

Arc 1 - Intermission 4 - A Major's Perspective III

- PoV: Ukuar Rurix -

The recording began by showing the inside of the viewing room again, where the Lieutenants had resumed their jovial, boisterous, and loud conversations and betting antics.

Meanwhile, Sovereign Alpha was making their way through what appeared to be an intricate underground tunnel system.

“The service tunnels underneath the inner wall...?” Ukuar muttered, which Lieutenant Zrael confirmed with a simple nod.

“With some surprisingly bold moves, they managed to get inside, but it wasn’t particularly interesting or noteworthy in my eyes. I’ll transfer the recording of their infiltration to your data-pad anyway, just in case you want to check it out later, Major,” Zrael added, filling in the gaps for him.

Ukuar, having no real idea of what had happened over the last two weeks, had no choice but to trust Zrael’s judgement for now—which he couldn’t exactly find any fault with; the previous recordings had been both exciting and important, exactly what he had been looking for.

Additionally, he couldn’t exactly go through every single recording himself, and he wasn’t about to ask one of the AIs, busy governing the whole assessment as well as the Void Daemon hunts on their respective ships, to compile a list for him—not yet, at least.

“I’m assuming they’re trying to get deep inside the city then; to move up to the control stations operating the Wall’s automated defences?” Ukuar asked again, and Zrael confirmed with another quick nod.

There wasn’t much more intel necessary for Ukuar to understand what was going on. This scenario was unfolding almost exactly as the original battle had, something Ukuar was inadvertently thankful for, for once.

Service tunnels were historically and perpetually a weak spot in any defensive setup; it was simply the nature of large-scale battles that had become commonplace over the last several hundred and thousand years in human history.

Ukuar was, literally, aware of a time when humanity did *not* field so many soldiers, armoured vehicles, and artillery at once. Battles supposedly used to be fought with a few thousand at a time, maybe a rare ten thousand or so on a single battlefield.

But those days were long past.

Under the Allbright System, Battlefields were gargantuan in scope and scale.

It wasn’t about claiming a single city; a single territory or even a single country, but rather entire planets, asteroids or sometimes even entire solar systems at a time.

It was as much about quantity as it was about quality, with Battlefields easily reaching upwards of a million-plus combatants—and those were still considered tame in the grand scheme of things.

As such, service tunnels were seen as a necessary evil.

While they represented a clear weakness for infiltrators to exploit, the reality was simple: A few infiltration squads could not cause nearly enough damage to justify not having service tunnels available. These tunnels also doubled as resupply routes and ambush or guerilla pathways for the defending faction if the main armies fought around them—essentially turning their weakness into a strength.

That didn't mean they'd be left completely undefended, of course, which is what Ukuar was expecting to see in this recording: Sovereign Alpha's fight against the service tunnel defenders, likely including auto-turrets as well.

'Auto-turrets are always a big hurdle for new Recruits to overcome, so this will be interesting,' Ukuar thought, excitement spreading throughout his body.

He couldn't deny that he was a bit obsessed with watching new Recruits and Privates tackle challenges that he remembered as difficult or problematic back in his early days.

There was something downright therapeutic about it for him.

Whether seeing them fail, just as he did; succeed, just as he did; or even come up with entirely novel ways to tackle issues that more seasoned Marines would never consider—after all, they already had established methods for handling these challenges.

This was one of the main reasons the early assessments, exclusively available to Recruits and Privates, were so popular among the more seasoned veterans.

Fresh blood in the war machine was a surefire way to find innovative thoughts, tactics, and strategies that could be polished and distributed throughout the entire faction, if appropriate.

The recording unfolded about as he had expected, with Sovereign Alpha making their way through the tunnels, clearing out the defended junctions with relative ease—nothing too surprising, considering their Alpha status.

Sovereign Alpha was up against T1 Soldiers, but their high base Attributes and guaranteed Silver-plus ranked starting Abilities were more than enough to outmatch the average Stellar Republic Soldier, even if the level difference between them was quite startling at times.

This equation didn't even include the element of surprise or the difficulty of defending a narrow junction, making Sovereign Alpha's trek through the service tunnels an expectedly smooth ride, as long as they didn't hit a snag with any particularly well-defended junctions.

