

Arc 1 - Chapter 135 - Do-Over

"It must undoubtedly feel like a lifetime ago that I welcomed all of you here the last time, just over a month ago," Major Quinn continued, her voice gently echoing through the massive assembly hall. "To say that I am proud of seeing your determined faces looking up at me right now, after everything you've endured, would be a massive understatement."

She stepped away from the podium, her dress uniform's boots clicking softly against the polished floor as she moved closer to the front row of Recruits.

Her gaze swept across the sea of faces, pausing here and there, offering nods that seemed to carry a weight of personal acknowledgment.

Each small gesture felt like an unspoken commendation, and the few Recruits lucky enough to be selected, straightened markedly under her watchful eyes, their postures stiffening with pride.

"The past month has been beyond gruelling, terrifying, and brutally unforgiving for all of you; and that is by design, of course. But what *you* have faced as part of the Kuigon Sector's Recruitment Drive of 943 PFC has been on another level entirely. To have a Recruitment Drive face a first assessment of Platinum Rank difficulty is a rarity beyond words. You can all be proud of yourselves for being a part of this historic drive in the Kuigon Sector."

She paused, letting the significance of her words sink in, giving the gathered Recruits a moment to absorb the gravity of their achievements.

A ripple of quiet pride swept through the room, a subtle shifting of shoulders and uplifted chins.

Thea felt it too—an unexpected surge of pride blooming in her chest, tinged with a chill that ran down her spine, despite the misgivings she has had with the UHF as a whole in the recent weeks.

Major Quinn's words had managed to cut through the noise in her mind, the way she spoke wrapping around Thea like a mantle of recognition, making her feel seen in a way she really hadn't expected.

"Even more proud should be those of you who gave it *everything* you had during the assessment," Major Quinn continued, her voice growing firmer, each word resonating with the echoes of battles fought and won. "Those of you who *fought, bled, and died*, only to rise and try again for the UHF, over and over. Despite the hopelessness of your situation, despite the seemingly insurmountable odds you faced in many of the engagements of this assessment, you persevered regardless. This ceremony is for *you*—for your determination, your talents, and the immense potential you've shown as up and coming Marines of the UHF."

She let those words hang in the air, their weight almost tangible, a collective acknowledgment of the struggles and sacrifices made by every Recruit in the room.

The silence that followed was charged, buzzing with unspoken emotions—pride, relief, exhaustion.

Major Quinn's presence, her words, felt like a balm for the wounds they all carried, visible or not.

She returned to the podium after bestowing another few glances to select marines in the crowd, taking her place behind it again before her voice turned more solemn.

"Before we truly begin, however, I would like to address one big question that has undoubtedly swirled in everyone's minds at some point during the assessment, and especially after leaving it."

With a smooth flick of her wrist, the entire back wall of the assembly hall lit up with a massive holographic display, spanning from floor to ceiling.

The vivid, rotating images that filled the screen sent a shocked murmur through the crowd, breaking the silence with gasps and whispers that even Thea's filtered Perception couldn't fully tune out.

She found herself staring, her eyes wide and locked onto the display, unable to tear her gaze away.

The images were a shocking montage of horror and gore: Recruits horrifically injured, some missing limbs, others with faces half-destroyed, their bodies scarred, ripped asunder and twisted from battle, yet somehow still alive.

The screen shifted between scenes of emergency medical interventions—gruesome snapshots of field surgeries and frantic attempts to save lives—and the aftermath thereof:

The stark, metallic glint of cybernetic replacements, bionic limbs and metal grafted where natural flesh once was, and the stoic faces of those who had been forever changed through the experience.

Each image was raw and utterly unfiltered. It was a gruesome tableau of blood, steel, and pain, that truly captured the brutality of what they had endured inside the battlegrounds of the assessment in a way that no words could.

The stark visuals struck like one of Isabella's gut punches, leaving them all reeling.

These scenes were a far cry from the glorified war stories they might have anticipated, the harsh reality of their experiences laid bare for all to see.

Thea's gaze was inexplicably drawn to a short video clip featuring a marine so horrifically disfigured that it was nearly impossible to discern even just their gender or overall role at all.

