

Volume 2 - Intermission 84.99 - Grand Viewing Gala V

"You ever notice how people talk about Cyans like they just appeared?

Like they crawled out of the Undercity one day, fully formed—eyes already glowing, already criminal, already something to cross the street to avoid at all costs.

Like the universe simply woke up one morning and decided to make something both ontologically evil, but also very easily identifiable.

Convenient story, isn't it? Lets *everyone else* off the hook...

But the truth isn't so simple.

Let's talk about what it takes for a woman to choose the Cyan Solution in the first place—because she *did* choose it, technically, in the same way you choose between drowning and the rocks.

No prenatal care she could afford. No medical access worth the name.

A pregnancy complication that, on any planet with a functioning healthcare infrastructure, would have been even less than simple routine.

Solved before it ever became a crisis in the first place.

But she wasn't on an Inner World, nor a Core one.

She was on a *Mid-World*, or an *Undercity*, or one of the dozen other categories of place that the UHF's maps include and its budgets conveniently forget.

The Cyan Solution was what was available. Her *only* true choice she was ever given, the *one* possibility to save her child.

She didn't *choose* to give her child those eyes.

She simply chose for it to *live*.

And the child—the child had no vote in the matter at all.

Arrived in the universe the way everyone arrives: Without a manual, without intent, without the faintest idea that their eyes were going to be a major problem for people they hadn't met yet, in places they hadn't been yet.

Just a child. Just a pair of eyes.

Beautiful eyes, if you want the honest version of this conversation.

I know that's not what you're used to hearing.

I've heard all of it.

And I understand the discomfort is real. I'm not here to tell you it isn't.

But I ask you: Have you ever noticed that nobody talks about the people who *don't* have that reaction?

Because they exist. They're not all that rare.

You probably even know some of them—you just don't know you know them, because there is no social currency in admitting that you looked at a Cyan's eyes and found them striking.

Found them vivid. Found them, if you were being fully honest with yourself, genuinely and arrestingly gorgeous in the specific way that unusual things are fascinating when you let yourself look at them without the framework of everything you've been told.

Nobody talks about those people. Nobody writes about them.

They don't show up in the cultural narrative about Cyans, because they *complicate* it, and the narrative doesn't *want* to be complicated.

The narrative wants the eyes to be wrong. *Needs* them to be wrong.

Because if the eyes are just eyes—extraordinary ones, unusual ones, eyes that carry the biological evidence of a mother's final, ultimate sacrifice—then the whole architecture of the discomfort starts to look a great deal less like instinct and a great deal more like a *choice*.

Instead... The child arrives. The eyes are the eyes as we know them.

And then what? It's a problem right from the start? The monster we all know?

But monsters aren't *born*. They are *made*.

Assembled piece by piece. Word by word. Silence by silence.

You take that child, and you tell them they're *nothing*.

They're a criminal.

They're an abomination.

They're everything wrong with the universe.

They're the reason for society to be the way that it is.

Not once—*continuously, structurally*, in every system they try to navigate and every room they try to exist in.

You make sure they understand that the circumstances of their birth—circumstances they did not choose, produced by conditions they did not create, originating in a failure of infrastructure they had no hand in building—are a moral failing that belongs to *them* personally.

You show them that kindness is weakness.

That trust only gets you hurt.

That love is conditional and disappears the moment you need it most.

You do this for years—*decades*.

What do you think happens?

You think they stay soft after that? You think they stay open?

No. They *adapt*.

They build walls where trust used to be.

They learn to read a room before the room reads them.

They sharpen their very instincts into weapons, their body into something that can outlast everything that is thrown at it, again and again.

They learn to navigate a world that never *once* indicated they were meant to thrive in it, only *endure* the pain of it—and then one day, when they stop apologising for merely existing, stop merely *asking* for a place in this world, you look at them and say: “*What happened to you?*”

Like you weren't there.

Like you didn't build the city.

Like you weren't the lesson, every step of the way.

Like you didn't write the policies, drew the district lines and decided, generation after generation, that the people at the bottom were a *condition* to be managed rather than a problem to be solved.

But nobody wants to go take a look at the recording.

Nobody wants to sit with the uncomfortable truth that maybe, just maybe, the monster is the group project.

Here's the thing about monsters, though: They don't forget who made them.

Every door. Every denial. Every room that went quiet when they walked in.

Every person who crossed the street, who moved their children to the other side, who said *nothing*—because saying nothing is also a *choice*.

They don't forget who built the Undercity.

They don't forget who decided to simply stand by.

They don't forget who closed every door in front of them.

And one day they stop simply enduring, apologizing and asking—they start *knocking*."

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[Excerpt From "Spoken word performance," Artist unknown, Recorded at the Cultural Preservation Festival, Orionis Alpha, PFC 939.]

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PoV: Veyra Lindra Sylarion

The atmosphere that followed the continuation of the recording was different in quality from anything that had come before it in the evening.

The grief from the announcement about the Monarch's loss was still present, of course—it hadn't gone anywhere, and wouldn't; nobody expected it to—but the particular, coiled tension that had been layered *on top* of it since the Cyan reveal had begun, slowly and then more quickly, to dissipate.

The room breathed differently now, after that first taste at the Awards Ceremony that Madam Sen had provided—Emperor knows through what means, exactly.

Rigid shoulders that had been held by people bracing for *something* had settled, fractionally, back toward their natural positions. The conversations in the designated pauses had lost the brittle, pressurised quality of earlier in the evening and found something closer to the register the Gala had been designed for—considered and engaged.

The careful but genuine exchange of people watching something they found genuinely interesting and had things to say about. Of course, always coupled with the subtextual and hidden meanings behind every word that Legacies were so known for.

'*The singular release valve*,' Veyra thought, '*was Thal Masters' laughter...*'

That single, enormous, entirely unperformed eruption of *genuine amusement* had done something to the room that no prepared speech could have ever possibly managed—it had given everyone permission to stop holding in quite so much.

The uncertainty that had been radiating outward from his corner of the ballroom since the first Valiant Defender announcement, the careful watching of faces around him to see how he received each development, the unspoken collective question of "*how is he taking this*"—all of it had answered itself at once: The answer had been *laughter*, and the room had exhaled accordingly.

Veyra watched the recording continue and let herself do the same.

The ceremony aboard the Sovereign moved at Major Quinn's characteristic pace—efficient, precisely structured, with *just* enough room between moments for the assembly to breathe.

When Desmond Reimart's clip played, him having won the 0-Star Gold Medal for the “Eye in the Sky” category—the drone feeds in their split-screen arrangement, the compound corridors, the two drones sacrificed to give the squad the layout they needed to counter the ambush—the reaction in the ballroom was warm and, notably, free of the complicated undercurrents that had accompanied some of the earlier conversations.

A clean reaction and a well deserved one, in Veyra's estimation.

