

Volume 2 - Chapter 28 - Build Reworks I

'You can learn more about a Faction not through their slogans or speeches, but through what they choose to immortalize in their Faction Trait.

The Stellar Republic created a Trait solely to produce disposable duplicates—Replicas meant for slaughter, thrown into the meat grinder of every Battlefield across the galaxy with no regard for continuity, memory, or meaning.

That tells you *everything*.

To them, a human life is a resource to be spent. A unit on a board. Something *replaceable*.

The UHF, for all of our own pursuit of efficiency and sacrifices, is defined by a different truth:

We build to last. We endure, we conserve, we refine.

We do not throw our people away like spent tools.

A Faction Trait is not just a mechanical bonus the System provides to create more conflict.

It is the crystallized belief of an entire people.

And in the Republic's case, that belief is clear: Their leadership does not see people, only expendable bodies in the ceaseless pursuit of victory...'

- Marshal Vel '*Listbreaker*' Maron, 933 PFC, "The Pursuit of Victory"

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Thea spent the rest of the second day—and most of the third—buried deep in buildcrafting for both Alpha Squad and herself.

Most of her time went into writing out what felt like hundreds of Ability names on her datapad, based on her memories from games, tournaments, and late-night strategy dives.

Each time, she'd ask the Sovereign to cross-reference them with the System's Ability database. And almost every single time, the result came back the same: Out of reach.

'*Damnit...!*' she found herself thinking more than once. '*Everything I **really** want to recommend or grab is Platinum-rarity or higher... or straight-up locked behind Tier 2...*'

It was frustrating. But not exactly unexpected.

She was essentially trying to recreate endgame meta setups—stuff she'd used during the final seasons of her tournament career—for a group of recruits not even out of the tutorial phase yet.

Endgame builds weren't meant for new characters.

That was the whole point of the term "endgame" being included.

Eventually, however, after several unproductive hours and more than a few curse-laced grumbles, Thea switched approaches.

Instead of trying to recreate perfection, she went for practicality.

Something that worked *now*, that would give them the best possible outcomes for the currently available options, rather than trying to find something they could keep for the next decade to come.

She'd simply have to revisit everyone's builds once they got access to higher Rarity and Tier options; simple as that, really.

It reminded her quite a bit of the limited-format tournaments she used to compete in—restricted loadouts, capped stats, no high-tier loot pools.

Just tight rules and whatever tools you could scavenge together.

Buildcrafting in that kind of environment had always been one of her favourite kinds of challenges.

'This is basically just that,' she reminded herself, again and again, whenever her irritation at the lack of viable top-tier Abilities started boiling over. *'Limited format. Early game puzzle. Solve it.'*

With that mindset shift, things finally started to click into place.

By the start of the third day, she was making steady progress.

By mid-morning, she was fully in the zone.

Every three hours, however, a medic came in to check on her regrowth—examining the slow, steady progress of her jaw and hand.

That included during the night, of course. On the hour. Every three hours.

While she appreciated the medical attention, the interruptions were definitely piling on to her growing sense of frustration. Between the lack of sleep and the lack of high-Tier options, she'd felt like she was spinning her wheels for half a day straight.

But even through all the interruptions, the limitations, and the deep mental gymnastics of adapting half a dozen builds for Alpha Squad's Tier 1 loadouts, Thea eventually reached something close to satisfaction. A first-pass blueprint she could actually hand over.

"Haaaaa..." She let out a long breath and leaned back, stretching out her spine until her shoulders popped.

Her jaw was almost entirely healed now, though still stiff and uncooperative. During the last medic's visit, she'd been given the go-ahead to start speaking again—slowly, carefully—to test if the muscles were rebuilding properly.

"Shat wash a lot more annoying shan I wash hoping for..." she muttered, wincing as her tongue stumbled on the stubborn 'S' and 'TH' sounds.

Still, even with the slurred words, a small smile tugged at the corners of her lips.

