

Volume 2 - Chapter 41 - UHF 101: Challenges & Aces

JUNO VESARI (opening remarks):

"Welcome back, listeners. In this follow-up to our ever-popular segment on the UHF Challenge System, we once again bring you direct voices from within the ranks—raw, unfiltered perspectives from Recruits and Privates aboard the Recruit and Main-Force Transport Vessels in the fleet.

This week, we're stationed aboard the *Imperator of Deserts*.

Whether eyeing a coveted Alpha slot, holding the line in Beta, or observing from the sidelines, every voice tells part of the story. So let's hear what they had to say, shall we?"

—

PRIVATE LIAN YU, Squad: "Vespitula", Support, Unchallenged:

"Oh, it's cool, I guess. Gotta be kinda scary though, no? Like—one day you're eatin' your lunch, next thing you know, someone calls your role and now you're in the shit, having to prepare to stand on the field gettin' your face wrecked by someone with three Gold-rarity Abilities and a personal grudge—or just a whole bunch of drive. I just... try to stay low and train. Ain't ready to step in that kinda ring yet. Maybe next Assessment."

—

RECRUIT MIRA SAAD, Squad: "Onigiri", Offensive Heavy, Two-Time Challenger (Unsuccessful):

"Honestly? It's rough. I've challenged twice for Beta already. Both times, I thought I was ready. And I was—on paper. But paper burns quick when you're up against someone who's been in serious squad formations for several months longer than you have. Still, no regrets. Learned more in those fights than any class the UHF threw at us. Next time? I'll win."

—

PRIVATE HENRY LIMAR, Floater, Support (Mechanic):

"Look, ain't nobody challenging or being challenged by Mechanics. We're the glue behind the guns, man—ehh woman. But that whole Challenge System? It's stressful even just watchin' it, honestly. You see someone train for three months, build their whole loadout, work their ass off in the Assessment, then train for another month straight. Finally they get into the Challenge and... then get bodied in twenty seconds. Still, it's fair, I guess. Brutally fair. Best people rise. The rest keep tryin'. Nothing else to be said about it."

—

PRIVATE JULES HARVEY, Floater, Offensive Heavy (Self-Identified 'Benchwarmer'):

*"I train. I eat. I run simulations. I've written five full loadout guides for Offensive Heavies. Am I ever gonna challenge for one? Maybe not. But if someone else fails and there's an opening in one of the top squads? AND I managed to get a pass from a class or Assessment? I'll be there with my homework **and** my medkit. Not all of us gotta swing a hammer to make a dent."*

PRIVATE ELI VERAN, Squad: “Falsetto”, Defensive Heavy, Unchallenged (Yet):

*"I watch the roster shifts every night before bed. Like clockwork. It's inspiring... and completely terrifying. I train six hours a day, every day, and I still don't know if I'm good enough to challenge anyone. But I'm planning to. **Soon**. I just need the right window. One clean opening. That's all it takes, right? So... Maybe next Assessment, or when a Prof thinks I'm ready and hands me a slip."*

PRIVATE ELIAH MORDEN, Squad: Alpha, Recon (Two Successful Defenses):

"First time I got challenged, I puked three times before stepping into the first sim. Twice more before the second. Wasn't scared of losing though—was scared of not being good enough, y'see? You don't realize how much that damn place means until someone tries to take it from you. Now? I dare them all to fucking try. I've bled for this Emperor-forsaken spot. Let 'em all come and break themselves on me."

PRIVATE RUSSEL JANG, Squad: Beta, Offensive Heavy, Former Floater:

"I challenged Beta's Offensive Heavy role last cycle. Got through by the skin of my teeth. Was on fire the whole fight—dodging, taunting, dragging half the sim's aggro. Walked out missing a leg, an arm and my entire armour was broken beyond recognition, but I walked out. Craziest part? Next day, someone challenged me. The win didn't bump my points enough to get above the people that also had an eye on the spot, but hadn't gotten a proper Challenge Slip. But when I unexpectedly took it, they were technically above me in the ratings, so... Yeah. No rest. Just relentless fucking pressure."

JUNO VESARI (closing remarks):

"In the UHF, prestige is not given. It is contested, earned, and defended under fire.

