Arc 1 - Intermission 3 - A Major’s Perspective II

- PoV: Ukuar Rurix -

Thea McKay had always been somewhat of a mystery to him.

Ukuar recalled that one of his earliest emergency meetings as a freshly minted Major had centred on her, and more recently, Majors Daxton and Quinn had also faced severe reprimands from Captain Cross over their handling of her as a notably promising Recruit.

Although Ukuar himself had not yet interacted directly with Thea herself, he had diligently reviewed the detailed briefings provided about her, becoming well-versed enough to feel like an expert on her profile—though one might argue the feasibility of ever truly being an "expert" on any individual.

Since her arrival, Thea had been under close observation; her file was flagged with a Black-level lock by Major Daxton, practically forcing the Sovereign to consider her as a VIP from the very moment she had stepped foot on the ship.

As such, the fact that her name appeared at the top of the list for this particular recording both surprised him and didn’t, at the same time.

“How many of these recordings involve Sovereign Alpha?” Ukuar inquired, glancing over at Lieutenant Zarael who seemed to be picking out the next video to watch. “Is Sovereign Alpha ‘*that Sovereign Squad*’ your friends mentioned earlier? The one you seem quite taken with?”

Zarael paused, a sheepish look crossing his face as he nodded. “Yes, that’s them. I became a fan on their first day on the planet. Watching them hold the line at the eastern front, and the heroics of Recruits Itoku and McKay at different places, yet simultaneously—it reminded me of the highlight reels from my first own assessment. Our Alpha Squad back then had similar moments, and it just brought all those memories back. I’ve been following them primarily since then, although I do have a few recordings that don’t involve Sovereign Alpha at all, if you’re interested…”

“No, that’s fine,” Ukuar interrupted, his curiosity piqued. “I need to catch up with my Alpha Squad anyway, so I might as well do it while I’m getting up to speed with the rest of the assessment. I’ll want to take a look at some of the recordings from a broader perspective, however. I want to feel the atmosphere of the viewing room and such; I’ve got a hunch that Sovereign Alpha might’ve been a bit too flashy, if what you’re saying is right…”

With a determined and eager nod, Lieutenant Zarael pulled up the next recording on his data-pad.

Ukuar appreciated the Lieutenant's assistance, as the prospect of sifting through the mountain of footage alone, or worse, enlisting the help of an AI, seemed too cumbersome at the moment. He was in the mood to unwind and absorb some entertainment, though naturally, his focus was on assessing his Drive's performance.

This time, the recording depicted the spectating room, exactly as Ukuar had requested.

He was particularly keen on evaluating how Recruit Thea McKay was perceived, especially after Colonel Thalia had publicly announced her interest in her during the first day of the assessment.

Following this, Thea had garnered a notable following of "admirers" within the UHF—Lieutenants, Majors, and even other Colonels had taken an interest in her, influenced by Colonel Thalia's endorsement. Known for her discerning eye for top-tier Marines, Thalia's preferences were well respected across the upper echelons of the UHF in their sector, attributed to her exemplary record in deploying effective forces on Battlefields.

Despite his intentions to monitor the discussion forums and trading tickers for new Recruits, the Void Daemon crisis had kept him from staying updated over the last two weeks.

He planned to revisit these updates later, once he was ready to dive back into text and numbers instead of engaging assessment footage.

Especially as, with the recent complications involving Major Daxton and Quinn's handling of Thea, Ukuar was uncertain of Quinn's standing within the UHF hierarchy.

There was a tangible possibility that Major Quinn might be made to trade Thea away—not only to capitalise on the influx of Credits promised by Colonel Thalia but also as a punitive action for the mismanagement.

This potential move was something Ukuar knew would trouble Quinn greatly, making it imperative for him to gather insights quickly, now that he was relieved from his duties related to the Void Daemons.

Should he find anything significant, he planned to immediately inform Major Quinn—it was a small return for the years of support she had provided him, helping him climb from Lieutenant to Captain, and eventually to his current rank.

Without Major Quinn's guidance, his career trajectory might have been markedly different, after all.

The first thing that struck Ukuar upon viewing the recording was the boisterous and jovial atmosphere inside the Lieutenants' spectating room.

The Lieutenants were engaged in lively conversations, their laughter echoing in the background along with the clinks of glasses and the shuffling of betting chips as they wagered on various outcomes within the assessment.

This scene was starkly different from the more subdued and orderly gatherings he was accustomed to from the first day, with the Majors and Colonels, where betting also took place but was conducted in a much quieter manner.

