

Volume 2 - Chapter 20 - Heart

PoV: Lucas Callahan

Sweat was pouring down Lucas' face beneath the helmet of his armor as he braced himself, muscles straining, to absorb yet another wild and far too powerful swing from Isabella's Decimator.

Clang!

The sound of heavy-duty metal on metal echoed through the training hall, reverberating up Lucas' arms and into his shoulders as he locked his stance, holding firm against the sheer brute force behind Isabella's strike. His own ragged breathing filled his ears, blending with the rhythmic clangs and scrapes of combat as their spar reached its final moments.

For the past few hours, Lucas had been corralling Isabella, keeping the squad's resident loose cannon from rampaging through the public training hall and terrorizing the unfortunate souls just trying to get a spar in and get used to their new Abilities and Attributes.

Before that, they had spent some time in the System Store within the Sovereign's trade district, trying to round out their respective Ability portfolios using the Merit they'd earned during the Assessment.

Naturally, neither of them had needed to overhaul their setups too much.

Between the Accomplishment rewards they had claimed—many of which had netted them Silver-Rarity Abilities outright—and their existing pre-Assessment lineup, they were already well-equipped.

Instead of diving headfirst into expensive new purchases, they had mainly swapped out a few Abilities here and there, fine-tuning their arsenals rather than overhauling them entirely.

But, as always, Isabella had found a way to make things more complicated.

Lucas had spent way too much energy trying to talk her out of a reckless attempt at min-maxing her build toward, in her own words, *"ripping people apart better"*.

And, more specifically, trying to convince her not to outright ditch the Gold-Rarity Ability she had earned from their shared Accomplishment of defeating the Psyker duo.

Lucas had wished—*desperately*—for backup from Corvus or Karania, both of whom were infinitely better at crafting persuasive arguments than he was.

But, unfortunately, he'd been on his own.

"Isa, seriously, think about it," he had practically begged her as she stood there, arms crossed, looking deeply unimpressed with his concern. "It's a *Gold*-Rarity Ability. You *know* we're not getting another one anytime soon. None of us have any idea how good this one actually is yet. What if you throw it out for something objectively worse?"

“Doubt it,” she had replied flatly, eyeing the Ability list in the System Shop like a kid in a candy store.

Lucas had to fight the urge to groan. *‘Why is she like this?!’*

In a last-ditch effort, he had pulled out his trump card.

“Let’s at least wait for Thea to get back from her Psychic lesson,” he had argued. “She’ll definitely have some good intel on how important anti-Psyker stuff is going forward. And—need I remind you—you were the one who declared her our ‘Official Build Advisor.’”

He had shot her a look, raising a brow. “I think we should at least double-check with her before making any big moves like this.”

That, somehow, had actually worked, much to his own surprise.

With an exaggerated sigh, Isabella had finally backed down. “Fiiiiine. We’ll wait for Thea.”

Lucas had barely stopped himself from sagging with relief.

And now, back in the training hall, he was paying for all that effort physically as Isabella took out her pent-up energy on him with her Decimator, every swing sending tremors through his entire frame.

Ultimately, she had decided to get a surprisingly equal mixture of defensive, mobility and offensive Abilities, both Passive and Active, to supplement and replace some of her pre-existing ones.

Clang!

Lucas gritted his teeth as his Stalwart shuddered under another devastating blow, his shield arm burning from the relentless punishment Isabella was delivering. Every strike sent a jolt through his frame, rattling his bones despite the sheer bulk of the Stalwart absorbing most of the kinetic force.

His entire forearm was already starting to go numb and they had barely been at it for five minutes. Even knowing her raw Strength score was leagues beyond his own, feeling it firsthand was something else entirely.

‘By Xagis, this is truly insane...!’

Lucas adjusted his stance, fingers tightening around the grip of the vibro-blade he had picked up for this spar.

He hadn’t been able to afford a proper melee weapon before, not with the gaping hole his Ultra-Heavy Armour and Stalwart purchases had burned into his pre-Assessment budget—even just the partial licenses.

Most Defensive Heavies in the drive couldn't even dream of affording his current setup, let alone wielding it effectively—but it had come at the cost of having an actual offensive cqc weapon at his disposal.

Not that it would matter in general combat, as cqc was definitely not his role, but when it came to a spar? He still needed something to actually fight back with.

