

Arc 1 - Chapter 145 - Awards IX

Stepping toward the podium with unsteady, almost mechanical steps, Thea felt a surreal detachment from reality. The thunderous applause and deafening cheers that filled the hall barely registered in her mind, drowned out by the racing thoughts swirling within her.

'An Assessment Award? For what? We just followed some tire tracks, nothing more...'

The thought reverberated through her head as she cautiously climbed the stairs, her legs feeling as though they might give out at any moment.

The weight of thousands of eyes boring into her made her stomach churn.

Every step felt like an eternity, each one harder to take than the last.

Her breathing came in shallow gasps, and for a fleeting moment, she was sure she might faint. The only thing keeping her moving was the memory of Karania's calm, reassuring voice echoing in her mind:

"You got this. Just walk up, shake Major Quinn's hand, and get your medal. Then come right back down to me, okay? Nothing to worry about. I'll wait right here for you."

Thea clung to those words like a lifeline.

Hearing Major Quinn announce her name so suddenly felt like a physical blow, jarring Thea from the endless spiral of her thoughts.

She had been mentally sifting through all the possible awards she might have been eligible for—ones she *should* have been eligible for and was guaranteed to get at least one of, based on Councillor Lumis' reassurances during their conversation with Selene.

The unexpected announcement struck with all the force of a bullet—and Thea was unfortunately all too familiar with how that felt recently.

She had expected, perhaps, a Recruit-level award for something like *Surgical Strike* or even a *Stellar Republic Reaper* award thanks to her Psychic Powers. But to hear her name attached to a Palladium-level Assessment Award?

That was something that just didn't even begin to compute in her mind.

Her head swam as she reached the top of the podium.

The room around her felt suffocating, the air too thick to breathe. Her vision had narrowed into a tunnel, her surroundings reduced to a blur of indistinct shapes and colours. The sound of Major Quinn narrating the recording behind her barely penetrated the fog in her mind.

'I don't want to be here.'

The thought struck her like a hammer, loud and insistent.

Her legs screamed at her to turn around and run—to simply bolt out of the assembly hall and escape the crushing weight of those countless, judgmental stares.

But then a voice—her own voice—pushed back against the fear.

‘No, keep it the fuck together, Thea! This isn’t any different from the thousands of people who watched the AoC tournaments you were in. It’s just a bit more direct, that’s all. Just pretend they’re numbers on a livestream... just numbers on a livestream...’

She gritted her teeth, her hands trembling at her sides as she forced herself to look forward.

Major Quinn’s imposing figure stood beside her, usually a calm and commanding presence that now somehow felt intimidating and downright suffocating.

She wished she could have brought Kara up with her, but her friend had put an end to that idea with a firm shake of her head and a gentle, yet resolute tone. *“Thea, this isn’t **my** award. It’s **yours** and yours alone. Go get your dues—I’ll be right here when you get back. You got this.”*

The words had offered a momentary comfort, but as Thea stood at the podium, she felt utterly alone; the lacking warmth of Kara’s hand all the more prominent from having relied on it for the past few hours.

Major Quinn had turned toward her now, speaking words Thea knew were meant to praise her accomplishments, but they were drowned beneath the deafening roar of her own heartbeat. She couldn’t lift her eyes to meet the Major’s gaze, her focus trapped somewhere between the polished medal waiting in Quinn’s hand and the floor beneath her feet.

This was supposed to be her moment—the one she had fought tooth and nail for, through blood, sweat, and endless doubts. She had dreamed of this recognition, imagined herself standing tall and proud, proving to every naysayer, every condescending glance, every whispered doubt, that she *belonged* in Alpha Squad.

That she *deserved* to be here.

But instead of the moment of triumph she had always envisioned, she felt like she might simply *shatter* under the weight of it all. The tight coil of anxiety in her chest had grown to unbearable degrees, every breath a fight for her life against the overwhelming pressure.

Her heart felt like it was about to give out with every single one of its massively accelerated beats, her body barely holding back the tremble threatening to escape.

She had failed to process a single word Major Quinn had said since getting up from her chair, nor the applause or cheers of her fellow Recruits.

