

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 shimmering in the 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 actually get used to the Arena’s flawless projections.

“Clear,” Logan echoed in a grunt, and Chancery looked over her shoulder to find him still peering north, head slowly scanning as he, too, made sure they were alone. “There was a duo going at it, but I’m pretty sure they 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 squadleader 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, and only managed to stay upright a second or two more before falling face-forward into the dust.

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

Which meant it was just the two of them.

She raised her eyes to Logan just 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 chuckled.

They launched themselves at each other in the same moment.

Black and red 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 their initial encounter 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 spear with every dip move she made. He was waiting, taking advantage of his atypical agility to—

WHOOM!

Chancery only lived because she'd fought Logan a thousand times before, and had learned to read his own tales as well as he seemed to know hers. A clash of steel set him up, Honoris' butt end smashing away Zion's head, bringing the axe naturally back, almost like another 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 until herself away until her head was nearly below her hips. The axe ripped though the air over her within an inch of her stomach, so close she that her combat suit might have caught it had it not been perfectly skin

tight. Snapping back up, she used to 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 liked, 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 his 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...

Chancery paced out the next pair of exchanges, dodging another swing of Honoris' blade and blocking a thrown, steel-clad elbow with Zion's haft. 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, a fleeting moment where her spear might strike true. Instead, she kept any eye out for the opposite, and opportunity where *she* might create the chance.

Like... *there!*

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

Logan smirked.

WHAM!

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

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

The big guy chuckled.

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

And then he leapt 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 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 disengaged, backpedalling away again. Logan gave chase, a lumbering titan of glow red against his white armor. Even without the flames he was a frightening sight, heavy steps pounding the dust 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, as fast as her C7 Speed allowed for, she reversed direction and rocket straight for Logan.

Warband!

It had taken most of the semester, but Chancery had at last managed to get the hang of the voiceless commands 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 provided only a ghost of what she knew her opponents saw, giving her clearer vision by which to strike with. A temporary boost 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 left upper 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, peircing his armor and punching right through the armor. 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 when 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 got a flicker of red light in his eyes to join Overclock's fire. She was luck to catch even that, though, before she was lifted right off her feet by her face, with barely enough time to kick as and try and fail at screaming as Zion was ripped from her grasp.

Then Logan slammed her back down into the earth, driving the back of her head into the hard packed earth with enough power that there was an audible *CRUNCH* of giving 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 Logan's face, dark hair hanging to frame it as he smiled down at her. His fingers were still wrapped around her head, Zion still sticking out of 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, feeling the familiar coolness of the projection plating against her back. Her eyes flew open, but she stayed lying down for a second, allowing her vision to adjust the solar lights that lined the Arena ceiling.

After a second, a broad, black silhouette appeared, 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."

"Fair enough," Chancery snorted, taking the hand. "But let's just say you'd make Viv some *very* good pancakes."

Logan hauled her up with a chuckle. The movement made her momentarily dizzy, but even as she found her feet her the ache started to lesson. 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.

“Killer fight,” Jack Benali was agreeing with a heavy nod.

“Okay, we *actually* need to practice together more often,” Kay told her fervently.

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 soluted. 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 stood a little straighter.

“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 teammate Cadet Grant was too familiar with—”

Chancery would have liked to hear the rest. She and Kay were fairly evenly matched for the year’s second-strong Lancers, or had been as of Sectionals.

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 sounds seemed to vanish from the world as Chancery went cold. For several seconds she couldn't do anything, could 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 shit..." 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 she realized, and pulled up the first notification again, scanning the text once more.

... Shard 4.

Not Shard 3.

Shard 4.

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

By her side, Logan was standing there, as slackjawed as her, staring at the lines playing trailing down his frame.

"Oh... *Shit*," Chancery repeated, louder this time. It was enough 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, but in *my* class 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.

"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.

"SB3," Bretz told them hurriedly. "Let's go. *Now*."

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

"WARD! ON ME! NOW!"