

Arc 1 - Chapter 137 - Awards I

The assembly hall quieted as Major Quinn once again commanded the room's attention, her presence bringing a calm authority.

"Now," she began, her voice carrying an easy warmth, "let's ease into these awards by starting with something a little more lighthearted."

A genuine smile crossed her face, clearly enjoying the shift in tone from the serious matters she usually handled. "First up: The Unlucky Awards!"

At her gesture, the massive screen behind her flickered to life, displaying the bold, stylized words: **"The Unlucky Awards – Sovereign Drive."**

"This award goes out to the unluckiest Recruits of this Drive, as determined by the ever-watchful AIs, who made sure to record and catalogue every misstep, accident, and unfortunate moment," she explained, her smile widening as soft chuckles rippled through the crowd. "Of course, there will be no rewards for this one—it's purely for entertainment. Sometimes, hindsight really *does* make everything seem a little funnier."

She let her gaze sweep across the gathered Recruits, her eyes twinkling as she gauged the reaction, ensuring no one took offence to the lighthearted start. The atmosphere in the room had noticeably relaxed; the slight tension that had lingered earlier now seemed to have eased.

Thea, sitting among the others in the first row, couldn't help but feel a spark of excitement.

This was a chance to see what some of the other Recruits had gone through during the Assessment. Even if it was all just for laughs, it promised to be an interesting glimpse into the chaotic moments they had all experienced.

'I wonder if anyone from Alpha Squad made it into this...' she mused, thinking back to her time in the assessment. *'We haven't really had many 'unlucky' situations—at least not the entertaining kind,'* she thought to herself.

It was hard to imagine any of her squad's intense moments turning into something funny, but then again, maybe the AIs had found something amusing in their struggles after all.

Major Quinn's smile grew even wider as she prepared to reveal the first unlucky moment. "Alright, let's start with the #3 spot for The Unlucky Awards," she announced with a chuckle, gesturing toward the massive screen behind her.

The screen flickered to life, and a video began to play. The setting was a dense forest environment, one that instantly caught Thea's attention.

'That's the Silver Forest...!' she realised immediately, her eyes narrowing in recognition.

Though the specific location wasn't familiar to her, as the area on the screen was far denser and more overgrown than the paths Alpha Squad had traversed, the massive tree trunks and their iridescent glow in the sunlight were unmistakable.

In the recording, a lone Marine cautiously made his way through the towering foliage, his weapon drawn, his eyes darting nervously between the shifting shadows.

"This is Recruit Darnel Kenson, from Inaka Squad," Major Quinn narrated, her voice carrying a note of light amusement. "As you'll see, he had a bit of a... *misunderstanding* with the local fauna of Nova Serene."

On-screen, Private Kenson seemed to be searching for something—likely his squad, judging by the absence of any other Marines nearby. His comms crackled as his frustrated voice came through, "I swear I saw something... damn forest plays tricks on you. Where the fuck even are you guys?!"

He paused, eyes sweeping the treetops as if expecting something to jump out from above.

Then, his head snapped toward a noise in the distance—something rustling in the thick bushes ahead.

The camera zoomed in on Kenson's face just as he made his first, and ultimately disastrous, decision. "Must be one of those little forest creatures... what were they called again... Marupils? Yeah, that sounds about right," he mumbled, his confidence returning as he slung his rifle across his back and crouched low.

"Marupils were entirely harmless, *right?*" he asked over comms, waiting for his squadmates' affirmation, which apparently came because his expression grew more relaxed.

Major Quinn grinned at the scene, addressing the crowd. "For those of you unfamiliar with Marupils, first off: Read the Emperor-damned briefings carefully!"

Laughter rippled through the audience as she continued. "Secondly: Marupils are *indeed* harmless—tiny mammals native to Nova Serene, known for living in the dense shrubbery of the forest underbrush. They love to build little nests underground; truly adorable! Now..." She paused, building suspense, her smile widening. "Recruit Kenson did *not*, in fact, stumble upon a Marupil. If he had read the briefing properly, instead of merely skimming it, he might have recognized the danger signs of this particular area instead..."

The screen cut back to Kenson, still oblivious to the threat.

