

Volume 2 - Chapter 71 - Exchange

“They call Terra’s video games “*entertainment*.”

That—right there—is the lie that makes it all work.

Now, the *truth* is that they’re the most successful long-term military training program humanity has ever devised—and not just for one Faction, but for all of humankind at once.

Children grow up learning Systems logic, cooldown management, resource pressure, spatial awareness, teamwork, sacrifice... And so much more.

They think they’re chasing ranks, skins and tournament wins, but really, they’re simply internalizing humanity’s war doctrine without knowing.

The games are built to be cross-Galaxy by design.

Shared servers, shared metas, shared leaderboards the whole way through.

Terra’s AIs aggressively wall off anything mission-critical—no coordinates, no operational chatter, no Faction planning. You can’t organize a strike inside one of their games even if you wanted to. Even if you tried your hardest.

But you *can* learn how other humans think.

How they fight. How they value risk. How they solve problems. How they handle stress.

Cultural and societal bleed-through is not merely some sort of side effect of the system Terra has created, but rather one of the main goals of it.

But even *that* isn’t actually the *real* goal.

The real goal is visibility.

If a Faction tries to quietly raise monsters inside Terra’s games, *everyone else* will see them do so. A dominant player in UHF space doesn’t stay a secret—even if Terra’s AIs and protocols keep their exact location a secret, you cannot truly hide which rough direction of the Galaxy a top-tier player comes from after years or decades of play.

Other Factions *will* notice and learn, someday. And then bounties appear to counter their builds. Rival champions are pushed forward through massive campaigns.

The ecosystem self-corrects through increasing pressure, not intervention.

There is only one thing Terra directly intervenes in: The *Untouchables*.

The Galactic Super-Champions.

The ones who win the hardest tournaments again and again and again.

The foundational Build Makers.

The ones whose builds don’t just win, but reshape how the game itself is played.

Terra protects them: No recruitment. No pressure. No “special offers.”

Because pulling even one of them out of the ecosystem destabilizes the training tool for billions of players—often for years, sometimes even for decades.

So they remain gamers. For years. For decades. Sometimes for centuries.

Perfectly honed weapons that are *never* meant to be picked up by anyone.

Until, once in a great while, chance intervenes.

When iron sharpens iron endlessly, and the sharpest edges grind against each other... sometimes, something slips through.

They somehow join a Faction anyway.

Not because Terra *allowed* it—but because chance did.

And that, Terra reluctantly has to permit.

A Champion joins a Faction. A Build Maker lays hands on the *real* System.

That is when the war changes. It always does.

Terra’s game-shaped crucible forges swords never meant to be wielded—tools made to sharpen other tools, iron to sharpen iron.

But when one of those swords is accidentally pulled from the stone—the entire galaxy bleeds...”

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[Director Halvorsen during a closed symposium on Pre-Integration Strategy, Terran Imperial Forum - Hall 17B, PFC 876]

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PoV: Lucas Callahan

Five hours.

That was how “long” it took Thea to pin down Rachel Masters’ exact Build, down to three one-hundredths of an Attribute Point, and Lucas could do nothing but feel completely out of his depth.

He had been watching her repeat the same movements over and over for nearly five hours straight, making adjustments so tiny that they all blurred together in his mind.

Somehow, though, *she* had managed to keep track of all the variables, juggling a dozen moving parts at once until she arrived at the result they had now.

Thea—wearing a plain-looking avatar with Rachel Masters' exact size and proportions—was running through the same motions she had practiced all this time. But instead of the quiet muttering and constant tongue clicks from earlier, she was now sharp and laser-focused, her movements precise enough to hold Lucas completely captive.

'It's something else, seeing her like this,' he thought, watching her swing the Glassbane stand-in through the air with enough force to make it sing. *'It's like she turns into a different person the second she steps into the arcade.'*

And the difference was truly striking.

The awkward, uncertain girl was gone. In her place stood someone who owned the space completely, with no hesitation about telling others exactly *what* to do, *how* to do it and *when*.

They had taken several regular breaks—mandated by Thea herself—to eat snacks and down drinks from the unlimited refills she had ordered. Lucas had definitely questioned the fourteen-hour booking at first, and the cost of all the food and drinks, but he had quickly accepted it after seeing just *how much* Thea consumed every break.

It was like she had a black hole in her stomach, made entirely for salty crackers and endless liquids.

