

Volume 2 - Chapter 53 - Fire and Smoke

“The difference between a One-Star MVM and a Two-Star MVM is not simply a matter of one extra star being added to the medal—it is a leap measured in several orders of magnitude.

One-Stars prove themselves the strongest of their Recruitment Drive, and that’s no small feat—outperforming thousands of similarly experienced Marines in their sector cluster. But a Two-Star? A Two-Star has bested *everyone* in their Assessment.

That widens the pool exponentially.

Instead of just outscoring a few thousand—or even ten thousand—fresh hopefuls from the same Recruitment Drive, they’ve risen above seasoned Marines—true veterans—in one of the harshest competitions the Corps can throw at them.

And there are *far* more veterans than there are Recruits in these Assessments.

An early-Drive Assessment usually runs a ratio of about one Recruit to thirty, sometimes even one to fifty Privates and beyond, depending on where in the galaxy you are.

To beat *that* many hardened Marines and walk away with a Two-Star MVM medal?

That isn’t something you can brush off or pretend doesn’t matter.

And the Digital Missions reflect that very truth.

The rulesets scale with it: Three One-Stars in a platoon are worth keeping an eye on, but a single Two-Star often proves more disruptive, more impactful, and more game-changing than all three combined.

The reason is relatively simple—raw strength is part of it, sure. But it’s never just that.

It’s *mentality*.

It’s the way they treat every DM like it’s life or death; or a perfect testing ground for a new way to apply themselves to the fullest. It’s their refusal to waste even a second, wringing every possible advantage from loadouts, terrain, timing, and squad coordination.

They warp Digital Missions around themselves without even trying.

Smart leaders know this, too—they pivot the entire strategy for the DM around a Two-Star MVM, using their weight as the spearhead while the rest of the platoon becomes the haft, the counterbalance and the force that keeps the thrust steady.

And it works. Again and again.

The payout for an upscaled DM completed with the help of a Two-Star is more than worth the risk for everyone involved.

And that’s something you don’t teach. You don’t train that.

The kind of understanding that comes with it, is something else entirely.

And so, being matched with a Two-Star MVM is both blessing and curse alike.

Your personal contribution might shrink in their shadow, but the lessons learned—watching a Battlefield Ace in the making, understanding how the machine works when it's oiled to *perfection* and supporting the very best of us—are worth more than any individual merit.

Supporting them teaches you that even the smallest cog, when aligned just right and alongside all of its brothers and sisters, can move the weight of the entire galaxy.”

—Captain Lorren Vey, UHF MC Instructor, PFC839

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Staring at the embrasure and the suspended Gram, where her faux-self had just disappeared moments prior, Thea forced herself to steady her breathing, though her pulse still ran too fast.

She had never expected to see Æht again after the Assessment, not outside of that nightmare—certainly not in something as routine as a Digital Mission.

The Rune priest hadn't been able to give her much clarity back then either. Even after she'd told him everything about her Awakening and the strange encounter, he'd kept his thoughts close, only hinting that he had ideas worth chasing.

Ideas she hadn't heard anything about since then, nor knew where they might lead him.

But, in hindsight, Æht had a point she couldn't shake.

*‘What, **exactly**, would the Rune priest actually do, if he knew more about her...?’*

She had been desperate for clarity—so desperate to peel back the fog around her powers and stop stumbling blind—that she'd dropped every bit of caution she'd learned from James, from the Undercity, from years of survival, and handed herself over to a man who'd admitted outright that he answered to no one.

If he decided she was a curiosity worth dissecting—whether by Psychic intrusion or a more traditional scalpel on a table—there was nothing in the galaxy that could stop him.

The thought made her throat tighten.

One lesson in, she knew it already: Whatever was going on inside her was far from standard.

If the Rune priest needed weeks of study just to form theories, then what did that make her? Something so rare that even he hadn't seen it before? Or something *truly* new, something without precedent?

It sounded impossible.

The galaxy was *too* vast, *too* populated, for her to be the only one. Hundreds of years of System history, recorded and combed over for every crumb of knowledge by the different Factions in this conflict.

