

Volume 2 - Chapter 66 - Squad Time II

“Colonel Harlan Vey,” the interviewer began, “thank you for joining us. I’ll get straight to it: A UHF world was lost. Command leadership was decapitated during an enemy offensive. And now we know there was a traitor involved. How could something like that happen?”

Colonel Vey did not bristle. He folded his hands on the table and answered calmly.

“Because spies and traitors are hard to catch. Harder than most people want to admit.”

The interviewer leaned in slightly. “Even with Faction Traits in play?”

“*Especially* with Faction Traits,” Vey replied without missing a beat. “There’s a popular idea that Traits make everything easy. That we can just point at someone and force the truth out of them. But that isn’t how reality works. Every activation of a Trait comes with a Merit cost. For us especially, but also for them. You can’t just burn Merit on every suspicion that crosses your desk—in extraordinary circumstances, we do. But not as a general rule. You’d be burning down your own army to embers before the first shot is even fired.”

“So you didn’t test them,” the interviewer said pointedly.

“We couldn’t,” Vey said. “Not at the scale required. Not *responsibly*.”

He continued before the next question could even come. “People also imagine that we can just put every Marine into the DDS and let the AIs sort things out over time. And... In theory, yes, if we have the time. In practice, however, the answer is simply: No. There are limits. You see, respawn chambers are finite. When a ship is en route to a Battlefield, we board tens of thousands of Marines along the way. Many of them never enter the DDS at all. They come aboard combat-ready days before deployment.

“Add to that, a large portion of UHF Navy personnel being Unintegrated and you have a large collection of people that you can’t simply Faction Trait check, even if you wanted to,” Vey said. “And even those who *are* Integrated often stay outside the DDS. Someone has to keep the ships running, after all. Someone has to manage the reactors, the engines, and calculate the jump windows.”

The interviewer nodded slowly. “So there are *gaps*.”

“There are *realities*,” Vey corrected gently. “Add Void Incursion response teams manned by our own Marines. Add long-term external deployments made up of both Marines, Navy and AD. Add the fact that the Albright System enables some *very* dangerous Abilities for assassins and infiltrators. And suddenly you’re no longer looking for *one* failure point. You’re looking at thousands of moving parts that all need to be perfect, *all the time*.”

“But this time,” the interviewer said, “they weren’t.”

Vey exhaled. “This time, someone happened to choose the *exact* right path. The *exact* right moment. They snuck in, then struck at headquarters and cut the head off the chain, just when the chain was being pulled taut. It worked.”

The interviewer paused, then asked the question many were likely thinking. “So why should people still trust the UHF Marine Corps to handle things properly, if something like this happens?”

Vey looked straight into the camera. “Because you’re all hearing about it.”

The interviewer frowned. “Elaborate, if you would?”

“If failures like this were common,” Vey said, “they wouldn’t be news. They’d be statistics, and I wouldn’t be here to listen to your questions and give answers. The very fact that this incident is being dissected across the entire UHF right now tells you something important.”

“That your defences usually hold,” the interviewer said quietly, realisation dawning.

“I always knew you were one of the smart ones,” Vey confirmed with a smile and a nod. “It means that our preventive measures work far more often than they fail. We caught tens, even hundreds of thousands of threats you’ll never hear about. This *one* got through. And because it did, we are tearing the system apart to make sure it never happens the same way again.”

There was a short silence.

Then the interviewer asked, “And the battlegroups responsible for that planet?”

Vey’s jaw tightened, just slightly. “They didn’t die for nothing. And the person who betrayed them will not be remembered as clever. Only as *temporary*.”

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[Excerpt from UHF Public Affairs Network – (Integrated) Interview Segment, PFC 924]

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Watching Karania’s DM recording was a completely different experience from Corvus’ or Lucas’ altogether.

Alpha Squad’s Medic offered a few pointers and comments here and there about what she had been doing at the time—such as certain medical procedures or explaining her thought process on certain triage decisions—but for the most part, the recording spoke for itself.

