

Volume 2 - Chapter 26 - Unfavourable Rolls

Continuing to mull over the choice, Thea leaned forward slightly, elbows on her knees, fingers steepled as her eyes scanned the glowing interface.

She was still turning over the same question in her head.

‘Could I solve the Focus issue some other way...?’

The real problem was how limited her options were.

She couldn’t count on stumbling into a perfect Focus-recovery Passive anytime soon. Those weren’t exactly common, and they definitely weren’t guaranteed to show up even if she claimed all her Ability rewards.

And waiting until Class-selection to fix it?

She scoffed softly at the idea. “That’s almost a year away. Way too late.”

From what she currently knew, there were only a few methods to reliably recover Focus during combat.

First and foremost—time.

The standard regeneration rate, tied directly to your Focus and Recovery Attributes. And from personal experience? That regen rate was *painfully* slow, especially in the middle of a fight.

Then there was [Meditation Focus], which she technically *could* use to speed that regeneration up... but only if she had the time to sit still for a solid chunk of time, uninterrupted. And that just wasn’t realistic most of the time.

“Right. That still falls under ‘time,’ technically,” she muttered to herself, making a mental note. “And that’s not gonna help when shit hits the fan.”

The third method was having someone else top you off with Focus—something she’d only seen a couple times so far. Both Orion during the Cube Trial and then again with Medic Johnsen during the Assessment, had used their [Focus-Link] on her to top her off for whatever she needed to do at the time.

But those were circumstantial. She couldn’t rely on that happening regularly. Kara might be able to do it too, eventually, but asking her to spend her own limited Focus every time Thea needed a power surge wasn’t practical—or fair.

“She needs her Focus more than I do, honestly,” Thea said, rubbing the bridge of her nose. “So that’s off the table unless it’s a total emergency.”

That left the last option she’d seen so far: Focus Boosters.

They were probably expensive, definitely limited-use, and not something she'd want to rely on for daily engagements... but in a pinch? They clearly *worked*.

Vi had used them during the suicidal push across no-man's-land back at the start of the Assessment, shielding the entire group under her bubble long enough to make the trek.

Without those boosters, Vi would've burned out halfway through.

Thea's brows furrowed slightly as she ran through the numbers in her head.

'Okay... say I use [Sensory Overdrive] early in a fight. I'll probably have enough Focus left for one or two boosters to push me into [Psychic Reversal] range later. Assuming I'm not just spamming Abilities nonstop, I could potentially make it work... Barely.'

The more she considered it, the more doable it seemed.

"Not ideal," she muttered. "But viable. If Psykers really are as rare as everyone makes them sound, I might only need to fire this thing off once in a Luminarus Festival... I can definitely plan around that."

The more she mulled it over, the more realistic the option started to feel.

She really was swimming in System Credits after the Awards Ceremony—between the Accomplishment payouts themselves and the personal medals during the Awards, she had more than she knew what to do with.

And it wasn't like she had any plans to blow all of it on equipment—not that she was likely to even be able to, considering all the sales voucher she had also acquired from the Awards.

Most of what she needed gear-wise was already covered anyway.

The only real expenses left before her Class Unlock at the end of the year would be Skill lecture purchases—and even there, she had a ridiculous stack of free vouchers sitting untouched for those as well.

The idea started to solidify in her mind. It wasn't perfect... But it was more than workable.

Turning toward the only real source of concrete information she had access to right now, Thea called out, "Sovereign, how much do Focus Boosters cost, and how much Focus do they recover exactly?"

She couldn't access anything in the menus with a System prompt active, not without making a decision, but thankfully, the Sovereign had a tendency to keep tabs on things.

"Tier 1 Focus Boosters, available for all Marines of Tier 0 and above, cost 220 Credits—200 Credits if the Squad Medic role is held. They restore between 50 and 100 Focus Points, dependent on the recipient's maximum Focus pool," the AI responded immediately.

Thea perked up at that. "What are the limitations? How many can I actually use per day?"