And yet, the more she thought about it, the less she could deny the *possibility*.

Thea was good at logic puzzles. Always had been.

It had been one of the main reasons she had managed to become MMM—one of the big three build creators of the last decade. She thrived on patterns, on unraveling impossible-seeming problems until they yielded to her logic.

And the puzzle laid out before her now only pointed in one direction: Something about her was *off*.

Not just unusual, but stranger than almost anyone else in the galaxy.

It had all started with the (Apex)-rarity Accomplishment—one she still had no clue how she'd earned or what it even represented.

Then came the revelation from the UHF brass: Her Attribute spread wasn't just unusual, it was *unique* among the entire Faction's history, capable of peeling back layers of the Allbright System's Class mechanics that nobody else had been able to explore for them.

And then, most damningly, the Rune priest himself—one of the foremost experts on Psyker phenomena in the entire Faction, if not Galaxy as a whole—had been baffled by some of the things she had described.

Even *he* didn't have all the answers for what was going on with her at hand.

Sure, she could try to pass it all off as coincidence. But logic wouldn't let her.

At some point, coincidences piled up into a pattern.

And that pattern, no matter how much she tried to ignore it, was becoming impossible to deny.

Thea had recognized it a long time ago but kept pushing it aside, terrified of what it might mean if she admitted it. And yet, she had always wanted someone to explain it to her—desperately, hungrily—even though deep down she *knew* the pattern itself pointed to the one, logical conclusion: No one could explain it.

Not the brass, not the Rune priest, maybe not even Æht, whatever she was.

'Something is uniquely strange about me... and it has to do with Æht.'

She let the thought echo in her head, repeating it like a mantra until it settled deep.

But she also knew she couldn't do everything alone.

That had been proven during the Assessment.

Her squad had carried her as much as she had carried them.

Viladia teaching her about her first Psyker abilities. Arrow Squad taking the torch when Alpha and herself reached their limit. Zach... helping her face what her Psyker Powers really were.

And there had been so many more.

Every step forward had come with someone at her side.

'I need help.'

The thought was clean. True.

She needed help—and a lot of it. To understand her Powers. To grasp how they worked, what they could become, and what made her *different*. To uncover what Æht really was, and what it meant for her that this *thing* shared her existence.

'But I also need to make sure I'm safe. I can't trust blindly... Æht is right about that.'

That, too, was true—and she couldn't deny it.

While Æht's overall behavior was... abrasive, to put it lightly, Thea couldn't deny that being spoken to in such sharp, unflinching terms was exactly the kind of push she sometimes needed.

Æht had cut straight to what she saw as Thea's failures, no sugarcoating, no soft edges.

And as much as Thea hated to admit it, she understood the point.

But she also knew she *needed* the Rune priest.

As Major Quinn had said, there was quite literally no one in the galaxy more qualified to answer her questions, to teach her about the things she was fumbling through blindly, than him.

He was dangerous, sure—but he was also her best shot at any sort of clarity.

'I'll need to figure out if the Rune priest is really an ally of mine... or just playing his own game,' she thought, a cold weight settling in her chest.

It was one of those things that sounded simple enough in her head, but in practice? Nearly impossible. She had no way to test it outright. All she could do was feel him out and trust her instincts—instincts that had dulled ever since she'd left the Undercity.

And even if she could answer that question, there was still the other one gnawing at her: Could Æht, herself, be trusted?

Their first meetings inside the Assessment hadn't exactly been friendly, or reassuring.

Æht had always radiated danger more than anything else.

Her words this time had made a certain amount of sense, but Thea couldn't shake the unease.

Trusting her felt like walking a knife's edge—though she couldn't ignore the echo of James' old advice: "*Be careful with the brass.*"

Æht had said nothing different there; which gave it a certain level of credence. But there was always the possibility that the entity itself was simply trying to keep Thea from the Rune priest to be able to continuously try to manipulate her in turn...

The truth was, none of it could be solved right now.

Not Æht. Not the Rune priest. Not the strange patterns circling her life.

