? No way Major Quinn would pull that again, right...?’*

The thought of Lucas’ shared medal briefly pulled Jin’s focus toward the young defensive heavy. Lucas sat quietly, his eyes forward, his hands folded before him as if in silent prayer.

*‘Lucas? No shot he gets another one. He already bagged Valiant Defender with Masters. I don’t see him beating out other drives for anything else at this level.’*

Finally, Jin’s gaze landed on Karania. The medic sat with her usual air of calm detachment, her posture perfectly composed, as if she were untouchable—which she very likely was.

*‘Karanja...’* Jin shook his head instinctively, not out of dismissal but sheer awe. *‘She’s going to win everything. Emperor’s Touch, MVM, maybe even something at the Assessment level. That girl’s not a Marine—she’s a fucking monster.’*

A shiver ran down his spine as he involuntarily recalled the mechanical precision with which Karania had saved Yonbu during the IgT bombardment at the eastern front.

The memory thoroughly unsettled him, prompting him to quickly avert his eyes, letting them land on the last and most enigmatic member of Alpha Squad.

Thea’s sharp, intense expression betrayed none of her thoughts.

She sat on the edge of her seat, her body tense, her gaze fixed firmly on the podium as though trying to will herself into understanding what was to come.

*‘And her...’* Jin mused, unable to fully pin her down.

There was an unpredictability about Thea that made it impossible to guess her place in all of this. She was quiet, but there was a storm behind those eyes, and Jin couldn’t tell if it was one she was struggling with—or one she was barely containing.

*‘Now, why haven’t **you** gotten anything yet, Thea...?’* Jin mused, his fingers reflexively cupping his chin.

There were only two plausible explanations for Thea’s lack of medals so far, and both were equally perplexing.

The first, and perhaps the most problematic, was the possibility that Thea had been grossly overhyped and had ultimately underperformed compared to the high expectations set for her.

This would cast doubt *not only* on Thea's abilities but also on Major Quinn's own judgement, considering the attention she had placed on the girl since the very beginning.

The second explanation, however, was the one that *truly* unsettled him.

*'Did you sweep the entire assessment, Thea...? Did you completely exceed even Major Quinn's expectations and claim awards at a level no one anticipated...?'* Jin's stomach twisted at the thought, an inexplicable mixture of dread and awe coursing through him.

The problem was that he didn't know enough about Thea beyond the surface-level information everyone else had—rumours, whispers, and the occasional observation.

She was an enigma, and that made her unpredictable.

What added weight to the second theory, however, sending a fresh wave of unease through him, was Karania's demeanour.

Jin had spent enough time observing people to know when someone was masking concern, and while she definitely was masking something, it wasn't *concern*.

She was utterly composed, completely unfazed by the fact that Thea hadn't received a single award yet.

*'That can only mean one thing... She knows something we don't.'* Jin's eyes narrowed slightly as he shifted his gaze between the two.

The bond between Karania and Thea was an anomaly—something far deeper than typical squad camaraderie; more akin to his own bond with Yonbu, yet different.

It was one of the only potential chinks in her armour that Karania had allowed to shine through her otherwise thoroughly impenetrable facade. He had considered her to be an unassailable genius, her every move calculated, but this strange emotional attachment between Thea and Karania was the first potential vulnerability he'd ever spotted in her.

Something he had every intention of keeping a close eye on, in case it ever became important to have something in the back pocket to deal with her; not that he hoped for that to become a reality, of course—he'd much rather be on Karania's good side.

And yet, even *despite* that bond, Karania didn't seem concerned at all.

If anything, her calmness bordered on downright smug assurance, as if she were *certain* that Thea would be recognized in due time.

*'And if **she's** confident... then we're all in for a surprise.'* Jin exhaled slowly, trying to shake the growing sense of unease that settled over him. If Karania believed in Thea that strongly, then the rest of the assembled Recruits, including himself, might have grossly underestimated her, despite his best attempts at following Major Quinn's initial warnings...

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PoV: Astra Zorus

*‘My neck hurts so much...’*

It was one of Astra’s dominant thoughts as she twisted and craned her body in her seat, trying to catch a glimpse of the front row.