It was all just noise to her—faint, distant, swallowed by the rush of blood roaring in her ears.

*‘Just... **focus**, Thea,’* she begged herself, her inner voice both desperate and stern. *‘This is **it**. The moment you’ve been waiting for. Don’t let it pass you by like this... Not like this...!’*

The oppressive weight, the gnawing anxiety, the deafening rush of blood in Thea's ears—all of it abruptly vanished in an instant, like a bubble popping.

The relief was so sudden and complete that it left her completely breathless, her mind reeling to catch up with the abrupt shift. Before she could even process what had happened, she felt a steady hand that was placed gently on her shoulder.

As if pulled by some invisible force, Thea found that she could effortlessly lift her head, her eyes naturally rising to meet the Major's.

It was almost startling how easy it felt now.

There, in Quinn's sharp, piercing gaze, she caught the briefest wink—a fleeting gesture so subtle that she would have missed it if not for her high levels of Perception.

It was quick, casual, but it carried a message loud and clear: *"I got you."*

'Did she just...?' Thea's mind raced as she tried to piece it together.

Had Major Quinn just used a System Ability on her? Some sort of calming effect?

She couldn't tell for sure, but whatever it was, it worked like a charm—and she was infinitely grateful for it.

Shaking off her confusion, Thea stood straighter, now meeting the Major's outstretched hand. As their hands clasped firmly, she realised for the first time just *how loud* the assembly hall really was.

The noise hit her like a wave, a thunderous roar of applause and cheers echoing off the walls, the sound so overwhelming it made her stomach flutter in a completely different way than before.

This was for her.

The sheer volume of celebration wasn't something she had ever associated with her victories before. Her triumphs had always been personal, celebrated privately or maybe with Thomas and James at best.

But now, the noise, the clapping, the shouts—it all felt surreal.

All these people, all these voices... They were cheering for her victory.

For *her* victory.

Major Quinn's smile widened as she reached for the Two-Star Palladium medal, its silver-hued lustre catching the bright stage lights.

With a proud gleam in her eye, Quinn handed it over, her hand lingering just slightly to ensure Thea had a solid grip on it before letting go.

Thea stared at the medal in her hands, its polished surface gleaming under the bright lights of the stage. The weight of it, both literal and symbolic, settled heavily in her palms, grounding her in a reality that still felt utterly surreal. She couldn't help but trace her fingers over the intricate emblem etched into the metal—a true testament to her efforts and achievement.

She felt Major Quinn's steady gaze and glanced up, meeting eyes filled with pride and joy.

It was a look Thea hadn't expected but one that sent a ripple of warmth through her chest.

"Congratulations, Recruit McKay. The UHF hereby awards you the Two-Star Palladium medal for the *Eyes In The Sky* award," Major Quinn announced, her clear, commanding voice carrying over the hum of residual applause. "With it, naturally, comes additional benefits: You will receive 7,500 Credits, a 75% Sales Voucher for any equipment aboard the Sovereign, and a Skill Voucher. Additionally," she continued, her words precise and deliberate, "I have been informed by the Sovereign that you have met a point threshold for this category, which warrants an additional Skill Voucher on top of the one standard with the award."

Thea's head spun as she processed the magnitude of the rewards.

'Two Skill Vouchers...? I guess Councillor Lumis did mention that I would get extras during the ceremony, to circumvent the System's restrictions on handing out things for free...'

Combined with the credits and the sales voucher, it was a bounty that left her momentarily speechless; it even dwarfed some of the higher-rarity System Accomplishments she had managed to snag.

Major Quinn gestured subtly with her hand, a silent indication that Thea was free to leave the stage.

Thea understood immediately and gratefully took the cue.

With quick, purposeful steps—perhaps a bit *too quick*—she descended the stairs, doing her best to keep her gaze forward. The sea of faces staring up at her was overwhelming, the sheer number of eyes exerting a level of pressure that threatened to undo the calm the Major's earlier intervention had provided.

