

Volume 2 - Chapter 33 - Augmentation

“In peacetime, the cleverest of soldiers are praised for efficiency. In war, that same cleverness is tested by blood.

The enemy does not care how sharp your plan is—only how much it all bleeds when cut.

The Galactic War teaches one truth above all: Strategy is not the art of brilliance, but of endurance.

A thousand flawless moves mean nothing if your line breaks once.

*And it **will** break—because the enemy is brilliant too.*

So learn faster. Adapt sooner. Bleed smarter.

Victory does not belong to those who plan best, strike first or even hardest.

It belongs to those still standing after the last scream fades, and nobody else...”

- Commander Cern Vostek, 922 PFC

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Thea spent the next hour simply exploring what else the Augmentation Bench could do—beyond just reshaping the armour’s frame to fit extra Module Slots.

Most of her time went into fiddling with the various material composition sliders available—each one adjusting the exact amount of each component at different points across the Spectre’s plating. It was surprisingly intuitive, with the interface showing real-time changes to weight, flexibility, resistance values, and, most importantly, cost.

She experimented with swapping out heavier alloys for lighter composites in a few less critical spots, watching how the system recalculated the weight, flexibility and ARV scores with every adjustment.

It was downright addicting.

The last notable thing she found—tucked away in a menu labeled *Auxiliary Systems & Passive Frameworks*—caught her completely off guard.

These weren’t Modules in the standard sense. They didn’t need slots.

Instead, they were integrated directly into the design, offering minor bonuses or utility perks.

All of them came with a cost, though—and not a small one.

“Hmm... It's tough to make choices here with so many options...” she muttered, stepping back from the Augmentation Bench for a second and crossing her arms in thought.

“I think tweaking the material layout could be smart. Save some weight, maybe bump the ARV... but that cost hike's pretty nasty.”

That was the one real drawback she had come to recognize: The reprint cost increase.

Every change she made—every slider she adjusted—pushed the price up, and none of it was temporary. It wasn't just a one-time crafting fee—though that was part of it—it also permanently raised the base reprint cost of the armour if she ever needed to replace it later.

And she would need to, eventually. That was just a fact.

Right now, she had plenty of Credits to throw around. But Thea wasn't naive enough to think that would always be the case.

‘At least the material changes are still cheaper than the Auxiliary stuff,’ she thought, frowning slightly. *‘But they’re not nearly as cool, either...’*

With a small sigh, she stepped back up to the Augmentation Bench, fingers tapping along the side as she pulled the Auxiliary Additions menu open again.

The Spectre's holographic frame shimmered in front of her, waiting.

She navigated to the list-style menu, and more than a dozen auxiliary options populated the screen in front of her.

They ranged from simple HUD-upgrades for her helmet's internal display, to actuator improvements designed to make the armour's joints move more naturally, to more exotic add-ons—like the one that had really caught her attention: A mini-drone-compatible targeting upgrade for her helmet, along with a matching drone storage and recharge pouch that could be mounted to the rear of her armour.

It stood out for a reason.

The demo videos showing it in action had immediately given her some good ideas on whether it was something that would be useful to her—and it definitely could be.

The footage showed an operator directing the drone to scout a room from outside a building, peeking in through windows or other openings.

With just a general directive and heading from the user, the mini-drone's built-in AI handled the rest, autonomously scanning for hostiles and tagging points of interest.

The drone itself wasn't particularly advanced—it couldn't hold a candle to Desmond's larger, customizable variants—nor did it last particularly long, but it was quick, small, and smart enough to do its job without excessive amounts of hand holding being required.

Perfect for someone like Thea, who often had other things to worry about than navigating a single drone.

But what had really sold her on the idea wasn't the drone itself.

It was the way it worked in tandem with the helmet HUD upgrade.

If the user had both, the helmet would automatically sync with the drone once it spotted a target and—if the weapon in-hand had its specs preloaded into the drone's database—would generate real-time firing solutions.

Even through walls, as long as the drone had successfully scanned the material composition. It would automatically calculate the penetrative power of the weapon in the operator's hands and display the estimated trajectory in real-time.

'Basically like those badass grenade throw previews in old games... or like those turn-based tactics titles where you can trace the bullet's path through cover to line up the perfect shot,' Thea mused with a growing grin, already imagining herself back in the ship's arcade on her next day off, booting up something with grid-based combat and wall-banging rounds just for the nostalgia.