The only real constant was Isabella’s downright manic laughter at the sheer, utter apocalypse unfolding on the screen at any given moment—and Thea honestly couldn’t fault her for it.

‘The Faultline modifier really is insane,’ Thea had to admit after seeing it for herself. *‘Kara mentioned how rough it was, but **this**... is on a whole different level than what I had in mind...’*

She had expected some rumbling, maybe the ground cracking open in places, rockcrete shifting up or down by half a meter here and there. What actually happened in the DM, though, was far beyond anything she had imagined—let alone thought realistic enough to be used in something as reality-close as a training mission.

While Karania's point of view was often buried deep inside the bodies and organs of wounded Marines, seeing her best friend's work from a first-person view was both terrifying and awe-inspiring at the same time.

But it was the moments *between* patients—when Karania lifted her eyes and took in the battlefield in search of the next target—that left the whole squad sitting in stunned silence; or manic laughter in the case of Isabella.

Not just because of the scale of the destruction, but also because of Karania's freakishly precise situational awareness, even in the middle of all that apocalyptic chaos.

One moment in particular burned itself into Thea's mind.

Karania's view had burst out from behind a half-collapsed med-station just as the ground screamed beneath her boots. The earth didn't shake so much as it *ripped and teared*—a deep, rolling crack splitting the street straight down the middle as if something massive underneath had decided it had finally had enough.

Rockcrete around her buckled, folded, then shattered into clouds of dust that swallowed the lower levels whole. Buildings simply seemed to implode inwards and then came down in chunks, entire facades shearing off and smashing into the streets and fighting Soldiers and Marines below.

Artillery thundered overhead at the same time, the concussive booms stacking on top of the seismic roars until it was hard to tell where the battlefield even ended and the planet's wrath itself began.

Mortars walked their destruction across the ruins, Stellar Republic emplacements trading shots with Marines who were scrambling not just for cover, but for the few pieces of solid ground that *still existed*.

And Karania moved through it like she was dancing on a knife's edge.

Her steps were light and impossibly steady—skirting cracks that widened into yawning chasms mere seconds later, vaulting over sinking slabs of street as they tilted away and then cracked into nothingness.

The HUD marker she was chasing flagged a Marine listed as “green,” mobile and uninjured, just ahead.

Thea had no idea *how* Karania had known this would happen, as she hadn't seen anything out of the ordinary to indicate as such, but by the time Karania had reached the Marine in question, that status was no longer even remotely true.

A fresh collapse had come down only moments prior.

Several tons of shattered rockcrete and twisted durasteel rods had crushed the Marine against what had once been a wall. His vitals were spiking, then crashing, his body pinned so completely that only his helmet and one arm were visible beneath the rubble.

Karania didn't even slow down at the sight.

She slid to her knees just as another shockwave rippled through the ground, debris raining down around her, hands already moving—injectors out, armour seals snapped, fingers morphing into medical tools one after another even as the world tried its best to kill them both.

Somewhere nearby, the roaring sound of rockcrete being torn apart by nature itself sounded and a chasm opened, swallowing an entire fireteam whole, their icons blinking out in the corner of Karania's HUD as if they'd never existed.

And still, she worked without pause to free the Marine from his predicament.

Watching it, Thea felt her throat go dry.

This was pure, unfiltered mayhem.

The end of the world, happening again and again in every direction at once—and somehow Karania was running straight through it, carving out small pockets of survival in the middle of total collapse.

Ultimately, however, the recording and Karania's run in the DM had ended with a fireteam of Stellar Republic soldiers catching Karania off-guard in yet another shattered section of the battlefield, where a small triage point had been set up.

They had slipped behind the UHF lines—if the ongoing chaos could even be called lines anymore—and hit the first-aid area hard.

Karania had been working on another Marine when she realized what was happening, but even with her insane situational awareness, she hadn't been fast—or armored—enough to handle a full fireteam on her own, and definitely not in the middle of surgery.

"So... yeah. That was Faultline," Karania said into the heavy silence once the recording ended. "I can only recommend it if you want some experience with pure chaos. I'm pretty sure you'd love this one, Isa."

