

Volume 2 - Chapter 47 - Locker-Room Talk

MVM—Most Valuable Marine—medals aren't just for bragging rights.

They're made for the battlefield.

Forged from actual combat-grade metals, shaped to survive more than just glass cabinets.

And while some recipients do hang them up as keepsakes, waiting for retirement, most Marines know exactly what they've got in their hands: A tool; and a guarantee.

The lower-tier medals—Silver, Gold, even Platinum—don't carry much weight in raw material value. But trade one in? The UHF will pay handsomely.

Recognition of excellence *always* comes with its own perks, and plenty of Marines exchange their first medal for top-tier equipment, a spot in elite squads, or high-grade training modules.

But once you get into the rare stuff—*Palladium*, *Crysum*—you're holding something else entirely.

Not just a trophy. A *resource*.

These are materials most Marines will never see outside a System Lecture.

Weapons forged with Crysum alloy are often considered heirloom-tier, and armor integrated with plating made of it? That's the kind of protection Battlefield Aces get custom-commissioned from the Faction itself.

Which is why some Marines melt their medals down and reforge them into what they need most: A knife. A barrel. A reinforced plate to encase an overcharged powercell.

The possibilities are as endless as the Marine's own creativity.

And yet... most *don't*.

Most simply wear them. Slotted into the armor, just above the heart.

Because an MVM isn't just about what you've done—it's about where you're *headed*.

See a Marine walking through the staging zone with a one-star Palladium medal implanted in their breastplate? You're looking at someone officially recognized by the Brass as on track to become a Battlefield Ace.

You see a two-star Crysum? You're looking at somebody with the potential to rival the greatest of the greats: Witchglass. Thunder Breaker. Unbreakable Shield.

A Marine that's been *officially recognized* to have what it takes to be added to that very list.

That's what the stars mean.

That's why there's only *one* per type, per cluster, per quarter.

That's why there's only ever a few hundred of them being handed out at most, across the entire galaxy, in any given year.

Wearing an MVM medal isn't just a random arrogant flex.

It's a UHF-sanctioned *declaration*.

Seeing that shimmer on someone's chest means you're looking at a future legend.

A Faction-certified *problem*—the kind Command will one day deploy to end wars.

And our enemies know it too.

That's the risk you take.

MVM medals draw attention, paint targets.

If you're wearing one in combat, everyone with a scope, blade, or grudge is gunning for you.

Not out of respect, or even disrespect.

But out of *fear*.

Because a one-star MVM wielder might just become the Marine who puts down your entire forward line in the next deployment.

A two-star? That's the signed death warrant of the entirety of a future Battlefield, if left unchecked.

But that's *the point*.

They weren't just made to *reward* greatness. They were made to *provoke* it.

To push every Marine a step further. To ask the question, every mission, every fight: "*Do you want it bad enough to be the next name carved into UHF history?*"

And if the answer's yes? Then wear it proud.

Because every shot aimed at that medal is one more chance to prove *exactly* why you earned it in the first place.

So... *Let them come*.

Let them try their best.

Let them break themselves upon you, despite it.

Let them be the kindling that fuels your fire to set the whole damn galaxy ablaze.

Because the medal isn't just a trophy—it's a *promise*.

"I'm not fully here yet. But I'm coming. And you better pray for the Emperor's own mercy, that you're not there anymore when I arrive."

[UHF High-Marshal Myra "Godeyes" Veltros, 2x 2-Star Crysium MVM Recipient, PFC922]

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PoV: Private Chester O'Neil

Loading into the Digital Mission's staging area, Chester felt a calm wash over him—something he hadn't felt in months.

"Finally back..." he muttered, as the space around him solidified into a small, private locker room—the standard initial staging area for every DM.

After months of relentless, messy combat in the real world, returning to the DDS for the several-month trip toward one of the south-western-most fronts near the Klaedish Sector was more than welcome.

Here, inside the ship's servers, there was a strange comfort in knowing nothing could touch you.

Well... unless some cosmic-level rarity Void-event decided to split the ship in half mid-transit, in which case—'*Not my problem anymore*,' he thought dryly, the corner of his mouth twitching upward in a humorless scoff.

The simulation finished loading, and the familiar Grade 0 parameter list popped up in front of him.

Nothing seemed to have changed since before his deployment.