'I guess when it comes to arcades, she really does know best. No point questioning her calls here,' he had finally admitted.

For the most part, he and Evelyne had been sidelined during the process, though Evelyne had proven to be an invaluable resource whenever Thea needed confirmation or small corrections.

Thea, naturally, hadn't wasted a single second and simply took Evelyne's input at face value every time. She had never asked "are you sure" or pushed for any kind of clarification.

When Evelyne said something like, "This needs to be a bit different. Try being faster here," Thea implemented the change immediately and kept going until Evelyne gave the all-clear.

At first, Thea had done most of the calibration herself using the recording Lucas had brought from Rachel's fight with Isabella.

But at some point, she had switched to relying almost entirely on Evelyne's word.

"The Glassbane is her signature weapon," Thea had explained earlier when Lucas had asked why she wasn't just using the recording the whole way through. "And like Evelyne said, she probably has a Passive tied to it. That means I need to figure out what that Passive is and what level it's at, because it affects how she moves. The recording lets me dial in the Attributes, but if we want this to be accurate, I also need to match her Ability levels, especially the Passives that make everything feel natural."

Lucas still had no idea how she actually did any of this.

Her explanation—"I'm just using Wildmaws' optional third-person view to watch myself move and copy what Masters does in the recording"—had sounded completely insane to him.

The words made sense on paper, but when he had tried even just *moving* via the third-person view himself, he had faceplanted repeatedly just trying to walk straight.

So, in the end, he had decided to simply let Thea do her thing.

She had given him a few basic tasks to keep busy—getting used to the mechanics again, swinging his weapon, lugging the Stalwart stand-in around—but it mostly felt like filler.

He didn't mind.

Once Thea finished calibrating, he had no doubt he'd be drowning in work anyway.

Lucas glanced over at Evelyne, a small smirk forming as he noticed the awed expression that had been glued to her face for hours—practically since the moment they'd walked into the arena. When Thea had casually announced she could brute-force Rachel Masters' entire Build on the spot, something inside Evelyne had visibly broken.

Any attempts to hide her fascination with Alpha Squad's scout had completely fallen apart by now.

'She's down catastrophically bad...'

Still, that wasn't really a problem in his eyes.

If anything, it might actually be good for Thea to deal with more people outside of Alpha Squad from time to time. Having a clearly fascinated fan around—one she'd have to interact with regularly—seemed like solid social practice.

'And she seems downright comfortable with this kind of attention, if any social interaction can really be called comfortable for her,' he thought. *'The fact she even agreed to all of this makes it pretty clear she's dealt with fans before. Probably comes with all that gaming experience, huh...?'*

"Lucas, it's time," Thea's sudden voice cut into his idle thoughts, making him almost jump.

"I've got it all dialed in now. I just need to do a few test spars to get a feel for it in real combat, and then we should be good for today's training. Sorry it took so long."

He straightened up, picked up his chainaxe and tower shield, and walked over to her, to close to a more duel-ready distance between them.

"Nothing to apologize for, Thea," he said with a warm smile, knowing it helped put her at ease, before fastening his full-helmet. "You're doing things I can't even wrap my head around. A few hours honestly feels insanely fast."

"It *really* is..." he heard Evelyne mutter from the sidelines, and he couldn't help but smile.

In a strange way, Evelyne had become his window into what Thea was doing, but from a much more *normal* perspective. It felt odd to admit that the somewhat unhinged fan was the *less* insane point of reference, but compared to Thea's sheer aptitude, it was likely still true.

'Honestly, I'm kind of glad she's here, after everything,' he thought. 'This would've been way harder without her. And I'd be missing all of the context for what Thea is even doing if it weren't for Evelyne's reactions and comments.'

Focusing back on the task at hand, he asked, "So, what's the rules for this?"

"Death," Thea replied immediately.

Lucas blinked. Then blinked again.

"Ehh... okay. Yeah, I guess that makes sense in a game like this," he said slowly. "Any other rules we should stick to, or are we just trying to beat each other to death as hard as possible?"

"Just beat each other, yeah," the blank-faced avatar replied in Thea's voice. "You've got [Redundant Organs] now, like I recommended, right?"

Lucas nodded. He'd picked it up before his first Digital Mission, and it had already paid off there.

"Good. Then yeah. Death. Aim for the head."

That seemed to be everything she wanted to clarify as the countdown manifested between them.

