

Chapter 58

Mid April - One Month Later

PLACEHOLDER

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“Unbelievable...” Christopher Lennon muttered to himself, stylus tapping at the pad set against the thigh of his crossed legs as he reviewed the numbers for the hundredth time in 3 weeks. He wasn’t supposed to have them. Parameter Testing results tended to make the rounds—especially impressive ones—but they weren’t *actually* a public thing. And, from their own mouth, Firesong had had to take their exams segregated from the rest of their class, making the school rumormill even less dependable than usual. But Valera Dent had judged the information appropriate to share when Chris had asked. After all, it had been mostly *his* records that had been broken.

His *second year* records...

Rei had just edged him out in the Speed & Agility test, beating his 78-discs by a single point with 79. Offense & Endurance was pretty close, too, with both of them having hit the 2nd B9, but the brat managing it some 17 seconds faster at 5:34.18 to Chris’ 5:51:65.

And as for *Defense*... well... Better *not* to think about the fact that Rei had apparently been *capped* at A0, beating out not only Chris’ B9, but matching the best scores the then-second-year *Phalanxes* had managed. As a first year.

And it wasn’t even the last parameter test of the semester.

“Juuust when you start to think you’re hot shit,” Chris said with a laugh, swiping Rei’s numbers away. The others’ results were distinctly less extreme at a glance, but still

worth whistling at when circumstances were taken into consideration. Aria had consistently had the second best Defense score of the class, but she'd outdone herself this time by eclipsing everyone else by 4 whole ranks. Similarly, Logan's Offense & Endurance—always at the top—now left Kastro Vademe and Laquita Martin vying for a very distant third place. Chancery was still in the top 10% of everything *but* was improving faster than most, and while many would have been alarmed that Viv had only slightly edged out her previous numbers, Chris was more than impressed given she'd still been recovering at the time of the exam. She'd been pulled off light duty since—*finally*—and he was willing to bet that if she took it again *today*, she'd shatter every expected metric. He was still attending their extra training hours—as was Dice—so he was confident in that assessment.

But—after Rei—it was *Catcher* who Chris could only shake his head at the most.

“Hey handsome. Fancy seeing you here.”

Chris blinked, looking around from his seat near the middle of the Arena's east stands.

“Speak of the devil,” he said with a smile as he found his girlfriend walking up the row towards him, school bag over one shoulder, cap in hand while she used it to fan at her flushed face.

“Aww, you just say just the sweetest things sometimes, you know?” Reaching him, she bent down for a quick kiss. “Does that mean you were thinking of me?”

“You could say that,” Chris answered, watching her drop her bag to the floor before claiming the seat on his left. “How was combat training?”

“Hell.” Dice groaned as she pretended to melt against the projected back that promptly appeared to accept her weight. “I *actually* think Bentley has it out for me.”

“He doesn't,” Lennon assured her with a laugh, returning his attention to the pad still propped against his thigh. “He just wants to pull everything he can out of you while we're still here.”

“Easy for you to say, golden boy,” she grumbled in answer. “Just cause you still train with the Duelists doesn’t mean we *all* get treated like you do.” When he didn’t answer after a second, her eyes dropped to the tablet. “Whatcha doing? Studying?”

“Take a look.” He handed it to her. “Wonder what you’ll think.”

Sitting up straight again, Dice accepted the pad, taking the numbers in with interest. After a second, she frowned.

“Catcher’s Parameter Test results? Didn’t you show me these a couple weeks ago?”

“Sure did.”

“So?”

“So he’s in the top 25% of the class in everything.”

“Right...?” Dice gave him an odd look. “Again... We talked about this.”

“We thought that was pretty low, given where the rest of the squad ranked.”

An eyebrow rose. Interest further peeked. “Yeah...?”

“So... I got curious. Asked Dent if she’d let me see his *previous* results.” Chris reached over, swiping up, once, twice, three times. “Take a look. Those are his baseline results from the start of the year. Then his Q1 results, then Q2.”

Dice slowly swiped between the value sheets, going back and forth here and there. It didn’t take a her long to see what he was trying to show her.

“Oh. Woah.”

“Right?”

“Top 45% at baseline,” she muttered. “Then top 40%, *then* top 35%.”

“And then...” Chris swiped down one more time, to the recent Q3 results.

“Top 25%,” Dent finished for him, nodding. “Damn... That’s a jump.” Her eyes flew across the screen, and she flipped up and down between the pages a few more times. “I mean improving makes sense given all the extra hours they’re putting in and his squad, but... that’s a *jump*.”

“Makes you wonder, doesn’t it?”

Dice frowned again as she looked back up and around at him.

