

Arc 1 - Chapter 138 - Awards II

PoV: Rachel Veronica Masters

The tension Major Quinn was building by holding back the name of the winner was *thoroughly* pissing Rachel off. She'd been waiting over a month for this—to hear her name on the big stage, to get her dues, and finally rub her win in the face of that smug asshole from Alpha Squad by one-upping him.

Rachel didn't need this drawn-out game of "let's pretend this is a beauty pageant" that Major Quinn was playing. Her fingers drummed impatiently against her leg, her jaw clenched, as she glared at the stage.

Her squad sat just as tense, but for reasons Rachel couldn't even begin to understand.

After all, this was *her* award, not theirs.

"When it comes to this Defensive Heavy in the assessment," Major Quinn continued, her voice full of admiration, "they truly embodied the best of what this drive has to offer—the very best of what you, as the *Sovereign's* Recruits, can bring forth. Each and every one of you should be proud and inspired by their actions, aiming to emulate them and strive for that same level of excellence."

Rachel bit back a scoff, forcing herself not to roll her eyes. The whole thing felt like a cheesy speech with Quinn's over-the-top praise dragging out the suspense.

'Just say my fucking name already,' she thought bitterly, the anticipation inside her coiling tighter with each word. There was no doubt in her mind that Major Quinn was about to call her up to the stage—but the wait was still excruciating.

After all, she'd put on an absolutely stellar performance in the assessment; there was *no chance* Lucas Callahan could have outdone her.

This was the one silver lining to being denied her rightful place—Beta Squad was a collection of complete and utter losers. Normally, having to carry their dead weight would have been infuriating for someone like her, the best of the best.

But for the Assessment Awards, it was *perfect*.

Unlike her, Lucas Callahan had to compete for a spot in the spotlight while surrounded by powerhouses like Alpha Squad's Squad Medic or the Offensive Heavy.

With members like those, how often would a Defensive Heavy's sacrifice even be necessary in the first place? With that squad, it was unlikely he'd ever get the chance to shine, with his "heroic moment" denied before it could even come into existence by everyone else's stellar performances.

For Rachel, though, this was no issue.

Her squad was barely functional, each member practically falling apart at the seams.

It had been *her* leading them through every engagement, *her* pulling them back from the brink, and *her* delivering inspirational moments that had practically written themselves into legend already.

Lucas Callahan needed some sort of cosmic alignment for Alpha Squad to crumble around him to earn a place for this award; she just had to show up.

She hadn't even needed to force situations for the sake of appearances, even if she had initially planned to do so—her squad had *naturally* given her ample opportunity to prove herself as they repeatedly failed to perform again and again.

"Now, without any further preamble, let's take a look at our Platinum Award winner's heroic actions," Major Quinn announced, finally moving to the moment Rachel had been waiting for.

Rachel held her breath as the screen behind the Major shifted, displaying a crumbling, broken cityscape. The camera panned down to reveal the battleground of the recording, and Rachel had to fight back a triumphant yelp.

She could feel her pulse racing as Major Quinn's voice rang out: "This is Recruit Rachel Veronica Masters, from Beta Squad."

Everything else faded as Rachel's mind clung to that one line, blocking out the rest of Quinn's words.

This was it. She had done it.

The phrase echoed in her mind like a chorus as she felt her squad's hands pushing and prodding her from both sides, their enthusiasm grating on her nerves.

This was *her* award, not theirs. Why the fuck did they make such fuss about it?

She had known this was her day the moment she'd woken up.

Everything had felt aligned: Her feet had landed perfectly on the ground when she'd gotten out of bed, her breakfast had tasted richer than usual, and even the air had felt clearer.

She'd tried to ignore those signs—*superstitions like those weren't her thing*—but there had been no shaking the feeling deep inside her that today would be the day she proved her worth to everyone.

A satisfied, almost predatory grin spread across her face as she watched the screen.

This was her moment to show them all—to make them see that the UHF had made a *terrible* mistake in overlooking her for Alpha Squad. Her eyes remained glued to the screen, replaying the moment that would cement her as better than that average Defensive Heavy they'd dared to put in Alpha's ranks.