Being part of Mid Squad—a name their group had chosen both as a nod to their Midworlder heritage and their expectations of remaining, well, *mid-tier*—her seat wasn’t exactly prime real estate for watching the frontrunners of the assessment awards.

From where she was, Astra could easily spot Isabella and Lucas; their sheer size made them impossible to miss. Even from a distance and at an awkward angle, they stood out like twin pillars of Alpha Squad.

But they weren’t who she *really* wanted to see.

*‘Why is Thea so damn small...?!’*

It was both a frustrated and amused thought.

While Thea wasn’t actually short—she was, in fact, far taller than anyone in Mid Squad—her presence felt diminutive compared to the towering figures of other Recruits.

The post-Integration growth spurt had added a few extra centimetres to everyone, but it only emphasised the already vast gap between Midworlders and those from Inner or Core Worlds.

Astra could just barely manage to make out Thea’s blonde hair amidst the sea of Alpha Squad’s elite by craning her neck, and it was infuriating.

She wanted to see her idol’s reactions to all of this.

“Thea’s not even been called up once... And neither has Isabella. Are we sure the UHF is even going to allow Midworlders to get any awards at all...?” Pino’s deflated question pulled Astra from her internal grumbling.

Her first instinct was to snap at him for voicing such a ridiculous thought, but she hesitated.

As much as she hated to admit it, his worry mirrored her own.

By now, even her own optimism was starting to waver, despite her unwavering trust in Thea’s capabilities—it was the UHF’s intentions that she didn’t entirely trust.

At first, when Isabella and Thea hadn’t been called up for the Sovereign-tier awards, everyone in Mid Squad had shrugged it off.



“They’re saving the best for last,” they’d said, convinced that the pair were destined for the Recruit-tier awards or higher.

But then came the *MVM* medals.

One by one, the names were called, and neither Isabella nor Thea had appeared... And how could they realistically expect either of them to have beaten out *all* other Recruits, when they hadn’t even beaten out the ones in their own ship in the *MVM* category...?

“I’m sure they’ll show up soon!” Astra finally said, trying to sound more confident than she felt. “The UHF wouldn’t be openly classist like that. It wouldn’t make any sense after finally starting recruitment on Midworlds! They’re getting Recruit Awards, guaranteed. Just you wait!”

Her words hung in the air, a thin shield of hope she wasn’t sure could hold under the mounting pressure.

By now, the *Valiant Defender* Recruit awards had already wrapped up. The Palladium Medal had gone to Quonam Irael from Imperator Alpha.

Astra had been silently hoping for someone from her own ship to win, but with both Lucas and Rachel already having received awards in that category, there was little chance of anybody else getting close.

The Assessment-tier awards were already halfway through, and the tension in her chest grew with every passing moment.

Each new name felt like a nail in the coffin of her fragile hopes, even though neither Isabella nor Thea had any actual chance of being called upon. The simple fact that their names hadn’t appeared, however, caused her more and more stress as the ceremony continued.

*‘If even Alpha Squad’s Midworlders can’t get any recognition, what does that mean for the rest of us...?’*

Some might have seen it as pathetic to hope for the victory of others in a ceremony like this, instead of their own, but for the members of Mid Squad, it was far more than that.

It wasn’t about personal glory—it was about something far bigger. They were painfully aware of their own limitations, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t cheer for others to succeed.

All they wanted was to see others *like them*, Midworlders by birth, pave the way for the rest by being acknowledged.

From the very first day after Integration, when Major Quinn had announced that there weren’t just one but *two* Midworlders selected for Alpha Squad, Astra and many other Recruits hailing from the Midworlds had seen it as a monumental sign of change.

It was proof that the galaxy was beginning to shift.

Midworlders, long considered second-class citizens in the grand scope of the galaxy, now finally had a chance to prove their worth—not just through the monumental expense of travelling to an Inner World for a shot at the UHF, but directly through the Cube Trials on their very own planets, a system accessible to them for the very first time.

That alone had been groundbreaking. But the fact that Midworlders could not only enter the UHF but also rise to the very top, earning a place in Alpha Squad?

It was a beacon of hope.

For weeks, that hope had sustained Astra and others like her.

