

Volume 2 - Chapter 57 - Debrief

Corporal Michael Wellis (Squad Leader of "Wellis' Squad"):

- ++ Effective use of an Oversized Squad, splitting the forces evenly across the lines with planned merging once casualties started.
- + Proper delegation of Squad Leadership for temporarily created purpose-squad.
- Lack of leadership when faced with overwhelming odds: Demerits applied for communicative breakdown between main-squad and purpose-squad.
- Outward dislike for Squad Member: Demerits applied for not outwardly suppressing this preference. (Severe, additional Demerits applied by Reviewing AI. For information on this decision, contact Review Code "Lumis".)
- Improper usage of command channel's report functionality: Demerits applied due to reported misinformation that caused Command to waste resources on unverified assets.

—

Corporal Jaxon Mir Sartin (Squad Leader of "Infall Squad"):

- ++++ Proper assessment of battlefield asset and taking of immediate action to bring said asset to Command's attention: Merits applied for personally seeing to the transfer of information without compromising operational security via unsecured comms.
- ++ Effective Squad Leading in the heat of combat: Merits applied for resource conversation attempts when facing massed Stellar Republic wave tactics.
- + Correctly delegated Squad Leadership for the short duration of absence.
- Lack of information provided to Command prior to arrival at the HQ: Demerits applied for not forewarning Command of the incoming battlefield asset via the proper procedures (Private Command Channel).

—

Corporal Malicia Cintera Plasst (Squad Leader of "Menis Squad"):

- +++ Effective use of Offensively-focused Squad, despite the mission parameters: Merits applied for correct orders being issued a vast majority of the time.
- ++ Proper response to Battlefield Ace Deployment and full adherence to UHF Doctrine: Merits applied for following Doctrine despite personal doubts and inexperience.
- ++ Sweeper Duties fulfilled to exemplary degree by commanded Squad.
- Problematic Squad makeup for Upscaled 'Hold-The-Line' Missions: Demerits applied for not adjusting the personnel once the full mission parameters were revealed.

-- Unnecessary loss of priority personnel due to improper spread of Marines: Demerits applied for not collaborating with other Squads to spread high-value Roles and lessen the impact of suppressive fire by the enemy.

—

Sergeant Ryker Invictus Kalt (Squad Leader of "Command Squad" | Platoon Leader):

+++++ Mission-critical deployment and support of unexpected Battlefield Ace asset, despite collapse of the frontline: Merits applied for keeping the trenchlines in-tact while orchestrating the collection and creation of Squad designated "Alpha". Merits applied for continuous assistance and coordination of "Alpha"s movements and tactical arrangements after initial deployment. (Additional Merit applied by Reviewing AI. For information on this decision, contact Review Code "Lumis".)

+++ Immediate and proper pivot of a losing strategy when presented with a high-value battlefield asset: Merits applied for adequately identifying, analysing and judging unexpected Battlefield Ace asset with subsequent high-level support. (Additional Merit applied by Reviewing AI. For information on this decision, contact Review Code "Lumis".)

+++ Leading the counter-charge to keep key position from being overrun, leading to an immediate Mission failure: Merits applied for leaving "Command" Role behind, when "Ace" Role was required.

+ Use of Platoon-wide Ability to bolster specific sectors and critical moments in the Mission.

-- Wasted Command resources chasing misinformation provided by Squad Leaders on the ground without verifying information: Demerits applied for not confirming provided information before acting upon it.

—

Private Chester O'Neil (Squad Medic of "Wellis Squad" | Squad Leader of "Wellis Two"):

++++ Exemplary support of fledgeling Psyker and implementation of "Last-Breath" protocols: Merits applied for standing by to prevent the fledgling Psyker from Overdrawing their Focus before their death. (Additional Merit applied by Reviewing AI. For information on this decision, contact Review Code "Lumis".)

++ Temporary Squad Leadership used to teach fellow Marines: Merits applied for spreading knowledge to both Recruits and Privates alike.

++ Excellent Role fulfillment: Merits applied for fulfilling Role "Squad Medic" to a more than satisfactory degree.

