

Volume 2 - Chapter 70 - Emulation

"You've got to be fucking *kidding* me..."

The room was dead silent.

"Weeks," the station boss snarled, pacing back and forth behind the glass wall of the editorial pit. "*Weeks* since the first Assessment wrapped up. *Weeks* since the western front lit up every internal metrics board the UHF has. And you're telling me that none of you—*not a single Emperor-fucking-one of you*—managed to get even a scrap of an interview with the newest star Recruit of the UHF?!"

No one answered. A chair scraped loudly. Someone flinched.

"Do you have any idea how long that is in a news cycle?!"

The boss's voice cracked through the bullpen.

"How hard is it," he continued, now quieter, more dangerous as he paced, jabbing a finger at no one in particular, "to throw Credits at the right fucking officers and get your useless asses on the damn ship? Or at least set up a Void-blasted DDS meet?! We've done this *countless times*, people. This is not *new*. This is not *complicated*."

He slapped the datapad in his hands against his palm so hard it cracked.

"Last year's top Recruit? Two days. *Two days* from Assessment finish to prime-time interview! And now? *Weeks*. And you're telling me that all you have is the Emperor's pubic hair wrapped in his own farts?! After *weeks*?!"

More people flinched.

"Our *name* alone should open doors," he went on. "APNN has been the first stop for every major Recruit story for *decades*. And now you're telling me you can't even get a *call back*? Not an interview, not a date for official releases, not a even fucking estimate?! People trip over themselves to get on our channel! And yet here you are—*empty-handed*."

Silence stretched, the Bosses rage spent—for the moment.

The highest-ranked editor in the room cleared his throat.

"S—Sir," he said carefully. "We... Ehh... We've tried all of that. *Literally*. All of it."

The Boss' head snapped to his highest-ranked editor.

"What?"

"We—We offered *premium* prime-time slots," the editor continued. "Above anything we've ever put on the table before. We multiplied our standard Credit offers *several times* over. Beyond what we would even really be allowed to spend without your approval, Sir. We leaned on *every contact* we have. The response has been the same every time."

He swallowed. “T—The UHF is locking this Recruit down hard, Sir. Harder than anything I’ve ever seen. We haven’t managed to get *basic background* information. We don’t even have a *name* yet.”

Stunned silence.

“We’re waiting on the official Alpha Squad highlights broadcast later this week just to see *their face* for the first time.”

The boss stared at him, mouth slightly agape.

Slowly, the fire drained out of his expression, replaced by something colder—and visibly more unsettled.

“...I—I see,” he said at last.

He straightened his jacket, voice quieter now. “Then... I guess we will have to try a lot harder going forward.”

No one spoke.

“If the UHF is truly clamping down *this hard* on even basic information...” he continued, almost to himself, “then this Recruit isn’t just *a story*. They’re *the* story. A bona-fide UHF asset. One worth their weight in Credits many, many, many times over.”

He looked around the room again.

“And we *are* going to get the first interview. I don’t care what it costs, you understand me? This first interview will make or break the next year’s news cycle, if not longer. If the UHF is protecting this Recruit to this level, this isn’t just another run-of-the-mill Drive. Whatever this Recruit means to the UHF, we will find out, you hear me?”

He saw nods around the room, hesitant at first, but then more determined.

He smiled.

“Good. Get me that interview. I don’t care what it takes. You are authorized to offer *every incentive* you can possibly think of. If it takes me personally interviewing that Recruit naked, with the Emperor’s own asshole permanently embossed on my chest with a 3D Holo-tattoo, then so be it. *Get. Me. That. Interview!*”

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[Transcript Excerpt — Internal Feed Leak, Aquila Prime News Network, PFC943]

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Evelyne returned about fifteen minutes after her abrupt, hasty retreat, and Thea let out a quiet sigh of relief.

'Thank fuck...'

For the last five minutes, she had been stuck debating whether going after Evelyne—and possibly helping her through whatever had happened to her—would have made things better or just worse.

Lucas hadn't been much help either; his answer to whether she should go after her had simply been, "No idea."

Thankfully, that problem had resolved itself now.

Thea carefully scanned Evelyne as she stepped back into the booth and closed the door behind her.

She looked... perfectly put together.