Whether they succeed or fall, Marines who engage with the Challenge System do more than shape their squads—they shape themselves.

Stay vigilant. Stay hungry.

And if you're aiming for a Named Squad, remember: The challenge begins **long** before the Committee calls your name, and continues to persist long after..."

[GalNet Archive – Citizen's Voice | Weekly Segment: Challenge Accepted]

Originally aired: 938 PFC

Segment Host: Juno Vesari, UHF Media Liaison and Podcast Host

=====

=====

PoV: Tiberius Soren

“Yes, once a Challenge concludes, the loser gains immunity from any further Challenges until the next quarter,” Professor Harrow explained, his tone light with amusement. “The winner, however? No such luck. It wouldn’t exactly be fair if someone in Alpha Squad, for example, got challenged once, won, and then got to coast through the rest of the quarter untouched, right?”

He gave a short laugh to himself before continuing. “No, no. Immunity’s for the one who falls short. The winner has to keep defending their slot until every last Challenge has been resolved—or until they lose. It’s stressful, absolutely. But that’s kind of the *point*. That’s what separates the best from the rest of you lot: Whether or not they can take the pressure and hold the line.”

Tiberius jotted the note down on his datapad, nodding slightly to himself.

It wasn’t exactly surprising. He’d already assumed that the Challenge System wouldn’t hand out protection to the winners—not in a place as competitive as the UHF.

‘Makes sense. It’s not like anyone can just throw their name into the ring for a top slot anyway...’ he thought, tapping his stylus against the corner of his pad. *‘To even Challenge an Alpha member, you’d have to either outperform them in an Assessment, outrank them once the full Recruit ratings go public after the second Assessment, or somehow get your hands on a Challenge Pass from a professor...’*

Which, from everything he’d learned about the UHF so far, probably bordered on a downright mythical occurrence.

The UHF as a whole was nothing if not fanatical about its regulations.

Even the *existence* of a professor-sanctioned bypass was already surprising.

The idea that such a Pass would be even remotely common? Absolutely laughable.

Still, the fact that they existed at all?

‘That’s worth remembering.’ He scratched his jaw, brushing his fingers through the rough stubble on his chin as his eyes flicked back to his notes.

Professor Harrow had been lecturing for about half an hour now, and most of that had gone straight into the Challenge System’s structure, mindset, and regulations. Which made sense—based on the tension in the room, it was clearly what most Recruits were here for anyway.

‘Glad he doesn’t waste time with needless fluff. Straight to the good parts... Can definitely respect that.’

Tiberius had even made a point of sitting a few seats away from Roland.

His squadmate had many talents—studying quietly during a lecture wasn't one of them.

And with how dense Professor Harrow's explanation of the Challenge System had been so far, Tiberius wasn't about to let himself miss a single word.

'If I want to Challenge anyone this Assessment cycle, I need the full rules rundown... No gaps, no guesswork.'

From everything Harrow had laid out so far, he'd already started identifying a couple of viable paths—possible angles he could work with.

But one route had become immediately and irrevocably closed, almost immediately.

Challenging Alpha Squad's Recon/Sniper? Guaranteed suicide.

He'd initially thought it might be possible—under the right sim conditions, with a scenario tailored *just* right, he might have had a shot. But after Professor Harrow had broken down how the scoring for Recon/Sniper worked, Tiberius had tossed the idea out straight away.

It wasn't necessarily that the scoring was in any way different from the other roles, of course, but rather what the actual Mandatory Sub-Roles for that particular spot included.

His eyes flicked toward the back of the lecture hall, to where Thea McKay sat with Karania Faulkner beside her. As always.

She wasn't in uniform for once, and he barely registered it until a half-second later, when it occurred to him that the outfit wasn't half bad. Pale blouse, dark pants, nothing flashy.

Looked like she was finally starting to get comfortable in her skin—at least more so than she had been earlier when he had entered the hall and saw her continuously tugging at her clothes like they were booby-trapped.

Still. Fashion wasn't his game.

"She's a real fucking monster for that role, isn't she..." he muttered under his breath, barely audible even to himself.

He'd already known that, deep inside. Everyone had.