As Kenson crept toward the bushes, the rustling grew louder. He hesitated for a moment, but then shrugged, shaking his head. "Just nerves," he muttered, reaching out to part the foliage, convinced he'd find nothing more than a harmless creature behind it.

What he found instead made the crowd gasp—and then burst into laughter mere seconds later.

A massive, clawed appendage shot out from the bushes, catching Kenson completely off guard. Not only did it knock him off his feet, but it sent him tumbling backward, flailing wildly through the air before he collided with the trunk of a tree.

He hit the ground with a groan, disoriented, eyes wide with disbelief.

It took him a second to gather his bearings, but once he did, sheer panic set in as he scrambled to get his rifle aimed at whatever had just launched him like a ragdoll.

The audience roared with laughter as Kenson fumbled clumsily with his weapon.

In his haste, he didn't realise that his rifle's sling had gotten tangled around his arm—and worse, had looped itself around his throat. While his armour protected him, the slight pressure at his throat caused him to panic and fumble even harder, his movements frantic as the pressure intensified.

Charging toward him from the bushes was the creature—a hulking, bear-like beast, nearly five metres tall and just as wide, its dark, matted fur streaked with dirt and grime.

Its claws, three-pronged and the size of knives, tore through the underbrush as it thundered toward Kenson, its guttural, angry growl reverberating through the forest.

Kenson's horror-stricken face was unmistakable as he stammered, "That's no fucking Marupil!" His voice was barely audible over the creature's growl as it lunged at him again, closing the distance.

Then the screen froze—Kenson's back pressed against the tree trunk, the rifle sling hopelessly tangled around his arms, body and throat in a ridiculous mess more reminiscent of a failed BDSM experiment than a military operation, his wide eyes reflecting pure terror.

The caption beneath him read: **"Recruit Darnel Kenson (Inaka Squad) vs. Nova Serene Fauna – Who Wins?"**

The crowd erupted into laughter once more, the absurdity of the situation too much to contain. The entire assembly hall seemed to buzz with amusement at the sight of Kenson hopelessly tangled in his own gear, staring down the hulking creature.

Thea chuckled softly, shaking her head at the sheer ridiculousness of it.

'How do you even get tangled up that badly?' she wondered, barely stifling another laugh.

It was hard to imagine something like that ever happening to her, given her hyper-awareness and prior combat training. Her precognition made it practically impossible to get surprised by such a hulking creature out of nowhere, and besides, she *always* remembered the quick-release latch on her rifle's sling.

Her Old Man had hammered that lesson into her during every training session.

"A weapon's sling can be your best friend or your worst enemy," he'd said countless times, showing her how to avoid getting caught in exactly the kind of mess Kenson had found himself in.

'Guess not everyone got that lesson,' Thea mused, still grinning; once more thanking the Old Man in her mind for teaching her important lessons, even if she didn't recognize them at the time.

Meanwhile, Major Quinn, clearly enjoying the lighter tone of the ceremony, grinned at the crowd and shook her head, letting the laughter die down.

"I think we all learned something valuable from Kenson's adventure," Major Quinn began, her tone light but with an underlying edge of seriousness.

Then, with a swift motion, she pulled out a rifle, complete with a sling, that seemed to appear in her hands out of nowhere. With practised ease, she showcased the quick-release latch at both the top and bottom of the sling attachment.

"Always keep track of your gear—especially your rifle's sling. And this," she emphasised, pointing to the latch, "*remember* this quick-release right here. You never know when you'll need it; when it is quite literally the difference between life and death."

She paused for effect, her smile widening as she added, "And maybe, *just maybe*, take the four minutes to read the damn briefings we in the brass carefully put together for you. Trust me when I say, your life might very well depend on it."

The crowd chuckled again, but this time with a more thoughtful edge.

Quinn's demonstration, though playful, carried the weight of hard-earned experience. It wasn't just a joke—her words were a clear reminder that in the field, even the smallest oversight could lead to disaster.

Major Quinn, still grinning, expertly slung the rifle back over her shoulder, before it simply disappeared in the same manner it had appeared in the first place, and stepped forward, the screen behind her flickering once again as she moved on to the next item on the list.

