

## Chapter 24

PLACEHOLDER TEXT

-PLACEHOLDER TEXT

*Ab fu—!*

Catcher didn't even have time to finish the thought before the Andre Boone's Repulsion wave caught him all-but full-in-the-face, brought into extreme close-quarter's by the Phalanx's sudden lunge forward. He'd just barely gotten the flat of Arthus' blade up and braced against his left shoulder—as the Firesong hive mind had decided the night before would be his best choice of defense against the Ability—but didn't have the fraction of a second more that he needed to lean into the impact.

Frankly, though... As the wave crashed over him, Catcher doubted there was really anything he could have actually done against the force of it short of cementing himself to the ground. He was *thrown* off his feet, blasted backwards in a way that no hit he'd ever taken before had struck him. No... Actually that wasn't true. He *had* been hit like this before. Repeatedly, in fact.

He'd been hit like this during their occasional obstacle-course days in combat training, where the runs only ended after you typically took a wall of solid light to the face at 40 or 50 miles an hour or so.

The result, at the very least, was similar.

Catcher felt himself go flying as the wind was knocked from him, felt himself go rocketing back and slightly up as the Repulsion ballooned in an invisible dome from around Boone's whole body. He had just enough sense to focus all his being on holding onto Arthus' sword, fortunately, gripping the weapon's handle stubbornly even as his armored calves caught the lip of the closest of the rusty conveyer belts. His backwards momentum suddenly turned into a whipping spin, and if he'd had the breath too

Catcher knew he probably would have yelped—or *squealed*, more likely—as he found him turning end over end.

Fortunately, his momentary experience as a human top was brief.

Unfortunately, that because a *second* conveyer belt cut his flight short as his left shoulder crashed into it at what felt like Mach 2.

As he crumpled to the ground, Catcher knew the limb was “broken” even before his NOED informed him as much as red text in the combat log he kept in the top left of his frame. He gasped—half as his lungs demanded air and half out of the pain that washed up his arm—but the blessing of the loss was that he hadn’t hit his *head*. His neurorline was still fully function, his focus and vision clearing in record time.

It was the only reason he managed to register Boone leaping over the first belt and charging, the flat of the Phalanx’s damaged shield angled to crush him against the metal props of the second conveyer at his back.

*Oh this is gonna suck SO much*, was all Catcher managed to think as he shoved himself up with his good hand—still balled in a tight grip around Arthur’s handle—and threw himself out of the way just in time.

There was a massive *crunch* metal as Boone hit the rusted belt, but Catcher barely heard it. He was too busy gritting his teeth as he rolled and twisted, the move sending a wave of pain from his shattered shoulder that nearly brought him right back down to his knees again. Just the same, he came up with his sword before him, left arm dangling limply but ultimately still in the fight.

At least for now.

With the advantage distinctly his, Boone changed his strategy. With a yell the 9<sup>th</sup> Sector cadet wrenched his shield from the wreckage of the conveyer and rushed Catcher straight on, abandoning the traditional wait-and-see tactic preferred by most Phalanxes. That was fine, though. Honestly, that was preferable to Catcher.

He might have lost his claws, but he wasn’t a cat, was he? He was a Saber.

“Oh god, she’s infected me,” Catcher muttered just before Boone reached him, practically able to *hear* Claire do Soto shouting the words at him and the rest of his Type-group in morning training.

Then again, he’d have to thank the Saber sub-instructor for the thought if he came out on top of this fight.

No. Not if. When. *When* he came out on top of this fight.

Because he had to. Not for the team. Not for Galens. Not for anyone but himself.

He had to.

Catcher was the weak link of team Firesong. He knew that, and he knew it in a way he wasn’t sure anyone else on the squad did. He suspected they might have the thought now and then, but knowing Rei and Viv and Aria, it was a passing consideration that wasn’t even worth their concern. Cashe, he suspected, might take the notion more seriously after some time on the team, and Grant—okay, actually... maybe *Grant* was well aware of the fact, but had smartened up enough of late not to voice his opinion out loud.

It stung a little to think about, as Catcher crossed blades with Boone, their swords slamming and screaming against each other in a brief flurry of blows. Of the six of them, he wasn’t only the lowest rank, but also probably the least skilled in terms of combat ability. Admittedly that was a little awe-inspiring, all things considered, but it was also true. Catcher had had a *stellar* record on his combat team during prep school. He had his mother’s blood—the blood of a Systems Champion—and had welcomed and weathered her coaching all his life. Catcher had always been the best, or at least *close* to the best, when it came to competitive fighting for as long as he could remember.

And yet, somehow, he landed himself in a group where he wasn’t at the top. Nowhere near the top, in fact.

Thing was... to his surprise, Catcher had discovered he didn’t mind all that much. For one thing, he was 99% sure he would *never* have managed 3/4ths the growth he and

Arthus had experienced since the beginning of the year if he hadn't hooked up with the insane pairing that had been Rei and Viv, then later Aria. For another—beyond even just straight spec-leveling—Catcher had learned more than he could have thought possible fighting against the three of them in the first semester of their school year, and even *more* since Cashe and Grant—yes, Grant too, admittedly—had joined the group. It was a little hard, knowing he was the bottom rung, but getting his ass kicked by the likes of the other members of Firesong carried with it more than just the understanding that he was the weakest link.