These were questions that would need to be thought over again and again, with time, until she found an actionable answer—if she ever could.

'*For now,*' she told herself, locking the thought away as she stepped up and gripped her rifle suspended in mid-air where it had been this entire time, '*I'll finish this Digital Mission. Then I'll start untangling everything else after... one step at a time... Somehow.*'

She had no real idea how to break out of the frozen moment Æht had conjured, but something in her chest tugged at her with quiet certainty, as if whispering the way forward.

It wasn't words, just an instinct, a pull toward the exact state she'd been in before Æht appeared.

Carefully, Thea shifted herself back into place, pressing against the suspended Gram the same way she had when she'd triggered her—or Æht's—[Glimpse]. The cold hum of focus gathered just behind her heart, a familiar pressure that told her she was on the right track.

She inhaled deeply, letting the air fill her lungs, closing her eyes for a steadying heartbeat.

The strange silence pressed down on her one last time, heavy and absolute.

Then she opened her eyes.

The battlefield lurched back into motion at once—tracers carving the night, explosions blooming across no-man's-land, Chester still crouched behind her, frozen mid-breath only to suddenly jolt into life again, screaming in pain over the din.

The world had snapped into that strange monochrome once more.

She could feel her body moving on its own, the familiar disembodiment of [Glimpse].

Her vision-self moved the Gram, firing once—clean through the visor of a clone crouched behind a corpse, three copies slumping down in unison. Another turn, another shot—the laser slipped perfectly into the gap of a half-broken shoulder plate, dropping the Marine and the two doppelgängers flanking him.

On and on it went.

A Duplicator sprinting between craters—one shot to the knees, one to the visor as they fell just far enough to reveal the helmet between another clone's body.

Another hidden in a knot of soldiers, revealed only when her future-self threaded a shot into the side of his skull, the rest of the cluster collapsing like puppets cut from strings.

Each kill burned itself into her memory, angles, timings, positions, her mind scrambling to keep track of all of them.

Seconds passed.

Too many.

Her skull throbbed with the effort, her temples pounding as she tried to hold on to every last image.

Five Duplicators. Then ten.

Each one marked, each one memorized.

Her chest felt tight, like her brain was going to melt and spill out her nose.

Still, the [Glimpse] dragged her further.

Eighteen kills. Eighteen. Each so precise she could still feel the trigger-break in her finger.

Then her vision-self jerked suddenly, throwing herself backwards into Chester and knocking him off balance—just as a storm of rockets and explosives shrieked in from the enemy line.

The world detonated in fire and dirt.

The embrasure disintegrated, collapsing in on itself, burying them both in a wave of molten dirt and shattered ferrocrete.

And still, impossibly, the vision held.

Through ringing ears and blinding dust, her vision-self clawed free, dragging a half-conscious Chester by the straps of his armor, hauling him deeper into the trenches while explosions rattled the earth around them.

Every step left Thea feeling like her own lungs were on fire.

Only then—after what felt like a lifetime—did the vision finally begin to fracture.

The monochrome bled away, shattering into a thousand shards of glass.

Thea slammed back into the “real” world with the echo of her own scream still vibrating through her helmet, so raw and powerful it nearly ruptured her eardrums even with the noise-cancellation of her helmet maxed out.

Color came roaring back—red tracers, orange fire, the dark blue of the Tauron night hued in red and white from the flares—all alive and blazing around her again.

Her head hammered. Her knuckles were white on the Gram.

She had no idea how much Focus she had just burned, but she was terrified to look.

All she knew was that it had been more than a full minute of precognition—a minute she could not waste, now that she had already paid the price...

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PoV: Corporal Jaxon Mir Sartin

Contending with a Stellar Republic's initial push was always beyond cursed, Jaxon knew.

It had been years since his first encounter with the Freaks' sheer fanatical, self-destructive tactics, yet every single time it still rattled him to the core. The way they treated their Soldiers as nothing more than disposable meat to hurl forward—it was inhuman, and far, far worse, *it always worked*.

But this... this was something else.

