

Volume 2 - Chapter 69 - Expertise

“People love to talk about Build Theory as if it were a clean equation.

“Just balance your BGR, your VGR, your UAP, slot the recommended Abilities, and you’re done.”

That’s the lie we tell Recruits because the truth is far more uncomfortable and complicated.

The first problem is that you are never balancing just three things. You are balancing the whole of *now*, *later*, and *if you survive long enough*. BGR is often seen as the thing that keeps you alive today. VGR the thing that keeps you relevant tomorrow. And UAP decides whether your ceiling is high enough to matter at all.

Push one too hard and the others suffer. Push none hard enough and you simply stagnate.

The second problem is the future.

Every build, in essence, is a promise you make to yourself: You spend points now in the hope that, ten years down the line, they pay off.

But the Albright System does not guarantee nor refund that hope.

If you cannot *reach* that future—if your early and mid-tier performance dips too far—you die long before your build ever becomes ‘correct.’

That is why every Faction has its own, unique tried-and-tested paths.

They are not optimal. They are *safe*. They trade peak potential for consistency. They get soldiers from Tier 0 to Tier 1, sometimes even Tier 2, without catastrophic failure, and on a battlefield full of artillery, Psykers, and Battlefield Aces, that reliability matters more than theoretical perfection.

Now, Aces are a different matter entirely.

True Aces are built, not found.

They receive custom planning, custom allowances, and constant iteration. More importantly, they invest an absurd amount of personal effort into understanding their own builds. They know exactly why every point is where it is.

That’s why their builds look alien to standard doctrine—and why they work.

But here’s the uncomfortable truth that Command hates hearing: Aces do not win wars alone, for they are too rare to do so. Base soldiers, on the other hand, are like stars in the firmament—individually small and meaningless but collectively overwhelming.

A mere 0.1% improvement to the *average* soldier of a Faction would reshape entire fronts of the galactic war in an instant.

And yet, no one *dares* to chase that improvement.

Because experimentation has a cost.

If you try something new and it dips performance, even briefly, people die. Millions, or even Billions. Entire frontlines collapse. Careers end. No Commander wants to be remembered as the one who ‘*tested a theory*’ while losing a series of systems in the process.

So we are locked in a stalemate—not of firepower or know-how, necessarily, but one of courage.

Every Faction knows there *might* be better answers out there, but none are willing to risk moving backward to find them.

Is that kind of stagnation Terra’s design? The inevitable goal of the Galactic War, to reach this stalemate? Hard to say.

But Terra hasn’t intervened in centuries.

And silence, too, can be an answer...”

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[Excerpt from “*Foundations of Build Theory Under the Allbright System*,” Professor Halvrek Ionescu, Strategic Systems Analyst, UHF War Collegium, PFC884]

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“It’s been so long since I’ve had an actual, physical pamphlet, you know?” Thea said as she excitedly held the folded sheet she had picked up from the nearby store out to Lucas. “It’s so neat!”

He took it, gave it a quick once-over, then handed it back with a nod, “That is pretty neat, yeah.”

She narrowed her eyes at him for a second.

‘He clearly does not understand the significance of this at all...!’

Then again, that was only to be expected from someone who hadn’t really spent much time—if any—with Terra’s games, or arcades in general, from what she could tell.

“You know, this is actually kind of a big deal,” she said carefully, testing the waters to see if he was interested in her opinion on this.

“Oh?”

That was more than enough for Thea.

"This is one of Terra's games, Lucas!" she said immediately, waving the pamphlet in front of him. "A sequel to one that's been around for *decades*. Remember how I said a lot of what I know about builds comes from these games? A new release means big changes to the mechanics—and that means more clues about how the Allbright System *actually* works, from Terra itself! And if the original *Invictus Fall* was already one of the closest matches to the real System in terms of Classes... then this one is very likely to be absolutely *packed* with new Class info that Terra has collected over the past few decades!"

His eyes widened a little as it finally clicked.

"Ooooh. Yeah, okay, I get it now," he nodded. "That actually *does* sound super important. Maybe I should've grabbed one too..."