'Alright then. Aim for the head. Death. I can work with that, I guess,' Lucas thought.

He lowered his center of gravity, slipping into the combat stance he'd been building together with Isabella in their recent spars.

Tower shield forward, chainaxe held in a high grip for close-quarters swings.

Last time around, he'd only faced Karania—which had already been rough, since Alpha Squad's medic was anything but slow to adapt—but this time was very different.

This time, he was facing the real thing.

He'd only watched Thea's emulation of Rachel Masters fighting Isabella before, but even just *seeing* it back then had been lowkey terrifying.

'Guess it's time to find out what it's actually like to face Rachel in a duel...'

The countdown hit zero just as he finished his thought—and the sand beneath Thea *exploded*.

She launched herself forward, shield angled toward his chainaxe side, hammer dragging low behind her, its head skimming just above the sand as she closed the distance in a blur.

Lucas barely had time to respond to her movement before the first clash hit.

Her shield slammed into his with brutal force, not to break through, but to twist his angle just enough for the hammer to whip around from below and to the side. He managed to catch it on the edge of his tower shield by instinct alone, the impact rattling up his arm and forcing his boots to dig into the sand.

He tried to answer with a horizontal axe swing, but her shield was already there—the instant he had moved his shield to counter her hammer, she had already moved hers into position to counter his axe—knocking the teeth wide before the weapon could even begin to threaten her.

Second exchange.

She stepped in with a sharp shield-to-shield impact, then slipped back just as fast, her hammer dragged low and almost invisible with everything going on, before darting in again.

Her shield snapped forward like it had a mind of its own, once again crashing into his.

Lucas tried to push back, tried to bully his way through with sheer mass and momentum—because even in Rachel's body, Thea was still markedly lighter than him—but every time he committed, her shield was already there, set at the perfect angle to shut him down.

When his axe came down in another heavy chop, it rang against her shield, just moments after their shields had collided—and stopped *dead*, without Thea moving as much as an inch.

'Grav-lock...!'

The realization hit him half a second late.

Her shield had locked solid for just an instant, perfectly timed, turning his committed strike into a mistake as his muscles locked up momentarily to eat the recoil.

She was already moving again as he disengaged from his own movement, and only *then* did he remember to lock his own shield in response to her actions.

Third exchange.

'Better...'

He locked his shield, absorbed the hit, unlocked, stepped, swung. Then repeated.

For a brief moment, it felt like he might actually be in the fight.

Then she was suddenly *gone*.

The fourth exchange happened so fast it barely felt real to him.

She hit his shield from one side, locked to counter his instinctive counter-push, unlocked, shifted, locked again slightly angled to eat his frantic axe-swing, hammer flicking up and down in tight arcs, then wide arcs that came from outside his range of vision that forced him to keep his own guard high and moving constantly.

Lucas struggled to keep up with the rhythm—lock, unlock, counter, attack, move, repeat—but his timing was always a fraction off.

Every interaction widened the gap between their steps further and further.

By the fifth exchange, he was already drenched in sweat.

He felt it before he saw it—the pressure vanished from in front of him, the sudden wrongness of empty space where her shield had been just an instant prior.

His instincts screamed as he turned to the side, his own tower shield's locked presence having hid Thea's movements, but he was too slow.

She was already there. Right past his shield.

The hammer's head had already filled his vision as his eyes landed on her form, having been swung with no wasted motion or even a hint of hesitation the instant she had managed to duck past his shield and into his space.

The world snapped to white-hot pain and then blackness as the hit crushed through his faceplate with little resistance...

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Lucas reappeared an instant later, breath hitching and heart hammering in his chest.

He just stood there for a moment, staring at Thea's avatar as she lowered the hammer and flicked blood and brain matter from its head into the sand, while his own body fell backward and broke apart into motes of light.

"...Five exchanges," he muttered, shaking his head slowly. "By Xagis..."

Even against Isabella, he usually lasted far longer than this.

Karania's attempts at teaching him the last time they'd been in the arcade together had seen him hold out even longer than that.

He watched Thea stretch, roll her shoulders, then start walking back to the starting position of their bout, idly twirling the bastard-hammer in her hand as she did so. "Let's go again. I'm slowly starting to get the hang of this."

Lucas took a deep breath to steady his racing heart, let out a heavy sigh, and started back toward his own mark.

