

CHAPTER 61

PLACEHOLDER

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While it had taken him some months to get used to it, Rei'd always been aware that there was something *really* nice about knowing he could call on Phalanx-Mode with a thought. It was—naturally—the least useful of his growing bag of tricks when it came to damage dealing, and he might as well have been bolted to the ground compared to the agility of his Brawler—or even *Saber*—form. But there was just something comforting—even if he didn't always pull the trigger—in knowing that he *could* summon a massive wall of steel between himself and whatever it was that was most likely attempting to separate him of figurative life and limb.

Logan had robbed him of that sense of security 2 minutes into their first test match.

WHAM-WHAM-CLANG-WHAM!

Even coming in at 9 ranks higher and packing A-Ranked Defense as a Phalanx, Rei was half-convinced—for the *fourth* time in the last 10 minutes or so—that his arm was going to break. Once again he was forced backwards foot by foot, step by step as Logan followed his retreated. Honoris fell again and again in a blaze of ion flames, crashing against Shido's shield in a thunder of monstrous blows that felt as fast as they were endless. Rei took them without rebuttal, accepted the assault without counterattack. It was the point of the exercise, to be the practice dummy.

But even as a dummy, his being pushed back was *very* real.

CRUNCH!

Rei cursed out loud as one hit dug into his battered shield at just the right angle, the red-outlined edge of Honoris' upper tip finally managing to just punch through the

heavy metal. Instantly it was gone again, wrenched free to continue its storm of attacks. Rei took advantage to peer through the inch-wide gash that the axe had left behind, taking Logan in through the hole.

Unlike Viv and Catcher, the Mauler hadn't seen much change in his armor that had already protected his limbs up to the shoulders and hips. Finer lines of red vysetrium—all currently ablaze as his new Ability burned hot—cut through the white, dividing it into finer layers and plates. Otherwise, however, he was much the same. On the other hand, Honoris now formed with a *full* helmet, one that enclosed Logan's head from front to back. Almost solid white, it was made of several form-fitting sections that held tight to his skull, complemented only by a two-finger-thick line of red rising from the pointed chin of the face plate, splitting it in half. Initially, it had reminded Rei of depictions he'd seen of the warrior civilizations that had once held firm over the southern parts of Earth's old Europe.

Right now, afire as the vysetrium was, it made him think more of some demon's lone leering eye.

Another dozen blows came, and Rei saw an opportunity. The axe drew away, and with a thought he flicked into Brawler Mode even as he threw himself back. Honoris fell, cutting through the air exactly where Rei's head had been an instant before, but as the shield vanished and his armor thinned, the world slowed down. Honoris cut harmlessly by as he flipped back into a reverse somersault, rapidly gaining a few paces of distance. Even as he landed on his feet again, though, Phalanx was back up, Shido—shield included—good as new.

Right on time to watch the ion flames rippling across Logan's CAD finally flicker and die.

Rei didn't let his guard down.

For a fourth time, Logan paused. Honoris' head dipped briefly like it had suddenly gotten heavier, but didn't sag to the floor or anything of the sort. On the contrary, Logan immediately hefted it up in again in both hands without much trouble.

And that... seemed to be about it.

"You're kidding," came a voice from above. "Grant? *Still?*"

The question was permission to call a break, and both Rei and Logan looked up and around. Along the edge of the privacy ring that they were all long familiar with, Aria, Viv, Catcher, and Chancery were seated or crouched as they watched the fight with wide eyes. Michael Bretz stood with arms crossed, while beside him Lennon and Dice—who'd apparently been in the stands watching the first years train on the main floor—were hovering, both seeming to have trouble deciding whether to be concerned or elated.

And on the second lieutenant's other side, Valera Dent looked equal measures stunned and exhausted, staring down at Logan while massaging both temples like she had a headache.

The captain had clearly been in the middle of hands-on training with either the second or third years when she'd been summoned to the sub-basement, because she was barefoot in her red-on-white staff combat suit. The line of her prosthetic left arm was visible—as were her multitude of other battle scars—but most alarming was the fact that her tone was just as shocked as anyone else.

But seriously... Who could blame them?

"Still, ma'am," Logan confirmed, voice slightly tinny through the helmet that was turned up to face her. Her lifted his axe higher—which, like the rest of his armor, was still much the same as before the evolution—pumping it with ease to make his point. "I'm good to go. It takes about the same amount of time to charge, and I can only hold it about half as long, but..."