“Booster-type consumables are limited to three per day for individuals of Tier 0 and Tier 1,” the Sovereign explained. “This limit increases by two for every Tier gained beyond Tier 1.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly, *‘Booster-type...?’*

“What do you mean by Booster-type? Can you list them?” She asked.

“Booster-type consumables refer to items that recover specific System Resources. These differ from Buff-type consumables, which temporarily enhance performance. For your current Tier, available Booster-types include: Focus Boosters, Stamina Boosters, and Psychic Boosters. HP recovery is excluded from Booster classification and instead requires specialized injectors or medical treatment, typically administered by a Squad Medic.”

Thea nodded slowly, absorbing the flood of information.

‘So there are Psychic Boosters. Interesting...’ she thought, already filing that away for future use.

But even just the Focus Boosters alone would be a game-changer.

The fact that she could get three Focus Boosters a day, made this whole idea of accepting [Psychic Reversal] a lot more viable.

As long as she carried around three of them on her person at all times, which she could probably fit into the Spectre—or have it adjusted to fit an extra storage compartment for Boosters, potentially with an auto-inject feature even—she would rarely, if ever, run into a situation where she was completely out of options.

She had rarely dipped more than 150 Focus during the Assessment.

Only in absolute emergencies—usually involving her pushing her Psyker capabilities to the limit. For a regular day, or even most fights, the combo of passive regen and one or two Boosters would already be more than enough.

Three if she was really getting to the end of her rope.

With the Sovereign clearly willing to assist, Thea figured she might as well squeeze in one more burning question that had been gnawing at her thoughts.

“Sovereign, can you tell me what the Ability Alterations for [Psychic Reversal] are?”

“I cannot,” the Sovereign replied at once, tone perfectly neutral. “Ability Alterations differ from participant to participant, based on their individual usage of said Ability. While there are many known Alterations recorded within my available data, your current clearance level does not permit access to that information.”

Thea exhaled sharply through her nose, leaning her head back against the wall.

‘Clearance... That’s definitely a UHF restriction. Figures. Gotta prevent build poisoning somehow—can’t let people meta-chase the seemingly perfect combo if you’re trying to

*encourage experimentation and adaptability... Probably a lesson they learned the hard way. Makes sense. Even if it's **massively** annoying for anyone who actually knows how to build shit properly...*

Still, something about the Sovereign's phrasing caught her attention.

"...Can you disclose how Alterations *generally* work?" she tried, careful with her wording. "Specifically, I'm looking for whether [Psychic Reversal] has a Focus cost reduction as part of its Minor Alteration path. All of my other Actives had one at Level 5—was that just coincidence?"

"I can indeed disclose this piece of general information, Recruit McKay," the Sovereign replied without hesitation. "All Active-type Abilities have cost reduction Alterations available at Minor thresholds—specifically at Level 5 and Level 15. The form of cost reduction, however, varies. It is determined based on the user's combat behavior, Ability usage pattern, and frequency of activation. Flat reductions, reductions over consecutive uses, conditional discounts, and more are all possible."

Thea nodded, more to herself than to the voice. "Perfect, thank you."

Her thoughts were already turning again, stacking the new info on top of everything else she'd gathered so far.

'So. I've got Focus Boosters. Three a day. 10% cheaper if I have Kara pick them up under the Squad Medic discount—gotta remember to tap her for that... That's 200 each, 600 for a full set, which is easily affordable with my current funds. Kara could even stockpile a bunch just in case. Hmm...'

"Sovereign," she said aloud, eyes narrowing slightly. "If I have 225 total Focus, how much would a Tier 1 Focus Booster recover for me, *exactly*?"

"With a maximum Focus of 225," the Sovereign responded, "a Tier 1 Focus Booster would recover 58 Focus."

A slow, satisfied grin crept across Thea's face.

'That's 174 Focus minimum, with all three. That's almost enough to let me cast [Psychic Reversal] even after heavily using [Sensory Overdrive]...! If I then get even a small cost reduction at Level 5, I'll be absolutely golden. Practically guaranteed to have at least one emergency use of it—even during heavier fights.'

And realistically, she wasn't going to be using it all the time.

Only when she came up against Psykers.