"I'm guessing this recording kicks up a notch once the Stellar Republic's response to the infiltration gets deployed?" Ukuar double-checked with Lieutenant Zrael, who once again simply nodded, clearly not wanting to give anything away that he didn't have to.

Satisfied enough with that simple guarantee, Ukuar kept watching attentively.

A few junctions were cleared without much trouble, with Sovereign Alpha employing very standard clearing tactics.

They used grenades to take out the problematic auto-turrets, which weren't programmed to shoot down enemy ordnance inside the tunnels—a hard-learned lesson over many years, no doubt. While losing auto-turrets to grenades was always somewhat problematic, it was better than giving the enemy a sure-fire early detonation and shrapnel-bombardment opportunity on the fleshy defenders of the junctions.

Ukuar kept a close eye on the scrolling list of orders from the command units on the side, using his elevated privileges to have them active at all times.

It was immediately apparent that Sovereign Alpha's continued delve did not go unnoticed.

Orders cascaded down from the command units: Auto-turrets were moved, junctions reinforced, more soldiers sent into the tunnels. A good few dozen tunnel exits were reinforced, while others were sealed shut entirely to potentially block the infiltrators from reaching critical positions behind the Stellar Republic's defensive lines.

But all of that didn't seem to slow Sovereign Alpha down at all.

They continued their way through almost entirely unopposed, until they reached one of the last junctions before their projected exit point.

As they engaged the junction, using their previously foolproof strategy, they were met with an unexpected response: Their grenades simply disappeared before they could take out the auto-turrets.

Recognizing the danger half a second ahead of time, undoubtedly thanks to her being a Wielder, Thea managed to push Lucas out of the line of fire, but not without some serious damage being done to SA's defensive heavy.

"Interesting..." Ukuar murmured, making a few notes about what had just occurred.

Primarily, he was interested in how Recruit Thea McKay's Psychic Powers functioned *specifically*.

Like every other Major, he had long passed his Psychic 101, 102s, and whatever else was considered must-attend by the UHF brass, so he was very much aware of what a Short-Term Precog Path meant; but he had very rarely come across them in the field personally.

With the Recruit's Inheritance being that of Veritas as well, it was an entirely new experience for him to see.

Most Short-Term Precogs had to play a strange game of chance with different possible futures, having to choose the right one for their intents and hope they didn't get unlucky with the outcomes.

But the Veritas inheritance that Recruit McKay supposedly possessed made that a completely different beast altogether. Her Short-Term Precognition powers were *always* accurate, showing *exactly* what was going to happen before it did. There was no ambiguity with her powers whatsoever, which made the whole scenario seem strange to Ukuar.

'Why didn't she see this as an issue before rounding the corner? Is she only able to see about half a second ahead...?' He wondered, trying to figure out why she hadn't called off the attack before it even happened; most Short-Term Precogs would have been able to.

Rewinding the footage, much to Lieutenant Zrael's surprise, Ukuar took a closer look once again. This time, he paid extra close attention to her exact positioning and what the girl was doing, leading up to the faux pas.

It didn't take much for him to recognize the issue; it was almost immediate, as he watched her coordinate the attack, then seamlessly go into the line of fire alongside the defensive heavy.

But what she *did* was not the important part to Ukuar at all, it was more about what she *didn't* do, which was the important part.

'Ah... She's not actively using it,' he concluded quickly. *'Definitely an issue with the lacking Psychic training. No trained Short-Term Precog would have made this mistake. Actively looking ahead is a must in situations like these... But it's understandable that she didn't; she hasn't had any training, after all.'*

Letting the recording continue, Ukuar was surprised to see the squad medic whip up a surprisingly robust-looking amalgamation of a prosthetic for the defensive heavy. It was an unholy combination of her own blood, metal braces and what seemed to be one of her System Abilities.

"Wow... That's... *Something* alright. I'm not sure what it is, but it's definitely *something*," Ukuar commented, unsure of what to even say.

Lieutenant Zrael couldn't hold back his laughter at that and chimed in, "I know, right? That Squad Medic is an absolute riot, no matter how you look at it. But one thing you can't say is that she isn't Emperor-damned *efficient*. That brace is better than almost any rudimentary solution I have ever seen whipped up in the field; at least that quickly, that is."

Ukuar couldn't help but nod in agreement.