Isabella's answer came in the form of loud, roaring laughter. "Absolutely! That looked like a fucking blast, holy shit! I'm honestly tempted to jump into one right after this and see if there's a Faultline modifier available... My own DM was boring as fuck compared to that, damn!"

Corvus was the first to visibly react to the whole thing wrapping up, even if only non-verbal.

He simply nodded once, like he was filing the whole thing away for later.

Lucas, on the other hand, looked a bit pale.

He scratched the back of his neck and let out a low breath.

"I... don't know if I'd last thirty minutes in something like that," he admitted. "No cover, the ground trying to kill you, buildings falling over—it feels like the whole planet's your enemy. And with my Super-Heavy armor, there's no way I could get out of the way fast enough."

He went quiet after that, staring at the frozen frame on the display, clearly lost in thought.

'I'll have to run a lot of drills with him once we start training in the arcade,' Thea realized. 'Super-Heavy types need that kind of practice more than anyone else, with all that extra weight. You can't just trust the armour to tank everything for you in environments like that. It's one of the main drawbacks of those armour types in the first place—that'll be a lot of work...'

Desmond, however, was the one who surprised her the most—for what felt like the fifth time today.

"Honestly? That looked kind of amazing," he said. "No stable sightlines, no predictable terrain, enemies everywhere... For drones, that's a damn playground. So much vertical space, so many angles."

He paused, then added, "I mean—yeah, *terrifying*. But still. I'd love to try it."

That... actually made sense, Thea had to admit.

For a Drone Operator, a battlefield like that was practically tailor-made for highscores.

Karania stretched her arms over her head and broke the moment. "Oh, right—almost forgot. Friendlinks." She grinned. "Got sixteen requests after that DM. I only accepted three."

Corvus raised a brow. "Selective."

"Naturally," Kara said easily. "Two medics—both solid, knew what they were doing. And one Sergeant. Only Squad Leader in that whole mess that wasn't completely hopeless."

She rolled her eyes. "I missed you in there, Corv. A lot of those people should *not* be allowed near command... But here we are."

Thea winced in sympathy.

Her thoughts drifted despite herself. *'How would I have done in that DM...?'*

Her Passive [Glimpse] would've warned her before the ground split open—at least most of the time—but actually fighting in that chaos?

Every engagement she'd seen had been extremely close.

A hundred meters, maybe less. Practically CQC range for all of them.

Finding clean lines of fire would've been almost impossible in that chaos—just the smoke from the mountains of debris alone would have made that tough, not even mentioning all the cover the broken buildings and chasms had created.

'Still...' She made a quiet mental note. *'I should try a modifier next time. Faultline if possible, just to see how I'd deal with it all in the moment.'*

Karania clapped her hands together. "Alright! Enough about my little adventures. Isa, you're up, I'd say! You mentioned yours was boring...?"

Isabella groaned, dragging a hand down her face.

"Ugh. *Fine!* But don't expect anything exciting," she said. "Compared to whatever the fuck *that* was? Mine's gonna look like a damn training sim."

Still, she reached for the controls, and the squad settled back in for yet another review...

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'Well... she wasn't wrong,' Thea had to admit reluctantly after Isabella's DM recap had finished. *'That really wasn't particularly exciting.'*

Isabella's DM, which by all accounts should have been exciting just by virtue of who Isabella was and what her Role involved, had somehow ended up being the least interesting of all the DMs they'd seen so far—by a wide margin.

It had been a Point Assault, with Isabella in a squad made up of two Offensive Heavies, a Defensive Heavy, two Supports, and a Squad Leader.

They were missing a Medic, but it hadn't really mattered.

Everything had just... *worked.*

Like they were running a clean training sim, exactly like Isabella had described.

No surprise attacks, no sudden complications, no mistakes. The squad moved smoothly, covered each other perfectly, and pushed the objective without any real resistance.

For all intents and purposes, it had been a flawless mission—which made it painfully boring to watch.

