

Arc 1 - Intermission 5 - A Major's Perspective IV

The recording continued and the camera angles switched between different perspectives, capturing Sovereign Alpha's meticulous movements and the tense atmosphere inside the apartment complex.

The squad was on high alert, their weapons ready, and their expressions determined. Each step they took echoed through the deserted hallways, adding to the suspense.

As they ascended the narrow inner stairwell, higher and higher, the camera rotated around and flipped to the outside of the building, revealing a single drone latched onto the building's exterior, hidden via some basic camouflage; but clearly missed by Sovereign Alpha's preliminary scans.

The noise level inside the viewing room abruptly kicked up a notch at that.

Lieutenants quickly changed their bets, joined in on new ones, or simply yelled out warnings to Sovereign Alpha, as if that would somehow help the squad of recruits who had no possible way of hearing them.

It didn't take long for the Stellar Republic to react to the drone's surveillance either.

The northern section of the stairwell abruptly exploded in a massive conflagration of rockcrete and fire. An enemy heavy-weapons squad had unleashed their rockets on the residential building to catch Sovereign Alpha off guard.

Fortunately for Sovereign Alpha and lucky for the Lieutenants who had bet on their survival, Thea's Short-Term Precognition came through clutch once again.

She had warned the rest of the squad about the incoming rockets mere instants before the stairwell exploded, allowing them to duck into cover just before they would have been ripped apart.

Immediately, Sovereign Alpha returned fire.

Lucas, defensive heavy, placed his massive solid-cover shield to create a rudimentary firing position for Thea's deadly precise shots. Meanwhile, Isabella, the offensive heavy, was already busy unloading her rotary machine gun in the general direction of the attackers, aiming for the plasma-like trails in the air left behind by Thea's laser rifle.

The tunnel-like confines of the stairwell were filled with the deafening roar of Isabella's gunfire and the sharp crackles and pops of Thea's shots superheating the air around them momentarily with each trigger pull.

The camera captured every moment of the chaotic, albeit brief, firefight, doing a great job of highlighting the squad's coordination and quick response, as some of the heavy weapon's squad fell to their return fire.

Flashes of more and more explosions lit up the darkened building, continuing to assault and compromise their position further, until Thea quickly called for a complete retreat—the risk of the building collapsing too great to continue fighting in this manner.

Hiding out of sight from the enemy heavy squad that had assaulted them, Sovereign Alpha prepared to defend the stairwell coming up towards them.

‘Reasonable decisions, given the circumstances... They’re trapped now, though. So how do they get out...?’ Ukuar thought, nodding at Thea’s immediate orders. He would have likely made the same decisions in this situation.

Being stuck in an apartment building inside enemy territory was one of the worst possible scenarios to find oneself in, Ukuar knew all too well.

There was no real winning play in that situation, as anything you decided to do was inherently fraught with risks.

If you decided to fight your way out, down the staircase, you ran the risk of running into a serious ambush the moment you exited the building. But if you decided to stay and hold your ground, the enemy had every card to play and an infinite amount of time to prepare them.

No matter what Sovereign Alpha did, the moment the drone had detected them, they had ended up in a difficult position.

“I’d imagine the idea was to wait for the overall assault to start and then provide covering fire from the building,” Ukuar mused aloud, including Lieutenant Zrael in his thought process.

“The Stellar Republic wouldn’t have the same amount of resources and time available if they also had to defend from multiple different angles. But because they got spotted early, they’re stuck now. What would you do in this situation, Lieutenant?”

Zrael’s face turned contemplative as he attempted to put himself in Thea’s shoes.

“Hmm... I guess I’d hunker down as long as possible, just like they are,” he replied after a few moments. “Wait for the rest of the assault to begin and hope that it puts the Stellar Republic’s forces into enough of a bind to give us an opportunity to break free or otherwise impact the mission—essentially follow the original game plan. Just trying to fight my way out of this situation would likely be impossible.”

Ukuar nodded in satisfaction at that. It was the answer he had been looking for.

“Correct,” he replied. “It’s what I’d do as well. It’s risky, but likely the least risky of the options they currently have access to. Let’s see how it plays out, shall we?”

Continuing the recording after their brief discussion, they watched as Thea ordered Isabella to start taking down the nearby apartment walls to increase their range of motion and potential firing arcs.

'*Smart choice,*' Ukuar noted, though he felt it was odd seeing Isabella prepare everything, only for her to spend additional time knocking on doors and informing the residents that they were blowing the walls.

'*We probably shouldn't have pushed the civilian aspect as much in the briefing... They really shouldn't waste their time with this. It's a war-zone. There's no time to watch out for every individual civilian out there. The Stellar Republic put you into that situation, so any civilian deaths that follow are on them.*'

He jotted down a few notes regarding this instance, including a recommendation for future assessment briefings to make it clear that, while civilian lives should be spared as much as possible, Marines were not required to watch out for every civilian in an active engagement.