So, when given the standard selection before the spar, he had opted for the standard-issue vibro-blade.

A chainsword would have been the more traditional choice for him, offering better control and a vastly improved coefficient on his own Strength score, but against Isabella?

Against *her*?

It would have been utterly useless.

The raw durability of her Heavy-type armour meant there was a real risk of the chainsword's teeth scraping off on impact, failing to bite into the plating at all, if he got an unlucky angle on her. A vibro-blade, on the other hand, would likely actually pierce if he got lucky enough to land a proper strike.

A small chance—but a chance nonetheless.

Not that it was looking likely.

Lucas knew Isabella was holding back, could see it in the way she was moving.

She wasn't using any of her Abilities, wasn't pressing her advantage with the sheer level of speed and aggression he knew she could muster if she wanted to. She wasn't even trying to maneuver around him much—just keeping him on edge, hammering away at his defenses, making sure he got a proper workout.

If she had been taking this seriously? He would have been long dead.

That much, he already knew.

Alpha Squad had some heavy hitters, but nobody could match Isabella in close-quarters combat; not even close. And that was before she had properly optimized her Ability toolkit.

Before she had dumped her long-hoarded Attribute Points earlier this morning.

Before she had *truly* become the cqc-monster everyone already saw her as.

Clang!

Lucas gritted his teeth as the Decimator slammed against his Stalwart, another bone-rattling impact that sent vibrations up his arm. His muscles burned, his stance was slipping, but he wasn't done yet.

Not by a long shot.

Isabella was pressing him hard, her strikes relentless, her dodges almost lazy in their effortlessness. Every time he thought he had an opening, she was already one step ahead.

"Predictable," her body language screamed, *"too slow."*

But Lucas wasn't just a walking wall. He had patience. And most of all, he had *timing*.

If there was one thing that a Defensive Heavy had to know more than anything, it was timing—timing to move and protect the squad, timing to hold fast, timing to reinforce or attack a position.

Timing was all there was for a Defensive Heavy, and Lucas had plenty of it.

Bracing his stance, he pretended to stagger back after another one of Isabella's heavy hits, letting his weight shift as if he was buckling under the sheer force of her strike. Isabella, sensing blood in the water, stepped forward to capitalize—

And Lucas struck.

With all the strength he could muster, he abruptly threw his shield forward in a brutal, unexpected bash.

CRACK!

The edge of the Stalwart slammed into Isabella's breastplate with a loud bang reminiscent of an explosion, sending her staggering backwards.

For the first time in the entire fight, her footing faltered.

Lucas didn't waste a second. His vibro-blade was already in motion, cutting through the air, aimed straight for the now-exposed opening at her side—

But somehow, *somehow*, even as she stumbled and was disoriented from the Stalwart abruptly hitting her dead-on, Isabella still reacted.

Her chainsword came up at the last possible second, the Decimator clashing against his blade with a shriek of metal against metal. Sparks flew as she diverted his strike, just barely knocking it off-course before it could bite into her armor.

Lucas cursed, pivoting on his back foot to keep up the pressure, but Isabella had already recovered.

Her stance reset, her balance restored, and now?

She was definitely having fun.

"Oh, you sneaky little shit," she laughed, rolling her shoulders, shifting her grip on the Decimator. "That almost fucking got me!"

Lucas didn't bother replying—no time for that.

He lunged again, swinging the vibro-blade in a rapid series of strikes, trying to press the small advantage he had created.

But Isabella was done letting him control the tempo.

She met every swing, every thrust, with lightning-fast counters. Their weapons clashed again and again, his blade almost scraping against her armor, but never quite getting there.

His shield intercepted her chainsword's deadly teeth time and time again—

Until it didn't.

Lucas felt the moment he lost.

The Decimator came down in a brutal diagonal strike, too fast, too heavy. He tried to pull his shield up, but his arms were sluggish, his muscles screaming for relief.

He wasn't fast enough.

The chainsword crashed into his chest plate.

For a second, it stalled, grinding against the Ultra-Heavy armor—And then Isabella *pushed*.

She put the full force of her arms behind the strike, the teeth finally finding their bite in the thick armour, before chewing through the reinforced plating.

Lucas barely had time to register the pain before—

Darkness.

A breath later, he was standing outside the arena, whole again, the faint chime and horn of the Arena confirming his respawn and the end of the round.