After the Assessment, no one with even half a functioning cortex could pretend she'd just lucked her way into Alpha Squad.

She hadn't just won her spot—she'd *buried* the competition.

And not just Sovereign Recruits. Other ships too. And a good chunk of the Privates as well.

But even with all that in mind, Tiberius had still held onto the idea that there were parts of the Role where he could outperform her. That with the right sim setup, under the right scoring parameters, he could land a convincing enough win to Challenge her properly.

And honestly? He still believed that.

The problem was, those particular strengths weren't part of the official scoring metrics for the Recon/Sniper Role.

At least, not in a way that mattered when it came to passing the Challenge.

His notes on the subject were a mess by now.

Sections had been scratched out, redrawn, restructured, and marked up with half-legible shorthand. There were at least three different question marks next to several entries and a cluster of half-sentences near the bottom that he had planned to turn into actual questions—questions he'd wanted to ask Professor Harrow directly.

But by the time he'd looked up, half those questions had already been answered by other Recruits tossing out their thoughts from across the room.

Still, the base information was solid. The structure of the Challenge Scoring was clear enough now, even if it wasn't exactly what he'd hoped for.

Tiberius narrowed his eyes at the datapad in his hands, reading over the bulleted section one more time:

Recon/Sniper Mandatory Sub-Roles:

- **Advanced Recon:** The skill to locate, track, and assess enemy positions before the rest of the squad makes contact, as well as spotting traps, ambushes and enemy-prepared installations ahead of time.
- **Long Range Accuracy:** The capacity to reliably take out high-value targets at distances over 1km.
- **Tactical Communication & Spotting:** The ability to relay enemy positions, squad routes, and priority threats with clarity and speed.
- **Stealth & Infiltration:** The know-how to approach or reposition without detection, both in urban and natural environments.

Recon/Sniper Optional Sub-Roles:

- **Counter-Recon/Sniping Capability:** Specialized training in detecting, out-positioning, and eliminating enemy Recon/Snipers.
- **Forward Sabotage:** Ability to breach or disable key infrastructure before a unified assault.
- **Climbing/Traversal Expertise:** Proficiency in vertical and horizontal advanced movement, urban mobility, or difficult terrain to access otherwise unreachable vantage points.
- **Escape & Evasion:** Personal survival skillset allowing solo extraction when separated from squad or under heavy pursuit.
- **Mobile Firing Solutions:** Skill with on-the-move combat, snapshots, and close-range fallback weapons when forced out of position.
- **Distraction & Disruption:** Capability for deployment of individual strategies or psychological squad-tactics to confuse and split enemy attention.

- **Trap Setting & Disarming:** The capacity to place or identify and disarm traps that manipulate movement or delay pursuit.
- **Solo Operative Viability:** Ability to operate fully independently for extended periods without resupply or direct support.

“Haaa,” a sigh slipped out as Tiberius scanned the notes again, frustration tugging at his brow.

He’d already done the math—painfully, thoroughly—and marked off every single sub-role where he’d thought Thea McKay might, or was very likely going to, outperform him.

Which had left him staring at a list where every box was crossed out, save for two: “Mobile Firing Solutions” and “Trap Setting & Disarming”.

And even for that first one he hadn’t dared give himself a clear edge on. Or any edge, really.

Just a shaky “40/60” scribbled next to it.

Tiberius knew his strengths.

He was bulkier, stronger, and far better equipped to push through close and mid-range encounters with sheer brute force.

If it came down to a one-on-one at thirty meters, especially with him geared up in his vastly heavier loadouts, he was confident he had a chance at beating her with sheer stats—armour, raw Strength, weapon difference; the whole package.

But that wasn’t what the sub-role was testing.

‘It’s not about who wins a fight in a vacuum or in a one-on-one...’ he reminded himself, frowning. *‘It’s about who can maintain pressure while moving, who can keep fire consistent in dynamic environments without compromising recon integrity or wasting unnecessary amounts of time or ammo.’*

Raw strength didn’t score points here. Not unless it was paired with utility and control.

