

Volume 2 - Chapter 60 - System 102: Maintenance & Soul Transfer

“Psykers did not begin with the Allbright System, nor will they end with it.

“They are older than recorded history, older than our first colonies, older than even our earliest attempts to truly quantify the human mind in earnest.

“But their independence from the System does *not* mean the System ignores them.

“The Psychic Attribute exists for a reason. And so do several functions, Titles, and hidden metrics within the System Interface that only Psykers ever see. Then there are several Abilities that are specifically designed to work with or counter Psykers—even Classes that specifically synergize well for the same tasks. Yet all these features, as remarkable as they are, never change the underlying truth: The System does not create nor exist *for* Psykers.

“It merely *reacts* to their existence.

“A person Awakens because their Attributes—while, yes, granted by the System—push their mind and biology past a threshold that our predecessors used to reach only through risk, trauma, or pure cosmic luck.

“The System accelerates the inevitable; it does not inherently cause nor define it.

“This is why the PV—your Point Value—remains one of the System’s most controversial measurements. For all the versatility, raw force, and reality-bending potential that Psykers bring onto a battlefield, their PV barely reflects that truth.

“It is, frankly, the only area where humanity *collectively* believes the System shows a fundamental misunderstanding of the capabilities afforded.

“And we, as a Faction, are quite grateful for that.

“The Unified Human Federation is one of the few Factions that pours its heart, soul, and resources into nurturing Psykers—actively searching for and molding Marines that could fill this role from the very start. If the System ever accurately priced their power, as humanity understands it, our scant few advantages would erode into near nothingness overnight.

“Outside Integrated society, Psykers sit in a strange kind of middle ground: Feared, whispered about, sometimes praised, but always understood to be inherently *real*. They are treated almost like living myths—rarer than a million lucky coincidences, often exaggerated in rumor, but never dismissed as fabrications outright.

“They are one of the few pieces of the war that humanity does not need to lie about. No propaganda drapery, no data purges, no smokescreens necessary.

“The Allbright System itself refuses to label them as System-born, and so humanity is free to acknowledge them and their capabilities openly.

“Some of the greatest Aces the UHF has ever produced were Psykers—heroes whose records the UHF can publish with barely any redaction at all. Their stories inspire *hundreds of billions* over the centuries.

“Their feats look like literal magic to the untrained eye—and even those that are trained, frankly—and unlike most of our operations, we don’t have to *hide* them.

“And in a war where every Faction is fighting for more than just territory or annihilation—where we’re fighting for the hearts and minds of our future brothers and sisters in arms—Psykers are our loudest, brightest message to the galaxy.

“They are living proof that humanity *can* do the impossible.

“They are our strongest blade—*on* the battlefield, and far, *far* beyond it.”

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[Excerpt from “The Allbright System’s role in the Galactic War,” – Taran Eniv – PFC861]

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“—something like the Sidoreno series, on the other hand, gives you way more cargo space and troop capacity, while also being far tougher against enemy fire. And all that for basically the same relative price once you adjust for the increased size. So... yeah. I’d practically always recommend one of those over the smaller, more ‘affordable’ variants, if someone can save up enough to get them. But I do get that that’s not always realistic,” Lucas finished, wrapping up his whole spiel on why patience paid off when buying vehicles.

Thea nodded along.

She wasn’t exactly a vehicle person, but she understood the logic well enough—gear worked the same way in her experience. A high-end, purpose-built piece of equipment usually outperformed cheaper general-use stuff in the long run.

They’d drifted into this tangent during the first break of the System 102 lecture.

Honestly, it felt nice.

Talking to Lucas like this—about something he clearly loved—made him feel different from the normally quiet, more reserved Defensive Heavy she’d gotten used to. He only ever got this animated when vehicles were involved.

Once he got going though, stopping him looked about as easy as stopping a freight train.

The topic had come up because she’d asked if he’d already made his list of Skill Classes for the month. She’d mentioned that Major Quinn had been willing to give Kara and herself extra Class Passes—and she was pretty sure Lucas would qualify too.

Professor Hirana had gone over the basics of Skills earlier in the lecture, including how the System handled them and why some requirements still showed up as strings of question marks.