That would simply breed bad habits that could get them killed on a real battlefield.

Meanwhile, the squad medic was busy throwing white-foam grenades to seal up some of the shattered and broken parts of the stairwell, further increasing their range of motion without accidentally running into the enemy's line of fire.

'*Once again the squad medic's quick on her feet,*' Ukuar noted, writing down further observations on his data-pad. '*The squad lead didn't even have to say anything; she already had the grenades in hand before they even broke off from the initial return fire... She's good—very good.*'

As a ruckus at the stairwell broke out, Ukuar grimaced as he realised what the shouting was all about. '*Civilian engagement... That's a nasty one.*'

He watched with rapt attention as Lucas and Karania tried to pacify an approaching civilian, asking them to stand down, but he knew all too well that this wasn't going to work.

The civilian AI for the assessments was unfathomably rudimentary—a necessity to simulate the millions upon millions of them that existed within the entirety of the simulation. The ones near the control stations were programmed to have a certain chance of becoming "obstacles," essentially mini-dilemmas for the Marines to deal with.

This was clearly one of them: An armed civilian, ready to fight what they perceived as enemy invaders in their home.

It was a necessary evil to include aspects like these, as the simulations were supposed to mirror real life closely. Situations like these happened more often than one would like, and even more often than officially reported in after-action write-ups.

He paid extra-close attention to how Sovereign Alpha handled this civilian issue, as their directives were directly at odds with the situation.

They had been ordered to minimise civilian casualties, but now one of the civilians was actively intending to inflict harm on them—how would they deal with that...?

The answer came quickly and abruptly with a roaring echo of gunfire.

Isabella's rotary machine gun cut through the civilian almost immediately after the shouting had begun. The scene was chaotic: Blood spattered across the walls, and the civilian's body crumpled to the ground, the dismembered parts of it tumbling down the stairwell, the anger in their eyes replaced with a vacant stare.

A few moments of yelling followed, as Lucas and Karania were visibly upset by Isabella's actions. The offensive heavy, however, gave exactly the kind of reasoning that Ukuar had been hoping to hear in response—shutting down the complaints swiftly and effectively.

'Armed civilians are not civilians,' he echoed Isabella's words in his mind. 'She definitely has experience with these kinds of situations... Not good ones, based on her reaction.'

He pulled up Isabella Itoku's profile and perused it briefly before gently nodding to himself.

'Lost more than half her squad to a "civilian" suicide bomber on a midworld... That'll definitely hardline you for the future, that's for sure. Good thing she's with Sovereign Alpha, as she seems to be the only one ready to do what's necessary in this situation...'

As Thea's voice cut through his thoughts, ordering everyone to consider anyone not-UHF as an enemy, his eyebrows rose involuntarily in surprise.

"Wow... That's direct," he muttered to himself, which Lieutenant Zarael picked up on.

"She's definitely gotten a lot better at reading the room and making decisions based on other people's expertise since their Squad Leader handed over the reins," Zarael commented, nodding sagely.

"No kidding," Ukuar agreed, rewinding the situation to watch it again, this time focusing on Thea's expressions and movements. He noted how there was only a brief window where she seemed uncertain before she made the call to transform Isabella's experience into a firm order for the rest of the squad to follow.

'Surprisingly agile in thinking. It's clear she didn't necessarily agree with the heavy's decisions, but she saw the pragmatic value behind it and the need for them to be cohesive as a unit... Impressive, considering her non-existent leadership training,' Ukuar thought as he jotted down a host of notes on both Thea's and Isabella's profiles.

The recording continued to unfold, with Thea ordering Lucas to change the position of his shield to give her some cover. She aimed to sniff out the heavy weapons squads that had them pinned down—a good idea, in theory.

The moment everything was set up, however, Thea abruptly stopped dead in her tracks, looking downright confused, before closing her eyes entirely.

"Huh...?" Ukuar mused, leaning in closer, as if that would somehow help him understand her thought process.

When nothing seemed to happen, he glanced at Zarael, who simply gave him the same enigmatic smile he had been wearing all morning—one that told him to just wait and see.

When Thea opened a comm link, Ukuar was even more surprised, but his surprise turned into downright anticipation as he listened to her conversation with Viladia, the assassin from the elite-infiltration squad that had helped bring Sovereign Alpha into Nova Tertius.

“Ah, so this is where they meet, huh?” Ukuar muttered, putting away his data-pad momentarily to fully focus on the unfolding scenes on the screen.

It was time for Sovereign Alpha to meet their first Psykers, and he couldn't wait to see how they would handle it, especially considering they had no training in dealing with that type of enemy.