And, frankly, with Thea McKay’s uncanny precognitive abilities, Tiberius was seriously doubting if he even stood a chance there. He had been very optimistic in his hopes for the simulation parameters when giving himself the 40% shot at taking her down for that sub-role.

The only other sub-role he hadn’t managed to make any real judgements on was “Trap Setting & Disarming.”

It had a lonely question mark next to it, the last flicker of possibility.

There hadn’t been any footage of Thea working with traps during the public feeds—none at the Awards, none in the post-Assessment releases so far.

*‘But that doesn’t mean she **can’t** do it. Just that it wasn’t her focus in the clips they showed us...’*

And that was the problem.

Even *if* he had a slim edge in one or two areas, she absolutely *dominated* the rest.

Her sheer level of aptitude in most of the sub-roles was beyond anything Tiberius had considered possible at their level, yet here she was... Holding onto that Alpha Squad spot with an iron-fist that would make Terra itself proud.

*'No, the Recon/Sniper role's locked down. No getting around that. But the Squad Leader or Support roles? Those **definitely** have potential...'*

With another low sigh, he let his gaze drift further down his notes, flipping past the headings.

Squad Leader Mandatory Sub-Roles:

- **Tactical Oversight:** The capacity to read the battlefield in real time and issue decisive, adaptable orders based on shifting combat dynamics.
- **Command Presence:** The ability to maintain control over the squad's morale, positioning, and cohesion under pressure.
- **Astute Situational Awareness:** The know-how to keep a constant, accurate mental map of friendly and enemy positions, resources, mission objectives, and environmental factors.
- **Strategic Adaptability:** The skill to rapidly pivot when plans collapse or unexpected threats appear—often without full information. Capacity to continue directing the squad effectively even when under jamming conditions or physically separated from the Battlefield Commander or HQ.

Squad Leader Optional Sub-Roles:

- **Multi-Squad Coordination:** Ability to communicate and synchronize actions with allied squads or command units in real-time.
- **System & UHF Interface Proficiency:** High fluency in using UHF-specific and System-linked commands, tactical markers, comms channels, and live-feed analysis tools.
- **Combat-Capable Command:** While not required to outgun the Offensive Heavy, a Squad Leader should possess sufficient combat capabilities to be able to effectively support any other member of the Squad.
- **Crisis Mediation:** Skill in de-escalating internal disputes, managing emotional responses, or pre-planned prevention of Squad collapse in chain-of-command scenarios.
- **Post-Mission Deconstruction:** Can lead tactical after-action reviews to identify weaknesses and restructure future squad behavior.
- **Fallback Authority & Expertise:** In the absence of a Battlefield Commander, can temporarily assume operational control over larger units without major loss of efficiency.

For the Squad Leader position, things were already looking a lot better for Tiberius—especially since he had a far more complete picture of Sylarion's capabilities than he did Thea McKay's.

'It's lucky that even Alpha and Beta Squad's leaders aren't locked away in some private comms channel during the squad leader meetings... I really should thank Major Quinn for those glorified intel dumps at some point,' he thought with a faint smirk, tapping his stylus against the edge of his datapad.

While both he and Sylarion obviously covered the *mandatory* sub-roles for the Squad Leader position the *optional* ones were where things got interesting. Thea McKay had been near-impossible to touch in her role.

Sylarion, though? Sylarion had *cracks*—and not just hairline ones.

*'The most glaring weaknesses are in "Multi-Squad Coordination," "Fallback Authority & Expertise," and—most of all—"Combat-Capable Command." When it comes to raw frontline performance, Sylarion ranks in the bottom twenty percent of active Squad Leaders aboard the Sovereign in my estimate... That's a **major** black mark.'*

He'd already run the numbers.

On paper, he had a clean 50/50 shot at winning a Challenge against Sylarion.

It wasn't a longshot. It was actually viable.

The real problem—the part he hadn't quite cracked yet—wasn't Sylarion himself.

It was *his squad*. Or rather, *any* squad he was in.

'The real killer is his [Direct Order] Ability... I can't possibly match the kind of compound boost that gives when it's applied to monsters like Isabella Itoku, Karania Faulkner, and Thea McKay, all at once... They're already at the top of their game—add a command-tier multiplicative buff on top and there's just no competing with that level of synergy. Not with anything I've got or can get right now...'

