

Volume 2 - Chapter 24 - Real Builds

"That, at least, explains why you had such sound fundamentals when we first sparred," Isabella muttered with a long exhale, her back thudding softly against the wall behind the bench.

They'd respawned in the equipment room after the match ended, both still in their digital armour, now spectating from the viewing ranks above as Karania and Lucas clashed in the arena below. The soft thuds of impacts and occasional clangs echoed faintly through the arena, a distant rhythm to their quiet conversation.

"I always wondered how an Undercity rat like you moved like that," Isabella went on, her tone casual but tinged with something else—curiosity, maybe. "Not just street-smart fighting. I'm talking *clean* footwork. Control. You weren't just swinging and hoping. You had, like... textbook-level spacing. Real precision."

She tilted her head and glanced sideways at Thea, one brow raised.

Thea gave a small laugh, brushing some loose strands of hair behind her ear. "Yeah, I know what you mean. The Undercity's a warzone, sure, but I wasn't exactly brawling in back alleys every day. I just... got lucky. *Really* lucky. Found somebody to take care of me and he brought me to an arcade early. Just spent most of my time there after that. Kept me out of a lot of trouble. Guess I absorbed more from it than I realized."

She paused, her gaze drifting down to the match below. "Still not even close to your level of real-world experience, though. I've never actually fought to kill like that—not *really*. Not like you have."

Isabella snorted, a low, half-amused sound. "Yeah, well... if that last match was any indication, maybe that doesn't actually matter jackshit. You picked up a new weapon, a damn fucking *tower-shield*, a whole new stat spread, and entirely new fighting style, barely spent ten minutes getting used to it, and still managed to body me like that. If I'd tried that in the field, I'd be dead sixteen and a half times over."

She sighed again, this time heavier, her eyes distant. "Starting to feel like all those years with the mercs... might've been a waste. Maybe I should've just no-lifed it in some arcade like you did. Could've spared myself a lot of scars."

Thea turned toward her, unsure how to respond.

The weight in Isabella's voice wasn't one she heard often—soft, raw, a little lost. There was a vulnerability there that didn't match the usual confidence.

So, unsure how to approach that vulnerability, Thea didn't.

It wasn't her area of expertise to engage with this kind of talk; not yet. She had barely gotten past the stage where she was comfortable talking to people at all, so this was too much of a step to take at this point.

Instead, she offered something honest. Something she *did* know how to approach.

“Well... I kinda cheated.”

Isabella blinked and looked at her sharply. “The fuck do you mean ‘*cheated*’?”

“My precognition,” Thea replied simply, holding her hands up in surrender. “It works in here, apparently. No idea why, but I’ve been using it this whole time. Saved me more than half a dozen times from your attacks. Would’ve easily lost a few rounds without it, no doubt.”

Isabella stared.

Her mouth opened, then closed. Then opened again.

Her eyebrows twitched like they were trying to decide how angry to be. Finally, she just sagged further into the bench with a long groan.

“Ahhh, *whatever!* Doesn’t matter, I guess.” She waved a hand loosely toward the virtual sky. “You’d have it in the real world too, right? So... fair’s fair. Even if your build is completely different in here, the instincts still translate. My own instincts, muscle memory and such also applied, so I guess it’s only fair...”

Her head thunked gently against the wall, eyes closing for a moment. “Still sucks to lose, though.”

“True, I guess,” Thea said, though she still wasn’t totally sure how to cheer up Isabella. “But you’ve got to remember that Attributes are part of who you *are* now. Who we *all* are. I can mimic your build here in Wildmaws, or Masters’, sure—but in real life? I can’t become a melee-monster like you, any more than you can just decide to be a Psyker like me. We just don’t have the same Base Attributes. I could try all I want and it still wouldn’t work. At best, I could get like 70% of the way there, if that. So when it comes to raw martial prowess, especially out there in the real world, you’ll beat me practically every single time. Same goes for just about everyone else—you’ll still be absolutely on top.”

That seemed to land. Isabella’s lips curled into a smile, but it was lopsided—more of a dry smirk than anything full of confidence.

“Well... *except* for that Masters bitch, of course,” she muttered. “She’s got the Attributes *and* the experience from all those games.”

Thea didn’t try to argue. She couldn’t.