Both upgrades together would seriously bump up the reprint cost, however—more than she'd expected, honestly.

Just the extra Module Slot alone had already pushed the reprint cost from the original 123 Credits up to 156.

If she added both auxiliary upgrades too, the number jumped again. Hard.

A staggering 322 Credits, just to reprint the armour once.

'How often would I realistically even use this...?' she wondered, tilting her head slightly as if the new angle might offer some magical clarity. 'With my current loadout, not that often, probably. The Gram can't punch through walls in its current form. The Icicle's got better penetration, but its rounds are too fragile for anything beyond a few centimeters in thickness...'

That only left the Caliburn.

*'Which, let's be real, doesn't exactly **need** a firing solution. Just point in the general direction of whatever's hiding behind that wall and it'll turn into red paste on its own.'*

Leaning back in the cushioned chair she'd claimed to scroll through the options more comfortably, she stretched her arms over her head with a quiet sigh, then brought her focus back to the screen.

*'I **do** plan to fix the Gram's limitations, though... so maybe this isn't such a pointless upgrade long-term. But investing in this new setup **before** fixing the core issue feels kinda backwards, doesn't it? What if I can't figure out how to make it all work after all...?'*

It was the sort of frustrating, chicken-and-egg situation she hated dealing with.

She liked having clear problems with clear paths to their solutions.

But this... This was all about future planning, and she didn't have all the puzzle pieces yet.

While she still liked the Gram's feel and performance overall, the lack of adaptability in its current laser-based variant had been bothering her more and more. After seeing the level of modding Kar'Al had done on his basic ballistic version, she'd started seriously thinking about alternatives to it.

That was more than half the reason she'd dragged herself out to go shopping so soon after the Assessment in the first place.

The sooner she nailed down the weak points in her loadout, the better her chances for the upcoming digital missions and the rest of the Assessments for the year.

"Haa... Let's just take a look at the materials for now then," she muttered aloud, exhaling as she closed out the Auxiliary tab and refocused on the next part of her list.

She returned to the default view of her Spectre armour and began taking a closer, more deliberate look at the materials that made up its overall composition.

There were more details than she'd really processed on her first pass through the system—this time, she actually paid attention.

The main interface displayed a clean percentage breakdown of the entire armour's structure, color-coded by material type. But when she tapped any specific segment of the 3D model—like the chestplate or the outer thigh guard—it expanded into a detailed material view, showing exactly which components made up that specific area.

For the Spectre as a whole, the stats broke down into a rough 48/24/17/9/2 split between Plasteel, Synthetic Hyperweave, Carbon Synthweave, Durasteel, and a small amount of Fortixium—the T1 System Material that showed up in just about every Tier 1 armour build.

The 2% Fortixium didn't come from solid plates like with the heavier models—it was applied after construction as a kind of micro-coating.

A reactive mesh, almost like paint, but smarter and far more expensive.

It added a final layer of passive protection, woven into the other materials during the print process and applied over everything to make sure the armour had the protection it needed to keep her alive.

Light-type armours like hers didn't use solid System Materials at all—not even a singular full plate of it. That was the tradeoff: Low protection, but maximum mobility.

And for her role as a Scout/Sniper, that tradeoff was non-negotiable in her eyes.

By contrast, Karania's, Corvus', and Desmond's Medium-type suits had actual chunks of System Material reinforced across critical areas—like the chest, spine, and stomach—giving them far more defensive strength at the cost of some weight, energy draw and flexibility.

And Isabella?

Her Heavy-type looked more like it was built from Fortixium *first*, with everything else being the afterthought.

Layered plates. Full-core shielding. Stuff designed to survive some serious firepower.

That kind of protection came at a cost, though—her loadout weighed several times more than a Medium's, and that was before counting the ammo and whatever else Isabella had in terms of Modules in her armour.

Then, finally, there were the Super-Heavy types—like Lucas'.

Those suits were basically walking Fortixium tanks, running 90 to 95% System Material across the entire frame. They were slow, ridiculously expensive, and nearly impossible to kill unless you had serious anti-tank firepower.

