

CHAPTER 60

PLACEHOLDER

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“Clear!” Chancery called out, chest heaving as she studied the south side of the Wargames field. To her eyes, the desert plateau seemed to extend forever, disappearing into a haze of blue-white sky that shimmered in the very-real heat. She knew there were *actually* only some 70 or so yards of combat area before her, but she wasn’t sure if her mind would ever really get used to the Arena’s flawless projections.

“Clear,” Logan echoed in a grunt, and Chancery looked over her shoulder to find him peering north, head slowly scanning as he, too, made sure they were alone. “There was a duo going at it near the top edge, but I’m pretty sure they both just fell into the split.”

Chancery raised a hand to cover her eyes as she squinted over the Cliffs beyond him. Sure enough, she didn’t see any movement. On a field as flat as this, they would have, barring some Abilities she was positive none of the other first years had. Confident it was just the three of them, she turned to Aria.

Just in time to watch their squad leader grin and lift her shattered spear in salute as her green eyes lost their focus.

“That’s me done.” Her voice came in a wheeze, like she’d punctured a lung. “Have fun.”

Then Aria dropped to her knees, Hippolyta’s broken shield tumbling from her grasp along with her weapon, where she only managed to stay upright a second or two more before falling face-forward into the dust.

Chancery blinked down at the ‘body’ that was already starting to slip through the projection. Viv was long gone, as was everyone else.

... Which meant it was just the two of them.

She raised her eyes to Logan as he did the same, having turned in time to watch Aria fall, too. For a breath, they just looked at each other. Then Chancery smirked, and he shrugged.

They launched themselves at each other in the same moment.

Black and red vysetrium crossed, parried, and blurred. With Zion in both her hands Chancery thrust the spear in a hundred blitzing attacks while she danced around Logan, trying to find an opening. Ordinarily she would have had the edge. She had the range, and would usually have had at least a measure of Speed advantage too, against a Mauler.

But Logan was widely still considered the third strongest User in their class for *damn* good reason.

Honoris found its way between every single one of her attacks. Sometimes it was the axe's haft, sweeping away the spear, sometimes it was the flat head, working as well as any Phalanx's shield. After an initial exchange he stayed on the defense, but Chancery wasn't fooled. She didn't have him on his back foot. Not even close. If anything, she could *feel* Logan's black-red eyes studying her, taking in her arms and legs and weapon with every move she made. He was waiting, taking advantage of his atypical agility to—

WHOOM!

Chancery only lived because she'd sparred Logan a thousand times before, and had learned to read his tells as well as he seemed to know her own. A clash of steel set him up, Honoris' butt end smashing away Zion's head, bringing the axe naturally back, almost like any other parry he'd made so far. Instead of moving to defend again, though, the heavy red-and-white blade ripped around at Chancery's side, left partially open when her own attack had been rebutted. In a blink Chancery whipped her body back as she let her knees buckle, bending herself away until her head was almost below her hips. The axe screamed through the air within an inch of her stomach, so close that her

combat suit might have caught it had it not been so perfectly skin-tight. Snapping back up, she used the opening to thrust again, but Logan had let go of his swinging weapon with one hand the moment he'd seen he was going to miss, leaving an armored arm to bash Zion away again.

And like that, they were back to the blitz.

For longer than Chancery wanted, the two of them went at it like that, back and forth, back and forth, almost equally matched. She knew that Logan, like her, had his Ability charged by now. She knew that he, like her, was looking for the right moment, the right chance. It would come soon. It had to, even if Chancery had to force it. What she had in range, she was lacking compared to a Mauler's Endurance, especially *Logan's* Endurance. She was good for now, but she knew she would tire first. The moment she lagged, the moment she showed an ounce of fatigue, he would be on her with Overclock, and it would be done. She had to time Warband *exactly* right.

... Unless...

Making a decision, Chancery paced out the next set of exchanges, ducking another swing of Honoris' blade and blocking a thrown, steel-clad elbow with Zion's haft before parrying a dozen other hits. As she did, she let her breathing come harder, let her lungs feign extra work. She'd changed what she was looking for, no longer seeking an opening, no longer watching for a fleeting moment where her spear might strike true. Instead, she kept an eye out for the opposite, an opportunity where *she* might create the chance. 30 more seconds slipped by. Then a minute.

Finally... *there!*

Honoris whirled. Not perfectly set to swing again, but the temptation would be set. Chancery lanced Zion forward, but deliberately aimed off, an inch or clear of Logan's center. She let her right foot slip a little in the dust, leg crumpling slightly. The bait was prepped. The opportunity perfect. If the axe fell, it would be less than an ideal swing, and she'd be ready.

She saw Logan's smirk too late.

WHAM!

Instead of the expected axe coming at her left side, Chancery took an armored shin in the ribs of her right. It still wasn't a clean hit—Logan had been twisted away from her—but red still flashed in the corner of her vision, and her abdomen tightened up slightly. Maybe fractured bone. Maybe just bruised. Either way, Chancery let out a grunt and disengaged for the first time in the fight, getting clear of Honoris' range as she clutched at her side.