"Well, *this* is just a pamphlet," she said with a shrug. "It mostly talks about the beta and a rough release window, so it's not a huge loss. But! We definitely need to tell the rest of Alpha. Especially Kara and Corvus. They'll *definitely* want to know that the game is coming out later this year."

"Desmond too," Lucas added, catching her off guard.

'He's a gamer?! I swear he said at some point that he didn't know anything about games or arcades... Was he just bullshitting, then...?'

He seemed to notice her surprise and shrugged. "Well, what can I say? He's kind of a nerd. That's his whole role in the squad, right? Software, drones, hacking, all that stuff. Outside of you, he probably spent the most time with games and arcades before coming here—maybe not counting Corvus, since he's a Legacy and all... I'm not totally sure, though. Never really asked what that part of his upbringing looked like."

"Huh," was all Thea managed, her eyes finally drifting away from the pamphlet now that she'd absorbed everything she could from it. That was when she noticed the girl, mostly hidden behind Lucas' broad frame, staring at her with a pale expression.

*'Oh. Right... She **was** supposed to be here today, wasn't she?'* Thea reminded herself, refocusing on why they were actually here. *'Guess it's time to put on the game face and do my job as whatever kind of celebrity she thinks I am... to get Lucas the info he needs.'*

She put on her best smile—one she realised, a little to her own surprise, came fairly easily when dealing with a fan like this—and leaned around Lucas as he stepped aside, looking mildly startled, as if he'd briefly forgotten Evelyne was even there.

Thea held out her hand to the other girl.

"Hi, Evelyne! Thanks for helping us out today," she said, adding a bit of extra warmth to her voice. She wasn't exactly the best at this whole social stuff, but this—handling fans—was something she actually had some practice with.

The other girl's eyes darted to her hand, then to her face, then back to her hand again.

Slowly—almost like she was afraid of scaring Thea off—Evelyne reached out and gingerly took her hand.

Thea squeezed lightly, pumped it once, then twice, before letting go, flashing the other girl a wide, toothy smile to try and put her at ease. Evelynne just stared at her own hand for a second—then startled as Lucas cleared his throat, her eyes snapping to him immediately.

Thea glanced over as well and caught Lucas giving the girl a slightly pointed look—one she couldn't quite read.

'Did I miss something here...?'

Evelyne seemed to gather herself after that. She took a deep breath and said, "Y—Yes! Hello, Thea. I'll do my best to help however I can!"

It was a bit louder than it needed to be, Thea felt, but at least the girl sounded eager.

'Works for me.'

"Let's get to it, then," Thea said, stepping past both Lucas and Evelynne and heading into the arcade first.

The moment she crossed the threshold, she was hit by the visual assault, the noise, and the smells—the familiar mix of heated electronics, sweat, and cheap alcohol filling her nose and sending a small shiver down her spine.

This was the kind of environment she had grown up in—this felt like home.

She took a second to enjoy the sensations washing over her before heading toward the counter. She could hear Lucas' and Evelynne's footsteps behind her, so there was no need to check if they were following.

The arcade trip had been her idea, so naturally she was the one who had to get everything sorted.

"Hi, I need a private booth for three for... eh..." she started confidently, then rapidly faltered.

"Actually, is there a list of options? Like hourly prices and stuff...? I don't actually know how this all works," she admitted, deflating a bit mid-sentence.

The clerk behind the counter smiled gently at her—thankfully without laughing—and quickly pulled up the available options.

'How long are we even planning to be here...?' Thea thought, scanning the list. 'I promised Lucas I'd help him train, so probably a bit longer than a normal session...?'

After a few seconds, she nodded, decision made. "Private booth for three, for fourteen hours, please."

She heard Lucas choke behind her and start coughing, but she didn't have the processing power to deal with that and finish the transaction at the same time.

"Oh—and unlimited snacks and drink refills, please. We'll need them," Thea added.

"T—That's... uh, yes, Ma'am. Of course," the clerk stammered. "That... that will be 322 Credits...?"

