

Volume 2 - Chapter 54 - Becoming

“There is no such thing as fairness in this universe.”

Those are the words of Patriarch Alaric Laniz Dravain, head of the Dravain Major Legacy, when asked about his family’s training regimen for their children.

“The UHF is a meritocracy through and through. Our merit is measured not just in skill, but also in blood, in connections... in *legacy*. We would be failing our children—and our Faction—if we did not shape them into weapons worthy of the posts they will one day hold.”

It is difficult to argue with the results: The Dravains have produced sixteen consecutive generations of high-ranking officers, Battlefield Aces, and accomplished squad leaders.

In the modern Corps, where every Marine is measured in raw Attributes, Ability efficiency, and combat readiness, the Dravains have perfected the art of raising *guaranteed powerhouses*.

Their children begin education practically as soon as they can walk.

UHF-like Skill classes (minus System restrictions, of course) are woven into their daily schedules: Simulated Combat Tactics, Advanced Marksmanship, Physics, Biology, Psyker Theory, Battlefield Engineering, and many, many more.

Each curriculum is personalized to suit the child’s predicted top-Role—Support, Heavy, Recon, Medic, Squad Leader, Assault, or any of the myriad other Roles the UHF MC observes—often selected before the child turns ten.

Combat instructors include retired Battlefield Aces and decorated war heroes, hired for astronomical sums to pass down everything they know.

Beyond raw combat training, the children receive instruction in galactic politics, military history, leadership doctrine, and strategic decision-making, ensuring they can thrive not just as marines but also as leaders at every level.

Several years are devoted to Build theory as well, using Terra’s most sophisticated gaming platforms to test and refine potential Attribute spreads, Ability synergies, and equipment compositions.

They review the current galactic gaming meta, dissecting the best Builds created by the foremost professional Build designers of their time, contrasting theory with practice until it becomes second nature to them.

To outsiders, the regimen borders on ruthless.

But to the Dravains, it is simply the *duty* of a family that is considered a Major Legacy.

They do not ask their children *if* they want to become Marines.

The question is only *how far* they will rise once they do become one.

Raised in an environment where every moment is directed toward becoming an apex-level marine, few ever think to resist.

It is not indoctrination so much as inevitability—after all, when a path is laid so clearly, what reason is there to stray?

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“We are the fire that keeps the forge burning bright and hot,” Patriarch Alaric Laniz Dravain once said. “Our sons and daughters will be the ones holding the line at the edge of the Void, while others debate whether it is *fair* they were born into privilege.

The universe does not care.

The enemy certainly does not care either.

The UHF is a meritocracy—and our legacy is our merit.”

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Thea stood on the compacted dirt of the trench hallway, eyes sweeping over the four Marines in front of her while she waited for an answer to her request for a Medic—someone who might actually be able to help Chester recover faster.

None of them screamed “Squad Medic” at first glance, but she knew better than to trust appearances by now. Kara’s own armor was proof enough—medium-type, sure, but it looked closer to a heavy-type than anything a field medic should have been wearing in a traditional sense.

These four, though... by their gear, two were clearly Offensive Heavies—both lugging weapons that looked far too big for any sane person to carry around—and one was definitely a Defensive Heavy, his shield strapped to his forearm and the bulky plates of his super-heavy-type armor scorched and lightly dented from the recent fighting.

The last one was a medium-type, probably their Squad Leader judging by the way the others were looking his way, waiting for him to speak first.

Thea was still catching her breath from dragging Chester out of the blasted ruin of Wellis Two’s alcove, the air back there still hot enough to taste. Chester had been half-dragged, half-carried, his legs barely cooperating as they scrambled to the far end of the trench before the next explosive salvo could hit.

'I definitely need to apologize to him...' The thought twisted uncomfortably in her head as she glanced back at him. *'Didn't think the damn Nanobot Swarm would be that loud.'*

Even now her ears throbbed with a constant high-pitched ring, her noise cancellation cranked all the way up and still not enough to save her hearing from the auditory assault.