He fast-forwarded the recording, not wanting to wait any longer, until the first instances of action became visible. Thea gave rapid-fire orders, manoeuvring Sovereign Alpha into what she considered the best possible formation against the enemy Psykers.

Knowing nothing about their capabilities, she prepared for as many eventualities as she could.

“Rigging the whole floor to blow...? A bit excessive, but definitely effective if you don't know what you're dealing with. There's only a select few things that can survive having a building collapse on top of you. Smart thinking on that, for sure. If nothing else, they'd make sure the Psykers were dealt with,” Ukuar noted openly.

Zarael chimed in with a hint of devious mirth in his voice. “I was a big fan of that as well. It comes in handy in quite a different way than expected, though, not to say too much.”

Ukuar's eyes met Zarael's, signalling that he was almost going too far with the spoilers, which made the Lieutenant nod an unspoken apology before they both returned their attention to the screen.

Switching the view to the viewing room briefly, Ukuar saw the atmosphere building up in a similar anticipatory manner. Conversations became more scarce, more stifled, and only a few new bets were opened. The entire room was poised to see how the fledgling squad of Recruits would fare against the experienced duo of Psykers and their entourage.

It took quite a while for the two parties to finally make contact.

Ukuar fast-forwarded through the lull in action until the first clones of the Psyker's entourage attempted to storm the room, only to be met by the fortified position atop the stairwell.

The tension in the air of the viewing room was palpable as the scene unfolded.

Thea quickly ducked out of cover, firing off three rapid shots from her Gram before ducking back behind the shield immediately. Her movements were so quick and fluid that it didn't even seem like she had aimed at her targets.

‘She's leaning more and more into her psychic side, isn't she? That was probably all Short-Term Precognition at work, letting her take the shots so quickly and duck behind cover before even bothering to confirm them,’ Ukuar thought, impressed.

It was exciting but also quite frightening to see her growth since the beginning of the assessment.

She had gone from someone who didn't even know what a Wielder was to someone who seemed to wear her Psychic heritage as a second skin. And all that without any formal training—pretty much everything self-taught, aside from a few pointers from fellow Marines.

'General Harbinger's daughter... I can see why he took a fancy to her. Based on everything I've read about him, she seems cut from the same cloth, no matter how you try to twist and turn it.'

The next group of clones was met by a barrage of grenades from Lucas's Havoc launcher at Thea's command—a smart play by the interim squad leader.

“Good idea to keep the enemy guessing on how you're going to respond to their approach like this. If they don't know whether to look out for a sniper peeking over the shield or grenades coming their way, they have to prepare for both—which ultimately means preparing adequately for neither,” Ukuar commented, earning an agreeing nod from Zrael.

Ukuar wasn't quite sure why he felt the need to vocalise these thoughts, but something about being around Lieutenants made him instinctively want to teach, even if they had long passed the stage where such basic-level knowledge was necessary.

As the battle continued, things started to escalate.

First slowly, but then more and more rapidly, as continuous groups of clones were sent up to probe their defences time and time again.

Thea retreated momentarily, pulling out what seemed to be a XIR-View, one of the standard equipment items provided by the UHF for Scouts in urban environments.

Ukuar didn't personally think they served much of a purpose, as they were useless in more than 99% of cases. However, he had to admit that Thea's thinking was somewhat accurate here; this was one of the very rare cases where a XIR-View *could* actually come in handy.

The main issue with them was their limited penetration range, making them only usable once you're already next to or inside a building. By then, however, any potential enemy would already know you're there, defeating the whole purpose of looking through the walls in the first place; which is why most Scouts didn't even bother bringing them.

But being stuck in a building with no real drone support, as the drone operator had already lost most of his drones, the XIR-View could actually provide exactly what they needed: Intel on where the enemy was and what they were doing.

As Thea fiddled with it, clearly unfamiliar with its operation, she abruptly stopped dead in her tracks. Ukuar immediately saw what had made her pause, his own Psychic knowledge effortlessly latching onto the slight ripple in the air: The accumulation of Psychic energy near her and Lucas at the top of the staircase.

“Go, do something!” he whispered desperately, feeling like Thea was hesitating far too long to react to the obvious danger. Then, just barely in time, Thea lunged and wrestled the defensive heavy to the ground, just before the psychic energy culminated in a pressure-pop.

Ukuar couldn't help but fist-pump the air once, thankful that they didn't die to the very first usage of psychic power they had ever encountered.

The viewing room erupted momentarily, with some of the Lieutenants whooping or cheering at Thea's last-second action. But the tension was far from gone, as everyone realised that the real encounter was only just beginning.

When they all heard Thea abruptly order Desmond to move over without seeing her utter a single word, Ukuar saw dozens of alarmed faces among the assembled Lieutenants as they recognized the severe danger that Sovereign Alpha had suddenly found themselves in—Voice Mimicry and Voice Projection.