"It is quite the rare occurrence indeed to present a Recruit with such a prestigious Assessment Award—particularly for the First Assessment," Major Quinn said, her voice cutting through the hall with a tone that carried equal parts gravity and humour. "For those of you who had aspirations of taking Recruit McKay's spot in Alpha Squad, I fear those dreams just got quite a lot more difficult to achieve."

The quip earned a wave of chuckles and murmurs from the audience, though Thea couldn't help but catch sight of a few less-than-amused faces among the crowd as she made her way back to her seat.

As soon as she came close enough, the whole of Alpha Squad erupted into renewed, if subdued enough to not interrupt Major Quinn's continued ceremony, cheers.

Even Desmond joined in, clapping enthusiastically and giving her a genuine grin.

His support surprised her less and less these days, though she still found it odd at times.

The animosity that had defined their early interactions was steadily dissolving, replaced by a grudging mutual respect born from shared battles and proven reliability. While she doubted they would ever be close friends, and she still felt an official apology from him was overdue, Thea couldn't deny that his presence within the squad had become increasingly reassuring.

"I told you, you'd win big," Karania said with a smug smile as Thea drew close enough to hear her without raising her voice. Her tone was filled with the self-assuredness that only Karania could manage in a moment like this.

"Congratulations, Thea. It's more than deserved!" Lucas added warmly, leaning slightly forward to peek out behind Karania, with a supportive grin.

Isabella's voice came next, loud—almost too loud—and teasing. "Fuck yeah, Thea! I was planning to show you up with the medal I was going to win, but it looks like that's not happening now, huh?"

She laughed, though there was an unmistakable pride in her tone.

Corvus, seated farther away, simply gave her a respectful nod paired with a proud smile, his quiet approval carrying its own weight. Even Desmond, still sporting his grin, gave her a thumbs-up, his gesture of support simple but sincere.

Sliding back into her chair, Thea let out a long, relieved sigh, the overwhelming tension from moments ago easing from her body. Instinctively, she reached for Karania's hand, seeking the comforting connection that had steadied her over the past few hours.

Karania raised an eyebrow in mild surprise at the unexpected action, briefly pulling away before resigning herself to the role of Thea's anchor once again.

Their hands intertwined, and Karania began gently stroking Thea's fingers, the warmth and physical sensation slowly calming her racing thoughts and nerves.

"Major Quinn do something to you?" Karania asked quietly, her voice low and soothing, though tinged with curiosity.

Thea nodded, leaning in slightly to keep her response between them. "Some kind of System Ability, I think. I'm not really sure what. But it just... wiped everything away—all the anxiety, the fear, the pressure. It was... Nice. *Really* nice."

She hesitated before adding, "Is that how everyone else feels *all* the time? Just standing there, enjoying the moment, despite everyone staring at you...?"

Karania's lips curled into a small, knowing smile as she gave Thea's hand a reassuring squeeze.

“Not even close,” she said softly. “Most people feel at least *some* level of nerves in a situation like that. Remember Corvus earlier? Even he wasn’t immune to it, you say it yourself—his hands were shaking up there, and we all know how unshakable *he* usually is. Just like him, you’re only human, Thea. Some people handle that kind of pressure easier, some struggle a bit more, but *everyone* feels the weight of moments like that to some degree.”

She paused, her gaze steady and grounding. “And even with that Ability helping you out, you handled it beautifully. Abilities don’t change who you are at your core, System-related or not. I don’t think it wiped away your nerves so much as it amplified the part of you that was *already* fighting to stay calm. It didn’t *create* the courage—you already had that in you. It just gave you the clarity to show it.”

Her smile grew. “And hey—who’s to say you won’t get to the point where you won’t even need the boost? One day, you’ll step up there, nerves or not, and enjoy the moment entirely on your own.”

Thea blinked at her, the words sinking in.

Karania always had this uncanny way of making things sound so... *Achievable*.

Even if Thea didn’t quite believe it herself just yet, she held on to her friend’s words for now.

She offered Kara a faint smile in return as the ceremony pressed on.

“But let us not dawdle on Recruit McKay’s achievement,” Major Quinn continued, effortlessly pulling the room’s focus back to the ceremony. “As impressive and noteworthy as it is, we still have quite a few categories to get through, and this one is not even over yet.”