She grimaced. *'Should've warned him. Definitely should've warned him. That one's on me. Stupid, Thea. Stupid.'*

"N... No," the medium-type finally answered, his voice shaky, still sounding half-buried under the shock of the barrage that had torn their alcove apart. From the way his armor was scorched and caked in half-molten debris, Thea figured they'd been caught in the same chain of blasts that had annihilated Wellis Two's position—unlucky collateral in the Stellar Republic's retaliation.

"What is the plan, Ma'am?"

Thea blinked, caught completely off guard.

The "Ma'am" landed harder than the question itself, and she felt herself pull back slightly, as if the word had been thrown at her.

Since when was *she* the one Marines asked for orders?

Her eyes flicked toward the other three, expecting some sign that this was a joke, or maybe that they thought their Squad Leader had lost it.

But there was no confusion on their faces.

No hesitation, no glance back at him to double-check. They were all staring straight at her now, waiting, as though her answer was the only one that mattered.

*'Wait... is he **not** the Squad Leader after all? Maybe he's just the one they expect to have answers, which is why they were all looking at him earlier,'* Thea thought, quickly reassessing her read of the squad dynamic. *'Kind of like when Corvus handed command over to me during the Nova Tertius infiltration...? Wasn't exactly a Squad Leader, except in name only back then too.'*

The memory made her wince.

She could still picture the chaos of that run—her calls that hadn't been sharp enough, the hesitation in moments that had demanded precision, the chain of missteps piling up until their squad had gone down before ever reaching their main objective.

Dying out there had been bad enough, but knowing they'd failed the mission *entirely* was the part that dug under her skin every time she remembered it.

'They can't keep fighting here,' Thea realized, eyes flicking to the ruined alcove.

The front wall was shredded, the firing slits collapsed or completely buried in debris.

These four wouldn't be able to do anything but get themselves killed if they stayed here.

And they'd just asked *her*—a random Recruit who'd run up out of nowhere—for a plan.

That meant one thing: Whoever had been leading them was gone.

She hesitated, biting the inside of her cheek as her own situation hit her as well. Chester was the last other survivor of Wellis Two, barely managing to lean upright against the trench tunnel's wall behind her.

Her mind jumped to the experiments she'd meant to run for this Digital Mission.

The weapons testing—done, or at least done enough for this round. Her Psyker Powers... Well, those had left her with a headache and ringing ears, but she *definitely* had something to work with now; even if she wasn't entirely sure *what*, quite yet.

But with the state of the battlefield, there was no more time for experiments.

She'd heard at least half a dozen Squad Leaders call their own squad's fallback to the second trench over the comms in the last minute. The front line was collapsing, and if she wasted any more time playing around, they'd lose the DM entirely.

Æht's words came back, curling through her mind like smoke that lingered, no matter how much Thea tried to clear it away. *"Where did your instincts go? All the teachings James drilled into you...? Unleash yourself, Thea."*

The words thrummed through her chest, almost as loud as the ringing in her ears. She let out a slow, heavy breath, forcing her shoulders not to sag, refusing to let the weight show.

"Alright then," she said, her voice more forceful and sharper than she felt, letting herself slip into that tone the Old Man had drilled into her years ago. The one meant for moments exactly like this—when leadership had to be assumed, even if only for a few minutes.

"You're with me now."

She jabbed a finger at the medium-type, who straightened immediately despite the lingering shock still written in his posture. "You—help Chester. He's our only Medic, and we need him back on his feet. Get him moving, carry him if you have to. We're falling back to the second trenchline."

Her gaze swept over the other three Marines, making sure every helmet visor was pointed at her before she continued. "Once we're situated, I'll go and find Sergeant Kalt to coordinate anything further from there."

It was the only plan that made sense.

If she wanted to make a difference here—*really* have an effect on this fight—she needed more than just four shellshocked survivors trailing her through the tunnels. She needed direction, proper support, and someone with the authority and experience to actually coordinate everything.

Sergeant Kalt was the fastest, most reliable way to get that.

She didn't wait for a reply.

Instead, she pushed past the medium-type and into the tunnels, trusting without hesitation that they would follow.

