

Volume 2 - Chapter 37 - Skill Classes

“Segment: Mindfulness in Void-Bound Development

*“Time doesn’t pass in the Void. That’s not poetic—it’s clinical. The Void has no temporal flow. It’s a space without rhythm, without heartbeat, without change. It does not move forward. **You** do.”*

“That’s the problem.”

In today’s mental hygiene briefing, Dr. Kellis issued renewed warnings regarding the misuse of Time-Dilated Skill Classes—particularly among new Recruits still adapting to the Allbright System’s neural load. The dangers, he explained, are not just theoretical or rare.

They’re well-documented, and steadily increasing with the pressure building from the Galactic War’s progression.

*“Time Dilation training offers a massive boost in Skill acquisition efficiency—sure. But compressing months of mental development into what is, externally, barely a day? It’s a form of accelerated isolation, and your brain isn’t built for it. Not fresh out of Integration, at least. We’re social creatures. Our minds aren’t **meant** to live in that kind of pocketed silence.”*

This is why, he reminded, Recruits are limited to one Skill Class per Category per Terra-Standard-Time Month, with mandatory cool-downs between uses. Veterans—those who have already suffered their share of artificial solitude over years and decades—can often weather these training jumps.

Some even crave the stillness, and flourish in it. But for those new to the grind?

“It fractures the mind,” Kellis stated bluntly. “You come out speaking the same language, but the people around you didn’t live the time you just did. And when nobody understands what you went through, what you learned, how you mentally grew up in that time frame, that gap can be lethal. Not just socially: Psychologically. Existentially.”

Kellis further clarified that these Skill Class sessions are only made possible by very specific and very expensive ship bound conditions. Among them:

- *Entry into the Void during stable drift.*
- *Sustained power output well above baseline, provided by excess Void-fusion or harvested Void-anomaly-spike storage.*
- *Synchronized DDS-buffer realignment for data integrity post-session.*
- *And more, which, in his own words, “aren’t really fit to talk about over breakfast.”*

That's why classes cost so many System Credits. They're not just paying for knowledge—they're paying for stability, safety and reality itself, in some ways.

And his final message?

"Always remember: You are UHF. You were not bred, trained, and launched into the black to sprint until you break. Our careers are not sprints—they're campaigns. They're lifetimes. Oftentimes several.

The System will let you overtrain. It'll even encourage it, if you let it.

But the smart Marines pace themselves. They take time to integrate what they've learned. The best of us don't rush the climb. They make sure their next step holds."

"Remember—this war isn't going anywhere. You've got centuries to win it."

[UHF Internal Broadcast – Psycho-Sanitation Brief: Dr. Alren Kellis, Lead Combat Psychologist, PFC 847]"

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"Peria!" Thea practically yelled as she skidded to a stop next to Karania inside the System Store.

Karanja just gave her a raised eyebrow, unimpressed.

"Ehh... Peria. That's her name. I got it," Thea explained, lowering her voice a bit as she realized half the store had turned to look at her like she'd just screamed bloody murder. The silent judgment in their eyes said it all—*who's this loud gremlin and why is she yelling like this?*

"Great work," Karania said dryly, reaching out to pat Thea on the head like she was a toddler who'd managed to tie her shoes for the first time.

Thea almost pulled away on instinct—but it was Karania. Her best friend. And honestly? This win *had* been hard.

Maybe not for someone like Corvus or Kara, but for her? It *had* taken some serious effort.

*'Maybe I **do** deserve some head pats for this,'* she thought, a bit of pride blooming in her chest as she allowed the gesture, just this once.

She wasn't usually into the whole "head pat" thing, but today? Today it felt earned.

"So," Thea said, still riding the high of her small but mighty victory, "you find anything interesting while I was off doing my whole... name-finding quest?"

Karania nodded, shifting slightly to make space for her and held out the datapad she'd been browsing. "Been looking at some Skill classes I might want to take. Problem is, most of the ones I like fall under the same category, so I'm locked out after taking just one. Thinking about asking Major Quinn for an exception slip—maybe get around the one-class-per-month rule."

Thea stepped closer, glancing down at the datapad.

Her eyes started to widen the farther she scrolled—there were *so many* classes!

"Fuck me..." she muttered under her breath, then spoke louder, "No kidding you'll need that slip, Kara. But like... do you *really* need [Advanced Biochemical System Warfare] right away? Or [Advanced Pathogenic and Prion-based Weaponry]? Those sound... kind of horrifying. And not really important for Tier 1, no?"

Karania didn't even need to say anything.

The look she gave Thea said it all—*obviously I require all of these*.

