

CHAPTER 1

Late December, 2468

Astra System – Astra-3 – Sector 9

Castalon

“When did I know she was the one? Easy. I knew when she was the only person left who still scared me enough to make me do the laundry and put my dishes in the—OWOWOWOW that’s my ear, my ear, Aria!”

*-Post-match interview with the Stormweaver
Interrupted by his longtime partner, Aria of Flames*

Reidon “Rei” Ward didn’t think he had ever been in greater danger. Not any of the times he’d been put under the knife on the surgical tables that had been the nightmare of his childhood. Not when he’d nearly had his face kicked in by Mateus Selleck and some other jealous Galens Institute classmates a few months back. Not even when he’d faced Christopher “Lasher” Lennon across the 30-yard expanse of an SCT Dueling field, much less the likes of Logan Grant soon after that.

No. Now, as Rei’s slate-grey eyes flicked to every bustling corner of the massive room he stood in—and finding no easily attainable exit—he was sure of it.

He had never been in greater danger.

“Rei. *Rei.*”

Rei blinked and looked straight again, hoping the terror didn’t show on his face as he took in the tall, green-eyed girl standing before him like nothing was remotely wrong

with the situation. A plain black baseball cap, identical to his own, covered her vibrant red hair, and she was looking at him expectantly.

“Yeah?” he asked, his voice forcibly calm.

“Are you going to tell me? Which one do you think would look better?” Aria Laurent, the ace of the Institute’s first-year cadets, held up a pair of pretty button-up blouses that Rei would have bet his Device’s S-Ranked Growth were *perfectly* identical. “The ‘Heaven Blue’? Or the ‘Afternoon Sky’?”

Obviously, there was only one thing to do in a situation like this.

“The Sky,” Rei stated with *distinctly* false confidence, dipping the brim of his cap at the blouse in the girl’s left hand. “It would go better with your eyes.”

Aria blinked at him, a brief look of confusion passing across her face.

Then, slowly, she grinned.

“You can’t tell the difference, can you?”

“Not even remotely,” Rei answered promptly, keeping up his air of bravado.

Aria laughed, then, the sound more satisfying than any Rei had ever known in his life, even if it made him scowl in the moment.

“Sorry, *sorry*,” Aria managed to get out finally, still grinning even when she was done. “You could have just said as much, you know?”

“And ruin your fun? Not happening.” Rei chuckled. “You’ve bought more clothes *today* than I think I’ve owned in my *life*, lady. I’m not about to jeopardize that kind of commitment.”

It was Aria’s turn to eye him, and she hefted the three *full* bags of apparel that hung from her elbows proudly, each of them sporting a different brand design in shimmering neon holo-displays that were only visible through their NOEDs. “Are you judging me?”

“Not even a *little*,” Rei assured her with his own laugh, bringing up the *four* bags he himself was carrying for the girl so that she could keep shopping with both hands.

“I’m just teasing. We have to wear our regulars at all times at school, so I find it a little baffling is all.”

The pair of them were standing in “Swallowtail”, a massive, single-room clothing boutique that might have fit half a 150-yard Wargames field. The space was a wide-open two stories, and sported so many displays of such a variety of garments that Rei couldn’t imagine there wasn’t a person in the entirety of the ISC who couldn’t have found *something* to wear from among the selection around them alone. They even had an entire section devoted exclusively to wigs, for those in the mood for a more drastic change in look.

And it was only *one* store.

Easthold Mall, it had turned out, was one of the single largest shopping centers in the entirety of the Astra system, thronged daily by the vibrant populace of Castalon and the thriving tourism that was often fed by the Galens Institute and professional Simulated Combat Tournaments the school occasionally hosted. The mall took up no less than *three* of the city’s towering skyscrapers, and comprised of some eleven *thousand* different outlets, shops, and foodcourts, many of which were represented multiple times throughout the sprawling center. Even if they had spent the entirety of their winter vacation exploring, Rei was fairly convinced he and Aria wouldn’t have been able to visit a quarter of the massive complex, for which he was both grateful and disappointed. On the one hand, he’d never been much for shopping, even if he did have a decent pile of credits saved up from the small stipend he’d all-but-forgotten the military provided its cadets.

On the other, while he might miss Viv and Catcher—and even Chancery Cashe, who was quickly growing on all of them—spending the entire vacation stuck inside with Aria didn’t seem like the *worst* way to pass the break...

Whether fortunately or unfortunately, though, Aria herself had other plans.

“Rei I have *three weeks*—well, two, now—to *not* have to wear those damn regulars, and I’m going to take advantage of it. Just because *you* can pull off black and gold every day, Mr. White-Hair-and-Grey-Eyes-for-Days, does not mean the *rest* of us can.” She’d moved on from the blue blouses to steadily thumb along a line of colored tank-tops. “If Uncle Ram and the rest of the staff are nice enough to let us wear civies on breaks, you damn well better believe I’m gonna take advantage of it. Besides—” she plucked a simple pink top from where it was suspended, the magnetic latch that held the hanger in place releasing without a sound “—not *all* of this is for me. You think Viv is any more partial to our uniform than I am?”

Rei had to stop himself grinning evilly as Aria scrutinized the shirt for a moment before replacing it with a *click* to pull down another one. “Viv? Not me? I thought this was supposed to be *our* date.”

He got the reaction he’d been going for at once.

Aria froze. Her face flushed, ears going nearly the color of the red hair she had tucked away under the black cap, and it took her a second to look at him, though her gaze flicked away again immediately.

“Tease,” she mumbled at last, replacing the second top too as a group of four or five boys about their age and in matching uniform jackets passed them on the other side of the suspended rack. After a second, though, she found her composure, and turned her green eyes on Rei’s own clothes. “Actually... Something for *you*... That’s not a bad idea.”

He made a face at her, lifting both arms in display. “What? Why? What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?”

In response, he got an arched eyebrow.

Aside from their matching hats—kindly provided for them by Bashir Sattar, the gruff Galens quartermaster—Rei and Aria couldn’t have been dressed more differently. They both wore long sleeves, partially to ward off the December chill and partially to

hide Shido and Hippolyta's colored bands from the eyes of curious passersby, but while Rei thought he'd looked smart in a white half-zip, a black jacket, and black jeans—the nicest clothes he owned aside from their standard ISCM uniform—Aria had, predictably, put him to shame from the moment they'd met up in the lobby of Kanes, the first-year dormitory, a couple of hours before. Her green bomber jacket was artfully too big for her, loosely buttoned over a low-cut shirt, and her own jeans were fashionably ripped and worn around her thighs and knees. Rei was glad, too, that even with his new 5'7" frame he was used to being towered over by everyone in his life, because Aria—already 5'11"—had kept to her black military-issue boots, adding another inch or so more over him and his simpler sneakers. All-in-all, the girl cut the perfect picture of a voguish teenage model, looking like she might have dropped right out of one of the ads scrolling across the massive smart-glass screens that made up the ceiling of the shop above their heads.

It was a side of her Rei had never seen, and he was enjoying every second of it.

"Rei... We wear black all day, all year." Aria was looking at him almost pityingly, now. "I can't convince you to *try* a splash of color at least? Even blue? To match your C—to match your bracelets?"

Aria had caught herself, obviously about to say the word "CAD" out loud, which had enough of a chance of causing trouble that Galens cadets were discouraged from mentioning their Devices beyond the grounds. When they'd notified the school of their intention to leave, in fact, Rei and Aria had been surprised by the list of "recommendations" the Security Center had sent back along with their approval and the hats. The Institute was famous, they knew—across the system but *especially* on Astra-3—and took the safety of its students seriously. While the list had been non-enforceable, each point had come with reasonings that had had the pair of them following it to a T.

Especially when they'd seen the custom note added at the bottom, pointing out that Rei and Aria were—aside from perhaps a handful of second- and third-year cadets like Anatoli Sidorov and the Lasher—the *most* recognizable students the school currently hosted among its body.

And so the pair of them had hidden their most distinguishing features, tucking their white and red hair under the provided caps respectively. The jackets concealed their CADs, and in Rei's case served the double-purpose of covering the now-long-healed scars of over 160 past surgeries, markings that had apparently become a “signature” distinguishing feature of his according to the forums and feeds that followed the Intra-School and collegiate-level SCT's. He and Aria avoided all mention of CADs, Devices, Users, and the like, and did their best to keep their conversation private while they moved about the mall. If he'd been with anyone else, Rei might have found the restrictions oppressive.

Instead, he'd been more than happy for the excuse to stick close to Aria, keeping to themselves all afternoon as they'd bounced from place to place, laughing and talking as easily as any other day, so long as Rei didn't remind the girl they were on an actual *date*.

Eyeing Aria's outfit, Rei grinned as he answered her. “It's not like I'm *opposed* to other looks. I'm down for it, as long as you don't hold on to the hope that there is a shot in hell I'm ever going to look as stylish as you.”

Aria managed to keep her composure this time as she looked him up and down. “I don't know about that...” She lifted her gaze over his head then, taking in the projected signs that labeled the different sections of the store. “Men's... Where's the Men's... Ah! There!” She pointed further into the shop and started to hurry around Rei, obviously eager. “Come on!”

“Yeeeah... Not happening,” Rei answered with a laugh, catching her by the arm as she passed. “I'm all for shopping for *you* anywhere and any day of the week, but if

you think I can afford a place like this, you're insane. I haven't touched my stipend all year and I *still* think I'd have to take a loan out to buy a *sock* from this shop."

"That's no problem!" Aria started brightly. "I can just get it for—"

She stopped, though, as he cocked his head at her with a bit of a grimace.

"Ooor not...?" she said tentatively.

"Or not," Rei confirmed with a snort. "If I'm lucky enough that you still want to buy me boxers sometime in the future, we can talk about it. But no *way* are you dressing me on your dime on our—" he paused for dramatic effect "—First. Date."

Aria flushed again, so brightly Rei could have sworn he felt the girl's *arm* heat up under the sleeve of her jacket still in his grasp.

"You're the *worst*," she muttered, looking away at once.

Then, almost immediately, she perked up, whirling back to face him.

"Oh... *Oh*...!"

"Oh' what?" Rei asked, taken aback by her sudden enthusiasm.

"It's just *me* buying it that's the problem, right? If I find something you like, and you can get it yourself, you would?"

"I'd... consider it," Rei answered, choosing his words carefully as he finally let go of her elbow. "Like I said, if you think I can afford anything in a fancy place like this, you're out of your—"

"Nope!" the girl cut him off, and suddenly Rei found himself being pulled along, Aria having spun on her heel and switched the bags from one arm to the other. The next thing he knew, he'd been taken by the hand to be led—rather enthusiastically—towards Swallowtail's front exit. "Not like this! Not at all like this!"

Rei was so caught off guard he couldn't say anything until well after Aria had half-dragged him into the busy, brilliant-white fairway of the mall floor's packed main hall. He wasn't sure she'd even noticed that she'd grabbed him *by the hand*, but *he* certainly

had, and the warmth of her fingers around his was enough to scramble his usually-clear head.

Eventually, however, he managed it, laughing as his feet finally caught up under him. “Aria! Where are we going??”

In answer, the girl looked back over her shoulder.

“To the mecca of affordable fashion, duh!” She grinned at him. “Have you never been thrift shopping??”

Jay Taylor was feeling pretty good about himself. It had been a while since he’d felt this good, in fact. His loss in his seventh match of the Pennview Military Academy’s Intra-School SCT had knocked him out of qualifying individually for the first-year brackets of the Sector 2 Sectionals tournament, and he hadn’t been picked to compete as one of the non-qualifiers on any of the Academy’s three squad groups even *despite* his parents’ attempted interventions on his behalf. As a result, he’d spent the last week of term sulking and training with his friends, and the days at home since doing much the same.

Then, after a couple private training sessions with a former Systems Champion Lancer his mother had found to instruct him over break, Jay had managed to not only manage an impressive—in his opinion—D4 CAD-Rank, but also achieve his first evolution since his assignment back in May, one of only a handful of cadets to manage it in the *whole* of Pennview’s first-year class.

His parents had, predictably, wanted to celebrate in extravagance, and what better way to do so than to send Jay—along with his friends Dabeet, Milo, and Colson from school—on an all-expenses paid trip to the hottest city on the planet?

Yeah... Jay Taylor was feeling pretty good about himself.

Especially after crossing paths with the tall, green-eyed girl who'd all but taken his breath away.

“Yo, these guys are *legit*,” Colson Meadows had been saying behind his back as they'd explored the Easthold Mall. The black-haired Saber, along with Milo Rett, had apparently caught the tourist bug from Castalon's towering cityscape, because the pair of them had been watching reruns of some of that year's Galens Institute Intra-Schools ever since they'd reached the shopping complex. “This is *insane*. Some of these first-years are already C-Ranked, and well into them!”

“It's nuts right?” Milo, a hulking boy with narrow eyes and orange-blue hair—who could have been a perfect specimen of what someone might think a Brawler-Type User should *exactly* look like—had agreed from behind Jay's left shoulder. “And did you see the upper year matches? That ‘Lasher’ guy is on another level. Apparently he's a top favorite for ISC Collegiate Champion this year.”

“Woah.” It was Dabeet Anand this time, his towering, green-haired frame walking tall on Jay's other side, who'd finally entered the conversation. “I forgot Lennon was a student at Galens! Think there's a shot we could meet him while we're here??”

The silence that followed had had Jay looking back at the trio, not-unexpectedly finding them watching him hopefully.

He'd smirked. “How about I call my dad after we're done here? Maybe he can get us a tour of the Institute, if we're lucky.”

“Nice!” Dabeet and Milo had said together even as Colson nodded along in eager agreement.

Shoving his hands into his pockets—careful to let the white of Ephrodite's vysetrium gems shine unhindered in its blue-green bands—Jay had looked forward again, feeling like the day was only getting better and better. Truth be told he'd doubted his father—despite being a high-ranking official in Sector 2's local government—would have the kind of pull to get them anywhere near *Galens*, but ever since assignment his

parents had been fawning over him even more so than usual, so it couldn't hurt to ask. He liked, too, feeling like the lynchpin of his little group, like Dabeet, Milo, and Colson would eagerly follow him through any door he could grease open for them.

So when he saw the girl, Jay was feeling sure enough of himself to take a swing even he—confident as he was—might have thought twice about any other day.

After all, she wasn't alone...

It was the flash of green that caught his eye, a brilliant shade of emerald that sparkled even under the brim of the plain black cap she had tucked tight about her head. To call her stunning would have been an understatement, an athletic form—obvious despite the loose jacket she was wearing—complementing a face that stood out even in a modern world of engineered beauty. She wasn't far when she passed by to head into a shop on the right side of the crowded hall they'd been making their way along, so Jay found himself brought up short about as much by the way she moved—graceful and quick as a dancer—as any other part of her.

Then again, maybe she *was* a dancer, for all he knew... It would have made sense given her companion—wearing a matching hat, if nothing else of any real style—moved with a similar poise and confidence. Jay actually would have suspected the pair were Users like him and the other three, except for a simple fact:

The guy looked to be barely more than five-and-a-half feet tall, and somewhat wiry despite his straight shoulders and self-assured air.

“Woah...” Dabeet said again, but this time Jay knew it had nothing to do with the Galens tournament recordings. “Who is *that*, and how do I get to know her?”

“Great minds, man...” Jay answered, glancing back as the girl and her short friend vanished into the store—the “Swallowtail”—while chatting animatedly. Dabeet looked to have been the only one to have seen her of the other two, because Colson and Milo were looking between the pair of them, blinking away the playback from the neuro-optics.

“What are you guys talking about?” Milo grunted, frowning around them as he searched for the reason they’d come up short. “Get to know who?”

“You know... Why don’t we find out?” Jay answered, running a strong hand through his long, grey-black hair before heading for Swallowtail himself, not surprised when he heard his friends hurrying along behind him.

It didn’t take them long to find the girl and her companion. Despite the shop being a sizable one even by the standards of Easthold Mall, the matching black hats moving through the artfully-suspended displays weren’t too hard to parse out of the colored hair and flashy clothes of the store’s other shoppers. After about a minute of weaving casually throughout the aisles Jay and the others found the two in the “Women’s” section looking at shirts, the girl apparently in the process of asking the boy his opinion. When Milo and Cooper got an eyeful of her, their matching expression of “Oh *man*...” had Jay smirking again.

He’d seen her first, and he knew none of the other three were dumb enough to try and claim his dibs on this opportunity, lest he ditch them to find their own—rather expensive—rides home from the city.

Pretending as best they could to be looking for a selection for themselves—which might have been easier if any of their four had been wearing anything but jeans and the casual jackets Pennview provided for its cadets, emblazoned with a proud crest of the school on one side—they listened in on the pair, exchanging sidelong looks of surprise every now and then. As it turned out, the short boy was *definitely* more than a friend, or at least angling to be. It sounded like the two of them were on their first date, in fact, and Jay had to stifle a repeated frown as the guy—“Rei”, the still-nameless girl called him—teased her more than once. She was obviously a self-conscious thing, and Jay couldn’t help but feel bad for her. If she was so timid that someone as diminutive as *this* punk could convince her to go out with him...

Unfortunately, Jay had just made his choice to interrupt—or maybe try to catch the girl on her own if he got the chance—when the pair of them abruptly high-tailed it out of the store, the girl dragging “Rei” off by the hand like he was some grade school boy.

“Wow,” Jay snorted in annoyance at last as the two disappeared out into the hall again, already moving to follow and hearing Dabeet, Milo, and Colson all fall in behind him quickly. “The hell is she doing with a guy like *that*? A hundred credits says I get her away from him inside of a minute.”

Had he looked over his shoulder, he might have seen the other three exchange a less sure look.

“Uh... You think so, Jay?” Milo asked uncertainly as they, too, stepped into the hall and turned left. “They seemed pretty tight to me...”

“*Really* tight...” Dabeet agreed just as carefully.

Jay only laughed. Ahead of them he could still see the paired black hats, and he picked up his pace, engaging his Speed slightly, which forced the others to do the same in turn. He didn’t even bother keeping an eye out for city security, enjoying the widening eyes of the civilians who hurried to get out of the foursome’s way. Sure, it was frowned upon for a User to draw on their specs in public, but it wasn’t *illegal*.

“Girl’s probably just never had someone show proper interest in her,” he said over his shoulder as they moved, lifting a wrist to shake Ephrodite’s CAD band pointedly. “Another hundred says her jaw drops when she realizes I’m a *User*. If anything, she looks in need of rescuing, don’t you think?”

In answer, Jay got only silence, which satisfied him plenty. Again, though, if he’d looked back he might have noticed the other three trade another glance, as well as Colson muttering under his breath. “Rei’... ‘Rei’?... Why do I feel like I’ve heard that name before...?”

“Now *that* is what I’m talking about!” Rei couldn’t help but exclaim some 45 minutes later, half-walking, half-skipping out of “Olson’s Second-Hand”. While he still carried Aria’s four bags, his load had now been added to with a pair of his own, and not for the first time he thanked Shido for the Strength spec he could politely call on even out and about. “I might be starting to look like a pack mule, but I’m gonna be a *sexy* pack mule once we get back to school!”

Aria, following a couple steps behind, giggled at that. “Good thing Viv’s not around to overhear you. I don’t think you’d live that particular image down for days.”

Rei grinned, turning and waiting for her to catch up. “Worth it. How did I not know this was a thing?? Seriously!”

Aria laughed again. All her bags were on one arm, now, and with only a brief hesitation she slid her free one into the crook of Rei’s elbow. “I’m glad you had fun. Not gonna lie, I was second-guessing myself all the way down here. I mean *I’m* a fan of thrifting, but it can’t be everyone’s vibe, you know?”

“Nah! That was *way* cool! You had me a little worried there with how badly you wanted me to put on that purple top hat, but aside from that I was *here* for it.”

Aria nodded approvingly. “Good, I’m glad. Now though…” She looked to check the time in the corner of her NOED. “It’s a getting a little late. If we want to be back in time to have dinner with the others, we might need to catch a flyer in the next hour or so.”

Rei only barely kept himself from sighing out loud in disappointment, pulling up the frame of his own neuro-optics as he led them along aimlessly up the nearest hall. He quickly had a map of Easthold up to scan it briefly, pleased when he made note of their location.

“There’s actually a port just two floors up, it looks like. Won’t even take us five minutes to grab an elevator and call a ride.” He blinked the frame away to look at Aria again. “Seems like this floor has a bunch of other second-hand places, though. Wanna check out a couple more before we head out?”

“Oh, I’m *so* in,” she agreed at once, giving a little skip of excitement on his arm. “I came here with my sister a few years ago, before she volunteered for the front lines. There’s a *bunch* of good spots! First, though—” she pointed to a glowing holo-sign up the hall a little ways, displaying the minimalist shape of a human form that morphed every second or two from a roughly masculine outline into a more-feminine one accented by the shape of a dress “—nature calls, if that’s okay?”

“Nah. Gonna make you hold it all the way back to school,” Rei joked absently even as he shifted them to head for the bathrooms, earning himself a poke in the ribs. He might have chuckled at her blushing again, except for the fact that he was a little distracted. As they’d started crossing the hall, he thought he’d seen a familiar set of school uniforms drifting along in the throng nearby...

Keeping an eye out, Rei turned them down into the narrower, empty alley off the main way, plain aside from the advertisements that played across the walls between the half-dozen open bathroom entrances and a trio of mostly-free double-sided benches thoughtfully provided for partners and families left to guard purchases. Agreeing to keep an eye on their things, Rei didn’t watch Aria hurry around the privacy corner into the nearest of the unisex restrooms, choosing instead to toss his stuff on the plasteel seat beside where she’d dropped hers before easing himself down by the bags. As he did, he studied the end of the fortunately-one-way hall, wondering if he’d been imagining things.

He didn’t have to wait more than 10 seconds to be disappointed.

The four boys took the corner as a group, rounding it with a purpose that told Rei immediately their appearance was no coincidence. Indeed, they to-a-one locked eyes

with him even as they approached, and Rei forced himself to ease back and rest one arm across the top of the bench behind him, hoping to cut a casual air.

He'd learned a long, long time ago that it didn't always take much to throw most troublemakers off their game.

Sure enough, he saw the division at once. The shared, uncomfortable look between the three trailing boys—sporting black, green, and orange-blue hair respectively—told him there was a mastermind behind whatever was about to go down. Indeed, as they approached, it was on the leader of the group that his eyes fell, a tall, handsome youth probably his age, with a strong, square chin that framed his face well along with his own black-and-grey locks. The boy was smirking as he neared, but that was hardly the first thing Rei took note of.

Much more alarming, after all, was the CAD...

Well... shit, Rei thought, eyeing the matching bands of blue-green steel accented with white vysetrium. Unsurprisingly the other three, too, sported Devices, but Rei only watched the leader as the four of them finally came to a stop before him, spreading out to pin him in with a practiced efficiency that said this was not the first time this game had been played by the group.

Rei's certainty in this fact redoubled when the leader smiled at him and spoke with the absolute confidence of someone very, *very* used to getting their way.

"Get lost, munchkin."

There might have been time, in a past life, where Rei would have risen to that bait, where he'd had something to prove by standing up to this *exemplary* example of a pompous prick. As it was, though, he instead blinked at the boy, then looked around over his shoulder as though making sure there wasn't anyone behind him who might have been addressed instead. There was no one, of course, and—taking the opportunity to double-check that Shido's bands were still hidden under the sleeves of his own jacket—Rei looked around again in feigned confusion.

“Sorry... Are you talking to me?”

The tall boy’s smirk redoubled. “Stupid to boot.” He looked around at his friends. “See? Told you I was right.” There came only shared nods from the others who—Rei made sure to note—never looked away from him.

Possibly only one real idiot here, then... he made a mental note of even as he considered his options. He’d been worried he—or Aria, more likely—had been recognized by cadets from a rival school looking to pick a fight, but obviously that wasn’t the case.

Which unfortunately only meant they were about something much more devious...

“Oh, was this your bench?” Rei asked, playing for time and putting on a genuine air of concern as he motioned to the plasteel beside him. “Sorry. I can move our stuff if you need to take a load off?”

The smirk faded a little at that, like the boy wasn’t used to this level of difficulty getting his *very* obvious point across.

“No, it isn’t our *bench*, you moron. Are you *actually* this slow? Let me make it clear for you, then.” He bent low to cock his head in Rei’s face. “We’re—” he motioned between himself and the trio “—of the opinion that your friend is in need of better company than yours. In case it wasn’t obvious, that would be us.” He lifted a hand to show off the CAD band. “I’m assuming you know what this is?”

“I know what that is, yeah,” Rei said calmly, eyeing the Device.

“Good, then you should also know it means that *you need to get lost*, shouldn’t you?”

As the white vysetrium in the bracelet gleamed under the hallway lights, Rei saw the opportunity and took it at once. It had been drilled into him for more than 5 months now, after all, that information was often more valuable than strength in a fight.

So, instead of answering, he peered at the boy’s jacket.

“‘Pennview Military Academy’,” he read off out loud, the emblem stitched into the cloth over the left breast clear now that it was so close. “Is that one of those ‘SCT’

schools? That's cool. You guys look pretty badass, too. I'm guessing you're like..." he looked between them, snagging quick snaps of the group's faces with his frame as he pretended to ponder "... fourth-years, maybe?"

"First," the tallest of the other three, green-haired and olive-skinned, grunted in answer. "There's no fourth year for ISCM cadets." He looked at the ring leader. "Okay, Jay, I'm convinced. This guy's definitely an idiot."

Rei, though, had stopped listening, pulling up his frame again the moment the second boy had spoken. He'd intended to do an image scan using his surreptitious camera work, but the name was *way* more useful.

Pennview Military Academy. A school he'd never heard of, which—despite the fact that there were a *lot* of schools he'd never heard of, even on Astra-3 alone—was a good sign. It took barely a second for the name "Jay"—coupled with the confirmed first-year status—to draw "Jay Taylor" up on the feeds, and Rei was pleased to find that Pennview actually displayed its cadets' publicly-accessible information on their students' profiles, saving him the precious seconds it would have taken to do a search of the ISCM User database.

Jay Taylor. First-year. Lancer.

D4.

Rei couldn't help himself from smiling, letting the tension go with a breath as he sat back more comfortably in the bench.

"The hell are you grinning at?" The leader—"Taylor", Rei knew now—half-snarled as he caught Rei relaxing. He was standing straight again, hands balled into fists at his sides. "I said to *get lost*, didn't I? Walk away, or—"

"Or *what*, dumbass?" Rei cut him off sharply, letting his voice harden and staring the boy down even as Taylor towered over him. "You'll call your Device on me? Try to kick my ass in a *public mall*? Pretty sure the only moron here is *you*, and that's being kind to your friends."

Taylor blinked at him, then, obviously completely taken aback by this sudden shift in tone. Of course he was, though. Bullies never handled being shoved back into line well, and it had been months since Rei's bravado in situations like this had been all sham.

D4. What a joke. After his final duel against Logan Grant in the Galens Intra-Schools had won Rei an individual qualifying spot at Sectionals nearly 4 weeks ago, Shido had made numerous individual spec jumps, including Endurance and Strength. It hadn't been enough to upgrade his CAD-Rank after his training with Christopher Lennon the Sunday before had *just* gotten him to C4, but the fight combined with nearly a month of training since—including a full week of squad-format sparring under the watchful eyes of Valera Dent—*had* done the trick and then some. Assuming Jay Taylor was the strongest of this foursome—which tended to be the case with groups like this, in Rei's experience—Rei's shiny C6 CAD-Rank, tied for the highest first-year rank with Aria, was a full *tier* higher than any of them.

Even if his combat specs were skewed closer to C2 or 3 due to his S-Ranked Growth, he was pretty sure he could have taken any two of these guys on his own without much trouble if worse came to worse. Probably even three.

As it happened, though, it had been *years* since Rei had had to pick his fights alone...

"Rei... What's going on?"

As one Rei and the four Pennview first-years looked around. Aria was standing just outside the entrance to the bathroom, looking a little alarmed at the sight the five of them must have cut. Before Rei could get a word out, though, Jay Taylor changed tactics in a flash, moving so fast to stand in front of the girl it couldn't have been more obvious he'd deliberately triggered his Speed. In a heartbeat the others, too, had left Rei to join him, surrounding Aria in a half-circle, her back to the opening.

“Hey,” Taylor greeted her, and even from behind Rei could tell he was offering the girl what had to have been a dazzling smile. “I’m Jay. Don’t worry about your friend. He was just telling us he had to get going, unfortunately.” He lifted one hand with what Rei admitted was uncanny subtlety to brush a lock of loose hair out of his eyes, making sure to show off the CAD around his wrist again as he did. “What’s your name? I’d be happy to hang out, if you still have shopping to do...?”

Aria only stared at the boy wide-eyed, clearly processing what was going on. After a second or two of catching up the bewildering situation, though, she slowly leaned around him to look at Rei again.

“Woah... Is this *actually* happening?” she asked him in a stage whisper.

“Yup,” Rei answered back in equal tone, trying not to laugh as he did. “You might want to consider it, though. That guy is a *D4* User. Must be the real deal!”

Aria snorted at that, taking Taylor in again, who’d glanced over his shoulder to look between the two of them in obvious confusion. Whatever he’d been expecting to happen, this was *definitely* not it.

Aria spoke to Rei again before he could say anything to save face, though.

“So... Are you not gonna help me?” She eyed him as he sat, still cutting a casual air with one arm draped across the back of the bench. “Seems like pretty bad form on a date. A *first* date, too, as you keep reminding me.”

Rei couldn’t stop himself chuckling. “Aria, you could probably take all four of them on *without* Hippolyta, and you know it.”

She made a pouty face at that. “Well yeah, obviously. Still... That doesn’t mean a little help wouldn’t be *nice*...”

Rei rolled his eyes even as one of the boys—the black-haired one—suddenly tensed, the color seeming to drain from his face all at once. “Fiiiiine... I’ll take the two the left. You take the right.”

“Your left? Or mine?”

“Mine.” Rei stood up, giving an exaggerated stretch as he did. “Don’t hurt them, though, okay? I *really* don’t want to get brigged again.”

“Wait,” the black-haired boy spoke up, sounding abruptly very, *very* nervous. “‘Aria’? Aria *Laurent*? And ‘Rei’? As in—?” His eyes went wide in realization, looking between the pair of them. “Oh. Oh, shit...”

“What?” Jay Taylor demanded, sounding more irritated at being left out of whatever was happening around him than anything else. “*What*, Colson?!”

As ‘Colson’ opened his mouth to speak, though, Aria cut him off sweetly.

“Oh, no. No, no, no. It’s *way* too late now, buddy.”

And then she and Rei were moving in synch.

Wham-wham-wham-WHAM!

Engaging his C6 Speed, Rei closed the short gap between him and the group in a fraction of a second. He saw the boys respond, saw them draw on their own specs, but not a one of them had the ability to do so remotely fast enough. Speed was tied for Cognition as Rei’s best attribute, and likely outranked any of theirs by a full tier and then some. His Strength, too, was up to C0, having been only trailed by Endurance as the last of his specs to reach the Cs in the past week—at least when Shido was left in its innate Brawler Mode.

In short, it meant that he had enough agility and power behind his steps to not only take both of the left-most Pennview boys—Taylor and the tall, green-haired one—by the necks of their jackets before they could respond, but also twist them around and slam both up against the smart-glass wall at their backs with enough force that the projected advertisements there glitched and flickered for a moment before resuming their silent play-through.

“*OOMPH!*” was the only sound either of them got out as the wind was knocked from their chests even through their reactive shielding.

Rei didn’t let them recover.

“Sounds like ‘Colson’ is the quickest of the four of you,” he said through a smile that bared all of his teeth. “Surrounding a pretty girl like a pack of dogs in heat. Are you *freaking* kidding me? You’re lucky we *are*, in fact, on a date, or I’d drag your sorry asses into one of these bathrooms and play waterboard with the toilet water.”

“Oh don’t let me stop you, Rei,” Aria chimed in, still speaking in that sickly sweet voice.

Deciding he could afford to glance away from the still-recovering pair he had pinned, Rei stole a peek sideways just long enough for his grin to widen further. Aria—who’s own CAD-Rank wasn’t skewed in *any* way—had Colson similarly held to the wall with one hand, while the large boy with orange-and-blue hair appeared to be struggling in vain to get off his back from where he’d been thrown to the floor.

He might have had an easier time of it had the girl not had one military-issue boot planted firmly on his chest, pinning him to the ground as absolutely as might a steel piston.

Shaking his head in amusement, Rei looked back to his own charges. “Hear that, friends? The lady says I can give you both a swirly and she’ll *still* let me walk her home. What do you say?”

Despite the impact they’d just suffered, the two boys *were* Users, and so had recovered quickly from the blow that had clearly been mostly-absorbed by their shielding.

“W-what the *hell?*” Taylor managed to get out first, one hand coming up to grab Rei around the wrist, the other pressed to his chest in an attempt to help him catch his breath. “Y-you’re a *User?* *You?*”

“Oh yeah,” Rei said with a nod. He had to work not to wince as the Lancer squeezed his wrist in an attempt to get free—their difference in Strength wasn’t so great as to make him invulnerable, it seemed—but his grip hardly budged even when Jay

started wrenching at the arm. “You bet your ass I’m a User. Might have been smart to ask that *before* you decided to try and crash our party.”

“But... *how?*” Jay snarled. His breath was back, and he was half-staring, half-glaring at Rei. “How did *you* even get past the assignment exam?”

“J-Jay.” The one called Colson had started to recover as well, apparently. “St-stop talking. Now. *Please.* They’re Gale—”

Before the boy could finish whatever he was about to say, though, there came a shout from the end of the hall.

“That’s *enough!*”

Together Rei and Aria looked around to see a pair of men in matching blue-on-black uniforms shove through a staring crowd to come storming in their direction. Unbeknownst to any of them, the scene they’d all made had clearly not gone unnoticed by the other shoppers, because whereas the bathroom hallway was still empty, a veritable throng of gawkers had formed at the edge of the main way, more than one pair of eyes bright with actively recording NOEDs.

At once Rei let go of Jay and the second boy, stepping smartly away from them as Aria did the same with her pair. The security officers—common citizens that they were—took several seconds to get to them, but to their credit immediately took up position between Rei and Aria and the four now gathering themselves against the wall.

“You and you,” the closest of the officers—a short, older man with bright red eyes whose long hair was combed behind his ears under his blue cap—pointed at the two of them as light flashed across his retinas while he met their gazes. “Reidon Ward and Aria Laurent. Step away, or I’ll be forced to detain you.”

They did as instructed, backing up a further few steps until they were even with the bench and their things again. Rei might have imagined it, but he thought he saw the other officer—a younger man with cropped maroon hair under his own cap—start and glance around at them from where he was addressing the Pennview boys.

Before Rei could guess as to what *that* was about, though, the older officer was snarling in their faces.

“You’d best explain yourselves, cadets, and you’d best explain yourselves *fast*. Galens students calling specs on ordinary citizens. You better have a *damn* good reason for your behavior, or you’re about to be in a *world* of hurt with your superior officers after I have a word with them.”

At this, Rei and Aria exchanged a glance.

“Uh... Sir...” Aria spoke up first, raising a hand tentatively. When the man turned his glare on her, she pointed past him to the foursome now being questioned by the other officer. “They’re not ‘ordinary citizens’. They’re Users... Like us...”

The older man blinked at her for a second. Then he looked over his shoulder, then around again to fix Rei with a look this time, as though seeking confirmation.

“It’s true, sir,” Rei assured him at once. “*They* came at *us*. We just dealt with it before anything could really get started.”

Again there was a second of silence.

Then the older man half-turned to bark at the second officer. “Garret! These two say your lot are Users. That true?”

“Y-yeah!” the one called “Garret” answered unsteadily, not meeting Rei or Aria’s eyes for some reason. “‘Pennview Military Academy’, they say.”

“Huh,” the older officer grunted in answer to this. “Fancy that.” With a huff that might have been relief, he was distinctly less-ruffled when he looked back around at Rei and Aria. “Well that changes things. *And* saves me a hell of a lot of paperwork. You say they came at you?” As the pair of them nodded together, he lifted a hand to one breast pocket to pull out a small, palm-sized pad and stylus. “Let’s hear it, then. What happened?”

Aria let Rei lead this time, having missed the initial confrontation. Only when he got to the part where the four boys had penned her in did she take over, and the officer’s

grimace of irritation at her description of being surrounded seemed like a good sign to Rei. Indeed, as soon as they were done with the quick recounting the man didn't even bother checking with his partner for the Pennview foursome's side of the story, opting instead to lift his gaze to the top of the opposite side of the hall, where the wall-full of advertisements met the brightly-lit ceiling. As his NOED went live again with a tiny moving, rectangular outline that could only have been a video recording, Rei and Aria didn't have to look around to know what he was doing.

In a place like Easthold, after all, there were probably more security cameras spread through the trio of skyscrapers than any of them ever had a prayer of counting.

"Idiots," the officer muttered finally, closing his frame after he must have skimmed the footage of the incident. "Officer Garret and I will review this in detail later, but I'd say that settles things pretty clearly. Wish you hadn't almost broken one of our walls, but seems like a legitimate preemptive defense to me, given the situation."

Rei and Aria nodded in thanks at once.

"Does that mean we're free to go, sir?" Rei asked as the officer replaced the pad in his pocket. "We were planning to catch a flyer back to school in a bit anyways..."

"Unless you've got anything to add to your statement, yeah." The man waved towards the end of the hall, where some of the crowd has started to disperse now that the excitement was obviously over. "Then again, I ain't gonna stop you listening in as I give a call to *that lot's* school administration, if you want." He jerked his head over his shoulder to indicate Taylor and the others.

Rei was just about to answer that he would indeed *love* to bear witness to *that* horrifying moment in the boys' lives, but Aria cut him off with a hand on his arm, obviously seeing his response coming.

"No thank you, Officer. We'll head out as soon as we gather our things. I imagine—" she gave Rei a pointed look at this "—that Galens will hear about this one way or the other, and we shouldn't press our luck. Isn't that right, *Rei?*"

Seeing her point, Rei swallowed an “Aww...” of disappointment and nodded. With a shrug the officer turned away from the pair of them, and they could virtually *see* his hackles rising again as he thundered towards the Pennview boys, who were all looking *much* more sheepish than they had not 2 minutes prior. Exchanging nothing more than a glance, Rei and Aria turned and gathered their things quickly, collecting up their bags before starting for the main hall again.

They hadn’t made it more than a half-dozen steps, though, when they were stopped short.

“H-Hold on, please!”

With a traded frown they turned again, this time finding the second officer—Garret—jogging after them. The older of the two well into tearing Jay Taylor and his friends a new one, the man seemed to have stolen a moment for himself.

And plucked up some courage judging by the fact that he was managing to look Rei and Aria in the face now, if with some obvious difficulty.

What’s this about...? Rei couldn’t help but wonder.

Aria, fortunately, was more tactful.

“Can we help you, Officer?” she asked with a smile that might have lit up the sunless side of a cold moon.

“Err...” Coming to a stop before the pair, the younger man again seemed to have some trouble finding his tongue, his eyes flicking between them. Strangely, they lingered more on Rei even as he addressed Aria. “You’re... You’re Aria Laurent, right?”

“I... am...?” Aria answered cautiously, like she was unsure of how she was supposed to answer this inquiry. “Your partner already got our statements, though, so—”

“Oh, no!” Garret flushed suddenly. “No statements! Nothing like that! It’s just...” He hesitated, then reached up and pulled his own small pad from the breast pocket of

his uniform. “Could you... Would you mind signing this for me? Well, for my daughter, actually. She’s seven, and you’re her absolute *favorite* right now.”

Aria stared at him, mouth dropping open slightly. She stood dumbstruck for so long, in fact, that Rei ended up having to elbow her in the side to bring her back with a jump.

“Oh!” she almost squeaked, half-scrambling to put her bags down. “*Oh!* Sure! Sorry! I... uh... I didn’t expect that, sorry...”

As she accepted the officer’s pad with both hands, he seemed finally to relax. “Really? Thank you so much! You have *no* idea how excited she’s going to be! We’ve been watching your Sunset Beach fight against that Mauler kid ‘Grant’ on repeat for weeks now, along with most of your others.”

“*Really?*” Aria sounded genuinely bewildered—though not displeased—at the prospect of such an enthusiastic fan, no matter what their age might be. “Well tell her I said I hope she keeps watching!”

“I doubt I’ll need to,” Garret said with a rushed laugh as Aria finished a quick signature with the stylus before accepting the pad when she handed it back. “She’s glued to every fight they stream these days, especially among the Astra System cadets.”

“Sounds like me, when I was her age,” Rei said with a chuckle as Aria bent to pick up her bags again. “Careful there. You might have a future User on your hands.”

Garret, though, stiffened a little as Rei addressed him, looking suddenly nervous again.

“Y-yeah...” Oddly enough, he hadn’t put his pad away. “Um... Speaking of...”

And then, with another hesitant pause, he was thrusting the tablet at Rei.

Rei blinked at the smart-glass, then up at the officer, unsure of himself. After a second or two, though, it was Aria’s turn to put an elbow in his ribs.

“Oh!” Rei put down his own bags to accept the pad with a grin. “Mine, too?”

“If you don’t mind...” Garret mumbled hopefully. Unlike with Aria, Rei’s agreement didn’t seem to have steeled his nerves. “I would be very grateful...”

“Sure thing!” It felt strange, taking up the unfamiliar stylus to sign his name on a stranger’s pad, but not unpleasant. “I’m surprised your daughter knows who I am, though. Aria’s the rockstar of the first-year class, but I’m not much of anybody.”

Beside him Aria opened her mouth to say something very likely to the contrary, but Garret—funny enough—beat her to it.

“Not true,” the officer said, sounding suddenly like he was trying to suppress his elation as Rei handed the tablet back. “You’re Reidon Ward, right? The Iron Prince of Galens?” When Rei nodded—feeling himself flush a little at the unofficial nickname that was still making the rounds in the feeds—the man grinned. “Thought so. Your signature’s not for my kid.” He tucked the pad away, looking distinctly pleased with the day’s events. “It’s for *me*.”

And then he spun on his heel and hurried back towards where the other officer was still tearing into the Pennview boys, leaving Rei struggling to decide if he was smiling harder because of the pleasant surprise of meeting a fan—his *first* fan—or at the utterly dumbfounded look that was starkly humbling Jay Taylor’s handsome face.

CHAPTER 2

Late December, 2468 - 4 Days Later

Astra System – Astra-3 – Sector 9

The Galens Institute

“We’re not ready for this. I couldn’t tell you how long those bastards have been preparing, out there in the dark. But I can tell you we’re not ready for this...”

*-General Carmen Laurent
Call with Central Command
2468*

10 years would be gone in a flash.

That was the thought that had Valera Dent so distracted in the moment that she barely noticed the blaze of vysetrium blades and the scream of steel on steel rising up from the first-year students battling it out below her. Indeed, her gaze was far away as she looked down on the massive Wargame zone—an aggressive variation of “Grasslands” with a healthy number of stone outcroppings and rolling, dipping valleys—too consumed with the exchange she was watching play out before her as lines of rapidly scrolling text displayed in a pair of colors across her frame.

Ten years cannot be right. Kestrel’s words typed themselves out in bright blue. *Your calculations are flawed. Run them again.*

My calculations are never flawed. The answer came in red. *If anything, this is a liberal estimate. Additional data has been consistently leading us to a shorter and shorter timeline.*

Meaning what?

Meaning that—extrapolating the trend of information for the last half-century—a closer estimation would be five years, perhaps as much as seven. But that's only if we're lucky.

Valera balked, reading this, eyes going so wide that Second Lieutenant Michael Bretz, the Brawler sub-instructor for the first-year Galens cadets, gave her a sidelong glance even as he shouted down feedback to one student or another below. She missed the look of concern, of course. After all, Bretz was as blind to the conversation playing out before her as she was to the scene of the Wargame, in that moment.

5 years... Forget 10. If they really only had 5 years remaining to them...

With her left hand Valera typed out a quick interruption of the rapid-fire argument, the message posting in green as soon as she sent it.

And you're sure it's still best not to conscript all Users? I understand the SCTs have their place, but removing our most proficient soldiers from the combat still seems like a massive misuse of firepower...

The red text flashed into being so quickly, it might as well have been typed by thought.

Yes. I'm sure. Nearly 1.8% of my entire processing function is currently devoted to running further simulations pairing our SCT professionals differently—and against various combat situations—but 98.6% are resolving with a reduction in those five to seven years, with 45.6% resulting in cutting them in half, another 12.6% even further.

Meaning the professionals stay where they are, Kes' script typed out only slightly slower than the red.

Yes.

Valera took a breath at that, forcing herself to take in the data she knew without a shred of doubt had to be accurate. Even if she had her own qualms with the SCTs—even if every ounce of human common sense screamed that keeping most of the strongest 20% of the ISCM's Users away from the front lines was folly—she knew the data would be accurate. The tournaments were a tremendous tool for recruitment, and the numbers said they apparently needed *more* blades in the field than sharper ones, for the time being...

With a slow breath, she let her fingers flash across the invisible keyboard once more.

If that's true, then we're almost out of time.

There was a pause—one Valera knew was only artificially inserted, given the nature of the conversation, before the mirrored answer came, green and red arriving one after the other.

Yes.

And we really do only have once chance left to us... Valera's thought was to herself now, and at last her attention was finally diverted from the conversation, her focus moving beyond the text and down to the Wargames field. Below her, the battle taking place might have seemed little more than mass chaos to any common onlooker, but her trained eyes only need a fraction of a second to find the form she was looking for. He was in the melee, the flashing blade in his hand lined with green—a color that was even more alien against his otherwise black-and-white Device than the weapon—battling nearly back-to-back with Viviana Arada as Layton Catchwick applied his own sword against a separate opponent under an outcropping nearby. For a while, Valera just

watched, seeing less the match and more the movement of the young man who was finally *visibly* taller now than he had been when she'd first taken him in on a dirty gym floor more than 7 months ago.

You need to get stronger, Valera thought as the conversation started to script itself out in rapid succession once more, dim and blurred in the forefront of her vision as she ignored the resumed debate. *You need to get stronger, and fast...*

Rei didn't know if it was a good thing that he could say he'd definitely been in worse spots. In training, in combat, even off the field, he had *definitely* been in worse spots.

On the other hand... That didn't mean his current situation was *remotely* ideal.

Viv was at his back, which was good, and Catcher sounded like he was doing a fair job of crossing blades with the Saber Lena Jiang nearby, but that was about where the positives of the trio's circumstances ended. Among the three Users he and Viv were currently holding at bay, after all, were *both* squad leaders of the Red and Blue teams.

The fact that the third was Jack Benaly—widely considered the best Brawler in the first-year class other than Rei himself—meant they were basically one mistake from being totally screwed.

Woosh! Whoom! Woosh!

Kastro Vademe, ace Lancer that he was, demonstrated no drop in guile and dexterity despite the full extension of his spear. The carbonized, green-and-yellow steel of the wide, 2-foot blade flashed with a narrow streak of red light as it cut and cleaved at Rei, pushing him to draw every ounce of his reduced Speed and Cognition to bear to keep from getting sliced in half. The Lancer had forced him to Type Shift Shido into

its Saber Mode, but even with the longer sword in his right hand and greater Strength, there was little opportunity to counterattack.

Not with Benaly constantly keeping him on his toes from the right.

Dammit! Rei thought in alarm as the Brawler indeed chose that very moment to close the gap he'd put between them only 2 seconds before to allow Vademe his assault. Despite the fact that Benaly's vysetrium glowed blue compared to the Lancer's red, they were working in sync to wear Rei down, not giving him even a moment where he might go on the offensive safely. As he caught the Brawler's punch on his sword, redirecting the solid pistons of green-and-gold with *great* effort, he thought he heard Viv, too, curse from where Laquita Martin would be challenging her two Duelist's blades with a matching set.

It made sense, unfortunately. Rei had to admit it to himself as he slammed Vademe's next punching thrust aside with the black plating of his left arm even as he twisted to deliver a heavy kick up at Benaly's face, forcing the Brawler to turn his follow-up swing into a defensive block. It might not have been "fair" or "sporting", but the team-up definitely made sense, even if it had been obviously planned off the field before the match. For one thing the squads complemented each other well—Vademe's reach-heavy Users lacking in the firepower and in-your-face combat ability that Martin's brought—and would have been an ideal grouping of teams in a real combat situation. For another, though, even if this *wasn't* a real combat situation, it was obvious Red and Blue both knew they really had no other choice if either of them intended to come out on top of the sparring match.

If *his* squad had suffered a full week of straight losses—even in these free-for-all rounds—Rei supposed he would have given ganging up some serious consideration as well.

"AAH!"

There came a yell—a familiar yell—over the combat coms that was echoed in Rei’s own ears, and he knew with a thrill that Catcher had either fallen or was about to. Foreseeing the match spinning out of control, Rei redoubled in his effort to draw every ounce of power and agility he could out of Shido’s modified specs, fighting to keep his focus on the 2-on-1 fight before him. He knew it was only a matter of time before he was overpowered at this rate—Vademe and Benaly were terrifying fighters in their own right, after all—which meant there was only one choice to be made.

“Viv, I’m going to do something stupid,” he said as loudly as he dared while slamming another two punches from Benaly aside, trusting the coms integrated into his NOED to pick up his words without cluing his opponents in. “Gonna see if I can give you a shot at one of these guys. Think you’ll be able to take it?”

There was a pause, extending so long Rei was afraid the girl hadn’t heard him.

Then, as he ducked under a wheeling kick from Vademe, Viv’s voice grunted back at him with effort.

“Obviously—*urk*—not, but since when would that stop you? Just—*buff*—say when.”

Rei grinned, his half mask of black steel over a white underlayer hiding the smile from the two before him. For another 7 or 8 seconds they continued their exchange like that, he only barely keeping them at bay.

Then, as Vademe powered forward for another heavy thrust that seemed to be his one consistent attack, Rei took a hard step to the right and snapped his left hand up even as he twisted inward.

There were pros and cons to his plan. Pro one: the clawed fingers of Shido’s Saber Mode had no issue finding and gripping the haft of the Lancer’s spear as high up on the weapon as he could find purchase. Pro two: his bonus Strength—which leapt from C0 to a whopping C5 in his Device’s current form—made it easy to use Vademe’s momentum to advantage, pulling the boy through and along the direction of the thrust

to send him staggering by as the Red Team squad leader instinctively held onto his CAD, not wanting to risk being disarmed. Pro three: Viv was as dependable a teammate as they came, so when Rei shouted “LEFT!”, she disengaged with a brief flash from Martin, stepping back for just long enough to slash with one blade leftward, almost blindly. Her phantom-called parrying dagger—lacking the actual solidity of a true-call—caught Vademe in the right arm above his bare elbow and passed straight through, immediately depriving the Lancer of his main hand as the Arena assigned total neural interruption, imitating a complete severing of the limb.

When it came to the *cons*, on the other hand... Rei’s plan also left his back almost completely open to Jack Benaly.

WHAM!

The blow came thunderous and unforgiving, and Rei only kept himself from suffering an immediate “Fatal Damage Accrued” announcement by twisting as violently as he could even as he’d pulled Vademe through and past him. As a result, instead of a crushing blow to his upper spine that probably would have had his CAD registering complete loss of function from his neck down, Rei took the impact of the Brawler’s piston in the left shoulder.

The strength behind it sent him flying, half-spinning and half-tumbling, the jarring impact of the rock and grass coming up to meet him almost making Rei miss the notification that flashed red in the combat log in the top left of his frame.

Skeletal muscle damage registered.

Left glenohumeral compound fracturing registered. Left acromioclavicular compound fracturing registered. Multiple soft-tissue ruptures registered.

Applying appropriate physiological restrictions.

Immediately Rei's left shoulder seized up, and he hissed in pain as the agony of the simulated destruction of bone and tissue raced up his neck and into his chest like fire. His left arm went limp, and he realized it was probably only his boosted Defense—raised from C1 to C4—that had kept him from registering FDA even despite his avoidance of a cleaner hit.

Absent a limb, now, Rei had a bit more trouble regaining his footing than he would have liked as he slid across the field. Fortunately for him, on the other hand, his reactive shielding proved more than enough to weather the jolting hits of the stones beneath the grass, making the uneven ground more of an advantage than anything. As he struck one particularly large rock, he used the lift of the impact to shove his right fist into the earth—still holding the handle of Shido's sword—half-pushing and half-bouncing himself up onto his feet, clawed toes digging furrows into soft earth to cut his slide off within another yard or so.

Jack Benaly was predictably close behind.

Rei's blade came up even as he finally caught his balance, deflecting the haymaker that would have taken his head clean off otherwise. His NOED flashed red in warning, and he ducked under the kick the redirected impetus turned into. Another flash, and this time he leapt straight up, avoiding the Brawler's other leg as it came sweeping at his ankles. In midair Rei took advantage of their proximity to plant a foot on Benaly's closest shoulder, shoving up and off the larger boy in a backwards flip that got him another 10 feet of clearance or so. The Brawler kept coming, however, and Rei knew he had to think fast as the piston rocketed at his face again. Even with only one arm he was pretty sure he could take Benaly in Saber Mode. The real problem was going to be—

“Rei! Behind you!”

Viv's shouted warning was all that saved him. Rei dropped like a stone into a sideways roll, hearing the scream of steel rip over his head as he did. There was a

SHLUNK, followed by an “URK!” from Benaly, and Rei stood once more to find the Brawler staggering to one knee, arms and legs both going limp. Before him, Lena Jiang sucked on her teeth in annoyance as she wrenched her red-lined blade from where it had taken the Blue-team Brawler through the chest, snapping it up at the ready again even as she turned on Rei.

“‘Tag-team unless you’ve got a clean shot,’” Rei muttered to himself, summarizing what he suspected Vademe’s commands had been to his squad, now. “Guess teamwork can only take you so far...”

Then, though, Jiang was lunging at him, and Rei was forced to hiss a quick verbal command.

“Type Shift: Brawler Mode!”

In a flash that didn’t take more than half a second, white lightning arced up the green-lined steel that encased Rei’s arms, legs, and the lower half of his face. In a rippling wave that matched the release of energy, Shido changed, first condensing as it absorbed the sword and heavier plating of the Saber Mode, then expanding into finer, thinner lines until a trio of black, dagger-like claws extended from the knuckles of Rei’s hands, each one lined with wickedly sharp vysetrium. At once Rei felt a now-familiar weight leave his body as his Strength and Defense faded in favor of his Speed, and his NOED seemed suddenly to react infinitesimally more cleanly as his Cognition maxed out again.

It wasn’t an ideal solution given his still-limp left arm, but Rei only had a month of scattered training with Shido’s secondary form, and he was *not* about to take on the best Saber in the class at her own game.

Shing!

Jiang’s first cut glanced off Rei’s forearm, brought up at an angle, but her second came around again with blinding Speed, thrusting for his chest. Rei spun leftward, the blade barely slipping by the red griffin that adorned the chest of his grey combat suit,

and he punched at the Saber's ribs with Shido's functioning claws as his left arm continued to flop uselessly by his side. Jiang swept the blow aside with the shorter curved claws of her left hand, trying to rip open his wrist as she did, but Rei hadn't forgotten the lesson from their last fight, more than 2 months ago now.

Even with all the training they'd had since the opening week of the Galens Intra-Schools, Jiang's Offense still had to lag compared to her other specs, and the false-red vysetrium that edged her fingers skittered harmlessly off his black armor.

Unfortunately, though, where Jiang *didn't* pale was in Speed.

Wham!

The kick—while not half-as-heavy as what Benaly might have landed had his body not been in the process of being drawn down into the 10 feet of the FDAed waiting area under the field—was lightning fast, faster even than Rei might have managed. He'd committed to the punch, leaning into it with his right arm, which left his other side wide open given the Arena-applied limitation. A rainbow-blue, steel-clad shin took him cleanly in the ribs, and once again Rei was thrown sideways under the impact. He managed to keep his feet at first, but this time the roughened Grasslands variations *did* betray him when his ankle caught on a rock beneath the grass, tripping and taking him down with a *thud*.

Of course, Lena Jiang was on his heels with a shout as she brought her sword down in a killing stroke, red mixing with green and white as she cleaved at his face.

Wait... green and white?

CRUNCH!

The impact of the hit, dealt by a massive, two-handed axe that seemed to have come out of nowhere, took the Saber with such force that it *literally* sent her flying despite having undoubtedly "cut" her cleanly in two. Rei just had time to see the girl's eyes go wide in confusion as she was lifted off her feet and sent arcing up some 10 feet in the air and twice that back. Her weapon flew from her hands, and she struck the very

outcropping of rock where she'd likely downed Catcher not a half-a-minute before with her own painful *thud*.

Before Rei could watch the girl's body tumble to the ground, though, his vision was obscured by a massive form, legs and arms clad in white metal accented in red, the vysetrium lining the armor glowing the same alien green as his own.

“Get up, Ward,” Logan Grant grunted irritably, voice doubled over the coms as his red-black eyes glared down at Rei through loose locks of dark hair. “If you can't even handle a User *four ranks under you*, what good are you?”

And then, before Rei had a chance to respond, the Mauler was thundering away again, every step a crushing *thump* of sound even through the grass as he sprinted towards where Viv was still having it out with Laquita Martin in an eye-watering blur of green and blue light.

Gritting his teeth in annoyance—and not a little bit of pain—Rei shoved himself up once again, watching the Mauler go. To say that Grant was an essential part of the squad was an understatement, to be sure. He was the hammer, the battering ram that so often formed the tip of any assault the team made, especially in objective-based formats. During Elimination bouts like this, too, he was no less of an ace, not infrequently taking down as many as three or four opponents all on his own, especially when Valera Dent had all three of the Sectional-qualifying squads battling it out on the same field.

Still, that didn't mean there weren't whole *days* that Rei didn't regret having pushed Aria to invite the Mauler onto the team.

With a curse and a grunt, Rei forced himself to focus on the fight again, looking around. The last hint of Kastro Vademe's form was in the process of being drawn down into the ground, likely having finally succumbed to the bloodloss of his missing right arm, leaving only Rei, Viv, Grant, and Martin “alive” in the semi-circular bowl of broken stone the entirety of the battle had taken place in. Deciding the Mauler and Viv were

more than enough to finally take down the Blue Team's squad leader, Rei turned and sprinted up the nearest incline, intending to get a clearer view of the entire Wargames field even as he shouted into his com.

“Aria! Cashe! How are things looking?”

There was a short pause, then Chancery Cashe responded first, answering just as Rei crested the top of the hill to look out over the windswept plains.

“I'm clear! Heading east to try and rally at center! Is it just me, or are Red and Blue *definitely* working together?”

“Sure are,” Rei answered, turning west to peer over the craggy edges of the Grasslands. “Catcher and I ran into Martin *and* Vademe. Viv found us just in time to save our asses, and Grant's with us now too.”

“Any casualties?”

“Catcher, and I've lost function of one arm, but we took out Benaly, Vademe, and Jiang. Viv and Grant are handling Martin as we—” There was a scream of pain, and Rei looked over his shoulder into the dip below to see Laquita Martin drop her swords to claw at the paired blades Viv had just planted in her gut and chest respectively. “Scratch that. Martin *is* handled.” He looked east again, and this time caught a flash of silver and green between some of the outcroppings. “I see you. 75 yards and 30 degrees east. Rally on me.”

“Copy,” the answer came promptly, and almost at once Cashe's form appeared as she vaulted cleanly up and over the lip of a flatter ledge of jutting stone, long spear held high and clear of the outcroppings in her right hand.

Raising and waving his good arm to make sure she didn't miss him, Rei scanned the rest of the field around them as he kept the com line open. “Aria? Come in, Aria. Status update?”

Nothing, though, and Rei grimaced. While Aria had only been downed four times in the half-a-hundred or so Team Battle and Wargames matches their squad had utterly

dominated since the start of winter break, it wasn't impossible she'd been taken out. Given the fact that Vademe and Martin had clearly been in cahoots, in fact, it might even be likely.

“Rei!”

Rei turned in time to find Viv and Grant taking the hill behind him quickly. In 2 seconds they were standing at his side, reaching him almost at the same time as Cashe.

“Aria's not-*guh*-not answering?” Viv asked breathlessly as they all came to stand together. Despite her impressive C4 ranking, Rei suspected Endurance would ever be among his best friend's weakest specs, at least by comparison.

“Nah,” Rei confirmed, only giving her the once-over to check for obvious combat limitations, then stopping himself from frowning in annoyance as he did the same to Grant. “Could be she's in too deep to talk.”

“Or could be she's been downed,” Grant grunted, grimacing as he, too, looked out over the sweeping Grasslands. “With Catchwick out and Ward injured, we should assume that basically puts us three short.”

The slight had Rei gritting his teeth again, but he forced himself to keep his tone level. “For the most part, yeah. Either way, I'm enacting decapitation protocols until we regroup with Aria, or FDA whoever's left.”

At once Viv and Cashe nodded. Unsurprisingly, Grant made no such indication of acknowledgement, but that was largely to be expected. The command structure of the squad had been established since day one by Aria, and while the Mauler had admittedly been measurably less of a dick since losing to Rei in the final match of the Intra-Schools, it was very clear he'd never liked being sixth—and therefore *last*—on the list.

Much less Rei being *second*.

“What’s your call, bossman?” Viv asked, but the joke came tense. Glancing at her, Rei couldn’t help but notice she seemed to be standing a little further from Grant than she usually did when the two were in proximity.

Thinking he might know the reason, he suddenly suspected the Mauler was going to be paying for his attitude one way or another soon enough.

Unable to stop himself from feeling a little satisfied at the thought, Rei started down off the crest of the hill, heading northwest. “We move,” he said as he took the slope towards the center of the massive, 150-yard field. “And we keep moving. If Red and Blue are legitimately tag-teaming, we’re going to need to work twice as hard to bait out pairings we can take down, not to mention keep them from grouping en masse.” Reaching the flat of one of the Grasslands’ many valleys, he picked up his pace as he heard the others following quickly behind. “Jiang *did* take out Benaly, though, so with any luck their truce isn’t so solid that we can’t—”

Before he could finish the thought, though, a cool, familiar voice rang out clear and calm across the field.

“All Red and Blue Team combatants eliminated. Winner: Green Team.”

As one, Rei, Viv, Cashe, and Grant came to an unsteady halt, looking upwards in surprise. The moment the Arena made the announcement, the field had started to dematerialize, and almost at once the blue sky of the windswept plains faded to reveal the geometric, well-lit plating of the Galens Arena roof, closed off to the morning’s snow and the December chill. Within seconds the hills around them, too, started to depixelate, and then all four felt themselves slowly dropping as the artificial gravity of the projection field began to withdraw.

“Nice!” came a shout from beneath them.

Looking down, Rei saw Catcher jogging the short way across the stadium floor from where he'd been FDAed. His CAD, Arthus, was still called, but the vysetrium that lined the Device's greaves and sword and tipped the clawed gauntlet of his left hand was rapidly shifting from the artificial green of their Wargames team color back to its natural purple over yellow and white. Shido's vysetrium, too, was returning to its usual ice-blue glow, with Viv's Gemela and Cashe and Grant's Zion and Honoris turning back to silver, black, and red respectively.

Glad—if unsurprised—to see that his friend was okay, Rei turned his attention back to the Arena as they dropped the last of the 10 feet to the black projection plating.

It didn't take him long to find Aria, of course. Unlike the rest of them, her Hippolyta's natural emerald accents were only a few shades off from the team-assigned green, and stood out starkly against the red-and-gold of the Device's steel. She was a ways away from them—some 50 yards to the south—and as Rei watched her drop he almost let out a laugh that probably wouldn't have been taken too kindly by Vademe, Martin, Jiang, and Benaly standing nearby.

It *was* pretty funny, though, to see her descend alongside the three semi-prone forms of Kay Sandree—their blue-and-red haired Lancer friend from the 1-A class block—Duelist Zain Kadness, and Mauler Jasmine Ranjha.

Especially since the Saber and Lancer Amelia von Leef and Hannah Tethers were already waiting on the floor below, heads tilted up to watch Aria and the others' controlled drift down towards them.

“Daaaamn,” Viv said with a whistle as she, Rei, and the other two all reached the projection plating together. “Aria looks like she did *work!*”

“She totally did,” Catcher agreed, coming to join as he, too, looked east towards where Aria was now offering Kay the butt of Hippolyta's spear to help her up. “I think von Leef and Tethers were already going at it when she hit them, but the others were pretty much all her, and almost all at once.”

“She *definitely* had to call on Third Eye,” Cashe muttered. “No way even *Laurent* could manage that without it.”

“Recall.” Rei flexed his left arm—which was quickly regaining its usual function again—as Shido whirled out of being to take the familiar form of its twin bands around his scarred wrists, leaving him wearing nothing but the grey combat suit of the Galens first-years, the red griffin of the school emblazoned across its chest. “And agreed. Even with Third Eye I’ll bet that was a hell of a fight, too.”

“Definitely was. Kay’s been doing double hours in the training centers ever since she lost at the Intra-Schools.”

Rei and the others looked around to find Kastro Vademe approaching them, the squad leader’s own attention on Aria and the distant group as well even as he neared. His CAD—which Rei didn’t know the name of off the top of his head—had been recalled, the recently-red vysetrium orange over green and yellow once more.

“Nice fight, by the way,” the Lancer said, finally turning his gaze on Rei once he’d reached them, holding out a hand. “And Kay’s not the only one who’s been burning the candle a bit more intensely, lately. We’re *all* pushing it. Won’t have a shot in hell of beating you guys in Ganos if we don’t.”

“Nice fight,” Rei echoed, reaching up to shake briefly. Vademe—like most every other male User at Galens—stood a good half-foot taller than him, with silver-blue hair tied into a knot above his head and pale eyes bright even in a complexion as pallid as Chancery Cashe’s was dark. He would have been imposing enough even *if* the mention of the city Sectionals was being held in hadn’t left a little anxious excitement in Rei’s gut to add to it. “*Really* nice fight. You and Benaly would have had me down *real* quick if Viv hadn’t been nearby, so whatever you guys are doing is definitely working.”

“You might even be able to take us on without teaming up, next time…” Grant muttered darkly from behind Rei.

Fortunately for all, Vademe didn't rise to the barb, and even had the grace to look a little apologetic. "Yeaah... About that... Sorry. Didn't enjoy it, but I'll admit it was my idea. Had a chat with Martin last night, and we decided to give it a try. I know it's not exactly good form, but..."

Rei shrugged. "Do what you gotta do, man. You have to use what information and advantages you can get, and we've got to be ready for it."

"Not like we aren't *all* gonna have teams trying to gang up on us at Sectionals," Catcher added with a nod, Arthus back around his wrists along with everyone else's Devices now. "Especially in the later rounds, assuming we make it that far. It's probably good practice, if anything."

"Excellent way of looking at it, Catchwick."

The familiar, gruff voice of the woman, come from above, had every one of them whirling at once and snapping to automatic attention. Overhead the wide, white disk of the physical hologram that made up the instructors' observation platform was descending quickly, bearing with it the two figures who'd been overseeing the match. One was a shorter, broad-shouldered man with a short-cropped beard, standing at ease in the red-on-white combat suit that denoted him as a Galens Institute staff member. *Second Lieutenant* Michael Bretz—the first-year Brawler sub-instructor and A9-Ranked User had received his promotion not a week prior—had his eyes set forward, dutifully half-a-step behind his superior even before the platform touched down to melt into the black plating of the floor. Even had it not been his prerogative as a soldier, though, Rei doubted the man wouldn't have been rigid beside the woman.

After all, Captain Valera Dent, the famed "Iron Bishop" of the Astra Systems, had the kind of presence you could almost *feel*...

Sporting her usual ISCM regulars—it was a rare treat that the Chief Combat Instructor of the Galens Institute donned a training suit—the captain was regal and poised in her black and golds. The sheen of the uniform glinted in the Arena's overhead

lights as she and Bretz strode towards Rei and the others, the red-on-white armband denoting the same griffin of the school stark around her left arm. In her late 30s, Rei would have called her a handsome woman—even if Viv preferred to use the more simple description of “hot”. She was tall and fit, with brown hair cut shorter on one side of her head and tucked neatly under the standard military cap that accented her height. The only blemish in the entirety of her bearing, in fact, was a thin black line that trailed from outside her right eye before cutting across her cheek, over the bridge of her nose, and all the way to her left ear.

The distinct mark of a full-frame prosthetic that made up most of “the Bishop’s” lower face, earned—along with many other terrible wounds whose scars were hidden under her uniform, they all knew—on the front lines of the war she volunteered to take part in.

“All of you, on me!” Valera Dent called out, her voice ringing strong in the vast openness of the otherwise empty Arena’s 150,000-seat black-and-white stands. “Time to review!”

It took the rest of the Sectional squads barely more than 5 seconds to reach them, even from as far away as the very northern edge of the Wargames field where some additional skirmishing had apparently gone down at some point. With the slowest among them likely sporting a Speed spec no lower than D5, the three teams gathered in quick succession, Martin’s to Rei and the other’s left, Vademe’s tight to their right. Not having turned away from the captain, Rei jumped a little when someone pinched his side in passing, glancing around in time to catch a wink from Aria as the girl took her expected place at the head of their six.

Once they were all gathered, Dent looked around at them with a nod of approval. “At ease, all.” Immediately, all 18 squad members joined Michael Bretz to stand more comfortably with legs spread slightly and hands clasped behind their backs as the captain kept on. “First of all, *excellent* effort by everyone. While the second lieutenant

and I do have some commentary, we agree that we've seen nothing but continued improvement over the last week and a half. Cadet Vademe—" she turned her brown eyes on the tall Lancer now standing at Aria's right "—the Endurance training your group has been maintaining seems to be working. Keep it up. Additionally, did I overhear that it was your idea to ally with Cadet Martin's squad?"

"Yes, ma'am!" Vademe answered clearly, earning himself his own personal nod from the woman.

"Good thinking. When faced off with a tougher opponent, finding allies wherever you can is sometimes the only option. Cadet Martin—" Dent looked to a slender Duelist whose bright-red dreads matched her eyes over deep black skin "—I commend you for taking Vademe up on his offer. It seems you've been paying attention to the feedback about listening to outside ideas and suggestions."

"I have, ma'am!" Martin answered at once.

"Fantastic. All around. Now, Laurent—" it was Aria's turn to be fixated by the captain's gaze "—I know the field manifestation split you off pretty far from your squad, but once you see the replays I think you'll be pleased with everyone's performance. Ward, Arada, and Catchwick held a good central position until Grant could reinforce, and then made to regroup with Cashe, who downed two on her own without injury. Was there an issue with your coms, though? Ward ended up enacting decapitation protocols after you didn't answer..."

"No, no issues, ma'am," Aria answered with a shake of her head. "I was being pressed by Kay and Ranjha, and I didn't believe I had the ability to respond *and* hold focus on Third Eye in the moment. I knew Rei and Viv were still up, so with our second and third relatively in good shape I trusted in the command structure if something were to happen to me."

"Good call," Dent agreed. Then she looked around at all of them. "I was a Dueling specialist, so while I personally don't find the idea of ganging up an appealing one, it

was the right choice, and almost perfectly executed—and responded to—by all parties. Still, like I said, we *do* have some criticism, which will be addressed by the second lieutenant.”

She stepped back, giving Bretz the floor, and he took it with a directness that Rei knew all too well after having spent half a year under the Brawler’s instruction.

“Cadet Jiang,” the man started with a bark, finding Lena Jiang out of the pack behind Vademe. “Care to explain to me what your logic was in downing Benaly when you did, given Ward’s vulnerability against a two-on-one assault? In those circumstances—”

Twenty minutes later—and with at least *some* feedback for almost every one of the students—the morning’s second match commenced, and Aria’s team took the victory once again. Whereas the Grasslands Elimination bout had scattered them across the field on manifestation—a dizzying transition Rei hadn’t quite gotten used to, yet—the next round was a “Capture Point”, an objective-based battle that had them all starting together and vying against the other two teams to seize at least half of the six available nodes scattered around the map. Using Grant as a punching force supported by Viv’s damage-dealing speed, they’d wasted no time in stealing a base out from under Martin’s team—playing as Green this time—losing Cashe to an FDA but suffering no other major losses. It made the encounter with Vademe’s Red team tough when it came two nodes later, but Catcher managed a brilliant surprise attack in the middle of the fight that took down Phalanx Xander Philips *and* Hannah Tethers in quick succession, more than evening the field. Not a minute later, the Arena called the match for them, and Dent and Bretz had the first-years all gather once again.

This process continued for the remainder of the 2 hours of the morning team-training period, as Rei knew it would repeat later that afternoon. After another pair of matches, forms started to appear among the stands, and no one had to look around to know that the second-year squads had started to gather up in preparation for their own

practice time. Rei could admit to a little jealousy. The first-years' daily squad format periods ran from 0600 to 0800, then 1300 to 1500, which meant an early rise 6 out of 7 days of the week. Given their personal regimen had consisted of at *least* 3 or 4 additional hours of training a day on average for most of the last semester, he, Aria, Viv, Catcher, and Cashe—as it transpired—had been more used to the pre-dawn practices than most, but the consistency of them was still rough. All the same, everyone was adjusting, and no one stayed sleepy long when the Iron Bishop herself was watching.

At long last, and with another healthy congratulations on a morning well spent, Dent and Bretz dismissed the first-years to the showers. It was a bit of a hike—they'd been assigned the locker room in SB3 for the duration of the break—but the walk and elevator ride was always a lively one, so no one really minded. While Martin's group mostly kept to themselves as was their habit, only Grant and Lena Jiang didn't participate in the banter among Aria and Vademe's squads as they made their way down to the third of the Arena's seven training sub-basements.

This, of course, surprised no one, given that the Mauler hadn't been much more than a sullen presence among them all break, and Jiang wasn't exactly known for making friends easily.

“Kay, you *have* to show me that trick you pulled on Rei in the third match later,” Aria called down the locker room aisle all of them were changing in after showering. “I'm surprised you didn't take his head off with that bait and switch!”

“She almost did,” Rei said with a snort, a foot on the closest of the long benches that bisected the space as he tied up the laces of one sneaker. It still felt strange being allowed to wear civies, but he wasn't about to complain, *especially* after his and Aria's healthy shopping spree over the previous weekend. “Cut my nose clean off. Hurt like an absolute *bitch* the rest of the match.”

“Sure thing,” Kay answered Aria from where she was changing between Vademe and Phillips, hopping in place as she fought to pull a pair of skinny jeans up over

muscular legs. “Even better, I think we’ve got Allison Lake overseeing Dueling training tomorrow. She’d be a better person to ask, given she’s the one who taught it to me.”

“That lady is *intense*,” Catcher chimed in from where he was pulling a bright-red baseball cap over his short, blond hair. “Only worked with her in cross training, obviously, but your sub-instructor always makes me feel like I’m minutes away from stepping onto the front line, Kay...”

The Lancer laughed at that, answering something about Claire de Soto—the Saber sub-instructor who’d once fought under the name “Stone Lily” in the professional SCTs—being even scarier, but Rei tuned them out. He’d gotten distracted, noticing that Viv seemed to be taking her time getting dressed beside him, and didn’t miss her shooting annoyed glances up the aisle from them every few seconds. Looking around her, he found Grant as expected, the massive boy pulling a shirt over his muscle-cut arms several lockers down, having chosen—as usual—to stay a few paces separate from the group.

Taking a breath, Rei steeled himself, then spoke quietly sidelong.

“Viv... If you want to go talk to him, it’s fine. Seriously.”

Rei had said it before, of course. A few times, in fact. Ever since Viv had had something of a run-in with the Mauler a few months back, it had become more and more obvious the girl saw Grant in a very different light than the rest of them. She’d never confided in Rei about it, sadly—then again, Grant *had* been nothing short of a dick to him from the first day they’d stepped onto the Galens grounds—but the signs were there. Not to mention Grant himself had once asked, almost awkwardly, if Rei and Viv were “a thing”. Rei didn’t get it, sure—and he suspected Viv knew that, given she’d never brought it up—but the girl had been Rei’s best friend for going on 5 years, and had pulled his ass out of more fires than he could count in that time. They’d built the kind of trust that didn’t shake easily.

If there was something going on between Viv and Grant, there was a reason for it, and Rei had attempted frequently in the last month or so to let her know he got that.

Viv, though, only ever turned to stone whenever he tried to bring it up.

She stiffened, clearly not having expected to be caught looking, the button of her pants slipping between her fingers. After a moment, though, she resumed tidying herself up, promptly pretending she didn't hear him even as she glanced his way.

“So... You and Aria got a second date planned yet?”

Instantly Rei felt hot around the collar of the long-sleeved T-shirt he'd pulled down over his scarred shoulders. As the others continued to shout and talk around them, he hid his face, pretending to tie his left shoe for a second time.

She *definitely* knew how to distract him, at the very least...

Not today, though.

“Viv...” he started quietly. “When are you going to stop dancing around this? You're one person when you're just with us, and another when he's around. That's not healthy. Whatever's going on, you know you can—”

“Rei,” Viv cut him off smoothly, her whisper artificially bright as she smiled at him mechanically. “Have you ever known me *not* to talk about something I want to talk about?”

Rei hesitated.

“... No,” he admitted after a second.

“No.” Viv repeated the word pointedly. “Then, in so many words: when I want to talk about something, I will. Right?”

Rei sighed. “Sure. Most of the time. But this—”

“This is no different. When I want to talk about it, I will. *Okay?*”

The finality of it left Rei with nothing but the option to nod sullenly down at his sneaker. It wasn't the outcome he'd been hoping for, but it *was* a step closer to Viv

addressing the situation than he'd ever gotten before, which he supposed he could count as a win.

“Awesome,” Viv said shortly. “Now...” Her tone dropped back to her normal tenor, and her grin was more genuine. “Seriously. Answer the question. Are you two going out again?”

Rei finally gave up on mock-tying his shoe in favor of turning to face the lockers, putting his back to where Aria stood laughing at some passing joke of Chancery Cashe's just across the aisle from him.

“*Dude,*” he hissed out of the corner of his mouth. “She's *right there.*”

“Oh I *know,*” Viv giggled back, though she had the common decency to lower her voice this time, at least. “Which makes it *so* much fun.”

“For you, maybe,” Rei grumbled, reaching into his open locker to pull out the hooded jacket that hung there, suspended in the gentle anti-grav compartment designed to help keep their regulars wrinkle-free during combat training. “And to answer your question... No. We haven't made plans yet.”

Even without looking around, he could see Viv's expression slip into a deadpan.

“... You're a lot of things, Reidon Ward, but I wouldn't have topped that list with ‘idiot’ until right this second.”

“I'm *working* on it,” Rei growled back. “We got a little... interrupted... at Easthold. Just want to make sure that doesn't happen wherever we go next.”

He could practically *feel* Viv roll her eyes.

“She told me she had the time of her life at the mall, moron. And I was there when you got the call from Hadish Barnes about that bullshit with the Pennvale punks, remember?”

“Pennview,” Rei corrected her automatically, slipping an arm into the jacket.

“Whatever. My point is, if the school's *chief of campus security* cleared you guys of any wrongdoing, why are you still worried about it?”

“I’m not *worried* about it,” Rei insisted, tugging the jacket snug over both shoulders—it was one of his old articles of clothing he’d brought from Grandcrest, and only barely fit his steadily-broadening frame. “I would just rather make sure whatever we do next is perf—”

“What are you two whispering about?”

Aria’s bright question had Rei and Viv both starting before spinning around in unison.

“Nothing!” they said together, exchanging a panicked glance.

Then Viv’s face brightened.

“Rei was just talking about how nice your hair looked today!” she added quickly, grinning.

“I was not!” Rei protested automatically, mortified. Then, though, he caught himself, turning to find Aria watching him with a raised brow. “I-I mean it’s not that I *don’t* think your hair looks nice. It’s just that that’s not what... what we were... talking about...”

His protest trailed away lamely as Aria’s eyebrows only rose higher and higher with every word. On either side of her, Catcher and Cashe—who had looked around at them, too—stared at Rei with matching, expressionless face.

“... Dude... You know you’re not fooling anyone, right?” Catcher asked at last.

“Like... *anyone*...” Cashe agreed with a slow nod.

In answer, Rei mouthed at the air for a full few seconds, then finally regained the wherewithal to whirl on Viv.

“You,” he hissed even as the girl pretended to study her nails, avoiding his eye and feigning innocence. “You *do* remember that I know where you sleep at night, *don’t you?*”

This drew a low gale of laughter from Cashe, Catcher, and most of Vademe's group nearby, but Rei was fortunately saved by further embarrassment—and explanation—as someone called his name from the far end of the aisle.

“Ward!”

All eyes turned west, towards the front wall of the locker room. Looking around Viv again, Rei was surprised to see Michael Bretz in black and golds—a rare sight indeed—standing near the room's entrance, which was still in the process of sliding shut behind him.

“Sir?” Rei called back, puzzled. He'd never seen an officer in the cadet locker rooms, and suspected—judging by the slight frown that marred every face around him, even Grant's—that he wasn't the only one.

“They want to see you in Administration. Get your ass over there, double pace.”

This announcement had Rei's jaw dropping, but before he could ask so much as a what-when-where-why, the second lieutenant had turned and left again, vanishing in a blink into the wide hall that looped the Wargames floor in the center of the SB3 space.

“Administration?” Rei echoed after the doors had slid shut again, utterly bewildered and staring at the spot his sub-instructor had just been standing. “As in the Administration *building*?”

“Ooooooh! Someone's getting called to the principal's office!” Kay crooned from up the alley, getting another laugh from Vademe's squad.

Around Rei, though, no one cracked a smile. Aria, Viv, and Catcher, after all, were probably thinking along the same lines as he was, while Cashe and Grant—even up the aisle as the latter was—were both smart enough not to miss the others' serious faces. If it had been something to do with his fibro, Rei was pretty sure Lieutenant Colonel Willem Mayd—the school's chief medical officer—would have summoned him to the Institute's hospital. Or at least his case worker, Lieutenant Major Ameena Ashton, would have. To be called to the Administration building, the center of Galens

operations and staff offices, was a first for him, and spoke of an entirely different subject.

Meeting Aria, Viv, and Catcher's eyes, Rei felt like he could hear their echoed thoughts.

Shido. Someone—likely pretty high up the chain at the school, if not beyond—wanted to talk about Shido.

Without much choice to it, Rei finished getting dressed quickly, wishing suddenly that he'd had his regulars if he was getting called to where everyone from civilian professors to the commanding officer of the Institute spent their off hours...

"You... uh... want us to come, man?" Catcher asked uncertainly as Rei pulled the hood of his jacket over his white hair.

"We shouldn't." It was Aria who answered first, shaking her head despite not looking away from Rei. "Not to Administration. It's probably important, and I doubt they'd take kindly to any of us seeming like we're trying to butt in."

"Whoever 'they' is, yeah..." Rei grumbled in agreement, making sure the cuffs of his jeans were pulled over the lips of his sneakers. It had been snowing lightly when they'd left the first-year dorms that morning, and if he was going to have to suffer this impromptu summoning, he wasn't about to do it with wet socks. "But I'm good, Catcher, thanks for offering. Whatever it's about, I'll fill you guys in later."

"Assuming you can," Viv muttered with a frown, watching him step by as he started for the door. "I still haven't forgotten about that stupid gag order after you first developed Type Shift."

Not remotely interested in opening *that* particular can of worms again, Rei only looked back long enough to catch Aria's eye. "I'll message you when I'm done. Let me know when you guys are leaving breakfast, if I'm not back before?"

"Sounds good," she said with an attempt at a smile that didn't hide the worry creasing her brow.

Even forced as it was, it still made Rei's stomach do the smallest of backflips.

"What are *we*, then?" he heard Catcher ask as Rei avoided Grant's dark gaze when he slipped by the silent Mauler, heading for the door. "Chopped liver? Since when is Aria the one who gets to tell him where we're at? We've got a group chat for that!"

"But... aren't they dating?" Chancery Cashe's answering question was hesitant. "Seems pretty normal to me..."

Fortunately for Rei's mood, the hiss of the locker room doors opening before him, letting him out into the hall, wasn't loud enough to hide Aria's audible squeak of embarrassment.

CHAPTER 3

“The importance of a User’s health cannot be understated, as most would agree. However, the concept of ‘health’ is a much broader one than many might think at a glance. Physical fitness is a must, obviously, but the nature of SCT and combat training typically handles that passively, and there are very few non-lethal injuries remaining that modern medics do not have some way to address.

It is, therefore, a User’s mental health that often requires the most careful—and caring—of eyes...”

*-Captain Vorbees Forester, MD, PhD
Clinical Psychiatrist, the Galens Institute*

To say that Logan Grant felt out of place would have been the understatement of the year.

It was both an old and new experience for him, and one he hated entirely either way. His whole life Logan had always largely been the center of attention, even when he’d wanted nothing more than to disappear. As he’d gotten older that feeling had fortunately faded, and it had been so long since he’d been big enough to prove a terrifying force on his grade school combat team that he’d largely forgotten what it felt like to be an outcast.

Now, though... Now “outcast” was probably the nicest way of describing how Logan felt...

Pulling his shirt on over his head, he grit his teeth in annoyance at the thought. By most measures he *shouldn’t* have felt disconnected from the group that was changing just a few steps up the locker room aisle from him. He was an important part of Aria Laurent’s squad, he knew. A *very* important part. He might have argued his position on the team—as the only Mauler, and a C4 at that—actually made him borderline essential,

but he'd been working to temper that kind of arrogance down for a few months now, since it always got him in hot water with a certain someone. Still, Logan *was* important, and he could at least say he wasn't replaceable, if only because part of the challenge of squad formation was that the six-person groups were final as soon as they were submitted for approval to Dent and Dyrk Reese.

And yet... Logan Grant felt out of place.

"Your own damn fault, though, isn't it, idiot?" he muttered to himself, angrily tugging the shirt down over the lithe, broad muscles of his chest and abs.

Yeah... Yeah, it was. He was starting to get that now, if slowly. If he was honest with himself, Logan knew he'd had some suspicion of it for a while, and at *least* since Mateus Selleck—coward that the Saber was—had taken it upon himself to gather up their little posse of mutual "friends" to jump Ward, back towards the end of the first quarter of school. In the months since, though, it had been drilled into Logan, with Laurent having been basically saying as much for months, and Ward himself having beaten it into him in the final match of the Intra-Schools. Even Layton-friggin-*Catchwick*—the team clown, by any measure—had grown the balls to call Logan out more than once in the last month, while Chancery Cashe's silent stares of disapproval had spelled it out just as viscerally.

The worst of them, though...

Logan, not for the first time, stole a glance sidelong. A few lockers down from him, Viv was still getting dressed, her brown hair in ever-perfect curls over slender shoulders only loosely covered by an open shirt, and he turned away again quickly, partially out of uncertainty, partially out of modesty. He'd thought he'd seen the girl look his way a few times, but she hadn't yet responded to the private message he'd sent as they'd been making their way down to SB3, asking if she wanted to steal away from the group for a bit and get breakfast.

Then again, he suspected she wasn't too pleased with him, at the moment...

“Idiot...” Grant mumbled again as something someone said down the aisle drew laughter from most of the two squads, Vademe’s group only a pace beyond the rest of Laurent’s.

It was his own fault. He was definitely starting to get that, now.

So why could he *still* not stop himself from being a monumental di—?

“Ward!”

The familiar voice of Michael Bretz cut across the amusement of the room, and Grant looked around with a frown to find the sub-instructor standing in full regulars near the locker room entrance.

“Sir?” Ward answered, sounding—rightfully, Logan thought—completely taken aback to see the second lieutenant down there in the dungeons with them.

“They want to see you in Administration. Get your ass over there, double pace.”

With that seemingly-simple announcement, Bretz was gone again, leaving all of them more than a little stunned.

The hell is that about? Logan wondered, half turning again to see Ward exchanging a serious look with Laurent, Catchwick, and Viv. Even Cashe seemed tense despite Kay Sandree cracking a joke about “the principal’s office” down the way, and he couldn’t blame her. Logan had never heard of a student—at least not a first-year—getting summoned to the Administration building.

That said... Reidon Ward wasn’t any kind of ordinary student, was he?

Again Logan felt out of place as Ward and the others had a quick exchange, culminating in the Atypical taking his leave of them quickly. Logan watched him hurry by, eyeing the slighter boy carefully as he passed, not missing the fact that Ward didn’t meet his eye under the hood of the jacket he’d pulled over his long, bone-white hair. Instinctively the lack of acknowledgment irritated Logan, but he suppressed the urge to sneer in favor of following the boy’s jog out through the double doors and into the hall beyond.

He still wasn't exactly sure what was going on with Ward's CAD, but he had a pretty good idea, just like most of the school—in particular the prior summer's training group whose members were largely represented in the Sectionals qualifiers and squads—probably had a pretty good idea. Similarly, he was 90% sure that Laurent, Catcher, and Viv all knew, but were being distinctly tight-lipped about it. The only time he'd put a feeler out during one of the few hours he and Viv had stolen to hang out in person during their Sundays off, Logan had found himself shut down so absolutely he'd never braved trying to do so again. Cashe, too, he believed was in the dark, but at least *she* seemed to be doing a fair job of steadily making a place for herself within the group.

He, on the other hand...

It's your own fault, Logan silently repeated to himself yet again.

Unbidden, a familiar face drifted across his mind, older and sickening. In the same instant, another, less-distinct form shaped itself in his thoughts, and Logan stiffened as he saw again the feet that didn't quite reach the floor...

No. The anger in the voice at the back of his head was comforting, welcoming and easy in its heat. *No. It's not your fault. It's his*.

His...

That face... That *damn* face that never quite seemed to let itself be forgotten...

Forcing himself to take a deep breath, Logan started to climb back out of that dark place, finding that he was staring blankly at the large leather jacket hanging in the otherwise-empty locker before him. Fighting off the memories he would have cut from his brain with Honoris if he'd so much as *thought* the Device might possess such a merciful ability, he reached up to pull the jacket free from the anti-grav compartment.

It was pure will that kept his hand from shaking as he closed the locker, just as it was pure will with which he banished the echoes of old pain—and even older hate—away.

At least for the time being...

“Nah. You guys go on ahead. I’m being slow. I’ll meet you in the mess hall.”

Viv’s voice, as it so often tended to, dragged Logan back the rest of the way out of the dark, and the next breath he took was easier. Even though she obviously hadn’t been speaking to him, it was enough to be reminded of her presence nearby. It grounded him, reminded him that—for once—he had *something* good to hold onto, even if just loosely...

Plus... Was he wrong to hope the girl had ulterior motives in telling the others she’d catch up?

“If you’re sure,” Catchwick grumbled, and Logan knew the blond Saber would be looking between his back and Viv pointedly. “Don’t take too long. Can’t promise we’ll find you a seat.”

“In the mess hall?” Aria asked dubiously, clearly not catching on to Catchwick’s implication that he knew *exactly* why Viv was “being slow”. “There’s literally only like... a *fifth* of the usual student body here, right now? Why wouldn’t we be able to find her a seat?”

The sigh that followed might have been Cashe’s, confirmed as the Lancer spoke gently. “Laurent, you and Ward are *definitely* made for each other. So smart, and yet so often *totally* clueless ...”

“Pardon?” Aria asked with feigned hurt even as the three of them passed behind Logan to head for the locker room doors. “I’m sorry, could you remind me... *Who* was it that thought Rei got let into Galens because of *nepotism*, originally?”

It was Cashe’s turn to squeak in embarrassment as the doors opened to let them out. “I already apologized for that! *So* many times!”

The trio’s banter would have continued, Logan knew, but as they stepped into the hall the entrance sealed shut again quickly behind them, cutting off Aria’s laughing reply. In the end, Logan was left only with Viv in the aisle, along with Vademe’s team a little down the way. In silence they waited like that, not looking at each other—much less

speaking—as they deliberately finished dressing at a snail’s pace, until at last the Lancer squad leader gathered his group up with a call for breakfast, all six of them making their exit not a minute after Laurent, Catcher, and Cashe.

Then, at last, it was just Logan and Viv, Martin’s team apparently having left unnoticed some time before.

“Hey.”

With a nervous leap in his gut, Logan turned around. Nimble as she was, he’d barely heard Viv move to stand between him and the aisle bench. As a result, their bodies were barely 6 inches apart as she stared up at him.

No. Not stared, he realized.

Glared.

CRASH!

Even though Logan’s Strength ranked in at an astonishing C7, it wasn’t much good against the laws of physics. Feet even as they’d been when he’d turned to face the girl, he didn’t have the Speed to step back and catch himself as she shoved him, *hard*, with both hands. His back hit the flat of his closed locker, the steel door shaking along with every other one in the line extending to either side of him.

Before Logan could make so much as a sound of surprise, though, Viv was in his face, her snarled words burning with livid fury.

“Here’s the deal.” He could have *sworn* he saw the barest hint of silver light shining behind the girl’s blue eyes as she spoke. “I like you, Logan Grant. The MIND knows why—I certainly don’t—but I like you. A lot. You know this, I know this, and I’m pretty sure everyone at this *damn school* knows this by now. *However—*” she was baring her teeth, the anger palpable in every word “—let’s get something very, *very* straight, because apparently I haven’t been clear enough about it: If it comes down to picking between you and Rei, you aren’t even in the *competition* right now.”

Unbidden, Logan’s irritation—only just barely suppressed—flared.

“You think I don’t know that?” he growled, starting to push himself up to stand from his awkward position still against the locker. “You think I’m not *acutely* aware of that already, Viv?”