But she wasn’t about to let that be the end of the conversation, either.

“Sure. But you’ve got something she doesn’t—*real* experience. The kind that doesn’t come with a respawn timer or pause button. You’ve had to win for real. You’ve had to survive for real. Many times. More than you can probably count. That *matters*.”

She leaned forward slightly, her voice firmer now.

“Just look at your first match with her. She was winning, right? Had the upper hand, full control. And the second she thought she’d won—when your heart got blown out—she dropped her guard. She *panicked*. That moment right there? *You* would never do that. You’d adapt. You *have* adapted. Again and again, in many situations that you hadn’t expected before. For you, surprise isn’t... Surprising. It’s just a new variable to keep in mind. You’ve seen what it’s like to stare death in the face and keep fighting anyway; tooth and nail. She *hasn’t*.”

Isabella blinked at her, eyebrows rising slightly in surprise. Her eyes widened just a touch as she studied Thea, like she hadn’t expected *her* to say something like that.

Encouraged, Thea pushed on.

“Honestly... I’d bet she looks at all this the same way I do. Which... Now that I say that out loud, sucks hard to admit, trust me,” she added with a visible shudder, shaking it off like she’d just bitten into something sour. “But it’s true, I guess. The DDS, the simulations, the post-Assessment points and stats—the Albright System set this whole thing up to *feel* like a game. And when it feels like a game, people like me—and probably Masters—treat it like one.”

She motioned toward Isabella.

“But not you. You see it differently. I’m guessing this all feels more like boot camp to you than some arcade fantasy. Like prep for the war you *know* is coming. A war you’ve always kind of been fighting—one for victory or death. That’s not just mindset—that’s a *lifestyle*. That’s muscle memory. That’s training. That’s how you survive when things *actually* go wrong.”

Isabella didn’t speak right away. She just gave a slow, thoughtful nod. Something unreadable passed over her face—less frustration now, more focus.

“For me, when it comes to making decisions, I’m still stuck in video-game mode,” Thea admitted, her voice quieter, more thoughtful. “Even after two years of UHF bootcamp before Integration, my head still snaps back to it without thinking. Like... whenever I’m faced with something, my brain immediately goes, ‘*What gets me the most points here?*’ Not ‘*What’s smartest?*’ or ‘*What keeps me alive?*’ Just... points. Which, I guess, at the end of the day usually ends up with a similar decision; but still.”

She sighed, running a hand through her hair. “I don’t know if that’s right, though. It doesn’t sound like it *should* be right. Because this *isn’t* a game. Not really. But the thing is... it still obviously works. The UHF treats me like some hotshot. I even placed first in a bunch of categories Drive-wide. So now I’m stuck wondering... is it wrong to think like that...?”

Thea hadn’t meant to take the conversation here.

She’d just wanted to reassure Isabella.

Instead, she’d cracked open something inside herself she hadn’t quite realized was there.

'What would the Old Man say about this...?' The thought came naturally. She missed his gravelly voice, even if she would never admit that out loud. Missed the way he made complicated things like this make sense to her as easily as breathing.

'I'll have to make a list,' she decided. 'For when Ship-Duty-Month finally comes around and I can actually talk to him again... He'd know what to say.'

"Doesn't matter," Isabella said suddenly, pulling Thea from her thoughts.

"Huh? What doesn't?" Thea asked, blinking at her.

Isabella leaned back against the bench, gaze drifting toward the empty arena floor below. "Whether you kill someone 'cause they're a threat to your way of life... or because you think it'll get you a higher score. Either way, they're dead. You're not. That's all that matters, right?"

Thea didn't answer immediately.

She cupped her chin in thought, as Isabella kept going.

"As long as the drive behind it is the same... I don't think it matters one lick what system your brain's using to get you there. The result's the fucking same. You survive. They don't. I think the only time it can get dangerous is when the drive just isn't there. When you're still thinking in game logic but you don't actually care about the high score. That's when you fall apart. But you?" Isabella gave her a side-eye glance. "Let's be real. You'd probably have an existential crisis if you missed a bonus reward or a high score."

Thea laughed—short, loud, and unfiltered—because, yeah... she couldn't exactly argue with that.

Because what was her way of life, really?

If the UHF had stayed in charge or the Stellar Republic took over... the Undercity wouldn't have changed.