One-on-one duels, infiltration counter-ambushes, or extreme emergencies.

That kind of encounter was rare enough to make the tradeoff viable.

The duo of Psykers during the Assessment had been the only one recorded in the entire Assessment—Thea had checked. And everyone had made it sound like a complete anomaly to begin with. Viladia, Arrow Squad as a whole, Major Quinn during the Awards...

So there was no real reason to base her entire build around fighting *two* Psykers at once.

Besides, her Focus would increase over time—especially after her Class selection. This wasn't a permanent bottleneck, just a temporary hurdle.

And now, it was one she could overcome.

With everything finally tallied up in her head—resources, boosters, Ability scaling, fallback plans, and even Sovereign-confirmed Alterations—Thea finally made her choice.

[System]: *Do you want to accept and equip this Ability or trade it in for: 1x Accomplishment-Store Ability Voucher (Silver-rarity or lower)? Y/N*

She confirmed the prompt and immediately, another one appeared.

[System]: *Active-type Ability Slots are full. Please select Active-type Ability to replace with newly acquired [Psychic Reversal]:*

- [Active (Silver) - Sensory Overdrive | α - Level 9]
- [Active (Iron) - Inspect Target | γ - Level 6]
- [Active (Silver) - Sky Step | β - Level 7]
- [Active (Copper) - Improved Sprint | α - Level 7]
- [Active (Iron) - Penetrative Shot | γ - Level 8]

The decision on this one was, thankfully, a lot easier than on deciding whether a Silver-rarity Voucher was worth more than an Ability she might not be able to use much.

[System]: *Do you want to replace [Inspect Target] with [Psychic Reversal]? Y/N*

She confirmed the selection with a simple mental command and let out a quiet breath, "Haaa... One more down."

Dropping [Inspect Target] had been the easiest decision so far.

She hadn't used it once during the Assessment—not meaningfully, anyway.

It had sounded useful on paper, especially early on. Being able to identify potential Ace-level threats before engaging them? That had seemed like a no-brainer when she first picked it.

But then the reality of combat had kicked in.

There hadn't been *time* for careful examination.

There hadn't been any calm moments to read through stats or information. When things got heated, the only thing that mattered was *shoot first, survive later*.

Taking time to “Inspect” someone mid-fight was the kind of luxury you didn’t get when someone was trying to blow your head off with a shotgun from thirty meters away.

At least, not yet.

‘Appraisal and Inspection-type Abilities only really start pulling their weight mid to late-game,’ Thea reminded herself, recalling dozens of games where those tools had felt borderline useless at the start—until they became god-tier later on.

When enemies got weird. When stats lied. When Abilities layered on top of one another to hide builds inside builds, and the only way to avoid getting absolutely steamrolled was knowing *exactly* what you were dealing with before it hit you in the face.

At those stages, intel *was* damage.

But here and now? At Tier 0, possibly Tier 1?

[Inspect Target] just wasn’t doing the job. Not when compared to something like [Psychic Reversal], which could *immediately* swing the tide against Psykers in life-or-death situations.

A perfect trade, really.

‘Two down. Two to go,’ she thought, already swiping over to the next Accomplishment on the list, eyes narrowing with renewed focus as she lined up her next reward.

[System]: *Do you want to claim the reward for [“**Fledgeling Scout**” Accomplishment]?*

She confirmed, and yet another Ability Description appeared right in her field of vision.

[Active (**Silver**) – Mark Hostiles - Level 0]

Requirements: Perception 8, Line of Sight

Description: *Allows the participant to use up a certain amount of Focus to mark all currently visible hostiles within line of sight for the entire squad. Marked enemies are tracked in real-time by all friendly HUDs within a certain range for a duration, as long as Line Of Sight is not broken.*

Cost: 65 Focus – Max Targets: 6 – Effect Duration: 15 seconds

Squad Sharing Range: 30 metres

“Uuuggghhh... Another Active-type...?!” Thea groaned, dragging a hand down her face in frustration.

She had really, *really* been hoping for a Passive this time—something clean, simple, and most importantly, slot-friendly. But no, of course the System decided to throw another Active Ability at her, like it was trying to fill her roster with things she physically couldn’t use all at once.