“No,” came the answer promptly, the girl snapping up a hand to press against his chest, pinning him back down to the steel door behind him. “No. I really, *really* don’t think you do, Logan. Rei and I have known each other for *four years*. We’ve had each other’s backs for *four years*. Longer, now, actually. I could make the argument—despite whatever my parents might think—that he is the *sole* reason I managed to get into Galens, and maybe even got to become a User in the first place. He has been my *best friend* since the day we met, and I would burn every damn bridge I’ve made at this school—and beyond—if it meant keeping him there.”

“Sounds healthy,” Logan responded with a sarcastic sneer. He regretted it immediately, of course, especially when he saw some of the wrath fade from Viv’s eyes at the words, replaced by something much more distressing.

Sadness.

“Logan... you can’t keep doing this.”

The statement came quiet now, more gentle, and Logan felt the pressure from her hand on his chest ease up a little bit, letting him finally straighten again. As he did, Viv kept on.

“You can’t keep doing this. I know you. I’ve seen *you*. Not the ‘you’ that makes a mean *ass* of himself whenever you get the opportunity. Not the you that lashes out whenever someone rubs you the wrong way. Not the you that *insults my friends*—your *teammates*—when they’re down.”

Logan swallowed.

“So that *is* what this is about?” He did his best to steady his own voice, his suspicions confirmed. “Because I called Ward out in the first match? He was about to be taken out by Jiang, Viv. *Jiang*. A couple months ago he almost beat her in the Intra-

Schools, and you and I both know he's lightyears stronger now than he was then. He beat *me*, and it feels like he's barely months—maybe *weeks*—from being able to take out Laurent without too much effort. So yeah, I called him out. He's got no business losing to—”

“You know better than that.”

Viv's interruption was firm despite not raising her voice again. In fact, she wasn't looking at him anymore, having dropped her gaze to where it was only her fingertips, now, that rested against the fabric of his shirt over his chest.

“What?” he asked, not sure he understood.

“You know better than that,” Viv repeated, still not looking up. “You know better than to think Rei would get taken down by Jiang at this point, at least not alone. Which means you didn't bother to review the match footage, or even just ask what happened.”

“What are you talking ab—?”

“It was three-on-two to begin with,” Viv answered before he could finish the question. “Me and Rei against Martin, Vademe, and Benaly.”

“Benaly?” Logan asked with a frown, genuinely surprised at this. He'd seen the Brawler after the match had been called, but hadn't realized he'd been in the thick of the fight. “Vademe was bleeding out when I got there, but when did Benaly—?”

“After Rei sacrificed his shoulder so that I could down Vademe. And then only because Catcher lost to Jiang, who was nearby. It was about to be *four*-on-two. Rei had to make a choice, and in the end it left just Martin and Jiang up, and Rei with a limp arm.”

Abruptly, Logan felt most of the pent up anger that he always seemed to carry with him drain away for a moment. He saw now, in retrospect, the circumstances. It *had* been strange, looking back, that Ward hadn't “died” of blood loss shortly after that encounter, which should definitely have happened had Jiang—a *Saber*—cut off the arm

that had already been limp when Logan arrived. He suddenly saw the fight clearly, playing out a rough dance of what had to have happened in his head.

Four-on-two... Ward had faced four-on-two odds—not counting the fact that Viv looked to have been engaged *solely* with Martin, making the situation basically three-on-one—and come out with nothing but a minor injury by comparison.

It's your own fault, came the words again, echoing not from the comforting rage, but from the other voice that had only started to balance that heat in the last few months. The quiet, cooler one that Dr. Forester had helped him dig up.

The one that sounded a lot like Viv's, even in his own head...

"Shit..." Logan got out after a few seconds of silence.

Only then did Viv, at last, look up at him.

"That's all you have to say?" she asked him with a slight frown. "Really?"

"I'm sorry," Logan corrected himself at once, feeling his cheeks flush in embarrassment, not to mention a healthy amount of self-directed anger. "Really. I'm sorry. I didn't realize. I didn't kn—"

"No, you didn't know, but that's kind of the point."

Viv stepped back from him at last, dropping her hand from his chest. Her usual spark was back, the fire in her eyes again as she took him in.

"You shouldn't *have* to know, Logan. To act like a decent human being, you shouldn't *have* to know. Do you even realize what you're like, sometimes? How you treat people? *Especially* Rei?"

Yes.

The answer was clear in Logan's head, but he couldn't seem to say it out loud.

His silence, though, was obviously enough of a response.

"And yet you still do it. *Still*. Why? Why do you *still* do it?"

"Because he reminds me of him."

This time the words slipped out, and Logan couldn't decide if he was glad they did, or wanted to snatch them back. The moment they were voiced, though, he found it hard to meet Viv's eyes, and he looked away as he forced himself to press on.

"Because Ward reminds me of *him*, okay? I can't stand it. The way he does things. The way he fights."

"But... Logan... He *does* fight..."

The words were quiet again, and yet just as sharp as anything else the girl had said so far. Still, though, Logan couldn't look at her, even as he felt the point claw at him, claw at the anger that was always, *always* present.

"He's not your father, Logan. You know that. You *know* that... don't you?"

And there it was. The hammer fell, slamming against the walls that Logan kept up, that he held, eternally bolstered, in order to keep from drowning in fury.

Fury... and grief.

"I know..." he barely managed to get out.

After a moment of silence, warm fingers touched his cheek, cupping his square chin lightly before guiding his face around. He managed to meet Viv's eyes, now, and saw—with a mix of relief and guilt—that the only emotion left in that gaze now was worry.

"I hope you do..." Viv's voice was gentle. "I hope you understand that he's anything *but* your father. I just... I wish you would get to know him. That you would *try*, at least. If you did... If you even just tried, you might realize he's the kind of person who would have done anything—*anything*, I promise you—to help you, back then. To help you... and stop her..."

They flashed across his mind again, then. Not the face... Not the smug, taunting face of the man he hated this time. Instead he saw a small, curled form. The dark outline of a tall, slender figure.

And the feet that didn't quite reach the floor...

“I know...” he said again, struggling to fight off the images once more. “I’ll... try. I’ll try.”

“Promise?”

Taking a breath as he forced the images from his thoughts for a second time that morning, all Logan could do was nod.

“Good...” Viv withdrew her hand, leaving the pair of them standing slightly separate, still not looking away from each other. “Because if you don’t... We’re done. I’m sorry, but we’re done. I can’t do this forever. Rei’s too important to me.”

Logan managed a low bark of laughter even as he nodded his understanding. “Wouldn’t we have to actually *be* something first, before we could be done?”

Viv smiled at him, at that, sad again.

Then, finally, she turned and started for the locker room entrance, giving no indication that she wanted him to follow as she answered without looking back.

“Then I guess that would mean it would be over before it even had a chance to start, wouldn’t it...?”

CHAPTER 4

“And I thought Salista Laurent was a force of nature... Is it just me, or does that woman put her to shame and then some...?”

*Maddison Kent
Chief Assistant to Galens Commanding Officer
To Colonel Rama Guest*

Rei—fortunate as he was to have possessed a mind as curious as his body had been frail growing up—understood why Astra-3 had a winter. Every terraformed planet in the ISC had a winter, though they all varied broadly in length and intensity depending on various factors. There was an element of nostalgia to it, of course, an element of the desires of the first colonizers to carry the seasons of “home” into the stars with them. More practically, however, the allowance of variation in climate not only required less battling by technology against the forces of planetary rotation and the natural orbits of every system, but also provided for a much more varied—and subsequently more sturdy—range of ecosystems that balanced any given world. For these reasons and more, winter—just like spring, summer, and fall—was an important part of not only the terraforming process, but the long-term survivability of any planet as a whole.

Of course, that didn’t mean that Rei had to *like* it.

“Son of a *bitch!*” he half-grumbled, half-shouted as he took hold of his hood in both gloved hands, pulling it more securely in place as the roar of a frigid wind that hadn’t been present earlier that morning threatened—for the third time—to rip it right off his head. Worse still, the subtle drift of the soft snow shower that had been pretty over the light-lit campus paths before training had turned into a full-blown blizzard, pelting at his exposed face if he didn’t keep it bowed. Had he been in uniform it would

have been ten times worse, and not for the first time Rei found himself cursing the CAD scientists who hadn't bothered figuring out how to turn reactive shielding into a weather-resistant barrier yet.

With nothing much to be done about it, sadly, Rei plowed on, braving a full jog through the elements north-by-west along the paths that wound their way through the Institute buildings. He passed several of the structures he and the others had sat for class in during the previous semester, and was pretty sure he'd made out the outline of the glass-walled hospital at one point through the storm, but Rei didn't slow down to admire anything as he moved. The ground was slick in places, the service drones having apparently not gotten to this part of the paths yet, and if he didn't watch his footing he was pretty sure he would be presenting himself to whoever had summoned him banged up and wet from slipping and falling.

Then again, Rei didn't so much mind that part of his traitorous trek, for the time being.

Keeping an eye out for ice and slush helped him from dwelling on where he was headed, not to mention *why* he was headed there...

After a minute more of cursing the storm—and himself for not having thought to don his *boots* that morning at the very least—the grand structure of the Administration building came into view, and at last Rei let himself bring his head up to take it in. Situated largely in the northwest corner of the grounds, the structure was one he'd seen before while doing laps of the campus for Endurance training, but otherwise hadn't had much chance to observe. It was a little out of the way, somewhat separate from the Institute's other buildings, this accentuated by the fact that a wide, open square of flat stone—now covered in tumbling white—led up to the short three steps before the wide line of entrance doors.

It did nothing to help the imposing presence of the place—all artfully-angled steel and jutting edges, like stone ledges growing outward with each of the 10-plus stories—as it loomed out of the blizzard.

Crossing the courtyard in a dozen quick strides that left damp footprints in the shallow snow, Rei didn't risk losing his nerve by pausing outside the closest of the transparent doors. As they slid open for him the moment he crossed under the slanted overhang that shielded the entrance, he stamped his sneakers clean on the carpeted threshold only briefly before stepping inside. Tugging his gloves free to shove them into his pockets, he finally pulled the frost-crusting hood off his head to look around. He was a little surprised to find himself in a large, brightly-lit lobby of white marble and dark, polished wood, the open space above extending what had to have been 2 whole stories upwards. Lining the walls of the top 20 feet of this space, massive smart-glass panels flashed with color and light, some displaying the rotating shape of the red Galens griffin, others the seven stars and crossed swords of the ISCM, and yet more of the familiar clips and stats of past alumni, the recordings identical to those one could find playing in the underworks of the Arena. Just as astounding, too, was the fact that the space was *busy*, with some score and a half of officers, soldiers, and what had to have been civilian staff—judging by their lack of regulars—crossing this way and that over the polished floor as they conversed or perused wide tablets in both hands. Barely anyone gave Rei so much as a glance when they passed by, though he felt the gazes of those that *did* always linger a long moment on him before looking away again.

It didn't matter. Rei was used to funny looks, even on campus. At a healthy 5'7", he was more than 2 inches taller now than he'd been before Shido had been assigned to him at the end of the previous school year, when he and Viv had still been students at Grandcrest Preparatory Academy in Sector 3. Despite this fact, however, he was still the shortest User on campus—and likely well beyond—by a good bit, making him instantly recognizable even if his white hair hadn't made him stand out in a world of

engineered color. If the majority of these staffers—very few of them sporting CADs, even among the officers—were administrative workers, it stood to reason this was probably the first time most had set eyes on him in person.

Get your staring in, yeah, yeah, Rei thought to himself, uncaring as he looked around. More importantly in the moment, Michael Bretz had only told him to report *to* Administration, not what to do after he *got* there. Which meant...

Spotting a kiosk at the far end of the lobby, Rei made a line for it at once, eyeing the trio of officers standing behind it, apparently manning the building entrance.

If this place is this busy on breaks, I'd hate to see what it looks like during the year, he thought, watching as one of the attendants looked to take a call on their NOED, nodding at once and hurrying off with a word to the other two.

“Reidon Ward?”

Rei was almost in the exact middle of the atrium when the clear voice brought him up short, as it did many of the individuals around him. Intending as he had been to ask for directions—or maybe even the purpose of his summons—at the kiosk, he was surprised when he looked around to find a slender woman with blonde hair approaching him with a purpose from one corner of the chamber, high heels *clicking* lightly over the stone as she walked. She wore a skirted business suit—marking her as a civilian even despite the red-on-white armband above her left elbow—but the way the other staffers hastened to get out of her way as she neared told Rei at once that she was someone important, at least within the confines of this building.

“Yes, ma’am,” Rei answered after a brief pause of confusion, deciding on the safe bet of saluting the woman sharply before she was within 10 feet of him.

The smile this earned him said it had either been the right choice, or she’d found it funny.

“Manners. I like that.” Coming to stand before him, the woman brought up her pad with one hand even as she briefly pointed at his face with the other, the bright red

of her painted nails flashing in the atrium's light. "Eyes up. You might be something of a standout, but I'm not about to get reprimanded for dragging in the wrong cadet."

Holding back a curious frown at these words, Rei met the woman's eyes dutifully as her neuro-optic flared. When the scan was complete, she pulled the data up on the smart-glass tablet to review, apparently preferring not to keep it in-frame.

"No surprises, you *are* indeed Reidon Ward," she said with a touch of amusement. "You got here quick, Cadet. We only put the call out fifteen minutes ago."

"First-years just finished morning team training, ma'am." Rei hadn't yet brought his hand down from the salute, keeping his gaze over the woman's shoulder now that he wasn't obligated to look her in the eye. "Second Lieutenant Bretz knew where I'd be."

"At ease, soldier," she said with a laugh. "I don't mind all the 'ma'am' stuff, but in case it wasn't obvious, I'm *not* rank and file."

Rei relaxed, though he assumed the *actual* "at ease" position out of habit, earning him another chuckle.

"You can lead a horse to water, I guess," the woman muttered before holding out a hand. "I'm Maddison Kent. I'm here to escort you up, if you'll follow me."

"Oh!" Rei said in realization even as he automatically shook, then stepped in behind the woman—Kent—when she promptly turned and made for the same corner of the chamber she'd appeared from. "I know who you are! Aria's told me about you."

That drew a smile from Kent, looking back over her shoulder at him as she moved. "Is that so? Good. I would have felt bad being the only one in the know. I heard you two had *quite* the first date recently..."

"Ah... Uh..." Rei felt a knot of embarrassment grow in his gut, recalling the incident with Jay Taylor and his entourage once more. "Yeah... That was... definitely something."

The woman laughed, looking forward again as she brought him around a well-disguised wall behind the kiosk where a smaller space led to a set of stairs standing beside a bank of elevators.

“Don’t worry, it was mostly good things,” Kent teased as she opted for the elevators, swiping up on a pane of smart-glass between the nearest pair. “Though she *did* mention some disappointment about a... purple hat, I think?”

Rei finally cracked a smile at that, deciding it was alright to relax a little in front of the woman.

“Oh yeah. *That*. I thought she wasn’t going to let me leave the store without trying it on. *So* not my color.”

Kent snorted, giving a nod of understanding as the quiet sound of the car reached them just before the closest doors opened silently. “Good for you.” She stepped in and to the side, immediately poking at the inside panel. “I’m glad she’s having fun, but don’t spoil her *too* much, you hear?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Rei answered, following promptly and claiming the back of the small compartment. “How did *you* meet Aria, though, if you don’t mind me aski—?”

The words, however, caught in his throat just as the doors shut behind him, closing him in. It had just struck him, as he’d posed the question.

The question he already knew the answer to.

Yes... Yes. He *did* know Maddison Kent. “Maddie”, Aria always called her. “Maddie”, the one person on campus she teased that she liked more than him. “Maddie” who she’d encountered through Aria’s uncle, as the man’s chief assistant.

Aria’s uncle, who was none other than...

“Oh boy...” Rei muttered, feeling the car start to rise beneath his feet, zipping them upwards at breakneck speed. He didn’t even have time to take in the Galens grounds in storm behind him as the elevator brought them up into the open again, riding up the side of the building, slipping in and out of the uneven, jutting floors. He

didn't have time to steel himself, didn't have time to get over his alarm before the car was slowing again, having very clearly taken them to the very top floor.

What he *did* have time to do, on the other hand, was take in the slight smile Maddison Kent had offered him as she'd watched him make the realization.

"Colonel Guest is expecting you," she said a little more formally as the doors opened again, motioning him through first. "Let's not keep him waiting."

"Yeah... Let's not..." was all Rei managed to get out in answer, feeling some of the blood drain from his face as he stepped out into a quiet hall accented with red carpet and black wallpaper, the windows on one side only moderately supplementing the circular solar lights above with a greyish illumination.

Colonel Guest. Colonel *Rama* Guest.

Rei was there to meet with the commanding officer of the *entirety* of the Galens Institute.

Not sure whether to feel elated or terrified—was it possible to experience both in tandem?—Rei waited for Kent to take the lead again. The woman walked briskly for a civilian, and Rei's anxiety grew as he followed in silence now. One turn, then another, until they came to a plain wooden door marked simply with the words "Commanding Officer" in silver on a black metal plate. Opening it, Kent led Rei into a small waiting room with a few angular chairs set against the walls, offset by the wide, tidy desk in the corner upon which rested a nameplate unsurprisingly engraved with "Chief Assistant Maddison Kent". Not bothering to pause, Kent led him straight through and left down another, smaller hall that ended with a single door in the right wall behind which Rei could make out what he thought were at least a pair of voices.

"Chin up," the woman said quietly, giving Rei another, kinder smile this time as she put a hand on the doorknob. "Keep your head on straight, and don't be afraid to lean into those manners you've already shown off. Got it?"

“Got it,” Rei whispered back with a nod of thanks, swallowing down the stone in his throat.

After pausing to give him a final moment to compose himself, Kent opened the door with a *click*, stepping right in.

“Cadet Reidon Ward is here to see you, Colonel,” she announced clearly, moving aside to let Rei enter behind rigidly.

The room they entered was a pristine space, definitely befitting the man of highest rank in the entirety of the school. Longer than it was wide, the two walls opposite the corner door Kent closed behind Rei were comprised of full floor-to-ceiling windows accented by red curtains and gold rope, while those on either side of him were solid bookshelves of a dark timber displaying a variety of awards, trophies, and oddities. At the far end of the room, a lacquered desk made of the same wood dominated the last fifth of the space, with a pair of long, burgundy couches taking up the rest of the floor.

It was a gorgeous study, to be sure, but Rei was more interested in the trio of figures that already took up the space, clearly having been waiting for them, all three heads turning to the door the moment Kent had made the announcement of their arrival.

The first and most obvious presence was Rama Guest himself. A powerfully-built man with brown skin and a greying beard that matched the long ponytail of hair protruding behind the nape of his neck, the commanding officer of the Galens Institute was seated on the edge of his desk, arms crossed over his broad chest. His uniform was prim and proper—lacking only the tall cap that sat on the wood next to him—but despite the easy air he was cutting, Rei could sense at once that the man was tense.

Given the colonel was the only other S-Ranked User in the school other than Valera Dent—a Pawn-Class Lancer, to be precise—Rei *immediately* felt the hairs of his arms stand on end under his jacket.

Taking in the other two figures, then, he thought he could understand a bit of what it was that had put Guest on edge.

The first of the pair he noticed was simultaneously the least interesting, and yet most alarming. Dressed in black from head to toe, the only thing Rei could venture a guess at was that they were probably male, and even this only judging by the figure's outline under their distinct apparel. If the black boots, pants, and synthetic jacket—which Rei would have bet anything hid skin-tight carbonized-steel body armor that worked in a pinch if one's Device wasn't called—weren't enough to alarm, the tight, oblong helm of clean black glass definitely did the trick, the curved faceplate completely obscuring the figure's features even though it was turned precisely in his direction. There, along the left side of the glass, the only splash of color on the entirety of the imposing uniform could be made out, a branded logo that Rei thought spelled out "Kamiya" in a holo-displayed of neon green.

The nature of the single word—whose phonetic origins Rei didn't miss—immediately had him wound more tightly than he'd thought possible.

And yet the last of the three, seated easily upon the furthest couch and so utterly different from the guard—for what else could the man in all black have been?—only set off further alarm bells.

The woman was *strikingly* beautiful, and seemed to understand how to surgically apply that fact to advantage. Her attire was hardly immodest, but the hem of her white skirt rode up just above the one knee she had crossed over the other, matching shirt cutting an artful angle across her chest. The skin there teased at bare shoulders, but she'd covered up with a stylish, sea-green jacket complimented by a pair of black half-gloves, which worked well with her dark choice of necklace, high-heeled shoes, and the earrings that glimmered under a healthy length of straight black hair tied up in a tight knot behind her head. Her eyes offered the only other contrast, a vibrant, brilliant blue that glimmered between narrow, slanted lids.

Looking into them, Rei immediately felt—despite the pleasant smile playing across the woman’s lips that actually seemed quite genuine—that the doubtless-high-ranked User bodyguard was the *less* dangerous of the pair of them.

And that *despite* the fact that the woman wasn’t wearing a CAD...

“Cadet Ward. Thank you for coming so quickly.”

Colonel Guest’s gruff address brought Rei back to himself in a blur, and it was only with a touch of unsteadiness that he snapped up once more into a salute.

“Yes, sir,” he answered at once, looking over the commanding officer’s head into the storm still raging outside the window wall behind him. “If I may, I feel I have to apologize for my attire, sir. If I’d known I would be called to—”

But Guest cut him off with a raised hand from under his crossed elbow even as Rei thought he could make out Maddison Kent chuckling quietly behind him.

“Your dress is fine, Cadet. I was on the board that granted the Sectional qualifiers leave to go plain clothes for the duration of the break, so none of us expected anything else. If you would, though—” the broad man dipped his chin at the second, unoccupied couch before him, across from the strange woman and the guard hovering a step behind her, neither of whom had looked away from Rei “—have a seat.”

Rei, a little less stiffly after the colonel’s forgiving reply, did as he was told, forcing himself to sit in the center of the wide couch despite the distinct urge to curl up in the corner of it, as far from the other three as he could. In that room, even *Kent* held a presence behind Rei that had him on edge, and he realized it felt not unlike being watched by four Valera Dents all at once.

Once he was comfortable, Rei looked around expectantly, trying to keep his eyes on Guest, but failing as he found himself unable to stop from glancing across to the other couch more than once.

“Cadet,” the colonel started after a pause as he seemed to choose his words carefully, “I imagine you’re a bit at a loss as to what you’re doing here, so I’ll cut to it.

An... offer has been presented to me. Well... *you*, more directly, but given the atypical nature of it, I felt the need to be a bit more involved than I would usually be with this sort of thing.”

‘This sort of thing’? Rei repeated to himself, far from understanding.

“This—” the man fortunately didn’t keep him hanging as he indicated the stunning woman who was still smiling brilliantly across from Rei “—is Ueno Jasper.”

“Ueno is my family name,” the woman cut in briefly, her voice a little huskier than Rei had anticipated given her appearance, the words tinged with the faintest hint of an accent he wasn’t surprised to recognize. “Call me Jasper, please.”

“Jasper—” the colonel continued even as Rei nodded in acknowledgment to the woman “—is here as a representative of her employer, the Kamiya Corporation. Have you heard of them, Cadet?”

“No, sir...” Rei answered tentatively, frowning between Guest and the woman. “Should I have...?”

“Don’t worry, it wasn’t likely.” Jasper laughed as she answered, this time. “The Kamiya Corp isn’t a conglomerate I expect most anyone outside of the Sol System would be very familiar with. How about this, though—” her smile really *was* striking, making it hard for Rei to look away “—have you heard of Yen Pressure? Or Seven Oceans?”

“Uh... Y-yes, ma’am.” Rei couldn’t help but trip over his response. *Had she just said ‘the Sol System’?! “The two largest manufacturers of hole drives in the ISC, I believe?”*

“Correct. What about VIZIA? 1Part Visuals? Square Epics?”

“NOED makers. Again, the biggest in the Collective.” Rei looked around at the colonel again. “I’m sorry, sir... *What* does this have to do with me, exactly?”

“Kamiya is a nano-tech fabricator and distributor,” Guest answered with a bit of a grimace, as though aware that his answer was hardly satisfactory. “They provide

materials and parts not only to every one of the companies Jasper has just listed off, but directly to the ISCM.”

“And several thousand other significant enterprises,” Jasper herself confirmed with a nod. “Chances are good you have Kamiya tech in your head right now, Reidon.” Rei didn’t miss her casual address of him as she indicated her temple with a slender finger, where her neuro-optic would be implanted. “Not to mention—” the woman’s gaze drifted down to where Rei’s hands were in his lap. “—the Kamiya Corp also had a part in the development of Combat Assistance Technology, in its infancy stages.”

That had Rei’s eyes going wide, but he frowned, too. CAD tech? Really? If that was the case, he was *sure* he would have heard the name “Kamiya” before. Even long before a semester’s worth of classes under John Markus, the head of the Device Evolution Department, Rei—and Viv, too, to a lesser extent—had *pored* over the history of User and SCT development.

After a moment racking his brain and failing to recall the company ever being mentioned in any old or new text he was aware of on the subject, Rei caved to the itch of doubt.

“Pardon me, ma’am, but I’m... uh... *annoyingly* well-acquainted with the history of Device tech development. I’m fairly confident I would recall the name ‘Kamiya’ if it had been a significant part of the process, early on or not...”

If it was possible, Jasper only smiled wider at that.

“Yes... I *was* made to understand that you were a bit of a special case when it comes to Users, even among the renowned quality of the Galens Institute students. Happy to hear my information seems accurate.” Her eyes bored into him for a moment before she continued. “The Kamiya Corp is not at liberty to disclose *how* it was involved with CAD development, only that it *was*. Fortunately, the colonel here has been given leave to confirm this for us.” She gestured to Guest in indication.

'Given leave? Rei thought privately again, looking to the colonel curiously. If that was true, then it meant this woman—or her employer, at least—had connections very, *very* high up in the military. Probably even Central Command...

"It's true, Cadet," Guest confirmed with a grunt. "But that *is* all I am at liberty to say. Similarly, *you* are barred from disclosing that information to anyone outside this room. And I do mean *anyone*." He stared at Rei pointedly. "Am I making myself clear, *Ward?*"

The way the man said his name had Rei very abruptly wanting nothing more than for Shido to have the ability to warp him anywhere but there, sitting on that couch, in *that* room. All at once he recalled that he not *only* was in the presence of the Institute's highest-ranked officer, but also the *knowingly*-doting uncle of the girl he had just had his first date with.

"Yes, sir," he finally got out, too momentarily terrified to hear the squeak in his own voice.

Fortunately for him, the colonel clearly had more important things in mind than pursuing Rei's relationship with Aria, in the moment.

"Good," the man said with a poignant finality. "Then to the heart of the matter, if all parties allow?" He glanced at Jasper, waiting for the woman to nod curtly before continuing. "All of this beating around the bush isn't without reason. I—or the Galens Institute, rather—wanted you to have a good sense of who it was you might be getting in bed with, Cadet. The Kamiya Corporation is a *highly* respected company within the ISC, and powerful. Their reach is extensive, as is their influence."

"Oh, you flatter, Colonel!" Jasper said with a titter that somehow managed to be both diplomatic and flirty at the same time.

Rei, though, could only blink at his superior officer. In the corner of his vision he thought he saw Kent's face go still from where she'd moved to stand along the wall

perpendicular to the colonel, and he was glad he wasn't the only one who'd clearly been kept out of the loop.

'Get in bed with', Guest had said. Rei knew what that implied, of course, knew what that meant, but there was no way. No way.

"I-I'm sorry, sir," he started uncertainly after a second of disbelief. "I don't really follow..."

Once again, though, it was Jasper who answered him.

"Reidon, the Kamiya Corporation would like to offer you access to their resources and funding. They would like to extend to you their influence and capabilities, and provide you an income to supplement your military stipend. In other words—" her smile was as dazzling as it was imposing "—if you're amenable, the Kamiya Corp would like to sponsor your career as a User."

CHAPTER 5

For a long, *long* time—longer than might otherwise have been prudent in the presence of a superior officer—Rei stared, dumbstruck, at Ueno Jasper. Had he been able to see himself he might have facepalmed at the character he cut, mouth slack and eyes wide.

Then again... it was pretty damn understandable.

His shock, though, was further overpowered by his disbelief at what he'd just heard, and the incomprehension was enough to find his words eventually.

“I’m sorry... *What?!*”

He hadn’t meant to raise his voice, but his astonishment was just that great. A sponsorship? *Him? A first-year Cadet?!* And by a company that clearly had enough of a stake in the Intersystem Collective to be able to pull strings in the highest echelons of the military?!

No. No way.

“Abrupt, I know.” Jasper answered his incredulity with a laugh, sitting back to raise an expecting hand over her shoulder. “I *did* tell them you might find that a little hard to believe.” In a flash a small pad appeared in the woman’s waiting grasp, handed off by the bodyguard who’d stepped forward so quickly that Rei suspected the man’s Speed was in the As, if not higher. Just as swiftly, however, the figure backed off again to resume his rigid stance closer to the wall while Jasper uncrossed her legs to lean forward.

“I, Reidon, am what you call a ‘fixer,’” she explained as she tapped the screen, blue light reflecting suddenly in her eyes as the pad came to life. “Basically: I’m a go-between for powerful people and the actions they want to see accomplished.”

Rei had guessed as much—from the start the woman had clearly been careful not to say “we” when referring to Kamiya—but that did nothing to alleviate his disbelief.

“That—” Jasper continued, apparently finding what she was looking for with nothing but a few quick swipes before giving the screen a quick once over “—makes

me perfect for a situation like this. An *unprecedented* situation like this, to be exact.” After she was satisfied, she flipped the pad around and offered it to Rei to take. “A situation in need of a more delicate hand than the massive machine of corporate bureaucracy.”

More automatically than anything, Rei accepted the tablet, finding himself looking at a wall of text. As though through a haze he glanced over the initial clause headlines and bolded details of the contract, even reaching up to scroll further along the document to read. 15 seconds wasn’t nearly enough to find the bottom of the text skimming, but it *was* enough to solidify one absolute fact.

“You’re serious,” Rei muttered, still tracing along the dense lines of blue. “You’re *actually* serious.”

“Oh, honey. My employer is rarely anything but *dead* serious,” came the laughing answer.

No. No way.

And yet there, slipping away upward before his very eyes, was the indisputable evidence.

It made no sense to Rei. How was this possible? Third-years were one thing, and he *had* heard of some second-years getting approached for sponsorship by companies and powerful families in the past. Christopher Lennon had been hounded with offers after ranking in the top 100 at the Intersystem SCTs the previous summer, apparently. But even those examples were few and far between, with only a handful passed out each season to the absolute *best* of the rising stars of the collegiate tournaments.

And Rei had *never*, not once in his life, heard of a *first-year* getting extended such an offer, much less one who hadn’t competed at any level higher than his own academy Intra-Schools.

It made no sense.

In the pro circuits, sponsorships were hardly a rare thing. Almost every professional SCT combatant had some kind of backing, contributed to by everyone

from smaller businesses looking to get their name out at their local Sectionals all the way up to the quadrillion-credit brands that backed the King and Queen-Class fighters who competed for the ISC Championship title every year. There were even individual families in possession of enough private wealth to try—and not infrequently succeed—at establishing their legacy by sponsoring the User with the right future.

The collegiate level, though, was a completely different story.

For one thing, there was a risk attached to sponsorships. If something happened to a User's reputation—if they fell out of favor, if they were caught in a scandal, if they were arrested or even just dishonorably discharged from the military for some reason—the influence of the SCTs was such that any name associated with said User was often tarnished as well. Backing teenagers—even *ISCM-trained* teenagers—could only redouble that risk. What was more, sponsorships were expensive, with even minimally-competitive offers on a Sectional scale providing a yearly stipend multiples of times greater than a User's typical military salary, not to mention other benefits.

And—if Rei wasn't wrong—the contract before him would have been competitive at *much* higher than a Sectional scale...

One million credits a year?! Rei thought his head might have exploded at that number alone, around 40 times higher than his paltry cadet stipend. MILLION?!

It made no sense. It just made no sense.

Except, of course, for one, single fact...

Ab.

All at once Rei felt his shock fade as the thought, the realization, took hold of him. He closed his mouth and forced himself to focus.

“Do you mind if I take a moment to review this, ma'am?” he asked, looking up at Jasper briefly.

The woman's bright answer was prompt even as she kept smiling. “Of course! Take all the time you need. It's not like we don't expect you to have questions.”

Nodding his thanks, Rei looked to the colonel for approval next, receiving an immediate—and pointed—dip of the officer’s head.

Be. Careful, Rei thought he could read in that gesture, doubly sure as Guest met his eyes intently.

Rei answered his own smaller nod, looking back to the pad as Jasper promptly engaged Maddison Kent in enthusiastic small talk. He had every intention of being careful, though not in actually reading the contract. Rather, what Rei had needed was time.

Time to think.

It *did* make sense, at least to an extent. It was well known that sponsoring parties—especially the larger ones—often had whole *teams* of people dedicated to scouting the SCT’s of every system, professional and collegiate both. If anyone had been bothering to watch the Galens first-years during the Intra-School, if anyone had been paying attention, it made *perfect* sense, in fact. So much so that Rei could have kicked himself for not preparing for this exact eventuality. Even if Shido’s Growth spec wasn’t public knowledge with the ISCM doing everything it could—short of locking him far away from the light of day—to keep the exact circumstances of his CAD a secret, the truth would have started to leak out by now. If the whispers on the forums—the same that had given Rei the unofficial name of “Iron Prince”—didn’t put it together, doubtless the sharp eyes or virtual intelligence networks of those larger parties looking for the next great User to back would have. Kamiya, if anything, was just ahead of the game.

Still... Weren’t they a little *too* ahead...?

Rei’s eyes narrowed as he stared at the tablet in his hands, thumbing the text upward every couple of seconds in a careful imitation of reading. All the while he thought, considering it all carefully.

Kamiya... A company he’d never heard of. That bothered him. Not because he thought he *should* have, per se, but rather because of the information the fact that he

didn't know of them presented him with all on its own. The corporation had means and ability—that much was clear—and Jasper and the colonel had given good reason why he wouldn't have heard of them. They provided tech to other entities, rather than direct sales. They clearly weren't afraid of taking action behind the scenes. They were far away, situated in the Sol System.

Sol... The system with a condensed wealth as substantial as any pair of the other six systems combined, and home to thousands of companies Rei *had* heard of...

It bothered him. And the longer he sat there, the more the shock-turned-realization morphed once again into something else.

Suspicion.

After 5 minutes of rolling every angle and question he could think of over in his head, Rei had come to the very conclusion his gut had been screaming from the moment Ueno Jasper had handed him the contract. That it was too soon. Way too soon. Even for his and Shido's circumstances, it was *way* too soon.

And Kamiya was indeed too far ahead of the game.

Which probably meant...

"I do have a question, ma'am." Rei spoke at last even as he continued to pretend to read the contract, pleased to find that his voice had regained its steadiness.

Jasper—who had somehow managed to get both Guest and Kent involved in a perfectly-pleasant discussion about the unfortunate weather—looked around at him with interest again.

"Really? Just one?"

"For now."

The woman laughed lightly at this. "Alright. Let's hear it."

"Why me?" Rei still hadn't looked up, continuing to thumb the screen slowly upward before him. "I'm curious as to why a group like the Kamiya Corporation would be so interested in me? I'm a first-year, and haven't even had my first Sectionals

tournament yet. Even if I had, that's the extent I'll be fighting this season. I won't even be allowed to *qualify* for Globals until my second-year, and we all here—" he lifted his other hand to indicate the room without glancing up from the pad "—know that very few cadets manage that, much less get to go further."

Even without looking at her, he could see the woman's smile turn wry.

"Reidon, please. I did you the courtesy of acknowledging the intelligence both my research *and* my observation tell me you possess. I would appreciate it if you extended me the same kindness."

At last Rei stopped pretending in favor of lifting his eyes from the tablet, and for the first time he thought he saw Ueno Jasper as the person she truly was. The smile hadn't faded from her lips, nor had the genuine edge of it that threw him a little, but her eyes had changed. Gone was the glib cheer of the woman who'd been sitting across from him a moment before. Gone was the casual posture she'd had when he'd walked into the room. Jasper's gaze now felt more like the study of one of Earth's great hunting cats he'd heard about, a predator waiting to see if he would prove friend or food. Despite leaning towards, him, too, there was no eagerness to her body language, no hint of need. If anything she seemed *expectant*, as though the woman were trying to say with even the angle of her bearing that there was only one direction for him to take.

If he hadn't been before, Rei was suddenly very certain that the Kamiya Corporation did not pinch its pennies when it came to the quality of the "fixers" it hired, at the very least.

"Fair enough," he agreed, looking from Jasper to Colonel Guest as he set the pad aside. "Permission to speak freely, sir?"

The colonel's eyes narrowed ever so slightly at this, but he nodded after a moment. "Within reason, Ward."

Be. Careful, the words said again.

“Yes, sir.” Rei, too, leaned forward, addressing Jasper once more. “Your offer is generous—*very* generous, even—but I mean no disrespect when I say that that sets off more alarm bells for me than you’re going to get leaps of joy.”

“Oh?” Jasper asked, and for some reason Rei thought she caught a glimpse of something like satisfaction flit across the woman’s face. “Is that right?”

“It is,” Rei said with a nod. “On the one hand there’s the adage that ‘if something seems to be too good to be true’ and all of that, but on the other... Compensation *that* generous is very high even for the circumstances—circumstances you and Kamiya clearly have a decent grasp of—and that’s *with* completely setting aside the entire fact that I’m largely unproven as a fighter. What does that say about this offer?”

“That Kamiya hopes to give you not only every reason to take advantage of the opportunities they can provide you with now, but in the future as well,” Jasper answered at once, indicating the pad he’d set aside with a gesture. “Is it so suspicious that they want to invest in a way that would encourage you to always consider them first and foremost for sponsorship long-term?”

“Closer to the truth, I think, but I’m not buying it.” Rei was frowning once more. “Here’s another question, then: does the Kamiya Corporation sponsor any other Galens cadets?”

“It has not had the pleasure, as of yet,” the answer came, as confident as it was craftily diplomatic.

Man this woman was good.

Rei, though, didn’t let himself get distracted, looking to Rama Guest again. “In that case... Colonel, can I ask how many of the third-years have sponsorships?”

“Seven,” the man answered, glancing at Maddison Kent and waiting for the woman to nod in confirmation before adding to this. “With a potential eighth in negotiation as we speak, I believe.”

“And among those sponsors, are there names you would say are stronger than Kamiya’s when it comes to influence and ability?”

Guest raised an eyebrow at that, but answered anyway. “Only one or two, but yes.”

“What about the previous graduating class? Or the one before that?”

“More than one or two.”

Rei nodded, theory confirmed. “Then—given those parties’ existing ties to the school—is it fair to say that they keep a close eye on the rest of the Galens cadets year-over-year?”

He might have imagined it, but Rei thought he saw the barest hint of a smirk start to play at the corner of the commanding officer’s beard as the man seemed to realize where he was taking this line of questioning. “Almost always.”

Satisfied, Rei turned back to Jasper, who was watching him with an air that was something between subtly amused and impressed. “So... Do you get where I’m going with this?”

“I believe so, yes.” Her smile was reaching her eyes again, brilliant as ever. “All the same, do please enlighten me.”

“Fine.” Rei shrugged. “Basically, here’s where my gut goes: If there are other parties with closer ties to the Institute, *and* some with larger war chests than your employer—” he watched the woman intently, trying to read her expression “—what is it that made Kamiya beat them to the punch? What is it that has *you* sitting here, edging out anyone else by a mile, and that *despite* the fact that you have no previous ties to the Institute?” He met her gaze leveling. “Again... Why. Me?”

He repeated the question with emphasis, hoping to drive home the point. He wasn’t reaching, he knew. It *was* reasonable that potential sponsors would be keeping eyes on him, after all, but even with the momentum of his Growth and improvement—not to mention the fact that Type Shift was public knowledge, now—bigger and stronger entities with more cash to throw around had existing ties to the Institute. If

they, therefore, had yet to develop the confidence to approach him, why had Kamiya? And why with a contract that would have had most Global-level SCT pros salivating?

Despite the money, despite the *healthy* list of tremendous benefits Rei had caught a glimpse of as he'd pretended to peruse the text, these questions burned hot enough to steel his hand.

Without so much as a twitch in her smile, it was Jasper's turn to take Rei in in silence. For a long moment the woman seemed to study him, to examine every line of his face, eyes lingering on what he thought were probably the few scars visible along his neck and peeking up from the collar of his shirt and jacket.

When she finally spoke again, it was with a quiet, dry laugh.

"What if I told you you were nothing more than a calculated risk? That you were a gamble?"

"All due respect, ma'am, but I'd say you were full of it," Rei answered at once. "You have access to every data point any other potential sponsor of mine—present or future—has, and you're the only one sitting here, throwing a contract like *this*—" he gestured to the pad at his side "—at me. If I *am* a gamble, that would have to mean I'm probably some rogue element's gamble, wouldn't it? Maybe some specific person's? Which, yet again, leads us right back to the same question. Why me?"

"Why you indeed..." Jasper muttered, nodding as though in approval. "I have to say, Reidon, you exceed my expectations, and I'm a *very* hard person to take by surprise."

Rei, unsure how to respond to this, only shrugged again. "Thanks, I guess? Assuming that's a compliment...?"

"Oh it is," Jasper said, and to his surprise she got to her feet, smoothing her skirt down over her knees before standing straight. "It definitely is." She held out a hand. "Could I have my pad back, if you please? You obviously won't be needing it any further today."

A little taken aback by the confidence of this statement, Rei picked up the tablet to hand to the woman just the same, watching her promptly take to swiping across its surface again.

“Wait, is that it?” It was Maddison Kent, funnily enough, who spoke up. “He hasn’t even turned down your offer.”

“No, but he’s going to,” the fixer said with another laugh, typing something quickly out across the smart-glass. “And unlike most negotiations, attempting to improve on the terms would only be counter-productive. Isn’t that right, Reidon?”

Rei nodded slowly, still thrown by the sudden shift in the conversation’s direction. “Probably. But how do you know I’m going to turn you down?”

“Because I’m under very strict—and rather annoying orders—not to lie to you, ironically enough.”

The words had an immediate impact on the room, already tense as it had been. Over his shoulder Rei thought he heard the shift of clothes as Kent stiffened, while Guest at long last uncrossed his thick arms to push himself up from the edge of the desk, standing tall and ominous in his black-and-golds.

“I recommend you explain that statement, Ms. Ueno,” the man rumbled, his earlier, casual air immediately replaced by the presence of the commanding officer of the Galens Institute, more powerful and threatening than even the storm outside that was still pelting the windows with snow. “As it stands, it seems you’re implying you would have preferred to con my cadet into signing your contract, had you been at liberty to do so. That’s hardly in line with how the Kamiya Corporation was presented to me by General Waymores when I agreed to take this meeting.”

“Ease up, Colonel,” Jasper said with a sidelong glance and another smile, finishing her manipulation of the pad with a swift swipe in Rei’s direction, which was followed by a ping on his NOED telling him he had been sent a file. “It’s *because* I’m currently representing the Kamiya Corporation that I’m... let’s call it *‘limited’*. You’ve been too

far removed from the bureaucracy of Sol if you think scheming and politics isn't how most things still get done at the heart of this beautiful mess we call human civilization."

Before Guest could say anything more, though, Jasper was addressing Rei again, who'd opened the message to find the very same contract he'd just—if indirectly—turned down.

"Those are the terms offered. My contact ID is attached, for when you change your mind."

"When?" Rei repeated with a bare laugh, closing the file again to look the woman in the eyes. "That's a lot of confidence, isn't it?"

"Says the boy who just turned down more credits a year than he could spend, and without so much as blinking," the fixer answered with a chuckle. Then she grew serious, taking Rei in carefully again even as she handed the pad back to the guard behind her, who accepted it with another quick step forward. "I should probably tell you you're too sharp for your own good, Reidon Ward, but something tells me that's not really the case..."

The way she said it...

"I'm right, aren't I?" Rei pressed with a frown. "There's a reason Kamiya is interested in me. A reason other than what those other parties would have?"

Even as he asked it, he felt a tension he'd only passively been aware of on entering the room tighten in his gut. Jasper's momentary silence didn't help it, much less the slow, single nod she offered him in answer.

"Yes, you're right. There is a reason."

"But you won't tell me..."

She smiled again.

"No, I won't. I might not be military, but I have my own set of rules I have to follow, too. And in my line of work—" she winked at him "—you never know who might be listening."

And then, with that and a brief word of gratitude for taking the meeting—accompanied by a polite bow from both Jasper and the guard towards Colonel Guest—the woman took her leave, exiting the room so quickly with her black-clad shadow that Rei was left feeling almost windblown at the departure. Clearly he wasn't the only one, because it was a solid few seconds before any of the three remaining among them finally spoke.

“Ooookay... Is there a ranking for ‘quickest-meeting-that-should-have-taken-hours’? Because that had to be some kind of a record.”

Maddison Kent's confused humor broke the spell of surprise Ueno Jasper's sudden departure had cast, and Rei turned to find the chief assistant scrunching her nose at the door. Colonel Guest, on the other hand, was watching Rei, and it was with the jolt of realizing that he was the only one left seated that he jumped to his feet to take an at ease position before the man.

“Apologies, sir,” Rei got out quickly. “I hope nothing I said was cause for offense...”

For a moment or two more, the colonel studied him, staring him down much in the same way Jasper just had.

Then, at long last, the man relaxed with a snort, waving Rei down again even as he moved to the seat the Kamiya fixer had just vacated.

“Sit, Cadet,” Guest grunted, dropping down himself and leaning forward to rest his elbows on his bent knees, gaze now on the closed door of his office as well. “You said nothing wrong. If anything, I think you handled that situation as well as could be expected, given the circumstances.”

Doing as he was told, Rei found himself moving stiffly again when he sat, and forced a slow breath in and out before responding.

“Yes, sir. I'll admit that was... er...”

“Unexpected?” Kent offered, coming around to stand behind the colonel, who still hadn’t looked away from the door.

“Haa…” Rei got out tightly. “That’s one way to put it, I guess?”

“It is. Another would be as Jasper herself stated.” Guest finally turned to Rei again. “*Unprecedented.*”

Rei swallowed, then nodded. Now that the fixer was gone, the adrenaline he hadn’t even felt from the moment she’d announced the Kamiya Corp’s offer was taking its toll. His hands were cold, and he was pretty sure his heart would have broken free of his chest had Shido not been steadily improving his skeletal tissue integrity for the past half year. His head, too, a moment ago so clear and aware, was suddenly flooded with questions and doubts, including not a few nagging voices screaming at him that he should have taken the money and run, rather than ask stupid questions.

“A million credits…” he muttered, and it was only as he noticed Guest and Kent both blink at him that he realized he’d said it out loud.

“S-sorry!” he stammered in quick apology, going rigid. “I just—”

Before he could finish, though, Guest held him up with a hand again.

“At *ease*, Ward. You’re an odd one, I’ve gotta say. Cool as can be when you’re staring a shark in the face, only to start shaking the moment you get to dry land again.” He was watching Rei carefully. “A million, you say, though? Is that what they were offering you?”

Rei nodded unsteadily, working to keep the number from playing across his head on a loop. “You weren’t aware?”

“No.” The colonel shook his head. “The ISCM allows these sorts of things to usually be handled largely independently. Given that you’ve been in my care for a lot less time than most cadets who end up sitting where you are now, I just thought I should be a least a bit more present.” Guest grimaced. “Still… A million credits… You

did even better than I thought, with that on the table. What the *hell* are they playing, throwing an offer like that around?”

“Right??” Kent’s disbelieving answer came in a hiss. “Why are they even approaching him in the *first place*?? I mean, well...” she glanced at Rei with interest “... aside from the obvious, I guess...”

The irritation by the pair on his behalf—coupled with this surprising reminder of his circumstances—was enough to pull Rei away from the risk of daydreaming about how much thrift shopping he and Aria could have done with a *million* credits.

“You know?” he asked of the woman, surprised and looking from her to the colonel and back again.

“She knows,” Guest confirmed for his assistant with a nod before Kent herself could answer. “Maddison was in the room when you were accepted to Galens. As was I, obviously.”

That much Rei had assumed, but it still helped him gather to courage to ask his follow-up.

“Then... I’m not crazy, right? For them to come in swinging like that... My—*Shido’s* Growth spec, rather... It’s not enough to have warranted that kind of offer *this* early alone... Right?”

In answer, Guest made a face even as Kent nodded fervently over his shoulder. “Honestly... With the forward-facing information the public has at the moment, no. It’s not. Still, one can follow their logic. In the time you’ve been here, Ward, in the six months you’ve spent at this school, you and your Device have ascended through more CAD Ranks than a lot of Users will see in most of their lifetime. Your S-Ranked Growth might not be general knowledge, but the fact that you—as a first-year—have an active following on the feeds—”

“And a *kickass* nickname,” Kent added, earning a brief glare from Guest over his shoulder even as he continued.

“—is an indication that word is going to spread quickly. It makes sense that sponsors would come knocking earlier than any cadet we’ve had at this school. I’ve been aware of that for some time, and had even thought to ask Valera Dent or Dyrk Reese to take you aside to make mention of it. Unfortunately, I got word about Kamiya’s interest before I believed it would be an impending issue. For that, I suspect I owe you an apology.”

The mention of Major Dyrk Reese—the principal arbiter of all of Galens’s hosted SCTs and the man who had actively worked to make Rei’s life hell throughout the Intra-Schools during the previous quarter—only briefly brought up a flare of anger Rei quickly shoved aside as the colonel further kept on.

“Still... I have to agree with you. It’s too early. Prior to that meeting, I made much the same assessment of the situation that you just did on the fly, so kudos for that as well. Don’t know if you noticed, but I was a little... on edge, when you arrived.”

“I may have noticed, yes, sir,” Rei managed to get out with a weak smile, earning himself a grunt from the S-Ranked User.

“No surprises there, I suppose. Then maybe you can understand what I mean when I say I feel a certain relief that you turned down that offer. Not many people would have, I think, in your stead...”

“More like it was turned down for me,” Rei said with a disbelieving shake of his head. “If you don’t mind me saying it... That woman was *terrifying*, sir. It felt like everything I did was being dissected a micro-second at a time.”

“You’re not the only one, don’t worry,” Guest turned to look back at his chief assistant. “Do you know anything about her, Maddison?”

“No, but I do know her kind.” It was Rei who the woman addressed as she spoke. “I hope you’re not dumb enough to think that Users are the only dangerous people out there, Ward. She wasn’t wrong, implying that the Collective has more back alley deals

and plots woven into its systems than a bad mystery novel. The MIND isn't *actually* all-seeing, and it's certainly not all-powerful."

"Yes, ma'am," Rei answered quickly. "I'll remember that, ma'am."

"Do so," Guest said, looking around at him again. "Especially when you go through that contract in detail, as I'm *well* aware you are going to as soon as you have a spare moment. We clearly share reservations about this offer, Ward. I hope you can remember that in the face of temptation."

"Yes, sir," Rei said again. "I will, sir."

"Good. And speaking of..." the colonel started slowly at this, leaning a little closer over the space between the couches. "I could be wrong, Cadet, but did it seem like you might have a sense of *why* it was that Kamiya would be knocking at our door about you so early? I'm well aware of your academic accolades, but you came to that conclusion awfully fast, even given..."

It took every ounce of willpower Rei had not to tense at this question. He did, in fact, have an inkling of why Kamiya had shown up at their doorstep, though a weak one at that. It was honestly hardly more than speculation rather than any true theory, in fact, predicated entirely on that single bothersome factor that had caught his eye as he'd entered the colonel's study in the first place. Still, Rei was *far* from sure he was right about this nagging suspicion, and doubted he would have put to voice his hunch even if he had been.

After all, in a universe of a quarter of a trillion people, it wasn't *completely* impossible that the name "Kamiya" would seem to share the same phonetic basis as Rei's own first name...

... Was it?

"No, sir," Rei lied with a straight face to the expectant Colonel Guest. "I'm as in the dark as you are there. I just thought it odd Kamiya is obviously so willing to put the cart *this far* before the horse, even with reason. Others should have been here first, if

that was the case. If anything, the best guess I have is that they know about my Growth spec. Know for a *fact*, I mean.”

For another long moment Guest watched him with a slight frown, like he was trying to read something deeper in Rei’s words. Eventually, though, Maddison gave a polite cough from behind the couch, and the colonel sat back with a dissatisfied sort of shrug.

“If you say so, Cadet. Not sure I believe you, but I *am* sure I’m already sticking my nose too far into this as is. Just keep in mind what I said, got it?”

“Got it, sir.”

“Excellent. Now then—” the man, without looking away from Rei, pointed at the door “—Maddison, if you could give us moment, I would appreciate it.”

“Sir?” Kent asked in surprise, clearly not having expected this sudden dismissal.

“You heard me. Out, if you please.”

“But... you’re supposed to call the Ellison Academy back as soon as you can, and after that there’s your scheduled meeting with—”

“Push them.” Guest’s eyes still hadn’t left Rei, who was very quickly remembering, once again, who *exactly* it was he was sitting across from. “You can let them know something important has come up, if needed.”

“‘Important’, sir...?” Kent asked, still obviously uncertain, though she’d started dutifully for the door just the same.

“Oh yes,” Guest said, neon-grey fire flashing for a moment in his dark eyes. “*Exceedingly* important. Cadet Ward and I need to have a chat, you see. One involving a certain red-headed niece of mine, and how a simple *outing to a mall* almost turned into a *six-man brawl in front of a public restroom*.”

As Maddison Kent left the room—her confusion replaced by wicked sniggering that was audible until the door closed behind her—Rei found himself calculating that he *could*, in fact, survive the ten-story drop to the snowy courtyard far below.

On the other hand, as the oppressive pressure of Guest's unmoving gaze started to feel like it was crushing his very soul, he was *much* less certain as to whether that possible exit via the nearest window would be a voluntary means of escape... or an assisted ejection.

CHAPTER 6

“With the signing of the New London Treaties, greater conflict as a whole was largely abolished within the boundaries of the freshly-formed ISC. In an ideal world, this would have documented the start of an era of bliss and ease for all, a time in our history marked as the beginning of long-lasting peace. One could even say it did mark such a moment, if only on the surface.

To those in the know, however, it is apparent that humankind simply found another way to wage its wars amongst itself, with bloodless battles now carried amongst the shadows and privilege of the elite...”

- “A History of the Collective”

Gilbert France, M.S., Ph.D.

Distributed by Central Command, Earth

As the door to the flyer finally closed behind them, cutting off the wicked bite of the wind and snow outside, Jasper had to stop herself from cursing in every language she knew. Despite whatever her trimmed, confident appearance might say to the contrary, it was *work* to pull off the look she liked for in-person jobs like this, and anything that messed with that effort could fall to the archons for all she cared. Still, as much as Jasper would have liked to scream profanity at the frost-crusted window in French, German, English, and Japanese most fluently, she kept her poise, choosing instead to brush the snow from her jacket shoulders and hair delicately before scooting back further into the luxury leather of the personal transport’s wide seats.

Her self-control was made much easier by the sense of triumph that had been burning in her cheeks from the moment she’d realized Reidon Ward wouldn’t be signing that day.

“Lose the smirk if you please, Jasper,” her companion said, his voice distorted and mechanical through his helmet. “I will admit it. You were correct.”

With a smile—a real, true smile, rather than the perfected mask of one very few people could tell from the other—Jasper looked around from the full-frame window to the figure sitting across from her, facing the back of the flyer. She could see her own reflection in the clean black of the glass that obscured the man’s features, distorted and made ugly by the curve and spattering of melting snow that peppered the otherwise-smooth surface.

“Oh? Not even going to let me get in an ‘I told you so’, then?”

In answer, the man sighed in tired exasperation, reaching up as he did to finally release the hermetic seal of the helmet along the line of his jaw before pulling it carefully free of his head even as the flyer started to lift beneath them with a quiet *whir*.

Doctor Kamiya Hiroto had been a handsome man for all of the nearly 3 decades Jasper had known him. Even now, at just over 70, the CEO of the Kamiya Corporation cut a notable figure, his slate-grey eyes and long, white-streaked black hair sharp alongside the dark uniform whose skin-tight underlayers reached all the way up his neck to the edges of his thinly-bearded chin. It was a strange look to sport for someone she had only ever rarely seen out of either custom-tailored suits or a karate gi, but it worked well for the man.

Maybe because—as an A8-Ranked User and a former Global-level fighter on Earth—even in his advancing age Kamiya Hiroto could have trounced the vast majority of the innumerable guards his company *actually* employed to wear that uniform.

“No matter how many years pass, your sass never does cease to amaze me.” The man shook his head as he set the now-empty helmet on the seat beside him, leaving one hand atop it to keep it from sliding to the cabin floor as the flyer tilted slightly in their ascent. “Interesting way to treat your former teacher, I must say.”

“My apologies, *sensei*,” Jasper responded with a laugh. “Very well. I shall graciously elect *not* to bask in my righteous vindication, just as I shall graciously elect *not* to point out that that meeting went exactly—*exactly*—as I said it would.”

“How noble of you to spare me,” Hiroto answered darkly.

Jasper only grinned wider.

Then, though, she felt the smile slip.

“So... What did you think?”

For a long time Hiroto sat in silence, seeming to contemplate the question.

“... I think... ‘unsettling’ is the right word,” he finally answered just as the flyer started to level out a couple thousand feet above the ground, slipping into the snow-obscured traffic of the skylanes flawlessly. “He is at once nothing like what I expected, and yet everything I could have hoped for...”

Jasper nodded slowly. “I can see that. I wasn’t kidding. The kid took me by surprise. We knew he was smart—his Assignment Exam scores said as much, even the lowered one he *thinks* he got—and there’s obviously something going on with that CAD of his that’s going to have the SCT world buzzing soon enough. But he’s more than that. He’s clever, too. Saw right through us.”

“Just like you said he would...” the doctor gave a muttered admittance, turning to scowl out the window, fingers starting to drum at the top of the helmet still sitting beside him in what was usually a telling sign of either deep thought or frustration.

In this particular case, Jasper suspected it might be both.

“Yes,” she answered simply, careful to keep her voice level. “I did tell you we were coming on too strong, and you know I wouldn’t say that lightly. It’s not like you to go diving in full-bore like this. You *know* money can’t solve everything, better than anyone. I’ve poached enough assets for Kamiya—for *you*—to know you give people what they need, not what someone else *thinks* they need. People like Abigail Smith don’t simply work for whoever offers the highest bid on their talents. The best need more than that.”

“Reidon’s file suggested that—”

“Reidon’s file is *shit*, Hiroto. I told you that, too. What little we managed to get out of our *combined* contacts at Central isn’t enough to give a clear picture of the kid. Like I suggested, we should have waited, or at least approached this another way.”

“What way?” Hiroto snorted, though Jasper knew the anger that tinged the man’s voice as he continued wasn’t directed at her. “What other way did we have?”

“I don’t know,” Jasper admitted placatingly. “But if you’d given me more time, I could have figured it out. We only *just* got his exam results. If we’d waited, I could have found a way in through his friends, or maybe that foster house that took care of him, the Estoran Center. Those kinds of places are usually tight on funds. If we’d applied the right pressure—”

“*No.*”

The single, ringing word instinctively had Jasper sitting up straight in her seat, and she knew she had, for once, *actually* taken it a step too far. Hiroto was looking at her directly now, and though there was no glimmer of color in his eyes, the sheer force of his resolution was enough to make her swallow.

“Of course. I’m sorry, I just—”

“You are very dear to me, Jasper,” the doctor cut her off, voice as cool as it was calm. “As a former student and friend both, and you have proven time and time again to have no limit of value to my company and personal estate alike. For these reasons I overlook the tactics you stoop to with your other employers. *However—*” the black of Hiroto’s disguising uniform seemed to be drawing in the light, somehow, tricking Jasper into feeling like the cabin was shrinking and darkening around them “—I will not *tolerate* such suggestions when it comes to my own interests. *Is that understood?*”

“*Yes, sensei.*”

The response was so automatic, ingrained in her from over 20 years of instruction under the man, that Jasper didn’t even realize she’d slipped into their shared native

tongue. Hiroto, for his part, watched her a moment more, clearly intent to drive his point home.

When he looked away at last, eyes shifting to the looming forms of Castalon's skyscrapers they could just make out as shadows through the blizzard, the day seemed to brighten, and Jasper let go of the breath she'd been holding.

"So... What do we do now? Do we come at him a different way, as you suggested?"

The question came calmer, bringing Jasper back to herself a bit as she blinked. With a cough to help steady her shaken composure she folded her hands over her lap, forcing herself not to look away from her employer—a difficult feat in that moment even despite his averted gaze.

"No. We don't. We've swung this door open too wide and too loudly. It's clear that Reidon was already put on edge by our offer. If he gets so much as a *whiff* that we are coming at him from another angle as well, those walls are only going to get higher. Given the situation..." Jasper paused, choosing to give herself a moment to pick her words carefully "...I don't think you want to make any more hurdles for this endeavor than there already are..."

Before her the doctor made a rare face at that, one lip curling up in an expression lingering somewhere between disgust and annoyance. He muttered something in Japanese, of which Jasper only caught "*fool of a son...*" before the man spoke more clearly.

"So, what? We wait? For him to come to us?"

"It's not without its risks, but... yes..." Jasper nodded, feeling her usual confidence and pep returning steadily. "The money may have been too far a swing, but you were smarter with the rest of the offer. There are opportunities in there that Reidon will likely have great use for, *if* our deductions regarding his abilities are correct." She hesitated. "There is, however... a risk to that."

Hiroto nodded knowingly, still looking out the window as hundreds of other transports zipped over and around them in every direction. “A more enticing offer.”

“Or even just a more *appropriate* one,” Jasper said. “It doesn’t have to be better, at this point—let’s be honest, how could it *get* better?—it just has to be... real.”

“Because how could ours have been, yes...” Hiroto muttered at the glass, his eyes narrowing at his own reflection. “Yes... I do see it now... I suppose I let my desire for forgiveness cloud my better judgment, didn’t I?”

“Just a little...” Jasper answered carefully.

The doctor didn’t respond for a long moment, clearly contemplating the issue. After nearly a minute, he at last gave another sigh—one more resigned, this time—and turned to face her once again.

“I’m starting to think it might have been better off just introducing myself directly. Face to face. None of this sneaking around.” He looked suddenly annoyed. “I often wish you hadn’t dissuaded me from that.”

“You needed a softer entry, Hiroto. You *still* need one. What we *do* know about Reidon isn’t much, sure, but...” Jasper offered him as sympathetic a look as she could muster “... Keiji and Samantha... They all but left him to die, Hiroto. And the life he’s lived since... The surgeries. The pain. The stunted growth. I can’t even find any real evidence of *friends* other than this ‘Viviana Arada’ before he came to Galens...” She shook her head. “I’m sorry, I don’t care how strong the boy is and how steadfast his spirit seems. You don’t just hammer down the doors on a history like that. You can’t. You just *can’t*.”

Hiroto grimaced again, though Jasper didn’t miss the tension that had snapped into place at the mention of the man’s son and daughter-in-law.

“I need a softer entry,” he echoed. “Yes... I suppose you’re right...”

Another pause, and Jasper got the impression the man was steeling himself for something.

Sure enough, when he looked around at her again at last, his face was stony.

“I can provide the circumstances by which Reidon isn’t offered another sponsorship opportunity. At least not anytime soon. You’re confident that he’ll come around to us, if I do so?”

“I am.” Jasper smiled, feeling wholly herself again at long last. “He has to. If he continues on the trajectory he’s headed, Galens can only provide him so many opportunities. Eventually he’ll need more, and the choices won’t be many.”

Hiroto nodded yet again, slower this time.

Then his hands, still gloved, balled into fists.

“If I had just *been there*,” he growled. “If I’d just prioritized him over the damn *company*. After Sarah was born, though, I thought it was fine. I thought I could meet him a few days later, and it would be fine...”

Jasper offered him a sadder smile, now. “Hiroto... everyone makes mistakes. Hell, look at me.” She indicated herself with both hands even as she batted her eyelashes dramatically. “The doctors told *my* parents I was a boy when I was born. Just because of some silly thing between my legs. See how that turned out?”

Hiroto, though, wasn’t in the mood to be appeased.

“You had a supportive family and access to the best medical therapies and doctors money could buy, Jasper. If anything, you are the *antithesis* of Reidon’s circumstances.”

Jasper waved away the man’s foul mood. “Fine. You don’t want to be cheered up. I get it. In that case, we move forward.” She dropped her hands back into her lap to watch the doctor seriously. “If you can make it so that he has little choice but to turn to us, I assure you he will. That being said—and I’m a little afraid to know the answer to this—how you are going to do that?”

It took a moment, but Hiroto’s expression changed, then. From a quiet, still anger he rose, mouth twisting slowly upwards at the question. Then he was grinning darkly, the ugly smile making Jasper think of a man enjoying his last meal.

It terrified her in an entirely different way, and she knew the answer even before he opened his mouth.

“Simple enough. You will make Kamiya’s interest in Reidon known. You will make it known—through the right channels, of course—and you will make it clear that *any* party who attempts to join us on this dance floor will find themselves cut off from every product Kamiya might be providing them, now and forever. If they aren’t already a customer, then their *partners* will be cut off, and so on, and so forth.”

Even though she’d seen it coming, Jasper’s hands went numb.

“Hiroto... That’s barely a short step from economic suicide... You might lose clients—hundreds of clients, even—just for *making* that threat. ATTALIS, Wyre Industries, maybe even the likes of *Veragoth*... Every one of your competitors will flock to fill that void!”

The doctor nodded briefly, as though this were hardly a passing concern. “I’m aware of that. But we deal in *tech*, Jasper, not canned food and vacuums. The contract negotiations for a changeover like that would cost any company weeks of time and revenue, and that’s on top of the months lost to fully adapt and update hardware and software both.”

Jasper pushed harder. “You would trash your reputation. You would *trash* every ounce of good will you’ve built, not to mention your mother and grandfather and every other member of your family before you.”

Hiroto *did* wince at that—as she suspected he might—but didn’t otherwise budge. “So be it. Reputation can be salvaged. All of it—money, clientele, contracts—all of it can be salvaged.”

Jasper could only stare at the man, dumbstruck for the first time in what had to have been years. She thought she had seen it all, in her 2 decades working in the back alleys of industry plots and politics. She had seen the greatest rise and fall, had seen

those with the most potential cut off at the knees by those with the least merit, and those with the lowest chance lifted by titans who had already made it.

But she had never—*never*—seen a man with as much to lose as Kamiya Hiroto look into the abyss of destruction, laugh, and begin to juggle everything he had while standing on one foot at its very edge.

“You would burn it all down?” she asked quietly, as horrified as she was awestruck. “You would burn it all down? Just for him?”

Without so much as moment’s hesitation, Hiroto nodded. Outside, the storm seemed to have redoubled, the raging bellow of the wind through the monoliths of Castalon like a scream made by the universe in an attempt to drown out his answer.

“Of course. How could I not, when those that should have been his family already tried to throw him into the flames?”

CHAPTER 7

“Friendship is the hardest thing in the world to explain. It's not something you learn in school. But if you haven't learned the meaning of friendship, you really haven't learned anything.”

*-Muhammad Ali
Pre-ISC athlete and philosopher
c.1980*

It was Viv who found Rei first.

It had been a gamble, but she wasn't completely surprised when it paid off. Four and a half years spent mostly glued at the hip was enough time to get a good sense of where his head would be at depending on how the mysterious meeting with Administration went, and an hour's wait after breakfast turned into 2, then started threatening to encroach on the lunch break before afternoon training.

That was when Viv suspected something had gone sideways.

Well that and the fact that not even *Aria* had heard from Rei yet, which was way more alarming.

Eventually even Cashe had started to voice some concern over the low audio of the SCT recordings the 5 remaining members of the squad had decided to review in their morning free time, which had finally had Viv getting to her feet.

“Idiot's probably in a huff somewhere,” she'd grumbled over her shoulder as she made for the door of the Tactical Studies classroom they'd commandeered for their study session. “Aria, can you check 304? It's the most likely place he's at. Catcher, you and Cashe look around East Center. He might be blowing off steam for some reason. Or maybe the mess hall? Grant—” she was careful to use Logan's last name, partially not to give their familiarity away and partially to let the boy know she wasn't anywhere *near* over her morning's irritation “—can you spin by the Hospital, please? Just in case.”

To his credit—even if the others were more enthusiastic in their agreement and hurrying to follow after her—Logan nodded at once even as he shoved himself up from his chair a row back from where the rest of them had been seated. They were down two floors and outside in short order, the blizzard that had made their way to and from breakfast earlier hell having fortunately abated somewhat, and all split off at once to check their designated area. Viv lingered a moment, feeling a little bad as Aria in particular took off at a faster clip than most patrolling staff officers might have approved of.

Even if it had been with good intentions, she was pretty sure she'd lied...

Turning west, Viv hurried through snow, ignoring the cold with nothing more than a glower into the still-blasting winds. It wasn't long before she'd passed the Arena, then the second- and third-year dorms, ignoring them all. Instead she made a beeline around Vellus—the towering third-year residence—the moment she could, aiming for the handsome, oversized three-story building some 50 yards from the frosted Institute wall. Maybe it was because its location made it more frequently used by the school's upperclassmen, but the West Center was both a larger and more-polished training facility than East, where all of them—except Cashe—were more accustomed to spending their additional conditioning and combat hours. Though she'd rarely been inside, Viv could have known at a glance that the floors were taller, which granted the fields inside a healthier gap between projection plating and ceiling. Made sense. While it was unlikely any of the first-years—with the exception of one white-haired dummy, maybe—would develop enough Speed or Strength to need more than the 10 yards of vertical clearance East Center offered anytime soon, Viv knew for a *fact* there were a good number of third-years who could have easily topped out that kind of height from a standstill, and probably some second-years who could have managed it with a running start. On top of that, the walls of the West Center were less stone and more glass, offering wide, sweeping views into the training rooms along the bottom floor of the

facility, or at least into those whose occupants hadn't decided to turn their walls opaque for privacy. One of the chambers closest to the double doors of the entrance was largely whited out, allowing only sneaking hints of blistering colors that told Viv it definitely wasn't Vademe's or Martin's squad in the middle of training, while in the far corner what looked to be two of the second-year squads seemed to be taking turns sparring in groups. Viv had to stop herself from pausing to watch, momentarily distracted as she noted several Duelists she'd cheered for during the Intra-Schools taking to the field, and cursed Rei for his bullheadedness as she headed inside.

The doors opened for her with a hiss of air, then shut again the moment she was in the warmth of the facility. As she'd recalled, the polished stone of the ceiling above was indeed at *least* 15 yards over her head, and the inside of the space was as clean and spartan as any other building on the Galens grounds, all white marble, steel, and smart-glass. Looking around, a blue holo sign that showed stairs at the far end of the hall blinked against her frame, and Viv made a line for it at once, working hard again not to look to her left as she passed the opaque room where she was almost positive several groups of third-years were in the middle of mock combat. It was harder than it should have been, thanks to the screaming sounds of the clash combined with the shouted feedback of onlookers ringing clear through the door that looked to have been propped open as a source of fresh air.

Viv almost leapt clean out of her boots, therefore, when a familiar voice caught her off guard as she passed.

“Arada?”

Something almost like fear prickled up Viv's spine, and she whirled even as she snapped into a salute. It was more of a habit than anything, particularly since the person who'd stepped out of the blocked-out training room as she'd passed was an ISCM cadet just like her, and therefore didn't technically warrant the formal greeting.

Protocol only went so far, though, when it came to the dark-skinned young man standing before her now, looking at her with a sort of perplexed interest.

Christopher “Lasher” Lennon cut a strange figure for a User. He was small compared to other male CAD wielders, standing at *maybe* 5’9”, which actually put him a good 2 inches shorter than Viv. His face, too, was soft, stubbornly holding onto a bit more of the fat that most other cadets burned off within a few months of arriving at school, *if* they’d had any left to shed in the first place. His skin was pocked with sweat where his body wasn’t covered with his red-on-blue combat suit, and his sky-hued eyes were watching Viv curiously from under short, grey dreads.

Despite all that, however, it was well known that Christopher Lennon was a favorite to bring home the collegiate Intersystem Champion title that year, and it had been some time since Viv had been able to see the shorter boy as anything other than the beast he was.

“Sir!” Viv offered a sharp greeting to him, still saluting. “Sorry to distract. I didn’t expect to run into anyone.”

She could almost *see* Lennon working hard at not rolling his eyes, the mix of exasperation and amusement cutting across his features in sharp contrast to the cool, cold soldier Viv was more used to seeing him as. Valera Dent—apparently as a reward for the extra effort Viv, Rei, Aria, and Catcher had been putting in since the start of the school year—had hooked the four of them up with more than a half-dozen training sessions with the third-year midway through the fall quarter of the previous term. It might have been strange from the outside, a cadet training cadets, but the Lasher was no common student. His A8 ranking made him one of the strongest Users in the school, *counting* even the former front-line fighters and retired SCT’s competitors that made up their CAD-Type sub-instructors.

It had made those instructional evenings invaluable to all of them.

“Put your hand down, Arada,” Lennon told her with a snort, stepping barefoot a little further into the hall and half-closing the door to the training room behind him. “If all of you are going to salute me every time we cross paths, it’s going to make for an uncomfortable rest of the year for everyone.”

“Uh... Yes, sir...” Viv answered, dropping her hand as instructed and deciding *not* to voice that doing so felt about as awkward as casually addressing Rama Guest.

“Lose the ‘sir’, too. I’m a cadet, like you. You want to call me that on the training field, fine, but not outside of that.”

Viv relaxed a little at this, even managing not to slip into the at ease position.

Lennon didn’t miss the shift, and nodded in approval. “Good. Now... What are you doing here? I thought the first-year squads had their afternoon squad format training in an hour? Don’t tell me you guys have taken to skipping lunch for extra combat hours...”

There was something almost like a threat in the boy’s voice, and Viv had to swallow nervously as his eyes bore into her with a lethal edge. It was familiar, of course. It was the same way the Lasher had taken them all in whenever he’d been acting as their instructor, those seven Friday evenings the captain had cobbled together for them. Fortunately, the look no longer stole Viv’s tongue.

At least not completely.

“I’m looking for Rei, actually,” she admitted, glancing around at the other fields she could see from where she stood, all empty aside from the second-years going at it on the other side of the hall. “He was in training this morning, but got called to Administration after. We thought we’d see him at breakfast, but he never showed...”

Anyone else might not have gotten the full and honest story, but Lennon had earned Viv’s respect—as well as that of the rest of them—in more ways than one over the course of the last quarter. Aside from the sessions he’d promised through Dent, the Lasher had also taken it on himself to see Rei pushed to the limits in the final days

before his last match of the Intra-School, where he'd faced off with Logan. Rei himself had said more than once—on the increasingly-rare occasions when it was just the four of them again—that the third-year was the sole reason he'd won that match, and probably developed Type Shift to boot.

While Viv had found herself a little torn on the outcome of that last bout at the time, Lennon had at least cemented himself in her esteem that day.

“Ward got called to Admin?” the Lasher asked with a frown. “Why?”

“No idea. That’s kind of the reason we’re worried. We thought someone from higher up in the ISCM was looking for a word with him, but that was hours ago. Even if he got breakfast after, it wasn’t with us.”

The frown deepened. The third-year didn’t ask why an ISCM officer from outside the school might want a talk with a first-year cadet. Lennon knew better than most that Rei was special, even if he’d never asked—under threat of Dent’s wrath, apparently—about the specifics of the circumstances. That made the young man’s concern genuine, though, and he’d just opened his mouth to ask something else when a tall, slender girl with silver-black hair and olive skin popped through the narrow gap of the still-ajar door.

“Chris, you coming? Yuji says he wants to try and—Oh. Hello?”

The newcomer’s smile was bright under dark eyes as she caught sight of Viv, turning her attention from Lennon, who she was clearly familiar with enough to address more casually than Viv suspected she’d ever personally have the balls to try. She was a stunning beauty in her third-year combat suit, even for a designed child of the modern age, with the genetic correction offered by her CAD having rendered her features into a perfect symmetry not even every User was blessed with. Viv had the impression, for a moment, that she was looking into the sun as the girl beamed at her, and had to blink away her surprise to return the greeting.

“Uh... Hello.” She tried to return the smile, feeling like a clay doll in the face of the third-year.

Fortunately, Lennon didn’t leave her hanging.

“Dice, this is Viviana Arada,” he introduced Viv promptly, waving at her as the girl stepped up to stand beside him in the hall. “She’s one of those first-years I was working with last semester.”

“Oh!” the girl—“Dice”?—exclaimed again, looking excited now. “Another one? Cool!” She offered Viv a mock scowl, then. “I’ll have you know I didn’t appreciate you all stealing him every Friday night for two months. Not cool.”

Unsure how to answer this, Viv had opened her mouth to offer an automatic apology, but the Lasher saved her again.

“Don’t tease. I made it up to you.” He was grinning—another new expression—when he turned back to Viv. “Arada, this is Candice Meyer, my girlfriend. She’s also a third-year Sectionals qualifier, which means she’s coming to Kenneth Academy and Ganos with us. So you probably shouldn’t piss her off.”

“Who’s teasing now?” the girl retorted at once, glaring sidelong at Lennon even as she addressed Viv. “Call me Dice. I hate Candice. And between you and me—” she leaned in with one hand to her mouth as though passing along some great secret “—I only qualified on a squad invite. And not even *his*.” She pointed through her palm to Lennon, who *actually* rolled his eyes this time.

“You *know* Dent and the colonel would have thrown me through a wall if I’d invited you onto *my* team,” the Lasher snorted. “That’d be blatant favoritism. And I knew you’d be fine. If Ivanov or Esku didn’t pull you onto their squads, I would have punched them.”

Dice looked at Lennon flatly. “And *that’s* not favoritism?”

“Different kind. That’s allowed.”

“How convenient for you.”

Viv was, for a moment, reminded of Rei and Aria as the pair began to bicker good-naturedly in front of her, but the thought only brought her back to the reason she was standing there in the West Center in the first place.

“Sorry,” she said quickly, looking to Dice as she cut across the couple’s banter. “Did you say ‘another one’? Have you seen anyone else from my group today?”

“Hmm?” the girl asked like she didn’t follow. Then she brightened, catching on. “Oh! Yeah! The white-haired one. Ward, right? He was walking in when I was heading back from the bathroom. Were you two not meeting up? I just assumed.”

A touch of relief—flavored with just the smallest hint of pride—had Viv letting out a huff. “We are, he just doesn’t know it. Can you tell me which way he went? Do you know if he’s still here?”

“He was headed towards the stairs when I saw him. That was a couple hours ago, though, so I don’t know if he’s still here...”

“He is.”

Viv and Lennon said it together, and the Lasher offered her a smirk as he continued.

“He is. That guy’s got a pigheaded streak wider than Astra-3.”

“More like the entire star system,” Viv corrected, starting to turn away from the pair of them with a wave to Dice. “Thanks. At least there’s a silver lining to him being recognized on sight, now.”

“Sure thing,” Dice answered with another smile, obviously pleased to have been able to help. “Although that kid’s been pretty noticeable from day one, not gonna lie...”

“Fair enough,” Viv answered with a laugh.

Before she could step away, though, Lennon fixed her with another of his sharp looks.

“Arada. Keep me apprised, if I can help. Knowing Ward, if he’s avoiding you lot... There’s a good reason. Or at least what he *thinks* is a good reason.”

Viv grimaced, but nodded. “Yeah... That’s what I thought too. Will do.”

Then she was off, jogging now as she left the two third-years behind, making once again for the holo-sign that indicated the stairwell at the back of the building.

True to his nature, Rei didn’t make himself easy to find even after Dice’s help. Viv almost didn’t bother searching the second floor, but thought better of it when she imagined missing him by coincidence if he happened to decide lunch wasn’t worth skipping. As suspected, though, he wasn’t there, and it was a couple minutes later that she stepped onto the third-floor landing and immediately made out the distant thuds and grunts of what sounded like a single person in intense combat. Following the sounds, Viv found herself in the very back corner of the training center, facing another opaque wall. Through it, she could just barely see the flash and pulse of dark blue light, the lines of familiar vysetrium all that hinted at the figure inside.

For safety reasons, while the students who booked the training rooms could block out the chambers for privacy, they couldn’t lock the doors, so it was with nothing more than a glance over her shoulder to see if anyone else had happened to join her on the otherwise empty third floor that Viv slipped inside without a sound. Sure enough, there was Rei, his back to the room entrance, Shido’s innate Brawler Mode called around his arms, legs, and face as he fought alone on a raised, sterile white floor that only hinted at the outline of the hexagonal pillars that made up every variation of the Neutral Zone.

Well... Almost alone.

Viv held back an impressed whistle as she crossed her arms and leaned up against the inside of the smart-glass door, catching sight of the solid grey form of Rei’s sparring partner. The figure was female, but her expression was as blank as her lack of color, the only details across her entire body forming as the mock outline of a Galens combat suit and the digits on her back that spelled out “B0” Viv only caught when the solid projection whipped a spinning front kick at Rei’s chest.

B0? Viv thought as she watched her friend slam the offending leg aside with a parrying arm before countering with a flurry of blows with Shido's claws. *That's brave even for him...*

Which, she decided at once, didn't bode well...

Viv forced herself to wait, though, forced herself not to call out to Rei as he fought. The B0 figure was unarmored, so their back-and-forth was pretty linear for about 30 seconds longer, the pair of them slipping up and down the field as they each gave as good as they got. That was impressive enough even with the sparring dummy not having a weapon, because Viv was pretty sure Rei's own specs couldn't have actually averaged higher than C2 or C3 by now. As it was he was obviously having to focus with all his might, having to zero in on his opponent's every move, drowning out all other distraction.

Then again, Viv suspected drowning everything else out was exactly the point...

It also ended up being the reason for Rei's abrupt and brutal loss, the moment he finally caught sight of her.

After dipping and dodging through a series of quick jabs that had been aimed at his face and shoulders, Rei dropped to kick at the B0's ankles with a sweeping leg. She leapt back deftly, but immediately snapped forward again, bringing a diving punch downward at Rei that was probably backed by enough force to shatter the floor if it connected. Capitalizing on his Speed, though, Rei planted both feet again and launched himself into a low roll by the woman, coming up again behind her with hands up, ready to take whatever the hologram would throw at him next.

That, of course, was when he saw Viv, and the obvious surprise in his eyes—the only part of his face exposed between the metal-plated band around his forehead and the half-mask that covered his nose and mouth—was enough to have her grin and start to lift a hand in greeting.

She hadn't even gotten it all the way up when the B0 took advantage of Rei's unfortunate moment of diversion to rush him like a cannonball, a flying knee catching him so hard in the gut that Viv winced as she heard the impact of it.

WHAM!

The force of the blow—hitting him full-on since he hadn't even had the presence of mind to throw up a block—sent Rei rocketing backwards so hard that gravity hadn't quite taken hold of him by the time he slammed into the invisible barrier that marked the edge of the training field. There was an ugly *thud* of flesh and steel hitting solidified light, coupled with a brief, rippling disruption in the hologram, and for a second his impetus had Rei sticking to the flickering wall like a limp starfish.

Then, slowly peeling off the hologram with an “Urghh...”, he tumbled to the floor to hug at his gut and gasp for air as the Arena made the expected announcement.

“Fatal Damage Accrued.”

Immediately the B0 sparring partner froze, then turned and started walking back to the center of the field, taking up a passive position there where she would wait for additional instruction. Feeling a little bad, Viv pushed herself off the door and started walking around the white edge of the field, the solid-form simulation of the floor raised a yard off the ground. Reaching Rei in brief order, she stood outside the wall, over his curled form for a few seconds, watching his continued fight to reclaim the breath the finishing blow had very obviously stolen from him.

“If I could give some unsolicited, *super* high-level feedback, bud... *Not* getting hit is a *really* good strategy.”

Rei's answer only came as a single wheezing laugh, which had Viv feeling a drop of relief. Whatever had happened, it wasn't enough to blacken the boy's mood *completely*.

The again, she was pretty sure Rei could have had the building collapse on him and still manage to laugh it off most days...

It was another 10 seconds or so before Shido and its neuroline finally managed to help him get control of what had to have been a spasming diaphragm, then another 15 before Rei was able to push himself up onto his knees. He didn't look around at her, though, and Viv watched as he took a few more slow breaths, eyes closed before finally speaking.

“Recall.”

In a blur Shido vanished from around his scarred limbs, condensing into the familiar loops of the white-and-black CAD bands around his wrists, blue vysetrium gems glimmering with light. At the same time, Rei must have canceled the field projection, because the transparent Neutral Zone he'd been fighting in began to depixelate, lowering him the 3 feet down to the black projected plating that was exposed, and the hologram steadily faded. Only after he touched down on the actual floor of the room did Rei finally climb to his feet, turning to Viv at last, red in the face from exertion.

“How'd you find me?”

Viv smirked. “Seriously?”

Rei only stared back, and after a second she sighed, then summarized in quick succession.

“Mystery meeting with Administration. Likelihood of it going sideways: non-zero. You not showing up at breakfast: either it went long, or it went sideways. You not showing up *and* not letting even *Aria* know what was going on: it went sideways, and probably badly.” Viv lifted her hands to indicate the training chamber. “You probably wanted to vent, and you probably wanted to do it alone. That means a fight, and that means *not* East Center. So... voila.”

Rei snorted. “You're a pain in the ass, you know that?”

“Yeah, but at least I'm cute.”

“Is that what your parents tell you?”

Viv grinned.

Then, though, she felt the smile tense on her face as she looked him up and down.

Aside from the flush of effort that still lingered in his cheeks and neck, Rei was drenched in sweat. His white hair—long enough again now that it needed to be tied into a ponytail behind his head—was sticking to his ears and forehead where strands had slipped out. What was more, there were pressure lines across his nose, arms, and legs where Shido’s presence had pushed into his skin, which—given the surgically-perfect fit of the CADs—only happened with *extended* exposure.

“You’ve been here a while, huh?” Viv asked at last, eyeing in particular the redness over her friend’s knuckles, where hitting whatever multitude of enemies he’d thrown himself at had even left long-formed calluses a little bloody.

Rei hesitated, then nodded, looking away from her.

“How long?”

“...What time is it?”

“Noonish.”

“... Little under three hours?”

That caught Viv by surprise.

“Since 0900? Seriously? How long were you at Administration for?”

“Half hour. If that.”

As confused as she was worried, now, Viv stared at Rei. “Half an hour? We thought you’d gotten stuck there.”

Rei shook his head, lifting a hand so he, too, could take in his raw knuckles. “Nope. In and out.”

Viv waited for more, but the silence only stretched on. It lasted so long, in fact, that her concern started to deepen by the second. This was... weird. Really weird. Rei had always carried his own problems, sure, but even when he’d been at his lowest he’d

been energized, been loud and proud and ready to move forward. Viv had seen him carted in *and* out of major surgeries with a thumbs up, had seen him bullied and beaten and bloodied, only to rise above it all. He'd weathered the abuses of Dyrk Reese and his puppets for half a year, and eventually given them all the middle finger by coming out of his last Intra-School fight standing over Logan's prone form.

But now... Now, something was missing.

Now it was like some little piece of the light that had always made Rei shine had dimmed inside of him...

"Rei... What the hell happened?" Viv finally asked quietly.

For a long few seconds he didn't answer, still studying the weeping skin of his knuckles. He seemed to be contemplating, seemed to be debating how best to say what he wanted to, or maybe *if* he wanted to say anything at all.

"I'm... not really sure," he got out after a bit. "Honestly, that's the only real truth I can give you..."

Viv narrowed her eyes at that. "Oookay... Well that's not gonna fly. I sent Aria and the others off on a wild goose chase because we didn't hear from you. Even Lo—even *Grant's* checking the Hospital to make sure you didn't slip and break your neck on the ice or something. We were worried."

"Yeah... I'm sorry." Rei was quicker with a response this time, and he finally dropped his hand to look back at her, expression a little pained. "I should have said something, I just..." He trailed off again, and Viv, watching him carefully, suddenly realized what was so out of place.

Rei looked... lost.

For as long as she'd known him, for as many hoops as he'd had to jump through and hurdles he'd had to clear, Rei had *never*—not *once*—looked lost.

Viv was in front of Rei in a heartbeat, both hands on his shoulders. With all her Strength she pushed him down, dropping too even as his legs—not expecting the

pressure—gave under him as he let out a “Woah!” of surprise. In an instant they were seated in front of each other at the edge of the training field, Viv not letting go of him as the wind they could still hear outside echoed dimly in the expansive emptiness of the chamber.

“Reidon Ward, you’re going to sit there, and you’re going to tell me what’s going on.” She glared at him intently, hoping to convey that she meant every word. “*Exactly* what’s going on, you hear? No lies, no beating around the bush. You don’t get to leave until you do.”

“Oh yeah?” Rei countered, trying and failing at a laugh. “You said it’s noon? We’ve got training in an hour. Maybe I’ll just sit here in silence until we have to go.”

“Then we’re both getting brigged for missing team training, and Aria will kick your teeth in herself when she finds out why,” Viv answered promptly, finally dropping her hands from his shoulders to sit up straight and cross her arms in resolution. “Like I said, you’re not leaving until you tell me what’s going on.”

Rei grew serious, at that. “You’re one to talk. Weren’t you just saying this morning there are some things best left alone?”

“Sure.” Viv was already ready for this argument. “But my problems I can carry around without vanishing for hours only to turn up looking like my soul got sucked out of my ears.”

“That’s a bit dramatic...”

“*Dude...* You look like you could practically play an extra in one of those old zombie movies...”

Rei tried one final time to deflect.

“Fine, but if I talk about it, *you* have to tell me what going on with you and Gr—”

“Not a chance,” Viv cut him off. “Teenage drama does not trump whatever the hell is going on with you. Now... *Spill.*”

Another silence, this time with Rei spent staring at her, partly in surprise, partly in disbelief. Eventually, though, he seemed to understand that Viv wasn't going to let go of this bone, so he settled down slowly, frowning at her as he did.

Only when she'd stared him down in silence for another solid 10 seconds more did he finally open his mouth.

"What if I don't have anything to tell you?"

"You obviously do."

"No, I mean... What if I don't have anything *true* to tell you? What if I don't know *what's* true?"

"What do you mean?"

Rei made a face. "That *is* what I mean: I'm not sure. I don't actually know." He looked to be chewing on his words again, but the pause was brief this time before he spoke in a slow, uncertain tone. "I think someone might be messing with me... And if they're not, well... That might be a lot worse."

Viv relaxed a little, then, seeing the walls beginning to come down a little.

"Rei..." she started more gently this time. "You have to start from the top. I'm not following... What happened at Administration?"

Rei nodded unsteadily, looking away again. "Yeah... Yeah... Of course... It's just... It's a lot, Viv..."

"We've handled wor—"

"No. If I'm right... we definitely haven't."

Viv tensed at the words. Rei had S-Ranked CAD Growth. *S*-Ranked. The only cadet in the history of the ISCM to be granted an S-Ranked spec on assignment in *any* category, much less in *Growth*. And Viv had been the first person he'd told.

And yet *that* had taken less to get out of him than this...

"Rei... Just tell me what's go—"

Once more, though, Rei interrupted her, but this time it was by meeting her eyes again, NOED alive with blue light flashing script across his grey irises.

There was *ding* in the corner of her own frame, and Viv saw that he'd sent her something. With a mix of fear and anticipation she selected the alert at once to find a single document, opening it even before she'd finished reading the title of the file out loud.

“Offer of Sponsorship by the Kamiya C—?”

Then, though, the wall of text was scrolling upwards before her eyes, and Viv couldn't believe what she was seeing.

“Oh... Oh holy, *holy* shit...”

Her muttered curse didn't even begin to address her astonishment. She knew what this was, had known what it was the moment her brain had registered the name of the doc. Now, though, seeing the lines on lines of legalese flow by in a steady stream, the impact of it rocked her.

A sponsorship offer? A *sponsorship*??

“For a *first-year*??” she demanded aloud.

“Yeah...” Rei answered her slowly. “Yeah... My thoughts exactly.”

“Rei, this is *insane!*” Viv finally looked through the contract at him again, vision partially obscured even as the text went out of focus. “*Insane!* You got an offer! As a *first-year!* How does that even happen?? Who is this from??” Bringing the contract forward again she snapped to the top of the text with a quick command. “The ‘Kamiya Corporation’? Who even is that? I've never heard of them!”

“Me neither,” Rei assured her, watching Viv steadily. “At least not before this morning. That's not even half of it, though, Viv. Look at how much they're offering...”

“Oh man...” Viv hissed again, starting to scroll through once more in search of the “Compensation” clause header she'd thought she'd seen somewhere. “Don't tell me it's—”

Then she froze, finding the number.

“Yeah...” Rei acknowledged her silent astonishment. “Yeah... How ’bout that?”

Viv had no words for a long time, staring at the number—the *million credit* number—in utter shock. She wasn’t as familiar as Rei was when it came to the details of SCTs—who *was* really?—but she knew enough to be aware that the promised value floating there before her wasn’t just high.

It was *staggeringly* so.

“What the...?” she breathed, forcing herself to tear her eyes from the number, reading more carefully now through the other, smaller paragraphs underneath it, her shock only increasing with every sentence.