-- Lack of knowledge about potential dangers from Squad Members: Demerits applied for not perusing Squad Medic Database on squad-bound Marines for hazardous entities such as Fledgeling Psykers.

- Obvious attempt at gaming the system to obtain additional System Credits, Merit and CP: Demerits applied for not outwardly suppressing this intent. (Demerits applied by Reviewing AI. For information on this decision, contact Review Code “Fall”.)

—

[Tauron 6 ‘Hold-The-Line’ Upscaled Digital Mission: Personnel Review – Governing AIs, PFC943]

=====

=====

The first thing that registered when Thea came to was the System Interface, hanging in front of her vision like a translucent screen.

Its familiar blue tint washed over everything, blocking out most of the room around her.

What little she could see past it looked strangely plain—flat gray walls, smooth floor, no distinct features. The sort of bare waiting-room space the DDS always seemed to default to when pulling someone out of a mission.

[System]: *You have **successfully** completed Faction Mission “Tauron 6: Hold-The-Line - Upscaled”.*

[System]: *Notice: Contribution Point rewards omitted, as the Participant is already at the Threshold. Contribution Point rewards will continue once Tier-Up is completed.*

[System]: *You have received 75 System Merit and 445 System Credits. (Mission - Upscaled)*

[System]: *You have received 378 System Merit and 1134 System Credits. (Combat - Upscaled)*

[System]: *You have received 45 System Merit and 150 System Credits. (Objectives - Upscaled)*

It took her a moment to understand what the System was telling her.

The jump from fighting in the Digital Mission to suddenly standing in this strange room was too abrupt for her mind to catch up.

But the notification itself was, thankfully, very clear.

“Huh... So we won? I... don’t remember how the DM ended though...? What happened? Did I get suddenly killed by something...?” she muttered, trying to rewind the memory—only to run face-first into a blank wall where the last stretch of the mission should’ve been.

A slow frown pulled at her expression.

“I didn’t fuck up and Overdraw again and someone hit me with a Mnemorix, right? Kara would *absolutely* kill me... Please tell me I didn’t do that again—”

“You did not,” said a voice from nowhere.

Thea yelped—an embarrassingly high-pitched noise—spinning around so fast her boots slid a little on the smooth floor. The System Interface vanished as she flicked it closed, searching for *anyone*, but the room was as empty and plain as it had been before.

“My apologies, Thea,” the voice came again—familiar now, steady. The Sovereign’s voice, she recognized. “I did not intend to startle you.”

Thea let out a breath she didn’t realize she was holding, shoulders loosening just a little.

The sound of the ship’s AI felt grounding, like a tether.

‘Okay. Not glitched. Not soft-locked in some DDS purgatory. Not dead. Still on the Sovereign. I can work with that,’ she reassured herself.

“It’s, uh... yeah. It’s alright, Sovereign,” she said, though the embarrassment now warmed her ears. She waved vaguely at the empty space around her. “So... what is this place? Why am I here?”

“Debriefing,” the Sovereign replied, as calmly as ever.

“Ah.”

“You have successfully completed your first Digital Mission. For that, the UHF wishes to extend its congratulations. This first mission fulfills your mandatory monthly participation requirement—per the agreement made during post-Assessment review with Councillor Lumis and Auxiliary Staff-Sergeant Selene. You are now free to pursue your own schedule for the next thirty days without concern of missing any deadlines.”

Thea nodded slowly.

Very slowly.

She had *definitely* remembered that part. Totally. Absolutely. 100%.

“As for your previous question: You did not Overdraw your Focus,” the Sovereign continued.

“Because this was not an Assessment-level simulation, a Focus Overdraw would have resulted in immediate termination of the Digital Mission so that specialized personnel could administer first-aid. This is to prevent any and all permanent loss of life. Naturally, such an event would also result in severe disciplinary consequences for the Marine responsible, as an Overdraw directly wastes all invested resources—manpower, digital operation costs, and most importantly, time.”

Thea hummed quietly, a small sound of acceptance.