Those two Psychic Powers, when combined, were the absolute bane of any leader's existence; to the point they were downright infamous and were even part of the UHF's leadership doctrine and training for aspiring Squad Leaders and Commanders.

Not *only* did they completely hinder rescinding orders or communicating effectively, but they were also exceedingly powerful in breaking apart defensive positions.

After all, every Marine was trained to listen to orders first and foremost.

If an order was issued, there was no time to think about the order's origin or reasoning before deciding whether to follow it. That was not how the UHF worked, or *any* functional army, for that matter.

In a war, there simply was no luxury of time to figure out these things, so one of the first things any Marine, any Soldier, and any fighter learned was to follow orders without hesitation.

This was when the recording really escalated in terms of rapid-fire events. So much so that Ukuar had to rewind and slow down the recording multiple times to catch each instance and the reactions of both the members of Sovereign Alpha and the Lieutenants in the viewing room.

First, Thea shoved Lucas out of the way of another psychic pressure-pop before faux-Thea issued another command, ordering Isabella to make noise.

Simultaneously, Thea used frantic hand gestures to try to get Desmond to understand that she had never been the one that had issued the previous order and that he should get away as quickly as possible.

Her efforts were too late, however; a renewed pop ripped the drone operator almost in half just as he attempted to escape. While her last-instant warning allowed him to barely save his own life, without medical intervention, he would die in mere seconds.

Much to Ukuar's surprise, however, mirrored by the startled and confused outcries by the Lieutenants in the viewing room, the Squad Medic was already at Desmond's side, working to stop his grotesque bleeding and stabilising him before he had even fully hit the floor.

"Huh?!" Ukuar openly muttered, his mouth agape, as he rewound the footage. "What the fuck, how...?"

Directing the camera to focus on the squad medic, he could barely believe his eyes.

The very instant Thea had shoved Lucas out of the way and started signalling to Desmond, Karania had *already* begun pulling medic supplies out of her quick-access pouches and sprinting towards the top of the stairwell, where Lucas, Thea, and Desmond had been corralled.

The first signs hadn't even finished being signed by Thea before Karania had started her run—the mere fact that Thea was signing instead of speaking had seemingly given her all the information required to extrapolate *exactly* what would happen in the following few moments, necessitating her immediate action.

"I don't... Do you fucking see this?" he failed to articulate anything further, simply gesturing towards the screen as he stared utterly flabbergasted at Zrael, who mirrored his disbelief.

A moment of stunned silence reigned between the two of them before Zrael was the first to find his voice again.

"I honestly didn't even realise that, Major... I was so engrossed with the rest of the events, I didn't even stop to think about *how* the medic managed to already be there when the drone operator hit the ground. That's... I don't even know what to say to that. How the fuck did she know? Does she have Psyker training?"

Ukuar shook his head, having checked this *exact* thing earlier already. "No. She's just... I don't know. I'll have to do more research on her background; this is not normal. I thought Recruit McKay was strange already, but at least most of her big moments can be explained through her burgeoning Psychic Powers and quick thinking. But this...? I really have no explanations. I've never seen anything like it."

He picked up his data-pad again, having discarded it earlier to pay close attention to the recording, and pulled up Karania Faulkner's profile, dragging her bookmark to the very top of his list.

He then spent around ten minutes writing down his thoughts on her actions and potential recommendations for her future training and deployments, before attaching the whole thing in a message to one of his colleagues.

'*There's no way Theron will want to be in the dark about her...*' he thought with a hint of mirth.

The image of his stoic friend going through the recordings of Recruit Faulkner and freaking out was too delicious to ignore. That thought sparked another idea in his mind, and he added a few lines of text to the end of the message.

'If he's already going to do a thorough background check on her, he might as well share with me, right? Repay me for scouting her and save myself some time; not a bad deal for either one of us, if I do say so myself.'

Ukuar leaned back, feeling a mix of excitement and curiosity.

The squad's performance so far had exceeded all of his, already lofty, expectations—and the assessment wasn't even close to being over just yet!

In the viewing room, the Lieutenants watched in silence, their earlier chatter replaced by focused attention. The tension was very much palpable, and Ukuar felt a surge of pride for the Recruits—*his* Recruits—knowing they were facing extraordinary challenges and doing their best to try and meet them head-on.

Ultimately, however, he had very little hope for them coming out of this situation victorious.

With no idea what was happening to them, facing enemies that could kill them without getting close or requiring a line of sight, and with no way to effectively communicate, they were bound to get ground down by the Psychic Powers of the Stellar Republic's Psyker duo. But Ukuar was not one to quit halfway through. He had a recording to finish watching, even if the outcome seemed preordained.