Lucas exhaled slowly, shaking off the phantom sensation of getting bisected.

Then, with a wry smile, he muttered, "Alright. That was *almost* a good one... Definitely making progress here."

Isabella hopped down from the arena platform with an easy grace, the faint *thud* of her boots echoing through the training hall. She reached up, yanked off her helmet, and let it drop unceremoniously to the ground, where it promptly disintegrated into nothing—another seamless cleanup courtesy of the Sovereign.

"That shield bash was something else, damn," she said, flashing a toothy grin. Snagging a towel from a nearby dispenser, she wiped the sweat off her face. "Dihnt eshpec hat fom yu," she mumbled through the fabric, the words garbled beyond recognition.

Lucas raised an eyebrow, crossing his arms as he tried to piece together whatever she'd just said. "Uh, what?"

She peeled the towel away, huffing a breath before grabbing a water bottle and taking a long swig. “I didn’t expect that from you,” she repeated, this time with actual clarity.

“Well, yeah. I definitely can’t beat you on speed or power, so I had to try something else,” Lucas shrugged. “I’m not built for this kind of CQC, and you know it.”

Isabella finished her drink, then leaned back against a nearby railing, looking him over.

“Honestly? I don’t think that’s true,” she said, her expression more serious than before.

“You’ve got the right mindset, and the instincts are there. You just need to commit more. If you really put in the effort, you could be an absolute menace in close combat.”

She pointed at him with the empty bottle. “And that shield bash? That was sick. Never seen you do that before. Definitely keep that one in your toolkit.”

Lucas made a noncommittal hum, waving off her words as just friendly flattery.

The truth was, the shield bash had been a spur-of-the-moment decision—something that had popped into his mind during the Awards Ceremony.

Seeing the footage of Rachel Masters in action had been a wake-up call.

The way she switched seamlessly between offense and defense, wielding her shield like an extension of herself instead of just something to merely hide behind or shield others with—it was something he hadn’t really considered before.

The Stalwart was massive. Unwieldy. Heavy as hell.

At least, that was what he *used* to think.

But he wasn’t the same Marine he’d been before the Assessment.

He was stronger now. Faster.

His Integration had pushed his capabilities far past what he’d ever thought possible. And with [Lighten Equipment] active, the Stalwart barely felt heavier than a few hundred kilograms. That was definitely something he could smash into someone’s face.

Still, the fact that he’d needed to see Masters do it first with her shield irked him more than he wanted to admit. He should’ve thought of it himself.

Before he could dwell on it further, Isabella was already moving on to another topic entirely.

“So,” she asked, cracking her neck, “you down for another round, or are you out?”

“I’m out,” Lucas said immediately, holding up a hand in surrender. “I need a damn break.”

Half an hour in the ring with Isabella was more than enough to wreck even him, stamina-wise.

Isabella's grin only widened.

"Fine by me," she said, already turning back toward the arena. "I'll just open up the ring to anyone interested in taking a crack at me, then!"

Lucas sighed, shaking his head as he watched her stride away with all the excitement of a predator spotting fresh prey. This was what she had been waiting for the entire time.

He had done his best to stall her, making sure the rest of the drive only had to suffer her wrath for a couple of hours at most.

'I'm sorry, everyone. That's about as much as I could do... Good luck,' he thought, a mixture of amusement and rueful acceptance settling in.

But at the end of the day, anyone foolish enough to step into that ring with Isabella was just asking for it...

—

The arena's horn blared once again, signaling yet another Marine's respawn outside the ring. The newly eliminated fighter was met with a round of polite applause and a few encouraging words from the small crowd that had gathered over the last half-hour.

It had become something of a spectator event—watching Isabella systematically dismantle any and all challengers.

Lucas, comfortably seated on one of the cushioned chairs on the raised viewing platform, only spared the latest casualty a brief glance before returning his attention to his datapad.

He had been skimming through the available Tier 1 Squad Vehicles, cross-referencing stats and potential loadouts, though he still made sure to check in on Isabella's rampage every few minutes.

Corvus had specifically asked him to take a look at their options before heading off to a meeting during breakfast. Not that Lucas wouldn't have pulled up the list on his own anyway—vehicles were kind of *his thing*—but having the official task delegated by their squad leader definitely added a bit of satisfaction to the process.