It carried also the knowledge that being the weakest link among the six of them in no way meant that Catcher was actually *weak*.

And he would prove that to himself. No matter the cost.

*WHAM!*

Boone's rush to take advantage of his edge in the fight came at a quick price as Catcher redirected a slash from the Phalanx one-handed, then let his elbow collapse to slam into the boy's face. The hit missed Boone's nose, taking him in the cheek, but it still sent him reeling backwards a moment and blinking at what had to have been substantial pain. Catcher—still ignoring the agony of his own wound—rushed in to keep the pressure on, focusing on making a plan as he did.

He *would* come out on top. He *would*.

He had survived the Repulsion. Maybe barely, but he had survived. It had taken nearly 90 second for Boone to built it up, too, and with Catcher fight one-handed it seemed unlikely the match would last that long again. He had to find a way to turn the tide now, or it the fight was as good as over.

For that, though, he needed to find a way to break through Boone's defense.

Catcher—as had been drilled into him as much by Rei as by Claire de Soto—made sure to watch the Phalanx as they impacted again, just as he'd made sure to watch him from the start of the match. He'd studied the cadet before the fight, of course, but video

recording and old feeds never offered half the chance to learn about a User as taking them on one-on-one. For that reason, Catcher had taken as many notes as they'd collided as he'd accepted actual blows, and as the match wore on—Boone being pressed back a little now, after the hit to the face—a few observations in particular stood out.

Firstly, the Phalanx depended heavily on his shield. Even mores than most of his Type. It was a big, heavy thing, and he used it to almost as good an effect as hiding behind a wall.

Secondly, Catcher had already made a big “dent” in said wall, cutting part of it off with sheer force of will.

And lastly... Boone seemed quick to shift gears when he thought things were going in his favor.

A little *too* quick, in fact...

A plan started to form, and if he'd had the second to do so Catcher would have rolled his eyes. Apparently de Soto wasn't the only one who had corrupted him. A certain “Iron Prince's” madness had caught ahold of him too, at some point.

Well... if it worked for Rei...

*Oh I'm so gonna regret this*, Catcher berated himself privately, shifting his assault as he changed the target of his attacks from what few opening's Boone allowed to the Phalanx's shield.

If Boone saw the trick, he didn't know what to make of it, and Catcher suspected after a second or too that the tactic hadn't registered with his opponent when the cadet found his footing again and came to a fast stand. Immediately the tiny amount of momentum Catcher had gained from the elbow to the boy's face was lost, and immediately Boone was in his element again, take the assault with relative easy despite the shield missing a chunk of it's inside section. That fine. That was all *fine*.

So long as Catcher could make it work for him.

Ignoring the pain in his shoulder and the fatigue at last starting to building up as the fight pushed into 2 full minutes, Catcher continued to hack and slash at the shield, dropping Arthus again and again and again on the sold steel. Boone had adapted, though, and was working hard to make sure he didn't lose any more of his defense to the blade, angling the metal so that the sword never caught an edge straight on. Now and the Catcher would have to duck or deflect as the Phalanx struck out with his own weapon, but on the whole Boone seemed content to let him slam himself into exhaustion against the shield. In fact, Catcher started to suspected his time might be shorter than anticipated, if Repulsion was being charged again at an accelerated pace due to his assault.

Whatever. It was too late to shift tactics now.

And then, at last, the chance came.

Catcher had watched, had waited for the opportunity. As a crossing down slash brought Arthus across his body, Boon accepted the blow for the hundredth time, taking it on the shield and bring the steel down with the hit to lesson the impact. Catchers sword screamed off the metal after only leaving a mild gauge, but the shield was before him now, perfectly angled to face him straight on. With a snarly he didn't hear himself make, Catcher snapped Arthus back up and plunged the blade forward with as much force as he could muster through his tired arm, twisting into it with every ounce of strength he could squeeze of his his aching body. The sword struck the flat steel of the shield dead-on, and the point of the weapon punched through cleanly. For a fraction of a second Catcher celebrated as the blade lanced through with more force than he'd expected, Arthus ripping through the hole it had made in Boone's wall.

Then, though, his strength ran out, and the sword screeched to a halt only a foot into the shield, wedged into the metal several inches shy of reaching Boone himself.

The Phalanx, in that moment, smiled. Catcher saw it, just like he's seen the instant Repulsion had come on line. To Boone, the fight was over, and it certainly would have

been under must circumstances as he wrenched the shield sideways, aiming to disarm Catcher even as his own drove forward from behind his defense, going for a killing blow.

*Checkmate*, Catcher thought.

And let go of Arthus in the instant the sword would have pulled him off balance.

He saw too, then, the instant Boone registered his mistake, the Phalanx obviously understand—just as Catcher did—that it was too late to rectify. The shield was heavy, and the force with which he'd hauled it sideways was great, since he'd been aiming to snatch Arthus away from a reluctant grip. Freely released, however, weapon and the shield it was stuck in only left Boone wide open, his left arm outstretched to one side, his right driving for with his own shorter blade.