The whole setup might not be perfect, but it was miles ahead of the blind guesswork they'd been doing up to now. At the very least, it gave everyone in Alpha Squad a focused path forward—something solid to build on, instead of just hoping their random Ability choices happened to click.

After a few minutes of stretching and letting her thoughts drift into idle nothingness, Thea finally pulled herself back together, tapping her datapad and scrolling back through her notes.

"Alright, Ishabella firsht shen," she muttered, jaw muscles still half-rebellious.

Isabella had been the easiest to pin down, so she'd started there.

Locking in one solid build early had helped ease her own stress, especially with how fruitless some of the later attempts had felt.

Thea knew two things for certain about Isabella's wishes for her Build: She wanted to be an unbeatable duelist, and she wanted to be a proper Offensive Heavy.

Easy enough to say—but actually turning that into a working build had been more complicated than she'd expected.

Isabella had talked before about wanting to stand toe-to-toe with Battlefield Aces.

That had been the main reason Thea told her to push Strength as far as it would go pre-Assessment, and had been the main underlying idea behind everything so far.

If nothing else, stacking her Strength that high gave Isabella the raw, overwhelming force that—combined with Alpha Squad's support and her own growing Ability selection—might let her overpower an Ace someday.

The trickier part, however, was pinning down the second half of her role.

An Offensive Heavy wasn't just a battering ram. They were meant to shake the battlefield—to control space, absorb heat, and make sure every enemy nearby stayed too busy dealing with them to worry about anyone else.

It meant being loud. Flashy. Dangerous. And also very, very hard to ignore.

'Isabella's been leaning too hard on the duel side of things,' Thea had quickly realized while reviewing her current Abilities. *'All of her Active-types are for close-range, single-target takedowns. Not bad in itself, but it's not balanced for a squad role.'*

Identifying that overcommitment had helped narrow down which Abilities needed to go.

Thea had then spent the next hour refining replacements that covered Isabella's *actual* weaknesses—not just amplifying her already pre-existing strengths.

In particular, two major problems stood out: Mobility, and presence.

Mobility was obvious.

Isabella was a walking calamity with enough muscle to shred absolutely everything up close, but she had no way to *get* there reliably unless the enemy came to her.

Which, if they had *any* brains, they wouldn't.

Presence, on the other hand, was a little trickier to define.

The rotary machine gun helped, sure—but Thea had seen enough large-scale combat footage, and experienced it first-hand, by now to know that even a big gun didn't mean much when you were lost in a sea of other Heavies, all firing similarly sized weapons.

Without something that *visually* or *tactically* set Isabella apart, she wouldn't be able to do her job—pulling aggro from the rest of the squad—anywhere near as well as she needed to.

And luckily, for that first problem—the movement one—Thea had immediately known which Ability to ask the Sovereign about. It was one of the rare early-tier Abilities that saw consistent use even in endgame builds. A ridiculous bang-for-buck mobility tool that had carried entire team comps in more than one tournament.

It was an Ability she remembered from Archion—[*Tremendous Jump*].

At first glance, it didn't sound like much. Just a jump boost, really.

Pretty tame, compared to the flashier stuff out there.

But Thea knew better.

With a heavy Strength investment and a few levels under its belt, the Ability turned downright *insane*. She'd seen high-level players use it to clear entire city blocks—hundreds of meters forward, dozens upward—with a single leap.

It turned the battlefield into a damn jungle-gym.

And what *really* made [*Tremendous Jump*] shine were the secondary perks it came with.

It didn't *just* boost your jumping power.

It increased your armour's overall absorption during and briefly after the jump, protecting you from the inevitable fire you would draw. And the cherry on top: It gave a brief window of enhanced speed and responsiveness after landing as well—perfect for blitzing through an opening or breaking through a stalemate in the chaos of a large-scale brawl.

It was the kind of Ability that made melee-focused Offensive Heavies utterly terrifying.