To no big surprise Lucas already had a list, much like everyone else in Alpha Squad probably—he just couldn't decide which (Driving)-related Skills to prioritize yet.

He wanted all of them, obviously, but choices had to be made.

Even though there was a general-purpose (Driving) Skill he needed as a prerequisite, there were at least half a dozen specialized land-based vehicle driving Skills branching off from it.

'Pretty different from my own experience with the Skill System so far, huh?' Thea thought, turning the idea over in her head. 'Outside of maybe some of the (Physics) and other science Skills, I haven't really run into branching trees like that before... I wonder if some of my Skills have branches too at later stages. Like maybe (Sniping) splitting off into something else...? I might need more Skill Vouchers if that's true.'

And just like that, the two of them had shifted fully into talking about the different (Driving) Skills—starting with something simple like (Driving – Personal Vehicles), moving up to (Driving – Squad Vehicles), and then all the way to (Driving – Platoon Vehicles) which was the Skill that included vehicles like the Sidoreno series Lucas had just finished extolling the virtues of.

There were even bigger vehicle ones than that, apparently.

The largest Lucas had found so far was (Driving – Faction Vehicles), which he said almost certainly referred to Mobile Headquarters or similarly behemoth-sized machines.

Thea couldn't say she knew anything about vehicles that size—she had never even heard of something like that before—but if Lucas said it existed, she trusted that he knew what he was talking about. He was, after all, the squad's expert on anything with wheels, treads, or an engine, so there was no reason for her to doubt his words on the matter.

The whole day so far had been pretty enjoyable in Thea's opinion, even with the presence of the less-than-ideal Masters brat lurking in the lecture hall.

It was nice getting time to talk with the others again—almost like the calmer moments back during the Assessment. Since it had concluded, everyone had been so busy catching up on everything they needed to do that she hadn't really gotten much time to talk with anyone except Kara.

The lectures and mandatory classes were, at the very least, a good chance to feel like more of a squad again, even if only for a few hours at a time before they all became busy again.

Much like their short break was already drawing to a close as well, when Professor Hirana returned to the podium and signaled for the Recruits to quiet down once more.

She glided back to the podium with her usual sharp steps—her long black coat swaying behind her like a curtain of ink.

She was a middle-aged looking woman, with silver-streaked, ebony hair tied into a low knot that somehow never seemed to loosen, not even during the more animated parts of her lectures.

As she spoke, her voice carried that soft, clipped tone that always managed to magically cut through any and all chatter without effort.

“Welcome back, Recruits,” she said, neatly silencing the conversation in the room. “Let us move on to our next topic: Maintenance and Deterioration under the Allbright System.”

A few groans immediately rose, only half-hearted, but Professor Hirana ignored them easily.

“As some of you may already know,” she continued, tapping her datapad once to pull up a floating schematic of a human body framed in blue light, “the Allbright System has been... *lenient* with you so far. Your bodies have been operating at enhanced levels without any associated Merit costs. I am here to inform you that this grace period is *temporary*.”

She raised two fingers.

“Exactly two months after your Integration date, the grace period ends. From that point forward, the System will begin deducting Merit on a weekly cycle to cover maintenance fees—essentially the cost of keeping your bodies functioning at the Attribute levels you possess.”

That earned her more than a few alarmed murmurs.

A couple of Recruits cursed under their breath.

Someone loudly whispered, “They’re charging us for *existing*?!”

Hirana didn’t even blink at that, her focused, green eyes darting to the Marine in question.

“Yes,” she answered simply. “The System’s support is not free. Higher Attributes mean a higher load on biological structure, neurological processes, and cellular integrity. The System supplements these. As such, it naturally expects repayment for those efforts.”

The murmuring grew louder. Thea noticed Lucas stiffen beside her, his brow furrowing like he was already recalculating his weekly Merit math.

Professor Hirana pressed on, unbothered.

“This is why the UHF mandates a minimum number of Digital Missions per week. Contrary to popular belief, this is not merely to ensure you can afford meals or occasional equipment, although that is, of course, part of it. But your Merit income must *also* cover these mandatory maintenance deductions, in addition to building a buffer for once you are deployed to actual real-world Battlefields, in order for your Faction Trait to function. If you do not complete enough DMs, your Merit will fall into a net-deficit every week. You can likely sustain this for a few months, just from the Assessment’s rewards, but if not...” She gave a pointed, razor-thin smile. “You will *not* enjoy the results.”