‘Well... I was right about one thing, at least,’ he thought with a quiet chuckle. ‘All that earlier sidelining doesn’t really matter that much as I’m absolutely drowning in things to do now. Mostly getting smacked in the face really hard, but still.’

They had a little under nine hours left in the session.

It was going to be a very, very long day...

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Six hours and around a dozen snack and rehydration breaks later, they were standing in the sandy arena once more.

Lucas felt utterly exhausted, but if Thea felt anything like that, she didn’t show it at all.

She had been relentless, pummeling him into the ground again and again without pause, barring the snack breaks that doubled as short discussion windows. In those, she’d given him so many pointers and things to focus on for the next leg of the session that he had trouble even remembering them all, let alone actually applying them.

It didn’t help that she had refused to stop improving during the first few hours, either.

He’d been knocked down to surviving a meager three exchanges at one point, before plateauing there for nearly half an hour of repeated head-smashing.

‘At least I got better, I guess...’

Thanks to Thea’s advice and a lot of trial and error, he’d slowly managed to claw his way back up to five exchanges before death about two hours ago.

By now, he was holding out for seven—sometimes even eight.

It was a slow, gruelling climb, trying to deal with Thea’s—or rather Rachel’s—aggressive, high-speed fighting style.

He wasn’t used to this much constant movement and repositioning in a fight.

Even Isabella didn’t demand this level of mobility and flexibility when they sparred.

But Thea’s version of Rachel—one Lucas had no reason to doubt, given the hours of work behind it—was an absolute nightmare to try and track. It wasn’t just one singular, giant weapon, like with Isabella, but the tower shield only slightly smaller than his own, paired with a hammer she somehow wielded like an extension of her own arm.

‘Didn’t she say she’d barely ever used hammers before...?’ he thought. ‘Could’ve fooled me.’

Thea finally lowered her shield and hammer, removed her helmet, letting out a slow breath as she looked him over.

“You’re doing really well,” she said. “Honestly, I’m impressed with how much ground we’ve covered already.”

Lucas snorted, wiping sweat from his forehead after removing his own helmet in-kind. "You've gotta be kidding me. I feel like I'm barely doing anything except scrambling not to die out here."

"That's normal," she replied immediately with a shrug. "And it's not really true, is it? You're adapting faster each time we go. I'm pretty sure I've got Masters' general style down by now—at least the important parts."

She tilted her head slightly. "There'll be differences, of course. Her Legacy goes way deeper than what we can see from a single recording, even with Evelyne helping fill in the gaps. Thank you again, by the way," she added in Evelyne's direction, which had the girl jump in surprise—Lucas had to fight down a smile at the sight.

"We're never going to perfectly copy her, of course. But that's not really the point to begin with."

She stepped closer, tapping the hammer against her shield once, the sound gently echoing over the sandy arena. "This isn't about *memorizing* her moves or anything. It's far more about getting *you* used to adapting your own style on the fly. So that no matter what she ends up throwing at you, you are able to react in the moment. And you are doing that already. Way better than you might think."

That did make him feel a little better—right up until she continued and his heart sank.

"*That said*," Thea added, "we've mostly been fighting with raw martial skill so far. And that's not how real fights work once the System's involved. We need to start layering Abilities into this."

Lucas groaned internally. '*Great. Back to three exchanges. Maybe less.*'

He just hoped he could hold the line there and not completely collapse.

She looked at him again. "You still have [Remote Detonation], right?"

That caught him off guard. He hadn't really thought about that Ability in a while; rarely even used it, to be perfectly honest.

"Uh—yeah. I do," he answered after a moment, then tried to start to list his other Abilities.

She cut him off with a quick shake of her head before he even got a single one out. "Nope. Don't tell me. I'd rather not know. I need practice dealing with unknown Abilities too."

She went quiet for a moment, her eyes unfocused.

A second later, she nodded to herself—and six small packages appeared in the sand around her. She picked them all up, then walked over to Lucas and handed him one.

"EX-9—style charges, Wildmaws edition," she explained with a smile. "Same rough power as the portable stuff the UHF uses. I want to test your Ability for a bit and see how it actually

plays out. You probably haven't really thought about your Abilities in actual combat all that much, so I want to fix that gap too, while we're already here."

She glanced up at him, her smile turning vicious. "So let's see what happens when things start exploding! Go ahead and equip [Explosive Finish]. It's the Wildmaws equivalent of [Remote Detonation]... or at least the closest thing to it. There's no perfect one-to-one, unfortunately."