'Or at least that's what I picked up from the documents the Sovereign gave me...' Thea thought, her eyes still focused on the material sliders as she adjusted one slightly, watching the tiny fluctuations in armor weight and ARV pop up on the side of the screen.

She'd spent what felt like ages in the med-wing after the Assessment, and when she wasn't sketching out build concepts for Alpha Squad or herself, she'd burned through every piece of technical documentation on her gear that she had available.

When that ran dry, she'd asked for more from the Sovereign—general breakdowns, repair manuals, standard UHF gear specs—anything she could get her hands on.

All of it was prep for this exact trip.

'Kinda glad I powered through all that now. At least I've got a clue what I'm doing with these sliders instead of having to waste several hours figuring it out from scratch...'

During her earlier round of experimentation, Thea had figured out that the main material composition slider wasn't just dumb brute-force—it actually seemed to understand what it was doing.

The Augmentation Bench's built-in algorithmic AI was surprisingly smart, auto-adjusting the armour's layout in ways that matched what she herself would've gone for, even diving into the specific armour sections themselves.

Instead of applying an overall increase to, for example, the Fortixium amount equally across the armour, the bench smartly applied the increased percentages in areas where they would be the most useful.

'Makes sense, I suppose. If the Augmentation Benches aboard the Sovereign are linked, or maybe even across the entire UHF, then they'd have a ton of data to pull from to make them as smart as possible... Still... If I actually knew anything about armour schematics or material balancing, I bet I could squeeze a few more points of efficiency out of this by tuning specific segments,' she thought, watching the composition readout shift slightly as she dragged a slider a few ticks left and right. *'Might be worth picking up a Skill related to this at some point.'*

For now, though, she'd stick with the AI's auto-balancing feature.

Trying to calibrate things manually when she had zero engineering background sounded like a great way to mess up something critical.

Best not to reinvent the wheel on her first attempts.

Her eyes drifted back to the updated stats the bench was now displaying, factoring in the changes she'd already made—especially the new Module Slot she'd integrated.

[L-ST-08 'Spectre' Light-type Frame - Augmented]

Composition: 48% PS / 24% SH / 17% CS / 9% DS / 2% T1-F

Mobility Rating: 9.67

Weight: 11.34kg

Armour Rating Value - Overall: 2.13

Armour Rating Value - Vital: 4.41

'Mobility Rating's kind of arbitrary though, huh...' she mused, recalling the technical docs she'd studied. *'Just a scaling number—higher is better, obviously—but from what I remember, anything around 4.00 is considered standard for Medium-type gear. So... 9.67 is pretty damn high. Could always be better, I guess, but I haven't really ran into any mobility issues so far. Might be more of a high-Strength kind of issue for some other Recon builds.'*

The ARV scores were more intuitive.

"Overall" covered the average protection across the entire suit, while "Vital" focused on the critical zones—the chest, stomach, head, spine.

Hers were decent enough, especially given the weight and mobility the Spectre afforded her, as the frequent shootouts in the Assessment had proven.

At the long engagement ranges she preferred, most of the Stellar Republic's basic arsenal had a hard time penetrating the 4.41 of her armour's Vital-ARV.

Still, her eyes lingered on that 2.13 Overall-ARV.

'I wonder if I can push that up just a bit more. I'm getting real tired of asking Kara to flick holes shut every time some stray round catches me in the side...'

While her vitals had stayed mostly protected during the Assessment—barring that one miserable encounter with the enemy Ace, which she really didn't want to think about—her overall body had taken a serious beating.

Stray bullets, shrapnel, glancing blows—her Spectre had soaked up a *lot*, but also missed quite a good number of potentially avoidable damage if her Overall ARV had just been a *bit* higher.

‘I’m fine with losing a little mobility, as long as it’s not too much, and I can stomach some extra weight... Let’s see what I can get away with.’

With that in mind, Thea started playing with the material composition sliders again, this time more deliberately, trying to figure out what gave her the best performance boost for the lowest cost.

As expected, Fortixium had the most dramatic effect on her ARV—both overall and vital—just by adding a few percent.

But the trade-offs were rough: Massive reprint cost spikes, a steep drop in mobility, and a noticeable increase in weight. Only Durasteel came close to it in terms of ARV impact, and even then, it was a distant second.

Plasteel, Synthetic Hyperweave, and Carbon Synthweave came after that—Plasteel giving decent protection per kilo, Carbon Synthweave the least.