They were Marines, after all.

"Competence is to be assumed at all times," James' voice echoed in her head, a lesson hammered in during countless drills. *"Coddling your fellow Marines when you've given clear and concise orders will do nothing but slow you down."*

The original plan for Wellis Squad had been simple: Regroup in an orderly fashion at the center of the trenchline as shooting alcoves became untenable, then fall back as one unit toward the second trench once they were close enough together to call a unit-wide order.

But that had always been the best-case scenario—an ideal, not a guarantee.

Squad Leader Wellis had made it very clear before the fighting started that the acting leader of Wellis Two would hold full operational command over their sector. If the situation turned bad enough, they had the authority to call a fallback on their own, no questions asked.

So that's what she did.

"Wellis Two, falling back," Thea announced into the command channel, her voice cutting through the storm of similar chatter.

The channel was a half-disciplined wall of noise by now—squads reporting retreats in quick succession as the first trenchline steadily crumbled, mixed with Sergeant Kalt's repeated, near-frantic demand for intel on a supposed Offensive Heavy with some kind of laser-gatling.

Thea couldn't help with that.

She hadn't seen anyone like that in her sector, hadn't heard the weapon fire, either.

Supposedly they had been somewhere nearby—based on Kalt's very limited intel that claimed them somewhere on the eastern flank, same as her—but that meant little when she had neither visual nor auditory confirmation on anything of the sort.

'I should've paid some more attention to the battlefield in general... I'll have to ask about the weapon later, at the very least,' she thought grimly, boots pounding through the dirt as she pushed past alcove after alcove.

Most were tombs now—bodies sprawled in corners, armor cracked and scorched.

Some were little more than smoking holes, dirt, rockcrete and ferrocete plating having collapsed inward like paper. A select few were entirely empty, and those felt eerily hollow, like they had been abandoned in a rush—which was likely to be exactly true.

'Still,' she told herself, forcing her pace faster as she heard the five sets of footsteps behind her, the ringing in her ears almost entirely subsided by now, 'Isabella would want to hear about a weapon like that. If it's got someone like Kalt this rattled, then it's definitely something worth noting and pointing out to her, so she can take a look.'

Thea kept them moving, guiding Wellis Two down the trench tunnels.

The din of battle raged behind them—distant roars of explosions, the hiss of laser fire, and the dull thumps of heavy ordnance—but down here it all sounded muted, muddled by layers of dirt rock- and ferro-crete. The tunnels carried the echoes like a low, endless rumble, constant but strangely dull, like thunder behind walls.

They made good time.

Chester's injuries slowed the group down a little, but not so much that they risked getting bogged down. He seemed to be recovering bit by bit, his steps growing steadier the further they went, though he still leaned on the medium-type for support.

When they broke into the main tunnel of the second trenchline, Thea paused. Alcoves stretched in both directions, some already filling with retreating Marines, others still empty.

She had no idea which were already claimed, and she didn't want to drag her squad into someone else's position by accident.

She turned to the group. "Anyone know the layout? Which alcoves are open?"

To her surprise, the medium-type spoke up without hesitation. "Second trench doesn't have a fixed layout, Ma'am. Squads are supposed to leave at least one alcove open between them, two if possible, for repositioning later. Other than that, just fill in as you fall back."

Thea gave a short nod, piecing things together. "And Sergeant Kalt? Where's his command area?"

"Around thirty alcoves to the east," he answered instantly, visor steady on hers.

That confirmed it.

He wasn't just another grunt—he had to be the interim squad leader. No random Marine would know both the spacing protocol for squads falling back *and* command's location.

"Good," Thea said firmly. "We're heading that way. Keep sharp, and eyes open for a Medic."

They pushed deeper into the second trenchline, moving alcove by alcove.

By the fourth, Thea spotted what she'd been looking for: A Medic crouched over another Marine, patching up a nasty gash along the side of his torso.

Without hesitation, she stepped forward.

“Medic. I’ve got another one for you,” Thea called, motioning for Chester to be brought forward. “Take him in, get him patched up. We need every Medic standing if we want to make it.”