Recruit Karania Faulkner's solution to the problem hadn't just been surprisingly robust but also *exceedingly* quick. It was almost like she had already had the answer prepared before the issue had even arisen.

Double-checking her profile, Ukuar made sure they weren't dealing with a once-in-a-lifetime double-precog squad.

According to the Sovereign's preliminary analysis, however, the Squad Medic was neither a Wielder nor showed any interest in the Psychic aspects as of yet.

'I'll have to keep an eye on her going forward... She's very quick and stupidly resourceful. Exactly what we need our Squad Medics to be,' he thought, bookmarking Karania Faulkner's profile and leaving a couple of written notes commending her work.

The next part of the recording went by in a flash, but Ukuar noted a few important aspects.

Firstly, Thea had abruptly changed her demeanour after the previous incident.

Where before, she had been somewhat forceful in her approach to leading the rest of the squad, looking like she wanted to do everything herself, she had done a complete 180.

Now, she was trusting everything to her squad, at times even a bit too much, in Ukuar's eyes.

It was as if a switch had flipped in her head after the sudden failure of her previous plans.

This change was especially apparent when she led them in double-time toward a completely different junction.

Previously, they had been slow, methodical, and overly cautious for Ukuar's tastes.

Now, however, she was leading the squad with downright reckless abandon, sprinting through the tunnels without even stopping at corners to check for potential enemies that might have snuck up behind them or were waiting in ambush; a stark departure from her earlier style of leading.

He leaned in closer as the squad approached a heavily fortified junction featuring two auto-turrets set up in a cross-pattern.

This was going to be the real test of their skills and likely the *real* reason Lieutenant Zarael had chosen this recording—something significant or spectacular was going to happen here.

As they got into position, Ukuar tried to follow Thea's potential thought process.

'She's going to use the shield from the heavy to hide behind, then take a quick shot at the auto-turret... As a Precog, she can probably do it; risky, but doable,' he mused quietly. *'The real problem will be the other auto-turret on the right, as well as the Soldiers. Without grenades, how will they handle this...?'*

The moment they stepped into the open, however, with Lucas bracing against his solid-cover shield to withstand the barrage of auto-turret shots, Ukuar was utterly confused.

Instead of taking the shot, Thea was simply lying on the floor, seemingly not moving at all, for a few seconds.

"What...?" he muttered to himself, wondering what was going on.

The most logical play would be to take out the auto-turret as fast as possible, yet here she was, simply lying on the floor. The tunnel echoed with the sounds of gunfire and the whir of

the auto-turret, its targeting systems clicking as it adjusted for the hundreds of shots it took each second.

Then, she finally moved again, but instead of shooting, she gestured towards the rest of the squad still in cover, pointing towards the right.

Ukuar's eyes widened at that.

"What?!" He exclaimed in disbelief, his eyes searching for Lieutenant Zarael's, as if to double-check if what he thought she had just done was correct. Zarael's smile told him that he was right, but also that there was even more to come.

'She used her active Precognition in that scenario...? That's... Scary,' he thought as his eyes were once again glued to the screen in front of him.

The next few moments unfolded at such a rapid pace that Ukuar decided to slow the recording down to pay close attention to each member.

He watched as Lucas and Thea's perfectly coordinated attack took out the first auto-turret.

Thea's precision was uncanny, her shot hitting its mark with eerie accuracy—benefits of a Veritas Precog, undoubtedly.

Simultaneously, two drones and the offensive heavy of the squad rushed past them.

The first drone was shot down the instant it turned the corner, but the second managed to get a shot off that pierced through the auto-turret's barrel, not quite destroying, but disabling it.

The offensive heavy, Isabella, equipped with a two-handed chainsword, then rushed into melee combat, swiftly taking care of the entire right side.

The rest of the squad moved up through the tunnel behind her, aiming to take out the left side in the meantime.

It was a severely risky play—one Ukuar hadn't expected the interim squad leader to take, but given their current situation, it was definitely one he couldn't fault.

As the brief skirmish continued and started to threaten to take a turn for the worse for Sovereign Alpha, however, Thea stepped out of cover from behind the solid-cover shield entirely.

Ukuar, trying to keep an eye on everyone equally, was startled by this unexpected change.

His eyes widened, confusion etched onto his face.