As he continued, he watched as Thea frantically tried to reach the rest of the squad via her comms; the attempt was utterly fruitless. Then, he saw the tell-tale signs of her activating her signature Ability, causing him to lean in closer. Every time she had activated [Sensory Overdrive] in the assessment so far, things had become interesting.

Whenever Thea activated her [Sensory Overdrive], her pupils dilated ever so slightly, and her eyes darted around at many times their normal speed—signs nobody would ever notice unless they were intensively studying recordings of her.

The next moments completely defied any and all expectations Ukuar had for Sovereign Alpha.

With a seemingly calculated move, Thea barely dodged a massive psychic eruption, dipping half of her body into it at an angle.

She used the pressure pop to propel herself to the side—sacrificing her left arm and taking serious damage in the process.

But she barely managed to slip out of cover and into line of sight, just as Isabella was about to start firing her rotary machine gun into the ground, which would have revealed her position and signed her own death warrant.

Isabella's eyes widened at the abrupt appearance of a heavily wounded Thea, but then turned dead-serious as she watched her interim squad leader sign one-handed that communications were compromised.

For the offensive heavy, things seemed to fall into place. She replied with a single nod before signing back, asking what Thea's orders were.

With only one hand, the best Thea could do was sign “down,” “two,” “explode,” “shield.”

Ukuar had no idea what that could possibly mean as he watched the “conversation” unfold, but Isabella seemed to fully trust Thea’s orders.

She prepared the remote detonators that Karania and she had set up earlier without hesitation.

“What are they going to do...?” he muttered quietly to himself, trying to figure out where they were going with this, but momentarily failing to do so.

The enemy Psykers seemed disoriented without any sound from Sovereign Alpha’s side, as they stopped attacking with psychic pressure bombs.

Instead, a large group of clones started making their way up the stairwell.

Meanwhile, Thea gestured to Karania, “leave him,” “kill,” “return.”

Karanja met her with a determined gaze that Ukuar wasn’t sure she could break, but a brief non-verbal exchange of glances was surprisingly enough for Karania to begrudgingly follow Thea’s orders.

Lucas picked up his shield, and together with Karania and Isabella, moved into the previously blown-open apartment section of their area, while Thea made her way to the window just above the stairwell.

As Ukuar watched the two heavies and the medic prepare inside the apartment, stepping onto the Stalwart that was now facing the ground—right on top of a small pile of shaped charges and explosives, his eyes widened in sudden realisation.

“What... What are they doing? They aren’t doing what I think they’re doing, right?” He asked in utter disbelief, his eyes meeting Zrael’s once again, who wore a big, toothy grin.

“Oh yes, they are,” the Lieutenant answered with a satisfied nod, just as the recording showed a massive explosion ripping the floor out from below the trio.

The explosive force was absorbed by Lucas’s solid-cover shield beneath their feet, before they dropped one floor lower.

“Holy fuck, you’re *actually* kidding me. There’s no fucking way this works out...!” Ukuar muttered, utterly enthralled by what he was seeing.

Then, another explosion occurred right below them—a second set of charges that Isabella had quickly planted under the shield, ripping through the ground again before the shield broke apart and they landed inside the apartments below them.

They were now on the same floor as the enemy Duplicators and Psykers—just like that.

The doors of the apartments exploded outwards as Lucas used his grenade launcher.

His grenades exploded moments before hitting the door—likely some sort of System Ability being used to detonate them proactively, saving precious fractions of seconds to allow them to act on the brief moment of surprise.

The Duplicators, caught off-guard, were hit by Lucas's follow-up shots.

In return, Lucas was hit almost immediately by a pressure bomb as one of the Psykers returned fire, and Karania stepped in to take care of as many of the confused and disoriented Duplicators as she could.

Meanwhile, Isabella was preparing to charge in from the other door, slightly further away from their drop-point.

A sonic scream ripped through the building, hitting Lucas head-on and clipping Karania at the door to the north, but leaving Isabella unscathed as she charged in from the southern one.

She crashed into the disoriented Duplicators, her two-handed chainsword ripping and tearing through the enemy lines like they were made of wet tissue paper.

The room filled with the sound of metal against flesh, the buzz of the chainsword, and the cries of the wounded.

The Stellar Republic's fate was sealed when even the seemingly grenade-gone-awry from Lucas's last shots didn't take out Isabella, but instead was absorbed by one of her System Abilities, further strengthening her movements.

She was hit by a myriad of shots and slices as the Duplicators tried their best to respond, but the reach of her two-handed chainsword, the power of her attacks and the thickness of her armour was too great to escape or quickly bring her down.

Their only hope was the two Psykers still recovering from their earlier power uses, but just as it seemed they were ready to go, the window atop the stairwell right next to them shattered.

The pressure-Psyker fell dead to the ground with a miniscule hole in his temple, and then Thea crashed through the window, pistol in hand, taking out the last Psyker.

Both Ukuar and the viewing room were completely silent.