“But it’s repeatable,” Rei couldn’t stop himself from finishing for his friend, finally lowering Shido’s shield to shake his head. “Dude... *Four* times... This is going to be *insane*.”

“Yeah...” was all Logan seemed able to respond with as he looked back around at Rei. “Bout how I’m feeling right now, yeah...”

“Endlessly?” Dent called down, finally dropping her hands to her hips. “Are you getting *any* sense of building fatigue? NOED warnings? Anything?”

“Nothing, ma’am,” Logan answered her again. “At least nothing out of the norm. I’ve been hacking at Rei for 10 minutes, so I’m definitely *tired*, but not feeling more than I would be ordinarily. If anything the Device improvements have me feeling better than I should, I think.” He dropped the axe’s butt to the ground to tap at his faceplate. “Not getting any ‘HUD’ stuff like Ward and Arada have, but definitely getting oxygen prioritization like I know Shido does. Pretty sure there’s also pressure-assisted breathing, when I get winded too.”

“That is... wild,” Catcher croaked out from where he was perched on the balls of his feet over the very edge of the ring. If he’d tried to get any closer, he would have fallen onto the field. “Like... *wild-wild*...”

“That’s one way to put it.” Dice’s voice sounded fainter than Rei had ever heard it.

And they hadn’t even reached the limit of whatever the hell Logan’s Shard 3 had done.

“Ma’am?” Rei addressed Dent. “Should we keep going?”

The captain considered. Her eyes flicked up to her frame like she was checking something, then she nodded. “Yes. Continue, Cadets. Captain von Bor and the others are on their way, so we may as well see if we can hit a cap to this before moving on.”

Only she and Bretz did a good job of not glancing Chancery’s ways, at that. Even Lennon and Dice couldn’t seem to stop themselves, much less the rest of them.

Rei saluted with his sword, then faced Logan again and crouched at the ready. He had a sense he knew the answer, but they obviously had to confirm. And, in the end, he was right.

And then some.

3, 4, 5 more times, Logan triggered his new Overclock. Like Type Shift when it upgraded, the Ability name hadn't changed, just "redesignated" to "Overclock II". Logan's notification, however, had also come with a different line. The one that had probably given Dent her headache.

User-Unique.

And deservedly so. 9 times the Ability was triggered, and while Logan could indeed only hold onto the boost for about 20 to 30 seconds at a time compared to his previous 50 to 60, its repeatability made it a *horrifying* skill to face. No single blow packed the same punch as a hit from Catcher's Ruinous, but every 2 minutes or so Logan was suddenly hitting with a speed and force that was probably half again his usual power. And that was if he swung Honoris *one-handed*. If he kept the axe in both hands, he could deliver cleaving strikes that felt like they hit with *twice* their usual weight. Those were the ones that kept setting Rei back a step, the repeated impacts ringing through his shield and arm so brutally that even in Phalanx Mode he had no choice but to allow himself to be driven back. He would have bet, in fact, that if he let Logan land such a hit straight on in Brawler or Saber Mode, it would have done *real* damage despite their difference in ranks.

After contemplating it, Rei decided not to make the suggestion. He was already feeling enough like a punching bag.

Plus... They still had at least one more curiosity to puzzle out.

"Okay! At ease, Cadets!"

Dent's call came again after the flames faded from Logan's most recent trigger. He immediately collapsed to one knee, holding onto Honoris' haft for support. Still, to

Rei's eyes it just seemed like regular exhaustion. 20 minutes of constant hacking would do that to most Users, even a newly minted B-Rank. Rei, for his part, was breathing pretty heavily too, but A-Ranked Endurance was no joke. Even as he stood straight he could feel his heartrate settle, and the ache in his shield arm was already starting to fade.

Right on time to realize the audience had grown.

Kalus Laurent—in civilian clothes—was speaking quietly with Michael Bretz, while Jayden Wainwright had pulled Chancery to the side and was nodding along as she listened to the Lancer explain. Serena von Bor, meanwhile, stood to Catcher's left, leaning over her cane while her gold-black eyes took Rei and Logan in intensely.

Unsurprisingly, the Ivory Shield did bother with small talk.

"How many times, Grant?" she asked once she was sure she had their attention.

"Nine... ma'am..." Logan answered with difficulty from his place still kneeling on the ground. Despite his new helmet's assistance, his whole body was heaving after the exertion.

"And still normal?" Dent followed up with. "No *atypical* fatigue? No crash?"

"Nothing... more than... what I'd expect." With a grunt Logan used the axe to leverage himself up onto his feet again, where he gave himself a couple seconds. When he continued, his voice was a bit clearer. "I'm... *definitely* beat. But already... recovering." He took Honoris up in both hands again for emphasis.