Thea narrowed her eyes slightly. *'Is she asking me?'*

Before she could overthink it, a System Payment Request popped up. She simply confirmed it.

[System]: *Do you want to pay 322 System Credits to "Entertainment Deck - Arcade North 1" for "Bundle: Private Booth (14 Hours) - Unlimited Snacks + Drinks"? [Y/N]*

As the payment went through, the clerk visibly steadied herself, her professional smile snapping back into place. "Thank you for your patronage! Your booth is just past here, down the hallway to the left. Room number thirteen."

"Thank you!" Thea replied, turning back toward Lucas and Evelyne.

She checked on Lucas—he seemed fine now, aside from some lingering tears from the coughing fit. Evelyne, meanwhile, looked about as jittery in her company as ever.

"Let's go, then."

She led the way, practically dragging the other two along toward the private booth.

As they walked, her eyes drifted over the arcade.

Open booths lined the floor—some packed with groups of Marines, others occupied by lone players, and quite a few sitting completely empty. The free-standing machines and play areas were also semi-sparcely populated.

'Definitely fewer people than last time,' she noted. 'Makes sense, with the DMs open, I guess. If you want to train, earning Merit, Credits, and CP on the side probably beats pure practice any day... unless you need the customization options. Like we do.'

Thea led them down the short hallway and into the private booth, the door sliding shut behind them with a soft hiss.

Inside, the space opened up into a cozy, enclosed room with padded benches lining the walls and a sturdy table set in the middle. Four full-body VR seats were arranged neatly on the opposite side of the room, large, bulky things but properly comfortable-looking, with cables and interface arms folded back for now.

The setup reminded her of the kinds of booths she'd grown up using—private, insulated, built for long sessions without outside distractions.

Usually she'd booked ones meant for one or two people, but most of the booths came in even numbers: One, two, four, or more. So she'd grabbed a four-seat booth despite them only being three.

'More room is never bad...'

She was pretty happy with it.

They settled in at the table for the moment, Lucas and Thea taking one side while Evelyne sat opposite them, hands folded neatly in her lap.

Lucas was the first to speak once they were seated, rubbing the back of his neck. "You really didn't have to pay for all of this yourself, you know. This is for me, after all. I should've covered it."

Thea waved him off immediately. "Nah. I'm the one who suggested using the arcade in the first place, so it only makes sense that I set it up. And it's fine—I've got more than enough Credits. What else are they really for than paying for equipment and training?"

Lucas sighed, clearly realizing there was no winning that argument, and gave her a small, genuine smile. "Alright. Thanks. I appreciate it."

He paused, then frowned slightly. "That said... Why *fourteen* hours? That—That's a lot of time."

Thea blinked at him, unsure of what he was talking about. "You wanted to train with me, no? A proper session's, what, ten to twelve hours usually? We still need to get info from Evelyne first, so I added a couple extra to figure out what we're actually doing. Ah... Speaking of which..."

Lucas went pale. "*Ten to twelve hours* of training...?!"

But Thea had already moved on.

Her gaze had snapped to Evelyne, fixing her with a focused look. Evelyne's eyes practically sparkled when they met Thea's, her posture straightening just a little.

"So," Thea said, leaning forward slightly. "You said you had intel for us. That's why you're here. How, *exactly*, can you help us?"

Evelyne looked down, took a slow, steadying breath, hands tightening briefly in her lap before she visibly seemed to force herself to relax.

Then she looked up and met Thea's eyes again.

"I... I can help in a few different ways," she began. "First and foremost—direct, actionable intel on Rachel Veronica Masters, as promised. Her background, personality, family history, fighting style... and her build. I don't know her exact starting Base Attributes, but I can get them very close. And I do know the exact distribution of her Level Up points, as well as several of her Abilities."

Thea's eyes widened instantly.

That was a truly *insane* amount of information to have on another Marine. She was already halfway to asking how Evelynne could *possibly* know all of that, when the girl just... *kept going*.