He'd gone in circles trying to solve that one problem and come up blank every time.

Still, on every other front?

He had Sylarion beat.

He was better at fighting while leading. He didn't need to hang back or micromanage; he could *direct and execute* in real time. He had practical experience with multi-squad deployments, having orchestrated them multiple times during the Assessment Phase—something Sylarion himself had admitted lacking during a squad leader debrief.

And when it came to large-scale operations and tactical planning? That had been one of Tiberius's main focuses since day *one*.

He wasn't just confident—he was *certain* he had the edge there.

The rest of the optional sub-roles were a mixed bag. Some might lean toward Sylarion, sure—but there were several that Tiberius knew were more up in the air.

'All things considered... it's not just possible. It's doable. Maybe even likely.'

While he couldn't Challenge Sylarion this cycle, as he had also won an MVM medal as was, thusly, immune, it was a definite consideration he'd have to make in future ones, if he couldn't manage to get into Alpha by the start of the second Assessment.

He tapped his datapad, circled Sylarion's name twice—then underlined it.

Then he scrolled down further on his list, passing by the Offensive Heavy sub-role section—which, like the Recon/Sniper one, had been almost entirely crossed out in red; nothing there had been viable for him at this point.

But then his eyes landed on the Support Role.

"The Support role's a weird one, isn't it...?" he muttered to himself, tapping the screen and zooming in slightly to get a clearer look at the sub-roles.

It was the only Role that had genuinely surprised him when Professor Harrow had broken it down earlier in the lecture.

The surprising part? There were *no mandatory sub-roles* for Support.

None.

Unlike every other UHF-designated Role within the Marine Corps, the Support slot was built entirely from optional sub-roles—plus one major twist: any mandatory sub-role from *other* Roles could also be pulled into its overall evaluation.

In effect, it was like a wildcard slot.

A single Role designed to overlap with *every other member of the squad* and provide additional coverage wherever needed. Recon. Defense. Offense. Command.

All of it, wrapped up into a single designation.

That kind of flexibility was dangerous—and full of opportunity.

Tiberius leaned back slightly, raising an eyebrow as he processed that again.

'Didn't even have Desmond Reimart on my radar before... But with how wide the Support category stretches, he might actually be the best possible target. Sylarion's a gamble. Desmond Reimart, though? He might be the path of least resistance...'

The Drone Operator of Alpha Squad didn't have any standout abilities, at least not that Tiberius had been able to uncover.

He wasn't firmly locked into the squad's core either—not like Sylarion or Thea McKay.

No specific anchor Role. No real commanding presence.

Tiberius scratched thoughtfully at his chin, eyes flicking over his handwritten notes.

He hadn't even bothered writing out the *full* list of optional sub-roles for Support.

There were just too many.

But he *had* jotted down the ones that either he or Desmond could reasonably fulfill.

Out of the twelve he'd marked?

Seven went to him. Five, to Desmond.

'And on top of that... I cover more than three times as many mandatory sub-roles from other core Roles. That should definitely count for something with the committee.'

And yet, even with that clear advantage in mind, there was one thing that gave him serious pause. One unknown that kept buzzing around the back of his mind:

The Drone Operator problem.

Tiberius had spent the last week digging through every scrap of intel he could find about the members of Alpha Squad, in order to figure out his whole Challenge situation, which had proven particularly prudent—especially since Professor Harrow had just confirmed that the cutoff date for Challenges was two weeks post-Assessment.

That left about five days to make a move.

In the process, he'd stumbled on dozens of cached GalNet articles buried in the Sovereign's intranet. Every single one of them praised Drone Operators to high heavens—especially higher-Tiered ones—as some of the most dangerously flexible builds in the entire Galactic War.

And they weren't fringe opinions or fan blogs.

These had been interviews with veteran officers, post-deployment breakdowns, tactical commentary.

The kind of stuff that *mattered*.

'If Desmond manages to stretch his Assessment rewards the right way... even partially... he could already be fielding enough utility drones to cover half the sub-roles I'm relying on beating him out on... One well-upgraded support drone, a recon model, something with AI-assisted comms or line-of-sight relay tech... It's bound to add up damn quick with the sheer number of Optional sub-roles the Support role has...'