The outcome of this engagement was so *thoroughly* unbelievable, so far beyond anything that could possibly be expected, that nobody had any thought to celebrate the unlikely victory or to lament their unexpected betting losses.

Silence reigned for quite some time until Ukuar finally regained some of his own senses.

Still refusing to believe his eyes, simply not accepting that this was how it had all played out, Ukuar couldn't help but question, "They created a pincer out of that situation...? When did they even have time to plan this out?! You can't just go and do something like this without a single second of planning!"

Rewinding the footage frantically, he watched in disbelief as the camera followed Isabella closely, instead of going back to an overarching view, after the moment the two of them had parted.

As Karania rushed towards her, followed closely by Lucas, Ukuar saw it.

The Squad Medic was laying down the whole plan via a rapid series of hand signs, obviously having seen Thea's earlier communication with Isabella; immediately after meeting up with the rest of them.

"Explosives," "Shield," "Down," "Again," "Explosives," "Shield," "Down," "Pincer," "Isabella far," "Lucas, I, close," "Close, Duplicators," "Far, Duplicators," "Thea, Priority," "Go".

The whole plan that was unfolding in the next moments had been laid out by her, without a single second of apparent thought required, simply incorporating the ideas that Thea had briefly conveyed to Isabella with her own, to facilitate whatever overarching plan the interim squad leader had thought of.

Ukuar leaned back in the cushy seat, utterly stunned by the coordination and quick thinking displayed by Sovereign Alpha as a whole.

It wasn't just Thea's quick thinking to use the psychic eruption to get into Isabella's line of sight and stop her from following the fake orders, or Karania's impossibly quick and detailed plan, or the almost flawless execution thereof.

It was the combination of all of the above, as well as the sheer audacity to use breaching explosives, coupled with a T1 solid-cover shield and its gravity-lock feature to rapidly breach downwards towards an enemy vastly superior in experience, numbers, and positioning, that truly took the cake.

The viewing room slowly began to revive itself as well, with stunned and flabbergasted Lieutenants trying to figure out what exactly they had just witnessed.

None of them could make heads or tails of what had occurred, as they didn't have the immediate luxury of rewinds, camera changes, and slowdowns that Ukuar had.

The room devolved into an utter mayhem of yelling, discussion, and cheers over the next few moments. Ukuar decided to mute the recording entirely and turned towards a broadly grinning Zarael.

"I... I really don't know what to even say," Ukuar admitted, struggling to find the right words.

"They're my Alpha Squad, sure, but... I mean... This ain't exactly shit we teach, y'know?" He chuckled to himself as the tension of the earlier moments left his body, only now realising how on-edge he had been to see Sovereign Alpha in such a tight spot. "I understand, *logically*, how this happened. But emotionally I still can't believe that what I just saw is real..."

"Neither can they, I guess," he added, gesturing haphazardly towards the viewing room.

The camera captured the chaos in the viewing room: Lieutenants animatedly debating strategies, some gesturing wildly, others nodding or wildly shaking their heads. The excitement was very much evident and in stark contrast to the stunned silence that had prevailed moments before.

Ukuar watched it all with a mixture of pride and disbelief. His Alpha Squad had not only defied expectations but had done so with a level of ingenuity and bravery that was almost unreal.

The adrenaline from the intense battle still coursed through him, but he felt a deep sense of satisfaction. Sovereign Alpha had proven themselves to be a truly extraordinary unit; beyond even his wildest dreams.

“So, where do we go from here? They aren’t looking particularly healthy after this one. Did any of them make it out?” Ukuar asked Zarael, hoping for another recommendation. The Lieutenants' choices had been superb up until this point, so he saw no reason to change their dynamic at this stage.

“Yeah... They didn’t make it much farther,” Zarael admitted, a tad of sadness spreading over his face. “Lost quite a bit of Credits as a result, but I really thought they might get through this whole thing alive—at least Recruit McKay, considering she hadn’t died at all up until this point. But she ultimately ran into the third Ace, who took her out. Can’t exactly fault her for dying there.”

Ukuar’s eyes widened at that news, but he let Zarael continue his recounting.

“Arrow Squad tried to fight the Ace. They were somewhat caught off-guard by him, only able to react thanks to Recruit McKay’s last-second warning, but they ultimately failed as well. They all died, except for Private Sortal, who got captured and tortured for almost two days straight... That fucking piece of shit Ace...”

Ukuar immediately pulled up his data-pad, looking up both Private Sortal’s status and information about the third Ace.

As his eyes fell on the name of the Ace, he couldn’t hide a vicious snarl, “Lieutenant Yiue Alcantar... Of course it’s him,” he commented, his blood starting to boil.

He had heard stories from Nova Tertius and Lieutenant Yiue Alcantar’s actions during the original battle. Actions that were not limited to just this battlefield either.