"Now, let's keep things rolling with the #2 spot on the Unlucky Incidents list," she announced, her tone brimming with anticipation. "This next one happened during a rather heated situation—during a full-on firefight."

The screen switched to a recording of an urban battlefield—smoke rising from shattered buildings, rubble strewn across the streets, and the distant crack of gunfire echoing in the air.

It didn't take a genius like Kara to know that this was right in the heart of the Nova Tertius assault; Thea recognized. The architecture and the sheer fact that there was urban cityscape all around made it impossible to see this area as anything but the main city they had attacked in their Assessment.

The camera zoomed in on a Marine darting between cover, her armour battle-worn, with cracks and a few holes showing, but still gleaming under the smoke-filled sky.

"This is Recruit Elena Victris from Kappa Squad," Major Quinn continued, some Recruits inside the crowd murmuring in recognition. "She was engaged in an intense firefight during one of the Nova Serene assessment missions. But, well... let's just say things didn't go *exactly* according to plan."

On-screen, Recruit Victris sprinted from behind a crumbled wall, her laser-type rifle blazing as she fired back at the enemy forces. She seemed in control, focused, as she dashed forward, weaving through the debris with precision while coordinating with the rest of her squad around her.

But then, the scene shifted.

The camera zoomed in as Victris dove for cover behind a half-destroyed, civilian vehicle.

As she hit the ground, her rifle jolted against the jagged edge of the vehicle's metal, causing her grenade belt to shift out of place ever so slightly. Unbeknownst to her, one of the grenades had come loose, rolling just inches away from her.

Thea winced in sympathy, having an inkling what was about to happen, but the crowd couldn't help but chuckle as they watched the next moments unfold.

The camera zoomed in on the loose grenade, which had rolled directly under her prone position. Still oblivious to the potential danger, Victris fired off another burst of lasers, the intensity of the firefight completely masking the potential threat just beneath her.

"And here's where it gets interesting," Major Quinn said, her voice brimming with amusement.

On-screen, Victris made her move—springing up from cover to advance, but her foot caught on the edge of the loose grenade, sending it tumbling forward a few inches, out of cover.

She froze mid-step, her gaze dropping down to the explosive just in front of her, her eyes widening in utter disbelief. The camera caught her horrified expression perfectly, just as the beam of an enemy laser rifle impacted the grenade's exterior.

The screen froze at that exact moment, Victris frozen in disbelief, her expression a mixture of shock and pure panic. In front of her, the grenade, mere fractions of a second away from being hit by a laser, was about to detonate.

The caption under the image read: ***"Recruit Elena Victris (Kappa Squad) vs. Gravity – Sometimes, It's Just Not Your Day."***

The crowd erupted into laughter, and even Major Quinn couldn't help but chuckle.

She winked at the audience, her grin widening. "Lesson here? Always keep an eye on your grenades—and your footing. Because, as Recruit Victris learned, the battlefield doesn't always care how careful you think you're being. Pay attention to anything out of the ordinary happening, like bumping your rifle into a piece of scenery and it impacting your own body as well—things might get shaken loose!"

As the laughter subsided, Thea found herself thinking about the recording.

It was somewhat hard to imagine herself in that same situation.

Her Perception had become *monstrous* compared to what it had been pre-Integration. That, coupled with the countless hours of training with James earlier in her life, who had drilled vigilance into her relentlessly, had naturally heightened her awareness to such things to a razor's edge.

Little things, like the way her rifle moved or the slightest shift in her gear, rarely escaped her notice now. And her Precognitive Powers would have undoubtedly given her a warning the moment the grenade posed any *real* danger—well before it could roll out of cover and catch the attention of an enemy.

Still, she frowned slightly, considering the possibility.

Could something like that really happen to her? A grenade slipping out unnoticed?

It was unlikely that her precognition would alert her to something so mundane before it turned into a legitimate threat. It wasn't exactly the kind of thing that would trigger a life-or-death warning.

And yet, if she *had* jumped and bumped into something the way that Recruit Victris had, she *knew* she would've instinctively checked her gear before moving on. Not only had James ingrained that instinct into her, but growing up inside an undercity had made bumping into people an instinctual check—pickpockets were a dime a dozen, after all.

