

CHAPTER 61

PLACEHOLDER

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While it had taken him some months to get used to it, Rei had 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 coming at him.

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 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 Rei’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, Honoris finally managing to just punch through the heavy metal. Instantly it was gone again, wrenched free to continue its storm of attacks, and 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 that rose from the pointed chin of the face plate, splitting it in half. To Rei, it gave him inklings of images 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 one leering eye.

Another dozen blows came, and Rei saw an opportunity. Honoris drew away, and with a thought he flicked into Brawler Mode even as he threw himself back. The axe 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 find Logan again and watch the ion of flames rippling across his CAD fade and die.

Rei didn't let his guard down.

For a fourth time, Logan paused. Honoris' head dipped like it had suddenly gotten heavier, but it didn't sag, and Logan hefted it up 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 quickly getting 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—were hovering, both looking like they were having trouble deciding whether to be concerned or elated.

And on the second lieutenant’s other side, Valera Dent stood with her hands on her hips.

The captain had clearly been in the middle of hands-on training with either the second or third years when she’d been summoned, 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 expression 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 answer with as he looked back around at Rei. “Bout how I’m feeling right now, yeah...”

“Endlessly?” Dent called down again. “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 axes 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 this is also providing pressure-assisted breathing, 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 there’s a cap to this before moving on.”

Only she and Bretz did a good job of not glanced at Chancery 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 even Dent shaking her head.

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 his previous 50 to 60, its repeatability made it a *horri-fying* skill to face. No blow packed quite the punch as Catcher's lone 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 strikes ringing through his shield and arm with such impact that even in Phalanx Mode he had no choice but to let himself 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 the difference in their ranks.

After contemplating it, Rei decided not to make the suggestion. That could be a puzzle for another night.

And they already had at least one more curiosity to get through.

"Okay! At ease, Cadets!"

Dent's call came again after the ion 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 to, but Phalanx specs were no joke. Even as he stood straight he could feel his heartrate settle and the ache in his shield arm start to fade.

And right on time to realize the audience had grown.

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

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

“Nine... ma’am...” Logan answered, from his place still on the kneeling on the ground. Despite his new helmet’s assistance, his whole body was still 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 he used the axe to leverage himself up onto his feet again, where he allowed himself a number of second. When he continued, his voice was a good bit clearer. “I’m... *definitely* beat. But already... recovering.” He took Honoris up in both hands 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 to make sure it *is* infinitely repeatable...” the Ivory Shield finally said, giving the hardlight 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 this 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 ISCM knows about Endwalker or not*]

“Not like the world 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 allowed herself an appraising look over the two Lancers, this time. “Yes, I think that’s a good idea. Want to pitch here again Ward, or review things yourself?”

“I’d like to assess the improvement myself, if that’s alright.”

“I’ll allow it. Grant. Ward.” She called on Logan and Rei without looking around at them. “Up you come. Take a breather.” Her brown eyes fell on Chancery. “Let’s see what you’ve got for us, Cashe.”

Chancery didn’t hesitate. On the contrary, she clearly was all anxious energy as she dropped the 10 feet down onto the field floor. Rei crossed paths with her as they trade 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 face 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 earthtoned 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. Chancery and Logan had called on their evolved Devices together, and after a thorough, awe-struck study they had started testing Overclock II. Chancery—like Catcher—hadn't developed a new Ability, but whereas Honoris hadn't made much of a visual change other than it's new helmet, *her* armor was almost completely unrecognizable.

Silver and green plating formed a complex, almost-liquid pattern over her legs, arms, and body. Subtle flares of steel formed slight blades at her elbows and knees, imitated by similarly formed razor 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 two 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 half as wide as the weapon's head, had developed, turning it into what was essentially a two-sided spear. Rei had to admit that Chancery almost looked more like an Atypical than a full Lancer, standing there.

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

While her shoulders, 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 skull.

"Well, Cadet Arada..." Serena von Bor grunted with something like a laugh from Firesong's left. "It seems you two have developed something of a theme..."

Beside Rei, Viv could only shake her head slowly, taking in Zion's frightening face again. 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.

He 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."