Several of the Legacy representatives around her, whose professional interest had been genuinely caught, leaned in slightly as the clip ran. Heads inclined toward neighbours.

Quiet exchanges, a few nods.

One of the older proxies near the right cluster—a Minor Legacy, Veyra placed him as having some significant UHF military background from the way he'd been tracking the combat footage, specifically, all evening—made a short sound of appreciation that was clearly involuntary and seemed mildly embarrassed about it afterward, which she found privately charming.

'The young man has definitely earned that reaction,' she thought, watching the feeds play out.

She had been turning it over since the title card—the particular implications of what having a *Drone Operator* performing at that level, in a *first* Assessment, *actually* meant in practical terms.

The master-of-all approach to the Role—scouting, recon, support running simultaneously, each drone given a distinct function and managed without visible degradation in any of them—was not something the UHF typically saw until the late end of Tier 1, when an Operator had *years* of accumulated experience to draw on and a Class framework fully built around the capability.

Desmond Reimart, however, had somehow done it in his first Assessment. Before Integration had even fully finished settling. Without the full equipment loadout the Role was *fully designed* to be used with.

She ran the logic through once more and arrived at the same place she'd arrived the first time: Purely on the basis of how far ahead of expected development his performance placed him, this particular young man from Dannas I was arguably further along the projected curve than any other member of Alpha Squad they had seen so far.

The others were extraordinary in their own right, no doubt—the recordings had made that abundantly clear already—but their extraordinary qualities were the kind that could be understood, that had context and clear precedent.

What Reimart had done required a category of simultaneous information management that most Marines spent the better part of a *decade* working toward.

'That,' Veyra thought, 'is the kind of thing that makes fantastic careers... If he can keep pace with it al.'

The applause in the Sovereign's assembly hall carried on the recording, and the applause in the ballroom carried alongside it in the pause that followed, genuine and unguarded in the way the evening had only slowly gotten to the point to manage.

Then Rachel's name appeared again—the Ace Squad medal, Beta Squad ascending the podium together—and the ballroom did what it had been doing all evening whenever something touched on the Masters Legacy *directly*.

It watched Thal Masters—carefully and out of the corner of their eyes, never directly.

And what they all found there was *satisfaction*.

Not relief—not the carefully managed expression of a man who had been worried and was now performing composure—but the genuine, settled satisfaction of someone watching something unfold in a way that confirmed what they had already believed.

He nodded once, and said something low and warm to the person nearest to him that produced a quiet laugh from both of them during the interim pause.

The tension that had existed around the question of Rachel—around whether she would win *anything*, around how her father would receive whatever she *did* or *didn't* receive, around the specific social geometry of a man of his standing watching his daughter perform in public—finished dissolving entirely in that moment.

Veyra watched it go and felt the room settle in even further around her.

When Rachel's 0-Star Silver MVM came—Quinn's voice sharp and clear over the recording, the name landing with the particular weight of a third medal in a very short amount of time—the ballroom's attention moved to Masters once again, and found the same thing once more: Quiet pride, worn easily and without performance.

'Makes sense... This is a very impressive display of raw talent, no question.'

The first Assessment was not, by any reasonable measure, a showcase for Legacy investment. The window between Integration and the Assessment was too narrow—a matter of weeks, not the years of accumulated tactical education and System knowledge that Legacy training produced.

Whatever advantage of preparation a child of a Major or Prime Legacy carried into the UHF in the long run, the first Assessment *specifically* was the place where the gap between preparation and raw individual capability was at its absolute smallest.

Every Recruit was new to Integration. *Every* Recruit was learning the shape of their own Attributes in real time—even Legacies.

The playing field was never even close to level, of course, but it was considerably *less* unlevel in those first weeks than it would be again for a very, very long time—if ever.

In that context, three medals—including an MVM—before the ceremony had even reached its upper tier, was not a modest result dressed up in Legacy polish.

It was *genuinely* extraordinary.

The kind of result that required no framing and no charitable interpretation.

And Thal Masters, watching his daughter receive her third recognition of the evening with that quiet, settled pride on his face, clearly knew it as well—just as everyone else in the room likely did.

Veyra's thoughts had drifted back to Thal Sen more than once throughout the ceremony.

The question of *what exactly* the woman had planned with her was still nagging at the back of her mind whenever it had a spare moment to wander.

Answers, as ever, remained elusive.

'Trying to figure out the mind of a Sen... What are you even doing, Veyra? Are you trying to drive yourself mad, or are you just bored?'

She was neither, she was fairly certain.

It was extremely hard to be truly bored standing in the Masters' main ballroom with Madam Sen and Madam Dravain mere steps away, surrounded by more Legacy pull than most people would encounter in a lifetime.

The level of pull where a single evening's worth of conversations could quietly reshape the next decade of UHF politics, if the right people said the right things to each other.

That did not, however, stop her from spacing out about it—only to be jolted sharply back to attention by the sound of her own name.

"Corvus Leander Sylarion!" Echoed Proprietor Quinn's voice clearly through the recording, and Veyra's eyes snapped back to the screen to find her son's face looking back at her.

The recording showed, in those initial seconds, not the action itself but the architecture of decision-making that led to it.

Alpha Squad inside the abandoned industrial zone of Nova Tertius.

Rusted platforms, broken concrete—terrain that had clearly seen better decades.

The squad gathered, and Veyra watched her son's face on the screen as the situation was laid out by Proprietor Quinn's narration—a high-value target, heavily defended, the question of who was going to take the shot sitting over the group like a weight none of them wanted to pick up.

The recording had no audio at this point, or if it did, the broadcast was not carrying it.

It didn't need to.

The body language of the squad told the story cleanly enough.

The general hesitation. The back-and-forth between the members...

The specific, visible moment when Corvus made his decision known—with the quiet, settled quality of a man who had done the arithmetic and arrived at an answer he didn't particularly like and was implementing anyway.

He took the Scout-Sniper's Caliburn.

Veyra had never seen the weapon before.

She understood, from context provided by Proprietor Quinn and from the recording itself, that it was not a standard-issue rifle by any measure.

The way Thea McKay—the Cyan, the one whose reveal had shattered decorum forty minutes ago—handed it over, and the brief exchange that followed, told her clearly enough that this was something *singular*—something that came with very specific usage instructions and knowledge attached.

The recording moved forward.

He climbed a tower.

The platform was high—higher than the surrounding structures by quite a lot, exposed in a way that served the shot and nothing else.

Veyra tracked the angle as he settled into position, the Caliburn braced, the target below visible through the recording's wide-angle feed, and she understood immediately what the elevation meant.

It was not a defensible position.

It was not a position you chose because you intended to survive it.

It was a position you chose because it was the one that gave you the shot you needed.

Veyra unconsciously held her breath as the recording got to the deciding point as her son lined up the shot at the high-value target.

Then he took it.

The transport *erupted*.

