

Volume 2 - Chapter 25 - Tough Choices

Pulling up her list of outstanding Accomplishment rewards, Thea blinked in surprise when the interface actually responded—*inside* the Wildmaws simulation, no less. She hadn't expected the System to be accessible here, but apparently it had somehow synced itself up.

[“Without Equal“ Accomplishment]

Stay the highest PV member of your Faction at your current Tier and Level for at least one month.

Rewards:

- 1x Ability Choice Voucher [Gold-rarity or below] (Unclaimed)

[“Speedrun“ Accomplishment]

Reach Level 10 before the end of your 2nd month of Integration.

Rewards:

- 1x Random Ability [Gold-rarity or below] (Unclaimed)
- 5,000 System Credits (Unclaimed)
- 500 System Merit (Unclaimed)

[“Psyker's Bane“ Accomplishment]

Defeat two or more Psykers in direct confrontation, without the use of any Active Psychic Powers or Psychic-related Abilities.

Rewards:

- 1x Psychic-related Ability [Gold-rarity or below] (Unclaimed)
- 5,000 System Credits (Unclaimed)
- 500 System Merit (Unclaimed)

[“Fledgeling Arms Dealer“ Accomplishment]

Have at least 100 Integrated enemies killed by your weapons, without you being the wielder.
Next Rank: Have at least 1,000 Integrated enemies killed by your weapons, without you being the wielder.

Rewards:

- 3x Skill Voucher [Silver-rarity or below] (Unclaimed)

[“Fledgeling Infiltrator“ Accomplishment]

Successfully infiltrate and complete a Faction Mission deep behind the enemy lines three times in one Battlefield.

Next Rank: Successfully infiltrate and complete a Faction Mission deep behind the enemy lines five times in one Battlefield.

Rewards:

- 1x Stealth- or Assassination-tagged Ability [Silver-rarity or below] (Unclaimed)
- 3,500 System Credits (Unclaimed)
- 300 System Merit (Unclaimed)

[*"Fledgeling Scout" Accomplishment*]

Successfully lead a squad as a scout and detect traps, ambushes and dangers that would lead to failure of a mission three times in one Battlefield.

Next Rank: Successfully lead a squad as a scout and detect traps, ambushes and dangers that would lead to failure of a mission five times in one Battlefield.

Rewards:

- *1x Perception-based Ability [Silver-rarity or below] (Unclaimed)*
- *3,500 System Credits (Unclaimed)*
- *300 System Merit (Unclaimed)*

'That's... way more than I thought it'd be,' she thought, her eyes skimming the long scroll of notifications and unclaimed rewards. The sheer number of Accomplishments she'd left untouched was kind of ridiculous now that she was looking at them all in one place.

But she hadn't really had a good time to go through them until now.

Her current setup was solid.

All her Active Ability slots were full, and most of her Passive slots had been filled too.

Accepting something new meant risking a full reset of a slot, starting an Ability back at Level 0 mid-Assessment—and that had felt like a gamble she just couldn't justify when she was aiming for the top of the leaderboards.

'Better to stick with what works than to swap things out blindly during high-stakes missions,' she reminded herself—echoing something James had drilled into her ages ago.

It was the same way she'd always approached her games.

When faced with an unknown build or weird new strat, she didn't just toss her whole setup out the window and panic-change everything. She'd push through the fight, take notes, and only adjust once she had a full understanding of what needed to change.

Now that she had a moment of quiet and control, though, she could finally take a proper look.

Two main issues with her current build jumped out at her immediately.

"I need more reliable Active Abilities," she muttered, eyes flicking through the list. "Stuff for mobility, or to kick my output into high gear when things go sideways..."

Her fingers tapped lightly against her leg as she scrolled.

"And I *really* need to fill out my Passives. That's so much potential power I'm just wasting right now for no good reason."