Someone in the front row raised a hand. “Professor—so the System can just take Merit whenever it wants?”

“Naturally. The System is effectively omnipotent, as far as we can tell. *But*: It only takes exactly what it says it will,” Hirana explained. “And it provides a full breakdown of the deduction if you bother to check your logs. This is not theft or anything of the sort. It is merely *upkeep*. A very literal Maintenance cost, to allow you to function at beyond superhuman levels. Without it, your bodies would collapse under the strain of your own Attributes.”

She let the words settle heavily over the crowd.

“So,” she concluded, tapping her datapad again to dissolve the projection, “complain if you must. Dislike it if you must. But *accept* it. Because there is no way around it. You receive. You pay. That is the exchange; nothing else to it.”

She explained that the weekly Maintenance cost was tied mainly to a Marine’s Point Value, but asked everyone to stop themselves from checking it right away—they would get to that later, once all the connected topics had been covered.

There was more than one mechanic linked to PV in today’s lecture, she informed them.

‘Fuck,’ Thea thought immediately upon hearing that, stomach dropping. *‘I have the highest PV of anyone in the whole damn Faction at my own level, according to the “Without Equal” Accomplishment... If the pre-Assessment numbers weren’t lying, my weekly bill is going to be insane. And there’s even more tied to it, too? Please let there be some way to lower that thing... My Merit economy is going to fucking implode otherwise...!’*

Professor Hirana, naturally, had no time to spare for Thea’s silent panic.

She moved right along into the consequences of failing to pay upkeep.

“Now, the System is not unreasonable,” she said, leaning forward slightly. “If you cannot pay your weekly cost, it will grant you a one-month exemption. During that time you must gather both, all of the missed Merit and the following week’s Merit. Should you fail to do so, you will enter what is commonly referred to as a state of *Deterioration*.”

A wave of uneasy whispers rippled across the hall.

Thea heard several nervous curses echoing her own thoughts.

None of this sounded particularly pleasant.

“Deterioration,” Hirana continued, “is the symptom of the System clawing back some of the energy invested into your body. You will diminish. Your muscles will weaken. If your Vitality enhancements had halted your aging, that will resume. Your mental and physical faculties will return toward a more human baseline over the span of a month.”

She lifted a single finger, making sure every Recruit was paying attention.

“However, note this clearly: The System enacts these changes *gradually*. There have been zero confirmed cases of death caused by biological failure during Deterioration. And if you consider the logic, it is quite obvious why: Any previously Integrated individual is a potential future Participant. Should they return, the System benefits. Allowing them to die would be a net loss of energy—and the Allbright System is many, many things, but wasteful is *not* one of them.”

The Professor went on to give a rough rundown of how Deterioration usually progressed, stressing that it was essentially the System pulling back the energy it had once invested into a Marine.

The Attributes someone had invested into the most would lose the most, as was logical.

The System generally left an ex-Participant at anywhere between one-third to one-tenth of their former capability, depending on how much total investment the System had put into them in the first place.

The more the System had poured into an Attribute, the higher the final percentage loss thereof after Deterioration. The final numbers one would be left over with, would be based on the final deteriorated values or baseline human capabilities—whichever number was higher.

To make it clearer, she gave a concrete example: A Prime T1 Marine with their main Attributes in the low-20s and their lesser Attributes around five or six.

After Deterioration, their primary Attributes would land somewhere around a two-point-five, while the rest would settle closer to one-point-five.

“Wouldn’t that mean we’d still be superhuman even after going through Deterioration?” one Recruit asked once the example wrapped up.

Professor Hirana nodded. “Yes, that would be an accurate description. Once you are Integrated, you will almost always stay at the peak of human capability, even if you stop participating in the System’s competition—”

Thea barely heard the rest.

Her mind had slipped away from the lecture as a different thought clawed its way to the front.

