

## Chapter 27

**\*\*\*\*\* First part of Chapter 27, to be released Friday. \*\*\*\*\* First part of Chapter 27, to be released Friday. \*\*\*\*\* First part of Chapter 27, to be released Friday. \*\*\*\*\* First part of Chapter 27, to be released Friday. \*\*\*\*\* First part of Chapter 27, to be released Friday. \*\*\*\*\* First part of Chapter 27, to be released Friday. \*\*\*\*\* First part of Chapter 27, to be released Friday. \*\*\*\*\* First part of Chapter 27, to be released Friday. \*\*\*\*\* First part of Chapter 27, to be released Friday. \*\*\*\*\* First part of Chapter 27, to be released Friday.**

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For the tenth time in a row Viv brought a finger up to the pad she had propped against her lap, dragging it backwards to rewind the recording before playing it back again. For the tenth time in a row she watched Cashe's Warband Ability trigger, watched the Lancer upper body seem to split into three different images as she lunged at Aria, each bending or twisting in a slightly different plausible direction of attack, with the *real* Cashe actually landing a clean hit straight through Aria's gut to score her first ever FDA against the girl.

For the tenth time, Viv only felt worse looking at it, and she sighed and let her head fall back to the bed board she'd set her shoulders against.

"This *sucks*..." she mumbled with a sigh, starting to close her eyes as she fought *not* to be jealous, *not* to be worried.

"Something up?"

Viv started, sitting up straight again and doing her best to casually slide the pad—which was still playing the recording of Cashe's testing time—off to the side, onto the blankets of Logan's bed. "Nothing!" she said, cursing herself silently for the squeak in her voice. "Fine! I'm fine!"

Logan himself only narrowed his eyes at her from where he'd leaned out, bare-chested, from the room's bathroom, his black hair damp and slicked back, the one massive shoulder she could see still wet from the shower they'd just taken.

They were in his and Vademe's room, the Valormade squad leader having taken his leave after subtly—and very considerately, Viv thought—letting them both know he would be gone for at *least* an hour or so while he caught up on the day's matches with his team. Viv was wearing nothing but one of Logan's plain white undershirts, but even as tall as she was the neck hole left bare one shoulder no matter which way she pulled it, and the bottom dropped almost to her knees when she stood up. On the whole, it hung on her like one of those ancient virgin's veil she'd heard about once.

The irony of that comparison, of course, was not lost on her.

“Viv... What's up?”

Logan, very obviously, hadn't been convinced by her appalling act, and she felt her cheeks go a little hot as he stared her down. Anyone else would have thought he was glaring, she knew. He was so... intense. In a way that had long since caught her around the heart so suddenly and abruptly she doubted the feeling would ever ease up in any meaningful way. She knew him now, though—or at least knew him much better than she had a few months earlier—and she could see beyond the sharpness of his gaze, beyond the coolness of his eyes.

Concerned. Logan was concerned.

It made her chest tighten, sure, but it was also *not* what she wanted to be thinking about in the moment, given their circumstances.

“Nothing,” she repeated herself, smiling this time. “Really. Just watching some recordings from the day.”

It wasn't a lie. She didn't like lying to Logan when she could help it. She kept enough secrets from him already, so when she could be honest she always was.

Or as close to honest as possible, as was the case this time.

Uuuunfortunately... for a second time, he didn't buy it.

Stepping out from around the corner now, Logan made a beeline for her, passing Vademe's bed—the closer of the two to the bathroom—as he did. For a second Viv wasn't sure if she was relieved or disappointed he'd wrapped a towel around his waist since they'd gotten out of the shower, but it didn't matter once he was standing over her, a monolith of muscle, power, and intensity. She shivered, and not in a bad way.

Right up until he spoke again.

“Lemme see the pad, Viv.”

His voice, so stoic and lacking emotion when he spoke to almost anyone else, was gentle, and there was that *damn* concern again. Viv tensed, forgetting to answer for a second too long, because Logan nodded as though something had been confirmed for him before starting to reach for it.

“No! Wait!”

Viv accidentally triggered her Speed spec in the rush to put a hand on the smartglass tablet, blocking him from getting to it. Of course she knew without a *doubt* that he could have wrestled it from her in a heartbeat if he'd wanted to, but she knew also that he wouldn't.