The promised credits weren’t the only incredible aspect of the offer, it transpired. Kamiya—whoever they were—were promising Rei things Viv doubted a lot of Users got to see in writing before they became *System*-level competitors at least, and maybe even higher. There were guarantees of housing as needed, both permanent residency for the duration of the contract and temporary for competitions. Expense coverage was promised—because Rei would *obviously* be needing more than a million credits a year, why not?—as well as access to rehab and medical facilities stated to outclass even the ISCM’s, in case of any potential injury recovery. There was language about marketing deals, promotional events, even *merchandise* lines??

The big one, though, the *really* big one was—

“Trainers,” Viv whispered, reading a clause that had been entirely bolded, as though the drafter of the contract had known this would be an area of particular interest. “Rei, there are guarantees in here about getting you private trainers. A- and S-Class. They’re even promising to find Atypicals...”

“Yeah... I know... I read it all, on the way over here. Twice.”

“But...” Viv was having trouble finding the words to voice her disbelief even as she continued to read. “But *why*? I mean I get it, to a degree. It’s pretty obvious you’ve

got something special going on, but this is *nuts*. That's way more than any *pro* Sectional-level fighter I know of makes, and promising *S-Ranked* trainers?? My parents looked into that when they hired my instructors over the summer, and it was *so* expensive."

"It would cost more than the compensation they're offering," Rei said with a nod. "Probably a couple times more, if they hired for any kind of extended period."

"For a *first-year*??"

"Yeah... That was what made me suspicious..."

At last, at long last, Viv's managed to pull her focus from the contract again to take in her best friend. He hadn't looked away again, but that lack of light was more obvious than ever, a sort of hollowness behind Rei's eyes that was more alarming than anything else he'd shown her thus far. It had Viv closing out of the text immediately, studying him intently as she asked the obvious question.

"Suspicious about... what?"

Rei, though, hesitated again. Viv let him take his pause, this time, guessing they'd finally gotten to whatever it was that had her friend secluding himself in the furthest corner of campus that would still let him punch something. The contract was *insane*, sure, but Viv didn't for a second think the unprecedented nature of it was enough to warrant this strange theft of his usual energy. *He* was unprecedented, after all, as was his CAD. Someone was bound to have noticed eventually, right?

And yet...

"Do you know what my name means, Viv?"

Viv blinked at that, not having expected this particular question. It was especially strange given she was sure Rei already knew the answer.

"... Yeah?" she answered tentatively. "Of course? It's an identifier. Marks you as a 'ward of the state'. Or it did before you emancipated yourself and got into Grandcr—"

“No,” Rei interrupted with a dark laugh. “Not my last name. My *first* name. Do you know what my *first* name means?”

“Oh...” If anything, this was even more confusing. “I think you explained it to me, once. Something about an old god from Earth, or something...?”

Rei nodded. “Yeah. Pretty much. ‘Raijin’, or ‘Raiden’. Ancient Japanese god of lighting, thunder, and storms.”

“Oookay...?” Viv intoned, not sure what she was supposed to make of this.

“And how about ‘Shido’? Do you know what *that* means?”

Abruptly, Viv started to see where Rei was going, the pieces clicking together.

“No,” she answered after a second. “But I’m going to assume it’s something in Japanese...”

“You got it. ‘Seed’. ‘Shido’ means ‘seed’...”

Ordinary Viv might have been surprised that she hadn’t been aware of this, but any such considerations were swept away as her theory solidified.

“And let me guess... ‘Kamiya’ is Japanese too, isn’t it...?”

“Full marks. Nice job. I don’t even think the colonel or Maddison Kent put that together.”

Viv stared at Rei, forcing herself to skate by the fact that both Rama Guest *and* his chief assistant had apparently sat in on the meeting. Alarm was the first thing that registered, shifting quickly into worry, then disbelief.

Then, though, came the *anger*.

“No. No way. There’s no way. It’s got to be a coincidence.”

Rei shook his head. “That’s what I thought, too. At first.”

“At first?!” Viv demanded, feeling the heat of building fury start to burn in her gut. “What do you mean, ‘at first’?! Rei, if you’re saying what I think you’re saying...!”

She didn’t finish the sentence, almost afraid to voice the words out loud. She understood, now. She understood what it was that had robbed Rei of his light, that had

sent him into a spiral that he was obviously having trouble escaping. There was only one thing she could ever *imagine* that might shake Reidon Ward—the *very* aptly-called ‘Iron Prince of Galens’, even if he’d never admit it—to his core so thoroughly.

“No way...” she hissed again, feeling the anger pulse.

“Way,” Rei answered simply, his NOED alive again. “Kamiya’s not a known name way out here away from Sol, but it’s big. *Really* big. Took me all of five seconds to pull it up on the feeds. About the same to find the leadership team profiles. They’re nice enough to be pretty transparent about their head honchos.”

There was another ping to her frame, and this time Viv opened up the notification to find a feed link. Following it, she found herself looking at a brief list of biographies, complete with modest, circular headshots of what were obviously the executives of the Kamiya Corporation. There were a good eight or so just in her frame now, with more half-visible to be scrolled through at the bottom of the page, but Viv didn’t have to look past the very first face and name before every muscle in her body stiffened.

Dr. Kamiya Hiroto, the profile read, listing the man as the CEO and president of the Corporation. There was a sparing of other information as well set in a brief profile, but it was the *image* of the man that Viv couldn’t look away from. Kamiya Hiroto was handsome for his age—some sixty or seventy years old, by the looks of his face—but there was something about the fall of his straight, white-streaked black hair and the angle of his jaw. His nose and mouth were different, as was the more-distinct slant of his eyes, but those features were all cast aside in favor of one thing.

“Grey...” Viv managed to get out. “Rei...”

“Yeah...” Rei answered quietly. “You’ve said it yourself, haven’t you? That I’m not exactly ‘all-natural’, just like the rest of you.” He pointed at his face, indicating his own eyes.

His own *slate-grey* eyes, whose shade could have been plucked from the picture of Kamiya Hiroto Viv still had floating before her.

“Pretty sure my family has finally decided to acknowledge I exist, Viv...”

CHAPTER 8

“Control. Control is a factor too often neglected when it comes to assessing the effectiveness of a soldier, much less a User specifically. Without control—without the ability to manage yourself, your strengths, your emotions—what are you left with? What do you become?”

I’ll give you the answer... You become dangerous.”

-Captain Elean Samsus

Combat Theory Department Head at the Galens Institute

Lecture on squad coordination and communication

“Arada! Ward! You’re late!”

Lieutenant Catori Imala’s annoyed bark nearly brought Rei and Viv up short as they bolted barefooted onto the main floor of the Arena together, already breathless from having risked booking it at a full sprint from West Center all the way to the middle of campus, then getting Viv changed in a hurry. The Phalanx sub-instructor—a tall, narrow-shouldered woman with a tanned complexion and pale, orangish hair that hung in a tight braid down to her waist—had caught sight of them the moment they’d run up the ramp and through the double doors that were one of the many entrances that led onto the field from the underworks, and her shout had the attention of everyone present turning on them.

Most unfortunately, this included Valera Dent’s, the chief combat instructor looking like she’d been in the middle of lecturing the other 16 squad members only to have the conversation interrupted by the two’s tardy arrival.

Bracing himself for a thorough berating, Rei didn’t look at Viv as they closed the gap a little slower now, working just as hard not to meet Aria or Catcher’s gazes as they

did Dent's or Imala's. When they were within the circle of waiting cadets, they finally pulled up into a salute.

"Reporting for training, ma'am," Rei addressed Dent quickly, not trusting Viv to keep her tone level if she'd spoken first. "Apologies for running late."

"Apologies don't cut it, *cadet*." Imala was the one to answer, stare fierce as she stepped by the captain to stand before them, cutting a frightening figure in her red-on-white combat suit. "You better have a *damn* good reason for why you almost left your teammates hanging dry for the first match, or you're both going to be running laps around this field until your feet are—"

"Lieutenant, I've been informed Ward may have special circumstances. Take over the discussion for me, if you please."

If Imala was surprised by Dent's calmer interruption, the A9 Phalanx didn't show it. Instead she spun to give the older woman her own brief salute, then moved forward smartly to pick up what sounded like a lecture on some minor reoccurring issues the different squads had been demonstrating.

As she did, Dent turned and moved smoothly by Rei and Viv, motioning them to follow her. Complying, the two fell in step behind the tall woman until she faced them a dozen yards from the others, eyes steady over the black line of her prosthetic lower face.

"I understand you had an interesting meeting this morning, Ward. Is that correct?"

The question came quietly despite their distance from Imala and the rest of the first-years, the Bishop obviously not wanting anyone else to overhear. It said something about her awareness of his and Viv's relationship, too, given she hadn't bothered to separate them. It was one of the many reasons he wasn't remotely surprised the woman had clearly been read in on the situation.

Or at least what aspects of the situation Galens was aware of.

“Yes, ma’am,” he answered simply, not trusting *himself* to keep an even tone, either, if he’d elaborated.

Dent nodded, the gold brim of her black cap glinting in the Arena’s lights. “And is that the reason for your tardiness?”

Rei hesitated, unsure of how best to answer this question. In the end, he and Viv *had* actually ended up skipping lunch, but that was fine. Neither of them harbored much of an appetite after the rest of their pre-training hour was spent half with Rei talking his best friend off from marching out to light the Administration building on fire, half with both of them trying to disprove his theory about the Kamiya Corporation’s intentions and—more distressingly—motivations. In the end, they’d done just the opposite, with Rei having grown more and more convinced of his suspicions until he’d realized they’d completely lost track of time and flown from the West Center for the Arena, praying that the wind and snow would discourage any patrolling officers from shouting after them to slow down.

They’d also, in the end, completely failed to message either Aria or Catcher, which Rei suspected was why he thought he could feel at least one pair of eyes—probably emerald-green, if he had to guess—staring daggers at his back.

“We—I lost track of time discussing the meeting, ma’am.” He decided sticking as close to the truth as he dared was the best answer to Dent’s question, in the end. “It was... a lot. Viv was helping me get a handle on it. It’s my fault we’re late. I should have kept an eye on the clock.”

Dent looked to Viv, at this.

“That so, Arada?”

In the corner of his vision, Rei saw Viv jaw clench as she offered a very stiff “It’s both our fault, ma’am” through half-gritted teeth.

It was strange, in a way. Rei had left Administration that morning feeling... empty. The moment he’d been excused after the “conversation” with Rama Guest—which had

largely amounted to a string of subtle threats on Rei's life, limb, and future in the ISCM if he so much as harmed a *hair* on Aria's head—he'd chased down his suspicions about Kamiya, and found his evidence without much effort. It had stolen something from him, in that moment. Rei wasn't sure how—though maybe he understood *why* a little better—but looking into the still face of Kamiya Hiroto and seeing what could have been his own eyes staring back at him had stolen something. He'd been left hollow, the emptiness only filled by an anger he hadn't felt in a long, long time. Years, even. It had demanded an outlet, demanded an exodus. His fight with training simulations had helped a little, to that extent.

But not half as much as Viv's lingering fury on his behalf, her wrath palpable even now, standing there with the Iron Bishop herself staring them both down.

Dent, too, seemed to sense something in Viv's hard tone, because the captain was suddenly studying the girl a bit more carefully. After a moment she looked back to Rei, and he could have sworn the woman was about to ask him something, her expression briefly slipping into what might almost have been genuine concern.

The calm, intent mask of the chief combat instructor of the Galens Institute was back up as quickly as it had gone, though, and Dent lifted one black-gloved hand to point towards the edge of the Arena floor.

"I'll allow some leniency given the circumstances, but you're still not excused for nearly leaving your squamates in a bad spot. You two *are* going to run laps around the Wargames field until your first fight is up, and you're going to hold a C0 Speed pace at minimum. We're practicing Team Battles this afternoon, so I'll keep Laurent and the rest of your squad back from the first round. Is that understood?"

"Yes ma'am!" Rei and Viv answered together. It was definitely a forgiving punishment by any account. Aside from the fact that the captain would have been well within her right to brig the pair of them for a night, they shared speed specs above C5,

if equally lagging Endurance. A C0 pace for what was likely to be 15 to 20 minutes would be uncomfortable, but it wouldn't leave them *totally* spent for their first match.

“Good. Get to it. And if you're late again I *will* ensure that Hadish Barnes hosts the both of you for an overnight stay. *Without* training privileges.”

With another mirrored acknowledgement, they took off at once, Rei experiencing a twinge of guilt at the relief he felt that he wouldn't have to face the others just yet. Sure enough, as they reached the open 5-yard-wide track that encircled every Arena and started to speed up—in silence despite running side-by-side, as was mandated for such disciplinary action—he didn't miss not only Aria and Catcher's eyes following them around the closest edge of the field, but Cashe and Logan's almost as intently.

Yeah... He definitely still needed a minute to prep for *that* face to face...

In the end, Rei suspected Dent—maybe in full awareness of the fact, knowing the captain—had done him and Viv a favor. While their talk in the West Center definitely got him feeling better than he had when his hollow rage convinced him to call up a B0 training partner to spar with—a combat level that was yet a bit beyond his ability—the fury had still very much been there as the two of them bolted for the Arena. He suspected it would be there for some time, too, but as they ran in silence—the wind rushing by as the C0 pace carried them around the Arena at a speed the Olympic sprinters of centuries past would have fainted to see—Rei got the chance to breathe. He was forced back into the moment, forced back into the present. He'd been lost, for a second there. He'd been lost right up until Viv had shoved him down and all-but-headbutted him into telling her what was going on. He wasn't completely back, yet, sure, but he wasn't gone either, and with every loop around the field Rei was reminded of where he was, and why he was there.

Why he was there...

With a quick series of eye commands, Rei pulled up a specification request, feeling his resolution solidify as Shido's stats scripted out across his vision in rapid lines.

Specifications Request acknowledged.

...

Combat Assistance Device: Shido. User identification... Accepted.

Type: A-TYPE

Rank: C6

...

Identifying Preferred Mode.

Preferred Mode identified as: BRAWLER

...

User Attributes:

- Strength: C1

- Endurance: C0

- Speed: C6

- Cognition: C6

...

CAD Specifications:

- Offense: C3

- Defense: C1

- Growth: S

...

Display Additional Modes?

YES/NO

Not for the first time Rei's eyes lingered on these final two lines of the request. His stomach had finally stopped doing a flip every time he read them or the "*Identifying Preferred Mode*" code higher up, but he still wasn't used to seeing any of it. They were a

new addition to the script, one he was pretty sure was as unique to him as Type Shift itself, which had Rei doubting he would ever *completely* get accustomed to the presence of the words.

Still, it wasn't his Ability he was interested in the moment. At least not entirely.

His Offense was up to C3 since the weekend, and Strength had just ticked up to C1 after his 2-plus hours of training against the simulations that morning. While Rei's meteoric growth had certainly slowed down ever since his specs had all broken into the Cs, the fact that he could still generally rely on three or four of them ranking up every week was incredible, and that was putting it *very* mildly. While his average stats *were* still lower than his overall C6 CAD level thanks to his Growth, he was on pace to break away from Aria before Sectionals and officially become the highest-ranked of the freshmen cadets at Galens. The first—and only—time the two of them had faced off on an official field had been when Rei had excitedly—or stupidly, depending on who you asked—offered himself up as a partner for the Commencement exposition match, where he'd promptly gotten himself skewered for his trouble. He'd been an E-Ranked nothing then, though, all those months ago. The next time they went head to head—which was very likely sooner than either of them had admitted to themselves yet, given the circumstances—they would be *much* more evenly matched.

And Rei knew he had *earned* this strength. Even if he might never admit it out loud, with literal blood and sweat—and the endless help of friends who were too good for him—he had *earned* it. F8 to C6, he had risen since assignment.

By the end of Sectionals, Rei knew there was a chance he was going to have clawed his way three full tiers up from the bottom of the barrel to a place very few first-year Users were ever fortunate enough to see...

Rei's jaw clenched at the thought, and he closed the spec request with a blink before dropping his head and picking up speed a little, pushing his pace to C1, then C2, earning himself a grunt of annoyance from Viv as she moved to match him. The slap

of their bare feet over the cool metal was soon a rapid-fire song, but Rei barely heard it, too focused was he on his one conclusion.

Whatever happened, whatever came of the next days and weeks, he wasn't about to let "Kamiya"—and whatever that name might mean to him beyond just the title of a company—be anything more than just another reason to push himself further and faster than he had yesterday.

After 5 minutes of running and with their breath finally starting to come harder, Rei and Viv heard the first match of the afternoon get announced throughout the Arena, and taking a loop along the south end of the floor the two of them saw a variation of "Cliffs" rise into being above the 30-yard diameter of the north Team Battle area. Not 30 seconds later the empty expanse of the stands was filled with the sounds of fighting and shouts of coordination happening as Vademe's and Martin's teams went head to head in an Elimination bout, the 6v6 fight escalating rapidly into an all-out brawl across the simulation of stone and dust and mountain vegetation. It wasn't long, in fact, before the winner was announced as Vademe's squad—who'd been heralding the Red Team colors—and the zone dissipated to bring both the victors and their fallen opponents back to the ground. Rei and Viv watched more intently, now, while the two squads converged on the spot where Aria, Catcher, Cashe, and Logan had been looking on, with Dent and Imala descending from observation to give feedback.

Then, after nearly 20 minutes of running and the burn *very* real in both their legs, the Lieutenant's blessed shout finally reached them.

"Arada! Ward! Get over here! You're up!"

Neither of them being dumb enough to slow down, Rei and Viv shifted course and were in front of Imala and Dent again in barely more than a heartbeat, standing beside Aria and the others, who collectively only cast one or two sidelong glances their way. Still not meeting anyone's eyes, though, the pair of them waited at ease expectantly.

“Cadets, enter the field. We’re going to give Vademe’s group a bit to recoup, then they’ll join you. I want to see every effort, even if a couple of you are worn out.” Imala’s eyes were as sharp as knives as she glared at Rei and Viv pointedly, who both had the sense not to do more than join the other four in shouting a collective “Yes, ma’am!” before dispersing towards the Team Battle zone.

The moment they crossed the silver line that marked the edge of it—spreading out a bit as they headed for the far end of the 30-yard circle and the scattered line of six distinct starting rings waiting for them there—a notification popped up across Rei’s frame, bright in the red text that only displayed in combat circumstances.

Team communications established.

Though he’d expected it, Rei couldn’t help but wince as Aria’s voice—as concerned as it was angry—immediately rang clear over his NOED.

“I’m assuming I don’t need to *ask* for an explanation.”

Rei almost sighed as they crossed the halfway mark of the field.

“We’ll talk about it later,” he answered, knowing Shido would pick up the words even when it wasn’t called. “We should just focus on the match right now.”

Unsurprisingly, that didn’t go over so well.

“Oh no you don’t. You skip breakfast, go missing for the better part of the morning without a word, then Viv sends us all off looking for you only to go AWOL too. An hour later here you both are, together *and* late. Again: I’m assuming *I don’t need to ask for an explanation.*”

Rei *did* sigh this time, making sure to bring two fingers up to press to the spot where his neuro-optic was implanted as he did.

“Muting yourself won’t help, Rei. I’m *looking* at you.”

Wincing again, Rei glanced to his left sheepishly. Sure enough Aria was glaring lightning at him from a few yards away, making for her usual flanking position that was the southmost of the starting circles. They had a set order to their initial places for Team Battle, having quickly deduced how best to take advantage of their various capabilities within a few days of the first week of training. While Aria and Cashe held their edges—their spears’ reaches provide the best opening defense for most object-based formats—Viv and Grant comprised the center to form an ideal piercing point of speed *and* power if they needed to rush for Elimination or any capture-themed fight. That left Rei and Catcher—the most versatile of the six of them—to take up the spots between Aria and Viv and Cashe and Grant respectively, providing adaptable support for whoever needed it.

It was unfortunate when that all went out the window for the Wargames matches that often scattered them across a broader map, but they had to start somewhere.

“Aria, I *promise* we’ll talk about it later,” Rei swore, finally meeting the girl’s fiery gaze in the hopes that she would see that he genuinely meant every word of it. “I promise. But now’s *not* the time.”

“Dude, you get dragged off to a mystery meeting with who-knows-who, then go totally radio silent on us.” Catcher, for once, sounded almost as angry as Aria. “Can you blame us for being a *little* peeved?”

“Both of you, shut up.”

The harsh words came hard just as they reached their starting points, and each of them—include Cashe and Grant—turned inward to blink with some alarm at Viv. She, for her part, had her eyes set across the empty field from them, having reached her circle first and whirled to set her feet and wait, arms crossed rigidly over her chest.

It was hard to tell, but Rei was pretty sure he could literally *see* Gemela’s twin bands shaking around her trembling wrists.

“...Viv?” Aria asked, her anger suddenly replaced by concern.

She didn't get an answer, however, and Rei's earlier appreciation for his best friend's empathetic fury suddenly turned into his own worry.

"Viv, take a breath..." he told her evenly. "It's not worth it."

Viv responded by turning slowly towards him, eyes wide with anger.

"Not worth—Are you *kidding me*, Rei?!"

"Guys, *what the hell is going on?!?*" Catcher's demand was wholly unsubtle now as he bent to look around Grant at the three of them.

"I said *shut up*, Catcher!" Viv snarled in answer, spinning on him without leaving her spot. "Rei said we'll talk about it later, so we'll—!"

"*All of you*. Shut. Up."

Grant's voice, a heavy, dark rumble, carried like a threat over the coms, and the boy's powerful presence as he turned black-red eyes on each of them over their heads in turn had everyone stopping short.

"You want to fight? Fine," he continued, his stare lingering on Viv in warning. "Do it. But how about *after* the match, and *after your* coms can't be overheard *by the instructors?*"

Rei started, and he heard Aria take in a quick gasp from his left as she, too, saw their stupidity. Sure enough, looking across the field again Rei found Lieutenant Imala staring at all six of them in silence, clearly having been waiting for them to make the realization. Behind her, Dent too was frowning in their direction, having half-turned away from Laquita Martin, who she seemed to have just been talking to.

"Are you all finished?" Imala snarled after they were finally quiet for a moment, ice-cold words ringing as clear through their NOEDs as they might had the tall woman been standing next to each of them. When no one was dumb enough to answer, she nodded slowly. "Good. Clearly you lot haven't gotten the message that your whole team is already on *very* thin ice thanks to Ward and Arada, so let me make it *crystal* clear for every one of you. If the captain or I hear another *peep* out of your squad that isn't related to this match, you'll be dismissed from today's training. You two in particular."

Even standing so far away, Rei could tell she was glaring between him and Viv again. “Understood?”

“Yes, ma’am!” the collective answer rang out at once, and Rei decided he would make sure that was the last time he got chewed out that day.

Without so much as acknowledging their agreement, Imala turned away again, and for a bit they all stood there silently. Viv, Catcher, and Grant kept staring sullenly forward as Cashe occasionally glanced nervously around at them all from the far end of the line, while Rei had to work himself not to look at Aria.

Fortunately, a message notification hit his frame just before he was about to cave.

Are you okay?

It was like magic. As he read the question, a weight lifted off Rei’s shoulders, some of the building tension in his back releasing. He was worried about Viv, still, but it seemed like her temper had cooled enough of Aria’s own irritation to have concern rise predominant again.

Thinking that responding by hand might push Imala’s buttons too much if she caught him, he took the extra time to answer in-frame.

Yeah, he spelled out with his eyes. I’ve got a handle on it. The meeting was with your uncle and some civilians. Corporate reps. Maddison Kent was there too.

The brief delay in answer told him Aria also wasn’t foolish enough to give them away by using the projected keyboards that would have been preferable in most any other situation.

Corporate reps?

I'll tell you later. You and Catcher both. Trust me, it's not something we should get into right now.

Rei, what happened?

Aria. Later. Please.

The delay in response was longer this time, and Rei finally gave in to glance around at her briefly. Aria didn't notice, too busy was she frowning into empty space, focus clearly on the conversation he could barely make out across her NOED. After a good few seconds, he saw her eyes start to move again, and only then did the message finally come.

But you're okay?

Rei wasn't sure why—maybe it was the insistence of the repeated question, or maybe that he just hadn't really registered what the words meant to him—but he felt a familiar emotion squeeze at his chest, reading the words again. He smiled. The first *real* smile he thought he'd managed to put on since before meeting Ueno Jasper's sharp eyes that morning.

Yes, he responded more firmly this time. Viv got me out of the rut. He paused, unsure of himself for a moment before adding: *Seeing you helped a lot, too. I'm sorry I worried you.*

He sent the message, and couldn't stop himself from watching and waiting. Sure enough, Aria's eyes snapped forward the moment she received it, only barely moving as she read his answer.

Then, like clockwork, she stiffened as her cheeks went a touch pink, snapping out of her frame to briefly shoot him a glare that somehow seemed all at once annoyed, embarrassed, and pleased.

Chuckling to himself, Rei turned his gaze forward again, indeed feeling much, *much* better than he might have thought he could have not an hour or so before.

It wasn't 5 minutes later that the Lieutenant's distant call had Vademe and Kay's group getting to their feet from where they'd been taking a well-deserved break on the cool steel of the projection plating just outside the Team Battle ring. Soon the half-dozen of them, too, were stepping onto the field, splitting off until they formed a mirrored line across the circle, all standing tall to face off with Rei and the others. Unlike them, Vademe's six hadn't yet settled on a specific starting formation, usually changing it up a little every time they fought, which had its own advantages. This time—perhaps in a bit of an echo to Aria and Cashe—Vademe and Kay had picked flanking positions, with Jiang, Ranjha, Tethers, and Phillips between them. Once they'd settled, the twelve first-years stood at the ready, Rei nodding politely to Vademe as he caught the Lancer's eye, thinking he saw Aria, Catcher, and Cashe do the same to some other member of the opposing team on either side of him. Grant, of course, didn't so much as twitch, and Rei couldn't pretend he was surprised when he stole a quick look to his left to see Viv staring across the projection plating with murder in her eyes.

Uh oh, he had just enough time to think, wondering if it was worth trying to get the girl's attention again to make another attempt at calming her down, only to be interrupted as the ground around them suddenly changed to a light, bluish hue, and several voices rang clear in his head as calls immediately started getting made.

"Volcanic Slopes?" Cashe asked in a rush from the far end of the line as the familiar sensation of being lifted from the floor took hold of them, the Arena bringing them up while it drew whatever field Dent and Imala had selected for them into steady being.

“No. Desert.”

It was Catcher who called it before they were even a yard in the air, the ground around them indeed turning to uneven sand under their still-bare feet. Rei agreed, but kept the coms deliberately clear, just like they’d practiced a hundred times before. He decided to trust that Viv wouldn’t do anything stupid. She could leash her temper, when she had to.

... Couldn’t she?

“Desert,” Aria confirmed, and at once started giving commands even as the field took form before them, rising rapidly before their eyes to swiftly hide Vademe and the others from view even as the stands faded into darkness. “Looks like a dune-heavy variation. Nighttime. I’ll call north or south as soon as we get a clear idea of obstacles. Catcher, you and Cashe take the lead and be ready to go on defense. Rei, Viv, and Grant will take middle, and I’ll watch our rear. We’ll adapt based on the scenario selection.”

There was a chorus of agreement from everyone but Viv, which didn’t make Rei feel any better. He grew more nervous even as they climbed higher, the interlocking plates of the Arena’s closed-off ceiling indeed disappearing into a dark emptiness of a brilliant night sky as the temperature around them plummeted. The field itself was plain, the sand reflecting a pale blue in the bright light of a single full moon hanging over the northern horizon they couldn’t see, the rising and falling appearance of stars above their heads marking the tops of towering dunes that would make mobility complicated.

“Field: Desert,” the Arena announced as anticipated.

“Come on, Viv...” Rei muttered to himself under his breath, low enough not to get picked up by their coms. “Come on...”

Their ascent finally halted, starting positions having shifted only slightly so that they found themselves in a deep valley between two steep, sandy slopes ahead and behind them. Rei looked around, making the deduction even as Aria's callout echoed his thoughts.

"South," she said simply. "Clearer path. Too much possible obstruction to the north."

Six bodies immediately shifted to the right, tense and ready.

The Arena didn't keep them waiting long.

"The Galens Institute: Red Team versus the Galens Institute: Blue Team." The clear voice spoke out of the dark. "Elimination Bout. Combatants... Call."

"Call," Rei and five other voices commanded, and the night was suddenly ablaze with crimson light.

Shido, just like each of his squadmates' other CADs, had adapted to their team-assigned colors. Instead of the familiar deep blue Rei was accustomed to, the vysetrium that lined his Brawler Mode claws and the armor plating of his arms, legs, and half-mask glowed a shifting red, the Stryon particles within the Device's crystalline vysetrium making the light swim and shift within. Before him, Aria's typical green was gone as well, and over his shoulder he knew each of the other four would be similarly matched. It was always strange to see, with Rei only just getting a little used to the change after months of Team Battle exposure they'd started in the second quarter of the school year, but the momentary adjustment was worth being able to tell the difference between friend and foe in nothing but a glance.

Devices, after all, cut down allies just as well as they did enemies when such unfortunate events became relevant.

On cue, more red script appeared in the top left corner of Rei's vision, starting off what would be his in-action combat log.

Field presence detected. CAD-call detected.

Reprioritizing all processing to combat functionalities.

"Elimination," Aria repeated in the bare seconds they had between announcements. "No orders. Stick together. You all know what to do."

Any other day, Rei would have agreed with her wholeheartedly.

As it was, though...

But then the Arena spoke again, and Rei could only hope against hope that he was worrying for no reason.

"Combatants... Fight."

The starting circles blinked out, and five of them started southward, intending to collapse as Aria had ordered. In a blaze, however, someone bolted by Rei at breakneck speed, lithe form leaving trails of red across his vision against the night.

He didn't need Catcher's curse, nor Aria's shout of alarm, to know who it had been.

"Oh shit!"

"Viv! No!"

Dammit, Rei thought before abandoning the formation himself, flying after the faint glow that was all that was left of his best friend, the girl having already turned a corner in the sandy valley they'd been aiming for.

"I'll try to catch her!" he shouted over the coms as he tore away from the others. "I'm the only one fast enough! Collapse on us when you can!"

“She’s going to get herself killed!” Catcher yelled after him.

As he ran, though, leaving the four of them in the dust in less than 2 seconds, Rei wasn’t so sure he agreed. He’d caught a glimpse of the look in Viv’s eyes as she ripped by, *just* caught a hint of the anger that blazed there...

If Catcher wanted to be worried about anyone, Vademe and the others might be more worth his thoughts, in that moment...

There were only two times in her life Viv could recall ever feeling this angry. As she ran, as she kicked up a spray of sand with every nimble step while the artificial red of Gemela’s glow cast weird shadows on the inclines of the dunes around her, she couldn’t help but think of those times, think about those moments. The first had been during her and Rei’s first year at Grandcrest Prep, a burning indignation fueled by her own mother and father’s dismissal of the boy who had quickly become her best friend, the only time she had ever hung up on her parents as she’d told them to get on board or not bother calling her again.

The second had been more recent, standing over Rei and looking down at his nearly-unrecognizable face, taking in a body so bruised and battered he could barely lift his head from the hospital bed to try to explain what happened.

They don’t get to do this, was all Viv could think, pushing her legs to even further speed despite them not having quite recovered from the disciplinary laps. *They shouldn’t get to do this!*

Her fury, though, had nowhere to go, no place by which to escape. Rei was no help. After their talk he’d mostly come back to himself, and Viv had watched as they’d done their punishment run in silence, witnessed as his unyielding spirit had worked its magic behind his grey eyes like it always did. She’d seen the change, as subtle as it was,

seen the conviction settle back into place, seen the light come back. It had made her feel a little better in the moment, but before long it had only infuriated her further.

What he'd taken back should never have been stolen. What he'd reclaimed should never have had to be chased down.

They don't get to do this!

The desert valley before her blurred oddly, and Viv blinked to clear her vision. She was seeing red, she knew that. She wasn't an idiot—no one at Galens, student, staff, or otherwise, was an idiot—so she knew she was seeing red. It didn't matter, though. Nothing mattered. Viv felt like a bomb was going off in her chest, felt like an eruption was building up between her lungs. Logan being an idiot. Imala yelling at them. Aria and Catcher not taking the damn hint. All of it added to the blossoming fire of *anger* that was all Viv felt, and she didn't care about the lingering shouts of her friends as she bolted away, nor the sound of someone who could only have been Rei himself giving chase barely 20 steps behind her.

She needed to let it out. She *needed* to find a way to let it all out, or it was going to swallow her whole.

Fortunately, the faintest hint of blue light ahead—barely teased around a corner in the valley some 5 or 6 yards from her—let her know she'd have her chance soon enough.

Without pausing Viv planted a foot to shift her angle of approach abruptly, pushing her Strength to its limits through the carbonized purple-and-yellow steel of Gemela's boots. The slope of the dune to her left was loose and steep, sure, but she took it at such a speed that her momentum was only barely cut as her metal-clad toes hammered deep into the incline with every step, finding their grip in the cold, harder packing beneath the unsteady top layers. Down to her right, now, the blue light was strengthening, assuring her that what she needed was indeed on the other side of the

dune she was sprinting up, her approach muffled by the sand. Viv's vision blurred again as she reached the apex, but she ignored it this time, too focused on what came next.

With a shove and grunt of effort, she leapt, clearing the top of the hill by 10 feet, soaring into the chill of the night as a new, frigid wind caught in her hair.

She didn't feel it. She didn't feel the thrill of the leap, nor the instinctive pitch of her gut as she crested, then started to fall the 30 feet or so earthward. She didn't even feel the elation she might have any other day, seeing that she'd calculated her attack exactly right. None of it mattered.

Not when all six of Vademe's Blue Team were set up in a perfect line there below her, their shared attention in all directions but straight up as she rolled Gemela's blades through her fingers to guide the Device's points down through the drop.

WHAM!

Not a one among the first-year Sectional qualifiers was underserving. Even if they weren't there individually, there was a reason they'd been hand-picked by Aria, Martin, or Vademe to be a part of their respective squads. Indeed, as they moved they were vigilant, having clearly been carefully instructed to keep eyes peeled. Unfortunately for them, though, none of six seemed to have thought to be wary of an attack from *above*, so Viv hit them so hard and fast she might as well have been a mortar shell.

The Phalanx Xander Phillips went down first, the longer blade of Gemela's sword taking him through the unprotected space between his shoulder and neck, the Arena registering a severed windpipe and punctured lungs before the boy could even think to scream. Less-fortunate was poor Jasmine Ranjha who'd been standing next to him, the Mauler dropping her two-handed hammer to clutch with a scream at where Viv's parrying dagger sliced a clean line across her face, likely blinding her. Hitting the sandy ground, Viv didn't hesitate to pull the "dying" Phillips down with her as her armor-reinforced legs easily accepted the weight of the 3-story drop, wrenching her sword free of his body as she rolled forward onto her feet again. There was a shout of alarm, but

even with Lena Jiang—the fastest Saber of the first-years—among the surviving four, the shock of the attack gave Viv the moment she needed to whirl and gather her bearings, to register Vademe, Kay, and Jiang on her left, with Hannah Tethers alone on her right, split from the others by the fall of her two squadmates.

Viv was on the Lancer in a blink, uncaring about her own open back as she flew at the poor girl with blades flashing.

Tethers, to be fair, had not only qualified for Sectionals individually, but also been among the privileged few who'd gotten to attend Galens exclusive training program the highest-ranked incoming cadets had been invited to the summer before. She was good—*very good*—and she responded exactly as she was supposed to in the given situation, flinging herself backwards even she swept her spear horizontally in an attempt to dissuade Viv's approach and maintain the open space between them. Regrettably for her, though, Viv was too quick by half, ducking under the CAD's glowing blue blade even as she closed the distance. Her sword flashed at the girl's gut, but the Lancer twisted her haft in and down to deflect the blade, spinning to her left as she did. Had Viv had any sense of self-preservation, the move would have worked since it offered the chance to slip by and put Tethers between her and the other three Blue Team members still left standing. Viv had already downed two without so much as a scratch. Any other time she would have taken the offered chance to dash by and vanish into the dunes again to regroup with Rei and the others.

Instead, Viv twisted with the parry, bringing one knee up to catch the Lancer clean in the side with all the force of the rush.

As a Duelist Viv was lighter and faster than any of the other CAD-Types, even the Brawlers. That, though, only detracted so far from her Device-boosted Strength, letting the blow land with the impact of a half-dozen sledge-hammers. Tether's reactive shielding was all that kept her ribs—and probably her spine—intact, and the girl was slammed sideways, losing her footing at once to fall and slide across the loose sand with

a cry of pain as the Arena undoubtedly registered significant internal injuries. Still blind to everything else, Viv lunged at her fallen opponent, fully expecting to feel three blades take her through the back at any moment.

It was unexpected, therefore, when her sword fell unhindered, and Tethers' whole body went limp as her head was "severed" from her shoulders.

Breathing hard—half out of effort and half of the continued rage that hadn't yet dissipated—Viv whirled, blades at the ready for the inevitable attack. She could feel her neuro-line whirring as her Cognition took in the scene in a heartbeat, every muscle in her body taut and prepped to defend herself.

Instead, however, all she found was 5 yards of empty space between her and the spot where Rahnja's painful writhing in the sand was starting to diminish, the Mauler still clutching at her maimed face.

Viv blinked, not understanding for the briefest of instances. She'd been wide open. Even in her blind rage, she'd known that she'd been wide open. And while she suspected she was probably good enough to take on Lena Jiang, now, Viv wasn't so brazen as to think she was better than Vademe or Kay, much less both of them at the same time or—MIND forbid—all *three*.

Then she registered the blazing roar of red through mirrored flashes of blue, and made out the slight form who'd apparently arrived just in time to occupy the rest of the enemy squad.

It was over as quickly as Viv's own fight had been, if not faster. Lena Jiang was already face-down in the sand, looking like she'd been hit from behind just after she'd spun inward when Viv had struck their middle. Kay and Vademe, meanwhile, were still up, but Kay's left arm was limp at the shoulder, and even two-on-one the pair had already lost the key advantage of their Type's superior reach.

Well inside their guard, Rei ripped through them like black-and-red lightning.

Deflecting a one-handed strike from Kay with an easy swipe of Shido's crimson claws, Rei twisted to let by a plunging thrust from Vademe. The spin turned into a flying elbow aimed at the Blue Team leader's temple, succeeding in its intent even when the boy jerked so that the blow only glanced off his head. Vademe staggered, throwing one last desperate slash sideways as he did, but the attack was as weak as the follow-up from Kay that came from the other direction. Instead of dodging, Rei's hands flashed up to *catch* the hafts of both spears, stopping the strikes dead and promptly hauling the weapons inward. As was the instinct of almost every User, the two injured Lancers held tight to their Devices, both stumbling forward under the strength of Rei's pull.

It made it simple for him to jump 5 feet in the air and—with terrifying precision—deliver a split kick that caught both of his opponents in the side of the head with mirrored *thuds*.

Viv—who hadn't even had enough time to take more than a single step towards the fight—didn't need the Arena's announcement a moment later to know Vademe and Kay had been FDAed, the two of them tumbling limply to ground on either side of Rei like a pair of felled trees as he landed again, all the while still holding tight to their now-loose spears, one in each hand.

“All Blue Team combatants eliminated. Winner: Red Team.”

Ranjha, apparently, had succumbed to her head wound just as Kay and Vademe dropped, because with the match call the field began to dissolve. Light flooded the dunes briefly when the night above them faded first, then the sands too started to dissipate as Viv felt herself start to descend. While she did, though, she didn't look away from Rei, didn't look away from her best friend even when she saw him turn to her just before he, too, started to drop, lips moving to form her name.

They shouldn't get to do this...

As the field fell away, Aria and the others came into view, having apparently only been around the corner in the valley when the fight ended. In the corner of her vision Viv saw their normal CAD colors return, saw Devices vanish in a whirl of metal and light, and muscle memory had her mumbling “Recall” even as she still didn’t look away from Rei.

They don’t get to do this...

Then, at last, she touched down, and the cold steel of the projection plating hitting her once-again-bare feet was enough to jolt Viv back into the present.

“Viv! *Viv!*”

Viv started, realizing suddenly that she was surrounded. She’d somehow missed her squad closing in on her, with only Logan—very possibly looking more openly worried than Viv had ever seen from him—lingering a step back as Aria, Catcher, and Cashe all came to stand before her. Their expressions were mixed and muddled, partially because her vision was still blurring for some reason again, and partially because none of them looked to be able to decide if they were angry or worried.

Worried...?

“Viv... Come here.”

As Viv saw Rei offering hands to help both Vademe and Kay from the floor beyond her friends, Aria reached up and took hold of her face gently, running thumbs carefully under her eyes once, then twice. Viv blinked, not sure what was happening but also somehow unable to form the words to protest. The anger was still there, still lingering, but instead of an eruptive force it felt more like a black hole now, like it was draining everything she had from the inside out.

Then, though, Aria brought a hand back down to wipe off against the side of her combat suit, leaving a damp smudge of wet black on the grey fabric.

Only then, at last, did Viv realize that she was crying...

“Viv...” Catcher seemed to have officially settled on worried at the sight of her tears, his yellowish eyes wide as he took her in. “What the *hell* is going on...?”

Viv, though, couldn’t answer, too surprised at herself to voice anything as she stared at the smudge of what had to be running mascara on Aria’s suit.

Fortunately for her, the four standing before her turned out not to be the only ones alarmed by her state.

“Aria, we need to sit out the next round.”

Rei joined them, coming to stand beside Aria, but as he spoke his grey eyes were only for Viv, and it was to her that he spoke next.

“Viv... I’m sorry. I didn’t realize... If I’d known it would upset you this much, I wouldn’t have—”

“No.”

Viv found her voice at last, and she was relieved to hear it come strong and firm despite her unbidden tears.

“No,” she said again, bringing up her own hands to wipe at her cheeks, letting out only a small snuffle. When she pulled them away, she indeed saw much of the rest of her makeup coming off on her fingers. “Don’t be an idiot, Rei. What were you gonna do? Sit on it?”

“I should have—”

“You should have done jack shit, bud,” Viv got out with a dark laugh, using the back of her wrist to rub at her eyes, now. “You would have locked yourself in West Center until you passed out if I hadn’t found your sorry ass, and you know it.”

Rei apparently had no answer to this, only frowning at her before turning to Aria again. “We have to sit the next fight out,” he repeated. “We need to talk.”

“Yeah, we *do*,” Catcher answered, gaping at Rei now. “If whatever going on is enough to send Viv on a rampage, we *really* do. Still, do you think Imala and Dent will let us take a break from the next—”

“Oh, that won’t be an issue, Catchwick.”

Even Viv, numb as she was, felt a tingle crawl up her spine at the hard, cold words, and all six of them turned with a thrill to see the observation platform falling quickly in their direction. When it was still 20 feet above the ground Catori Imala dropped down to the plating to storm towards them, apparently too furious to wait. She looked *livid*, teeth half-bared as her long braid swung behind her with every step, and inside of 2 seconds she towered before them, the whole squad having long since snapped to attention.

“Not in my damn *life* have I seen a group of cadets so apparently dead-set on pissing me off,” she hissed in their faces, fiery gaze flicking between all six of them in turn. “I tell you to get your act together, and you allow all hell to break loose.” Her eyes fell on Viv, then, mouth open in apparent readiness to chew her out with *particular* venom. She paused, though, and even not looking into the Phalanx sub-instructor’s face Viv knew Imala was taking in what undoubtedly had to be wet cheeks and streaked mascara.

Apparently, it was enough to earn her a little pity at least, because Imala’s next words came a little more steadily.

“Arada, if that assault had been planned, I would be singing your praises right now. Fast, hard, and totally by surprise. Under normal circumstances that kind of attack would be commendable, as would Ward’s quick backup. The two of you took out Blue Team within 20 seconds of the match starting, all by yourselves. *Unfortunately*, all I can do is express my *extreme* disappointment in your apparent inability to keep your emotions in check. Not only did you put yourself in an unnecessarily one-sided combat situation, you blatantly ignored your team leader’s instructions *and* put your squad at risk of disadvantage had your rush not worked out. It was rash, it was stupid, and it was damn selfish.”

Viv swallowed, every word hitting her hard. “Yes, ma’am,” was all she managed to get out. “I’m sorry, ma’am.”

But Imala seemed to have run short on mercy.

“I already told you once today that apologies don’t cut it,” the Lieutenant continued coolly. “You’ve already had your warning. So—” she looked to Rei and Catcher “—Ward, Catchwick, you two wanted to sit out the next match? You got it. In fact, take the rest of the afternoon. You’re all dismissed from training. Use the time to get your heads on straight.”

Viv’s stomach dropped like a stone.

“Ma’am!” she got out in a rush, even daring to look Imala in the eye in her desperation. “Please don’t punish the team for me being an idiot! I’ll sit out the rest of the day if—!”

“Keep talking, Arada, and I’ll ban your squad from training tomorrow as well.”

That shut Viv up, and beside her she saw Rei, Aria, Catcher, *and* Cashe’s mouth’s all snap shut at the same time, each of them clearly having been about to voice their own protests.

“Your selfishness is only the straw that broke the camel’s back,” the sub-instructor continued, glaring at her. “I *said* you were all on thin ice. I warned you. You reap what you sow. And no—” she lifted her fingers to snap in front of Viv’s face, bringing her eyes back to the sub-instructor from where they’d instinctively started to move beyond Imala to the figure standing impassively behind the woman “—the captain isn’t going to pull your ass out of the fire on this. This is her directive as much as mine.”

Despite herself, Viv *did* end up looking by the Lieutenant, and sure enough Dent’s gaze was only disappointed as she met it. This beyond anything had Viv—and everyone else, she suspected—understanding that their fate was sealed, because not a word seemed left to be argued with from any of them.

After several seconds of silence, Imala grunted in irritated satisfaction. “Finally nothing else to say? Good. Only smart decision I’ve seen from most of you today. Now get out of my sight.”

With that the sub-instructor turned away from them and made for where Vademe, Kay, and the rest of the former Blue Team had been standing nearby, every one of them looking on with the same shocked expression Martin’s squad, too, was taking them all in with from the eastern sidelines. Her departure left Dent’s presence unobstructed, but the captain maintained her stony silence, brown eyes unflinching while she stood with arms crossed where the observation platform had deposited her, not having taken so much as a step in their direction.

This is the bed you made, her stare seemed to say, and Viv suddenly thought she might start crying again, if for an entirely different reason.

What an idiot. What an *idiot*, she’d been.

Still...

They shouldn’t get to do this...

Someone, maybe Aria, was tugging at the back of her combat suit, but Viv barely felt it. She couldn’t look away from Dent, couldn’t look away from the steady displeasure in the captain’s gaze that was unlike anything she’d ever seen. She wanted to shout, wanted to scream that she had reason, that she had a *reason* and wasn’t a loose cannon, but her words seem to fail her again. Even as Rei and Catcher both called her name quietly from behind her, she couldn’t look away.

At least not until a different, larger hand came down to take her gently by the shoulder, pulling her around with a firm, steady strength.

“Come on, Viv.” Logan’s voice—usually so harsh—was soft as he turned her away from Dent to face the others, everyone else having already taken a morose step towards the nearest passage down into the underworks.

Only then, at last, did Viv let herself be guided away, numb except for the hole in her chest now, absent even the anger that had carved it out in the first place.

Avoiding the eyes of the other squads, the six of them made the walk of shame from the Arena floor ploddingly, like they all wanted to be free of the scrutiny of the others, but didn't want to seem like they were fleeing. Even Viv, shaken as she was, felt a tension lift from her throat as she passed into the passage that led down from the main floor, and she thought she audibly heard Logan let loose the smallest breath of relief from where he still stood beside her, never having let his wide hand fall from her shoulder.

Down the ramp they went, the double doors they had to pass through sealing shut behind them as they reached the landing that split north and south into the main hall of the underworks to loop the entirety of the Arena. There the six of them all stopped, as though collectively knowing that was the place the dam would finally break.

It didn't take long.

"Oookay... I want someone to tell me what the hell is going on. *Now.*"

It was Cashe who spoke first, and Viv supposed she couldn't blame the Lancer from letting a little anger *finally* seep into her voice. Of all of them, she was the only one without *some* small fault for what had just happened—direct or otherwise—and therefore had the greatest reason to resent being denied most of an afternoon of squad training. Their team might have been head and shoulders above Vademe and Martin's—and therefore likely most any other first-year group in their Section—but every opportunity to get an edge mattered in the world of CAD combat. They all knew that, with Cashe happening to be particularly aware of this truth...

Thankfully, it was quickly apparent Viv wasn't the only one thinking the girl deserved some kind of explanation.

"I can't tell you everything." Rei's voice was calm as he turned to face them all. "I really can't. But... I was offered a sponsorship this morning."

There was moment of stunned silence. Even Logan went still, his arm tensing ever so slightly around Viv's upper back.

"*What?*" It was Aria who found her voice first. "Rei... That's amazing! Who offered you a—?"

"It's not all sunshine and rainbows," Rei interrupted with a shake of his head, reaching up to tuck a few strands of white hair that had come loose of their tail behind one ear. "Not even a little. Like I said, I can't tell you everything, but there are some... some *conditions* to the contract."

"Conditions like what?" Cashe apparently couldn't help herself from asking, looking nothing short of shocked as she took Rei in. "And are you serious? Ward... That's *nuts*. I've never heard of a first-year getting offered a *sponsorship*."

"Because it's never happened before."

At last Logan's hand fell from her shoulder, and Viv looked around to find the tall boy watching Rei with eyes sharpened by something between alarm and suspicion.

"It's *never* happened," he said again. "I know. I looked into it."

"You did?" Catcher asked, sounding a little surprised at this. "Why?"

"Personal reasons," Logan answered briefly without looking around at the Saber. "But I'm *sure* it's never happened before, at least that I could find."

"And I think you're right," Rei agreed with a nod. "I haven't actually checked into it, but some things were said in the meeting that make me believe that's true..."

"But then... Why?" Cashe's perplexion seemed only to be deepening. "Like... I get you're a freak of nature, Ward—and I mean that in the most positive way you can imagine, I hope you know—but isn't that *insane* of them??"

"I think 'insane' is kind of a theme for the day, honestly, Cashe," Rei said with a sigh. Then he glanced at Viv as he continued. "Sorry, but that's honestly all I can tell you. Anything else could be... problematic."

“Another gag order?” the Lancer asked with a frown. “You guys have talked about how you were under one when you first developed Type Shift, right?”

Rei suddenly looked a little uncomfortable. “Uh... Not... Not exactly...”

“It’s not a gag order,” Logan grunted. “If it was, we wouldn’t be in this mess.”

Silence followed this, all of them—perhaps to spare Viv’s feelings—unwilling to acknowledge that he was right. If Rei hadn’t confided in her—if he hadn’t said anything—she wouldn’t have ruined the afternoon for them.

She simultaneously appreciated their restraint and hated herself all the more for it.

“Which means—” Logan kept on after the silence held for a few seconds, not having looked away from Rei “—that it’s not that you can’t tell ‘us.’” He indicated the group as a whole. “It’s that you can’t tell *us*.” He pointed between himself and Cashe, who raised an eyebrow at this. “Am I right, Ward?”

Rei looked a little uncomfortable, but didn’t bother to deny it.

“Yeah... I’m sorry.” He sounded like he meant it, but he only looked at Cashe as he spoke, maybe not able to bring himself to apologize to Logan’s face. “I wish it wasn’t the case, but there’s... some stuff going on with me. Stuff I can’t tell many people about, even if I want to.”

“Reeeally? Nooo shit?” Cashe’s answer dripped with sarcasm. “You climb *three* tiers through the ranks in the same amount of time it took everyone else to climb only *most* of *one*, and you say there’s ‘some stuff going on with you’? Color me soooo shocked.” She stared at him flatly.

Rei just barely managed to crack a smile at that. “Yeah... I know... Still, I’m sorry. Maybe one day.”

“Sooner would be better than later, Ward.” Viv looked around to find Logan scowling, now. “In case you hadn’t noticed, keeping stuff from the squad isn’t exactly good for our performance.”

Instantly Viv bristled, some of her irritation at the boy from early that morning rising quickly. She half-turned on him beside her, intent on letting him have it for the *second* time that day, but for once Catcher beat her to it.

“Rich coming from you, *Grant*,” the Saber snarled. “Care to elaborate on what the hell *you’ve* done recently that’s been so great for team bonding?”

Beside her, Logan’s entire form went still, and his face hardened into a familiar, unyielding mask. Viv opened her mouth, about to snap that he could keep whatever snide vitriol he was coming up with to himself, when the impossible happened.

Logan let out a breath through clenched teeth, his body relaxing ever so slightly, and he nodded.

“Fair enough,” he acknowledged, if a little stiffly. “In fact...” He hesitated, then looked at Rei again. “Ward. About this morning. In training...” He paused again, and looked to be chewing on his tongue, like biting it off might have been easier than getting out what he had to say.

Rei, for his part, looked on warily, Catcher doing much the same as Aria and Cashe exchanged a confused look.

Finally, though, Logan spoke with deliberate steadiness.

“I’m sorry.”

If *anything* could have surprised Viv more in that moment, she doubted she would have been able to think of it. She *gaped* at Logan, utterly unconvinced that she had heard him say the words. Not only say them, but say them *there*, in front of everyone. She obviously wasn’t the only one, because when she finally tore her eyes from the hulking boy she saw Catcher mouthing at the air like a landed fish, while Aria was staring at Logan with genuine concern, probably worried his 6’7” frame had led him to hit his head on a tunnel overhang or something.

Most surprised of all, though, looked to be Rei, his eyes so wide he might have just seen Logan explode into a cloud of confetti.

“Uh... Thanks, man,” he almost stammered after a moment, clearly as unsure as Viv was if he’d just heard right. “It’s... all good, I guess?”

Beside her, Logan nodded curtly, and when she turned to him again Viv couldn’t believe her eyes.

Was Logan—Logan *Grant*—red in the face??

Before she could make sure she’d seen right, though, he turned away and started making down the south hall, muttering back to her as he did.

“Viv, come on. You too, Cashe.” He motioned for the Lancer to follow as he passed her. “If we can’t train with other squads, we might as well hit East Center.”

“Wait, what?” Cashe asked, turning to watch him go with surprise. “Why just me and Viv?”

Logan barely glanced over his shoulder as he answered. “Cause Ward’s got something to talk about with Laurent and Catchwick that isn’t our business, apparently. Isn’t that right, Ward?”

Once again, Viv only just heard Rei as he answered with an uncertain “Uh... Yeah... Thanks...”. For a few seconds more she stood there, taking in the departing outline of Logan’s broad back.

Then, finally, she shook herself free of the confusing mix of feelings she felt in that moment, turning only briefly to tell Rei, Aria, and Catcher that she would catch them later before hurrying after the boy and a still-protesting Cashe.

In the end, maybe it *hadn’t* been such a totally worthless day, after all...

CHAPTER 9

“Don’t ever half-ass taking someone down. If you’re gonna do it, do it right. On the field, off the field, whatever. Wherever it needs to get done, do it right.

’Cause if you don’t, then that someone might just get back up again and feed you your own teeth...”

*Dalek “the Gatebreaker” O’Rourke
Post-Match Interview, c. 2435*

“Dude...” Catcher muttered for perhaps the hundredth time, somehow still managing to sound more and more alarmed with each repetition of the word. “*Dude... Duuuude...*”

Rei didn’t respond, watching from the opposite couch as the Saber—still in the combat suit each of them had yet to change out of—stared at the feed pulled up on his NOED. Beside him, Aria had been quiet for nearly a full minute, and Rei didn’t have to look at her to know she, too, would be taking in the static profile image of Kamiya Hiroto with equal disbelief.

They were sitting in the “Black Room”, the somberly-decorated professional locker room that had become a sort of unofficial gathering space for the three of them and Viv, and whose actual name they’d only finally learned earlier in the break. The space—one of six readying chambers kept for visiting pro fighters and teams during the SCT’s Galens hosted on a yearly basis—was all red and black, with two longer, crimson couches taking up the center of the carpeted floor and a single short row of several lockers lined up behind each of them. Over their heads, lights hanging with dark crystal cast a dim, calming glow throughout the chamber, supplemented by the steady bubbling of a massive fish tank that took up a quarter of the whole length of the back

wall. Within, the water's glowing occupants drifted lazily about against a black background that highlighted their blueish colors, hues Rei suspected had no business being anywhere but the deepest parts of some distant ocean.

Still, despite the fascinating nature of his surroundings, it was only on his friends that his entire attention lay.

Covering the simpler circumstances of the contract language alone had been a hurdle in and of itself. While Rei knew Aria and Catcher each came from families at *least* as well off as Viv's, both of them still had some awareness of what reasonable terms were for sponsorships at various levels of SCT competitiveness. For that reason there had been a lot of spluttering at the monetary values promised in the forms of the stipend and expenses coverage, and even more at the language about housing, medical facility access, and most significantly the guaranteed training. It had taken a while for Rei to reel them back from the shock of the contract itself, in fact, but when he had he was glad that the two had been so alarmed at the terms.

Like with Viv, it made convincing them of his broader theory all the easier.

"*Duuuuunde...*" Catcher said yet again, apparently unable to get out anything more eloquent in the moment even as he closed his frame to stare at Rei, obviously hard hit by the evidence.

"Yeah..." was all Rei could answer with.

For a long time the three of them sat in silence, one of Rei's knees bouncing nervously as he waited for it all to sink in, Catcher just gaping while Aria appeared to reread the Kamiya Corp CEO's bio so many times she seemed to want to commit it to memory.

Finally, at long last, the shock faded enough for voices to be found again.

"No *wonder* Viv went nuclear..." Catcher muttered. "I probably would have, too, if I'd known. And I'm not *half* as hot-headed..."

Rei nodded. “I’m sorry... I would have loved any other way to tell you guys this—especially after that match—but...” He let the statement fade, pretty sure the pair sitting with him would understand how important it was to him that they know.

“You’re right to tell us.”

Aria had finally closed out of her own frame, but unlike Catcher she seemed unable to look at Rei when he turned to her. He wasn’t sure what exactly he should have expected, but he couldn’t be all that surprised to find the girl’s hands balled into fists on her lap, features composed in an expression so steely he wondered how long it would take for the metal lockers behind Catcher to collapse under her glare.

“How do they think they can do this?” Aria kept on, her voice almost mechanical as she obviously fought to keep it even. “If you’re right—and I’m pretty sure you’re right, Rei—how do they think they can do this?”

“You’re assuming they care,” Rei answered with a snort. “I don’t think these are ‘good’ people, Aria. Setting aside this back alley bullshit, the one—and *only*—interaction I’ve had with my ‘family’ was when they handed me off to the hospital I was born in without so much as a last name. If you’re expecting them to have any kind of moral compass, I’d say your bar is lightyears too high.”

“Yeah...” Aria grumbled in response, fists only tightening at the words. “Yeah... Maybe.”

“Hmm...”

Catcher’s ponderous contemplation had Rei looking around at him.

“What?” he asked. “You disagree?”

Catcher snorted. “Hell no, man. Sorry, but I give it twenty—no, *fifty*-to-one odds that your family is total trash.” He offered Rei a strained grin that only held for a couple of seconds before slipping back into sober. “Thing is... Is that enough of a reason not to take this?” He pointed at his temple, obviously indicating the contract he’d closed out of 10 minutes ago.

Rei furrowed his brow at his friend, trying to deduce if the Saber was joking.

Quickly, though, he realized that Catcher wasn't playing any kind of game, and a spark of disbelief flared in his gut.

Probably fortunately, Aria got the words out first.

“Catcher, you can't be serious.”

But Catcher, incredibly, didn't back down.

“Dead serious.” He looked between the two of them, leaning forward intently to rest his elbows on his bare knees. “Rei, you know you're the only first-year more into the SCTs than me. Obviously you'd want someone who *actually* knows what they're doing to take a look at it, but nothing I read in those terms is... well... ‘bad’, for lack of a better term? Even the *length* is only for a single year—not even your entire time in school. Do you know how crazy that is?”

“That's the *point*, though, man.” Rei's irritation had morphed into disbelief. “The *whole point* is that it's too good to be true. There's a *reason* it's written like that. Do you not get what I'm—?”

“Oh I *definitely* get it, dude.” Catcher cut him off with a shake of his head. “I do. Or at least in and of as far as I can, not having grown up in your shoes. You've been through hell, man. It was obvious from the day you outdid our resident ace in our first Fortitude parameter test that you've been through hell.” He gestured to Aria briefly without looking at her. “*But...* while I haven't been around you half as long as Viv has, I am a hundred-and-*ten* percent convinced that you eat fire for breakfast.” He pointed to his NOED again. “When you said there were conditions to the contract, I was expecting a clause regarding a life-long commitment or something. Like I said, you *definitely* want someone to look at this that's more qualified than a bunch of idiot teenagers with an unhealthy SCT obsession, but if you set *aside* that this seems like puppeteering by your family... Isn't this kind of a golden opportunity...?”

“*Catcher*,” Aria hissed at the boy like he’d just sworn in polite company. “How can you say that?! How is Rei *supposed* to set that aside?? Would you? *Could* you??”

Catcher let out a laugh. “Hell no!” he exclaimed as though this were the most ludicrous suggestion in the world. “I probably would have torn the contract up then and there before punching the Kamiya rep in the face.” He frowned, suddenly. “Sidebar... I never got that phrase. ‘Tear it up’. The hell does that even mean?”

“It’s from when people used paper for legal documents,” Rei answered automatically, taking in his friend as he turned over Catcher’s words. “The stuff they made us take the written portion of our Assignment Exam on.”

“Oh. Huh... Yeah. Guess that makes sense. Anyway, my point is: Sure, there’s no way I could ignore the puppet strings. Even for an opportunity like this, I would probably rather get kicked in between the legs by the Lasher full-force than accept the contract.”

“Then why would you suggest—?” Aria started indignantly, but Catcher cut her off firmly.

“Thing is... *I’m* not *Rei*.”

He’d never looked away from Rei the entire time he’d spoken, but now Catcher took him in keenly, more seriously than he might have ever before. Even when Rei had told the Saber about his S-Ranked Growth, he wasn’t sure he’d ever seen the boy so intent.

He suspected, too, that he knew where his friend was going now.

“Rei... you’ve slowed down since hitting the Cs, haven’t you?”

Rei met Catcher’s gaze steadily, turning over the expected question, adding it to the maelstrom of confused considerations the boy’s words had made of the thoughts he’d only *just* gotten under control.

After a long few seconds—in which Aria, too, turned to study Rei, obviously interested in his answer—he sighed and nodded slowly.

“Yeah...” he muttered. “A lot, actually.”

“I’ll bet you know why, too, right?”

Rei smirked. “I’ve got a theory or three...”

Catcher gave his own nod, but said nothing more, leaving Aria to frown between the two of them.

Rei, for his part, didn’t know whether to laugh or curse at his good fortune of friends. Catcher hadn’t just read his mind. He’d pieced together some of the floating, jumbled mess of his own doubts and hesitations. Abruptly Rei realized that maybe he *hadn’t* had such a good handle on the emotions the morning’s meeting had left him floundering in, and he unconsciously crossed his arms as he sat back on the couch to think.

Yeah... It was true that his growth had slowed down, and by a good bit. He’d expected it, of course, especially after seeing a similar pace change in the improvement of Shido’s Rank after he’d cracked the Ds to finally catch up to the majority of the rest of the class. Even then, though, he’d continued to climb steadily, his meteoric ascent from the Fs and through the Es only guttering slightly in momentum.

The Cs, though, had been an entirely different matter.

And he was pretty sure he knew why...

“The last time I saw a *real* jump in my specs was after my training day with Lennon,” he thought out loud, not having noticed his gaze drifting to the carpet between their two couches as he contemplated it all. “Specifically after we actually *fought*. Most of that day was spent doing conditioning and targeted training, and while I got a few ticks up, it was nothing like what happened after we actually went head-to-head.”

Beside him, he thought he saw Aria’s frown deepen.

“Really? What about against Grant? During your last Intra-School match?”

Rei shook his head, not looking away from the floor as he answered. “Nope. I mean I definitely saw a jump—in Endurance aaand... Strength, I think?—but it wasn’t

the same. Before the Cs—and *definitely* before the Ds—any real match usually had my numbers ramping in leaps and bounds.”

“Makes sense,” Catcher agreed simply, though he said nothing more. He didn’t have to.

“Because your opponents were stronger than you...”

Aria didn’t seem to have made a realization, *per se*, but rather spoke like a suspicion she’d long held had been finally confirmed.

Rei nodded again. “Exactly. And it’s more than that, too. Used to be I could get stronger off of most anything, not just fighting. I used to see improvements after parameter testing, conditioning runs, all that stuff.” He snorted grimly. “Even when Selleck and the others jumped me. My Defense ranked up after that. Plus—” he finally looked around at Aria “—even fighting *you* stopped doing much for me a while ago. Despite the fact you were—*are*, really—way stronger.”

Aria nodded. This she’d already been aware of, as had Catcher and Viv. It had been a curiosity voiced more than once throughout their training. While their group sessions—particularly counting the extra hours they had long held before the Intra-Schools, much less the formation of the squad—had been invaluable, it hadn’t provided Rei with the level of growth he might have expected had he been an outside observer. When he and Aria had *first* fought at Commencement, even that brief Duel had had his specs rocketing upward, some of them as many as *3 ranks*. Ever since, though, their frequent sparring had proven increasingly less effective in improving his numbers, despite the discrepancy in their baseline power. Part of that, of course, had to be that the gap between them had closed substantially. It was mathematically consistent that he would see more of a jump when all his stats had been F-Ranked against Aria than he would when they were in the Ds and Cs. Another part, just as obviously, was that they’d never had a real *all-out* SCT fight since that first day on the grounds, with all their bouts taking part during practice and conditioning.

But still, given the sheer *number* of times they'd gone toe-to-toe—having practically been each other's exclusive training partner aside from mixing here and there with Viv and Catcher, and more recently with Cashe and Grant—Rei felt like he *should* have gotten more from his fights with Aria.

Which left him—unsurprisingly—with another suspicion that he'd probably been subconsciously harboring for much longer than he knew...

An image of a strange, neon white face, somehow smiling despite a total lack of distinguishing features, flashed across Rei's mind, and he didn't feel his crossed arms instinctively tighten over his chest.

"Variables," he muttered under his breath. "It needs variables..."

"Huh?"

Rei jumped, finally looking up to find Catcher watching him with an eyebrow raised, obviously not having heard him. Aria too, was turned to him, her head cocked curiously.

"Nothing," Rei said quickly, thinking fast. Even if he would have given the *planet* to tell them what was on his mind, there was one promise he had made—they had *all* made, he suspected—regarding the third portion of the CAD Assignment Exam that he was unwilling to break. "Just... Variety. Something tells me Shido needs variety. It's true across everyone I've gone up against more than once. Aria especially, but also you and Viv, Catcher." A thought struck him. "That had to be the deal with Grant, too. The guy's average specs were *definitely* higher than mine during our Intra-School match, but I didn't see the boost I might have expected."

"Cause you'd already fought him?" Aria asked, a little confused now. "When?" Then her eyes went wide. "Ooooooh... Right... During cross-training that one day..."

Catcher snorted, confirming her realization with a nod. "Yeah... That was before you started hanging out with us. Rei and Grant got paired, and apparently Grant went

ballistic post-match. Huh...” He frowned slightly. “He and Viv might be better suited for each other than I thought, all things considered...”

Aria turned to glare at him, but Rei wasn’t interested in getting side-tracked.

“The day Dent catapulted him into the sub-basement wall, yeah. After that match, Shido jumped so high it evolved for the second time since I’d been at school.”

“Just like it did after the fight with me...” Aria only slowly looked away from Catcher, apparently unwilling to let the boy *completely* off the hook even as he held up both hands in apology across from them. “Yeah... You might be onto something there... Not that it’s completely surprising. Variety is the whole reason we *do* cross-training and stuff. If we only ever trained with our Type-groups...”

“We’d be pretty trash, yeah...” Rei finished for her, his thoughts coming full circle as he got lost in momentary contemplation again. There was something there he hadn’t seen before, something he hadn’t let himself see...

What had Catcher called it? A “golden opportunity”?

Shit, Rei thought privately as a door he hadn’t even realized had been barred shut broke open to release a flood of all-new implications and—horribly—possibilities.

Setting aside the obscene amount of credits the contract stipend would provide him with, Rei was suddenly reviewing the terms of the Kamiya contract in a different light. In a way, Catcher was dead on. It *was* an insane opportunity, and one any other User would have had to be completely mental to pass up, at least with the knowledge Rei had on hand. Even if he also ignored the clauses about expenses, housing, and medical facilities—he was a dorm student with minimal expenses, and would sell Shido before walking away from the care he received from Willem Mayd and Ameena Ashton—the *training* aspect of the contract wasn’t something he could so easily disregard. If he was right about what Shido was in need of to keep climbing in strength, there *were* opportunities at Galens to pit himself against stronger opponents. Lennon had taken him on once already, after all, and Rei suspected he could have begged his

way into sparring with Michael Bretz and some of the other sub-instructors now and then if he really needed to.

But Lennon had been compensated for his time by Valera Dent, Rei knew, and their supervising officers—who were also responsible for *at least* the other first-year blocks—couldn't exactly drop everything just to accommodate his itch to fight stronger opponents.

Which left Rei a problem...

“Shit,” he muttered aloud this time, really seeing the hurdle—or hole, more accurately—shaping itself into being before him.

Between being just a few weeks short of surpassing Aria as the top-ranked first-year and there being no additional SCTs for their grade after they returned from Sectionals at the Kenneth Academy in Ganos, Rei suspected he was going to have *very* minimal opportunity to face off against anyone who would strain Shido's learning algorithms—or whatever it was the Device worked off of—for some time. That wasn't the end of the world, of course. He suspected that his Growth spec would still have him comparatively careening upward so long as he just put the effort in, but the idea of even a *relative* plateau after the ascent he had experienced since arriving at school was painful to contemplate.

And yet—as Catcher *had* rightfully pointed out, Rei acknowledged now—he now had what seemed like an ideal solution in the palm of his hand...

Still... just how much “fire” was Rei willing to eat, for the sake of getting stronger?

All of it.

The answer came without hesitation, but it still made him wince internally. A few hours ago it might have been an easy awareness to bear, but now things were different. Earlier that morning, the “hell” Catcher had referred to had largely consisted of nothing more than enormous effort, lots of time committed, and a willingness to fail again and again and again against someone like Lennon or Bretz.

Now, though... Now there was something else, and something not so easily swallowed.

And yet...

“Oh you gotta be kidding me,” Rei groaned, finally uncrossing his arms to lean forward, resting his own elbows on his knees to put his face in his palms. “Catcher, you evil son of a bitch...”

Across from him, he heard the Saber chuckle. “I’ve been called worse.”

“And you’re gonna be, pretty soon,” Aria got out sternly before Rei heard her shift on the couch to look at him. “Rei, think about this... *Really* think about this.”

“I *aaaamm*,” Rei groaned again, barely turning his head and opening his fingers to peer between them at her with one eye. “You can’t tell me he’s not right, Aria.”

“I can’t tell you he *might not be* right,” she corrected quickly, looking a little alarmed and scooting closer to put a hand on his arm. “You don’t know. You said it yourself: it’s too good to be true. I’m not a lawyer, Rei. Neither is Catcher—”

“That you know of,” Catcher said mysteriously, managing the first real grin from any of them in a while.

Aria, of course, ignored him. “Did you show the contract to my uncle? Or Maddie? What did they say?”

“I didn’t,” Rei admitted, sitting up again—and finding himself just a little pleased when Aria didn’t lift her hand from his scarred arm. “They never saw it. Unless Jasper showed it to them, which I doubt. I shut the offer down before they had a chance to ask. I wasn’t kidding. The meeting was done in like... literally twenty minutes.”

“Because your gut told you this is a *bad idea*, Rei.” Aria sounded like she was just short of pleading now, eyes almost scared as she took him in. “It sounds like you walked into the room and knew something was off before you even *sat down*. Am I right?”

“Yeah...” Rei agreed, grimacing as he recalled how his hackles had been up almost from the moment Maddison Kent had opened the door.

“Then don’t ignore that,” Aria hissed. “If you need stronger people to fight against, there’s other ways. Galens would help, I know. I’ll talk to my uncle. You can talk to Dent and Lennon. You *know* there’s other ways.”

Rei opened his mouth to argue her points—the same ones he’d already addressed in his head—when Catcher interrupted him.

“For what it’s worth... I completely agree with Aria.”

Together Rei and Aria turned to look at the Saber, who was watching them seriously again.

“I’m *not* saying you should jump on this, man,” Catcher continued once he was sure he had their attention, face still set even as he leaned back to hang both bare arms across the top of his couch. “Not even a little. I would be a pretty shit friend if I was, *especially* since I think she’s right.” He dipped his head at Aria. “There *are* other ways to get what you need.” He paused, considering for a moment. “I guess all I *am* saying is that maybe it’s not worth dismissing out of hand. There’s definitely other ways, but there’s no *faster* way, at least not with what I can tell from that contract.”

“Not from what *any* of us can tell!” Aria insisted, hand finally dropping from Rei’s arm to rest on his knee instead as she turned on Catcher. “Catcher, this is a *bad idea*. I’m telling you. It’s a *bad idea*.”

“And I’m ninety-eight percent sure you’re right,” Catcher agreed without looking away from her. “I’m not kidding. I said I give it fifty-to-one odds Rei’s family is hot garbage. *But*—” his yellow eyes did finally turn to Rei again “—I think it would be wrong of me not to *at least* point out that there might—just *might*—be something there worth considering, especially since finding out isn’t all that hard.”

At this, Rei and Aria both frowned at him.

“What do you mean?” Rei asked.

Catcher smirked. “Dude... You’re sitting in a room with two people who *both* have family members tight with the SCT community. My mom is a former Systems

champion, and Aria's brother is a *current* contender. A current *S-Ranked* contender." He watched Rei steadily. "Is there a risk in letting them look over this offer? Would you lose *anything* by letting them take a peek at it and telling you if it's legit?"

From beside Rei, Aria let out a little "Oh!" at this suggestion, and Rei had to admit himself equally surprised.

"Would they... Do you think they would do that?" he asked seriously, considering it. He'd double-check the language again later, but he was pretty sure he hadn't seen any kind of non-disclosure clause among the legalese of Kamiya's offer. On the contrary, he'd thought it strange such terms were missing when he'd read through it, given the extremes of the offer.

If anything... it was almost like Ueno Jasper had *wanted* him to talk about it, had wanted him to ask people.

And had wanted them to tell him what the offer really was...

"My mom would," Catcher said, and he suddenly looked a little uncomfortable, squirming slightly as he said it. "She... uh... She's kind of a fan. I'll bet she would be thrilled."

That stumped Rei. "A fan? Of who?"

Catcher rolled his eyes. "Of you, dumbass. She's always cheered for the underdog, so you're like her ultimate dream come true. Pretty sure she recorded more of *your* Intra-School matches than mine, actually..."

Rei blinked at this, the explanation taking a moment to register. Then it was his turn to "Ooooh...", feeling a little heat creep back into his cheeks, which had been cold the entire time the stone of Kamiya's contract had weighed down on their conversation. In an attempt to hide his shared embarrassment from Catcher, he instead looked to Aria, who seemed to be contemplating Catcher's suggestions.

“It’s... not a bad idea...” she admitted after a moment. “Kalus is at a big three-week event on Venus right now, so he probably doesn’t have a lot of time, but if Catcher’s mom could do it, or if you’re willing to wait...”

“I would be,” Rei said quickly. “I am. I don’t want to ask the colonel or Dent. I don’t want to put them in that spot. But two people who don’t know me, who could look at the offer with fresh eyes? I would wait.”

Again Aria nodded slowly, one finger ticking up and down on Rei’s knee while she thought. As she did, Catcher’s gaze drifted down to her hand, lingering on it for a second before lifting back up at Rei. Grinning again, the Saber repeated the process pointedly, and Rei could feel the flush intensifying in his face even as he considered telling his friend to preemptively shut up.

He didn’t get the words out fast enough.

“On another note... Nice to see you two finally not tripping over each other in embarrassment whenever you brush shoulders or something...”

Rei glared at the Saber, trying to tell Catcher with his eyes that he would be spiking his lunch with every laxative he could get his hands on at the next opportunity. Beside him, on the other hand, he thought he caught a moment of confusion flash across Aria’s face.

Then it clicked.

Aria’s hand snapped away from his leg so fast Rei couldn’t follow it with the naked eye, and she was suddenly sitting ramrod straight beside him. Across from them, Catcher’s smile broadened, and he laughed even as he pushed himself to his feet.

“Yeeeah, that’s more like it. One of these days, though.” He winked at the pair of them.

His amusement didn’t last long.

“Seriously, though, Rei...” His voice was somber again. “You get that I’m *not* saying you should take this, right? I’m just saying it wouldn’t be smart not to at least

consider it. Even if your family is behind it. If there's just a shot in hell it's legit..." He trailed off, leaving his insistence to hang heavy between them.

It made it easy for Rei to swallow, then nod.

"I get it man. I know what you're saying. Like you said, it costs nothing to make sure."

"Yeah..." Catcher agreed quietly, looking like he himself was again weighing the implications of what Rei had revealed to them. "Yeah... Exactly." After a second of staring at nothing, he came to with a breath, the brightness Rei had long come to associate with the boy returning only a little forced. "Okay. Cool. Then if you're good with it, I'll send the contract to my mom tonight. Meanwhile, I'm gonna go figure out where the hell Grant dragged the girls off to. Pretty sure I could use my own punching bag right now, and his face seems like a pretty viable candidate."

Rei chuckled at that. "Sounds good." He started to stand, too. "We'll come with. Bugs me that we're missing out on team training, but we can make it up a bit if we—"

He stopped, because a hand had taken him even before he was halfway out of his chair.

Half-turning, he found Aria not looking at him, eyes on the glowing fish in the back wall of the locker room, her fingers steady around his wrist.

"Yeeeeeah... Maybe you should hang out here for a bit," Catcher said, sounding like he was hiding another smile. "Catch up when you can."

And then, before Rei could answer one way or the other, the Saber was off whistling a too-cheerful tune as the doors of the room opened for him, the sound echoing clearly in the expanse of the hall outside until they shut once more at his back.

Easing himself down again slowly, Rei waited, Aria not letting go of his wrist even after he was sitting beside her once more.

When she didn't turn to him for a good 20 seconds, though, he finally spoke.

"Hey... You okay?"

In answer, Aria took a single, shaky breath, then slowly turned to look at him.

“That’s *my* line, dummy...”

Rei felt a tightening in his gut he didn’t like one bit. While Aria wasn’t crying, exactly, her eyes were red, and her expression was one of barely controlled fury. Much like Viv, the suspicions he’d shared with her and Catcher had obviously hit her hard, and Rei wanted—not for the first time that day—to punch himself.

“I’m really sorry,” he said quietly. “If I’d known it was going to be this heavy on you guys, I would have—”

“Rei, if you *hadn’t* told me, it would be *you* I would be eventually looking to shish kabob with Hippolyta, rather than your shitty-ass parents.”

Rei managed a tight smile at that. “Not sure you can use ‘shish kabob’ as a verb...”

“You can. As of today. I’m coining it.”

“If you say so,” he answered with a dry laugh, still taking her in carefully. “But you didn’t answer me... You okay?”

Aria snorted, finally letting go of his wrist to wipe at her eyes. “Yeah. I’m fine. I’m with Catcher, though. I definitely *get* why Viv went ballistic on Vademe’s group. If I’d known what was going on beforehand, I probably would have done the same thing.”

“*That’s* not a scary image at all.” Rei couldn’t help but be amused at the thought. “You should consider your opponent’s feelings before doing something like that, Aria. *You* coming barreling out of the dark with murder in your eyes? Blue Team would have all had to change into clean uniforms after the match.”

Aria let out another, more genuine laugh at that, looking up at him as she finished drying her eyes. For a little while she just watched him, lips curled slightly as though unsure whether she wanted to frown or smile.

“I’m just tired of you having it rough, Rei,” she said eventually. “I’m tired of you getting treated like crap because people are selfish asshats. It’s bull. And I’m tired of it.”

“Imagine how *I* feel then,” he grumbled, still trying to lighten the mood. “Do you know how many times giant corporations have offered me a million credits in exchange for my soul? Organizing the invites alone is freaking exhausting.”

“Rei, I’m serious. They shouldn’t be able to do this. If your family *is* behind this crap, it’s awful.”

Rei shrugged. “And I say again that you give them too much credit if you don’t think they’re awful people, Aria.”

Aria nodded at that, then sighed. “Yeah. Fine. You’re right.” After another moment or two she straightened up, a bit of her usual confidence coming back to her. “Still, if there’s anything I can do, you know I’m here. I’ll get the contract to Kalus, too, obviously, if you’re okay with that.”

Rei opened his mouth, about to automatically answer that he appreciated it, and that he would definitely let her know, when a thought struck him.

A thought he suspected Viv would be proud of him for.

“You know, there *is* something you could do for me, actually...” he said, grinning at her slowly.

“Oh?” Aria seemed a little surprised but not displeased as she brightened a bit more. “What?”

“I *definitely* owe you a date where we *don’t* end up pinning a bunch of random dudes to a bathroom wall, don’t I?”

The red came quick, Aria’s cheeks and ears turning almost the same color as her freckles.

Still, for once, she didn’t look away as she smiled.

“Yeah. You *definitely* do.”

CHAPTER 10

The remainder of the week passed without any great excitement or incident, as did the following one. Rei and the rest of the squad were allowed to resume team training the next day, with Dent and Sergeant Major Liam Gross—the first-year Duelist sub-instructor—working all 18 first-years hard enough to punish the group all over again and then some. Friday came and went, as did Saturday, and Rei and Aria actually got most of the day Sunday to spend in Easthold, having the opportunity to explore everything from the rest of the thrift stores to a sizable indoor petting zoo neither of them had known existed on the very top floor of one of the mall’s towering structures. After that, it was Monday, with the last week of break highlighted only by an embarrassed announcement from Catcher.

His mother had gotten back to him about the contract.

Obviously mortified, the boy shared the message with Rei, Aria, and Viv over a breakfast they’d managed to sneak away from Grant and Cashe for. Taking it in, Rei had first only been able to take note of the astounding amount of emoticons and exclamation points, the sheer volume of graphics added to the few short paragraphs putting even Viv’s famously animated communications to shame. It had made it borderline impossible to decipher the actual *contents* of the response, resulting in Catcher having to translate—with well-practiced exasperation—more than one section for them all. Rei was glad he did, though, because the news was surprising. When the now-retired captain of the ISCM had understood who the question was for, she’d not only combed through the contract herself, but redacted it and shown it to a few friends still active on the SCT circuits. Apparently, all had returned with a unanimous assessment:

Not only was the contract legitimate, it was a steal unlike any of them had ever seen for anyone under a consistent *Systems*-level competitor at the very least.

Rei—after asking Catcher to extend his thanks to his mom from him—had been unable to think of anything else for the rest of the day, so distracted by this confirmation that he blundered their training that afternoon, going down to Laquita Martin’s paired blades in a Capture Point round to cost the squad one of the only two matches they lost the entire week.

Fortunately—or at least Rei thought so—as the days passed and the last weekend before school recommenced arrived, he had good reason to set further consideration of the Kamiya contract aside.

They would have one week of class—basically an excuse for institutes like Galens to get schedules in place and run any bi-annual or quarterly parameter testing they wanted—and then it was time for Sectionals...

Despite everything else, despite his growing strength and the squad’s consistent top-level performance, Rei couldn’t help but start to get nervous as Sunday arrived with the sound of flyers dropping every few minutes from the sky lanes above the school. Meals—held with all six of them together—were an atypically quiet affair, with even Catcher’s boisterous nature tinged with an edge of uncertainty and Grant’s somber presence even more heavy than usual. It took little convincing of anyone for them all to spend the afternoon in East Center, partially in order to eke out as much training as they could from the last day of the break, but mostly to avoid any more of the half-dozen variations of “Ready for Sectionals?!” that the growing number of returning students had cheerfully shot their way between breakfast and lunch. So prevalent was the buzz of excitement from the cadets who hadn’t qualified that all six of them—even *Grant*—spent the evening hanging out in 304 after the sun set just to get away from the greater school body. The other squads, too, seemed to be feeling the pressure, because Benaly himself left his room in a rare appearance to join them on the suite’s two couches, venting about the eager hounding from his friends he’d been getting all day.

In this fashion the first Monday of the new semester arrived, with Rei, Aria, Viv, and Grant making an odd group after waving farewell to Catcher and Cashe, who weren't in their shared 1-A class block. Making the steady trek across campus under a crisp January morning sun, they headed for the Device Evolution Department for their first lecture of the new semester. Reaching the building, it took only a minute to climb the stairs up to the third floor and find their lesson hall abuzz with a familiar drone of conversation and noise from their classmates.

Abuzz, that is, until almost all discussion faded over the 5 or so seconds it took for people to notice they were there.

Rei wasn't surprised, looking around as the four of them reached and started up the steps that bisected the room's hundred-and-something amphitheater-style seats. From what he could tell, the other 1-A cadets had already largely been gathered around Kay—who'd arrived first—obviously having been excitedly asking her about the break and how she was feeling about Sectionals. What was more, even as Rei caught the poor Lancer's eye through the crowd—as well as her mouthed "Help!" that got a low chuckle out of him—he knew there was more than one reason why stares would be lingering, particularly from a few forms sitting separate from the majority of the rest of the group.

As Aria led the way, pressing across into one of the lower rows to pick a seat near the lecture podium at the front of the class, even *he* had to work not to look surprised as Grant followed them, tailing Viv at Rei's back to claim a chair to her right, making their group a foursome that took up most of their claimed aisle.

"You don't have to sit with us if you don't want to..."

Rei's ears perked up even as he set his bag down beside his chair, and on his left he saw Aria partially freeze as she, too, heard Viv's sidelong whisper to the Mauler.

Grant scoffed under his breath. "You think I'd rather sit on my own?"

"No, I just... I meant you can sit with your friends, if you wanted to? I can see you at lunch..."

Grant gave another snort, reaching into his bag to pull out a stylus and pop it between his teeth to hold onto as he dragged out a large pad next. Setting it up at a propped angle on the desk before him, only then did he free his mouth up again, turning the pad on with a tap of the screen even as he answered.

“I want nothing to do with those guys, Viv. Barely ever did in the first place.”

Glancing around briefly while he slid his own smaller pad from his bag, Rei thought Viv looked rather pleased as she pulled the cap of her uniform off her head to set it on the table, fidgeting with it as though just to distract from the smile she was clearly trying to suppress. Turning in his chair, then, he braved a look up the rows until he found a pair of angry blue eyes.

For once, though, Mateus Selleck’s irritation wasn’t directed at him, but rather at Grant’s back. Meanwhile, on either side of the Saber, Tad Emble, Camilla Warren, and the legendarily gossipy Phalanx Leda Truant seemed uneasy, glancing between Selleck and Grant as though unsure of what to make of what was probably an unexpected situation.

Catching Warren’s gaze briefly as she looked their way, Rei couldn’t stop himself from smiling venomously up at the treacherous Brawler, and was about to offer her a sarcastic wave when his vision was suddenly blocked by a wide, familiar form.

“Before you say anything, Kay already made me *swear* not to ask you about Sectionals, so don’t worry about that.”

Looking up into the grinning face of the tall, bald boy leaning over the desk of the aisle above them, Rei had to answer with a laugh.

“Good on her.” He offered up a fist to the cadet to bump in greeting. “If one more person asks me if I’m ready, I’m either gonna punch them or vomit on their boots.”

“Gross,” Viv muttered, though she, too, turned to give a little wave to the boy. “How was break, Sense?”

Bahnt “Sense” Senseon—a wide-shouldered Brawler with a shaved head who had arguably been Rei’s first friend at school after Viv and Catcher—made a face even as he lowered himself down to sit behind them. His cap and bag weren’t with him, but Rei knew they would be over by where Kay had resumed fending off the throng that had apparently decided she would be a more likely source of information than Aria’s group. Sense and the Sectional-qualifying Lancer were suitemates, and along with the Saber Leron Joy had developed a strong bond early on in the school year, forming an in-class trio much like Rei, Viv, and Aria had for the first semester. Joy—unlike Sense and Kay—wasn’t a fan of Rei’s for various reasons, but the other two were good-natured enough that it made tolerating the Saber’s sour nature worth it most of the time.

“Urgh,” Sense started to answer with a disgruntled sigh even as he gave his own wave of hello to Aria, who’d turned to mouth “Hey” at him after setting up her pad. “Honestly... not great. My mom was chill, and really pleased with my progress over the first semester, but I think my dad was a little disappointed I didn’t qualify for the SCTs, or at least get invited to a squad.”

“Yeah... That’s a bummer, man,” Rei agreed sympathetically. “I was a little surprised, not gonna lie... You’re *easily* one of the best Brawlers in the class.”

He meant it, too. In fact, aside from himself and Jack Benaly, Rei would have placed Sense as the third strongest Brawler—or at least “User with Brawler capabilities”—among the first-years, though probably tied with Emily Gisham, the other of their 1-A training group overseen by Michael Bretz. Sense was quick for his size, and his “Scarabus” packed a heavy punch, but he was also smart, on *and* off the field.

“It’s just bad luck.” Aria seemed to be in agreement as she nodded at Sense. “It’s just the direction the others decided to take their squads. If Vademe had wanted a Brawler on his team, I’ll bet you would have been a top pick.”

Sense perked up at this. “You think so?”

“Definitely.” She leaned back in her chair a little and dropped her voice. “You were *my* next pick, if Rei said no.”

The Brawler’s eyes went wide at that, mouth going a little slack.

“Nuh-uh,” he got out after a second. “You’re kidding.”

Before Aria could affirm, though, she was interrupted.

“Your Intra-School record was tied with Gisham’s, and you’ve got more speed than she does. Even if she’s a heavier hitter, Laurent already had our offensive ability covered by me and Viv, and Benaly had already signed on with Martin. Statistically, you’re better balanced than Gisham and would have been the best choice.”

As one, Rei, Aria, Viv, *and* Sense all looked around at Grant slowly. The Mauler was fiddling with his pad, not having turned from the screen as he’d spoken, but when no one said anything for several seconds he finally glanced up.

Blinking at the sight of all four of them staring at him, his brow furrowed.

“What? I pay attention.”

“Yeah... Apparently,” Sense was the first to answer, sounding *completely* flabbergasted by Grant’s words. “Uh... Thanks, man. That actually makes me feel better.”

Grant nodded curtly, then returned to messing with his setup without another word. After he’d looked away, Sense turned to Rei with eyes so wide they might have popped out of his head, expression clearly asking “What the hell was that??”

Rei, though, could only shrug and hope his raised eyebrows answered with a satisfactory, “No idea.” In truth, it wasn’t unknown for Grant to have praised other cadets—Rei had witnessed it before himself—but it *was* rare, and the Mauler was still largely more widely known for his moody temperament and the bad blood he’d been largely responsible for stirring up in the first semester. Then again, that—along with the fact that Grant was still undisputedly the third strongest first-year at Galens after Aria and Rei—probably made his approval much more ironclad.

Sure enough, Sense seemed rather less disgruntled with himself as he let out a “Huh...” and sat back in his borrowed chair, looking like he was contemplating a whole new reality.

Then he seemed to come back to himself.

“Like Rei was gonna tell you ‘no’, though.” He let out a dry laugh, looking around at Aria again before his grin grew a little more genuine. “What choice did he have? No one else would *willingly* drag his scrawny ass to Sectionals, let’s be real.”

“You know, that’s a *really* good point,” Aria played right along with the Brawler, turning to look at Rei with a frown. “Come to think of it, I definitely *should* have negotiated a little harder...”

“Hold up!” Rei exclaimed, looking from Aria to Sense in alarm. “When did this suddenly become ‘pick on Rei’ day?”

“It’s *always* ‘pick on Rei’ day, dummy,” Viv whispered from behind him, and he looked over his shoulder to find the girl grinning wickedly from her chair. “At least until you’re tall enough to not need a booster seat in class.”

“Oh you little—!” Rei started, whirling to face his best friend in full, but before he could get another word out, a stern, clear voice cut across their banter.

“Alright, everyone, that’s enough. To your seats, if you please.”

At once Aria, Rei, Viv, and Grant all straightened in their chairs automatically, while Sense let out a quiet curse from behind them as he got up to join the scattering others seeking their chosen desks. Ordinarily *none* of them would have been brave enough to be so lax while waiting for an instructor, but Lieutenant Major John Markus was as well known for his lack of interest in decorum as he was for being the—often long-winded—head of the Device Evolution Department. Tall, thin, and yellow-haired, in full black-and-golds the officer came ambling into the room while eyeing the class sidelong, but everyone was quick enough to find their places before he reached the lecture podium on the far side of the hall, so he made no further comment as he came

to stand before them. With a tap the lectern whirred to life, the flat part of the mechanism rising quickly from its stand to hover up before the man, anti-grav technology allowing him to sweep his hand across the lift desk's surface. Without preamble, the smart-glass wall behind the lieutenant came alive, and Rei had to suppress a groan—while several others failed to, including Viv beside him—as the title “Quantified Metrics of Average Device Progression” spelled itself out before them all.

There were certainly parts of class Rei had missed, but he got a feeling this particular course was not going to be a pleasant reminder of any of them.