The Medic spun around sharply, clearly ready to snap that he was already more than busy—until his visor landed on the gleaming medal embedded in her chestplate. He froze for half a second, audibly caught himself, then quickly nodded, his voice suddenly far more formal.

“Y–Yes, Ma’am. Leave him here. I’ll have him ready to go in a minute or two.” He was already laying out supplies, hands moving fast. “Where do I send him once he’s good?”

Thea hesitated, thinking it over as she glanced back at her small squad.

“I’ll send someone to inform you once we’ve claimed an alcove,” she decided.

“Understood.”

With Chester finally in proper hands, Thea straightened, forcing some of the tension out of her shoulders. She turned back to the others, sweeping them with a quick look before nodding toward the deeper tunnel.

“Alright. Now we get Wellis Two a firing position and find Sergeant Kalt.”

Thea led the reformed Wellis Two down the tunnel at a brisk pace, finally stopping about ten alcoves away from where Chester was being treated.

The spot was intact and offered a decent firing angle toward the first trenchline.

“Set up here,” she ordered, pointing toward the embrasures. “Get firing lanes established and keep the pressure up so the first trench can finish their fallback.”

The three Heavies moved without hesitation, taking positions and readying their weapons.

Thea turned to the medium-type, “You know the way to the command area?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” he replied without pause.

“Good. Lead the way.”

Thea cursed under her breath and kicked off after him, boots slapping against the dirt-packed floor. He ran like it was nothing, not even pushing himself.

Meanwhile she had to fight to keep pace.

‘Wish I could’ve invested more into Strength; this is ridiculous,’ she cursed inwardly, teeth gritted. *‘Always struggling to keep pace like this is so fucking stupid...’*

They reached the command area after a hard push—an open dug-out that stretched parallel to the alcoves, dug into the opposite side of the main tunnel.

Marines bustled in and out, relaying orders and reports, the place buzzing with activity.

Thea strode up to the first Marine she caught standing idle near the entry after taking a deep, steadying breath to recover from the running. “I need to speak to Sergeant Kalt.”

The Marine turned, eyes flicking over her from helmet to boots.

His posture froze, then stiffened when his visor lingered on the medal set in her chestplate.

He nearly tripped over himself in his rush to sprint deeper into the dug-out, barking for Kalt as he went, “S—Sergeant! Sergeant Kalt!”

Moments later, the ground seemed to tremble under heavy footfalls.

Sergeant Kalt emerged from the far end of the command space, a hulking figure in super-heavy armor, the runner carefully following behind him, like he wasn’t quite sure if what he did was right or not.

Confusion was etched across his scarred faceplate as his gaze locked onto her.

Thea stepped forward immediately, squaring her shoulders, refusing to let the sheer size of him press her back.

“Recruit Thea McKay, current interim Squad Leader for Wellis Two, sir,” she introduced herself crisply. “Requesting permission and coordination to assist in holding back the Stellar Republic push—if you can provide me with the support I need.”

As she spoke, she angled her chest slightly, making sure the Crysium Two-Star Medal caught the light, displayed plain for all to see.

If every other Marine she’d crossed paths with had frozen at the sight of it, then she was damn well going to use that reaction to her advantage. With any luck, it would bypass the whole tedious round of “*what does a Recruit think she’s doing requesting to talk to a platoon leader?*”

While it was a perfectly reasonable question under normal circumstances—especially with the UHF’s chain of command drilled into every Marine—they didn’t exactly have the luxury of blind adherence to protocol right now.

Not with the first trenchline already collapsing less than an hour into the mission.

The proper chain of command for her in this situation would be to talk to Squad Leader Wellis first and have him push the request up the chain, which just wasn’t a great use of everybody’s time, in her eyes.

Kalt loomed over her, his massive frame casting a shadow that made Thea feel even smaller in her light armor. His head tilted just enough for her to catch a flash of surprise in his eyes—mixed with something else she couldn’t quite pin down.

“Damn... well, I stand corrected,” he rumbled at last.

The words meant absolutely nothing to Thea, but she held his gaze anyway.