Lucas eyed the charge in his hand, then opened his Wildmaws interface, searched for the Ability Thea had mentioned, and equipped it.

'I guess I really haven't thought about my Abilities much at all, like she's saying... I've got no idea where she's going with this, though. Why this one...?'

He threw the charge, aiming for about twenty meters out.

It landed with a meaty thud, digging slightly into the sand.

He focused on it and mentally triggered the Ability.

[Explosive Finish]

The charge detonated instantly, blooming into a small fireball. Heat and force washed over them, sand spraying in every direction as a blackened crater was torn into the arena floor.

"Did that look roughly like what you'd expect from your [Remote Detonation]? If not, upgrade the Ability and try again until it feels about the same," Thea commented.

He did exactly that, dialing it in over a few more attempts until it behaved just like his [Remote Detonation] outside the game. As he did so, he also realized he *really* should have been using it more in the first place if he ever wanted it properly leveled.

"Alright, done," he announced, cringing slightly at the low level of it. "It's level four now. Same as my [Remote Detonation]."

Thea unfocused for a brief moment, then snapped back. "Perfect. I set mine to four as well, then. Let's see if this works."

She casually strolled toward the blackened, ruined stretch of the arena as the sand began to regenerate beneath her feet.

'She's so fast with all these in-game settings... Xagis knows I wouldn't even know where to find the option to reset the arena.'

He pulled his helmet back on as she did the same, reading the situation well enough to know he was about to get smacked with a hammer again.

"Alright, same rules as before. To the death. You're free to use your Abilities, Lucas," Thea announced from a few meters away.

He dropped back into his stance just as the countdown appeared between them, ticking down to zero.

And Thea, as always, surged towards him in a rapid dash.

Lucas forced himself to breathe and tried to read her movements, just like he had been doing for hours now.

'Adapt, not endure,' he reminded himself of that over and over.

He let his feet carry him backward instead of planting himself, refusing to be a solid wall for her to circle around. If he gave her space, she would own it—so he matched her, step for step, shield always between them.

She slammed into him, shield crashing into shield.

Lucas met it with a grav-lock of his own, the impact absorbed entirely. He swung his chainaxe in response, aiming to punish the commit—but the blade cut nothing but air.

Thea had already moved, slipping further toward his shield side.

His own shield drifted into the path of his swing, still locked for a split second too long—the same problem he had run into countless times already, but he hadn't quite managed to fix.

'Too slow again, damnit!'

Then her hand snapped out toward his right side.

His brain screamed *hammer*, but... It wasn't coming.

Before he could process the implications of that, her shield smashed into his again, the weight and strength behind it, pushing him back slightly.

He had just unlocked his own to reposition and been caught mid-transition.

The impact pinned him in place, his footing trying to recover, his balance slightly broken.

And then the world suddenly *detonated*.

Light and heat tore through him at point-blank range.

The blast ripped his axe arm apart in a spray of fire, blood and bone fragments, shredded through his side, and hurled him into the sand.

Pain exploded through his body as he screamed.

It lasted less than a second.

The hammer came down through his helmet, and everything went black...

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He came to a moment later at the same respawn point he had returned to countless times by now, breath coming hot and heavy as phantom pain still rushed through his head. He watched Thea flick his blood and brain matter from her hammer once again.

‘What in Xagis’ name just happened...?’

Thea jogged over, pulled off her helmet, and flashed a wide, toothy grin.

“It works!” she announced triumphantly, while Lucas struggled to even understand what she was talking about.

“[Remote Detonation]—or, I guess, [Explosive Finish]—is actually really, really good for duels like this,” she continued, and suddenly it all clicked, his eyes widening.

*‘She threw one of the packs, locked my shield so I couldn’t react, then detonated it the instant she took cover behind my own shield from the explosion on **my** side...!’*

Lucas just stared at her for a second, completely stunned.

She had watched him use the Ability a handful of times, asked one question, and then turned it into a clean, brutal kill in a single exchange—against him.

“I’ve had that Ability for over a month,” he said quietly. “And you figured out how to fold it into a close-quarters exchange, shield-lock, and an almost undefendable kill... in what, five seconds...?”

Thea just grinned wider, clearly pleased with herself, while Lucas let out a slow breath, shaking his head.

‘...Yeah. Okay. That’s fucking terrifying...’