That was more than a little surprising, considering she had looked like she was about to puke up her entire body mass when she'd fled the room.

Now there wasn't even a hint of discoloration on her face.

Her carefully applied makeup—and even her lipstick—were completely untouched, as if nothing had happened at all.

'Either she's incredibly good at not making a mess... or she's terrifyingly good at reapplying makeup outside her own room,' Thea thought. *'Maybe I should ask her for tips...?'*

Her body language had changed too.

The frantic nervous energy from before was seemingly gone, replaced by the more composed, professional demeanor she'd previously only shown when interacting with Lucas.

Both of them watched her as she walked up to the table.

"I sincerely apologize for the delay, and for the... unsightly way I left earlier," Evelyne said evenly.

Lucas waved it off immediately. "Pah, it's fine. You feeling better now?"

Thea nodded as well. "Yeah, no problem at all. Are you okay? I almost went out to check on you."

Evelyne's eyes widened at that, snapping to Thea for a split second.

*'Okay. **Definitely** a good thing I didn't do that,'* Thea decided. *'Good job, indecisiveness.'*

"N—No, it's really okay. I'm feeling much better now, thank you," Evelyne said, fidgeting slightly before gesturing toward the VR seats. "I'd... recommend we get started. I'm sorry for the delay I caused. I'll gladly pay for an extra hour to make up for it. I asked to be part of this, and so far I've only caused trouble..."

That tugged hard at Thea's heartstrings.

'And doing this in front of her idol, too... That has to be utterly mortifying,' she thought. 'She's handling it way better than I would have. I'm not sure I'd even have walked back in if that were me.'

The girl had more backbone than Thea had given her credit for so far.

"Sure, we can book an extra hour at the end if we need it," Thea agreed with a nod. She got up from the bench Lucas and she had settled back onto while waiting for Evelyne to return and headed toward the VR seats.

'There's really no reason to deny it if she wants to pay for an extra hour.'

"Which I'm sure we won't need to," Lucas chimed in almost immediately, giving Thea a pointed eyebrow raise—which she had no idea how to interpret at all. "I'm sure it'll be fine, Evelyne. But yeah... Probably best we get started."

Thea stared at him for a few seconds, trying to figure out what that had been about, but he clearly had no intention of explaining.

She decided it was something she'd ask him about later—if she remembered.

They logged into their private Archion instance and met up in the locker room of the colosseum-style arena—the same one Thea had picked last time when she'd helped Isabella and Lucas deal with the Masters girl's nonsense.

Thea stretched in her Turixa avatar, feeling muscles shift and pop in ways her real body never could. Being larger and stronger than her actual self was always a strange but weirdly familiar feeling for her.

Lucas, in his usual true-to-life avatar, looked like he was just getting used to the world of Archion again.

Evelyne's avatar, however, caught Thea completely off guard.

She loaded in as... a Turixa.

Thea's competitive instincts flared immediately.

'Huh. Would you look at that,' she thought, her opinion of the girl ticking up a notch. 'Turixa are a high-skill race. That means she's played this before. Maybe I can get some real Archion sparring in later...'

She shook her head, pushing those thoughts aside for now, and took a closer look instead.

Evelyne was about the same height as her in her Turixa form. Her standard gear showed light armor, a full set of daggers strapped across her body, and two short swords crossed on her back.

'Rogue-type,' Thea thought. 'Yeah. That tracks. She gives Scout or Infiltrator vibes, for sure.'

Evelyne started to visibly squirm under the attention, so Thea stopped staring and got to the point.

“So,” she said, turning serious, “the Masters girl. What can you tell us?”

Evelyne visibly locked in right away.

The squirming stopped, she took a quick, steadying breath, then nodded.

“Rachel Veronica Masters is part of the Masters Major Legacy,” she said. “That means there’s at least six generations of data on how a Masters usually operates—what their builds look like and how their fighting style develops from start to finish. Rachel, just like her parents before her, went with what we’d call a Paladin-type build in Archion terms. In the real world, that usually translates to a Brawler.”

Thea nodded, appreciating that Evelyne was using Archion terminology.

That alone made this a lot easier to follow.

“As for her base Attributes,” Evelyne continued, “I can’t give you exact numbers. But I can give a fairly solid estimate, based on the data I’ve had access to and gathered over the past month.”