Thea’s curiosity was piqued at the reminder that there was still the Crysium Eye In The Sky medal left, wondering just what kind of event had outdone the incredibly lucky find that she and Alpha Squad had made; and who.

“Without any further ado, let us take a look at the Crysium medal winner, Private Gabriel Enem of Lance Squad, hailing from the Emperor of Seas.”

With those words, the screen behind Major Quinn flickered to life once again, displaying a series of rapid-fire events.

The footage followed a lean, lightly armoured Marine navigating through the chaotic, war-torn ruins of Nova Tertius with an efficiency that immediately caught Thea’s eye; he was definitely experienced in navigating urban environments like this, just like she was.

“Following the main assault and the breach of the Wall,” Major Quinn narrated, “the UHF’s main forces pushed deeper into Nova Tertius, targeting strategic locations outlined by Legate Kuan. Private Enem was deployed as part of a vanguard unit tasked with scouting the post-battle zones, ensuring safe passage for the advancing army behind them. Whenever the main force was engaged in heavy combat, Lance Squad’s role was to provide overwatch and track enemy movements, minimising the risks of ambushes after the fighting had finished.”

The footage showed Lance Squad sweeping through broken alleys and gutted buildings.

Private Enem, however, was often ahead of the group, slipping through rubble and traversing precarious terrain like a ghost.

“This, on its own,” Major Quinn continued, “is certainly commendable, of course. But such duties, as vital as they are, are not enough to earn a medal of this calibre. What sets Private Enem apart is *what* he discovered—and the moments that followed.”

The recording transitioned to Private Enem crouching behind a crumbled section of a building.

His sniper rifle was aimed toward a half-hidden encampment of Stellar Republic soldiers nestled in the remnants of a shattered plaza. The camp was busy triaging their wounded, the medics and soldiers working frantically under the ruined remnants of a pair of buildings.

Thea’s focus, like everyone else’s, was drawn to Enem’s scope as it swept the scene.

When his scope landed on a specific figure, the entire audience seemed to hold its breath.

It wasn’t a soldier, nor was it a medic.

It was a hulking, twisted figure, larger than anyone else in the camp by multiple metres, its body encased in a heavily customised exosuit that appeared more like armour grafted into flesh than something merely worn.

Its movements were slow, laboured, and clearly pained, but its sheer presence exuded a terrifying power and authority.

‘*What the ...? What even is that?*’ Thea thought, her heart racing.

Private Enem, however, didn’t linger on the figure for long.

He moved with the swiftness of someone who immediately understood the stakes of what he had just borne witness to. Ducking back behind cover, he did what most Scouts would consider suicidal when deep behind enemy lines—he used his comms.

The recording played the unedited audio of Enem’s transmission, his voice low but razor-sharp and intent: “Zulu Gamma Zulu, I repeat, *Zulu Gamma Zulu*. I got eyes-on. Coordinates read D-5, I-14. Target designation: Beast. Target is injured but mobile, requesting *immediate* Ace-hunter deployment. ”

Thea’s eyes widened as the pieces clicked together in her mind.

‘*He found an injured enemy Ace...!*’

As if to confirm her suspicions, Major Quinn’s voice cut through the murmurs rippling through the crowd. “As you’ve likely guessed by now, Private Enem not only managed to catch sight of but also coordinated an attack on one of the Stellar Republic’s three enemy Aces. The Ace, designated ‘Beast’ by UHF command, earned their moniker for a reason. They

possessed a Palladium-rarity Class that allowed them to drastically alter their physical form, granting them superhuman capabilities that rivalled the very best the System has to offer. Recognizing the magnitude of this opportunity, Ace-hunter squads were immediately deployed, alongside one of our own Aces, to capitalise on this rare chance.”

She paused briefly, allowing the information to sink in, before stepping back and adding, “Killing an enemy Ace is *exceedingly* rare. These individuals are among the most treasured assets of any Faction. Unless you’re fighting on a Battlefield designated with at least A-rank importance, Aces are typically withdrawn the moment they’re at significant risk. They’re far too valuable to lose. That alone should tell you just *how* extraordinary this opportunity really was.”