But, because she was Karania, she still launched into an explanation anyway.

She flipped the datapad back towards herself and tapped one of the course names with far too much enthusiasm, before presenting it to Thea again.

"Okay, so," she began, tone already shifting into that rapid-fire cadence she used when excited, "the [Advanced Biochemical System Warfare] class isn't *just* about weaponizing things—it's about *understanding* how synthetic compounds interact with augmented physiology under stress. Literally all of us got at least some level of bio-enhancement from the System, which means any exposure to mutagenic or volatile compounds won't follow standard degradation models that I know of. I need to understand how different delivery vectors—like aerosolized neurotoxins or adaptive nanite swarms—behave in a closed battlefield environment, now that we're all Integrated and beyond human."

Thea blinked slowly.

That was already almost too many words, but she managed to still follow the logic.

"And the Prion class?" Kara continued, completely unfazed, "You have *no* idea how terrifying protein-folding disorders are until you realize just how easily they bypass normal immune detection. And I seriously doubt the System has changed much of that—but I need to be *sure*. Prions don't trigger inflammatory responses, Thea—they just slip right past all the built-in alarms and start rewiring tissue. They're like silent rewiring bombs. And if someone deploys an engineered prion in a zero-support zone? Maybe even with some sort of System Material-enhanced nightmare booster attached? *I'm* the one that has to stop the meltdown before someone's spinal fluid turns to jelly."

Thea opened her mouth. Closed it. Tried again. "...Spinal fluid *what now?*"

Karania barely paused. "*Jelly*. Literal jelly. It's called spongiform encephalopathy, and it's a *nightmare* to diagnose without real-time biospectral imaging, which—surprise—we *don't*

have in the field. Our portable models can only get us so far—and we don't really carry many anti-prion injectors in our normal kits. I picked some up, just to be sure, of course, but it won't be enough if there's some large-scale attack. So unless you want to see someone's motor functions collapse mid-fight because a designer protein thought it was cute to mimic a structural neuron? I *need* this class. And fast."

She said it all with a straight face, like this was just basic prep work.

Like she wasn't describing some terrifying, high-tech version of medical horror.

Thea stared at her for a second, trying to catch up, then sighed. "Right. So, uh... I'm guessing '*field bandages and painkillers*' wouldn't cut it for that one."

"Only if you want to die artistically," Kara replied, scrolling to the next module with a little hum.

Thea took a second to rewire her thoughts before nudging the conversation forward. "Anything aside from the classes, then? You looked at any Abilities, by chance...?"

She was trying to ease Karania into bringing up [Bone Shards]—the Ability she'd specifically recommended after that long, grueling hospital stay. Thea had made a point of sending everyone a quick summary of suggestions just before getting discharged, in case any of them decided to hit the System Store before she caught up.

"I did," Karania said with a small nod. "Looked at a few, but haven't really made any decisions yet. I still feel like I'm missing too much foundational System knowledge to really commit to something specific."

Thea felt a bit of her enthusiasm fizzle out at that.

She knew Karania wasn't the impulsive type, but still—she'd hoped for a little more progress.

"Oh... I *did* also check out the Ability you recommended—[Bone Shards]," Karania added, almost as an afterthought. But the moment Thea's expression lit up, she smiled knowingly.

"It's definitely interesting. I'm not entirely sure I want to spend a full Active-Slot on something that feels a little niche, since I'm not exactly going for an offensive loadout, but the potential utility is... *intriguing*. I'm seriously considering picking it up—try it out and see if I can adapt it into something useful. Thanks for sending it my way."

"No problem! I'm really glad you think it might work for you!" Thea responded, a little louder than intended. She couldn't help the rush of excitement—Karanja taking her suggestion seriously felt like a small but meaningful win.

"Honestly," Thea continued, still riding the high, "I think we need to sit down properly sometime and go over your whole build, just... figure out your goals, maybe nail down what kind of Abilities you want long-term. I've been trying to brainstorm stuff for you, but it's hard. Like really, really hard. I've never had to build around a realistic Squad Medic style before. All the games I played had the super-gamified stuff—healing bursts, revive drones, support fields—nothing like what you're *actually* doing out there."

Karania let out a quiet laugh, not mocking, just amused.

It threw Thea off for a second.

“Thea...” she said, still smiling, “you know you don’t *have* to make everyone’s builds for them, right? I mean, I really do appreciate the effort and the thought, but I’m more than capable of figuring things out on my own. I’ve got my own plans, my own sense of what I need. Input’s always welcome, but you don’t have to turn yourself into some one-woman Build Department just to try and help out with things you don’t really understand well to begin with. Remember that I have more than a decade of experience in the medical field. You’re not going to be able to catch up to this, no matter how hard you try, while also continuing to do your own thing.”