Tiberius frowned as he stared down at Desmond Reimart's name on his pad, the stylus hovering.

'I only get one shot before the next Assessment window. If I misjudge this, I'm out of the running completely. And a halfway-realized Drone Operator with the right toys... could dismantle my odds in minutes.'

He didn't cross the name out. Nor did he circle it.

But he *did* draw a question mark next to it.

Big. Bold. And underlined.

Just then, a line from the ongoing lecture broke through Tiberius' thoughts and snapped his attention forward again.

"Great question!" Professor Harrow said brightly, a wide grin spreading across his face. "And one that's perfect for steering us away from the more Challenge-centric talk we've been buried in for the past half hour, right?"

Tiberius looked up as the professor began his usual slow, deliberate circle around the podium—a habit Tiberius had already clocked as a sort of '*here comes the long speech*' indicator.

He leaned back slightly in his chair, datapad still in his lap, stylus hovering mid-air.

"The question," Professor Harrow continued, glancing toward the crowd, "for those of you who weren't paying attention or maybe didn't catch what the good Recruit in the third row asked—was this: *What's even the point of the Challenges, when the ranking boards already show who's the best at each Role?*"

He paused briefly, then smirked.

"Now, the answer to that is about as complicated as you'd expect from a military bureaucracy, but lucky for me—and *unlucky* for all of you—I'm gonna shamelessly use that open-ended mess of a question to pivot us toward the next part of the lecture that I was going to cover anyway."

A ripple of laughter moved through the room.

Tiberius couldn't help but crack a small smile.

The Professor had this way of being honest and cutting while still somehow keeping things light. It wasn't showboating, not exactly—more like controlled chaos, wrapped in charm and delivered with a scalpel.

"One of the reasons," Professor Harrow said, having resumed his pacing, "is that the UHF wants you to strive for greatness. Over and over again. You get put in a room with Stellar Republic drones and yeah, you'll learn to shoot straight and follow orders. But that's not growth. Not *real* growth."

He stopped, turning to face the rows of Recruits more directly now.

"We want you fighting people who are *just as good as you are*. People breathing down your neck. Pushing you. Forcing you to adapt. Because that's where the real stuff happens. That's where the sharp edge of your instincts gets truly honed."

He let the words settle... then added, quieter, but more pointed:

“Because we don’t want you to be *Marines*.”

That landed with weight.

Tiberius caught several heads turning around the room.

Confused glances. Raised brows. A few whispers.

Professor Harrow didn’t speak for a moment—letting the silence linger long enough to turn uncomfortable.

Tiberius didn’t need the explanation.

He’d been thinking the same thing from the moment he stepped into his first briefing.

‘If the UHF just wanted Marines, they wouldn’t be limiting their recruitment drives as heavily...’

“We want you to be *Aces*,” Harrow finally said, voice calm but razor-sharp. “You get it? Marines are a dime a dozen. We lose hundreds of thousands every month across the galaxy. It’s a harsh truth, but it’s *the* truth.”

He swept a hand across the room, pointing a finger briefly into the air for emphasis.

“Tens of thousands get Zero’ed on every front—on every ship, every station, every campaign across the borders of our territories. And not because they weren’t good Marines. But because being a good Marines *isn’t enough* anymore. We don’t need bodies who know how to pull a trigger. With only a couple decades left in this war, we need something else, right?”

He paused again, this time locking eyes with several students in the front rows.

“We need *Aces*. People who can change the outcome of a battle *on their own*.”

Then he came to a full stop at the center of the podium, hands loosely folded in front of him, his posture suddenly formal in a way that made the room quiet down all over again.

“Now. What *are* Aces, exactly?”

For a moment, no one said anything—half the room unsure if it was rhetorical or not.

Then, slowly, a few Recruits began to shift upright in their seats, postures straightening as if they’d just realized this wasn’t a rhetorical question after all.

One hand went up near the front—hesitant, but steady.

Professor Harrow pointed with an easy flick of the fingers, his head tilting slightly as his eyes locked on the boy. “Go ahead.”