Another blare of the horn pulled his focus back to the ring.

Isabella had already returned to her starting position, swinging the Decimator in an arc to fling off the blood and viscera clinging to its whirring chain-teeth.

Lucas smirked, shaking his head. *'What's that now... number 17? 18? I think I'm losing count at this point. That woman has stamina to rival Xagis himself...'*

So far, the only thing he had seen slow Isabella down even slightly was the occasional snag caused by her newly adjusted armor.

It was the only real equipment change either of them had committed to post-Assessment—though it had been more of a necessity in Isabella’s case.

She had put on her old set that morning and immediately declared it “*completely and utterly unacceptable.*”

Which, to be fair, it was.

UHF armor designs were built to account for System-based muscle growth, their adaptive designs able to accommodate increased mass without issue, especially as they were printed on-demand, with the exact size of a person in mind.

But while the armor could be resized with the proper alterations for System-based muscle growth, it didn’t account for... *other* forms of growth.

Or as Isabella had so eloquently put it that very morning:

"These damn tits are about to burst out of my fucking armour."

Lucas grinned at the memory.

Apparently, her combination of Assessment-gained Strength and a general post-Integration growth spurt had done some *serious* work up top, rendering her pre-Assessment armour design practically unwearable. It had only taken about ten minutes to get a re-sized design drawn up and printed at the appropriate store, with no additional charges, of course, but the adjustments were still throwing her off.

And that was one of the things that Lucas had been keeping an eye on in the ring.

Isabella rarely hesitated in a fight, but every now and then, he could see it—the fraction of a second where her movements weren’t as fluid as they should be. The added buffer zone of her new armor was throwing off her timing, ever so slightly.

Not that anyone else would have noticed.

To the untrained eye, Isabella was flawless in combat, but Lucas had spent enough time around her, analysing her style, to pick up on the microscopic delays.

‘Can’t really blame her for that,’ he thought, watching as she adjusted her grip on the Decimator before her next match. *‘After fighting in the old armor for a month straight... yeah, I’d probably fumble with the Stalwart if my gloves were suddenly even a little thicker.’*

He had gotten lucky.

His own System-based growth had been more evenly distributed—mostly height, slight gains in muscle mass, nothing drastic enough to force a full armor rework. Those kinds of growths were all expected and already included in the original designs, making them flexible enough to accommodate the changes without needing immediate adjustments.

Isabella, though? She was still getting used to hers.

Not that it seemed to matter much.

Because as the horn blared again, signaling the start of yet another match, Lucas watched with amusement as Isabella cracked her neck, Decimator in hand, and charged forward like a damn war machine, about to end another hapless fool.

Lucas let out a breath, finally turning his attention back to the datapad in his hand.

There was still plenty of work to do, and Corvus would be expecting a full report on the best vehicle options soon. He was just about to scroll through the latest specifications on one of the squad transports when a murmur rippled through the gathered crowd.

At first, he ignored it.

Excited whispers weren't uncommon during these kinds of fights—Isabella had already put on an absolute clinic today, and people loved watching a streak like hers.

But this time around, the murmuring didn't die down.

Instead, it *grew*, like a wave slowly rolling through the room, shifting from idle chatter to something more focused.

Lucas frowned.

Still seated, he glanced up from the datapad, scanning the training hall for whatever was causing the commotion. And then—his stomach twisted.

'Oh, for fuck's sake...'

There, strolling through the entrance like she owned the place, was one of the few people he really didn't want to see that morning—Rachel Masters.

His grip tightened around the datapad as he tracked her movements.

The Defensive Heavy from Beta Squad walked with a deliberate, easy confidence, heading directly toward the crowd forming around Isabella's arena.

'Like a moth to a damn flame...'

She never could stay away from crowds now, could she?

Rachel's gaze swept across the gathered spectators with that ever-gorgeous, ever-irritating smile of hers—one that had a way of effortlessly parting groups and drawing people in, no matter where she went. And just like that, the crowd shifted, subtly but unmistakably making way for her as she sauntered toward the front of the line.

Lucas gritted his teeth as she bypassed the queue entirely, cutting in without a single word of protest from the people waiting their turn. No one was about to argue, not with the way she carried herself—like she belonged there, like the arena owed her a fight and nobody else was worthy of stepping in her way.

Then the horn blared again, signaling another loss.