Thea had lost more than a few precious Credits and items over the years, before she had learned to properly keep her pockets secure and check them after every physical interaction.

But then again... She couldn't exactly deny the truth of it—the pure chaos of battle *did* have a way of distracting even the best Marines.

No matter how well-trained or perceptive she was, the battlefield was, after all, unpredictable.

Small, careless moments could turn deadly fast.

And yet, ultimately, she was certain that, at the *very least*, her precognitive powers would have kicked in before the grenade could have been targeted by an enemy and exploded.

'At least I wouldn't have died... That's something,' she concluded with a determined nod, absent-mindedly squeezing her hand around Karania's tighter.

Still, Thea definitely understood the point Major Quinn was making to the rest of the assembly: No matter how well-trained you were, no matter what advantages the System granted, a single moment of distraction, a flicker of inattentiveness, could change *everything*.

As Thea mulled over Major Quinn's point, the room settled again, the laughter and murmurs from the last clip fading into anticipation.

Major Quinn, still wearing a playful grin, took a breath and moved on.

“And now, the moment you’ve all been waiting for—the #1 spot on the Unlucky Incidents list!” she announced with a gleam in her eye. “This one... well, let’s just say it’s a prime example of how, sometimes, when things go wrong, they *really* go wrong.”

The screen flickered to life again, showing the chaotic setting of an intense battlefield—explosions rocked the area, smoke filled the air, and bullets whizzed by from all directions.

Major Quinn’s voice narrated over the chaotic scene. “This is Recruit Nathan Griggs from Dora Squad, who managed to experience a series of events so unlucky, it could’ve been scripted as a comedy.”

On-screen, Recruit Griggs crouched behind cover, his eyes scanning the battlefield as his squad advanced. The firefight seemed fierce at first glance, with explosions and gunfire in every direction, but Griggs seemed focused on the task at hand, his rifle at the ready as he prepared to move.

He glanced over his shoulder, calling to his squad over the comms. “Alright, moving up. Watch my six!”

Griggs made his move, sprinting across the open ground toward a half-collapsed building.

But just as he was about to reach cover, an artillery round hit nearby, throwing him off balance. He stumbled but kept moving, barely managing to dive behind a pile of rubble as shots ricocheted around him. The crowd let out an amused gasp as Griggs landed awkwardly, his rifle slipping from his hands and clattering several feet away.

Griggs looked at his rifle for a moment, only to realise that his sling had been cut through by a stray piece of shrapnel at some point prior.

“Now, here’s where things start to *really* go downhill,” Major Quinn said, chuckling. “But, in a way that you can only look back on and say, ‘*Yep, that was just bad luck.*’”

On the screen, Griggs reached out for his rifle, but as his fingers grazed it, a stray bullet pinged off the nearby rubble and hit the weapon, sending it spinning and careening further out of reach and into the open.

Griggs blinked in disbelief, crawling after his rifle while the battle raged around him.

Just as he finally got hold of the rifle, an explosion from another artillery round caused debris to fall from the building above him, knocking his helmet askew and nearly covering him in a cloud of dust; causing him to accidentally let go of the rifle once again.

The crowd was chuckling by now, but Major Quinn continued, grinning.

“Recruit Griggs, undeterred, gets up and tries to press forward. But unfortunately for him, his streak of bad luck wasn’t over.”

On-screen, Griggs adjusted his helmet and resumed his quest to re-obtain his own rifle.

But just as he started moving, the ground beneath him gave way—a hidden crater that had been obscured by the newly knocked-down debris. He tumbled down, landing face-first in a small pit.

The laughter in the room grew as Griggs pushed himself up with a groan, clearly frustrated but still determined.

As Griggs finally managed to climb out of the pit, shaking off the dust, he spotted an enemy soldier approaching him. He rapidly pulled out his side-arm and raised it, ready to fire, but just as he squeezed the trigger, a nearby explosion sent a piece of shrapnel flying.

The shrapnel hit the side of his weapon, jamming it at the worst possible moment.

"Are you fucking kidding me?!" Griggs yelled, shaking the weapon in frustration, much to the amusement of the crowd.