‘Yeah... makes sense. They really wouldn’t want people thinking Overdraws are something you can just shrug off. And considering how much power and resources these DMs eat up... yeah. Harsh punishment tracks.’

She glanced around the empty room again, feeling oddly sore just from standing—despite logically knowing her current body should have been feeling brand-new.

Almost immediately, a soft-looking armchair appeared just a few steps away, as if the Sovereign had pulled it from thin air.

“Thanks,” she muttered, dropping into it. Her body sank into the cushions and she let out a small, unfiltered sigh. “Ahhh... that hits the spot...”

After a moment, a thought surfaced.

“Actually, Sovereign... why *do* I feel sore? Shouldn't I be perfectly fine after the DM? I thought everything in there was DDS stuff, so... shouldn't I just be in a clean body again?”

“As you correctly surmised, your body has indeed been completely reconstructed to the same state before you entered the Digital Mission,” the Sovereign replied without pause.

“Physically, you are as unharmed as you were before entering. It is your mind and Soul that are fatigued. The strain stems from your Psychic Power usage. You drew on far more Psychic Energy than would be considered standard for a Psyker of your current development, which has likely stressed the seams of your Gate. The sensation you are experiencing is comparable to muscle soreness. It will fade naturally.”

Thea blinked.

“...My Gate can get *sore*?”

“Yes. The venerable Rune priest has already reviewed your results and confirmed that this is normal. Would you like to hear his attached comment?”

Her eyebrows lifted. The Rune priest had already checked in? Immediately after the DM?

“Yes, please.”

The Sovereign's tone shifted seamlessly into the perfect cadence of Rune priest Vedun's voice:

“Hehehe. *Classic.*”

Then shifted back.

“End of comment.”

Thea stared into the empty room, blank expression, dead behind the eyes.

Silence stretched.

“I fucking *hate* him,” she muttered eventually, dragging her hands down her face. “I hate him so much. Why is he like that...”

She imagined punching him the next time she saw him. It did not make her feel much better.

But still, better.

'If I didn't trust Major Quinn's judgement so damn much... I might've asked for literally anyone else to be my mentor... As knowledgeable as he is, why is he such an idiot at times?'

She took a long breath through her nose, let it out through her mouth, and forced her shoulders to relax.

"Alright. So," she said, lifting her head, "what do I actually need to do for this debrief? I'm assuming there's some final step before I get out of here. Kara's probably already pacing holes in the floor somewhere, so if we could speed this up, that'd be great. No offense meant, of course."

"None taken," the Sovereign replied. "For the debrief, I will present your final statistics, optionally present some select notes from the Governing and Reviewing AIs, and a walkthrough of the friendlink system. You have received multiple requests regarding the latter, which must be addressed before you are fully cleared. Future debriefings will not include this portion, as you will be familiar with the process by then."

Thea's eyes lit up at that. *'Stats?! Let's fucking go!'*

"Your final statistics for the Digital Mission: 'Tauron 6 - Hold-The-Line - Upscaled,' are as follows: You successfully eliminated 116 T1 Duplicators, along with 30 T1 Duplicates. These totals do not include any collateral Duplicate eliminations resulting from Duplicator deaths. You died once, due to self-inflicted injuries."

"Wait, *what*? Self-inflicted injuries...? What the fuck happened?!" Thea blurted out, stunned.

Why would she kill herself in a Digital Mission? How did that even happen?

Instead of answering verbally, the Sovereign replaced the gray room with a perfect recreation of one of the trench alcoves on Tauron 6.

She watched herself, Medic Chester, and Medic Dan in the middle of a frantic scene where she saw herself sat up against the wall of the alcove. It moved on to show the brief discussion between the Medics and herself, culminating in Medic Dan heading out of the alcove and leaving her with Chester.

Hearing herself talk through her reasoning for the self-inflicted damage to the two medics made complete sense, so there was nothing she could really say about it.

"Ah. Yeah. Okay," she said, nodding slowly. "That *does* make sense. So... note to self: Don't overuse the Psychic Power or I'll end up cooking myself. Got it."