“About what?”

Chris grinned, eyes on the main floor of the Arena and the massive Neutral Zone variation projected across the entirety of its 150 meter expanse.

“What else is going on with them?”

On the field, the Wargames was a bloodbath. It being Wednesday afternoon, the first years were having their collective training day, and the supervising instructors--Michael Bretz and Liam Gross—had apparently decided it was worth getting some practice in with the Battle Royale format that had been gaining a *lot* of popularity in the last year. 64 combatants *always* led to some measure of chaos, but most of the time the format meant a brutal free-for-all until the last man was left standing—or mostly standing, as was often the case.

When any portion of Firesong was on the field, though, the rules apparently changed.

Of the 5 members of the team that had been drawn for this particular match, 4 were still in the running. Aria had gotten swarmed out the gate, but it had taken 4 of her fellow classmates to bring her down, 2 of whom she’d taken while *also* leaving the remaining pair pretty critically wounded. Chancery, similarly, was currently holding her own against a trio who’d clearly formed a truce until she was dealt with, while Logan was currently facing off against another 4 of his own. He’d managed to find a joint set of raised white pillars to put his back to, making him impossible to flank, and it was clear his opponents were struggling to find an opening *and* watch their own sides given they could be stabbed in the back at any moment. Viv and Catcher, meanwhile, had managed to find each other in the mess, and were fighting hip-to-hip again no less than 7 classmates. They’d been pressed up to the very border of the fields’ south wall, their

assailants forming a half-oval around them, but like with Logan the attacks came careful, calculated.

“That’s not gonna go well for them,” Chris muttered.

“No it’s not,” Dice agreed, apparently following his eyes to the same fight.

Sure enough, within 15 seconds, Viv made her move. He could see the moment arrive. A Lancer whose name he didn’t know stepped slightly too far sideways from the end of the pack. Abruptly, she was alone—if only by an extra foot.

It was enough.

“*Now*,” Chris and Dice said together.

Viv’s timing was so perfect, they could have thought she’d heard them.

In a flash of movement that she wouldn’t have been capable of a couple weeks ago, she’d flanked the Lancer, coming in from the side. Ordinarily the girl *should* have seen her move, *should* have been able to react at least in some way.

Having both been on the receiving end of Endwalker, though, Chris and Dice knew better.

Down the poor girl went, twin blades taking her fully through the ribs. There was a yell of alarm as the 7 abruptly became 6, but to their credit of their opponents the ring immediately tightened around Viv and Catcher.

“They’ll probably manage another two or three, and then go down,” Chris muttered, eyes moving to scan the field again. “These kids are *all* good. Dent’s done a hell of a job with them.”

“She’s done a hell of a job with *all* of us,” Dice corrected.

Chris nodded in agreement, finding Logan again. His 4 were now 3—a Saber Chris thought might have been named ‘Selleck’ was in the process of being pulled down through the field floor—but at some point he looked to have also taken a hit to his left arm. He was clearly having trouble wielding his ax as efficiently as before. His remaining opponents, though, weren’t pressing the advantage. Which was smart of them.

“He’s not already burned out, so he’s still got Overclock in the barrel.” Dice read his mind, following his eyes again. “He’ll take two of them, and go down to the third.”

Given two of the three were first-years Chris recognized, he had to agree. The third he didn’t know, but Jack Benali and Hannah Tether had both been individual qualifiers at Sectionals in December. Logan was good—and improving—but, especially injured, he wasn’t *that* good.

Yet.

“Oh, *good* timing, girly.”

Suspecting what Dice had seen, Chris’ eyes flicked to Chancery. Like Logan, she’d downed one of her original 3 assailants, but she looked like she’d managed to do so unscathed. Even better, she’d just triggered Warband. Chris caught the last second of her leaping lunge, the Ability creating a mirage of attack angles. The Phalanx he didn’t recognize did an *excellent* job of responding, immediately picking two of the three spears coming at him to place his own spear and shield in front of. The exact most probably directions. More than a 67% chance he’d picked correctly.

Chancery’s Device took him through the throat anyway.

“She’s getting better with that Ability every day,” Chris commented, nodding in approval as the Lancer followed through with the attack with a forward roll that brought her clear of the sword slashing at her back, wielded by the Saber that was her last remaining opponent. “If she manages to charge it up again, she’ll take the top spot.”

“Chicken dinner,” Dice answered in what *seemed* to be an agreement.

Chris blinked in surprise, then looked around at her.

“... What?”

He couldn’t tell if the red in his girlfriend’s cheeks was embarrassment, or some remaining flush from combat training.