He ducked back behind cover, frantically trying to unjam his sidearm, but things continued to spiral. Just as he finally managed to clear the jam, he stood up—only to be immediately struck by the burning remnants of an out-of-control drone that had been blasted out of the sky by friendly fire.

The impact sent him sprawling, his weapon flying out of his hands once again.

The screen froze as Griggs lay flat on his back, his arms splayed out, staring up at the sky in defeat, the burning drone partially resting on top of him. The caption under the image read:

"Recruit Nathan Griggs (Dora Squad) vs. Literally Everything – Sometimes, the Universe Just Hates You In Particular."

The crowd erupted into full-blown laughter, some Marines wiping away tears.

Major Quinn shook her head, her grin wide. "Unfortunately, Griggs didn't make it through that one. The poor guy was already done with it all by the time an enemy Soldier finally caught up with him. But let this be a lesson—sometimes, no matter how skilled you are or how hard you try, the universe just has other plans."

She gave a playful shrug before adding, "Although, when it *does* happen, please, at least make sure it's caught on camera for everyone to enjoy later."

The room was still shaking with laughter as Major Quinn stepped back, letting the humour of the moment wash over the crowd.

Even Thea couldn't help but crack a smile as she glanced at the rest of Alpha Squad.

Karania, who usually kept herself composed, was flushed red, *clearly* from laughing too hard. She looked relatively calm now, but the way her lips kept twitching, gave her away in Thea's eyes. Isabella, meanwhile, was completely unrestrained, roaring with laughter so loud it drowned out some of the others around them.

Corvus and Lucas both wore wide grins, clearly enjoying the lighter moment, but the person who seemed to be having the most fun was, unexpectedly, Desmond.

He was practically beside himself, slapping his one remaining knee repeatedly as tears streamed down his face.

He pointed at the screen, attempting to say something, but each time he tried, his laughter got the best of him, leaving him gasping for air between bursts of laughter.

It was clear that the misfortunes of others were helping Desmond feel a lot better about his own past "incident."

Thea's smile softened as she watched him.

There was something oddly comforting about seeing him this way, carefree and lost in the moment.

While she didn't consider him a friend—*far* from it—there *was* a growing respect between them. They had fought and bled together, after all, and as members of the same squad, it was only a positive if Desmond could finally work through his insecurities and come out stronger for it.

'*Good for him,*' Thea thought to herself as she looked back up toward Major Quinn, who was clearly preparing to transition to the next part of the Awards Ceremony.

The laughter in the room slowly quieted as the Major stepped forward again, her expression shifting from lighthearted to serious.

"Alright, everyone, now that we've had our fun with the Unlucky Awards, it's time to move on to something a bit more meaningful." Her tone grew more formal as she clasped her hands behind her back, projecting the kind of presence that immediately commanded attention.

"Next up is the first of our serious honours—the "*Valiant Defender*" award. This one's about honour, sacrifice, and the kind of courage we demand from *every* UHF soldier when the chips are down; although for this *particular* award, we're only considering Marines in the Defensive Heavy role."

The screen behind her changed to display the bold, silvered title: **Valiant Defender Award – Sovereign Drive.**

A murmur of anticipation rippled through the crowd as the focus shifted.

"The *Valiant Defender* award," Quinn continued, "honours those who have faced some of the worst situations on the battlefield—those Defensive Heavies who've stood in the line of fire, battered and beaten, but held their ground to protect others until the very last."

Thea's attention sharpened, as did the rest of Alpha Squad's.

She felt Lucas, the squad's Defensive Heavy, straighten up a couple of seats to her left.

It was *his* category, after all.

"Now, just to clarify," Quinn said, addressing the room with a sweep of her hand, "this award, like all others today, is exclusively for those aboard the *Sovereign*. These awards reflect the courage, grit, and tenacity displayed by those who fought and bled in the same Assessment and battles, going in with the same exact level of knowledge as everyone else in this room."

She paused, giving the crowd a moment to settle before continuing. "As for the criteria—it's simple: The Defensive Heavy had to *actively* protect or sacrifice themselves in order to safeguard another Marine or an important Objective, allowing that Marine or Objective to impact the battlefield in a significant way afterwards. We honour those who didn't just throw themselves into the line of fire, but those who truly made it count. Unfortunately," she added, her voice slightly more sombre, "if your attempt to save someone ended in failure, you will *not* be considered. As much as we honour bravery and sacrifice, *failure*—no matter how valiant or honourable—*remains failure*. And in the heat of battle, *results* are what matter most."