"So yeah," Isabella said with a sigh. "That was my DM. Just a simple Point Assault, nothing special going on. I linked with the whole squad, 'cause, well, you saw them. They rocked. Honestly. Hoping we'll get to that level as a squad too, someday."

Corvus nodded with genuine excitement, somehow the only one who seemed to have gotten a lot out of it. "That was truly marvelous... I'd like the full recording later, if you don't mind, Isabella. There's just so much to learn from it all...!"

Isabella gave him a slightly strange look, but agreed anyway, before quickly shifting gears.

“Well then,” she added, grinning. “I guess it’s time for our grumpy Drone Operator to go next. We’re clearly saving the best for last, even if nobody’s saying it out loud.”

She wiggled her eyebrows at Thea, who could only roll her eyes in response.

‘How was I supposed to know my first DM would turn into a fucking upscale...’

Aside from Kara, nobody actually knew what had happened during it, barring that fact—but judging by the energy in the room, they were all very interested to find out. Somehow, without anyone really mentioning it out loud, Thea had ended up with the unofficial final act of the entire review session.

Desmond, meanwhile, leaned forward at Isabella’s cue, looking far more animated than Thea was used to seeing him.

“Okay, uh—no promises that this tops Kara’s apocalypse,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck, “but it was definitely not as ass-boring as Isabella’s.”

Isabella snorted, rolling her eyes. “Low bar.”

He grinned, then added more seriously, “Heads up, though. This one might be rough to follow if you’re not a Drone Operator. Or if your Perception’s kinda low.”

Thea almost asked what he meant—but then the recording started, and the answer became obvious immediately.

Instead of a single point of view, the screen split into four.

Desmond’s own perspective sat in the center, while three additional windows bloomed around it, each showing the feed from a different drone.

They moved independently—one skimming low over rubble, another climbing in a slow spiral, a third darting between broken structures—each camera tilting, rotating, and adjusting on its own.

“What am I even supposed to look at?” Lucas groaned barely a minute in.

“My eyes hurt,” Isabella added. “This is bullshit.”

Karania and Corvus fared a bit better, but both looked strained, utterly focused and remained silent, brows furrowed as they tried to keep up with all of the perspectives.

Thea blinked, surprised to find that she could actually follow it fairly easily.

Not perfectly, but more than well enough.

Her eyes jumped between feeds without much effort, piecing together how the drones overlapped, how Desmond used them to build a moving picture of the battlefield and even started getting an idea for how Desmond liked to position them around him in a sort of overlapping triangle to keep his own back in view at all times as well.

Judging by the chorus of complaints around her, that acumen probably wasn't normal.

'I guess that's thanks to my Perception... And having dealt with varying picture-in-picture's in a lot of the games before. Nothing quite as intense as this, but it probably doesn't hurt.'

After a few more minutes of suffering, Desmond cleared his throat.

"Okay, yeah, that's on me."

With a few quick inputs, he collapsed the extra views, only pulling them up when they mattered.

The collective relief in the room was immediate.

The rest of the DM settled into a clearer rhythm after that.

It was a Point Defense, focused on a singular compound, with Desmond feeding constant recon to his squad—calling out flanking units, marking incoming armor, sending drones out as bait once the enemy started digging in. When things got messy, his drones slipped behind enemy lines, forcing repositioning and buying space for the Marines to breathe.

The three-dimensional vantage point the drones provided wasn't just great for gathering information, however.

Desmond was also using their flanking routes and strange angles to pick off high-value targets—such as Duplicators—that could be spotted far earlier thanks to the drones' enhanced camera systems.

Alpha Squad's Drone Operator had also clearly upgraded his kit since the Assessment too.

Thea was fairly sure he hadn't even had half of these tools back then.

The first thing that really caught her eye was a probability-matrix overlay built into each drone's camera, estimating how likely a given Stellar Republic enemy was to be a Duplicator based on movement patterns and positioning.

It was all genuinely impressive, especially considering this was still early Tier 1 tech—and without any advanced Drone Operator Class backing it up.

Watching it unfold, Thea couldn't help but imagine how different her own DM would have been if an Operator like this had been on the other side.