The problem, though, was that Carbon Synthweave and Hyperweave were doing most of the heavy lifting when it came to keeping the Spectre lightweight and agile. As soon as she tried swapping them out—especially the Synthetic Hyperweave—for more ARV-heavy materials like Durasteel or Fortixium, the Mobility rating tanked *hard*.

‘I’m guessing those two make up most of the joints and the underlayer,’ she thought, watching the number dive as she tinkered. *‘If I reduce them too much, it stops being a suit and turns into a walking slab—like the others in the squad wear.’*

Still, just to see how far she could push it, she cranked the Fortixium slider up, inching it right bit by bit while the bench balanced the rest of the materials proportionally.

By the time she’d hit just over 6% Fortixium, the Augmentation Bench lit up with a cascade of red warning boxes.

The armour’s integrity was compromised. Functionality warnings. Fitment errors.

It looked tough on paper, though—ARV had climbed to 3.68, with vital protection jumping to 5.58. But mobility had plummeted to 3.86, which was *worse* than the average Medium-type loadout.

Her Spectre wasn’t built for this. She was just brute-forcing it past its designed limits.

*‘At that point, I might as well switch to a standard-issue Medium frame. It’d weigh less, move better, have more ARV, and **definitely** cost way less to reprint too.’*

Still curious, she toggled the simulation overlay to see what that level of protection actually *meant* in combat.

And the result... wasn't exactly mind-blowing.

That boost from 2.13 to 3.68 in Overall ARV only gave her about 200 meters more effective defense range against standard ballistic and shrapnel threats. It was quite a lot, when looked at in a vacuum, but considering the amount of sacrifices she'd have to make, it wasn't anywhere close to enough to consider it worthwhile.

The last thing she checked was the projected reprint cost—and almost laughed when she saw it.

The previous 156 Credits? Ballooned to 498.

And that was *without* any auxiliary upgrades added.

"Yeah, no thanks," she muttered, dragging the slider all the way back down and resetting the layout. *'Spectre's just not built for that much Fortixium. Lesson learned.'*

The next fifteen minutes passed in a blur of trial and error, sliders and simulations.

Thea leaned in, elbows on the edge of the Augmentation Bench, fully dialed into the numbers floating in front of her.

She tried small changes first—nudging the Durasteel up by just two percent, then pulling it back down when it spiked the weight and dropped the mobility more than she liked.

She swapped chunks of Plasteel for it next, finding that it was a better tradeoff overall. Durasteel was heavier, yeah, but its defensive output was *way* better, and the amount of Plasteel in the original Spectre's design definitely left some stats on the table.

'Alright... Plasteel's gotta give a little. Not all of it, but enough to make some space for more Durasteel,' she muttered, eyes flicking between the material graph and the Mobility bar.

Every tweak came with a cost. Every cost demanded a trade.

It felt like one of those balancing puzzles she used to play in Krillson's Path's item crafting—except this time, it wasn't just for fun.

It was about augmenting the armour that was very much responsible for keeping her alive.

Thea then moved on to the hyperweave.

She liked what it offered—light, ridiculously strong for a fabric, a good balance—but it was expensive, and didn't pull its weight in terms of mobility the way the synthweave did.

So she started sliding that number down, replacing bits of Synthetic Hyperweave with Carbon Synthweave instead, to offset some of the Mobility losses from the Plasteel -> Durasteel trade earlier.

Surprisingly, the ARV didn't drop as much as she feared.

'Guess Carbon Synthweave really is the backbone of movement systems,' she thought. 'If I'm careful, I can bulk it up a bit and offset some of the other changes without totally tanking my ARV...'

After a few more minutes of tweaking and checking, she decided to get bold.

She eyed the Fortixium slider.

'Okay... just a little. No full-body plate-armour nonsense this time.'

She nudged it up slowly—one percent... then 1.5.

She could *feel* the Augmentation Bench judging her, but no errors popped up this time.

Just recalculations.

She carved out the extra Fortixium by trimming back both Plasteel and Durasteel in equal measure—just enough to not dip below their contribution thresholds.

She had momentarily tried to just drop the Plasteel instead of both, but she had quickly thrown that idea out when she had watched the Mobility Rating soar towards the bottom like a ship hit by an anti-air emplacement.