The young man cleared his throat. “Aren’t... Aren’t they the ones that get the Ace Slots on Battlefields? Like... the higher-Tiered Marines that act as heroes or something? The ones that help turn the tide?”

A sharp, double-tongue click came from Harrow—something he'd done a few times before.

Not quite a “tsk,” not quite a pause, but more of a habit that signaled his gears were turning.

“Those, dear Recruit, would be what we call *Battlefield Aces*,” Professor Harrow replied, his voice light but quick to correct. “It’s a bit of a terminology minefield, if I’m entirely honest... You’re not wrong—but you’re not entirely right either.”

He walked over to the side of the podium and tapped at his pad, throwing a projection up on the large datascreeen at the back wall. A crude diagram bloomed to life—circles, arrows, numbers, and a few hastily drawn stick figures, all scrawled in handwriting that looked like it had been copied straight from a mad scientist’s notebook.

“There are *two* types of Aces in the UHF,” he went on, tapping at two separate parts of his chart, even as he kept talking. “There’s your standard Ace—someone who outperforms in practically every way, across their specialization, role, coordination, situational judgment, the works. That’s the *goal* of this program. That’s what you’re here to become.”

Then he tapped the other side. “*Battlefield Aces*, on the other hand, are... limited. And I mean that in the strictest technical sense. Their number is *capped*, agreed upon in advance by both Factions in any given Battlefield, before the first shots are even fired.”

He zoomed in on a section labeled “Tier 1 Battlefield,” a few red circles highlighting certain names.

“Imagine a Tier 1 deployment. That’s what you’ll be seeing the most of during Digital Missions, the Assessments, and, if you make it, your early deployments as actual Privates. Tier 1 is where the bulk of combat happens. It’s the mud, the blood, the front line, right?”

He looked out across the crowd, letting that hang for a beat before saying it plainly.

“And most of you? That’s where you’ll stay for your entire life.”

The murmur that followed wasn’t loud—but it was sharp.

A quiet ripple of disbelief and unspoken insult passed through the gathered Recruits, several turning to look at one another like someone had just slapped them in the face.

Tiberius, for his part, barely blinked.

He shifted slightly in his seat and sighed through his nose, already annoyed by the sudden wave of shock from his fellow Recruits.

‘It’s just math,’ he thought, glancing at the others. *‘How do they not get that if tens of thousands of Marines get Zero’ed every day, the vast, vast majority of them are Tier 1? You think Tier 2s are disposable? Tier 3s? It’d be suicide trying to run this whole war machine that way.’*

The room was still buzzing, low whispers crackling like static across the hall, but Professor Harrow didn’t bother waiting for it to die down.

He clicked his tongue again—twice, sharp—and zoomed the diagram back out with a swipe of his hand before continuing, his voice steady and just loud enough to cut through the noise.

“Generally speaking,” he said, pacing along the edge of the podium again, “Tier 1 Battlefields come with what we call a Battlefield Ace +2 modifier. Which means that any slot granted the Battlefield Ace designation—however many the Factions agree on for that engagement—can hold up to a Tier-3 Prime Power Participant. Marine, Soldier, Specialist, doesn’t matter what you call them. You could have a “Dog-Man” in that slot, and it would be perfectly within the rules.”

He paused just long enough to let the chuckles settle before adding, “Now here’s the kicker: *All* Battlefield Aces are Aces. But not all Aces are Battlefield Aces.”

The diagram shifted again on the screen behind him, forming two new shapes—two circles.

One was massive, taking up most of the display. The other was tiny, barely the size of a firing pin’s head by comparison.

“This big one?” He tapped the larger circle. “These are your Aces. There’s a dozen or two of them per drive, per ship, give or take. We call someone an Ace when they embody the pinnacle of performance within their role—or a cluster of sub-roles—in a given operational environment, right?”

His eyes scanned the crowd, then drifted toward the back of the room.

“Take our very own Aces sitting with us here today as prime examples.”

Tiberius didn’t turn, though he could feel the shift in the room as a wave of heads swiveled toward the back. He already knew who Professor Harrow had pointed directly at.