They'd discussed it endlessly—how Thea and Isabella being in Alpha Squad was proof that the galaxy was moving toward a fairer future, one where Midworlders weren't just overlooked and dismissed.

It had felt like the start of a new chapter.

But now, as the awards dragged on and neither Thea nor Isabella had been recognized, the weight of all that hope and expectation felt almost unbearable.

It wasn't fair, Astra knew, to place so much on two people's shoulders.

And yet, if they didn't succeed here, if they didn't get the recognition the Midworlders had pinned their dreams on, it would raise questions none of them wanted to face.

*"Did they even deserve to be in Alpha Squad?"*

The idea made Astra's stomach churn. Those whispers would inevitably lead to a far darker question, one that had haunted the Midworlds for centuries:

*"Are the Midworlds even worth investing in?"*

No matter how much pride they felt for Thea and Isabella simply being in Alpha Squad, it was undeniable that their success here—or lack thereof—would shape the perception of Midworlders in the UHF for years to come.

The weight of that realisation hung over Astra like a dark cloud as Major Quinn's voice rang out, announcing the winner of the very first Crysium medal: Corporal Leon Manero from the fittingly named Valiant Squad, a team of T1 Prime Power-rank Marines from the Hegemon of Stars.

The announcement was met with a wave of applause that felt distant to Astra, her thoughts still caught in the whirlwind of what these awards meant for Midworlders.

The ceremony, which had felt like it dragged on endlessly earlier, now seemed to rush by in a blur.

The anticipation coursing through Astra and the rest of Mid Squad made every announcement simultaneously too quick and unbearably long, as Major Quinn's steady cadence became little more than a backdrop to their rising anxiety.

Thea and Isabella's names loomed large in Astra's mind, each passing moment amplifying her desperation to hear them called.

*'Thea McKay... Isabella Itoku... Thea McKay... Isabella Itoku...'*

She strained in her seat, craning her neck to try and catch glimpses of Thea in the front row.

Thea, who had always carried herself with such quiet determination, was now a mystery from this distance. Astra couldn't tell if she looked nervous, confident, or something in between, but every time she thought she caught sight of her, Major Quinn's voice drew her attention back to the stage.

One name after another echoed through the hall, each belonging to Marines from squads Astra had never heard of, aboard ships she hadn't even known existed.

The names she was so desperately waiting for felt like they were lost in the ether, refusing to materialise; and while it made sense that they weren't included in these awards, the logical knowledge thereof didn't help her feel any better about it.

The *Spiritus Machina* award came and went in the blink of an eye.

The Palladium medal was awarded to Patrick Onala Baris from Transcendent Alpha, while the Crysium medal went to Isolde Comfire, another T1 Prime Power-rank Marine from Yona Squad, hailing from the Empyrean of Swords.

Both names were accompanied by applause and murmured acknowledgments throughout the hall, but to Astra, they might as well have been background noise.

Each announcement seemed to simply deepen the pit in her stomach.

*'Are they **really** not going to call them...?'* The thought gnawed at her, threatening to take root in her mind, but she forced herself to remain hopeful.

There were still plenty of awards left to go, and surely, Thea and Isabella's time would come.

It had to.

It *had* to.

"Moving on to the *Eyes In The Sky* Recruit Awards, we once again honour those that lend us their impeccable perceptive capabilities: the Drone Operators, Scouts, Spotters, and the myriad other roles whose main purpose is to keep the rest of us informed about the enemy's movements and safe from ambushes," Major Quinn's voice broke through the haze inside Astra's head.

*'This is one of the ones Thea has a good chance for... right?'* Astra thought, clutching onto the thin thread of hope, her heart cautiously daring to believe again.

She glanced at Pino, who returned a hopeful look of his own, though the tension in his eyes betrayed his uncertainty. To her left, she squeezed Marika's trembling hand—a gesture meant as much to reassure her squadmate as to steady her own nerves.

Ulfar and Jonas, usually the lively, boisterous centrepieces of their squad, simply nodded tersely at Astra's silent plea. The tension had rendered them uncharacteristically quiet, their energy drained by the slow grind of the ceremony.

*'Come on, Major Quinn... please... just this once,'* Astra begged internally, her silent prayers looping with every beat of her racing heart.