"No higher Tier weapons, even with a voucher. No higher Tier combatants, even if the enemy gets some. Squads are formed by Squad Leader Role Marines in the prep room, CO chosen from the same pool... yep. Same as ever. Good to see the update didn't screw with the basics," he hummed under his breath, stepping toward the locker.

A new window bloomed into existence, listing every License he'd acquired and prompting him to choose his equipment and gear loadout.

'It's a Grade 0 Hold-The-Line... Not particularly hard, but not a walk either—60% clear rate still means four out of ten DMs don't succeed. Not something to slack on.'

His eyes scrolled over a long history of loadouts from nearly three years in the UHF MC.

'Tauron-6's environment isn't hostile, no nasty local diseases in the timeframe... eh, standard kit should do.'

Decision made, he selected one of his tried-and-true setups.

Immediately, the weight of his armour settled across his shoulders, followed by the familiar heft of the large, med-packed backpack he'd hauled countless times before. Every pouch and strap was exactly where muscle memory expected it to be.

“No respawns means more work for people like me,” he muttered with a faint grin, reaching for his Corscew—his trusty laser-type SMG, by his side since his Recruit days. The weapon was, of course, flawless—freshly spawned from the governing AI—but he still inspected it.

Habit.

His instructor back in basic had drilled it in: “***Always*** check your weapon when you have free time. It keeps you sharp, and it might just save your life.”

Years later, Chester still did it instinctively whenever there was even a second to breathe.

He just wished he had managed to develop a flashier personal quirk alongside it.

‘Would’ve much preferred a tick like Feldoh’s—spinning those knives like some damn Terran holo-drama badass. Way cooler than re-checking the same damn gun for the 13,000th time...’

Holstering the Corscew, he drew his Vibrosword, giving the blade a slow once-over—finding no apparent issues with it, as he had expected.

Satisfied, he set it back into its sheath before turning his attention to the backpack.

Even after years of running missions, it was easy to mix up which loadout had which specific setup—something he had done exactly *once* before.

“Yeah... that’s the right one,” he muttered, leaning over the open pack.

The neat rows of injectors sat snug in their custom pouch, each one secured in place alongside his preferred med-tools: Compact cutters, sealant sprayers, trauma foam canisters—all exactly where his hands expected them to be.

With everything checked and in working order, he stepped toward the lone door in the small staging room and wrapped his fingers around the handle.

[Do you want to move into the Preparation Room now? Y / N]

[Note: Once entered, you cannot leave the Preparation Room. Your Loadout cannot be changed for free once inside the Preparation Room. Additional changes to the Loadout will incur System Credit costs, equal to a portion of the Licenses used.]

He tapped confirmation, and the door allowed itself to be opened with a soft hiss, leading him into the Digital Mission Preparation Room—which, in reality, was a network of connected chambers.

The space he entered now was another locker room, but far larger and busier than the private one he’d just left.

Several dozen Marines were scattered throughout; some leaned together in quiet conversations, while most were focused on their own gear—tightening straps, running diagnostics, or making small adjustments before the operation began.

The faint sounds of touch-fasteners tearing, metallic clicks, and the low hum of powered systems filled the air.

A soft, translucent icon pulsed in the top-right corner of his vision, the System's polite reminder that there was still time before the op kicked off for real.

[Status: **Waiting for Participants...** 41/100]

Chester moved further into the room, weaving past a pair of Marines arguing over the best anti-armor loadout until he spotted a larger, empty stretch of bench near the eastern wall.

Dropping onto it with a quiet sigh, he set his backpack at his feet and leaned forward, elbows on his knees, letting his eyes roam across the room.

The status counter in the corner of his vision had started at forty-one when he'd loaded in, and it was ticking steadily upward now. More Marines trickled through the door, sometimes even two or three at a time—friend-linked—each group's arrival bringing a bit more noise and motion into the space.

Some of the Marines moved with a casual confidence, others with that tense, twitchy energy that came from nerves—those never really went away, Chester knew.

He kept an easy, neutral expression, but his mind was already cataloguing details—gear choices, stance, the way someone handled their weapon or armor.

A guy with an overstuffed ammo rig hanging lopsided.

A woman carrying a loadout far too heavy for her frame, clearly trying out something she'd never used before, simply by the way she was fumbling with her equipment.