The explosion was large enough that the recording's frame washed briefly with light, and in the moment before the chaos resolved into its next shape, Veyra saw Corvus already moving—already climbing down, jumping off the platform and running, the Caliburn still in hand, because there was simply no version of what came next in which standing still was an option.

What followed was a chase.

Veyra was not a military strategist—she had direct experience on the ground, yes. But nothing tactical or strategic at the Command-level that would make the types of decisions that would come into play here.

Yet even she knew that the scale of the response pouring out from the Stellar Republic's side was *not* the response you got from a routine engagement. It was the response you got when something *significant* had been destroyed, and the people responsible for protecting it were now allocating *every* available resource to the problem of dealing with whoever had done it.

The recording showed Corvus running through it all.

Veyra was aware then, distantly, of the ballroom around her.

It had gone *very* quiet.

Not out of respect for decorum, as there was always some quiet shuffling around, the clinking of glasses, the sound of aperitif's being consumed or the likes around, even during times where decorum was to be honoured. But because people were enraputred—fixing their full attention on the screen, just like Veyra was.

She kept her eyes on the screen and her son running across it, and felt the quiet, involuntary recognition of something she had always known but rarely seen so plainly demonstrated: That Corvus had always been *exactly* what she and Orvyn had never raised him to be, but always secretly hoped he would become.

She wasn't sure, at that moment, whether that made it easier or harder to watch.

The industrial office came into view and they all watched him go inside.

The recording's angle shifted—closer now, the editing tightening around the space—and Veyra watched what happened next with ironbound focus.

Corvus inside the office. The Stellar Republic forces arriving one after another with no end.

The last stand—not a heroic, choreographed stand, but the unglamorously bloody, costly, inch-by-inch reality of one person against a great many, fighting not because it was going to *work* but because it was the *only* option left.

She watched as his armour began to fail in pieces.

She watched the various wounds accumulate, each one catalogued automatically inside her mind with a clinical clarity that she found, in some distant, professional part of herself, she would have preferred it not have.

The part of her that was a Legacy representative in a ballroom full of Legacy representatives noted the details and filed them.

The part of her that was his mother absorbed it differently, without filing it anywhere, without even the *option* of filing it anywhere, because there was no drawer in her that was built for

this specific *kind* of weight—the weight of watching her son get torn apart, piece by piece, and actively die on the screen in front of her.

She watched him continue firing after the point where continuation stopped making obvious physical sense.

The Caliburn far beyond safe operating temperature.

The hand holding it paying the price for that in ways the recording made *very* clear, and that she looked at *directly* because she had decided, somewhere in the first few seconds of his last stand, that she *was* going to look at all of it. That looking away would be a small betrayal of something, even if no one in the room would have likely faulted her for it.

She did *not* look away.

'*He knew,*' she thought, with the quiet certainty of a mother who had spent decades learning the shape of her child's mind. '*He knew exactly what he was doing and he did it anyway... And if it had all been real—if that had been a real Battlefield and a real Caliburn and real consequences—he would have made the exact same call...*'

That was the part that sat heaviest.

Not the recording.

Not the wounds or the failing armour or the impossible, defiant continuation of someone running on nothing but will past the point where everything else had given out.

Those were hard to watch, as they always were—especially when it was her own son. But they were ultimately *finite*—they had an end, and she knew the end was coming in this very recording.

What didn't have an end was the knowledge that the decision itself, the reasoning that had put him in that position, was simply *who he was*.

Had *always been* who he was and *would* always be who he was.

The UHF hadn't made him this way.

She and Orvyn hadn't made him this way, not exactly, not *intentionally*—they had given him the framework, the discipline, the vocabulary of duty, Legacy and responsibility, but the particular *shape* of the choice he had made in that recording, the specific quality of it, the way he had assessed himself as a mere resource and allocated himself accordingly—that had always been in *him*, and him alone.

The pride and the pain of the realization were not separable.

She had stopped trying to separate them approximately two seconds after seeing him climb that tower, and simply held both at once—the way a person held something hot because putting it down wasn't an option.

She was aware then, in the peripheral way that never fully switched off, of the attention in the room having shifted toward her.

She kept her own face composed.

It was not difficult, exactly. She had many, many years of practice.

But there was a particular quality to the specific composure—of watching your child on a screen, hurt, overwhelmed and yet still refusing to stop, in a ballroom full of people who were measuring your every reaction—that required something *more* deliberate than the usual effort, and she was aware of spending that resource rapidly right then.

Then the Caliburn suddenly made a sound.

Or rather—the sound *stopped*.

The recording went aggressive with it, the silence not simply quiet but actively *wrong*, the kind of silence that preceded *something*, and she watched—out of the corner of her eyes—the comprehension move across the faces of the Legacies around her as they registered what the silence meant, the ones with the UHF background understanding it a beat faster than the others, their expressions shifting first.

Then the screen went *white*.

It held for a moment—the brilliant, flat whiteness of something that had exceeded what the recording could contain—and then cleared to the crater.

The absence where the office had been.

The Stellar Republic forces that had surrounded it, *gone*.

The clean, absolute finality of a Solarium-core detonation doing what Solarium-core detonations did.

The recording held on it.

The ballroom was entirely silent.

Veyra exhaled, slowly—ever-so-slightly shakily, despite her best efforts—through her nose.

Her hands stayed where they were, perfectly still, and she was dimly grateful for the years of training that made the stillness automatic, because she was not entirely certain she was even producing it consciously right now.

Proprietor Quinn's voice came through the recording, and the room, by the instinct of long training, attended to it with all their focus.

"Recruit Sylarion takes a more traditional approach to leadership than someone like Recruit Soren," Quinn said, her voice carrying the particular register she used when something was meant to be heard and retained rather than simply acknowledged. "He does not lead from the front. He does not seek the moment of individual heroism. His preference, consistent

throughout the entirety of this Assessment, was to position each member of his squad where they could be *most* effective—to treat each engagement not as a display of his own capability, but as a problem to be solved with the resources available to him."

One of Proprietor Quinn's characteristic pauses.

"What you have just watched is not a contradiction of that preference, as some of you might believe. It is merely the expression of it, taken to its logical end-conclusion. When Recruit Sylarion identified that the shot *needed* to be taken, and that taking it would require one member of his squad to accept near-certain death, he assessed the available options and made the only decision that preserved his squad's overall operational capability: He did not send *someone else*. He allocated himself—because he understood his own Role within his squad clearly enough to recognise that, of all the pieces on the board, he was the one that could be *spent*.

"That level of clarity. That willingness to put himself on the line for the greater good of his squad—not out of impulse, not out of recklessness or the want to be a hero, but out of cold, careful logic applied to the people he was responsible for—is *precisely* why Recruit Sylarion rightfully deserves this Platinum Medal."

She paused once more, and when Proprietor Quinn spoke again there was something in her voice that was not quite the warmth of pride but was very adjacent to it. "Your actions have etched a legacy that won't fade from the minds of your squad—or from anyone in this hall—anytime soon."