An upscaled Digital Mission meant the Republic's opening assault had been magnified to a degree Jaxon had never endured before. The numbers arrayed against them were simply overwhelming, a tidal wave crashing against a wall too thin, too fragile.

Unfair didn't even begin to cover it.

His eyes flicked left.

Two of his squadmates lay slumped where they'd fallen, blood pooling in the dirt. The remaining three were still on their feet, pressing themselves against the firing slits and letting loose with everything they had, muzzles spitting fire and tracer.

'And we were one of the lucky squads too...' Jaxon thought grimly, teeth clenched.

A Defensive Heavy, a competent Medic, even two Offensive Heavies. And the only Support Role they had ended up with hadn't been a slouch either.

A stacked hand, compared to most.

And yet here they were, bleeding men—both the Support and Medic—before the first hour was even out.

He wasn't sure there would *be* a second hour of this mission.

The Republic's firepower was unreal, an endless storm pounding the first trenchline.

Every stray shot that found its way through the narrow slits in the armor claimed lives instantly—his fallen squadmates hadn't stood a chance.

Just unlucky angles, no heroics, no warning.

One heartbeat they were there, the next they were gone.

There were simply too many rounds flying, too much energy lancing across the field, for any non-Heavy to survive with their head above the line for long.

That was why Jaxon himself didn't even *try* to sight properly anymore.

He hadn't laid real eyes on the enemy for more than a flicker of a second at a time, and even then, it had been through the slimmest gaps in cover.

Every time he poked up, the storm of death came answering back.

So he did the only thing left to do: Leaned half-blind into the embrasure, kept his head down, and fired upward and outward in controlled bursts, praying the rounds found their marks while he stayed tucked behind the thick reinforced plating of the trench wall.

He switched over to his squad-comms. "We'll fall back soon. The first trench won't last much longer. Make sure to take Lonaz' and Irin's backpacks as well. Don't leave anything behind—every mag, every kit matters."

A chorus of clipped affirmatives crackled back through his helmet, the kind of replies that said they understood exactly how tight the margin was that they were dealing with. Jaxon slammed a fresh mag into his rifle, the metallic snap oddly grounding against the chaos outside.

The command channel buzzed alive in his left ear, a steady stream of squad leaders barking updates, all trying to keep their people in line with Sergeant Kalt's directives. Orders flowed like clockwork—disciplined, calm, precise—and Jaxon found himself clinging to that structure.

'At least we've got someone like him leading this clusterfuck,' he thought, flashes of the briefing replaying in his mind. *'Sergeant Kalt... guy's a real pro. Maybe we actually stand a chance.'*

That pre-mission sit-down had left an impression.

The moment the squad leaders had assembled, Kalt had owned the room without hesitation.

He'd laid out his Digital Mission record with brutal transparency—win rates, clear times, survival ratios—and then capped it by showing everyone the description of his Platoon-wide buff Ability.

A True-rarity ability. Palladium.

The kind of thing most Marines only ever *heard* about in rumors.

Jaxon had felt the sting of envy even then. *'If only I had something like that...'*

But now, under fire, he wasn't complaining.

That buff was the only reason half of them weren't dead yet.

When it came time to vote on command, the decision had been unanimous.

Kalt wasn't just the best choice—he was the *only* choice that had made sense.

And that had been *before* the upscaled protocols kicked in. Now, his calm, measured voice cutting through the storm was the only thread holding their fragile defense together.

"Squads Pelt, Delta, Arctic and Peters, fall back to the second trenchline," Kalt's calm voice commanded through Jaxon's ear, unshakable as ever.

One by one, the squad leaders responded with crisp affirmatives.

"Squads Elise, Menis and Oracle, keep the pressure on to cover their retreat. Hold steady—you'll rotate soon. Next up, Squads—"

The voice cut off in Jaxon's ear as an ear-splitting shriek erupted from somewhere on the right, a mechanical scream like a thousand broken speakers tearing themselves apart all at once.

It ripped through the trench tunnel, bouncing off dirt walls and slamming against the embrasure with skull-rattling force.