Thea blinked, frozen for a moment as her brain caught up to the obvious.

She hadn’t even considered that.

Somewhere along the line, she’d just started assuming it was her job to cover *everyone’s* builds, like they’d fall apart without her input.

She’d been pouring so much energy into trying to figure out Karania’s and Corvus’ setups—despite constantly hitting a wall—that she forgot they were both perfectly capable of handling their own loadouts.

She’d been trying to *force* a solution instead of supporting where it actually made sense.

“I... I guess you’re right...” she admitted, her voice softer now. “I honestly didn’t even think about that. I guess I got wrapped up in trying to be helpful. Thought maybe all those years spent theorycrafting in the arcade weren’t just a waste, y’know? But yeah, I’ll focus on the ones I *can* help with—like Lucas or Isabella. Maybe Desmond. Stuff I understand. No point scrambling to keep pace with people who already know what they’re doing, like you and Corvus.”

Then she gave a small smile. “Still down to bounce ideas though. If you ever get stuck or want a second opinion.”

“Deal,” Karania grinned. “And honestly, I might ask for those lengthy discussions anyway. Just... aim them at build theory instead of my personal choices, yeah? I still don’t think I’m grasping everything I need to avoid making big mistakes in the long run. That’s the part I’d *really* want your help with—no question about it. Corvus too, I promise you.”

Thea nodded so fast she probably looked like a bobblehead. “Any time!”

Then Karania tilted her head and asked, “So—what would be your number one, go-to piece of advice for us right now? Like, if you could only give one thing that we should keep in mind when picking stuff for our builds, to make them really good?”

It caught Thea off-guard, the sudden shift back into theory talk, but she rallied fast.

No way was she going to drop the ball on this one.

“Hmm...” She frowned in thought, then nodded slowly as her brain clicked into gear. “Honestly, after going through a bunch of Abilities recently and comparing them to the builds I know from experience... I’d say this: Don’t fall into the trap of trying to force a SAD build.”

She paused just long enough to clarify. “Single-Attribute Dependency. It’s super tempting—especially if you’ve got a standout Attribute like Isabella’s Strength. It makes all your level-up points feel more impactful, and it’s easier to focus your upgrades. Most games reward you for going all-in like that.”

Her words started flowing more easily now, the topic energizing her.

“And yeah, SAD builds *are* strong. In pretty much every meta I remember, they always had some of the highest potential for raw power. But here? In the Albright System? Most of the Abilities that *make* those builds work are stuck behind higher rarities or Tier locks. We’re still Tier 1. Even if you plan ahead, you won’t be able to execute those builds properly for a while. And the more SAD you go, the less flexible your kit becomes. You end up spending half your Ability slots just trying to *make* everything scale off the same Attribute.”

She caught Karania’s smile out of the corner of her eye and kept going, encouraged.

“MAD builds—Multi-Attribute Dependency—are usually weaker on paper, sure. But they’re way more versatile. You’ve got way more room to adjust your toolkit for whatever comes up. You don’t end up choking your build just trying to force synergy. Conversion Abilities are great, but if your whole strategy is just ‘*make everything run off Strength*’ or something? You’re gonna have a bad time when something doesn’t go according to plan.”

She tapped her chin, words slowing down a bit as she pulled it all together.

“If I had to design builds for everyone, I’d shoot for a balance between the two. Get one or two good conversion Abilities, yeah—but then build around being the best you can be *right now*, not some hypothetical later version of yourself. You can always replace Abilities when you get better options. You *will* have to, anyway, once you start unlocking rarer stuff.”

She let out a breath, realizing she’d kind of gone off on a tangent.

“So, yeah. I guess, in short: Focus on versatility first. Then plug in SAD-style conversion Abilities as you get them. Build toward them gradually. Don’t force it too early, or you’ll lose more than you gain. It’s not worth giving up flexibility just to chase a few extra points of power—especially not when your life’s *literally* on the line like it is for us.”

Thea nodded to herself as she wrapped it up, feeling pretty satisfied with her delivery.

‘Would’ve liked to go deeper into a few parts, but that felt pretty clean overall.’

“Hope that helps all of you. Now, if you’d please back off so we can continue our shopping in peace?” Karania said loudly, voice raised enough to carry, her eyes going beyond Thea.

Thea blinked, startled. “Wait, what?”

She looked around and noticed a small group of Marines sheepishly backing off, mumbling quiet apologies as they shuffled away.