The contrast was particularly jarring given the grim reality that Ukuar, his fellow Majors and the Marines on active ship-duty had been contending with—battling the existential Void Daemon threat.

Unaware of the crisis, the Lieutenants' carefree demeanour underscored their ignorance of the dire situation unfolding elsewhere on the ship.

Ukuar couldn't help but think to himself with a sardonic grin, *'It's probably for the best. They'll have their hands full soon enough when the Recruits start really testing their limits. Might as well let them enjoy this lighthearted respite; I have a feeling this particular Drive is going to cause more than one bout of early-onset grey hairs, before the year's over...'*

Turning his attention from the lively viewing room back to the assessment itself, he watched footage of Sovereign Alpha navigating through what appeared to be a deserted urban landscape.

"Nova Tertius' outskirts, I assume? Looks to me like they're out of sector S-Z64 towards the northern side and into the evacuated industrial sector of… Maybe S-I51?" he inquired, seeking confirmation from Lieutenant Zarael.

With a nod that conveyed both surprise and respect, Zarael replied, "Yes, Major. Extremely astute observation… I assume you have a broader familiarity with this Battlefield as a whole, then? I wouldn't have been able to guess their location *that* precisely, even if I had a map in front of me as I tried."

"You could say that…" Ukuar chuckled, reflecting on his deeper connection to the location. "I was part of the committee that chose it, and, as a matter of fact, it was a Battlefield I was a part of—not Nova Tertius, mind you; but Nova Secundus further towards the planet's equator. Let me just say that the whole planetary invasion was an absolute mess, thanks to the Stellar Republic's sudden jump in technology…"

His voice trailed off, his smile fading as memories of the harsh and gruelling warfare on Nova Serene flooded back—memories he preferred to keep buried deep in his past.

Where Nova Tertius' Sub-Battlefield had grappled with a deficit of intelligence from the onset of the landing, the situation at Nova Secundus' Sub-Battlefield was catastrophically different.

The Stellar Republic had deployed much of their new technology around the main city—technology whose origin remained a mystery even to the UHF's diligent intelligence efforts that aimed to craft comprehensive overviews and worst-case scenarios.

To say that they had missed the mark was a stark understatement.

Nova Serene's planetary invasion escalated into one of the most harrowing chapters in UHF history, largely due to the catastrophes at Nova Secundus' Sub-Battlefield, which claimed an exorbitant toll on UHF lives.

At that time, Ukuar served as a Legate, charged with leading the assault on one segment of the frontlines—a daunting responsibility that eventually led to his rapid promotions, first to Lieutenant and then Captain.

'*Many others deserved recognition more than I did,*' he mused with a tinge of sorrow. The campaign on Nova Serene had inflicted deep personal losses on Ukuar; wounds that had not fully healed and perhaps never would.

‘*Thankfully, Nova Tertius was spared the chaos of Black-level respawn sites. Introducing such horrors in the first assessment for new Recruits, regardless of their potential and massive PV values, would have been absolutely unthinkable…*’

Shaking his head subtly to dispel the distracting thoughts, Ukuar refocused on the datapad, observing Sovereign Alpha's manoeuvre through the outskirts of Nova Tertius’ urban zones.

The footage was heavily accelerated, yet several aspects caught his eye, prompting him to make notes on his own datapad.

“It seems the squad has already grasped the art of task delegation; quite impressive,” he murmured, realising he had been too silent, leaving Lieutenant Zarael out of the loop.

He felt it necessary to vocalise some observations, possibly as learning points for the Lieutenant. “Having Recruit McKay take point is undoubtedly a strategic move by the squad leader, given her undercity upbringing. Urban settings like this are notoriously complex to manoeuvre; a key reason this assessment was deemed as Platinum-rank difficulty for newcomers. But McKay’s Scout-type Attribute-spread and her familiarity with such environments are evidently giving them a considerable edge.”

Lieutenant Zarael nodded, hinting at future developments, “Recruit McKay’s knowledge of this terrain *certainly* comes into play more than once in this footage.”

A mixture of anticipation and apprehension started making itself known within Ukuar, as the thought of Recruit McKay garnering even more attention from the rest of the command staff was not something he was particularly looking forward to; despite it already happening almost two weeks ago and him having no way to influence this outcome.

The video continued in this vein, with Thea deftly guiding Sovereign Alpha through the city’s fringes, meticulously checking corners, streets, and building façades at every turn.