The room grew still, the gravity of her words settling over the assembled Marines.

Everyone knew what was coming—the top three winners of the Valiant Defender award, and the stories of their courage under fire.

This wasn't just about accolades; it was about showcasing what the UHF Marines truly stood for, about those Marines who had put *everything* on the line to protect their comrades and turn the tides of battle when it mattered most; the best of them all.

Thea straightened in her seat slightly, glancing over at Lucas.

He sat as composed as ever, his eyes fixed on Major Quinn, his face unreadable. But Thea couldn't help the thought that crept into her mind: '*If anyone deserves it, it is Lucas.*'

A sudden twinge of anxiety twisted in her stomach, catching her off guard. She wasn't used to feeling this way—anxious for *someone else's* sake.

It confused her for a moment.

She had never been the type to worry about others; before, it had *always* been her against the world. But then again, she had never had people like this before—a *squad* she could rely on, people she could call her friends.

Her squad.

Thea's thoughts faded as Major Quinn's voice filled the room with a weighty reverence.

"Let's start with the #3 spot on the *Valiant Defender* award," Quinn began, her voice both respectful and solemn. "This Marine held the line in the face of overwhelming odds, ensuring his squad not only survived, but went on to complete a key objective in their mission."

The screen behind her flickered to life, showing a battlefield thick with smoke and debris, the chaos of combat raging all around. In the centre of it all, a Marine clad in Ultra-Heavy

Armour stood tall, his full-cover shield raised, deflecting and absorbing enemy fire as his squad moved into position.

"This is Recruit Darius Kellar, from Eriz Squad," Major Quinn continued, as the screen zoomed in on Kellar, his armour already battered and scorched from prior relentless barrages. "During one of the most intense engagements of the Nova Tertius assault, Kellar's squad found themselves pinned down by enemy fire while trying to secure a high-value objective. With no other options and reinforcements unlikely to arrive in time, Kellar stepped forward, taking point to shield his squad as they advanced."

The video cut to the scene of Kellar in action—his large full-cover shield absorbing round after round, his feet digging into the ground with every impact as he methodically cleared a path for his squad from cover to cover. Eriz Squad, meanwhile, moved behind him, using his shield as their only reliable form of cover as they approached the enemy stronghold.

"Kellar held his ground under constant fire, allowing his squad to breach the enemy defences and secure the objective. Despite being hit a total of fourteen times, suffering from severe lacerations, gunshot wounds and broken bones in more than eight places, despite even his shield starting to buckle under the weight of counter-fire at times, Kellar never let up," Major Quinn narrated.

On the screen, a massive explosion abruptly rocked the area, sending Kellar stumbling, his shield cracked and scorched and the grav-lock broken.

But he stayed standing, even as his armour was torn apart by shrapnel and energy blasts.

His arms shook under the strain of keeping the solid-cover shield upright for his squad to seek cover behind and return fire, but he continued to push forward, one step at a time, continuously creating a path for his squad to follow.

The final shot showed Echo Squad breaching the enemy lines just as Kellar finally collapsed, his shield shattered, his body broken and riddled with burns and cuts.

But the mission had been a success.

The screen froze on that moment, Kellar's broken figure lying on the battlefield, with the caption beneath reading: ***"Recruit Darius Kellar (Eriz Squad) – An Impenetrable Shield Until The Very End."***

The room was quiet, the weight of the moment pressing down on everyone. Major Quinn smiled softly. "Kellar's sacrifice ensured Echo Squad's mission was a success, and as a result, allowed eighteen other squads unopposed access further into Nova Tertius itself. Without his resilience, his squad, nor the eighteen others that benefited from their subsequent heroic efforts, would have never made it past those defences. That's what the *Valiant Defender* is all about—holding the line, pushing forward and providing the necessary stability for your squad to do what is necessary; no matter the cost."

The room erupted into cheers and applause, the solemnity of the moment giving way to celebration. The sound reverberated through the hall as Major Quinn beamed at the gathered Marines.