"That's certainly an improvement, then," von Bor said with a slow nod. "Even discounting this 'redesignation' of Overclock. Your Endurance has always been solid for a Mauler, but not to that level."

"Spec bump... is what pushed me over to B0." Logan seemed to assume the testing was done, because his Device dematerialized back to his wrists as he continued. He closed his eyes and lifted his sweat-lined face up to the ceiling as he continued to work to catch his breath. "That plus the helmet... did the trick."

Rei, too, recalled Shido, but didn't say anything as he looked between Logan, Dent, and von Bor. The two women were quiet for a moment, clearly considering.

"We'll need to really push the boundaries of it one of these evenings to make sure it *is* infinitely repeatable..." the Ivory Shield finally said, giving the ring under her feet a familiar *bang* of her cane. "It would be a problem if you got caught with your pants down in an overlong match. Or worse, the frontlines." She smiled slightly, that eager gleam Rei occasionally caught shining suddenly in her eyes. "Still... This is incredible, Cadet. I think congratulations are in order, as outlandish as it all is."

"Here here," Kalus Laurent grunted in amused agreement. He'd apparently finished his conversation with Bretz, and was mirroring Dent's hands-on-hips stance as he stared down at Logan. "*Three User-Unique Abilities on one squad... one first-year squad. When this gets out...*" [*go back and identify if the ISC-as-a-whole knows about Endwalker or not... Viv used it publically in Chapter 59*]

"Not like the Collective can be *more* surprised." Wainwright, too, entered the conversation. She was still standing on Firesong's other side, a hand on Chancery's shoulder as she looked towards Dent. "Ma'am, if you're done with Grant for the time being, can I request we move on?"

The Iron Bishop did hesitate. "Yes, I think that's a good idea. Want to pitch her against Ward, or review things yourself?"

"I'd like to assess the improvement myself, if that's alright."

"Allowed. Grant. Ward." She gave her head a sidelong jerk, indicating the top of the ring. "Up you come. Take a breather." Turning, her brown eyes fell on Chancery. "Let's see what you've got for us, Cashe."

Chancery didn't hesitate. On the contrary, she was clearly all anxious energy as she dropped the 10 feet down onto the field floor. Rei crossed paths with her as they traded places, giving her a subtle thumbs up that she answered with the flash of a nervous grin.

Logan had similarly swapped with Wainwright, and by the time Rei had claimed a spot with his legs over the edge between Aria and Viv, the two were facing each other.

Dent didn't give it any fanfare.

"Users! Call!"

In silence, both CADs came to life. The lieutenant's was a familiar, frightening sight with its six eyes and white vysetrium over earth-toned steel. The great blade of her harpoon-like weapon blazed even against the stark floor. Jayden Wainwright was gone, and 'Jetwing' had appeared.

An entrance made slightly less impressive as the young woman let out a bark of disbelieving laughter.

Everyone but the Kamiya trainers had already seen Zion's new form once. Chancery and Logan had called on their evolved Devices together, but after a thorough, awe-struck study they had started testing Overclock II. Chancery—like Catcher—hadn't developed a new Ability, but whereas Honoris had seen only a few visual changes other than its new helmet, *her* armor was almost completely unrecognizable.

There was no longer even a hint of combat suit left exposed. Silver and green plating created a complex, layered pattern over Chancery's legs, arms, and almost the *whole* of her body. Subtle flares of steel formed slight, vysetrium-lined blades at her elbows and knees, imitated by smaller razored edges over each knuckle. She hadn't developed distinct pauldrons or anything of the sort, but finely interlocked armor now covered her chest and back, with lines of glowing black traced outward from a trio of diamond-shaped vysetrium gems lined under her collarbones, all three the color of the deepest voids of space.

In her hand, Zion's spear was no less transformed. Where it had originally been much like any other Lancer's weapon, the black blade now nearly matched Wainwright's for size. About the length of Rei's forearm from elbow to the tips of his fingers, it was nearly 2 hands wide, with flat edges that angled sharply at their end into a diamond tip.

The more impressive change, however, was that—like Hippolyta after Aria’s last evolution—the butt of the spear was now capped in vysetrium as well, but much more impressively. A *full* second blade, about half as long and wide as the weapon’s head, had developed, turning it into what was essentially a two-sided spear. Rei had to admit that Chancery looked almost more like an Atypical than a full Lancer, standing there.