The recording held on Corvus at the podium for a few moments longer, then paused as Thal Masters gave the room the break it very much needed.

Veyra exhaled immediately—slow, shakily and louder than she'd intended—and let her hands move to straighten her dress, which did not need straightening.

She felt her heart beating faster than it should have been.

The room's reaction came in layers.

The first was sound—a low, collective exhale that moved through the ballroom the moment the pause was given. Conversations started immediately, the need to process out loud overriding the usual measured quality of Legacy small talk.

What struck Veyra, as she steadied her breathing and kept her hands still, was the direction of it all.

Not all of the conversations were aimed inward, at neighbours and companions.

A significant number of them were aimed, with varying degrees of subtlety, at her directly.

It had been happening gradually throughout Corvus' clip—she had tracked it in her peripheral vision the way she tracked everything, the small physical adjustments of people repositioning themselves, the Legacy equivalent of leaning in.

But now, with the pause active and decorum formally suspended in this regard, it was no longer subtle.

Faces that had been angled carefully away from her throughout the ceremony had turned.

Legacies who had been standing in one part of the room were standing in a slightly different part of it, the drift small enough to be deniable, yet large enough to be unmistakable.

The press corps had not missed any of it either.

She let her gaze move across the line of journalists along the eastern wall—briefly—and found what she had suspected she would find.

Several of them were no longer watching the screen but were instead watching her.

Two of them were in what appeared to be a quiet, pointed argument, each gesturing in her direction with the contained urgency of people who had identified the same subject and were disagreeing about who had the right to pursue it first.

She looked away before any of them could catch her looking.

And that was when the thought arrived, with the particular, cold clarity of something that had been assembling itself in the background for some time and had finally finished.

‘Madam Sen had known the entire time...’

Not just that Corvus was Squad Leader.

Not just that he had performed well, or that his name would be called at the ceremony.

She had known this *exact* sequence was going to be played on the big screen.

She had seen all of it before tonight, had been holding all of it before tonight, and had walked into this ballroom and spent the entire evening positioning Veyra in front of exactly the right people, and had said absolutely *nothing* to prepare her for what watching it in a room full of Legacy observers was actually going to feel like.

‘A *test*,’ Veyra concluded immediately.

There was no other reasonable interpretation.

Everything else Madam Sen had done this evening had been deliberate, layered and purposeful—the introductions, the pledge, the timing of every movement across the room.

The silence about Corvus’ recording was not an oversight in any capacity.

It was a variable, introduced intentionally, to see what Veyra would do with it.

To see whether she could sit with something *that* hard, in public, and remain standing.

She thought, briefly, of the morning she and Orvyn had sent Corvus to Integration.

The particular, gutting feeling of watching someone you had spent decades protecting walk away from you into something you had absolutely no control over.

She had not slept that night, or the night after. Had spent two weeks convincing herself that no news was good news, and another month after that convincing herself the same thing with decreasing amounts of success, again and again.

That had been the hardest day of her life.

Until approximately five minutes ago.

She was not entirely certain, standing here with her heart still beating too fast and her hands still wanting to find *something* to adjust to keep busy, that tonight hadn't surpassed it.

At least the morning of Integration had been private.

This had been in Thal Masters' ballroom.

Her eyes moved to Madam Sen. A quick check, brief enough to be deniable.

Madam Sen was already looking at her.

The fan was still.

Her expression had not changed—it practically never did—but there was something in the quality of the attention that carried, if you knew how to read it, the faintest acknowledgement.

A nod. *Miniscule*.

Veyra looked away and breathed out again, slowly.

She had passed.

Whatever the test had been, whatever specific quality Madam Sen had been measuring in the woman she had spent an evening carefully positioning in front of every face that mattered—she had passed it.

Perhaps not with the effortless composure she would have liked. But she *had* passed.

Madam Dravain spoke ten, from her left, quiet and direct in the way she did everything. "Your son conducted himself with exceptional clarity under impossible conditions."

She did not elaborate.

With Madam Dravain, elaboration was apparently optional when the core statement was sufficient, and she had apparently decided it was sufficient. "You should be proud."

"I am," Veyra said, and meant it in every direction at once.

Others followed—the Minor Legacies Madam Sen had introduced her to over the course of the evening, each one finding their way to her in the designated break with the careful,

practised warmth of people who had decided that proximity to her was worth the minor social cost of being seen to seek her out.

Compliments offered with genuine appreciation, names she had filed and now retrieved, faces she matched to the earlier introductions. She received each of them with the composure she had been spending all evening, which was apparently still not fully depleted.

And then, from across the room, she caught a pair of eyes finding hers.

Thal Masters.

He was not subtle about it.

The man was three meters tall in ceremonial armour and had apparently decided, somewhere between his daughter's medals and watching a Sylarion sacrifice himself in an industrial office for the good of his squad, that subtlety was not required anymore.

The smile that crossed his face when their eyes met was broad enough to be visible from this distance—the full, unguarded, toothy smile of a man who had genuinely enjoyed what he'd watched—and the nod that accompanied it was deep enough to constitute a *real* acknowledgement, the kind that carried weight from a man of his standing compared to hers.

Veyra returned it with a measured inclination of her head, keeping her own expression composed and warm in equal measure.

'Of course **he** loved it,' she thought, with the first flicker of genuine amusement she had felt in the last half hour. '*A heroic sacrifice of a leader, a Solarium-powered explosion, a crater where the enemy used to be... If you had written a dry list of everything Raymond Masters would find **deeply** satisfying in a single recording, it would look **exactly** like that.*'

She was, she realised, profoundly relieved when the recording continued shortly after.

The Sovereign-specific awards wrapped up with the efficient, unhurried pace that had characterised Proprietor Quinn's ceremony throughout—clean transitions, no wasted moments, each category given exactly the time it warranted and no more.

The tier shifted after that.

The screen behind Proprietor Quinn changed, the category emblems updating, and the distinction was made clear: Recruit and Assessment awards. The *full* Drive.

Not just the Sovereign anymore, but every ship, every squad, every Marine who had taken part in the Assessment across the *entire* Drive and sector cluster.

The room's attention sharpened accordingly.

The Eye in the Sky awards moved through their lower tiers without producing anything that made the ballroom react. Gold. Platinum. Palladium.

Then came the Two-Stars. Platinum. Palladium.

Polite acknowledgement, appropriate applause, the measured appreciation of people watching other ships' Marines receive recognition.

Then came the Two-Star Palladium.

“Thea McKay, from Alpha Squad.”

The pause that Masters provided lasted approximately four tenths of a heartbeat before the arguments started, and they started with the specific, unguarded energy of people who had apparently decided that Thal Masters' earlier speech had been directed at *everyone else* in the room but them.

