

Volume 2 - Chapter 23 - Video Games

“...And that’s basically how the virtual system works in here,” Thea finished, gesturing for Isabella, Lucas, and Karania to start exploring the equipment options scattered around the sandy prep room of the Wildmaws arena.

“The only other thing we really need to cover is Passive Abilities and Stat distribution,” Thea continued, stepping aside to let her squad poke around. “Which, let’s be honest, is kind of the *real* reason we came here.”

She watched them each gravitate to different gear sets—Isabella grabbing oversized weapons and testing the heft with a few trial swings, Lucas methodically flipping between armour types to test weight and mobility, and Karania holding up items that looked wildly impractical, like she was just trying to see how weird she could get before the game stopped her.

Which it wouldn’t, Thea knew.

“Generally speaking,” she said, raising her voice slightly so they could hear her over the clatter of the equipment they were moving around, “and this is something I only pieced together after the Rune priest pointed it out—Stats in here work almost *exactly* the same way they do in the Allbright System.”

She flicked her wrist, opening up her own Stat Distribution screen, and rotated it outward so the others could see.

“You’ve got your Base Attribute values, and then anything else—equipment bonuses, buffs, skill boosts—they get added on top as percentage modifiers. Unless it specifically says otherwise. So it’s almost 1:1 with the real thing, but it lets us *play* with things we’d never risk trying in the real world.”

She gestured toward the screen again. “And since this *isn’t* real life—or even the DDS for that matter—we can also freely change things around as much as we want. There are tournament rules that limit your points, yeah, but outside of that? We’ve got full creative control. Freeform builds, hybrid sets, wild experiments—it’s all on the table. That’s probably how Masters got so good at fighting. Just grinding here, or in an equivalent game, nonstop until everything clicked.”

With a few quick taps, Thea shifted her Stat spread—pumping Strength and Vitality first, then sprinkling in some Finesse, Recovery, and Stamina for good measure.

Her Turixa avatar bulked up as she confirmed the changes, muscle mass visibly filling out the model’s limbs and core.

“And just for fun,” she added, flicking her race from Turixa back to Human.

In seconds, her avatar warped again—now a tall, imposing human woman with a dense build, somewhere between soldier and bodybuilder. She rotated her arms, flexed one experimentally, and turned toward the others.

“Ta-da~! Not a perfect copy of Masters, obviously—just a rough estimate—but you get the idea.”

“Whoa,” Lucas breathed as he watched Thea’s virtual body shift and reshape in front of them. “That’s wild.”

“No kidding,” Isabella said, nodding slowly as she turned in place, clearly impressed. “I had no idea these games had... like, all of this. They were training tools the whole damn time? Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

“Because,” Karania answered almost instantly, “they probably *couldn’t*. Think about it. Telling people outright that they were training tools, would inevitably lead to questions about why they were set up in this strange, Attribute-based way. It would ultimately mean explaining why the mechanics were created in this way and that would probably fall under the kind of information you’re not allowed to talk about before Integration.”

She tapped her chin thoughtfully, eyes narrowing just slightly. “Still, I *do* remember seeing all those ads about the arcades and different games all the time... Y’know, the ones that said games improve reflexes, reaction times, mental mapping. And all those studies showing gamers had better hand-eye coordination than non-gamers... Maybe that was their way of nudging us in the right direction? Quiet encouragement. Soft conditioning, in a way?”

Thea, meanwhile, was only half-listening as she moved back toward the racks of equipment.

Her eyes scanned the rows before she reached out and grabbed a spear and a massive tower shield, pairing them with a full set of heavy armour. The moment she lifted the shield, however, her knees nearly buckled.

‘*Oh shit,*’ she winced. ‘*That’s **way** heavier than I thought it’d be...*’

Not hesitating, she flicked open her Stat menu and dumped a few more points into Strength.

Just enough to make it manageable.

‘*This is just for demonstration anyway,*’ she reminded herself. ‘*Not like it’s a real match or anything...*’

Still, the moment she went past the standard tournament cap, she felt a weird twinge of guilt settle in her gut.

Even if it didn’t *really* matter, it still felt wrong—like she was violating the spirit of the thing.

She returned to the group, the heavy boots of her newly equipped heavy armour thudding softly against the sand-textured ground. Lucas and Isabella simply stared, caught somewhere between curiosity and confusion.