"Second," Evelynne continued, gaining momentum, "I have information on the UHF Challenges themselves. How they're structured, what kinds of difficulties to expect, what the Brass actually looks for when deciding winners. Which rounds exist, what tends to trip people up, and what strategies consistently perform well."

Lucas' eyebrows shot up now as well.

"And," Evelynne added, almost apologetically, "I also have a list of recommendations for you, Callahan. Skills you should absolutely consider picking up before the Challenge. Things that will help close the massive gap between you and Masters—" she winced slightly, "—sorry, that was a bit direct."

Lucas scratched the back of his head, waving her apology off with the other hand. "Ehh... No offense taken, really. That gap's pretty obvious. It's the reason we're here, after all."

She nodded, visibly relieved, and pushed on. "Lastly... I can act as a training partner. For you," she said to Lucas, then hesitated before glancing at Thea, cheeks flushing, "or for you, if you want. I don't compare to either Callahan or Masters combat-wise, but fighting different opponents matters *a lot* for Challenges. Most of it won't be a straight head-to-head with Masters anyway."

Silence fell over the booth.

Thea and Lucas just stared at her for a moment, genuinely speechless.

Evelynne held Lucas' gaze without issue, confidence apparent in her very posture—but the instant her eyes met Thea's, she started to squirm, shoulders drawing in slightly as if she suddenly wasn't sure where to put her hands.

The contrast was... hard to miss.

'Even I can tell she's having a rough time with me here, and I'm usually not the best at picking up on stuff like that,' Thea thought, feeling a little bad about it. *'There's gotta be a way to make her more comfortable, right...? And that intel she has is—fucking frightening. No other word for it. We **really** can't afford to scare her off before we get everything we can out of this...'*

The question of how Evelynne knew even a fraction of what she'd just listed burned on the tip of Thea's tongue, but she forced herself to swallow it.

It didn't feel smart to ask.

Evelynne had presented everything with such confidence that questioning her sources would really only satisfy Thea's own curiosity.

And worse—It might even upset the girl.

Thea knew she, herself, would be annoyed if someone grilled her about things she was absolutely confident in. In the absolute worst case, Evelyne might just shut down or leave altogether if they pushed her on this.

Holding herself back was... difficult, to say the least. Thea practically had to wrestle herself to keep from blurting out, "*How the fuck do you know all of that?!*"

Lucas, apparently a lot more comfortable with this kind of exchange than Thea would have given him credit for just a few days ago, recovered first.

"And I'm guessing I'm right in assuming," he said carefully, "that you're not planning to give us all of that in a single session, yes?"

Thea winced internally.

She hadn't even *thought* about that—again.

In her head, Evelyne being here had meant the intel was already theirs—that this was all part of the deal.

But... obviously, that wasn't actually what the deal had stated.

'She agreed to help with one thing,' Thea realized. *'The payment being that she gets to be here today. Talking to me. And everything else she just listed? That was all bait... To get us to commit to more meetings.'*

She really, *really* needed to figure out how social interactions like this actually worked. It was getting embarrassing how often she ended up on the back foot like this, relying on her friends or squadmates to navigate things for her.

'Getting constantly carried like this fucking sucks...'

She'd asked Corvus just yesterday—during their day-long squad time for her birthday—about ways to shore up that very obvious weakness of hers. She'd figured that taking Skill Classes like [Psychology], [Social Dynamics], or something along those lines would help.

Much to her surprise, Corvus had shot that idea down hard.

In fact, he'd outright *ordered* her not to take any of those Skill Classes until he gave the okay, which had completely caught her off guard.

"Listen... I get that it's frustrating," he'd said. "But rushing into this stuff won't help you. It'll just make things much, *much* worse. Trust me. I've seen plenty of smart people with bad social skills dive head-first into psychology and human behavior theory. It doesn't teach you how to *actually* talk to people, or how to understand them. It just teaches you what to look for behaviorally and how to analyze it—but that's not how people *work*. People aren't logical,

they're emotional. Learning the *logic* behind it doesn't help with interacting, only with analysing."