The screen continued to play the recording, showing an accelerated feed of Private Enem maintaining his position, carefully monitoring the Beast while coordinating with the incoming Ace-hunter squads and the UHF’s own Ace.

Finally, the footage transitioned to the encirclement of the Beast.

The UHF squads moved into position with practised precision, completely surrounding the injured Ace and the small group of Stellar Republic soldiers nearby.

The ambush was executed with chilling efficiency.

Hundreds of explosions erupted simultaneously, lighting up the screen in a blinding cascade of firepower. A hailstorm of bullets, energy blasts, and unleashed System Abilities pounded the Beast and anyone unlucky enough to be near them.

Within mere fractions of a moment, the enemy Ace and their entourage were reduced to smouldering ruins.

It was undeniably effective, but...

“Wow... *That’s it?*” Thea muttered under her breath, unable to hide her disappointment.

Her quiet remark didn’t go unnoticed, of course.

Karania, sitting beside her, turned with a soft chuckle, one eyebrow raised. “What did you expect, exactly? The Beast was injured, surrounded, and completely blindsided. They didn’t even have a chance to activate their Abilities. Nobody—not even an Ace—can survive that kind of firepower without reacting. Aside from maybe the Emperor himself, if you believe the stories.”

Karania’s words made sense, but they still left Thea with an odd feeling of anticlimax.

She had somehow wanted more—something dramatic, like an epic, last-ditch effort from the Beast that justified their title as an Ace. Instead, what she got was a brutal yet mundane reminder of just how swift and unforgiving war could be.

Major Quinn’s voice pulled her back to the present. “With the death of the Beast, the UHF secured a decisive advantage on the battlefield. Having one more Ace than the enemy

during the strategic battles that followed allowed us to tip the scales in our favour at critical junctures. It is no exaggeration to say that this event played a pivotal role in securing ultimate victory on this front.”

The screen shifted to a still image of the ruined battlefield, the charred remains of the encampment marking where the Beast had met their end.

“Private Enem, through his exceptional perception, quick thinking, and his willingness to take the immense risk of communicating from deep behind enemy lines, presented the enemy Ace to us on a silver platter,” Major Quinn continued, her voice resonating with pride and respect. “This act of courage and tactical brilliance not only neutralised one of the enemy’s most critical assets but also prevented untold losses on our side. For his actions, he will be awarded the Crysium medal for the *Eyes In The Sky* category.”

The room erupted in applause, though to Thea, it seemed noticeably more subdued than the cheers she had heard when she was on stage. While the applause was polite and consistent, there was a lack of that electric energy she’d felt earlier.

‘I wonder if it’s just the acoustics of the room... or maybe people just aren’t as excited because it’s not someone from the Sovereign winning this time. Could be a mix of both, I guess...’ she mused, her thoughts running in circles as she glanced around the assembly hall.

Major Quinn didn’t miss a beat as she continued with the ceremony.

The *One Man Army* awards were next.

Despite her best efforts to stay attentive for Isabella’s sake, Thea found her focus slipping.

A wave of exhaustion had settled over her, leaving her feeling strangely drained as Major Quinn began introducing the category.

Her thoughts drifted aimlessly, the words on stage blending into the background, until a familiar name suddenly pulled her back into the moment like a sharp jolt of energy.

“Tiberius Soren, from our very own Wano Squad!” Major Quinn’s voice rang out, and Thea watched as Tiberius stood and made his way to the stage to accept the One-Star Platinum medal.

He ascended the podium with now very evident, practised ease, the applause from the audience a mix of genuine respect and begrudging acknowledgment.

It was his second medal, and just as Thea had thought when he received the first one, her suspicions solidified: Tiberius was going to be a problem.

He accepted his medal with the same calm, self-assured demeanour he had displayed earlier, shaking Major Quinn’s hand with gusto. As he stepped down from the podium, a satisfied smirk playing on his lips, Thea’s eyes followed him.