She would indulge her squad's excitement this once; their antics couldn't possibly spoil this for her. Mere followers like them could never undermine her rightful rewards.

"...Recruit Masters became the cornerstone of her squad, allowing them to hold the line long enough for reinforcements to arrive and push through to the enemy HQ," Major Quinn's voice continued as the screen filled with the intense scene unfolding around Rachel.

It was time to fully enjoy her dues that she'd been waiting for, for so, so long now.

On the screen, the recording showed the chaotic battleground of a narrow city street bordered by crumbling buildings, thick with smoke and debris.

Beta Squad was clearly overwhelmed, their members battered, beaten and bleeding, clinging to what little cover they could find inside of a couple of ruined buildings. In the midst of it all, Recruit Masters stood firm, having positioned herself in a critical choke point between two ruined buildings, cutting off the enemy's path towards the rest of her squad.

The narrow alleyway forced the advancing enemy squads to funnel directly into her line of defence, and she had planted her full-cover shield in front of her like a wall, grav-lock engaged, her stance unwavering.

Her shield absorbed the brunt of incoming fire, each bullet and blast ringing out as it struck the reinforced surface, the purple-hue of the grav-lock flaring up again and again.

Grenades lobbed from the enemy lines trying to dislodge her detonated around her, shrapnel glancing off her armour, piercing through it at points and sending sprays of her blood across the battlefield.

But even as explosions rained down around her, Rachel remained steady, pushing her full weight and muscle's ability to exert themselves into the shield to support the grav-lock's functions.

With every major hit, she repositioned herself slightly, angling her shield to deflect the blasts more reliably; making sure they were always aimed away from her squad, who were just a few metres behind her, hidden behind a few pieces of debris, recovering as Beta's medic frantically worked to patch them up.

"Recruit Masters didn't just *hold* the line," Major Quinn narrated, the pride in her voice palpable. "She *became* the line."

The recording captured the moment when the enemy, realising they couldn't break through her defence with the gunfire of their weapons alone, surged forward in a desperate melee assault.

But that played directly into Rachel's hands.

As the first enemy soldier came within range, she shifted her shield to intercept his attack, disengaging the grav-lock in one fluid motion. Using the enemy's body as cover from the rest of the advancing foes, she slammed him backward, sending him sprawling across the ground.

Quick as a flash, she pulled out her sidearm, a revolver-like shotgun pistol, and fired a shell directly into the soldier's chest. His armour cracked, and blood sprayed out of a web of decidedly lethal wounds as he twitched on the ground one last time.

Another enemy, initially knocked back by her shield's brutal hit on their teammate, tried to charge forward again. She spun to meet him, the sheer heft of her solid-cover shield connecting with crushing force, knocking him into a pile of rubble.

His armour caved under the impact with a sickening crunch, the reinforced metal shattering against the massive force of her shield's impact.

Without missing a beat, Rachel slammed her shield back down and re-engaged the grav-lock just as a new round of gunfire rattled against it, ricocheting off harmlessly.

Her breathing was heavy, her eyes locked on the advancing soldiers, but every move she made was as calculated as it was lethal. She had drilled these techniques since she'd been old enough to stand, her body now moving with muscle memory honed by years of rigorous training.

In that narrow choke point, Rachel was a literal fortress.

Every attack was blocked or countered, every enemy shot neutralised, every retaliatory strike she made carefully aimed to kill or brutally incapacitate.

Enemy soldiers tried to force their way past, first individually, then in small groups. The cramped terrain limited their approach, making it impossible to come at her with more than two soldiers at once.

But whether they attacked alone or in pairs, each met the same brutal end against her unyielding shield and sidearm.

Her armour, battered and scorched from countless impacts, stood firm. Cracks webbed across it like a cracking sheet of ice, but she wielded her shield with a seemingly unending amount of strength, swinging it as if it were made of driftwood rather than Ultra-Heavy T1 Armour plating.

Even when Grenades, carefully lobbed by the enemy to use the nearby rubble to bypass her shield, landed just behind her, Rachel never panicked.