2 hours—and several barely-avoided naps by all *four* of them later—Rei, Aria, Viv, and Grant exited the Device Evolution building and made for the Tactical Studies Department. It was warmer than it had been that morning, and they were joined by Sense, Kay, and a reluctant Leron Joy now as they made the trek across the grounds, all of them other than Grant and Joy chatting animatedly about the break while they walked. Fortunately for everyone, their second class—an active review of multi-team combat positions on complex fields—was *much* more interesting than Markus' staid lecture, particularly when Captain Sarah Takeshi spent the second half of class making each of them assess various mid-match group positions across a variety of Wargame maps. By the time they were released for lunch, Rei was feeling much more in the swing of things again, and it was with a bit of returning excitement for the Galens curriculum that he shot Catcher and Cashe a message that they were all headed to eat before afternoon combat training. Reaching the mess hall, they said goodbye to Sense, Kay, and Joy—the former two having voiced a desire to find Vademe's group—and got in line for food.

“That was a *bitch*,” Catcher groaned as the six of them sat down some 5 minutes after they all found each other, dropping his roasted chicken and asparagus to the table unenthusiastically. “Only a morning down, and I'm pretty sure we have, like, *three hours* of review to do for Combat Theory.”

“Really?” Aria asked, sounding surprised. “Samsus is dropping work on us already? Markus and Takeshi didn’t give us anything.”

As they had all through the break, the six of them had claimed their favorite table in the south quarter of the hall. Built inside a great arboretum whose domed walls and ceiling had been constructed from thousands of rectangular panes of thick, clear glass, each quarter of the building used some sort of unseen zoning tech Rei had yet to completely figure out to host its own unique flora and climate. Whereas the east quadrant—most commonly frequented by first-years—had been designed after the tropics, with bright colors, palm trees, and a healthy warmth to the temperature, the *south* section of the structure held a deeper, calmer air. Pines and other evergreens rose above their heads from beds of moss and stone in the wide beds that separated the floor into winding sections, and what little artificial accents had been added were largely deep green or blue, helping to give the area a serene sort of aura. The climate, too, was cooler, and this despite the fact that their six-person table—secluded in a nook the second-years who made up a majority of the quarter’s occupants tended to ignore—sat not 3 feet from the rounded wall that let in the late morning sun.

It made for a pleasantly quiet spot on any day, but in particular when Rei had felt some hundred different stares trading off boring into his back as he’d stood in the lunch line with the others.

“Voss didn’t give us any homework either, but I guess that’s not surprising.” Cashe was frowning at Catcher from the opposite corner of the table. “Didn’t enjoy the protocol review, but I guess the school staff think three weeks away from campus is enough time for first-year cadets to forget how to salute properly.”

“Oh we have *protocol review*?” Viv groaned from beside the Lancer and opposite Rei, forkful of mashed potatoes pausing halfway to her mouth. “*Please* tell me it wasn’t four hours or whatever it was last semester...”

Cashe, though, could only grimace apologetically in response, earning another groan.

“At least this afternoon is going to be interesting,” Rei cut in, trying to cheer everyone up as he took his fork and knife to his own roasted chicken, having loaded his plate almost as high as Grant had on Viv’s other side. Between training and Shido’s ongoing effect on his body, there were days he was convinced he could have eaten his weight in food and asked for seconds. “Gotta be parameter testing, right?”

“Maybe?” Aria answered uncertainly from his left, not yet having touched her salmon and salad. “I imagine they’ll want to get it done before we head out Sunday, but that does leave them the whole week.”

“Nah, it’s today,” Catcher chimed in again. “A friend of mine from 1-E messaged me about it, since they have combat training in the morning. Makes sense. It was right out the gate the first Mondays of the last two quarters. I’ll bet Dent and the others want to make a point to anyone who didn’t keep up on conditioning over break.”

“Won’t be too many of those, though, will there?” Cashe asked with a frown. “You’d have to be pretty ballsy to take *three weeks* off of training, especially after the Intra-School results.”

“No. There won’t be. People will be jealous. Especially with how many of the Sectional qualifiers weren’t a part of the summer training program.”

Once again there was a pause, and Rei, Aria, Viv, Catcher, and Cashe all turned to look at Grant in surprise. Rei wasn’t sure if it was well-hidden nerves, subtle excitement at the return to school or the upcoming SCTs, or the fact that the massive boy was just finally starting to feel a little more comfortable around them all, but his active participation in their conversation not once but *twice* in a single morning was practically unheard of. The Mauler had never been *quiet*, per se—he could be direct enough when it came to combat strategizing in particular, for example—but he’d simply never bothered to try and take part in this lighter small talk that the other five of them always

indulged in. It had admittedly been awkward for the first week of break or so, but they'd gotten used to it eventually, settling into a quiet understanding that Grant was likely never going to be much more than a silent, hulking presence in their midst.

Rei, seeing what he suspected would be a rare opportunity, decided to try and capitalize on the chance.

"You think that'll have that much of an effect?" he asked Grant diplomatically as the Mauler popped half of the rather-large potato he'd just sliced in two into his mouth. "Were there enough outside the summer group to light that kind of fire?"

It felt odd, asking the question, because he happened to agree wholeheartedly with Grant. Rei had witnessed a renewed energy from the first-years from the very start of the Intra-Schools, and was pretty sure it had carried all the way through the remainder of the second semester, even after the tournament had wrapped. Still, it felt like a good way to offer back his own olive branch, so he was careful to keep his tone curious as he asked.

Unfortunately, the flat expression Grant treated him with even as he chewed through his mouthful of potato told him the boy had seen right through his attempt.

Then again... That only made Rei feel sure it had been the right move when he swallowed and answered anyway.

"Definitely." His response was terse but civil as he started to cut into the hefty slab of seared flank steak that took up the center of his plate, eyes obviously deliberately set on the task. "Me, von Leef, Khatri, and Ranjha all didn't get through. Khatri didn't even get invited to a squad. Plus, some of the others are *only* going as individual qualifiers."

"Not everyone plays nice with others," Viv agreed, seeming particularly eager to keep the conversation going now that Grant was actually involved. "Don't know how the hell Jiang convinced Vademe to invite her onto his team, for example."

"Do we not like Jiang?" Cashe asked, looking curiously between them all.

"We don't."

Aria and Catcher answered together, as Rei would have had he not taken the opportunity to dig in himself. Catcher chuckled under his breath at their echoed timing, but indicated that Aria could explain by biting into his chicken.

“She’s... not very nice, in our experience.” Aria was apparently feeling polite. “Especially when it comes to Rei.”

Viv, less patient as always, elucidated more poignantly.

“She’s a bitch.”

Rei and Catcher both snorted while Aria shot Viv a “That’s not very nice” look, which was only answered with a shrug.

“What? It’s true. She tries to blame everyone else when something doesn’t go her way, she doesn’t take feedback well, and she’s pretty obviously *pissed* that Rei can beat her with his eyes closed now. Am I wrong?”

Aria opened her mouth to argue, but paused, seeming to contemplate Viv’s points.

Finally, she appeared to give up with a shallow sigh, turning to Cashe again.

“She’s a bitch.”

“Noted,” the Lancer answered with a smirk, though her eyes went from Aria to Rei apologetically. “Not that I’m one to be able to judge...”

Rei waved the look away with his fork as he swallowed. “You had damn good reason for being nasty. You were just wrong. It’s different. I’ll bet you anything Jiang would have fallen in with Selleck and the others if she was in our class block. She’s just got that kind of temperam—*om!*”

A boot to his shin had Rei wincing, and he looked at Viv to find her giving him a wide-eyed, warning stare. Realizing his mistake, Rei only glanced at Grant briefly, finding something like a grimace barely held back behind the Mauler’s tight lips.

“It doesn’t matter.” Rei corrected course quickly, giving Viv a quick “Sorry!” look. “She probably got picked for a good reason I’m sure.”

“Maybe they’re dating?” Catcher asked curiously.

“Vademe and Jiang?” Aria looked around Rei at the Saber. “Don’t think so. Pretty sure he’s been going out with Dorne since second quarter, hasn’t he?”

“He has?” Cashe sounded pleasantly surprised. “Oh that’s good! I like Sam! He’s in my class block and really nice!”

After that the conversation devolved quickly into the standard fare of gossip and chatter that Rei thought was a healthy thing to still be able to have so soon before Sectionals. In what seemed to be a group effort, everyone—with the exception of Catcher, who was obviously still holding out—even made more than one attempt to involve Grant in the banter, pulling the Mauler out of a threatening sullenness Rei had foolishly almost brought on. They even got something of a smirk out of him—Viv’s work, obviously—when they started talking about some of their individual accomplishments from the week before, and by the time they had to split again for afternoon training Rei was feeling almost optimistic about the future of their little squad, both on and off the field.

The walk to the Arena was a pleasant one, Rei and Aria close together and talking about going back into the city to check out some of the other attractions while Viv and Grant held their own subdued conversation a few paces back. Despite the sun it was definitely still winter, and the morning chill had returned in force while they’d been eating, making Rei glad for the longer hair he’d let grow out despite the girls’ shared protests that he should cut it. He’d had mixed feelings about donning the uniform again that morning, and especially hadn’t missed not being able to pull a hood or hat over his ears as he’d been allowed to do over break, but fortunately the mess wasn’t too far from the center of campus. Before long, they—along with a scattering of other 1-A students and upperclassmen—were ascending the stairs into the Arena, the air growing warmer the moment the four of them crested the top of the entrance stairs to spill out onto the walkway that rose 10 feet above the main floor below them. From there it was barely a few minutes to the underwork elevators and a descent to SB2—the second of several

sub-basements that extended probably several hundred yards beneath the building. One last familiar walk to the shared locker rooms, and 10 minutes later the four of them were out of their regulars and in their usual red-on-grey combat suits, barefooted as they took the corner out of the wide hallway onto the main floor of the massive training chamber.

As with each of the other sub-basements—at least to the best of Rei’s knowledge—SB2 was centered around an entire full-length Wargames floor. Other than wide openings in the east and west portions, the colossal space was entirely surrounded by flat white walls that extended all the way to the arched ceiling that peaked some 100-plus feet over their heads. Beneath them, on the other hand, the black steel of the projection plating was almost identical to that of the official field of the Arena proper, except for one significant difference. Whereas the standard makeup of such a combat area would have consisted of the 150-by-70-yard Wargames zone that hosted two circular 70-yard Team Battle areas and a *further* two 30-yard Dueling circles, SB2’s Wargame zone had forgone these typical divisions. In their stead, the training space hosted a full *six* Dueling circles, presenting as two parallel lines of 3 butting right up to the 5-yard buffer zone that looped the entirety of the chamber. Stepping onto the plating, Rei was filled with an abrupt sense of anticipation that was—while not more intense—different than what he’d experienced whenever he and the others had prepped for squad-format training over the break. Maybe it was the return to form, the return to familiar ground and the drone of conversation from the 1-A classmates that echoed through the chamber, no longer diminishing at their appearance now that the other cadets had gotten their fill after the morning classes.

More likely, though, it was the impressive sight—one he hadn’t seen since the very start of the previous term—of Valera Dent standing at ease in her full regalia over the heads of the gathered students, formally flanked by six men and women in red-on-white combat suits to wing her on either side.

“That woman *does* know how to make a statement,” Viv mumbled after a low whistle. “Dammit she is *hot*...”

“Keep it in your pants, Viv,” Rei sniggered over his shoulder, earning himself a concurring grunt from Grant as he did.

Dent and her sub-instructors—their collective eyes following every arriving student in turn when each entered the chamber—had picked Field 3 to present themselves, as was the chief combat instructor’s habit. Despite having seen and spoken to *all* of the staff frequently over the course of the break, the sight of the seven of them all in one place was *definitely* imposing, especially since the field had been lifted 2 feet above the ground so everyone could take them in. As the four of them came to stand in a gap within the milling students, Rei caught Michael Bretz’s eyes for a moment, raising an eyebrow at the second lieutenant in question.

The man offered him nothing more than the slightest lift in the corner of his mouth, which Rei thought might have been amusement.

“Weirdos, all of them,” he muttered with a low laugh, turning from the silent instructors to wait for the rest of the class.

It didn’t take long.

“First-years! Welcome back to the Galens Institute! I trust everyone had a pleasant break?”

Valera Dent’s clear voice rang throughout the sub-basement after the last of the 1-A stragglers—the Saber Joshua Kallum—had hurriedly reached their gathered number a couple minutes later. At the question, there was a unanimous chorus of “Yes, ma’am!” from the class, everyone turning immediately to face Field 3 as the woman drew their attention.

“Excellent! That’s good to hear. As I’ve insisted before—both in class and privately to some of the more zealous among you—” Rei might have imagined the woman’s brown eyes flicking to him over the line of her prosthetic in that moment “—proper

rest is *essential* to the wellbeing of a User. Your Devices might provide you with a tremendous boost to stamina and recovery, but no matter how strong you get or how highly ranked your CADs might ever be, solely depending on them to keep you on your feet is a mistake you do not want to make. Trust me. I have been there.”

There was a scattering of suppressed laughter as Dent gave them a grimace that assured them she had *indeed* definitely “been there”, and it had *not* been a pleasant experience.

“That being said, I hope the majority of you who did not have the opportunity to grace us with your presence over break this year did more than sit on your asses for the last three weeks. I can assure you your twenty-one classmates who will be attending Sectionals with me next week have been doing anything but.”

Rei felt some of his nerves come back at these words, returning alongside the silence that immediately took hold of 1-A once again, far more deliberate this time.

Dent obviously noticed, because she nodded. “Yes. I see it. I see you. I see those of you who I know have toiled with me over the last three weeks to prepare for the coming fight, but I see also those of you who missed your opportunity. It bothers you, doesn’t it? Good. It should. Use that. Use that as fuel. Use that as fire. If you haven’t already, make today the day you start to push yourself to new heights, start to push yourself to new limits.” She paused to scan the class with an intensity that seemed meant to drill the fervor of her words into every soul before her. Rei could only imagine that most of the gazes she met were likely set and resolute, just as he knew his would have been in the reverse situation.

Sure enough the Bishop finally smiled, apparently satisfied with what she saw.

“Wonderful. Then speaking of limits...” Half turning, Dent indicated the sub-instructors still standing at-ease behind her. “As I imagine most of you suspect, along with my welcome back to school comes the announcement that it is time for your third parameter test! No fanfare today. Your Type-instructors are eager to get you onto your

fields and see how far you've come in the last thirteen weeks. As usual, I will be observing your attempts, and I want to see personal records from everyone in every category before the day is done. Is that clear?"

"Yes, ma'am!" came the unanimous call again, the energy of the woman's brief address audible in the voices of the first-years.

Another smile of approval from the captain, then a quick order without looking away from her charges.

"Instructors, the floor is yours!"

On cue, the six men and women behind the Bishop began to shout at the top of their lungs.

"Maulers, Field 6!"

"Sabers on 3!"

"Phalanxes! Meet at 5!"

As the others, including Michael Bretz, put out the call, Rei turned to Aria, Viv, and Grant.

"Catch you guys later," he said with a quick two-finger salute. "Kick some ass."

"Hell yeah," Viv agreed with a grin, already backstepping towards where Liam Gross was moving to gather his Duelists on Field 4. "Also, how about you try not to make all of us look bad this time, hmm?"

"Where's the fun in that?" Rei answered with a chuckle as Grant offered nothing more than a silent nod before turning away. Suspecting Aria wasn't about to leave as quickly, he looked around at her, unsurprised to find the girl watching him with something between suspicion and worry.

"I'll be fine," he assured her. "Promise."

She rolled her eyes, obviously unconvinced. "Rei, I've never met someone as prone to pushing themselves over a cliff as you, so don't make me promises you can't keep." Meeting his gaze again, though, she stared at him pointedly. "I'm getting used to it,

though. How about we compromise and settle on ‘don’t go till you’re bleeding from the ears again’. Deal?”

“Deal,” Rei echoed, holding out a hand for a mock handshake. “Cross my heart and hope to die.”

Aria didn’t miss a beat, accepting the offered hand and squeezing it with juuuust enough added Strength to make Rei wince. “Better hold to that swear. ’Cause if you make me worry again I might just kill you myself, jerk.”

Rei laughed, fingers lingering in Aria’s for a second after she’d relaxed. She, too, didn’t go anywhere, and for a moment Rei experienced a strange sort of contentment as the two of them stood still, the only ones not moving in the bustle of students making for their fields.

Unfortunately for them, they lingered just a *fraction* of a second too long.

“Ward!” Michael Bretz’s ringing shout was as clear as a bell, rising from Field 1 for all to hear even over the sounds of chatter and bare feet on steel. “Kiss your girlfriend goodbye and get over here before I make you do push-ups until the shape of your face is *permanently worn into this floor!*”

CHAPTER 11

The red “0” flashed. The starting circle vanished.

Rei took off with a *crack* as the white surface of the simulated flooring beneath Shido’s steel toes crunched under the pressure of 13 weeks of newfound Strength and Speed.

All other sound from around the sub-basement faded to nothing as Rei ripped forward, Cognition setting his neuroline to whirring in his head even before the numbers had started counting down. Bolting northward, his eyes barely moved now as he struck left and right, high and low, every inch of his Brawler Mode applied to the task at hand. Claws, knees, elbows, shins. Even his head came into play in one flip as he left the ground to run *up* the sheer wall of one of the many octagonal white pillars that formed the Neutral Zone’s only obstacles. He was a whirlwind of destruction, every punch and thrust and hit calculated now in a way he’d never managed to map out before. His movements were deliberate, almost mathematical, from the slightest shift in momentum to the skyward leap from the rising staircase of pillars that looped half of the field. The only thing Rei didn’t count was the time, pacing himself deliberately, pushing himself here only to apply the brakes there, applying both focus and speed to the task at hand.

It paid off as Bretz’s shout reached him through the thrum of thought and the passing wind just as Rei dropped out of a kickflip off yet another rising wall that had brought him nearly 20 feet into the air.

“Time!”

Rei landed with a light *thump*, both legs and one hand accepting the impact of a drop any regular body would have crumpled under, the other arm extended out to balance himself. Breathing hard, he brought his head up to look skyward, finding the second lieutenant obviously struggling to hold back his delight.

“47 disks this time, Ward! Way to finish clean!”

Though his mouth was hidden, Rei was sure the officer would be able to see the grin in his eyes as he forwent answering aloud in favor of getting to his feet and throwing the man two thumbs up. It wasn't that he didn't have the breath for it, for once. If anything, his new C-Ranked Endurance was already largely bringing his lungs back online.

He just didn't trust himself to keep the glee out of his voice if he'd tried to squeak out a “Yes, sir!” or the like.

47! 47! Setting aside the fact that his second and third attempts had each gained him an additional 3 disks—the black, circular targets that had disappeared from the Speed & Agility testing field the moment his 15 seconds had been up—47 was pushing on *twice* his total score of 26 after the previous quarter's testing! What was more, Sense had only achieved 45 disks, officially marking Rei as the fastest User among the 1-A Brawler group according to standardized measurement. Feeling a little apprehensive about this fact, actually, Rei turned at a word of dismissal from the sub-instructor and started for the edge of the field where the others were waiting in their scattered circle, seeking out his friend's eye even as he muttered “Recall” to shed Shido's armor and claws in a whirl of metal and blue light. He'd had a rather poor experience the last time he'd hit a major milestone in class. Surpassing Tad Emble had earned him the beatdown of his life—and Rei *knew* beatdowns—even landing him in the campus hospital for most of a day before his Device could do enough to get him back on his feet again. Therefore, as he found Sense—seated between Rei's empty red circle and the one from which Emily Gisham was watching him approach with mouth hanging open—he braced himself for the worst.

In the end, he needn't have worried.

“*Rei,*” Sense hissed under his breath, gaping at Rei as he sat down. “My *man.* That was so freaking *cool!*”

Ordinarily they weren't allowed to speak between testing runs, but Bretz was occupied calling Warren up for her third and final attempt, so Rei granted the boy a sidelong laugh. "Thanks, dude. I think Shido's calculations actually ripped part of your go, so I feel kinda bad..."

"*Don't*," Sense insisted with a snort, throwing a thumb back at Gisham. "Emily and I were just saying we wish we'd recorded that so we could try copying the last half of it. That wall run and flip... That was awesome!"

"Thanks," Rei said again as Gisham—a short girl with cropped, reddish hair who he'd always been friendly with—leaned forward to listen around the boy. "Shido replotted after your second attempt, I think, but that last part was tricky, yeah. The clawed toes helped a lot."

"I'll bet." Sense glanced down at Rei's bare feet with a note of envy as Warren started a run at last, taking off in a blaze of orange light to—he suspected—make a desperate attempt at outdoing him. "I know you've heard it a hundred times before man, but that Device is something else."

"Scary," Gisham added in a hiss before stiffening as Bretz at last turned to frown down at them from atop his observation platform.

Rei raised a hand in apology, and after another second's worth of warning glare the sub-instructor turned back to watch Warren again.

Yes... Rei *had* heard Shido called "scary", and for good reason. Covering his arms, legs, *and* a good portion of his face, his CAD had demonstrated not only a terrifying potential for statistical improvement, but physical change as well. Even Aria didn't have a partial helm yet, and some digging through the recordings of the Sol System Intra-Schools—widely considered to host the strongest military schools in the ISC—had confirmed she wasn't the only top-level first-year lacking in such a way. *No* other cadet his age, not in the entirety of the Instersystem Collective—had a CAD that had

developed as far along physically as Shido, and that was despite a handful of students recruited to Earth's own academies who were now C7 and C8...

His Device's Growth spec wasn't just accelerating Rei's specification improvement. It had also *additionally* improved his evolution pacing, with a rough calculation indicating he was likely to achieve twice as many alterations to Shido's manifestations than the average User in his lifetime. And that didn't even count the transitions *Type Shift* added to the mix...

"Scary" was a very polite way of describing the CAD, if Rei was being honest with himself...

"Time!" Bretz called out, shaking Rei from his musings to drag his attention to the field again. "Total disks: 41. Decent showing, Warren. Off you go."

Warren's dark cheeks looked flushed as she pushed herself up from where she'd fallen to all fours the moment the attempt had wrapped. Turning on her heel and not looking at Rei—or anyone, for that matter—she recalled her CAD as she stomped off the already-fading field, leaving him to watch her take a seat as he did his best to suppress the gloating warmth of victory bubbling in his gut. 41 wasn't bad by any means. It wasn't a far cry from Sense's 45 and Gisham's 44, but it was obvious Warren was kicking herself for placing behind them all. It could have been worse, of course, and as the girl brought her knees up to hug to her chest in a dejected sort of way, Rei's eyes slipped by her to Tad Emble, who looked almost grey, as he had from the moment he'd finished his third attempt. 41 wasn't bad, sure...

But a final score of 37 would have had Rei feeling sickly, too.

"You know the drill, cadets!" Bretz shouted the moment the platform had brought him down to the projection plating again, vanishing into the black steel before them. "Five minutes of rest and recuperation, then it's time for Offense & Endurance. Any questions?" As usual, the second lieutenant didn't wait for anyone to voice any concerns. "No? Good. Break!"

Rei shoved himself up, and was soon deep in a three-way conversation with Sense and Gisham about their runs, trading feedback and recommendations as to what each of them thought the others could have done better from an observer's perspective. Meanwhile, Warren and Emble stayed seated where they were, not even bothering to interact with each other, much less Rei and the others. He might have felt bad, actually, if it weren't for the memory of Mateus Selleck's boot all but breaking his nose.

As it was, all he could do was stop himself from smirking, which undoubtedly would have earned him questioning looks from Sense and Gisham both.

Finally at a point where his body recovered nearly as quickly as the Brawlers', it wasn't more than a minute or so before Rei was feeling a hundred percent again, his lungs and limbs prepped and ready for the second test. With this rapid recovery came excitement, too, because this next exam was going to offer an opportunity he'd never had before, and Sense turning to him in a lull in the conversation as their break neared an end indicated Rei wasn't the only one thinking about it.

"You gonna shift for Offense & Endurance?"

The question was stated casually, as normally as one could expect, but the tension in Sense's features and the slight—but immediate—tautening of Gisham's shoulders beside him told Rei this was a query they both had been waiting eagerly to get an answer to. And of course they were. Shido's Saber Mode was slower than its Brawler form, so calling on it would have put him at a disadvantage during the Speed & Agility test, but such wasn't the case for the second exam.

A fact Rei had spent more than one distracted moment mulling over since he'd realized the edge Type Shift might offer...

"Shift'," he repeated Sense's offhand abbreviation of his Ability with a laugh. "I like that. Might have to adopt it. It's a pain to call it 'Type Shift' every time."

Sense and Gisham offered him only mirrored, tight smiles, obviously not about to let him distract them from the answer they were looking for.

Rei sighed internally, giving in. “Honestly... probably? I’ve got a plan, but I want to test it out in the first two attempts if I can.”

Gisham chuckled, sounding somewhere between genuinely amused and exasperated. “Bretz is gonna *love* that. You know how much he enjoys it when you twist the testing rules in your favor.”

Rei chuckled at the sarcasm. “Given the two of you took a page out of my book during the last parameter tests, I’d say I’m doing something right.”

The girl grinned, the tension leaving her and Sense both now that it was clear Rei wasn’t about to stonewall them despite the subject matter. “That’s different. We’re just following the science. You get to be the guinea pig, and when you don’t get yelled at—”

“Or die,” Sense added with a smirk.

“—we just apply what we learn,” Gisham finished, nodding sagely. “Mind you the Defense test is a little different. We can copy you easily enough there, but I don’t think anyone else is about to spontaneously learn to pull a whole new CAD Type out of their ass overnight, so I think you get to run this maze all on your own.”

“Am I a guinea pig, or a mouse?” Rei asked, amused.

“Yes,” Sense and Gisham both answered at once, earning themselves a heavy rolling of the eyes.

“I *seriously* need better friends,” Rei pretended to mutter to himself, just loud enough for the two of them to hear. They laughed, but before either of them could press him any further on his scheme for the exam, Bretz’s voice had them looking towards the field again.

“Alright, cadets! It’s been three months since your last Offense & Endurance exam, so we’re going to do a thorough review before we get started.” The A-Ranked Brawler threw a thumb over his shoulder, indicating the center of the Dueling zone where a red circle was bright against the plain white of the rest of the 30-yard floor. “You stand

there. Bad guys pop up to the north and south of you. Bad guys need to be FDAed. Bad guys get stronger every two you beat. The more bad guys you beat and the faster you beat them, the better you make me look. Clear? Great! Glad we had this talk!” Bretz looked to Rei, Sense, and Gisham, still standing together several yards from where Warren and Emble had finally gotten to their feet. “Gisham! You’re up!” A light flared briefly in the second lieutenant’s eyes as he pulled something up in his frame. “Your score to beat is... first B0 in 4:28.83, it looks like. Ready?”

“Yes, sir!” the girl announced loud and clear, unsurprisingly eager as she stepped forward. Gisham’s score—which had involved ripping through *sixteen* training projections to reach the first B-ranked opponent—had been the highest in the group last quarter, and one of the highest in the class block, only coming in behind Aria, Grant, Viv, and Kay, despite lower-ranked Brawlers being at something of a disadvantage in this particular test. Though Rei thought he had a good chance of surpassing her this time around, Gisham still approached the middle of the sparring area excitedly, looking like she had something to prove.

“Cadet. Call.”

Bretz’s command had Gisham’s CAD, Feron, flashing into being not long after she’d taken her position in the middle of the zone. Blue vysetrium—several shades darker than Shido’s—glimmered along red and green steel. The Device covered her lower legs from hips to toes and encased her forearms in narrow plating that was a little lighter than most C-ranked Brawlers might have been expected to sport. Feron made up for it, though, in the matching long, singular blades that extended from just above her wrists over articulated gauntlets, reaching some 8 inches beyond the length of her middle finger. As a result, what Gisham lacked in Defense was compensated for in an excellent reach for her Type, along with what had to be a heavy Offense spec, not to mention the added bonus of free use of her hands that some Brawlers—like Sense—didn’t have.

It all made for a pretty badass sight as the girl took a ready pose designed for her manifestation, left hand up defensively between her and the red number 5 that had just appeared before her face, right drawn back at her side, ready to plunge forward at a moment's notice.

Then the number hit 0, and Gisham had the chance to turn all that coiled readiness into pure, ripping destruction.

North of her starting position, a smaller red circle had appeared as the countdown ticked away, and by the time the Brawler left her ring the form of a woman had pixelated into being, completely monotone grey other than the plain black "F0" Rei knew would be marked on the projection's back. Despite having her arms up at the ready as Gisham hurtled towards her—the opponents in the Offense & Endurance test only ever dodged and defended, rather than taking any offensive action—the "woman" had no more physical ability than an average non-User, and was therefore all-but-helpless as Feron tore through her feeble guard to pierce her chest.

All within probably 2 seconds.

Gisham didn't pause, of course. Ripping her Device free of the falling form, she whirled and bolted across the field again where a second figure—this time that of a man—appeared to the south. Another F0, it took no more time for the girl to bring him down, and she was turning again, this time facing off with the first F5 of the day.

Back and forth like this Gisham sprinted, tearing through the Fs, the Es, then the Ds. There she slowed down a bit as the projections gained speed and some real defensive aptitude, but it was only when she reached the first C0 woman that any kind of real fight was actually had. The Brawler's opponent was *definitely* quicker now, and it took some chasing and footwork before Gisham finally hooked an ankle to bring the woman down, felling her cleanly with a slash from Feron's blade across her neck. The C0 man was next, then the C5 with even more noticeable difficulty, then at last...

“Time!” Bretz yelled, his NOED flashing again from where he was standing at the edge of the field. The B0 woman that the girl had been hounding glitched and vanished, leaving Gisham staggering and breathing like the bellows. “First B0 reached in 3:57.90! Strong improvement, Gisham! Nice job!”

“R-Really?” Gisham barely managed to get out, so obviously disappointed in herself that she appeared to forget decorum for a second as she spoke through gasps. “But I... didn’t even break my... record...”

Bretz frowned at her. “The hell are you talking about, cadet? You cut more than 30 seconds off your previous time. You might not have taken on a stronger opponent, but you got there a whole half-minute faster. That’s more than a little improvement in my book.” Before Gisham could respond, however, he crossed his arms and jerked his head over his shoulder. “Now clear the field. Emble! You’re up!”

Gisham—looking marginally more pleased with her performance after this exchange—remembered to salute this time before recalling and trading places with Emble, who Rei made a point to ignore even as the boy took his middle position. Instead, he joined Sense in giving Gisham a grin and a thumbs up, which he hoped would further tell her she’d done better than she thought. Still, he totally got the disappointment. The easiest measure of improvement in the Offense & Endurance test was what rank of opponent you managed to get to, but cutting more than 30 seconds off of reaching the B0 fighters was *definitely* an achievement, just like Bretz said.

And solidified Rei’s plan in his head.

Emble wrapped his first attempt with a much better showing than he’d given in Speed & Agility, making it to the second C5—up from the second C0 the previous quarter—in a respectable time, which was almost commendable given he had sandbagged the last parameter testing in an effort to outdo Rei. After that, Warren went, making a similar improvement by reaching the first B0, though much slower than Gisham had.

And then Bretz turned his eyes on Rei.

“Ward! Let’s go!”

Rei was up and jogging towards the center of the field at once, not bothering to look at Camilla Warren as they crossed paths, focusing instead on the task at hand. Like Emble he had eased up on the gas during the October testing, saving everything for his third attempt. Shido, though, had over 3 months of growth since then, including a big leap in its Endurance spec, and if he wanted to properly try out his plan, he wasn’t going to have the luxury of taking things slow.

This is gonna suuuuuuck, Rei thought privately, suddenly getting flashbacks of running hills with Viv and the rest of the combat team back at Grandcrest Prep when they’d been in high school.

Man, he’d hated those days.

“Cadet! Call!”

Bretz’s expected shout came, and Rei settled into his standard pose, bringing both hands up, loose and open, in front of his face as his knees bent slightly in preparation. “Call,” he muttered, focusing on the subtle pressure of Shido’s steel around his wrists, not even blinking when the CAD whirled into place. After the familiar embrace of the metal and vysetrium over the Device’s white underlayer pressed across his arms, legs, and face, Rei watched the red number 5 blink into being, ticking to 4 even as he readied himself.

When it hit 0, he was gone, one singular goal in mind.

The F0s fell in a flash, as did the F5s and all four of the Es. The D0s were next, and Rei was thrilled to find himself not even winded as he ripped through the pair of them, only suffering one blocked hit from the woman and a deflected kick from the man before the Arena announced “Fatal Damaged Accrued” for each of them respectively. From there, the D5s took a bit more work, and the C0s started to put up

an actual fight, requiring Rei to push himself in order to take them down in a reasonable time limit.

So focused was he on the intent of this run, in fact, that he barely registered when the C5s fell and the B0 woman appeared, marking the first time he'd ever managed that particular achievement.

Then again his distraction might also have had something to do with the wicked burn in his arms and legs that had finally manifested when the Cs started putting up a decent resistance.

"Time!" Bretz shouted 30 seconds later, and the B0 flickered out of being even as Rei threw an exhausted haymaker at her temple, leaving him staggering. "First B0 reached in 3:47.76, Ward! *Excellent* jump from last quarter! Glad to see you putting in the effort off the bat!"

Rei, catching his balance unsteadily, bent over himself to suck in air through his mask—the CAD helping to prioritize his oxygen intake—as he put one hand on a knee and threw a weak salute at the sub-instructor with the other. He allowed himself a couple of seconds like that, only barely hearing Bretz call for Sense, before he forced himself to stand straight and recall Shido to make an unsteady line towards his ring beyond the edge of the circle.

"Nice," Sense whispered sidelong as they passed, giving Rei a subtle fist bump.

Rei grinned.

Yeah. It *was* nice. And it was exactly what he'd been going for. He'd known if he went all out he would be able to shatter his personal best just on the basis of his vastly improved specs. He was pleased that he'd broken through to the B0s like Gisham and Warren, but the massive chopping down of his time—nearly a full *3 minutes* faster than the roughly 6 minutes 45 seconds it had taken him to get to the C5s last quarter—was what he'd *really* been going for. He'd sandbagged that attempt *hard*, of course, so the

jump wasn't actually as impressive as it might have been on paper, but he had a sense of it, now.

He had a sense of the limits his Brawler Mode could take him to.

“*Dude*. Could you try *not* to make us look bad in at least *one* test?”

Gisham was smirking at him in a dejected sort of way as he half knelt, half fell into his circle, and he let out a croak of a laugh in answer.

“I *barely* beat you,” he answered back, pleased once again to discover his chest no longer ached as it might once have so soon after such an arduous attempt.

Gisham snorted as though to say “Uh huh,” then turned to watch Sense’s first attempt get started. Rei imitated her, not sure if he was more pleased with the success of his first run, or at the realization the afternoon had brought that he should have put more faith in the character of his friends. It was nice not to be looked down on, anymore, but equally as pleasant was the understanding that his steady rise over the heads of the majority of the other first-years in the last 6 months hadn’t left him a complete pariah...

Sense ripped through his run in short order, reaching the first B0 in just over 4 minutes, managing the opposite success from Gisham of pulling a slower time than last quarter but reaching a higher-ranked opponent. After him, it started over again, with Bretz calling Gisham up for her second attempt, where she *just* managed to set a second PR by another couple of seconds, returning to her circle again sweaty but genuinely pleased now. Emble went, then Warren again—neither of them making any significant improvements to their scores—then Rei found himself once more taking a position in the center of the field.

This time, though, he struck a different pose, right arm back—just like Claire de Soto and Catcher had taught him—left hand outstretched with fingers splayed as though ready to accept the rush of an oncoming attacker.

Even over the sound and flurry of activity that was the other Type-groups taking part in their own testing all around them, he didn't miss Bretz's brow furrow slightly, nor Sense and Gisham perk up in anticipation from their circles.

“Cadet. Call.”

“Call,” Rei echoed, but even as Shido's CAD bands dissolved from around his wrists, he kept going. “Type Shift. Saber Mode.”

It was lucky that, contrary to the majority of other Abilities like Repulsion, Type Shift wasn't dependent on a buildup of the electromagnetic energy that naturally accumulated over the course of a fight. It was more like Break Step or Third Eye in this way, with the best current understanding being that it drew instead on the Stryon particles within a Device's vysetrium. Whatever the reason, it allowed Rei to trigger the Ability as soon as—or even before, as was the case now—combat was initiated. As Shido came into being, the whirl of metal and light settled a little differently over Rei's body, the Device feeling a bit heavier, denser around his limbs. His standard Brawler Mode blades hadn't finished manifesting before the CAD's form was commanded to adjust mid-call, the still-unfamiliar weight of the vysetrium-lined sword settling into the palm of Rei's right hand, the fingers of his left tipped with glowing blue claws as the Device finished its summoning.

In the end, as the “5” appeared once more, Rei was left standing at the ready, looking the part of a Saber in true, Shido's armor thicker around him and his reach and offensive capabilities suddenly magnitudes improved.

Of course, that all came at a cost.

0.

Although Rei knew he was still moving at a blistering pace to any onlooker, he felt sluggish as he surged out of the starting circle, the drop in his Speed and Cognition specs always the first thing he noticed when he switched out of Brawler Mode. Initially this had been a source of alarm for him when he'd first developed Ability, but he'd

quickly learned its advantages heavily outweighed its cost, at least in the right circumstances.

Circumstances—just for example—like a test designed to measure one’s total offensive capabilities.

Despite his drop in agility, the Fs fell in short order, as did the four Es and the D0s. The D5s proved no real challenge either, but Rei—who hadn’t had nearly enough hours using the sword and claws to *really* be used to them—had to work a little harder to apply his new weapon correctly to compensate for his most-prized Brawler specs. Pretty soon, though, he’d figured out he still had the Speed needed to grab hold of the D5s with his left hand to hold them in place as his blade did its work, and so he moved into the Cs feeling even better than he had in the first round.

The C0 woman took a little, as did the man, but they fell eventually. The C5s were even more difficult, their Speed actually surpassing Rei’s now, but he still cut them both down within 20 seconds or so of his allotted 30. He was feeling the fatigue finally, but the ache wasn’t in his limbs like it had been, his improved Strength assisting his added Endurance to keep him going. The first B0 appeared, and Rei put everything he had into challenging the woman, focusing with every fiber of his being on the lessons de Soto and Catcher had imparted. Step. Strike. Grab. Miss. Thrust. Twist. Strike. Strike. The projection, of course—bearing B0-level specs across the board—was stunningly quick, and despite the immense pressure Rei applied on her it was all nearly to no avail.

Nearly.

There.

Rei saw the opportunity, the chance in the pattern, an echo of his previous test. As the cutting sweeps of his blade drove the woman back there was always a moment where one leg was left extended just ahead of her body while she backpedaled, and as the seconds ticked threateningly by, Rei forced himself to wait, forced himself to be patient.

Then he struck.

Had he been in his Brawler mode, his reach would have failed him by a foot or more, but even with his reduced Speed there was no such weakness for a Saber. The top 4 inches of his long, single-edged sword trailed blue light to catch the woman clean in the side of the knee as she continued to retreat away from his onslaught, bringing her to the ground in a crumpled heap. To the credit of the combat program the B0 *still* managed to put up a hell of a fight from there, applying the projection's Defense and Cognition to the max by redirecting the rain of blows Rei brought down on her head, but he managed to get a surprise kick through her blocking at last, the crook of his ankle catching her a tremendous blow under the chin in what had to have been the last few seconds he had.

“Fatal Damage Accrued.”

As the Arena announced Rei's victory—and he thought he heard a hearty whoop of excitement from Sense on the sidelines—Rei whirled and bolted across the field. He was *definitely* winded now, and didn't want to know how much more time it had taken him to get to the end of the first B0, but it didn't matter. He'd done it. He'd cracked through, just like he'd hoped. Even if the growing exhaustion that had his arms shaking as he clashed with the B0 man let him down, he'd confirmed his theory.

Now—as Gisham had put it—he just had to “follow the science”.

“Time!” came Bretz's shout 30 seconds later, announcing the end of the attempt. “*Second* B0 reached in 5:03.23! *That's* how we get it done, Ward, even if it was with an inferior Type.”

Rei, despite his utter exhaustion, let out a bark of a laugh even as he nearly stumbled to his knees. Again he granted himself a few seconds like that, sucking in air through the half-mask, and as expected his recovery was even more speedy given his

higher Endurance. Recalling Shido, he looked up to find Sense already most of the way to the middle of the field, and he hurried off as best he could after yet another quick salute to the second lieutenant.

By the time he crossed the silver perimeter, he was already doing the math in his head.

Second B0. That was great. That was what he'd been hoping for, given how thoroughly the first B0 had shrugged off his assault in Brawler Mode. Had he had 100 more hours of practice with his Saber form, actually, Rei was pretty sure he would have been able to get through to the B5s, but experience had failed him. Still, on the whole the entire experiment was an absolute success.

After all, his weaknesses had shown themselves exactly as expected...

Accepting an excited “Nice job!” from Gisham with a tired grin, Rei dropped to sit with arms extended behind him, tilting his head back to take in the sub-basement ceiling high above as he continued on working to catch his breath, still running the numbers. Just over 5 minutes. Assuming he'd taken basically all 30 seconds he had to down the B0 woman, he'd reached the point where he'd wrapped his first attempt in roughly 4 minutes, probably about 45 seconds slower in Saber Mode. That was actually better than he'd expected—given his Speed and Cognition went from his top specs to his *bottom* when he switched from Brawler—but it was still an impressive drop in agility. Aside from the reach of his blade, his Endurance had clearly been the deciding factor in the success of that second run, because there was no way in hell he would have been able to push himself that much longer if he hadn't—to steal Sense's abbreviation—“shifted”.

Now, though... Could he do better?

Rei—his breathing finally settling and his arms starting to shake less—couldn't help but get excited as he started to plot.

Sense made a truly impressive showing of his second attempt, cutting almost 10 seconds from his first run to join Rei and Gisham in the sub-4 minute mark for the first B0. After that, there was no fanfare as Bretz initiated the third and final round of the Offense & Endurance exam, and Gisham started them off by shaving *another* 2 seconds from her already-impressive score to top out at 3:53.00 exactly. After her, Emble failed to improve on his second run while Warren barely scraped under her score, and then Rei was once more on his feet, his heart rate half again what it should have been while he made for the starting point, going over the simple plan in his head one last time.

This time, when Bretz told him to call, he let Shido take the standard Brawler it always started as.

Then the count hit 0 again, and Rei was off with all the Speed he could muster one last time.

Fs, Es, Ds. All of them fell with a precision he would have been proud of had he not been wholly focused on the test. One after another Shido cleaved through them, Brawler claws working perfectly well to tear through the meager defenses of those lesser ranks. The Cs came next, and Rei held to the path, bulling into each until they fell to punches and cutting slashes. At last, when the C0 man toppled to an axe kick between the eyes, Rei spun and bolted with everything he had at the first C5.

But when he was 5 yards from the woman, he leapt, launching himself in an arcing blur some 10 feet into the air.

As Rei flew, he ground out the words through clenched teeth.

“Type Shift! Saber Model!”

CHAPTER 12

Shido rippled as it changed with arcing bolts of white, reclaiming the Brawler's claws, before reforming into the Saber's heavier plating and sword just as Rei slammed into the C5 woman. Having been in midair as the Device shifted, the drop in Speed didn't immediately affect him, and Rei felt a thrill of triumph as the longer blade punched through the projection's lifted defense. The hologram had clearly been "taken by surprise"—or whatever the equivalent was for an AI deliberately calculating that even an opponent of a C5 rank wouldn't have been able to anticipate the triggered Ability as Rei fell—and hardly a heartbeat later the Arena announced the FDA, leaving Rei to whirl on the C5 man.

Just over a minute and change later, he was once again facing off with the second B0, body screaming for rest and oxygen, when Bretz's merciful call rose over the shriek of the vysetrium blade.

"Time!"

The grey projection flickered and vanished, leaving Shido to slash harmlessly through air as Rei cursed himself. His goal hadn't necessarily been to reach the B5s—not right then, at least—but he'd seen the possibility even more clearly this time, seen it only to have it snatched away by the time limit.

Then, though, Bretz announced his score, and Rei lost all need to complain.

"Second B0! 4:28.76! Hell, how about that?"

The sub-instructor's genuinely surprised—and certainly not displeased—tone had Rei smiling again behind his mask, and he had to stop himself from giving a fist pump with his clawed left hand. Truthfully he wasn't really sure he could have gotten the limb up to do it, because his legs gave out as he tried to turn to face the officer, dropping him to the white floor with a "Woah!" to leave him sprawled on his back. He lay there

for a moment, the sub-basement spinning around him, barely noting that Bretz didn't tell him to hurry up and clear the field.

Rei supposed he'd earned the reprieve, so he stayed there like that, waiting for the room to right itself.

Sub-4:30... More than half-a-minute faster than his second attempt, and reaching the same point. He was happy with that—*more* than happy with that—but the victory was two-fold. Aside from the score, Rei also felt like he had made an actual, *tangible* step towards understanding Type Shift and its advantages, noting and applying the Ability almost perfectly to a situation, just as he'd planned.

It was just as good a feeling—no, *better* a feeling—than demolishing his personal record so thoroughly.

“You did good, man, but I give you five seconds before Bretz calls you a drama queen and has you running laps.”

Rei—Shido still called and sword still in one hand—blinked and brought his head up, finding that the training chamber had finally stopped turning around him. Sense sported an amused expression as he bent over him, one hand already outstretched and offered.

“Fair,” Rei groaned before muttering a last “Recall” and accepting the Brawler's help in getting to his feet after the CAD had pulled away from his limbs. Standing, he had to blink several times before he got his bearings, then gave the boy a word of thanks and a good luck pat on the shoulder before taking an uneasy step towards the waiting circles again. Passing Bretz, he gave the officer an appreciative nod—which was returned, if with a smirk—then settled down to sit as Sense got the last Offense & Endurance test of the day done.

Rei hadn't been wrong. That *had* sucked.

But it had also been *absolutely* worth it.

He smiled to himself, forcing himself to focus on Sense's run, to not dwell on his success thus far. The worst had yet to come, after all, and he had beaten his body to a pulp as it was, evidenced by the slower progress of his recovery this time. He focused on his breathing, watching the boy rip through the lower ranks of the exam, trying to will his limbs into good health again. It took the better part of the Brawler's attempt, but they got there, and Rei had to again shake his head at the effect of Shido's presence around his wrists.

Even as his lowest spec, C-ranked Endurance was no damn joke...

"Time!" Bretz finally called one last time. "First B0 in 3:59.92! Not an improvement on your second run, Sense, but we'll allow it all things considered. Good work."

Sense, doubled over himself with Scarabus' pistons resting on his knees, only nodded as he gasped. If he was frustrated with not having managed another PR, he didn't show it when he finally straightened to draw in a deep breath before recalling his Device and making for the edge of the field. Rei and Gisham both congratulated his effort quietly, but before either could get anything else out Bretz was talking again.

"Okay! Warm up's over! You've got 5 minutes to recover, then we're knocking out the Fortitude test." The man's eyes lingered on Rei. "Some of you like to play games with this one, I know, but keep in mind that I better see *magnitudes* of improvement from anyone not doing things by the book. Clear?"

"Yes, sir!" answered five voices in unison, though Rei thought Sense and Gisham's sounded a little guilty. They—like him—had taken a different approach to last quarter's Fortitude testing, and done so not only under Bretz's scrutiny, but that of Valera Dent's as well.

Speaking of...

As Bretz summoned them bottles of water and dismissed the five to their respite while he prepped the field, Rei half turned where he sat, taking in the rest of 1-A.

Unsurprisingly everyone but the Duelists were still wrapping Offense & Endurance—the other ‘Types’ slower Speed always noticeable in those scores—and after a few seconds of searching Rei found the Iron Bishop standing just north of them with the Sabers by Field 3.

Standing by the Sabers... but watching *him*.

Rei almost started as he registered the woman’s brown eyes, and had to force himself not to look away immediately. Politely he nodded to the chief combat instructor, then turned in time to find Sense and Gisham approaching from their spots as a trio of drones zipped through the other fields in their direction.

He wasn’t all that surprised at Dent’s attention—not with Bretz’s loud announcements that the Brawlers were now prepping for the Fortitude test—but Rei wasn’t sure he would ever *really* get used to the piercing nature of the woman’s gaze.

For some reason, it always seemed to say “Show me. Prove to me what you can do...”

“*Second* B0, man... Not gonna pretend I’m not a *little* jealous.”

Sense groaned as he dropped down across from Rei, Gisham doing the same to his left as she nodded.

“For sure,” the girl said, reaching up to pluck three bottles of chilled water from the underside of a bot as it slowed overhead expectantly. “It was definitely cool, but you’re making me wish *I* had a sword, now.”

Rei shook his head with a dry laugh, accepting one of the waters when she offered them to him and Sense in turn. “Careful what you wish for. I’m not gonna complain, but I’m *way* less handy with Saber Mode than I am in Shido’s Brawler form. It’s kind of a pain in the ass trying to master both.”

Sense made a face, waving the attempted placation away with a hand. “*Please* don’t try to make us feel better about it, man. Griping about a thing like that’s not a great look.” He grinned as Rei grimaced in answer. “I’m kidding. Sure it can’t be easy, but if

anyone can do it it's you. And even if you don't ever get it down *one hundred percent*, it's still a nifty trick to have up your sleeve."

"Which is totally your MO," Gisham agreed with a snort.

Rei couldn't deny this, of course. Trickery and deceit had always been his go-to fighting style when he could manage it, at least in the Dueling format. What was more, that jump attack on the first C5 in his third attempt had proven that he could still be clever in direct combat, even if his Saber Mode *was* a lot slower.

Still, he shrugged, not super keen on lingering on Type Shift given how close that conversation often came to details about Shido he'd only ever shared with Aria, Viv, and Catcher. "Maybe, but it's not like it puts me head and shoulders over everyone. Aria hit the B5s *last* quarter. And I'll bet Viv, Kay, and Grant all manage it today."

"Comparing 'everyone' to those freaks isn't exactly a fair assessment." Gisham gave him a mock scowl, but seemed to sense that he didn't want to stay the center of the conversation because she continued. "But yeah, speaking of, I think I *did* see Arada down the B0 guy while Emble was fighting, so you're probably—"

After that the conversation took a turn for the safer, with the three of them placing stakeless bets on how the rest of the first-years would do in the Offense & Endurance testing, particularly the Sectional qualifiers. By the time their 5 minutes was up, Rei was feeling refreshed—and rehydrated—and so Bretz's shout for them to get on their feet only came with a clench of anticipation.

This time, when the second lieutenant faced off with them, his expression was a bit more grim.

"No jokes on this one, ladies and gentlemen," he started evenly. "You know what's coming, and you know what it takes to succeed. I can tell most of you—" he deliberately didn't look at Emble or Warren "—put everything you had into your first two exams, so take it as a compliment when I say that if I could give you a few more minutes to recover I would. Unfortunately, that kind of defeats the purpose of standardized

testing. So... Everyone ready?" For once, he actually paused to take them all in, waiting for the chorused "Yes, sir!" that came a little more staggered, all of them not expecting to actually have to reply. Only after they had, though, did he nod. "Good. Then get to it, and do what you gotta do."

This last statement Rei found at once strange and gratifying, because while Bretz hadn't been looking at him as he'd said the words—his gaze almost deliberately fixed on Gisham at the time, in fact—it felt like a permission.

"Will do," Rei muttered privately, already moving with the others towards one of the five larger, evenly-spaced red circles that encompassed the outside edge of the field, bright against the white contrast of the projected floor. He ended up between Warren and Sense, this time—Gisham on Sense's other side and Emble two to his left—and so he kept his eyes on Bretz as the officer took his own place in the middle of the space.

Despite his earlier talk of "standardized" time limits, the man sure took a suspiciously long time in turning to take them all in, only stopping when he was—at last—openly meeting Rei's eyes now.

One last nod—small, and meant only for him, Rei suspected—and Bretz shouted loud and clear.

"Okay, cadets! Here we go!"

And then the number 5 appeared before Rei's eyes—mirrored too in front of the faces of each of the 1-A Brawlers, and the countdown began.

There had been no order to "Call!" this time, no indication that they should summon their CADs. The nature of the exam required no such application of their Devices, though perhaps that was unfortunate. Rei had to admit to himself—as the 3 appeared, then 2, then 1—that he felt bare without Shido in that moment, like leaving the CAD around his wrists was unnatural as he stood on that field, preparing himself. In fact, there was a brief moment where he thought he should remember to ask Bretz

if he was *allowed* to call, just to have Shido's comfortable weight around him to make himself feel better, or if summoning the Device was actually banned in the exam.

Then, though, the number hit "0", and Rei was made to consider that perhaps he should focus on the task at hand as Bretz yelled "F0!" for all of them to hear.

The Fortitude section of parameter testing was—by unanimous consensus of *anyone* who might be asked the question—the most deplored of the exams, entirely because of how damn *uncomfortable* it was. Sure, the mental strain of Speed & Agility and the anaerobic toll of Offense & Endurance could be miserable in their own ways, but they simply didn't compare to the actual *physical* hardship of the third and final exam. Using the Arena's simulation tech, the field under their feet would steadily be ratcheting up not only the pull of gravity on their bodies, but also stimulate their Group C nerve fibers, more commonly known by the average civilian by a different name:

Pain receptors.

The crawling, tingling sensation came first, as it always did, noticeable but not uncomfortable. It was almost pleasant, in fact, if Rei really considered it, especially compared to what he knew would eventually follow. Bretz yelled "F1" a moment later—the first notch up in what was supposed to have been several minutes of torture—and sure enough the buzzing over Rei's skin intensified just the slightest bit. Had he kept going he would have eventually pushed himself nearly to the point of blacking out, he knew, and he had every intention of fighting that fight.

Just not right in that moment.

"E5!"

Roughly a minute later—and with the biting nip of pain juuust starting to claw at him as Bretz announced the middle Es—Rei took a knee. At once the automatic sensor system the test employed shut down the simulation, and for a few second Rei felt off balance as the intensified gravity he'd only barely started to notice alleviated, leaving him to tilt off-kilter and catch himself with a hand. To his right he was unsurprised to

see Sense follow his lead in turn, then Gisham, the pair emulating him just as they had during their previous parameter test, and like an echo of 13 weeks past Rei caught Bretz give the three of them an eye roll as they grinned at each other.

What *was* a surprise, on the other hand, was what came next.

“Okay!” came the second lieutenant’s unexpected shout. “Since you all want to play this game, I hope you’re ready to fit my boot up your collective asses if *any* of you mess this up. Three minutes, then we go again!”

Rei, taken aback by this announcement, couldn’t help but gape around the field. To his *complete* shock Emble and Warren too were in the process of falling back off their knees to sit cross-legged in the middle of their circles, as-ever not meeting his eyes, but each of them a little red in the face as they looked everywhere but at Rei or the others. Rei, for his part, could only stare, at once bewildered and something almost like... impressed?

There was a reason he took a knee on the Fortitude parameter tests. At least the first two attempts. The fact of the matter was that the exam was as exhausting as it was uncomfortable, and exhausting in a way that could not be measured up to by either Speed & Agility *or* Offense & Endurance. While the physical demand of holding out against the increasing gravity was definitely a massive contributing factor, withstanding the pain that came with the advanced ranks—meant to measure where the average ISCM cadet of said rank usually fell in the exam—was borderline debilitating, at least for Rei. He had a history with pain, one that was well known by now to grant him an edge in this particular test, but that didn’t mean his body and mind *liked* the torture any more than the others. For that reason he’d come up with the tactic of dropping out and saving himself for the third and final attempt. Scoring, after all, was not an aggregate, but rather a best-of-three, and the strategy had worked so well that Sense and Gisham had adopted it the following exam. Emble and Warren, on the other hand...

Well... There was a reason Rei was staring, open-mouthed, at the pair of them.

Ping.

Rei blinked as a notification popped in his frame. Seeing that it was from Sense, he opened the message even as he turned to frown around at the Brawler, who was watching him expectantly.

Woah. That's a LOT of crow to swallow.

Rei allowed himself a grunt of a laugh, typing out his response—as he had often during squad-format training—with his eyes rather than his hands. While he doubted Bretz would have given them an earful usually for chatting in between attempts, the unexpected circumstances had clearly put the man in an edgy mood.

Right?? Who would have thought??

Honestly... Me. Sense replied. Mostly. I don't think they're very happy with their performances so far. That 37 disks from Emble in Speed & Agility was yikes, you know?

Rei barely kept himself from snickering, starting to feel a little bit like a bully. Typing back quickly, he worked to keep his face straight.

Maybe they'll be so shocked by how well they do that they'll suddenly turn into decent human beings?

Yeah... And maybe we'll sign a peace treaty with the archons and learn to coexist in a utopian society full of sunshine and rainbows.

Pessimist much?

Been called worse.

Rei grinned, but left the conversation at that, turning to take in Emble and Warren again. It *was* a surprise, but he supposed Sense had a point. There was a price to everyone's pride, in the end.

The call came a couple minutes later.

“Alright, up you get! Attempt two in thirty seconds.”

Rei and the other four Brawlers pushed themselves up to stand at the ready once more. Bretz had no additional words for them, preferring to look between Rei, Sense, and Gisham with a raised eyebrow, letting them know he was *very much aware* of the corruptive influence they had had on the group as a whole, now. Fortunately Rei—as he suspected the others did—kept his attention anywhere but directly on their sub-instructor, waiting in silence for the “5” to appear once more. Eventually it did, and steadily ticked away to 0 again.

And—predictably, this time—all five first-years staggered around Field 1 dropped immediately, Rei kneeling so soon after the last of the red digits vanished from view that the prickly sensation didn't even have time to reach his knees.

He thought he heard Bretz let out something between an irritated grumble and an exasperated sigh, and this time Rei was smart enough not to chance so much as *looking* at Sense or Gisham for risk of incurring the man's wrath. Instead, he turned where he sat, pretending to study the other Type-groups as they either wrapped their Offense & Endurance test or—in the case of the Duelists, the only ones faster than the Brawlers—dug well into their Fortitude exam.

Except for one...

Rei blinked, noticing first that there seemed to be one Duelist missing from the group, only to realize a second later that Viv wasn't gone, just sitting where everyone else was still standing and taking the brunt of what was probably their second attempt. She didn't look around at him, but Rei *did* accidentally catch the eye of Liam Gross,

who glared in his direction in a measured way that spoke to much the same irritation as Bretz was currently suffering.

Rei had to work hard not to chuckle as he looked away from Field 4 and the Duelists, wondering what the next quarter's testing would look like if Viv did well with the borrowed strategy.

Phalanxes and Maulers being on Field 5 and 6 respectively, it was harder to find Aria and Grant among the instructors and students between them, and both groups were still finishing up the previous test anyway. Deciding it was time to focus, Rei returned his attention to his own group, braving one glance at Bretz before dropping his gaze to the projected white of the floor between his feet. Taking a breath, he closed his eyes.

During their last Fortitude test, Valera Dent had capped him at B0, explaining that—despite whatever protests he might have—she had to prioritize a functional environment for *all* her students, not just him. Given that he had apparently been *screaming* by the end of the first quarter's test—an unfortunate result of his tendency to fall into himself, leaving the conscious world behind whenever pain threatened to take over his body—Rei had understood. This time, however, Dent hadn't yet made an appearance to give him the same warning, probably because she assumed he would know well enough to keep things in control *without* a reminder.

Rei grimaced, eyes still closed. A knot formed in his gut, thinking on it. He *would* keep himself aware, *would* keep himself from dropping away again, but it was really, *really* not gonna be fun. Thinking on it, he decided to set a goal for himself, considering what a good target was to claim solid improvement even if he dropped immediately after. After a brief consideration, he settled on B5. His previous test had seen an improvement from C2 to B0, and while Shido *had* made massive improvements in the nearly-3 months since, Rei was aware there was likely to be a distinct difference in the hurdles presented by each increasing B rank compared to the Cs. B5, he decided, was

good. Definitely not out of reach, he hoped, but a challenge that would make him feel like he'd accomplished something even if he couldn't go further.

B5, he repeated to himself silently, focusing on that number, trying to sear it into his mind to give him something to fixate on later.

Unfortunately, "later" turned into "soon" pretty damn quick...

"Third and final go, cadets! Get your asses up, show me what you've got, and don't make me have to add 'or else!'"

Bretz didn't seem remotely amused as he announced the last attempt, and Rei opened his eyes at last. With a steadying breath he got himself up, not looking at the other four as they, too, climbed to their feet, nor the second lieutenant or even the number "5" when it appeared. Honestly, Rei didn't look at anything at all.

He just focused.

0.

"F0!"

The tingling came, and Rei let it wash over him, letting his body relax as it did. To his right he thought he made out Sense shaking out his arms and legs while he still could, but Rei kept his thoughts inward.

"F1!" the call came, and the buzz intensified just the slightest bit. Rei frowned, wondering if he was imagining that the rank-up felt just infinitesimally stronger than it usually did, but he cast the consideration aside as "F2" was called, then "F3" with no additional concern.

It was only when "D1" got shouted out a bit later that he started to suspect something was wrong.

"What the hell?" he muttered to himself. The pain had arrived in the Es as expected, as well as the awareness of the increasing gravity. As the test slipped up through the Ds, though, there had felt like a *definite* jump in discomfort, with Rei actually wincing as the biting slipped into burning a little more abruptly than he remembered.

Was he wrong? Had he not warmed up enough? Maybe next quarter he would let himself push into the Ds to prepare his body more thoroughly.

Then, though, the test progressed, and Rei was forced to focus once more.

By the time he hit D5, Rei had forgotten about the odd shift in the test, requiring every thought to stay on keeping his jaw clenched shut and his lungs working. It was far from the worst pain he'd ever suffered, but it had definitely shifted beyond what he could shoulder with ease. Closing his eyes again, he accepted it.

Pain was easy, he told himself. Pain he could deal with.

“C1!”

Again Rei winced, but the passing concern that the exam felt like it had jumped up again vanished as the discomfort forced him to discard all distraction. He was starting to have trouble breathing, and he was long past the point where he would have ordinarily allowed his consciousness to crawl back, to retreat to the far reaches of his mind. The temptation was there, *so* there, and it would have been as easy as giving in, as easy as dropping to his knees had been during the first two attempts.

Feeling the weight of the Iron Bishop's trust in his common sense, though, Rei instead forced himself to stand taller, straightening his shoulders and bringing his chin up, trying to align himself as much as possible with the downward force of the now-wrenching gravity.

“C4!”

Camilla Warren's cry as she fell almost broke Rei's concentration, but he held to it, only allowing himself the briefest moment of appreciating that he was pretty sure he recalled the girl's last score being no higher than the low Cs. After that C5 passed, but with the call for “C6!” two other people fell more quietly, probably Emble and Sense judging by the directions of the *thud-thuds* that could only be knees and elbows slamming to the ground in near-unison. C7 was next, and Gisham went down with a dampened keen of pain.

And then it was Rei, all alone, he knew, standing there. Standing there, with his thoughts screaming at him to keep going, *keep going*.

The trouble was... he wasn't sure he could...

“C8!”

The pain was... extraordinary. Had he had the mind for it, Rei would have considered what it was that he had done wrong, what mistake it was that he'd made that morning.

“C9!”

If he'd been able to, he would have questioned everything about the day, and maybe even the weekend before. What was different? Why was this so much more difficult than he remembered? He hadn't even reached his last score of—

“B0!”

Rei tried to swallow, but couldn't, the pull of gravity feeling like it was dragging down even the muscles of his throat. Had he tilted his face to the ceiling he was pretty sure his eyes would have been forced open as the gravity wrenched at his eyelids.

B5, the number came when he called on it, his mind seeking a handhold to cling to. B5.

But no. Even as he brought the goal to mind, he was aware he wasn't going to make it.

“B1!”

B5. Come on! B5, you son of a bitch!

No. No...

“B2!”

B5! Come on! COME ON! B5! You can do it! You can—!

“B3!”

And that was the moment Rei's body gave in, the moment his willpower broke. As the test notched up, the keening agony that encompassed his every inch seemed almost

to redouble, like the acid he had been dunked into had suddenly been shocked with 100,000 volts of electricity. Rei's entire body spasmed, and with a wrenching gasp his eyes flew open.

Just in time to see the world spin away.

WHAM!

Rei hit the ground on his side, twisting as one knee gave before the other, the gravity hauling him down like a falling stone. He barely managed to save himself a concussion by getting his left hand between his temple and the floor, and even with that Rei was pretty sure he felt his reactive shielding trigger as he slammed to the solid projection of the white field.

“Gyauuhh!” he got out, feeling his eyes bulge as he attempted to drag in a breath even as he had the wind knocked out of him. For a torturous fraction of a second the pressure held, suffocating Rei on dry land, and the very edges of panic—a feeling he hadn't experienced in a very, *very* long time—showed themselves on the edges of his thoughts.

Then, though, the Arena released him, and Rei spasmed again as a shocked diaphragm fought his need for air.

“Easy, cadet! Easy!”

A pair of large hands took him by the shoulder and knees respectively, and Bretz was suddenly there at his side holding him down as firmly as an iron cage. Only then, as his body fought this restriction, did Rei realizing his initial jolting had evolved into full blown twitches—bordering on thrashing—his arms clenched across his body and his legs kicking.

Then, at last, his chest released, and he got his first real full breath in what had to have been several minutes.

“Guuuuuh!” Rei gasped painfully, taking in one lungful, then another, not seeing Sense or Gisham standing nearby with wide eyes, not seeing Emble and Warren beyond

them looking almost equally shocked. He breathed, heaving in air as best he could through a seizing chest, Bretz's hands never leaving him, helping to stabilize him as his body continued to battle itself.

Then, finally, after some 30 seconds or so, Rei felt the jerking abate, his awareness coming back measure by measure until he could blink and force himself to be still, inhaling through his nose in sharp, unsteady breaths.

“Ward.”

Rei twitched, but this time it had nothing to do with the Fortitude test or its lingering cruelties. Abruptly, as he regained the ability to focus on anything outside of himself, he realized that another figure had come to stand before him, looking down on where he was still pinned under Bretz's arms.

“Nod if you can hear me.” Valera Dent said quietly, her voice deathly calm.

Rei, finding the muscles of his neck difficult to control even with his head still resting on one hand on the floor, only managed a mere flinch of confirmation.

It was enough to bring the Iron Bishop down to one knee beside him.

“Michael, what did he get to?”

In any other situation Rei might have noted the casual address of the second lieutenant, one of the first real cracks in the captain's stoicism he'd ever borne witness to.

As it was, he was still preoccupied maintaining control of his limbs.

“B3,” Bretz whispered back in a worried rush. “I mean that's *definitely* high, don't get me wrong, but this? After he climbed from C2 to B0 last quarter, I kinda expected him to hit B5 at *least*...”

Rei was only barely aware of Dent's brown eyes looking him up and down, taking him in with measured concern.

Concern and... was that *anger*?

No. Rei had to have imagined it. He was aware enough, now, to realize what he must have looked like, crumpled like he was on the floor, and his embarrassment suddenly started to outweigh the slowly-fading shock of his body.

“I-I can sit up,” he got out through teeth that felt strange in his mouth, starting to press himself up with the hand under his head. “I-I can—”

“Absolutely not.”

Dent’s snarl was mirrored in the same moment by Bretz’s hands redoubling their pressure on him, pinning him down with the absolute immovability of a mountain, now.

“You will lie there until we can get a drone to scan you. It’s already on the way. If it comes back clean, then—and *only* then—will you be getting up, and that will be so that Arada or Laurent can take you to see Willem Mayd. Is that understood?”

Despite the question at the end, the captain’s words were snapped so fiercely Rei was pretty sure the planet would have started spinning in the other direction had she commanded it to in the same tone. Indeed, all he could do was unsteadily nod his agreement even as he made out the whirring of the medical drone approaching, reaching his ears in the silence of the sub-basement.

Silence?

“Shit...” Rei grumbled, his tongue finally starting to feel somewhat normal. “Everyone’s staring again, aren’t they?”

The question, though not intending to, appeared to ease the Bishop’s tension, because her expression softened minutely. Looking away from him—likely over Bretz’s shoulder—she took in whatever scene was behind Rei for a moment before nodding.

“You *do* have a knack for making yourself the center of attention, Ward,” she answered a bit more gently this time. “I just wish that it could occasionally be related to you *not* nearly killing yourself while under my supervision.”

Rei laughed at that, the drone finally coming into view, dropping down beside Dent.

Then, though, the laugh turned into a cough, then another, and Rei felt a pain in his chest even as he tasted iron in his mouth.

That wasn't *half* as concerning, though, as the blood, cast in a spray before him, reddening the white of the field floor and flecking the captain's black boots.

"Oh... that *can't* be good," was the last thing he remembered getting out.

And then Rei was falling, dropping into blackness, the world blinking out while he heard the barest shouts of his name ringing out from somewhere high, high above him.

CHAPTER 13

...

Processing combat information.

...

Calculating.

...

Results:

Strength: Lacking

Endurance: Lacking

Speed: Not Applicable

Cognition: Adequate

Offense: Not Applicable

Defense: Severely Lacking

Growth: Not Applicable

...

Checking combat data acquisition.

...

Adequate data acquirement met.

Device initiating adjustments to:

Strength. Endurance. Defense.

...

Adjustment complete.

Strength has been upgraded from Rank C1 to C2.

Endurance has been upgraded from Rank C0 to C1.

Defense has been upgraded from Rank C1 to C3.

...

Calculating.

...

CAD "Shido" has been upgraded from Rank C6 to C7

...

Checking combat data acquisition.

...

Adequate data acquirement met.

Prioritizing reasonable evolution parameters.

...

Selected Prioritization:

Defense.

...

Recategorizing for future parameters.

...

Processing.

...

Evolving.

...

Evolution complete.

Rei came to to the sound of quiet voices, their words jumbled and lost to him, but present even before the glow of solar lights registered through his eyelids. He tried to groan, but nothing came of it except a loose breath of air, and it was this strange lack of voice that had him pulling upward, out of the dark, his face contorting in discomfort as he tried to open his eyes. He managed it—if only barely—and it took one blink, then another, then several seconds of half squinting before he could make out enough to see where he was.

It said something—something not so great—that he was completely unsurprised to find himself staring at a familiar ceiling, lying in a familiar bed, surrounded by familiar white walls only partially hidden by the forms of three people standing on either side of him.

The Institute hospital, after all, was well-trodden ground, though much less so in the last couple of months after it was affirmed that Shido was doing an excellent job of keeping his fibro in check.

Honestly, more concerning to Rei in that moment was the awareness that he seemed largely unable to talk.

“Lieutenant Colonel.”

A young woman’s voice—one he knew well but hadn’t made out clearly until that moment—cut across the hushed discussion of the other two people, and Rei blinked again before squinting around to find Lieutenant Major Ameena Ashton looking down at him from the spot by his head, to the right of his bed. Despite not sporting a CAD herself, Ashton was one of the many health professionals employed by Galens that

specialized in the care and rehabilitation of Users, and had been the doctor in charge of Rei's case since he'd arrived at school. She'd been a godsend, proving herself both understanding and methodical, and had been responsible for tracking the regression in his diagnosis regularly throughout the previous semester. As a result, Ashton was one of Rei's favorite people on campus, so it pained him a little to find the woman staring down at him with a frown that was somehow simultaneously all concern and all anger.

Anger... Rei thought. *There's that anger again... What the hell is going on?*

It didn't help his confusion when he realized the Lieutenant Major's expression was a shared one. Left of her, a man had turned at her interruption, wizened features just as troubled as he looked first to Ashton after her interruption, then down at Rei as he followed her gaze. Brows knit together over a pair of spectacles that were a rare sight in a time of nearly-perfected medicine, the gold on the man's white doctor's coat flashed briefly in the light, marking him as a Lieutenant Colonel.

"Ward." Willem Mayd—Chief Medical Officer of the Galens Institute—spoke quietly through a wispy white beard as he took Rei's face in, though this might merely have been due to the wheeze brought on by many, many years of life. "Welcome back. While we do *so* enjoy your visits, I have to once again insist we try to make them less frequent. Also less... abrupt."

Rei, still not completely with it, tried to offer the man even a strained smile, but once again couldn't help but feel strange as he did. His confusion must have shown on his face, because Ashton brought a hand over the edge of the bed to rest on his shoulder.

"Relax. You can't speak. We injected your vocal cords with a paralytic to reduce the potential strain on your lungs. There may have been some creep into your neck and face, but it should resolve in a couple of hours."

This, at last, had Rei coming to in full, and he stiffened as he blinked a little more intently, taken aback. He'd just started trying to sit up again, just started to try and

motion for more information, when the third person—standing on his left—spoke with such deliberate warning, every word might as well have been a carbonized steel blade pressed to his throat.

“Cadet Ward. If you so much as *flinch* before the good doctors *tell you to*, I will remove the better part of your spine to ensure you stay still. And believe me, I *can* do it.”

Rei froze, every muscle in his body *not* already paralyzed suddenly losing all ability to even twitch. After a good 4 or 5 seconds of frozen stillness, he eased back down, allowing only his head to turn to take in the figure beside him.

Subconsciously, as he'd been rising, he'd expected Valera Dent to be there, to be taking up the darker figure he'd only been aware was present. In retrospect, he supposed he should have noticed the broader shoulders and taller presence, but whatever had knocked him out—combined with at least *one* drug, he now knew—hadn't granted him his bearings until that moment.

Beyond anything else—beyond waking up in the hospital or the blood he remembered coughing up or the tense expressions on Mayd and Ashton's faces—it was the presence of Colonel Rama Guest at his bedside that told Rei something had happened.

Something serious.

Guest—like the doctors—seemed to read the sudden alarm in his eyes, because the commanding officer brought up a big hand placatingly. “Relax. You're fine. Your hospital admittance isn't why I'm here.” He looked Rei up and down. “Though I admit you're not exactly any picture of prime health right now.”

Rei—initially feeling better at this statement—did his best to frown as he finally looked down at himself.

Oh what the heeeell? was all he could think.

He'd certainly been in worse condition—possibly in this very bed, in fact, judging by the familiar scene of the still-sunlit grounds through the expansive window wall behind the colonel—but there was certainly some newness to take in this time just the same. On the surface he looked fine, and the fact that he still wore his combat suit told him he hadn't been in bad enough a place that they'd needed to cut it off of him or anything. Still, that only made the presence of the weird, multi-armed apparatus cupping the right side of his chest all the more noticeable, particularly given it was pulsing with green light as it hugged his ribs in a broad C-shape of sterile white steel. What was more, the machine was rigid, and Rei realized abruptly that the majority of his odd discomfort waking up had come from the fact that he seemed only able to expand half of his chest with every breath.

“Deep-tissue reparative unit,” Willem Mayd answered his unasked question, reaching up to tap the device's polished upper arm with a finger. “Though ‘DTRU’ is certainly more merciful a mouthful. First time seeing one?”

Rei nodded slowly, not looking away from the thing.

“Not surprising. Your previous providers undoubtedly applied them after your more involved surgeries, but they were probably removed before you came out of anesthesia. They only help initialize healing, making sure it starts right. After that the body is best left to its work.” He left his finger on it for a moment. “*This* unit is specialized for the torso. Ideal when, say... one has partially ripped open a lung.”

Rei's eyes went wide at this, staring up at the lieutenant colonel, who looked to be trying to find what humor he could in the situation.

Ashton was the one to explain, her hand not having left Rei's shoulder.

“It was a small hole, don't worry. Inferior right lobe. We think the tissue was weakened in your Fortitude test's increased gravity, then ruptured after, when you were coughing. That—combined with anoxia second to the exam—had you passing out, and we kept you like that for a bit. Like the colonel said, though, you're fine. Lungs heal fast

on their own, and between your CAD and the deep-tissue unit, you'll be out of here by morning."

It took a moment, but Rei finally indicated he'd followed the explanation with a slow nod. If it was the wall of his lung that had ruptured, it made sense that they'd restricted the right side of his chest, not to mention opened up his vocal cords. He doubted Ashton would have been so confident in his recovery if he'd still been *using* the lung.

It was uncomfortable, but he could deal with it.

More concerning, though...

Rei turned back to the colonel, eyeing the man for a second before braving lifting one hand to his temple, asking silent permission.

"If you have questions, we'll have you use your NOED, yes," Guest agreed. "Wait a moment, though." He looked to Ashton. "Lieutenant Major, let the captain know he's awake, would you?"

Rei blinked at this, then turned to watch as the woman stepped away—hand finally leaving him—to approach the inside wall of the room. With a few quick taps on the smart-glass—which cleverly made up nearly every interior surface of the hospital short of the floors and ceiling—she dragged a finger down a meter that appeared for her in green overlaid atop the white. Immediately the opacity of the wall vanished, leaving a clear view into the hall beyond the room. For a second Rei wasn't sure why the woman had done this, but then he noticed the four figures standing beyond the glass. Valera Dent was there, arms crossed as she looked to be placating a frantic-looking Aria, who was also still in nothing but her combat suit. Viv, for once, looked to be the patient one, though she was chewing on her lip as she hugged her knees to her chest worriedly in one of a number of black chairs set up on the far wall.

And beside her, one hand on the girl's forearm as though to comfort her as he stared with narrowed eyes at nothing in particular, was Logan Grant.

Hub, Rei thought, still managing some surprise despite everything else. *Who woulda thought...*

“Rei!”

Aria’s voice was heavily muffled, almost entirely obstructed by the glass when she caught sight of him, but at her shout Viv too looked up, then jumped to her feet. Grant was a little slower to stand, but not by much, taking in Rei with a glower that seemed—for once—unrelated to him.

“Rei!” Aria called again, having stepped away from Captain Dent to press her hands against the glass.

Inside the room, Ashton put her palm to another green emblem on the wall.

“Take it easy, Cadet. He’s fine.” Her voice sounded layered, and Rei realized a speaker in the hall was probably carrying her words through, likely using a coms system designed for quarantined patients or the like. “Look. See?” She glanced back at Rei. “Give them a wave if you can, Ward. Laurent’s been so worried that the captain had to step out to calm her down.”

Rei, doing as he was told, lifted a hand to confirm, deciding it was best not to try and smile given the half-paralyzed nature of his face. The motion seemed enough for Aria, because she sagged ever so slightly.

“You’re fine?” she asked, her own words carrying clearly into the room now as Dent looked on behind her, Viv coming to stand at her side with Grant a step behind. “You’re sure?”

Rei could only nod unsteadily.

“He can’t speak,” Ashton got out ahead of what looked to be another question. “Not until the morning. He’ll make a full recovery, though, and you can all do me a favor and chew him out tomorrow for pushing himself too far. *Again.*”

“Oh we will.” It was Viv who growled out in answer, glaring at Rei so intently he was pretty sure she would have eventually melted a hole in the wall. “That’s a promise, ma’am.”

Ashton nodded as though this were a perfectly reasonable thing, then looked to Dent. “Captain, if you could join us. We need to... review.”

The way she said it... Rei was pretty sure Aria and Viv hadn’t caught the subtle implication in the request—intent on him as they were—but Grant looked to frown ever so slightly at the words, his reddish eyes turning to the lieutenant major almost suspiciously. There had definitely been something in that tone, and Rei, too, couldn’t help but watch Ashton as Dent nodded on the other side of the glass and stepped away from his friends to make for the room door. As the captain reached it, Ashton flicked a finger up the wall again, and at once the glass blazed white, blocking out any hint of Aria, Viv, and Grant as the door slipped open with a hiss, then closed behind Dent’s quick approach.

“How you feeling, Ward?” she asked as she came to stand at the foot of his bed.

This time Rei did try to smile, and the lopsided grimace he managed got a small smirk from Dent in answer.

“He’s got questions,” Guest cut in before anyone else could speak, apparently eager to move the conversation along. “With everyone’s permission, I’ll link a thread for him to communicate with.”

Three quick nods and a brief flare of light in the colonel’s eyes later, a notification pinged Rei’s frame. Looking up at it, he realized that it wasn’t the only notice he had, and without a thought he pulled the menu open, intending to glance briefly over the previous message before accepting Guest’s group invite.

Then, though, his jaw dropped, realizing what it was.

Forgetting all about the colonel’s thread—something of a feat when the man was standing not *2 feet to his left*—Rei skimmed Shido’s upgrade notification quickly, taking

it in with a pounding heart. An evolution?? Seriously?? He'd only climbed *3 ranks* since Shido's last physical adaptation! And what was up with these spec boosts?? He'd seen jumps early on in his time at Galens from things like the parameter tests, and they still happened on a rare occasion, but rank ups in Strength *and* Endurance, then *two* in Defense??

What the hell...? Rei thought again, already feeling the itch to find out what the evolution meant for Shido's manifestation, the temptation so real he wondered—briefly—if he might be allowed to call on his CAD once the DTRU was removed from his—

“Cadet?”

The fact that the colonel's question was easy coming implied it was obvious just by Rei's face that something had distracted him—now for probably some 15 seconds or so—from the original purpose of pulling up his notifications. At once Rei closed out of the upgrade alert to accept the group invite, tapping out a quick message with one hand.

Sorry, sir. Shido hit a rank upgrade and evolved.

It felt strange typing out the “sir”, but Rei thought it better to be safe than sorry as he sent the message. It was received with a flicker in the four frames around him, and the officers standing over him all shared a mix of quick glances ranging from surprise to irritation.

What happened? Rei followed up with when no one immediately spoke. *Shido's spec jumps were big. Too big for something like a parameter test anymore. I don't know if I've gotten a boost like that from simulations since I was in the E ranks.*

This time, the colonel nodded. “Yes... You could say that’s why I’m here.” He looked to Dent, then, giving her a nod of permission.

The captain didn’t hesitate.

“What can you tell us about the test, Ward?” she asked evenly. “What do you remember?”

Rei winced internally, recalling the exam.

It felt... off, I guess? It started pretty early, but I didn’t think anything of it until I was well into it.

Dent nodded. “And do you know what your final score was?”

It took Rei a moment to think back.

B...3? he typed out. *I think. Sorry. It’s a little fuzzy.*

To his left, Ameena Ashton snorted. “I would think so.”

Dent shot her a glance, and the doctor brought her lips tightly together in silent apology for the interruption.

“The reason your test felt ‘off’, Ward, is because it *was* ‘off’,” Rama Guest said slowly. “There’s no real easy way to say it, and if you’d rather take it easy we can talk about it once you’re back on your f—?”

“Someone tampered with your exam, Cadet.”

If anyone else had cut across the colonel’s careful words, Rei was pretty sure there would have been consequences. As it stood, however, not only was Valera Dent the strongest User on the Galens grounds, her title as Chief Combat Instructor—as well as “the Iron Bishop”—seemed enough to let her get away with the interruption with

nothing more than a frown from Guest. Rei, though, appreciated it. He didn't need anyone to mince words in the moment. He needed the truth.

Even if the truth left him cold.

Tampered with his exam? How was that possible? And who would even do something like—?

But no. There was someone. Immediately Rei could think of only one person, and the icy crawl of the growing feeling in his chest had him typing out the name without hesitation, momentarily forgetting his present company.

Major Reese?

To his surprise, however, all Rei got in answer to this were several raised eyebrows and Willem Mayd not bothering to hide a dark sort of smirk. He'd thought it was a good guess. He hadn't seen or heard much of Dyrk Reese since the end of the Intra-Schools when the major's purview over the first-years had ended, but the man had already—and pretty much *openly*—manipulated the Institute's systems repeatedly to put Rei at a disadvantage in more ways than one. And that had only culminated *weeks* of bullying and abuse so overt that some of the other instructors—several of whom had previously had no love for Rei either—had started treating him much more kindly in a clear attempt to make up for it all.

But no... Even before anyone answered him, Rei knew just by the looks on every face around that Reese wasn't the culprit this time.

“Major Reese's access to the Galens systems is expansive, Ward, but it's not absolute.” The colonel looked again to be choosing his words wisely as he answered. “He has leeway when it comes to certain assignments and protocols, but parameter testing is... different. It's a standardized program, with defenses and firewalls in place

to ensure no one without the *highest* levels of clearance in the ISCM can access it and manipulate the data.” He paused, his gaze boring into Rei. “Do you follow, Cadet?”

It clicked then.

Central.

Rei didn’t type this revelation out, understanding that Guest’s beating around the bush was meant for him to not only come to this conclusion, but very likely also *keep it to himself*. Looking around at Dent, Mayd, and Ashton, however, the darkening of their expressions told Rei he had no need to say it aloud anyway.

The awareness—and the implications, therefore—were already universal.

Central Command—the ISCM’s highest authority—had possibly messed with his exam. The top officers in the military may have back-channeled the coded defenses of the Galens parameter test and manipulated it, and probably live.

And as to *why* they were suspect, Rei didn’t even have to ask.

It was the second time, now, that Central had reared its head when it came to his placement at Galens, or at least the second time that he was aware of. The first had never been outright confirmed for him, but when Rei and Catcher had been abruptly pitched against each other in a last-minute change-up during the semi-finals of the Intra-School’s loser’s bracket, Maddison Kent had made it clear through Aria that their pairing had been no coincidence. Given it had ended up stealing them each away from lesser opponents they *both* would have confidently trounced, it had been suspicious from the go, and one of the many opportunities Dyrk Reese had used to gloat over Rei in silence.

That, though... That had been one thing. An experiment. A challenge he, Catcher, Aria, and Viv had all decided had probably been meant to stress Rei and identify if he had it in him to do whatever he had to to advance, even if it meant knocking one of his best friends out of qualifying for Sectionals. He’d met that challenge head-on, and suspected he’d exceeded it, painful as it had been.

But messing with his parameter test...

Rei lifted a hand again, barely registering that it was shaking with anger.

Anger... and maybe the smallest hint of fear.

They're getting bold.

A shared nod from the group, with a frown from the two doctors.

"They are," Dent replied first. "But more than that, they're getting dangerous. They could have killed you."

Rei made a face at that, about to argue before deciding not to. He might have said the test probably wouldn't have allowed that, but given he was lying in the hospital with a *literal* hole in his lungs... The captain kind of had a point.

"They're testing you, boy."

The quiet growl of the words, dangerous as they were surprisingly informal, sent a chill up Rei's spine, and it was almost hard to look around at Guest. Before anything else, before he was the commanding officer of Galens, or a soldier, or Aria's uncle, the man was an S-Ranked CAD User, the only one at the Institute other than Valera Dent herself. Rei had thought he understood what this meant, thought he'd gotten a taste of that presence when Guest had sat him down not 2 weeks before to lecture him about the fiasco that had been his and Aria's first date, but taking the colonel in now, he understood that the man had obviously been politely restraining himself that day.

Because now, as Guest's eyes flickered with a subtle orange glow, the force of his anger emitted an almost-palpable pressure, his aura so solid it might have made it hard to breathe even *if* Rei had had function of both his lungs.

"You know that, I'm assuming?" Guest kept on, either not noticing that his fury was leaking out or not caring. "That they're testing you? That they're seeing how far they can push you?"

It took Rei a moment to be able to nod, his body instinctively not wanting to move, like some poor woodland mouse in the presence of a wolf several hundred times its size.

“Good... Then as to the reason why I’m here... Do you understand, too, that there’s nothing I—much less anyone else in this room—can reasonably do to stop them?”

Rei swallowed, understanding now. There were a lot of things the presence of the four officers around him—the two strongest Users on campus and the doctors overseeing his care—could have meant. It might have been an intervention to ask him to stop pushing himself so hard, or even a simple gathering to ensure the wellbeing of a school student who’d briefly been in an uncertain danger. It wasn’t any of those things, however.

It was a warning.

Central Command was—as the name implied—the primary authority in the ISCM. The colonel might swing the biggest stick at school—in the entirety of Castalon, actually, at least in military terms—but at the end of the day he was only a finger controlled by a hand at the end of an arm attached to a *much* bigger body. From outside threats, Guest had power, had clout. Had it been some third party that had hacked the parameter exam—regardless of what cadet it affected—Rei was quite sure the man would have rained all the fierceness of hell down on the heads of those responsible.

But this... This was a different beast to take on.

The fear tightened its grip ever so slightly.

“That doesn’t mean you’re on your own.”

It was Valera Dent who spoke again, and Rei looked around at her, coming back from staring off at nothing as he’d taken in the colonel’s words.

“First off, let’s be clear: Central doesn’t want you dead, Ward. Quite the opposite. Everyone in this room—” the captain waved between herself and the other three

officers “—is aware of Shido’s special circumstances, just like Earth is. While *we*, though, see you as a person—as a *kid*—you have to understand that they only see you as a soldier, as a *User*, to be leveraged in whatever way they see fit. That means they’re going to push and poke and prod you in ways you aren’t going to like—in ways *none* of us are going to like—but they *definitely* don’t want you dead.”

“You are unique, Cadet.” Willem Mayd’s wheeze was as chillingly serious as Rei had ever heard it before. “But that also means equally unique challenges. This is the flip side of the advantages provided by your CAD.”

“*But*—as I said—that doesn’t mean you’re on your own,” Valera Dent repeated even as she nodded in agreement with the lieutenant colonel. “For the next two and a half years, you are a student of the Galens Institute, which means your safety is *our* primary responsibility. We may not be able to stop them, but what we *can* do is ensure you have the support you need to take on whatever they throw at you.”

Rei swallowed again, partially as his throat tightened with further consideration of the implications of Central interposing themselves on his school, partially to give himself a moment to think. He wasn’t sure what Dent was implying, and in the end typed out the only question he could.

How?

“The four of us have been talking.” It was Guest who answered. “Firstly, you are now going to be stopping in to see Lieutenant Major Ashton every two weeks, starting when you get back from Sectionals next Monday. It won’t be much, but it will help us ensure there’s nothing questionable going on that might otherwise go unnoticed. They may not be able to access your CAD, but we need to assume everything else within the grounds of the Institute—”

“And probably beyond,” Ashton muttered just low enough that Guest could ignore her as he kept going.

“—is susceptible to their manipulation. Do you understand, Cadet?”

Rei nodded. He didn’t expect more regular check-ups would be of much use, but he had to admit it *did* make him feel better to know the lieutenant major would be keeping a closer eye on things just in case.

“Second, Galens will be providing you—and the rest of your squad—with an instructor during your extra hours. Someone to keep an eye on things during conditioning. This will mean you will need to set a stricter schedule, but Michael Bretz and Claire de Soto have already volunteered to alternate evenings up until a half-hour before your curfew at 2200. Should you require additional supervision for mornings or the like, I am giving Ar—*ahem*—that is to say I am giving *Cadet Laurent* permission to reach out to my chief assistant directly to make such requests.”

“I’ll stand in myself if needed,” Valera Dent growled, affirming just how *pissed* she really was, even if her eyes hadn’t shifted from their typical brown.

Rei was glad his mouth was already half-slack, because he was pretty sure it hid his shock. They were getting *private* instruction?? Not only that, but he hadn’t *at all* missed the specific selection of officers who just so happened to have “volunteered” for those extra hours Rei and the others always spent in East Center anyways. Bretz and de Soto. The Brawler and *Saber* sub-instructors. It had been great having Catcher help him get a handle of Shido’s Type Shift, and he *had* had the chance to spend some time with de Soto over the winter break training, but every other evening for what sounded like about as much time as he could ask for...?

And that didn’t even take into account Aria being able to reach out to Maddison Kent—legitimately, for once—whenever they needed *extra* supervision...

Unfortunately, however, Guest wasn’t done, and his last announcement wasn’t nearly as welcome.

“Lastly, your future parameter testing—and any similar such events—will be held in private, and under Captain Dent’s direct supervision.”

Rei’s heart fell at that, and he was about to raise an objection when the Bishop herself lifted a hand, heading him off firmly.

“I know that’s not how you’d like things done, Ward, but to be honest I wasn’t far off from making the call even before this afternoon’s... *fun*.” She injected the final word with such dripping venom it almost made Rei wince. “The reality, though, is that even aside from your Fortitude test, just *three* cadets outdid you in Speed & Agility—Laquita Martin, Jack Benaly, and Arada—while Laurent and Grant were the only ones to best your Offense & Endurance score. If you measure that compared to where you were at the start of last term...”

She let her point hang, and Rei had to begrudgingly admit he followed her logic.

It definitely *wasn’t* how he’d have liked to get things done. While he’d made plenty of headway when it came to finally becoming accepted by his fellow students, the fact remained that plenty of them—the likes of Leron Joy and Lena Jiang being two prime examples—still viewed him as an outsider. That, or they at the very least resented his presence among them, either still because he’d entered the school as an E-ranked User—no one below a *D* had been accepted to the Institute before Rei—or because of how far he’d come since. Pulling him from parameter testing was *bound* to start some whispering next quarter—especially given the lack of love shared with Emble and Warren even within his direct group—and it was certain to only exacerbate the speculation regarding his “uniqueness”, as Mayd had called it.

Then again... It was unlikely to be worse than actually doing his next parameter testing for all eyes to see.

Fourth in Speed & Agility. *Third* in Offense & Endurance. He’d been expecting something along those lines, sure, but Rei still couldn’t help but mentally shake his head at the actual numbers, considering them. Even if Shido *had* slowed down, given his

current trajectory Rei was likely going to be scraping up against the bottom scores of the *second-years* by the end of the current quarter, and probably well into them by the end of term. In class and combat training there would always be an element of uncertainty in his ability, and he *could* tone things down if he absolutely had to, though the thought pained him to consider. With parameter testing, though, where the whole *point* was the quantification of their improvement...

Yeah... If it was speculation he was worried about, Rei supposed he could understand why Dent was making the decision to pull him from the general class.

Rei was allowed to sit in silence for a little bit following this, Guest, Dent, Mayd, and Ashton all seeming to understand that they had just given him a *lot* to process. Eventually, though, he looked back up and around at them again.