Jaxon dropped low on instinct, hands clamping around his rifle as if it could shield him.

The rest of the squad followed suit—Aimes threw himself flat against the mud, eyes wide, while Telissa cursed and covered her ears.

Kavos, in the middle of swapping out a mag, jumped and fumbled the magazine as he threw himself onto the ground, before staring dumbly at the rattling metal of the trench walls.

It was as though a sonic grenade had just gone off inside their alcove—or rather like a thousand of them at once in an alcove next to them.

"What the *fuck* was that?" Jaxon muttered, throat dry, heart hammering.

He tried to scrape his memory for anything from the briefing—enemy sound weapons, notable Psykers, even experimental tech that the mission might have started with—but nothing came up.

Nothing like that had ever been mentioned.

He forced himself to move, to do something besides sit there deafened and dumb.

Information meant survival. And right now, they didn't know jack.

Gritting his teeth, he slid forward and risked a peek through the firing slit, eyes straining past the muzzle flashes and the endless chaos of flare-light.

The enemy was still hammering away, still rabid in their fire, showing no sign of having unleashed whatever Void-forsaken-scream that had been.

He almost pulled back, survival instincts shrieking not to leave his head up a second longer—when the night turned to day.

A torrent of laser fire ripped out from an alcove somewhere down the trench line to his close-right, so fast it was less a volley and more a solid beam of destruction.

Like some mad engineer had strapped an Emperor-damned overdrive to a starship's point-defense array and let it off the leash. The sky itself seemed to shred under the weight of it, the ruby flares lighting up the night simply drowned in white-hot lances.

Jaxon's jaw slackened behind his helmet as the first line of enemy soldiers just *crumpled*, and then the next, and the next. Dozens—no, more than a hundred—fell in the span of a single breath, cut down so fast he couldn't even trace where the lasers landed.

One second there had been a wall of hostile fire.

The next, nothing but collapsing bodies, burned ozone, and chaos rippling backward through their formation, with a large chunk of those seemingly unaffected deciding to jump for cover from whatever unholy abomination of a weapon had just been unleashed upon them.

"Emperor's fucking light..." Aimes whispered hoarsely, his voice shaking as he leaned in beside Jaxon, helmet visor glowing faint from the reflection of the laser storm.

Telissa had stuck her head up too, one super-heavy gloved hand bracing against the wall of the slit. Her voice was shaky, her usual iron composure broken for the first time Jaxon had seen since meeting her in the prep room. "That's... that's not ours, is it?"

Kavos finally slammed his fresh mag into place with shaky hands, helmet darting between them. "I didn't see anything! What the fuck happened?! Describe it to me!"

Jaxon just stared, dumbfounded, as the push had come to a dead standstill for a brief moment. Whatever that weapon was, whoever was firing it, it had just shifted the entire eastern-side of the battlefield in a single moment.

"Who just fired that? The laser-gatling thing," Sergeant Kalt's voice cracked through the command channel, sharp enough to jolt Jaxon out of his daze.

He apparently wasn't the only one curious—Emperor-knowing, he was more than just a little desperate to know who had just unleashed that kind of firepower.

"Speak up, Marine. We can hel—" Kalt's order cut short.

Jaxon's eyes snapped wide as a storm of rockets suddenly belched out from the Stellar Republic lines. Trails of fire streaked the night, several dozen of them, arcing straight toward their trenchline with terrifying precision.

"GET DOWN!" Jaxon roared, throat raw, hurling himself backward and as far from the front wall as his legs would take him. His boots slipped in the mud, body colliding with the side of the tunnel as the incoming barrage screamed closer, the air vibrating with the promise of annihilation.

The world vanished into fire and thunder.

Rockets slammed into the trenchline in a punishing rhythm, each impact shaking the earth beneath Jaxon's chest, the shockwaves slamming through his ribs like hammer blows.

Secondary blasts followed—grenades, maybe mortars, hard to tell through the deafening roar—that chewed into the reinforced walls with brutal efficiency.

Dirt and shards of the reinforced ferrocrete that had been part of the firing slits sprayed through the alcove, clattering off his helmet, choking the air with smoke and dust.