She adjusted her shield at the last second to absorb each blast, making sure to position herself so that the shrapnel was directed away from her squad's flimsy cover, shielding them from potentially lethal fragments.

The recording showed her glancing back briefly again and again, checking on her squad and making sure that they were not in any danger before refocusing on the enemy.

Her breathing was heavier and heavier, her arms visibly starting to strain under the weight of her shield, yet she didn't flinch, didn't waver a single moment, as another wave of gunfire and a desperate melee assault battered her position.

The scene froze at a moment of pure intensity—Rachel, shield raised high above the head of a fallen enemy soldier, ready to end him, her armour cracked and scorched, breathing heavily as a small pool of blood continued to grow around her. The caption beneath read: “Recruit Rachel Veronica Masters – *The Final Destination*.”

“Recruit Masters went on to survive this final stand, holding her ground until reinforcements arrived to flank the remaining enemy forces from behind,” Major Quinn narrated, her voice filled with admiration. “Thanks to her resilience, her squad made a full battlefield recovery and later joined the reinforcements in the final assault on the enemy HQ, securing a vital secondary staging ground for the assault on the SADD.”

The screen shifted, displaying the shimmering Platinum-hued *Valiant Defender* Medal.

The room was silent, the sheer brutality, grit and heroism of her stand sinking in for a few delicious moments before the applause finally erupted, louder and more enthusiastic than ever before.

Rachel’s squad members clapped her on the back, some cheering, while she simply stood up, not paying them any heed, a satisfied, toothy grin spreading across her face as she absorbed the rightfully earned recognition.

Major Quinn waited for the applause to settle a bit before continuing.

“For her incredible resilience and strength in the face of overwhelming odds, Recruit Masters has earned the highest honour for the *Valiant Defender* award. This award recognizes not only her bravery but her ability to turn the tide of battle when her squad needed it most. We are proud to present Recruit Masters with this Platinum Medal, a 5,000 Credit award, 50% Sales Voucher for any equipment aboard the Sovereign and a Skill Voucher, to freely attend classes for any one Skill she deems worthy of her time, free of charge.”

Rachel’s expression was one of pure triumph as she made her way up to the stage, each step a victory in itself. She basked in the attention and admiration of the room, savouring every moment of acknowledgment she felt she had long deserved but had always been denied. Her lips curled into a subtle, self-satisfied smile, her heart pounding as the assembled crowd’s applause surrounded her like a warm blanket.

As she ascended the steps, Rachel couldn’t resist glancing over at Alpha Squad’s seats.

She sought out Lucas Callahan’s face, eager to see the sting of defeat in his eyes, the realisation that his dream of being Alpha Squad’s star Defensive Heavy had gone up in flames right before him.

Her eyes locked onto his, but she almost stumbled mid-step, caught *entirely* off-guard.

Instead of the bitterness or envy she had expected, she was met with genuine admiration in Lucas’s gaze. His eyes held no resentment—just respect, a sincere acknowledgment of her feat. He continued clapping, his expression as earnest as if he were proud of her victory.

Rachel’s steps faltered, her mind scrambling for an explanation that made sense.

Why wasn't he devastated? Why wasn't he seething with envy?

The idea of Lucas, her biggest rival, feeling *anything* other than resentment for being beaten was impossible for her to process.

'He should hate me,' she thought, a touch of desperation creeping in. *'He should be furious for losing this chance at the award...! He should be furious for losing out to a mere Beta Squad member!'*

But Lucas's respectful applause didn't falter, making her feel strangely unsettled.

It was like he didn't even care that she had bested him, or worse—that he was downright impressed and happy for her accomplishment.

It was a feeling Rachel's mind struggled to grasp, her inner turmoil starting to thoroughly undermine her triumph.

Then, her gaze shifted around rapidly, seeking *anything* to regain her sense of victory.

And she found it, surprisingly quickly, attached to Alpha Squad's scout—their sniper, Thea.

Her dirty cyan eyes bored into her, hard and unyielding, as though Rachel's very presence was an insult; the same way Rachel thought about the midworlder sitting right there alongside proper stock like Sylarion.