His attention shifted past her, landing on the medium-type who had led her here. “Thank you for bringing her to my attention, Corporal. You’re dismissed.”

‘*Corporal...?!*’ Thea’s thoughts snapped like a whip, her head twisting around to get another look at the Marine she had been casually giving orders to. For the last several minutes, she had been treating him like some random Private who’d been unlucky enough to find himself in a leadership position—but apparently he was actually a proper Squad Leader.

The newly revealed Corporal gave a casual shrug, visor reflecting the command dug-out’s lights. “Didn’t really do much besides show her the way. She was set on finding you herself. But still—my pleasure, sir.”

He offered an easy grin before heading back down the tunnel the way they’d come, boots thudding against the packed dirt floor.

Kalt’s face turned back to her, his massive frame still radiating the quiet authority of someone used to holding an entire line together by sheer force of will.

“Hmm... a Two-Star *Crysum*.” His voice was low, thoughtful, almost like he was speaking more to himself than to her. “Not something I’ve ever seen before... and definitely not something I’ve had the pleasure of commanding.”

His tone shifted, sharper now as he focused fully on her. “Well then, McKay. Tell me what you do—and how I can make damn sure you do it well enough to get us all out of this nightmare.”

“I’m a recon/sniper,” Thea said without hesitation, already anticipating the question. “Though for missions like this, I’m primarily a sniper. There’s not much actual recon to do in a trench defense.”

She took a breath. “I’m also a Psyker—Awakened Wielder. I have a Power that lets me pick out Duplicators in the middle of the enemy swarm, so every shot I take is guaranteed to be on a priority target. But if we want to inflict serious casualties, I’ll need Focus—more than I can supply alone.”

Her eyes flicked toward the map table nearby, already planning out potential firing positions in her head. “I’ll need at least two, preferably three Squad Medics with [Focus Link] to funnel Focus into me and keep me firing. I also need at least two Defensive Heavies to keep me alive when the Republic inevitably targets me again. The last time I pushed them hard, they hit my entire squad with a rocket barrage and shredded our position.

“And finally, I’ll need at least one Offensive Heavy—or anyone with the firepower to reliably handle Super-Heavy types, really. My current weapons can’t burn through their armor fast enough to be viable, but they’ll still need dealing with.”

Her eyes locked with Kalt’s again, catching the faintest flicker—a tiny flinch so subtle that even with her heightened Perception she barely noticed it.

She knew exactly just how much she was asking for here.

Pulling two Defensive Heavies and up to three Squad Medics away from their squads at this stage of the mission wasn't just a request—it was tearing chunks out of four or five separate units, leaving holes in the already crumbling defense line.

All so she could have the scaffolding she needed to operate at her peak.

And it wasn't even guaranteed.

Everything she'd laid out was based on her own read of what might work, her own conjecture.

There were no promises here.

But without that kind of support, she wasn't under any illusions: Alone, she couldn't tilt the battlefield, couldn't even hope to influence the fight at the scale necessary to matter.

If she was going to try and turn the tide, this was the *only* way she could see.

Kalt's eyes stayed fixed on her for a long moment before he finally spoke.

"Tell me something, McKay—are you the one who's been using a laser gatling out there?"

Thea blinked, slightly confused by the question.

"No, sir," she said immediately, unclipping the sling from her shoulder and pulling the Laser-type Gram into view. "This is what I'm using. Just a standard Laser-type DMR—high accuracy, single-target, nothing fancy."

She gave it a quick tap to emphasize her point before slinging it back into place. "And on my way here, I didn't see anyone who could pass for an Offensive Heavy with a gatling, either. I kept an eye out, as requested, but didn't see anything matching the description."

Kalt's helmet tilted slightly, and when he spoke again his tone was perfectly flat. "That thing's got no cycle-time, I assume?"

"Correct."

He let out a long, heavy sigh, tilted his head back and glanced up toward the dug-out ceiling, muttering under his breath. "Mandatory reporting classes. All of them. Right after this mission..."

When his gaze returned to her, his tone had shifted again, all business.

He gave a firm nod.

"You'll have what you asked for."