So what happens now?

“Nothing.” It was Ashton who spoke up first, apparently keen on making this point absolutely clear to *all of them*, not just Rei. “You are going to lie here until the morning, at which point the lieutenant colonel or I will clear you for release. Even then, though, you’re to be on light activity until Thursday *at least*.”

Rei immediately balked at this, so horrified by the orders that for a second he instinctively tried to protest, resulting only in a windy sound through his paralyzed airway and a very sudden lack of breath.

Even as he struggled to catch it again, though, he typed furiously, losing eloquence in favor of urgency.

Sectionals Monday! Need to train!

“No, Cadet. You need to *heal*.”

Willem Mayd's words were kind but unwavering, and he was looking at Rei with the sort of understanding a favorite uncle might offer his misbehaving nephew.

"I assure you we understand your desire to be ready for the tournament. However, the terms that the lieutenant major have given you are already stretching the recommended limitations for an injury like yours even considering the presence of your Device. So you would do best to follow them *exactly*. If you'd like me to do the math for you, I would point out that if you push yourself too far too fast and *reopen* your wound this week, you will be back in the bed for another day at minimum, and ordered to light activity for even longer."

"Translation: you won't be going to Sectionals at all."

Guest's growl was back, and this time the threat was very much directed at Rei, rather than any unseen party sitting behind a terminal at Central Command. Rei froze again, turning his head with some difficulty to face the man.

"I will admit that you have had a lot thrown on your plate all at once, Ward," the colonel granted him, still not losing the warning in his voice. "Sectionals. The Kamiya offer. Now this. However, there *is* a line where willpower turns to recklessness, just as there is a limit to when the leeway you have been granted to try and make up for these stressors runs out. You *will* follow the doctors' recommendation, and you will do so *as prescribed*, or I will pull you from the tournament myself. Clear?"

"Seconded," Dent added even before Rei could respond, eyes narrowed in a way that let him know there would be absolutely *zero* room to negotiate at this particular table.

The tension in Rei's shoulders held for a few seconds, his mind racing through every argument. He needed to train! Not be stuck to the sidelines for the next *2 days!* Setting aside the impending fight with a certain redhead he suspected would be crowning his Sectionals week, his squad needed him in *top* form. They might be ahead of the game and they might not be able rise beyond next week's SCTs *this* year, but any

missed practice this close to the tournaments meant a *massive* increase in the possibility of a mistake. A mistake most likely of *his* doing. And no matter *how* good the team Aria had put together was—no matter how much of an advantage they might have going into Sectionals—at that level of competition even the smallest error could lead to doom for *any* squad.

Still, in the end, Rei could only deflate, feeling like sinking miserably down, down into the wretched softness of the hospital bed even as he nodded begrudgingly.

“Good. Glad we have an understanding.” Guest’s eyes still didn’t leave Rei, though. “I’ll have Maddison reach out to Cadet Laurent before the end of the day to get scheduling underway for when you get back. Until then, I expect to hear no more reports involving your name until the fights.” He didn’t ask Rei if he understood this time, instead finally lifting his gaze to Mayd and Ashton. “Can his squadmates visit? Or would that not be recommended?”

Ashton snorted. “I think Laurent and Arada would both be prepared to break down the wall if we tried to stop them. That’ll go triply so once Catchwick hears about this, I imagine. I think it’s fine.” She did, however, look to the lieutenant colonel for approval.

Mayd shrugged. “So long as he doesn’t try to talk, I see no issue with it.”

“Then they can join him after we take our leave.” Guest looked back around at Rei. “Any other questions, Ward?”

Rei—pleasantly distracted by the surprise that Aria and the others would be allowed to visit, at least—was about to shake his head when he paused, realizing there was one answer he hadn’t gotten yet.

Slowly, hoping they wouldn’t stonewall him, he typed out the query.

What was my score? he asked, suddenly a little nervous to know the answer, assuming they gave it to him at all. *In the Fortitude test? What was my actual score?*

Guest frowned as the text slipped across all their frames, though Rei thought Dent might have hidden an upward twitch in a corner of her false lips as she reached a subtle hand up to scratch at the line of her prosthesis. The colonel, meanwhile, was looking to Mayd and Ashton again, and Rei thought he could deduce the silent question passed between them.

Should they tell him? Or would that only feed his “recklessness”?

After a moment, though, Willem Mayd let out a defeated sort of sigh—the kind that very clearly told Rei the old man didn’t think there was much any of them could do to keep him from running full-tilt into whatever came next on this insane climb of his—and nodded.

Guest snorted derisively, then turned to look at Rei.

“A1.” His voice was a hard rumble, an edge of that earlier anger returning with a vengeance. “They pushed you to A1, Ward.”

After letting Laurent, Arada, and Grant in behind the last of them, Valera told the other officers she had to see about getting overtime pay approved for Bretz and de Soto’s upcoming extra hours, saluting the colonel and lieutenant colonel as they left with Ashton. Once they’d gone—Guest towards the nearest elevator and the doctors further into the hospital to see to other patients—she sighed out loud, setting her back to the nearest wall even as she pulled her cap off with one hand to run the fingers of the other through her brown hair.

“Hope Mads likes me bald,” she muttered to the crisp white of the now-empty hall. “If I’m not rocking a comb-over by the time this is all done, it’ll be a miracle...”

The words hung in the air for a moment, and not for the first time Valera considered how any outside observer might have been left wondering why she—the famed “Iron Bishop”—would be muttering to herself as she tilted her head back to rest it against the wall behind her, gaze rising to the ceiling above.

Then, though, her frame lit up, and the familiar blue text zipped across her vision.

You assume it's going to end.

Valera scrunched her nose up at that. “Morbid, much?”

She was glad she didn't have to worry about typing out her responses, alone as she was.

Not when those particular ears most everyone else always wondered about overhearing were already in her head...

On cue, another response cropped up, this time in red.

You should have pressed them for more intensive treatment. Two lost days might not be much now, but they're going to add up. We all know this won't be the last time Ward is going to push himself to the brink.

Or get pushed, Kes added in blue.

“No,” Valera answered, working to keep her voice even as the words prodded at the fury still bubbling in her gut. “You heard Mayd. If we let him, that boy would run himself into a wall he's not going to be able to climb over so easily.”

I've done the numbers, the red replied. *The risk to his health is acceptable.*

“Not to me, it’s not,” she growled in answer. Then, though, she sighed, bringing the hand that had still been threaded through her hair down to press against her eyes. “Never thought I’d get where Professor X was coming from, keeping things to his chest like that...”

There was a brief pause, explained as a database scan when Kes answered.

Who?

Popular fictional character from an ancient science-fantasy comic series, the red text elaborated quickly. Written in the pre-ISCM centuries. You can find it archived under <Early-Development Period Arts>.

Another pause. And then...

Done. That was quite enjoyable. I do fail to follow the metaphor, however.

I believe the captain is stating that no matter how badly you want to tell someone something, sometimes they just aren't ready for it.

Valera shook her head, muttering a laugh into the darkness of her palm. “Seriously, why does *no one* appreciate the classics anymore?” Then, though, she dropped her hand, squinting up at the lines of solar lights that illuminated the hall. Through the door to her right, Valera heard someone—probably Arada—raise her voice to start snarling what sounded like every threat on the planet.

She smiled grimly.

“Let them be kids a little longer. That’s what I’m saying.”

We don't have the time to let them be 'kids', Captain, came the answer in red.

Valera, of course, knew that all too well. The fact that Reidon Ward was lying in a hospital bed *once again* was proof of it enough. If anything, the transition was already happening, whether or not the cadets in that room were aware of it.

And whether or not she wanted it to.

Then again, she had an actual target she could aim this particular font of anger at, for once.

“One of these days I’m gonna murder that bitch,” she muttered to the quiet, pushing off the wall to turn and start down the hall. “Believe it.”

No reply came, of course. Not as she pulled her cap back on, nor reached the elevators that quickly took her down the ground floor of the hospital. None was needed.

The feeling was, after all, eternally mutual.

CHAPTER 14

“It has been... endlessly astonishing. And that’s not doing it justice. I can’t aptly put into words—even as I write this simply for my own future perusal—what the experience of following that boy’s climb has been like. It’s like if I could reach out and run my hands along the surface of a passing comet and its trail even as it passed me through space at a hundred thousand miles an hour. Indescribable. Unprecedented.

Simply... unfathomable.”

-Lieutenant Major Ameena Ashton

Private Journals

“Reidon DIPS HIT Ward! If you so much as roll your eyes with excessive enthusiasm I’m going to call your old Matron, pay for her jump from Astra-2, and provide her with the best paddle money can buy to beat your ass with! Don’t. Be. An. IDIOT!”

From his spot hugging the window of the hospital room, Logan watched Viv put a firm hand on Reidon Ward’s chest, pinning him down as the dumbass started to try and sit up for the third time in the minute or so since Guest, Dent, and the two medical officers had left. While Logan himself had taken to leaning back against the clear panel of the smart-glass overlooking the school grounds, Viv and Laurent had rushed straight to the bed, leaning over the sides like mother hens making sure Ward was alright.

Well... *Laurent* was making sure Ward was all right.

Viv, on the other hand...

“If you want us to sit you up, there’s a whole *panel* of controls behind you,” she was snarling through gritted teeth, still pinning her best friend down without so much

as flinching even as he squirmed under her fingers in silent protest. “I bet I could make this damn bed do *backflips* if I wanted to, so will you *sit still* and *tell me what you want?*”

That mollified Ward, and after a second of him typing out his request, light flashed across Viv’s NOED. Logan watched with something between amusement and incredulity as she snorted and said “See? Was that so hard?” before reaching out with her other hand to press and hold one of the many touch-sensitive buttons set in the wall above Ward’s head. With only the faintest sound of whirring gears the bed started to sit up, and Logan was careful to keep his expression neutral as he took Ward in in full for the first time since arriving at the hospital.

The immediate—but not even the most alarming—thing he noticed was the sturdy-looking device that cupped the right side of the boy’s chest over his combat suit, white steel emitting an intermittent bloom of greenish light every few seconds. It looked uncomfortable, and even as he watched Logan realized Ward looked... off-balance? It took a second more for him to realize the boy seemed to be taking somewhat shallow breaths, putting together the fact that he couldn’t expand his ribs enough to inhale all the way. More concerning, though, was the fact that Ward appeared almost to have suffered a stroke, the right side of his face flaccid and drooping, the corner of his mouth dipping down even as he looked to try and smile in thanks at Viv as the bed finally brought him to sit up roughly at a 60-degree angle or so.

What in the MIND...? Logan couldn’t help but think, unable to keep himself from staring even if he did manage to get ahold of his jaw dropping open at the full sight of the boy’s condition.

Fortunately for his curiosity, Laurent was obviously thinking along a similar tack.

“Rei...” she hissed, sounding just short of scared. “What *happened?*”

Ward let out a huff of sound that might have been a laugh, then looked annoyed at his inability to communicate. Once again he started to type.

Botox. Docs said I had to look good for Sectionals.

“Not *funny*, asshat,” Viv growled. The hand that had finally left his chest as the bed brought him to sit came up again in a threatening finger hovering under his nose. “Last chance, or I’m calling the Estoran Center and telling them we’re shipping you back.”

Ward grimaced at this, looking to Laurent for support, but the girl clearly held no sympathy for him. Even only seeing half her face with her back partially to him, Logan could tell her lips were tight and her forehead was creased with worry. Ward, after a second, appeared to give in, because his fingers started moving again. When he was done, he paused, and Logan understood why when his grey eyes slid briefly in his direction, taking him in with calculated consideration.

He was debating who should be included among present company in the answer.

Logan said nothing, not even allowing a hint to show that he’d read that glance, but he had to admit himself a little surprised—and not unpleasantly so, oddly enough—when the Atypical seemed to make his decision, and a second later the notification pinged Logan’s neuro-optic right alongside Laurent and Viv’s.

Someone messed with my Fortitude test. Gifted me with a nice little hole in my lung.

There was a silence, after that, Logan feeling like he couldn’t have been the only one of the three of them to be rereading this statement—so simply stated—with growing alarm.

“*Excuse me?*” Viv finally growled, breaking the pause. “*Explain. Now.*”

Before Ward could continue, however, Laurent was speaking, her mouth having apparently caught up to her own thoughts.

“A *hole? Hom??*” She’d gone rigid, posture equal parts furious and bewildered. Indeed, she took the railing on her side of the bed with both hands and leaned over to

get closer to Ward, knuckles whitening around the metal as she found the more important question. “Actually, no... *Who?*”

“Was it Dyrk Reese?”

Logan hadn’t known he was going to ask until the words were already out of his mouth, and he almost cursed himself when Ward, Laurent, and Viv together all turned to look at him in what miiiiight have been surprise. It was a little irritating—he *had* been making an effort to participate in the squad’s conversations more of late, after all—but he supposed he couldn’t blame them. More to the point, he felt like it was a question worth having an answer to. Reese *had* had an obvious hand in messing with Ward’s schooling during the previous quarter already, so if anyone had the access to fudge around with a *parameter* test...

Ward made a sound that might have been a snort, and the fists already tucked under Logan’s crossed arms tightened instinctively.

Then, though, he forced a single breath in through his nose and out his mouth—just like he’d been working on with Viv since his last session with Forester—before responding, refusing to look away from the hospital bed as he worked hard to keep that ever-present temper of his under control.

“I just thought it was a good—”

Then, though, another message pinged him, and he stopped short.

That was my first guess, too. Funny. But no. Wasn’t him.

Logan blinked, taken aback. After he was sure he’d read correctly, he frowned, unsure how to feel about the confusing moment that combined a sort of passing pride at having—rightfully, clearly—not jumped the gun, and the unexpected nature of the answer.

“Okay...?” he continued after a moment, coming up short on any other hypothesis. “Not Reese. Then... who?”

Another hesitation from Ward, but this time Logan thought the pause felt more universal, like the boy wasn't sure he wanted to answer *any* of them, not just Logan himself.

When he finally did, the reason became clear pretty damn quick.

Central.

The impact of this one word washed through the room in a variety of ways. Viv snarled wordlessly, taking her own railing in such a violent grip that the steel tubing creaked ominously under her fingers. Laurent, on the other side of things, blanched, staring at Ward in disbelief, looking like she was trying to find something, anything, to say.

Logan barely registered any of it.

“Central?” he repeated in a hiss, not understanding. He didn't feel himself come off the wall, didn't notice himself uncrossing his arms and approaching the bed in a flash. One moment the warmth of the sun through the glass was on his shoulders, and the next he was standing beside Laurent, taking Ward in with narrowed eyes as he tried—and failed—to understand.

The boy nodded slowly.

Apparently they may have tapped some kind of back door to access the exam protocols, he typed out quickly. Dialed up the gravity and stimulus of the test incrementally. Bretz didn't know, so his level calls were off. Hence the lung.

This last statement was accompanied by a tapping of the apparatus—obviously some kind of recovery unit—that cupped the right side of his chest.

Viv made a sound like a wild animal, demanding more information, while Laurent's pallid cheeks filled suddenly as she, too, finally found her anger.

Logan, though, was too shellshocked to notice.

Central? Central *Command*? The highest operational level of the ISCM? *That* Central had tampered with the test of a *cadet*? It made no sense. None. Sure, Ward *was* a freak of nature—a term Logan had found himself using with lessening malice and a growing respect over the last couple months or so—but what the hell could be going on that would have *Central* sticking its nose into the business of the Galens Institute, literally *systems* away from Earth? Ward was a *first-year*. He barely had a full semester's worth of training and combat experience under his belt, and hadn't even qualified for Sectionals undefeated in the Institute's Intra-Schools. Was he really that special that *Central* would want to—?

But then Logan's racing thoughts slammed to a halt, frozen in time as the understanding struck him. No. No... He was thinking about it wrong. He'd caught himself, this time. It was too easy to slip into old assumptions, too easy to lean on expectations that had been disproven time and time again over the last 6 months. Ward *was* a first-year, yes, and he wasn't even the strongest in their class—not yet, at least. But that was only a snapshot of the situation, wasn't it? Only a cross-section of the factors that would have had Central's eyes turning in their direction. It had taken a long time—longer than he would ever likely admit to himself—but Logan had witnessed with his own two eyes what was so special about the situation.

What was special about the A-Type seated in the bed before him now.

Assuming Ward was telling the truth—and Logan had seen the *commanding officer* of the school exit this very room not 5 minutes ago, so there was a *pretty* good chance

he was telling the truth—what was important wasn't why Central was going around tampering with testing.

It was what had gotten their attention in the first place...

“How is that okay?! How is that *legal?!?*”

Viv's continued protestations finally brought Logan back, but he didn't look away from Ward even as he returned from his moment of epiphany.

“It's not. It can't be,” Laurent responded heatedly, obviously starting to let the anger come in full now that she knew Ward hadn't *actually* had a stroke or something. “This *isn't* alright. I'll message Maddison. My father too, if need be. There's got to be *something* that we can do!”

Ward tried to wave them down with both hands, looking a little stricken, but that only earned him the ire of both girls as they turned on him together and shouted “Don't. Move!” He pushed himself back into the angled bed automatically, as though trying to retreat even those couple inches he could manage, but just the same typed something out—obviously a placation—that Logan didn't see even as the text flashed across his screen.

Central... He was too busy still thinking, hardly any less stunned by the concept even as it lingered.

He didn't ask himself anymore what the hell it was about Ward that would have the ISCM keeping tabs on a first-year. Logan, just like the rest of the school—and probably a measurable swath of SCT combatants and enthusiasts throughout the ISC, by now—had long since pulled up Ward's assignment baseline. The climb from the Es into the Cs had already been impressive enough, but Ward had started even further back—in the damn *Fs*—before he'd been accepted to Galens, meaning he had risen most of *three full tiers* in half a year. That wasn't just unheard of. It was statistically impossible.

Except that... well... *technically* it wasn't.

The answer was there. Had *been* there, tapping at Logan's suspicions for months. The idea was so ludicrous—so *unfathomable*—though, that he had never *really* seriously entertained the concept.

But now...

Now, as Logan watched Ward trying to calm Laurent and Viv down in what looked like mounting alarm as the pair continued to work themselves up into what was promising to be a fiery frenzy, he doubted there was any other explanation.

Logan steeled himself, watching Ward's face—still fixed on the girls—a moment more before he began to voice his question.

“Ward.” He hadn't meant his voice to come out that low, but it did, like his own subconscious incredulity didn't want Laurent and Viv to overhear for fear of being ridiculed. “What's your Growth spe—?”

Ward had started to look around at his name, had started to take in the words, when Logan was interrupted by the sound of the door opening and the blur of two people bolting into the room. Predictably Catchwick led the way, but Cashe was right on his heels, both carrying their caps in one hand and bags in the other. It was obvious they'd sprinted to the hospital at full speed, their faces red from the cold and their hair battered and windswept.

“Rei!” Catchwick was exclaiming even as he entered, yellow eyes snapping to the bed Logan, Laurent, and Viv were still hovering over. “Sorry! Takeshi wouldn't let us out of double period, even after we heard that—Oh, *woah!*”

The Saber stopped short 5 feet from Ward, forcing Cashe to reflexively side-step him with a squawk. An instant later, however, she too was gaping at the sight the Atypical made. The two of them stood like that, frozen for a second, their appearance sudden enough to have even finally cut Laurent and Viv's spiraling anger short.

“Ward...” Cashe hissed, finding her voice first and stepping slowly up to the bed as her purple-green eyes took him in in horror. “What the hell *happened?*”

Ward raised a hand, looking like he was about to type out the explanation again, but Viv shoved his wrist back down to the bed and answered for him.

“He got *attacked*,” she growled.

Any other day—any other *minute*, actually—Logan might have bristled as both Catchwick and Cashe glanced instinctively in his direction at these words. The Lancer was quick to look away, of course—though the Saber’s gaze lingered for a deliberate moment longer—but Logan didn’t care.

He was still too preoccupied with the weight of understanding, the realization hanging over him like lead chains.

“Attacked?” Cashe repeated, voice rising in obvious confusion. “How? When?”

“Parameter testing.” Laurent was the one to answer. “In combat training, after lunch. And it wasn’t... It wasn’t a real ‘attack’, exactly...”

That was when Catchwick finally found his tongue, and Logan might have been surprised—had he had the mental capacity to do so, in the moment—at the iron edge in the Saber’s voice as he snarled out his demand.

“Someone *explain*.”

Viv was flexible enough to let Ward give his own recounting, and with all of them there now, he provided more detail. The test had felt off, he said, explaining about the early jump in stimulus he’d experienced, and how those spikes had continued throughout the exam. He told them how he’d made it to the Bs and thought something was wrong, and how the pain and gravity had leapt too high for him to handle at “B3”, resulting in his collapse. He told them about hitting the ground, about coughing up blood, and passing out only to wake up in the hospital with a hole in his lungs and Guest standing over him with the doctors “overseeing his case”.

And, at a passing question from Viv, Ward also told them what his *actual* Fortitude score had been, for once not hesitating.

Logan forced himself to pay attention this time, forced himself to read the text that spilled across his NOED. With every *word* he became more convinced that he was right, that his suspicions were correct, and the weight over his shoulders only got heavier and heavier until finally he had to reach out to put a steadying hand on the bed himself for fear of staggering. When the recounting was over, all of them stood in silence, the facts out in full for Logan, Viv, and Laurent, now, and the entire story completely new to Catchwick and Cashe.

Who ended up having two very different reactions to the retelling.

“Central?” Cashe asked weakly.

“A1??” Catchwick demanded at the same time, looking flabbergasted. “DUDE!”

Fortunately, Laurent had the sense to prioritize the questions.

“It’s not the first time,” she answered Cashe steadily, obviously working to keep her voice even. “Last quarter, during the Intra-Schools. We’re 99% sure Reese got orders to scramble the match that set the two of them against each other.” She waved between Catchwick and Ward.

Cashe’s face hardened. “Yeah...” she said quietly. “I *thought* that was sketchy... Reese said something about ‘injuries’ requiring the shuffling, but I don’t remember anyone ever figuring out who exactly got hurt... Is *that* what was going on?”

Laurent nodded. “Technically we don’t know for sure, but...”

“Let’s just say we’re as close to certain as we can be,” Viv finished for her with a snarl.

Cashe frowned, eyes flicking between the girls, then settling on Ward.

“A1...” she said, sounding simultaneously awed and in total disbelief. “That’s... That’s something else, man...”

“That’s what *I* said!” Catchwick tried to interrupt, throwing his hands up and looking around as though not understanding why his previous exclamation had been

ignored. “That’s *insane!* And if *last* quarter’s parameter test wasn’t a record, this *has* to be, right? Ri—??”

“How did you get there?”

Cashe’s question cut the Saber off sharply, the girl’s eyes so intently still set on the Atypical that Logan was pretty sure she hadn’t even noticed Catchwick had been speaking. It hung in the silence that followed, Laurent and Viv going still on either side of the bed and the Saber, too, pausing with his arms still up.

Nothing could quite freeze over a fire like addressing the elephant in the room.

For a long time Ward met Cashe’s gaze, but said nothing. He wasn’t nervous. Logan could tell that at a glance. He wasn’t hesitating or worried or anything that might have been construed as unsure or indecisive.

On the contrary, Ward was staring at Cashe like he was sizing her up, grey eyes so still on hers that after a moment the intensity of the Lancer’s gaze started to crumble.

“Sorry,” she said after a moment, hands tightening around her cap and the strap of her bag. “I get that we’ve been dancing around this for weeks now—*longer*, in some ways—but there’s a limit to what I’m cool with not knowing when *Central Command* is suddenly involved, Ward. There’s something going on with you. I know that. *Everyone* knows that. But we don’t know *what*. And you waltz onto campus as an E-ranker—Well, no. You *don’t* ‘waltz’—” she brought her cap up to cut Viv’s growl of protest short “—I know that, now. But you arrive at school a full tier lower than any student ever accepted to Galens, and then spend six months flying by the rest of us. I *know* you put in the effort, I do!” Viv clearly still wanted to interrupt, but Cashe bulled on in a rush, now. “But you’ve *got* to know we can tell something’s going on! I’m glad I’m on this squad—*thrilled*, I promise—and I get that Grant and I are still a step outside of the circle you four have going on—” she gestured to Ward, Laurent, Viv, and Catchwick with the hat “—but now it’s different... Central Command...” She let her hand drop again with a disbelieving shake of her head, dreaded lines of her silvery hair twisting across her

shoulders. “I believe you, I do. But I need to know why. I need to know *why* they’re messing with you, *why* you hit *A1* in a parameter test barely anyone else has scraped the upper Cs in.” Her confidence was back as she stared Ward down, returning with the words she’d clearly been keeping close to her chest for some time. “I need to know why you started school in the low Es, and half a year later you’re the second-highest ranked first-year on campus...”

She trailed off, and Logan found himself fighting back the strangest desire to *applaud*. There had been a time, maybe, when *he* would have been the one to shred through the invisible “Do Not Enter” tape that surrounded the topic of Ward and his CAD, but he wouldn’t have managed it with *half* the diplomacy the Lancer had.

Also, he didn’t feel like getting castrated the next time he snuck Viv into his room...

Cashe’s words seemed to ring, now. Instead of silence, though, the room felt like it was holding its breath, the still quiet before the onslaught of the storm. Viv was still vibrating with indignation, but she seemed to understand that this wasn’t her fight to take on for once, while across from her Laurent had turned away from the Lancer to look at Ward.

Ward, who still hadn’t moved except to cross one hand over the other in his lap, left covering the CAD band of his right wrist almost protectively, thumb running over the three vysetrium gems that glowed a deep, heavy blue against the white steel they were set in.

For a time—for an *eternity*, it felt like—nothing happened. No one moved or spoke. Only eyes shifted from person to person, mostly Catchwick and Viv’s nervous energy manifesting as they looked from Ward to Cashe and back again. Outside, a group of people passed the room in conversation, voices muffled beyond recognition by the opaque glass.

And then, just as Cashe's face began to fall, like she was starting to think she wasn't going to get even the hint of an answer, Ward lifted a hand to type.

I'm not, the first message came.

Everyone—even Laurent, Viv, and Catchwick—frowned in confusion at this.

“You're not?” Cashe echoed, her own expression having brightened only momentarily before dipping with a lack of understanding. “Not what?”

I'm not the second-highest anymore. Shido ranked up. And evolved.

Laurent, funny enough, was the first one to register this information, her excitement coming as a gasp that immediately morphed into a tempered squeal of excitement.

“What?? Rei, you didn't say that! That's amazing!” Her congratulations came out in a rush. “You're C7, now?? What did Shido do?? Oh, you probably don't know yet, do you?? It'll have to wait till—!”

But Ward, for once, wasn't looking at her.

He was still watching Cashe even as his fingers continued to move over the invisible keyboard at his side.

Shido is special, Cashe. Really special. There's a reason for everything, like you said, and there's a part of me that wants to tell you that reason. But I can't. Not now.

“Why not?” Cashe asked after she'd read the message. She was careful with the question, cautious not to come off snappish or heated like Logan thought he would have been in her shoes. Now that she was getting *some* kind of answer, it was obvious

she wanted to keep the conversation going. “Let’s be real... I have a pretty good idea of what’s going on, but why can’t you just tell me? Confirm my theory for me.”

Because it’s information that I can’t put back in the bottle. Not once it’s out there.

Cashe’s frown deepened, eyebrows coming together. “But *they* know.” She waved at the others again. “If it’s that bad, why can *they* know, but not us?” She pointed between herself and Logan.

It was a fair question, and apparently Ward thought so too, because he finally hesitated. After a second he looked around, meeting Laurent, Viv, and Catchwick’s gazes one after the other.

Because I trust them, the answer finally came.

Cashe’s face darkened at this, and her mouth opened to respond.

Before she could, Laurent stopped her with a word.

“Wait.”

Sure enough, Ward was still typing.

I trust you, too. I do. But this is different. If you think you have a good idea of what’s going on, I want you to take that idea, dial it to 10, and then double it.

Cashe’s eyes went wide at this, any offense very suddenly forgotten. “Wha—?” she started, clearly taken aback by extreme nature of this response. “H-How—?”

Another message, though, interrupted her.

And if that doesn’t help, ask Grant. I know for a fact he’s on the right track...

Logan snapped his head around from watching Cashe to look at Ward. The boy's eyes were lifted to him, now, cool and deadly serious.

After a second, Logan let out a low snort.

“So you did hear me...” he grunted.

Ward didn't respond, but he didn't look away either, and the lack of reply was enough of a confirmation in and of itself.

“Hear what?” Cashe asked quickly, looking between them with wide eyes. “Hear what? What's ‘the right track?’”

Before he answered, Logan watched the Atypical a moment longer, waiting.

The nod was almost imperceptible.

Only then did Logan turn back to Cashe. The others were all staring at him, studying him with something like warning in every gaze, including Viv's.

“I asked him how high his Growth spec was,” Logan told the Lancer quietly.

Cashe hissed, and Laurent and Viv's grips tightened on the bedrails while Catchwick's face grew dangerous.

“And?” the Lancer asked, obviously working to keep her voice steady. “What did he say?”

“He didn't.” Logan frowned, looking back to meet Rei's eye again. “But I think that's kind of the point...”

CHAPTER 15

“Secrets have their place in the world. It is the combined nature of life, character, and language to create and bear experiences and knowledge sometimes best kept close to one’s heart.

Secrets, however, are often not so different from an illness, an infection. If left to fester, they may corrode and corrupt, often taking more from you in silence than they would have if dragged out into the light...”

*- Captain Vorbees Forester, MD, PhD
Clinical Psychiatrist, the Galens Institute*

What followed was a brief—and ultimately unproductive—interrogation of Rei by Cashe, which had him dodging so many questions he soon felt like he was in full-on fisticuffs with some S-Ranked Brawler. The Lancer had only just finally started to tire—obviously beginning to understand that she wasn’t going to get any more of an answer from any of them that afternoon—when a medical tech with cropped black hair and a long nose arrived and announced that he was there to remove the recovery device from Rei’s chest. It was a welcome interruption, and Rei actually felt relieved when the technician seemed to notice he was looking a little haggard, because even as the man peeled the machine’s lower arms out from under Rei’s back, he told Aria and the others that it was probably “nearing time for them to leave”. Cashe gave a half-hearted protest—with Viv offering a more full-throated one, if for entirely different reasons—but the hospital worker was firm, especially after Rei shot him a subtle “Thank you!” look when the man leaned over him again, briefly blocking his face from view.

Honestly, tired as he was in the moment, he was only sad to realize that meant Aria would have to go too.

“Ashton said you get out tomorrow, right?” she asked as the others started to file from the room behind a grumbling Viv. “I’ll bring you your uniform in the morning. I think I remember what locker you left it in.”

Some of the feeling had come back to his face, so Rei managed to give her a much closer approximation to a true smile this time as he reached out to brush her bare shoulder, hoping to convey his appreciation. She returned it, then glanced around, and Rei only realized she’d been making sure everyone else was distracted—the others as they left and the tech as he started wiping down the device with a cloth that smelled of alcohol—when she leaned in quickly, bringing a hand to one side of his face and her mouth to his other ear.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” she whispered, briefly pressing his head into hers. “I’m really glad you’re okay.”

Then, before Rei could think to say anything in answer, she turned and planted a quick kiss on his cheek, disengaged, and made a beeline for the door Catcher had just stepped through. Even *if* Rei had been able to speak he very much doubted he would have found his voice in time before the door had closed behind Aria, leaving him with jaw slack and face on fire.

Then the tech—apparently not as preoccupied as had been assumed—gave a polite cough and muttered something like “Nice to be young...” under his breath.

After Rei had gotten control of himself again, what remained of the afternoon was spent largely in boredom, with even a review of recent top-level SCT fights becoming monotonous enough that he decided to catch up on what little schoolwork he’d been behind on from the morning. After that he studied the coding of his NOED for a bit—mostly just looking over the spots in the script he thought he might still be able to adjust to suit Type Shift a little better—but without a proper desk or smart-glass screen to display anything he got frustrated and gave up in favor of just trying to get to sleep early. Pleasantly the room reacted to him bringing the bed back down and closing

his eyes, because before he knew it the full-length window had faded into a black sheen to block out the day's dying glow, and the rest of the walls shifted to do the same as the solar lights dimmed and went out overhead.

If only sleep itself had been so easy in coming.

Rei was certainly tired enough for it. That wasn't the issue. Even early as it was—just after 1900, and half an hour since another tech had brought him a tray with soft foods for dinner—the afternoon had taken a *hell* of a toll on him, and a lack of fatigue wasn't any concern. Comfort was more of a problem—an ache had slowly grown in his chest since the removal of the recovery device—and toss and turn as he might, Rei couldn't find a position that kept him from feeling like someone was slowly pushing a needle up under his right ribs, even when he messed with the bed angle. Then again he doubted he would have slept much if he'd been floating on a perfect pad of silken roses.

His mind just didn't want to stay quiet.

Central... So they were showing their hand a little at last. Rei grunted in irritation at the thought as he plumped the pillow under his head and shifted yet again to try and get comfortable. He couldn't blame Cashe for finally breaking the unspoken agreement the six of them—and the rest of the school, to an extent—had been working under for some time, now. Maybe if nothing else had happened they could have gone on pretending, but with *Central Command* now casting its shadow on the situation of course Cashe's concerns would start to outweigh anything else. Grant's too. Rei had been surprised when the Mauler had voiced the question—or started to, at least—that had been hanging like a sword over his head for half a year now, but he probably shouldn't have been. A split in the road was coming, Rei could see now, and while he had managed to pump the brakes enough to keep from crashing headlong into disaster that afternoon, he knew he wouldn't be able to hold the collective curiosity of the other students at bay much longer.

No... It wasn't even that he wouldn't.

He *couldn't*.

C7... In a flash that Rei otherwise thought should have taken through Sectionals, he and Shido had suddenly tied Aria as the strongest Users among the Galens first-years. It was only on paper, sure—his average specs were still lagging thanks to the artificial average boosted by his Growth—but very few other people knew that, and Rei doubted many more would care even if they did.

No. What they would focus on was the number they could see, the metric they could measure. It wouldn't be long before someone outside of the squad realized he'd hit C7, and Rei could already hear the whispers of his classmates and the questions—relatively quiet until now—starting to get louder. Worse, too, was the fact that such a discourse wasn't going to be limited to the school. He had fans, Rei was aware—strange as the idea was—and while he'd largely avoided looking up what was being said on the feeds about him since Aria had told him about his “Iron Prince” moniker, he wasn't naive enough to think others weren't watching.

If anything, hadn't the parameter testing proven that *too* many were watching?

“Dammit...” Rei muttered at the thought, then again when the ache in his lungs stabbed at him suddenly, causing him to wince and clutch at his side. “*Damn. It.*”

He didn't even realize they were the first words he'd spoke since waking up.

Luckily for him, the brutality of Central's interference won over his body in the end, and after an hour or so of fighting, sleep finally caught up. It seemed like only a blink in time between when Rei was staring at the darkness of the window-wall and when he opened his eyes to find himself squinting at the hearty light of a new winter morning. He blinked several times, not understanding, then shot up out of bed with a yelp, checking the time. It was after 0900?? When the hell was the last time he'd slept in past—?

“Relax, Ward. Keep moving like that and you'll be hacking up blood again before you even get out of bed.”

Rei turned—a little more carefully, now—to find Ameena Ashton walking towards him, the room door closing behind her. Apparently her arrival had been what had lit the room and awoken him, and he lifted a hand to wave at the corner of his vision in indication of the time.

“Ma’am! Classes have already started! I need to—!”

“You need to take it easy is what you need to do, Cadet,” she answered firmly, reaching the bed and depositing a pile of folded clothes she’d been carrying by his feet, then a pair of boots on the floor closer to him. “Laurent came by this morning with these. If you’re a good boy I’ll let you out before noon, and you can join your squad for lunch.”

Rei spluttered, only glancing at what he now realized were the pieces of his promised uniform, cap and all. “But you said you’d clear me in the morn—!”

“In the morning, yes,” Ashton cut him off again without even blinking, moving up the bed to take him in with a critical eye. “But you’ll notice I didn’t say *when*, and since one of us has a bad habit of doing things too fast too soon, I imagine you will understand why I’m going to keep your ass here for *every* spare second I can. Consider it a lesson. Now—” she pointed at his pillows “—lie back down and let’s take a look at you, or am I going to have to threaten to withhold your breakfast as well?”

Rei groaned, but did as instructed. Ashton was quick with her review of his condition, and it was only as her fingers prodded at his chest and abdomen under the combat suit he’d never had a chance to change out of that he realized the ache of his injured lung was all but gone. He tensed a little when she palpated under his ribs, but nothing came of the added pressure, leaving him breathing a low sigh of relief when she nodded in approval and pulled back. Next came the imaging device she’d used before to check on the regression of his fibro, and after a couple more minutes the woman seemed wholly satisfied, pulling the wand-like sensor free from his body again

and moving around the bed to the counter and sink in one corner of the room by the window.

“Looking good,” she said as she started to clean the device with soap and water. “Your CAD seems to be working overtime. You’re in better shape than I’d hoped.”

Rei perked up at this, reaching back to press the button that would have his bed sitting up again. “Does that mean I can train?” he asked hopefully as the gears whirred into life.

Even with her back to him he thought he could tell Ashton was rolling her eyes.

“We never said you couldn’t train,” she answered as she turned, setting the imaging device under a small nearby ion scrubber that would further sterilize it before reaching for a towel to dry her hands. “We just said you would be on light duty for a couple of days. What that means will be up to Dent and your sub-instructors.”

Rei barely held back a groan at that, recalling with vanishing hope the hard lines of the Bishop’s face as she’d told him in *no uncertain terms* was he wasn’t going to be pushing himself until Thursday at the earliest. He grumbled something under his breath, not exactly sure what he wanted to say. He wanted to train, *needed* to train. Sectionals started in less than a *week*. If he wasn’t ready—

Splat.

To avoid overtaxing synthetic neuroline and the like, a User’s Cognition spec only engaged on demand, much like Strength and Speed. For that reason, Rei didn’t react fast enough as the damp towel was chucked at him, and squawked in surprise when the cloth took him in the side of the face and neck with a wet, flapping sound. He flailed momentarily before wrenching the thing off in disbelief.

Then he eyed Ashton warily.

“Are doctors allowed to throw things at their patients?”

The woman smirked. She was leaning back against the counter, arms crossed and head tilted to one side. “Oh so you *are* my patient, then?” she asked him pointedly.

“Does that mean you’re going to admit you’re hurt? Or are you going to keep being a colossal *dunce* and push yourself into an early grave? Because you can’t have it both ways, Ward.”

Rei had to struggle to try and find an answer to this, but the lieutenant major kept on before he could put the words together.

“Just be *careful*,” she said with a sigh, pushing herself off the counter again and making for the door without so much as looking back at him. “That’s all we’re trying to tell you. Be. Careful.”

And then she was gone, and Rei was on his own again, her last statement lingering in the silence of her departure.

True to her word, Ashton didn’t reappear for most of the morning. Luckily, though, 1-A’s first class had been a short period in Device Evolution, so when Rei rang Aria between periods she picked up quick enough. After a brief assurance that he was in one piece again, it didn’t take much convincing to get her to livestream the rest of the pre-lunch lectures for him, at last giving him *something* to do at the very least. Between some lingering discomfort in his side and not actually being *in* the class, it was a little hard to pay attention, but Rei managed it, and as though on cue the bell indicating the end of the last lesson rang just as the same tech from the previous day poked his head into the room to tell Rei he was free to go.

Thanking the man in a rush, Rei told Aria he’d meet her and the others at the mess even as he kicked his legs off the bed and stood, wincing as tight muscles protested the sudden change in position. He’d only risen thus far that day to use the bathroom—fearing Ashton’s wrath if he pushed his luck more than that—so he wasn’t surprised by the soreness of the previous day he hadn’t so much as had the opportunity to walk off after the testing. Giving himself a minute or so to stretch and roll out the discomfort, Rei reached for his uniform, intending to get dressed and hurry off to meet the others, when the gleam of Shido’s blue vysetrium caught the noon sun.

Shido...

Rei swore, not believing he'd forgotten. It said something about how far he'd come from the early days of being awestruck by every little change the Device made as it grew, but he still wanted to punch himself. Dropping his arm, Rei looked around eagerly, not exactly sure what he was searching for. There was a mirror in the bathroom—a small, private chamber hidden behind a section of the wall by the door—but it was barely large enough to reflect his face and shoulders. No, what Rei needed was—

And then his eyes fell on the large interior wall that hid the hall outside, and in two strides he was standing by it.

Working the smart-glass wasn't complicated. There were a number of functions hidden behind a biometric security system—obviously to limit access to the hospital feeds, patient information, and the like—but finding the “Display” settings only took a few taps after the initial menu popped up on the wall at Rei's first touch. He scrolled through, not for the first time marveling at the incredible nature of the technology—which allowed everything from a full-screen monitor to a livestream of the school Arena's now-empty main floor—until he found a “Reflective” option. Tapping it, he selected the first choice that popped up, and as desired the wall changed in a ripple of light, the opaque white giving way to a metallic array that worked as a perfect, massive mirror.

Rei stepped away from the wall, pleased with himself and excitement building in his chest. He took a breath, shaking his arms out and taking himself in in the reflection. He really *had* changed, hadn't he? He was over 5'7” now, and while he was still wiry compared to most—*all*, actually—of his classmates, not one had called him “skinny” in a good long while. His hair was getting long, too, and Rei allowed himself only a very brief chuckle thinking on the number of times he'd overheard Aria and Viv both muttering that he needed to get it cut. It wasn't the moment.

Instead, Rei set his feet shoulder-width apart and turned his palms towards the mirrored wall to give himself the best view. Only then did he consider, just for a second, if he should wait, if he should hold off until Aria, Viv, and Catcher were with him. Aside from his last evolution, at least one of them had almost always been there, and it felt a little strange standing there in front of the mirror all by himself.

Then again, the last time he'd hesitated they'd all ended up giving him an earful, so instead Rei just grinned as he spoke the word.

“Call.”

Shido responded in a rush, and inside of a heartbeat the Device's black and white armor had whirled into place, blue vysetrium shining between the steel plating and along the edges of his Brawler-Type claws. Rei had to stop himself from whooping, too, because while the change wasn't huge, it was obvious, and *definitely* a solid upgrade.

In the center of his chest, hiding most of the red griffin of Galens from view for the first time, was a narrow strip of dark steel that was widest at the top and narrowing before growing again towards the bottom, fitting perfectly—as always—against the swell of chest muscles. It was all black—except for a sizable wedge of vysetrium set in the thickest part of the metal, between his collar bones—and provided a healthy line of protection for vitals that had otherwise been largely exposed until then. Shido had prioritized mobility and combat over almost everything, so far, and while that had come with great benefits it had also left Rei's torso wholly open to direct assault. Now, though, even if it wasn't a *huge* improvement, opponents would have to be more careful when attacking unless they wanted to risk their body-shots getting caught by the new armor.

“Nice!” Rei barely managed to keep his voice under control, pumping the air victoriously with a clawed fist.

And realizing, at the same time, that what he saw wasn't all that had changed.

Something felt... different. Something was off, particularly when he moved. At first confused, Rei lowered his arm and started slowly twisting this way and that as he

watched the mirror, trying to deduce what was going on, but seeing nothing else different. It took him a second, but eventually he realized it was his *back* that felt odd, and with a surge of anticipation Rei whirled, craning his head around to look at his shoulders and neck.

He didn't manage to keep his excitement down this time.

“Oh *hell* yeah!”

All along his spine, from the base of his skull right to the armor that had encased his hips since the last evolution, a smooth line of metal plating now snaked. There was no vysetrium there, but the black steel over white twisted smoothly even as awkwardly turned as Rei was to see it, not hindering him in the slightest. Still keeping one eye on the mirror, he bent this way and that, spending a full minute marveling at the maneuverability of the joints by flexing and jumping, finally even spreading his legs and doubling over to look between them upside down, utterly thrilled. Shido had done as promised, making a *definite* improvement to its Defensive capabilities, but hadn't sacrificed any of the mobility that was essential to his Brawler-Type combat style especially.

He couldn't have been more pleased.

Rei was all smiles, therefore, and still looking at himself between his legs like that, when a familiar, wheezing cough cut across his excitement, making him freeze. Slowly, too mortified to even think to straighten up, he turned his head towards the room door whose opening he hadn't heard in his excitement.

There, standing just inside the frame, was an upside-down Willem Mayd, one hand behind his back, the other politely held as a fist over his mouth as the old man obviously fought to keep a straight face.

“Cadet, can I give you a piece of advice?” the lieutenant colonel asked, amusement obvious despite the lightness of his tone.

“Yes... sir?” Rei squeaked out, still too embarrassed to think to righten himself.

Permission given, Mayd reached for the mirrored wall. “Next time, keep in mind that high-end smart-glass has *two* options of reflective display. Your standard mirror, and—” he tapped the glass, bringing up the menu and navigating it with familiar speed “—a one-way version.”

And then, as Rei felt all the blood rush from his face, the man made a selection, letting the wall go clear. With an explosion of embarrassment he finally snapped up straight, horrified to find that no fewer than a half-dozen hospital workers had stopped to gawk, mouths hanging open, at what Rei realized had been the sight of him bending and twisting and admiring himself. Of all of them, only Ameena Ashton wasn’t staring, and only because the lieutenant major was busy facepalming, shaking her head into her open hand.

“Oh, and congratulations, by the way,” Willem Mayd said from the door, finally caving and grinning broadly behind his white beard. “An impressive change as always.”

Then the old man was gone, chuckling as he left, leaving Rei spluttering and as red as the wings of the griffin still partially visible on his chest.

One good thing, at least, came out of the humiliation Rei suffered as he’d finally rushed to actually get dressed and outright flee the hospital. When he reached the mess, the story was a perfect ice breaker to mutter to Aria and the others after they’d met up in the lunch line, neatly sidestepping any awkwardness that might have been lingering from the previous day’s discussion. Catcher—bless his ever-affable personality—was laughing so hard he was crying by the time they reached their usual table in the southern quarter of the arboretum, and even *Grant* looked to be working hard to hold back a snicker, a politeness neither Aria nor Viv bothered with. Best of all, Cashe—who’d initially been almost as tightly wound as she’d seemed when Rei had met her for the

very first time—relaxed and eventually chose to join in on grilling him first about Shido’s evolution, then on *specifically* what poses he’d struck for all of the hospital staffers to ogle.

“And take pictures of, hopefully,” Aria had added unhelpfully.

By the time lunch was done, Rei was pretty sure he could have charred his plate of pork chops and greens on his face if he’d wanted to.

After that he, Aria, Viv, and Grant parted with Catcher and Cashe as usual, and it was a brisk walk through a cold afternoon to the Arena, then down to the sub-basement. Unsure of what he could expect from the day, Rei changed with the others—noting as he did that he *really* needed a shower, judging by Viv’s scrunched-up nose beside him as he pulled back on the combat suit he hadn’t been able to wash yet—and walked out onto the training floor with the other three. He hadn’t missed the stares of the rest of 1-A at lunch and on the way to the Arena, and they certainly weren’t lost on him now, but he was careful not to acknowledge any of their gazes. Instead he stayed in deliberate conversation with Aria as Viv glared around at the rest of the class in open hostility, for once helped out by Grant’s typical resting glower.

In a way, it was a familiar experience. Pretend as he might to be unbothered by the attention, Rei found himself falling back into a mix of unpleasant memories, ones in which he’d walked out onto a similar combat floor in a different colored suit, as recently as less than a year ago. Back then, of course, the stares had been for entirely different reasons, but without detail or distinction the mutterings and whispers that chased their arrival still sounded much the same to his ears, marking him once again as ‘different’. For a moment, just a moment, he wanted to snarl at the rest of 1-A, to join Viv in fixing everyone around them in turn with a silent threat.

Aria, perfect as she was, stopped him with a cool hand on the back of his shoulder, smiling at him as she read the frustration in his eyes even as he fought to pay attention only to her.

What he'd done to deserve this girl in his life, the MIND only knew...

Fortunately, unlike most of the first-years, Valera Dent seemed about as impressed with Rei's recent shared ascent to the coveted top spot in the class as she might have been a random sweat stain. Without so much as an extra glance in his direction she called class to order shortly thereafter, and a minute later Rei, Aria, Viv, and Grant were splitting for their usual fields. Once there, any lingering hope Rei had of ducking Mayd and Ashton's orders were dashed when Bretz paired him up with an E-ranked holographic opponent for warm ups, the second lieutenant even going so far as to laugh out loud when Rei weakly asked if he could at *least* bump the opponent level up to D.

In this fashion the rest of the afternoon training passed, with even the interest in Shido's subtle upgrades—shown off for all to see as soon as he'd called on the Device—dying down eventually. The rest of the day was much the same, and after a dinner in which Rei was only sniggered at *half* as often as he'd been at lunch, he and the rest of the squad made for East Center, where absolutely no one let him believe even for a *second* that he would be allowed to get out of light duty just because there were no instructors present. At least the five of them let him fight live, though, with even Grant cycling out of the 1-on-1 pacings they were putting themselves through to spar at quarter speed, and by the time curfew neared Rei was feeling a little less frustrated with the situation.

Wednesday slipped by in the same way, the only notable deviation being that Rei was halfway through breakfast before he realized the ache in his chest was finally resolved. The morning classes passed without anything to note, as did combat training in the afternoon and evening. Thursday morning came and went, and to Rei's relief Dent came over to Field 1 at the start of class to let Bretz know he was clear to resume regular conditioning. It was good timing, too, because the Type-groups were scattered for cross-training, and Rei had a chance to really put his new Defense upgrades to the test for the first time when he was placed under Lieutenant de Soto's care along with

Viv, Kay, Mateus Selleck, and Selleck's gossipy Phalanx crony Leda Truant. It brought Rei's spirits up *immensely* when he trounced both Selleck *and* Truant back-to-back without so much as calling on Type Shift, and he had a chance to get a healthy amount of excellent feedback from de Soto on his bouts with Viv and Kay in turn, both fights lost because he took them on *solely* in Saber Mode, but neither too easily. That evening, too, things were back to form, Rei and Aria spending most of their extra hours duking it out with a rare vigor even for them, eventually getting told by the others to claim half of their training room's Dueling field so they could practice on a better variety of environments. It had taken some convincing, but the pair of them had acquiesced in the end, not displeased to blast their way through more than the smaller section of the Neutral Zone they usually kept their evening conditioning limited to.

By the time afternoon training on Friday ended, Rei was feeling largely himself again, and it was with more excitement than anxiety that he heard Dent call for a dismissal of the class, followed up by a shout of "All Sectionals participants! On me!"

With a range of mutterings that were a mixture of eager, jealous, and disappointed, most of 1-A took their leave of the combat floor, Sense giving Rei an excited double thumbs up before hurrying to find Leron Joy in the departing crowd.

When they were gone, only Rei, Aria, Viv, Grant, and Kay were left gathered around Dent, even the sub-instructors having gone to probably prep for whatever class section would be training next.

"How are you all feeling?"

The Iron Bishop's question was easy but pointed, obviously not meant as a platitude as she took the five of them in deliberately, hands on her hips and eyes clear beneath the brim of her cap.

There was an exchange of looks from Rei and the others before Aria spoke up for them, hesitating only long enough to glance at Kay.

"Good, ma'am. Er... Nervous, but good."

“Unsurprising.” Dent looked to Kay expectantly. “How about you, Sandree? Cadet Vademe was in morning training, and he seemed confident with how your squad’s extra hours have been going in particular.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The Lancer bobbed her head as she agreed, tucking a few errant strands of her purplish hair behind one ear. “Don’t know how much of a chance we have catching up to this lot, but we’re feeling good.” She motioned to Aria’s squad with a mock-grimace.

“Focus on the win,” Dent said with a bit of a smile. “Fight to win, and everyone has a shot. Fight not to lose, on the other hand, and you might as well stay at Galens in the first place. But regardless—” the captain turned back to all of them “—I didn’t call on you to lecture. I called to let you know what travel plans are.”

Rei wasn’t sure if he was the only one of the five of them whose heart rate sped up, suddenly. It might be a small thing, but planning to leave Galens for their first *actual* inter-school competition...

It suddenly made the looming presence of Sectionals much more realistic.

“Tomorrow, all squads are excused from regular classes and combat training. Instead, you’ll report to SB1 for one last Team Battle and Wargames practice. It’ll be light-pace—we don’t want any last-minute injuries—but it’ll be all day, so be ready. You’ll have the chance to recover before Monday, because we leave Sunday morning at 0900 from the south gate. That means eat beforehand, or miss breakfast.” She paused, just to ensure there were no questions. When none of them voiced any, she continued. “Pack for the week. We’ll be staying at The Chevaron—the hotel the ISCM has put the visiting schools up in—and you’ll be permitted to wear civies there, but uniforms or combat suits will be mandatory in the Arena depending on if you’re fighting that day or not. Obviously, even when *not* in your regulars you are expected to comport yourselves as proper members of the military. Understood?”

“Yes, ma’am!” came the unanimous reply.

“The school has booked flyers to get us to the Castalon orbital station, where we’ll be taking a tram to Ganos. Same for travel from the hotel to Kenneth Academy. Once we’re settled in the city, it will be go-time, and you will be expected to stick to your squads from morning to night and use every spare moment you have to prep and strategize.” She stopped again, and that hint of a smile came back. “There have been some changes this year that I think will make it a little easier to keep that team-oriented mindset in place over the course of the week, and I’m looking forward to hearing what you all think of them.”

That got Rei’s ears to perk up, but Viv beat everyone else to the punch.

“Changes, ma’am?” She sounded both intrigued and worried, which was probably an apt summary of all their emotions. “What kind of changes?”

But Dent only shook her head and grinned outright, apparently pleased to have been able to tease them. “Nothing you need to worry about till Sunday, Arada. Now, if you don’t have any questions, I need to get ready for the next class.” Aptly pulling a page out of Michael Bretz’s book, though, she didn’t so much as give them a second to voice any other curiosities at her cryptic last hint. “Nothing? Perfect. Dismissed, and I will see you all in the morning.”

With that, obviously, the five of them had no choice but to salute and turn on their heels, taking their leave as one. All of them, of course, were actually nothing *but* questions, and Kay proved the least able to contain herself, erupting in what could just *barely* be considered a whisper as soon as they were out of earshot and about to turn the corner around the main chamber wall into the sub-basement hall.

“Changes?” she hissed, looking around at the rest of them. “What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“No idea,” Rei muttered quietly, contemplating it. “Sectionals are pretty straightforward, especially for first-years. Not a lot of fanfare...”

“Which means there’s a lot they *could* change,” Grant grunted in agreement, letting his voice rise to a normal level as soon as they stepped into the hall. “Sectionals are usually single-elim, right? Maybe they’ve moved to double?”

Rei was a little amused to find himself less surprised than usual at the Mauler’s unhesitating participation in the conversation. It was still strange to bear witness to, but maybe—just maybe—he was getting used to it.

“Nah,” Viv answered with a shake of her head as they neared the locker room doors. “That would take forever. Our Intra-Schools took three weeks on their own, and there’s going to be *more* teams *and* squad-formats on top of Dueling. If they did double-elim we’d be there until February.”

“Fair,” Grant muttered in answer, looking pensive when Rei glanced back him.

“School team-up?” It was Kay’s turn to offer, sounding suddenly hopeful. “*That* would be cool...”

“Like Wargames, but with sides?” Aria asked, obviously interested. “Yeah... *That would* be cool...”

“But unlikely,” Rei hated to say, leading the way into the locker room to be greeted by the rumbling chatter of the rest of 1-A, most of those in the closest aisles turning towards them at once upon their arrival. “It would basically be a whole new format. They’d probably want to establish the rules for that in training beforehand, so it wasn’t a mess live.”

“True...” admitted Kay glumly, starting to look around as they headed for the back of the room and the last line of lockers that had become Rei, Aria, Viv, and Grant’s usual spot. Apparently spotting someone—probably Sense—waving her down in one of the middle rows, she broke away. “Well whatever’s going on, we’ll find out Sunday! See you guys later!”

She left them, in the end, to nothing more than further speculation, and by the time they connected with Catcher and Cashe again later that evening—both of them

having received their own lectures in their respective training times with the other Sectional qualifiers—all six of them had theorized everything from special uniforms to first-years being given their own bracket in Globals for the first time. It was fun to gossip about what could be going on, and the chatter carried them all the way through dinner and an intense evening of additional training that culminated in the six of them staying up till curfew to converse in Kanen's sprawling common area.

Saturday dawned bright and late for Rei, with the squad having decided the evening before to forgo any discussion of morning hours if they were expected to do team training all day. They met outside of 304—since four of the six of them roomed there—and took their time making for the mess, Catcher claiming all the attention with a new, wild theory that all the Sectional SCTs were going to be held on Earth, and that they would be making a hole jump the following day to the Sol System. They laughed the idea away, but it filled an otherwise quiet breakfast, made strange by the lack of students in the arboretum, the vast majority of whom were already in class. They even took a different table, grabbing a spot next to Vademe's group—who were also eating late—so they could trade theories and chat about what *they* thought the changes would be, and what Kenneth Academy was going to be like.

Squad format training, fortunately, was a more comfortable affair, familiar after 3 straight weeks of repetition over break even if it was held on the SB1 Wargames field that day. All of them—Aria, Vademe, and Martin's teams collectively—were practically vibrating with excitement, and the anticipation manifested just as often as recklessness as it did in adrenaline-fueled genius. Even Aria wasn't immune to the feverish enthusiasm, making a rare significant mistake as squad leader when she made an ill-advised call that sent Catcher and Rei into the full body of Martin's squad, costing them the match. In her style, though, the stumble only seemed to clear Aria's head after she'd gotten through apologizing to them, and despite several blunders here and there by the others it was the only fight they lost all day. By the time lunch break passed and the end

of the afternoon came around, Catori Imala—who had cycled out with Allison Lake and Liam Gross over the course of the extended day—had nothing but praise for every single one of their three teams, and they all left the Arena not long after feeling rather proud, and maybe just a tad *too* confident for their own good.

And then, before they knew it, it was Sunday morning.

Rei was up well before his alarm, which he'd set the previous night for 0700 in the vain hope that he might be able to sleep in again. On the contrary, anticipation had him up even earlier than usual, and he spent nearly an hour packing, unpacking, and repacking the one travel bag he'd brought with him from Grandcrest Academy, which had barely seen the outside of his closet since the start of the year. He was *actually* getting nervous now, to the point where he eventually sat himself down at his work desk and forced himself to rip through what assignments Sense had been kind enough to send all of them from the previous day's missed classes. It was something to *do*—at least something that wasn't outright fidgeting over which worn hoodie or thrift-store T-shirt he should bring to wear around the hotel—but even then Rei couldn't stop himself from checking the time every couple of minutes or so.

Finally, 0700 came, and he practically bolted up from the desk, gathered his school and clothes bags, and was out of his room into 304's common area before he'd so much as properly put on his cap.

Benaly was the first to come out of his own room not a minute or so after, greeting Rei with a dull "Morning..." that gave off the distinct impression the big guy hadn't slept a wink all night. Similarly, as soon as the Brawler was gone, Catcher's door cracked open, and he stepped out looking a little green.

"Dude, I had the *weirdest* dream..." he muttered, hauling his own luggage out along with him before eyeing Rei imploringly. "Do me a favor. If Viv tries to make me wear a dress onto the field, put me down painlessly."

Rei snorted, but before he could promise any such thing Viv and Cashe's own doors opened, probably in response to the sound of Catcher's voice.

"Oh good, you guys are ready." Despite her dark complexion, it was obvious Cashe was feeling even more sickly than Catcher. "I've been up since like 0300. So much for a good night's sleep..."

"Same," Viv barely got out through a yawn, hitching her bags over both shoulders, the underside of her eyes indeed a little baggy. "Rei and I did combat team for *years* at our old school. So did Catcher. You'd think we'd be used to a competition."

"It's a little different." Rei tried to sound encouraging despite his own nerves, bending his head questioningly in the direction of the hall that led to the suite door, then heading towards it as the others all nodded with various levels of enthusiasm. "This is an SCT. An actual *SCT*."

"Ward, I like you," Cashe muttered queasily, "but if you keep reminding me, I'm going to aim for you when I vomit up my breakfast on the tram."

Given they were more heavily laden than usual, it had been agreed the night before that they would meet up in the lobby, and so after a quick walk down the hall, an elevator ride, and not a few "Hey! Good luck!" calls from various other first-years they crossed paths with, they found Aria waiting for them on one of the red couches of the main common area. She was watching snow fall through the red-orange leaves of the tree in the courtyard that took up the middle of the building—some kind of invisible barrier Rei had never really looked into keeping the heat inside despite the illusion of an open-air cloister—but she looked around when Viv called out to her in greeting. Watching her turn and stand, Rei was a little relieved to find that she, at least, looked composed, because between his barely contained excitement, Viv's fatigue, and Catcher and Cashe's anxiety, *someone* had to at least *appear* level-headed on their squad.

He decided, approaching, that he could pretend not to notice the energetic twitching of Aria's hands, fingers bouncing over the side of her black slacks like a child told to sit still for too long.

"You guys ready to go?" she asked as they came together, her voice a little *too* bright and her smile a little *too* wide. "Everyone pack a toothbrush?"

"Oh, *damn*," Catcher grumbled, dropping his bags and promptly turning back towards the elevators.

Aria started to laugh, but stopped when Catcher didn't look around again to say he was joking.

"Wait... seriously??" she demanded after him.

"Leave me alone!" the Saber called back as he hurried away. "I'm *nervous*!"

"Not. *Helping*!" Cashe responded through clenched teeth, clutching at the straps of her bags. "I swear you lot *want* me to throw up..."

Aria turned to her in concern, opening her mouth in the obvious hope of finding something sympathetic to say, but Viv threw an arm around the Lancer's shoulders before she could, pulling Cashe in close.

"Relaaaaax," she said, clearly a bit more awake now and pointing between Aria and Rei. "We've got these two freaks on our side. If any of us shit the bed, Thing 1 and Thing 2 here will just carry us to gloooooorious victory."

"Seriously—*seriously*—not helping, Arada..."

Rei laughed, dropping his things by the couch and moving around Aria to plop down in the spot next to where she'd been sitting. "Then don't think about the tournament," he offered helpfully, putting an arm across the back of the seat to half-turn towards his still-green teammate. "Maybe just focus on the fact that we're gonna get off the school grounds for a bit? I mean, I like it here plenty—" he waved his other hand around at the lavish setup of the Kanes lobby "—but we've been stuck on campus for most of a year now."

“Not *all* of us,” Viv said with the hint of a wicked smile, freeing her arm from around Cashe’s neck to raise an eyebrow pointedly at Rei and Aria. “*Some* of us have been into the city a couple of times of late, if I recall correctly.”

For once, though, Rei was feeling impervious to his best friend’s teasing, too excited and too nervous already to get going.

“Jealous?” he asked with his own crafty smile. “We checked out some pretty cool shops in Easthold. I can make some recommendations if you want.”

“Reeeei...” Aria whirled on him, the warning in her voice sounding like it couldn’t decide if she was pleased or mortified.

Rei turned his grin on her in turn, about to suggest again that they should see what else they’d missed in the city when they got back from Ganos—he really *was* feeling impervious—when a tired, rumbling voice interrupted him.

“What shops?”

Rei turned, surprised to find Grant standing on the other side of the couch across from him, carrying not two but *three* bags across his shoulders. Then again, given his frame, Rei supposed it wasn’t a shock he’d need more space for enough clean clothes to last the week.

And Rei couldn’t help but smile even more broadly at the Mauler’s question, unexpected opportunity that it was.

“I’ll get you a list,” he said brightly, deliberately turning back to look Viv in the eye even as he continued. “I’ll bet I can come up with a few spots that beanpole here would *definitely* like to—”

“Say another word, you overlarge holiday elf, and I will ensure that awkward dates and handholding is the *only* lovey-dovey couples activity you two ever get to partake in,” Viv growled at Rei, having gone deathly still as her cheeks flushed. “And since you might be too thick to catch my meaning, I’m saying I take Gemela, shove her down your pants, and cut off your d—”

“OKAY THEN!” Aria practically shrieked, clapping her hands together and not looking at either Rei *or* Viv as her face predictably turned the color of her hair. “I’m sure Catcher won’t be long, so let’s get ready to go! I want to eat and make it to the gate with plenty of time, and the snow might slow us down a little!”

Rei, feeling his own ears burning a little despite himself, had to force back a snigger at the daggers Viv was still shooting him, getting up instead to gather his bags as ordered. Oddly, he felt Grant lingering over his shoulder, but before he could turn to ask the Mauler if he needed something, Catcher did in fact make his reappearance, sprinting out from the hall that held the elevator booths, toothbrush aloft to wave victoriously above his head.

“Got it! Got it! Can’t believe I forgot to—!”

He stopped almost dead, though, yellow eyes flashing first to Aria’s red face, then to Viv, then to Rei, who still hadn’t stopped grinning.

“Wait what did I m—?”

“NOPE!” Aria squeaked, cutting him off and snatching her own things up from the floor by the couch before moving like a mechanical doll in the direction of the doors. “FOR THE LOVE OF THE MIND, LET’S GO! *PLEASE!*”

Cashe hurried after her at once, seeming eager to get out into the fresh air, and Viv—in embarrassed silence—avoided all other eyes as she uneasily chased after the pair. Catcher was left looking completely at a loss as he stood there dumbfounded, toothbrush still in hand, and Rei could only shake his head at the poor guy and say “Come on, then,” as he, too, started for the dormitory exit.

As he did, however, he was taken aback to find Grant falling into step beside him.

Looking sidelong at the Mauler, Rei found him not meeting his eyes, but even as he wondered what was going on he thought he heard the lumbering boy mutter something. Facing away, however, and with a winter wind picking up as the doors

opened to the outside for the girls ahead of them, he couldn't make out so much as a word.

“What was that?” Rei asked, hoping he was keeping his tone polite.

Grant, funnily enough, tried again, a little louder this time, but Rei still didn't catch more than the word “list”.

“You gotta speak up man, sorry.”

The boy appeared momentarily annoyed—though seemingly more with himself than anything else—and as they stepped together out in the morning snow he finally looked around to face Rei, though he still avoided his gaze.

“I'll... take that list,” he got out at last, quiet but audible now. “The shop list. For Easthold. If... If you're actually offering.”

Rei was *so* surprised, he *actually* tripped as the toe of his boot caught a lip in the stone path hidden under a light half-inch of white that appeared to have built up overnight. Shido's Speed and Cognition specs snapped into overdrive with a thought, though, and he just managed to keep his feet, standing up again to walk ram-rod straight, like nothing at all had happened. He coughed and—after a couple of seconds to compose himself—nodded, working to keep his voice even as he answered.

“Sure, man. I'll send it to you.”

Grant—who'd granted Rei the dignity of pretending not to see him almost eat snow—looked a little surprised, but pleased, and he muttered a low “Thanks” before doubling his pace to hurry off after the girls, like he couldn't handle anything more than this one—there was no other word for it—*friendly* interaction in the moment. For his own part, Rei could only stare after him, and didn't even blink when Catcher caught up to walk along at his left, breath misting in the air and toothbrush tucked behind one ear, half-under his cap. Apparently Aria's desperate exodus hadn't given him enough time to stow it away properly.

“So... That happened...” the Saber said slowly, watching Grant’s broad back and failing to hide *any* of his disbelief.

“Sure did...” was all Rei could mutter in response. “You heard that?”

“Yeah... Barely. If he’d been any quieter I’d have thought he’d forgotten how to speak or something...”

Rei just nodded, still a bit too surprised to get his thoughts untangled.

Catcher hesitated, and even in the corner of his eye Rei could tell he was struggling with himself.

“Do we...?” he finally started uncertainly, watching Grant catch up to Viv ahead of them as she slowed down to fall back and walk beside him. “... Do we... still hate him?”

Rei, at last brought back from his astonishment at this question, let out a slow, confused breath.

“Dude... I have *no* idea anymore...”

CHAPTER 16

As it turned out, none of them had much of an appetite for breakfast—least of all Cashe—so the six of them ended up sitting around in mostly-nervous silence for the better part of an hour before Aria called them all to move once more. She'd finally started meeting Rei's eye again halfway through the meal, and eventually seemed to have forgiven him his part in the morning's antics when she let her knee rest against his under the table, making him feel hotter around the collar than anything Viv could ever have said. He was a little disappointed, therefore, when they all got up and left the mess, bags over shoulders, to make for the southern gate, following a visible breadth of flattened snow that indicated half-a-hundred other boots having made that very trek ahead of them.

“Name?” a sergeant holding a pad in gloved hands asked unnecessarily as they finally reached the great, open exit to the campus, the steel teeth of the colossal gate all that showed out of where it was rolled sideways into the heavy breadth of stone wall that towered above them. It was so tall in fact, that from where they stood the wall and its banners—depicting the Galens griffin under the black-and-gold crossed swords and seven stars of the ISCM—completely hid the skyscrapers of Castalon behind the defenses, abruptly reminding Rei of the awe he and Viv had shared when they'd first arrived on campus through this very gate.

“Cadet Aria Laurent and my team, sir,” Aria answered promptly, having stepped forward at the request. To their left, another officer was asking a group of second-years Rei only recognized in passing much the same thing, while beyond them both the broad half-circle of flat stone that made up the southern landing zone had been cleared of snow. It was already thick with activity, too, a mess of bodies and movement as students milled about, staffers calling out names, and flyers dropping down from the sky-lanes above.

“Laurent...” the sergeant repeated, obviously going through the motions by first meeting Aria’s eyes to scan her NOED, then looking down at his pad as identification information flashed into being across the screen. “Laurent. First-year squad leader. Confirmed. And you’re with...” He looked up at Rei and the others, frame flashing five more times in quick succession. “Yup. Arada, Catchwick, Cashe, Grant, and Ward. Confirmed. The major is your chaperone for the trip, so behave yourself. Obviously Captain Dent has field command of the outing, but don’t push your luck.” He threw a thumb over his shoulder, indicating that they were clear to go through. “Off you get, and don’t forget to kick ass for us. Everyone’s gonna be watching here.”

“Yes, sir!” they answered a little disjointedly at the surprise encouragement, then stepped by as the officer waved forward a squad of third-years who had lined up behind them.

It was Grant who voiced the question that had already formed like a boulder in Rei’s throat.

“The major?” the boy grunted darkly. “Don’t tell me...”

“*Don’t* jinx it,” Viv hissed, going to elbow him in the side only to barely reach above his hip.

“Toooooo late...” Catcher grumbled, and Rei’s heart fell as he, too, saw the figure standing on the far side of the circle from them, voice raised as he called out over the heads of the lingering cadets.

“Squad Lennon! Squad Sidorov! Squad Laurent! On me!”

“Son of a *bitch*,” Rei hissed under his breath, but even as Aria reached a hand back to take his and squeeze it ever so briefly, she turned them to head in the man’s direction.

“Here, sir,” she said flatly as soon as they were close enough to be respectful, executing a salute that was as rigid as it was flawless. Rei barely managed to do the same, and he heard Viv and Catcher muttering outright under their breaths behind him as the others followed.

It took no more than a second for Rei to be sure that—despite not having seen each other for well over a month, now—his placement hadn't changed in the least in Major Dyrk Reese's esteem. As ever, the man's deep-set eyes took them all in steadily, like nothing at all in the world was wrong with the situation, offering the only hint of his displeasure in the form of his attention lingering just a fraction of a moment longer on Rei than any of the others. He wore full black-and-golds, as did the other officers calling to their own groups from around the plaza—Captains Sarah Takeshi and Elean Samsus—and his hands were crisply clasped behind his back.

“Noted,” the major said in the same flat tone Aria had offered him, providing the minimum level of civility either of them could get away with without there being any risk of accusations of insubordination or abuse. “You're the first to arrive, so we'll wait for the others. It shouldn't be long.”

Aria only nodded, eyes undoubtedly set dutifully over the man's head with Rei and the others standing in a triangle behind her, and it was a few seconds longer than strictly necessary before the man muttered “At ease”. At once the six of them took up the more relaxed posture with their own hands behind their backs. It was a little awkward given their bags—especially for Grant—but fortunately they indeed didn't have to wait too long.

“Major,” a cool, familiar voice said from the right, and Rei had to work hard not to whip his head around to look.

Christopher Lennon stepped into view, offering Reese his own salute there in the snow. Small as he was for a User, the “Lasher” appeared especially diminutive in proximity to Grant's towering form, but it had been a very long time since Rei had been able to see anything less in the third-year than a beast who only kept himself leashed and chained when he deemed fit. Lennon didn't so much as glance around at them, of course, but five other cadets with red-on-blue armbands whom Rei didn't know were similarly lined up behind him, and a couple of *them* certainly did. They snuck sidelong

peeks at Aria's squad, in particular in Rei's direction even as they copied Lennon's salute, and if Reese noticed their breach of form he made no indication that he cared.

That was when something struck Rei, watching the major greet Lennon's squad a fair bit more cordially than he had their own. He'd been too distracted to take it in before. Reese had called the third-year and his team to him, the strongest Users among the Galens cadets, just as he'd called for Aria and her group.

But there had also been one more, one other name Rei had recogni—

“Major,” a quiet, steady voice spoke up from the left, and this time Rei had no chance of keeping himself from looking around. Lennon, terrifying as the third-year was, was a familiar face.

The boy, broad-shouldered and pale with his long, bronze hair tied in a ponytail under his cap as he stood at the head of his own team of second-years to their left, was much less so.

Behind him, Rei thought he heard Catcher choke, as he was very close to doing so himself.

The Lasher might indeed be the more impressive of the two older squad leaders on paper, but the cadet standing on Aria's other side was none other than Anatoli Sidorov, the ace of the second-year class. A Lancer Rei had seen tear his way almost effortlessly through the Intra-Schools, Sidorov wasn't just any other student. Like the Lasher, he was a bit of a legend, having been crowned champion of the Sector 9 first-year bracket the previous collegiate season. Additionally, also like Lennon before him he was a favorite to break through the invisible ceiling of second-year participation in the higher levels of the SCTs, with expectations that he, too, might just have a shot at being one of the rare non-third-years to qualify for the Intersystems, if luck was with him.

In short, Rei and the others were standing sandwiched between the closest thing to royalty Galens had among its cadets.

And beyond that... Did he imagine it, or had Sidorov just taken him in sidelong...?

“All here. Good.” Reese was looking between the three squads steadily, though his dark eyes didn’t meet Rei’s again. “As you have no doubt realized, I have had the privilege of being designated by *Captain Dent*—” he spoke the Bishop’s rank as though to remind them all that he was still the woman’s superior, if only technically for the duration of Sectionals “—as supervisor of the three teams the Galens Institute has the highest hopes for in your respective years. That is not to say the other squads do not have an equal chance of earning merit—” Rei could practically *taste* the forced nature of the mandatory platitude “—but as you well know the school provides for those who have shown greatest promise, and greatest... effort.” Reese’s eyes at last flicked to Rei again, but in no show of compliment.

Rei’s hands tightened about themselves behind his back, and he thought he could *feel* the heat of Viv’s irritation behind him.

Steady, he willed himself, just as he willed his best friend. *It’s not worth it.*

He had risen to Reese’s baiting before. It wasn’t the time to do so again.

“As arbiter of the Galens SCTs and an A-Ranked User myself, only the captain is more qualified to provide combat feedback and criticism on your upcoming performances.” Reese was still going, somehow managing to sound both pompous and blithely humble in the same breath, although Rei suspected he made out the former only in his head. “I am not, however, your team coach from prep school, nor am I your instructor. Once you step into the Kenneth Academy Arena, you are combatants, and you are solely responsible for your actions and the consequences they bring. For that reason I and the other chaperones expect all of you to pursue your own internal discussions before you seek assistance from any of us. We may have the Heads of Combat Theory and Tactical Studies along for the ride, but that is no excuse for you not to figure out your own weaknesses and strengths, and make the necessary adjustments as needed.”

Nicest way of saying 'don't bother me unless you have to' I've ever heard, Rei seethed privately.

He knew that wasn't completely fair, of course. Dent had told them much the same thing more times than he could count. SCTs were supposed to be simulated combat, and as lofty as the goals of the top cadets might be, collegiate fighting was still primarily to prepare soldiers, not entertainers. Seeking thoughts and feedback had its place at Sectionals and beyond, but there would be a certain level of disappointment—and possibly even subtle consequences—if individuals and squads couldn't stand on their own legs.

“Glad to see we understand each other,” the major said with a nod into the silence that followed his little lecture, apparently pleased he wasn't about to be bothered. “Perfect timing, too. It appears our ride is here.”

On cue there was a *whoom* of noise, and a massive flyer that could have easily held twenty-plus people plus cargo was suddenly descending on them, sending the edges of jackets rippling and caps almost tumbling off of heads.

“Everybody on,” Reese ordered, finally unclasping his hands and stepping closer as he turned and moved clear of the landing area. “Captain Dent will have additional information and announcements on the tram.”

The flyer touched down, and after a few seconds in which it settled and its engines wound down a large port opened near its front end, as did a half dozen smaller compartments along its sleek black undercarriage. With expected deference Rei and the others waited until Reese had ascended the short stairs into the vehicle before slipping their bags off their shoulders, then for the older squads to stow their things and head inside. As the third-years shoved their things into place, Lennon at last turned and caught Rei's eye, pausing to study the entirety of Aria's squad before offering them the smallest of winks.

“Did he just... wink at us?” Cashe hissed, sounding like she’d totally forgotten her nerves for the first time all morning as she stared after the third-year. “The Lasher? At *us*?”

“Sure did,” Rei said, managing something like a laugh at last now that Reese was well out of earshot.

“But... Why?” the Lancer asked, tripping over her bewilderment.

Rei, not exactly sure how—or if he wanted—to answer this, decided to let someone else tackle the question.

“He... uh... He’s a... friend, I guess?” Aria managed unevenly, looking back at Cashe and Grant in apology as Sidorov’s group loaded up next. “Sorry. I guess you guys wouldn’t know...”

As Cashe stopped dead at this, Catcher scoffed and poked her into motion again. “Is that what we’re calling it? The dude wiped the floor with us for like two months straight.”

This did nothing to help the girl’s confusion, obviously.

“I’m sorry... What?”

“Agreed... *What?*” Grant echoed, and Rei looked around in time to see him frowning at Viv, who was pointedly studying the wall of the Institute as though its roughhewn stones were very abruptly the single most fascinating thing in the world.

Obviously *some* secrets had remained such, which Rei couldn’t help but feel jointly relieved and concerned about. Catcher had aptly voiced their shared, mounting confusion when it came to Grant on the way to breakfast, but no matter *how* he felt about the guy, Rei knew it couldn’t be easy for Viv to balance whatever it was the two of them were *and* keep things from the Mauler...

Still—as much as he’d have trusted Viv with his life if it came to it—it was nice to have confirmation that she’d clearly kept more than one thing under lock and key, and not *just* Shido’s Growth spec.

Then again, here was an opportunity to pull back the veil for Cashe and Grant, if even just a little bit...

Rei sighed internally, following Aria in the direction of the now-available luggage compartments as she stepped towards them. “Dent got us a bunch of training nights with Lennon last semester, during the Intra-Schools,” he explained over his shoulder. “We didn’t ask *how*, but yeah... We definitely know the guy.”

Almost better than I’d like to remember, he added privately, just managing to suppress a wince at the memory of the absolutely *brutal* final training day the Lasher had put him through, the very session that had unlocked Type Shift for him.

Cashe, however, seemed like she was all out of “that’s shocking” energy. Rather than press the issue, she just fixed Rei with a deadpan expression while the others slid their bags into place, then finally brought one hand up to press thumb and forefinger against her temples.

“I can’t decide if I’m more annoyed no one gave *me* an Intersystem-level User to train with, or that I didn’t hook up with you guys earlier,” she grumbled, earning a dry chuckle from everyone but Grant.

The flyer was as spacious within as it seemed from outside, and Reese—blessedly—apparently had no other speech to give even after all 18 members of the Galens top-seeded squads had gotten comfortable in their seats. As such it wasn’t but another couple of minutes of waiting and quiet conversation amongst themselves while the other groups loaded up into their own transports before it was time to take off, and not long after they were whipping through the gleaming towers and neon advertisements of Castalon proper. Viv, Catcher, Cashe, and Grant—who hadn’t had reason to leave the school since Commencement—took in the passing city through some lingering snow with obvious interest, while Rei and Aria exchanged a sympathetic grin before sitting back where they’d taken up spots next to each other to look out their own shared window.

After a while of level travel they cleared the city, and their angle of direction shifted upward once again to break away from the main body of traffic that stretched out in heavy lines over the horizon. Instead, they joined a different lane that was quickly taking them straight up, eventually breaking out of the storm and into the clouds. Then the foggy white gave, and they were rising out of the breathable atmosphere, the blue sky rapidly fading until the planet was below and the black of space hung like a dark shroud above them.

This Rei hadn't had the chance to see in some time either, and he found himself craning over Aria's lap to take in the sight.

As fast as they were going, they weren't long in arriving at the orbital station, their flyer steadily slowing down to pass into the complex structure of networks and zero-pressure tunnels of coming and going trams. As they finally came to a stop, Reese called them all off the flyer, and 2 minutes later they had their bags again and were crossing the station platform—not so busy as it had been on the day Viv and Rei had arrived together the term before—into the building proper. The major led them into the grand lobby—crowned by a great angular ceiling formed from a hundred long panes of massive clear glass and steel—and straight through the milling throng of civilians within, almost all of whom stopped to a one to gawk at the Institute students' very recognizable uniforms and armbands as they went by. From there, it was directly to the terminal entrance. They didn't so much as have to pause at security, because an officer in black and golds lacking any Galens emblem—marking him as a representative of the broader military proper—waved them through what was obviously a predetermined checkpoint. More eyes followed their group when they made this rapid pass by the lines of waiting people, and Rei was relieved when Reese led them without delay up a single flight of stairs to an open, relatively-empty docking platform, the gleaming, low-friction tram already waiting on its rails. Their trio of squads, as it transpired, seemed to have just been beaten by the other groups. The cadets weren't alone on the platform—there

were a number of individuals, groups, and families all ogling them from up and down the way—but two adjoining cars looked to have been set aside for them, because Takeshi and Samsus were already waving their charges on.

“Come on, all of you,” Reese said with crafted patience, moving them forward.

Soon they were aboard, with their squad claiming three double rows of seats at the very front of the lead car, Aria and Rei next to each other with Viv and Grant behind them, Catcher and Cashe across the aisle. Lennon and Sidorov, at Reese’s direction, had each claimed space closer to the middle of the compartment, spots that offered a slightly better view out the windows.

It had been a while, Rei realized, since he’d felt like the second-stringer on a team...

“Man...” Aria muttered after they’d stowed their things in the anti-grav compartments above their heads and taken a seat. “This is actually happening...”

Rei could relate. Now that they were there on the tram, the idle thrum of the orbital engines vibrating lightly beneath them, the reality of what was about to take place settled even more heavily than it had when Dent had first told them the travel plans.

“Feels a little surreal, doesn’t it?” he agreed, turning to look back along the open connection of the two cars. At least 54 cadets—he wasn’t actually sure how many additions there had been to the squads from outside in the individual qualifiers—sat in organized chaos behind them. On top of that, he couldn’t help but note—seeing Martin’s group just behind Sidorov’s—that the first-years all looked distinctly more queasy than any of the second- or third-year groups.

“Veterans,” he said with a low laugh, turning to face forward again.

“What?” Aria asked him.

Rei shook his head. “Nothing. Just thinking I hope I get the chance to feel like this *isn’t* a big deal, one day.”

Aria looked lost. “Why? That sounds like no fun...”

“Huh...” Rei said, realizing she was absolutely right. “I guess so...”

She gave him a weird sort of smile, obviously about to ask him if he was feeling alright or something, when a loud, clear voice from his other side cut all other distraction off.

“Sectional qualifiers! Glad you could make it!”

Rei turned quickly, discovering that Valera Dent had, at last, joined them. She was standing in the aisle just in front of them, smiling down the line of the cars that housed her students, clearly amused at the *very* sudden silence that had taken ahold of the Galens students the moment she’d spoken. She wore her typical regulars—giving her a striking presence outside the familiar setting of the Institute—and in her right hand she held some sort of oblong wireless transponder that was the same clean grey as the walls of the tram. When she spoke again, Rei could hear her words carried up and down the cars in a clear volume that easily outmatched the hum of the engines.

“As you undoubtedly know by now, if you are part of a squad then you have been assigned a supervisor. Major Reese, Captain Takeshi, or Captain Samsus. They are mostly here to be of assistance and act as support as needed, but I remind you all once again that while you are being granted *some* liberties for the duration of this tournament, you are by no means relieved of your responsibilities as representatives of the Galens Institute and the ISCM. Basically: don’t give any of us a reason to act as anything more than necessary help, if you *please*.”

There was a smattering of “Yes, ma’am!”s along with a roll of light laughter from some of the students.

“On to more important things. Obviously we are headed to Ganos, and will be fighting at Kenneth Academy. It’s a quick trip, and the tournament starts first thing in the morning. I imagine some of you—” Dent glanced over Aria’s group and towards where the other first-years were seated further back in the car “—have had a little less

sleep than others, so I encourage you to take it easy while you can. I don't want anyone blaming narcolepsy and dry eyes for losses in the first day."

Another, louder, mix of laughter.

"You think I'm kidding?" Dent said with something of a snort. "Look around yourselves. You and those seated next you are the best of your year, the best the Galens Institute can bring to the field. That means you are very likely the best this *planet* can offer, quite possibly even the Astra System as a whole. *None of you* got here without pushing yourselves, without breaking your limits again and again and again. I'm proud of you—so *damn* proud of you—but I'm also as aware as anyone sitting on this tram that that sort of drive can be a double-edged sword."

Rei didn't miss the Bishop's eyes flicking to *him* in particular, this time.

"I expect you all to push yourselves once more, this week. I expect you all to break your limits, hopefully again and again and again. But I also expect you to be smart. This is no longer training. This is no longer practice. This is combat. Real, *team* combat. You are part of a whole, now, both as claws of your squad and collectively as a limb of the Institute. You aren't here to prove you're just the fastest or strongest or most dangerous. You're here to prove you're the *best*, in every meaning of the word."

Silence this time as she paused, and Dent obviously expected nothing less. She let the quiet hang there for a bit, let her words ring and drive their way into the cadets. *Be smart*, she was saying.

And Rei, for some reason, felt like they were words meant almost entirely for him...

"Now that I've hopefully got you thinking clearly about the coming week, there is one last order of business to attend to," the captain started again after a full 5 seconds of silence. "As some of you may have heard, there have been a few changes made to this year's collegiate SCT's. While I'm *sure*—" she had to raise her voice despite the receiver as the murmurs immediately started up again at this "—that you have

doubtlessly come up with any number of grandiose theories, I assure you the adjustments are hardly major, though still of import. Firstly—” there was a flash in her frame, and a moment later Rei’s NOED lit up with a notification “—the ISCM has elected to update identification protocols for their collegiate-level combatants. This is the first of two changes that have been made in an attempt to keep interest in the tournaments piqued and relevant.”

Rei might have laughed at this—the SCTs were followed by well over *half* of the ISC’s population with access to the feeds, after all—but he was too busy opening the alert, just as he was aware Aria and the others were doing the same around him.

“Oh wooow...” came Catcher’s low moan of awe from his right, joining a number of other voices raised in astonishment.

Rei was right there with them.

There, floating in his frame as they spun gently in place, seven solid black emblems formed a horizontal circle of holograms. Rei knew what they were at once, recognizing the distinctions within them—as did every other student in the paired cars, he was sure—but was still astounded, and couldn’t help but immediately start scrolling through them one after the other.

Seven emblems... for seven CAD-Types.

The Phalanx’s was the first to be presented, which might have been an odd choice were it not the base of the overall design of *all* the symbols. Taking the shape of a single great, sweeping shield with a sharpened bottom and winged top-ends, it was artfully hollowed out and complimented by a bisecting slice down the middle. This separation was important, too, because it was from this empty space that the other emblems built their individuality, each of them keeping the overall shape of the shield for visual consistency, but otherwise shifting in detail.

The Saber-Type emblem was simple, depicting a sword cutting parallel down the length of the shield. The Lancer-Type was much the same with a spear, with the

Mauler's displayed as a massive, two-handed axe. Duelist and Brawler were a little different, but kept in the same theme, the former a set of crossed short swords atop the matching silhouette, while the latter depicted a clenched fist that managed to remain symmetrical by hiding the hand's thumb behind the outline of fingers and knuckles.

And then, capping it all off, was the A-Type emblem.

It was, in essence, designed in a similar vein as the other six, but there was no weapon to be found within the form, no hint of a blade or other promising shape against the shield. Instead, an intricate sort of pattern had been carved out of the black, focusing around a pointed shape in the center that hinted at the letter "A" but didn't quite promise it. It was different, alien to the rest, and yet still married to the concept of the symbols of the other Types.

To Rei, it was perfect.

"Everyone approve? Great!" Dent had, kindly, given them all most of a minute to ogle their new designators, obviously aware some leeway for excitement was due. "As you can *hopefully* tell, these emblems have been designed to depict your CAD-Type. Inside the Sectionals Arena they will be automatically displayed in-frame on your uniforms in white, here." She pointed at the outside of her right shoulder, at the black cloth under the gold lining of the tassels there. "The main idea is to give viewers and spectators something new to get excited for, even if it's small, but those of us with boots on the ground are also hoping it might provide a conversation starter between individuals, teams, and schools. I know this is a competition, but at the end of the day you're *all* cadets of the ISCM, and anything to remind you of that is good in my book."

Something, though, was clearly amusing, because the woman looked to be hiding a smile as she kept on.

"Then again, the *second* change that's been made leans in the other direction, so hopefully you won't be tempted to call me a hypocrite."

Rei raised an eyebrow at this, finally closing out of staring at the slowly-spinning A-Type emblem to give the captain his full attention.

She made it worth it immediately.

“Starting this year, registered SCT squads will be allowed team names.”

There was a breath, barely more than a second or two, of ringing silence. Even the engines seemed to fade away as all registered what the Bishop had just told them.

Then the already-vibrating aura of nervous energy cracked and overflowed, exploding from the gathered cadets like a dam breaking wide. Even the third-years—usually the most composed of the classes—were suddenly shouting, and at least a dozen thrilled students leapt to their feet.

“Names?? Did she say we get names??”

“Oh *hell yeah!*”

“Do we get to pick them?? Who gives them??”

Rei was so tempted to join, turning to share an open-mouthed look of exhilaration with Catcher across the aisle, that he was almost glad when Viv spoke up from behind him in a hushed tone.

“Uh... Why is everyone freaking out?”

Rei almost laughed out loud.

“Viv!” he exclaimed, turning on her. “It’s a name! An *actual* name!”

Viv, though, was still at a loss. “So...?”

“So it’s something for people to recognize! To follow!”

She shook her head, still not getting it. Of late Viv had been *much* more enthusiastic about the details of SCTs—the Intra-Schools and the Duelists she’d seen there had opened her eyes in a big way—but she was still a ways off from catching up to the likes of Rei and Catcher, obviously.

And, apparently, Grant.

“You get Arena names, right?”

Rei was actually a little grateful when the Mauler was the one to ask, frowning around at Viv. If *anyone* could get her to understand...

“Of course,” she answered, turning to him. “Like ‘the Gatecrasher’? Or ‘the Lasher’?”

Grant nodded. “Yeah. Even people calling Ward ‘Iron Prince’, to a lesser extent. That one’s just not authenticated yet. It’s like... a title. Something that legitimizes a User in the circuits. Makes them more superhero than person, I guess you’d say?”

“Yeah, I know that...” Viv said, her eyes going a little wide.

“It’s like that,” Grant said simply. “And for collegiate-level stuff, it’s a big deal.”

“A *really* big deal,” Rei agreed at once, nodding vigorously, pleased with this summary. He could even forgive Grant the embarrassing reminder of his own unofficial title. “People have been asking for team names for a *long* time. Like... since the SCTs got started, basically.”

Viv’s expression only grew more surprised.

“And they’re only just getting to it *now*?”

“They probably have to keep things fresh,” Cashe spoke up from beside Catcher for the first time, and Rei turned again to find the girl still examining what had to be their new emblems in-frame as she explained. “And location-based names have always done the trick. School, planet, system, etc.” She shrugged, still not looking around. “Not gonna complain, though.”

“Oh man...” Viv mumbled, sounding suddenly much more excited by the prospect as their collective enthusiasm appeared at last to grip her. “So do we get the name? Do we just get to pick it, or—?”

Right then, though, Major Reese’s thunderous voice cut across the chatter of the cadets.

“SILENCE!” the man roared, having stood up from a seat near the end of the car. Immediately all sound ceased, half-a-hundred faces going bleach-white as everyone realized how thoroughly so many of them had just broken protocol.

“Thank you, Major,” the captain said politely after everyone had gotten control of themselves, clearly trying not to look cross at the man’s excess.

Reese, however, smugness leaking out just a bit through his usually-perfect mask, only sat back down with a sanctimonious little nod.