She was momentarily taken aback, as she had never met someone who radiated such raw, open dislike. But rather than being unsettled by it, Rachel felt something different.

A slow, predatory grin spread across her face as she met Thea's glare, her own eyes glittering with smug satisfaction.

'So, she hates me for one-upping her squad member,' Rachel thought, feeling her confidence reignite with a vengeance. *'Good. Very good...'*

If Lucas wouldn't react, at least the cyan's burning gaze was proper proof that her triumph had cut through Alpha Squad's air of superiority.

Rachel returned the glare with a toothy, complacent expression, basking in the raw contempt that practically *radiated* from the mid-worlder. She straightened further, her sense of victory now fully restored.

Let the midworlder hate her—she would relish every second of it.

With her confidence now fully restored, Rachel strode forward and accepted the Platinum Valiant Defender Medal from Major Quinn, the weight of it resting satisfyingly in her hand as she felt the eyes of every Marine on her.

She basked in it, letting the moment fill her entirely, feeling almost euphoric.

But just as she turned to leave the stage, Major Quinn's hand rested firmly on her shoulder, holding her in place.

She looked up, confused, only to find Major Quinn smiling down at her, a glint of something almost mischievous in her eyes.

Confused, Rachel looked up at the Major, who was smiling with a spark of excitement. Quinn took a step forward, her voice ringing clearly over the hall as she addressed the assembled Marines.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we have a rare occurrence here today,” she announced with a hint of excitement. “This assessment drive didn’t just see one outstanding Defensive Heavy rise to the occasion—but two.”

Rachel’s heart skipped, a knot forming in her stomach as her breath hitched. *‘A second? What the fuck is she talking about...? An award goes to one person. That’s how it works.’*

The crowd stirred, murmurs sweeping through the audience, and Rachel could feel a rush of something cold prickling at the back of her neck.

Major Quinn continued, the tone in her voice growing more earnest, “The brass had quite the challenge deciding between two first-place-worthy acts of valour, both from Defensive Heavies aboard the *Sovereign*. Each one showed such incredible strength and resilience that it was impossible to say one outshone the other. So, in a rare and deserved exception, we’re awarding the Platinum *Valiant Defender* Medal to both.”

The knot of dread twisted tighter in Rachel’s stomach, a chill sweeping over her.

‘This can’t be happening. This can’t be fucking happening!’

Her heart pounded as Major Quinn’s next words boomed through the hall.

“Please welcome Recruit Lucas Callahan, from *Sovereign*’s very own, esteemed Alpha Squad, to the stage. He, too, has earned the title of *Valiant Defender* for this assessment.”

It was as if the floor had dropped out from under her.

The applause erupted again, but Rachel couldn’t hear any of it.

Major Quinn’s words echoed in her mind, reverberating painfully as her vision blurred with shock. *‘Lucas Callahan... also won.’*

Her whole world seemed to shatter as she tried to make sense of it.

‘This was my award. My recognition. My moment!’

The impossible reality of Lucas—*Lucas*—being elevated to her level made her stomach twist painfully. It was as though her victory, her triumph, had just been ripped in half, sullied by someone she had done everything to surpass.

She could only stand there, frozen, the hall spinning around her, as Lucas rose from his seat and made his way to the stage with that calm, respectful demeanour she had always despised. N

ow, though, there was something even worse—a humble, almost grateful smile plastered on his face, as if he couldn't believe his own luck. The sight made her stomach churn, her vision narrowing as the reality settled like a crushing weight on her shoulders.

'This can't be happening... This is a joke... It must be...'

Rachel's fingers tightened around her medal, her nails digging into her palm, the sharp edge of the metal biting deeper into her skin. Warm blood began to drip down her hand, pooling silently on the stage floor.

She barely noticed, too busy trying to keep her expression from cracking.

The weight of every gaze in the hall felt oppressive now, like they were judging her; laughing at her. Yet her mind spun in disarray, unable to register anything but the unadulterated horror overtaking her.