'Plasteel is definitely important to have as an interlayer, I guess. With just Durasteel, Fortixium and the weaves, the armour does not bond together in one cohesive unit, it seems...?'

Finally, she sat back, rubbing her thumb against her knuckles as the Bench displayed the new totals:

[Updated Composition - L-ST-08 'Spectre' Light-type Frame - Augmented]

Composition: 33% PS / 19% SH / 27% CS / 17.5% DS / 3.5% T1-F

Mobility Rating: **8.67**

Weight: **13.77kg**

Armour Rating Value - Overall: **3.03**

Armour Rating Value - Vital: **5.12**

'3.03 ARV... from 2.13... That's a solid-ass jump. Sixty extra meters of effective protection against ballistic junk. That's a full sprint's worth of survivability if things go sideways,' she mused, a smirk tugging at her lips. 'And the jump from a 4 to a 5 on the Vitals rating... Yeah, that's actually way more impactful than I figured it'd be.'

According to the Bench's simulation overlays, that bump in the Vitals rating put her out of reach for a ton of standard munitions that would've previously been able to punch through her chestplate at normal engagement distances.

It was also why she'd made sure to nudge the Overall ARV past the 3.00 threshold instead of leaving it just below. The difference between 2.96 and 3.03 wasn't just cosmetic; it gave her almost double the range buffer in several scenarios—thirty meters versus almost sixty—especially when it came to high-velocity shrapnel or rifle-grade penetration tests.

The Mobility loss was there, sure. But it wasn't awful. Manageable.

She had tested the armour a bit using the live-test feature of the Augmentation Bench, jumping up and down as well as shadow-dodging invisible bullets and lasers—practically everything she normally did in a given mission—and had found no major issues with it.

8.67 still clocked her firmly in the Scout range, and the new weight—13.77 kilos—was only a couple kilos heavier than the original.

She'd carried more than that during drills and training ahead of Integration.

'I'm definitely going to feel that weight in longer missions and Assessment-style marathons, no doubt... But it's also not so much that I don't think I could handle it. I'll get used to it.'

And especially compared to the protection upgrade? Worth it.

She folded her arms and gave the holographic readout one last glance, eyes scanning the numbers again.

'It's not a god-tier rework or anything... but it's a proper field upgrade. Balanced.' She exhaled slowly. *'If this means Kara won't have to scrape bullet fragments out of my ribs every damn day, then yeah—totally worth it.'*

Thinking about how Karania was always there to patch her up—no matter how banged up she got—something clicked in Thea's brain like a bolt of electricity.

Her eyes widened slightly as the realization hit her like a sucker punch.

'Oh fuck—! I completely forgot about the damn Focus Booster storage and auto-injector functions...!'

A groan slipped out as she leaned forward, elbows resting on her knees, staring at the holographic projection of her Spectre with something between frustration and disbelief.

'That's not going to be cheap to add on top of everything else... And the mini-drone Auxiliary is definitely out of the budget at that point... Unless I want to go all-in on the armour, but... that's a no-go. Not with how much I still want to do to the Gram.'

She felt boxed in, standing at the crossroads of function and finances.

Sure, she *could* technically afford the whole package—the full armour Auxiliary upgrade, the Focus Booster hardware, and the material rework she'd just finished dialing in, and easily too. She would even have a decent chunk of Credits left for experimenting with the Gram's mods afterward, considering the absolute mountain she was sitting on right now.

But the problem wasn't just now. It was what came *after*.

Because all of these upgrades didn't just add functionality. They stacked cost permanently.

The new reprint price would be enormous with everything stacking on top of each other. And unlike the one-time upgrade fee she was about to pay, *that* price would follow her forever.

Every time she lost a fight and needed to reprint, that number would burn a hole straight through her wallet.

And the truth was—she wouldn't keep raking in Credits like before.

Most of her recent haul had come from the early, easy Accomplishments and the UHF quarterly Awards, which didn't come around often. Digital Missions, from what she'd heard, paid out scraps in comparison—barely a tenth of what an Assessment might yield.

One or two deaths wouldn't bankrupt her. But it'd sting. Bad.

“Haaa...” she sighed again, heavier this time, running a hand through her hair as she made the only call that made sense.

She confirmed the material rework, locking in the changes.