“How *did* you even get access to this kind of information?” Lucas asked, and Thea was quietly relieved she hadn’t been the one to blurt it out—cause she had just been about to, as well.

“It’s my job,” Evelyne replied simply. “I’m the information collector for my squad. One of our Defensive Heavies was thinking about challenging her before the Awards Ceremony, just because she’s a Major Legacy. He wanted to make a name for himself—beat a Masters and steal her spot.”

She shrugged. “But we didn’t rank nearly high enough during the Assessment, so that plan died pretty fast.”

She sighed, then went on. “I gathered all this intel to help him prepare, and then it almost felt completely pointless once the rankings came out.”

A small smile crept onto her face. “But then I overheard you two talking, and... well. Here we are. I’m honestly just glad all that work isn’t going to waste. Even if it doesn’t really help my squad anymore...”

She looked a bit down about that, clearly uncomfortable with using information meant for her squad for something else.

‘What else was she supposed to do though?’ Thea thought. ‘Letting all that intel rot would’ve been worse. She really shouldn’t feel bad about this...’

Lucas shifted a bit and gave her a small, reassuring smile. “Hey, then I guess we’re lucky we ran into you. This is going to help us out a lot. Seriously.”

He left it at that and leaned forward slightly, clearly ready to move on, which threw Thea off more than she expected.

‘...*Wait. Did I miss something again...*?’ she thought, brows furrowing.

Lucas had asked *how* Evelyne had gotten her hands on that kind of information.

But Evelyne hadn’t actually answered that, had she? She’d explained *why* she had gathered it—her role in her squad, the Defensive Heavy, the failed challenge—but not actually answered the question of *how* she accessed it in the first place. Not really.

Just vague mentions of Legacies and “information being out there.”

Thea was halfway through replaying Evelyne’s answer in her head, trying to pinpoint the exact moment where the question had supposedly been answered—figuring that Lucas must have caught something she had missed—when Evelyne continued speaking, clearly taking Lucas’ reaction as a go-ahead.

“So, as I mentioned, these numbers are educated guesses at best, but from everything I can tell, her base lineup looks roughly like this:

Strength: 4.6–4.8

Finesse: 4.1–4.4

Vitality: 5.0–5.2

Recovery: 3.3–3.5

Stamina: 4.5–4.7

Focus: 2.1–2.2

Perception: 3.5–3.6

Resolve: 3.8–3.9

“I can’t say for sure which ones lean toward the high or low end of those ranges, since a lot of Attributes interact with each other,” Evelyne continued, seeming downright apologetic about it. “But it should be close enough to give you something solid to work with, Thea.”

It was phrased almost like a question, but the confidence in her voice made it clear she was utterly *convinced* it was more than enough for her—which it absolutely was.

Thea and Lucas just stared at her for several seconds, both thoroughly taken aback by the sheer absurd levels of detail Evelyne had on Masters’ Attribute spread.

Before either of them could even respond, however, she just... went on.

“As for her Level spread, she should be Level 7 right now, after finishing her second DM, and she’s closely following her Legacy’s standard path. That means most of her points are going into Vitality, Strength, Finesse, and Stamina. She’s also investing into Resolve to reach the 4.0 threshold, and Perception for the same reason. The split should be around 3 / 1.5 / 1 / 0.5 for those core Attributes, with two or three Levels’ worth of points set aside for Resolve and Perception. She’s already invested into Perception, but not Resolve yet, so at least one Level went there. That leaves a minimum of twenty-four points total—putting her Vitality at

roughly plus sixty percent, Strength at plus thirty, Finesse at plus twenty, and Stamina at plus ten.”

Thea was already scrambling to input everything into a fresh build, having pulled up the interface the moment Evelyne had simply kept talking, not wanting to have to ask for repetitions. The numbers were pouring out of Evelyne at a rapid pace, leaving her no time for anything else... and she absolutely loved it.

This—this was build theory at its absolute *purest*, being dumped straight into her lap without pause.