She couldn't help but notice how the attention of the room shifted with him, the same magnetic pull that Rachel Masters had commanded.

Anyone winning multiple medals seemed to ascend to a near-mythic status among the Recruits, the murmurs of admiration and jealousy creating a palpable undercurrent in the air.

Before she could dwell on it, though, Major Quinn started to announce the next name, and Thea's focus immediately snapped back to the stage with no time to even worry about how Isabella was handling getting outdone in her own category.

"And now, for the One-Star Palladium medal in the One Man Army category..." Major Quinn's voice rang out once more, and Thea felt her chest invariably tighten with anticipation.

"Isabella Itoku, from our very own Sovereign Alpha!"

Cheers erupted from every corner of the hall, but none louder than from Alpha Squad.

"Fuck yeah, Isabella!" Desmond bellowed, his voice cutting through the noise surprisingly clearly, while Thea clapped and cheered alongside the others, her grin wide as Isabella rose from her seat and strode confidently toward the podium.

It seemed that Thea had not ended up having to worry about her friend after all; Isabella betrayed not even a hint of surprise—like she had expected to be called upon, even after Tiberius had already taken a Recruit Award in this category.

'To have that level of confidence in yourself...' Thea thought wistfully, as he cheered alongside the rest of the squad.

Isabella accepted her medal with her trademark swagger, the toothy grin on her face as bright as ever as she turned to shake Major Quinn's hand. The applause thundered around her, but it was clear that it didn't phase her in the slightest; if anything, it seemed to feed into her energy, making her posture all the more confident.

Thea heard Karania's quiet voice beside her, pulling her from the noise. "I guess I was wrong, Thea. My apologies for lying to you—it seems there actually *are* people completely immune to pressure. Isabella really is one of a kind."

Thea couldn't help but chuckle softly. "That she is."

As Isabella descended the podium, her movements still exuding confidence, her eyes caught Tiberius's.

He was seated not too far from the first row that Alpha Squad was positioned in, his sharp gaze meeting hers for a brief, charged moment.

In that split second, Thea caught the flicker of unspoken respect passing between them, tempered by an undeniable hint of challenge.

Isabella's toothy grin widened slightly, almost daring, while Tiberius merely raised an eyebrow in response, his expression initially cool and unreadable until he nodded ever so slightly.

Thea watched the exchange closely, her mind cataloguing the moment.

'This is going to be interesting.'

Alpha Squad celebrated alongside Isabella for a brief moment, with her receiving a fist-bump from Thea and a handshake from Karania on her way back to her seat.

Major Quinn allowed the cheers to continue for a moment longer before raising her hand to regain the room's focus. "Two Recruits from the same ship earning Recruit-level awards in the same category," she remarked, her tone light but tinged with pride. "A rare feat; no matter how anyone wants to paint it. But then again: You are from *my* Drive, part of *my* Legion and were born as part of *my* Sector, so perhaps that is not all *too* surprising now."

She ended with a wink, earning herself chuckles and cheers from the audience again, their pride evident as the ceremony continued moving forward unabated.

The Major then seamlessly transitioned into the next category, riding the wave of relaxed tension to introduce the Recruit and Assessment Awards for the *Surgical Strike* category.

Thea couldn't help but feel a pang of hope.

'Surgical Strike...' she thought, her mind flickering to the destruction of the Stealth Generator and the Anti-Armour cannons atop the wall. Both moments had been critical, precise, and—dare she say it—*impressive*.

But she quickly tried to temper her own excitement. *'Don't get greedy now, Thea. You already got a Two-Star Palladium medal. Something nobody would have ever dared to dream of. Just enjoy the rest of the ceremony.'*

Major Quinn began announcing the winners, starting with the Gold Recruit medal, which went to a Marine from the Imperator.

The room erupted in applause as the highlights rolled, but Thea found herself clapping half-heartedly.

Her hopes continued to dim further with the announcement of the Platinum Recruit medal, awarded to someone aboard the Emyrean.

With each name that wasn't hers, her flickering hope shrank a little more.