The next moments, playing out in slow motion thanks to the recording, were downright surreal.

He and Zarael watched as Thea seemed to dance through the tight junction, as if conducting the entire battle herself. Shots barely grazed her armour, deflected perfectly by the angled plates or missing by mere hairbreadths as she moved at the last instant to avoid them.

All the while, she fired her laser rifle at a frightening rate, each shot hitting its mark perfectly; sometimes even on targets she wasn't even looking at.

Watching this unfold sent a chill down Ukuar's spine.

These were not the actions of a mere Recruit, Short-Term Precog or not.

The human mind and body could not possibly keep up with the amount of data being input in a situation like that, where a dozen adversaries were trying to shoot at you simultaneously, much less allow enough time to process and react to that data.

It was utterly impossible, yet he watched it being done—by a *Recruit*.

His mouth was agape, words failing him as he stared at the screen, watching the last few moments of the recording before it went black.

"I... What...?" he stuttered, looking to Lieutenant Zarael for an explanation he knew the Lieutenant wouldn't be able to give him.

What met him was an amused smile, coupled with a helpless shrug. "I have no idea, Major. Honestly hoped you could give me some insights, considering she's from your ship 'n' all?"

Rewinding the recording again and again, Ukuar watched the moment Thea stepped out from behind cover more than a dozen times back-to-back.

He took notes, trying his best to catch each interaction between her and the Stellar Republic soldiers in the junction. He then thoroughly checked her profile once more, his eyes landing on her signature Ability.

Only then did things start to make a modicum of sense.

"I see," he sighed heavily. "She's using both her Psychic Powers and her System Abilities here to pull this off. It's still... completely ridiculous, but I can see how it could be possible, at least."

Turning towards the expectantly waiting Zarael, he explained, "Her Ability, [Sensory Overdrive], skyrockets not just her Perception but also the processing speed of her brain using information. She seems to be using that in combination with her Psychic Precognition Powers to preempt, dodge, and attack the enemies in the junction around her."

He explained it matter-of-factly, but deep down, Ukuar felt unnerved by the revelation. This wasn't something a Recruit should be able to pull off in their first assessment, or even as a Private.

The sheer amount of Psychic Resource needed to maintain an active-use Short-Term Precognition against that many targets in a situation like that was immense, not to mention the burden of *also* running the Allbright System's Active Ability at the same time.

It was beyond reckless, but somehow it seemed completely in line with what he had come to expect from the girl.

With apprehension, he swapped the viewpoint of the recording to show the viewing room and replayed the scene once more, bracing himself for the inevitable.

As the last Stellar Republic soldier in the junction fell, the viewing room was coated in silence; none of the Lieutenants knew what to say.

The first outcries of "What the fuck was that?" and "Huh?!" were followed by a wide variety of discussions on how the recruit had managed to pull that off, whether she even was a recruit in the first place, and a flurry of bets on the squad's chances to get through the rest of the assessment alive—or at least Thea herself.

Ukuar breathed a quiet sigh of relief that nobody had shown any more interest in Thea just yet.

Memories of Colonel Thalia's open trade request still lingered in the back of his mind. The worst-case scenario for Major Quinn right now would be if others started taking an even more active interest in the Recruit—a bidding war was the last thing they needed.

Before moving on to the next recording, Ukuar double-checked the state of the battlefield as a whole, wanting to see just how far the current assessment had diverged from the original. As his eyes fell on a few specific lines of orders from the Command Unit, his blood froze.

His eyes met Lieutenant Zrael's, who had attentively waited for the go-ahead to pull up the next recording. Ukuar simply said, "Please tell me they didn't fight the Psyker Duo..."

"Is that an order, Sir?" Zrael replied with a playful grin.

Ukuar couldn't hold back a groan. The sheer improbability of it all was beyond grating by now.

Not only had Sovereign Alpha's own actions significantly impacted the overall Battlefield enough to change the defensive setup of the Stellar Republic near the control stations, but the actions of the other infiltrating Alpha Squads, as well as Arrow Squad and the auxiliary infiltration squads, had *far* surpassed what the original Battlefield's squads had managed.

They had so thoroughly destabilised the Stellar Republic's defences behind the eastern front that even the third Ace, who had been kept back in both the original instance of the Battlefield as well as the assessment, had been ordered to hover around the control stations before the first infiltration squads had even begun engaging in their sabotage.