“As for her Abilities, her signature one is called [Pro-Reactive Movement], and it pretty much does exactly what the name says. It’s an Active-type that lets her react to any attack coming her way, as long as she has some idea of how to evade, block, or parry it. It works against both melee and ranged attacks, and she doesn’t even need to be aware of the attack beforehand—as long as the Ability is active before impact, it will tell her what the attack is and where it’s coming from, giving her the chance to respond to it—instantly.”

Thea’s eyes widened even further at the detailed explanation of Masters’ signature Ability.

It sounded, in some ways, similar to her own [Glimpse].

Better in some aspects—like actually letting her react in specific ways instead of effectively being *forced* to dodge, since the reaction window was so short—but worse in others, such as needing to be Active ahead of time.

Still, it explained a lot of the movements Masters had pulled off during her fight with Isabella, especially those moments where she had somehow defended against attacks that should have been physically impossible to handle.

“She also has several close-quarters focused Abilities, like [Rapid Reposition] and [Unmoving Bulwark], but she uses them sparingly,” Evelyne continued, leaning against the nearby wall and listing off the Masters’ girls entire Build makeup like it was nothing. “Most of the time, she prefers to rely on her own raw capabilities to make plays. Still, they’re not something we should ignore during prep—they can easily catch you off guard. I’m not fully aware of all her other Active-types yet, but I’ll keep watching for them.”

She took another breath before going on. “As for her Passives, the Masters Legacy leans heavily into overwhelming presence and close-range dominance, like most Paladin-style builds. She’s almost certainly picked up multiple Passives that improve maneuverability in Super-Heavy Armour, and possibly even something that enhances her Full-Cover Shield. On top of that, she uses a large one-and-a-half-handed hammer as her main weapon, and based on how fluid her movements are compared to her Strength and Finesse, she has to have at least one Passive that improves handling with that kind of weapon. She also either already has or will be picking up one Passive and one Active Ability in relation to diplomacy; something to enhance her presence on and off the Battlefield alike. I would argue that she hasn’t done so yet, but they might just still be low-level instead.”

Evelyne sighed, looking noticeably less pleased as she added, “She *also* recently picked up [Redundant Organs], after her run-in with Itoku. That’s going to be a major pain to deal with—and it really patches up one of her more obvious weaknesses that I was hoping my squad mate could work around... Specifically her lack of staying power. Rachel is more of a Burst-Brawler, not a Tank like you, Lucas, at least by build. She relies on taking enemies down before they can really put sustained damage on her. But with [Redundant Organs], she’s shored that up pretty effectively... It’s going to be hard to deal with.”

Lucas just stared at Evelyne for a moment, his mouth opening and closing once like he was trying to find the right words and coming up empty.

He finally shook his head, letting out a slow breath.

“I... wow. That’s a lot. Like—*way more* than I ever expected,” he said honestly, rubbing the back of his neck. “Seriously, thank you. This helps. Like a huge amount.”

Thea barely reacted at all, fingers already flying as she dumped the numbers into the fresh build template she had opened earlier. Windows stacked over each other as she cross-checked Attributes, compared breakpoints, and pulled up lists of Abilities.

Her brows knit together in focus as she muttered under her breath, trying to remember exact Archion equivalents. At one point, she even flicked open the chat overlay and quietly queried the Sovereign for a shortlist of matching Ability frameworks.

She was just as stunned as Lucas by the level of detail—but that reaction was buried under the need to get everything down correctly before her brain could move on.

Evelyne glanced between the two of them, then gave a small, almost shy shrug that Thea caught out of the corner of her eye.

“I’m just glad it might actually be useful,” she said. “It’s really not that big of a deal.”

Lucas immediately shook his head. “No, no. It *is* a big deal,” he said without hesitation. “We’re incredibly lucky we ran into you. Don’t sell yourself short. You should honestly consider offering this kind of intel to other people too, maybe? Could probably earn a few extra Credits from folks trying to climb the ladder.”

He paused, then added with a half-joking grin, “Just—don’t give anything about Alpha Squad away, yeah?”

Evelyne actually seemed to think about it for a moment, before giving a small, uncertain smile. “Ahah... I’m not really sure that’s what I want to do,” she said. “This is different because—” her eyes flicked to Thea, “—well, because it was something I already had. And there was something I could get out of it that I wanted...”

She trailed off at the end.

Lucas lifted his hands in surrender and shrugged. “Fair enough. Not gonna push you into anything you don’t want to do. Still—thanks. Seriously.”