“No idea,” she admitted with a shrug, refusing to look around at him. “Just something I once heard Dent say when I managed to win one of these things.”

Chris stared at her for a second.

Then decided he didn't *want* to know what the hell that could be about.

As it turned out, they were almost exactly right on the money. Logan was forced to trigger Overclock when all 3 attacks came at him at once, and he managed to FDA not only the Saber Chris didn't know, but Hannah Tethers as well. Jack Benali had expertly used the other two as easy temptations, moving around Logan's form as the fires rippled over the Maulers armor so that the other two stayed closer at hand and easier to engage. He waited until the Overclock ran its course, then put his fist through Logan's back just as the ion flames flickered out and the big man sagged in exhaustion. Chancery, meanwhile, dispatched her last remaining opponent without much trouble as expected, but Viv and Catcher managed to collectively take down not 'two or three', but actually *four* of the 6 that had had the surrounded. Catcher's Ruinous actually did most of the work, FDAing a Brawler outright *and* doing some serious damage to a nearby Duelist and Saber, both of whom Viv had dispatched with the precision of the predator sniffing out wounded prey. The remaining 3 had taken advantage to do some serious damage, though, and Viv had only managed to get a sword through the eye of one of them before she and Catcher had fallen.

The field thinned significantly by that point, Chris and Dice just waited, following Chancery's quick movement across the field, nodding or clapping lightly every time she took down another opponent. As they might have bet, 5 minutes later it came down to her and Benali. Unfortunately the Brawler seemed to have taken damage to his left leg at some point Chris hadn't caught, pretty much deciding the final face off even before spear met fist.

"All opponent eliminated. Winner: Chancery Cashe."

They clapped a little louder as the Arena announcement ended, which earned them both some wide-eyed stares from across the floor. While Chris ignored them, he was exactly *zero* percent surprised when Dice smiled and waved. He'd had been there the whole time, having sat in from the stands opposite the group from the start of training, but he hadn't bothered to try to meet any of their eyes.

Of the pair of them, his girlfriend had *always* been the extroverted one.

"Good work, Cashel!" they hear Michael Bretz shout from the raised viewing disc he shared with Liam Gross. "Everyone gather up on the track! We'll review while Group 2 gets set up!"

"Group 2!" Gross shouted as the disc began to drop. "On deck!"

As one, that second half of the class that had partially just been staring across the Arena stood up and started making for the underworks entrance. Chris couldn't help himself looking, but any hint of white hair was lost against the shuffling grey of the first-year combat suits.

"*This* should be fun," Dice said through a low laugh.

Chris smiled, but didn't answer. He'd been sitting there for an hour already.

He *knew* it was fun.

While Bretz and Gross spoke to the first combat group from the disc just above where they 64 of them stood in 4 lines in the buffer track around the floor, Group 2 was soon trickling steadily out onto the projection plating. The red starting circles were a little harder to see from up in the stands, but each first year found their assigned place—they would have been a bright blue in-frame, Chris knew from experience—until all of them were in their starting position. Some just stood there, waiting, while other stretched or bounced up and down on their feet. When he finally found Rei, Chris was unsurprised to find that the kid was amongst the latter, arms swinging front to back to loosen up his shoulders and chest.

2 minutes later, the officers were in the air again, and the field came alive once more.

Oh this would be fun, Chris thought smirk, watching the projected air turn thick and sooty and the light shift into shades of black and bright red.

“Field: Volcanic Slopes.”

“Ooph,” Dice muttered. “That sucks. Always hated getting *blasted* in the face with that heat, as a first year.”

“Less of a problem for some,” Chris pointed out with another chuckle.

“Battle Royale.” The announcement returned. “64 User. 1 winner. Combatants... Call.”

It *was* something special, seeing so many CADs light up at once. Chris hadn’t seen it in person at a professional SCT yet, but he had to imagine it was an incredible sight given that watching a bunch of *first years* do so was still *really* cool. Vysetrium flared up like dozens of different colored candles all across the floor. Armor appeared, showing the standard range of coverage that was typical early in development.

And in their midst, standing lightly north and east of center, a single figure covered in black steel accented in glowing blue.

... *four, five, ... maybe six...*?

“Six,” Chris decided aloud, making Dice look around at him.

“Six?” she repeated. “Six what?”

“Six classmates nearby who’ve been eyeing him,” Chris said with a wicked smile, unable to stop himself leaning forward in his seat. “Dudes about to get jumped.”

“Huh,” Dice grunted, placing a hand on his back out of habit. “Almost makes you feel bad.”

Chris shot her a dubious look.

“For... him?”

“Na... For *them*.”

“Combatants... Fight.”