"Dick," she ground out through a grunted laugh as Logan followed her carefully.

The big guy chuckled.

"That would have worked on most people. We've just fought too much for me to fall for it, sorry."

And then he leaped at her, and the battle renewed.

For another minute or so they traded blows, moving now as Logan pressed his gained advantage. Pretty soon Chancery *was* actually breathing hard. She could ignore the discomfort no problem, but it felt like her lungs couldn't inflate completely. In a moment of locked blades, she dared a flick a glance up at the Arena's notifications, and was indeed unsurprised to find that she *had*, in fact, cracked two ribs.

Now or never, then.

Chancery shoved off, backpedaling away again. Logan gave chase, a lumbering titan of glowing red outlining his white armor. Even without the flames he was a frightening sight, heavy steps pounding the dusty earth as he pursued. Chancery sped up her retreat, faster and faster, like she was genuinely trying to put space between them, to get some range before clashing again.

Then, fast as her C7 Speed allowed for, she reversed direction and rocketed straight for Logan.

Warband!

It had taken most of the semester, but Chancery had at last managed to get the hang of the voiceless command two weeks before. The Ability triggered with no audible warning. Inside a fraction of a second Logan went from chasing injured quarry to the prey suddenly hurtling at him as she partially split into three. As always, Chancery felt more than saw her two mirrored torsos. The Ability cleverly fed her neuroline only a ghost of what she knew her opponents saw, giving her clearer vision by which to strike with. A temporary spike in Cognition let her see what the mirages were doing. One went for Logan's left thigh, the other straight for his heart. In turn, she thrust at his upper left arm, hoping he'd prioritize avoiding the more critical strikes. He did.

It still didn't save her.

Shlunk!

Logan didn't even wince. Zion ripped into his bicep, piercing armor and punching right through the limb. It should have been a critical advantage—*was* a critical advantage—but just the same Chancery knew she'd lost as the Cognition boost faded, lasting just long enough to see Honoris fall to the ground where Logan had deliberately dropped it. Showing as much notice for the horrible injury as he might have a papercut, Logan hadn't even glanced down at the spear before his right hand wrapped around her face, massive fingers taking firm, painful hold.

That was when the flames came.

Chancery thought she actually *felt* the power surge through the Mauler. She was sure, at the very least, that she'd spotted a flicker of red light in his eyes, a glow rising to join Overclock's fire. She was lucky to catch even that, though, before she was ripped right off her feet by her face, struggling and flailing in an attempt to free herself as Zion was ripped from her grasp. Up Logan wrenched her, lifting her until her boots kicked a full yard off the ground.

Then he slammed her down again, driving the back of her head into the hard-packed dirt with enough power that there was an audible *CRUNCH* of giving stone and earth.

Red ripped across Chancery's NOED, but the concussion the Arena applied was—ironically—so severe that she couldn't make sense of any of it. One fractured thought said it was bad luck she hadn't been FDAed outright. Another said it probably wasn't a concussion, but full on brain damage.

The only thing she *could* make out, after a second, was a snatch of Logan's face, dark hair hanging to frame it as he smiled down at her. His fingers were still wrapped around her head, Zion impaled through his ruined left arm. His mouth moved, and it took a moment for her restrictions to allow her to process the words.

"Good fight."

And then his hand pulled away, formed a clenched, flame-clad fist, and drove down one last time.

Chancery came to with a jerk, the familiar feeling of the projection plating cold against her sweaty back. Her eyes flew open, but she stayed lying like that for a second, allowing her vision to adjust to the solar lights that lined the Arena ceiling.

After a second, a broad silhouette appeared against them, stooping over her.

"You good?"

Logan was still smiling, and she took some satisfaction in the way he was massaging his left arm.

Not that her head felt much better.

"Owww..." she got out by way of answer, and he chuckled.

“Yeah yeah.” He quit his rubbing to offer her a hand. “You tried to turn me into a skewer. I tried to turn you into a pancake. Call it even.”

“You say ‘tried,’” Chancery snorted, taking the hand. “My head feels like you *definitely* succeeded. Did you *have* to Overclock at the last second?”

“Would you rather I *not* have taken you seriously?” Logan asked as he hauled her up. The movement made her momentarily dizzy, but even as she found her feet her the ache started to lesson.

“Fair enough,” she mananaged, standing a little straighter. By the time she registered that they were surrounded, her head was almost entirely better.

“That. Was. *Awesome*.” Hannah Tethers was saying, eyes wide as she looked between the two of them. Most of the group gathered was at her back, and she wasn’t alone in ogling.

“Killer fight,” Jack Benali was agreeing with a heavy nod from Hannah’s left.

“Seriously,” Kay told Chancery from her and Logan’s other side fervently. “We *actually* need to practice together more often. Seriously.”

A dozen other voices were shouting out praises, but a call from above brought everyone up short.

“Group 1! Eyes up!”