'What did you expect, honestly?' she chided herself internally. *'It's not like they're going to hand out medals for every little thing you did.'*

Finally, Major Quinn announced the One-Star Palladium medal. "And the Recruit awarded the One-Star Palladium medal for the *Surgical Strike* category is... Kar'al Rodun Imahara of Ascendant Alpha!"

Thea blinked, her thoughts momentarily interrupted as she registered the name. A smile crept onto her face as she joined the cheering, clapping with genuine enthusiasm.

'Good for him! Fuck yeah, Kar'al!'

Kar'al had been one of the only Recruits she'd managed to talk to during the assessment, a small yet meaningful interaction that wouldn't have happened without Corvus's nudging.

She remembered the calm, focused demeanour he'd exuded even then, despite the chaos of the assessment. Their conversation about the customised Gram, its upsides and downsides and the reasons for his modifications were still fresh in her mind; practically begging her to finally get tinkering on her own Gram the moment she had some free time.

He deserved this, no doubt about it.

As the crowd's cheers began to fade, Major Quinn's commanding voice once again filled the hall, shifting the ceremony seamlessly into the Assessment Awards for the *Surgical Strike* category.

Thea leaned back in her seat, feeling the tension that had built during the Recruit Awards finally leave her shoulders. She clapped politely with the rest of the crowd, her earlier hopes for another award having long since settled into a quiet acceptance.

She allowed herself a brief, wistful thought, her mind starting to wander as Major Quinn continued. *'It's fine. I'm more than happy with what I've got. I—'*

"Thea McKay from our very own Sovereign Alpha, once again!" Major Quinn's voice cut through Thea's thoughts like a thunderclap, sending her spiralling into stunned confusion.

"Huh?" she muttered, blinking rapidly as her brain scrambled to make sense of what she'd just heard. *"What?"*

Beside her, Karania laughed, already halfway out of her seat as she pushed Thea to her feet. "Go, Thea, you absolute moron! You just won another! Go, before Major Quinn has to call you out twice! Pay attention next time!"

The sudden realisation hit Thea like a freight train. *'Another medal...? At **Assessment** Tier? Seriously?!'*

Her legs felt shaky as she stood, the renewed, massive eruption of applause and cheers from the crowd only adding to the surreal haze around her. For a moment, she simply stared at the podium, as if it were some unreachable peak, before Karania gave her another reassuring nudge; this time more forceful, sending her stumbling forwards.

"You've got this, Thea," Kara said with a grin. "Now go show them what you're made of—*again*."

With that, Thea forced herself to move, her steps hesitant at first but gaining momentum as she approached the stage.

'Two Two-Star medals...? This can't be fucking real...'

Yet, as she ascended the podium, the shining emblem of the Two-Star Platinum *Surgical Strike* medal glinting on the screen behind Major Quinn reminded her: It was *very* real.

Surprisingly, Thea found herself standing before Major Quinn faster than her nerves or anxiety could fully take hold.

The sheer and utter confusion of how she had possibly managed to secure another Assessment Award had completely overridden the usual spiralling thoughts that accompanied situations like this.

The medal felt almost weightless in her hands, though its significance pressed down on her like a physical force. Behind her, the screen displayed the destruction of the three Anti-Armour Cannons atop the Wall, a moment that she remembered vividly yet now felt like a distant memory.

Thea's mind flickered to a strange thought: *'Maybe I'm still in the shower room the Sovereign made for me... Maybe this is just a weird dream...'*

As if sensing her disbelief, Major Quinn leaned in slightly, her lips curling into a faint, playful smile. She lowered her voice just enough that no one else could hear and added a conspiratorial wink. "It's *very* real, Recruit. Better get used to being up here."

Thea blinked, thrown off-balance.

Before she could muster the courage to ask the Major what exactly she meant, the woman straightened, her expression snapping back into its usual composed professionalism.

With a commanding tone, she addressed the hall.

"For her exemplary contributions in destroying critical enemy installations—thereby crippling their ability to mount effective defences and forcing the Stellar Republic's hand at the eastern front—Recruit McKay will be granted 6,000 Credits, a 60% Sales Voucher for any equipment aboard the Sovereign, and a Skill Voucher. Congratulations, Recruit; you are making the entire Drive proud!"

