

Volume 2 - Chapter 21 - Review

Thea was abruptly ripped from her sleep by the feeling of weightlessness.

“Wuaaah—!” she yelped, flailing around blindly as panic surged through her.

Her eyes flew wide open, needing a moment to adjust to the sudden brightness before she found herself staring at Isabella’s face—tilted sideways and thoroughly annoyed.

“Enough of whatever cozy snuggle party this is. I need you,” Isabella ordered bluntly, leaving no room for argument.

Before Thea could even form a protest, she felt herself effortlessly moved alongside Isabella, rotated ninety degrees as if she were nothing more than an oversized pillow, and deposited firmly onto the couch, right next to an intrigued and highly amused Karania.

“What... what is happening here?!” Thea blurted out, still trying to shake off the confusion of her sudden and undeniably rude awakening.

Instead of offering an explanation, Isabella simply dropped herself heavily onto the couch beside Thea, the weight of her heavy frame causing the entire couch to rock noticeably. Without another word, she gestured impatiently toward someone else—Lucas.

Thea only now noticed Lucas standing there as well, offering her an apologetic, exhausted glance, clearly exasperated by whatever had been going on before she woke up.

“Show them the thing,” Isabella commanded in a listless tone, before snapping her head sharply toward Karania. “You’re watching this too. I need your freaky brain for this.”

It wasn’t a request. It was a simple statement of fact—an order.

Thea’s eyes darted toward Karania’s at that, meeting them briefly. They exchanged a quiet understanding: whatever had happened was clearly serious—for Isabella especially.

While Isabella was brash, brutally honest, and straightforward at all times, she still respected hierarchy. Within Alpha Squad, none of them outranked each other, so Isabella wouldn’t normally resort to ordering any of them around like this—not unless Corvus himself had authorized it or the situation was dire enough for her to take matters into her own hands.

Something had rattled her badly; that much was now obvious.

Thea shook her head gently, trying to clear away the last of the groggy confusion from her abrupt awakening, before turning her attention toward the large screen Lucas was manipulating.

It was Alpha Squad’s main data screen, which served multiple purposes: A TV for entertainment, a presentation device that Corvus loved to use for squad briefings, and a complex 3D modelling and design tool—though they’d barely had a chance to use it for anything complicated since joining the UHFMC.

It didn't take long for Lucas to finish setting everything up.

After he'd double-checked the settings one last time, he sank down onto a nearby cushioned armchair, exhaustion clearly etched into his face. With a quick wave of two fingers toward Isabella, he transferred control of the screen to her.

"Go ahead," he said with a long sigh, as if bracing himself.

Without waiting even a second, Isabella started the video playback.

It was immediately clear the footage had come from the training hall down on the Recruit deck.

On the screen, Isabella was effortlessly dismantling one of their fellow Recruits.

For just a moment, Thea thought Isabella might've simply wanted to show off her latest combat moves—until she glanced sideways and caught the intense, grim look on Isabella's face, her eyes locked onto the screen as if hunting for something specific.

Thea quickly threw her earlier assumption away.

"I ran into some... *trouble*," Isabella finally said as the video kept going, another figure stepping into the sparring ring with her. Thea's breath caught painfully in her throat as she instantly recognized the newcomer.

'*That fucking bitch...*' she thought, a sudden flare of anger igniting in her chest at the sight of Rachel Masters, the Defensive Heavy from Beta Squad who'd seriously pissed her off during the Awards Ceremony.

"You ran into trouble, *how*?" Thea pressed, trying to hide the confusion in her voice. She genuinely couldn't see why Isabella would ever consider Masters a problem, especially in a one-on-one match.

She'd sparred with Isabella more than enough—even before the enormous boosts in Abilities and Attributes they'd all gotten after the Assessment—to know that nobody in their entire drive could realistically match her, much less pose an actual threat.

Isabella should've been able to easily wipe the floor with Masters.

"Just fucking watch," Isabella snapped back, but there wasn't any real heat in her tone—just a bone-deep exhaustion Thea rarely heard from her normally self-confident and brash squadmate.

Concerned now, Thea glanced at Karania sitting next to her and saw the same cautious worry reflected on her friend's face. Karania leaned forward just slightly, fully alert and focused, eyes narrowing in thought.

Whatever they were about to see, Isabella clearly considered it serious enough to shake her deeply—and that realization alone was enough to put Thea on edge.

The four of them watched in complete silence as the footage played out.