One second they were way in the back—next second, they were in your face, swinging a chunk of screaming, biting metal the size of a small car right at your centre-section.

And even if you saw it coming, with their heavy armour further reinforced by the Ability's secondary benefits, you could rarely do anything about it—your rounds simply bounced off.

When she'd asked the Sovereign for the Allbright System equivalent, Thea had grinned as wide as her half-regrown jaw would allow.

Not only did it exist—it was a Tier 1 Ability. And more importantly, it was *Silver*-rarity.

That meant it was easily accessible for them.

With the number of Accomplishments Alpha Squad had racked up during the Assessment, getting their hands on a Silver Ability or two each wasn't just doable—it was downright *expected*.

It was the perfect fit for Isabella's mobility problem.

And more than that, it gave her the kind of battlefield presence she desperately needed.

An impossible to ignore, high-speed missile of destruction.

Exactly what a melee-focused Offensive Heavy like her should be.

[Active (*Silver*) - Heroic Leap - Level 0]

Description: *Allows the participant to use up a certain amount of Stamina to perform a mighty leap. This leap treats the participant's Strength score as being higher by a large factor and also increases the participant's Armour Value Rating (AVR) by a factor for the duration of the leap and a short time after. Upon landing, the participant is granted increased levels of Strength for a short duration.*

Cost: 30 Stamina - Strength Factor: 5x - AVR Factor: 2x - AVR Bonus Duration: 1 second(s)
- Increased Strength Factor: 1.5x - Increased Strength Duration: 3 second(s)

'That's a way better name for an Ability like that,' Thea thought, skimming through the Sovereign's description of the Allbright version. *'Archion always kinda sucked at naming things, now that I think about it... everything either sounded overly dramatic or like it came from a twelve-year-old's notebook...'*

When it came to picking the second Active-type replacement for Isabella, though, the process hadn't been nearly as smooth.

It had taken Thea way more time than she'd expected—not just to figure out what *type* of Ability Isabella really needed, but also to narrow it down to something that was actually within reach.

Anything above Silver-rarity was pretty much off the table at this stage, so finding something that worked and wasn't locked behind Tier 2 or rarer drops was a massive headache.

But eventually, she'd remembered another Ability from *Archion*—[*Bouncing Fire*].

Or rather, as the Sovereign had listed it in the Allbright System, [Ricocheting Shots].

It had been a low-Tier utility-offense hybrid in Archion, not usually considered meta-defining, but Thea had used it more than once in her alternate loadouts, especially when she was trying to get more creative in limited-rule tournaments.

The core concept was simple: Bullets or projectiles fired during the duration of this Ability would always ricochet off of solid surfaces for a certain number of times, based on the level of the Ability. In practice, it could turn a well-placed spray into a room-clearing barrage of carnage.

And it was flashy. Spectacularly so, given the right kind of ammunition.

Glowing tracers, wild bouncing patterns, chain-hit sounds echoing through confined spaces—it drew attention like a spotlight.

Exactly what Isabella needed.

She was already terrifying in close quarters, but Thea had noticed over the course of the Assessment that her suppressive fire often went underutilized when it didn't make a visual splash. With [Ricocheting Shots], however, every bullet had the potential to become a mini-light show of destruction that drew the enemy's attention.

It also scratched the other itch Thea had been focused on: Getting Isabella to see value beyond just raw dueling.

Because Isabella was, at the end of the day, all about impact and results.

If it didn't hit hard or look impressive, she'd probably write it off. So Thea needed something that *did* hit hard—and made sure everyone watching *knew* it hit hard.

[Ricocheting Shots] delivered both, while also simultaneously helping with battlefield control.

It was a clean solution.

And more than anything, it *fit*—which, in Thea's book, was half the battle already won.

[Active (Silver) - Ricocheting Shots - Level 0]

Requirements: Ballistic, Ranged

Description: *Allows the participant to use up a certain amount of Focus and Stamina to temporarily allow all of their gunfire to bounce off of solid surfaces a certain number of times*

for a duration. While this Ability is in effect, the recoil of the used weapon is drastically increased.