[----- Abilities: 5 (5) | 5 (8) -----]

[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]

[Passive (Silver) - Armour of Resolve - Level 7]
[Passive (Silver) - Meditation Focus - Level 7]
[Passive (Silver) - Silver Respiration - Level 6]
[Passive (Iron) - Agile Stealth - Level 7]
[Passive (Gold) - Detect Weak Spots - Level 7]

"I think [Improved Sprint] and [Inspect Target] are probably the best ones to swap out if I roll a better Ability from my rewards," Thea muttered, her fingers hovering over the glowing interface. "I've still got Passive slots open, so no reason to throw anything away yet. [Armour of Resolve] is way too important to drop, [Silver Respiration] has literally kept me breathing through some absolute bullshit, and [Detect Weak Spots] was the only reason those cannons went down..."

She paused, leaning back slightly on the bench as her mind raced through potential builds she'd played before. One in particular, from *Archion*—a fantasy-heavy game she'd spent countless hours mastering—kept surfacing in her thoughts.

Unlike Wildmaws, which focused heavily on martial skills, *Archion* had leaned into magic, classes, and abilities that, in hindsight, reminded her suspiciously of the Rune priest's Psychic demonstrations from earlier.

The build she'd enjoyed the most there had combined magic, stealth, and pinpoint deadly strikes—a tribrid between mage, assassin, and infiltrator.

It relied heavily on mental stats over physical ones, *exactly* like her current build in the Allbright System.

But that had also meant the physical side was always weaker by default.

You could ignore that issue, balance things out with raw player skill or patch those weaknesses with Abilities, but if you got too far behind in stats, you'd eventually get overwhelmed—exactly what had happened to her against Isabella during their spars as well.

Thea had always preferred mixing skill and carefully selected Abilities to fix those kind of holes, rather than ignore their existence entirely—something many people had done in order to cram even more power-based options into their builds; pure glass cannons, essentially.

But especially now, with real-life, literal *death* as a consequence to that kind of glass cannon build, she couldn't just shrug and accept those weaknesses. The stakes were too high to have such gaping holes in her defenses, and honestly, patching things up suited her careful, methodical style of builds better anyway.

Unfortunately, however, her current Attributes—locked entirely into Perception and Resolve until Class Selection at the end of the year—meant many critical aspects of the build were missing, like explosive bursts of speed and rapid maneuvering.

If she could pick the right Abilities, though, she might just patch those gaps enough to make the build viable until she could eventually adjust Attributes later.

'Psyker for the mage stand-in, sniper for the assassin stand-in and scout for the infiltrator stand-in... plus sabotage with the Caliburn,' she thought, a small smile forming as the idea solidified. *'Yeah, that might just work.'*

Eventually, she'd have to invest at least a few points into Strength to fix the reaction-speed problems she'd run into against Isabella. Knowing what to do but lacking the physical speed to actually do it was frustrating beyond belief—and dangerous in a real fight.

"Though it's a bit naive to think I'd never run into someone like Ela again," she sighed softly, shaking her head. "There's always going to be someone out there who's so far ahead in one stat or another that I just won't have a chance going head-to-head."

The only real problem she could see with the plan was that the build she had in mind—while solid—was basically an early to mid-game strategy at best.

If what the Rune priest had said about the limitations of Psychic Energy Reserves held true—and the lack thereof later down the line, she'd eventually need to branch out and start incorporating ideas from other builds—especially ones from *Krilson's Path*.

Krilson's Path had always been one of the most complicated games out there.

The builds were intricate, layered, and required a ton of planning, especially as you hit the mid-to-late stages. Everything scaled off of multiple interlinked stats, and synergy was king.

But it also happened to be the only game she could think of that would actually *fit* with the bones of the Archion-inspired build she wanted to start with. It leaned heavily into Psychic-style Powers, sure—but not as the *focus*.

More as a background buff for everything else.

That suited her perfectly.

'Not a mage,' she thought, nodding to herself. *'A magical assassin and infiltrator. That's the goal. Support-focused Psyker work, with assassination and recon at the forefront.'*

It was probably the best she could hope for, given how little she actually understood about how deep the Allbright System went. She'd definitely have to get the Rune priest's take on it sometime soon—assuming she could catch him take a break from his usual riddle-filled lectures.

But none of that would matter unless she fixed up her current foundation.

She needed to reshape her setup into something that at least *resembled* the Archion build's starting point. That was step one.

And that meant...

“Time to crack open some loot boxes,” she grinned to herself.

There was always something weirdly fun about it—something unpredictable and stupid and chaotic. The System could either bless her with something incredible, or hand her the digital equivalent of a moldy boot.