"For his incredible act of courage and resilience, Recruit Darius Kellar is awarded 2,500 Credits and One 50% Sales Voucher for any piece of equipment aboard the *Sovereign*," Major Quinn announced over the enthusiastic clapping.

She waited for the noise to die down slightly before continuing, "And, *of course*, we couldn't let him leave without something a little more *lasting*. Recruit Kellar, come on up here."

The screen shifted, showcasing a gleaming silver medal, emblazoned with the emblem of the *Valiant Defender* award: A small full-cover shield, scorched and cracked but still standing strong—a perfect symbol of the role Defensive Heavies played in battle; and something any Marine would love to include in their armours' heraldry.

Kellar, looking somewhat overwhelmed by the whole attention and the fact that he had somehow made it on the list, made his way to the stage, the applause growing even louder the closer he got.

As he stood beside Major Quinn, she presented him with the silver medal.

Kellar accepted it with a humble nod and bow, clearly still in utter disbelief.

The crowd's cheers continued, full of admiration for his bravery.

Thea clapped along with the rest of the squad, her eyes following Kellar as he took the medal. There was no denying it—he had earned this moment. But as the applause finally began to settle and Kellar returned to his squad, she couldn't help but compare him to Lucas.

'He's good,' she thought to herself, *'really good, even... but definitely not at Lucas' level.'*

Kellar had been valiant, unwavering under fire, but Thea had seen Lucas in action more times than she could remember, at this point.

Lucas didn't just endure, he practically commanded the battlefield around him, by not just simply defending, but also blanketing the enemy in grenades or providing fire-support for the rest of the team.

When Alpha Squad was pinned down, it was almost always Lucas who moved first, who positioned himself perfectly to cover his squadmates while somehow managing to shield them from even the heaviest enemy fire.

He wasn't just a wall, but a veritable *tank*.

'If anyone deserves to be called a Valiant Defender, it's Lucas,' she thought.

Still, she had to admire Kellar's strength and grit.

His actions had saved not only his squad but allowed so many others to push forward. That kind of selflessness was rare and commendable—something Thea wouldn't have minded seeing in her own squad, if she didn't already have Lucas.

As the applause for Kellar died down, Major Quinn stepped forward once more.

"Now, let's move on to the #2 spot for the *Valiant Defender* award," she said, the room quieting in anticipation. "This Marine similarly went above and beyond in their duty, performing an act of defence so heroic that it turned the tide of an *entire* section of the Nova Tertius Western assault."

The screen flickered to life again, this time showing a ravaged, tormented battlefield.

The scene depicted a massive enemy push, the ground shaking from artillery fire, and an overwhelming number of hostiles advancing. In the midst of the chaos, a Marine could be seen sprinting toward the frontlines, his shield already battered and his armour scorched.

"This is Recruit Victor Anselm from Zeta Squad," Major Quinn narrated. "During a critical operation to protect one of the UHF AD's repair stations, Zeta Squad was unexpectedly assaulted by a wave of enemy forces *far* beyond their expected numbers. With their defensive position already heavily compromised from prior fighting, it was Recruit Anselm who took charge, using his shield, armour *and* body to hold off the enemy long enough for his squad and the Armored Division's crews to regroup."

On the screen, Anselm could be seen charging headfirst into the chaos, his full-cover shield raised to absorb the relentless barrage of enemy fire. The repair station loomed in the background, already damaged, as Zeta Squad scrambled to regroup and push back.

The camera zoomed in as Anselm positioned himself directly in the line of fire, his full-cover shield taking hit after hit, the grav-lock barely holding together. His squad moved behind him, using his shield as cover while he single-handedly withstood the brunt of the enemy's assault.

"He took more damage than any Marine should have been able to, given the numbers," Major Quinn continued, her tone heavy with respect. "But he didn't stop. Even when his shield started to crack, even when his armour failed to hold up against the onslaught, Recruit Anselm refused to let the enemy break through."

The recording showed Anselm staggering as an explosion rocked the ground around him, his shield visibly fracturing under the relentless pressure of enemy fire.

But instead of retreating, he pressed forward, forcing the enemy to focus all their fire on him.