Karania, however, just grinned and gave her a thumbs-up. “Ahh, I see where you’re going with this,” she said, nodding knowingly. “I like it. Always wondered how you’d move if you hadn’t dumped everything into Perception and Resolve.”

Thea let out a low chuckle from beneath her fully enclosed helmet, the sound slightly distorted and muffled through the metal. “Well, I’m not planning on actually fighting with *my* style or anything. That wouldn’t really show you guys anything useful.”

Isabella’s head perked up at that, eyes narrowing in interest. “Fighting? Who’s fighting?”

“We are,” Thea answered without hesitation, pointing her spear squarely at Isabella. “Set your Stats exactly how they are in the Allbright System. Pick the closest gear analogues to your current loadout. I’ll play Masters. Let’s find a way for you to break through her defense next time.”

Isabella blinked, looking briefly confused, but then gave a firm nod and turned to start adjusting her setup, pulling up her interface immediately.

It didn’t seem like she fully understood what Thea was going for, but the promise of a fight was clearly enough to kick her into high gear.

Thea turned to Lucas and Karania next, resting the shaft of her spear against the edge of her shield. “Not sure what you two want to do, but if you ask me, Lucas should definitely try to copy some of Masters’ moves. As much as it pains me to say this—she *really* knows how to use that shield to its full potential, based on what we saw.”

Lucas nodded, his jaw visibly clenched.

“The Stalwart’s a lot bulkier than hers, sure, but the principle behind her movement and counters should still apply,” Thea continued. “We don’t know what form the Challenge will take, but shoring up every weakness you might have is the smart move right now. Correct me if I’m wrong?”

She looked toward Karania, who just gave a small shrug.

“Nope. Sounds about right,” Karania replied, glancing off toward the racks of gear. “We’ve got zero information, so just sitting around for the rest of the week until the UHF 101 lecture is a waste of time. If we want Lucas to have even the slightest edge, we need to squeeze every drop of practice out of what we’ve got. Rachel’s probably been training with this stuff for *years*... We’re playing catch-up. Hard.”

Her eyes flicked back to the rack and then toward Lucas.

“I guess I’ll be your test dummy for a bit,” she added, rolling her shoulders as she stepped toward the loadout station. “Just let me know what kind of opponent you want to work on, and I’ll do my best to mimic them. I won’t be as good at it as Thea, obviously—she’s got way more experience with this whole “character builds” kind of thing—but I should be good enough to give you a decent sparring partner, at the very least.”

She paused, her fingers already gliding over the virtual interface to pull up her Stat screen. “If this system really does let us respec and reconfigure like this, then we can build all kinds of matchups. Pure offense, pure defense, hyper-mobile glass cannons... whatever we need to prepare for. Honestly, this has way more potential than I expected. And this is just *one* game out of what... dozens?”

Her eyes flicked toward Thea for confirmation.

Thea shook her head. “More like *hundreds*, actually. I mean, there are hundreds of thousands of games out there in general, obviously—but the ones officially developed or pushed by Terra, the ones that are likely to be actually tied to System mechanics? There’s a few hundred of those at least. So yeah. Pretty safe to say they’re all relevant in one way or another.”

Karania hummed at that, briefly cupping her chin in thought before turning back to the equipment rack. “I’m gonna have to spend *way* more time in the arcade from now on.”

Thea’s eyes practically lit up. “Yes! Yes, you should! Absolutely! I’ll go with you—we can play all the games together, I’ll show you which ones are worth it and—”

Karania slowly turned her head toward Thea with one eyebrow raised. “You mean... *train*. Right? *Train* together?”

Her voice was flat, with just enough edge of mockery to hit dead center.

Thea froze for a second before visibly deflating, arms falling limp at her sides. “Ah... yes. Of course. Strictly training purposes. Obviously. Yeah... *training*.”

Karania broke into a burst of laughter at Thea’s defeated response, the sound light and oddly warm as it echoed off the equipment area’s walls. Lucas, standing by the equipment rack with a medium-weight tower shield balanced in one hand, cracked a smile of his own.

“Don’t worry, Thea,” Kara said between chuckles, “there’s nothing stopping us from training *and* having fun at the same time. Leisure time is technically a very important part of the process too, you know? Recovery is key to performance. So if there are games that aren’t System-relevant but still worth playing—feel free to show me those too.”

That was all it took.