“As I was saying, the ISCM will be granting team names to squads starting this year,” Dent picked up as though nothing out of line had happened. “While I know some of you would have been eager to put forward your own preferences, I regret to say that these initial monikers have been assigned, if only because the powers that be wanted this all kept under wraps until the military can officially announce it tomorrow to the SCT viewership.” Her brown eyes flicked to the corner of her NOED. “Names, though, go out at 0930 our time, so I promise you won’t have to wait long.” She looked back to her students. “You’re right to be excited for this. You’re right to see the possibilities. It’s rare for a collegiate-level User to be given any kind of name, and even rarer for it to be made official by the ISCM. Part of the hope of this change, obviously, is to give tournament fans something more to hold onto, something to follow even from the earliest stages of a User’s training and education. I, however, see it just as equally as an opportunity to give all of *you* something more to take hold of, to share with your teammates. I encourage you to take pride in the name you’re given, and fight as hard for it as you do your squad as a whole. Who knows?” She smiled at them all one last time. “Maybe it’ll stick with some of you longer than you think...”

And then, from all around them, an announcement came over the same tram intercom Dent was using to inform them they would be departing shortly, and the captain stuck the receiver to a waiting spot on the closest wall before moving up the aisle to take a seat by Takeshi without another word, leaving the cadets to the growing

rumble of their once-again mounting conversations. Viv tried to ask something more, but the rest of them, to a *one*, hushed her excitedly.

Like Rei had been from the moment Dent had mentioned the time, Aria, Catcher, Grant, and Cashe were clearly all staring at the clock in the corner of their own frames.

It was 0928. Not even two minutes to wait...

Without speaking they sat there, letting the other students make the realization behind them in shouts and exclamations. Within seconds, in fact, the tram was silent again save from an escaping squeak of impatience from one overenthusiastic cadet or another when 0929 struck. It felt like most everyone was holding their breath, in fact, like no one knew what to expect but that the wait of *not* knowing was worse than the possibility of disappointment.

And then the clock ticked to 0930, and several things happened at once.

First, the orbital engine that ran the length of the tram beneath their feet rumbled into true life on an obvious schedule, and without a hitch they started moving, the slow acceleration that would quickly take them to supersonic speeds a gradual, flawless climb.

Second, voices started rising again, shouts of excitement and alarm ringing out from up and down the cars.

And lastly, another notification—the source of the commotion, obviously—blazed into being in Rei’s vision, unavoidable as it spelled out “URGENT ISCM INFORMATION. URGENT ISCM INFORMATION.” in massive red letters that looped steadily across the top of his frame.

NOTICE OF TEAM NAME ASSIGNMENT.

Squad Leader: Cadet Aria Laurent

Additional Squad Members: Cadet Viviana Arada, Cadet Chancery Cashe, Cadet Layton Catchwick, Cadet Logan Grant, Cadet Reidon Ward

Cadet Class: First Year

Assigned Team Name...

Rei froze, staring at the final line of the alert, at the name they had been assigned, for a good 10 seconds. He was aware, distantly, that the others had all done the same, and he thought only Viv beat him to looking up.

Looking up, and around at Aria.

She, even more so than the rest of them, was unmoving, at a clear loss for words as her green eyes twitched back and forth to read the moniker again, then again, then again. Rei couldn't blame her. It was... meaningful, to say the least, and not at all expected.

Catcher, as he was never credited enough for doing, swooped in to save the day.

"Now *that's* a good name," he choked, obviously as shocked as any of them, but voicing the truth regardless.

Slowly, shakily, Aria nodded.

Then, speaking clearly despite her blatant disbelief, she tried it out for all of them to hear.

"Assigned Team Name... FIRESONG."

CHAPTER 17

Astra System – Astra-3 – Sector 9

“The MIND may have more eyes than could ever be counted, but that doesn’t mean it’s all-seeing. If you know the right places to look—if you know the right people to ask—you can do just about anything you want to.

... At least for a little while.”

-Convicted serial killer Holly Keeling

Former CAD-User

An alert of an incoming call, and the woman picked up before the second ring had a chance to chime.

She didn’t even have to speak.

“It’s done,” came a voice on the other side of the line, distorted through so many different quantum scramblers it was doubtful even the Mass Intellect would have bothered trying to scrub the audio clean. “We expect the next portion of the payment wired within twenty-four hours.”

“It will be handled shortly,” the woman promised. “How will I access the system?”

“Remotely. A back-door program will be provided to you in the Arena. The south-end women’s bathroom. On the left wall of the third stall facing the inside.”

“The wall? Then anyone will be able to—”

“No, they won’t. The remote is a monomolecular script film the size of a fingernail. It goes over your NOED, and is programmed to provide a display that is only visible to you, so you can find it. If you choose not to retrieve it, even the cleaning

drones won't notice it's there, and it will be ionized by 1200 during the day's noon hygiene sweep. Obviously we therefore recommend getting to it as soon as the doors open."

The question of *how*, exactly, the data required to program such a device to her specific NOED had been acquired wasn't asked.

That particular answer was definitely one best left in the dark.

"Understood," she answered firmly. "As agreed, the final payment will be made after the event's conclusion."

It would have been preferable to pay the caller and their group off then and there and be done with the lot of them, but such was the way this sort of business was conducted.

As expected, the line went dead without another word exchanged.

With a sigh the woman sat back in her seat, unsure if she should be feeling guilty or proud—a frequent confusion of emotions for her. Setting the debate aside with a deliberate, shrugging thought, though, she turned to frown out the window of her flyer. The sun was setting, but it was hard to see the beauty of the sight beneath her, distracted as she was.

Even after the day's fading light caught against the steel and glass of the oblong towers of Ganos below her, the city growing larger and more distinct as Salista Laurent descended.

CHAPTER 18

Astra System – Astra-3 – Sector 9

Kenneth Academy

‘It’s incomparable. Totally. My friends always told me I was missing out by just watching the feeds, that I should check out the SCTs live now and then. I wasn’t against it—it’s not like the higher seats are too expensive—I just never bothered until now.

I’m not one for regrets, but I sure as hell wish I’d listened to them sooner...”

-First-Time Spectator

Centauri 2458 Collegiate Systems Tournament

“GOOOOO!”

Rei roared his encouragement out along with tens of thousands of other spectators, Aria, Viv, and Cashe on either side of him as they leaned into the silver railing that overlooked the main floor of the Kenneth Academy Arena. All around the qualifying cadets of the 103rd Military College had been considerate enough to make space for the four of them after noting their armbands and who they were cheering for, and a few of the closest students had even gotten caught up in their energy to scream right along with them.

Catcher would probably have liked that, Rei was sure, watching the Saber rip across the Grasslands zone raised up before them.

On the south Dueling field—the Kenneth Arena was oriented in the same way Galens was—Catcher was in the middle of a vicious clash with a tall, green-haired first-year from Sermont’s Point, the Lancer Sam Moroz. It was an utterly skewed match—

Catcher was the smarter fighter, four ranks higher than Moroz's D9, *and* had been practicing against Aria and Cashe for months now—but to her credit the girl was quick on her feet and did an excellent job of using the steep angle of the inclined zone variation to stay above the Saber, where the longer reach of her red-and-black spear could work best to keep him at bay. The white vysetrium edge of her Device's narrow blade flashed in weaving arcs against the purple of Catcher's Arthus, and from a ways down along the rail Rei could hear what could only be the rest of Moroz's own squad screaming animatedly, even if the Lancer couldn't make out their shouts and cheers.

He could appreciate their efforts, even if he suspected it was largely in vain.

Moroz had reach on Catcher, true, but that was where any advantage ended. They'd been going at it for barely more than a minute now, and while Catcher's sword had only sped up and improved in the accuracy of its strikes as he'd started to get familiar with the patterns in the girl's style, the Lancer had slowed down steadily, and was starting to outright lag.

“GO!” Viv howled by Rei's right ear, making him wince and almost bring a hand up to shield it. “GOOOO! CUT HER DOWN! CUT! HER! DOWN!”

“Bloodthirsty, much?” Cashe yelled with a laugh over the enthusiastic rumble of the crowd around them, but if Viv heard her she didn't respond. Catcher had just leapt forward into an opening, closing the distance Moroz had been forcing him to keep for most of the match, and the Sermont's Point Lancer was backpedaling desperately.

“He's got her!” Aria exclaimed in glee.

“Yup!” Rei agreed loudly. “He's got her!”

It took another 10 seconds or so, but Catcher kept the pressure on, unforgiving in his pursuit. He didn't let Moroz regain her distance, and eventually she'd retreated so far up the incline of the hill that her back struck the limit of the field and she had to throw herself sideways to keep from getting cut in half, Arthus' blade slamming inward to send ripples through the barrier exactly where her midriff had been a fraction of a

second earlier. Catcher followed in a blink, and the Lancer suddenly no longer had the high ground. She slashed desperately, white flashing in the projected sunlight of the zone, but Catcher blasted the spear up and away. Moroz was knocked off-balance, the armored boot of her heel catching in earth and grass as her feet failed to keep up with the shift in her weight. With a yell that echoed another roar from the crowd she started to fall backwards, but Catcher was on her before her ass hit the ground. Arthus cleaved through the air, catching the girl fully in the chest, cutting clean through.

“Fatal Damage Accrued,” the cool voice of the Arena, identical across all stadiums, announced as Moroz crumpled limply to roll several times down the hill, losing her spear in the process. “Winner: Layton Catchwick, the Galens Institute.”

“YEESSSSS!” Viv erupted, dancing and pumping the air with both fists as the students of the 103rd around them cheered in vicarious glee along with her. “YES YES YEESSSSS!”

Rei didn’t join her in her yelling, instead keeping an eye on Catcher as the Grasslands started to fade and the Saber began to drop alongside the laid-out form of Sam Moroz. They touched down onto the black projection plating together, and Catcher only took the time to recall Arthus before moving to offer the Lancer a hand and what looked like a word of encouragement as he pulled her to her feet.

“Nice going, dude,” Rei said under his breath, still smiling from ear to ear.

As Catcher and Moroz started off the field together and the Arena announced who the next fight would involve—a pair of second-years from Kenneth and the 105th Military College—there was a rapid slap of bare feet from the left, audible only with the dying sound of the stands.

“Did I miss it?” came the breathless call.

As one Rei, Aria, Viv, and Cashe all looked around to find Grant hurrying around the curve in the railing towards them, the Mauler's eyes on the Arena floor with a frown, his black hair plastered across his forehead with sweat. His right hand was wrapped in a loose layer of gauze, and despite his one and only match having ended several minutes ago—he'd been seeded higher than Catcher in these last-chance qualifying rounds—he was breathing hard, like he'd run up and around from the north Dueling field on the opposite end of the stadium.

“Yeah, but it's all good!” Viv was giddy with adrenaline, practically bouncing up and down as she answered. “He did it! He won! He's in the tournament! You're *both* in!”

Whether because of Viv's enthusiasm, Catcher's success, or some combination of both, Grant actually let slip a rare, real smile and a genuine “Nice!” as he reached them. Rei didn't think whatever the true reasoning was mattered much, though, at least not in the moment. Grant had cause to be a little giddy, just as Catcher had, now.

With this last fight, they were both in the *official* Dueling brackets of the tournament proper, Catcher having ripped through three 1-on-1 fights that morning to claim his spot, Grant having trounced his single opponent not a few minutes before.

Now—with the non-qualifier rounds wrapping—team Firesong were all in the fight together.

Rei grinned again, watching Catcher disappear into one of the underwork access tunnels as the south field arbiter called the combatants of the next fight into position, then turned to look up into the Arena stands with a prickling thrill that just didn't seem to want to go away no matter how many times he took the space in. The Kenneth's stadium might have been a third the size of the Galens dome—at “only” about 50,000 seats—but what it lacked in comparative body it made up for in the moment with sheer activity. The ten ISCM academies of Astra-3's ninth sector comprised of probably just under 600 students—some 500 of which would be in the Dueling brackets divided between the first-year and combined second- and third-year rounds—plus maybe

another half-a-hundred staff or so. Beyond that, however, nearly half of the stadium seats—carved out of black-and-red metal and stone that was a sharp contrast to what Rei was used to on his home field—were already filled with spectators, and they were still in the last 30 minutes or so of the non-broadcasted fights for the cadets like Catcher and Grant who'd still needed to qualify for the actual tournament. Some of them could only be Kenneth staff and students—identifiable pockets here and there of black-and-gold Rei could see even just standing at the railing—and a good number more were probably families or other supporters of individual cadets. Still, Rei didn't need to have been to a live SCT event before to know a majority comprised of a totally different group.

Civilian spectators come to take part in the excitement and action for themselves.

There were *thousands* of them, and more came pouring in every minute from the four smaller entrances the stadium had at every cardinal end and side of the oblong building. They were all ages, and arrived alone as often as they did in pairs or groups of as many as a dozen or more. There were even kids, their parents taking their little ones out for an action-packed family day, and Rei had seen more than one elderly fan being helped along the walkway to specialized seating sections by lesser officers of the Kenneth staff.

He was pretty sure that by the time the Team Battle rounds started after lunch, the Kenneth Arena would be practically packed to the brim, and Rei couldn't imagine what the experience of walking out onto the field under the rapturous gaze of *50,000* spectators was going to be like.

Then again, he also could barely stand the wait.

The Galens cadets' arrival in Ganos the evening before had been a bit more exciting than Rei suspected their chaperones would have preferred. Unlike Castalon, Ganos still thrived most closely to the planet's surface, with its largest buildings not rising more than 200 or 300 stories tall. For this reason the single massive transport

carrier that had flown the collective body of the Institute’s qualifiers from the local orbital station had touched down directly in front of the towering “Chevaron” the ISCM had apparently booked out for all the visiting schools—a great, round pillar of a building—and Rei thought he’d been among the first to notice that there was something of a crowd gathered around the hotel entrance, partially blocking the way.

Only after Dent had descended, followed coincidentally by Christopher Lennon and his squad, had that crowd started thronging and shouting out questions, and Rei had stared into the hovering lights suspended over several of the people’s shoulders—simple anti-grav devices obviously meant to help illuminate a target of interest—as he’d realized that they were *paparazzi*.

“Oooh boy...” he remembered Cashe muttering at the sight, watching the excitement and yelling redoubling when Sidorov and his team left the flyer next.

By some unspoken agreement from the others, Rei and Aria had found themselves penned in by Viv, Catcher, Cashe, and Grant, and they’d actually made it halfway to the hotel—staying tight to Captain Samsus’ guiding heels as the woman urged them along quickly—when the throng took notice of *them*, and all hell broke loose.

“WARD!” someone from the crowd had yelled. “REIDON WARD! LOOK OVER HERE! HERE!”

“IT’S ARIA LAURENT!” someone else called. “THEY’RE HERE!”

“THE PRINCE! THE IRON PRINCE!”

Even had the lights not been half-blinding and hot in their brightness, Rei thought he might have fallen flat on his face from sheer embarrassment several times if the others hadn’t been there to get them through the mass of pressing bodies. In fact, by the time they’d reached the hotel lobby—mercifully devoid of any recording NOEDs or screamed questions—he’d been feeling outright frazzled, his cap at a tilt on his head from being jostled, the straps of one bag having slipped uncomfortably from his shoulder into the crook of an elbow. Everyone else, too, had looked much the worse

for wear—even Samsus, who Rei *swore* he'd heard mutter curses under her breath—with only Grant appearing to have gotten through the push outside without too much ruffling.

Then, though, Rei had noticed the other cadets, and his face flushed all over again.

In retrospect he supposed he should have expected the attention. Hell, he'd *known* they would be staying in the same building as *eight* other schools—Kenneth's qualifiers were obviously staying in their own dorms—each consisting of a fighting team of more than half-a-hundred students, but Rei suspected he'd failed to *really* register two things about the situation, even after wading through the paparazzi outside.

First, they were the *Galens Institute*. Largely revered as the best military school on the planet, and often the best in the *system*.

Second—and *much* more awkward—Christopher Lennon and Anatoli Sidorov might be legends, but they weren't the only cadets of interest.

As he'd looked around, Rei saw that the eyes of every person in the expanse of the lavish, green and blue lobby had been fixed alternately on him and Aria, their arrival obviously having been foreshadowed by the older Galens students who'd already disappeared into the booth of elevators ahead of them. Collectively a hundred stares—from three or four different schools at least, judging by the variation in the colored armbands—had taken the pair of them in with an array of expressions ranging from awe to surprise to incredulity, and as others came in behind them from the flyer and Samsus called over her shoulder for them to follow her, Rei had heard the whispers start almost on cue.

“Is that them? That can't be them...”

“It's gotta be, right? But no way...”

“I heard he was small, but *come* on.”

“No way that's him.”

Not sure if he'd wanted to laugh or crawl under one of the nearby lounge chairs to hide, Rei kept his chin up and his eyes forward, much like Aria right beside him.

They had a few minutes to check out their rooms—doubling off into pairs that had Rei with Catcher, Aria with Viv, and Grant and Cashe with Vademe and Kay respectively—then were called to a massive luncheon by Dent and the others that had involved every one of the visiting teams, where Rei and Aria were subject to scrutiny all over again. Even the older students from the other schools had often stared openly at the pair of them, not helped when Lennon and his squad—Steelbound, the whispers on the tram had said they'd been named—took the other half of the table Firesong had claimed.

Then again, Rei had felt a little better when the Lasher had caught his eye again, spun a short finger in a circle to indicate everyone around the massive, high-ceilinged room the lunch was being hosted in, and rolled his eyes pointedly.

Forget them, the third-year had seemed to be telling him, and Lennon's immediate, careless conversation with the surrounding members of his squad following this had helped even more, almost adding *You'll get used to it*.

“Here's to hoping,” Rei had muttered under his breath, then pretended he hadn't when Catcher asked him if he'd said something through a mouthful of turkey-and-tomato sandwich.

Despite the point of the lunch having clearly been to encourage intermingling and the development of cross-school friendships, Galens had seemed largely left out of any mixing or discussion—aside from those that were *about* the Institute. As a result, Firesong—and a number of the other teams whose names Rei and the others hadn't found out yet—had finished quickly and were gathered back in one room or another shortly thereafter. The hotel was gorgeous—much better than any accommodations Rei was used to, much less the simpler living quarters of his Galens room and Grandcrest's before it—and the paired queen beds penned in by four walls and a *ceiling* of

manipulatable smart-glass offered not only ample sitting space for a team of six, but also plenty of display real estate on which to pull up whatever any of them could have wanted. Rei had suspected some of the teams would be trying to follow Dent's advice and relax with SCT feeds or the like, but he wasn't *remotely* surprised—or displeased, for that matter—when Aria immediately took charge when the six of them came together in her and Viv's room and announced that they were all going to help Catcher and Grant study for their pre-tournament matches. No one complained, and with the help of the full list of the schools and students who would be participating that they'd just been granted access to on the way to Ganos—along with a *lot* of public Intra-School fight recordings—they'd spent a relatively quiet afternoon discussing different tactics and strategies the two boys might find valuable depending on whoever it was they were matched up against the following day. No one had told them what the combat schedule was yet, but they all knew the non-qualifiers were battling it out first to see who would make it into the limited slots saved for them in the true Sectionals brackets. Cashe had been the one to suggest that the following morning—Monday—would probably be devoted to those non-broadcasted fights before the real Duels started up Tuesday.

Team Battles and Wargames, on the other hand, they'd all agreed would begin without delay, probably the following afternoon.

After going through all fifty or so last-chance fighters until Catcher and Grant were both satisfied they had at least some vague thought on their approach in every possible matchup, they'd moved on to squad formats review, and were in the middle of a complicated discussion about what a Zero-Grav zone might look like in a Wargames match when Reese had opened their door—without knocking—and barked that dinner would be served in the main dining hall at 1900. Given it had been just past 1830 already, 20 minutes later the Galens cadets were suffering the stares and glares of the other schools again, Rei not missing that even *more* eyes seemed trained on him in particular, now that people probably knew for sure who he was. This time, on the other hand, the

attention came with some perks. Aside from the buffet dinner being a delicious assortment of Luhman System delicacies Catcher had been particularly thrilled by, the rest of the Institute squads had obviously taken note of the unwanted attention during lunch, because *every* first-, second-, *and* third-year made a deliberate effort to surround Firesong, Steelbound, and King's Law—Sidorov's team, as they'd learned the group had been named from Kay in the dinner line. It had made the meal a more comfortable affair by far, with Rei almost forgetting about the dubious looks shot their way from the tables packed by the other academies.

At least until a few questionably-headstrong first-years bearing the mirrored green lions of Maston's Combat Academy—Rei had made a point of learning all the logos of every academy at the event—had decided to brave the walk between the two sections Galens had claimed in a corner of the hall by the back wall, coming to stand behind Aria and Rei silently until Firesong—along with every nearby team—all lifted heads or turned in their seats to look at them.

“You the ‘Iron Prince?’” the boy, a tall, thick-limbed youth with reddish hair that matched his freckled face and orange eyes, at the front of the group had asked Rei in an overly-pleasant voice. There were four of them in all—most of a squad, Rei had decided as he took them all in at a glance from where he'd remained sitting—and the two forward cadets had smiles plastered unconvincingly on tense faces. The two at the back, though, had looked a bit more honest with their emotions, *their* expressions strained and glowering.

“I'm Rei Ward, if that's what you're getting at...?” Rei had decided to ask after giving himself a chance to swallow the spinach-wrapped scallops he'd been sharing a plate of with the table. “Can I help you?”

“Nah,” the leader of the team said with a shake of his head. “Just checking is all. We weren't convinced.”

Rei—having dealt with his share of assholes *and* having suspected at least a few such interactions would come about over the course of the tournament—hadn't so much as blinked at the not-so-subtle insult. At his side, however, he'd felt Aria tense, and thought he'd heard the clink of metal as someone—Viv, probably—slowly put down their fork and knife across from him.

“Well now you should be,” he'd said by way of answer, turning away from the Maston's first-years and immediately asking Catcher if he could pass the dish of spicy potatoes that was across the table by the Saber's elbow.

If they weren't gonna bother being respectful, why should he?

Unfortunately, that hadn't quite been the end of the conversation.

“Are you *really* the Prince?” the same boy asked, sounding outright amused now. “I mean... We'd heard he was small, but come on. Are you a stand-in? Did they pay you to dye your hair like Ward's?”

Rei would have laughed out loud had Catcher not stiffened in the middle of passing the plate as requested, fingers suddenly latched onto the potatoes so firmly he couldn't pull them from his friend's grip.

“Come again?” Catcher asked the Maston's cadet, who was lucky it was the *Saber* who had gotten a word in first. Viv had looked ready to *murder*, and glancing sideways Rei noticed that even Aria and Cashe had gone pale.

“Hey man, I'm just checking,” the Maston's boy had answered, and even without turning—and as he fruitlessly continued to tug the dish from Catcher's frozen fingers between them—Rei had been able to tell he was smiling. “It would make sense, wouldn't it? Galens keeping their secret weapon out of sight?”

No, it made no sense, but the first-year had known that. They *all* had known that. For one thing *Aria* was still probably seeded higher than Rei despite their matching ranks, given she'd qualified undefeated for Sectionals. For another, there couldn't have

been a single person in that hall that could imagine a world where the ISCM would allow such asinine theatrics in or around their precious SCTs.

The Maston group had come angling for some kind of reaction—maybe in some desperate bid to throw Firesong off their game—and they were getting it.

What was more, when no one spoke for a moment—every Galens student in the vicinity having been at a loss given the logic that had just been presented to them—the boy decided to press his advantage, addressing the back of Rei’s head now.

“I mean even if you *are* the Prince, that’s only good for us. Must mean Galens is slipping. How else could—?”

But then he’d been interrupted by a cool, clear voice.

“What’s your name, first-year?”

There was an audible *snap* of a jaw closing, and Rei had had to suppress a chuckle as everyone within a 10-foot radius of them went completely still. Even Catcher had started and froze—*finally* allowing the potatoes to be freed from his grip—and as soon as they were safe on the table again Rei couldn’t help but glance down the row.

Lennon had been looking over him at the Maston’s group, taking them in with the sort of bored expression one tended to keep for a particularly unimpressive breadth of cement wall.

After a second of no reply, he’d asked his question again, tilting his head slightly over his plate so that his greyish dreads shifted out of his blue eyes.

“I asked you what your name was, first-year.”

This time, the answer had come, though in a *much* higher pitch than Rei suspected the red-headed boy had ever previously spoken in his life.

“D-Daniel, sir...”

Rei had almost felt bad for the poor guy. He knew all-too-well what it was like to catch the Lasher’s attention when you didn’t want it, just like he knew all-too-well how hard it was not to call the *A8* “sir” even if they were technically the same rank.

“Your *last* name,” Lennon had pressed coolly.

“Uh... Biggs, sir.”

“Daniel Biggs...” Lennon muttered with only the faintest hint of annoyance, frame coming to life in his eyes as the other third-years of Steelbound had looked to be trying hard not to snicker all around him. “Biggs... Ah, here you are. Maston’s. Mauler. C...” He smirked suddenly. “My apologies. *D9*.” He’d closed his NOED again and jerked his head pointedly up the aisle towards the rest of the milling schools. “If you’ve got something of value to say to our underclassman, Biggs, you can spit it out now. Otherwise, move on. At your rank, I can assure you’re about as interesting to Cadet Ward as you are to *me*.”

The tension broke, and there had come a full roll of laughter from up and down the rest of the Galens table at this, echoed by a choke of noise from behind Rei and a stammering of apology. Next thing he knew the Maston’s first-years had gone—all but sprinting away—and Rei looked at Lennon with a grin.

“I could have handled them, you know?”

The Lasher had nodded and shrugged, returning his attention to his plate. “Oh I’m sure. But *you* get to punch their lights out on the field. I don’t. Let me have my fun.”

Rei—and Aria beside him—had sniggered at that, the two of them and the rest of the squad ignoring the obvious surprise of many of the other teams around them as eyes went from him to Lennon and back again, obviously not understanding what could have prompted such friendly banter. A few, Rei noted, also looked less than pleased with the exchange, and he’d felt a little of the humor turn cold when he noticed one stare in particular leveled on Lennon, not even bothered with looking at *him*.

From the other side of Steelbound, Sidorov had been frowning in barely-concealed disapproval while, around him, the other five members of his King’s Law had their heads down without looking at anyone.

On the flip side, though...

CRACK.

Rei and Aria had both jumped, Cashe outright yelping in surprise from Aria's other side as the sharp sound of metal snapping completely drew all attention away from anything else. Opposite them, Catcher had jumped and cursed, much like Viv.

And between *them*, Grant had sworn too, if for very different reasons.

The knife—the *steel* knife—he'd been holding in his right hand had cracked clean in two in what had to have been a grip fed with an accidentally-triggered Strength spec.

“You *moron!*” Viv yelped, sounding concerned and reaching out in a blur to snatch several clean cloth napkins from where they'd been piled in a neatly offered stack in the middle of the table, having been replenished several times by passing serving bots over the course of the meal.

That's when Rei saw the blood.

With a jolt of concern—though whether it was for Firesong's prospects in the tournament, Grant himself, or some combination of both, he couldn't say even in retrospect—he'd been on his feet, quickly followed by Aria, Catcher, and Cashe. All around them several of the other students had gasped as well.

“I'll get someone!” Catcher had said hurriedly, stepping over the bench and bolting up the aisle towards where Dent, Reese, Takeshi, and Samsus were seated with the staff officers of the other schools in a table section of the hall designated specifically for them.

“Wait, don't bother with—!” Grant started to call after the Saber in the loudest voice Rei thought he'd ever heard the Mauler speak in levelly. He'd understood, though. While it had been alarming at first, as Viv took Grant's hand and forced his strong fingers open to dab at the cut, it was obvious the wound wasn't anything to be seriously concerned about. It was narrow and shallow along the inside of his palm, and only bled just enough to drip onto the white tablecloth between their plates.

Rei had decided not to say as much to *Viv*, though.

“Moron,” she’d been muttering under her breath again, although she’d looked more agitated than angry. “Moron, moron, *moron*. The hell did you do that for? You could have completely screwed yourself.”

“Sorry,” Grant muttered under his breath, wincing a little as she pressed a corner of the napkin to the cut.

“He okay?” Vademe had asked from Rei’s right, the Lancer and the rest of his “Valormade” leaning over their plates in concern. Turning in their direction, Rei saw that even Laquita Martin and her “Red Crown”—sitting beyond Vademe’s group—looked a little worried.

“He’s *fine*,” Viv had answered before Rei could get a word in, sounding a little more herself now that it was obvious Grant wasn’t about to bleed out at the table next to her. “He’s just an idiot who clearly wants me to die of heart attack before I’m *twenty*.”

That had drawn a smattering more of laughter from the rest of the squads who’d looked around in concern, and most everyone returned to their meals. Aria seemed unable to stop herself from pestering Grant and Viv both to make sure the Mauler was alright, but Rei was distracted by something else, having found his attention frequently drifting to the two halves of the steel knife Grant had broken and caused the scene with. He frowned at them, wondering.

He’d gotten his answer later that night.

Reese was the one to come running after Catcher, and he’d dragged the Mauler away despite Grant’s protests with a genuine concern that Rei found simultaneously gratifying and infuriating. It was a half-hour later—a bit after the rest of Firesong had left their plates for the bots and taken leave of the dining hall—that he’d rejoined them again in Aria’s room, assuring Viv in particular that he was fine, that the major had had him patched by one of The Chevaron’s resident medical drones, and that the bandage around his palm would have to stay on for a day or so but it wasn’t worth fussing over, much less be any issue in combat. Once they were all satisfied with these promises,

they'd spent another hour or so reviewing the best of other schools' last-chance fighters again for Catcher and Grant, then Aria called it for the night, dismissing them to their rooms with a very squad leader-like sternness that had everyone but the Mauler sniggering.

It was after they'd said goodnight to Aria and Viv, the other four of them heading for their own quarters, that Grant had spoken to Rei directly.

“Ward... Can I have a second?”

It wasn't completely unexpected, but Rei had still been a little surprised as he told Catcher he'd catch up and bid goodnight to Cashe. When he and Grant were alone in the hall—except for a couple of older girls who seemed unable to stop themselves from staring between the pair of them as they passed—the massive boy made a face.

“Was that what I was like?” he'd asked flatly, for once not hesitating. “Like that? Like those kids?”

Rei frowned. “Like Biggs?” he'd asked, making sure he understood. It was clearly what had most likely been bothering the Mauler, but there was no sense in risking a misunderstanding.

“Yeah. The asshole from dinner.”

Rei didn't pause.

“Dude... You were worse. *A lot* worse.”

If he'd expected this statement to hit Grant hard, he was mistaken. On the contrary, the larger boy's grimace had only deepened before he nodded.

“Yeah... I guess I can see that, now...” It took him a second more to meet Rei's eyes again. “I'm... sorry. I don't think I ever told you that. Not directly, at least... It's something I'm working on.”

It had been Rei's turn to nod, and after a moment of silence he decided the guy deserved a bone.

“I'm starting to get that, yeah. And I appreciate the apology. Can't be easy.”

Grant grunted a begrudging agreement, and for the first time there was a little color in his chiseled cheeks. He'd said nothing more, though, and after a bit Rei took a step back and started to turn towards his room.

"Alright, I'm gonna head to bed. You should too, since you're probably fighting in the morn—"

"I didn't get it," Grant interrupted him, a little more loudly than he'd probably intended given he winced as soon as the words left his mouth.

Rei had paused again, looking back at the Mauler.

"Get what?"

Grant chewed on his words, eyes shifting around the hall and refusing to meet Rei's again.

"Get... *you*, I guess?" he'd managed after a bit, then grimaced at the inadequacy of the answer and immediately continuing. "Not that I do *now*—at least not completely—but I'm definitely getting more of the picture."

"And what picture is that?" Rei had asked flatly, unwilling to let Grant off any kind of hook just yet, even *if* it was clear the boy was trying to be genuine in his apology. Despite the obvious intention, the conversation had started scratching at some old wounds. It hadn't been *that* long, after all, since the Mauler had gotten himself brigged for a week for attacking Rei with a phantom call post-engagement in combat training, and even less time since Grant had pinned him to a wall to growl that—though he'd had nothing to do with Rei getting jumped by Selleck and the other choice shitbags from 1-A—he still thought of him as "a waste of space" and an anchor to Aria and the others.

Yeah... *definitely* scratching at old wounds...

This time, though, Grant met his eyes as he'd answered.

"You're not a coward."

Rei had blinked, admittedly a little taken aback by this as he frowned.

“No...” he’d responded slowly. “No... I’m not.” He considered Grant a bit longer. “Is *that* what you thought of me? That I was a coward? That I was afraid?”

“You ran,” Grant had started to insist, bringing his hands up emphatically and taking half a step forward as though trying to make his point. “From everything, Ward. You ran from Laurent at Commencement. You ran from me in training. You ran when you should have—”

But then the Mauler had caught himself, chagrin flashing across his face. He’d stopped and dropped his hands at once. As Rei watched in amazement, Grant proceeded to take a long, slow breath in and out, and when he was done he seemed to have centered himself again.

“Sorry,” he’d repeated—probably the third time Rei had ever heard the Mauler say the word—dipping his head in apology. “Like I said... I’m working on it.”

Rei had nodded again, watching Grant carefully.

There was something else going on, he could tell. Something hung over the hulking boy in front of him, making him seem almost... small?

Rei had decided to press the issue.

Carefully.

“You hate cowards that much?” he’d asked cautiously. “No. I’m *not* a coward. But even if I *was*, the way you acted... It’s not easily excusable, Grant. And from the start I’ve watched you treat everyone else differently. Better.” He cocked his head. “Why do you hate cowards *that* much?”

He’d never taken his eyes from the Mauler’s face, and as a result didn’t miss the briefest—absolute *briefest*—shift in Grant’s features. Whereas one moment Grant had held the resolute calmness he’d forced himself to achieve, in the next there was something terrifying in his eyes, something both cold and hellishly hot, something so sharp Rei had been almost tempted to take his own step away in alarm.

Then, though, Grant had gotten ahold of himself, and the expression was gone.

But not before Rei recognized it, having seen it before on the very day Grant had come after him in training, and having heard it described by Viv when she'd told him of the night the Mauler all but hunted down Selleck and the rest of his old entourage before beating them to a pulp for having jumped Rei 6-on-1.

Anger. Anger like nothing Rei had ever seen, much less experienced. Something deep, something etched so keenly into Grant's heart that it felt like it had life of its own.

What in the MIND...? was all Rei had been able to think, cautiously watching the Mauler despite the moment having passed.

Eventually Grant offered him half an answer.

"I had... a bad experience," had come the reply, and the effort the boy was putting into tempering his tone was audible as he clearly fought to keep meeting Rei's eye. "A... A *really* bad experience, Ward. I..." He'd paused, looking like he was having trouble putting the words together, then he lifted a hand to wave at Rei's body in indication. "I get you didn't have an easy time, growing up. I should have gotten that from day one—the scars and everything—but it took Viv clueing me in about your fibro for it to take hold."

Rei wasn't sure he'd liked *that*, but he'd never hidden his diagnosis from the rest of their classmates, so he supposed he couldn't blame Viv for passing along *this* bit of information. In fact, it was more and more apparent that the girl's walls had been as absolute with Grant as anyone else, the only holes in her defenses seeming to be where Rei himself had given her—if indirect—leave to punch and kick them in.

"But you're not the only kid who had it rough..."

Rei had blinked again, taking Grant in. The anger had been leaking through again. He'd almost been able to imagine faint trails of red wisping away from the Mauler, escaping like smoke someone was desperately trying to hold in a clenched fist. That invisible weight, too, seemed to have redoubled, because despite the simmering fury Grant looked to be trying not to sag when he kept on.

“I’m not saying you had it easier, mind you. I don’t know that, and I’m not interested in comparing traumas. I’m... I guess I’m trying to ask you to understand that you’re not the only one with baggage. You’ve just got a handle on yours. A much better handle than me, at least, and I’m more than a little jealous of that...”

Rei had waited for the Mauler to say more, but that seemed to be the last of what words Grant had left in him.

In the end, he nodded.

“But you’re working on it,” he’d said carefully, not quite a question, but not quite a statement either.

Grant took another slow breath before answering. “Yeah... I’m working on it.”

Rei had considered him, then. Another pair of cadets—identifiable only as a girl and guy not from Galens given they were wearing sweats and well-worn hoodies—passed them without a word and only lingering stares.

Finally, Rei had braved the question.

“You wouldn’t tell me what happened even if I asked, would you?”

There hadn’t been so much as a pause to consider. Grant shook his head, red-black eyes steady again as he clearly got hold of the anger once more.

“Not now?” Rei decided to push just a little. “Or... not ever?”

Whereas the first question had obviously been expected, he’d seen—in the slight opening of Grant’s mouth—that *this* one, contrastingly, had taken the Mauler by surprise. They’d stood there for several long seconds, in fact, alone in the hall again, the only sounds coming as muffled conversation and laughter through the smart-glass walls around them.

Finally, Grant had stammered out an answer.

“You would... You would want to... to know?” He’d sounded completely bewildered. “Eventually?”

Rei had cocked an eyebrow at him. “I would ‘want to know’ *now*, dude. But that’s clearly not an option. So yeah. Eventually.”

Grant’s clear perplexion had only deepened at this.

“But... why?”

Rei snorted, deciding it was time to take his leave. Turning his back on the Mauler, he’d started for his and Catcher’s room again.

As he’d walked, though, he’d answered.

“I don’t know if you and I are ever gonna be ‘friends’, Grant, but we’re teammates. Probably will be as long as we’re at Galens, the way things are shaping up. That means you’re now important to me, even if I’d rather otherwise.” Rei reached the door of the room, a plain black thing in the green-and-purple display of the walls some 50 feet up the hall. Putting his hand on the handle, he’d looked back at Grant in full. “If something’s eating at you *that* badly, we all should know. Eventually.” He’d considered a moment, then added, “Not just Viv.”

And with that, Rei had opened the door and stepped inside without saying goodnight, leaving Grant to stare after him in silent shock.

He’d slept well that night, if a little fitfully, and even then only because *Catcher* spent most of the night in the room’s second bed tossing and turning and grumbling in his sleep about “No... Guuyss... Stop throwing things at me... I’m in the middle of a fight...”. When Major Reese arrived to wake them up at 0600—again opening the door without knocking to shout into the room that breakfast would be served in half an hour—Rei had already been up for a bit staring at the ceiling, frowning and recalling the conversation with Grant. The way Catcher had done nothing more than slowly sit up at the major’s yell implied that the Saber, too, had been lying awake for a while, and as they got dressed Rei saw with some concern that the boy was looking nauseous again, possibly even more so than he had as they’d left Galens the morning before. Funnily enough, walking into the dining hall for breakfast had been a *relief* for once, because as

soon as Catcher noticed half the cadets of the other schools were greener than he was—and not a few from Galens' own group—he seemed to cheer up.

Breakfast had been eaten quickly by all, the only comfortable discussion seeming to come from the third-year squads to whom the pressure was old news. For the first-years, it was their first true SCT, and it could be argued the second-years had even more on the line now that they were bracketed into the main tournament, with a shot at Globals and beyond for the first time in their collegiate career. As people had started passing dishes off to cleaning bots, though, Valera Dent made an appearance in their midst, smiling around at them, careful in particular to meet the eyes of those who looked the most nervous.

“You’ve got this,” she’d said simply. “All of you. There isn’t a doubt in my mind that you’ve got this.”

Then—leaving those words to hearten them all—she’d explained the itinerary for the rest of the day, including their commute plans and the combat schedule.

As it turned out, the members of Firesong had been right to suspect the last-chance fights would be held in the morning, as they’d been to think squad and multi-squad formats would start in the afternoon. Within a half hour of wrapping breakfast not only had they all descended to the hotel lobby in their regulars to wait on the flyer that would take them from The Chevaron to Kenneth Academy, but Catcher and Grant had both received notices of their morning pairings. The former had his first match almost first thing at 0915, while the latter wasn’t scheduled till much later in the morning at 1130. Aria had been the one who put forward the theory that Catcher was seeded lower in what had to be uneven brackets, and a little digging by Rei and Cashe on the public feed sites of the SCT had eventually brought them to a tournament layout that confirmed this. If Catcher was going to qualify for the Dueling competition proper, he would have to beat out three opponents over the course of the morning, while Grant’s pairing had him only requiring a single victory.

Ironically, this above all else seemed to calm Catcher's nerves.

"Good," he'd said. "They're underestimating me."

Rei had clapped him on the back just as Samsus started calling into their midst that the flyer was arriving. "They sure as hell are, man. And you're gonna prove them so wrong."

"So wrong," Aria, Viv, and Cashe had all echoed almost simultaneously, earning a laugh from the Saber and even a bit of a snort from Grant.

While there had been no fewer paparazzi leaving the hotel compared to when they'd arrived the afternoon before, the chaperones had clearly taken a lesson from their last encounter. After the same large flyer that had brought them from the orbital station to the hotel touched down again, Dent and Reese marched out at the head of the Galens cadets, Takeshi and Samsus flanking the column. The shouts and lights came just as intensely, true, but something about Dent's presence in particular seemed to have kept the men and women of the gossip feeds at bay, because they'd maintained a space of distance between themselves and the students this time. There were still yells of "The Bishop!" and "Lasher! Sidorov! Over here!" or "It's Laurent and the Prince!", but on the whole it had taken half the time for the *entire* mass of the nine squads and the other Dueling qualifiers to make and board the flyer as it had for just Firesong and the other first-years to reach the hotel the day before, so Rei hadn't complained. Instead he'd kept his eyes on the back of Dent's head when he could make her out through the bodies of Lennon and Sidorov's teams ahead of them, feeling a familiar sense of want.

That. *That* was what he desired. He'd remembered the first time he'd experienced it in full, witnessing the captain lift Grant off his feet with one hand and with no more effort than she might have given a morning stretch, and all without calling on her CAD. And now there she'd been, her mere presence enough—*despite* her fame—to hold at bay the tide of greedy enthusiasm that had nearly swallowed them all whole the day before.

That was what Rei wanted.

The flight out of Ganos had been uneventful, the trip taking all of 10 minutes in the ever-moving traffic of the sky lanes. Kenneth Academy, it transpired, had been built on the outskirts of the city some decades after its founding, and so it was that they actually broke out of the tall buildings and bright colors of the adverts and signs over glass and steel into the open, verdant plains of Astra-3. Like much of the rest of Sector 9, the lands around Ganos were all grasslands and rivers, with only pockets of buildings visible here and there among the greenery. The planet—like most every celestial body adapted in humanity’s explosive expansion into the systems beyond Sol—was still roughly 80 or 90 percent of its post-terraformed “natural” state, with mankind largely settling in the upward-reaching megastructures of the metropolises that zoning laws and environmental treaties always pushed to grow more vertically than horizontally whenever possible. As Rei understood it, this was a lesson learned after the nearly-catastrophic decline of Earth’s climate in the 20th and 21st centuries, and it was what resulted in places like Castalon growing to tower over the likes of the Galens Institute.

It was also the reason Kenneth Academy—while modest in size compared to Galens, sure—was a sight to behold as it came into view.

“Yoooo...” Catcher had breathed from the seat in front of Rei, leaning over Cashe on his left to get a better view out the transport window. “Look at *that*.”

Rei—and Aria beside him, judging by her wide eyes as they both peered downward—had been equally in awe.

While the Institute stood on a square, level breadth of land encircled by walls and woods in the middle of Castalon, Kenneth had abandoned almost all semblance of military rigidity. Built up the sweeping incline of a broad, grassy hill just outside of Ganos, the school felt almost like it had merely risen out of the windswept plains rather than being any kind of man-made addition. The paths and walkways were there, but they were looping, lazy lines of stone through the drifting green, and looked to have

been designed to work with the natural pitch and sway of the earth. The buildings were proper enough—most of them even newer-looking than Galens' longer-standing structures—but the metal and glass of their design reflected the nature around them, partially camouflaging much of the campus. Despite the winter climate, the entirety of Kenneth felt like a patch of spring made modern, a subtle accent of mankind's passing over the world.

Subtle, that is, except for the Arena.

Rei had felt a thrill as he'd noticed the building for the first time. While Galens' stadium stood as the centerpiece within the school's grounds, the Kenneth Arena held a different place of honor. Situated cleanly at the very top of the academy hill, the fact that it only seated 50,000 people was lost to the glamour of its presence. Instead of the monolithic black Rei was used to, the structure had been designed with the same conscious thought for the freedom of its surroundings, its mirrored, curved surface reflecting both the green of the grass and the blue of the January sky in what looked like a single, unbroken piece of polished, rising and falling steel. As the flyer had descended, aiming for the Arena, Rei realized quickly that the effect was not the result of a single surface, however, but rather the collective reflection of tens of thousands of smaller, hexagonal pieces of metal all about the size of his torso. Sure enough, when they'd made for one of the half-circles of stone that complemented each of the four entrances he'd noticed from the sky, Rei had watched in mesmerized fascination while the form of their large flyer reflected unevenly as they descended. They'd touched down, and the mirror image settled, broken into several hundred pieces as a blotch of black against the colors of the world.

Aria had to poke him in the ribs to get him moving, so impressed was he by the presentation of the Arena.

No paparazzi looked to have been allowed onto the Kenneth campus for the event, but the platform had still been a busy place as the Galens qualifiers disembarked

with bags slung over backs and shoulders. Another flyer had been in the process of touching down some hundred yards off on the other side of the semi-circle—unmarked, so Rei had no idea what school it might belong to—but the majority of the foot traffic was clearly not the result of the attending cadets and their chaperones. On the contrary, despite the early hour, Rei hadn't quite *believed* how many common civilians were passing them as they waited for Dent and the other officers, some running eagerly for the tall, rectangular entrance set into the side of the Arena ahead of them, others slowing down or stopping outright to point and gawk when they realized they'd just witnessed the *Galens* students arrive.

“Okay, now *I'm* getting nervous,” Aria had groaned in his ear just as the captain called for all of them to follow her before starting for the stadium.

Rei had only shot her a grin, hoping he didn't give away the flutter in his own gut at the hundreds of eyes he could feel following their quick approach of the Arena.

The inside of the building—fortunately for everyone—had a more-familiar feel to it, and despite the palette and design of the seats being different from Galens, Rei had found himself breathing a little easier after they'd mounted the twenty or so steps up to the entrance. Once in, the place hadn't even felt all that smaller than what he was used to, with the black and red rows rising upward in much the same fashion as they did at home from around the standard SCT field that was the center of everything, 10 feet below the edge of the main walkway. The ceiling was a *lot* closer—almost alarmingly so, at first glance—but the constraint of the space had been made up for ten times over by the buzz of noise and activity happening all around them. Everywhere Rei looked, people were moving, many along the paths that ringed the main level or split the seats, a few down on the Arena floor—all uniformed officers of the ISCM apparently doing a last-minute inspection of the projection plating—and most in the stands themselves. The emblems of the schools, too, had been cleanly displayed as massive, hovering projections over ten neatly divided sections of the stadium—these portions indicated

by bright, knee-high walls of blue light running up stairwells and between seats, their glow bouncing and fluctuating gently—and Rei had had a moment to take in not only Maston’s mirrored green lions and Kenneth’s own square of symmetrical blue-and-grey shields, but the rest as well. There was Sermont’s Point’s black-and-red serpent, as well as the 105th Military College’s three black, vertical swords. Oyekan’s School of Combat’s mirrored hands and daggers were near the 103rd’s winged, silver skull, while opposite them the 9th Sector Division had a simple yellow-and-orange diagonal cross marking a big X where it sat between to the 104th’s open blue-on-white eye and Deermont University’s golden stag head.

Then, though, Dent had been calling their attention back to her again, and they’d turned left, along the walkway, making for where the red griffin of Galens seemed almost to be holding court from its portion of the stands crowning the north entrance of the stadium.

It was a hell of a sight to behold, and Rei almost wished he hadn’t once *again* been distracted almost immediately, even if he wasn’t the only one.

“Oh!” Cashe whispered as voices started up from all around them. “Would you look at *that*...”

Rei had torn his eyes from the school emblems at last—having been taking in the great griffin with no small swell of pride, admittedly—to find the Lancer examining Viv’s right shoulder beside her.

Her shoulder, and the clean glowing white of the Duelist emblem that had suddenly appeared there to hover half-an-inch above the black cloth of her uniform.

Apparently the markers had manifested shortly after they’d reached the walkway, and Rei wasn’t remotely ashamed of how quickly he’d turned and pulled at the upper sleeve of his own regulars, his stomach doing a little flip of happiness when he saw that—sure enough—the A-Type symbol was there. A quick glance around had told him the others had gotten theirs, too, along with the rest of the Galens students, and peering

into the stands he'd seen that every cadet from every school already present had been marked as well. It had been kind of neat, taking it all in. Only those who'd been clearly present as designated chaperones—maybe as a distinction in and of itself—had been lacking the emblems, and Rei had himself a fun minute while they made their way to the north end of the Arena, trying to guess what CAD-Type different students were just based of their physique and posture. Amusingly, he was pretty sure he'd been right roughly four out of five times or so, but that wasn't all that surprising. Though he'd only been a User himself for less than a year, you picked up on the differences quick if you didn't want to get left in the dust.

Rei hadn't even realized he'd chuckled out loud after noting that Maulers in particular were easy to pick out, usually all shoulders and big hands, with chins lifted maybe a little too high...

“What's so funny?” Aria had asked him sidelong as they walked.

“I'll tell you later,” he'd promised with another grin.

They reached the north end of the stadium and claimed the lowest three rows of their section quickly. A brief set of orders from the chaperones, and the third-years had taken the bottom aisle of chairs, the second- and first-years claiming the next two respectively. They hadn't assigned any arrangement beyond that, but Martin had only given Firesong the slightest of resigned squints as she led Benaly and the rest of Red Crown down the aisle first to take the six seats furthest into their section, leaving Vademe and Valormade the next half dozen. That had left the seats closest to the stairs for Rei and the others, and he hadn't missed Aria making a point of thanking Vademe quietly as they stepped in after his group to drop their bags and claim the spot of honor—at least among the first-years.

When they were settled, Dent came to stand before them all.

“Cadets, eyes forward.”

60-something students had straightened against the solid-light supports that the Arena projected behind them as they sat. The Bishop had a large pad in one hand, and Reese, Takeshi, and Samsus were all standing around her at ease, but expectant.

Without fanfare, the captain dove right in, not looking up from the tablet while she'd read.

“Non-qualifiers, you're up first. First fights start at 0900, with brackets divided into fifteen-minute time blocks, as your schedules have already informed you. Make sure to keep an eye on your clocks, since no one will tolerate tardiness. Catchwick—” Rei had felt Catcher twitch from where the Saber sat to his right “—you're our earliest match at 0915.” Dent's brown eyes finally lifted briefly to Catcher. “Ready?”

“Yes, ma'am!” Catcher had answered at once, doing a fair job of not betraying the lingering nerves given away by the two fists half-clenching the legs of his slacks in his lap.

Dent had nodded, then looked back to her pad. “After that it will be Harrison at 0930—” a third-year girl whose first name Rei thought was “Tabitha” perked up in the front row “—followed by Nomura and Rosario at 0945.” Two second-years he didn't know exchanged a look from where they were sitting next to each other off to the left. “That's the opening round, if I'm not mistaken, so things will get more intense from there. Individual qualifiers, you're not up till squad formats in the afternoon, so I expect everyone to be cheering themselves hoarse for your schoolmates until then. Understood?”

“Yes, ma'am!” the answer had come, just as loud but a little more relaxed, and Rei hadn't been able to help but to admire the woman's ability to lift morale with nothing more than a well-timed shift in tone.

After that, Dent had dismissed them to their preparations before huddling up to talk with Reese, Takeshi, and Samsus. Catcher and Grant left them to join the other non-qualifiers in search of the locker rooms—walking off beside each other, but not

talking—and Rei, Aria, Viv, and Cashe had spent a quarter hour with their heads together over the large pad Viv had stowed in her bag, working on mapping out the potential opponents the two of them would be facing. Grant had been simple enough, and was easy not to worry about—half because he only had one fight against a C1 from Sermont’s Point to make the tournament proper, and half because it was *Grant*—and frankly Catcher hadn’t taken that much more consideration. While Galens definitely had the strongest fighting presence across the board by far, there were still plenty of mid-level C-rankers among the other schools.

Thing was, almost every single one of *them* had qualified individually in their respective Intra-Schools, leaving nothing but the other Galens last-chancers as the only real challenges on the field that morning, with no one other than Grant who Rei would have put money on if they got matched with Catcher.

15 minutes later, the two boys had returned—having changed into their combat suits—with the information that the Kenneth Arena had two sub-basements, both of which had been partitioned. First-years had been designated the locker rooms on SB2, second-years SB1, while third-years had been granted the special privilege of using the smaller professional locker rooms spread out through all three floors, with the Galens senior class among those who’d been given one of the chambers off the underworks of the main level. Catcher had looked even better than when he’d left, too, but wouldn’t say why, and it took Viv prodding Grant several times before the Mauler caved and told them that there had been no less than *three* non-qualifiers from the other schools throwing up in the locker room’s adjacent bathroom while they’d been changing.

Rei had gotten a chuckle out of that, fist-bumping a grinning Catcher sidelong as he muttered “See? Could be worse,” before Aria asked Viv to pull her tablet out again so they could review Grant’s single matchup and Catcher’s most-likely path to qualifying.

Not too long after, and with a flop of Rei's gut that was only matched by Aria's hand flashing out to grip his wrist in excitement, a voice had boomed out across the Arena.

"Testing one two. Testing one two." It was a male announcer rather than the cooler tone of the automated system, and once it was clear the speakers were working the young man had continued quickly. "If I could have your attention, please. If I could have your attention, please. Final qualification Dueling rounds will begin in fifteen minutes. Again: final qualification Dueling rounds will begin in fifteen minutes. First round fighters, please refer to your schedules for your assigned field—it will be designated either 'N' or 'S' for north or south respectively—and report to the main floor. For students, staff, and spectators, we would remind you that final qualification rounds are not broadcasted, so we recommend recording any fights for review if needed. Thank you."

And with that the voice had faded away as quickly as it had interrupted the activity of the stands, leaving only a second or two of quiet before the hubbub picked up again even louder than before.

"Well that was a little underwhelming," Grant had grumbled from the end of the row, frowning up at the Arena's ceiling as though trying to convey his disappointment to the disembodied voice.

"They might not make a proper announcement of the start of the tournament until the afternoon?" Aria had offered, though she looked a little miffed as well. "Probably for the same reason they don't broadcast last-chance fights? They want viewers to be thrown into the higher-level action immediately."

Grant had agreed with a grunt and half a shrug, absently thumbing at the bandage around his right palm. Rei had eyed it for a second, wondering if the cut was bothering him, but decided not to voice his concern.

The Mauler had said it wouldn't cause an issue, and Rei had chosen to believe him.

“What field are you for your first match?” he’d asked Catcher instead, looking at the Saber.

“North,” Catcher answered at once, dipping his head to the section of the Arena floor directly in front of their seats, where the 30-yard Dueling zone was set inside the 70-yard Team Battle area. The two layered silver circles were mirrored in exactly the same fashion on the far side of the floor, too, forming the rounded ends of the much broader Wargames area. “Already looked it up. You guys won’t even have to get out of your seats.”

“Perfect,” Viv had said, leaning back to stretch into her projected seat in an exaggerated sort of way, then pulling her cap down below her eyes. “I needed a nap anyway. Wake me up when the *real* fighting starts... this afternoon.”

Catcher had choked back a growl at this, and Cashe, sitting between them, giggled into her hand. Rei smiled too, then settled back to wait.

He hadn’t complained when Aria did the same beside him, resting her shoulder against his before pulling a smaller pad from her own bag and asking him quietly if he’d review some field variations with her.

10 minutes later, two ISCM arbiters had strode out onto the floor to prep the north and south fields respectively, and 5 minutes after that—at exactly 0900—the first pairs of combatants had stepped out into the light from the underworks passages they looked have been told to wait in.

Even half-empty *and* despite these only being last-chance fights, the stands had positively *roared* with excitement.

“I’m headed out,” Catcher had had to shout over the noise as the Arena announced the two fighters matched on the north field before them—a pair of second-years from the 105th and Kenneth, Rei thought he’d caught. “Wish me luck.”

“Break a leg,” Cashe had said with a thumbs up, scooching back in her chair to let him by.

“Break *both* legs.” Viv, on the contrary, had stuck a foot out to try and trip him as he passed.

“And leave the rest of the team to deal with you all on their own?” Catcher had asked in mock disbelief. “I wouldn’t wish that on my worst enemy.”

It had been Viv’s turn to splutter, but Catcher was gone with a grin and wave back to Rei and Aria before she’d been able to formulate any kind of better comeback, jogging down the stairs to the walkway to head for the closest underworks entrance.

“Think he’s still nervous?” Aria had asked Rei sidelong once the Saber was gone.

“Oh yeah,” Rei snorted in answer. “But he’ll be fine. He just needs to get the first match out of the way.”

And he’d been right. Soon after the first round ended—in brutal fashion when the 105th’s second-year “decapitated” their Kenneth Academy opponent with a vicious sweep of their spear—Catcher had been called out from the tunnels to resounding cheers from almost every Galens cadet no matter their year, and the match started without delay. His opponent—a boy from Deermont—had been practically shaking well before the field had manifested into a common Neutral Zone and their Devices had been called. Rei felt bad for him, particularly in the seconds after the Arena called “Combatants... Fight!”

Even as a Duelist, at D7 he hadn’t even lasted 30 seconds against Catcher’s onslaught.

Sure enough, after the match was called and the two had descended back to the projection plating, Catcher looked around and up at Rei and the others, flashing them a grin and quick double thumbs up before jogging off the field.

“Told you,” Rei had laughed sidelong to Aria.

The rest of the morning had passed in a similar manner, with Firesong eventually rising from their seats to join one group or another of the other Galens students to cheer the various last chancers from all three years. Catcher’s second fight had come

and gone without a hitch—though the battle lasted closer to a full minute this time—and only *two* of the Institute cadets lost the opportunity to fight in the tournament proper by the time it was finally Grant’s turn to get ready to go. The match had taken place on the north field again, and to her credit his opponent—a 9th Sector girl named Hanna Steiners—took full advantage of the Zero-Grav field and her nimbleness as a Brawler to make a nuisance of herself. All of Grant’s superior specs and ability had amounted to little for the first 4 minutes of the fight as Steiners bounced around the simulated asteroid field, flashing by him and striking as she passed again and again and again. It had reminded Rei of the third-year fight they’d seen in the opening week of the Intra-Schools the semester before, between Lennon and the Lancer Annika Ivanov. Unfortunately, Grant had had little of Lennon’s defensive ability, and he suffered more than one hit here and there that looked to leave him with a few minor limitations to his side and both legs.

He held out though, and just before the 7th minute struck the Mauler had managed to grab Steiners by the throat as she’d passed with lagging speed, slamming her face in with his forehead to stun the girl before dropping his axe down between her eyes even as they’d spun together through empty space.

“Come on!” Aria had shouted as soon as the Arena announced the FDA and the win for Grant—officially qualifying him for the tournament proper—already heading south from where they’d been cheering at the railing of the north walkway. “Catcher’s up soon!”

Not long after, the entirety of Firesong were officially Sectionals qualifiers, and Rei could admit himself borderline-giddy as he looked up into the steadily-filling stands of the Kenneth Arena. Despite everything, despite the Maston’s asshats, Grant’s injury, and Catcher’s nerves at the start of the day, Rei had a feeling it was going to be a really, *really* good week.

Even Reese's voice—shouting at them from around the bend of the walkway as the major approached while they waited for Catcher to join them after his victory—couldn't ruin his mood.

“Firesong! Food has arrived, and Dent wants you eating first! Report back to the school section!”

All of them looked around to the man, and Rei was pretty sure he wasn't the only one who hadn't followed. Takeshi had informed everyone around 1045 that lunch had been ordered and would be arriving shortly, but it felt weird for them to get first dibs over the second- and third-years.

“Sir?” Aria ventured. “Dent wants us to eat... now?”

“I don't think I stuttered, Laurent,” Reese responded with only the ghost of a sneer, reaching them to glower across each of the group in turn. “Report back.”

“Uh... Yes, sir,” Aria answered, giving the man a salute the rest of them copied automatically. “Can I ask why, though? We expected we'd be eating with the other first-years, is all...”

Tactfully done, and Rei could see the major struggling to find a fault in the question.

Failing to, he answered flatly.

“Team format schedules have just been posted.” Finally, he allowed himself the smallest of raised eyebrows. “Unless you all want to fight on full stomachs, I suggest you get to it. You're up in the very first round.”

CHAPTER 19

“Cadets, staff, and spectators!” the announcer—*much* more enthusiastically this time around—claimed the attention of every soul in the Arena as his voice boomed throughout the stadium. “Welcome to the 2469 Collegiate Sectionals Simulated Combat Tournament of this 9th Sector of Astra-3, hosted by Kenneth Academy! The Intersystem Collective Military thanks you all for your attendance and support, in particular those who have traveled to make it here! I can assure you our roster of student fighters this year *will not disappoint!*”

From inside the dim grey tunnel of the underworks, lined up across from Aria on the ramp that led up and out onto the Arena floor, Rei listened to the stands respond to this promise with gusto.

“Yes, *yes!*” the announcer echoed the booming cheers eagerly. “Even better, as many of you no doubt know, this is an extra-special year in SCT history! Not only will those of you keeping an eye out in the stands notice the new Type emblems released only this morning to help you identify your favorite combatants, but we also have... TEEEEEAM NAAAAAAAAMES!!”

The excitement over this long-demanded change was obvious in the answering roar, and Rei managed a grin even as one finger tapped nervously against the bare, scarred skin of his biceps, his arms crossed instinctively over the red griffin on his chest.

“That’s what’s new, but let’s go over some basics to make sure everyone is up to speed. This tournament includes the ten ISCM-sanctioned academies in Sector 9, and is divided into two brackets. First-year students will be competing among themselves for a Sectionals championship, while second- and third-years will be mixed *together* in an attempt to qualify for the Global tournament held later this year, then hopefully on to the Systems and Intersystems coming this summer! If that sounds unfair to any newer

viewers, you should know that some of the third-years among us today competed as high as the top levels last year, so don't discount our younger students just yet!"

Across from Rei, Aria had one foot up on the wall she was leaning against, bent knee bouncing up and down, and she and Cashe both looked to be muttering to themselves while they stared at the floor, probably going over potential last-minute tactics in their heads.

"*Every* cadet at this tournament, however, has worked tirelessly to bring their best onto the field and impress! While many of you might think you're here to keep an eye out for future legends of the professional circuits, you can look forward to every fight delighting and surprising you, even among the first-years! After all... there are some special cases within the ranks our newest cadets this season, aren't there?"

That did nothing to help anyone's nerves, Rei suspected, least of all *his*, and he had to force himself to focus on Aria's bouncing leg and the fact that their first matchup had been a pleasant surprise when Captain Dent had showed them who it was.

Keep it together... he thought to himself, not even noticing how wide his eyes were as he stared at Aria's knee, fighting to keep the knot in his stomach at bay. *Keep it together. Just gotta get through the first fight. Just like you told Catcher.*

"I'm not one to bury the lead, though, and it's about time I let the *real* stars of the show present themselves to you! Therefore, without further ado, I urge everyone capable of doing so get on their feet, put their hands together, and CHEER AS LOUD AS YOU CAN FOR OUR OPENING FIGHTERRRRRS!"

This time the noise was practically deafening, even down in the closed-off tunnel, and Rei could actually *feel* the plasteel of the wall vibrate at his back. Braving a quick look around, it was almost funny to notice that of all of them, only Catcher—who had now gone through something similar three times now—wasn't looking at least a *little* queasy. Viv was winding a finger through a loop of her brown curls so fiercely Rei

thought she was at risk of pulling her hair out, while Grant had taken to twisting first one of Honoris' CAD bands around his wrist, then the other.

“ON THE SOUTH FIELD—” the announcer’s voice boomed over the rush of some 25,000 voices and stamping feet “—SECOND-YEARS FROM DEERMONT UNIVERSITY AND THE 9TH SECTOR DIVISION! I GIVE YOU... ‘FINAL WORD’, LED BY CADET NATHANIEL BRENNAN, AND ‘FATE’S THREAD’, LED BY CADET VEE PATRONE!”

The shouting and cheering intensified, and Rei—having been watching the Mauler—clearly saw Grant take one of those deep, calming breaths he knew the boy was depending on more and more of late.

“Here we go, people,” Aria got out as loud as she could manage—which was barely audible enough to be heard over the noise.

And then...

“AND ON THE NORTH FIELD, FIRST-YEARS FROM MASTON’S COMBAT ACADEMY AND THE GALENS INSTITUTE... IT’S ‘BONEYARD’, LED BY CADET DANIEL BIGGS, AND ‘FIRESONG’, LED BY CADET ARIA LAURENT!”

And with that the double doors at the top of the ramp opened, brightening the darkened tunnel in a wash of light, and Aria pushed herself off the wall to lead them up the incline at double-pace, Rei falling in behind her with the others right on his heels. They were up and beyond the underworks in barely a couple seconds, and he stepped out onto the Arena floor and into the rolling thunder of applause, screaming, and more—were those *air horns*??—of his first *true* SCT.

The experience was one he knew—even in that moment—he would never forget for as long as he lived.

It was like walking into another world, one full of noise and color, and Rei realized the dimming of the ramp area had probably been deliberate in order to give the arriving

combatants exactly this exhilarating effect to help get their blood going. Under the wash of light that illuminated the rising stands around them—so clear there weren't even shadows among the arched rafters of the stadium roof—the cheering was like a physical wall, and Rei felt like he'd been smacked across the face by it as his bare feet paced cleanly across the black projection plating of the floor. Peering up, the 50,000 seats were still roughly half-filled—Rei and Aria had overheard some of the third-years talking about how they probably wouldn't be packed until the weekend and the greater portion of the civilian population got out of work—but all the same it was like looking into a moving sea of color and life. There was a thin ring of mostly black and gold along the bottom of the stands where the cadets and their chaperones sat, but beyond that the designed hair and eyes of tens of *thousands* of common spectators mixed with a thousand different skin tones and a variety of getups and attire to make the place a flowing wash of brilliance, like an undulating, scattered rainbow. Everyone who could looked to have taken to their feet, and Rei oddly found himself tempted to lift a hand up in the air and acknowledge the crowd, just as he'd seen the great fighters of the professional SCTs do time and time again over the feeds.

Fortunately, Aria's well-timed order kept his momentary daydreaming in check.

"Eyes forward, guys. Clock the competition while we can."

At once Rei turned his attention earthward again, looking across the Arena from them. Having not turned around, Aria hadn't actually *caught* him gaping up into the stands—or the others he suspected were doing the same behind him—but she was right. She'd wanted to make sure they were claiming every advantage they could. Rei was grateful for that, partially because Aria was proving time and time again to be the most level-headed of their six, the exact right fit to lead the squad.

But then again, he was probably more grateful that the command allowed him the time to grin across the length of the Team Battle field at their opponents, not even bothering to hide his borderline-glee while five faces stared back at Firesong grimly.

The sixth, of course, belonged to Daniel Biggs, the doucherag who'd tried to pick a fight with Rei not even a day before, and if anything he was looking even greyer than the rest of his "Boneyard" teammates.

"Looks like *someone* got a reality check," Cashe murmured as they started to spread out once they reached the edge of the field nearest the six west starting positions that would appear shortly. Her voice —like Aria's before—came through Rei's NOED, Shido's coms system having activated as soon as they'd stepped onto the Arena floor. This was a change compared to their training sessions where coms only activated when they were on the actual combat field, but it made sense.

How the hell else were they supposed to talk pre-match with the rumble of the crowd and the voice of the north field's match arbiter already telling "Final Word" and "Fate's Thread" to take their starting positions?

Catcher snorted in answer. "I'd be scared shitless, too, if the freaking *Lasher* had told me off."

"Should we leave Biggs for Rei?" Viv joked, and even without looking around at her Rei could tell she, too, was smiling at their opponents, probably even more widely than he was.

Once again, Aria brought them to heel.

"Focus," she ordered calmly, her voice a little echoed since she was also standing right beside Rei in their six-man line. "Yes, these guys *should* be a joke compared to Vademe or Mart—compared to Valormade or Red Crown—" she corrected herself, all of them still getting used to the team names "—but assuming this will be a breeze is a *perfect* recipe for making an ass of ourselves and getting eliminated in the starting round of our first SCT. I don't know about you, but I do *not* want to give Reese *that* particular ammunition to hold over my head for the next two and a half years."

"Seconded," Rei grunted with a scowl, forcing himself to take the situation more seriously. Even with the noise of the stands dying down it took more effort than usual,

so easy was it to get distracted by the presence of the spectators now in the process of taking their seats again. He was aware, too, of much of the other Galens cadets—first-, second-, and third-years all mixed—standing along the walkway that overlooked the Team Battle field, and suddenly the nerves returned as Aria’s warning took on a new edge.

That, though, turned out to be exactly what Rei’s brain needed, and—as he finally managed to give “Boneyard” his full attention—he let his Cognition spec snap into place with a faint tingle of neuroline activating.

It let him be the first to start calling out his observations.

“Albertson and Bock look like they’re going to start in the flank positions.” He spoke clearly so no one would miss a word, and didn’t give any advantage away, only *verbally* pointing out the pair of boys he knew to be the Maston team’s two Lancers. “They’re either planning on maintaining a defensive position, or rush while holding a solid edge to either side. Biggs and Ahuja are center stage, with Wan center left and Meadows center right.”

“Brawler and Duelist supporting Maulers in the middle,” Cashe summarized this last bit, sounding like she’d managed to get serious herself. “I give 70/30 they’re gonna rush. It would be stupid to turtle up when they’re so outmatched in terms of firepower.”

“Most likely,” Aria agreed, but Rei thought she sounded a little hesitant. “Don’t know if we should bank on that, though. Especially before we know what the field looks like yet.” She paused, and Rei looked sidelong at her to find her brow scrunched together in thought.

It only took a second for her to make up her mind.

“I say we stay flexible. Rei, you and Viv plan on taking a wide loop south and see if you can’t come around their back. Grant, I want you to do the same, but north, and cut in down the middle. Catcher, Cashe, and I will meet them head on. The three of us

can definitely hold them off for the ten to fifteen seconds or so it should take you to drop back on us if needed. With luck we'll catch them from three directions."

"That's a pretty shotgun approach for you, Aria..." Catcher said, but he didn't sound worried. If anything, Rei thought he might have been a little impressed.

"They're *probably* sticking together, but if they're not then *us* staying too clumped puts us at risk of being surrounded and picked off guerrilla-style depending on the field. If they split and we split, though, you, Cashe, and I can hold strong while we wait for reinforcement, Rei and Viv can handle anything that gets thrown at them and are fast enough to support anywhere on the field in seconds, and Grant can probably take most of whoever he runs into before he goes down."

"Why am *I* the only one who definitely dies in this plan?" Grant grumbled through the coms, and Rei almost let slip a laugh.

"You'll go down a hero, don't worry," Viv told the Mauler with a snigger. "Your sacrifice will be remembered, and we'll make sure the bards sing your praises for the centuries to come."

That got a chuckle out of everyone, even Aria, who didn't call them back to order, apparently satisfied enough with their strategy to leave them be. Rei had to agree with Catcher that it *was* a little riskier of a plan than any of them had probably expected from her, but it was also a good one. Against a weaker team the important thing was to not let them gain any advantage, and if the field the Arena chose offered any kind of cover, the "guerrilla-style" combat was a fair concern to consider. The teams were split smartly, too, with Rei and Viv being able to collapse back towards the "main" group of Aria, Catcher, and Cashe if the pair of them encounter trouble, like if they ran into Boneyard's full six taking a surprise loop around the field or something. Grant, being on his own, wouldn't have the necessary speed to regroup and therefore *would* probably go down in a similar situation, but especially with Overclock in his back pocket it wouldn't be without a hell of a fight. He'd take one or two with him—at *minimum*,

probably—resulting in not only maintaining or *improving* the numbers balance, but also probably giving the surviving members of Firesong the Boneyard team’s position before he was FDAed.

Yeah. It was a good plan.

So when a white disk of light manifested just outside the south edge of the field, drawing all their collective attentions, Rei was eager to get the fight started.

A stocky woman with long, silver-green hair was striding out from the hall Biggs and his team had appeared from, bedecked in full black-and-golds. Reaching the disk, she stepped on, then strode to its center to stand at ease. Blue-grey eyes took Firesong and Boneyard in one after the other, studying them carefully, and for a second Rei wondered what the delay was about.

Then the woman spoke, her voice transmitted through their coms for them alone to hear, and he understood.

“First-years, I’m First Lieutenant Sandra Neilson, your field arbiter. As this is your first official SCT match, I am allowed to give your teams the opportunity to voice any questions you might have about the proceedings. Cadet Biggs—” she turned to the Maston’s team first “—does Boneyard require any clarifications before we begin?”

Across from them, Rei watched Biggs hesitate before glancing around at the others. When five heads shook in answer on either side of him, the boy looked back to Neilson.

“No, ma’am!” he answered clearly. “Ready to go!”

The first lieutenant nodded, then turned to Rei and the others. “Firesong. Any questions?”

Aria’s answer was prompt and expected, without so much as a pause to look at any of them to make sure.

She knew her team, just like she knew how much time they’d *all* spent prepping for this exact moment.

“No, ma’am!”

Rei thought he caught a hint of a knowing smirk as Neelson nodded again.

Then there was a flash of her NOED activating, and the woman started rising quickly, her words suddenly became amplified when the Arena as a whole picked them up too.

“Combatants, take position.”

Though there was no physical change to the field as of yet, Rei felt his hands tingle crossing the line of the Team Battle zone in a single step, moving right along with the others to each claim one of the six red circles that had appeared at the officer’s words 5 yards in. As they placed themselves at the ready, Rei watched Boneyard do the same, Biggs’ squad—like Firesong—not rearranging themselves despite the brief opportunity presented to do so. Changing formation was allowed as a team was called to position, per se, but it wasn’t commonly done. Higher echelon squads in the pro circuit SCTs could adapt in a heartbeat to such a changeup, so it was never bothered with, and as such had trickled down to be considered something along the lines of taunting an opponent while in a fight: allowed, but frowned upon.

“This is as an official Team Battle event.” The first lieutenant was high above them now, her observation disk having climbed to some 20 feet or so over all their heads. “It is therefore subject to regulation ruling. Once the field is formed, you will be ordered to call, then engage. Premature Device manifestation will result in a penalty. Premature approach, attack, or the like by any squad member will result in a match loss. Is that understood?”

Rei heard Catcher groan off to his left, and he understood the annoyance. All through the Intra-Schools Major Reese—who’d overseen the entirety of the tournament—had subjected the first-years to the full pre-fight oath rather than the traditional abbreviated version, and *only* the first-years. Neelson’s was slightly

different—it was an official Team Battle match, after all, rather than a common qualifying Duel—but it was equally tedious.

Guess we're still the rookies, even here, Rei admitted to himself, glancing sideways to see that the second-year match on the north field had already started on a nighttime Riverbank variation.

Luckily, Aria betrayed no signs of any such disappointment when she nodded towards the first lieutenant, Biggs doing the same on the other side of the circle from them. There was a pause as Neelson's eyes flashed with light one last time.

And then the six members of Firesong began to rise into the air, and the field started to change.

For once, there wasn't much debate to be had as everyone called out the zone all at once.

“Tundra!”

Even if the rapid manifestation of quickly-thickening snow hadn't given it away, the plummet in temperature definitely would have. Rei groaned internally while they climbed, suspecting they were about to have a rough time, but he knew he couldn't complain. Shido's advanced evolution for its CAD-Rank only left his neck and some of his face exposed to the elements. His combat suit wasn't exactly winterized, sure, but at least he wouldn't have the *bare* arms or legs that the others all shared some combination of, not to mention wholly uncovered heads.

Unsurprisingly, it turned out he wasn't the only one already considering these factors.

“Let's get this over with before all of us but Ward freeze our asses off,” Grant growled through the coms.

There was an echoed consensus from the others, barely heard over the howl of the blizzard, and then the field finished its manifestation.

White. Everything was white.

No matter where he looked, Rei could see barely three or four feet in front of him. He *thought* there might have been the faint shapes of what were possibly rolling hills rising up to either side and before them, but he couldn't be sure even when he leaned forward as far as he could within his circle and peered through the gale with both hands up to shield his eyes. It was the thickest snow storm variation he'd ever experienced in the Frozen Tundra zone, and Rei started to get a little worried. The cleaner the field—and therefore the less visual impairments and obstacles—the greater Firesong's advantage would have been over the weaker Boneyard. As it was, however, the blizzard sank that edge significantly, since it let almost anyone get jumped if they didn't have their head on a swivel.

Maybe sending Grant out on his own isn't such a good idea after all, he started to think, but the Arena interrupted him.

“Field: Frozen Tundra.”

Even the automated voice sounded a little dim over the howl of the wind, and Rei had to shield his eyes completely and avert his gaze when a gust pelted him with snow and hail, making it easy to ignore the usual notifications about “*Reprioritizing all processing to combat functionalities*” that blinked across his frame in red text. As he did, he realized that while he could just barely make out Viv to his left, Grant—on her other side—wasn't more than the dimmest silhouette, which was more than just a little alarming given the Mauler looked like he regularly washed down his breakfast with pulverized rocks.

Rei's concern redoubled.

“First-Year Red Team ‘Boneyard’ versus First-Year Blue Team ‘Firesong,’” the Arena announced for the spectators none of them could see—much less *hear*—anymore. “Elimination bout. Combatants... Call.”

Elimination. Good, Rei thought as he grunted “Call,” gratefully into the wind. Shido responded with a bloom of blue light—a little brighter than its usual tint, but still more familiar than the other standardized Team Battle colors—and a second later Rei was feeling a *whole* lot better, his arms and legs no longer victim to the cold, his breathing eased as the Device’s mask automatically warmed the air for him.

Man, he couldn’t *wait* to find out what advantages a full *helm* would have...

“Finally,” Catcher groaned in relief. At least they could still hear each other over the coms. “I thought my feet were gonna fall off in another minute of that.”

Rei looked sideways automatically, expecting not to see the Saber through the storm. He was a little caught off guard, therefore, when he made out Catcher’s atypically-blue vysetrium glowing through the tumbling snow. It wasn’t just him, either. Rei could distinguish Viv and Grant again, and even the glow of Cashe’s Zion stood out relatively clear now from the far edge of the line.

Eyes widening, Rei whirled to look at Aria, and sure enough her own blue glowed through the white, bright enough that he could even make out some the gold and green of Hippolyta’s steel now.

Hold on a sec...

A thought formed, and he opened his mouth to voice it, but the Arena cut him off.

“Combatants... Fight.”

For the first time *ever*, Rei was left standing where he was as the others all took off, blazing by him in lingering trails of azure lines.

“WAIT!” he shouted, hoping against hope that he wasn’t too late.

Luckily he’d been quick on the ball, because not even Viv had gone too far as everyone froze where they were, Catcher almost tripping and Grant’s weight sending him sliding several yards through the slush before he came to a halt.

“Ward, what the hell are you *doing?*!” Cashe demanded, stunned as he made out the blue of what had to be her spear gesturing for him to get going. “Let’s *go!*”

Rei, though, stood his ground.

“*Wait,*” he said again, and eyes darting north and south, wary for signs of trouble. “Call me crazy but... I have an idea...”

Gena Meadows, Maston’s Combat Academy first-year Duelist, could not have been more pleased with the turn of events as she sprinted through the snow with John Albertson at her side. For some reason—for whatever reason—Boneyard had drawn the short straw *right* out the gate at their first ever Sectionals, getting themselves paired with none other than team Firesong, the aces of the freaking *Galens Institute*. Despite all logic telling her otherwise, Gena couldn’t help at the time but wonder if it had been karma coming around to bite them in the ass after Dan Biggs had made a total *ass* of them all by trying to thump his chest at Reidon Ward at dinner the previous day. Gena had to admit she’d definitely been a little surprised to see the “Iron Prince” for the first time—even smaller and slighter than he’d looked on the feeds without his Device called—but she’d still practically *begged* Dan not to be stupid, and had been more than a little smug when the squad leader had returned from the Galens tables at a half-sprint with the other boys of Boneyard in tow, looking ghost-white and muttering something

about “Lennon”. After some coaxing, Gena had gotten it out of John that the Lasher *himself* had called Dan out for being an idiot, and she’d been hard-pressed not to laugh in their squad leader’s face.

Or, as it happened, scream at him when the pairings had been posted before lunch, matching their two teams up.

Now, though, things were different, and Gena had to work to keep her breathing steady and her attention focused while she ran through the snow, willing the flare of hope not to trip her up. Was Boneyard *likely* to win this match? Hell no. But the odds that had been so skewed 30 seconds before had been made *much* more even with the field manifestation. The variation was chaotic, the blind nature of the storm making not only visibility unreliable, but also terrain and footing. It was chaos, and chaos was the absolute best any of them could have hoped for. It tended to throw everything out of whack, and gave underdogs a chance they might not have had otherwise.

If they could be smart, if they could be fast... Gena thought there was a shot Boneyard might just pull off a miracle and come out on top. She genuinely believed it.

... Right up until the first time John went down beside her.

Whump.

In the scream of the storm the sound of the Lancer falling was almost lost to Gena, and she made it a whole five steps more before realizing he wasn’t on her left anymore. Skidding to a halt, she turned to find the bright outline of the Lancer pushing himself to his feet, leveraging himself up with the spear glowing with atypically-red vysetrium in his left hand.

“John?” Gena asked as loudly as she dared, her own two blades coming up automatically. Matching curved short swords, their crimson glow—usually white—was partially blinding in the blast of the snow, but she didn’t dare bring them down.

She might not have a *Galens*-level education, but she was still an assigned CAD-User of the ISCM, and wariness had been all but drilled into her blood by then.

And sure enough...

“Something... Something hit me,” John responded, wheezing. Indeed, as he stood Gena saw the red of his free right hand go to his side, and he seemed unable to straighten completely. “Hard... Ribs broken.”

Gena cursed, redoubling the scrutinization of the storm around her. “How?! Where?! I didn’t see anything!”

“Neither did... Neither did I,” the Lancer answered, taking up his spear in both hands and turning to put his back towards her. “Nothing.”

Gena cursed again, doing the same and starting to retreat in his direction, intending to get themselves back-to-back. Nothing? How could that be? If it had been one of the Firesong fighters, they would have at *least* seen the glow of their CAD. Was it possible there was something else out there...?

“John? Gena? What’s going on?”

Dan’s voice reached them over the coms, the others having obviously overheard their exchange.

“John got hit by something,” Gena informed the squad leader in the Lancer’s place, wanting the boy to save his breath if his ribs had actually been marked as “broken” by the Arena. “We didn’t see by what.”

“*What?*” Dan demanded. “It wasn’t an opponent?!”

“I don’t *know*,” Gena growled, still backstepping and watching the storm for signs of movement. “I don’t think so. He didn’t see them, and he would have if they were that close. CAD glow would definitely have given them away.”

“We haven’t seen anything either,” offered Greg Bock, who’d gone down the middle of the field with Eliza Wan. “We’re near their starting position, too, so it’s weird.”

The hair on the back of Gena’s neck stood on head, and she retreated another step, seeking the pressure of John’s back on hers. Boneyard had tried to give the impression that they were going to go for a middle rush in the hopes that Firesong

would clump up and try to turn the fight into a battle of attrition—in which the Galens cadets would have had the distinct upper hand. The *actual* plan, on the other hand, had been to split up into three teams of two, letting Greg and Eliza encounter and hopefully kite Firesong back towards Boneyard’s east starting point while the rest of them closed in on their flanks and tried to pick them off.

Somewhere along the line, though, something had gone wrong.

“Could it be something else?” Chad Ahuja offered, voicing the exact fear Gena had had. “Could they have added neutral enemies to the zone?”

“What, like simulated archons?” Greg asked with half a laugh that didn’t hide his obvious nervousness at the thought.

“Or giant *friggin* polar bears, man! Hell, I don’t know!”

Before any other ridiculous suggestions could be made, though, Greg set them right again. “*Om!* Shit that *hurt...*” A brief pause and the rough sounds of what might have been a hand rubbing against a face. “I... uh... ‘found’ the west edge of the field. Firesong isn’t here.”

“What in the MIND... *How is that possible?!*” Dan demanded.

“I don’t know,” Greg answered. “But Eliza and I are going to—”

Then, though, the Lancer stopped.

“Greg?!” Dan shouted over the coms, obviously starting to come unhinged as his plans fell to pieces. “*Greg?! What’s going on?!*”

A pause, and then Greg answered.

“She’s gone,” he hissed. “Eliza is gone! What the hell?!”

“WHAT?!” Dan yelled again.

Gena, though, suddenly understood, and with a thrill of fear she whirled, terrified of what she would find.

Sure enough, John Albertson had vanished.

“They got John!” she yelled. “It’s them! It’s Firesong! They didn’t call their Dev—!”

Before she could finish, though, a shape ripped out of snow at her, almost entirely formless until it was right in front of her face.

Even without her CAD manifested, Gena recognized Viviana Arada—largely considered one of the strongest first-years in the competition—from the girl’s curls and the gleeful grin on her face as she struck.

Fast as she was—Speed was her strongest spec as a fellow Duelist, after all—Gena wasn’t quick enough to avoid the blistering punch Arada threw at her after closing the distance between them in a blink. Without her CAD the Galens girl was completely unarmed and largely undefended, but her own Speed would only have been mildly affected, and her Cognition not at all. The blow took Gena in the elbow—deliberately not going for anything more damaging where her blades could have sliced at the limb with ease. Gena’s reactive shielding took most of the impact, and the Arena was fair enough to register at least *some* difference between a User’s regular punch and one with a steel-clad fist, because her arm didn’t break. Still, she screamed in pain and slashed at Arada with her sword in her other hand as red text in the corner of her vision told her soft tissue damage to the joint had been made all-but useless. She missed—because *of course* she missed as Arada slipped under the red blade only to vanish into the storm again—and was left standing with her left arm mostly limp.

“Shit!” Gena swore, whirling in place a half dozen times, her one sword up at the ready before her. White. Everything was white. “Shit shit SHIT!”

It didn’t help that her ears were now ringing with the sounds of her teammates falling and panicking.

“They got Chad!” Dan screamed, sounding like he was at least *engaged* with someone.

“They’re on me! They’re on me!” Greg echoed, sounding terrified.

Gena, though, couldn't answer.

As she'd turned one too many times there was a *crunch* of snow at her back, and she wasn't quite fast enough to whirl around again. Two bare feet took her in a flying drop kick in the shoulder, sending her rocketing sideways. Both her swords tumbled from her hands when she hit the slush and frozen earth, skipping twice before slamming into the steep incline of a hill she hadn't even been able to see through the blizzard. Coming to such a sudden stop, Gena fought to gasp in a heavy lungful of icy air, noting as she did that the combat log was telling her her right shoulder was shattered, as was one of her knees. Pain erupted through her, and if she'd been able she would have screamed. Regrettably, her shocked lungs didn't allow her to, so she was made only to hack and suffer.

Fortunately, the end came quick.

Through a vision blurred by what was probably a registered concussion, Gena watched two shapes erupt out of the snow. They were bare-footed and bare-limbed, and their hair whirled about their heads and faces as they closed the gap between them and her like wolves pouncing on a downed deer. Even unfocused as they were she recognized Arada at once, and it only took a glance to identify the other figure by his comparatively short stature next to the tall Galens girl.

Reidon Ward, the Iron Prince himself.

So much for outsmarting them... was the last thing Gena thought before Ward's fist took her in the throat with one final burst of pain.

Then, blissfully... nothing.

"Our two are down!" Rei heard Viv tell the others across coms as he straightened from over the spot where Gena Meadows, Boneyard's one Duelist, was already sinking

through the snow and ground after being registered as FDAed. “How’s everyone else doing? Anyone frozen stiff yet?”

“Good here!” Aria answered at once, though she sounded a little put off. “I didn’t even get to *do* anything. Catcher took out Wan with a drop kick from a cliff, and once she was down Cashe ended up calling and had it out with Bock one-on-one.”

“He was good,” Cashe said graciously. “If he’d been anywhere near our ranks it might have been a real fight.”

“Glad he wasn’t anywhere near our ranks, then.” Viv turned north, in the direction Grant had gone. “Logan? How ’bout you? All good?”

Silence.

Rei and Viv exchanged a glance. They’d taken out Albertson and Meadows in short order, and Aria, Catcher, and Cashe had obviously handled Wan and Bock. That meant that not only had Grant probably run into Biggs—likely the strongest member of Boneyard, even if he *was* only a D9—but the second Mauler, Chad Ahuja, as well...

They were off an instant later, the pair of them bolting up the hill to make a beeline north through the storm.

“Logan, if you can hear us, we’re on our way!” Viv shouted into the wind. “Just hold on!”

Reaching the top of the incline, Rei wasn’t surprised when they both deliberately chose to leap off the hill, nor when they shouted in unison while falling down through the whirling snow.

“CALL!”

By the time they hit the ground in twin rolls, Shido and Gemela were snug around their limbs again, and the next hill was significantly easier to manage as their armored legs and steel-clad toes powered forward with better purchase.

Then, not 2 seconds later, the coms opened again.

“Sorry, I’m good. I’m good.”

Instinctively Rei and Viv both slowed at the sound of Grant's voice, though neither stopped. The Mauler sounded winded, which might have been concerning had it not been clear he'd probably just taken on *two* Users all on his own, D-ranked or not.

Then again, since they were still in the fight...

"What happened?" Rei asked. "Match hasn't been called. We're still heading to you."

Another pause.

"Uh..." the answer came eventually. "Yeah. Probably a good idea. Thought you might want this one, Ward."

Rei frowned at that, not understanding until Viv failed to mute herself as she growled "Logan... what did you do?"

Then, though, a blaze of red light crested the top of the hill just in front of them, and they forgot everything else as they charged upward, weapons eager to end the Team Battle and claim the first Sectionals fight for Firesong and the Galens Institute.

"Wait! It's me! It's *me*, dammit! CALL!"

Shido's Brawler claws were literally *inches* from the chest of the figure when Rei yelped and turned them away, slamming shoulder-first into *Grant* as Honoris blazed blue around his squadmate. Given the boy's size, that of course meant Rei basically *bounced* right off him, and was rather pleased with the grace of his recovery as he twisted in midair to land on all fours in the snow.

At least until his left hand slipped on the icy rock beneath the blowing white, and he couldn't catch himself in time to stop from falling face-first in the slush.

"Ugh..." Rei groaned, shoving himself up onto his knees to wipe away the powder sticking to his hair, mask, and eyes. "I can't *wait* to get a damn helmet..."

"Are you rubbing it in again, dude?" Catcher muttered over the coms.

Rei chuckled at that, but otherwise ignored the jab, getting to his feet before turning to Grant.

“So...” he said, coming over to stand beside where Viv was already inspecting the Mauler. “There’s a couple obvious questions, I think. Namely... Whose hammer is that, and why do you have it?”

It was a pretty reasonable question, Rei thought, given that Grant was holding the haft of a massive *warhammer* in one hand, its barrel-sized head resting in the snow, Honoris’ axe hefted up on his other shoulder. Whereas *his* CAD glowed the team blue, however, the twin, pointed heads of the hammer were bright red—as was a line of vysetrium along its greenish haft—actually not too far from Grant’s usual color in fact.

The point, however, was that it very clearly wasn’t *his* hammer...

“Er...” The Mauler looked down at the alien weapon, then—for some reason—over his other shoulder. “Might be best if you just saw for yourself...”

Rei and Viv exchanged a glance, then together bent to peer around Grant from opposite sides, shielding their eyes with both hands again, careful not to cut any noses or eyebrows off with their respective CADs.

Immediately Rei’s mouth fell open behind his mask, and Viv made a sound that was somewhere between a guffaw and a squeak.

“Logan...” she hissed in disbelief. “Is that... Biggs?”

There was no doubt about it, of course. Rei realized, suddenly, that Aria had mentioned a *cliff* that Catcher sounded to have jumped off of, and he understood all at once that the zone was probably much, *much* more complex than the at-a-glance impression their starting point and his and Viv’s southern section had given him of nothing more than hills and snow. It explained why the others hadn’t caught up to them, yet, too.

And it explained why Daniel Biggs, looking like he was shivering from both anger and the cold, stood at the bottom of a 15-foot-deep ravine behind Grant, knee-deep in water that flowed under the inch-thick layer of ice the Masten’s cadet had clearly fallen—or been *thrown*, more likely—through.

Biggs still had his CAD called, of course. If he hadn't, the hammer would have long-since vanished from Grant's hands. His Device was a bulky-looking thing, two shades of green other than the red vysetrium, made much more visible by the limited snow that managed to drop down into the narrow gulley. It didn't look to have yet evolved any sort of leg-armor, but the Mauler's arms were clad to the shoulder, and his gauntleted fists —knuckles glowing with ugly crimson nubs—were currently clenched in anger.

Which, Rei supposed, was more than a little understandable.

“Why didn't you end it?” he asked Grant sidelong, coming to stand by the larger boy as Viv did the same on his other side, squinting down into the valley.

“Kicked him down there accidentally,” Grant answered with something of a shrug. “Don't think he can get back out easy, and I was dealing with the other one right up to the last second. Ahuja, or whatever his name was. Shit's a *lot* harder to do without a damn CAD.”

“And after that?”

Grant hesitated, and Rei could have sworn the guy actually *squirmed* a little, though he convinced himself a moment later it was just a trick of the falling snow.

“I don't know...” the Mauler finally muttered. “I just remembered what Viv said. You know... About leaving him for you...”