He was a known flayer, torturer, and breaker of Marines; generally seen as one of the worst low-level Aces the UHF ever had to go up against due to the sheer inhumanity of his typical modus operandi.

The Ace had a deep-seated hatred for everything UHF, to the point that he had tried for decades to find a way to permanently kill UHF Marines that fell into his hands; luckily, to no avail.

Unfortunately, the alternative route he ultimately ended up on wasn’t much better for the Marines that got caught, often ending with severe psychological trauma, PTSD, or broken

minds that made the Marines completely unsalvageable without heavy use of amnestics—drugs that had their own major issues.

“I honestly can’t believe they included him in the fucking assessment... But I guess that’s kind of on me, as well. I chose this one,” Ukuar muttered to himself as much as to the world around him, a blanket of guilt descending upon him. “If I had known the assessment would diverge so much from the original; that The Flayer would have enough time to do his dirty work on one of our aspiring Marines... I would have never voted for this one to be chosen...”

In the original Battlefield, The Flayer had never been this much of an issue, as he had been engulfed in larger scale engagements almost the entire time, giving him no opportunity to indulge in his “hobby.” It was only during the later stages of the battle, months after planetfall, that The Flayer had begun making headlines amongst the deployed Marines.

But due to changes in the assessment’s version of the Battlefield, he had been moved closer to the Control Stations earlier by the command units, meaning that he didn’t get caught in the maelstrom of large-scale warfare early on.

This ultimately allowed him to capture and torture Private Sortal to his heart’s desire.

Checking over Private Sortal’s assessment profile, Ukuar breathed a sigh of relief.

The preliminary psych-eval of the Private post-respawn showed that she was unlikely to carry significant mental trauma, likely thanks to the anti-torture training she had gone through as a requirement for acquiring her Assassin-type Class, “Shadow Stalker.”

Lieutenant Zrael seemed unsure what to say, remaining quiet and following Ukuar’s every move as he looked over the information on his data-pad. Realising that he was causing quite a bit of concern, Ukuar finally spoke up, “Well, it seems the Private is fine, after all. We’ll kill The Flayer at some point in the future, I guarantee it.”

Zrael nodded determinedly. “I’d love to be there for it... I wonder what Tier he’s at now. Tier 4, maybe? Or maybe he’s purposely staying at Tier 3 to get used in as many Battlefields as possible? The Stellar Republic would definitely do something like that; underhanded, honorless bastards...”

Shaking off the sombre tones, Zrael pulled up the next recording and introduced it.

“This one’s a bit more... large-scale, if you want. It’s the main assault on the Wall, after the majority of the Control Stations had been disabled by the infiltration squads—primarily thanks to the western-front’s infiltration units, as they didn’t run into much opposition. Not a big surprise considering the amount of firepower that had been placed on the eastern front, really.

“This one doesn’t really follow Sovereign Alpha *specifically*, although they’re also present, but it’s definitely the most important battle of the entire Assessment so far—potentially in general, depending on how the last week unfolds. It should still prove exceptionally valuable to check out, I’d argue,” Zrael explained.

He transferred the data for the recording to the screen in front of them and began playing it.

As Ukuar perused the data pertaining to the recording, something caught his attention, and he immediately paused it.

“When did Recruit McKay invest her Attribute Points?” Ukuar asked calmly, a certain feeling of strangeness overcoming him. As far as he had understood from previous updates on her situation, she had been too scared to invest any of her Attribute Points; yet the profile he was looking at now was unambiguous in its information—she had invested all of her points.

Zarael, somewhat taken aback by the seemingly random question, thought for a second before the memory came to him. “Ah! Right! She went on to find a Psyker in the FOB after her respawn. She got a few pointers from him and upgraded her Attributes under his supervision. It wasn’t anything special, so I figured we could just skip it.”

Frantically typing on his own data-pad, Zarael added absent-mindedly, “I have it somewhere here, if you want to check out what they talked about...”

“I’d appreciate that,” Ukuar said, feeling that watching Recruit McKay get information about the nature of Psykers was definitely going to be important going forward.

After all, he was technically here to evaluate her and ensure that other top brass didn’t blindside Major Quinn with purchase requests. Depending on Private McKay’s interest in becoming a Psyker, which was currently still very much in the air as far as Ukuar understood, the level of interest could skyrocket even further.

Up until now, however, the UHF had only gotten her to agree to go towards a Psyker build for the first ten Levels and provide the information on the names of potential Battlefield Psyker Classes that would be available to her.

They hadn’t asked her to take any of them, nor was it likely that they would, if Ukuar had understood the conversations aboard the Sovereign properly. Nobody wanted to *force* the burden of a Battlefield Psyker onto a new recruit like that, even a seriously promising one like her.