Thea perked up immediately. “Really?! Oh, that’s perfect! I’ve got *so many* to show you! There’s this one rhythm-platformer that helps build reaction timing, and this older one that’s basically an endurance puzzle gauntlet—actually, wait, that one’s fucking evil, but also kind of fun if you like suffering—and then there’s—”

“Alright, *alright*,” Kara interrupted, laughing again. “One step at a time. But yeah, I’m down. When we find the time for it.”

Thea nodded furiously, the metal of her helmet hitting her pauldrons clanking again and again, excitement practically radiating off her.

“Okay,” Isabella called out, hoisting a massive two-handed cleaver over one shoulder and shifting her weight in her thick plate armour as she moved back towards the centre of the room. “I think I’m about as ready as I’m gonna be. Got the closest analogue to my real kit I could find. So... what now? You said something about “*emulating Masters*”, but I’m not really following.”

She rolled one shoulder back, eyeing Thea curiously. “Like... sure, she kicked my ass. No doubt about that. And you’re also a really skilled fighter, I can’t deny that either. But how the fuck are you supposed to emulate *her*? That chick’s spent years—probably over a decade even—perfecting her style. I don’t see how you’re gonna just... copy that. Not in a couple hours, not even in a week.”

Thea grinned underneath her full helmet, the corner of her mouth twitching up as she tilted her head.

“And what exactly,” she asked, her voice half amused, half smug, “did you think I was doing all those years I spent in the Undercity of Lumiosia? At the Golden Age Arcade?”

Isabella blinked, visibly trying to parse the question.

“I’ve probably logged more total playtime than Masters has by a huge margin. Maybe not in *just* Wildmaws, but across all kinds of different games? Easily a factor of five or ten, considering she probably had a lot more obligations than me—maybe even more. And not just as a one-style player, either. I *never* stuck to one thing. Every tournament season had different metas, new balance patches that nuked the old builds, after all... so I had to learn how to adapt continuously.”

Thea stepped forward, spinning her spear in a fluid, graceful motion once, while slamming her shield in front of her into the ground with clearly practiced control before resting the shaft against it, pointing directly at Isabella—just like Masters had done as her main stance in the fight.

“I’ve fought as a naked berserker with nothing but speed and damage output. I’ve been a heavy tank that couldn’t be moved unless someone literally broke the arena underneath me. I’ve played everything from weird glass-cannon counter builds to passive drain setups that kill you by proximity. It wasn’t all fun; but it was effective. And... Now I realise that it has also been training all along, in a way. Training for *this*. The Allbright System, the builds that come with it, the fighting, the adaptations...”

She tilted her head again, “So yeah. If I’ve got the rough idea for the stats, the gear, and a decent enough recording of what I’m aiming to recreate? Emulating Masters isn’t just possible—it’s downright *doable*. So... Let’s get started?”

—

Clang!

Isabella’s massive two-handed swing crashed heavily against Thea’s tower shield, sparks scattering into the air as Thea angled the shield perfectly, deflecting the enormous force harmlessly to one side. Immediately seeing the opening this created, Thea thrust her spear around the side of the shield, aiming directly for Isabella’s briefly exposed flank.

Forced into a hasty retreat, Isabella stumbled back, her balance disrupted for just an instant.

Thea pressed forward quickly, one careful step after another, staying just close enough that Isabella had no chance to catch her breath.

'Just like Masters did,' Thea thought calmly, repeating the words in her mind like a chant. *'Keep pressure on but don't overcommit. Save your stamina. Let Ela tire herself out.'*

It felt like stepping back into an old memory.

This virtual arena, the gritty sand beneath her heavy boots, the adrenaline of facing a powerful opponent—it was all second nature.

She had done this thousands, if not tens-of-thousands of times.

Finding a strong enemy, learning everything about their setup, copying it herself until she understood *exactly* how to beat it.

Rachel Masters was strong, incredibly skilled, and clearly unbelievably experienced.

But she was also just another puzzle. Just another build. Just another meta.

Things that were second nature for Thea to solve.

Emulate. Improve. *Break.*

Thea remembered the mantra clearly. James had drilled it into her ever since she was four.

Now, years later, she found herself slipping right back into that same familiar rhythm.

She jabbed her spear forward again, this time angling the blade slightly, forcing Isabella into a predictable deflection. As the strike was knocked aside, Thea immediately drove her shield forward with all the power she could muster—power she had almost forgotten existed.