"Pity points." The voice came from the left cluster—one of the same voices from before, Veyra noted, the same western-affiliation Minor Legacy who had not, apparently, reconsidered anything. "The UHF is simply handing them out to make a point. It's *political*, you see? This whole evening has been political from the *moment* that title card came up. I tell you it's—"

"She found a *piece of equipment*." Another voice, even younger, somewhere behind that person, agreeing. "That's all this is. She stumbled onto something significant and the UHF is calling it genius because it suits their agenda. Anyone could have gotten lucky like that. Since when does the UHF do this kind of stuff?"

"*Anyone* could have—"

Veyra stopped listening to the specific words and listened instead to the quality of them.

The brittle, insistent quality of people who had decided on a conclusion and were working backward from it, rather than the measured skepticism of people genuinely trying to reason through something.

Her father's voice came back to her, the way it always did when she was standing in a room full of people doing exactly *this*.

“Luck is nothing but preparation meeting opportunity, Veyra. Remember that. The next time someone calls a person lucky, ask yourself what they were prepared for that you were not and adjust yourself accordingly for the future.”

She thought about the clip of the young woman finding the vehicle and insisting that Alpha Squad follow it.

She thought about the fact that Corvus—her son, had allocated himself as a sacrificial resource with the calm reasoning of a man who knew exactly what he was doing—had placed his full trust in this young woman. Had accepted her Caliburn and trusted her instructions blindly. Had chosen *her*, specifically, to keep running after he was gone—to lead Alpha Squad in his stead.

‘Corvus does not trust carelessly...’ She thought. *‘He’s never done so. Not since he was a baby.’*

She could give the young Cyan the benefit of the doubt on that basis alone.

'If Corvus trusts her, then there's no reason to believe she is anything but what she appears to be from her actions.'

The room finally quieted from the downright riotous candor as Masters restarted the recording, and the ceremony moved forward.

Isabella Itoku came next—One Man Army, One-Star Palladium.

The clip played and the room responded with the same split reaction it had been producing every time the Illyan's name came up: Genuine appreciation from the people watching what she could actually do, and the familiar, slightly uncomfortable commentary from the cluster near the windows about what it all meant for the broader question of Mid-World integration.

Veyra kept her eyes on the screen and her thoughts to herself, which was where they generally did the most useful work.

The pause ended. The recording continued.

"Thea McKay, from Alpha Squad" for the Surgical Strike Medal, Two-Star Platinum.

The outcries came again, but Veyra noticed—with the careful attention of someone who tracked rooms for a living—that there were ever so slightly fewer voices than before.

Not gone. Not even *close* to gone.

But there were faces in the room that had been loudest the first time around that were now producing expressions rather than words—the slightly conflicted expression of people whose certainty had developed a small crack somewhere between the first award and the third, and who hadn't yet decided what to do with it.

'Progress,' she thought. *'Of a sort.'*

The recording continued.

Karania Faulkner. Emperor's Touch. *Two-Star Crysium*.

The pause that followed was, if anything, louder than any of the previous ones—but *differently* loud. The earlier arguments had carried the shrill, brittle energy of people who had already made up their minds.

This was something entirely else.

This was the sound of a room that had been *genuinely* surprised and was processing it out loud, the overlapping noise of people turning to each other with *actual* questions and disbelief rather than rehearsed positions.

Datapads appeared rapidly. Not one or two but a significant number of them, across multiple clusters, people pulling out their devices and typing with the focused urgency of someone who needed more information *immediately*.

Veyra tracked the movement without moving her head and noted that it was not limited to the Minor Legacies. Two representatives she had placed as solidly Major earlier in the evening were among them as well.

*'A Two-Star Crysium Emperor's Touch... The best field medic in the **entire** Assessment. Not just the best among Recruits—the best among **every** Marine who participated, including the Ace and Elite Squads operating at full Tier 1 Prime capacity... From a young woman on her first Assessment, newly Integrated, with no accumulated Class framework, no years of combat experience to draw on and no apparent Legacy affiliation...'*

The reaction was, Veyra thought, *more* than understandable.

She felt a version of it herself.

"Who in the Emperor's name *is* she?" she heard from somewhere to her right—the honest question of someone who had looked at a Two-Star Crysium and understood *exactly* what it meant and needed to know the name attached to it more precisely than a title card could provide.

"Viscero, it said. Inner-World somewhere around—"

"I know what and where *Viscero* is, I'm asking who *she* is! The girl! Just what—"

Veyra let the conversations run and turned her own attention, as she had been doing all evening at every significant moment, to Madam Sen.

The fan was moving.

Slowly, with the particular, unhurried rhythm of a woman in no hurry at all.

The screen was still holding on the frozen image of Karania Faulkner accepting her medal, and Madam Sen was looking at it with the quality of attention that Veyra had learned, over the course of this single evening, to treat as *very* significant.

The same specific attention she had applied during the medic's clip earlier.

The same quality she had applied practically *nowhere* else.

And there—so small that Veyra almost missed it—was the smile again.

'Just who is she to you...?'

The question formed itself clearly and completely, and Veyra held it there without attempting to answer it, because there was no answer available to her and she knew it.

She had spent the better part of the evening trying to map Madam Sen's logic and had succeeded, to varying degrees, with most of it—the introductions, the pledge, the positioning, the test she was now fairly certain she had passed.

Those things had shapes she could trace, even if she'd only found the outlines after the fact and still did not know where it was leading, fully.

This, however, was different.

This had *no* outline she could find.

A newly Integrated Recruit from Viscero with a Two-Star Crysium and no prior Legacy affiliation, and Madam Sen looking at her frozen image on a ballroom screen with the closest thing to genuine, unguarded *delight* that Veyra had ever seen on a Sen's face.

It made absolutely no sense.

But then, she reminded herself—nothing about the Sen ever did, when seen from the outside. That was rather the point of them, deep down.

The recording continued once again.

And immediately, a familiar name appeared.

Thea McKay. Two-Star Platinum. Stellar Republic Reaper.

The pause produced noise again, but markedly less of it than before.

The room was beginning to develop the particular, slightly winded quality of people who had been arguing uphill for the better part of an hour and were finding the gradient steeper with every new announcement. Some of the voices that had been loudest earlier were still present but definitely quieter, their certainty having shed enough weight over the course of the evening that outright proclamation was no longer comfortable.

Then the recording continued and it happened again.

Thea McKay. One-Star Gold. Forward Leadership.

The pause was, for the first time all evening, almost *silent*.

Not the silence of a room that had nothing to say, for there was a lot that people wanted to.

It was the silence of a room that had run the arithmetic and arrived somewhere it hadn't expected to arrive, and was still trying to figure out how to actually deal with it.

Several looks were exchanged—careful, measured looks, the kind that communicated volumes without providing anything that could be repeated afterward.

A few people near the large left cluster had quietly, incrementally, adjusted their physical positions—stepping a half-pace away from the colleagues who had been the most vocal, with the casualness of people who had decided that a slight geographic distance might be useful—if not downright imperative—going forward.