It was all random. All luck. Which made it *weirdly* thrilling.

“I’ll open the Gold ones first,” she muttered, scrolling through the Accomplishments menu. “If those give me something good, I can dump the Silver ones for vouchers.”

Her eyes skimmed down the list until she landed on one.

“Let’s go with you first...”

[System]: *Do you want to claim the reward for [**Speedrun**] Accomplishment?*

Thea hesitated for a second—then confirmed it.

The screen shimmered, and another window popped up in front of her, flashing the random Gold-rarity Ability the System had rolled for her. Her heart thudded as she read the name, bracing herself for either complete disappointment or a jackpot hit.

[Active (Gold**) - Instant Reload - Level 0]**

Description: *Instantly reloads the participant’s currently equipped firearm using a compatible magazine located within a 3-meter radius. Alternatively, immediately reloads the participant’s currently equipped firearm with a standard-issue magazine of the same Tier up to a maximum Tier. This function incurs additional Resource costs.*

Cost: 10 Focus + 10 Stamina | 30 Focus + 30 Stamina

Magazine Size: Standard - Tier Limit: 1

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

Thea cupped her chin, eyes narrowing slightly as she tilted her head at a 30-degree angle—like somehow, that new angle might help the Ability make more sense.

“Definitely better than [Improved Sprint] or [Inspect Target],” she muttered under her breath, “considering I’ve basically never used either of those... But I wouldn’t exactly say this one hits the spot, System.”

It wasn’t bad. But it wasn’t good for her either.

Ammo had *never* really been a problem for her. Not even during the absolute chaos of the Assessment.

Her weapon setup and fighting style were designed for efficiency—precision over spray-and-pray.

Her Gram was a precise burst weapon, and her Caliburn... Well, that one was a special case altogether. The main problem with it wasn't ammo—it was *availability*. Once lost, it was practically irreplaceable. And the Gram, while versatile, wasn't ideal for stealth situations due to the noise and glow it gave off.

So this Ability, while functional and undoubtedly useful in some situations, didn't really solve any of her *actual* issues with her current equipment, nor could she see a point at which her equipment would change to a level where it would become so.

Still, she couldn't deny it was interesting, at the very least.

She'd never even *heard* of this one before, or anything even remotely close to it.

At least, not in the Allbright System. In some of the games she had played? Definitely.

'Could be useful for someone else, though...' she thought, tapping a finger against the side of her temple. *'Especially Ela. Her ammo weighs a ton, and she burns through it like a maniac. Even a minor reduction in ammo use could save her from having to resupply every two minutes.'*

It definitely wasn't right for her—but she made a mental note to mention it to the others later.

Maybe even recommend it.

With that, Thea moved her eyes to the second option on the System prompt—the little “Convert to Reward Voucher” line—and confirmed it with a simple thought.

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

'One reward down, several more to go...'

[System]: Do you want to claim the reward for [**“Psyker's Bane”** Accomplishment]?

'Next up's the Psychic-related Ability, huh...?' She thought, as she confirmed the prompt.

[Active (Gold**) - Psychic Reversal - Level 0]**

Requirements: 8 Resolve

Description: Allows the participant to use up a certain amount of Focus in order to place a temporary buff upon themselves, lasting for a moderate duration. Should the participant be affected by a hostile Psychic Power within that duration, the buff is immediately consumed. Upon consumption, the participant's Resolve is momentarily increased by a factor and compared to the enemy's Resolve. If the participant's Resolve is higher, the Psychic Power gets reversed, affecting the initial caster as the new target with the same parameters originally applied to the Power.

Cost: 210 Focus

Buff Duration: 300 seconds - Scaling Factor: 1.5x

Her eyes flew wide, and she sucked in a sharp breath—only for it to get caught in her throat and trigger a violent coughing fit.

“Holy *fuck!*” Thea managed between hacks. “What the *fuck?!?*!”

It took a few seconds to settle her breathing again, but her eyes never once left the glowing text hovering in front of her. She was completely locked onto the Ability description, scanning it over and over as her brain struggled to keep up.

“That’s... that’s *fucking [Arcane Reversal]* from *Archion...*!” she muttered in stunned disbelief, her voice barely above a whisper.