Thea's initial irritation toward Rachel Masters faded almost immediately—replaced by something much colder. Something more uncomfortable.

Her eyes stayed locked on the screen, barely blinking as the match unfolded, and with every passing second, her sense of disbelief deepened.

She had *vastly* underestimated the Masters girl.

What she'd expected to be a one-sided demolition quickly turned into something else entirely—something brutal, surgical and undeniably impressive.

While neither of them managed to do much damage at the start, it became obvious fast who was setting the rhythm.

Rachel wasn't just keeping up with Isabella—she was leading the fight.

Every time Isabella shifted her stance or changed her approach, Rachel was already there, cutting her off, adapting faster, smarter. It was like she had an answer ready for every possible variation Isabella had in her toolbox and threw at her.

Thea had fought Isabella more than a few times herself.

She was an absolute force of nature in close quarters—relentless, overpowering and unforgiving of mistakes. But now? She looked like *she* was the one struggling to keep up.

And then the moment came.

Rachel shoved her shield into Isabella's torso, hard.

Thea's heart skipped a beat as she watched Rachel twist her stance, her helmet getting torn open by Isabella's Decimator... and then the front of the shield exploded.

A miniature detonation, just large enough to punch a hole clean through Isabella's chest.

The recording caught the entire thing in crystal clarity—the blood, the recoil, the exact angle of impact.

Thea flinched slightly, hand twitching toward her own sternum as if to check it was still there.

But even then... even with her heart blown out of her chest... Isabella didn't stop.

Thea could barely breathe as she watched her squadmate surge forward again in a fury that was more monster than human.

There was no strategy left in her movements—just raw violence, and the hint of an edge Thea had never seen in Isabella's movements before: Desperation.

A storm of motion, smashing into Rachel and dragging her to the ground. What followed was messy, chaotic, almost hard to watch.

Isabella giving up her remaining arm, her shoulder... just to beat Rachel's head in with a blood-soaked helmet until the woman stopped moving altogether.

And then, Isabella simply sat there.

A broken mess of blood and ruin, slumped over the lifeless body of her opponent.

The screen froze on that final image.

No one spoke.

The silence that followed was heavy, stretching through the room like a storm that hadn't yet touched down. Thea's heart was still pounding, her thoughts an absolute blur.

It had been a victory, yes—but only technically.

In any real battle, Isabella wouldn't have made it another minute without immediate and severe levels of medical attention.

She'd won the fight. But just barely.

And by the look on her face now, even Isabella didn't believe it had been a win worth celebrating.

Thea finally understood why Isabella was looking so grim.

'A Defensive Heavy beating an Offensive Heavy...' Thea thought uneasily. 'It's not impossible, I suppose, but it must hurt like hell for someone as prideful as Isabella.'

She'd seen it countless times herself, back when she spent hours each day in the Golden Age Arcade, trying out every game and meta combination she could find. There had been times when tankier, more defensive characters dominated the rankings, easily beating out fighters built purely for aggressive damage-dealing.

Rachel Masters had just perfectly demonstrated why that could happen: If you couldn't break through the shield user's defences, you'd eventually get crushed.

It was a lesson Thea had learned a long time ago—but that had been inside a video game.

Real life, she knew, was supposed to be different. It was rare, maybe even unheard of, for someone to put so much time into perfecting the art of using a shield—a defensive tool—as their main attacking weapon, especially just for duelling.

*'But then again...' she thought, recalling the Rune priest's words from earlier, 'the video games were supposedly all designed specifically to simulate post-Integration System-enhanced combat. Sure, the games have conveniences and features that real life lacks... But the Rune priest **did** say that if something was possible in the game, it could also happen here, if you just took the time to adapt to the lack of those conveniences...'*

She swallowed hard, eyes flicking back toward the dark, tired expression Isabella wore, the raw frustration practically radiating off her friend.

The realization was deeply unsettling.

Maybe she had severely underestimated just *how* similar the real world had become to those simulated battles she'd spent her whole life mastering.

"So," Isabella finally broke the awkward silence, gesturing toward the screen before her eyes shifted expectantly between Thea and Karania, "thoughts?"

Thea struggled to find any words at all, still stunned by what she'd just witnessed, but Karania, oddly enough, seemed entirely too eager to start talking.

"Can I remove your heart and see how your body functions without it?"

Thea blinked.

The words replayed themselves in her head, but they still didn't make sense.