‘If the System does this whole Deterioration thing once someone basically retires from conflict... then the Old Man would’ve been in that state too, right?’ The idea twisted strangely in her chest, a kind of mental dissonance she couldn’t shake.

Even with every miracle-like thing she had seen the Allbright System do—everything it had done to her—she couldn’t make everything fit together. *‘But... he was stronger back then than Isabella is **right now**... How is that possible if he was already fully deteriorated by then?’*

She was *sure* of it.

Even if it had been years since she'd last seen him, even if she'd been a lot younger and more naive about the realities of the universe, she *remembered* him hefting wrecked old-tech trucks like they were nothing.

Just casually lifting them during their routine expeditions into the undercity's ruins.

Even Isabella—*Isabella*, who could punch straight through rockcrete walls if she felt like it by now—would have to plant her feet and put her full weight behind something like that, maybe even require a helping hand or two.

'So how...?'

How could someone supposedly drained back to near-baseline still do that?

The hairs on her arms prickled at the thought.

*'I... I don't actually know what Tier he was, do I...? Or even what rank. Now that I think about it, he never **did** talk about how far up the ladder he'd gone... I just always assumed he'd been a regular grunt because of how hard he always went after the brass, but... if his deteriorated Strength was higher than Isabella's is now, then his fully maintained Strength would've had to be over 100—maybe even 150...'*

Her eyes widened as the numbers lined up in her head.

It wasn't her math that was off.

It was her quiet, unspoken assumptions—assumptions she now realized had never been grounded in anything but her own expectations.

*'For Attributes like that, he had to be **way** above Tier 1. Even Tier 3 wouldn't cut it for that... Just who the fuck was the Old Man before he retired?'*

A cold shiver ran down her spine, equal parts shock and curiosity, and she made a mental note right then and there: Next time they talked, she was going to *pry* the damn answers to all of those questions out of him—no matter how long it took.

Ship-duty month couldn't come fast enough.

She managed to pull her attention back to the Professor's voice after a few moments, letting the unsettling thought drift to the back of her mind for now—there was nothing she could really do about it anyway—just as Professor Hirana began moving into the next topic.

"Now, as promised, there is another mechanic we're going to explore today, which is directly influenced by your PV. A mechanic that is, quite literally, *the* most important thing in each of your lives going forward, as long as you are UHF Marines: Our Faction Trait," she announced, right as the datascreen behind her shifted to display, in bold letters:

SOUL TRANSFER

A brief wave of murmurs rolled through the hall, and Thea couldn't fault anyone for it.

Even Lucas, who had pretty much remained stoically silent throughout the entire lecture, let out an involuntary hum at the mention of their Faction Trait.

It was the very reason other Factions called them “undead,” and the reason they were all sitting here now—instead of having been reduced to dust by the sweeping laser the UHF had originally used to force the Integration on everyone below.

Without access to this Trait, any death would be final, same as it was for everyone else.

Thea leaned forward in her seat, focusing all her attention on the Professor.

The rest of the hall seemed to do the same, the room settling into a tense, absolute silence for the first time since the lecture had begun.

A sly smile tugged at the Professor’s mouth as she looked over the silent hall.

“I’m glad you understand the weight of what comes next. Good... Very good.”

She eased the class into the core misunderstandings first.

Some points she spoke plainly, others she merely summarized for brevity.

“First: It’s called *Soul Transfer*, not ‘Respawn Me.’ People joke about it, but the distinction *matters*. As you climb the Tiers, you’ll learn this Trait is far more than a simple ‘come back to life’ button. Treat it with the respect and reverence it deserves.”

She moved on, tapping her stylus against the podium.

“Second: The cost paid in Merit is required *instantly*—the moment the Trait is supposed to activate. There is no grace period, no borrowing, no hoping the System is feeling merciful that day. If you don’t have enough Merit on the spot, the Trait simply won’t trigger and you will stay dead—forever.”

A ripple of discomfort passed through the room.

She let it settle before continuing.

“And third: Any death outside the DDS applies a permanent stacking penalty to all future uses. I *cannot* stress this enough—*every* death stays with you. For your entire lives. Some Marines forget that and burn through their Trait uses early on, thinking they’re untouchable. They are not. Most of them, unfortunately, learn this the hard way.”