The ceremony pressed on with unwavering indifference to her squad's desperation.

The Gold medal went to a Marine aboard the Empyrean, followed by the Platinum medal being awarded to one aboard the Exalted.

Each announcement felt like a slap, stealing away pieces of Astra's hope as the possibilities narrowed.

"Finally, we get to the Palladium medal for the Eyes In The Sky award," Major Quinn's voice carried a practised gravitas, heightening the anticipation in the room. "This medal is awarded to the single Recruit whose perceptive capabilities truly eclipsed those of any others in the drive. This Recruit has stopped ambushes before they could occur and spotted weak points in enemy lines that allowed their squad to break through seemingly unbreachable defensive positions again and again."

Astra's hands tightened on Marika's, her heart pounding painfully in her chest.

*'Please be Thea... please be Thea...'*

"That Recruit is none other than Kar'al Rodun Imahara of Ascendant Alpha!"

Applause erupted, cheers rising from various corners of the hall, but Astra barely heard it.

The sound seemed distant, like a muted echo in the background of her sinking thoughts. Her heart plummeted, the fragile hope that had barely been holding her together now shattered.

A hollow, aching void replaced the anticipation she had clung to.

It was as though a pit had opened in her stomach, swallowing every last shred of optimism.

For a moment, she couldn't bring herself to move, to react, even as Marika murmured something to her, likely meant to be comforting.

Astra didn't hear the applause or the continued fanfare.

Her gaze drifted back to the screen as Kar'al's recordings played, but the images blurred in her vision.

All she could feel was the weight of crushing disappointment and the gnawing fear that perhaps Thea wouldn't get recognized at all.

The same fear extended to Isabella, and by association, all Midworlders.

She slumped lower in her chair, her earlier hopes now little more than a distant memory.

For the first time, she stopped trying to catch a glimpse of Thea in the first row.

*'If I'm feeling this shattered... I can't even imagine what **she's** going through right now.'*  
Sympathy for her idol only deepened the pit in her stomach.

Thea had always been a beacon for Astra, someone who defied every stereotype and expectation placed on Midworlders.

That admiration wouldn't falter, UHF-sponsored awards or not.

But she couldn't shake the growing worry about what might happen to Thea's mental state if she went through this entire ceremony without a single acknowledgement.

Astra's thoughts spiralled into plans—half-formed ideas of how to cheer her idol up—only to snag on an unfortunate truth: Thea likely didn't even remember her.

How was she supposed to be there for her idol when she couldn't even get close enough to see her; much less speak to her?

Even from this distance, Alpha Squad might as well have been on another planet.

The pressure on her hand pulled her momentarily from her racing thoughts.

Marika was squeezing her hand, a repetitive, supportive gesture that Astra deeply appreciated, even if it didn't manage to ease her mind.

*'Maybe I could ask the Sovereign for help?'* Astra's mind latched onto the absurd idea as it circled through options. *'Is that something you can even do? Just... ask the ship's AI for advice?'*

She tilted her gaze toward the ceiling, half-expecting an answer to materialise.

The next squeeze from Marika wasn't gentle.

"Ouch! What the—" Astra hissed, snapping her head toward her friend.

"Thea! It's Thea! Astra!" Marika was practically yelling in her face, bouncing in her seat and pointing frantically toward the front.

Thoroughly confused, Astra followed the direction of Marika's outstretched arm and froze as her eyes landed on the massive screen. There, displayed for the entire hall to see, was a recording of Sovereign Alpha moving through an abandoned industrial sector in Nova Tertius.

Thea was on the screen.

The recording highlighted Thea's methodical navigation, her relentless efforts to lead the squad through booby-trapped buildings, deserted alleyways, and paths out of sight of patrolling Stellar Republic troops.

"What... Why... Why is Thea on the screen?" Astra's voice barely registered, her confusion deepening.

The Recruit awards were over. Kar'al had already taken the Palladium medal, and Major Quinn had clearly transitioned to the Assessment Awards.

So why was Thea being shown now?

Around her, Marika's ecstatic screams were deafening if thoroughly incoherent, and Pino, Ulfar, and Jonas seemed to have completely lost their minds with excitement.