As Zarael pulled up the recording, Ukuar leaned forward, eager to see the interaction between Recruit McKay and the more experienced Psyker in the FOB. He hoped it would provide insights into her understanding and potential interest in fully embracing her Psychic Powers.

Ukuar himself was of a split opinion on the matter.

On one hand, he couldn’t deny the overwhelming potential that the Recruit represented. She had unfathomable, once-in-a-millenia Base Attributes, coupled with the fact that she was a Wielder and had also received one of the highest-scaling Inheritances possible.

Having her become a Battlefield Psyker at Tier 1 would undoubtedly make her into an absolute powerhouse the likes of which would be exceedingly rare to find, much less be possible to be duplicated by other Factions.

On the other hand, however, he couldn’t, in good conscience, hope for her to follow that path—Psykers were not long lived, no matter how one looked at it.

It had taken Ukuar himself decades to accept that fact, to finally invest some more into his Psychic side before ascending to the rank of Major; but even he wouldn't dare touch the Battlefield Psyker side of things.

The horror stories of the few Battlefield Psykers he had known over the course of his time with the UHF; the raw power of the Call of the Void they had to deal with on a semi-regular basis... It was simply something he knew he couldn't fight for long.

It wasn't something he was hoping for her, even though he had never personally met the girl.

But from simply watching her over the last few hours, days and weeks; seeing her earnest attempts at improving herself, understanding the strange world she had suddenly been thrust into and bonding with her squad... He couldn't hope for her to become a Battlefield Psyker, as much as it could be considered treason by certain people in the UHF; for not wanting the UHF to receive the best possible war resources.

Shaking off these thoughts for now, realising that he couldn't impact it one way or another as things stood, Ukuar paid close attention to the recording.

Just as Lieutenant Zarael had said, it was a calm conversation between Recruit McKay and the more experienced Psyker named Zachary.

They shared around two hours of conversation before parting ways amicably, with McKay profusely thanking the Psyker for finally clearing up some of her confusion—a notion that sent a bolt of sympathy through Ukuar's heart.

He couldn't even imagine the pure confusion, terror, and fear the girl had been experiencing since her Gate had Awakened.

Normally, she would've received some sort of primer on what to expect, how to deal with the situation, and the aftermath, but due to the timing of her integration and the sheer absurdity of her Attributes, things had developed in the worst way possible.

It was absolutely unheard of for a new Recruit to open their Gate during the very first Assessment.

It had *never* happened before within the UHF; it was thought downright impossible due to the raw Attribute requirements needed to Awaken it in the first place. But with the Harbinger's daughter, impossible seemed to just be a challenge, rather than an absolute, Ukuar was quickly starting to realise.

As the recording wound down and Ukuar was about to pull up his data-pad to take some additional notes, he abruptly stopped dead in his tracks.

'*What...?*' he thought, confused by his own actions.

It was like his subconscious mind had spotted something and was trying its best to make him aware of it—like he was missing something important.

Focusing his attention on the only thing he could think of possibly being the cause, he stared at the recording's last moments unfold. The experienced Psyker and Recruit McKay were holding a last bit of small talk before they finally parted.

As the Psyker closed the door to his squad room, it finally struck Ukuar.

"Wait!" he abruptly said, startling Zarael, who had been about to change the recordings to the assault on the Wall.

"Wh... What? What's wrong, Major?!" Zarael asked, confusion evident on his face.

Rewinding the recording, Ukuar stared intently at Zachary's arm and quickly found what he was looking for.

"Look at his arm," he practically ordered Zarael, his voice surprisingly forceful.

The Lieutenant immediately complied, unsure of what was going on.

As Ukuar fast-forwarded the recording again and stopped at one of the last frames, Zarael uttered a "Huh?" indicating he saw the same thing.

"When did his uniform get damaged...?" Zarael asked, his eyes meeting Ukuar's who simply nodded and said, "Exactly."

Picking up his data-pad, Ukuar sent the recording to the Sovereign with a simple request.

[Sovereign, analyse this recording. Was it altered from the original events of the assessment? If so, figure out who did it and tell me.]

Immediately, the answer came back, sending a shiver down his spine as he read through it.

[Analysis Completed.]

[Likelihood of alteration: 100%.]

[Alteration requested by: {Insufficient Permissions}.]

[The original recording has been placed behind a Black-Level Lock, in accordance with Recruit Thea McKay's original profile settings. In order to access the original recording, please provide Black-Level Access Privileges.]

'So... Something major must have happened here, but the brass doesn't want anyone to know...? What don't you want us to see? And why...?' Ukuar asked himself, feeling a strange pull towards this unfolding mystery. Whatever had occurred between Recruit McKay and the Psyker had to have been more than a mere Attribute Point allocation and a short Psyker talk.

The question was simply: What, *exactly*, had happened and why was it *this* important?