A tall Marine with the kind of mismatched kit that screamed “picked whatever looked cool on the list.”

All potential trouble down the line—the kind of players who ended up needing a Medic for entirely, 100% preventable reasons.

He made a mental note to keep an eye on them once the bullets started flying; they were free Credits and Merit, ready to be harvested.

As the locker room filled, the atmosphere started to shift.

Squad Leaders started working the room, calling out over the background chatter or approaching Marines directly.

The questions were always the same: Preferred Role, combat specialty, previous DM experience or notable deployments.

Groups began to form in loose clusters, conversations turning into quick loadout comparisons and tactical discussions.

It didn't take long for Chester to get noticed.

Within moments, three separate Squad Leaders approached him, each making their pitch to have him join as their Squad Medic. They all wore the same eager expression, the same edge in their voice—like this was their shot to put together the perfect team.

He smiled politely, shook a few hands, but kept his answer the same each time. “Appreciate the offer, but I’m holding off for now. Going to reach out later if I think your squad’s a good fit, promise.”

He’d learned that lesson the hard way years ago—joining the first squad that came knocking.

The most over-eager Squad Leaders were usually trying to prove something, and in Chester’s experience, that kind of desperation rarely translated to high scores.

Better to wait, watch, and pick the squad that *actually* seemed to have their act together.

This plan did not last longer, however, as a sudden spike in noise pulled Chester’s attention from his idle observations.

The usual background chatter had swelled into a loud, excited buzz, accompanied by the sound of boots scuffing against the deck as people moved toward the far side of the room—where the entry doors of the personal lockers were located.

A tight knot of Marines had formed around someone who’d just walked in, their voices overlapping in bursts of questions and half-shouted greetings. Even the three Squad Leaders who’d been trying to recruit him earlier had abandoned their other pitches mid-sentence and hurried over, practically elbowing their way into the crowd from the back.

Not one to let some good tea pass him by, Chester pushed off the bench and wandered over at a casual pace, weaving between benches and gear crates until he reached the edge of the gathering.

He leaned slightly toward the first Marine at the back of the crowd.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

The other Marine didn’t take their eyes off the scene.

“One-Star Platinum MVM just walked in,” they said, voice full of awe. “People are peppering them with questions—experience, tips, what missions they’ve run lately. Squad Leaders are losing their minds trying to pull them into their groups.”

“Ah. Of course,” Chester gave a polite nod. “Thanks.”

With that, he turned and made his way back to his bench, the noise already fading into the background.

The excitement didn’t surprise him; he had seen it many times before.

It wasn't exactly rare to see an MVM Medal winner show up in a Digital Mission lobby.

If anything, it made perfect sense—those Marines were some of the hardest-working in the entire Corps, and the DMs were a natural place for them to hone their edge between deployments.

He'd met more than a dozen before in his time, and the reaction was always the same—wide-eyed awe at seeing a potential Battlefield Ace in the flesh, even more so at the slim chance of ending up in the same squad.

Most MVM winners were Alpha Squad or their equivalents, meaning the average Marine never got to watch them work up close as an equal; a true once-in-a-career chance for them to potentially pick up some trick or tactic that could help them along the way.

Chester, though? He wasn't exactly thrilled at the idea.

'MVM winners are always so... disruptive,' He thought with a heavy sigh. 'They move faster, hit harder, and often leave very little for a Squad Medic like myself to actually do... Sure, it makes for an easier mission, but it also means I am essentially just tagging along instead of getting to practice my craft and earn Credits and Merit.'

He had long decided that if he could avoid being slotted into a squad with one, he would do so—every single time.

A few minutes later, the noise in the room settled back to a steady murmur.

The MVM had clearly made their choice, now standing beside a Marine with the bright “SL” marker floating over their head—a Prep-Room-specific tag that made picking out Squad Leaders quick and easy.

The crowd that had been fawning over the medal winner was now jostling for position around that SL instead, voices overlapping as they all tried to secure a spot on the same team.

Chester's gaze drifted up to the corner of his vision, checking the counter.

The number ticked upward, and that familiar tension began to creep into his chest—the anticipatory kind.

The one that came right before the fighting started, when the promise of chaos and injury loomed close enough to taste. Combat, drama, adrenaline... and the steady rhythm of his hands working over torn armour and bleeding Marines, keeping them moving long after most people would have dropped.