Their lower jaw was completely gone, blood gushing from the gaping wound in torrents.

The skin that remained was grotesquely stretched and misshapen, warped in ways that defied natural anatomy. The rest of their body, what wasn't drenched in blood, was marred

by deep, horrific burns that left the flesh looking molten. Their right hand had been torn off, leaving behind a stump so badly charred and molten that it seemed to have straight up fused with the surrounding tissue.

But it wasn't the gruesome injuries that held Thea's attention—it was the eyes.

They glowed with a stark, self-illuminating Cyan, wild and unseeing, reflecting nothing but pain, agony, and the raw, animalistic drive for survival. The marine looked around frantically, trapped in what appeared to be a dense, dark forest, utterly consumed by their suffering.

'Is... Is that me?' Thea's thoughts faltered as she struggled to reconcile the savage figure on the screen with the image she held of herself.

This creature, this *animal*, couldn't possibly be her—she was a marine, a *person*, not this... thing. Yet, the cold, metallic sensation of her cybernetic jaw and hand that she had already learned to ignore but inexplicably decided to come to the fore, grounded her in a reality that was impossible to deny.

'This is why they called me Patches...' The realisation hit her like a cold wave, the nickname suddenly making a twisted kind of sense.

The image on the screen, the nightmare of a human being she saw, was the reality she had somehow survived—though it was a reality she could barely comprehend as her own.

Major Quinn's commanding voice broke through Thea's, and likely everyone else's, morbid fixation on the gruesome imagery displayed behind her.

"Roughly thirty-seven percent of you have suffered permanent injuries that remain with you to this very moment," she announced, her tone measured, almost clinical, yet carrying a subtle undercurrent of pride that could be detected by those paying close attention.

"The question on everyone's mind is undoubtedly: *'How did this happen? Why was I remade with a replacement part instead of my real body? Why did the scars remain?'* The full answer is too complex to fully address during this ceremony, but it is something that *must* be touched upon now regardless. You will receive a more detailed explanation in your upcoming Systems 101 classes over the next few weeks and months. For now, here is the simple version:

"All of our bodies, as members of the UHF Marines, are created using something called a 'Blueprint'—a term many of you have likely seen in your System Notifications during the assessment. This Blueprint determines the exact specifications of your new body when it is printed by the respawn pods. These are details that have been mentioned before, but what hasn't been discussed is the following:

"The Blueprints periodically update themselves to stay aligned with your Allbright System profile's progression. For instance, how would the respawn pods be able to recreate you with your newly gained six points of Strength if you previously had only four? It's not just System-magic providing the extra two points—it's actual, physical changes to your body that facilitate that enhancement. Muscles are condensed, fibres are created, genes are altered in ways that humanity has yet to fully comprehend. But all these changes need to be saved,

otherwise, every time you respawn, you would revert back to your Base Attributes. This, however, comes with a natural consequence: If you lose limbs, suffer scarring, or endure other permanent injuries in the field, those aspects are saved *alongside* the benefits.”

She paused, allowing the gravity of her words to sink in, her sharp eyes scanning the room to ensure the message was hitting home for most of the Marines before continuing.

“Naturally, the System isn’t so foolish as to save Blueprints that are *entirely* unviable. If you’re missing a heart, have a haemorrhaging brain seconds from rupture, or any other immediately life-threatening condition, the Blueprint won’t update. But *do not* mistake this for kindness. The System has one goal and one goal only: The Ultimate Warrior. It does not care about your inherent sense of self or what your beauty standards are. It will *absolutely* save your Blueprint if you’re horrifically scarred beyond recognition and reduced to just a torso and a head because scars and missing limbs aren’t considered *directly* life-threatening. The System is *not* your friend in this regard—always remember that.”

She gestured toward the screen behind her, which shifted to display some of the most severely mutilated Marines Thea had ever seen.

Limbless bodies, twisted forms barely recognizable as human, eyes reflecting nothing but unending pain—it was a nightmarish sight.

But what struck Thea the most was the Setting: The respawn room.