"I have several comments on this aspect from the Governing and Reviewing AIs, if you would like to review them," the Sovereign offered.

Thea made a face and waved her hand. "Ehh... I'm good. I can guess the tone, thanks."

“Very well. Overall performance: You have been nominated and confirmed as MVP. Congratulations, Thea. You are now officially a Grade-0 One-Time MVP. This designation will be added to your UHF Profile and may be displayed to others inside Digital Missions, pending your permission.”

Thea blinked, absorbing that.

*‘Not exactly fair to call me the MVP, when I basically just got pumped full of Focus by several Medics and let Sergeant Kalt handle literally **all** the battlefield strategy... but I guess I **did** kill a damn lot of them.’*

She rubbed the back of her neck, unsure whether to feel proud, embarrassed, or something in between. Ultimately, her body decided on the “something in between” for her.

“Further breakdowns and detailed statistics have also been compiled for you, along with a full recording of the Digital Mission. All of it will be accessible after the debrief concludes,” the Sovereign continued.

“The Governing and Reviewing AIs have marked two points as mandatory notices for improvement. First: Your communication with your squad—specifically your assigned Squad Medic—was below acceptable standard. Your Medic must, at all times, be aware of any risks you pose to yourself and others. As a Psyker, it is your responsibility to clearly communicate your Focus usage patterns and any potential strain. Without that, a Squad Medic cannot properly keep you alive.”

Thea winced at that, the memory of Chester’s scolding ringing a little too clearly in the back of her mind.

“Yeah... That’s fair,” she admitted quietly.

“Secondly,” the Sovereign went on, tone completely neutral, as if delivering weather updates, “you failed to warn your Squad Medic of the auditory danger posed by your Nano-Bot amplified vocal projection. This resulted in the full rupture of his eardrums and temporary loss of combat capability in the midst of an active frontline engagement. In standard battlefield conditions, this would qualify as reckless endangerment at best, and *traitorous behavior* at worst. You are very strongly advised to ensure this does not occur again.”

Thea swallowed hard, her stomach twisting.

She sank deeper into the chair, as if she could disappear into the cushioning itself.

‘Yeah... I really, really fucked that one up,’ she thought, heat crawling up her neck.
‘Traitorous behavior? Holy shit. The Old Man would drag me through a wall if he heard that.’

She let out a quiet, shaky sigh.

*‘Okay. Next time, I warn everyone—**before**—using anything to do with a maximum output on the auditory nanobots. Every single time.’*

Thankfully, the Sovereign continued on quickly, its tone as even as ever. “The final item of this debrief is the friendlink system. You have received nineteen friendlink requests from fellow participants of the Digital Mission. I will also offer to send any friendlink requests you may wish to make in turn.”

Thea blinked. “Nineteen? But I only actually *talked* to like... ten people. *Maybe*.”

“That is not a requirement,” the Sovereign clarified. “Any Marine within the Digital Mission may request a friendlink with any other Marine, regardless of direct contact. It is common for requests to be sent to individuals who demonstrated exceptional performance, leadership, or otherwise left a strong impression.”

Thea rubbed the back of her neck. “Ah. Okay. That makes more sense, I guess.”

A short pause. “Could you... sort them? Like, by relevance? Squad members first, people I worked with directly, that kind of thing?”

“Of course.”

The air in front of her shimmered again.

A list appeared, the names reorganizing themselves in clear, simple order.

The first request unfolded automatically, along with a short attached message.

Private Thoran Falks (“Wellis’ Squad” - Wellis Two)

“Good job out there, Ace. You paid the Freaks back for getting me—like, *a lot*. If you ever want to run another DM together, I’d be glad to! Promise I’ll try not to embarrass myself again like that. Also... if you’re willing, I’d love to ask a few questions about the Psychic thing you’ve got going on. Never seen anything quite like it.”

Thea felt something in her chest tighten—not painful, just enough to make her breath catch.

‘Feels strange... getting something seemingly genuine like that. All this over doing well in a simulation? It’s not like I did anything special...’