A Marine materialized outside the arena, dazed from their respawn. Normally, they'd be met with the usual round of applause and words of encouragement from the crowd.

But this time, there was nothing.

All eyes were on Rachel Masters.

The poor bastard who'd just been ejected glanced around in confusion, searching for the usual reception, only to find the entire room utterly fixated on the *other* show unfolding in front of them.

Lucas exhaled sharply, shoulders tensing.

'This is going to be trouble...'

He barely had time to finish the thought before the arena horn blared again—this time, not for another loss.

But for Rachel Masters stepping into the ring.

As she appeared inside the ring, the shift was palpable.

Her ever-present smile remained, but everything else about her changed.

A shimmer ran across her body as her armour materialized—a heavy-type set not unlike Isabella's, but distinct in its own way. Thick iron-clad plating encased her from head to toe, seamlessly locking into place with an elegance that felt almost at odds with its raw weight.

Unlike Isabella's more aggressive, bulked-out suit designed for pure offense, Rachel's armour had a controlled design, balancing defense, offense and mobility without sacrificing any of them fully.

One thing Lucas immediately noted, however, was that her armour didn't have any of the awards embedded into it yet.

'She hasn't gone shopping yet, huh...?'

A Full-Cover Shield manifested on her left arm—slightly smaller than Lucas' own Stalwart but clearly built for the same kind of brutal engagements. The plating on the front gleamed under the training hall's lights, but Lucas knew it wasn't just for show.

That thing was reinforced, a fortress in its own right, meant to weather even the heaviest of blows, just like his Stalwart was.

And then, there was her weapon.

A double-sided chainsword, oversized to be wielded with either one or two hands and unmistakably custom in design.

The engineering behind it was bizarre, but undeniably effective—the dual chains running parallel down the length of the blade, both sides primed for carnage rather than the traditional looping chain along a single edge.

It was meant to rip and tear, no matter which way it struck.

No hesitation, no mercy—just obliteration.

Her golden hair vanished beneath the enclosing plates of her helmet, that perfect, almost unreal beauty she was so famous for disappearing entirely beneath cold, unyielding pla- and dura-steel.

And with that, it was as if the room itself exhaled.

The spell she had effortlessly cast over the gathered Marines broke in an instant.

The tension, the stupor—it all faded the second her face was hidden away.

Lucas could feel it, the way the men and women around the arena snapped back to reality, as if suddenly freed from some subconscious trance.

'She's a fucking problem,' he thought grimly, shifting in his seat.

He knew it. Isabella *definitely* knew it.

Inside the ring, Isabella lifted her Decimator, resting it over her shoulder as she tilted her head toward Rachel.

"I've been wanting to face you," she admitted, her voice carrying across the arena. "Didn't think I'd get the chance so early."

Rachel didn't respond right away.

She simply tilted her head, as if studying Isabella for the first time. Then, with a careless shrug, she said—

"I don't even know who you are."

Lucas clenched his jaw. *'Bullshit.'*

They both knew that was a lie.

Rachel Masters wasn't somebody that would forget one of the six members of Alpha Squad. Probably the only six members in the entire Drive that had been put above her—it just wasn't in her character to simply "forget" about Isabella like that.

Isabella let out a sharp huff, shifting her stance slightly—but there was no anger in her body language. If anything, Lucas recognized that little shift in her posture.

Excitement.

Meanwhile, Rachel continued as if she hadn't just casually disregarded one of the strongest members of Alpha Squad.

"You're lucky I even considered joining in," she mused, rolling one of her shoulders, testing the fit of her armour as if this were just another warm-up session. "I don't usually waste my time outside of the proper Best-of-Seven Ironman Tournament rules... But I get that this is your little showcase arena, so I'm willing to be magnanimous enough to give you the time of day."

Isabella just stared at her for a moment, eyes narrowing ever so slightly behind her helmet's visor. Then, with a sharp breath out, she simply rolled her shoulders.

"Cool," she said, utterly unfazed.

Rachel's taunts fizzled into nothing, her insults failing to so much as ruffle Isabella's feathers.

Lucas smirked. *'Oh, she's gonna be pissed about that one.'*

The buzzer rang—

Isabella moved first.

A blur of motion, her Decimator coming down like a meteor. No hesitation, no cautious testing of the waters—just pure, overwhelming aggression from the very first step.