The cold, sterile environment was unmistakable, and it was clear that these Marines hadn’t been given a chance to heal or undergo surgery. What they were seeing were not temporary post-battle injuries, moments before they could have cybernetics fitted, but the actual Blueprints themselves—the true, unfiltered state of the Marines at the moment *just* after their respawn; their sorry states preserved by the System forevermore, until they could hopefully update their Blueprints again later down the line.

Thea’s stomach churned as she stared at the images, the unsettling truth of her own nickname, “Patches,” feeling like a small wound compared to the mutilations displayed on the screen.

She had thought she’d understood the System’s brutality, at least to a point, but this was a different level entirely.

The room had fallen into a stunned silence, the few scattered murmurs from earlier quickly snuffed out by the grim reality before them. It was as if everyone was collectively holding their breath, grappling with the terrifying understanding of what they could one day become.

Thea’s own eyes were similarly glued to the images, unable to look away from the horror yet equally unable to stop the fascination that bubbled up inside her.

The System was a force of nature, uncaring and unwavering in its quest to forge the Ultimate Warrior. It didn’t matter how much suffering it caused or how many pieces it left them in.

They were all just one bad mission away from becoming one of those tortured figures on the screen—broken bodies driven by nothing but the need to keep fighting, to improve their Attributes once again, to override that horrific prior Blueprint.

For every bit of power they gained, for every point of strength or skill, there was a price paid in flesh. And that price was one they had all signed up for, whether they'd truly understood the terms ahead of time or not.

"Every single one of you sitting here now," Major Quinn continued, her voice cutting through the stunned silence like a blade, "could have ended up like these unfortunate souls. Our Faction Trait grants us limited immortality, *not* immutability. *Never* forget this, Recruits. There are enemies out there who understand this flaw in our Trait—enemies who will go to great lengths to mutilate, to scar, to cripple—*permanently*. But *do not* let this become a crack in your armour; a weakness for them to exploit, born from fear. Remember, the entirety of the UHF stands behind you every step of the way."

She made a sweeping gesture toward the screen again, and the images shifted.

This time, they were what the Recruits had likely expected—scenes of glorious battle, with UHF Marines charging forward, weapons blazing, cutting down enemies in a display of sheer might.

The energy was palpable, a drastic contrast to the horrors shown just moments before.

But as the camera zoomed in, focusing on individual Marines, it became clear what the *true* message was. Each highlighted soldier bore the marks of their sacrifices—cybernetic limbs, bionic enhancements, and the surgical scars that told the story of their resurrection.

These were not mere replacements either; many of them were improvements, extensions of the Marines' will to fight on, to return stronger after each fall, after each scar earned and every Blueprint upgrade gained. The replacement parts weren't just restoring them to their previous state—many were pushing them beyond their previous limits entirely.

The screen showcased Marines outfitted with gleaming mechanical arms that tore effortlessly through enemy ranks, legs that whirled with mechanical power, propelling their owners forward with inhuman speed, and eyes glowing with the advanced optics of new-tech, scanning the battlefield with a cold, precise efficiency.

But the display also highlighted Marines who still looked almost untouched—flesh and blood preserved with only faint surgical scars as evidence of their past reconstructions.

Their unaltered, biological forms stood as a stark contrast to the more heavily modified warriors, a reminder that even among the heavily enhanced, there was still room for those who wished to keep their full, biological humanity intact.

"Whether you desire cybernetics, bionics, or prefer to maintain your natural biology, the UHF medical staff is equipped to make your choice a reality," Major Quinn continued, her voice commanding but reassuring. "The development of your bodies is entirely in your hands as you progress through your Allbright System journey. The UHF is here to ensure that when tragedy strikes, you are not left behind."

As she spoke, the screen shifted to videos of cutting-edge medical facilities—new-tech and next-tech labs filled with cybernetic engineering bays, bionic research stations, and biological growth vats with meticulously grown replacement limbs.

Advanced surgical pods hummed with activity, while robotic arms assembled intricate prosthetics with mechanical precision. The displayed technology was a marvel, each image showcasing the UHF's promise: No matter the injury, there was *always* a way forward.

Murmurs rippled through the crowd of Recruits as they took in the spectacle, awestruck whispers echoing between them. Some pointed excitedly at the cybernetic limbs, others gazed longingly at the biological regrowth vats, each Recruit already imagining their future selves enhanced by the vast possibilities the UHF offered.

Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, the screen winked out of existence, the vibrant displays of cutting-edge technology vanishing into silence.

The murmurs in the hall fell silent once more, every eye fixed on Major Quinn as she continued.

"There's one question that I know is on everyone's mind right now: Why weren't you told beforehand?"

She paused, letting the weight of the question settle over the room, allowing the Recruits to ponder their own answers before she resumed.

"The answer is simple: We wanted you to *experience* these changes firsthand. We could have warned you about everything, tried to cushion the blows, to sugarcoat the realities of war—but that would not have made you into the Marines you need to be to survive in this galaxy, and beyond. The injuries you've suffered, the hardships you've endured—these are lessons that cannot be taught with words alone. They had to be *felt*, lived through, and confronted *directly*. Because no matter how skilled you are, no matter how hard you fight to stay unscathed, there will come a day when you cannot avoid serious injury."

She took a step forward, her gaze sweeping across the room with a mix of pride and solemnity. "This assessment, and the brutal reality of war that it thrust upon you, is meant to be your trial by fire. It's designed to harden you, to temper your spirit, so you're prepared for the situations that lie ahead—situations where you won't be inside the safety of the DDS, where there won't be a medical team ready to patch you up the moment you fall, where psychological counselling isn't a given, and the Battlefield won't wait for you to get back on your feet."

She let the silence stretch again, giving the Recruits time to absorb the weight of her message. The atmosphere was thick with a mix of understanding and unease, her words resonating deeply with those who had felt the sting of injury during and after the assessment.

Major Quinn's expression hardened as she continued, her voice echoing powerfully through the vast hall. "Every one of you who has endured such injuries now understands the truth of our Faction Trait. We are immortal, but we are *not* unchanging. We can return from anything,

but we do not always come back the same. This is a lesson that must become part of who you are, ingrained into your very Soul, so you *never* lose sight of it.

“For those of you who were injured near the end of the assessment, you were denied retreatment up until now—and that, too, was intentional. The brief time between injury and today’s ceremony would not have been enough to truly make you understand the consequences of those wounds if you were given a replacement immediately. You needed to truly *feel* their impact, the debilitation they can cause, even if only for a short while.”

Thea’s mind flashed to Desmond and his missing leg, the frustration etched on his face as he struggled to move, forced to rely on the squad to help him.

It felt cruel, regardless of the rationale Major Quinn or the UHF had for it.

But as much as Thea hated to admit it, she couldn’t deny the truth behind the approach—it was effective. Desmond would *not* forget this experience, and neither would any of them who had been scarred in the line of duty in similar ways.

Major Quinn’s next words electrified the crowd, sparking a wave of excitement and jubilation, “All of that, however, ends *today*. Your injuries, your permanent scars, your refused treatments—they will be made null and void as part of this ceremony. But make no mistake: This is a one-time concession, a single opportunity to reset yourselves, to return to your pristine state, should you wish.”

The room buzzed with anticipation as Major Quinn continued, her voice carrying the weight of the offer. “After the ceremony concludes, each and every one of you is welcome to visit the medical facilities aboard the Sovereign and receive a *complete* restoration. Your cybernetics and bionics can be removed and replaced with regenerative solutions, allowing your bodies to regrow the parts you’ve lost; your scars will be erased, and your skin restored to its previous unblemished state. All of this is optional, of course. You may choose to keep the scars, the cybernetics, the bionics—as mementos, reminders of what you’ve endured.”

A murmur spread through the assembly, a mix of relief and contemplation.

For some, this was a chance to erase the physical reminders of their trials, to reclaim their bodies as they once were.

For others, the thought of losing these marks, these symbols of survival, was less appealing.

Major Quinn’s tone softened, but the seriousness remained. “In the future, these kinds of services will unfortunately cost you System Credits, as does everything in this new world of ours. The Allbright System does not allow for many such handouts. But for today, and for as long as it takes to ensure everyone here has had the chance to decide, these services *will* be free of charge.”

The announcement hung in the air, offering a bittersweet sense of closure to the harrowing experiences of the past weeks.