His determination became clear as he activated one of his System Abilities—an Ability Thea had only seen once before, during the initial assault on the eastern front.

His armour began to shift, unfolding from around him like intricate metal origami.

Plates of reinforced Ultra-Heavy Armor expanded and reconfigured, forming a massive, square-shaped shield in front of him, seemingly impossible for a single Marine to carry.

The screen showed Anselm bracing under the incredible weight, using the newly formed shield to cover his squad as they repositioned. His defensive wall stood like an immovable fortress, drawing enemy fire and giving his squad precious time to recover.

Meanwhile, the Armored Division's crew used the opportunity to jury-rig repairs on one of the nearby battle tanks' cannons. As the situation grew more desperate and even Anselm's newly created shield began to show cracks from the endless barrage, Zeta Squad, fully repositioned, launched a coordinated counteroffensive.

The battle tank's cannon roared back to life at the same time, and the combination of their assault finally managed to overwhelm and break the enemy forces' assault.

The screen froze on the final image of Anselm, standing tall amidst the wreckage of the battlefield.

His massive shield was shattered and lying in pieces around him, but he still clung to the few small remnants left in his hands, defiant. His armour, battered and broken beyond recognition, was cracked and torn apart, revealing his bloodied and scarred, muscular torso beneath.

Cuts ran across his body, his uniform shredded in places, and his face, bruised and bloodied, reflected the sheer brutality he had endured.

Yet despite it all, his posture remained unyielding, a figure of raw, unyielding determination.

The caption beneath the image read: **"Recruit Victor Anselm (Zeta Squad) – Unbroken, Unyielding."**

For a brief moment, the room was silent, the weight of Anselm's actions sinking in.

Then, the applause erupted—louder and more intense than before.

Thea couldn't help but notice a slight shift in the tone of the crowd, the cheering having a distinctly larger percentage of female voices, though she didn't pay it much mind. What mattered to her was the recognition of Anselm's heroism, and it was very well-earned.

As Major Quinn smiled at the room's reaction, she continued, "For his actions, Recruit Anselm is awarded 3,500 Credits and a 50% Sales Voucher for any equipment aboard the Sovereign. Additionally, we will also provide a new uniform for him, so that he may hopefully not end up half-naked on the next mission. And, *of course*, his gold *Valiant Defender* medal."

She motioned to the screen, which now displayed the gleaming gold medal with the now familiar image of "Valiant Defender" award.

As Anselm made his way up to the stage, the applause thundered through the hall, but Thea couldn't help but notice the not-insignificant number of female voices in the crowd shouting playful—but still inappropriate—obscenities. She rolled her eyes slightly, thinking this probably wasn't the place for that kind of behaviour, especially given the seriousness of the ceremony.

She wasn't one to snub appreciating some good anatomy herself, but there was a time and place for everything; and an awards ceremony *definitely* wasn't one of them.

Still, Thea couldn't deny her admiration for Anselm's efforts. His bravery, his ability to shield his squad under such impossible circumstances—it was heroic in every sense of the word.

'But still...' she thought as she watched him receive the medal, 'Anselm was great, but Lucas... Lucas could do even more—has done more.'

As the applause began to settle, Major Quinn stepped forward once again, a knowing smile playing on her lips as the anticipation in the room built.

"And now," she began, her voice carrying a weight that immediately commanded attention, "we move to the winner of the Valiant Defender award—the Marine who has exemplified *everything* this title stands for. The Marine who faced the impossible and still held the line, ensuring not just their squad's survival, but this very act also leading to an overwhelming victory on the battlefield."

Thea's heart raced as Major Quinn paused, letting the tension build in the room.

She could feel the eyes of every Marine present glued to the stage, everyone eager to know who would be named the ultimate Valiant Defender.

Major Quinn glanced at the screen, the crowd holding their breath in anticipation. "This Marine's actions were not only brave but truly *pivotal*, and their ability to stand tall when everything was on the verge of collapse is why they are receiving the Platinum Valiant Defender Medal."

Major Quinn looked up at the crowd, the name of the winner just moments from being revealed, clearly enjoying the building of anticipation and the cliff she was leading the Marines towards.

The tension was fully palpable by now, with every Marine in the room silently willing to hear a name they recognized...