

Volume 2 - Chapter 32 - Priority

“Before the System, warfare was about numbers. Strategy helped, equipment mattered, but no single soldier on the ground could ever truly shape the outcome of an entire battle.

That era is long over.

The arrival of the Allbright System changed the very nature of warfare completely.

A single individual, with the right training, equipment, Ability loadout, and enough System Accomplishments under their belt, can now turn the tide of battle on their own.

*From this brutal new reality, a new type of soldier was born—the **Battlefield Ace**.*

These aren’t just soldiers anymore. They’re strategic assets rivalling entire planets in worth.”

Among some of the most famous of the UHF’s Battlefield Aces is “Witchglass,” a Psy-Warfare Psyker whose presence during the Fall of Tridael Port resulted in the capture of three enemy warships without requiring her to fire even a single shot.

Within minutes of her arrival, enemy communications failed, commanders collapsed from targeted hallucinations, systems corrupted, and mass-suicides took out critical leadership.

What was expected to be a twenty-month siege ended in a seven-hour surrender.

Equally legendary, but on the completely opposite end of the spectrum for Battlefield Aces is “Gravepath,” a mechanized Ultra-Heavy specializing in mass-destruction loadouts, who single-handedly held Mirevale Crossing during the Third Push of the Iros Offensive in Dominion space.

Over twelve hundred fully-Integrated enemy soldiers fell at that choke point before any UHF reinforcements arrived.

No backup, no air support, no retreat—just Gravepath and a storm of explosives and firepower that nearly cracked the planet’s crust beneath him; an unstoppable dreadnought who refused to fall or give any ground.

“In another war, in another age, they would have been myth and legend.

Today, we call them by nicknames—and assign them to squads.”

Their stories aren’t just rare occurrences anymore either.

The System made it possible, and humanity’s need for heroes made them *essential*.

The UHF may never match the overwhelming numbers of its enemies, but thanks to its overwhelmingly powerful Battlefield Aces, it doesn’t *need* to.

While we will always find ourselves outnumbered, thanks to their existence and them standing side-by-side with us in every Battlefield, we are *never* outgunned.

They are more than symbols; more than extraordinary soldiers or marines.

They are the very heart of modern warfare; and not just for the UHF itself.

They are the difference between losing ground and holding firm.

Between victory and death.

They deserve all the awe, fear, and respect they receive—and more.

For without them, Factions like the UHF simply wouldn't exist...

[Excerpt from *Gilded Shadows: A History of Post-System Warfare*, 936 PFC]

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Going over the different armours in the store, Thea noticed there were way more options than in the shop where she'd first gotten her Spectre.

'There's at least three or four times as many here... Who would've thought a specialist store would have more selection, huh?'

Even with the extra choices, though, nothing immediately jumped out as better overall than her Spectre.

Some designs *did* offer the extra module slot she wanted, or had other useful perks, like thicker T1-plate layers in the front for better protection, or lighter weight thanks to slightly less overlapping of the armour plates—which didn't really hurt protection much but cut down a few grams of weight here and there.

But all of these armours lacked the one thing that had originally convinced Thea to pick the Spectre: The camo-cloak.

Cloaks usually caused problems, either by catching on stuff or getting twisted in annoying ways, but the Spectre's cloak had specifically been *made* to avoid exactly those problems.

The T1 material it was weaved from was *extremely* smooth, slippery even, meaning it wouldn't snag easily—unless it got tangled up in something seriously strong like Tenaxium-infused goop. The nano-fibre fabric itself was also *very* durable, almost at the same level as the rest of the armour itself and designed not to tear easily, which stopped it from getting caught on sharp edges or branches.

'And there's the camo function, too...'

When she had first bought it, Thea had mostly thought about using it for long-range fights.

She had seen herself as a sniper first, scout second before going through the Assessment.

But after everything she'd been through in the Assessment, it had become clear that her role in Alpha Squad involved a lot more close-range and direct combat than she'd ever thought.

At the same time, she'd completely underestimated just *how good* the camo cloak would turn out to be at medium or even short ranges.

It wasn't just some fancy trick for hiding during long-range sniper duels like she had originally assumed. It actually worked incredibly well even up close, as she had instinctively managed to prove multiple times already.

What really opened her eyes was watching the recordings of the first day, during the suicide mission in the forest that Sergeant Venn had sent her and parts of Arrow Squad on.

Even though Thea herself barely remembered the specifics, the recordings had shown *clearly* just how effective the cloak had been, even when moving through clusters of trees or across short distances.

And it obviously hadn't required that much practice either, seeing as she had managed to use it so effectively on day one.

'Must've been muscle memory left over from my stealth builds in Archion and Krilson's Path, I guess...' she thought with a small smirk forming on her face. The Rune priest's small side-note revelation in that regard being so much more impactful for her understanding of everything than he had likely realised or intended.