It was honestly exhilarating.

After the past two years of no video games and carefully investing only into Perception and Resolve after her own Integration, she had almost completely forgotten the rush of raw physical strength. For a brief instant, a sense of regret crossed her mind, wondering if perhaps she'd been missing out.

But then, a sharp twinge in her chest yanked her back into focus.

A powerful feeling of danger—a clear warning from her [Glimpse].

She ducked instinctively, positioning her shield higher and angling the spear to intercept Isabella's vicious and surprising counterattack, turning it safely onto her shield instead.

Clang!

"Fuck! *How?!*" Isabella roared, frustration finally breaking through as she staggered backwards yet again, her breathing now ragged and heavy with exertion.

Thea allowed herself a slight grin beneath her helmet, feeling a quiet satisfaction at the outburst.

*'Guess my investments **do** have their benefits after all,'* she thought wryly.

Her precognition had undoubtedly saved her more than once already.

Though the virtual environment filtered out nearly all other real-world Attributes and Abilities, Psychic Precognition seemed to somehow slip through unfiltered, giving her an unfair advantage the video game couldn't quite account for.

'Definitely feels like cheating a little...' she admitted silently, readying herself for Isabella's next charge. *'But it will also make this whole process faster, which will end up helping Ela just as much as it will help me... So it's probably fine.'*

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Three brutal strikes hammered against Thea's shield, the final one nearly jarring the spear from her grip. Isabella was furious now—her swings wild, explosive, and far too predictable.

Thea barely even had to think as her shield absorbed each one, the grav-lock passive keeping it locked in place like a mountain refusing to move.

But this wasn't learning anymore.

Thea could see it clearly now.

The frustration in Isabella's movements, the drop in form, the loss of precision.

She'd passed the point of useful sparring and crossed into raw anger.

Thea sighed internally, *'I should probably end this now... I got some solid ideas for counter moves to give to Ela now. Being in Masters shoes is... **interesting**, to say the least. The build and moves are solid, but there's definitely ways to attempt to get around them.'*

Shifting her stance, Thea abruptly surged forward.

Her first spear thrust struck hard against Isabella's shoulder-plate, knocking the big woman half a step back. The second jab came faster, lower, aimed at her thigh—not to wound, just to drive her off-balance. When Isabella stepped back again, gritting her teeth and raising her blade for another wide swing, Thea didn't wait.

She slammed her shield forward, catching another one of Isabella's attacks on its surface, then immediately shoved off and pivoted.

Thea's hand released the grip.

The tower shield flew through the air like a thrown slab of metal, its sheer weight giving it terrifying power.

Isabella reacted too late.

Wham!

The shield crashed square into her torso, slamming into her breastplate with a resonant **clang** and sending her staggering backwards, her boots carving twin lines through the sand as she fought to stay upright.

And then Thea was on her.

No longer weighed down by the massive shield, she sprinted across the gap with a burst of sudden speed, spear levelled like a lance.

Her tip shot forward, aiming for the centre of Isabella's chest—but somehow, impossibly, Ela caught the movement just in time and deflected the thrust with a last-second swipe of her greatsword.

'You are an absolute monster, Ela...!' Thea couldn't help but think, a toothy grin spreading on her face.

But she didn't stop.

If this had been outside the game, with their normal Attributes, Thea wouldn't have stood a chance in terms of speed and power. But in Wildmaws, with the rough equivalent to Rachel Masters build? Thea was more on even footing with Isabella than ever before.

She twisted with the recoil of Isabella's deflection and followed up immediately, jabbing high, then low, then high again in a rhythm meant to overwhelm, to break focus, to drown her opponent in tempo.

Isabella, clearly thoroughly exhausted by now, barely kept up with Thea's high speed, each block or parry slower than the last.

A half-spin, another feint—and then Thea struck true.

Her spear darted past a last sluggish, slightly-off angle deflection, slipping cleanly through the narrow gap between gorget and helmet.

Straight into Isabella's throat.

A fountain of digital blood burst out, streaking crimson across the air as Isabella's body went limp. She dropped her weapon, her legs buckling beneath her as she slumped forward against the shaft of Thea's spear.

And Thea just stood there, breathing hard inside her helmet, feeling the simulated weight of Isabella's full body hang from her weapon as the arena erupted around them...