In the original Battlefield, the Ace hadn't appeared until the third station had already been taken out. He had been positioned closer to the Wall and had to travel all the way through

the outskirts and a good portion of Nova Tertius proper to get to the control stations in question.

But now, he was already positioned in a central building between all five control stations, ready to respond to any active attacks as quickly as possible.

'This is an absolute nightmare scenario, what the fuck...?' Ukuar couldn't help but think, gesturing for Lieutenant Zarael to start the next recording.

He wasn't going to order the Lieutenant to lie to him about something he had already deduced was going to happen anyway. Sovereign Alpha was going to run head-first into a duo of bona-fide, trained Psykers and clash head-to-head with them.

The question was simply: How would they fare?

Considering that new Recruits didn't have any Psyker training or anti-Psyker training at all, as it was not assumed that there would even be Psykers fielded against them in the initial assessment to begin with—the Platinum-level difficulty being the only reason this was the case now—the outcome should be obvious; Sovereign Alpha was going to get completely wiped out.

But if the recent recordings had taught Ukuar anything, it was that their Alpha Squad for this Drive was beyond normal.

It wasn't just General Harbinger's daughter, either; although she easily topped the "strangeness" chart with flying colours.

The rest of the squad was similarly top-shelf.

Karania was a strong runner-up for high-potential Ace candidate, and Corvus was a solid strategic-level Ace candidate as well. Even Lucas and Isabella, the heavies of the squad, had shown qualities that went far beyond what was expected of such fresh Recruits.

The only outlier so far was their drone operator, Desmond, but that wasn't exactly a knock either. Being a drone operator meant he had more scaling potential than anyone else in the squad, barring their fledgeling Psyker, Thea.

There were very few drone operators around because it took so long to properly get all the required blueprints, materials, Abilities, and Skills to make their chosen style of combat shine.

However, *despite* these lacking features, Desmond hadn't so far pulled down the rest of this all-star-seeming squad. That, in itself, was a downright all-star performance given the restrictions.

Ukuar couldn't help but wear a big grin as he thought about these things.

It was always exhilarating for him to see a new generation of Marines, but having his inaugural Major-rank assignment be on the same ship as the highest PV-rated Alpha Squad in history? That was a straight-up treat for him.

Whatever cosmic alignments had led to this outcome, he was thankful for it.

The Drive he had been assigned to aboard the Sovereign was shaping up to be both extremely confusing and exhausting, but also unbelievably fulfilling, no matter how he looked at it...

The screen flickered as the next recording started, this time in viewing-room mode.

Ukuar was primarily interested in seeing the general reactions to Sovereign Alpha's performance. As long as they didn't get wiped out immediately and put up a good fight, there were surely going to be some parties interested.

Not any Lieutenants themselves, of course, but rather the few of them tasked as proxies by their superiors to keep an eye out for promising Recruits and Privates while they dealt with the Void Daemon incident.

Sovereign Alpha was front and centre in the recording, ascending a towering apartment complex next to the objective marker reading "Control Station 1."

The viewing room was abuzz with the usual conversations and rounds of betting on how the assault on the control station would fare.

Quickly double-checking the notes, Ukuar realised that none of the Lieutenants in the room at the time knew about all of the overarching changes to the Battlefield. They had simply chosen to let the governing AI select their viewpoints and had followed it since the start of the day.

None of them were aware of the potential for the enemy Ace to appear at any moment.

The enemy commanding officer, as well as the presence of the enemy Psyker Duo, seemed to be common knowledge, however.

He could make out various bets on how Sovereign Alpha would fare against the Psykers, and whether or not Staff-Sergeant Knave would be able to keep the control station alive. Bets being made on enemies, fully governed by the AI, seemed a bit odd to Ukuar, but who was he to judge other people's enjoyment?

The majority of Lieutenants were clearly just waiting for the spectacle of Sovereign Alpha getting ripped apart, judging by the bets Ukuar overheard.

'I'd probably have bet against them too... Though I am starting to feel like I'm understanding Lieutenant Zrael a bit more. I have the distinct feeling that they'll surprise me yet again, considering this is one of his chosen recordings to show off to me,' Ukuar thought to himself as he returned his full focus to the recording in front of him...