[Status: **Waiting for Participants...** 87/100]

As the last few stragglers filtered in, the room's energy shifted again, the idle chatter breaking apart into small, focused clusters.

Squads were starting to take shape, with SLs adjusting their floating markers as roles filled, making it easy to see which teams still needed key positions.

Chester rose from the bench, stretching his shoulders before weaving through the rows of benches and lockers.

He moved squad to squad, zeroing in on the ones that still had a gap where “Squad Medic” should be. Each time, he stopped to ask about their current loadouts, tactical plans, and intended approach to the mission—quietly gathering information, weighing whether any of them were worth his time.

By the time he’d made the rounds and gathered a solid picture of which squads were worth even considering, the status indicator in the corner of his vision ticked up the last few numbers and landed on 100/100.

A quiet pulse of light passed over it as the display updated, signalling that all three platoons—five squads apiece—were now officially inside the lobby.

The number vanished, replaced by a bold countdown.

[Status: **Waiting for Squad Creation... 14:59**]

Perfect. It meant the *real* sorting was about to begin.

Chester decided not to rush it, however.

The three squads he had in mind were solid enough, but they still had a couple of open slots beyond the medic role. He’d let them fill those first—see if they kept their cool under the growing impatience that always crept in during the squad-building stage.

That told him more about an SL than any pep talk could.

On his way back toward one of the quieter corners of the prep room, he caught a snippet of hushed conversation from two Marines leaning against a locker. Both had that mix of curiosity and mild annoyance in their tone, their words low enough to keep it between themselves—except Chester’s ears were tuned for this kind of tea.

“...did you see the kit they’re running? What even is that loadout supposed to *be*?” one muttered.

“I have no idea... Who needs more than one DMR for a DM...? I don’t think they even know what they’re doing in here,” the other replied.

There was a pause, a shuffle of boots. “Should we... I dunno, say something? Or just leave it?”

“Eh, probably a Recruit. Looks lost.”

The comments jogged something in Chester’s mind.

‘Right—this is the first Digital Mission that includes the new blood from the latest Recruitment Drives, isn’t it...’

He hadn’t given it much thought earlier, but now? That definitely changed the math.

Recruits were, without fail, walking opportunities in the DMs.

They came in underestimating a “simple Grade 0 simulated mission,” thinking it’d be a cakewalk compared to the real thing.

And while the stakes weren’t physical death, the sim still played by brutal rules.

It *always* chewed up the unprepared—leaving them limping, bleeding, and racking up points for any medic sharp enough to keep them alive until extraction.

Chester slowed, weighing the situation.

The mystery Marine they were talking about could just be an eccentric veteran messing with their expectations—but if it truly was a lost Recruit?

That was easy score potential on a silver-rarity platter.

Instead of brushing past, he angled toward the bench near the two Marines and dropped himself onto it with an easy, unhurried motion. He leaned back, stretching one arm along the backrest, his tone casual—almost bored—when he finally cut into their private little debate.

“If you think they’re doing something wrong,” he drawled, glancing between them, “might as well help ’em out, no? Recruits—especially first-timers—can use all the help they can get in here.”

He let a faint smirk tug at the corner of his mouth.

“We all started out like that.”

The two Marines exchanged a look, and Chester just let the silence hang, comfortable in the knowledge that his suggestion would either guilt them into stepping up—or make them tip their hand about what they actually thought of the new arrival.

Either way, he’d just positioned himself to learn something useful.

The two Marines seemed to mull over his words, glancing at each other with that half-guilty, half-unsure look that told Chester they were deciding whether to take his advice or ignore it.

He used their pause to shift his attention toward the so-called mystery Marine.

She stood a few rows down, near a locker, and even from here and at an off-angle she looked young—twenty, maybe twenty-one at the absolute most.

The first thing he clocked was her loadout, and it took him all of two seconds to peg her as a sniper. The giveaway wasn’t just the gear either—it was the way she carried herself, shoulders drawn in, feet spaced like she naturally wanted to melt into the background.

An adaptive camo-cloak was pulled fully around her body, the faint shimmer of its shifting pattern blending her outline just enough to make her seem part of the locker she was standing in front of.

Slung across her back were not one, not two, but three DMRs.