For the Recruits, this was an opportunity to move forward, a chance to decide how they would carry the weight of this first assessment—whether they would let those experiences linger as visible scars on their bodies or relegate them to memories in their minds.

Thea found herself already weighing the decision of whether to have her cybernetic jaw and hand replaced with regenerated, natural parts. A part of her resisted the idea of simply erasing the physical reminders of everything she had endured during the assessment.

‘Maybe just the jaw...?’ she mused, her thoughts turning over the idea. *‘It is honestly a bit annoying to have this metal thing there...’*

She absently stroked the cold, metallic surface of her jaw with her cybernetic hand, feeling the smooth, unyielding texture beneath her fingers. It was only then that she realised her other, last remaining, flesh and blood hand was still holding onto Karania’s own, a subtle connection that had lasted for however long they’d been sitting there.

She was half-inclined to let go immediately, feeling a sudden wave of self-consciousness, but the gentle warmth of Karania’s hand was something she found herself reluctant to give up. It felt awkward, to say the least, but as long as Karania didn’t realise their hands were still stuck together and pulled away, Thea greedily decided to hold on for a little while longer.

After all, moments like these—where she felt such a comforting sense of closeness to another person—were extremely rare; basically non-existent.

Who knew when she’d get another chance like this?

Major Quinn, meanwhile, let the energy of the room settle before finally continuing a minute-or-so later, her voice now openly warm and inviting, perfectly capitalising on the uplifted mood of the Recruits after the announcement.

“Now, I’m sure many of you have been through the wringer these past few weeks, but today is about more than just closure—it’s about recognition, celebration, and a little bit of fun. So, without further ado, let’s move on to the main event: The Awards Ceremony for the First Assessment!

“Here’s how this is going to work,” Major Quinn explained, pacing the stage with an easy confidence that commanded attention. “The awards will be split into different segments, starting with the Sovereign-specific Recruitment Drive Awards. These are for those of you who were specifically recruited and brought here aboard the Sovereign, honouring your performance and achievements during the assessment. Your achievements will be judged in comparison to other Recruits from this drive, and nobody else.”

She made a sweeping gesture towards the assembled Recruits, her eyes scanning the room as she continued. “Next, we’ll move on to the Overall Recruit Awards. These will include every single Recruit from all the Recruitment Drives that participated in this assessment—not just those of you who came from the Sovereign. This is where you’ll be competing against the best of the best, from every corner of the UHF’s training programs; so if you see some of your fellow Recruits here, be proud to be a part of the same drive, for they are the best of the best..”

The Recruits exchanged glances, the weight of the competition setting in, but there was a palpable buzz of excitement rippling through the crowd.

“And finally,” Major Quinn continued, her smile widening, “we’ll wrap things up with the Overall Awards. These are the big ones, folks. They include *every* Marine who was inside the assessment, from fresh-faced Recruits like yourselves to seasoned Privates, Corporals and even some Sergeant’s. So, if you’ve truly made a mark, *this* is where you’ll see your name.”

She took a step back, her expression turning slightly mischievous as she added, “But it’s not all about the serious stuff either. We’ve got something special lined up: The Numbskull Awards. Yes, you heard that right. These will showcase some of the least fortunate or, shall we say, least thought-through actions taken by everyone during the assessment. Trust me, you’ll want to stick around for those—they’re always a crowd favourite.”

The room erupted in chuckles and a few groans of anticipated embarrassment, the levity breaking some of the tension that still lingered from the previous part of the speech.

“There will be different categories for awards in general,” Major Quinn continued, her tone casual and relaxed, “but I’ll get to those as they come up. For now, I invite you all to sit back, get comfortable, and enjoy yourselves. This is your time to relax, celebrate your achievements, and take pride in what you’ve accomplished. You’ve more than earned it.”

Her words seemed to lift the weight from everyone’s shoulders, a gentle permission to breathe easier as the Recruits shifted into more relaxed positions, some leaning back in their chairs while others exchanged excited whispers about what awards they might receive.

The atmosphere in the assembly hall softened, the formal rigidity of a military gathering giving way to an air of camaraderie and anticipation, as Major Quinn’s speech segued smoothly into the celebration that awaited...