Despite carefully going through all the available options, Thea still couldn't find exactly what she wanted. Feeling a bit disappointed, but not ready to give up completely, she stepped out of the changing booth to look around for a store clerk—and immediately froze.

'Wait, what...?'

Something had *clearly* changed in the store during the last thirty minutes she'd spent browsing through the catalogue.

It took her a second to even understand what was different; her subconscious instincts had triggered alarm bells before she consciously noticed the details.

But when she finally caught on, confusion quickly replaced caution: Every single robotic store clerk—which were utterly omnipresent inside every one of the Sovereign's stores and had *definitely* been in this shop just half an hour ago—was now replaced with real, human workers.

When she first entered, she remembered seeing just one human clerk, patiently dealing with the two arguing Recruits, and at least four robotic ones scattered throughout the shop.

Now, there wasn't a single robot in sight—only human clerks, quietly rearranging displays or standing ready behind counters.

'What's going on here...?' She thought, glancing around nervously.

She soon noticed something else strange as well: Aside from the employees, she was completely alone in the store. No other customers anywhere.

She briefly wondered if she should ask the Sovereign about it, but quickly shook that thought away.

'No, that's stupid. You're just getting paranoid. It's a shop, Thea, not a battlefield. Relax. Maybe they had to do some maintenance on the robots, or they're swapping them out for some reason...?'

Trying to ignore the uncomfortable feeling, she slowly made her way toward the main store clerk she'd spotted earlier—the same one who'd patiently dealt with the loud Recruits.

As Thea approached, the man glanced up, looking friendly and attentive, and immediately set aside the catalogue he'd been reading. He was youngish, maybe in his early thirties, neatly dressed and professional-looking, at least as far as Thea could tell.

"Hi," Thea started carefully, sticking to the words she'd practiced in her head back in the changing booth. "I'm looking for something specific for my Light-type Armour, but I haven't really been able to find exactly what I'm looking for. I was wondering if you could maybe help me...?"

"It would be my pleasure," the clerk responded immediately, offering a graceful, slightly theatrical bow. It was a little over the top in Thea's opinion, but the politeness didn't bother her. If anything, it caught her a bit off guard. "What, *exactly*, are you searching for then, Miss McKay?"

Her eyes shot to his, blinking in surprise—and even more surprising, he didn't flinch.

Not a twitch.

Just calm, attentive eye contact.

"You... You know who I am...?" she asked, hesitant now, her rehearsed script suddenly slipping from her mind like water through her fingers.

"Naturally, Miss McKay," the clerk said smoothly. "Any employee worth their uniform would be briefed on potential high-priority clients aboard the Sovereign. I do hope you won't mind me saying this..."

He paused delicately, waiting for her nod before continuing.

"But earning the Most Valuable Marine commendation in the most recent Assessment that this ship has taken part in makes one rather difficult to overlook."

He gave a slight gesture to the space around them. "If, however, you would prefer us to act as if we are unaware of your identity altogether, we can *absolutely* accommodate that. Levitas' Armours prides itself on discretion, flexibility, and customer satisfaction above all else."

Thea stood there for a second, trying to wrap her head around everything he had just said. The words "high-priority client" made her brain short-circuit for a moment.

*‘What does that even **mean**? Is this how Kara and the others get treated all the time and they just... never mentioned it...?’*

She narrowed her eyes slightly, trying to gauge if this was some elaborate setup for a pitch or a sales trap.

But the clerk just kept smiling—genuinely, patiently. No pressure. No upsell.

Just... waiting for her reply.

“Ehh... Thea’s fine, I guess,” she replied finally, her voice slower than usual as she tried to work through what was going on with the sudden shift in tone.

She’d have to bring this up with Kara later.

Or maybe even Corvus. He *definitely* struck her as the kind of person who knew how this weird fancy-customer protocol worked.

“As for what I’m looking for... Ehh...” Thea hesitated, trying to recall the neatly organized pitch she’d rehearsed in the booth.

It was gone. Completely wiped by the unexpected shift in tone and politeness.

“I guess I’m looking for an upgrade? Something to help my armour. Like... I want to add a Module Slot—so I can install a Nano-Bot Forge—but none of the armours I’ve seen have *everything* I want. I was wondering if maybe there are more designs available somewhere that I could check out...?”

She winced a little at her own rambling delivery, but at least the core of what she wanted to ask had made it out in one piece. Close enough.

The clerk placed a hand over his chest and gave a small, sincere nod, his expression thoughtful. “I understand entirely. Unfortunately, I must inform you that the catalogue accessible through the changing booths is comprehensive. It includes all Tier-1 armour designs currently available from our store on this level.”

Thea’s shoulders sank slightly at that, her hopes taking a hit.