He did, though, press.

“Viv... What's up? Something's bugging you. You've been a little quiet all afternoon.”

She saw the opportunity, and leapt on it without thinking. “Well... Not *all* afternoon,” she told him with the best lip-bite grin she could manage, lifting an eyebrow suggestively.

No dice.

“Nice try.” Logan crossed his arms over his chest. “If you don't want to talk about it, that's ok. I get it. But *I* want you to talk about it, because it seems like you need to, whatever it is that's going on...”

Viv pouted for a second more, trying one last time to distract the boy, but he only frowned down in a way that let her know she wasn't about to dodge this train. With a sigh she opened her mouth again, about to insist once more that yes, she *was* fine and no, she *didn't* want to talk about it, when she stopped.

Stopped, because *Rei's* voice, of all people, had just rung through her ears.

*Promise you'll talk to me about this kind of shit from now on...*

Abruptly, and without *any* warning, Viv's stomach clenched, and she realized suddenly that she wanted to cry.

Something must have changed on her face, too, because Logan paled, and he was on one knee at the edge of the bed in a blink, pulling her legs off with one hand to spin her gently around to face him, the other coming up to her right cheek as he looked up into her eyes.

"Hey... *hey*. It's okay. It's alright. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to push. You poke me all the time about stuff with my dad, so I just thought I could do the—"

"No, *no*," Viv interrupted him, bringing her own hand up to rest her fingers on the outside of his gratefully. She hadn't *actual* shed any tears yet, and was relieved to hear that her voice wasn't cracking. "It's not you. You're... Well, you're perfect, almost annoyingly so. It's one *hundred* percent me..."

Logan didn't say anything to this, apparently understanding he wasn't supposed to. Instead he waited, slowly rubbing one thumb back and forth across her cheek comfortingly.

After a couple seconds, she kept on.

"Logan... What if... What if I get left behind?"

Viv would admit to herself in retrospect later that, had it not been for the heaviness of the doubts and anxiety that had weighed down on her all day, nothing in the world would probably have had a shot at making her feel better in that moment the utter *shock* that registered across her boyfriend's face at the question. It was so clear, so

genuine, in fact, that she wasn't sure she'd witness such naked emotion from the boy in the months they'd been together—officially or otherwise—much less *before* that. His jaw dropped as both eyebrows flew up practically all the way to his handsome hairline, and he looked totally at a loss for words for so long Viv started to wonder if she'd given him a heart attack.

“Tell me you're joking,” he finally managed to wheeze out after a second. “Seriously. Tell me you're joking.”

“I'm *not*,” Viv insisted, half-laughing and half-choking out the words as anxiety clenched at her stomach again. “I'm not. Logan, think about it. *Catcher* has an Ability. *Cashe* has an Ability. *You* have an Ability. Aria and Rie... well, they're both monsters, so I'm not gonna waste my time comparing myself to them. But the *rest of the team*...” She felt her cheeks tighten uncomfortably. “Firesong is supposed to be the ‘ace’ squad, right? But now it's got five people with Abilities, and one one without. And others are starting to get them! Vademe already has Break Step, and I'll bet—”

“Vademe has his own squad,” Logan cut in.

“So what?” Viv insisted. “So what? A *first-year* squad? What does that mean? For all that Dent talked about how we might be teammates ‘all through school and beyond’, I looked it up and it's *bullshit*. Only like eighteen percent of any squads formed in an academy setting fight in the SCTs or on the front lines as a group, and only *four percent* of squads formed as first years do. Firesong could *absolutely* go through changes, and as things stand right now I'm feeling like *I'd* be the first one to get axed...”

She stopped at last, realizing she'd barely breathed as the words had rushed out of her. Logan, meanwhile, was frowning at her with a mix of amusement and incredulity etched into every chiseled line of his face.

“What?” she asked, maybe a little more testily than she meant to.

“Nothing,” he answered with a shake of his head. “It's just the first time I've wondered if I'm dating an idiot.”

Viv bristled, dropping her hand from his coolly. “Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

“It should. Cause the last thing I think you are is an idiot.”

It didn’t help.