Cost: 25 Focus + 25 Stamina - Number of Bounces: 1 - Duration: 7.5 second(s) - Recoil Factor: 3x

[Ricocheting Shots], especially when combined with Isabella's Devastation, would let her create an absolute storm of destruction, turning enemy positions into chaos.

Depending on the type of ammunition she'd load, it could also become a wholly versatile tool for many different scenarios in Thea's mind.

From incendiary and tracer rounds creating a visual spectacle, making sure every enemy focused their attention directly on her—exactly as an Offensive Heavy would want—to explosive or shrapnel ones, that would be able to travel around corners before finally exploding.

This was one of the most important aspects of the Ability, in Thea's opinion: It guaranteed a number of bounces before the payload of whatever ammunition was used was activated.

Sure, the increased recoil was an obvious downside, of course, but Isabella's massive investment into Strength meant she'd likely have no problem controlling it, at least for the short burst when the Ability was active.

And even if it did end up becoming too difficult with further levels, which did increase the recoil factor as far as Thea remembered, they could still easily slot in a Passive Ability later to help with recoil control.

Considering Passive-type Abilities had more available slots than Active-types, Thea didn't think it would become too big of a problem in the long run.

But the biggest benefit of [Ricocheting Shots] wasn't just the flashy visuals or increased damage either; it would *directly* solve one of Isabella's biggest problems in combat—her lack of good angles.

As Alpha Squad's Offensive Heavy, Isabella was always forced into the frontlines, usually straight into enemy fire, with little chance of maneuvering to find better firing positions.

Unlike Thea, Kara, Corvus or Desmond, who could reposition easily and often, Isabella was always going to be the centre of attention, relying solely on direct shots.

With [Ricocheting Shots], however, every round she fired had the chance to bounce, allowing her to hit enemies hiding behind cover or even around corners, something she normally couldn't do at all unless her bullets managed to penetrate through the cover.

While a lot of people undoubtedly thought Isabella was nothing more than a muscle-headed brute—especially compared to Corvus and Kara—Thea had quickly realized how *incredibly* smart Isabella was during the heat of combat specifically.

'I bet she'll pull off some absolutely disgusting plays with this Ability,' Thea thought confidently. *'Assuming she actually gives it a proper shot, that is...'*

Because there was still one major worry lingering in Thea's mind: Would Isabella even be willing to give up two of her current duel-focused Abilities for the ones Thea was suggesting?

[Ricocheting Shots] in particular was purely an Offensive Heavy Ability—it didn't help at all when duelling a strong enemy one-on-one, unlike [Heroic Leap], which could double as a gap-closer or opener for duels, as much as it did for open field combat.

'This is always the hardest part,' Thea thought with a sigh. 'Convincing someone to make their build more balanced, instead of just piling on Abilities that make them feel unstoppable in specific scenarios. It always feels amazing to completely crush an enemy with a perfect combo of specialized Abilities. But if you don't balance things out at least a little bit, it just ends up making your build weaker overall...'

As for Passive-type Abilities for Isabella, Thea had managed to come up with five solid contenders, but she hadn't been able to narrow them down any further just yet.

"I gotta talk to Isabella to make any more headway on shish, I shink..." she muttered under her breath as she saved and closed the file for now.

Out of everyone in Alpha Squad, Isabella's Passive Ability loadout was already one of the most polished—and somehow still the most in need of revision.

She had clear favorites like [Redundant Organs], a Passive that Thea had immediately marked as a must-keep.

The utility and survivability boost it offered, especially in battlefield chaos, made it a no-brainer to keep all the way into high Tier and beyond. It cost little, required no upkeep, and could very literally keep Isabella breathing after something that should've been fatal—like losing her heart, for one reason or another.

The trouble was, aside from staples like that, the direction of Isabella's Passive-type pool was kind of all over the place.