“However,” the clerk continued smoothly, “when it comes to Light and Medium-class armours, Levitas’ Armours boasts the most extensive collection aboard the Sovereign; that, I guarantee. If a design is not listed in our catalogue, then I regret to say that it is exceedingly unlikely to exist at all—at least within Tier-1 specifications.”

Thea was already starting to consider abandoning the Nano-Bot Forge idea entirely, when the clerk added something that made her perk up again.

“That said, there *is* an alternative route available to you: If you possess the Full-License for a specific piece of equipment, you qualify for Equipment Modification privileges. These allow for customized adjustments to your gear—including, potentially, the addition of a Module Slot. And as it happens, Levitas’ Armours proudly offers these services in-house.”

Her eyes lit up with immediate interest.

“How does it work?” she asked, nearly bouncing on her heels.

The clerk smiled warmly and lifted both hands in a gesture of polite caution. “Before we proceed, I am obligated to inform you that any modified equipment incurs a higher reprint cost than standard-issue designs, Miss Thea. The more significant the changes to the original model, the more those costs will scale. This could, in some cases, impact how often you can afford to reprint the armour after heavy wear or destruction in future Assessments or Missions.”

Thea’s excitement faltered for a moment. “How much are we talking? Like... double the price? Triple?” Then, as an afterthought, she added with a faint frown, “Also, just Thea. I’m not a ‘Miss’ anything.”

The clerk gave a small chuckle and nodded. “Of course, Thea. Apologies. And no—nothing so extreme. Not unless you’re planning to overhaul the base chassis entirely. For something as straightforward as adding a single Module Slot, the increase would be far more modest. Somewhere in the range of ten to fifteen percent above the normal cost. With particularly compact or specialized designs, such as the Spectre-design you mentioned, it may climb closer to twenty-five, depending on how invasive the modification needs to be.”

He tilted his head slightly, studying her expression. “But in your case? It’s likely quite manageable, I’d imagine.”

Thea practically lit up, her earlier hesitation forgotten.

“Yeah—I’d love to check that out, actually,” she said, her voice a little too eager, but she didn’t care.

The clerk offered a graceful nod. “Very good. If you would be so kind as to follow me, Thea.”

He moved around the counter, then turned on his heel and led her deeper into the store, past the racks of displayed armour and beyond a discreetly placed access panel marked with a thin golden line along its edges.

With a soft chime, it slid open to reveal a secondary chamber—a private workspace clearly meant for higher-end consultations. The lighting shifted the moment she stepped inside, more focused and clinical, but not uncomfortably so.

The walls were lined with sleek data-interfaces, and just a few steps into the secondary room, they arrived at a large booth. The Clerk opened it with a simple swipe of his hand over a nearby data-interface, and the door silently opened into a room.

At the center of the booth stood what could only be described as a kind of digital workbench, in Thea’s mind.

The bench itself pulsed softly with blue energy, its surface forming the base of a three-dimensional projector array.

The clerk stepped forward and motioned toward the bench. “This is one of our Augmentation Benches. Once your profile is synced, you’ll be able to project a full schematic of your currently licensed armour—layer by layer—and preview potential modifications in real time.”

He spoke clearly and calmly, as he demonstrated how the interface responded to gesture and voice commands. A few quick motions caused a blank mannequin of UHF-standard proportions to flicker into view, cycling through various modules and overlays before resetting again.

“You can expand module slots, swap materials or composites, adjust weight distribution, or request balancing tweaks for the majority of components inside the armour. Some options will lock based on Tier limits or compatibility, and warnings will be displayed if you are attempting to do things that would seriously jeopardize the function of the armour itself, but everything that *can* be done without causing such issues or hitting such limitations *will* be shown clearly. Simply scan your licence now, and the Spectre model will appear. You may also allow the Augmentation Bench to scan your proportions, to display a mannequin of yourself, like I previously did with the UHF-standard proportion one.”

Thea, already half a step ahead and having found the necessary setting on the Augmentation Bench’s display, mentally confirmed the sync.

Her System Interface pinged once in her vision, and the workbench lit up again—this time displaying her current Spectre armour in full detail.

It floated above the surface in a faintly glowing wireframe, rotating slowly.

“Oh, that’s so fucking cool,” she whispered under her breath, already forgetting the clerk was even there.

The man took a measured step back, folding his hands behind his back with a courteous smile. “I will be just outside should you require any assistance, Thea. Take your time. Precision matters in modification work.”

But Thea wasn’t listening.

She was already knee-deep in the interface, fingers moving through the holograms, eyes rapidly darting left and right as she dove headfirst into the fine-tuning of her gear—checking what options were available, what they did to her armour and what might be the best options available to her right now...

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Around fifteen minutes later, Thea felt like she’d finally gotten the hang of the Augmentation Bench—or at least enough to navigate what it currently let her mess with.