It wasn’t just *similar* to the iconic high-tier PvP Ability from the old fantasy RPG—it was *exactly the same*.

Line-for-line.

The mechanics, the effect, the condition triggers... Even the scaling factor was identical. That alone sent a weird chill down her spine.

Everything was the exact same, except for one critical difference: Where [Arcane Reversal] had scaled off the Arcana stat, [Psychic Reversal] pulled directly from Resolve.

And Resolve was *her* stat.

What made it worse—or better, depending on how she looked at it—was the fact that this Ability had been on her shortlist earlier. She had *almost* asked the Sovereign about it when she’d rattled off examples... and now, here it was. Dropped in her lap like a cosmic joke.

“But most importantly,” she murmured, still leaning against the bench with wide eyes, “that Ability is fucking *insane* for me, isn’t it...?”

If what the Rune priest had told her was true—about how high her Resolve already was, comparatively—then [Psychic Reversal] wasn’t just powerful.

It was borderline *unfair*.

If it really did work the way it had in *Archion*, and her current stat level was already giving her far higher Tier-level scaling... Then her enemies would have to be built like the gods of old to overpower her while this was active.

With a raw +50% enhancement on incoming Psyker effects, and a full reflect if her mental defenses held, she’d be damn near untouchable in one-on-one Psyker fights. It would force opponents to either not use Psychic Powers at all or bait her into wasting the Ability first—assuming they were even aware of her having it in the first place.

Her first instinct was to take it immediately.

But she didn’t.

She sat up straighter, rubbing the back of her neck and forcing herself to slow down.

'Think it through. This isn't a game anymore. No respect tokens. No casual retries. The Albright System does not do easy do-overs...'

Taking a breath, she pulled the description back up, reading every line with extra care.

"Hmm," she muttered again, cupping her chin. "The Focus cost is... *yeah*, that's rough."

It wasn't just high—it was ridiculous.

Borderline comical, even, if it wasn't so painful to admit.

Without a much bigger Focus pool, or far better regeneration, [Psychic Reversal] might as well come with a warning label practically stating "*This is your only Ability for the day!*"

In a fight, using it would mean sacrificing every other Active Ability she had access to.

No [Sensory Overdrive]. No [Penetrative Shot]. No [Sky Step].

Nothing else. It would be *this*, or *nothing*.

And the current recovery time on her Focus... It was not great.

'If I used any other Ability before this one, I'd be locked out of using [Psychic Reversal] for hours. Maybe longer, depending on which one it was,' she thought grimly. *'And even if I finally got to use it, it would bring me down to practically 0. Being dry on Focus is... yeah. We've been there before. Not exactly what I'd call fun...'*

She thought back to the Assessment—the constant pressure, the exhaustion, the way danger seemed to hide behind every shadow. Every second had felt like it might be her last if she wasn't fast enough, sharp enough.

[Sensory Overdrive] had been her saving grace more times than she could count.

It gave her just enough of an edge to keep surviving—heightening her awareness, sharpening her focus. A better read on what was coming next.

A little more time to plan and react to the threat.

It was her safety net. Her comfort zone.

Her mainstay Ability since she had been Integrated.

And now this new Ability—[Psychic Reversal]—as powerful as it was, felt like it might rip that safety net away. Not because it replaced it directly, but because it competed for the same resource: Her painfully limited Focus pool.

If she picked this, she couldn't just throw out [Sensory Overdrive] at every incoming threat like she usually did. She'd have to think ahead, plan carefully, make hard calls about whether or not a situation was worth the cost.

One wrong guess, one delay in using her Abilities, and it could all go sideways.

She might not even get the chance to recover the Focus and course-correct, if a Psychic Threat showed up moments after she used her [Sensory Overdrive].

And in combat—especially at the pace the Allbright System demanded—those kinds of delays weren't just dangerous.

They were *fatal*.

She leaned back on the bench, staring down at the sandy arena, where Isabella was fighting the emulated version of Thea herself.

“Damn you, System,” she muttered under her breath, though there was no real heat behind it. A tired grin tugged at the corner of her lips anyway. “Why do you always give me the really hard choices...?”

The System never handed her anything easy. Not even her hard-earned victories...