'I would've had way less freedom to move,' she thought grimly. 'Drone Operators really are terrifying... I should put them extremely high on my to-kill list going forward... Not that they weren't already near the top, but this definitely cements it.'

At around the eighty percent mark through the DMs recording, Desmond suddenly reactivated all of the drone feeds alongside his own view, a smug, almost giddy grin spreading across his face.

“Hold on—don’t complain yet,” he said quickly, holding up a hand when Isabella was already half-opening her mouth. “Just... watch. All of it. There’s something here I haven’t mentioned.”

The recording ran for a few minutes before Desmond paused it, rewound, and let the same stretch play again.

“I can loop this as many times as you want,” he added. “Take your time.”

Thea straightened immediately, her earlier half-focus fully locking in on the screen.

Something about one of the drone feeds had tugged at her the first time through—a faint, uncomfortable itch in the back of her mind, that she couldn’t quite place.

This time, she locked onto that specific POV, still keeping the others in her peripheral vision.

“This is bullshit,” Isabella grumbled. “My eyes hurt...”

The room went dead quiet as the footage played.

Explosions. Suppressive fire. Marines advancing, then falling back and letting the Stellar Republic come to them.

“What the—” Lucas swore under his breath. “I can’t even tell where I’m supposed to look!”

Then—

Thea’s eyes widened.

Two Marines went down. Dropping like they’d been punched straight through the chest.

But the shots from the Stellar Republic’s side hadn’t *actually* hit them. They’d been caught by the hard cover in front of the Marines—barely—but still stopped.

Yet the Marines collapsed anyway.

Corvus frowned, jaw tight as he tried to isolate each feed one at a time.

Karania, though, went eerily still. Her eyes widened just a fraction at the second death.

That was enough.

Thea spoke before the moment slipped—feeling a sharp spike of adrenaline at finally catching something before Kara did, just this once.

“Desmond,” she said, eyes still locked on the screen. “Did you queue into an Infiltrator DM?”

He blinked at her, clearly caught off guard.

“There’s a Traitor in your lines,” she continued, finally meeting his eyes and watching him flinch. “Isn’t there?”

For a second, Desmond just stared at her, mouth half open.

Then he sagged back with a sigh. “Yeah. I did. And... yeah, there is.”

He rubbed his face. “I honestly didn’t expect anyone to catch it that fast. Kinda ruins what I was going for a bit...”

His eyes flicked back to Thea, equal parts impressed and annoyed. “Your Perception is fucking disgusting, you know that?”

He quickly lifted a finger. “—In a good way! In a good way. I’m not starting shit, I swear.”

Turning to the rest of the squad, he added, “I didn’t say anything on purpose, just to see if you’d catch it naturally. I only managed to pin them down near the end of the DM, and that was with two drones actively hunting the whole damn time. Rooting out a good Infiltrator is fucking hard. Like... *really* hard. If the DM parameters hadn’t told me there *was* one, I don’t think I would’ve ever realized it at all.”

Desmond pulled the recording back a few seconds and slowed it down, isolating the exact moments Thea had pointed out. He highlighted the two fallen Marines, overlaying projectile paths and impact markers as the footage crawled forward frame by frame.

This time, it was impossible to miss.

The incoming fire struck the cover. Clean hits. No penetration. No ricochet.

And yet—both Marines still collapsed, almost in sync, bodies jerking as if something invisible had passed straight through them.

“Yeah,” Desmond muttered, voice low, a little grim now that the reveal was out. “There. That’s the tell.”

He switched feeds, pulling up one of the drone POVs Thea had been instinctively drawn to.

The drone hovered high, angled just enough to catch movement behind friendly lines—subtle, deliberate repositioning that didn’t quite match the rhythm of the ongoing firefight.

“Watch this angle,” he said, scrubbing back again. “Not the enemies of course, but our guys.”

They watched as a single UHF Marine shifted positions between volleys, always just out of direct sight, always close enough to be plausible. The next playback showed the same Marine adjusting again, moments before another “impossible” death.