She often led the team away from buildings that appeared safe at first glance. After observing this several times, Ukuar took a closer look at the structures, only to realise that Thea had accurately identified which buildings were rigged with alarms and which were safe, all without stepping foot inside.

Approaching the open door had been enough for her to make a decision.

While she occasionally steered clear of buildings that were actually safe, her judgments were correct in more than ninety percent of the cases.

"Recruit McKay doesn't have any abilities related to trap detection, as far as I'm aware," Ukuar murmured, jotting down more notes on his data-pad about the overall squad performance. "Her instincts, likely honed by growing up in the perilous environment of a midworld's undercity, seem to have ingrained a deep sense of caution in her. I see your point now, Lieutenant."

Zarael looked somewhat surprised by Ukuar's observation and responded, "Oh? Ah! Yes, that's a great point, Major! Not exactly what I was hinting at, but definitely worth nothing."

Raising an eyebrow, Ukuar inquired, "There’s more to this recording, then?”

Zarael nodded eagerly, speeding up the footage.

Images of Sovereign Alpha moving through Nova Tertius’ outskirts flashed by until they reached the industrial zone of S-I51, where he slowed the playback.

“This is where it really gets interesting,” Zarael said with a grin that betrayed his excitement.

Ukuar, amused by Zarael's transparent enthusiasm, speculated silently, '*He's quite easy to read. Whatever is coming must be significant—perhaps a skirmish or something even more unexpected?*'

But as the recording played on and Ukuar checked additional assessment data, he realised a skirmish was highly unlikely—no Stellar Republic patrols were reported nearby, unless the footage was about to skip forward dramatically.

Confounded by Zarael’s eagerness, Ukuar struggled to guess why this particular segment was so crucial but decided to simply watch and see what unfolded, paying close attention to Sovereign Alpha’s actions.

After a few minutes of slightly accelerated footage, the squad halted unexpectedly; Desmond and Thea appeared to be engaged in a silent discussion, their words lost to Ukuar as he opted not to intrude by activating the audio portion of the recording for now.

Shortly thereafter, the squad entered a nondescript industrial office building and settled down for a brief respite. All except Desmond, who launched a second drone into the air.

'What have they found…?' Ukuar pondered, intrigued.

The sectors S-I45 to S-I55 were utterly unremarkable in the context of Nova Tertius’ original Battlefield, indicating that Sovereign Alpha's decision to deploy additional surveillance suggested an unforeseen change in the Battlefield dynamics, possibly a diverted patrol or a similar anomaly due to earlier actions by the UHF.

As he fast-forwarded through the drone's reconnaissance and the squad’s rest period, he noticed Desmond removing his helmet, revealing a broad smile.

“It seems he’s found what he was looking for,” Ukuar noted to himself, eager to discover what had caught the drone operator’s attention. A skirmish or unexpected encounter would certainly add a thrilling element to the footage.

Glancing at the viewing room during this moment, Ukuar wasn’t surprised to see it alive with speculation. Numerous bets were being placed on whether the squad would engage based on their findings, adding a layer of excitement to the onlookers' experience.

Her calling in Lucas sparked a thought in Ukuar; a dangerous thought.

He was very much aware of each Recruit’s interests and specialties and Lucas’ was almost singular in nature: Vehicles and Defence.

‘*No… It couldn't be, could it…?*’ Ukuar quietly pondered the unfolding situation as he rapidly retrieved his data-pad to pull up comprehensive details about the surrounding Battlefield area and the decision-making protocols of the Stellar Republic’s command units for this sector.

These were information and background channels from the assessment that Lieutenants did not have access to; things specifically for Majors and higher-ranked officers to check up on, to make more informed decisions and guide things properly; so Ukuar figured it wouldn’t hurt to let Zarael get a glimpse of it—after all, if everything went well, Zarael would be a Major in the future as well and would be needing to know how to use this level of access too.

In no time, the governing AIs delivered a vast array of data.

It was overwhelming in its breadth, prompting Ukuar to refine his inquiry, seeking a concise summary of recent high-priority commands issued by the Stellar Republic in this specific sector.

Just a few moments later he found what he was looking for.

“No fucking way… What are the fucking odds?!” Ukuar groaned in exasperation, which only seemed to further Zarael’s excitement. “They moved the backup control station all the way from the western front to sector S-I48 and Sovereign Alpha just so *happened* to run across it? What the fuck?”

Zarael’s initial thrill morphed into puzzlement at Ukuar’s reaction. “What do you mean *‘from the western front*’, Major?” he asked, trying to piece together the implications of what they were witnessing.