Slowly, she turned her head toward Karania, tilting it in disbelief. She wasn't alone—Lucas and Isabella both stared at the medic in stunned silence.

"What?" Karania asked flatly, glancing around at the shocked faces. "You don't think it's fascinating how she was still fighting? [Redundant Organs], obviously, but there must be some serious biological changes for that Ability to work properly. I mean, there's *gotta* be something visible on an operating table, no?"

Still, no one said a word, their eyes locked onto Karania as if she'd grown a second head.

With a dramatic sigh, Karania waved her hand in the air, trying to clear the awkward atmosphere. "Fiiine... About the fight: Masters beat your ass. There's no other way to say it. The only reason you won is because she didn't know you had [Redundant Organs]. Maybe she didn't even know the Ability existed. But I wouldn't bet on that, seeing as she's a Major Legacy."

She reached toward the screen, her hand grasping at thin air, taking control of the video playback. The recording rapidly rewound, stopping suddenly on a single frame.

"This," she said sharply, tapping a finger towards the screen, "is the moment I realized you were absolutely screwed, Isabella."

Thea's eyes snapped to the image displayed, freezing at the exact instant of... their second exchange.

"That early, huh? *Fuck*." Isabella accepted the feedback without arguing, visibly frustrated.

She continued with a deep sigh, "At that point, I genuinely still thought I had her... It was only later, when she started countering my Abilities like they didn't even matter, that I realized just *how* fucked I really was. Haven't had my ass handed to me like that since... Well, since I was training under my old Master, way back in the Mercs. Fuck!"

Isabella stomped her foot against the floor, hard. The impact sent a small tremor through the living room, leaving a visible dent in the flooring before it quickly repaired itself.

"The reason is Masters' control. Just watch her movements—completely precise, absolutely confident, no scrambling or hesitation," Karania explained, slowly advancing the recording frame-by-frame to highlight her points. "Every step she takes is perfectly planned. She's not struggling or scrambling at all; she's methodically positioning herself every step of the way."

She paused the video, turning pointedly toward Isabella. "You, of all people, should *recognize* what this means. This isn't her first fight against someone like you. Not exactly like you, of course, given how surprised she was by [Redundant Organs], but someone with a very similar weapon and fighting style. And not just once or twice, either. The sheer level of confidence and instant adaptation tells me she's done this hundreds—maybe even thousands—of times."

"Fucking how?!" Isabella snapped back, frustration clearly rising again. "We've been Integrated for barely a month, most of which was spent in the Assessment! There's absolutely *no* chance she fought that many Offensive Heavies one-on-one already. None. And even if she's a Legacy, Major or otherwise, there's no way she could've learned to handle a Full-Cover Shield like that before Integration. Sure, maybe some lighter variant for training purposes—but being this skilled and comfortable already with the real thing? No fucking way."

As Isabella finished speaking, Thea could see some of her usual spark coming back.

Even though she was still clearly frustrated and confused, simply talking things out seemed to help Isabella regain some confidence, bit by bit.

Karania nodded thoughtfully, humming in agreement. "You're not wrong there... Even if she practiced with a shield of a similar size, the weight difference alone, even with all her post-Integration Strength, would still take a lot of time to adjust to. Maybe she's just a prodigy or something? Or perhaps she paid—"

"Video games," Thea suddenly blurted out, interrupting Karania and instantly drawing everyone's attention.

"*What?*" Karania and Isabella asked simultaneously, confusion evident on their faces.

"Video games," Thea repeated with more confidence, her eyes brightening as the idea formed clearly in her mind. "That's how. She learned how to use the shield and fight properly by practicing it in video games, and then she brought that muscle memory with her when she Integrated."

Now everyone was looking at Thea like she'd grown a second head.

'So that's how that feels, huh?' she thought.

Letting out a sigh, she decided the best thing she could do was just explain herself properly. "Listen, earlier during the Psychic Lesson, the Rune priest told me about this. It was just a

casual remark—barely more than a footnote—but he explained that all the video games we grew up with and love to bits—"

At this, Isabella, Lucas, and Karania shot each other questioning looks that clearly said, '*Do we, though?*'

Ignoring their confusion, Thea pressed forward. "They were created primarily by Terra. He said it was some sort of galaxy-wide psyop, teaching people about Integration, the System, and how to fight... All those character builds, abilities, and even combat styles in the games—they were designed *specifically* to mimic post-Integration. Off the top of my head, there are at least three games I've personally played that would have let Masters practice fighting someone almost *exactly* like you; given the right parameters."