The recording continued, showing Sovereign Alpha taking refuge inside the remains of an old office compound as the squad huddled around one of Desmond's drone feeds.

On the screen, Thea pointed insistently at a fresh set of tire tracks etched on the concrete in one of the drone's feeds, her expression fierce as she argued with the squad. Her gestures were animated as she seemingly urged them to investigate further.

*'I don't understand...'* Astra thought, her mind sluggish, trying to process the unfolding events.

Her stupor was broken by the steady, authoritative voice of Major Quinn narrating the scene.

"It was Recruit McKay who convinced Sovereign Alpha to investigate further, using her unique perspective as someone who grew up in a Midworld Undercity. What seemed like nothing but random dirt and scuffs to others was, to her trained eyes, a critical anomaly," Major Quinn explained. "Her intuition ultimately prevailed, and what Sovereign Alpha uncovered... Well, let's just say it changed the entire course of the eastern front."

Astra's brain finally began to thaw, her focus narrowing on the screen as the recording shifted to show the vehicle itself—the same truck that Corvus had destroyed in his MVM highlight.

Recognition dawned, accompanied by a flood of utter disbelief.

"Wait... Did... Did Thea *win*?" Astra stammered, her voice barely audible amidst the growing din of the room.

Marika's incessant yelling next to her should have answered the question, but Major Quinn's voice overpowered it entirely.

"The truck, overloaded with experimental Stellar Republic technology, was designed to reinforce the Wall's defences by providing additional computational power and refined

algorithms. It also served as a failsafe, capable of replacing two Control Stations should they fall to saboteurs,” Major Quinn continued.

“Through Recruit McKay’s impeccable perception and trust in her own intuition, Sovereign Alpha identified and destroyed this critical asset before it could be deployed. This single action accelerated the eastern front’s progress markedly and, ultimately, guaranteed the UHF’s success on this side of the Battlefield.”

The weight of those words hit Astra like a tidal wave, and her body reacted before her mind could fully comprehend.

Tears welled in her eyes as the truth settled in: Thea had won.

Not just any award, but an *Assessment Award*.

“Thea won, Astra! Thea *won*! She fucking did it! She won!” Marika screamed, her voice shrill with excitement as she bounced up and down, clutching Astra’s arm with both hands.

The rest of the hall had long erupted into cheers, a cacophony of applause and whooping from the Recruits. Astra noticed, however, that the cheering wasn’t for Thea specifically—it was for the fact that *someone* from the Sovereign had claimed an Assessment Award.

Thea’s name wasn’t chanted, but for Astra, it might as well have been etched in the very fabric of the universe itself.

She wiped at her tears, though they refused to stop falling. Thea—her idol—had done it. And yet, amidst the overwhelming pride and relief, one burning question took shape in her mind, the first coherent thought she managed to voice.

“Wait... What?! Thea won? She *fucking won*?! What... What place is she even in?!”

Her head snapped toward the screen, intending to scan for the medal’s emblem.

Her eyes froze as they landed on Thea herself, making her way up to the podium.

Thea’s steps were steady, her figure as comparatively diminutive as ever, but to Astra, she looked almost unchanged from the girl she had idolised a month ago.

*‘She looks just like she did back then... A tad nervous, not wanting all the eyes on her... Like she’s just another Midworlder...’*

Major Quinn’s voice returned, calm and deliberate, anchoring the chaos in Astra’s mind.

“And it is with the greatest pleasure that I hereby present the Two-Star Palladium *Eyes In The Sky* medal to Recruit Thea McKay, of our very own Sovereign Alpha!”

The words echoed in Astra’s head, solidifying into reality, and the dam of her composure broke entirely.

“Fuck yeah! Theaaaaa! Let’s gooooo!” she screamed, her voice turning hoarse almost immediately but unyielding, as she leapt out of her seat and embraced Marika with enough force to topple them both back into their chairs.

“She fucking did it! Let’s fucking go!” Astra repeated, her words a mantra of victory as tears streamed down her cheeks.

While Mid Squad was likely never going to be seated anywhere near the podium, or would ever stand out enough to obtain any medals, the noise they were making in the wake of Thea’s win was louder than any other squad’s, including even Alpha Squad itself...