She smiled and nodded to herself, accepting the friendlink with a quiet tap.

The next message opened automatically.

Private Marie Zinconia Levant (“Wellis’ Squad”- Wellis Two)

“By the fucking Emperor, that was INSANE!!! I was watching the entire time because I died super early (sorry about that haha) and WOW!!!! The way you *lasered* through that whole fucking army?! And the mid-mission weapon augmentation, what the fuck was that all about??!! AND WHEN YOU DID THE SHOUT THING??? Anyway uh yeah if you ever want to team up again I’d totally love to? I know I’m dead weight and all but I promise I’m trying!! And I will try even more! Also you’re really cool, so please? I swear I’m going to be super good next time!”

Thea snorted—and then laughed. *Actually* laughed out loud.

It came sudden, bubbling out of her chest before she could stop it.

“Marie, you absolute disaster,” she muttered under her breath, wiping the corner of her eye with her thumb as the smile just wouldn’t leave her face.

She could practically see the girl bouncing around while typing that message.

Dead weight, though? Hardly.

Thea could clearly remember Marie bracing her rifle against the embrasure wall, firing again and again into that sea of advancing bodies. She remembered the way the other woman’s shots landed, having tracked the shots absent-mindedly while shooting at her own targets—they hadn’t been perfect shots, of course, but steady and undeniably consistent, even while under the kind of counter-fire that would have likely made most other Marines duck and pray.

And Marie did not have precognition, no [Glimpse], nothing fancy to help her.

She had just... held. Through sheer power of will alone.

Even when she ducked low and complained about the incoming fire, she had never fully broken, going back to firing when the embrasure was even remotely clear.

There was nothing “dead weight” about that.

She accepted Marie’s request without hesitation.

The next few names on the list didn’t ring any bells. The Sovereign noted they were part of Wellis’ Squad—the half that stayed with Squad Leader Wellis at the start, instead of the ones in Wellis Two on the eastern front.

Squad Leader Wellis himself hadn’t sent anything.

‘Not that I would’ve accepted anyway... Asshole,’ she thought, a small, humorless snort slipping out.

She declined the rest of Wellis Squad in quick succession.

No point connecting with people she knew nothing about, and didn’t particularly want to.

Then the next name appeared—one she barely recognized, but enough to pause:

Corporal Jaxon Mir Sartin (“Infall Squad”)

“I’m glad everything worked out the way it did. Seeing you step out of the smoke like that... I don’t think I’ll ever forget that sight. You’re something else, Ace. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise—*especially* yourself. I can imagine that being such a beast this early in your career can make it easy to lose perspective, but let me be clear: You are beyond exceptional, as a Marine. Keep going the way you’re going and you’ll do great things for all of us. I’d love to have you under my command someday—if only to hand you back off to Command right away again.”

Thea blinked. And then blinked again.

Her eyebrows had risen higher with every line—until she was pretty sure they were on the verge of leaving her forehead entirely.

She stared at the message a moment longer than she intended.

It felt... surreal.

She had spent the entire mission utterly *convinced* she was just barely holding things together. That she'd been improvising every second.

That if Chester hadn't kept her upright, or if Quent and Dan hadn't given her all their Focus, or if Sergeant Kalt hadn't cleared the battlefield for her, she would have been unable to do anything at all.

That most of what she did was just reacting really fast and trying not to fall apart.

"Beyond exceptional, as a Marine."

Her first instinct was to reject it. To write it off as someone just being polite.

Or overly impressed because they hadn't seen real Psykers before. Or maybe he was just saying that because he happened to catch the most dramatic moment of the mission—her walking out of the smoke, like some heroic propaganda poster come to life.

She *almost* dismissed it.

But then she remembered the look on the enemy front when she had hit them the *first* time.

The way their push had simply *stopped*.

The way every UHF gun on the line had surged forward as she deployed as an official Battlefield Ace, like a wave catching its momentum.

The way the Stellar Republic had started reacting to *her*, specifically.