Not for her. Not for anyone down there.

The faces at the top might shuffle around, but the bottom stayed the same; it *always* stayed the same.

So no—there'd never been a deep, personal reason for her to fight in this war. To join the UHF and put her life on the line. Not until the System had handed her one.

The Allbright System had turned life into something she understood.

Something she could *play*.

Every kill, every completed task, every mission—all of it added points to her score. Everything fed into her Attributes, her Abilities, her Level.

Accomplishments. Classes. Skills.

It was a system built like a game. Built for someone like *her*.

It was the ultimate video game, with the ultimate leaderboard to rule all leaderboards.

And, if she was being honest with herself... the only thing she *really* cared about was seeing her name at the very top.

"Only you would ever be able to say that, huh?" Thea chuckled again, her voice lighter than before. "I'd actually love to hear more about your life before the UHF sometime, Ela. Your way of thinking is... really something. Not in a bad way, just—different. As a fellow midworlder who actually made it off the rock and into the stars, I figure you've probably got a lot of good thoughts rattling around in that thick skull of yours."

Isabella slowly turned her head toward her, giving her a wide-eyed, mock-offended stare. "Did... did you just insult my head? *You*, Thea. *You* insulted *me*?"

Thea froze. The color drained from her face as her eyes widened in horror at the realization of what she had just said. She opened her mouth to explain, maybe apologize—or deflect—but didn't get the chance.

Smack!

A heavy slap landed on the back of her armor, not hard enough to hurt, but loud enough to echo through the bench area.

"HA! *Finally!*" Isabella threw her head back and laughed, a full-bellied roar of genuine amusement. "You're finally opening up to me! That's good shit, lil' Thea. Yes! Insult me more! That's the shit I'm talking about!"

She leaned forward, grinning like a kid on their birthday. "This is how friends talk! A few punches, some swearing, the occasional death threat—it's beautiful. Warms my bloody heart."

Thea blinked at her in disbelief, still halfway processing what just happened.

"...You're insane."

"Damn straight I am," Isabella beamed. "And now I've got *you* halfway there too, lil' Thea."

Chuckling at that, shaking her head, Thea tried to process what had just happened—but Isabella, as always, was already on the next thing.

"So, what's the verdict? About the whole sparring thing. You wanted to end 'cause you had some plans, right? I doubt you ended it just 'cause you got bored of blocking my hits."

Thea exhaled slowly, letting her thoughts shift gears. "Right... yeah. Back to business."

She sat forward on the bench, elbows on her knees as her mind replayed the fight in pieces—movement, timing, positioning, all of it.

“That setup—the tower shield and spear combo—it’s great in one-on-one duels. Super solid, super frustrating to get around, especially for builds like yours. But... I started to notice some cracks. Big ones.”

Isabella raised an eyebrow and leaned forward. “Go on.”

“For starters, it’s not great in bigger fights. Like, at all. No mobility, limited angles, bad visibility if people swarm you. You’re a wall—but a slow one. I already kinda knew that going in, but it’s worse than I thought. But more importantly, even in 1v1? There’s weaknesses.”

She looked over at Isabella.

“The shield bash she kept doing? Yeah, it looks cool, hurts like shit and lets her keep the aggression on, but... It’s not a buckler. It’s heavy as fuck; even with her Strength. You actually *need* to wind it up to get any proper impact. And that means if you stick close to it, like right up in its face, she can’t get the angle or the momentum to really make it work. It becomes this awkward dead weight she has to lug around instead of a weapon.”

Isabella gave a thoughtful grunt, clearly chewing on that information.

Thea nodded and kept going. “You already tried working around her setup by circling more to her off-hand side, away from the spear. And honestly? That’s what I would’ve said too, before today. But after being on the other side of the shield...? That’s not the actual weakness.”

She held up a finger. “It’s the *other* side. Her spear-hand side. That’s the side you wanna press.”

Isabella blinked. “Wait, *what*? Why would I want to run into her weapon?”