Thea barely had time to process those words before the crowd erupted into thunderous cheers. The sound was deafening, but beneath the roar, she caught something *new*.

Something different.

The applause wasn't just loud—it was deliberate. Purposeful.

And the energy felt sharper, more focused.

It was like Thea could feel a literal shift in how she was perceived as a whole.

The eyes trained on her weren't just curious glances, like they had been before, trying to size up the Marine who had done the improbable and won an Assessment Award.

No, this was something far more overwhelming.

'They're not just looking at me,' she realised with a jolt as she descended the podium, the medal clutched tightly in her hand. *'They're **seeing** me.'*

Every step back toward her seat felt heavy with the weight of countless eyes fixed on her.

Hundreds of Recruits gazed at her, their expressions eerily similar to those she'd seen directed at Rachel Masters or Tiberius Soren earlier in the ceremony: *awe* and *respect*.

It was the kind of look Thea wasn't used to seeing directed at herself, and the sheer number of faces reflecting it only added to her growing discomfort.

She did her best to meet the gazes directed at her, letting the competitive fire in her blood relish the respect she had undeniably earned. But after locking eyes with only a few of the countless onlookers, the anxiety coiling in her chest became once again unbearable.

Her confidence faltered, and she quickly dropped her gaze to the ground, focusing on the not-so-steady rhythm of her accelerating steps as she returned to Alpha Squad.

Her squadmates greeted her with a fresh round of cheers and congratulations, their enthusiasm cutting through her swirling thoughts.

Isabella, however, shot her a playful, mock-annoyed glare. "You just *had* to one-up me, didn't you? Even after *already* showing me up before I even got mine. Seriously, Thea, you're unbelievable."

Thea opened her mouth to respond, but Isabella wasn't done.

She turned dramatically toward Corvus, throwing her hands up in exaggerated frustration. "Corvus, can you believe this bitch? Isn't there, like, some rule against this? Illegal amongst squad members or something?"

Corvus surprised everyone by openly laughing—a rare occurrence in itself—and shrugging. "What am I supposed to do, Isabella? If she's just better than you, then she's better than you. And keep in mind, I even took away her most powerful weapon for a good chunk of that Assessment. If you still lost, I don't know how much more I'm supposed to help you."

The squad collectively froze for a moment, Thea included.

Corvus was rarely one to banter, much less deliver such a pointed jab.

But something about the celebratory mood, the string of Alpha Squad victories, and the high-energy atmosphere seemed to have melted even the stoic squad leader's usual composure.

The stunned silence broke as Isabella erupted into loud, roaring laughter, clapping her hands as she tilted her head back in delight. However, her laughter was abruptly cut off by a yelp of pain as she clutched the back of her head, glaring around as if searching for her assailant.

The entire squad's attention shifted toward the stage when they heard a person clearing their throat pointedly, where Major Quinn stood, arms crossed and an unmistakable chiding expression etched on her face.

"Did... Did she just *Psychic-Slap* me?" Isabella muttered in disbelief, her voice markedly subdued.

Corvus, his earlier amusement replaced with a guilty cringe, answered in a low voice, "I think so."

The rest of the squad tried—and failed—to stifle their laughter, their shoulders shaking as they exchanged amused glances. Each of them, however, kept a wary eye on Major Quinn, who stood at the podium with a towering presence, one brow raised in a way that seemed to silently challenge any further disruptions.

"Now," Major Quinn said, her voice laced with playful authority, "with Alpha Squad *momentarily* quieted down, I will continue with the ceremony." Her tone carried a chiding undertone, but the glint in her eyes betrayed her amusement.

The remark earned a ripple of chuckles and polite applause from the audience, the tension from moments ago diffusing into shared amusement. Even Isabella, still rubbing the back of her head with an exaggerated pout, couldn't help but smirk at the Major's impeccable timing.

The Major started introducing the next category's awards as Alpha Squad quietly *decided* to sit down again, keeping their continued conversation and congratulations for Thea to a whisper-quiet level...