Then he turned to Thea. “What do you think?”

“Yeah, it’s a lot,” Thea replied with a nod, still focused on finishing the last touches on the build, a bit annoyed that Lucas was breaking her concentration for, frankly, nothing.

“Thanks, Evelyne,” she added a second later, almost forgetting to say it.

Silence followed, which suited Thea just fine.

She refocused fully on the build and put the last pieces together. Once she confirmed the template and equipped it, her avatar shifted and reshaped into what was supposed to be the current Rachel Veronica Masters according to Evelyne—aside from using the default female human frame as a base.

“Whoa,” Lucas muttered on her left, but Thea barely registered it.

She’d gone through changes like this countless times.

She didn’t need much time to adjust to the new Attribute spread, but she still ran through her usual pre-tournament warm-up—shortened, but nevertheless thorough—to get a feel for how the body moved and where its limits were.

“Hmm... yeah. This should work,” she muttered, before finally looking back at the others.

“This is really good. Seriously. But I think we can dial it in even further.” Her gaze shifted to Evelyne, who immediately stiffened. “Do you have a solid visual memory of how Masters moves when she goes all-out with certain techniques? If you do, I can emulate her and you can tell me what looks off. Then we can adjust the base Attributes up or down.”

Evelyne’s eyes widened.

She opened her mouth, stopped, then tried again. “T—that’s something you can do...?”

Thea raised an eyebrow. She’d just said that, hadn’t she?

“Yes. That’s why I said it,” she replied slowly, making sure Evelyne caught every word despite the obvious star-struck panic. “Being able to emulate builds down to around three-hundredths of an Attribute point is essential for tournament prep. You can’t find that kind of detail on the GalNet. Most serious build work is done exactly like this—loading into an arena, copying the spread as closely as possible, then making small adjustments while comparing recordings frame by frame. I’ve done it plenty of times. It’s really not a big deal.”

She opened the interface again and added, “And we still have a little over thirteen hours for a reason. So... let’s get started. Into the arena.”

She headed out of the locker room before either of them could really respond, fully trusting they would follow. This was her area of expertise, after all.

Inside the Archion simulation, the confidence she felt was on a completely different level than anything she ever felt in real life—or even inside the DDS.

The only thing that came close were those brief moments after using her [Glimpse], when she knew *exactly* how things would unfold in the coming seconds.

Nothing else got even close to being compared.

"I—I had no idea something like that was even possible," Lucas muttered behind her, quietly speaking to Evelyne.

"I wasn't aware of it either, to be honest," Evelyne replied, sounding genuinely taken aback.

'Hmm... maybe not a high-level tournament player after all,' Thea thought, mentally nudging Evelyne's importance down a notch. *'Definitely experienced and knowledgeable, but not someone who's lived at the top end... Unfortunate.'*

As they moved toward the arena, Thea absently equipped the gear she'd picked to emulate Masters, starting with the Super-Heavy style plate armour. When she reached the weapon selection, though, she hesitated over the available hammers.

"Evelyne, what hammer would best match Masters'?" she asked, not turning around, simply raising her voice slightly.

A small squeak followed. "Ehh—Probably the Dead-Grip, if I had to pick... It's the closest to her Glassbane that I know of."

Thea nodded and selected it. That had been her guess too, but confirmation helped.

The Dead-Grip was what people often called a bastard warhammer—one-and-a-half handed, much like a bastard sword was on the bladed side of things. She equipped it and gave it a few test swings, letting the weight settle naturally into her muscles.

'Not something I use often, but I can definitely work with this...'

A flicker of excitement ran through her as she pulled the massive tower shield into her other hand, its bulky weight locking into place around her arm. It had been a long time since she had truly tried to emulate and determine somebody's exact Build through experimentation.

Then she abruptly stopped, fully geared, and turned sharply.

Lucas and Evelyne both halted, caught a little off guard by the suddenness.

"Alright. Let's do this," she said. "What movements do you remember best, Evelyne? Be as precise as you can be. Lucas, stand aside for now, just observe."

Evelyne stared at her for a second, eyes practically sparkling, before she took a deep breath, gathered her thoughts, and started describing one of Masters' techniques in careful, exact detail...