And that was before they got to her *helmet*.

While her neck and part of the back of her head remained unarmored, Zion now shielded Chancery’s face in a frightening mask that none of them could pretend wasn’t a little bit familiar. A single curved plate of black vysetrium hugged the upper half of her face and head, the top of which was studded with a number of green rings from which dark cords trailed weightlessly around her. Beneath this plate, however, silver covered her mouth, cheeks, and jaw.

Silver, accented in more green, carved into the grinning mouth of a fleshless skull.

“Well, Cadet Arada...” Serena von Bor spoke with something like a laugh from Firesong’s left. “It seems you two have developed something of a theme...”

“Seems so, ma’am.” Viv’s muttered agreement was all awed excitement for Rei’s side, taking in Zion’s frightening face. It was true. It was like looking at an inverse of Gemela’s skull-like mask. One with hollowed eyes and no mouth, the other with a deathly mouth and no eyes. Rei wasn’t sure he liked whatever implication that all came with.

Then again, he didn’t have time to think about it, because Dent was speaking again.

“Okay, Cashe... Let’s see what you’ve got.”

Chancery, who’d been bouncing up and down getting used to the weight and feel of the new armor, nodded without a word. No one reprimanded her for the lack of acknowledgement. The situation allowed for some lapsed decorum.

Especially after she took Zion up in both hands, appeared to take a steadying breath...

And ripped across the field at Wainwright with a *crack* of fracturing hardlight.

An upgrade in Speed had notched Chancery to C9 and the evolution, and between that and her CAD's improved manifestation, Rei had to consciously ratchet up his Cognition to follow her across the gap. Against the glow of the floor, Zion's vysetrium left a flowing blaze of black in its wake, trailing lines of liquid shadow. She led with the spear first, her new head a solid blade of perfect emptiness.

Wainwright's own white vysetrium met it with a *crash*, and then the two were a blur of light and motion.

"Daaaamn," Catcher whistled from Viv's other side. "Is it just me, or is that a *big* change."

"It's not just you," Rei and Aria said together, while Viv and Logan nodded.

"It's *definitely* a big change," a familiar voice echoed from behind them, and they all glanced back to find Lennon and Dice standing at their backs, watching the fight. It was the Lasher who'd spoken, but his girlfriend picked up for him.

"That's a *heavy* boost in speed. Precision too. Do we know if *she's* got anything pulling up in her HUD?"

"Don't think so?" Logan answered for them, his own eyes still on the two Lancers as Jetwing fended off a flurry of some dozen strikes in less than a second with a shout of approval. "She didn't say anything when I mentioned I wasn't seeing any changes, at least."

"Hmm..." Lennon's brows knit together. "Honestly... I'm not so sure about that."

"You see it, too?" Rei asked. He'd returned his attention to the fight, taking it in with... confusion. There was... something there. Something, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it.

He felt more than saw the third year's eyes fall on him.

"Yeah... But I'm surprised *you* do."

Rei lifted a hand to tap at the side of his head. "Cognition clocked to max. But I'm seeing *something*, but I'm not really sure what...?"

"It's precision."

They all turned to find Kalus Laurent walking towards them, head turned so as not to miss a beat of the fight even as he approached.

"Precision?" Aria asked him with a frown. "What are you guys seeing that I'm not?"

"Precision, *sir*?" her brother reminded with a smirk. "Don't make me make you run laps and miss all of the fun. Then his expression grew serious. "But yeah. Precision. It's subtle, but it's there. I'm not even sure *Cashe* realizes it."

"I'm lost." Catcher raised his hand. "Can someone explain it like I'm 5?"

"For all of us?" Viv agreed as Logan nodded beside her.

"Easier to show you, I think." Kalus' NOED lit up, and he typed out a quick message, which he sent with a flick of two fingers. A moment later, the battle below shifted in a flash. Wainwright's left hand snapped out as she sidestopped a chopping cut, taking Zion by the haft just below it's head. At the same time, her right let came up, and almost lazily the S-Rank booted Chancery straight in the gut, sending her rocketing back even as her spear was ripped from her own grasp and left behind. She slammed into the wall of the ring, but Zion's improvements continued to show themselves priceless as when she landed on her feet, only staggering slightly from the impact.

Wainwright, meanwhile, had turned her Device's six eyes up to von Bor.

"Ma'am, you seeing this?"

"I am," the old woman answered, looking in turn to Dent. "Captain."

"I see it," the Iron Bishop agreed with a nod, watching Chancery. "Cashe! What are you seeing under your helmet?"