Thea blinked, caught entirely off guard.

She'd been bracing for pushback, maybe even an argument or haggling for how much he could potentially give her, but instead he was just... giving her *everything* she'd requested; just like that.

No questions about her plan, no demands for justification or anything.

"Now... Unless you've got specific ideas about where you want to set up and how you want to play this," Kalt continued, "I'll be orchestrating your movements from here."

"That would be perfect," Thea said quickly, a small breath of relief escaping before she could stop it. The truth was, she hadn't even wanted full responsibility for coordinating everything herself—she just wanted to be pointed at the right targets and unleashed.

That was the best way for her to simply focus on what she did best: Shooting people.

Kalt nodded once more, and this time a wide, toothy grin spread across his face.

"Beautiful. Never had the pleasure of commanding a Battlefield Ace before," he said with a rumble of amusement. "Looking forward to seeing what that feels like, McKay."

Thea froze for half a second, thrown by the statement.

She wasn't a Battlefield Ace—at least, she didn't think she was—but with the level of resources he was now putting behind her...

'I guess technically I am one now, huh...?'

"Umm... Just Thea is fine, by the way," she added finally, feeling oddly awkward about how often he'd been calling her by her last name; after all, McKay was her fa—Old Man.

"Just Thea it is," Kalt replied with a short chuckle, before turning toward the nearest comm officer to start setting her support in motion.

She stood at ease, waiting those few extra moments for Sergeant Kalt to wrap up, knowing better than to walk off without being properly dismissed.

In the meantime, her thoughts churned, circling around the weight of what had just been handed to her: She'd have to crank it up to eleven for this next stretch of the Digital Mission if she wanted to prove that Kalt's trust in her hadn't been misplaced.

'This is going to be exhausting...' she admitted inwardly, a small cringe tugging at her. But then, despite herself, a grin pushed through. *'But it's also going to be fun. Really, really fun. A full support team built just for me? That's not something I'll probably ever see again. I'd better make the most of it while I can.'*

The thought settled like a spark in her chest, cutting through the fatigue and replacing it with a sharp, focused excitement.

Finally, Sergeant Kalt turned back to her, his presence as imposing as ever. "You got a spot with Wellis Two already?"

“East 14, sir,” Thea replied without missing a beat.

“Very well. Return there and hold until your support team assembles, Thea. Won’t be long, though a few of them are still pulling out of the first trenchline. Once they get here, they’ll report directly to you. When everyone’s in position...” his toothy grin spread again, anticipation practically written across his faceplate, “...we’ll start this whole show.”

‘I’m not the only one looking forward to this,’ Thea thought, a smile tugging at her lips as she gave a quick nod. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. I’ll be making an announcement I’ve always wanted to give, in just a moment.” His eyes locked on hers again, that near-imperceptible flinch surfacing once more. “Don’t let us down, Thea. Dismissed.”

She gave a sharp nod and broke into a sprint, boots pounding the packed dirt as she raced back toward East 14—the alcove where she’d left the rebranded Wellis Two, the squad she’d apparently stolen right out from under a Corporal.

Halfway there, the command channel went dead quiet, overridden by Kalt’s priority message.

“This is a priority notice for all Marines: We will be deploying a Battlefield Ace momentarily, with squad designation ‘Alpha’. If you are requested to provide assistance by a Thea McKay, do so immediately and without question. Take her orders as my own. You’ll know her when you see her—you can’t miss it.”

Thea’s eyes went wide.

The order was staggering in its scope, an open endorsement that felt almost impossible to wrap her head around.

Kalt’s voice returned one last time, bone-dry and cutting. “Oh—and stop chasing reports about the supposed laser gatling. Everyone who filed them will be signed up for mandatory reporting classes after the mission. That’s all. Good hunting, Marines.”

The channel cut out, leaving the trenches in a silence that lasted only a heartbeat before chatter flooded back in, more chaotic than before.

By then, Thea had nearly reached East 14.

Her stomach twisted with nerves and something dangerously close to exhilaration.

She was about to be deployed as a real *Battlefield Ace*...