Two rested on one side in a crisscross sling setup, pulling her cloak tight at the front, while the third hung solo on the other, positioned for the fastest draw.

It was overkill, sure—but also oddly meticulous, in a way. He could appreciate that kind of over-prep, even if it screamed “rookie overcompensation” to him.

Outside the cloak’s coverage, he caught glimpses of plated combat leggings and the half-mask dangling loosely from her neck, ready to snap into place the moment she needed it.

His gaze drifted upward, idly cataloguing details—until she turned.

It wasn’t sudden, just a slow, methodical sweep of her head as her eyes scanned the room.

And that’s when he saw them.

Cyan.

For a split second, something cold twisted in his gut.

The reaction was automatic, older than his years in uniform—an instinct born from stories told to wide-eyed kids around mess hall tables and campfires. His eyes narrowed slightly before he caught himself, pulling in a slow breath and forcing his shoulders to stay loose.

Cyans weren’t inherently bad. He knew that.

Hell, he’d run missions with a few in various DMs, and they’d all more than pulled their weight, as if trying their damndest to prove every stereotype about them wrong.

One himself—one of the better medics Chester had crossed paths with—was a Cyan and served on a squad from the same damn transport ship.

Still, the feeling lingered.

That old, ingrained suspicion didn’t fade easily, no matter how many times reality proved the old stories, news reports and articles thoroughly exaggerated.

He broke the stare before it could turn into a challenge, letting his attention wander back to the two Marines beside him as if nothing had happened—though the image of those Cyan eyes lingered, sharper than it had any right to.

Just in time, it seemed—the two Marines had finally come to some kind of decision.

They both stood, moving toward the girl at a casual pace.

One of them, grinning like he thought he was clever, opened with, “Hey there, Marine. You think you got enough guns for the mission?” His tone carried that joking edge meant to break the ice, though Chester could hear the faint hint of judgment underneath.

The Cyan blinked at him, her brows pulling together slightly as she gave the rifles slung across her shoulders a quick glance. “Ehh... I’m not sure. First time in one of these, honestly. It’s all a bit new. You think I need more?”

She half-turned back toward the locker she’d been standing in front of, raising one hand to its surface. The interface flickered alive under her palm. “...I have two more I could bring.”

That made Chester pause mid-thought.

‘Five weapon licenses? As a Recruit? How the fuck has none of the brass flagged that yet? ...Guess they’re still big on letting rookies experiment for the first year. And if she’s only packing Partials, the credit loss isn’t exactly back-breaking...’

His confidence in her being a walking payout just ticked up another notch.

“Wha—What?” one of the Marines stammered, catching himself a beat later. “Ehh, I meant more that you don’t *really* need to overprepare like that. The mission’s only, what, six hours? You’re not gonna burn through a barrel in that time, let alone three of them.”

That was Chester’s cue.

Pushing himself off the bench, he crossed the gap in a few quick strides.

“*Jenkins*,” he cut in smoothly, his voice carrying just enough weight to turn heads, “tormenting the new Recruits again, huh?”

Both Marines turned toward him, frowns knitting in confusion.

“Let the Recruit take her guns into the run,” Chester went on, stepping right past them like they weren’t even there. “Extra firepower never hurt anyone, and a jam or malfunction can ruin your day quick. You should know better than to hassle a first-timer in their first Digital Mission.”

The two exchanged baffled looks, clearly both wondering who exactly he’d just called Jenkins. Truth was, he called anyone ‘Jenkins’ when he needed a quick name to throw out—though the one time he’d actually run into a *real* Jenkins mid-rant had been... awkward.

Stopping in front of the girl, Chester gave her a polite nod. “My name’s Chester O’Neil, Recruit. Squad Medic. I’d recommend you stick with me—I’ll make sure you don’t get hassled by other veterans who think first-time Recruits are prime targets to screw with.”

He glanced back at the pair, letting his gaze linger just long enough to make the point, before turning back to her. “Follow me. I’ve got a squad in mind for us to join.”

It was a gamble—a medium-sized one. But he’d played this game before.

New Recruits, in their very first DM, were always the same: Overwhelmed, scrambling to process a flood of information and stimuli. They rarely had the footing to push back against a decisive suggestion from someone who looked like they knew the ropes.