Feet shuffled in that pause and many looks were exchanged. Nothing else.

The recording continued.

And then Proprietor Quinn's voice, clear through the recording's audio, announced the Ace Squad award—Two-Star Crysium, the highest available, awarded to the Sovereign's Alpha Squad—and the ballroom stirred back into life with the warm, genuine reaction of people who had been watching this squad accumulate recognition for the better part of two hours and had, medals or no medals, long since arrived at the conclusion that the recognition was very much earned.

Corvus ascended the stage with the rest of Alpha Squad, and Veyra felt a quiet warmth, seeing him standing there as the *leader* of a truly, unbelievably talented squad.

But then Major Quinn kept speaking beyond the usual rewards.

Veyra heard the words.

She processed them individually, each one arriving cleanly, and then she processed them as a sentence, and then she stood *very* still for a moment while her mind ran the sentence back from the beginning to confirm it had understood correctly.

'A celestial object... Personally bestowed by Proprietor Quinn herself, come each Alpha Squad member's retirement... Any unowned celestial object, within the Sector... Any...'

She was almost certain something had come out of her mouth.

She thought she caught it—barely, in the half-second between the impulse and the sound, snapping her composure back into place with the sheer force of decades of practise—and managed to reduce it to a sharp, controlled exhale that could, charitably, have been interpreted as simply breathing.

Several people around the room were not as quick.

Three Minor Legacy proxies spoke aloud, outright, before they could stop themselves—short, involuntary sounds that were not quite words and were not quite not-words, the sounds of people whose composure had been exceeded by the speed of what they'd just heard.

One of the older representatives near the staircase actually said "**Pardon?**" loudly enough to carry, which under any other circumstances would have been a significant decorum violation, and which, in this *specific moment*, appeared to be entirely forgivable because approximately half the room was thinking it in exactly those terms.

The pause, when Masters provided it, lasted considerably longer than any of the previous ones.

And the room filled immediately, *completely*, and without any of the usual Legacy restraint.

"That *cannot* be legal under the MC code—"

"She's a Proprietor, the code doesn't—"

"Any unowned object? Does that include—"

"*Stars*. Stars are celestial objects. Unclaimed stars—"

"There are *black holes* in the outer Sector that haven't been—"

"—six members, six objects, the compound value of that over a single century—"

Veyra's mind had, independently of the conversations around her, already begun running the same calculations that the rest of the room was running, and had arrived at numbers that her composure was having some serious difficulty accommodating.

The Sylarion Legacy owned one planet. Three moons, acquired over the last decade, that were somewhere upwards of thirty years from returning anything meaningful on the investment.

The portfolio was respectable for a Minor Legacy.

It was a *footnote* compared to what was currently sitting in a box labeled "*Corvus, upon retirement*" inside Proprietor Quinn's private authority.

Any unowned celestial object. *Any*.

Within an entire Sector that was the Proprietor's to command, which meant the choice available to him was not constrained by the modest inventory of a Minor Legacy's territorial holdings but by the full, *enormous*, largely unmapped catalogue of *everything* in that Sector that nobody had even yet *thought* to claim.

She flagged down a servant with a movement that was considerably less composed than her usual standard.

The servant appeared—as good servants did—practically from nowhere, and she took two glasses from the tray in quick succession and drank them without tasting either one.

Madam Dravain appeared at her right shoulder.

The older woman said nothing for a moment—simply stepped closer and placed one hand, briefly and precisely, on Veyra's back, the particular gesture of someone who had seen a person needing steadying and had decided to provide it without making a production of it.

"Quite the generous one, our Proprietor," Madam Dravain said, with the calm of a woman for whom the recalibration of significant sums was a routine part of existence. "Congratulations, Madam Sylarion."

She paused briefly, and then added, with the directness that apparently characterised all of Madam Dravain's communication, "I would very much like a sit-down, at your convenience, to discuss the ties between our Legacies. No need to respond now. Take your time and consider it."

She paused once more. "I trust you know how to reach me."

Then she simply stepped back to her position to the left of Thal Sen, as though she had done nothing more remarkable than comment on the weather.

Madam Sen, meanwhile, was observing the room with her usual, absolute composure.

Her eyes found Veyra's briefly, and the nod she produced was the same miniscule acknowledgement as before—small enough to be deniable, precise enough to be unmistakable.

'I don't know if I can survive this evening, my love,' Veyra thought, in the direction of Orvyn, several kilometres away, entirely unaware that his wife was currently in the process of being offered Legacy alliances from *Major Legacies* and *celestial real estate* while standing on legs that were performing their function mostly out of habit.

She was glad, profoundly and specifically glad, that they had agreed she was the better fit for this ballroom.

If Orvyn had been standing here instead—not because he was weak, he wasn't, he had always been steady in ways that had saved both of them more than once—but because his heart was considerably less armoured against their son specifically than hers was, and this evening had targeted that *particular* vulnerability with the precision of something *designed* to find it.

He would not have survived the crater.

She was not entirely certain she had survived it herself, in any meaningful sense, and she had *considerably* more practise with this type of evening.

She straightened.

Let her breathing find its usual depth.

Smoothed her dress again, unnecessarily.

Thal Masters, after allowing the longest pause of the entire evening to run its course—and given what Quinn had just announced, nobody in the room was in any position to argue that the extra time was unwarranted—restarted the recording.

The next major moment was something that stopped everyone inside the ballroom dead in their tracks.

Karania Faulkner. Two-Star Palladium. Most Valuable Marine.

Second place. In the *entire* Assessment.

The clip played.

Everything Karania Faulkner had done in that recording, she had done it with a precision and an absence of hesitation that made several Legacy representatives visibly uncomfortable in the way that genuine excellence sometimes made people uncomfortable—the unsettling

feeling of realising that the upper limit of a category you thought you fully understood had just been *redefined*.

The pause, thankfully, came quickly.

The confusion that followed was not the brittle, defensive confusion of earlier in the evening.

It was fully and authentically *genuine*.

It moved through the room in overlapping exchanges carrying a collective bewilderment.

"How has *nobody* heard of her before tonight—"

"Viscero isn't—it's not even an unknown planet, someone should have—"

"Second overall. *Second*. Among Tier 1 Primes. From a First Assessment. How is that—"

"Has *anyone* managed to find anything on her? There's *nothing*. She isn't in any of the pre-Integration registers and watchlists that I can—"

Datapads were out across the room in numbers that exceeded even the reaction from earlier.

The searching had a frantic, slightly disbelieving quality to it. Like people who had run the same query twice and received the same null result were now running it a third time in case the first two had, somehow, both been wrong.

Veyra observed all of it and looked, simultaneously, at Madam Sen.

The smile from earlier was back and had widened.