“Our two Alpha Squad members in today’s lecture—thank you both for showing up, by the way—are prime Aces. Top of their roles. The Assessment made that clear enough.”

He clapped once—sharp—snapping the room’s attention back toward the front, and gestured toward the smaller circle. “This tiny one here? These are the *Battlefield Aces*. A fraction of a fraction. They’re the chosen few, handpicked out of the massive number of Aces by the brass to represent the absolute peak of what the UHF has to offer. They’re not just Marines. They’re *symbols*, right? The tip of the spear, forged out of everything the System and the Marine Corps can offer.”

Then, with a theatrical sweep of his hand, he gestured again toward the back row. “Now, will these two women become Battlefield Aces someday? Who knows. That part’s still unwritten. But if you ask me?”

He gave a slow shrug, letting a knowing grin tug at the corner of his mouth. “I wouldn’t bet *against* them. It’s not every cycle that a Recruit comes out of an initial Assessment with that many medals. Especially medals *that* impressive. Let alone *two*.”

That earned another round of murmurs, scattered whispers of disbelief and curiosity rippling through the seated Recruits.

Tiberius rolled his eyes with a quiet scoff.

'He's buttering them up again. Feeding them just enough to keep their jaws slack.' He leaned forward slightly in his seat, watching the others react like they hadn't seen it coming. *'But that's not really his fault. They're letting it happen... Morons.'*

Professor Harrow clapped again, louder this time, clearing the mental fog in the room like a gunshot.

"If you put half as much effort into learning and reflecting as you do whining whenever I deliver a truth that stings," he said, tone dry but amused, "you might just earn the right to be called an Ace yourselves. Maybe even a *Battlefield Ace*, if you're particularly studious."

Tiberius watched him smile—wider now, fully in control of the moment—and felt that quiet sting of respect that came from recognizing someone dragging the room into a perfect ambush like that.

'Classic.'

"Now, when it comes to *Battlefield Aces*, they vary wildly in role and purpose, right?"

Professor Harrow began again, his tone shifting slightly as he walked to center stage. "Some are strategic planners, others are pure-blooded combat monsters. Some are field medics, or infiltration experts, or logistics miracles. It all depends on the battlefield's demands, and what the brass deems most valuable to drop in like a sledgehammer, right?"

He waved his hand, shutting off the diagram behind him with a flick.

The soft hum of the projector faded as he stepped into the open, no podium, no barrier—just him, talking like he was explaining things to a group of half-curious friends instead of a room full of Recruits.

"Now—like I said earlier—the terminology? Absolute *nightmare*. Battlefield Aces, *on* the actual battlefield, usually aren't called 'Battlefield Aces.' People just say 'Aces'."

He looked around the room, as if daring someone to challenge that point.

"In most situations, that's fine. Because most of the chatter planet-side is about squads, not individuals. Unit positioning, objectives, mission flow. No one's sitting around debating who counts as a proper Ace in the middle of a firefight."

He held up a finger, pacing again.

"So, to lock this down nice and tight: Aces are the best at their roles—or clusters of sub-roles—in a given combat environment. *Battlefield Aces* are still Aces, but they're the handpicked, specially authorized kind. The elite-of-the-elite types who get their names on mission briefings and kill lists. They're your tide-turners, right? The ones Command drops in

when they need to say, '*This battle isn't over yet.*' Or... I guess '*This battle is about to be over,*' depending on which ones they send in."

He paused, let that sink in, then gave a pointed look across the room. "And when you're *on* a Battlefield, and someone says 'Ace,' they almost *always* mean *Battlefield* Ace. Context is king. Clear enough?"

Tiberius nodded, arms folded across his chest, but he could already see the confusion on a few faces around him—Recruits blinking slowly, eyebrows furrowed, still trying to puzzle out the categories like it was some kind of trick question.

He sighed and leaned back with a low groan, one hand dragging down his face.

'This is gonna be a long lecture...'

Right on cue, one of the Recruits spoke up—loudly enough to pierce the rising murmur. "So, uh... if a Battlefield Ace meets an Ace on a battlefield... what do they call each other?"

A second of stunned silence passed.

Tiberius closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose.

'No, really. This is going to take for-fucking-ever, isn't it...?'