Lucas let out a slow breath. “That’s... fucked.”

Isabella leaned forward, elbows on her knees, eyes narrowed. “Sneaky bastard.”

Karania nodded, as if approving, “Very clean work. Whoever that was knew exactly what they were doing, damn.”

Desmond let the recording continue.

A few minutes later, his drones tightened their search patterns, one peeling off from recon to linger just a little too long near that same Marine.

Then, a thermal spike. A delay in return fire at enemy lines that didn't line up with the thermal spike and a half-second of movement that didn't make sense in normal combat.

"Aaand *there*," Desmond said, a hint of pride creeping into his voice despite himself. "That's when I knew. Drones picked up the inconsistency first, but after that, it was just a matter of confirmation and passing the intel up the chain."

The footage ended with the traitor being marked, boxed in by a squad of Marines, and quietly eliminated once command was notified.

The DM summary flashed across the display a second later.

[MVP Award – Awarded for: Intelligence Superiority]

Desmond leaned back in his chair, rubbing the back of his neck, cheeks just a little red. "So... yeah. Turns out that's part of why we actually won the DM. Caught the traitor before they could do any more damage."

For a heartbeat, the room was quiet.

Then Lucas grinned. "That's huge, man."

Corvus nodded. "Textbook example of why intel wins wars. Well done, Desmond. You're really starting to fill out that role of yours, eh?"

Isabella gave him a firm clap on the shoulder, leaning far over the couch. "Didn't think I'd ever say this, but—glad to see your drones are good for other things than just comedic relief."

Desmond ducked his head, clearly pleased despite trying not to show it. "Yeah, uh... I got a bunch of Friendlink requests after that, too. Didn't really know what to do with them though."

He shrugged. "I accepted two. A Sergeant and a Corporal. Both seemed solid. Figured I'd at least keep them on the radar."

Corvus's smile sharpened just a touch. "Smart. Very smart."

Desmond hesitated, then added, a little sheepish, "I'll... probably pay more attention to that stuff going forward. You all kinda made a good point earlier, honestly."

Then he turned, smirk sliding back into place as his eyes landed on Thea.

He kicked one ankle up over his knee and gestured lazily toward the display.

"Alright," he said with a sigh. "Enough about me, I guess. I think it's time we see whatever absolute bullshit Miss Nonsense over here managed to pull this time around."

Thea snorted, rolling her eyes, but she didn't miss the easy tone in his voice—or the fact that it didn't sting at all.

"Wow. *Rude*," she said dryly. "I'll have you know my bullshit was very carefully thought out this time. And I had Squad Medic approval!"

"Not fucking *mine*," came Karania's immediate, icy response.

It made Thea flinch, but she did her best to ignore the bite in it. A few chuckles rippled through the room, and Thea felt a small, unexpected warmth settle in her chest.

Getting teased like this felt... normal. Even if it was Desmond doing it.

She'd dealt with all kinds of people back in Terra's games, after all.

'Teasing and ribbing is just part of the game,' she thought with a faint smile. *'And honestly... this feels like the right level of camaraderie for someone like him.'*

She finished setting up her DM recording, then cleared her throat. "So... apparently DMs can upscale. Who knew, huh?"

"I did," Isabella said immediately.

"Yep. Knew that," Desmond added.

"It was in the post-lecture materials...? Why wouldn't we know?" Lucas asked, genuine confusion on his face.

"Would be pretty irresponsible for an Alpha Squad member not to know, really," Corvus noted, shooting Thea a pointed look.

Karania—ever-loyal, dependable and trustworthy Karania—was the only one Thea knew would back her up.

"Well, Thea didn't, 'cause she's an idiot," Karania said, instantly crushing that hope.

"*Anyway!*" Thea cut in, much louder than needed.

"Upscaled missions are kind of insane. And I might have spent a bit too long testing different weapons before I realized just how bad it was gonna get, so—uh—let's just start watching, yeah?"

And with that, under a mix of scrutiny, amusement, and mild exasperation from the rest of the squad, Thea started the recording of her own DM...