Still grumbling, she forced herself to look past the initial disappointment and actually read the description. A second later, her eyebrows lifted slightly.

'Wait a minute... This is basically just a better version of Desmond's [Target Designator], isn't it?'

The resemblance was uncanny.

Desmond's version was dirt cheap—only 30 Focus to use—but it tagged just a single enemy, at least at low levels. It had probably improved by now, but even then, it had always been more about precision than volume.

[Mark Hostiles], on the other hand, started at six targets.

And from what she could guess, that number would scale hard as the Ability leveled up. It was a battlefield-wide threat ID system... with her at the center.

Objectively powerful. Practically? That was another story.

'The same problems as [Inspect Target] and [Psychic Reversal] still apply,' she thought, already rubbing her temples. *'Who's even going to use the marks I hand out?'*

Isabella didn't exactly do "precision", at least not at the ranges that Thea would be marking.

Lucas was usually too focused on defense and his Havoc didn't exactly scream "precision" either, and Corvus—while potentially capable—was rarely going to be at the right angles to capitalize on her targeting.

Desmond might be able to swing it with his drones, sure, but he usually had his hands full managing the wider battlefield.

Kara was the only one who could maybe capitalize on marked targets in closer encounters... But when were they ever actually near each other in a fight? Unless Thea was actively bleeding out and requiring her immediate attention, the answer was almost never.

And then there was the Focus cost.

Sixty-five.

'That's... yeah, that's a hard no for me,' she sighed.

For someone like Desmond? Or even Corvus? This would've been *amazing*. They had the spare Focus and the squad-wide synergy to make it work. But for Thea—who was already scraping the bottom of the barrel on Focus and Ability Slot economy—it was just too steep.

Too unwieldy.

No hesitation this time.

"Pass," she muttered, tapping the second option without a shred of regret.

[System]: *Do you want to accept and equip this Ability or trade it in for: 1x Accomplishment-Store Ability Voucher (Copper-rarity or lower)? Y/N*

She declined the Ability and banked the additional Voucher instead.

[System]: You have **received**: 1x Accomplishment-Store Ability Voucher (**Copper**-rarity or lower). Access the Accomplishment-Store interface via your nearest System Store to spend it.

[System]: Do you want to claim the reward for [**"Fledgeling Infiltrator"** Accomplishment]?

'Time for the last one. Please be a Passive-type for once...' Thea thought, as she went on to accept the last outstanding Accomplishment rewards she intended to claim for now.

[Passive (**Silver**) – Quick Draw – Level 0]

Description: *Grants the Participant enhanced speed and silence of weapon draws and holstering, reducing exposure during surprise engagements or stealth takedowns.*

Draw/Holster Time Reduction: 25% – Noise Output: Minimal Reduction

Thea stared at the Ability description for a long while, brows furrowed.

'Hmm... At least it's a Passive, I guess?' she thought, dragging her eyes down the small print. *'Not exactly game-changing, but maybe useful in a pinch...?'*

It was a simple one: A 25% reduction to the time needed to draw or holster her weapons.

On paper, it didn't sound bad. She had the spare Passive slots to take it, so it wouldn't cost her anything immediately. But still...

'Not like I'm fumbling with my loadout every other second,' she mused. *'Most of the time I've already got the right weapon in hand before the fight even starts.'*

Still, she thought back to the Caliburn—how awkward it was to maneuver sometimes.

Not clumsy exactly, but it wasn't made for quick draws or smooth holstering. And switching to the Gram or Icicle in close quarters in a hurry? That could be useful, under specific circumstances.

'Alright, so... maybe it has a use. Sometimes. Just not all the time.'

The real question bouncing around her brain now was whether or not this was better than just turning it into a voucher.

Copper-rarity Abilities weren't rare whatsoever. Fully available at the System Store.

She had more Merit than she knew what to do with, especially after the Assessment and all the Accomplishment Rewards she had just cashed in.

She leaned back slightly, still undecided.