Rei turned then, very slowly, to gape up at the boy, and didn't miss Viv doing the same opposite him. For longer than any of them should have—given they were still technically in an active fight, not to mention under the unseen eyes of tens of thousands of spectators, their match arbiter, *and* the Galens chaperones—they stared at Grant together.

Then, just as he thought he heard the *crunch* of snow behind them heralding the late arrival of Aria and the others, Rei reached up and clapped Grant on the back.

“As far as peace offerings go, bud, this is a pretty damn good one.”

And with that he stepped off the edge of the canyon and dropped down into the gulley before anyone—mainly Aria—could have stopped him.

CHAPTER 20

Rei hit a section of unbroken ice some 20 feet downstream of where Biggs stood, crushing through it as expected. He felt the rush of the water through Shido's steel, but not the cold—CADs were incredible like that—and his clawed boots found good purchase on the rocky bed of the stream. Straightening, he turned towards the Maston's boy and started his approach, his Strength spec and the smooth plating along his shins splitting the inch-thick ice before him with every step like it was nothing.

When they were barely a body length away from each other, he stopped, eyeing Biggs up and down.

“So...” he started steadily, raising both hands up from his sides to let the blue glow of Shido's claws ripple off the stream and the stone to either side of him. “This isn't awkward *at all*...”

Biggs, in answer, bared his teeth at Rei, eyes flicking nervously from him to the cliffs above, where the others were all undoubtedly gathered now.

“What do you want, Ward?” he demanded after a second. “Why haven't you guys finished me?”

“Well you seemed like you wanted a shot at me yesterday,” Rei offered smoothly, dropping his hands again and cocking his head at the larger boy. Biggs wasn't as tall as Grant, but he was probably a few inches over Catcher, making him most of a *foot* above Rei. “Apparently, my teammate was looking out for you there.”

Biggs snarled. “You want to *fight*?! Like *this*?! I don't even have a weapon!”

“And whose fault is that?” Rei asked with a snort. “Why haven't you ditched already? You could have had it back in your hands while the three of us were talking on the cliff.”

He'd assumed the Boneyard squad leader just hadn't thought to do that, but Biggs' sneer corrected him at once.

“Just so you lot can jump me in the time I’m undefended? Fat chance! Not after how you guys fought in the match! That was horseshit! What kind of cadet doesn’t call on their CAD and waits around hiding for their opponents to—?!”

“*Smart* cadets, jackass,” Rei cut him off sharply, losing patience a little. “If you’re going to whine about losing to better tactics, then I’ve got nothing more to say to you. Ditch so you can get your hammer. Then we’ll do this.”

Biggs’s face lost a little of the color it had, and he took half a step back nervously. “I-I told you,” he stammered. “I’m not about to drop my CAD and let you jump me when you’re five feet from—”

“You know what, dude?” Rei interrupted again, shaking his head in disbelief. “Fine. You want it to be fair? I thought not slicing you open where you stood was cue enough, but clearly you need a bit more buttering up. How’s this?” Rei opened his hands up to either side of his hips, leaving himself wide open. “Recall.”

Shido vanished from his body in a heartbeat, and he almost winced in shock as the frigid rush of the water *did* hit him now, instantly digging into his bare feet and shins to the bone, all of which had already been painfully freezing from the earlier ambush.

“How’s this?” he offered, starting to turn in a slow circle. “No CAD. You can ditch, and once you have your hammer back we can—”

There was a *crack* of breaking ice, and if he’d had time Rei might have sighed in disappointment.

Instead, he whirled and met Biggs’ lunge head-on, the Mauler having made a desperate move to try to take advantage of his turned back and Shido’s absence.

Rei’s specs were closer to C3 or C4 on average than his actual C7 Rank. Add that to the fact that his CAD was indeed *not* called around his limbs and his potential in a fight might have been pretty similar to Biggs’ with *his* Device manifested, at least on paper.

The reality, though, was that even if Rei hadn't suspected he was the much better fighter, he knew, at the very least, that he was the *faster* one.

By lightyears.

With a sweep of his left hand Rei redirected Biggs' leading punch outward, letting the steel gauntlet slip by his left cheek by millimeters. At the same time his right snapped up to take a fistful of the Mauler's combat suit, just above where the green mirrored lions of Maston's had been stitched into the standard first-year grey. Then, twisting into his deflection and using Biggs' lunge to his advantage, Rei rolled and hauled as hard as he could on the cloth. It said something about the tech built into the fabric that it didn't tear.

It said something else entirely about Rei's improved Strength when Biggs yelped in surprise as all 250-plus pounds of him and his CAD were hauled off his feet and bodily thrown some 15 feet downstream, landing in an explosion of cracked ice and cold water near where Rei had first dropped from the cliffs above.

"Idiot," Rei muttered under his breath, though he wasn't sure who he was admonishing in the moment. He was annoyed at Biggs for not having taken the opportunity to be decent about things, sure, but he was angrier at himself for having given the boy the opportunity in the first place. It probably would have been better for everyone if he'd just taken the Mauler's head the moment he'd dropped into the gulley, or if Grant had seen it done without these theatrics.

But Rei, at long last, was starting to get sick of being treated like shit just because he didn't "look the part".

Biggs was up inside of a second, spluttering and coughing up icy water as he shoved himself free of the stream. Getting to his feet, he staggered and turned, scrambling to wipe the wet from his eyes and blinking rapidly in an attempt to clear his vision.

He wasn't quick enough, though, and Rei's flying knee took him in the chest, sending the Mauler launching backwards again.

This time a bend in the stream broke his fall, and Biggs slammed into the rock wall of the valley with a *crunch* of breaking stone and ice and an “*Ooomph!*” of forcefully expelled breath.

“Call,” Rei muttered, watching the Mauler tumble off the stone to crash into the frozen stream again. As Biggs struggled a bit more to get up this time, Rei looked up. As he'd suspected, all five of the other members of Firesong were there, outlined in the matching glow of blue light of now-called CADs, but he deliberately only looked to one.

“Grant!” he shouted up over the wind he knew was still howling above, holding out a hand expectantly.

Grant got the message.

Red vysetrium flashed as Biggs' hammer plummeted down into the gulley, kicked off the edge of the cliff above just like its User had been before it.

Rei didn't bother trying to catch the thing. He knew better. There was a reason Maulers in particular were at a disadvantage when they lost an arm or a hand in a fight. Sure enough, the hammer fell head-first, and demonstrated its incredible weight by landing in the stream with a small explosion of ice and water. Rei got a hand up and turned his face away in time to avoid the worst of it, but it still left him drenched, and when he looked back only the haft of the oversized weapon was visible, sticking out of the flow like a crimson beacon.

Moving towards it, Rei spoke again.

“Type Shift: Saber Mode.”

Shido flashed as it responded, short bursts of white static arcing over and off his arms and legs as the CAD changed. By the time he stood by the hammer, Rei's armor

was thicker and less sleek, and the single-edged sword in his right hand was mirrored by the claws tipping the fingers of his left.

He was glad he'd made the change, too, because he ended up having to stick the sword into the rocky bed of the stream to take the Mauler weapon in both hands before he could heave it up and free of the water.

Then, with a twist and every ounce of the *substantial* improvement in Strength the Type Shift granted him, he just managed to toss the hammer towards the spot where Biggs had finally regained his footing once more.

Again it struck the stream, but the wash of water and shattered ice was less this time, barely reaching the Maston's boy's chest. It took him by surprise just the same, however, because he leapt back as the weapon was returned to him, then stood gawking at it for a several seconds, clearly not understanding.

“Pick it up,” Rei clarified for him at last as he himself reached out and jerked Shido's sword free from the streambed again. “You wanted a ‘fair’ shot. Now you've got it.”

Biggs found his voice even as he took two sudden, jerking steps forward to take hold of the hammer. To his credit, he hauled it up much more easily than Rei had, which spoke to a *considerably* skewed Strength spec.

“A shot? At what?”

“At proving I'm a ‘stand in’. What else?”

And then Rei surged forward, ripping through what little ice was left intact between the two of them, clawed hand leading the way and blade trailing behind at the ready.

In any other circumstances Rei didn't think he would have chanced opening an engagement in Saber Mode. He hadn't trained with the form enough to make it useful as anything other than a surprise attack or confusing shift in pace in the middle of an exchange. In that moment, however, things had lined up in such a way as to make the

risk not only possible, but preferable. For one thing Aria and the rest of the team were standing at the ready above them, so even in the regrettable event that he actually went down it would have a negligible impact on the impending nature of Firesong's victory.

For another, he needed to make an example of Daniel Biggs.

In the blink it took him to close the distance, Rei drew on his neuroline to its fullest extent. The reduced Cognition of Saber Mode made his thoughts feel lagging compared to the mental abilities of his Brawler form, but it did most of its job admirably, with thousands of hours of training and study doing the rest. Biggs was too close to the left wall, and was right-hand-dominant. He wouldn't be able to swing the heavy hammer horizontally. He was near the back wall as well, yes, but stepping forward would be a lot easier than stepping sideways when wielding such an ungainly weapon. With Rei charging him head on, there was only one thing the Maston's cadet could do.

And so, as expected, Biggs snarled as he rushed to meet Rei, the hammer coming up and falling in a roaring, vertical arc.

It was over in a blink.

With deliberate, measured movements Rei stepped sideways at the last second, just out of the swing of the weapon. He twisted as it fell, rolling the impetus of his rush and turning into a dropping strike of his own. Shido's vysetrium-lined blade fell just behind the upper haft of the hammer, and as the Mauler weapon crashed into the stream and stopped dead as it struck the rocks beneath the water, the sword's edge cleaved through that thinnest part of Biggs' Device, severing handle from head. Rei was hardly done, though, retracting the blade even as his opponent started to recoil in shock, stepping around the Mauler as he continued to twist.

Two turns. Four clean, severing cuts. Less than a single second.

And done with a deliberate grace Rei wanted every single person watching to have carved in their memory of the moment, to recall whenever they thought of scorning his size or stature or scars again.

In the end, Rei was left standing behind Biggs, his back to the boy, Shido's sword swept out to the side where it had finished the arc of his last blow by carving a clean sheet of water out of the stream. The Mauler didn't make a sound as he fell, as he collapsed down to splash into the stream. How could he have? The first cut had broken his hammer. The second and third had relieved him of an arm and leg each.

And the fourth had cleanly parted his neck, severing brain from body.

"All Red Team 'Boneyard' combatants eliminated," the Arena announced after a second of silence. "Winner: Blue Team 'Firesong'."

Almost at once the sounds of the stadium returned in a deafening flood as the zone began to fade and Rei started to drop. Behind him he knew Biggs and the rest of Firesong would be descending as well, falling slowly through the vanishing snow and frozen earth. He didn't look back at any of them, though.

Instead, he just raised a hand, smiled, and allowed himself a moment to wave into the bellowing crowd he knew he had just given a show worthy of their praise.

CHAPTER 21

‘I remember that fight, that first real match they had. A lot of people were grumbling, even among the other Galens cadets. ‘Did he have to do that?’ ‘Did he have to make an example of the guy like that?’

Meanwhile, I was just standing there shaking my head with Chris, wondering what had taken the guy so long.

*-Candice “Double 6” Meyer
S-Ranked Pawn-Class User
Concerning the Stormweaver*

“Unbelievable behavior from ISCM cadets, much less representatives of the Galens Institute! Not in eighteen years as a staff officer have I seen such a shameful display of disrespect on the field! You’re lucky I was not the arbiter of your match, or the lot of you would long since be on your way back to the hotel after being disqualified and banned from participating in the rest of the tournament!”

With an internal sigh Valera picked up her pace, boot heels clicking over the polished concrete stairs as she hurried down from the stands and into the tunnel of the Kenneth Arena’s underworks. Much like Galens’, the passages were all clean white plasteel and smart-glass, but the walls alternately depicted the emblems of the ten Sectionals competing schools, fight schedules, and the swords and stars of the ISCM rippling across holographic banners every few panels. The narrow space was busy, too, lined with milling students of all three years waiting for their turn on the south Team Battle field, along with a handful of other figures not in combat suits. There were school chaperones, ISCM tournament staff, and even a couple medical drones on steady patrol,

at the ready to respond to the occasional emergencies that did unfortunately happen in competitive combat, phantom calls or no.

Regrettably, the drones were the only ones not turned eastward, in the direction Dyrk Reese was continuing to lay into his victims, so loud he was audible long before the group came into view around the bend of the tunnel.

“The Maston’s Combat Academy chaperones have put in a complaint with the tournament supervisors, and *rightly so!* Even if what you did was legal, it was *despicable*, and all six of you will be drafting formal apologies to *every* member of Boneyard before I let any of you set foot on the floor again!”

“But, sir! We’ve got a Wargames fight this evening! We need to—”

“I *could not care less*, Laurent! *You* made this bed, so *you* will sleep in it! And count yourselves lucky in doing so! I have half a mind to send all of you back to the Institute as is, where you can explain to your friends how the aces of the Galens’ first-year class got themselves sent home on the *first day of Sectionals!* Do not test me, or you’ll be able to count that fight as your first *and* last at this tournament.”

“That decision isn’t remotely in your power to make, Major, and you are well aware of it.”

Valera had heard enough, and despite still being 20 feet away and with several squads of students from the other academies between them, she decided it was time to cut the man’s power trip down to size. Ordinarily she might have tried to call him out in a more private setting, but Reese himself had picked this particular battleground. He could just as easily have waited for the squad to return to their seats and berated them quietly there, or even dragged them to the nearest professional’s locker room Galens had access to—not 20 yards up the hall—if he *really* felt the need to yell. Instead, however, he’d decided to make a *public* display of Firesong, facing off with its six members at the base of the ramp that led up to the Arena floor, crafting a spectacle of ripping into them even as he blocked half the hall. Still partially on the ramp, Laurent’s

team were all standing at attention, though their range of expressions were anything but complacent. Arada and Grant—and *Catchwick*, almost amusingly—looked livid, while Cashe seemed resigned and Laurent herself was white in the face at the front of the group, taking the brunt of the tongue-lashing. Just behind her, Ward’s features were dark, and Valera had to wonder if she’d have been able to do anything at all for them had the boy ended up punching Reese in face.

But she was there now, and two could play at the game the major—who was now whirling to face her rigidly—had dragged them into.

“*Captain Dent*,” Reese growled, for once making no effort to keep his cool as he yet again put emphasis on her lower rank. “If I see fit to punish the cadets under my charge, I will do so, and I would politely ask you to refrain from sticking your nose where it doesn’t—”

“*Major Reese*,” Valera cut him off flatly, determined to play the calmer party in the eyes of so many witnesses. “I understand that you have been cooped up in the comforts of the Institute for a long time now, but that is no excuse for forgetting what ‘field command’ means. Should I remind you? Actually no, better yet... shall we call Colonel Guest and have *him* remind you?”

Reese glowered at her, teeth half-bared. Before he could answer, though, Valera stopped in front of the man and kept right on.

“As for them being your charges, *I* am of half a mind to see *that* responsibility brought to an end, given the shameful way in which you’ve opted to discipline them. Look around!” She raised a hand to indicate the stares of the score or so of students and officers in the tunnels immediately surrounding them. “For someone so keen on ‘maintaining the reputation of the Institute’, you’ve sure picked an interesting place to have it out with a bunch of teenagers!”

Reese’s cheeks flushed red, but he wasn’t about to go down without a fight.

“I am not the one you should be accusing of damaging the reputation of our academy, Captain,” he snapped back. “I decided that the other schools needed to see that Galens does *not* tolerate the kind of behavior Firesong displayed in that fight. If anything, I am attempting to *salvage* our reputation after that blatant display of unsportsmanlike conduct and disrespect that—”

Valera took a step forward, her irritation causing her to lose her cool for a moment and engage her Speed spec. She was nose-to-nose with the major so fast that the resulting blast of displaced air actually forced the man to bring a hand up to keep his cap atop his shaved head.

“I bet you didn’t even ask them *why* they acted in such a manner, did you?” she half-whispered, half-hissed. The two of them were of a height, but Valera was well aware of the impact her presence—the presence of a rare S-Ranked *Knight-Class* User—tended to have, and she leaned into it now. “I bet you started yelling the *moment* you had them down here, without bothering to give them an opportunity to explain themselves. Am I right?”

Reese’s mouth shut tight with a *snap*, though whether out of surprise at her approach, momentary fear at her proximity, or because he didn’t have a good answer, she couldn’t be sure.

She decided to go with the option that fit her narrative best in the moment.

“Yeah... Thought so.” She sneered into his face for a second more, then stepped around him to stand in front of Firesong. It was a little gratifying to see the hint of relief on all their faces—other than Arada’s, predictably, given the girl was staring at the back of Reese’s head like she was calculating what size plaque she would need to hang it on her dorm room wall—but Valera couldn’t let *them* know that. The behavior they’d displayed had been out of line—Grant and Ward’s most obviously, with the rest of them complacent in their inaction—but it had also been out of *character*. That alone

should have given Reese pause, but the man clearly didn't know how to let go of a grudge.

Valera, on the other hand, was already well aware of what had happened. She'd known since the evening before, and had been patched into—through back channels only one entity in the entirety of the ISC could have granted her access to—the conversations that had taken place in the Boneyard v. Firesong match. She saw the logic, and she approved.

But—again—she couldn't let *them* know that.

Yet.

“One of you,” she said sharply, not wanting any listening ears to accuse her of favoritism later. “Explain yourselves.”

She hadn't let them drop to at ease, so the six first-years had to exchange awkward side-glances with whoever stood beside them.

Eventually, Ward himself spoke up.

“It's on me, ma'am,” he said steadily, strands of his long white hair loose around his grey eyes, and looking only slightly less inclined to break Reese's nose now that Valera stood between them. “I shouldn't have played any games with Biggs. I should have ended it as soon as I dropped down into the—”

“I didn't say I wanted a play-by-play of what you *should* have done, Ward,” Valera interrupted him unforgivingly. “I said I wanted an explanation. So... *Try again.*”

It was Aria Laurent who answered first this time.

“Daniel Biggs attempted to provoke Cadet Ward at dinner last night, ma'am,” she said quickly, like she wanted to get something unpleasant off her chest as fast as possible. “He and several members of Boneyard—though we didn't know it was them at the time—came by our table and made... accusations.”

“Accusations?” Valera pretended she didn't already know exactly what Laurent was talking about. “What sort of accusations?”

“They called him a ‘stand-in.’” It was Catchwick who snarled out in anger now. “Said there was no way he could be who he is.”

“They tried to pick a fight,” Cashe added, clearly not intending to leave her teammates hanging even if she still looked a little morose. “They were trying to throw us—or at least Ward—off our game.”

“That is *no excuse* for the way you behaved on the field just now!” Reese cut in, taking a step up to stand beside Valera as he started to lay into them once again. “If anything, you should have made an *extra* effort to prove to them that—”

“Major,” Valera said coldly, not taking her eyes off Cashe. “I’ll ask you to leave this to me now, if you please.”

For once, Reese went quiet immediately, and as Valera let the silence hold for a second to ensure he stayed that way, she found herself having to ignore the brief lines of text that popped into the corner of her frame momentarily, the first in blue, then in red.

Maybe you should try the scare tactic more often.

Agreed. It seems to do wonders for the man’s character.

“I agree with the major in this fact, at least,” Valera continued as though nothing had interrupted her train of thought, slipping her hand into her pocket to surreptitiously type out a “*MUTE ALL INCOMING MESSAGES*” command into her NOED. Immediately her frame went grey, letting her focus without distraction again. “That is *not* enough of an excuse to explain away your behavior. So someone needs to elaborate.”

A silence again. One that stretched into 3, then 4 seconds. It went on long enough for Valera to be sure, now, that every nearby ear in the hall was trained on their conversation.

Good, she thought. They need to hear this. All of them.

And sure enough...

“They needed to be proven wrong.”

Valera’s attention snapped to Logan Grant. The towering Mauler, on the other hand, seemed to be having a hard time meeting her gaze, his red-black eyes hovering on the ceiling over her head somewhere.

“Proven wrong?” she repeated pointedly.

Granted only nodded at first, but when she said nothing more he seemed to understand he was expected to expound on this simple answer.

With a breath, he did so, though obviously unwillingly.

“Ward is small. Compared to the average User, at least. He’s short, he’s thin, and he’s light. That’s the only thing anyone sees when they go up against him at first. Because of that, he’s underestimated. Every time. Just like when Biggs picked a fight at the table yesterday. Just like at school.” The Mauler grimaced a little at this subtle admission, but didn’t stop. “Would the other squads have come to grips with how things really are eventually? Sure. But until then every win we have—and every win Ward has on his *own*—would have been... questioned.”

“How so?” Valera prodded. “People underestimate him, you say. That’s an advantage. Why would you want to give up an advantage?”

It was the best way she could subtly encourage the boy to keep going.

Even for her, though, the answer was a pleasant surprise.

“It’s an edge that comes at a cost, ma’am. One Ward should have stopped paying when he... when he caught up to us.”

When he beat me’, Valera translated silently, appreciating that—despite the leaps Grant had been showing of late in his attitude—there was a pride there that wasn’t so easily swallowed.

She didn't take her eyes off the boy, willing him to keep on with her continued silence, but she didn't miss Ward and Laurent stiffen a little at his words, nor Catchwick and Cashe frown in surprise or Arada's barely-stifled grin.

"At school, Ward keeps the peace with—and pardon my language—dicks like Daniel Biggs on the regular. I would know. Distinctly, ma'am, *I* would know. But school is home base. You don't shit where you eat, so to speak. But here... He shouldn't have to deal with that crap here, too."

"Is that the only reason you have?" Valera pressed him, pleased but still wanting more. "He shouldn't have to deal? Because that's weak reasoning, Cadet."

"No, ma'am," the Mauler answered at once. "I have another reason."

"Which is?"

"Because you're always telling us to reach for more, ma'am. Because you want us to get stronger."

Valera, at last, smiled at Grant then, which promptly elicited an amusing sort of relief that was largely alien on the usually-somber cadet's face. It was also, it seemed, enough to have him pressing forward with more confidence.

"We don't *want* to be underestimated, ma'am, and we sure as hell don't *need* to be. Sure, we might have breezed through the first half of this tournament with people not taking Ward seriously, but how does that serve us in the later rounds against fighters who have sized up to the fact he's half-again the threat of any of us but Laurent, when we'd had no practice against outside teams adapting to that understanding? We're not here to win because our opponents keep tricking themselves into believing Ward's Intra-School performance was a fluke once they see him. We're here to win because they can't stop us, even when they take every member of this squad seriously. *That's* my reasoning. *That's* why Ward needed to be the one to take Biggs down." Grant was looking Valera full in the face, at some point having met her eyes with an iron kind of certainty. "They needed—all of them—to be proven wrong, ma'am."

Valera raised an eyebrow at him.

“And you think you’ve achieved that with this little stunt? You think you’ll be taken seriously?”

The answer came with just the hint of a smirk, a sort of pleasure in the words that was both frightening and heartening to make out.

“I’m pretty sure the show Ward put on is the kind you only need to see once. Don’t you, ma’am?”

Valera smiled wider, unable to stop herself.

Anything, the familiar voice whispered in her head, the same voice that ticked off one more day from the 5-year countdown every time she woke up in the morning. *Anything to make him stronger.*

Unfortunately, on the other hand, Reese chose that precise moment to find his courage again, and had very clearly caught the look on her face with outrage.

“*Enough!*” he snarled, stepping by Valera in an attempt to assert himself once more. “You can make whatever excuses you feel like, all of you, but it doesn’t change the fact that you displayed *unfathomable* behavior on the field! I stand by my decision! If you all want to fight in your Wargames match this afternoon, then I expect six written apologies from each of you before the start of your match, addressed to the members of Boneyard. Otherwise, you can kiss your chance to fight again goodb—!”

“You’re all dismissed, cadets,” Valera interrupted the man smoothly, not even bothering to look around at him. “I want you to head to the sub-basements and grab a field to warm down on. No need to write any excuses. You wanted to be taken seriously? I’ll bet you got your wish. Hope you don’t regret it in the Wargames.”

“Captain *Dent!*” Reese snarled, his fury so visceral now she could actually *feel* low pulses of energy thrumming from the bands of his CAD around his wrists, his Device responding autonomously to his anger. “I *refuse* to allow you to let them get off without

reprimand, much less a *slap on the back*! Not after such ill-conceived actions put on full display for all the world to see!”

“I saw no ill-conceived actions,” Valera replied, careful to maintain her even tone as she met the eyes of the six members of Firesong steadily, one after the other. “On the contrary, with context I now know that what I saw was a deliberate and well-executed maneuver to ensure that my top first-year team is not potentially put at disadvantage later in this tournament in exchange for an easy early lead. If anything I *completely* agree with Grant’s assessment. Had Biggs’ attitude been allowed to echo in the opinions of the rest of the schools, it could have been a problem. Now... it’s not.” At last she turned to Reese, steeling her smile so that there was nothing but ice left for the man. “They made an example of one single cadet. An example that won’t have to be repeated, and one single cadet who seemed to think belittling and bullying—*off the field*, no less—is an appropriate tactic in SCT combat. Given what they might have had to do to the other teams to achieve the same result later, I actually think they did quite well, don’t you?”

Reese was practically vibrating with indignation. “And Maston’s?!” he demanded sharply. “Their complaint?!”

Valera considered a moment, then looked sidelong at Aria Laurent. “Cadet, you say Biggs tried to pick a fight at dinner. I’m assuming you were with other students at the time?”

Laurent blinked at suddenly being addressed, but answered, if a little hesitantly. “Uh... Yes, ma’am. Basically everyone from school.”

“Oh?” Valera looked back at Reese, letting her smile widen a little. “Everyone, you say? So there were very likely any number of witnesses who will corroborate that Cadet Biggs attempted to publicly goad Ward and your team?”

Laurent caught on then, standing a little straighter as she understood what Valera was fishing for.

“Yes, ma’am! In fact I believe Christopher Lennon exchanged words with Biggs right before the Boneyard members... er... took their leave.”

“Well now, if that’s not just *so* convenient,” Valera mused sarcastically, still watching Reese. “I do have to imagine, Major, that the Maston’s chaperones will be *much* less inclined to let their complaint stand after they hear *that* little tidbit. In fact, I’m sure Cadet Lennon would be willing to offer his account of the interaction if needed. Therefore... matter settled.”

Reese only glared at her, upper lip twitching in irritation. For a long few seconds they stared each other down like that, neither willing to give an inch to the other. If she’d thought to ask any of the observers around them after, Valera would have been told witnessing the pair’s standoff—A- and S-Rank Users respectively—had been like watching two storm clouds brush in passing, prodding and testing to see if either could risk trying to swallow the other.

The potential calamity passed, though, when Reese looked away first, spinning on his heels and stalking off up the tunnel at last, back unusually hunched even as he sent a group of poor second-years from the 103rd scurrying with a snapped “Get out of my way!”

Valera watched him go, careful not to let *too* much of the smugness show even after the man had vanished into the bodies of the waiting fighters and attending staff.

Then, at last, she turned to take in the closest of the throng, those that were still staring at her and Firesong like they might have a lion pawing at the loose lock on its undersized cage.

“Back to your business, if you please,” she said sweetly, not dropping the ice in her smile.

An instant later the hall was buzzing and bustling again, everyone moving around or past them like time had suddenly become unfrozen, some actually returning to

necessary preparations, others just hurrying to look busy so they could pretend like they definitely hadn't been ogling the scene all of a half second before.

There were definitely *some* advantages to being “the Bishop”, Valera had to admit...

“Now that *that's* dealt with...” She returned her attention to Firesong again at last. “I do believe I already dismissed you, cadets. What are you all still doing here?”

Laurent and the rest jumped as though physically poked, having not once dropped their salutes. With nothing else to be done about it—and all of them recovering from the shock of the exchange at different intervals—Valera received a staggered series of “Yes, ma'am!”s and “Sorry, ma'am!”s before the six of them started off at once, Laurent and Ward in the lead, all of them looking a little dazed.

Valera chuckled under her breath. “Firesong.”

The squad stiffened and turned again, instinctively saluting once more.

“Ma'am?” Laurent asked.

Valera lifted a hand, pointing south, in the opposite direction the group had been headed.

“Elevators are that way.”

Laurent blinked like she didn't understand.

Then it dawned on the girl, and her expression grew mortified right along with the rest of them.

“Yes, ma'am!” came a more collected acknowledgement this time.

And with that they were gone, moving into and through the crowd of readying fighters until even Grant's towering head of jet-black hair had slipped out of sight.

Then, and only then, did Valera unmute her notifications.

That was rather rude of you. Kes' disgruntlement was obvious even through text.

Hardly. The disagreement came in red. *If anything it was likely a rather inopportune time for us to interrupt.*

“You think?” Valera muttered sarcastically, passing herself into the crowd. There were only two kinds of situations in which it was safe to speak her answers to the pair. When she was completely on her own—which was preferable—or when she was surrounded by enough bustle and noise that anyone who noticed her would just assume she was on a call, or else just mumbling private thoughts out loud.

The underworks barely counted as the latter, but she didn’t have the patience to type out her answers in the moment.

It couldn’t be helped, Kes argued. *It was pleasing to see that man ‘put off his game’, as you say.*

No answer, which Valera knew could only mean a lack of disagreement.

Instead, a question came in red.

Are you sure that was the right call? It was an opportunity to course-correct an early sign of ego. If Ward ends up walking the wrong path...

The statement hung, but Valera shrugged the implied concern off.

“He won’t,” she muttered firmly, reaching the stairs up towards the stands again.

You seem certain...

“Because I *am* certain.”

How?

Kes, this time, which simultaneously irked and amused Valera. They'd had whole conversations in which the two presences that flitted through her frame and neuroline had seemed so entirely human, but now and then she was reminded that—at the end of the day—there were still more machine than anything else. Kes had developed consciousness well over a year ago, now, and had made vast improvements in her—Valera had been unable to stop herself from coming to think of the CAD as female—understanding of humanity and all its complexities, but she was still very much learning.

Valera couldn't help but wonder if another Device—say one with a much greater potential for exponential growth—would develop in the same way...

“Because I trust him,” Valera explained. “Because I trust the people around him. What we saw wasn't ego. It was a calculated decision.”

It was mostly the truth, and perhaps another person would have bought it.

Unfortunately, she wasn't dealing with *people*.

I refuse to believe it was not ego. The disagreement was spelled out in red. *All my data shows that pride is a consistently driving factor in much human activity, both good and bad.*

“Okay fine, it was *partially* ego, sure,” Valera huffed, reaching the top of the stairs and stopping there, not stepping out onto the walkway just yet. Before her the first third-year Team Battle fight of the tournament was coming to an end on a hilly Grasslands field, with the red 9th Sector Division squad looking to have slowly whittled down Sermont's Point's blue team. “But can you blame the kid? It's been implied—if not outright *said to his face*—that he's less than everyone around him his entire life. His. Entire. *Life*. He saw a chance to make payback work for him and his team. He took it.” She shrugged at nothing, glancing back down the stairs behind her to ensure she was

still on her own in the tunnel. “I’m not saying it was selfless. I’m just saying that I don’t think we would have seen the same fight if Firesong hadn’t had something to gain from the lesson they just taught every cadet in this place.”

No response this time, which could only mean the pair had no answer that would add anything to the discussion. That was good, but Valera wasn’t done.

“And besides, worrying about Ward taking ‘the wrong path’ is a little rich coming from someone who flung that door *wide open* for him, don’t you think?”

Whatever do you mean? came the question in red, as innocently as one could convey over text communication.

“I mean that there are *thirty* first-year squads at this tournament. Any of them getting paired with any specific other one has about a three percent chance. Add that to the likelihood that they’re basically the *first* match of the Team Battle brackets... Come on. I’m not an idiot.”

Are you accusing me of something, Captain?

I think she is, Kes chimed in unhelpfully.

Valera rolled her eyes. “Not accusing you, no. *Stating*. You set that up, didn’t you? Didn’t you, MIND?”

A long pause.

Then...

... *Maybe*, came the answer, and Valera would have sworn she could somehow make out the most powerful AI in human history chuckling in her ear.

CHAPTER 22

*“Do not pray for an easy life.
Pray for the strength to endure a difficult one...”*

*-Bruce Lee
Pre-ISC athlete and philosopher
c.1960*

“Go on ahead. I’ll catch up to you guys in a bit.”

Rei was still pissed as Firesong finally reached the elevator lobby at the south end of the Kenneth Arena underworks, but Dent’s intervention had settled him enough to at least think straight. He’d known, of course, that he and Grant had been punching a *lot* of buttons in how they’d dealt with Biggs, but he hadn’t expected Dyrk Reese to go full-bore on them in *public* like that. It had had his blood boiling from the go—and most of the others, too, he bet—and the Bishop had probably arrived about 10 seconds or so before Rei decided to find out if his Strength was high enough yet to get through an A-ranked officer’s reactive shield. And that was only if Viv hadn’t beaten him to it.

It hadn’t helped, either, that he’d gotten something of a surprise notification halfway through them getting chewed out by the major.

“Everything okay?” Catcher asked as the rest of the team looked around at him from where they’d been waiting in silence for a car.

Rei nodded, deliberately not looking at anyone as the numbers on the smart-glass wall before them showed one of the elevators about to reach the main floor. “Yeah. Don’t worry about it. Just need to check something.”

He tried to be nonchalant about it, but he knew he hadn't succeeded when Aria, Catcher, and Viv's expression all fell into a practiced sort of flatness, and Cashe and Grant exchanged a wary look.

Rei knew he wasn't fooling anyone anymore, but there was still merit to keeping up appearances, given the circumstances.

At least for a little while longer...

"We'll grab a field and meet you there," Aria said firmly, as though to make it clear that there would be no arguing from anyone who might be considering doing so. "SB2. Don't take too long."

"Yes, ma'am," Rei offered with a forced grin and a mock salute as the car reached them. Aria rolled her eyes, but led the other four onto the elevator, leaving him on his own. He caught Catcher's eye as the doors closed, not missing the questioning lift of one eyebrow, and he granted the Saber a small nod of confirmation.

When they were gone, Rei didn't hesitate before selecting the notification in the corner of his frame. It had been teasing him for long enough already.

It also served as a good distraction for the stares and whispers of the first- and second-years—and a few of their chaperones—lingering around him as they waited for their own rides down to one sub-basement or another.

Reeally gonna have to work on getting used to that, he thought to himself as the upgrade notification took over his vision.

...

Processing combat information.

...

Calculating.

...

Results:

Strength: Adequate

Endurance: Adequate

Speed: Adequate

Cognition: Adequate

Offense: Lacking

Defense: Lacking

Growth: Not Applicable

...

Checking combat data acquisition.

...

Adequate data acquirement met.

Device initiating adjustments to:

Offense.

Defense.

...

Adjustment complete.

Offense has been upgraded from Rank C2 to C3.

Defense has been upgraded from Rank C3 to C4.

Rei caught himself about to make a face at the notification, ready to give the information a look that would have very much spelled out for any onlookers the “What the hell...?” reaction he was otherwise *definitely* feeling. *Defense* had gone up? *And* *Offense*? He couldn’t get his mind around it. The latter he maybe could understand—it had been a minute since his *Offense* had ranked—but *Defense*? That had made a *two-point* bump literally a week before, after the fiasco with his parameter testing and Shido’s evolution...

And now it had upgraded *again*...?

But that wasn't the only thing that was confusing Rei. Boneyard was a perplexing factor, too. They'd been a full team of new fighters to take on, sure, but not only had Rei only had it out with two of them—neither encounter anything he could honestly call a real fight, either—but the average specs of the Maston's team had probably ranged from between 4 to 7 levels under his.

And yet Shido had upgraded Offense *and* Defense...?

Rei stood there for a long time, contemplating this new information. It didn't take long for him to come up with a theory, but it was a loose one, and he wanted to develop it further with testing before locking into it if he could. It wasn't the moment anyway, given the timing, but as he closed the notification again Rei felt an old tingle of excitement down his back, and he couldn't help but have to work to keep from bouncing on his heels in suppressed anticipation as he considered it.

Two rank-ups. Against a weaker team. There was only one factor he could think of that might have triggered that, and if he was right...

But no. No sense in dwelling on the possibility until he knew for sure. For the time being he would keep it to himself and not get his hopes up. Yeah. He could do that. He could hold it close to his chest, at least for the rest of the week.

His resolve lasted all of 30 seconds after he'd grabbed a spot in the next car headed down to SB2, stepping out into the lower lobby to find Aria waiting for him with fists on hips and lips pursed.

"Shouldn't you be with the oth—?" Rei started to ask, hoping to deflect the assault he knew was coming.

He didn't even finish before the girl took his hand and dragged him off down the hall, away from the lobby and the staring gaggles of first-years from every school coming and going, until they found themselves a relatively quiet spot in the tunnels that—fortunately—weren't nearly as busy as the main floor's upstairs.

There she stopped and turned on him, leaning in until their faces were barely 2 inches apart.

“Okay. What happened?”

The question was more stated than asked, so apparently sure was Aria that something had gone down.

“Nothing serious,” Rei tried to play it off with an attempt at a shrug. “Just an upgrade. Nothing out of the ordinary.”

“Uh huh,” Aria answered in a tone that communicated that she very, *very* much did not believe him. “If that was actually the case you would have checked it on the way down and told the three of us afterwards, or shot us a message. Don’t bullshit me, Reidon Ward. I might not know you as well as Viv yet, but I *do* know you.”

Alarmingly well, apparently, Rei couldn’t help but think, struggling to weather the intensity of her green eyes.

He cracked almost immediately.

“Okay, *okay*,” he groaned, bringing his hands up before him like that might ward away further scrutiny. “I just... I thought it was weird, that’s all.”

He expected Aria to ask him “Why?”. Shido’s Growth spec was known to her, after all, and she’d been around him and his CAD long enough not to be surprised by its accelerated pace of improvement anymore.

She didn’t.

“Because Boneyard was weak.” She nodded with a frown. “And you only fought two of them, right? Yeah... That’s a little strange, given you don’t tend to upgrade fighting me or the others anymore...”

Rei blinked at her in open surprise.

“What?” Aria asked, going a little red and bring a hand up to brush a strand of hair out of her face self-consciously. “Am I sweaty? I hope not. I barely did more than jog in place in that fight...”

“What? No. Well... a little—but that’s not it!” Rei scrambled to save himself as she glared at him. “That’s not it! It’s just... that’s *exactly* what I was thinking. About Boneyard...”

Aria somehow managed to maintain her glower while looking a little amused at that. “And that’s weird to you? Why? I already said it. I *do* know you.”

“Yeah... Better than I thought, clearly...”

Aria waved his continued surprise aside, turning to watch a group of tall Kenneth Academy boys pass in what Rei was pretty sure was an attempt to hide a little more color rising in her cheeks. “*Anyway*... Maybe it’s not that big a deal? Even if they were weaker than you, they were still *new* fighters. We’ve established that’s usually good for Shido, right? Maybe you were just on the edge, and Boneyard put you over.” She looked at him sidelong again, still not turning his way. “What upgraded?”

“Offense...” Rei began.

“Oh well that kinda makes sense, doesn’t it? Didn’t you mention the other day that it’s been a while since Offense impr—?”

“... and Defense.” he finished, giving her a pained smile.

Aria stopped talking, at last looking him straight in the face again. For a second she didn’t say anything, taking him in with eyebrows raised.

“Oookay then...” she got out eventually. “Yeah... That *is* weird.”

“Exactly,” Rei said. Aria, Viv, and Catcher had all been brought up to speed on Shido’s last evolution, so he was less surprised at her reaction this time. “Hence why I’m a little... confused.”

Aria nodded, appearing to mull over this new information.

After a second she made a face, opened her mouth to speak, then closed it, looking unsure of herself.

“What?” Rei pressed. “What are you thinking?”

“Something silly,” she muttered. “Something stupid.”

“Well I happen to be thinking something a little stupid myself so... Let’s have it.”

Aria frowned at him a moment longer, clearly not about to be easily bullied into giving up whatever was running through her mind. Rei stared her down, though, and eventually she relinquished with a huff.

“I’m wondering if it’s because you initially took them on without Shido called, okay? I know it sounds dumb!” she was quick to clarify. “I do! But it’s the only thing I can think of that—What? What are you grinning at?”

Because Rei *was* grinning. Broadly. Frankly he was outright beaming at the girl.

“You know, I think I like it when you make me feel smart.”

Aria scowled at him. “I *said* I know it sounds dumb. You don’t have to rub it in.”

Rei laughed. “Oh, no. No no. *Not* what I meant.” He raised an open hand, showing off Shido’s three smoldering blue gems over the Device’s black and white steel. “What I’m saying is I was thinking *the exact same thing*. And if *you* came to the same conclusion... then I’m feeling a lot less of a fool about it.”

It was true, crazy as it sounded. Having quickly gone over every detail of the fight on the elevator ride down—every facet and second and traded strikes, as few as they’d been—it was the only variable he couldn’t account for. It was the only outlier. Boneyard had all been new fighters, yes, but Rei just hadn’t been able to correlate that fact with Shido’s atypical jump in *Defense* no matter how hard he tried to connect those dots. He’d only fought *two* of the Maston’s squad members, and neither of them had offered any kind of real challenge for one reason or the other.

No. The longer he thought about it, the more he could only see one answer.

Shido hadn’t cared that it hadn’t been called for most of the fight. All it cared about was the ironclad fact that Rei *himself* had been wholly “lacking” in armament—weapons and armor alike—compared to his opponents for the greatest duration of the bout, and had reacted accordingly.

And if that was the case...

“Rei...” Aria beat him to it. “If that’s true... If Shido read you as missing in Offense and Defense in that fight just because you weren’t wearing a CAD... You know what that means, right...?”

Rei, staring off at nothing while contemplating the implications, nodded slowly.

Yeah... Yeah, he sure as hell *did* know... In fact it wasn’t even the first time he’d considered it. Thinking about it all, he recalled suddenly a random thought he’d had months ago after Reese had brigged him for mouthing off, when he’d been debating if there might be a way to get more out of his limited training hours with Aria. He’d wondered if learning a partial call to face off with her with less of his Device summoned might stress Shido more efficiently. At the time it had been a ludicrous idea, not only because Aria had been significantly stronger than him already, but because ISCM cadets didn’t learn partial calls till their second year typically.

But now...

You need to get stronger, Valera Dent’s words echoed—for the hundredth time—in the back of his head.

If Rei was right—if *they* were right, since he couldn’t discount Aria helping to convince him of the fact—he may just have confirmed an all-new way to snatch at that strength once again.

Then, though, what he was considering struck him in truth, and he groaned.

“Oh man... This is gonna suck all over again, isn’t it?”

Aria did her best, he thought, not to give him *too* wicked a smile, but there might have been at least the smallest touch of genuine pity in her eyes as she answered.

“Yeah... It is...”

Rei snorted, bringing a hand up to rub against his face as he let out a frustrated sigh.

Aria reached up and pulled it away gently, watching him more carefully now and not letting go even as he let the hand drop to hang in hers.

“No point in getting depressed about it right now. Not like we’ll have a chance to really test it until we get back to school.” She stepped back and started pulling him along by the fingers, towards the great opening of the sub-basement’s inside wall that led to the warm-up and warm-down fields. “Besides, we’ve got other things to worry about right now. I know this is probably big—*really* big—but we still have a tournament to win, bud.”

Rei allowed himself to get dragged along, letting himself enjoy the moment, adjusting to hold Aria’s hand a little more firmly. It was only 10 seconds or so—and in full view of the glances they got from the other first-years they crossed paths with—but even then the mix of excitement and nerves that Shido’s upgrade had caused calmed by the time they reached the entrance, where they let go before stepping into the cavernous space that hosted the subterranean Wargames zone and the Dueling fields it was divided into.

It turned out it was a good thing they had, too...

“If I see it happen again, it will be reported to your school chaperones for discipline! Unbelievable! I don’t know what the Galens Institute standards are these days, but that is *not acceptable here at Kenneth!*”

Aria and Rei stopped short as they turned the corner, caught by surprise at the raised voice. Immediately Rei found the officer—a blue-haired Kenneth Academy second lieutenant, going by his armband and insignia—facing off with Viv and Grant, the two of them at rigid attention in front of the man as they let themselves get chewed into while Catcher and Cashe stood off to the side. At first Rei thought that the officer had had the gall to try and ream out Firesong—a team from another school—for their actions in the Team Battle, but it was *only* Viv and Grant the man was yelling at. And what was more...

“Why is Catcher smirking?” Aria mumbled sidelong, taking a step towards the scene, which was being gawked at by some thirty or forty other students warming up and cooling down all around the space.

Sure enough, Catcher was looking like he was trying to hide a satisfied grin, while Cashe was *actually* facepalming with *both hands* as she shook her head into her fingers.

“Out in the open for everyone to see! Unacceptable, and *undisciplined!* You’re fortunate you aren’t students of *my* school, or you’d be running laps until you could loop this room with your eyes shut and your—!”

“Sooo... What’s going on?” Rei asked after he and Aria had slipped behind the second lieutenant to join Catcher and Cashe.

“Idiots,” Cashe groaned in answer before Catcher could get a word in, not even looking up from her palms. “Idiots. That’s what happened.”

“Only *one* idiot, to be fair,” the Saber followed up with, nodding along as though this clarified things. “Poor Grant just got caught in the crossfire.”

“Poor... Grant?” Aria repeated slowly, like she couldn’t believe *Catcher*, of all people, had possibly uttered those words. “What are you—Oh.” Something clicked, and she moaned under the breath. “Oh no... What did Viv do?”

“Ask her yourself,” Catcher answered with a snicker.

About a minute later the second lieutenant seemed to have finally had enough of screaming—all while offering no help whatsoever in guessing what the hell had happened—because he dismissed Viv and Grant both with an irritated jerk of a hand and a final warning. They half-shouted their expected “Yes, sir!”, then hurried over to where Rei and the others stood.

“Viiiiiv...” Aria growled quietly the moment the officer had stepped away. “What. Did. You. *Do?*”

Viv, though, appeared surprisingly hesitant to answer. She was red in the face, but her expression wasn’t angry or surprised. It was something like...

Embarrassed...?

Suddenly suspicious, Rei turned his attention to Grant, and a theory immediately started to form. Whereas the Mauler was usually somber of face, he had seemed as irritated as any of them after Reese had tried to make a parade of laying into the team after the fight.

Now, though, the boy only looked dazed, and his hair—damp with drying sweat from the only *actual* fight any of them had had in the Team Battle not 10 minutes before—was sticking up in weird places.

Understanding dawned, and Rei let out a something between a snort and an exasperated sigh.

“What?” Aria hissed, turning on him as she realized he’d figured it out. “What did they do?”

“Not *they*,” Rei confirmed for Catcher, eyeing Viv pointedly. “If I had to guess... Cadet Arada here had the bright idea to grab Cadet Grant and... what?... *kiss him* in the middle of room *full of first-years and staff?*”

He meant the words to come out most jokingly, but something pinched at him as he said them. Something very similar to... irritation, maybe?

Aria, meanwhile, let out a sound like she’d been punched in the gut, then whirled on Viv.

“You *didn’t*...”

Viv, though, looked to be reclaiming a bit of her spark, because she only squirmed a little under her squad leader’s glare as she answered.

“... Maybe...?”

“*Viv!*” Aria squeaked. “Are you kidding?? You could have gotten in *so much trouble!*”

Viv, in answer, mumbled something in return, all while Grant was still staring off into the clouds beside her like someone had hit him over the head with a brick.

“What was that?” Aria demanded shakily, clearly unsure of how she was supposed to act in the moment.

Rei saved everyone the trouble. “She said ‘Worth it,’” he answered for Viv, knowing his best friend all too well. “And let’s keep moving, Aria. They’ve already been yelled at, people are staring, and we’re gonna have a rep after Reese’s stunt upstairs as is. Let’s not make another scene...”

Aria looked at a loss for a second longer, then threw her hands up before whirling on her heels to start for one of the fields on the west side of the room that had just opened up. Catcher and Cashe—still smirking and looking mortified respectively—followed close behind, while Grant started ambling along after them like some addled, obedient pet giant.

Viv, though, didn’t move, and had gathered the courage to finally look at Rei.

Abruptly suspecting what was coming, he paused, holding back to watch the girl expectantly.

“Rei... I’m sorry...”

Rei frowned, crossing his arms as that earlier annoyance nipped at him again. There were a lot of things he could say, in that moment—a *lot*—but he owed Viv more than sarcasm or a growled demand for an explanation. In the end—as he had with Grant the night before—he decided to try to give his best friend room to lead the way herself to what she was trying to get at.

“For...?”

“For... Well... You know what for...”

Rei let the discomfort hang a moment longer, fighting with himself.

It was easier now, though, to let go of the confused feelings he was having than he thought it would once have been. Especially after the fight with Boneyard. He sure as hell wasn’t *happy*, of course. There *was* a part of him—a big part—that was glad Viv

finally seemed ready to talk to him, but it was a feeling marred by bad memories and a grudge he didn't know if he'd be able to completely purge himself of anytime soon.

But still... he owed her more than that. He owed the person who had been there for him for years—*years*—more than that.

“How did it happen, Viv?” he asked slowly. “That’s what I don’t get. That’s what I’ve been wanting to talk about. We’ve all known what’s been going—I hope you don’t think you guys were fooling *anyone*—but what gets me is that you went out one night to *kill* the guy, and the next morning you couldn’t look him in the eye...”

Viv squirmed again, making a face that said she *wanted* to explain, but...

“I can’t tell you that,” she said quietly, looking crestfallen. “It’s not... It’s not my story to tell. Really. That night...” She took a breath, obviously trying to center herself. “I just... I saw him in a different light, after that night...”

“Because he beat the shit out of the idiots who beat the shit out of me...?” Rei pressed, not *completely* managing to keep the sour out of his voice, but doing a decent job. “Cause I hope you can see why Aria, Catcher, and I might say that’s not exactly a healthy diving board to jump into a relationship from, or whatever it is you two have going on.”

Viv, however, shook her head vigorously.

“*No*,” she insisted, then hesitated. “We’ll... Okay maybe that’s a part of it, but *definitely* not everything. Logan...” She looked stricken, like she was fighting with herself. “Rei. We talked a lot that night. After I called him out on being a hypocritical pig and an asshole and every other colorful word I could get out while giving him that black eye you saw. Logan has... a lot going on. A *lot*...” Viv’s cheeks had gone pale. “He’s not who you think he is, just like *you’re* not who he thinks *you* are. Or did...? I’m not really sure anymore...”

Rei met her eyes for a long moment, after that, studying them. There was confusion, there, mixed with a little bit of pride. Viv stood tall despite the situation,

which admittedly irritated that tiniest part of him that couldn't help but be *pissed* at his best friend, all else aside.

After a bit, though, he sighed and looked away from her, searching for Aria and the others in the crowd. Finding them looking, he held up a finger from his crossed arms to indicate that he and Viv would need a minute, getting a nod from a warily watching Aria and Catcher both, as well as a nervous look between the two of them from Cashe.

Grant, on the other hand, was still staring at the closest wall like he'd been struck dumb.

It was an amusing enough image that it helped Rei find his voice again.

"Honestly, Viv, I don't know who I think Grant is anymore." She'd been standing there, nervously watching him, and perked up at the words. "Catcher and I were talking about it the other day. Yesterday, actually. Grant's... Grant's come a ways, I gotta say. In no small part 'cause of you, I'm sure. But climbing twenty feet up a well you've fallen fifty feet down into is still a distance from the light, you know...?"

Viv seemed to follow the metaphor, because she nodded.

"I know. I really do. It's why I'm sorry..."

"I just don't get *how*," Rei insisted, a little more forcefully than intended, letting a touch of the frustration he didn't realize had been pent up leak out. "That's what *really* bugs me. I get *why*—or at least I'm starting to get why—but it's just the *how* that I'm lost on."

"It wasn't immediate," Viv said quickly, clearly wanting him to understand this really *wasn't* something she'd planned on. "That night was the start of it, but *just* the start. Just where we talked. It was months before anything happened..."

Rei believed her, but it only helped so much.

"But you can't tell me what you talked about."

He made it a statement, desperately needing to convey his frustration.

Viv's face dropped again, and she looked so heartbroken in that moment that Rei wanted to curse himself for a fool, toss his anger aside, and throw his arms around her and tell her it was all okay, that it was all going to be okay.

He refrained. This was something they had to have out if Viv was finally ready to tell him about it.

Even if she wasn't ready to tell him *all* about it.

"I can't, Rei. For the exact same kind of reason I don't tell people about your history, or Dent and Lennon, or Shido's... details."

That, Rei thought, was an unfair comparison at scale, but he allowed it.

"Fine," he sighed. "I guess I can get that. A little. Grant implied he might talk to me about it sometime anyway."

He could have *sworn* he saw Viv's ears *literally* perk up under her perfect curls.

"He did?" she asked, not even pretending to be subtle in her eagerness. "When?"

"Last night," Rei told her with a shrug. "We had a brief chat, after the Biggs situation—the *first* Biggs situation," he amended, snorting. Then he grew serious again. "I can tell he's working on it. I really can. I just... there's a lot to unpack there. I hope you get that. This isn't like Grandcrest. This isn't Mikael Dorsey. I knew what you were doing then, even if I didn't find it as funny as you. This is... a whole new ball game."

"I know," Viv answered somberly again. "I do, Rei. It's why I need you to know I'm so, *so* sorry..."

Rei stared at her for a long moment then. So long, in fact, that Viv started to fidget again, and had to look away.

"There really was no other way things could have gone?" he asked after a bit.

She looked pained again, but shook her head. "No, Rei... I tried. I really, *really* tried, I promise. But I..." She hesitated, and seemed to look for the words. "I couldn't leave him like that... Not after... Not after we talked..."

That only had Rei more curious, and he couldn't help but turn to look at Grant across the Wargame area. The Mauler seemed to have just recently started to come to his senses, because he was blinking and looking around as though astounded to find himself already on the field with the others. He turned, and Rei locked eyes with the boy. For a second Grant seemed taken aback to find him and Viv standing there, clearly in the middle of some kind of discussion.

Then the Mauler looked to register the seriousness of the moment, because his face darkened before he turned away again in favor of approaching Aria, Catcher, and Cashe. It gave Rei the impression the guy had been... ashamed to look him in the eye?

The hell is going on...? Rei couldn't stop himself from thinking, and he wondered suddenly if this was how Cashe and Grant felt about the mysteries surrounding Shido.

That was a sobering thought—and one that he'd have to self-examine later, he knew—but with a sigh he turned back to Viv.

Viv, who had had his back so often he wasn't even 100% sure he would be alive without her, and knew with *certainty* that he probably wouldn't have been standing there, in SB2 of the Kenneth Academy, at his first SCT as one of the favorites in the entire tournament.

He owed her more than the frustration he felt at not being given the whole picture.

“Just... *Talk to me* about it next time, okay? I can't *do* anything—for myself *or* you—if you don't friggin' *talk to me.*”

Viv grimaced nervously. “Rei, what was I supposed to say...? ‘Sorry, dude, but I caught a thing for the guy we both wanted to punch in the balls last month.’ What would you have said to that?”

“That you're an idiot and probably remind you that you're little bit of a man-eater—or *person-eater*, I guess? Is that a thing?”

He'd timed the moment of humor deliberately, and was rewarded with just the tiniest of smiles.

“If it’s not, it should be.”

Rei chuckled dryly, then brought a hand up to rub at his eyes. “Honestly, Viv... I don’t know what I would have said. Maybe I would have yelled. Maybe I would have called you a shit friend. Hell, maybe I would have punched you—or tried at least, since your Speed spec *spanked* mine last semester. But at least we would have *talked about it*. Instead of... dancing this stupid dance for the last couple of months...”

Viv looked more apologetic than ever. “Yeah... Okay... I know. I know I should have said something. It’s just...” She hesitated, like she was trying to find the words to articulate whatever it was she wanted to get out.

“Easier said than done?” Rei offered after a second.

Viv sighed. “Yeah... Yeah. A *lot* easier said than done.”

Rei nodded, then watched his best friend a little longer, taking her in, trying to scrape out even just an *inkling* more of whatever was happening only to get a little frustrated when he found no other hints in her gaze.

Yeah... He was *really* going to have revisit how Cashe and Grant felt about things in the near future...

“Promise you’ll talk to me about this kind of shit from now on, then?” he asked.

Viv offered a strained smile. “How about a promise I’ll try? Good enough?”

“Is that the best I’m gonna get?”

“Probably.”

Rei let out a huff of a laugh, resigning himself to that meager victory.

And then, unable to help himself, he reached up and—maybe with just the *slightest* poke at his Strength spec for good measure—flicked Viv a good solid one in the forehead, right between the eyes.

“*Ow!*” she yelped, leaping back in surprise and bringing both hands up to protect her hairline. “What was that for?!”

“To quote you: You know what for.”

Viv stared for a second, wide-eyed.

Then she laughed. A real, actual laugh.

“Yeeeeeah okay... Fair enough.”

They shared a grin, then, and finally turned without a word to cut in silence across the busy room together, not meeting any of the dozens of eyes that had been very poorly trying to hide that they’d been flicking to the two of them continuously for the last couple minutes or so. It was a little awkward, but it was better, too, and Rei realized that—even if he wasn’t anywhere near satisfied with the conversation—a bit of a weight he hadn’t realized was hanging between the two of them had lifted.

They were halfway to the field Aria had already summoned a plain Neutral Zone onto when he decided to try and scratch away just a bit more of it.

“Okay, but you gotta tell me... Did you *have* to kiss him in *full view* of every school at the tournament? *Officers included?*”

He knew it had worked when Viv sniggered at his side.

“He did good. With Dent, I mean. And Reese. He’s working hard.”

“So... What? He needed a... reward?”

She shrugged. “What can I say? Mama bear is proud of her growing boy.”

At that, Rei stopped dead. A step or two later Viv did the same, realizing he wasn’t with her and turning to look back at him in concern.

“What?” she asked a little nervously, probably worried she’d undone what progress they’d just achieved.

Rei, though, could only stare at her queasily.

“Viv... I love you. I really do. *But...* Do you remember that rule we made up last year? About neither of us ever using the words ‘man meat’ ever again?”

“Oh.” Viv looked immediately realized, then confused. “Uh... Yeah...?”

“We’re expanding it. *Immediately.*”

CHAPTER 23

“You never get used to it. Never. Is it different from that first time I stepped out onto the field, that first time tens of thousands of people were all standing and shouting and screaming my name? Sure. Maybe a little. I get half as many butterflies now, and it’s easier to walk out with my head held high and a smile on my face.

But I don’t care what any blowhard wants to tell you otherwise. You never, ever get used to it...”

-Kalus Laurent

S-Ranked Pawn-Class User

Leaning over the edge of the railing, Aria roared along with the crowd around and behind her, screaming herself hoarse into what she suspected was the furor of over 25,000 people. It *was* probably the vast majority of the crowd for once, truth be told, because whereas usually the attention of the morning spectators might have been divided across the two Dueling fields, it just so happened that the north field—on the other side of the Arena—was currently being taken up by two first-years from the 14th and Oyekan’s who hadn’t quite broken into the Cs yet.

Which made the fight on the *south* field—suspended before Aria, Viv, Catcher, Cashe, Grant, and a good portion of the Galens cadets who weren’t fighting anytime soon—only that much more interesting to watch.

“And would you LOOK at these two go!” the Kenneth commentator exclaimed. “Barely 15 seconds in, and it’s already got to be one of the wildest fights of the—”

Aria, though, wasn’t listening.

“GOOOO!” she screamed along with the others as Rei’s fists flew in a blinding flurry of strikes at his opponent’s body. “GOOOOO!”

From her left, further along the railing and separate from her by several pockets of second- and third-years, other voices joined the call, with Jack Benaly's being the loudest.

“TAKE HIM DOWN! TAKE! HIM! DOWN!!”

On a simple variation of Grasslands—a mostly-flat plain of shin-high greenery divided by a single wide stream—Rei danced with none other than Laquita Martin, and the Red Crown squad leader was *clearly* uninterested in handing the win to him without a *hell* of a fight. They'd been going at it for not even 15 seconds now, but already a swath of the grassy field was ripped up and overturned, either torn to shreds by rapid footwork and steel boots, or actively kicked or slashed up into one face or another to try to gain an advantage. The outcome was all-but-given, maybe—Aria wasn't the only one to have seen Rei take on Martin *and* another cadet at the same time and come out on top before, after all—but that didn't mean it was going to be easy, and the Duelist had brought her A-game.

It all only made Aria—and the rest of Firesong around her—yell that much louder too.

“GOOOOO!”

Rei didn't disappoint.

His Speed really *was* a frightening thing. He and Martin's stats were probably about even, the Duelist being C4 or 5 when last Aria had checked, but the fact that he was keeping toe-to-toe with the girl's quick movements and agility was outright breathtaking. Their arms and blades were just a step shy of blurs as they crashed, broke apart, then engaged again, and in between cuts and punches and slashes there came a blistering of kicks, knee, and leg sweeps. Despite the two of them being first-years, Aria didn't think she'd heard the crowd get this riled since Lennon and Sidorov had each taken to the field for their own—rather quick—Dueling appearances earlier that morning.

In fact, if she strained to listen, Aria was pretty sure she could make out individuals shouting here and there, calling for the “Iron Prince” to show them what he was really made of.

Aria could have laughed into the chaos of the excitement and noise.

Despite all of Dyrk Reese’s bluster, if the crowd had disapproved of Firesong’s antics during the Team Battle the afternoon before, the condemnation had been fleeting. The Wargames they’d partaken in the afternoon after that first match had—as expected—gone their way, but not before Valera Dent’s parting warning about the team’s likelihood of being taken seriously proving itself *pointedly* true. Despite the Arena having assigned the bout as a Capture Point match, it might as well have been an Elimination fight with Firesong at the top of the menu. The Arena had kept the six of them together due to the nature of the match-type, but that had turned out to be as much a curse as a blessing when not one but *two* of the three opposing teams—from 9th Sector and Deermont respectively—had descended on them together from the crags of the Cliffside variation within a minute of the fight starting, obviously having already struck some kind of temporary alliance over their greater common enemy. Firesong had held their own, with only Cashe going down before they’d culled almost half of their twelve opponents, and would have been in good shape before the *third* team—another of Deermont’s squads—came slipping and sliding down the loose shale of the hills at their back. Aria had almost lost her cool in that moment, fearing they were about to get cut from the multi-team format brackets early on, but *Grant* had ended up saving the day, growling that he’d do what he could to hold the new arrivals off before charging right for the group of six, the green of their team-assigned color trailing his Device in whips of ion fire as he preemptively triggered Overclock. It had left Aria with only Rei, Viv, and Catcher to fend off the remaining seven of the original two teams, but it had been the right move. Aria herself had gone down, with Viv a few seconds later, but in the end Rei and Catcher had been left relatively unharmed against barely *half* of the

second Deermont squad, Grant and his Ability having cut down two opponents and severely injuring a third all on his own before he'd been FDAed as well.

As it turned out, three above-average first-years didn't hold so much as a candle to the likes of even a fraction of Firesong's total might.

The Galens Institute cadets as a whole celebrated well that evening, with ample cause to do so. Not only had Catcher and Grant qualified for the official Dueling brackets and Firesong had pulled through in both its multi-team format matches, but the vast majority of the other students had kicked proper ass just as thoroughly. Lennon's Steelbound and Sidorov's King's Law had done particularly well, with the former promptly knocking out a Kenneth Academy squad who'd been one of the stronger teams at the tournament, and the latter coming out on top in a Wargame that had featured not one but *two* third-year teams mixed in among the four-squad Elimination bout. In fact, only *one* Galens squad had been knocked out of the Wargames brackets day one—a second-year group whose members Aria wasn't familiar with—and *everyone* had made it through the Team Battles. That had the second-years in particular feeling good about themselves, even said team who'd been disqualified from the Wargames. It had made celebrating easy, and Aria and Firesong had been atypically chatty with both Valormade and Red Crown over their food, with not even the occasional whispers that Major Reese was giving their raucous tables the stink eye from where the officers were dining doing anything to temper the energy.

In fact, Aria wasn't sure the passing night since had done much of anything to sober anyone either, especially after the Dueling tournament proper had started that morning.

“OOH! And a close swing and miss from Martin, there!” the announcer exclaimed. “Reidon Ward keeps his nose, and the advantage, it looks like! How this fight is going to end is anyone's—”

“Yes! YES!” Viv shouted, drowning out the commentary beside Aria, and she glanced over to find the others jumping up and down in excitement, with even Grant having cupped both hands around his mouth to bellow encouragements. On the field before them the tide of the battle had steadily given way to Rei’s superior combat ability, with Martin having been driven back more than a half-dozen steps from the point of their initial clash. As fast as both of them were, neither had bothered trying to disengage from the fight to try a different approach, knowing the other would be able to keep pace with any retreat and take advantage of any backpedaling or turned back. As a result the fight—while not as vicious as some of the second- and third-year battles, maybe—was an acute example of the destructive power of the upper levels of even the youngest generation of Users, with weapons and limbs moving faster and faster and *faster* while Rei or Martin struck, blocked, countered, punched, kicked, ducked, or dodged more than a dozen times in a quarter that many seconds. It was an awesome sight—one Aria had to begrudgingly admit to herself she was a little envious of given her and Hippolyta’s lagging Speed spec by comparison—and she could imagine the awe being tenfold among the civilian spectators who were watching zoomed-in feeds from higher in the stands.

And then, as was so often the case, the end came in a blink.

While Martin might meet Rei for Speed—a rare thing even among the Galens cadets—she certainly didn’t match him for cunning. As he’d pressed her steadily back, Aria had watched with a familiar eye as Rei had grown more and more confident in the patterns of the Duelist’s attacks and defenses, so she was only mildly surprised when a wide cross-swipe of Martin’s right blade came around low and quick, only to stop dead as Rei outright *caught her by the wrist*. From Viv’s other side Catcher gave a whoop of success that was immediately lost to the pitch in the cheering of the crowd as Rei proceeded to catch Martin’s *other arm* too when the girl seemed to panic and cleaved at him with a wild slash at his face that was telegraphed long before the blow came. For a

fraction of a second the two of them were locked like that, Rei fighting to find a proper hold while Martin hauled back and twisted, trying to break loose.

She didn't manage it before he seemed to find the proper footing, crouched, and rocketed upward in a jump that should probably have shot Rei 15 feet into the air...

... if his knee hadn't caught her chin on the way up, of course.

There was a collective "OOOOOOH!" of sympathy from the stands and the commentator as Martin's head snapped back, Rei letting go of both of the Duelist's wrists just as the blow landed. She was lifted a body length off the ground under the impact of the hit, and Aria thought it likely the match was already over. Rei, however, clearly wasn't planning to hold anything back against such a dangerous opponent until the moment the Arena called the match, because he was twisting even as he landed again, bring his body around and one leg whipping up.

The kick caught Martin full in the side just as she, too, started to drop back to the ground, the power behind it sending the poor girl blasting sideways to careen over the Grasslands, skip—literally *skip*—over the burbling surface of the stream, then come to a crashing, tumbling halt up the shallow incline of the far bank. It said something to the girl's fighting spirit that she'd somehow managed to hold onto both her swords despite the hit.

Especially when she didn't move from the spot where she lay crumbled at the stream's edge, the stillness of her body echoed in the relative quiet of the stands for a full breath before the Arena spoke up.

"Fatal Damaged Accrued," said the Arena on cue. "Winner: Reidon Ward, the Galens Institute."

"YEEEEAAAAAH!"

It was Viv whose scream opened the eruption of noise from the stadium, and Aria didn't have to turn away from the field to know that a *lot* of people had taken to their feet to cheer. There were stomps of boots and shoes on cement mixed with the rush of clapping and howling, and Aria was right there with the rest of them, smacking the railing before her with both hands as she yelled her lungs out. The noise was so much that the commentator's final congratulations were lost to her. Even Benaly and the rest of Red Crown sounded to be applauding, and looking around she found the Brawler, Kadness, von Leef, Kwasi, and Clayton only looking politely miffed at the results, with a couple of them even shaking their heads or shrugging as though they'd not really expected the fight to go any other way.

Which, realistically, they probably hadn't.

"Alright!" Aria finally called out once the spectator's enthusiasm had started to die down, turning to Viv and the others. On the Arena floor, Rei was helping Martin get to her feet on the projection plating, both of them having recalled their CADs. "Catcher, you're up next. Ready?"

Catcher turned to her, one of only two of them to still be wearing their combat suits. "Ready as I'll ever be, boss!" he answered with a two fingered salute and a wink. It felt like the boy's natural humor, a good sign given the circumstances. Rei's fight had obviously bolstered the Saber's confidence, which had been lagging a little so far that day.

Aria couldn't blame the nerves he'd been showing again that morning, given his upcoming fight...

"Cool," she answered with a grin, knowing better than to push the subject. "North field, right? You should probably get going. The four of us will meet with Rei, then head your way. We'll be over there long before your match is up."

"Roger that," came the answer, and Catcher turned to start jogging along the walkway towards the closest of the underwork entrances, shouting a final loud "Nice

fight, Rei!” towards the Arena floor before vanishing into the steady traffic of fighters and civilians that were coming and going along the walkway. After he was gone, Viv let out a groan and draped herself dramatically over the railing, arms and hair hanging limp.

“North field *again*? At this point it feels like we’re basically doing conditioning laps for combat training...”

Cashe gave a grunt of agreement from beside her. “Right? I think we’ve been on opposite ends all morning for your guys’ matches, haven’t we?”

Like Catcher, Cashe was still in her combat suit, whereas Aria, Viv, and Grant had long changed back into regulars after having claimed the wins in their own morning Duels without much trouble. Since multi-team battles took so much longer and there were only so many squads, they were staggered over the course of the week, so Firesong didn’t have any Team Battle or Wargames matches until the following afternoon. As a result, Rei, Catcher, and Cashe’s fights were all the six of them had left for the rest of the day, and black-and-golds—with the added holo-patch of their Type-emblem in white on their shoulder—were expected for any cadet not actively prepping for anything.

Aria gave the girls a sympathetic half smile at the complaints, then danced down to see where Rei had gotten off to. He and Martin weren’t anywhere to be found on the Arena floor, though, and since the next fighters—a pair of third-years whose names she’d missed being called as the arbiter summoned them from the underworks—were walking towards the Dueling field already, it stood to reason he was on the way up to them.

“Rei said he’d shower after you and Catcher are done, since you’re right after him,” Aria told Cashe before glancing at Viv and Grant. “Let’s grab him at the underwork stairs, then head over?”

They all nodded, and so Aria took the lead, heading east around the walkway just as the south field fighters were being told to step into the ring. It took the four of them

longer than they were used to to reach the underwork entrance given the foot traffic—which only minimally reduced when a bout was actively going on—but Rei was waiting as expected at the top of the stairs, waving when they approached and stepping in behind Aria once they reached him.

“*Great* fight, half-pint!” Viv exclaimed the moment he’d joined up, throwing an arm around Rei’s shoulders and grinning at him as he winced when she pulled him into a light headlock. “I mean obviously I knew you had it, but *still!*”

“Brave of you, calling me that,” Rei answered with a grin, fighting to get loose. “Didn’t I just beat the only other Duelist in this tournament who holds a candle to you? You’d think I’d have earned a *little* bit of respect, at least.”

“Once you’re not living in a different altitude than the rest of us, you can moan about it. Until then... suck it.”

The pair of them laughed together at that, with Grant watching them a little warily from the back of their short line, and Cashe only rolling her eyes before telling Viv to let go of Rei so they weren’t forcing other people on the walkway to move around them. Aria herself, though, just hid a smile and didn’t reprimand them further, pleased to leave the two at their antics. She and Rei had messaged pretty long into the night the evening before about the conversation he and Viv had had—a little later than was probably prudent given where they were, truth be told—and she was pleased to see them jabbing and poking at each other in common fashion. They’d never really *stopped* their back and forth, of course, but—like Rei had said he felt after the talk—Aria thought their interactions felt a little... easier? There was probably still a little tension there, and likely would be until Viv—or possibly Grant himself, it sounded like—clued them in as to what was going on there, but the fact that they’d had it out even somewhat looked to have healed some of the strain neither of them had apparently really been aware was there. It was nice to see, and only added to the overall excitement of how Sectionals had gone for Firesong and its individual members so far.

Then again... They were coming up on the first real potential challenge to that bliss, weren't they?

"Group's leaving up there," Cashe pointed out a minute later, raised finger indicating a spot along the bend ahead of them as they reached the north end of the Arena. Sure enough, what looked like the better portion of a couple of squads from the 104th were stepping away together from the railing just in time for Firesong's arrival, and Aria started making mumbled excuses as she pushed through the crowd in more of a hurry. It was a silent rule that walkway viewing was to be kept for the schools, but space was usually still tight for everything but fights between the lowest level first-years at the tournament. As expected, even rushing, half the space had been claimed by the time they reached the railing, and Aria was about to regrettably ask Grant to stand behind them—given he could see over all of them with half-a-foot to spare—when Rei's hand nudged her forward, then slipped around her back as he took hold of the barrier at her hip and pulled himself gently up against her left side

Aria felt a tingle along the back of her neck that had *nothing* to do with Hippolyta's neuroline, and she looked around at him—as close as they'd *ever* been—to find him grinning, though avoiding her eye.

"Sorry," he said with an exaggerated shrug that said very much that he wasn't sorry *at all*. "Space is tight. Hope you don't mind."

She blinked, then looked at the others. Viv, for once, hadn't noticed as she chatted with Grant—who had amusingly pulled a similar move, though much more subtly given how much longer his arms were—but Cashe was eyeing her and Rei sidelong with a raised eyebrow. It *was* tight, but they'd managed to all wedge themselves into the space to get a clear view of the north field, so Aria turned away to pretend to look for... whatever. Anything.

"Just don't sweat on me too much," she mumbled, trying—and failing—to sound stern.

Rei's quiet snicker told her she hadn't been successful, and the light squeeze he gave her midriff with the encircling arm didn't help at all with Aria's attempt to focus on anything else.

They'd arrived between fights, and it was another match before Catcher's turn came up. The Duel was a good one, with all five of them picking one cadet or the other to cheer for, so they were already feeling the thrill again by the time the second-year from Kenneth saw an end to his valiant—but sadly fruitless—effort against a third-year girl from the 104th. After that, though, it was Catcher's fight, and only Viv shouted encouragements—ones that were probably only borderline acceptable per ISCM terms—as he and his opponent made their way out of the underworks towards the Dueling field after the second lieutenant acting as arbiter called for them.

Aria felt a twinge of anxiety, watching the boy move stiffly towards the west end of the 30-yard circle.

“He looks nervous again,” she muttered so that only Rei could hear, and he nodded beside her.

“Can you blame him?”

Aria could only shake her head slowly, her attention shifting to the other fighter as both of them reached the edge of the field.

Andre Boone hadn't exactly come out of nowhere. He was one of the strongest fighters at the tournament, and only a little digging had revealed that he was widely considered the ace of 9th Sector Division. A Phalanx like Aria, he was of the sword-wielding variety, which meant he had a familiarity with Catcher's fighting style that would be second only to another Saber. That wouldn't have been too problematic, and even the fact that Boone was a C5, a rank higher than Catcher, wasn't anything worth stressing too much about.

The issue was that Boone had demonstrated—in both a Team Battle and Wargame the evening before—that he'd been one of the earlier first-years to develop an initial Ability.

“Catcher knows what he has to do,” Rei told her, giving her another squeeze that was more comforting than teasing this time. “We spent all night and morning reviewing. He’s got this.”

“Yeah...” Aria managed as she looked to Catcher on the west side of the circle again. “Yeah... He’s got this...”

She hoped she sounded more confident than she felt.

“Combatants, take position.”

The arbiter called Catcher and Boone to move, and the pair of them stepped over the silver dividing line that separated the Dueling circle from the larger Team Battle and Wargames section. They were in their red starting rings in moments, and the officer continued as expected.

“This is as an official Dueling event,” he said. “It is therefore subject to regulation ruling. Once the field is formed, you will be ordered to call, then engage. Premature Device manifestation will result in a penalty. Premature approach, attack, or the like will result in a match loss. Is that understood?”

Two glances in either direction. Two nods. One flash of a NOED in the man’s eyes.

Then Catcher and Boone started to rise.

For once it was Viv who called the field first.

“Depot,” she got out before any of the others could even begin to guess, and it wasn’t a second or so more before she was proven right. Dirty concrete flooring manifested beneath Catcher and Boone’s bare feet, soon followed by rusting steel walls and chains hanging from a rotting ceiling of dilapidated sheet metal. It appeared to be raining “outside” the combat area, because water was streaming down to splash into

filthy puddles throughout the space. It reminded Aria a little of the zone she and Rei had first had it out on, the day they'd met at Commencement, except that instead of stacked storage crates there were several long lines of unmoving, raised conveyers whose belts had long-since peeled away into ugly black strands and rubber piles.

She only took it all in at a glance, though, still too intent on watching Catcher.

“Field: Abandoned Depot,” came the Arena’s first announcement.

Aria and the rest of Firesong held their breath, not hearing the cheers and calls from the stands and elsewhere along the railing that rang out despite the fact neither fighter would be able to hear anything anyone yelled now.

“Cadet Andre Boone of the 9th Sector Division versus Cadet Layton Catchwick of the Galens Institute. Combatants... Call.”

It wasn’t possible to hear either fighter make the summon. Aria only saw Catcher’s lips move, and a second later Arthus’ yellow and white steel clad his arms and legs, purple vysetrium tipping his left hand in curved claws and lining the edge of the Device’s longsword. She looked away from him, then, to take in his opponent.

Boone might only have been a single rank higher than Catcher, but his C5 evolution had apparently brought with it more advantages than just his Ability. His armor—all silver and white accented with glowing orange—covered both legs and girdled his hips, as well as plated both hands and forearms. His sword—a straight blade like Catcher’s—didn’t look to match Arthus for reach, but the boy’s shield was a beast of a thing, a round, flat plate of solid white edged with vysetrium that was half-again the size of the defensive bulwark Hippolyta offered Aria.

Catcher was going to have to play this very, *very* carefully.

Then again, they'd known that from the start, and had been preparing him for it accordingly.

“Combatants,” came the Arena’s voice one more time. “... Fight.”

“And OFF THEY GO!” the north field announcer shouted from where she stood behind the arbiter. “Or rather Cadet Catchwick goes! Would you *look* at that rush!”

Promptly Aria tuned the woman out—as she found she was doing more and more with the match commentary—focusing instead on Catcher as he charged.

It wasn't ideal, but it was the only option. On the one hand was the fact that, as a Phalanx, there was very little advantage to Boone moving more than minimally necessary from his starting point. Top-level Defense came at the cost of agility with almost every User of his and Aria's shared Type, so it would have been silly for the 9th Sector cadet to budge unless absolutely necessary. Ordinarily that *might* have allowed for a more patient approach by Catcher, *might* have allowed for a bit more study of the zone to see if there were any environmental factors at play he could take advantage of.

Unfortunately, time was not on the Saber's side in this particular fight.

Reaching the first of the conveyer belts in a flash, Catcher planted a foot on a solid-looking part of the steel and leapt, flying upward in a massive arc that took him a third of the way to the ceiling high above. He didn't make a sound as he dropped, but there was a *crash* of noise when he impacted Boone's waiting shield with both feet. The Phalanx accepted the hit, but tilted his defense away at the last second so that Catcher half-slid off the metal. The force still drove Boone back two paces, however, which had been the point. The boy swung at Catcher, trying to catch him in the side with his shorter sword, but with his footing shifted the blow didn't carry half the speed or force it might have from a solid base, so it sailed harmlessly over the Saber's head as he ducked. Rocketing upward from that crouch again, Catcher first feigned Arthus' blade

at Boone's eyes over the edge of the Phalanx's shield, then twisted into a sweep of his clawed left hand at the boy's sword arm, hoping to sneak in enough damage to disarm the cadet.

No dice, unfortunately, and the fight only got more hellish from there.

Catcher, fortunately, had always been well-balanced in specs—as Sabers tended to be—and had made a point of training up his Endurance when he could, so keeping up a steady flow of hits and slashes and strikes wasn't any major issue. Even as the fight slipped out of its first 30 seconds and passed into a minute in length, there was no obvious slowing down. It was good evidence, Aria thought absently as she looked on, of the steady improvement they'd all made over the last months, and she was particularly glad for it in the moment. Again, ordinarily it would have been asinine to chop at a Phalanx's shield like a lumberjack might challenge a stubborn tree, but Catcher didn't have the time for that. He *had* to get through. He *had* to. If he didn't manage that soon, he was at risk of—

SHING!

“OH!” Cashe exclaimed excitedly, and Aria felt a thrill that was accented by Rei's arm stiffening across her back. Catcher's ceaseless pounding had abruptly borne fruit. After what seemed like a hundred vicious hits, Arthus' edge had apparently caught at just the right angle in Boone's chipping shield, because the sword had cleanly sheared off maybe a quarter of the left side of the steel. Aria's grip tightened around the railing, seeing this, all her experience as a Phalanx telling her this was a *huge* blow. Aside from the obvious reduction in coverage, a round shield that size would suddenly be off-balance by such a loss. If Catcher was ready for it...

WHLAM!

“YES!” Aria and Rei exclaimed together as the hit blasted forward and landed cleanly.

Before the hunk of metal had even completely hit the floor, the abrupt change in the weight of the shield had bent Boone's arm awkwardly for just the briefest of moments as the boy fought to rebalance his defense. It was only an instant, a fraction of a second, but the Phalanx was wide open. Unfortunately the stroke that had cleaved the steel had brought Arthus' blade out of position, but that hadn't stopped Catcher. On the contrary, he'd bent into the impetus of the downstroke and driven a shoulder forward, catching Boone full in the chest as he did.

The Phalanx, still with his feet planted, didn't go flying like most other Types might have in the moment, but he was at least thrown back, arms and legs flailing to find his balance. Catcher followed, bringing his sword up again and lancing forward, angling to drive the Device straight through Boone's ribcage and end the fight then and there. The 9th Sector cadet, however, proved atypically nimble for his Type, because he found at least a decent balance just before the blade hit, and he pivoted, sweeping his shield around to catch the weapon and redirect the plunge by and past him. Boone's own sword cleaved horizontally in a clean follow-up, but Catcher was ready for it, diving forward into a roll that had him coming up dirty and soaking in one of the zone's filthy puddles, but not absent any significant part of his being.

Like his head.

It had been a good save, but still. Aria felt a stone starting to form in her gut. That had been a *perfect* opportunity to end the fight in a reasonable time, and Boone had *just* managed to slip the noose. Now the match was going to push the 90 second mark...

"Not goooood..." Cashe muttered in a worried sort of singsong, her own knuckles tight as she gripped the railing to Aria and Rei's left with equal vigor.

"*Really* not good," Rei confirmed as Viv and Grant nodded along in agreement on the Lancer's other side.

"Come on, Catcher," Aria muttered under her breath, not even realizing she'd leaned over the edge of the walkway. "Come ooon..."

Sadly, if you tell the universe your plans, it tends to laugh...

Catcher reengaged in short order, ignoring the muddy state of his suit and CAD. He charged Boone again, Arthus leading the way once more, and the Phalanx was once more promptly put on the defensive. He'd adapted to the weight of the imbalanced shield now, though, and was clearly skilled enough to make do even with the reduced coverage of his all-important defense.

Which was why he had enough time to weather not just that assault, but the following two, winning himself another 15 seconds of breath or so.

Or—much more concerningly—15 seconds of charge.

Aria saw the moment, saw the instant the change happened. Her own Third Eye—like Rei's Type Shift—wasn't an Ability that required any electromagnetic buildup, but a lot of them were. From what she understood, one was informed of the availability of such an option the moment it was brought online, having built up through time, movement friction, and impact absorption.

So it wasn't hard to tell—if one was looking for it—when Boone's face subtly lit up, giving away what was about to happen.

And Aria hadn't been the only one looking for it, apparently.

"Ah shit," Rei cursed.

She didn't have time to echo the sentiment before Boone shifted his footing and launched himself at Catcher for the first time all match, shouting the voice command as he did.

"REPULSION!"

CHAPTER 24

“Since the finalized development of the modern Combat Assistance Device, the list of User Abilities has grown year over year, with additions ranging from basic triggers in the style of Break Step or Overclock all the way to the User-Uniques that are so rare and coveted, such as those in Stormweaver’s varied arsenal. There is a curve to ownership, of course, with the most common being found en masse in any professional SCT, while of the rarer variations only one or two may be present at any given high-level tournament, and possibly not at all.

Regardless of what Abilities a User may possess, however, it is incredibly important for combatants to always retain the awareness that even the most basic of them can provide a devastating edge in the right hands...”

- “Essentials of CAD Combat”

Colonel Jon Haskelson

Distributed by Central Command, Earth

Ab fu—!

Distressingly, Catcher didn’t have time to finish the thought before Andre Boone’s Repulsion caught him almost full in the face, brought into extreme close quarters 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 electromagnetic 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 landed with. 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 they had in combat training, where the runs only ended after you typically took a wall of solid light to the face at 30 or 40 miles an hour.

The result, too, was similar.

Catcher felt himself go flying as the wind was knocked from him, felt himself 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, 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, Catcher knew he probably would have yelped—or *squealed*, more likely—as he found himself turning end over end.

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

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

CRUNCH

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 neuroline was still fully functional, 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 lurched out of the way just in time.

There was a massive *crash* of 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.

The advantage now distinctly his, Boone changed his strategy. With a grunt the 9th Sector cadet wrenched his shield from the wreckage of the conveyer before rushing 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 damn 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 afternoon 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 had the thought now and then, but knowing Rei and Viv and Aria it was probably never more than 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 tied with Cashe, but also probably the least skilled in terms of combat ability. Admittedly that was a little awe-inspiring, all things considered. Catcher had had a *stellar* record on his combat team in prep school. He was the son of a Systems Champion, and had welcomed and weathered his mother's coaching since he'd been old enough to swing at a hologram. Catcher had always been among the best when it came to competitive fighting for as long as he could remember.

And yet, somehow, he'd 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. His CAD's development had been astonishing, frankly, as had Gemela's and Hippolyta's, with the only reason the group never discussing it much being that *Shido* was a hard Device to be compared to. 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 brought 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.

Thud!

Boone's rush to take advantage of his new 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, had survived the big scary Ability. Maybe barely, but still. It had taken nearly 90 seconds for Boone to build it up, too, and with Catcher fighting one-handed it seemed unlikely the match would last that long again. He had to find a way to turn the tide now, or the match 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 recordings and old feeds never offered half the chance to learn about a User as did taking them on head-to-head. 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 more so than most of his Type. It was a big, heavy thing, and he used it almost as effectively as he might have hunkering down behind an actual *wall*.

Secondly, Catcher had already made a big “dent” in said wall, cutting part of it off with sheer force of will. That meant it wasn't totally impenetrable.

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 obviously 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 openings Boone allowed to the shield itself.

If Boone saw the trick, he didn't know what to make of it, and Catcher suspected after a second or two 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 at once Boone was in his element again, taking the assault with relative ease despite the shield missing a chunk of its inside section. That was 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 build up in his sword arm as the fight pushed at 3 full minutes, Catcher continued to hack and slash at the shield, dropping Arthus again and again and again on the solid 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 then 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 his opponent slam himself into exhaustion against the shield. In fact, Catcher started to suspect 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, some 10 seconds later or so, the chance came.

Catcher had watched, had waited for the opportunity. As a crossing slash brought Arthus down across his body, Boone accepted the blow for the hundredth time, taking it on the shield and tilting the steel with the hit to lessen the impact. Catcher's sword screamed off the metal after only leaving a shallow gouge, but the shield was before him now, perfectly angled to face him straight on. With a snarl 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 aching body. The vysetrium-lined tip 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 into 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'd seen when Repulsion had come online. To Boone, the fight was over, and it certainly would have been under most 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.

It was pretty obvious he hadn't expected Catcher to *let go* of Arthus just as the sword being ripped from his fingers would have pulled him off balance.

Abruptly Boone's expression changed as he registered his mistake, the Phalanx obviously understanding—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 swung too wide, leaving Boone completely open, his left arm outstretched to one side, his right driving forward 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 only blade slipped by his groin and chest by less than an inch, but the heavy steel of Catcher's heel caught the Phalanx square in the side of the head, brought around with more weight than a swinging hammer.

WHAM!

Boone dropped like a rock, tumbling to the dirty cement floor of the depot in a crumpled pile of limp limbs. Lying there, he didn't do more than twitch for a full second, then two, then three.

Then...

"Fatal Damaged Accrued," the Arena called out. "Winner: Layton Catchwick, the Galens Institute."

Catcher—who'd spun through the kick to finish at ready with feet spaced and his one good hand in a fist up before him—blinked in surprise.

"Well damn..." he 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, the commentator's voice reaching him first.

"And THAT's how you turn a match around, ladies and gentlemen! Congrats to Cadet Catchwick, and let's hope his opponent learns a lesson in caution from this—!"

But then the woman's voice was lost to the thunder of the applause.

Whether it was the same level of enthusiasm for the likes of Rei or Aria's matches earlier in the day, he had no real way of telling, because going from nothing but the sounds of rain and splashing water to the eruption of cheers was something he didn't think he would ever get used to. He'd been so focused on his astonishment 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 largely fallen away around him. As the last of 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, locating Rei's white hair first, the rest of Firesong having gathered in one 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 something like a *smile* on the Mauler's face.

Then, though, he raised his eyes to the rest of the stadium, taking in the *thousands* of people all applauding and screaming, many having gotten to their feet, 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 starting to move 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 almost took a step in Boone's direction, but thought better of it when the arbiter—who'd been the one to dismiss him—caught his eye and shook his head, like the man knew what he was thinking. Feeling a little guilty but having no choice, Catcher offered a quick salute to show he understood, then turned and hurried off the field, making for the tunnels.

It didn't really hit him until he'd dipped down the dimly-lit ramp, 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 couldn't help putting a hand out to support himself against the closest polished plasteel wall. It was more of a surprise than he'd really been willing to admit to himself before the match, given the odds. Boone had been 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.

But Catcher had *won*...

For a long time he stood there, taking it in. It was a strange sensation. 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 had only ever eked out a single win against Grant. He'd *never* come out on top against Aria, and it had been some months now 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 and his three qualifying matches the day before, but thinking about it... This was the first time Catcher had cleanly beaten an opponent who—by all rights—had 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, he 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 crisp high fives.

That, though, was the moment his NOED came alive unbidden.

Catcher stopped again, and 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, his jaw dropped further and further until he got to the bottom of the notification.

And 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 fraction of appreciation for the rush Rei had to experience with Shido time and time again.

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

“User Ability... Assigned...?”

CHAPTER 25

“Catcher was only the first sign we noticed. There were others, I think, in retrospect. A lot of them. In fact, looking back on it, I’m pretty sure the truth was under our noses the entire time...”

*- Aria of Flames
Concerning the Stormweaver*

It was 20 minutes or so before Rei started to get worried that something had happened. Three more fights had passed on the north field without Catcher coming up to join them again—including a stellar matchup where Kastro Vademe took out another mid-C-ranker from Deermond—and as another off-balance pair of a second- and third-years were called up for the fourth match, Rei realized he no longer believed the Saber had jogged off for a well-deserved shower, or simply found a quiet spot to take a break. If that was the case, Catcher would have at least shot them a message by then.

“The hell did he get off to...?”

Aria must have been harboring similar concerns, muttering the question and frowning for probably the tenth time up the walkway towards the closest underwork entrance. More space had opened up along the railing since Catcher’s fight, so the five of them had spread out a little more evenly absent the reason—or *excuse*, more like—to squeeze together.

“Catcher?” Rei asked. “Yeah... I was just thinking the same thing. I wonder if something happened...”

“Did you message him?”

Rei shook his head. “Figured he was just taking it easy. But it’s been a while now...”

Aria nodded again, obviously a little worried as she bent to look around Rei.

“Cashe, you’re up in a bit, right? South field?”

The Lancer on Rei’s left didn’t glance away from watching the setup of the fight before them with interest. “Yeah. Another trek. I was gonna head that way after this match...”

Aria bit her lip. “I hate to ask... Would you mind heading down now? And doing a loop of the north tunnels?” She threw a thumb over the gold trim of one shoulder, towards the underwork stairs. “Catcher should have come up and met us by now, or at least told us where he’s off to. He knows you have a match coming up.”

Cashe blinked, looking around in concern now, too. “I hadn’t realized... Yeah. I’ll head out. Think he’s still by the ramp?”

Aria shrugged, and Rei could only mirror the motion beside her.

“Maybe?” he answered for her. “Or he headed for SB2 and a shower, but that seems unlikely. He said he’d wait for us.”

“Might have just slipped his mind after that fight,” Cashe muttered, but she didn’t look all that convinced of the notion. “But yeah, I’ll do a loop. Let you know if I find him. Otherwise I’ll see you guys after the fight, and we can go looking together.”

And with that she was off, heading for the underworks as requested, her departure catching Viv and Grant’s attention from her other side.

“Where’s Cashe going?” Viv asked, watching the Lancer depart. “Doesn’t she have a bit before her fight?”

“To check on Catcher,” Rei answered, politely sliding over to fill Cashe’s vacated spot—and briefly putting an arm around Aria’s waist again to pull her along with him—to make space for other onlookers. “Something’s going on. He should have been back by now.”

Viv frowned, and her gaze flicked briefly to the corner of her frame, probably checking her clock. Almost at once she, too, seemed a little worried, and a second later her NOED was alive to let her type out a message against the rail with one hand.