Thea had sifted through a mix of offensive, defensive, and utility Passives, using the Sovereign to filter options from her old games into their closest Allbright System equivalents.

But picking which ones to actually recommend? That was where the problem hit.

She needed a clearer picture of what Isabella *wanted*—not in broad terms, like "duel powerhouse" or "frontline chaos generator," but in far more *specifics*. Did she want more resistances? More utility? Something to further enhance her already absurd Strength?

Unlike Active-type Abilities, where the tight slot limitation helped force decisions, Passive-type Abilities suffered from the opposite problem: With more room to work with, it was far easier to fall into the trap of too many good options and not enough focus.

And right now, Thea was firmly stuck in that trap.

Without sitting down and talking it all out with Isabella, in detail, there was no way to make the final call.

Karania, however, had presented the opposite problem entirely.

After finishing Isabella's file as far as she could, Thea had turned her attention to Kara's build. And almost *immediately* hit a wall.

'I have never really played an in-depth Medic role like that before... So I can't really give her all too much input... This sucks...' she had grumbled internally, more times than she could count, frustrated by the lack of personal experience to pull from.

Ultimately, Thea had only managed to settle on a single Active-type Ability to suggest—one she remembered from *Krillson's Path*.

It had been a backup tool for support builds, letting them dish out a burst of real damage when pushed into a corner. Not something you'd lead with, but perfect for clutch situations when all else failed.

It wasn't exactly a seamless fit for Karania, not with her more medically-aligned, support-inclined Abilities—but Thea was confident that Kara, with her ridiculously huge brain and tendency to make strange things work in terrifying ways, would find a way to get the most out of it.

Even if Thea couldn't design the perfect medic build from scratch, she could at least give Kara some of the right ingredients.

The rest, she had no doubt, Kara would figure out all on her own.

[Active (Silver) - Bone Shards - Level 0]

Description: *Allows the participant to expend Stamina to generate a set of sharpened Bone Shards inside of their hands. These shards may be rapidly ejected as projectiles or fused into a solid melee weapon, with the length and mass scaling based on the number of shards used. Each shard possesses a hardness proportional to a fraction of the participant's overall level, and can pierce materials with an Armour Value Rating (AVR) up to a specific threshold with minimal resistance.*

Cost: 40 Stamina - Number of Shards: 5 - Hardness Fraction: 0.2 - Pierce Threshold (AVR): 6

The Ability, as Thea remembered it from the game, came with some serious drawbacks—mainly the fact that it caused razor-sharp bone shards to rapidly form inside the user's hands, only to be ejected forcefully through the skin at their enemies.

Brutal, bloody, and reportedly *very* painful.

But even with all that in mind, Thea was pretty confident Karania could handle it.

'Considering that her [Surgeon's Toolkit] doesn't come with any kind of pain reduction either, and she still uses it all the time to twist and morph her own hand into all kinds of surgical monstrosities... Yeah, she'll be fine,' Thea had thought with a half-amused, half-concerned smile tugging at her lips.

She still wasn't entirely sure whether to be impressed, scared, or just a little horrified by Kara's uncanny ability to push through extreme pain without even flinching.

But in the context of these kinds of Abilities, it was undeniably a huge advantage—no matter how disturbing the implications.

"I'll have to get her some kind of regeneration Passhive though..." she mumbled, skimming through the still mostly-empty notes she'd made in Karania's build file. "And we'll definitely have to talk about all this, so we can work together on figuring out the right kind of options for her..."

Her speech was still awkward with the regrown jaw not quite finished, but her mood had noticeably lifted.

Between the shopping trip she'd already mentally locked in, the arcade visit she was basically counting as a guaranteed win, and now the full Ability and build discussion with Kara added to the mix, her next few days were lining up exactly the way she liked them.

Tons of Kara-time, doing the most fun things she could imagine: Shopping for gear, going to the arcade and building builds...