'It's not bad... but it's also not something I'd go out of my way to get. And I do need to start thinking long-term, not just "maybe this helps in some corner-case scenario."

Her thoughts hovered over the second option.

A voucher might be more useful later on, when her build was tighter and slots more precious. But then again, wasting an open Passive slot also felt wrong.

“Ughhh... why can’t you just give me something *good*, System,” she muttered under her breath, still stuck between two not-great choices.

Ultimately, however, she decided on the most economical option.

[System]: *Do you want to accept and equip this Ability or trade it in for: 1x Accomplishment-Store Ability Voucher (Copper-rarity or lower)? Y/N*

With a quick mental confirmation, Thea accepted the Passive Ability and slotted it at the very bottom of her current lineup.

“I’ll just switch it out later when I find something that actually fits better...” she muttered, stretching long and hard as the System finally released its lock on her major movements.

Her shoulders popped as she leaned back and glanced down toward the arena below.

Lucas and Karania were still locked in their low-intensity back-and-forth, trading blows with deliberate slowness—clearly working on movement flow and defense rather than going for wins. Isabella, meanwhile, looked like she was trying to break the sound barrier with how fast she was hammering away at the Emulated-Thea’s shield.

“We’ll need another build session soon,” Thea murmured to herself, her eyes following Isabella’s movements carefully. “And we still have to get Desmond and Corvus into the rotation too... so much to do...”

Her voice trailed off as she closed her eyes again, head resting back against the wall.

Behind her eyelids, a carousel of builds spun in her mind—thousands upon thousands of hours’ worth of experiments and matchups from her time at the Golden Age Arcade.

She’d played *so many* roles, tried so many styles.

Now, it was just a matter of figuring out which pieces belonged to who.

Because in the end, the strongest build wasn’t always the one with the best stats.

It was the one that actually *fit*.

She knew that all too well.

The players who won galactic tournaments weren’t usually the ones using the mathematically optimal combos—they were the ones who knew their builds inside and out.

The ones who moved like their avatars were extensions of their own bodies. The ones who could squeeze every ounce of power out of what they had.

Comfort beat perfection. Familiarity beat flash.

Always had. Always would.

'It'll take some time... but I can do it,' she thought, a grin tugging at the corner of her mouth. 'It's just the same old challenge. More pieces on the board, is all.'

Pushing off from the wall, Thea stood up and rolled her shoulders out. Her joints cracked faintly with the motion as she stretched out her back and arms.

'A little extra training won't kill me. And I still need to rope Kara into shopping duty so I can stock up on Boosters... Though that'll probably have to wait until tomorrow. Gotta brief everyone on the Psyker stuff too.'

She moved down the stairs toward the arena.

Isabella caught the movement instantly, pausing mid-swing with the Emulated-Thea and straightening up.

"You get everything sorted?" she called.

"More or less," Thea nodded. "I need to go shopping soon. *Desperately*. But I also figured I should get in some actual reps myself. I didn't use the Throatcutter much during the Assessment. Better not get rusty with it."

"Smart." Isabella cracked her neck with a sharp tilt. "You wanna go now?"

Thea gave a sharp nod in response and headed back into the equipment room.

She adjusted her Attribute settings to something closer to what she could actually hit with a little Strength investment—still not close to Isabella's level, but better than her current real-life stat line. Enough to at least not get flattened like a fly, hopefully.

Reaching the weapon selection screen, she lifted her voice slightly. "Sovereign, can you create a digital copy of my Throatcutter glaive for Wildmaws? I'd like to train with it."

"I can facilitate this request, Recruit McKay. The cost will be 50 System Credits," the Sovereign responded without delay.

"Approved," Thea answered immediately, and moments later, a perfectly rendered copy of her weapon materialized in the rack beside her.

She picked it up, feeling the weight balance settle instantly in her hands.

"Alright then," she muttered with a small smirk. "Let's see if I can hold my own against Ela when I'm not completely nerfed by my Attribute spread."

Weapon in hand, she stepped back out of the equipment room and into the arena's burning, golden light—walking toward the waiting Offensive Heavy with a focused calm in her stride...