Even behind the faceplate, Chancery seemed confused. “Nothing, ma’am?” she asked as she started moving towards Wainwright again. “Like I said earlier, I’m not seeing any highlights or anything like what Ward and Arada have.”

“It wouldn’t be highlights.” von Bor’s cane *banged* again. “It’s too quick for that.”

“It, ma’am?” It was Michael Bretz who asked, and Rei turned to find the man peering with his head cocked at Chancery. “I’m afraid I’m in the same boat as Ward. I’m seeing *something*, but I can’t tell you what I’m looking at.”

Rei felt something between astonishment and elation punch him in the gut, and he looked sidelong at Aria. Unsurprisingly, she’d glanced at him too, one eyebrow raised.

He was apparently catching up—at least in Cognition—to their Brawler *sub-instructor*.

“Maybe a closer matchup would make for a better,” von Bor looked around at Dice. “Meyer, in you go. Half speed. Leave some openings.”

If Dice had any questions or qualms about being suddenly put on deck, she didn’t show it. On the contrary, she saluted and quickly stripped out of her jacket while kicking off her shoes. 10 seconds later she dropped down into the combat area with a light *thump*. Wainwright, meanwhile, had tossed Zion back to Chancery and stepped out of the way. Her own CAD whirled back away into her wrists, and she took up an observatory position along one wall of the ring.

“Cadet, call!” Dent ordered.

By the time she’d taken up a position opposite Chancery, Dice’s CAD—Myrrus—was partially summoned around her limbs. Black and reflective silver armored her arms and legs, while in each hand the girl wielded an identical narrow longsword, thin, ocean-green edge glowing around the dark metal core. Rei knew the full call was even more impressive, but if she was limited to half-speed, it was considerate of her to go partial.

“Cadets, fight!”

Whereas Wainwright had obviously been playing the test dummy, Dice matched Chancery as an actual *opponent*. She blocked and parried, but also attacked in turned, twin blades cutting in a blur of green. It forced Chancery to stay half on defense at any given time.

But it also created those promised opening, and indeed made the change easier to easy.

“Yuuup,” Lennon intoned from Firesong’s back, saying what they were all thinking. “*Big* change.”

Everyone nodded—even Catcher and Viv—so Rei was unsurprised that *he* could see the difference clearly now.

“It’s like... she’s seeing *every* opening...” Aria muttered, leaning forward and squinting at the fight like those extra few inches would make it all clear.

“And *taking* them, too,” Rei agreed, following Zion’s black blade as it moved around and through Dice’s swords.

‘Precision’, Kalus had called it, and that was accurate enough. It was still subtle even against a more evenly-matched opponent, but that was just by nature of the change. Chancery had always been an incredibly capable Lancer. Being one of the rare few Users who’d earned a CAD on her *second* Assignment Exam, she’d worked harder than pretty much anyone to earn that accolade.

But now...

Below, Chancery broke away from the fight suddenly, dancing back with one hand help up to call as stop. Dice pulled up short as requested, and the two girls settled several yards from each other. For a second, no one said anything

“Cadet?” Wainwright asked first, pulling away from the wall.

“I... see it,” Chancery answered hesitantly. “At least... I *think* I see it.”

“See what?” Kalus and Bretz asked together.

“It’s like... a flicker. Honestly I’m not sure how to describe it.” She brought her empty hand up to look down at it through her faceplate. “There’s like... a *fraction* of a second where Cadet Meyer gets pulled into focus—or *part* of her, at least.” She looked up at Dice. “Out of curiosity... Have you ever been told you tend to overextend on before the downswing with your left hand?”

Rei and Aria both started as Lennon let out a bark of a laugh from behind them. Below, Dice was suddenly scowling.

“Lennon.” Dent shot him a warning look.

“Sorry, ma’am,” he corrected himself, grinning down at where his girlfriend was in the process of scowling at him. “But we *both* know it’s the thing Lieutenant Joss has been harping at her about all year.”

“It *is*, yeah...” Dice growled at him from below, but she was turning back to Chancery. “But how could *you* tell?”

“I kept... seeing it?” Chancery was clearly struggling to answer. “Like... a pulse around your left side. Ribs or armpit. Around there. Most of the time you went from an overhead attack from the left. Like that ‘focus’ for a split second that made the opening obvious.”

There was a moment of quiet.

Then everyone heard Jayden Wainwright sigh before she looked up at Valera Dent.

“Pretty sure we’re *literally* creating the Avengers piece by piece, ma’am...”