She only caught fragments of Major Quinn's voice as she recounted Lucas' actions that had been deemed similar to Rachel's own, broken pieces that slipped through her haze: "...*first day of the assessment...*" "...*heroically defended...*" "...*horde of Stellar Republic soldiers...*"

Words drifted past her ears as Quinn described Lucas's actions, how he had stood to protect the remnants of his squad, his unwavering defence keeping them safe even as the overwhelming enemy numbers had surged around him.

Rachel's brain simply couldn't grasp it, couldn't process that he had somehow, after everything, managed to stand on the same pedestal.

She'd given everything, sacrificed so much, *proven herself*, again and again.

Yet here he was, this random no-name from a backwater planet, elevated to her level, given equal recognition by the UHF. The thought sent a pang through her chest that she couldn't bear; it felt like her heart was being ripped asunder.

Rachel was still trapped in her disbelief when Major Quinn's voice cut through her haze.

"And now, if our two recipients would honour us with a handshake," Major Quinn announced, smiling warmly at them both.

Rachel's eyes darted up, her mind still struggling to process the command, and she felt a light prod on her arm.

There he was—*Lucas Callahan*, standing close with that repulsive, earnest grin, hand extended toward her as though they were supposed to be allies.

She almost decked him instinctively, her fist half-formed, before catching herself just in time.

'Breathe,' she reminded herself, summoning all her remaining self-control. *'Appearances matter.'*

She forced her face into a semblance of a smile, which, though passable for the average person, was more a grimace to anyone accustomed to the subtleties of high society.

Her hand, sticky with her own blood, met Lucas's, and she tightened her grip, feeling the damp medal press into his skin.

She twisted her hand slightly, making sure the blood smeared across his palm, hoping it would break his skin, maybe even poison him somehow through the sheer anger and disbelief she felt.

Lucas's face registered a flicker of surprise at the sensation, though he masked it quickly enough that only she noticed.

"Congratulations," she forced out, her voice dripping with a mix of venom and sickly politeness. Lucas simply nodded, seemingly oblivious to her spite, or worse—choosing to ignore it—and replied in kind, "Congratulations to you too, that was an extremely impressive showing."

If Major Quinn's voice hadn't once more filled the hall, a cue for the audience to clap as she began introducing the Assessment Awards for the *Valiant Defender* Medal, Rachel would definitely have killed Lucas right then and there.

Instead, Rachel took the opportunity to all but fling Lucas's hand from her own, sending small droplets of blood spraying across the stage.

Turning on her heel with as much dignity as she could muster, she left the stage at a brisk pace, leaving a thoroughly perplexed Lucas behind her.

She stormed back to her seat, holding herself with all the dignity she could muster while practically fleeing the stage in a barely contained fury. Her stomach twisted with suppressed rage and humiliation, each step sending a jolt of indignation through her.

'This can't be true... This can't be—'

As she reached her seat, she was greeted by the all-too-familiar, grinning faces of her squadmates. She barely registered their congratulations, brushing past them with clenched fists as she finally sank into her seat, eyes shut tight as she tried to stave off the sheer wave of fury crashing over her.

'This is a nightmare... This can't be happening... This isn't real... This is—'

"It's amazing you managed to get first place, Rachi!" Mayra's annoyingly cheerful voice cut through the storm in her head.

A switch flipped.

Her eyes snapped open, and she turned her head to face Mayra, her expression venomous.

In a low, controlled voice that trembled with the force of her anger, she whispered, "If you don't shut your fucking whore mouth *right now*, I will break every bone in your body and toss

what's left of you into the nearest incinerator. And when your ashes are nothing more than dust, I'll make sure they're scattered out the farthest airlock on this ship to make sure you cannot be brought back; ever. I will end you right this very instant." She leaned closer, her words dripping with malice. "If I hear so much as a *breath* from you, I swear on the Emperor himself that your entire family will *wish* they'd never been born into this universe. Do you understand me, you ignorant, half-witted *harlot-ass* bitch?"

Mayra paled, her eyes widened and cheerful smile vanishing instantly.

The silence that followed was thick and suffocating, but Rachel barely noticed, her attention solely on containing the rage still simmering beneath the surface as she returned back to her normal sitting position, closing her eyes and praying to the Emperor that this was all just a bad dream...