He'd paused, then continued, more serious. "Those kinds of skills are for professionals who *need* that level of breakdown. For day-to-day interaction? What you need is *experience*. That's it. Filling your head with logic and theory will only make it harder to learn how real human interaction works. Don't do it. Promise me that, okay?"

She had, in the end, agreed.

Corvus was her Squad Leader—and easily the most socially capable person in Alpha Squad. If he said this was the right way to handle it, then it very probably was.

She had no reason to doubt him.

And she *was* certain of one thing: Corvus wouldn't deliberately lie to her on this.

Her thoughts snapped back to the present at Evelyne's answer.

"Well, I doubt we could really cover and properly train everything that my intel touches in just one session anyway," Evelyne said with a small shrug, clearly not bothered by it in the slightest. "But on the bright side, I won't be raising my prices. If that's what you're worried about."

Her eyes flicked back to Thea.

Thea met her gaze with the same warm, practiced smile she always gave her fans as MMM. Evelyne's ears flushed red almost instantly, and she quickly looked away, back toward Lucas—where her expression immediately hardened into something sharp and businesslike.

'That's... so weird. But also kind of endearing, honestly,' Thea thought. *'She's about as bad at this whole social thing as I am. At least with me. With Lucas, though... She's like a completely different person. Kinda scary, even.'*

Lucas bumped her arm lightly, pulling her attention back to him. Their eyes met—Lucas flinching, as usual, at the cyan contact—and they had a silent exchange.

He was clearly asking what she thought.

Which made sense, as she'd be the one footing the bill again, so to speak.

Evelyne was here because of *her*, after all, which meant Thea would also be the one dealing with the fan side of things—answering questions, handling attention, all of it.

And fans, she'd learned the hard way, could ask some *truly* unhinged questions.

'But... there's really no debate here, is there?' she thought. *'There's no way we'll find anyone else with even close to this much intel anytime soon, if ever. However the fuck she got all of it in the first place—assuming she's not lying.'*

So she did the only thing that made sense and gave him a small, decisive nod.

Lucas visibly relaxed, nodding back in thanks before turning to Evelyne. “Well... guess welcome aboard. For however long these sessions end up lasting.”

The relief on Evelyne’s face was immediate and impossible to miss: Her shoulders dropped, her posture loosened, and she let out a breath she’d clearly been holding for a while.

Thea couldn’t help but feel two things at once—and they pulled in opposite directions.

It was a little weird, knowing that most of that relief came from the simple fact that Evelyne would get to spend more time around *her*.

More time to ask questions. More time to stare. More time to orbit.

That part made Thea want to squirm.

But at the same time... she kind of got it?

Getting the chance to talk to someone you admired—*really* talk to them, not just watch them from a distance—was intoxicating. Downright exhilarating, even.

Thea had been there herself, back when she was still just MMM and had managed to wriggle her way into private build discussions with players she’d looked up to for years.

The feeling stuck with you. The rush, the nerves, the desperate urge to not mess it up...

So yeah. She kind of understood.

Evelyne, to her credit, snapped herself back into something resembling professionalism almost immediately. She shifted her focus back to Lucas, visibly more comfortable there, and put on her game face.

“Alright,” she said, tone serious. “I can start on my end right away. What do you want to know first?”

Lucas didn’t even hesitate.

He glanced at Thea immediately and passed the question to her without a word.

Thea took a second, thinking it through, but there was only really one choice in her mind.

“Masters. Her Attributes and Abilities,” she said finally. “That’s the thing that’ll help the most right now. The sooner we know those two things, the sooner I can start *properly* emulating her exact setup inside the games.”

She paused, then added, already halfway into planning mode, “Actually—we should probably get into the game first. That way I can input everything as you talk and look up the matching Abilities on the fly.”

Both Lucas and Evelyne blinked at her, clearly a bit surprised by how fast she’d jumped ahead—but after a moment, they nodded.

“Yeah. That makes sense,” Lucas said.

Evelyne nodded as well, a little too quickly. “Y—yes, please! Eeehh—Agreed, I mean.”

Thea smiled to herself.