"I think they overheard us earlier," Karania said casually. "Probably hoping to pick up some build advice. You *do* realize we're in the spotlight now, right? They know our faces. Especially yours and mine, after the Awards Ceremony. Don't expect to blend into the background like before. You're gonna get recognized, Thea. People will try to glean information from you wherever you are, on how to get to your level."

Thea blinked again, eyes still tracking the Marines as they dispersed—some throwing quick glances back over their shoulders like they were trying to memorize every word she'd said.

It felt... *weird*.

She wasn't used to this kind of attention. Never had been.

Sure, in games, she'd dealt with it—getting swarmed in a lobby or in chat after pulling off a ranked clutch, being followed around in lobbies, even getting a few creeps now and then.

But there'd always been a log-out button. A way to vanish, to reset the space around her.

Real life didn't come with that option.

The thought hit a little harder than she expected, settling like a weight behind her ribs.

She briefly considered asking the Sovereign to, somehow, do something about it—maybe nudge people away, keep the crowd at bay—but scrapped the idea almost immediately.

Running away was probably easier. Less dramatic.

And besides... the Sovereign wasn't exactly someone she wanted to lean on more than she had to—which, arguably, she had been relying on far too much recently as-is.

Being next to Kara again reminded her of that—of her friend's quiet warnings and offhand remarks about not trusting the ship completely. About not mistaking convenience for safety.

She exhaled slowly and rubbed the back of her neck, still a little thrown.

Her gaze flicked down the aisle and around the store, scanning faces, checking corners.

Too late, obviously, but still.

Her Perception score was high enough that this shouldn't have happened.

She should've *noticed* the crowd creeping closer. The extra eyes. The awkward hush of people trying not to be caught listening.

But she hadn't.

She'd been too locked into the conversation with Kara—too focused on the thrill of being helpful, of actually giving advice that might matter. Despite having zero real-world medical knowledge, she'd still wanted to contribute to her friend's build and success.

To prove she could.

And in doing so, she'd stopped paying attention to anything else.

Thea let out a quiet breath, the corner of her mouth twitching into a frustrated half-smile.

'Some Scout you are...'

Ambushed during downtime, surrounded without even realizing. Not exactly the look the #1 should be rocking.

Mentally, she filed it under 'unacceptable performance.'

'Gotta fix that,' she thought, resolve settling into place. *'Next time, I pay attention—even if I'm just talking builds while out shopping. No excuses.'*

"For what it's worth," Karania's voice cut through her thoughts, calm and warm, "I think your advice was prudent, actionable, and very insightful. I, for one, definitely got a lot out of it. Thanks, Thea."

Thea gave her a small, half-hearted smile.

She could tell Kara was trying to lift her spirits—and honestly, it was working—but the weird weight in her chest didn't vanish completely. The attention, the crowd, the whole *'being known'* thing still sat awkwardly on her shoulders.

Still, she didn't want to drag down their shopping trip with mopey energy.

With a conscious breath, she pushed herself back into a lighter mood.

"No worries! Glad it helped you... and, apparently, half the drive too," she said with a dry chuckle.

She stepped over to the nearby terminal and picked up one of the data-pads resting in its recharging slot—the one right beside the empty space where Karania had taken hers. Thea started flipping through the Skill class listings, eyes scanning the interface as she mentally sorted priorities.

"I've got a whole laundry list of must-take classes from the Rune priest," she muttered, tapping through selections and compiling her tentative schedule. "There's a bunch I want to take for my own interests too... It's gonna be tight. Might need to ask for an exception slip myself..."

"If you do, we can ask Major Quinn together," Karania offered, tone light. "I'm sure if two Alpha Squad members ambush her at once, even the ever-stoic Major will have to hear us out, right?"

She winked.

Thea laughed, picturing it—Karanja with that persuasive glint in her eye, Thea awkwardly trying to make a formal request without shrinking under Quinn's no-nonsense stare.

It was both hilarious... and definitely more than just mildly terrifying.

"Sounds like a plan."

The next several minutes passed in focused silence as Thea finalized her list, occasionally stopping to weigh the pros and cons of certain classes, then moving on.

When she finally finished, a long, tired sigh escaped her lips.

"Lots of classes?" Karania asked, glancing up with interest written all over her face.

Wordlessly, Thea held up her data-pad, letting Kara scroll through it.

"Hmm..." Karania mumbled as she read. "Way more variety than mine. Still heavy on the Research category, though. Yeah, we're definitely gonna need those slips."

She nodded slowly, more to herself than anyone else. "So you're focusing on the Rune priest's recommendations first?"