Desperately wanting someone else to share in his dumbfounded, impossible find, Ukuar gladly guided Zarael through the information on his data-pad.

“You can see the last few days of decisions made by the Stellar Republic command units here,” he pointed at a long list of mid-high level orders scrolling across the right side of the screen.

Picking one out, he blew it up for Zarael to take a closer look. “This one, for example, is in response to the rapid destruction of anti-armour cannons at the eastern front. While the command units expected to lose them over time; the rapid pace at which they were destroyed as a result of Staff-Sergeant Venn’s risky play with the offensive heavy squads, as well as Recruit McKay’s extremely unlikely combination of equipment and Abilities; caused the command units to deviate from the original Battlefield quite significantly.”

Ukuar expanded the causal tree, tracing the subsequent decisions that stemmed from this action. “This accelerated loss caused the Stellar Republic to initiate an IgT bombardment earlier than anticipated—this was a deviation from the original battle plans. In the original scenario, such a bombardment was reserved for later stages to counter a major offensive from our forces on the western and central fronts, instead.”

He pointed to another link in the causality chain, continuing, “Following the bombardment, the western front was then assessed as the most vulnerable to breaches, given that the eastern front had already been softened up by the heavy artillery.”

Jumping over the next few steps, he finally arrived at the causality chain marked in red; the colour indicating that this was the result of his original search. “Finally, and I can’t believe this is actually what fucking happened, the command unit decided to move the backup control station outpost from behind the western front to behind the eastern one, into sector S-I48… Right into the path that Sovereign Alpha *just so happened* to be taking; ending up with them finding the tracks of the recently passed transport vehicle and kicking off the search via the drone operator in their squad.”

As Ukuar massaged his temples, a growing headache signalled his frustration with the almost ludicrous sequence of events he had just finished explaining. Beside him, Lieutenant Zarael appeared equally stunned, which brought Ukuar a strange sense of relief.

‘*At least there’s someone else here that feels this is utterly fucking absurd…*’ he thought grimly.

“That’s… That’s insane,” Zarael finally murmured, and Ukuar responded with a weary nod.

“Let me guess what happens next: Sovereign Alpha blows up the outpost and walks away without a scratch,” Ukuar said, his voice heavy with exasperation. He was thoroughly fatigued by the constant stream of improbable successes that seemed to shadow the squad.

He couldn’t help but recall the first emergency meeting where Recruit McKay was mentioned, especially the references to her adoptive father. “The Harbinger's daughter, huh? Truly cut from the same cloth, isn’t she…?” he whispered to himself, disbelief evident in his tone.

“Actually… not quite,” Zarael interjected hesitantly, prompting Ukuar to give him his full attention. “They debated whether engaging the target was worth the risk of potentially not escaping; they decided to split off instead. Let me fast-forward to that part.”

The footage sped up, showing the squad deep in discussion. It ended with Thea handing her Caliburn to the squad leader, Corvus, and instructing him on its use.

“Admirable,” Ukuar remarked, jotting down a note on Corvus’ profile. “A squad leader who recognizes when to defer to the expertise of others is rare.”

Zarael nodded vigorously. “That’s why he’s my favourite in the squad! He’s level-headed, articulate, emotionally aware, and clearly understands what it takes to lead! You can tell he’s been groomed for leadership from a young age. You don’t just stumble into being this type of leader this early on otherwise.”

Ukuar was impressed by Zarael’s insight, especially since Corvus wasn’t the most flashy member of the squad. Recognizing the value of a leader's strategic acumen over more overt actions spoke highly of Zarael’s own leadership potential.

Jumping to the next morning in the recording; the two of them watched as the Caliburn's projectile pierced the transport without trouble, Ukuar noting that the moment chosen to take the shot was precisely what he would have recommended as well due to the inherent flaws of the transport itself—making a written note on Lucas' assessment profile for his insights—before the whole outpost exploded in spectacular fashion.

What followed was a harrowing chase scene, whose outcome was apparent the moment it began.

Corvus was not going to survive this level of rundown power—nobody would have been able to. Even Ukuar himself wasn't sure if he could have escaped the sheer amount of manpower and surveillance that poured out from the Stellar Republic's side as a result of the destruction of the outpost.

Double-checking the causality tree, he saw dozens upon dozens of orders firing as a result of the outposts destruction, that called in more and more Stellar Republic troops to the eastern side of the Battlefield; to the point that Sovereign Alpha's existence was even marked as "potential Elite Squad/Unknown Ace," which made Ukuar bury his head in his hands.