She paused long enough for a few throats to swallow.

Then the datascreen behind her shifted to a clean bell-curve graph, as she recapped the framework behind the Trait’s cost.

“The cost of *Soul Transfer* scales off three main factors: Your PV, the distance to the nearest Respawn Chamber, and the total number of deaths you’ve already accumulated in your career.”

She tapped at the curve on the datascreen with her, now extended, stylus.

“The distance modifier is the tricky one. It doesn’t follow a simple linear pattern. On ground-based battlefields, yes—the further you are from the nearest Chamber, the higher the cost, more or less, but things are more complicated than a simple “every km is an extra percentage of cost”. There are several “zones” that are considered the same cost around a Marine’s body, and price increases are based on those zones. Some zones are small, others are large. It’s almost impossible to get an exact, accurate measure for it on the ground—only the local command will have the exact numbers available.”

She flicked to a new slide showing vast space between ships and stations.

“Now space complicates everything even further. Distances out there are huge, as you know. If the System applied normal increases using the same logic as on the ground, you’d Zero-out before your first respawn. So it compensates. In space, the ‘distance cost’ is heavily compressed, while zone sizes generally stay the same.”

Thea continued listening as the Professor pushed deeper into the nuance.

“However—and this is where I usually lose quite a few Marines—this compression does not apply *inside* the ships. Respawning within a ship defaults back to ground rules, but only if Respawn Chambers are still intact and cheaper to use than space-rules would be. That’s why you will sometimes end up with odd situations where respawning three decks up on the same vessel costs nearly the same as respawning hundreds of kilometers away on a neighbouring ship. And if those Chambers are destroyed... then you don’t respawn five decks up. You respawn on a completely different ship instead.”

Thea was already scribbling down notes, copying the rough shape of the bell-curve onto her datapad as fast as she could.

She kept one ear tuned to the Professor, though half her mind groaned at how absurdly complicated the System insisted on being with all this.

‘Great. So you don’t even get exact numbers—just rough ideas,’ she thought, feeling a headache start to form. *‘Guess we’re meant to just... hope it’s affordable when we need it.’*

She wasn’t the only one frustrated; the tense quiet had shifted into restless murmurs and annoyed whispers spreading through the lecture hall.

The Professor lifted one hand, palm open, signaling for silence.

Once the room had finally calmed again, she continued speaking—more gently this time.

“I understand this is vague and not exactly comforting. So, after the lecture, I will provide the full zone-coefficients, distance multipliers and bell-curve references. You’ll be able to review all of them at your own pace and start learning about them on your time.”

She tapped the datascreen behind her, and new graphs briefly flickered into view.

“More importantly, however,” she continued, “is that when you’re deployed, Command will *always* ask for your current Merit status before you’re allowed anywhere near the frontline. They will track each of your profiles and make sure you aren’t sent into zones where the nearest zone would put you outside your safe-respawn range. That is their *job*. Just like it is your job to fight—so they can handle the numbers in the backline without getting their asses blown up.”

The sudden shift into blunt language snapped a ripple of surprised chuckles through the hall.

Even Lucas and Thea couldn’t help but crack a smile.

“Every Battlefield will come with a minimum requirement for frontline deployment,” Professor Hirana went on. “That requirement is roughly three times your System-stated Faction Trait cost. If you don’t have enough Merit to meet that threshold, you won’t be deployed to the front. You’ll be shifted into logistics or other backline work until you earn enough Merit to be considered fit-for-duty again. Rest assured—the UHF cares a great deal about your survival as individual Marines.”

A sly grin crossed her face.

“After all, we’ve invested quite a lot of resources into each and every one of you. We expect a solid return on that investment. Throwing you straight into a meat grinder doesn’t exactly make for great dividends.”

More chuckles rippled across the hall, but she pressed on quickly.

“Now, let’s get more specific about both Maintenance and the Faction Trait. As I said earlier, both are *directly* tied to your Point Value—the PV the System assigns you based on your overall combat potential. Whether or not that PV is an accurate measure of your worth is a discussion for another day. What matters here is that the PV determines both of these costs *directly*.”