Thea nodded. "Yeah. I figure he knows what he's doing, and if he's planning on teaching me more stuff down the line, I'd rather not fall behind. Makes sense to prep ahead."

Karanja didn't respond right away.

She stared at the data-pad a little longer, eyebrows furrowed in thought—and that alone was enough to make Thea second-guess herself before she even said anything.

"I think you should message him and double-check that, honestly," Karania finally said. "Like, yeah, [Basic Physics] and [Basic Chemistry] make total sense—especially with your Inheritance. Maybe even [Basic Mathematics] a bit later. But the rest...?"

She glanced up. "Stuff like [Basic Biology] isn't going to matter unless you're heading down a very specific Path, I'd imagine, and based on what you told me about your little shopping spree earlier, you're going to need [Basic Engineering], [Basic Weaponsmithing], and [Basic Material-Science] way earlier than you'll ever touch [Basic Biology]."

Thea opened her mouth to argue—but stopped.

Kara wasn't wrong.

As always.

"Unless," Karania added, smirking, "you plan to let those fancy weapons you bought gather dust for six or seven months while you slowly work through research you don't even need. And something tells me Peria won't exactly be thrilled about that either."

Thea sighed again—this time with a bit more resignation.

Yeah, that *definitely* sounded like something she'd need to fix.

She'd been avoiding messaging the Rune priest for days now, ever since that first intense psychic lesson had left her completely drained.

The whole "Voidborn" revelation hadn't helped either.

That one had lingered like a bad aftertaste, dulling her mood and weighing down her thoughts for longer than she wanted to admit.

She hadn't been ignoring him, exactly... just trying to mentally decompress.

But Kara, as usual, was right.

'I really do need to ask him which classes are actually critical,' Thea thought, rubbing at her temple. *'Which ones are just useful to have as a Veritas... and which ones only matter if I end up going down some specific Path, like Kara mentioned.'*

No point in putting it off anymore.

With a resigned sigh, she pulled out her personal data-pad and transferred over her compiled class list. She flagged the ones the Rune priest had recommended during their last talk, then started typing out a short, polite message detailing her request.

She kept it casual, like he'd told her to, but still respectful. Direct, but not too blunt.

Once finished, she read through it twice, eyes skimming for anything that sounded weird or too stiff. She paused, thumb hovering over the send icon, then glanced sideways.

"Kara, can you check this over real quick? Just tell me I'm not being an idiot?"

She held out the pad without looking, already second-guessing herself.

She wasn't exactly bad at talking to superiors—she'd had more than enough practice her entire life—but the Rune priest was a weird exception.

Not just unfathomably high-ranking, but... strange. Companionable, informal and cryptic, all at once.

She'd gone for a laid-back tone, like he'd asked her to, but part of her worried she'd crossed a line into *'too casual.'*

Karania read the message in silence, eyes flicking down the text.

After a second, she nodded. "Yeah, it's fine. You kept it clear, respectful, and casual—just like he wanted. If anything, I think he'll appreciate you reaching out at all. You *did* say he wanted more of a relaxed teacher-student dynamic, right?"

Thea nodded, relieved, and finally hit send.

“Alright, sent it off. Now I just gotta wait for him to answer... Until then, I guess I start working on Abilities,” Thea mused aloud, Karania nodding alongside her.

“Sounds like a good idea. I’m about to finish up my Skill classes as well here, but take your time. I might check through some Abilities as well afterwards, I could use some to fill out my Passives—so if you stumble upon some that might fit, send ‘em my way?”

“Will do,” Thea replied, before opening up the Ability section of the System Store, and dived back into her own build for once...

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- Skill Class Selection: Thea McKay -

Action:

- [Basic Scouting]
- [Basic Sniping]
- [Basic Stealth]
- [Basic Overwatch Tactics]
- [Basic First-Aid]
- [Basic Tracking]
- [Basic Outdoor Survival]

Research:

- [Basic Physics]
- [Basic Chemistry]
- [Basic Mathematics]
- [Basic Biology]
- [Basic Engineering]
- [Basic Electronics]
- [Basic Material Science]
- [Basic System Material Science]
- [Basic Photonics]
- [Basic Weaponsmithing]
- [Basic Equipment Design]
- [Basic Laser-Weaponry Design]
- [Basic Ballistic-Weaponry Design]
- [Basic Gauss-Weaponry Design]
- [Basic Armoursmithing]
- [Basic Light-Type Armour Design]

Knowledge:

- [Basic Allbright System History]
- [Basic Human History]
- [Basic History of Technology]

- [Basic Old-Tech History]
- [Basic New-Tech History]
- [Basic Next-Tech Philosophies]
- [Basic Linguistics]