“It sounds backwards, I know,” Thea admitted, “but every time you ended up near my spear side—whether from a bash stagger or from me repositioning after a parry—I *had* to scramble. It messes with the whole flow. The spear is long, yeah, but that also makes it harder to adjust fast if you’re too close. And if you’re *already* close when she’s trying to thrust? She loses all that control and leverage. She’ll either have to retreat, rotate her whole body, or risk getting disarmed. And the shield just becomes this super-heavy dead weight that you can’t do anything with. I always had to expend a ton of energy just rotating to follow, to make sure my shield was still useful, whenever you ended up at my spear side.”

Isabella let out a slow whistle. “So you’re saying I was circling the wrong way the *whole* time.”

“Exactly. Masters kept controlling distance because she *had* to. She was always one or two bad sidesteps away from losing the fight. So if you can force her into tight spaces, cut off her retreat lanes, and stay in her face—especially on her spear side—her whole gameplan falls apart.”

There was a beat of silence as Isabella leaned back against the wall again, arms crossed, her eyes sweeping across the arena below them with narrowed focus.

“So to beat her aggression, I have to stand close enough that her shield bashes can’t get momentum, and rotate towards her spear side at all times... Basically, I have to out-aggress the most aggressive, defensive fighter I’ve ever seen,” she muttered, tilting her head toward Thea. “That about right?”

Thea gave a sharp nod. “Exactly. You force her into the kind of fight she *doesn’t* want—tight, messy, too close to breathe. That’s where she falls apart. That’s why she’s so aggressive, because it makes people want to keep their distance.”

Isabella let out a low whistle. “Damn. That’s actually... weirdly helpful. Like, freakishly helpful. Why the fuck aren’t you charging me consulting fees for this...?”

“Who says I’m not?” Thea shot back with a smug grin. “You still owe me 2,000 Credits from carrying me off earlier! That guy whose ass I beat? He would’ve paid up.”

“There’s people who *pay* you to beat their ass?” Isabella asked with a raised brow, straight-faced. “Didn’t know you were into that, honestly.”

“What—?! Not like that!” Thea blurted, instantly flustered. “I’m not—! That’s not—!”

Isabella nearly doubled over in laughter, slapping her thigh.

“I beat him at Wildmaws! It was a *bet*, Ela!” Thea added, desperately trying to salvage her dignity.

“You keep telling yourself that, lil’ Thea,” Isabella said between chuckles. “I’ll be sure to let the Blood Witch know you’re offering those services.”

That brought Thea to a full stop. “What... What does Kara have to do with *any* of this?”

Isabella just grinned and shrugged, clearly enjoying every second of Thea’s spiraling confusion. Then, with a casual shift of tone that caused tremendous whiplash, she stood up and rolled her shoulders. “Anyway. Let’s go again. I wanna test all this in live rounds.”

Still catching up from the conversational chaos, Thea blinked. “Wait—what? I was gonna take a break...”

She hesitated.

There was something else gnawing at her now, something that had taken shape slowly over the past couple hours, growing in the back of her head.

A thought that needed following, a gut instinct that wouldn’t let go.

“But... maybe...” she murmured, already halfway lost in it. Then her eyes lit up. “Wait. I might have an idea.”

Isabella tilted her head like a curious dog, waiting patiently as Thea’s mind kicked into overdrive.

“Sovereign, are you monitoring this space right now?” Thea asked, her voice cutting clearly through the open air of the simulation room.

Isabella glanced sideways at her, one brow arching.

“Naturally, Recruit McKay. How may I be of service?” came the Sovereign’s voice at once, calm and even as always, resonating faintly in the air around them.

Thea grinned and gestured toward the arena below. “Can you create an emulation of Rachel Masters for Isabella to spar with? Something to help her train, based on the fight we watched?”

There was not even a short pause, before the Sovereign smoothly replied, “You do not possess the required clearance to access Recruit Rachel Veronica Masters’ personal data file. As such, I cannot assist you in that specific request.”

Thea’s face fell a little. “Figures,” she muttered, then crossed her arms and started thinking.

After a few seconds, her eyes lit up again. “Okay, what if I rephrase... Can you make an emulation of *me*, while I was emulating Masters during that last sparring match with Isabella? You should have the full data of that fight, including my stats and loadout from within the game, right?”

The Sovereign replied right away. “That would be within the scope of your user permissions, Recruit McKay. Emulating your in-game performance and configuration is permitted. However, I must inform you that using the Sovereign’s emulation tools for personal training incurs a mandatory System Credit fee. The rate is 200 Credits for one hour of use.”