Rachel barely managed to bring up her shield in time.

CLANG!

The impact sent a deafening shockwave through the training hall, the sheer force of the strike enough to send a visible ripple through the energy field keeping the spectators safe.

But Rachel didn't just tank the hit—she used it.

Rather than fully taking the hit herself and bracing the shield, a purple ripple had briefly enveloped the shield.

'What...?' Lucas thought, immediately recognizing the unmistakable tell.

The grav-lock on her shield had activated, the built-in system of the full-cover shield locking her in place for just a fraction of a second, absorbing the majority of the impact before she deactivated it again and immediately pushed forward.

A brutal shield bash slammed into Isabella's torso in reply to the hit—*hard*.

Lucas blinked.

'She's using the shield as her main weapon?'

Isabella staggered back a step, but she had barely even registered the hit before Rachel was on the move again.

Her bastard-chainsword snapped up, stabbing over the top of the shield.

Isabella twisted just in time, the teeth of the blade barely scraping against her armour as she pivoted to the side.

Another shield bash followed immediately. Isabella barely dodged.

Another stab over the shield—this time aiming lower, toward her legs. Isabella kicked off the ground, narrowly avoiding what could've been a crippling blow.

Lucas' brain raced to understand what he was watching.

Rachel wasn't fighting like any other Defensive Heavy he had ever seen.

She wasn't using the shield as a tool for defense—it was her *primary* weapon.

The bastard-chainsword, for all its viciousness, was being used only when needed.

Every time Rachel found an opening—or more accurately, every time she *created* one—she stabbed around the sides of her shield with terrifying precision, the double-edged nature of the weapon suddenly making perfect sense.

'She's using it like a spear...!'

The point-like tip, created by the twin chains converging at the centerline, let her stab around corners and thrust over her own cover without exposing herself.

It was relentless.

Every time Isabella tried to press forward, Rachel's shield would meet her like an impenetrable wall, only for her chainsword to lunge at her like a striking viper the moment she shifted.

Lucas watched in fascinated horror as Isabella—*Isabella*—was forced onto the backfoot.

Every time she tried to break through, Rachel was already there, already adjusting like she had seen Isabella's own adjustments coming from a mile away.

Isabella's raw power and aggression were supposed to be her greatest strengths—she bulldozed through her opponents, overwhelmed them before they had a chance to react.

That was how she fought. That was how she won.

But against Rachel, it was like running into a wall that refused to crack.

Lucas had never seen anything like it.

Every time Isabella adjusted her footwork, Rachel adjusted right back—seamlessly, effortlessly, as if she had an answer in her back pocket for every single possible change.

Every time Isabella tried to break through her shield, Rachel's grav-locks came in just before the hit, absorbing the impact and redirecting the force elsewhere, before immediately turning the aggression back onto Isabella, making her retreat again and again or risk getting cut up.

Every time Isabella tried to bait an opening, Rachel didn't take the bait.

It was utterly suffocating to *watch*.

Lucas was on his feet now, his heart hammering in his chest, his grip on the datapad in his hand forgotten. It felt like he was in the fight himself, every fiber of his being tensed with the sheer adrenaline of just watching.

Then—

Isabella had had enough.

She surged forward faster than should have been possible, her entire body blurring with an unnatural burst of speed.

Lucas' stomach dropped.

'She used an Ability...!'

Rachel's shield wasn't in position yet—it was still shifting, still moving into place—

The Decimator raced toward Rachel's exposed arm, faster than Rachel could react—

Or so Lucas thought.

Rachel's chainsword appeared out of nowhere, intercepting the Decimator before it could land.

Too fast.

Way too fast.

Lucas' breath caught in his throat. *'She was fucking ready for it...!'*

Rachel had known. She had been waiting for Isabella to commit. To use an Ability.

She had used her own Ability in response, to counter the attack.

Isabella didn't hesitate—if anything, she doubled down.

She surged forward again, using [Burst Step] once more, her speed exploding past normal limits. One moment she was locked in a clash against Rachel's shield—the next, she was already to the side, a blur of motion as her Decimator swung in a devastating horizontal arc towards Rachel's back.

Rachel's shield was out of position—she had already committed to a block that no longer mattered. For a split second, it seemed like Isabella had finally cracked through Rachel's overwhelming defense.

Then—Rachel *shifted*.