She gestured pointedly at Isabella, who was now looking at her like she had sprouted a third head between the other two.

"Okay, I get how crazy it sounds, alright?" Thea admitted with a wave of her hands. "But I'm serious. The Rune priest *directly* confirmed it. And looking back, he's honestly completely right—so much about the System, our Abilities, our Attributes, even how I ended up helping you guys figure out your builds—it all came straight from those *same* games. Terra intentionally made them for *exactly* this kind of preparation, after all. And Masters is a Major Legacy, right? She would've grown up *knowing* just how important those games actually would be. Her parents or trainers probably drilled her endlessly on them, created special training scenarios for her, made sure she practiced every day against all kinds of opponents and builds she'd face after Integration...!"

Isabella still looked skeptical, her eyes narrowing slightly as she crossed her muscular arms over her chest. "You absolutely sure you didn't just mishear or misunderstand something the Rune priest said?"

She shook her head slowly, clearly not quite sold on the idea. "I mean...video games as secret combat training programs? Terra running some galaxy-wide psyop through every game? Sounds pretty damn wild, Thea, not gonna lie..."

Lucas nodded in agreement, rubbing the back of his neck with uncertainty. "Yeah, I have to admit it sounds...a little far-fetched, even for Terra. I mean, think about just *how many* people we're talking about here. We're not just talking millions or billions, we're talking trillions upon trillions of people across the *entire* galaxy. You really think anyone could plan and manage something on that huge of a scale? Even Terra?"

Thea shifted uncomfortably, opening her mouth to defend herself, when Karania suddenly cut in, surprising them all.

"Actually, if you stop and think about it," she began thoughtfully, "Thea's theory isn't as impossible as it sounds. If we assume for a moment that she's right—that video games were specifically designed to prepare everyone for the System—it would explain literally *everything* we just saw."

She gestured at the paused fight footage on the screen, then pointed at Isabella directly. "The way Masters moved, her positioning, her perfect counters and adaptability—this makes total sense if she practiced this exact scenario hundreds of times in simulated environments. Honestly? Given everything we know, this theory is actually the most logical explanation right now. Unless we want to go with the idea that she's just a once-in-a-millennia prodigy of some kind."

She glanced toward Thea, a faint smirk forming on her face. "Besides, out of *all* the topics Thea might not pay close attention to and potentially misunderstand as a result, do you *seriously* think video games would ever be one of them? This is Thea we're talking about here."

Isabella and Lucas paused, considering Karania's argument.

Slowly, their expressions softened, turning from skepticism to thoughtful acceptance.

Isabella let out another sigh, nodding reluctantly.

"You know what? That's fair," Isabella finally conceded, glancing toward Lucas, who was also nodding along in agreement. "If there's *one* thing Thea wouldn't screw up hearing about, it's definitely video games."

Lucas chuckled softly, offering Thea an apologetic shrug. "Yeah, true. Can't really argue that one. Sorry about that, Thea. Just sounds so... Massive in scale, y'know?"

Thea stared at the three of them in silence, feeling a rush of heat spread across her cheeks as embarrassment and exasperation settled in. She couldn't help but feel absolutely exposed by how they talked about her like she wasn't even there.

'Damn, they're just openly roasting me now, huh?' she thought, feeling the urge to sink deeper into the couch to escape their knowing glances.

But for once, she pushed in the opposite direction.

"With some of the games I played, it would absolutely be possible. And I'm 100% sure I heard the Rune priest correctly. I bet even the Sovereign would confirm it if we asked her directly... But none of that *really* matters, aside from knowing that Masters has some seriously scary skill now. I mean... We kind of knew that already from the ceremony, but this is different. She's a *problem*," Thea explained firmly, forcing herself past the embarrassment and staying focused on the issue at hand.

"She's obviously going to challenge Lucas for his spot. We all know that. So we need to help him get ready for it. I doubt the challenge will be a straightforward one-on-one fight like we just watched, but... With all due respect, Lucas, Masters is worlds above in terms of individual skill as a Defensive Heavy right now. If we don't want to lose you to her challenge, we need a solid plan to make sure you come out on top—whatever form that challenge takes."

Lucas visibly tensed at that, anxiety flickering briefly across his face, but he nodded slowly along with the rest of the squad.

“You’re right,” he admitted quietly. “Honestly, after seeing her fight Isabella like this... It’s impressive, for sure. More than a little intimidating. I’d really appreciate any help I can get.”