Thea didn’t even hesitate. “Do it.”

“Very well. I will create an emulation of your performance, as observed during your spar with Recruit Itoku, designed to replicate the fighting style and tactics of Recruit Rachel Veronica Masters, to the best of your mimicking ability. Recruit Itoku will have access to the emulation for one hour. Minor adjustments can be made mid-session. However, requesting a change in emulation target or major stylistic shifts will incur an additional fee.”

A System notification flashed across Thea’s vision.

[System]: *Do you want to pay 200 System Credits to “Sovereign” for “Emulation Services (Training) – Arcade”?* [Y/N]

She confirmed the payment mentally without a second thought. A moment later, the Sovereign’s voice echoed again.

“Payment received. Recruit Itoku, you are cleared to enter the arena and engage the emulation at your convenience.”

Isabella stared at Thea for a moment, then glanced up at the ceiling like she expected to see the AI physically staring back. Her expression was a strange mix of suspicion and reluctant acceptance.

“You and this damn ship,” she muttered. “Always talking like you’re buddies or something...”

Then she shook her head and made her way toward the arena, already stretching out her arms and cracking her neck.

“Damn AI bullshit... I’ll never understand that girl and her whole ‘hey bestie’ routine with a ten-kilometre-long war machine...”

Thea chuckled softly to herself as Isabella walked off, then let out a breath and sank back down onto the bench.

Her thoughts, however, were far from still.

That gnawing sense at the back of her mind—the one that had started during the spar and only grown louder since—was now demanding her full attention.

She was thankful the Sovereign could take over the training for a bit.

As much as she didn’t really want to rely on the AI for anything, this didn’t feel like a shortcut or handout. It wasn’t for her, after all. It didn’t affect her directly.

But what it did do, was that it bought her time.

Time to think.

‘All my game experience... every build I’ve theorycrafted, every cheesy meta I tried to break or abuse... it’s all System-compatible,’ she realized, her brows furrowing as she stared out across the arena. ‘If every game I played was based on System logic, then every build I created back then might work *here*, too.’

Her mind spun with old names, old kits, muscle memories of keystrokes long since faded.

Then, a thought came to her: She had already confirmed that the Sovereign was paying attention... It couldn’t hurt to try, right?

She raised her voice. “Sovereign, is there a System Ability that functions like [Rapid Poison Strike] from *Archion*?”

The Sovereign’s reply came instantly, as always. “There is a Tier 1, Silver-rarity Active Ability that closely mirrors it. It is named [Verdant Assault].”

Thea’s pulse quickened. “What about [Perfect Smarts]? From *Krillson’s Path*?”

“[Perfect Smarts] would find its analog in the Tier 2, Platinum-rarity Passive Ability [Triumphant Intellect],” the Sovereign replied evenly.

Her brain kicked into overdrive. The names spilled from her mouth like a flood.

“[Falling Star] from *Archion*, [Berserker’s Rage] from *Ashes of Centuries*, [Improbable Failure] from *Wildmaws*, [Rapid Fire] from *Seeker’s Revenge*?”

A brief pause—less than a heartbeat—before the Sovereign responded.

“All four have functional equivalents within the Allbright System. [Falling Star] would be most similar to Tier 1, Gold-rarity Active Ability [Starfall]. [Berserker’s Rage] aligns with Tier 1, Gold-rarity Passive Ability [Undying Anger]. [Improbable Failure] is closely matched by Tier 2, Gold-rarity Passive Ability [Lucky End]. And [Rapid Fire] has a direct analog: Tier 3, Palladium-rarity Active Ability [Rapid Fire].”

Thea just... stared.

She felt like something inside her clicked into place, like a tumbling puzzle piece had just landed perfectly after years of spinning in midair.

All the builds she’d created, emulated, optimized, destroyed, rebuilt. All the weird hybrids and experimental classes she’d put together just for fun—or out of pure, stubborn curiosity.

They were all *real*.

All of them.

She sat up straighter, her fingers curling into fists with electric energy.

“Holy fuck... I... I think I might finally know where I’m going with my own build,” she whispered, a grin slowly forming across her face.

It was high-time she cashed in on all those Accomplishment rewards she had been sitting on for all this time...