She remembered the silence on the comms when Kalt's deployment order went out.

The way the entire battlefield had started shifting because of *her*; because of *her* presence.

Maybe—just maybe—it hadn't been luck. Maybe she *had* done fairly well, overall.

Not perfect. Not without mistakes. Not without literally killing herself.

But still.

She let out a slow breath she hadn't realized she was holding, the tension easing from her shoulders just a little.

“...I guess I *did* do some cool shit out there, huh?” She muttered under her breath, sounding half-surprised, half-embarrassed at hearing herself say it.

She accepted Corporal Sartin’s friendlink request.

The next request didn’t require a second of thought.

Thea accepted it instantly, her thumb tapping the confirmation before she even bothered to read the attached message.

Sergeant Ryker Invictus Kalt (“Command Squad”)

“Thank you for being my first Battlefield Ace deployment, Recruit. It was an honour and a damn pleasure serving as your eyes, ears, and tactical brain. You’re a boon to the entire UHF, plain and simple, and I’m looking forward to seeing where you go from here. If this really was your first DM, I can’t imagine what you’ll be doing in a year. Or ten. I’ll always be available as somebody for you to link up with; as long as I get to deploy you again every once in a while. It was far too much fun to be a one-time thing. May the Emperor’s light continue to guide you, Thea.”

A wide, genuine grin spread across her face before she even realized it.

She hadn’t spoken to Kalt for more than... What, a handful of minutes? And yet the man had felt exceedingly familiar.

Solid. Easy to trust. Firm but honest in all the ways that actually mattered.

‘*He reminds me of the Old Man, in a way,*’ she thought, a warm, strange ache rising in her chest.

She opened the last of the high-relevance requests to distract herself from the feeling—and actually froze at seeing who it was from.

Private Chester O’Neil (“Wellis Squad” – Wellis Two)

“Yeah, yeah, I know... It’s weird sending this after all the shit in the locker room and all. But look—Merit and Credits don’t lie, and you bring in a lot of both. Like a *fuckload*. You’re also a stupid fucking idiot for cooking yourself like that. Pissed me right off, not gonna lie. But by the damn Emperor, you’re worth dragging into the trenches if you provide that level of cashout every time. I have no aspirations to be your friend or whatever, but if you ever need a competent Squad Medic to keep you standing upright until the bitter end, I’ll be your guy. Just don’t let it become a habit, you’ll get your ass killed out there in the real world.”

A short huff of laughter slipped out of her, more surprised than anything.

Of course that would be Chester’s angle.

Not *gratitude*, not sentiment, not even some weird apology—just pure, calculated Merit-per-minute efficiency. He’d decided she wasn’t a burden after all, but the best damn investment he could possibly make.

It was kind of hilarious, especially considering he'd been the one bleeding and her dragging him back from the edge the entire time.

'The man really said: "Yeah you almost got me killed several times but damn, the profits though."

She couldn't help the grin spreading on her face.

The irony wasn't lost on her.

She barely got hit. He was the one who tanked half the consequences of her mistakes.

And yet somehow, in the end, *he* was the one sending *her* a link request, offering to be the guy who keeps her upright—though she recognized that it was likely in regards to the end of the DM, rather than before.

No pretenses about friendship. No flowery compliments.

Just raw practicality, frustration, and... weirdly enough—respect.

She accepted the request without any real hesitation; after all, she could deal with competent assholes way more than nice dead weights.

After that, she skimmed the rest—names she didn't recognize, people she'd maybe seen for two seconds through smoke, or not at all. No point in pretending she knew any of them or owed them anything.

She dismissed the remaining requests with a simple flick of her Interface.

"That concludes the friendlink review portion of the debrief. Are there any friendlinks you would like to send?" the Sovereign asked.

"No, I think I'm good," Thea answered, already pushing herself up from the armchair.

"Understood. The debrief has been completed. You will be returned to the Digital Mission Deck momentarily. Please remain still."

The room flickered—gray walls dissolving like mist, her body feeling weightless for a fraction of a heartbeat—

And the world blinked away around her...