'*This is going to cause **sooo** much headache for Quinn… Fuuuck,*' he thought to himself, already trying to draft messages to send to his de-facto mentor of sorts, in which he'd have to try and coherently explain how in the high-councillors all of Sovereign Alpha had managed to land on everyone's radar.

His attention was only reclaimed by the recording as a sudden warning flashed on the screen, explaining that the next few moments were heavily edited by the AIs to prevent injury to the viewers.

He watched with rapt attention as Corvus had a downright heroic last-stand in an industrial office, much like the one the squad had rested in the day before, but ultimately, Corvus ran out of ammo and took too many hits to stay standing.

Pulling the trigger of the Caliburn over and over in his last moments, Ukuar couldn't help but be thoroughly enraptured by the Marine's last moments.

As a sudden crack occurred and the recording turned silent, with a pervasive, aggressive silence, Ukuar suddenly remembered one of the most important parts of the Caliburn: Its Solarium core.

"Ah… That's why it was edited; makes sense," he muttered as the screen erupted in a blinding flash of light. Despite the AIs editing the effect down, the light was still enough to burn and cause his eyes to water through the screen as everything around Corvus was simply deleted from existence.

He jotted down another few comments on Corvus' assessment profile, before rewinding the recording and watching the whole sequence again; this time with the viewing room's PoV front and centre.

Much as he anticipated, the Lieutenants were utterly captivated, the usual boisterous atmosphere of the room giving way to a tense, heavy silence that spoke volumes of Corvus' dire situation.

The charged silence was so profound, one could hear a pin drop among the crowd of onlookers.

As the recording neared its tragic conclusion, however, the intensity among the Lieutenants surged; they vocally urged Corvus on, encouraging him to persevere, to keep running and never surrender. Some voiced resignation, calling out for him to accept his fate, arguing that the overwhelming numbers of Stellar Republic forces made further resistance futile; that he should simply take the respawn and get back into the fight with a squad.

When Corvus barricaded himself in the industrial office for his last stand, the room's atmosphere shifted dramatically.

A solemn realisation washed over everyone as they understood that entering the building was Corvus' tacit acceptance of his likely end.

The room fell quiet, the earlier cheers transforming into a grim tally of each enemy soldier Corvus took down, every grenade he dodged, and every shot he fired.

The room was charged with a palpable energy, a mix of admiration and dread that Ukuar found himself envying. It was the type of fervour only a first-time viewing of an assessment could elicit, featuring new and unlikely heroes whose tales were as yet untold.

He regretted missing much of it due to the Void Daemon invasion; but there was nothing to be done about it. For him, second-hand enjoyment was the best he could get.

With every hit Corvus sustained, the room responded with collective gasps and cries, each Lieutenant clinging to the hope that somehow, against all possible logical and all conceivable odds, he would survive.

When Corvus finally collapsed, exhausted and overwhelmed, some Lieutenants began chanting his name, as if their calls could revive the fallen squad leader.

Then, the crack occurred; as the Caliburn began its death throes; and the viewing room turned deadly silent. The aggressive, silent cries of the Caliburn were transmitted one-to-one through the recording into the room, overpowering the chants, the cheers, the cries; *everything*.

A lot of the Lieutenants simply froze; never having experienced or even heard about a Solarium-core breach before, their faces going from excitement, enjoyment or elation to abrupt confusion and terror at suddenly being aggressively silenced like this.

The screen abruptly whitened, pausing in a blinding glare that seemed to stretch endlessly, before finally clearing to reveal a vast crater—the final resting place of Corvus and the surrounding Stellar Republic forces, all obliterated by the cataclysmic Solarium explosion.

The shock of the event rendered the viewing room deathly silent, the earlier fervour replaced by a heavy stillness as the Lieutenants absorbed the gravity of what they had just witnessed.

Gradually, the room began to stir.

A few Lieutenants started to recover from the initial shock; some broke into spontaneous applause, others cheered, while a few began to vocally seek out those who owed them betting payouts.

It was at this moment, amid the mixed reactions of mourning and celebration, that Ukuar paused the recording.

He turned to Lieutenant Zarael with a serious expression, "Thank you, Lieutenant. This was indeed an impressive recording. And very significant. I'm increasingly concerned about how much this assessment has diverged from the original Battlefield... How much more will it spiral out of control…?"

Zarael, taking the words as encouragement to procure the next recording, transferred it to the Major's data-pad, ready to show off the next piece of his collection.

Enjoying his time, but simultaneously somewhat exasperated at the experience, Ukuar started it without hesitation…