She tapped the datascreen behind her. “Your weekly Maintenance fee is equal to two-point-five percent of your PV, rounded down to the nearest whole Merit point. Meanwhile, your Faction Trait cost is equal to a whopping ten percent of your PV, also rounded down.”

Then she raised a finger.

“However. Deaths matter, as mentioned earlier. The distance modifier as well, but we already covered it, so let’s focus on the deaths. On top of that baseline ten percent, you add an extra two percent for every prior use of the Trait. And after all base and distance multipliers are applied, there is a final additional five percent increase for each prior death.”

The datascreen shifted to display the exact formula:

Maintenance: 2.5% of PV per week

Soul Transfer: (10% of PV (+2% per prior use) × Δd [Distance Modifier]) × (1 + 5% per prior use)

A few seconds later, Professor Hirana clapped sharply, making half the hall jump—most of them were too busy scribbling numbers to notice her building up to it.

“Now, the moment you’ve all been waiting for: Your personal costs. You may now check your System Interface for your PV. However, it might be easier to open your [Ongoing Costs] tab, which will show both your current Maintenance fee—calculated every System tick, so around a thousand times per second—and your baseline Faction Trait cost all in one view.

“I recommend checking your PV first, so you actually understand where the numbers come from... But, really, I’m not here to babysit you.”

With that, she shrugged, sat down in the singular armchair on the podium, crossed one leg over the other, and adopted a relaxed posture.

“You have ten minutes. Copy whatever information you want from the datascreen—yes, I said that you’ll get all of it sent to your Interfaces after the lecture, but some of you insist on taking notes anyway, so who am I to say no to that? And check your personal information as instructed. Then we’ll continue.”

Thea met Lucas’ eyes, the Defensive Heavy flinching just a little at the contact, before both of them gave a small nod—as if to say, “*Let’s do it.*”

They had talked about their Point Values earlier that morning, an idle topic that had come up naturally before they’d even entered the lecture hall.

Both had been curious how their PVs had shifted since the Assessment.

According to Lucas, nobody besides Corvus had bothered checking theirs since then—not out of secrecy, but simply because nobody had seen a reason to yet.

Too much had been happening.

Thea hadn’t been able to confirm whether Kara had checked hers either, so the two of them had been wondering if maybe they should ask Corvus to turn it into a little squad moment. A repeat of their pre-Assessment “tradition”—a shared check-in on progress, something to mark how far they’d come.

But the lecture had made all of that potential scheming pointless now.

There was no reason to wait anymore, not when the information had suddenly become relevant in a very practical way. The brief chance for a fun squad moment had slipped through their fingers, but there was no helping that now—it wouldn’t be the last time they would get around to comparing their progress.

At the very least, doing it right before the next Assessment felt as good a moment as any to get the whole squad together again and compare how far they had come from one Assessment to the next.

With that in mind, Thea opened her System Interface and navigated to the menu in question.

First, she pulled up the [System Prowess Evaluation] Interface—

“*Fuck*,” she blurted before she could stop herself, earning a slightly startled side-eye from Lucas.

She waved him off. “Nothing. Don’t worry...” Then another thought hit her. “We’re keeping it a secret until we can bring it up with Corvus, right? We can still do the whole squad-wide reveal thing. Just because we know our own PVs doesn’t mean everyone else needs to know right away.”

Lucas considered it for all of a heartbeat before a wide grin stretched across his face.

“Sounds like a plan.”

Thea nodded and focused on the shimmering blue window floating in front of her.

‘This is going to absolutely wreck my Merit economy... Over the full year, this’ll chew through several Digital Missions worth of rewards, just from the damn Maintenance alone—not even counting any purchases or whatever...’

[System Prowess Evaluation]

Point Value: 1,773

With a heavy sigh, she opened the [Ongoing Costs] Interface next.

[Ongoing Costs]

Weekly Maintenance Fee: 44 System Merit

Base Faction Trait Cost: 177 System Merit

‘This is ridiculous... I’m basically dying once a month just in raw Merit costs for the Maintenance,’ Thea thought to herself. *‘Is this what paying rent is like...? The Old Man was always complaining about it... I think I finally get it now.’*

She added a mental note to check with Professor Hirana once the lecture ended, to see if there was any way—any at all—to lower her own PV...