The reprint price jumped from 156 Credits to 354—manageable, if a little sharp.

Then she returned to the Auxiliary menu, found the injector storage and auto-injector integration—thankfully listed as a paired module—and added them on. The mini-drone targeting and helmet upgrades? She scrolled past them without a second glance.

The final reprint cost ticked up to 615 Credits.

Even with everything she'd done to hold the line on cost, that number still hit like a gut punch.

‘Fuck me—That’s almost half of what a Caliburn reprint costs...! I guess I’ll just have to not die, ever. Good plan, right? Real simple. No pressure.’

With a small grimace, she opened the final confirmation tab and reviewed everything again.

‘Okay. Module Slot for the Nano-Swarm Forge. Material composition rework—lighter Hyperweave, Durasteel plates, Fortixium boosted... Focus Booster storage and injector setup... I think that’s everything...?’

She sat there a moment longer, going over every detail again, looking for anything she might've missed.

But no—everything was in place. She hadn't rushed. She'd done the math.

Weighed the trade-offs as best she could.

Finally, she exhaled and gave the mental confirmation.

[System: Do you want to pay 3,850 System Credits to “Levitas’ Armours” for service: “Augmentation Bench”? Y/N]

She double-checked everything once again, before nodding to herself and confirming the System prompt.

[System: Your Full-License “L-ST-08 ‘Spectre’ Light-type Frame” has been Augmented and replaced with new Full-License “L-ST-08 ‘Spectre’ Light-type Frame - Augmented”]

“Alriiiight!” Thea half-yelled in triumph, throwing her arms up as the final confirmation pinged across the Augmentation Bench’s interface.

She spun around, riding the high of having finished everything... only to freeze in place the moment her eyes landed on the store clerk.

He was still there. Standing just outside the booth’s threshold.

Same polite posture. Same composed expression.

From the look of it, he’d been standing there for the past two hours, quietly witnessing every muttered ramble, every fist-pump, and—worst of all—the victorious yell she had just let out like a lunatic.

Her face instantly burned red.

Neither of them spoke.

The silence stretched out painfully, the sheer awkwardness radiating off her like heat waves.

“Levitas’ Armours thanks you for your business,” the clerk finally said, bowing his head just slightly. “I take it you would like to exit the premises now?”

His tone was flawlessly polite—professional to the point of being surgical.

No teasing.

No comment on her solo celebration or the obvious chaos she’d displayed over the past two hours. If he’d been inwardly laughing at her, he didn’t show it in the slightest.

And Thea was *profoundly* grateful for that.

She gave a stiff nod and wordlessly followed him out of the private booth and back into the main showroom, before almost immediately darting out of the store—not paying any attention to the Clerk’s attempt at asking her to hold up.

The second she stepped out of the store’s exit, however, she almost crashed into a wall of people—about two dozen Marines crowded around the front entrance, clearly agitated.

“What the fuck do you *mean* the store’s closed?!”

“Since when does Levitas’ shut down in the middle of the day?! This is prime gear-up time!”

“We just got here and it’s fucking closed? Come oooon!”

Thea blinked, startled, as more voices piled on, everyone pushing forward to argue with the two overwhelmed store clerks guarding the doors.

And then someone spotted her.

“Wait—what the fuck?! Someone *was* in there?!”

“Hey! Hey, how’d *you* get in?!”

“What—Why in the Emperor’s *golden abs* were *you* allowed in, but we’re locked out?!”

Dozens of eyes locked on her at once. Questions came flying in all directions.

A few of them even moved toward her, arms out like they expected answers—or an apology.

‘Nope. Absolutely not fucking dealing with this right now...!’

Thea dipped low and slipped into motion, weaving through the loose crowd with smooth, practiced steps, like she was back on Lumiosia.

Someone reached out to stop her—too slow.

Another tried to block her path—she spun past them like they weren’t even there.

In seconds, she was out of the mob and cutting through a separate group of Marines just milling about nearby, disappearing from view entirely. By the time anyone had a chance to call out again, she was completely gone, ducking behind a corner and heading off at full speed toward the nearest weapons store.

‘What the fuck was that all about...?’ she thought, not even a little out of breath from the high-speed escape—a decade-plus of training clearly paying dividends.

Whatever the reason for the whole clamour, she didn’t plan on sticking around to figure it out...