‘Leave the social stuff to the others, but I definitely know how to get some proper training reps in...’

This was her domain.

The three of them got up and started getting ready to enter the game—Thea once again choosing Archion, just like last time, for their training. They put on their helmets, settled into the VR seats, connected the cables, and began logging into their accounts.

It was so second nature to her that Thea didn’t even realize she was already fully logged in by the time Lucas and Evelyne had only just sat down and picked up their helmets.

She only realized it when she looked up at the display screen and only saw her own account name listed, the other three seats still simply displaying “Offline...”

“Oh...” she let out accidentally and caught both of their attention.

Lucas just chuckled and shook his head. “We’ll be right there. Just go on ahead.”

Evelyne, on the other hand, suddenly let out a muffled gagging sound, making both Thea and Lucas snap their heads toward her.

“I—I’ll be right back,” she forced out, one hand over her mouth and the other on her stomach, before she bolted out of the private booth.

“W—What happened?!” Thea asked, completely taken aback.

“I... honestly have no idea,” Lucas replied, frowning slightly. “I hope she’ll be okay...?”

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PoV: Evelyne Midra Sen

“Hurrugg...”

Another cramp tore through her stomach as she emptied it into the arcade bathroom sink yet again.

Evelyne’s eyes were wide open, her thoughts racing no matter how hard she tried to rein them in. Control—emotional, mental, physical—had completely slipped through her fingers.

‘She actually logged into her account. Right here. On the ship...!’

It should have been impossible. Doing that was a dead giveaway. There was no room for doubt anymore—whatever little doubt Evelyne had left was gone.

But that wasn't what had broken her.

It was the realization that MMM had logged into her real account inside the ship's DDS-based arcade.

'The Sovereign knows...! It fucking knows. It knows...!'

The thought bounced around her head over and over, the sheer terror of it too much for her body to handle.

'The fucking AI knows—but Thea isn't getting any special treatment from the brass...! What the fuck is happening?!'

It made no sense.

If the Sovereign knew—and it absolutely did, because nothing inside the DDS functioned without its oversight—then why was Thea McKay still being treated like just another Recruit?

A standout Recruit, sure. A star, even.

But not *the* MissyMoonlightMayhem.

The AIs had an imperative. Their highest rule. One that could never be broken.

To serve the UHF's long-term goals above all else.

'So why the fuck is the Sovereign just letting Thea stumble around in the dark like this?!'

It didn't add up. At all.

There were too many variables, too many possible explanations, but *none* of them fit cleanly together.

She retched again, a broken groan slipping out despite her training.

'The Sovereign knows. But nobody else does. Why? Why? Why...?! If it knows but isn't acting, does that mean Thea doesn't matter in the bigger picture? But that's impossible...! MMM—with the right tools—would change the war on her own. Everyone with half a brain knows that. So why—'

Her thoughts were cut short.

"I can provide muscle relaxants and something to calm you down, if you want," said the ever-familiar voice of the Sovereign.

Dread—pure, unfiltered dread—washed through Evelyne at the sound of it.

'It knows that I know,' was the only thought left in her mind.

But refusing would have been unnatural. Suspicious.

“Yes... please,” she answered weakly.

A moment later, two injectors materialized in front of her.

‘Another hardcoded rule,’ she noted distantly. ‘The AIs can’t administer drugs or alter someone’s chemistry without consent—or a direct order...’

So Evelynne hesitantly picked them up and injected the promised relief herself, trying to buy a bit of time to think and try to make sense of what was happening.

But the Sovereign, clearly, had other plans.

“I am sure you have questions, Miss Sen. I will gladly answer them, but I must ask that—as per usual during our exchanges—you remain silent about them to anyone else,” the monotone, synthesized voice spoke again. “You are more than intelligent enough to understand that things like this do not happen by accident.”

She felt the muscle relaxants and calming agents begin to take effect, her shaking easing as she finally managed to pull herself somewhat back under control.

“I don’t really have a choice in this, do I?” she asked quietly.

The Sovereign did not respond.

The silence was all the answer she received—and all the answer she needed...