Everyone not already facing the voice turned automatically as all saluted. Bretz—who’d barked the order—and Gross were dropping down towards them. A little shuffling made way for the observation disc, which vanished into the projection plating as the two officers touched down.

“Grant! Cashel! Great fight!” Bretz continued, moving towards them. “We could have done with a little less chit chat here and there, but I’ll allow it. *North!*” Without looking, the Brawler sub-instructor pointed east over multiple heads. “Give me something Cadet Grant did that you could try to apply as a Mauler!”

Gillian North’s salute sharpened.

“Sir! Cadet Grant used his CAD very successfully as a *defensive* weapon as well as an offensive one. Something I can work on, sir!”

“Good answer!” Bretz nodded, looking around and finding Kay. “Cadet Sandree! Same question!”

“About how Grant used his axe, sir?” Kay answered with a bit of a smile. There was a roll of laughter, but Bretz only raised an eyebrow.

“Cute. Answer the question, or it’s laps, Cadet.”

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir. I think Cadet Cashe attempted to feign fatigue at one point, which makes sense given she was going against a Mauler. I think it would have worked, but—as her squadmate—Cadet Grant was too familiar with her combat style and level.”

“So he didn’t fall for it. Exactly.” Bretz nodded in approval. “A very good thing to keep in mind. An opponent who knows your strengths by definition also knows some of your most exploitable weaknesses. And vice-versa. That’s *particularly* important when faced with a well-matched or stronger—”

Chancery would have liked to hear the rest. Bretz—like all their instructors—had a knack for feedback that was almost always valuable.

The trouble, though, was that she was suddenly very distracted by the text flying across her vision as her NOED came alive unbidden in her eyes.

...

ALERT: New Link established.

Processing networked information.

...

Calculating.

...

Results:

Individual Link connection has reached 100%.

Link source: Combat Assistance Device 'Shido'

...

Checking networked data acquisition.

...

Adequate data acquirement met.

Device initiating Link manifestation.

...

Processing.

...

Manifestation complete.

Individual Link has been designated as "Shard 4"

Shard 4: ACTIVATED

Shard 4: ASSIGNED

All sound seemed to vanish from the world as Chancery went cold. For several seconds she couldn't do anything, couldn't say anything. She felt her jaw drop as her palms started to sweat.

She'd expected it. If Chancery was honest with herself, she'd expected it. They all were, after Catcher. But to see it manifest in *truth*. To see the 'Link' with her own eyes...

Goosebumps crawled up her skin. She read through the notice once, twice more. Then, unable to help herself, she closed out of the notification. Ignoring the second alert—the one she knew would tell her she'd ranked up from C8 to C9, likely with an evolution to boot—she pulled up a spec request. She was breathing hard again, and sound returned in the form of her heartbeat ringing in her ears. She wasn't sure what she wanted to find. Whether nothing at all, or—

Chancery forgot how to breathe.

D7. Her Growth spec—which had been D6 a moment ago, unchanged since the start of school—was now D7.

And glowing a bolded, lightly pulsing green.

“Ohhh *crap*...” Chancery didn’t even hear herself mutter, staring at the boosted value. A thousand thoughts ran through her head, a thousand questions, a thousand doors opening. This was it. This was *everything*. But at what cost? She’d joined Viv and Catcher, now, and gained *everything*. But at what—?

A pause. An itch. Something scratching at her mind. She’d missed something. Somewhere. Where? Where had she—?

And then it clicked. Pulling up the first notification again, she scanned the text once more.

... Shard 4.

Not Shard 3.

Shard 4.

Another wash of cold. Slowly, feeling like her heart was trying its best to hammer its way out of her chest, Chancery turned, looking up as she did.

By her side, Logan was standing there, as slack-jawed as her, staring at the lines trailing down his frame.

“Oooh *crap*,” Chancery repeated, louder this time. It was enough to catch the attention of everyone around her, and the sudden silence from her classmates was just enough to drag her back to reality.

Right in time to look around and find Bretz glaring at her.

“Cadet Cashe,” he started to growl, clearly unamused. “I don’t know if Lieutenant Lake allows you to interrupt her in class, but personally *I* don’t appreciate it when—”

But then Bretz stopped, eyes narrowing in curiosity. He took in Chancery—with her notification still pulled up in her frame—then at Logan, who still hadn’t moved. Slowly, his face went from annoyed, to concerned, to alarmed. A second’s more

hesitation, and he turned, searching. He found them one at a time in the crowd, just as Chancery followed his gaze to do the same.

Aria. Viv. Catcher.

All staring, all having gone just a little pale.

It was the confirmation Bretz needed.

“Gross, call Dent.”

Liam Gross didn’t need to be told twice. In fact, his own NOED was already live as he looked with similar concern from Chancery to Logan.

“Firesong. SB3,” Bretz raised his voice to speak clearly over the sudden murmur of 60-plus first years who’d all quickly caught on that something was amiss. “Let’s go. All of you.”

Chancery could only nod as the man turned towards the nearest underworks access, shouting up to the stands as he did.

“Ward! On me! *Now!*”