Catcher, meanwhile, twisted, embracing the momentary force Arthus being pulled away from him had offered him, whipping around right in a full circle and bring up his back leg in a whirling kick.

Boone's blade slipped by by less than an inch, but the heavy steel of his heel caught the Phalanx square in the side of the head, brought around with more weight that Catcher could have even managed on his own.

*WHAM!*

Boone dropped like a rock, tumbling to the dirty cement floor of the depot in a crumbling cascade of limp limbs as the force of the hit sent him sideways even as his still-moving shield twisted his body around. From there, though, he didn't move for a full second, then two, then three.

Then...

“Fatal Damaged Accrued,” the Arena called out. “Victor: Layton Catchwick, the Galens Institute.”

“Well damn...” Catcher had just enough time to mutter, staring at Boone’s still form as the pain in his shoulder start to fade. “That actually worked...”

And then noise returned to the world as the zone started to fade.

Whether it was the same level of enthusiasm for the like of Rei or Aria’s matches earlier in the day, Catcher had no real way of telling, because the state of going from nothing but the sounds of rain and flowing water to the eruption or applause was something he didn’t think he would ever get used to. He’d been so focused on his surprise at the success of his plan, in fact, that he actually jumped before he and Boone started to drop, only then looking up to find the Abandoned Depot fading away around him. As the rusted sheet metal disappeared, the stands revealed themselves in a cascade of depixilation, and Catcher found himself looking almost exactly north. He searched as he drifted down, and found Rei’s white hair first, the rest of Firesong having gathered in once place just to the right of the center of the railing. Rei himself was shouting with both arms around his mouth, while Aria, Viv, and Cashe were all jumping up and down with excitement. Even Grant was putting his hands together enthusiastically, and Catcher could have sworn that was the hint of an actual *smile* on the Mauler’s face.

Then, though, Catcher raised his eyes to the rest of the stadium, taking in the *thousands* of people all applauding and screaming, and he had to grin.

“Good fight, Cadet. Please clear the field for the medical team, if you would.”

Catcher started, then turned around to find that Boone still hadn’t gotten to his feet, though he was moving feebly now. There was a buzz of noise from behind him, and Catcher looked over his shoulder to indeed see several ISCM officers hurrying over the Dueling field border towards the Phalanx, as well as a medical drone come zipping up out of the closest underwork entrance. Suddenly concerned, he thought of starting towards Boone, but thought better of it when the arbiter—who’d been the one to dismiss him—caught his eye and shook his head, as though the man knew what he was thinking. Feeling a little guilty but having no choice, Catcher offered a quick salute to



show he understood, than turned and hurried off the field, making himself for the underworks.

It didn't really hit him until he'd dipped down into the tunnels, the sound of the Arena finally abating a little as the walls encircled him.

He'd won. He'd actually won...

Catcher stopped short, then, and found himself putting a hand out to support himself against the closest polished plasteel wall. It was more of a surprise than he thought he'd been willing to admit to himself before the match, given the odds. Boone had good—*really* good—having used his strengths and Ability to perfection, and adapted quickly the only time Catcher had put the boy at any real disadvantage. He'd been stronger, too, at least by a rank.

And Catcher had won...

For a long time he stood there, taking it in. It was a strange sensation, thinking about it. In a sense, despite all the bravado he'd talked himself up with during the match, Catcher was used to *losing*. He lost to Viv and Cashe most of the time, and Grant just short of *always*. He'd never won against Aria, and it had been some time since he'd snatched what he suspected was the last victory he'd ever get on Rei. Sure, he'd done well in the Intra-School as his three matches the day before, but thinking about it... This was the first time Catcher had soundly come out on top against an opponent who—by all rights—had every likelihood of kicking his ass.

Yes, he hadn't come out of it without a scratch—his still-numb shoulder was a testament to that—but just the same... Catcher had won.

Looking up again, Catcher started down the ramp once more, a little more pep in his step. Maybe all his talk about not being weak was more than just talk, after all. He smirked, thinking of the move that had won him the match in the end, and vowing to himself that he wouldn't make it a permanent part of his arsenal. It was the kind of trick

that only worked cleanly once, at least against opponents who knew to expect it, so he'd have to find some other way to overcome the likes of Boone in the future.

He could do it, though. Catcher knew that, now, and as he reached the bottom of the tunnel and the traffic of the remaining morning fighters and their chaperones he was smiling in truth, ready to head back up and find the others for a well-deserved series of high fives.

Then, though, he came up short yet again, because his NOED came alive unbidden.

For a second, there was only that infrequent thrill of realizing Arthus had upgraded and the anticipation of finding out where he'd gotten stronger. As he read, though, Catcher felt his jaw drop further and further until he got to the bottom of the notification.

Then every hair on his body stood on end.

For what felt like an eternity Catcher stared at the words, unable to believe them. For once he thought he had a minute appreciate for what Rei had to go through with Shido time and time again.

It was almost a full 15 seconds, in fact, before he remembered to breath, hissing out the words unintentionally, so low he didn't even hear himself speak.

“User Ability... Assigned...?”