‘This thing is the coolest fucking thing ever...’ she thought again, for probably the dozenth time. She couldn’t help it. It was like every childhood daydream had been yanked into reality.

An actual, working console that let her tinker with real battlefield gear down to the finest of details.

'I wonder if I can ask the Sovereign to add one of these to Alpha Squad's workbench... or if it's some "only for stores" luxury thing...'

She shook her head lightly, snapping herself back to focus for the umpteenth time. Her brain kept drifting off toward upgrade ideas or long-shot dreams about retrofitting the Squad's entire gear pipeline.

She had to stay focused.

"Alright... Module Slot. That's what we came here for," she reminded herself under her breath, zooming in on the Spectre's back-facing schematics.

The first chunk of her time had gone into figuring out the controls—which had ended up being way more intuitive than she expected. After that, she'd been completely absorbed trying to find *where* to put the new module.

Turned out, it was a *lot* harder than she'd expected it to be.

Most of the games she'd played—even the ones made by Terra—had let you slap modifications onto gear as long as it *technically* had the space required.

Reality, however, didn't play by the same rules.

Real-world armour had to deal with this little pesky thing called physics.

And balance. And heat distribution. And vulnerability points. And weight.

Every tiny shift had a consequence; sometimes even major ones.

Luckily, one of the first things Thea had done—out of sheer habit—was check for an advanced settings toggle. And, sure enough, the Augmentation Bench had an *Advanced User Mode*, hidden inside the options menu on the bottom-right corner of the interface.

She'd nearly laughed at how nostalgic it felt.

Back in the Golden Age Arcade, admin panels and machine debug modes had been her bread and butter. If it had hidden functions or deeper customization, she'd find it—mostly because she had to, as many of the machines simply refused to even allow maintenance to be done unless they were in that specific mode.

Many machines had died at her hands, during an attempt to rescue them, before she had figured out this particularly annoying limitation.

And just like back then, searching for the Advanced User Mode had paid off.

In this case, it meant she didn't have to add a *generic* one-slot module space—which would've required more surface area and deeper structural adjustments—but instead could add a Nano-Bot Forge-*specific* slot.

And because it only had to fit *that* module, the Bench let her trim a few dimensions here and there. It was still a bit of a squeeze, but it worked far easier than what a generic slot would have required from her.

She chose the lower-left section of the backplate—around the lower ribs—as the location for the new Module-slot.

It wasn't ideal by any means, but it was the least bad option she could come up with.

Adding a module slot invariably meant removing a section of armour, and no matter how you dressed it up, that ultimately translated to weaker defenses in that area.

'But I mean... If somebody managed to shoot me in the lower-back from that angle, I was going to die either way. The Spectre is just Light-type armour, there's no shot it would be able to keep me safe, even with its armour fully in-tact at that angle,' she thought.

'I'm a sniper and a scout, not really a frontline fighter. If somebody gets me from behind, I already messed up big time anyway. The risk's definitely worth it though. If I can use my Nano-Bot Swarm more freely, I'm way less likely to end up in that kind of situation in the first place.'

She double-checked the schematic once more, eyes scanning every angle of the 3D projection.

The placement looked solid.

No awkward overhangs, no major weaknesses in the surrounding armor layout—at least, nothing obvious. The Augmentation Bench had done a phenomenal job of making everything feel streamlined and simple, almost like it had been built with her specifically in mind.

Which was honestly kind of insane.

Thea didn't know the first thing about actual engineering beyond jury-rigging some circuits.

She had zero experience with armour fabrication outside of wearing the stuff. But here she was, actively altering the internal layout of a battlefield-ready piece of gear like she was some kind of junior tech specialist.

It wasn't just impressive. It felt like straight-up magic.

'I wonder if I could build my own armour from scratch someday...? What would the required Skills for that even look like?' She made a mental note to look into it later, probably after bugging Kara for advice—or maybe Desmond, considering that he was the foremost expert on this kind of stuff inside Alpha Squad.

Once again shaking her head to chase off the daydreaming, she refocused and confirmed the changes necessary to make the new module-slot fit into her current Spectre build.

The bench gave a soft confirmation beep, followed by a pulsing display of the updated schematics and a breakdown of the reprint cost—27% more than her current standard Spectre.

Thea winced a little, but it wasn't a dealbreaker.

She hadn't finalized anything yet—just saved her progress so she wouldn't lose the configuration. Still, it gave her a sense of how real the commitment was. This wasn't just theoretical anymore.

This was *her* Spectre, being reshaped to fit her evolving understanding of her role inside Alpha Squad—and the options available to her as a whole.

"Alright," she muttered under her breath, rubbing her hands together a little, "Module-slot theoretically acquired... But what else can I change...?"