Lucas didn't even see what she did at first. One moment she was holding the block towards the direction that didn't matter anymore, and suddenly, she wasn't there—or rather, she was *just* where she needed to be.

Rachel was somehow now facing Isabella, her shield already up, as if she had expected Isabella to change directions before she had done so. The Decimator crashed into the Full-Cover Shield, sending out a shockwave that rattled the arena, but Rachel didn't budge.

The shield was already in grav-lock once again, making it not move in the slightest.

Isabella snarled, stepping back to reassess, but Rachel didn't give her a chance.

Lucas flinched as Rachel slammed forward, shield leading, her massive frame moving with unexpected grace. Isabella barely dodged, the edge of the massive shield grazing her side as she twisted away—only for Rachel's chainsword to stab forward from behind it, forcing Isabella to twist again, barely avoiding a direct hit, the teeth of the chainsword scraping ineffectively over her armour.

Isabella skidded back, just outside of immediate range.

A brief pause.

Then, she adjusted again. And Rachel adjusted right along with her.

Lucas exhaled sharply.

'What the fuck is this?! How is she matching Isabella like this?'

But Isabella wasn't done yet. Not by a long shot.

She re-engaged, her Decimator arcing left—then snapping right, reversing momentum mid-motion instantaneously. Lucas immediately recognized it as her [Directional Strike] Ability, the one she had used countless times throughout the Assessment as well.

Lucas' breath caught. Rachel's shield wasn't there this time.

This was *it*.

Then—Rachel's chainsword moved abruptly; unnaturally.

It wasn't a block. It wasn't a parry.

Rachel shifted her weight, pushing herself into her own grav-locked shield into the exact direction Isabella had reversed toward—redirecting herself into the perfect counter position by using it as a solid wall to bounce off of.

The Decimator never landed.

Instead, it scraped against the sudden interjection of Rachel's chainsword, a perfectly timed, impossibly fluid motion that used Isabella's own power against her, redirecting the strike just enough that it failed to connect with anything meaningful, simply scraping by Rachel's heavy armour and leaving a dent in it.

Isabella growled as her strike wasn't just blocked—but diverted, robbed of impact altogether.

Lucas clenched his fists. *'What the fuck...'*

He had no idea what he was even looking at anymore. This wasn't any kind of fight that he had ever imagined possible, much less by people in his own Drive. Isabella was already a monster, but Rachel was something else entirely.

She was a Defensive Heavy, yet somehow she was pushing Isabella to the absolute brink of her capabilities—and *still* going even with her.

Lucas knew Isabella had already figured it out, too, because her stance changed again.

The Decimator flickered, splitting into two arcs at once.

'[Twin Strike]... You only just got this one, Isa...!' Lucas' heart pounded.

He knew that Isabella had never used that Ability before, since she had only gotten it from one of the Accomplishment Rewards earlier in the day.

'If she's pulling that out now, she's really running out of ideas...'

At the same time, however, he also knew that Rachel couldn't block both hits.

And so—she didn't.

Instead of trying to block them both, Rachel did something entirely different.

Rachel moved. Not to evade, not to counter—but to accept one of the hits.

Lucas barely had time to register what was happening before Rachel angled her head, just enough to keep the Decimator from biting too deep. Instead of taking the full force of the strike, she twisted, letting the teeth of the weapon rake across her helmet at a brutal angle, while deflecting it as much as she could with her own sword.

The sound of screeching metal filled the air as sparks flew—then, a sharp crack as the Decimator's sheer power ripped open the entire right side of her helmet.

The other strike of the Ability went wide as she had moved out of its area of effect.

But despite the hit, she was still moving. Even as Isabella's weapon tore into her armor, Rachel's shield pushed forward, slamming into Isabella's chest.

Lucas barely saw the movement.

A shift. A pressure adjustment. A sudden pulse of something at the front of Rachel's shield.

Boom.

Lucas' eyes snapped wide open as Isabella's body lurched backwards, a hole punched straight through her chest where her heart should have been.

Blood—a torrent of it—erupted from Isabella's chest cavity, spilling out onto the arena floor like a burst dam. She staggered back severely, large steps, knees buckling, her breath coming out in wet, ragged gasps as she struggled to remain standing.

Lucas couldn't breathe.

Isabella's entire heart was gone.