Not much—a fraction, by any objective measure—but from a woman whose face operated within a range that most people would have described as essentially static, a fraction was *considerable*.

The fan moved slowly, and Madam Sen's eyes were on the frozen image of Karania Faulkner on the screen with an expression that Veyra was now, after a full evening of careful observation, prepared to describe as something close to complete and utter satisfaction.

'What are you to her, girl...?'

Veyra turned the question over for the fourth time tonight and arrived, as she had the previous three times, at no answer.

She ran the Sen-plant theory again—briefly, out of thoroughness rather than genuine belief—and discarded it for the same reason she had discarded it before.

The Sen Legacy was many things, but it was nothing if not *consistent*.

Their markers were not subtle, were not designed to be subtle and were, in fact, specifically *designed* to be visible to anyone who knew what to look for: The scar beneath the left eye,

the makeup, the particular hairstyle that had not deviated in living memory, the emotional architecture of someone raised from childhood to perform composure as a first language.

Karania Faulkner had *none* of it.

The clip had shown a young woman who felt things visibly, who moved with the urgent, physical directness of someone whose relationship with emotion was entirely unmanaged by Legacy training.

She was not a Sen. She was not even Sen-adjacent.

She was something else entirely, and whatever *that something* was, Madam Sen had apparently known about it well in advance of tonight.

Veyra made a note of it, filed under a category she labeled “*long-term research, priority one.*”

It would take *months* to find anything useful, no doubt. Possibly years.

Finding anything substantive on a Sen, in Veyra's experience, took the kind of patient, incremental intelligence work that produced results only if you were willing to accept that the results might arrive too late to be immediately useful.

But Madam Sen had also, she noted, positioned herself in the ballroom in the specific configuration that placed only Veyra and Madam Dravain at angles from which her expression was *directly* visible.

Everyone else in the room was looking at the screen, Madam Sen's fan, at each other, or at Veyra herself. Nobody else could see what she was seeing.

Which meant one of two things: Either this was the first genuine mistake a Sen had made in a formal social setting in recorded Legacy history—possible, *technically*, in the same way that any statistical impossibility was technically possible—or it was another test, and Veyra was being shown something deliberately, and the question was whether she would know what to do with it.

She filed that as well, under the same category, and returned her attention to the screen as Thal Masters restarted the recording.

And then the final award was announced.

Thea McKay. Two-Star Crysium. Most Valuable Marine.

The room did not erupt.

It did not produce the arguments or the outcries or the brittle, defensive noise of the earlier hours.

It simply—*stared*.

A collective, wide-eyed, suspended staring at the screen as the girl walked up for the sixth time, a half-dozen medals already in her other hand, and the ballroom held every single thing it might have said.

Whether that was decorum or something closer to shock, Veyra couldn't have said with any confidence.

She noticed, however, that Masters had not paused the recording when the young woman had received her medal, like he had done for every single other medal so far.

Her eyes moved to Madam Sen.

Madam Sen was *grinning*.

Not the fractional, barely-visible curved smile from earlier.

Teeth. Actual, visible *teeth*, the full expression hidden behind the fan from everyone in the room except the two people positioned to see past it—Madam Dravain, on her left, and Veyra herself, on the right.

The cold moved down Veyra's spine before she had time to decide whether to allow it.

A full, involuntary shudder, the kind that came not from temperature but from pure animal recognition of something that had just exceeded her current model of the situation by a *significant* margin.

On screen, Thea McKay accepted her medal. The recording still continued.

Stepped back from Proprietor Quinn. The recording still continued.

Began to move away from the podium. The recording *still* continued.

And then *stopped*.

The quiet that settled over the ballroom in that single moment had a texture that had nothing to do with decorum—not the natural quiet of people watching something, but the held, suffocating silence of people who had sensed, collectively and without discussion, that something was about to happen, and had stopped breathing to make room for it.

The girl turned back and spoke for the first time.

"Using my earned rights as the holder of the Two-Star Crysium MVM Medal, I wish to issue a Challenge."

Her voice was level—unhurried.

The voice of someone who had, at some point, decided what they were going to say and was now simply saying it.

"While I am already part of Alpha Squad, a winner of an MVM Medal, and thus immune to *being* challenged, your rules said nothing about a Medal holder *issuing* a Challenge themselves. Is this correct?"

Nobody in the ballroom breathed.

Proprietor Quinn looked at the young woman for a long moment.

The pause on screen—the particular, considering stillness of a woman who was, by every account, among the most precisely calculating officers the UHF had produced in several generations, looking at a Recruit who had just found a gap in her own ruleset and was standing in it very calmly—was not something Veyra would forget quickly, if ever.

"I guess that would be correct," Quinn said finally, "based on the rules I've laid out, yes."

The girl turned.

Not toward Quinn nor toward Alpha Squad in the front row.

Toward the camera—directly, deliberately, with the full awareness of what that camera connected to: Every ship in the Assessment cluster, the Apex itself, every set of eyes that had spent the last several hours watching this ceremony play out, wherever they happened to be watching it from.

"Every single one of you has spent the past few hours watching me stand up here again and again."

Her voice carried easily, without being raised.

"You've seen the recordings. You've heard Major Quinn herself list the feats I've accomplished, the awards I've been given. Time after time, I've proven myself to the UHF—not just *once*, but over and over, in every category they've deemed worthy of recognition."

Around Veyra, the ballroom was absolutely *still*. Not a foot shifted.

"Despite all of that—despite the Medals, the recordings, the recognition—there are still those among you who simply can't seem to accept it. Maybe it's because I'm a Midworlder, born from the dirt and the ashes of a place none of you have ever even heard of or thought about existing in the first place. Maybe it's because I'm a Cyan, someone you see as less-than-human, simply because I was born from the corpse of my very own mother. Or maybe it's simply because the very idea of someone *like me* being better than you—*actually* better, with the proof to back it up—burns you to your very core."

A brief pause as the Cyan's eyes swiped across the assembled hall of Recruits.

"Maybe it is all of the above."

Veyra found, somewhere in the third sentence, that she had stopped tracking the room and was simply watching the screen. She noted the lapse and did not bother to correct it.

"This is the UHF. This is a meritocracy. Your bloodlines, your upbringing, your family's honours—*none* of that matters here. What matters is *skill. Results*. And I've proven, beyond *any* doubt, that I belong here. That I belong in Alpha Squad. That I *deserve* every single one of these Medals."

The certainty behind it, Veyra could tell, was not the performed certainty of someone having worked themselves up to something but the flat, settled certainty of someone stating established facts.

"But if you still can't accept it—if you *really*, honestly think I don't deserve to be here—then let's settle it right the fuck now."

Several people near Veyra's left had gone the colour of old parchment.

"I am laying down the Two-Star Crysium MVM Medal's Challenge. To *every single* person in this hall. To every single Recruit in here, without exception. You think I'm not worthy? You think Alpha Squad doesn't *belong* to me? You think a Cyan like me has no place in the UHF? Then step the *fuck* up. Approach me of your own accord. Ask to be challenged, and I *will* oblige—without hesitation."