All it took was the right moment to swoop in and play the saviour, and more often than not, they'd follow his lead without a second thought.

The two Marines were quick to jump in, voices overlapping as they tried to explain themselves.

"Hey, hold on—"

"We weren't giving her a hard time—"

Chester just tilted his head slightly, cutting their defense off with a casual, "Didn't expect to see you two chastising her for something that's completely valid. Bringing extra weapons? That's just smart."

He didn't give them the breathing room to argue, stepping right over their protests. "What *does* say something, though, is the first thing out of your mouths being about her loadout instead of even a simple hello. Bit telling, don't you think?"

That landed.

Both paused—caught somewhere between confusion, severe irritation and the faint realization they'd been cornered in front of an audience.

Chester seized the moment, turning back toward the Cyan.

"So," he asked, his tone lighter now, "you want to join a squad with me? I'll make sure you survive this one in one piece, promise."

She hesitated, her cyan eyes flicking toward the two Marines for a heartbeat before settling back on him.

After a moment's thought, she gave a small nod.

"Good choice," Chester said, already leading her away from the pair—who now looked *thoroughly* pissed but were clearly unsure whether to follow, press the issue, or just let it go.

He didn't give them the chance to decide.

He cut straight across the room toward one of the squads he'd scoped out earlier—the one with a medic slot still open. They were already sitting at five members out of six, but that wasn't a problem he couldn't easily fix.

Stepping up to the Squad Leader, a big, broad-shouldered man in heavy armor whose voice and presence practically radiated authority, Chester got straight to the point. "I'll join your squad, but *only* if you take her too. She's a Recruit, first-timer. I'll take care of her. Name's Chester O'Neil, Squad Medic, six-times Grade 3 MVP in the past year."

The SL's gaze swept over him, then shifted to the Cyan.

His scowl deepened, and for a second Chester thought he might refuse outright.

But after a brief sigh, the man rumbled, “Very well... Wellis’ the name. She’s on *your* ass. I’ll register us as one of the oversize squads. Don’t fuck this for us, O’Neil.”

“You won’t regret it,” Chester said with an easy smile, clasping the man’s huge, calloused hand. The handshake was firm enough to make his knuckles pop.

[Do you want to join “Wellis’ Squad”? Y / N]

He turned to the Cyan standing just beside him. “Accept the prompt.”

She gave a quick nod, her gloved fingers flicking in the air to confirm.

The floating marker above Wellis’ head ticked over to 6/+.

Chester’s lips curved upward, just a touch sharper than before.

‘Just as planned...’

He confirmed his own prompt a moment later, the number shifting to 7/+.

“Thank you for your hospitality, Wellis,” Chester said, turning back toward the SL. “I’ll make sure to keep everyone alive and get us that Squad MVP; don’t worry.”

“I’d fucking hope so,” Wellis muttered, his gaze flicking toward the Cyan like she was a dent in his otherwise spotless kit. “Making me take a Cyan first-timer... Always trying way too hard, those ones.”

He said it like she wasn’t standing literally two meters in front of him—his voice carrying over the ambient noise of the Prep Room without a hint of subtlety.

The Cyan didn’t flinch, but Chester caught the flicker in her posture.

Wellis didn’t bother to notice, already barking to the rest of the squad about the change in headcount and how they’d now be running as one of the oversized teams. With a hundred Marines in a Platoon, six-man squads never divided up perfectly; there were always a few extras tagged on here and there.

Chester leaned toward her slightly, keeping his tone casual. “So, what’s your name, Recruit? And, uh... sorry for the way Wellis talked. Guess it’s not exactly the first time you’ve heard that kind of thing though, huh?”

The girl shook her head, her cyan eyes steady, the faintest hint of amusement curling her lips. “Used to it. But he’ll learn... Name’s Thea McKay. I’m looking forward to working together, O’Neil.”

“Call me Chester,” he said, offering his hand again. “O’Neil’s my father, really.”

“Thea, for me,” she said, gripping his hand firmly before letting go.

Chester grinned wide—warm and welcoming on the outside, but underneath he was already celebrating.

Every obstacle had been cleared, every piece on the board *exactly* where he wanted it.

'This is going to be a damned good Digital Mission for me. Thank you, new Recruitment Drives—always a pleasure when your chicks leave the nest for the first time...'