And yet, through the chaos, he realized something with a cold twist in his gut.

Most of the rockets hadn't been aiming for them after all.

Their alcove took only a handful, enough to tear apart a good chunk of the embrasures and crater the front-wall, but the bulk of the barrage screamed past and detonated slightly farther down the line a fraction of a second later—exactly where he'd seen that storm of laser fire tear the night apart.

The realization sank in like ice water: Whoever had wielded that monstrous weapon, whoever had just buckled the Stellar Republic's momentum and bought them a precious minute for retreat, had been buried under the full fury of the Republic's retaliation.

A masterpiece of destruction, erased the moment it had revealed itself.

Squinting through the smoke, ears ringing, Jaxon forced himself upright.

The embrasures were mangled, slagged and crumbling. The trench wall still stood, but barely; firing from here was no longer an option.

He cursed underneath his breath, switching to squad comms.

"Aimes? Telissa? Kavos? Sound off."

Static hissed, then voices cracked through—shaken and raw, but alive.

Shapes stumbled out of the haze, half-crouched and limping against the far tunnel wall.

Aimes looked pale under his helmet visor, dragging himself on one arm before collapsing onto the dirt.

Telissa limped over towards him, weapon still clutched tight even as she leaned hard on the wall for balance. Kavos staggered last, armor scorched, helmet dented, but still on his feet.

Miraculously, they had somehow survived.

But the trench around them was completely dead; unusable to fire from any further.

Jaxon pressed his back against the wall, forcing himself to steady his breathing, heart still hammering from the rocket barrage.

He needed a clear head.

The Command channel buzzed sharp in his ringing ears, Sergeant Kalt barking orders with that iron steadiness only he seemed to manage under fire.

“All heavy machine gun emplacements, priority on those launchers! Offensive Heavies, you too! They’ve shown their hands, light them up. Destroy everything in their general direction; we can’t let them disappear into the crowd again!”

That had been the plan.

They’d been waiting for those bastards to expose themselves, holding back their biggest guns until now. It had taken the roar of that laser-gatling to flush them out.

‘A steep price,’ Jaxon thought grimly, *‘too steep, maybe...’*

He shifted, scanning the trench.

To the left, the tunnel stretched open, leading toward the battered centerline.

Still clear, still navigable.

To the right, nothing but ruin—smoke and shattered ferrocrete, the next alcove obliterated into an unrecognizable mess. Dust hung thick, glowing faintly with each flare burst outside, every breath tasting of copper and ash.

He exhaled slowly, forcing himself to rise, but the breath froze halfway in his chest.

Two cyan points burned in the smoke, staring straight at him.

They moved, deliberate and unhurried, cutting through the haze like ghostly beacons.

Jaxon’s body locked, fear spiking sharp through his gut.

He couldn’t look away, couldn’t even force his legs to move, as those lights closed the distance.

Then the smoke finally parted, as a figure stepped through towards them.

He flinched, catching himself against the wall as his mind scrambled to process what he was seeing.

A Marine—her immaculate cloak draped over flawless armor, not a scratch, not a scorch mark. Slung across her shoulder were not one, but two DMRs, with a third in her right hand, each of the same make.

With her free, left hand she dragged another Marine behind her, limp.

What made his throat tighten was the impossible contrast.

She had just walked out of the teeth of a rocket barrage, untouched, immaculate, as though the battlefield itself had parted for her passage. And then he saw it—the gleam catching in the flarelight, lasers and explosions that managed to shine through from the few slits and openings the rocket barrage had left.

Not quite the same colour as her eyes, but close.

Embedded in her chestplate, just above her heart.

A Crysium Two-Star Medal.

Jaxon staggered, knees buckling as his hand shot out to brace against the wall, eyes wide.

That wasn't just any old decoration; that was an Emperor-damned myth in medal form.

Then she spoke.

Voice raw and hoarse, carrying something that clawed down his spine like a specter closing in on its prey.

“Do you guys happen to have a Medic for my Medic...?”