Clap!

Everyone’s attention snapped toward Isabella, who had suddenly slapped her hands together, instantly changing the mood in the room.

“Oh, right! Build Advisor, advise my build! Is this Ability any good?” Isabella declared abruptly, shifting the entire conversation. “I wanted to drop it, but Lucas insisted I ask you first, since you’re our resident Psyker-lady and all that.”

Before Thea could even react, Isabella had already shoved a projection from her System Interface directly in front of Thea’s face.

[Passive (Gold) - Iron Will - Level 0]

Requirements: 6 Strength, 6 Vitality

Description: *Grants the participant a flat bonus to their total Resolve, equal to a portion of their currently equipped armour's Armour Rating Value. This bonus is doubled against effects that do not directly target the participant.*

Scaling Factor: 25%

Thea’s eyes widened dramatically as she read the description.

“What the fuck...? Where did you even get this?!” she blurted out, her mind racing to grasp just how good this Ability actually was for Isabella.

This was undeniably top-tier Anti-Psyker material.

Especially after seeing what the Rune priest had demonstrated with just a simple fireball—how even the most basic of Psyker attacks could annihilate someone instantly—Thea knew Resolve was going to be a *must-have*.

And not just for her, but for the *entire* squad.

Even with Thea herself around to weaken Psyker attacks, she couldn’t babysit Alpha Squad every second of every fight. She was a Scout/Sniper first; staying close to Lucas’ shield or Isabella’s massive guns all the time simply wasn’t realistic.

“The Accomplishment,” Isabella answered casually, completely oblivious to Thea’s internal panic. “You know, the one we got for killing those two loser Psykers during the Assessment. So, is this good or not...?”

“Yes! Fucking yes, Ela!” Thea practically shouted, rubbing her temples to keep herself calm.

Then she turned quickly to Lucas. “Lucas, you’re a fucking saint for stopping Ela from doing something so incredibly stupid. Seriously, *thank you*.”

“Hey!” Isabella immediately protested.

"You're an idiot, Ela! Never, ever consider throwing out an Ability of the highest rarity we've ever gotten access to without talking to me first, you absolute moron!" Thea snapped back, frustration mixing with disbelief as she took a breath to steady herself again.

"Look... Resolve isn't just important, it's *critical*. The Rune priest showed me what offensive Psykers can do and trust me—it's bad. Really, *really* bad. I'll explain it in more detail when the rest of the Squad is back, but just believe me for now: You need as much Resolve as you can possibly get. And this Ability right here?"

She tapped the projection emphatically.

"It practically fixes your *entire* build by *itself*. As a Passive! It's... incredible. Like jackpot levels of '*the System loves you*' incredible. You could've gotten literally *any* random Anti-Psyker Ability, but this one is basically *made* for you specifically. It's ridiculous how lucky you got."

Everyone had fallen quiet now, just staring at her, but Thea didn't even notice.

"Armour Rating Value," she continued, almost talking to herself now. "That's a term I've seen in tons of games before... It refers directly to your armour's protective strength—its material, thickness, type—everything combined into one simple number. Sure, it drops as the armour takes hits and damage, but it's still perfect for you. You're an Offensive Heavy; your armour's already thick enough to get massive value out of it. In the future, we'll probably want to min-max your ARV even more, just to boost the Ability further, but—HEY!"

Her explanation was abruptly cut off as Isabella lifted her into the air, slinging her effortlessly over her shoulder like she was nothing more than a sack of potatoes.

Karania, completely unfazed by this sudden development, raised an eyebrow curiously. "And what exactly are you doing, Isabella? Thea wasn't finished, and we still haven't even talked about Lucas' issues yet."

"What does it look like I'm doing?! I'm working on both!" Isabella huffed in response, clearly impatient as she gestured sharply toward Lucas and Karania. "That's exactly why you two are coming too. Otherwise, this is *obviously* all pointless."

"Coming where?" Lucas asked, sounding thoroughly confused.

"Thea said this armour-rating-whatever-thingy was in her games, right? I need visuals to actually get how this stuff works. And you," Isabella jabbed a finger directly at Lucas, "need more experience with your equipment and fighting style anyway. So we're going to the only place on this damned ship where we can do both of those at the same time: The Arcade."

Without waiting for any kind of response, Isabella strode confidently toward the exit, a protesting and squirming Thea held tightly over her shoulder while Lucas and Karania exchanged a hesitant look before finally giving up and trailing after her...