A gaping, blackened wound seeped fresh blood, pooling beneath her boots as she forced herself to remain upright.

Rachel, meanwhile, had taken a single step back, her entire right side dripping with blood.

The wound across her skull was brutal, deep enough that it sent a steady flow of crimson trickling down her partially shattered temple, mixing into her golden hair as she reached up and ripped the remnants of her helmet free.

Strands of red-gold cascaded around her face, the sharp overhead lights of the training hall glistening against the mixture of fresh blood, gold and sweat.

Rachel took a slow, measured breath, tilting her head slightly as if checking just how bad her wound was—then, with an infuriatingly casual smirk, she locked eyes with Isabella.

"You know," Rachel murmured, her voice mockingly light, "I think you're finally starting to bore me."

She took a leisurely step forward, rolling her shoulders like she hadn't just nearly lost half her skull, her bloodstained hair catching the light.

"Or maybe..." she continued, her grin sharpening. "You just don't have the *heart* to keep up anymore?"

Lucas' stomach dropped.

Rachel was completely certain of her victory... And he couldn't blame her one bit. She barely had time to process what was happening before Isabella moved again.

Lucas couldn't believe it either.

The woman was missing a fucking heart, but still, she hammered forward, slamming the Decimator into Rachel's shield again and again, like the brutal impact alone would force the universe to acknowledge that she was still alive and well.

Rachel, for once, looked genuinely startled.

After two brutal exchanges, she finally snapped, exasperation creeping into her voice.

“Alright, what the fuck—” she barked, stepping back slightly, trying to adjust her stance. “Are you playing some kind of practical fucking joke on me? How the fuck are you not dead?!”

Isabella didn’t answer.

She just charged.

Lucas barely had time to process what she was doing before Rachel’s shield came up again, slamming into Isabella’s battered body with full force.

This time, Isabella stumbled.

Rachel adjusted, bracing for the counter—except none came.

Because Isabella let the hit land completely.

Rachel clearly hadn’t expected that.

She had expected the dodge, the feint, the attempted sidestep.

Instead, Isabella used the momentum, letting the sheer force of the hit spin her slightly to the right—towards Rachel’s chainsword. She saw the movement immediately, clearly reacting on highly-trained instinct.

Her chainsword swung upward, forcing Isabella to retreat—

Except she didn’t.

Isabella leaned *into* the strike.

Lucas barely had time to blink before Rachel’s chainsword cut cleanly through Isabella’s right arm and shoulder, shearing through muscle, bone, and armor like paper. Blood splattered across the arena, but Isabella kept moving, her body crashing into Rachel like a wrecking ball.

Rachel went down... And Isabella was on her.

A gauntleted fist slammed down onto Rachel’s exposed skull.

Then again.

Then again.

Rachel, panicking, tried to bring her chainsword around, aiming for Isabella’s head—

But before the blade could land, Isabella shoved arm directly into the weapon, diverting the strike away from herself by sacrificing her last remaining arm. The chainsword ripped through what was left of her limb, splitting flesh and metal apart, but Isabella didn’t stop.

She drowned Rachel in blood.

The gaping hole in her chest poured rivers of it, coating Rachel's face, seeping into her throat, clogging her vision, her breath, drowning her.

Rachel gagged, coughed, sputtered—

And then, without stopping even a moment at losing her last arm, Isabella started headbutting her.

Again.

And again.

And again.

Rachel thrashed, trying to flail free, swing wildly, but she kept missing—

Blinded. Choking. Drowning.

She gasped, trying to breathe, her shield arm locked up, stuck to the grav-locked shield, her chainsword too late—

Until finally—

Crunch!

A sickening sound of bone breaking and soft matter being splattered across the floor rang out... And Rachel went completely *still*.

The buzzer sounded.

Lucas barely registered it, his breathing long having stopped at what he was seeing.

Isabella didn't move.

She just sat there, straddling Rachel's lifeless body, her chest still gushing blood, her shoulder a ruin of exposed muscle and splintered bone, her arms gone—

But she had won.

Somehow, she had won without as much as arms or even a heart.

Lucas finally remembered to breathe in, gasping for air like he had been underwater for an hour, his thoughts racing.

'That fight was absolutely fucking insane...! What did I even just...!'

But one thought was more pervasive than most:

*'I need to get a recording of this for the rest of the squad, **immediately**...'*