“Okay, this was a bad idea,” Viv said sourly, looking away from him and making to push his hand off her cheek. “Obviously I shouldn’t have brought it—”

But then, in a flash, Grant had her pushed back and pinned her to the bed, one hand locking down her right wrist, the other carefully placed about her throat so as not to hurt, but let its presence be known.

The effect on her body was instantaneous—just like he knew it would be—and when Grant bent down to growl into her ear, she could only tremble.

“Since you’re clearly not in the mood to have a civil conversation right now, we’re going to talk like this. Got it?”

She nodded shakily, answering automatically. “Yes.”

“Good. Then listen to me: give your friends some credit, Viv.”

The words were simultaneous fire and ice through down her throat, and she took in a sharp breath as he continued.

“Do you have an Ability? No. Put like Takeshi said the other day, that’s temporary. Even despite that, if you went up against Vademe, I would put your chance of winning at 50/50, which is a *hell* of a lot better odds than he had against you at the beginning of the week. My point though, is that none of that matters.” His hand moved from her neck to her chest, where he pressed a finger to her heart. “I don’t know Aria as well as you do, sure, but I can damn well say with confidence it would take a *hell of a lot* for her to rethink having you on the team. Not just because of how good you are, but because you guys are friends first. That’s clear to anyone who so much as passes you in the hall. You would have to light someone on fire, I think, to get Aria to even consider replacing

you, and if that person was Dyrk Reese or Mateus Selleck I doubt even that would be enough.”

Viv had at last regained just a little bit of her self control, though she still didn’t fight the pressure of Grant’s touch as she spoke.

“You don’t know that. The school might make her change.”

“The school would be an idiot to do that.”

“I’m a brat. She might not like me forever.”

“You *are* a brat, but not the kind that would make Laurent ever dislike you.”

“Rei could change her mind. If he thought I wasn’t the best fit for the team, I bet he could change her—”

“Oh no you *don’t*.”

The snarl cut her off, and just as abruptly as she’d been pushed to the bed Viv found herself standing on her tiptoes. Logan had taken a fistful of the shirt around her chest and hauled her up as he’d stood, pulling her along with him. She was looking into his eyes again, now, watching them blaze, and for the briefest fraction of a second Viv wondered if that was an *actual* red glow flickering behind that gaze.

She suspected she might have melted then and there, had he not continued.

“Viv, it’s not that I dislike Ward. I think you get that. But... you know that I don’t necessarily *like* him, either, right? That’s I’m still working on that part?”

Viv could only nodded, her breath tight in her chest for *multiple* reasons.

“Which means that you should get that when I give you my thoughts on him, it’s my honest opinion absent any bias?”

Nodding was still all she could manage.

“Perfect. The friggin *hear me when I say this*: Forget about Cashe’s Ability. Forget about Catcher’s. Forget about your bullshit eighteen percent and your bullshit four percent. I can tell you with *one hundred percent* certainty that Reidon Ward would not only cut of his right arm before letting you get replaced, but would also do his best to cut

off *Laurent's* if she was every actually stupid enough to suggest it. Which—and I repeat—*she is not.*”

For a few seconds more they stood like that, Viv on her tiptoes gaping up at him, Logan wearing nothing but a towel as he held her up with one hand by the shirt she'd borrowed from him. Eventually the fervor cooled, and he eased her down to stand again, letting his arm drop away from her completely.

“You're not replaceable, Viv. Not to the Institute, not to me, and not to your friends. Give them some credit, and give yourself some time. Okay?”

Another silence, one in which she was still unable to look away from him. She felt... warm, and she didn't know if it had happened slowly or suddenly or if it had happened because of what he said or for... well... for other reasons. She just felt the heat, and for the first time since that afternoon she managed an actual, real smile.

Then she reached up with both hands, took Logan around the back of the neck, and pulled him down to kiss him.

He'd just started to yelp in alarm when her lips locked on his, and even then it was a moment before he stopped struggling, probably finally realizing she wasn't trying to break his neck or something. For a while they just stayed like that, she pulling him in greedily, he letting it happen.

Then, at last, Viv brought her mouth away from his, though she didn't let him get too far as he made to stand again.

“You know...” she started quietly, dropping her forehead to his bare chest and closing her eyes. “You can be really sweet when you're not being an asshole...”

Grant chuckled darkly, and she felt his strong arms coming up to encircle her, holding her close.

“Like I said. Working on it...”