She looked directly into the camera for a moment that felt, even through the recording, considerably longer than it likely had been.

"Put your credits where your fucking mouths are. *Prove* me wrong, if you can. Because I promise you this: You will experience firsthand why I am the *very best* this Drive has to offer."

Then she walked off the podium.

And finally, the pause came.

The ballroom, however, remained entirely silent.

It was not the silence of a room processing something difficult, or the silence of decorum being carefully maintained, or even the silence of shock, which had its own particular texture and had made several appearances tonight.

This was distinctly different.

This was the silence of approximately two hundred Legacy representatives—press corps included, datapads forgotten in hands, not a single one of them writing at this very moment—who had just watched a Cyan Undercity Midworlder stand in front of *every* ship in the Assessment cluster and issue an open Challenge to all of them simultaneously.

Who had, in the space of the five seconds since she had walked off that podium, run the recordings of the past two hours back through their heads and arrived, to a person, at the same destination: She had meant *every* word of it.

And every word of it was backed by a Two-Star Crysium MVM medal, half-a-dozen other medals beside and recordings that nobody in this room or any other was going to be able to argue with.

Nobody reached for a datapad. Nobody spoke. Feet did not shuffle.

Veyra stood inside the silence with her hands perfectly still and the shudder still residing somewhere in her spine.

She did not look away from the screen and, specifically, did not look at Madam Sen again, because she was fairly certain that whatever expression the woman's face was currently carrying was more than she could absorb in the same evening as everything else that had already happened.

When the recording finally continued and the Awards Ceremony came to a close with the leaderboard reveal—Rachel Masters at #3 for the whole Drive, which put a visible, satisfied smile on Thal Masters' face; Karania Faulkner at #2 with nearly twice Rachel's points; and Thea McKay at #1 with more still—the ballroom had quietly arrived at a single, shared conclusion.

Nobody said it out loud.

Not during the recording, not in the hours of the after-party that followed.

But it was there, sitting in the room the way certain truths sat in rooms—present in the silences between conversations rather than in the conversations themselves.

That Cyan. That *one* Cyan, from the Undercity of a world that most of the people in this ballroom couldn't have placed on a star map an hour ago, was going to be the catalyst for a level of discussion inside the UHF that nobody alive had seen before.

What shape those discussions would take, or where they would land—nobody could say.

Even the Sen, Veyra suspected, were working without a complete picture on this one.

But that the Mid-World Recruitment Drive had justified itself tonight—that much was going to be very difficult to argue against, in any room, by anyone who had been present for the last several hours.

A generational talent.

The kind that appeared *once* a century, if that, and *only* if you were looking in the right place at the right time. The UHF had looked, just experimentally in the right direction, at the right time, and it had found *her*.

The evening kept Veyra busy well past the point where she had any hope of recovering her composure fully, the mingling beginning in earnest once the recordings had wrapped and the after-party took hold.

More than two dozen Legacies found their way to her over the course of the next few hours—from every region of UHF space, it seemed—and every single one of them wanted to talk about Corvus.

'Squad Leader of an Alpha Squad with a Two-Star Crysium Ace Squad award, and two Two-Star MVM recipients among its members.'

She ran it through her head more than once that night, still trying to find the edges of it.

Still trying to fully absorb the distance between what they had hoped for him and what he had actually done.

She and Orvyn had carried a quiet worry for years—that they had pushed too hard, too early, that the weight of expectation placed on him before he was old enough to carry it might have done something to him that wouldn't show until it was too late to fix.

That worry was gone now.

Corvus had clearly not bent under any of it.

He had simply grown into it, and then past it, in ways she *genuinely* could not have predicted.

By the midpoint of the after-party, even Thal Masters had made his way over to the small cluster that had formed around Thal Sen and Madam Dravain, and the four of them had settled into the quiet, comfortable exchange of people who had earned the right to speak plainly with each other.

Pleasantries, briefly.

Then Thal Sen leaned fractionally closer to Masters, her fan raised now even against Veyra and Madam Dravain, her voice dropping to the register she used when something was meant only for the immediate circle.

"You know," she began, with the particular lightness of a woman who was about to say something that was not light at all, "about the Cyan girl that upstaged your Rachel, Raymond."

The fan moved once, back and forth, slowly.

"There is *one* more thing the recording did not cover. Something that even I nearly missed—were it not for a rather fortunate coincidence."

"Oh?" Masters said. Genuine curiosity hushed across his face, completely unguarded.

Which was, Veyra noted, a relatively rare expression on him.

'Something a Sen would have missed, if not for luck...'

She turned that over once and set it aside, because the full implications of it were too large to process while simultaneously listening.

"The girl is an orphan," Madam Sen continued. "Or rather, *was*. The last name should point the way, if you follow it far enough. Because this McKay—the *specific* one she has claimed as her own—is not just *any* McKay."

She let that sit.

Veyra watched Thal Masters' eyes go still in the way eyes went still when someone was running records internally, pulling on threads, cross-referencing.

She was doing the same thing herself, instinctively, moving backward through everything she knew under the name McKay, and there was *a lot*.

Such a common name was hard to get anything from a vague nudge like Thal Sen had just provided. She went back years—thirty years, forty, further—and found nothing that landed with any weight before she ran out of road entirely.

Thal Masters, as was expected, got there first.

His eyes went *wide*.

"No." He shook his head once, firmly. "No, Eve. Don't—"

Thal Sen lowered the fan.

It was, in Veyra's entire experience of the woman across this single evening and every prior occasion she had been in the same room as her, the most she had ever seen on that face.

The grin was full and uncontained, and what it revealed—what the fan and emotional control had been hiding all evening, what perhaps only a handful of people alive had *ever* been positioned to see—were teeth that had been *sharpened*. Each one individually, deliberately, ground to a razor-point, the full set of them pearl-white, perfectly maintained and arranged into a smile that had absolutely *no business* existing on a human face.

Veyra knew immediately that this specific image was going to find her again in the dark, years from now, at moments she would not be expecting it.

"She is General Harbinger's adopted daughter, Raymond."

The voice was warm, almost gentle.

Her hand came to rest lightly on his armoured gauntlet, a brief and precise pat.

"And you have just volunteered to go headhunting for a Titanicus-class Void entity in her *immediate* vicinity."

A small pause, perfectly weighted. "I wish you the *very* best of luck. And I sincerely hope—for your sake, and for the sake of our long-standing friendship—that the girl has *not* inherited her adopted father's peculiarities."

The colour left Thal Masters' face entirely.

Veyra had attended a great many events in a great many rooms across her lifetime, and she had seen powerful people receive bad news in a variety of ways.

She had *never*, in any of those rooms, seen Raymond Oleaven Masters go pale like this...