“Just pinged him,” she said as she made one final input before closing the frame with a blink. “I didn’t even realize... You *seriously* get sucked into these fights.”

Rei—feeling a little better now that they were checking in on things—laughed under his breath at that. “Oh yeah? Have we finally given you the bug? Took long enough...”

Viv scoffed and turned away from him. “*Please*. Don’t go looking for more credit than you deserve. I always thought the SCTs were cool. I just don’t have any body pillows of my favorite S-Ranked fighters, unlike *some* people.”

Rei gave a “Ha!” at that, not helped by Grant looking around with a raised eyebrow as he registered the words.

“... Body pillow?” he repeated, eyeing Rei dubiously. “You’ve got... body pillows, Ward?”

“Even if I did, it’d be none of you guys’ business, would it?”

Grant blinked, something like a hint of a smile tugging the corner of his lip, but before either he or Viv could say anything else Aria poked Rei hard enough in the ribs to get a wince out of him.

“How about me, then?” she asked sweetly, and he turned back to find her giving him a venomous smile. “Would the idea of you spooning the Gatecrasher at night be any of *my* business, hmm?”

Rei, caught by surprise, mouthed at the air a second until he managed to get out an “Uuuh...”

Too late, because Viv was apparently on her game that morning.

“Can confirm,” she said, pretending to check something off an invisible list in the air before her. “Aria hasn’t been in Rei’s room yet.” She looked around at Grant with a snigger. “You owe me 100 credits.”

It was Aria’s turn to gape.

“VIV!” she squeaked at last while Rei tried hard not to laugh between then.

Viv, though, only grinned wickedly back at her while Grant sighed on her left and brought his NOED up to settle what had apparently been an ongoing bet. “Oh? Am I wrong? Maybe he just hides the pillows in his closet when you come over, then?”

Rei just short of lost it at that, covering his mouth with one hand and leaning into the railing as his body shook despite his best efforts. He managed to hide his laughter well enough, though not helped as Aria made multiple sounds that might have been the desperate gasps of a dying fish from beside him.

Then all hilarity took an abrupt pause as a message notification pinged their team chat.

“It’s Cashe,” Grant grunted first, and Rei opened the notice to see that he was right.

Found Catcher. Everything’s fine.

Rei read the message twice, then exchanged a glance with Aria. It was... a little strange, wasn’t it? More than a little, actually. Not only the brevity of the assurance that all was well, but the fact that *Cashe* had been the one to send it, rather than Catcher himself.

Especially after Viv had just messaged him...

Rei decided to shoot back a quick message.

You sure? Catcher, everything okay?

He waited, then—along with the other three—for an answer. It took a while, but when it came through it *was* from Catcher, this time.

But no more reassuring.

Yeab. All good. Sorry. Will explain later.

Rei was a little at a loss, and feeling no better than he had a minute before. If anything, he was more concerned.

And he wasn't the only one.

“The hell is that supposed to mean?” Viv grumbled. “He'll ‘explain later’? Explain *what?*”

Rei opened his mouth, taking half a step away from the railing and about to say that he was going to check on the situation, when Aria stopped him with a hand, and he looked at her to find her frame still bright.

“Cashe just messaged me privately,” she told him, eyes moving rapidly across what looked like a single line of text, going wide as she did. “Oh... *Oh!*”

“What??” Viv demanded, leaning around Rei to squint at Aria like she was trying to read the impossibly minute letters. “What is it?”

It took a second for Aria to respond, and when she did it was with no less surprise.

“‘Arthus evolved,’” she said, reading off the message. “‘Big deal. BIG deal. He'll come up in a bit. Leave him alone for a now. Shellshocked, I think.’”

There was a moment of silence at that.

Then Viv grinned.

“You don't think...?” she started, glancing around at each of them.

“Has to be, right?” Grant confirmed with a nod, looking maybe just a little bit impressed.

Rei, meanwhile, was wincing even as he, too, smiled, because Aria had grabbed his right arm so excitedly it was at risk of breaking.

“Has to be,” they both said together.

“Ruinous?!” Rei demanded half an hour later, jaw slack as he gaped at Catcher.
“*Ruinous*?! DUDE!”

“Yeah...” was all the Saber managed to answer with, disbelief still very much present in his voice even an hour after he had to have gotten the notification. “Yeah...”

They were all six in a back corner of the SB2 locker rooms reserved for first-years, the few other cadets who’d been lingering in the space having vacated the area quickly at a polite request from Aria—though Rei thought the matching glowers from Grant and Viv had probably helped. Cashe had wrapped her fight some 5 minutes before, coming out on top with relative ease in the unfortunate dual-Galens pairing against Valormade’s Hannah Tethers. She was the only one sitting on the aisle bench, massaging a spot in her side where Tether’s spear had gotten in one good stab late in the match, but the act was largely more automatic than deliberate.

Because Cashe, like all of them, was taking in Catcher’s evolved CAD with wide eyes.

Arthus had made a *big* jump when it came to its physical manifestation. Where originally it had only covered Catcher’s legs and forearms, it now clad his hips and plated his right arm all the way to the shoulder, then continued across half his chest. The Device’s sword, too, had adjusted a little, gaining what Rei thought was about an inch in reach and half that in width. It was a *proper* blade now, threatening even as it was passively held before Catcher to be examined, the growth having been added on almost

exclusively with additional vysetrium edging that gave the weapon a truly dangerous purple glow.

The physical evolution, though, wasn't even *close* to the coolest part.

“‘Ruinous?’” Viv asked, apparently not following despite glowing with excitement. “‘What does it do? I’ve never heard of it.’”

“‘Cause it’s *super* rare!” Rei practically squealed, unable to stop himself from whirling on her in his enthusiasm. “‘Like... *SUPER* rare, Viv. It’s definitely not User Unique, or anything but I don’t think there’s been more than like *two hundred* people to get it in the history of the ISCM!’”

“‘176,’” Catcher mumbled, still staring at the sword he was displaying before him. “‘I looked it up. I’m number 176...’”

“‘Oh...’” Viv said, catching on. “‘*Oh!* Holy *shit*, Catcher! That’s amazing!’”

“‘More so than you realize... Ruinous is seriously powerful in the right hands...’”

As it had been happening more and more often of late, everyone’s glance around at Grant was brief, and the Mauler ignored them as he looked at Rei and continued.

“‘You probably know better than I do, but Ruinous is the ‘condensed Overclock’ one, right?’”

“‘Uh... Yeah.’” Rei was pleasantly surprised. “‘Kinda amazed you know that, actually. It’s seriously not a common ability...’”

Grant waved the comment aside. “‘You and Catchwick aren’t the only hardcore SCT fans at Galens, man. Despite my lack of body pillows—’” Viv barely covered up a choke of laughter at that “‘—I’m pretty heavily invested in them myself when I’ve got the time to catch the feeds. Wasn’t Ruinous Deadskull’s thing?’”

Rei was *officially* impressed, now.

“‘Damn dude, you *do* know your shit...’”

Aria coughed politely, eyeing the two of them keenly as they looked around at her.

“‘Unlike *some* of us, apparently,’” she said dryly. “‘Could one of you *explain*, please?’”

Rei and Grant exchanged a look, and the Mauler nodded first, ceding the floor.

“Deadskull was one of the earlier Intersystem champs, like twenty or thirty years after the SCTs were formally established. He was an axe-type Mauler, like Grant, and his whole *thing* was Ruinous. It earned him his name.”

“Because...?” It was Cashe’s turn to sound impatient, standing up from the bench at last to join their circle around Catcher.

“Because Ruinous is basically what Grant said. It’s like a condensed form of Overclock. It’s a LOT shorter—like *half a second* usable time max—and it’s charge-based, like Repulsion, but it can be used repeatedly *and* doesn’t leave you totally drained like Overclock. Basically—” Rei brought one hand up and around slowly, demonstrating a swing with an invisible sword at Cashe’s side “—imagine you’re going toe-to-toe with a guy, and then all of a sudden out of nowhere one hit lands with three or four times the force of any other. No warning, no heads up. And *then* instead of being all but done, your opponent is still coming after you.”

Cashe’s eyes went wide.

“Oh holy shit...” she echoed Viv after a second. “That would be... bad.”

“*Really* bad,” Grant agreed with a grunt. “Against a Mauler it would snap your spear in half if you weren’t ready for it. Hence the name.”

“And ‘Deadskull’s’ moniker,” Rei confirmed with a nod. “The guy was known for timing Ruinous so that it would shred an opponent’s defenses and FDA them all in one go.” He forgoed wielding his pretend sword in favor of bringing his hand in a chopping motion at his temple. “Boom. Done. Usually via blow to the head.”

There was a long moment of silence after that as the girls turned to stare at Catcher, who hadn’t said so much as another word the entire time Rei and Grant had been explaining.

Then—in a moment of *deja vu* for Rei—Aria grabbed the Saber by one steel-clad wrist and started dragging him through the group and up the aisle.

“Woah!” Catcher exclaimed as he was hauled along at top-speed, coming to his senses at last. “Where are we going?! Recall! *Recall!*”

Arthus whirled inward in an instant, reforming around his wrists to leave the boy in nothing but his combat suit.

“Where do you think?” Aria asked without turning around as Rei and the others hurried to catch up to the pair. “We need to test this out. This is *huge*, Catcher!”

Catcher only got out another few scattered protests before they were out of their row of lockers and hurrying along the wider walking space by the west wall of the room, making for the exit. Rei, Cashe, Viv, and Grant caught the two just as the doors opened to let them out into the hall, and Rei was pleased when Aria didn’t immediately pull Catcher towards the SB2 training area. Instead, she dragged him left, in the direction of the elevators.

Smart, he thought with a grin, only looking over his shoulder to explain where they were going to the others when Grant asked in confusion.

They were up and out of the underworks and onto the main walkway of the Arena inside of a couple minutes. They reached the Galens seating section, and after a few seconds of looking around for who Rei thought was probably Valera Dent, Aria settled on Captain Takeshi standing at the railing observing a pair of third-years going at it on the south field. Takeshi eyed them all with interest when Aria marched right up to her—with Catcher still stumbling along behind her in tow—and even more so when the girl only offered a rushed salute before leaning forward to exchange a quiet word in the officer’s ear. Expectantly the woman’s eyes went wide, and she immediately turned to wave over Elean Samsus, who’d already looked up at Aria’s approach from where she’d been sitting not far away. The two captains spoke briefly, then Samsus nodded and said “Yup. You go. I’ll keep an eye on things here.” With a word of thanks, Takeshi promptly turned on her heel and started right back along the way Firesong had all come, motioning for the team to follow her.

5 minutes later, they were back down in SB2 again, and had claimed a field for themselves when a couple first-years from Sermont's Point had finished their warm-ups and taken their leave.

“Okay you two, zone coming up,” the captain told Aria and Catcher, who were standing close to each other well inside the field already. Rei and the others were lined up just inside the limit of the silver circle—where Takeshi had told them to stand—and for good reason. As Rei dutifully folded and put Aria's jacket down by her cap and boots—she'd handed them all to him in a rush after stripping down to only what parts of her regulars she could fight in—the plating beneath them glowed a solid white, and he, Viv, Cashe, and Grant were suddenly rising upwards, 5, then 10, then 15 feet in the air. Below them Aria and Catcher—with Takeshi standing nearby in observation—had only climbed the standard yard, placing them in an open, cylindrical hollow within the body-length wide wall Rei and the others were looking down from.

“Ooooooh,” Cashe muttered from Rei's right, finally catching on.

While students had access to the fields for warm-ups and warm-downs, said access was limited to calling up a single flat neutral zone to fight on. Most groups didn't even bother with taking up precious time to do that, choosing instead to loosen up and call their CADs directly on the black projection plating—which was totally impervious to phantom-called Devices—but even those who did were open to all observation and totally lacking in privacy. That wasn't a big deal *most* of the time—if everyone was at a disadvantage, no one was at a disadvantage—but on occasion Rei had seen closed-off zones like this called up here and there over the last few days, probably exactly for a situation like this.

It required the approval—and access—of a school chaperone, but it was well-worth keeping something like Catcher's newly-gained Ability private until it could be used to advantage in an actual match.

“Cadets, call!”

Takeshi gave the order, and below Rei watched Hippolyta and Arthus come roiling up around Aria and Catcher respectively. The Saber's newly improved CAD was particularly impressive in the moment—covering more of him than even Aria's Device, for once—and Takeshi actually let out an impressed whistle.

“Very nice, Catchwick! Now show us what you can do with it!”

On the field Catcher saluted the officer with his sword, then jogged forward until he was a couple feet from Aria. She brought up her shield, and he waited for her to tell him that she was ready.

Then Catcher let loose.

It had been decided that Aria was the obvious choice to test his new Ability on, and her lack of a combat suit was the result of being so eager to agree. So now she stood there, letting Catcher swing at Hippolyta like he was trying to break down a door, the shield accepting the brunt of the attack with the sharp, hacking sounds of crystalline vysetrium clanging off—and often cleaving into—metal.

It took about 100 seconds or so, by Rei's count, a number that would probably improve with practice and further CAD upgrades...

“Oh!” Catcher exclaimed abruptly, halting his assault to step away from Aria. “It's ready!”

As Rei felt Viv and Cashe both tense beside him, Takeshi nodded below.

“Okay! Let's make it more of a fight, then! Catchwick, I want you to do everything you can to FDA Laurent! Laurent, you're good with sticking to defense only?”

“Yes, ma'am!” Aria answered at once, settling down into a cleaner ready stance.

“Alright! In that case... Fight!”

Rei was right there with Viv as the girl barely stopped herself from instinctively yelling out an encouragement, just managing to clap a hand over her mouth in time as Catcher charged.

The Saber hit Aria with everything he had this time, slicing and slashing at her in a flurry that showed off his recent boost in Speed—the spec increase that had just so happened to jump the Saber up to C5. Arthus’ now-heavier blade did good work, too, but Aria was using her own spear to defend as well this time, blocking and parrying almost as equally as she accepted a hit to Hippolyta’s shield. Despite Catcher’s evolution she didn’t budge from her starting place even under the hailstorm of impacts, taking the assault with that razor focus Rei had always found as endearing as the girl’s off-field warmth.

And then...

There, Rei thought, seeing the opportunity.

Just like Catcher did.

“Ruinous!”

The vocal command was mostly lost to the sound of the fight and the clashes of the other first-years going at it on the rest of the fields, but Rei made it out just the same. He saw Aria react, saw her brace for the impact as Arthus’ sword blazed purple for a moment, glowing even more brightly than Honoris’ vysetrium did when Grant triggered Overclock. The blade landed, crashing into Hippolyta’s shield with a sound like a gong.

And Aria went flying.

Okay, so maybe “flying” wasn’t the most accurate description of the result, but the Ability landed with exponentially greater results than any of Catcher’s other hits. Rei heard Aria let out an “*Urk!*” of strain as she was thrown right off her feet, her whole body knocked back despite having been ready for the hit. She fell, slamming to the ground on her back. She tumbled once, then twice before just managing to get her feet under her and roll up into a ready stance 15 feet away, hair loose and in her face now.

Catcher, though, hadn't come after her. Arthur's blade returned to its calmer tone in his right hand, the Saber had stopped, staring at the girl.

And for *damn* good reason.

"Wooooah..." Rei, Viv, Cashe, *and* Grant all murmured together, taking in Ruinous's final results.

Hippolyta's shield... was *bent*.

It wasn't by much, admittedly, but the curve in the steel was obvious even from that distance, a solid, almost-horizontal cut marking the line along which Catcher had landed the Ability. It took a second before Aria, too, noticed, starting when she did and standing straight while lifting her shield over her head to examine it in the light with an amazed look on her face.

Then she beamed around at Catcher.

"Catcher!" she squealed, waving the Device around like a proud mother showing off her child's first drawing. "That was *awesome!* Did you see that? Did you *see* that??"

"Pretty sure he did, Laurent, given he's the one that *did* it," Takeshi answered for him, chuckling as she approached the pair again. Apparently there would be no reprimanding Catcher for having stopped the fight short as the captain reached him to put a hand on his shoulder. "*Very* nice, Cadet. I think this'll be a game changer for you, with some work."

"Y-yes, ma'am," Catcher stammered in answer, apparently unable to look at anything but Aria's shield, which she was still showing off with grinning pride.

Then, though, he seemed to come to his sense.

"Work, ma'am?" he asked, finally turning to the captain. "Is there something I can do to make this do more for me? I-I mean obviously I'll need to practice—" he was quick to add as Takeshi raised an eyebrow at the question "—I just mean is there something *specific*...?"

He trailed off, obviously unsure of himself, but the captain only smiled and gave his shoulder an encouraging pat before dropping her arm.

“There is, but not right this second. Still, I *am* a teacher so...” She looked around at Rei and the others, motioning that they join them. After the four of them had jumped down and hurried to gather around Catcher, the captain turned to Aria, who still hadn’t moved. “Cadet Laurent. Can you tell me the biggest weakness Catchwick’s Ruinous currently suffers?”

It was a softball of a question. Rei knew it, as did the others, he was sure. Catcher would have too, had he not been so stunned by his newfound Ability.

Sure enough Aria answered at once, only pausing to recall Hippolyta before approaching as she spoke.

“Yes, ma’am! The vocal command, ma’am!”

“Exactly,” Takeshi agree, looking to Catcher again. “Right now you’re in a decent enough spot, but in the Bs and As—much less the Ss—having to voice your activation isn’t an inch different from giving your opponent a written playbook of your strategy before the match. It’s a *huge* disadvantage to those who can’t master mental commands before they hit the later ranks. And honestly—” the captain made a bit of a face “—I say you’re in a ‘decent spot’, but your particular Ability is a bit problematic to shout even as a C-Ranked User.”

“Oh, yeah.” Catcher appeared to be catching up to them now, scrunching his face as he considered. “She braced for it. Aria did. She braced for the hit.”

“*Cadet Laurent*—” Takeshi reminded him of protocol gently “—braced for it, yes. Almost every User at your level will be able to do at least that much, even now. It hardly makes your Ability useless—not by a long shot, I promise you—but you managed to put a dent and a half in her shield when Laurent *knew* what was coming. Imagine what you could have done if she hadn’t.”

“And imagine it against any other Phalanx...” Cashe muttered, seeming to forget herself for a second as she eyed Catcher’s still-called Device. She caught herself, though, and straightened with an abrupt salute and a “Sorry, ma’am!”

Takeshi shrugged the apology off, not looking away from Catcher. “It’s a fair observation. Laurent is the best Phalanx in our year at this tournament, Catchwick. Probably the best *User*, with one or two possible exceptions.” Rei pretended he didn’t see the woman give him an amused glance. “So yes. Imagine what you could do to another opponent if you didn’t have to tell them what was coming.”

“So... master mental commands,” the Saber summarized with a nod. “That’s what I need to do. Got it.”

Takeshi snorted, and her eyes blazed briefly. The seven of them started to drop as the field faded beneath their feet.

“That’s what you *all* need to do,” the captain corrected, looking around at the rest of the team as she spoke. “You’ll be getting instruction on that later this semester, true, but if you want to be ahead of the curve it’s an area you can start practicing in now. Especially since I hear you’ve all been approved for special conditioning once we return to school.” She eyed them all appraisingly. “Of the six of you, only Laurent has a *single* voiceless command down. The rest of you need to catch up, at the very least when it comes to your Ability triggers.”

“What about those without Abilities, ma’am?” Viv asked, sounding a little bummed. “Cashe and I are odd men out, now...”

Takeshi smirked at that, giving the girl a look that firmly conveyed Viv would find no sympathy with her.

“Yes, even those without, Arada. Especially since I have a good feeling that’s not going to be a problem for either of you for very long...”

CHAPTER 26

It didn't take as long as any of them might have thought for Takeshi to be proven right, though on a scale that Rei thought the captain had probably not expected.

Sectionals was quickly proving itself to be a special place for breakthroughs, in particular among the higher ranked first-years of every school. By the time Firesong made it through the rest of their Tuesday matches, then Wednesday's—cleaning up all the while—the conversation around The Chevaron's breakfast tables Thursday morning focused almost exclusively on the news—and rumors just as often—of one student or another having made a big leap in their CAD development. Among the nearly 200 first-years, in fact, Catcher's evolution was only one of several that Rei had confirmed since the start of the tournament, and there were mumblings of that many more he hadn't yet looked into. That didn't exempt the Galens ranks, either, because Kastro Vademe himself had hit C6 in a Wargames the evening before, earning himself not only the start of the famous “Lupin's Foot” that Jack Benaly's Device already displayed—an additional articulation in the CAD limbs that offered an excellent neutral boost in agility on most terrain—but also the development of Break Step to go right along with it. The Valormade squad leader—usually largely level-headed and composed—had been positively shaking with excitement when he'd shared the big news with the other teams at dinner, and was all smiles at the whoops and shouts of congratulations from everyone he'd received in response.

Rei, though, had felt a thrill at the announcement that had had little to do with the fact that Galens' overall power had just notched up another level.

Vademe's Break Step was specifically the *third* Ability he'd heard had been earned among the first-years so far during the tournament. A Brawler from Deermont had been assigned “Bulwark” Wednesday morning after he'd lost a Duel to Zain Kadness, apparently, which provided a massive boost to his reactive shielding capabilities for a

short time. Catcher's Ruinous was still the chief among the whispers—as it had rightfully been since lunch Tuesday, when the Saber hadn't been able to stop himself from telling the Valormade and Red Crown in his excitement—the fact remained that *three* Abilities had been developed in a single tournament, and that was only so far.

Three Abilities from no more than *five* evolutions...

On the one hand, Rei had to concede that it made some sense. Christopher Lennon himself had told him once that Users tended to develop their first Ability in the C ranks, if they ever got one. Given the nature of Sectionals, that resulted in a lot of first-years in one place who just happened to be in—or near—the Cs.

Still... it seemed like a lot even despite that fact, didn't it?

Rei had a theory, of course. While he knew Shido tended to be the exception rather than the rule when it came to growth and evolution, he kept falling back on how his CAD had made that very specific jump in Defense and Offense their first Monday afternoon. It reminded him, too, of how Shido had seemingly responded to the greatest weakness of his Brawler Mode—his lack of reach—by providing him with a *User Unique* Ability that extended his range of attack significantly. Almost always the CAD seemed to evolve in reaction to his needs, seemed to intake the information—both in the moment *and* in the long term—and provide him with an answer to the problem. If he assumed that Shido wasn't different from other Devices in that sense—a big assumption, but one he had no evidence with which to disprove—then it made sense that other CADs responded in the same way, just at a much slower pace. That tracked, too, with the fact that Users could directionally train their specs to a certain degree, could steer their conditioning like Lennon had steered Rei's training day the semester before towards Speed. Now... well... here they were, the first-years in their first *real* tournament, being challenged every day—often several *times* a day—by combatants usually of a level with them, or better.

And people were making jumps, seeing evolutions, and gaining Abilities left, right, and center compared to normal trends.

Rei—and the rest of Firesong, when he brought it up with them—just couldn't help but wonder if their Devices weren't just a *tad* bit smarter than the ISCM had ever really let on...

For all the gossip and news, though, the fights still remained the centerpoint of the broader Sectionals attention, which was hardly any kind of surprise. The first-years were all abuzz, sure, but for the majority of the civilian spectators—both in person and watching from home—their interest was largely still more invested in the upperclassmen and their matches. If the feeds were to be believed, the three Galens rookie squads were generally the only Astra-3 first-year groups making any kind of splash in the news, while the likes of Steelbound and King's Law were only at the *top* of a long list of older teams getting all kinds of attention both in-system and beyond. The *individual* skewing of consideration was even more obvious, with only Rei and Aria making any headlines planet-wide in their year, while Lennon and Sidorov were among dozens of exceptional fighters from the older classes being touted as a part of the next generation of SCT pros. Those two in particular, of course, stole the spotlight more often than not, the latter for ripping through more third-years than he had any right to—even when they were ranked higher—and the former for consistently showing off the violent power of his CAD, Ouroboros, that had earned him his Arena name.

Of course, that didn't mean the other members of Firesong were interested in letting themselves get left in the dust.

“Dammit!” Viv cursed over the coms. “Anyone got an idea where you are? This damn place is so damn *big!*”

“I think I hear you,” Catcher responded from somewhere. “You're... down from me?”

“I’m with Grant.” Aria this time. “Arena brought us in in the same room. We’ll head for center field.”

“Roger.” Viv again, sounding like she was moving. “And yeah, I hear you too, Catcher. Coming to you. Rei? Cashe? Any idea where you are?”

“Zero,” Cashe answered. “Near the outside, given the viewports, but that’s all.”

There was a pause in the coms as everyone obviously waited for Rei to answer.

“Rei...?” Aria finally repeated, sounding a little worried.

It didn’t help.

“Little—*urk*—busy!” Rei finally responded through clenched teeth, already having a hard enough time keeping his bearings as he spun in freefall down the gently rotating hall, the strip lighting along what was now the floor, now the ceiling flickering and sparking.

The fact that he was up against not one, not two, but *three* opponents from a *pair* of different squads did nothing to help him center himself.

“Starting to *hate* Zero-Grav,” he growled as he managed to catch the edge of a broken plasteel doorframe, stopping his free “drop”. Looking back up the hall at the trio doing their best to give chase, he did a quick calculation, then launched himself at them, ignoring the continued chatter of his teammates in his ear as they demanded to know where he was so they could come help. There was no way they’d make it in time one way or the other.

“Type Shift: Saber Mode!”

Their Thursday afternoon Wargame—the quarter-final match before semi-finals Saturday and finals Sunday—had manifested as an Elimination bout on what was obviously some kind of massive floating space wreck. If he had to guess, Rei thought the ship had the feel of one of those colossal inter-system passenger carriers he’d seen docked on the rare occasion he’d gone back and forth from Astra-2 and 3 to visit the Estoran Center, the type of vessel so large its whole drive was powered by a hunk of

vysetrium the size of a small flyer. If that was the case, he was probably in some kind of staffing area kept off-limits to passengers, but even that was only indicated by the plain paint and narrow nature of the hall.

None of it mattered for the moment, of course.

Shido's sword—lined in team-assigned yellow—led the way up as Rei catapulted along the line of the shaft, working hard to keep some sense of up and down while the hall continued to rotate around him. The three fighters ahead—a Brawler and Lancer from the 105th called Barret and Skylar, alongside a Mauler from Kenneth called Fuentes—had clumped together as they'd chased after him, clearly looking to overpower Rei with numbers. It might have worked, except that in Zero-G it was *exceedingly* hard to reposition yourself quickly if you didn't mind your surroundings, much less in coordination with a team.

It helped too that—judging by the alarm that flashed across all of their faces as he ripped back up the hall—not a one among their three had expected Rei to turn and charge *them*.

His trajectory lined up to launch him past Barret first, aiming to take advantage of the Brawler's lacking reach compared to Shido's Saber Mode. As he streaked by, though, Skylar made a desperate thrust at him from her squadmate's far side, her spear flashing red in the inconsistent lighting. Seizing on a stroke of inspiration, Rei snapped his clawed left hand out to slap the weapon's haft away, instantly changing the angle of his momentum. Where Barret had been expecting a slash at his side as Rei would have slipped by the group, he instead took two armored feet full in the chest, the impact serving not only to send him flailing backwards up the hall again but also to mostly stop Rei just inside of Skylar's ideal range. The girl squawked in fear at the sudden adaptation, yelling for help even as she fought to bring her spear in for tighter quarters. Fuentes, though, was already struggling to get around from her other side to assist, which gave Rei as much time as he could have wanted to slash at the Lancer. Unfortunately having

no ground to plant his feet on had the blade landing with only a fraction of the force it might have, but it still cleaved through the arm Skylar threw up to protect her face, stopping just short of blinding her when she jerked her head back reflexively.

Then she was screaming in pain.

Content with the damage he'd managed to inflict, Rei slammed an open hand on the ceiling above his head—or was that a wall?—to shoot himself down and under the ripping cross swing of Fuentes' green-lined hammer as the Mauler finally managed to get himself lined up for an attack. The weapon might have ruffled Rei's hair had the field been projecting air currents for them, but a miss was a miss and Rei found the far side of the hall just as Fuentes's blow had the boy starting to spin like a top through the air. The Mauler yelled in alarm, but Rei was already launching himself back upward, Shido driving home point-first. The vysetrium-lined steel took the boy in the side and pierced clean through, nailing him to the first wall and causing him to spasm once, then go limp with a wheeze when the Arena undoubtedly registered his lungs as bilaterally punctured. Had it been a choice Rei would have ripped the sword back out again, but Skylar wasn't done despite her "missing" arm, and he cursed as he instead had to use the blade and the plasteel it was wedged into on the other side of Fuentes' body as a leverage point to shove himself away from the Lancer.

Still, that was hardly the end of the world.

Only taking the time to glance up the hall to make sure Barret, the Brawler, was still scrambling to find something to grab onto to halt his backwards tumbling, Rei commanded Shido again.

"Type Shift: Brawler Mode!"

For a second time his CAD shifted with roiling arcs of white lightning, and it was with some satisfaction that Rei saw Skylar's pained glare turn to fear when the sword he was no longer in contact with dematerialized as effectively as if he'd pulled a ditch. It was one of the earliest tricks he'd learned Type Shift allowed, though he'd only rarely

had cause to make use of it. A fraction of a second later he was streaking at her directly, armored arms to either side, ready either to defend or drive the blades of his clawed knuckles forward. From what he could recall Skylar was a lower C-Rank, and she showed her aptitude by flicking her spear forward in a defense posture despite only having the one functioning hand.

It didn't save her.

With a slash Rei knocked the spearhead aside. The move had him turning at once, but it just meant he struck the Lancer's face with a knee instead of a fist. As close to the nearest wall as she was, Skylar ended up as good as sandwiched, the back of her head hitting the side of the hall with a *thunk* and another muffled yowl of pain. Not giving her a moment to recover this time, though, Rei drove the blades of his left hand down, catching her clean in the chest, the yellow claws vanishing 6-plus inches into the three black swords of the 105th stitched into her grey combat suit. Like Fuentes she jerked as she was FDAed, the red-tipped spear slipping from loose fingers the moment Shido ripped through her back to sever her aorta and spinal cord alike.

Two down, Rei thought, looking up to find Barret finally barreling at him from up the hall again, snarling Skylar's name as his fists led the way. *One to go*.

With another spoken command Shido shifted once again, and not 30 seconds later Rei was standing—well, floating, actually—on his own in the hall, the bodies of the three Users all in various states of being drawn through the nearest floor or wall or ceiling as the Arena removed them from the fight.

“Damn,” Rei grunted in his coms, realizing as he did that he was breathing hard. “Zero-G is *tough!*”

There was a moment before anyone answered, and he took the time to look up and down the hall, making sure he had his bearings straight post-fight.

“All good on your end, Ward?” Cashe asked. “I think the others found trouble too. Meanwhile I haven’t run into anyone and I can’t figure out where the hell I am. Got any kind of lock on your position?”

Rei frowned, hoping the rest of the team wasn’t in too much of a pinch. “All good here. And I’m in a... narrow hall? Probably a staff access space?” He squinted at the nearest wall. It was tough to make out the exact shade of the paint in the flickering light. “Painted... white? Or light grey, maybe?”

“Really? Shit, I just passed a door that looked like it might lead down that way. Hold on, I’m doubling back.”

“Roger. Makes my decision, too.”

Rei struck out with the flat of Shido’s sword, hitting the nearest panel of plasteel he could reach to send his body drifting toward the opposite wall. As soon as he could get ahold of it he promptly pushed off in the opposite direction he’d sent Barret during the fight, where they’d all come from initially. The Arena had started him in front of what he’d thought was some kind of air lock, which meant that if there was a way into the vessel itself it was probably in the other direction.

Assuming there weren’t multiple halls like this one, of course, or—MIND forbid—the entire *ship* was hardly more than halls like this.

In the end, however, they got lucky. Rei found a bend in the way—shoving aside several pieces of furniture that were only the largest of the free-floating debris tumbling gently around the space—and sure enough a sterile-looking steel door with a narrow glass viewing window appeared just ahead of him. Catching himself on the corner wall and pushing off again at a 90-degree angle, he’d just started reaching for the metal handle when a yellow light shone through the glass and the door swung outward to reveal Cashe taking a wary peek inside.

“Heads up!” Rei called, and she caught sight of him just in time to pull herself down and out of the way, avoiding a head-on collision. Rei sped through the opening

to find himself in another, more-spacious hall with a cleaner design and the plasteel panels colored black, doing a good job of accenting the carpeted green floor that was currently above his head.

“Sorry about that.” Hitting the far wall and staking Shido’s blade in to get purchase, he turned to face Cashe. “You good?”

“Completely,” the Lancer answered like she was irritated by this fact, using her spear to likewise guide herself around to face him. “Still haven’t run into anyone, friend or foe. Others didn’t sound so lucky.”

“I wasn’t either. Three of them in that hall. Two 105th and one from Kenneth.”

Cashe groaned. “They’re ganging up *again*?”

“Sure are,” was all Rei could answer with, offering her a sympathetic laugh as he looked around, trying to decide which way to go.

Three Wargames, now, and three matches in which the other squads seemed to have unanimously decided that Firesong needed to be dispatched before any other significant combat could take place. The previous afternoon had been much the same— with the squad only *barely* coming out on top once more—so Rei supposed none of them should have expected otherwise. It was a bit frustrating, sure, but hadn’t this been exactly what the six of them had been asking for when they’d so brutally put down Boneyard that first Team Battle match?

Careful what you wish for, I guess, Rei thought, almost sighing as he recalled Dent’s warning about being taken seriously.

Then the coms cracked, erasing all other thoughts.

“If you two are done chatting—*gab!*—we could use some help here!”

“Viv!” Rei exclaimed, joining Cashe in looking up and down the hall now. “Where are you? Any indication? Any landmarks?”

Another pause, but shorter this time.

“Dining area! All four of us! Would recommend—*WOAH!*—Would recommend *getting your ass over here double-time!*”

“Seconded!” came Aria’s shout this time, followed by an echoed agreement from Catcher and Grant.

Instantly Rei and Cashe were moving, the Lancer in the lead.

“This way,” she said, pulling herself down to the... ceiling?—man, Zero-Grav fields really *did* suck—before wrenching her spear loose and shoving off up the hall. “I came from the other direction. Outside hull. All viewports. Nowhere they could be.”

“And the dining hall on these things would be in the front or middle of the ship,” Rei followed, nodding as he, too, jerked Shido’s blade free before launching after the girl. “Good call.”

Despite the lack of gravity, the absence of further encounters and decent Speed specs made movement quick for both of them. More debris—everything from mattresses to luggage to withered potted plants—slowed them down a little here and there, but they mostly just cut or shoved their way past these as needed. They hit two bends and had to double back once, assuring the others they were coming the whole time, but within about a minute Rei finally made out the sounds of fighting as they passed one especially large hall that led towards the front of the ship.

“Ahead!” he hissed, and he didn’t wait for Cashe to agree or not before throwing himself in the direction of the noise, slamming the claws of his left hand into the first panel of the wide tunnel’s polished wall he could reach to haul himself forward with all haste.

Not a couple of heartbeats later, Rei was jetting out of the hall again into the main dining area, and even despite the urgency of the situation he was forced to take an instant to marvel at the sight.

Everything—*everything*—was a dying, glorious red.

The projected ship was supposed to have been some kind of luxury liner, he could see now. All around him the furniture and related accouterments of a splendid eating area floated freely, tablecloths forming a hundred crimson, swimming ghosts, the tables and a single piano drifting like larger animals through a bloody ocean, all accented by the glimmering snow that was the silverware in the light. Instead of walls or a ceiling, a thousand triangular glass plates formed a half-dome over the space, almost exactly like the Galens mess hall. Beyond it, bits of wreckage and larger debris floated carefully by, cutting swaths of shadow through the glow of the red star that hung like a dim sun in the distance. It was a view worth being distracted by for a fraction of a moment even despite the circumstances, and Rei didn't think even a veteran spacefarer would have been able to *not* be taken in by it.

On the other hand, it also made figuring out who the hell was *who* a hell of a lot harder.

The fight was chaos, pure and simple. It was only Viv and Catcher now—just barely distinguishable by the glowing yellow of their vysetrium—with Aria and Grant nowhere to be found. If the latter two had been FDAed, however, they'd probably done good work before going down, because Viv and Catcher were only up against five—no, *six*—opponents, though Rei was quick to correct himself that there was no guarantee the entirety of the other three teams had found them yet. The pair were doing an excellent job of holding their own, too, using the Zero-G mechanic to advantage by bouncing around the hall unpredictably, avoiding the constantly moving web of their opponents. They might have been outnumbered, but the space was massive, allowing for plenty of openings to slip through and slash out a passing strike now and then when the opportunity provided itself.

Still, Viv only had her sword—the empty left arm cradled to her chest obviously having been marked either broken or severed—and Catcher's Speed was lagging compared to the two Brawlers who looked to be making a point of chasing him down.

“Cavalry’s here,” Rei growled into the coms.

Then he caught himself on a passing table, rolled over with it to leverage his momentum down to the floor just below him, and leaned into all his boosted Strength to rocket up again at an intercept trajectory with Catcher’s pursuers just as the boy zipped by 10 yards or so above head.

As focused as the pair had been, they didn’t even see Rei come flying up under them, left hand reaching for the first Brawler while Shido’s sword slashed upwards at the second. He was using the Saber Mode a *lot* more than he might have ordinarily, he knew, but the advantage of the reach in Zero-Grav was just too good to give up unless he was body-to-body with his opponent. Sure enough, he felt the blade catch in the further opponent’s side even as his clawed hand slammed around the closer’s throat. The Brawler—a girl from Kenneth named Vovk—didn’t even have time to react before Rei squeezed, his clawed fingers shattering the reactive shielding around her vulnerable neck with a visual sparkling of light, her body immediately rag-dolling as the Arena must have registered the snapping of her cervical spine. The perpendicular angle of their impacts had sent them spiraling widely, though, and he barely managed to untangle himself from the FDAed girl before slamming shoulder-first into the top of the viewing dome. Fortunately his own shielding was able to weather the hit, but it was still jarring, and Rei had to scramble to dig his claws into the glass before he bounced off, giving himself a moment for his neuroline to address the minor brain jostling.

Once his vision was clear, he looked down into the spilling red light of the fight.

Cashe had joined the battle too now, engaged with two separated opponents who’d gotten around to face her, spear moving with such blinding speed that the afterglow was forming the faint outlines of a yellowish sphere all around her. Unfortunately the second Brawler Rei had landed a hit on was still going, but he was clutching his side with one hand and moving at a *much* reduced pace, allowing Catcher to gain some distance between them. The one in trouble now, unfortunately, was Viv, who’d finally

gotten cornered by a Saber and Phalanx—both from Oyekan’s—along the far edge of where the dome met the dining area floor. The fact that she looked punch-drunk—or at least more so than should have been normal in Zero-G—told Rei it wasn’t a coincidence.

Her arm had been severed, he knew now, and blood-loss would be the end of her even if the two fighters closing in didn’t do the job first.

Not that that meant he wasn’t about to help.

Getting his feet under him, Rei once again launched himself off the glass, aiming as best he could. The three of them were far away and the ship was still rotating, so he’d calculated his trajectory for the shrinking space between Viv and the Oyekan’s cadets. He was a little off, over-judging the angle and hitting the dome again some 4 or 5 feet above his best friend instead of just in front of her, requiring that he plant and spin once more to face their two opponents.

Then again, it was worth it to see the pair immediately start to scramble to end their lunging assault at Viv, eyes going wide as their attention raised to him, likely looking like some kind of crouched, hungry man-spider as he glared down from the glass above her.

As he lunged, he could have sworn he heard one of the pair yelling “The Prince!” into her coms before Shido’s sword arced at her partner’s head.

The rest of the fight was brutal, but short. Catcher caught on that he was down to one injured pursuer and turned the tables on the poor Brawler in a flash before flying to Cashe’s aid against the pair of cadets she was still engaged with. Viv’s rapidly worsening bloodloss made her less than useless, unfortunately, but she’d been enough of a distraction for Rei to have no serious issue handling the two who’d been going after her, though the Phalanx proved a bit of a pain. In the end, however, he floated victorious between another set of bodies, working to swing himself around with the intention of getting to Viv and helping if he could.

He only managed to turn in time to catch the girl giving him an agonized grin and letting go of her sword to her one still-functioning hand to point to a corner of the dining area.

“Aria and Grant,” she managed woozily, looking like she was having a hard time keeping her eyes open. “That way. Trouble.” She turned the pointing hand into an unsteady thumbs up. “Go get ’em, half-pint.”

And then her face went slack, and Rei knew the red light flashing briefly over her unfocused irises would be needlessly notifying her that the Arena had made her succumb to her injury.

He didn’t hesitate.

“Catcher!” he called out loud, spinning himself around with a broken chair as it drifted into reach to look up at the Saber above him. “Aria and Grant are still in? Where?”

“That way!” Catcher shouted back, pointing in the same direction Viv had, towards a corner of the big room that was now to Rei’s left. “We got swamped and separated, so they split in that direction. Took at least half of the rest of the other squads with them.”

“Oh that’s not good,” Cashe said, already making to push herself towards the corner, where a smaller open tunnel led out of the dining area again.

Nope, Rei agreed silently, managing to get himself moving to follow the Lancer as Catcher struggled to do the same in the open air above them. *Definitely not good.*

It took a couple seconds to gather up, but once they had a rough triangle formation the trio took off after Aria and Grant, asking all the while that the two of them confirm their position over and over again into the coms. Neither responded, however, but when Catcher groaned that they were probably FDAed, Rei disagreed. If that many gathered opponents had gone after the pair and taken them down, they would probably have run into the survivors backtracking to the dining area.

It wasn't *too* far a reach, he hoped...

Lucky for them, Aria and Grant seemed to have done some fighting even as they'd retreated, because craters and scars in the walls, ceiling, and green carpeted floor that couldn't have been part of the field aesthetic offered a rough trail to follow. It actually took less than half a minute or so to locate the battle, though it came as a surprise when they did.

The three found themselves in the bunking quarters, with the halls narrowing down until only four people or so might have been able to walk comfortably across. Turning a corner down one of these first, Cashe had let out a barely-muffled yelp and grabbed the wall to scramble and pull herself back again, pushing the haft of her spear flat behind her as she did. Rei, who'd been paying attention, took the hint and grabbed the weapon to stop himself from floating forward. Catcher, on the other hand, had been busy checking their six, and so nearly sliced himself in half on the head of the spear when it barely missed taking him square in the chest.

"*Ow*," he grunted. "Cashe, what the *hemfff!*"

Cashe stopped him by slapping her free hand over his mouth, giving him bug eyes. When she was sure they would be quiet, she waved her spear at the corner, motioning for the boys to have a look. They did, slipping along the wall quietly to peer around the turn, and Rei had to stop himself from cursing.

There were—and he counted twice—*eight* opponents still up, all of them a mix of the red, blue, and green of the 105th, Kenneth, and Oyekan's respectively. The only reason Aria and Grant hadn't gone down already was because they'd somehow managed to wedge themselves into a single tiny room at the very end of the hall, likely what had been the trash or laundry chute area. The door to the small facilities chamber wasn't big enough for more than one person to get through comfortably, and so had resulted in a stalemate that was also the reason Rei, Cashe, and Catcher hadn't heard the fight coming up. There were eight opponents, sure, but none of them seemed keen on rushing the

narrow access point behind which two of the strongest first-years at the tournament were waiting for them.

Problem was...

“How long until they just set a Mauler to taking out the walls?” Catcher muttered, apparently thinking on the same track as Rei.

“Yeah, it’s a problem,” Rei agreed as Cashe, too, nodded from his right, having taken a spot to peer around the corner two. Had any of the other squad members turned around, they would have been treated to a rather comical sight of the tops of three heads sticking out around a turn in the hall. “I’ll bet they tried once already. See the damage on the side of the door?” He nodded in the direction of the room, over the enemy squad members, where several chunks were visibly missing from the top of the doorframe, beyond which Aria and Grant’s crouched, ready forms were highlighted in yellow. “I’ll bet Aria’s been keeping them at bay with her spear. Still, it means we’re on a timer.” He looked sidelong at Catcher. “Is Ruinous up?”

“Has been for a while. Haven’t used it.”

“That’s good. Does it build up multiple charges if you let it sit? I don’t actually know...”

The Saber frowned as a nightstand floated lazily by behind them. “Huh... Your guess is as good as mine. Hasn’t yet, and we’ve been fighting for a while, but nothing I read mentioned if it did or not...”

Apparently we’re gonna have a lot of things to test, once we get home, Rei thought even as he turned his attention back to the hall, contemplating the situation. With Aria indisposed—he wasn’t surprised she and Grant hadn’t answered now, since they probably wouldn’t have wanted to put their opponents on alert for reinforcements—he was next in command, which made the decision as to what to do his.

“Okay, here’s the plan.” He dipped his head at the exposed backs of the rearmost opponents. “We move quick and we move quiet. Hit them fast. Take down at least one

each *on contact*, then move *immediately* to the next. If we manage just that it becomes five to five and we've got them pinned from two directions."

"Oh you just *know* Grant's gonna have a field day plowing into them from behind if we're a good enough distraction," Catcher said with a snigger.

"Phrasing," Cashe muttered sidelong at the Saber, but her gaze was on Rei. "If that's what we're doing, then we better move fast. They're gonna check their asses eventually."

"No time like the present, I guess?" he answered with a tight smirk.

Then, taking a silent pull of his claws in the wall, he drifted gently out into the hall behind the gathered squads, Catcher and Cashe following carefully at an angle to each claim a side of their own. Moving as quickly as they dared without making a sound, they gathered speed, accelerating with every quiet grab and push.

As a result, they weren't moving fast enough to blast into the group when they reached their backs, but they sure as hell got the drop on each of the three cadets they'd individually aimed for.

SHLUNK!

Cashe's spear hit first, stabbing between the shoulder blades of a Saber from the 105th before the girl knew what hit her. Rei and Catcher were only a fraction of a second behind the Lancer, FDAing both their targets in one hit, but Rei's aim was a little off with the sword he still wasn't completely used to. The Kenneth Brawler gave an awful gasp as the steel tore out through the front of his combat suit, then managed just to start screaming before the Arena shut him up.

"*AUU—!*"

That, of course, was when all hell broke loose.

With momentum on their side, Rei, Catcher, and Cashe tore into the remaining five fighters' vulnerable rear, striking out as the closest of the opponents whirled at the cry. Weapons came around in instinctive swings or up to block, vysetrium edges

slamming against each other where they didn't meet armored steel. Yells started up, at first surprised, then panicked, and as Rei cut down at another Saber from Oyekan's he heard a roar and saw a blaze of yellow.

On cue Grant erupted from the room, swinging Honoris one-handed as only an Overclocked Mauler could do.

It probably took only 20 seconds for the advantage to slip out of the hands of the three enemy squads after that, and another 30 or so before the fight came to an end. It felt like a lot longer, though, as Rei shoved and twisted his way through the melee, quickly transitioning into Shido's Brawler Mode with a shout as the reach of a sword became less important in such tight quarters. Red and blue and green and yellow arched in all directions, weapons screaming through the air and *cracking* loudly against each other. The shouts to coordinate turned to screams quickly, and Rei found himself at one point fighting side by side first with Catcher, then Cashe, then even Grant as the chaos had them flying around one another a hundred times in the minute the battle lasted.

Then Aria found him in the roiling mess, Hippolyta's spear a blaze of light, shield moving with uncanny precision as Third Eye made itself useful. Turning in the air, they put their backs together and held position in the middle of the hall, weapons punching and slashing and tearing the way to victory as Firesong ripped the win right out of enemy hands.

Catcher got the final kill, locking up with a hammer-wielding Mauler from Kenneth briefly before dealing the boy a ringing headbutt to the nose. The Kenneth cadet went spiraling back to slam against the floor, but recovered quickly as Catcher pushed off the ceiling to lance forward in a flash, Arthus leading the way. The Mauler brought the heavy head of his weapon up to block the spearing blade.

Catcher, in answer, shouted at the top of his lungs.

“RUINOUS!”

There was a flash of blazing yellow, the sound of splintering steel, and Rei watched in awe as Arthus punched through the hammer to take its User through the chest, nailing him to the floor.

There was a second of ringing silence, all of them waiting with bated breath. Logically Rei could account for the vast majority of the eighteen enemy cadets that would have made up the other three teams, but in the chaos of the Wargame logic had lost a lot of its meaning. Despite that, despite the knowledge that the five of them had all somehow made it through the battle mostly unscathed, not a one of them had put their weapons down other than Grant, who was sagging in midair as his Overclock ran its course to leave him drained.

And then, finally...

“All Red, Blue, and Green Team combatants eliminated. Winner: Yellow Team, Firesong, the Galens Institute.”

As always, sound returned first, exploding from the stands long before the field—which had only just started to fade—revealed them.

“Oh thank the *MIND*,” Rei heard Aria groan from behind him as the match commentator shouted their praise in the background, breathing hard and tilting her head back to rest against his for a second as gravity started to return to the scene. “I thought we were goners for *sure*, that time.”

“Nope,” Rei said with a grin reaching back to give her armored thigh a reassuring pat before the Arena pulled them apart and corrected their orientation. Apparently all of them but Cashe had been basically upside down compared to the projection plating. “Made it. Almost whole, too.”

“Yeah, somehow,” Aria conceded, able at last to look around at him. She was sweaty and her hair was a mess, but her smile shone through like a sunrise. “Nice timing, by the way. Thanks for the rescue.”

“Your servant, m’lady,” Rei answered, sweeping Shido’s claws before him in an exaggerated bow as they floated down.

“Nerd.” It was Catcher who cut in, grinning while they all dropped. He’d already recalled Arthus, and had his arms crossed in mock judgement. “Not how you impress the girls, man. You know this.”

“If I counted right, Rei FDAed *eight* opponents this round, Catcher.” Cashe was smirking at the Saber. “I’m pretty sure he could strip naked and start singing bad 21st century pop music at the top of his lungs and there would *still* be a thousand people in this crowd willing to jump his bones.”

Rei couldn’t help but laugh at that—as he did at the slack-jawed look Catcher gave Cashe and Aria’s prompt facepalm—just in time for them to touch down. Viv was waiting for them on the floor, practically vibrating with excitement, having moved carefully in their direction so as not to step on any of the stirring bodies that were the other squad’s cadets.

“Guys that was *awesome!*” she shrieked, throwing herself on Rei and Aria first, one arm around each of their necks. “Talk about a comeback! I thought we were done for!”

“I said the same thing,” Aria mumbled, still a little flushed from the fight, but looking pleased. “Especially when Grant and I kited the group out of the dining area. Initially it was only six of them, but we ran into another three and only got one down even fighting our way back the whole way.” She paused, then, before adding—in a whisper to Viv only Rei thought he overheard: “Your man did good. I would have been down inside of 15 seconds without him.”

Viv expression was a little pained as she disengaged from the pair of them, still smiling but looking a little bummed. “I saw, yeah. After I went down. You *all* killed it.

And there I was twiddling my thumbs under the field.” She grimaced, glancing around at Catcher, Cashe, and Grant as the rest of the other squads pulled themselves to their feet and started walking away in mirrored, dejected slumps. “Sorry, guys...”

“Don’t sweat it,” Catcher said genially, stepping forward to give her a pat on the back as he offered a solemn sort of nod. “We’ve all been there. You’ll catch up one day.”

“Oh you sonofa—!”

Rei and Aria laughed again, with Cashe and Grant grinning nearby. The commentator finally finished singing their praises long enough to dismiss them so the next Wargame could get started, and they left the field under the rush of a final applause from the stands.

They were down the ramp, out of the tunnels, and headed for the elevators when it happened.

“*Oh...*”

Rei and Aria, who’d been walking elbow to elbow and chatting about the match at the front of the team, were the last to pause and turn. Catcher and Viv, who’d been bickering good naturally behind them, were already looking around, while Grant had an eyebrow raised beyond them.

Beside him, Cashe was standing frozen, eyes ablaze with light.

Rei stiffened, and he felt Aria do the same beside him.

No, he thought in disbelief as she watched Cashe’s face go from surprised to excited to outright shocked in *very* quick order. *No way...*

CHAPTER 27

“I think something’s going on...”

Rei finally got out the words that had been on the tip of his tongue all day, ever since they’d walked away from their Wargames victory. He was sitting on Aria’s bed in her and Viv’s room, his frame alive in his eyes. Aria herself was on her stomach next to him on her pad, reviewing her duel that morning against a highly capable Saber from Sermont’s Point, while Catcher sat at the room’s desk, taking advantage of the evening hours to pick through some of the schoolwork Sense had been sending everyone to keep up on while they were away. Rei barely saw them through the replayed footage he was streaming in-frame, even when both looked up when he spoke.

His attention was wholly fixed on watching Cashe lunge at Aria inside the ring of *another* privatized practice field—provided to them by Captain Samsus, this time—seeing her call out the vocal activation and witnessing Warband come to life yet again.

An Ability just as rare as Catcher’s Ruinous, Warband was at once as simple and *significantly* more complex. Its end goal was almost identical: provide a momentary advantage that allowed for the elimination or crippling of an opponent in one single strike. While Ruinous managed this with overwhelming speed and force—working well with Catcher’s more-balanced stats and closer-quarters combat—Warband approached the concept from a different angle. Rei had slowed the footage down to around a fifth of its regular speed, and so he saw a little of the manifestation, a touch of the pixilation as Cashe’s upper body and arms flickered mid-lunge, then split into three overlapping images that each shifted to drive her spear forward at a trio of different angles. She took on, just for a second, an air much like Rei thought the “hydras” of ancient Earth mythology must have carried, three heads rising or dipping or swinging around to bare their teeth from every which way.

If Aria had had Third Eye active her CAD might have been able to see through the deception—they hadn't tested that particular interaction of Abilities yet—but with only her own judgement and reflexes she was forced not only to step back but also pick two of the three directions to defend, raising her shield to intercept the glowing black tip of one spear while sweeping at the shaft of a second with her own weapon. She'd picked wisely, in a blink identifying which of the two points of assault were most likely to be the real one based on Cashe's original body position.

She'd also picked wrong.

Rei watched Cashe's spear take Aria through the chest, driving up to the armored fingers of the gauntlets that were the Lancer's newest addition to her CAD, and scoring the FDA on the spot.

For the first time ever.

“Rei...? *Rez?*”

Rei blinked, his focus pulled through the recording to the room around him again by a finger poking him in the forehead. To his left, her hair spilling down one side of her face, Aria had pushed herself up to sit cross-legged beside him, one knee resting comfortably against his thigh, while in the corner Catcher was eyeing him expectantly.

“Sorry.” Rei closed out of the recording. “Got distracted.”

“I saw...” Aria was squinting into his eyes. “Was that Cashe testing Warband? It was hard to tell.”

He nodded. “Yeah. I've been watching it on repeat. Basically since we got on the flyer after the fights ended this afternoon.”

“Meaning it has something to do with your not-at-*all* mysterious announcement of ‘I think something's going on’ before you zoned out until Aria prodded you back to reality.” One arm on the desk and the other hanging off the back of his chair, Catcher smirked. “Not to mention waiting to say so until Cashe wasn't in the room...”

Rei didn't deny it. Cashe had indeed excused herself a couple minutes before, having had the realization—with a girlish squeak of excitement that wasn't much like her—that she'd failed to call her dads and pass on the big news. Neither Viv nor Grant had joined them after dinner—she claiming a headache and him grunting something about making sure she was okay—which had left Rei alone with Aria and Catcher.

Finally.

“I'm not sure what's going on exactly, but... Nothing feels off to you guys, about all this?”

“About all what?” Aria asked, sitting a little straighter on the bed beside him.

“About Firesong. About these Abilities.”

“What about them?” Catcher this time, leaning forward with interest. “It's about time we started developing them, isn't it? Or do you mean the fact that this tournament seems to have a lot of big jumps happening left and right?”

While he was glad he hadn't been the only one to notice it, Rei shook his head.

“No. Well... kinda. I thought that too, at first, but I looked it up and it's actually pretty normal, apparently. Something like 11% of C-Ranked evolutions—where Users are most likely to get their first Ability—happens *at* Sectionals for Sectional-qualifying first-years.”

“Which means with 200-plus of us here, there's gonna be a *lot* of jumps,” Aria said, nodding to show she was following, but still watching him closely. “So...?”

“So 11% is impressive and all, but Catcher got Ruinous *two days ago*.” Rei pointed at the Saber, who was developing a telling frown. “And now Cashe and *Warband*...?” He looked between the two of them. “Do you see where I'm going with this?”

“Not... really?” Aria answered apologetically. “Sure it's a little strange, but is it *that* strange? Even if it's *strictly* 11% that means that each school on average will have two first-years gaining Abilities, right? And if that's the case, then *some* schools are likely to have that happen on the same team...?”

“Well sure, yeah, but that’s not the issue.”

Aria raised an eyebrow, showing off the smallest hint of impatience. “Then what *is* the issue?”

Before Rei could answer, though, Catcher spoke up again.

“Is it the Abilities themselves you’re talking about?”

Together Rei and Aria turned to the boy, whose gaze had drifted to a spot on the headboard between the two of them, eyes unfocused. If he’d had to guess, Rei would have said Catcher was probably making the same realization he had.

“Yes,” he confirmed. “That’s exactly what I’m talking about.”

“Okay, then someone clue me in,” Aria grumbled, looking between the two of them. “Unlike you two SCT hardcores, *I’m* not following.”

Catcher still looked lost in thought, so Rei obliged.

“Ruinous is a rare ability, right? *Stupid* rare.”

“Yes. I’m aware. You and Catcher haven’t stopped talking about it for two days now. I’m *definitely* aware.”

“Then how rare do you think it is for a *first-year* to get it?”

“I don’t know... As rare as a first-year to get Third Eye?”

“Okay, point made, but let’s not pretend you’re not a freak of nature on every level.” Rei grinned as Aria pouted a little at that. “But you kinda make my point for me. You’re exceptional, Aria—no, don’t try to deny it—so you should therefore *be* the *exception*. Third Eye isn’t frequently assigned *at any Rank*, much less as a first-year C-Ranked cadet. The same goes for Ruinous, except the chances are probably even more skewed.”

“Okay...” Aria said slowly, sounding like she might be catching on.

“So Catcher gets Ruinous, right? Extremely rare. Extremely powerful. And then—
”

“And then Cashe evolves into Warband, which is arguably just as hard to get assigned, and just as potent,” Catcher cut in, finally coming back to them and speaking like the understanding had indeed finally just hit him. Sure enough, when Rei and Aria looked around at him again, his eyes were wide. “Yeah... Alright. I think I’m picking up what you’re putting down, Rei... I’ve been so psyched about Ruinous—and then pumped for Cashe—that I don’t think it registered...”

“I’m getting there,” Aria agreed with a nod, frown deepening before turning to Rei again. “So... what? You don’t think it’s coincidence?”

“That Catcher and Cashe get assigned *extremely* powerful Abilities basically back to back?” Rei grimaced. “Could it *be* a coincidence?”

“Technically, sure.”

“Okay fine. *Technically*. But the odds of that would be... I don’t know? Astronomical?”

Aria smirked at him. “You mean like the odds of being assigned a CAD with *S-Ranked* Growth?”

She had meant it as an amicable jab, but Rei didn’t laugh. He didn’t say anything, in fact, choosing instead to just watch Aria, waiting.

His silence was what probably made it click.

“Oh,” she said quietly. “*Oooh*... You think this has something to do with Shido...”

Rei exchanged a look with Catcher, who didn’t seem all that surprised at the suggestion. Apparently the Saber had already deduced the possibility, which was to be expected. After all...

“If something extraordinary happens within a limited range of something *else* extraordinary... what are the chances they aren’t linked?” Rei asked the pair of them. He reached up from the bed to tap the steel of one of Shido’s bands with a finger,

making a dull *tink* of metal. “Think about it. First that big jump Monday afternoon, then Catcher, and *then* Cashe?”

“Wait,” Catcher interrupted. “Big jump Monday afternoon? What big jump?”

“Shido ranked up in Offense and Defense after our first Wargame,” Aria answered him briefly, not looking away from Rei as she clearly processed what he was saying.

“Ah...” The Saber looked underwhelmed. “And that’s atypical... how?”

Quickly Rei and Aria filled him in, telling him of the strange nature of the Defense jump in particular, and their theory as to what had caused it. It only took a minute, but by the end Catcher’s jaw was almost on the floor.

“What?” he demanded once they’d finished. “*What? Seriously?* Guys, if that’s true—if Shido can upgrade even quicker at *disadvantage*—then that’s—!”

“Huge, yeah,” Rei finished for him with a nod. “I’m aware. Been occupying as much space in my head as the Kamiya crap all week. But setting that aside, right now it’s just another reason I think something is going on. Shido responding to abnormal external stimulation isn’t *that* weird in the grand scheme of things. What *is*, though, would be if it’s somehow also affecting the development of *other CADs*...”

There was a silence at that, a heavy quiet as all three of them contemplated this.

Aria was the first to break the silence.

“First Catcher, then Cashe,” she repeated thoughtfully. “Two CADs that have been in close proximity to Shido...”

“If they’d developed standard Abilities out the gate, I wouldn’t even have blinked,” Rei said. “It’s Sectionals, and everyone’s been working really hard all year. But Ruinous? *Then* Warband? A one off? Maybe. But *both*?”

“It *could* still be by chance,” Catcher said, but he didn’t sound remotely convinced of the possibility. “*Would* have to be a pretty crazy coincidence, though, like you said. Wasn’t Dent’s first Ability Overclock?”

“And Lennon’s was Break Step,” Rei confirmed with a nod. “Almost every User out there starts pretty standard, even if their later Abilities are more specialized.”

“Vademe...” Aria muttered, still looking pensive. “Vademe got Break Step too. And he’s one of the best first-years at Galens...”

“Third best after you and Grant. Who *also* got Overclock, I might add.” Then Catcher paused to give Rei a look of feigned terror. “Well, he *was* third best, until the future ruler of the universe turned up in a snack-sized package over here.”

“Hardy *bar*,” Rei answered, not really in the mood for jokes even if Aria *did* let slip the tiniest of grins. “Hilarious. But yes. Exactly. Vademe and Grant are both perfect examples. They’re better than almost everyone else. Sorry Catcher, but they’re better than you—”

“Oh, you *wound me*, sir,” Catcher offered with a snort that said he was *well* aware of the fact.

“—and they’re better than Cashe,” Rei finished. “So... why didn’t *they* get Ruinous and Warband, or something of the like?”

Another silence, and Rei could tell, this time, that he had convinced Aria too. She was staring at him with wide eyes, and he could feel the tautness in her body though the knee she still had resting over his thigh.

“Rei...” she breathed after a moment. “If Shido is *actively* affecting our CADs... That’s on another level. Forget Monday’s spec jump. *This*...” She let the thought hang, her awe at the idea speaking volumes as it was.

“Is it even *possible*, though?” Catcher hissed, looking between the two of them. “Like... is there precedent for that? Anywhere? *Any* CAD that does something like that?”

He’d asked the question to the room, but it was on Rei his eyes paused as he did. And Rei, unfortunately, could only shake his head.

“Not really? I mean all phantom calls read energy signals from other CADs, but they don’t actively *transmit* anything.” He hesitated. “Then again... there wasn’t any precedent for an S-Ranked spec assignment either...”

“Yeah...” Aria and Catcher said together, almost numbly.

Then Aria sat up straight again, apparently making some kind of realization.

“Okay but... there’s a way to confirm it, right? At least to a certain degree?”

It was the boys’ turn to get left behind this time, as Rei and Catcher traded a confused look.

“... How?” the Saber asked, brow furrowing.

“Two’s a coincidence they say, right?” Aria asked, looking between them. “But three’s a pattern.”

Rei got it, then.

“Oh... Yeah... That would do it, I guess. Or at least more so...”

“What would do it?” Catcher was blinking between them in confusion. “I’m lost. Help a guy out.”

It took a moment for Rei to look away from Aria, managing an internal laugh at her proud glow at the idea.

“We’ve still got one left,” he told Catcher. “One squad member without an Ability. And she’s been around Shido longer than any of you...”

For the tenth time in a row Viv brought a finger up to the pad she had propped against her lap, dragging it to the left 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’s upper body seem to split into three different images as she lunged, 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 chest to score her first ever FDA against Aria.

For the tenth time in a row Viv only felt worse looking at it, and she sighed and let her head fall back to the headboard 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's eyes shot open again and she sat up straighter, 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 a little too quickly, cursing the slight shrillness of her voice even she could make out. "Fine! I'm fine!"

Sure enough, Logan 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 made himself scarce 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 veils she'd heard about once.

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

"Viv... What's up?"

Viv felt her cheeks go a little hot as Logan 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.

“Nothing,” she repeated, smiling and managing to keep her voice level 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 the tablet.

“No! Wait!”

Viv accidentally triggered her Speed spec in the rush to put a hand on the pad, 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...” His eyes were more visibly creased with concern, now. “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 okay. 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 at her.

“Hey... *hey.*” His eyes, so full of worry, searched hers. “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 and Dr. Forester, 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 *actually* shed any tears yet, even if her cheeks

hurt in that threatening way just before she did. “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, Viv kept on.

“Logan... what if... what if I get left behind?”

Viv would admit to herself 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 than 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 witnessed such naked emotion from the boy in the weeks they’d been together—officially or otherwise—much less *before* that. His mouth opened slightly as both eyebrows flew up practically all the way to his handsome hairline, and he was so 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 get 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 Rei... 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 that pain in her cheeks worsening. “Firesong is supposed to be the ‘ace’ squad, right? But now it’s got five people with Abilities, and 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 18% of any squads formed in an academy setting fight in the SCTs or on the front lines as a group, and only 4% 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 looking at her with a mix of amusement and incredulity etched into every chiseled angle 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 going out with 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 she was on her back.

In a blink of speed that ever belayed his size, Grant had put a gentle hand on her chest and pushed her firmly back onto the bed. Her arms were suddenly splayed to either side of her head on the sheets and the boy was half-standing, half-leaning over her, one foot on the ground and the knee of his other leg brought up to press into the mattress between her thighs. The effect on her body was instantaneous.

Just like he knew it would be.

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

She nodded automatically, heart hammering in her chest. “Yes.”

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

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

“Do you have an Ability? No. But like Takeshi said the other day, that’s temporary. Even despite that, if you went up against Vademe, I would put your chances of winning at 40/60, 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.” Grant lifted the hand he had on her chest slightly so his fingers could splay over 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 two in the hall. You would have to *literally* light someone on fire, I think, to get Aria to even consider replacing you, and if that person was Dyrk Reese—or maybe Mateus Selleck?—I doubt even that would be enough.”

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

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

“The school would be a moron 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 Logan was suddenly a *lot* closer, bending down over her to bare his handsome white teeth inches from her open mouth. The hand that had been on her chest finally lifted, too.

Lifted, and moved to press a single stern finger between her eyes, like the boy wanted to *physically* drive home every word he growled then.

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

Viv could only do her best to nod, otherwise unmoving as she stared up at him.

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

Attempting another nod was still all she could manage, and only then did Logan remove his finger and push himself off and away from her a little more, letting her take his face in more fully. The concern was still there, as was a faint simmering of what might have been frustration.

Mostly, though, it was pure intensity.

“Perfect. Then friggin’ *hear me when I say this*: Forget about Cashe’s Ability. Forget about Catchwick’s. Forget about your bullshit 18% or 4% or whatever they were. I can tell you with *one hundred percent* certainty that Reidon Ward would not only cut off his right arm before letting you get replaced, but would also do his best to cut off *Laurent’s* if she was ever actually stupid enough to suggest it. Which—and I repeat—*she is not*.”

For a few seconds more they stayed like that, Viv splayed out beneath the boy, Logan himself still bent over her in nothing but a towel, all but glaring. Eventually, however, the fervor cooled, and his expression eased. He pushed off of her completely to stand, offering her a hand to help her do the same as did.

She took it without thinking, still not saying anything as his light grasp pulled her carefully to her feet before him.

“You’re not replaceable, Viv,” he said quietly, then. “Not to the Institute, not to me, and not to your friends. Give them some credit, and give yourself some time. I *promise* that’s all you need. Okay?”

Another silence, one in which Viv 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 earlier 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 surprise 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 strangle him or something. For a while she held him like that, pulling him in greedily until Logan started leaning into her too.

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

"You know..." she started quietly, dropping her forehead to his and closing her eyes again. "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, bringing her in close.

"Like I said... Working on it."

CHAPTER 28

"Never regret thy fall, O Icarus of the fearless flight, For the greatest tragedy of them all, Is never to feel the burning light."

-Attributed to Oscar Wilde

Ancient Earth Poet and Playwright

Friday morning was the start of the bloodbath, with Cashe—ironically—proving its very first victim.

While the individual members of Firesong had thus far ripped through the Dueling rounds without issue every morning, the rule of chance had been bound to bite them in the ass at some point, as it did so the moment pairings were announced for the morning fights. While Rei, Aria, Viv, and Catcher were largely in the clear—at a glance getting matched with fighters from other schools they all suspected they had the advantage on—Cashe and Grant weren't so lucky.

They, unfortunately, had been paired against each other, and the match went about as expected.

Despite her improved armor, specs, and Ability, the fact of the matter was that Cashe wasn't on the same level as the Mauler when it came to pure combat skill. She put up a hell of a fight—lasting long enough to trigger Warband not once but *twice*—but Grant's neural aptitude was just too good, countering the Ability both times with a whirling, two-handed spin of Honoris' axe that intercepted all three points of attack within microseconds of each other, fracturing the illusion of the false pair and smacking the true strike off-course. After the second, Grant himself triggered Overclock, and about 15 seconds later Cashe lay still atop the white surface of the standard Neutral

Zone they had been fighting on, the originally-pristine floor a wreck of gouges and shattered flooring in the aftermath of their back and forth onslaught.

Grant had helped the Lancer to her feet after that, and was still praising her effort and approach strategy when they reached the rest of the team again, climbing up out of the underworks side by side.

First one to go, Rei had thought, glad Cashe seemed in relatively good spirits despite the loss, but fighting a grimace all the same. If he'd been honest with himself, he'd kinda been hoping all six of them would make it to the final eight of the first-year bracket together.

No such luck, though.

On the other hand, he, Aria, Viv, and Catcher performed as expected, so after a quick lunch the six of them headed for SB2 to snag a field to warm up on in preparation for a rapidly approaching afternoon Team Battle. They'd been paired off with the 9th Sector Division's "Greyfang" squad, who were led by none other than Andrew Boone, the Phalanx who'd nearly done in Catcher in the Dueling rounds earlier in the week. This far into the tournament there were very few true non-threats left in the brackets of any format, so Firesong was intending to take Greyfang seriously, especially given Boone's Repulsion Ability and the fact that he was one of five C-ranked Users on the squad, with only a Duelist—Simone Alba—still registering in the Ds.

Taking 10 minutes to warm up in a half-speed rotating melee—Aria shouting every 30 seconds or so for them to "Switch!"—they eventually ceded the field to a waiting group from the 104th and headed back up to the underworks to wait. There they reviewed some of the potential combat strategies they'd come up with until one of the unaffiliated ISCM officers overseeing Sectionals shouted "Firesong! On deck!". Aria called back a confirmation, then led the six of them up into the relative darkness of the ramp again, where they spread out on either side of the hall to wait, as had become their habit.

10 minutes of listening to the muffled roar of the crowds and the sounds of what could only have been a particularly vicious battle, then the doors at the top of the ramp opened, and a familiar group strode down past them.

Even had Rei not heard the announced victory, it would have been obvious from the pleased grin on some of their faces—and the smirks on others—that King’s Law had just advanced through yet another round of fighting. Of the six second-years, in fact, only Anatoli Sidorov looked utterly composed, face set and long hair practically pristine in its ponytail, like he’d only just been for a brisk walk around the block rather than in the middle of any kind of intense combat.

His expression only shifted, in fact, when he caught sight of Firesong waiting their turn in the tunnel, his silvery gaze flashing immediately to where Rei waited in his usual place opposite Aria. The moment they locked eyes, Sidorov frowned—no, *sneered*, actually—but he was gone and by them all with the rest of his squad in tow before Rei could so much as blink in surprise.

“The hell is *his* issue?” Catcher muttered from his left once the squad had passed by.

Rei made a face. “You saw that too?”

“Oh yeah,” the Saber grunted, eyes on the bottom of the ramp where King’s Law had disappeared into the tunnels. “Dude was eyeballing you like you’d kicked his dog.”

“What are you two whispering about?”

Rei and Catcher both looked around. Aria was watching them, as were Cashe and Grant beside her. Viv, too, actually, Rei could tell, leaning around from Catcher’s other side curiously.

Before either could answer, though, the announcer’s voice picked up once again from beyond the main floor, and Sidorov was promptly forgotten.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I hope you’re ready for a double feature! Not only did you just get a *tremendous* performance from the Galens Institute’s top second-year team, but

we're following it up with a one-two punch of talent! Two squads, both at the peak of their class! Who will prevail? We're about to find out! From the west, I give you the best of 9th Sector Division's first-years... GREYFANG!"

The applause was genuine, if a little subdued. Rei couldn't blame the crowd. They came for excitement, and while D and C-Rank Users might have been impressive out of context, compared to the destructive explosion that was every second- or third-year fight, first-year matches just generally failed to muster the same enthusiasm.

With one notable exception, Rei admitted silently, secretly pleased to be able to correct himself.

"And from the east, you already know them well! The pinnacle of the Galens Institute's newest batch of recruits... Come on out, FIRESONG!"

Partially due to the doors opening at the summons and partially because of the genuine roar of anticipation from the stands, Rei again felt his breath catch as Aria pushed off the wall and started heading for the top of the ramp. Then they were out in the light, and soon across the Arena floor to their ready spots, lined up opposite the Team Battle zone from where Greyfang was already waiting for them, unanimously grim-faced. No longer were there any sneers or suspicious glances in Rei's direction, and the twinge of guilt he felt at recalling the Boneyard incident came weaker and weaker every time he realized how worth it it had been.

The arbiter—a tall, thin officer with a bluish mustache above a matching beard that reached his chest—called them to their starting rings. The standard protocol was followed—including the irritating full explanation of pre-combat rules still kept only for the first-years—and Aria and Boone both confirmed their understanding. The arbiter's eyes flashed, and a few seconds later they were standing on *another* open Neutral Zone, Cashe having been the one to call it out first.

She also hadn't missed the chance to mutter "Man... Salt in the wound much?" into the coms, earning a chuckle from everyone but Grant in answer as the Arena announced the same.

Then...

"First-Year Red Team 'Greyfang' versus First-Year Blue Team 'Firesong'," the Arena announced for the spectators none of them could see—much less *hear*—anymore. "King of the Hill bout. Combatants... Call."

Six muttered responses, six CADs summoned. 20 yards away, Greyfang did the same across the open field. Between them, set perfectly in the middle of the zone, a single black pole about 7 feet tall and a couple inches wide manifested. This was the objective, the "flag" a member of one of the squads would need to stay in contact with for 15 full seconds to win the match. During Capture the Flag formats there would have been *two* poles, one in each of the squads' starting areas, but with King of the Hill it was all-out war for the single-zone victory. Just as often as not, winners were decided by the last squad standing, as they would have in a common Elimination bout.

In a perfectly open field and an obvious point of conflict, Rei suspected this particular fight would be much the same.

"Combatants... Fight."

Their strategy decided the moment the Neutral Zone had manifested, Aria didn't have to give the command before they all surged forward. The only adjustment any of them made was to their Speed, unanimously matching Aria and Grant—the slowest of them—so that Rei and Viv didn't bolt too far ahead and leave Catcher and Cashe somewhere in the middle of the two groups. Greyfang had made the same decision—

or rather had been given no other choice by the field's design—and so the two teams met almost precisely in the middle.

Where they slammed into each other like armies colliding on an open field.

It was chaos the instant they met, the flag unanimously ignored given the circumstances. Rei was grateful they'd been assigned blue again, because it was a touch easier on his focus to simply fixate on the closest person glowing red, who in the moment happened to be a Mauler named deBonne. The girl—who Rei thought had to have at *least* six inches on his 5'7"-ish frame, bellowed as she brought her axe down at his head. Had it not been for his superior agility, he might have been cut in two then and there.

Instead, though, it was deBonne who staggered, screaming in pain and dropping her axe to clutch at her stomach where the claws of Shido's right hand had "gutted" her as Rei ducked and slipped by the killing blow.

Not pausing, though, he jumped right back into the fray.

While it wasn't *quite* as disorganized a skirmish as that last Zero-Grav fight had been the evening before, that was only because no one was bouncing off walls or being flipped upside down against their will. If anything it was more vicious, with nothing to tip the scales in anyone's favor other than their innate ability. This resulted in a bloody affair—or as bloody as it could get without any *actual* blood—with Greyfang putting up an impressive effort despite being outmatched from the go. Firesong, though, just had more power on their side, with only Boone being near a match for any of them individually.

On top of that, one member of the team seemed to have *seriously* brought their A-game to the battlefield.

Out of the corner of his eye Rei saw Viv's blue blades whirl and scream in a constant pattern of cutting steel and vysetrium. She'd put on a particularly good showing that morning in her Duel, but whereas he'd suspected a good night's rest and

mounting excitement as she continued to climb the brackets, he thought now that maybe there was something more going on. Viv was... the honest descriptor was “terrifying”. She moved through the fight like a building stream through a storm, the bodies slamming together around her as inconsequential as trees brought down into the flood. She didn’t aim to kill necessarily, her attacks instead simply going for the best opening she could find as she slipped by, but the tactic was horribly effective despite her forgoing several FDAs. Slipping along the line, once down, then back, then down again, she not only forced Boone to drop his sword as she slashed the back of his hand, but also brought two other Greyfang cadets to their knees by severing muscles in their legs, blinding the Duelist, Alba, with a passing cut across the face, and finishing off deBonne with a quick thrust through the screaming girl’s ear. The entire time her Cognition looked to be dialed to the max, too, because the surge of the fight seemed to merely pass around her, the swings taken at her by Greyfang missing by millimeters every time when she danced by, the attacks of her teammates unimpeded by her bending, twisting form. Had Rei not been engaged as it was, he thought he might have been mesmerized, and promised himself he’d watched the replays as soon as he had the chance *just* to study Viv’s fight.

And then, before any of them knew it, Firesong stood tall over six sinking bodies, only Grant on one knee from what looked like a blow to the leg and Cashe’s left arm hanging limp.

“All Red Team ‘Greyfang’ combatants eliminated,” came the announcement.
“Winner: Blue Team ‘Firesong’.”

“Viv, that was *nuts!* Where the hell did you pull that out of??”

Catcher was displaying his usual energy as they made their way through the busy underworks back towards the elevators. The exclamation was well deserved, and even as they walked Rei felt like there were fewer eyes on him or Aria for once, the gazes that lifted to their passing group actually looking by them to take in Viv. Whereas Firesong prepped to the last second, Rei realized suddenly that many of these teams probably watched whatever fights they could live on the feeds—in particular the Galens teams', most likely—so almost everyone in the tunnels had either seen or already heard of the insanity that had been the first-year Duelist showing up even the “legends” of Aria Laurent and the Iron Prince. Rei didn't mind it one bit, feeling at once a little relieved not to be the center of attention and pleased Viv—or any other member of the squad, for that matter—was getting some justified time in the spotlight.

Well... he *would* have been pleased, at least, if Viv had looked even a little happy with her performance.

Despite Catcher's enthusiasm, despite Aria, Cashe, and Grant all nodding along and echoing their awe and agreement, Rei didn't miss his best friend's lack of reciprocation. Oh she smiled plenty, thanked them plenty, but Rei had been around Viv long enough to know when something was up. Her grin was wooden, her appreciation of the compliments just a touch too mechanical.

And, for once, he was completely at a loss as to what might be bothering her.

He debated, for the duration of the walk to the elevator, pulling Viv aside and asking her what was up. On the one hand he couldn't help but be a little worried—and baffled—but on the other the girl didn't seem to be having any adverse reaction to Grant congratulating her, so it obviously wasn't relationship issues. And since they'd already had it out about that subject so recently already, Rei was hesitant to come off as hounding about anything else...

No... Unless she brought it up, or unless he started to think something serious was going on, he decided to leave it alone.

Instead, as they reached the elevator lobby and Cashe poked at the smart-glass wall between the doors, Rei took advantage of his teammates' general distraction to make a spec request.

Specifications Request acknowledged.

...

Combat Assistance Device: Shido. User identification... Accepted.

Type: A-TYPE

Rank: C7

...

Identifying Preferred Mode.

Preferred Mode Identified as: BRAWLER-TYPE

...

User Attributes:

- Strength: C3

- Endurance: C2

- Speed: C6

- Cognition: C6

...

CAD Specifications:

- Offense: C3

- Defense: C4

- Growth: S

...

Display Additional Modes?

YES/NO

Rei nodded to himself, taking in the numbers. Shortly after the Team Battle his base Strength had notched up from C2 to C3, and his Endurance had already risen from C1 to C2 after their Tuesday Wargame. Combine that with the Defense and Offense jump he'd had on their first day, and Rei honestly couldn't have been more pleased with how Shido was progressing at the tournament.

Scrolling to the bottom of the spec request again, he found the “*Display Additional Modes?*” option and selected “*YES*”.

Additional Modes Request acknowledged.

Type: A-TYPE

Rank: C7

...

Additional Mode Identified as: SABER-TYPE

...

User Attributes:

- *Strength: C5*

- *Endurance: C4*

- *Speed: C3*

- *Cognition: C3*

...

CAD Specifications:

- *Offense: C4*

- *Defense: C5*

- *Growth: S*

Good. As he'd expected—or hoped, maybe—the improvement to his Brawler Mode Strength had translated to a boost in Cognition for Shido's Saber form, bringing it up from C2 to C3. The jump in his baseline Endurance earlier in the week had already converted into Speed, so while his two strongest stats innately were still his weakest as a Saber, overall the numbers were much more well-balanced.

If he leaned into Saber-Type training—especially if he took advantage of the extra supervised hours the Institute had promised they would provide Firesong once they got back from Sectionals—he could still see serious potential in his Type Shift Ability that hadn't even been *scratched* yet.

“Especially if I learn voiceless commands...” he muttered to himself, not realizing he’d spoken out loud.

At least not until he got a familiar poke in the ribs.

“What are you muttering to yourself about now, Mr. Prince?”

Rei looked around to find that Aria had detached herself from the rest of the team—probably noticing his distraction—to come stand by him. She was studying his face carefully—as she tended to whenever he zoned out, Rei had come to realize—and beyond her Catcher and the others were still singing Viv’s praises while Viv herself looked on with a smile that was maybe just a liiiiittle less strained than it had been a minute before.

Choosing again to ignore the pinch of concern at his best friend’s expression, Rei dismissed the spec request as he answered Aria.

“Just thinking about what Takeshi said Tuesday, about vocal commands being a bane as we get stronger.” He dropped his voice and slipped a touch closer to her just as the numbers on the wall above the doors before them showed a car was on the way up. “Shido jumped in Strength just now. Saber Mode translated it to Cognition, balancing me out pretty well.”

“And you’re thinking about how to use Type Shift more effectively,” Aria finished for him with something between a sigh and a quiet laugh. “Honestly, I thought it would take longer than this for me to get desensitized to the *insanity* that is your CAD, Rei, but here we are. ‘Shido jumped in Strength’... Unbelievable. Isn’t that *four* spec upgrades since the start of the tournament?”

Rei nodded, giving her a somber look.

“Better watch out. At this rate I’m gonna be C8 before we get back to school.”

Aria narrowed her eyes at him. “... And?”

He grinned. “And obviously I won’t want to associate with someone who isn’t as high of a rank as—Ow! *Ow!* Okay, okay!” Rei laughed as he took two more hard pokes to the ribs. “Holster the fingers! I’m just teasing!”

“Well tease someone else,” Aria grunted as the car reached them, glaring at him threateningly. Still, despite this she dropped her hand so that the back of her knuckles brushed his as the door opened before them.

And promptly snatched it away and up again into a stiff salute—mirroring Rei’s—as none other than Dyrk Reese stepped out of the elevator.

“Ah, Firesong,” the major said. “Perfect. Just the group I was looking for.”

Even had the major’s tone not been pleasant and even, Rei would have had alarm bells going off at the sight of the man.

He wasn’t sure he had—in more than 6 months of school—*ever* seen Dyrk Reese smile.

“Looking for us, sir?” Aria asked, not dropping her salute while students and chaperones from other schools stepped around them to claim the open car behind the major. At their backs the conversation, too, had ended, and Rei knew that the others had quit their praising of Viv to come to attention just as swiftly.

“Yes indeed, Cadet Laurent.” The man’s civil, almost-kind tone was *seriously* clawing at Rei’s nerves. “I wanted to catch you all before your warm-down to congratulate you on a good fight. Well done.”

The stunned silence couldn’t have been louder, and it took almost a full 5 seconds for Aria to respond.

“Th-thank you, sir...?” She seemed unable to stop herself from voicing her surprise as a question. “Greyfang was a dangerous team. We took them seriously. We wanted to end the fight before Boone had a chance to charge up his—”

“Yes yes, that’s good. Good.” Reese was still smiling as he cut her off. “Also, though, I had other business with you. I have news for your team.”

This time Aria stayed silent, for which Rei was glad. Here it was. *Here* was the reason Reese had actually sought them out, he was sure.

He was pleased Aria had clearly read as much, and wasn't about to give the major the satisfaction of asking what this "news" was.

Sure enough, after a good pause of waiting, Reese must have realized he wasn't about to bait any of them. His smile twitched slightly, which Rei told himself was enough of a victory to combat anything the man had to say.

But then the major spoke, and the smugness of his words screamed trouble before they really even registered.

"Your semi-finals Wargame matchups for tomorrow have been posted. I'm looking forward to seeing who comes out on top..."

CHAPTER 29

Viv's loss in the Saturday morning Duels the next day was the first time Rei finally managed to stop grinding his teeth.

For the better part of the last 24 hours he'd been the quiet one on the team for once, though to be fair all of them had been pretty sedated ever since Dyrk Reese had ripped the wind from their sails following their Team Battle victory over Greyfang. So profound had been their sour mood, in fact, that not only did Christopher Lennon make a point of stopping Firesong in the hotel halls after dinner to ask what was going on, but he'd been joined by a gorgeous girl looking on with genuine concern who Viv had later had to explain to them all was Candice Meyer, the Lasher's girlfriend and a fellow third-year individual qualifier. It hadn't taken much for Lennon to get the truth out of Rei—with Aria, Viv, and Catcher all grumbling alongside him while Grant and Cashe gaped in silence behind them—but unfortunately the A-Ranker could only grimace and say he had faith Firesong would make a hell of a fight of it no matter which way it all went down. In the moment it hadn't helped much—though Rei had forced out a muttered thanks just to be polite—but looking back he was grateful the Lasher had taken the time to remind them it wasn't all about winning.

And yet, despite that, it took Viv losing her quarter-finals match for Rei to finally kick himself out of his black mood.

As they'd entered the weekend, several things had happened. Firstly, not only did the morning fights start an hour later, but the Dueling periods had been elongated to match the increased level of competition. After dropping from 128 combatants in each of the tournament's two brackets to only eight following Friday's Duels, the rapid-fire, two-at-a-time fights that had claimed the mornings on the Arena's main floor had given way to single fights on the north Dueling field. With only the eight quarter-final matches total Saturday morning that would bring each bracket down to the top four cadets, each

bout was provided plenty of time to go as long as it needed, which ended up being for the better.

Some of the matches between the older students—like the Duel between Anatoli Sidorov and the Deermont third-year he ended up barely beating to win a place in the top four—took more than 15 minutes to complete as the best students on the planet ripped and tore at each other until one or the other was too exhausted to put up a proper defense anymore.

The other big change was—as expected—that the Kenneth Arena filled to the max, without a single seat Rei could see from wherever he stood left empty. As the work week ended and the civilian SCT fans who hadn't had a chance to partake in the earlier days of the Sectionals freed up, getting in and out of the building became such a congested affair that ISCM officers had started forming designated lanes at the entrances specifically for combatants and their chaperones to access the Arena. Overall, it had resulted in a new level of thrumming excitement throughout the venue when Galens arrived, with more than ten thousand new tournament fans shouting in fresh enthusiasm when they caught sight of Lennon or Sidorov or Rei or Aria. Rei suspected, too, that that energy would only be doubled again the following morning, Sunday, when the last two rounds of Duels would happen back-to-back, deciding first the final two from each bracket, then the Sectionals champion.

And yet Rei hadn't been able to enjoy so much as a moment of it, his mood so foul that Aria—whose own quiet seething had only become more pronounced when they'd discovered *Catcher* was her quarterfinals opponent later that morning—had openly taken his hand in both of hers as they'd sat in their Institute's Section of the stands, kneading his palm and fingers in an attempt to get him to relax and trying to engage him on any subject other than the upcoming afternoon.

Rei hadn't pulled his hand away—what madman would have?—but he'd equally not had the self-control to meet her halfway when it came to conversation, only saying

anything more than “Yeah” and “You’re probably right” when he got up to head down for his own fight, at which point he’d also apologized for being an ass and promised he’d make it up to her once they were back at school.

His anger had fed his fight, too, to the point where Rei had almost felt bad when he made mincemeat of his top eight opponent—a C5 Saber named Ashley Wong, one of only two non-Galens quarter-finalists—inside of a minute. Impatient to get the match over with, the moment they’d met on the Sunset Beach variant he’d feigned an attack at the girl’s face only to kick sand into her eyes from below when she raised her sword to defend her head. After that she’d done a truly admirable job of keeping him at bay despite being half-blind, but the fact that she was a two-handed Saber-Type made it hard for her to try and clear her vision, and Rei took the win when he eventually got behind her, kicked her supporting knee out from under the girl before driving Shido’s claws into the back of her skull as she fell with a cry.

He’d returned to the Galens section to roars of approval from most of the older students, but only quiet compliments from the first-years.

Largely because not a single member from Valormade or Red Crown seemed able to look Rei in the eyes.

It had helped a little that Aria had taken his hand up again without a word after he sat down, apparently unfazed by his mood, and it was a minute or so before Rei came to the conclusion she was probably holding onto him as much in an effort to keep *herself* calm as she was trying to help.

Of the first-years, Grant was up next, facing off against the only other non-Galens fighter left in the bracket, a Duelist from Kenneth itself called Fred Wynn. That match had been even shorter than Rei’s, with Grant taking Wynn completely by surprise about 10 seconds into the fight when he triggered Overclock early, and to devastating effect. The Duelist lost an arm in the first blow once the Mauler’s Ability was engaged, and hadn’t been able to respond quick enough under the shock of that wound. His left leg

had been taken next, then the better part of his upper torso in a massive two-handed swing, and Grant had been declared one of the top four.

And then, an hour later, it was Viv's turn.

"Here we go," she muttered under her breath as she pushed herself up from the seat between Catcher and Grant, smiling with difficulty around at the rest of the team. "Wish me luck."

"Good luck," the five of them echoed in answer, no one in the mood for any jokes or games. She took her leave, and Rei turned back to see Vademe doing the same, the Lancer happening to be glancing around in their direction in the same moment.

They locked eyes for a second, then nodded to each other, both understanding the situation and neither liking it.

For 20 minutes or so Firesong waited in near-uniform silence, with only Catcher occasionally making a half-hearted attempt to engage with any of them. Rei even eventually silently stopped Aria's frustrated massaging of his hand in favor of just holding hers and running a thumb along the inside of her palm in an effort to keep them both even tempered.

At least until the match before them came to an end—Rei hadn't even registered who was fighting—and the announcer started shouting again.

"What a *match!* Congratulations to Cadet Baxter, and best of luck to Cadet Lupo! You still have a long journey ahead of you, we're sure! But speaking of coming journeys, it's time for some of our youngest stars to show off what they're made of once again! Please put your hands together and raise those voices for one of the Galens Institute's finest first-years... FROM THE WEST, IT'S CADET VIVIANA ARADA!"

Rei and the others managed to get a few shouts out at Viv's appearance from the right side of the floor below them, but on the whole they left the cheering and applause to the roar of the crowds. This late on, even the first-year matches were something to look forward to, so enthusiasm was less lacking now than it had been earlier in the week.

“And from the east, also from the Galens Institute... IT’S CADET KASTRO VADEME!”

More noise. More cheering. Rei wondered if he would be returning to the school with his hearing permanently impacted, or if Shido would be able to handle that potential damage as well as it had dealt with his fibro.

“Come on, Viv...” he heard Aria mutter to herself beside him, and he squeezed her hand to let her know he was right there with her.

Vademe. The matchup was unfortunate. Viv needed to get close to her opponents to do any real damage, and Lancers specialized in preventing exactly that. Worse, Vademe was often touted as the best of his CAD-Type at Galens—though Kay and Cashe both might take that as a challenge—which meant he was very possibly the best on the *planet*. And now that he had an Ability in his arsenal to boot...

Come on, Viv, Rei echoed Aria, but only to himself.

The field arbiter—First Lieutenant Neelson again, who’d overseen their first team match—called the pair of them up to their starting points, and soon after Viv and Vademe were rising rapidly into the air. No one from Firesong made the call this time, satisfied to let the more-enthusiastic Users and spectators above and around them shout their guesses out. The tall walls of a Cliffs variation were quick to manifest, with Viv at the bottom end of a sloped, looping canyon, any sight of her blocked from Vademe’s position higher up in the stone outcroppings. A quick look-over told Rei the field had multiple different paths and alleys through the rock—with even a couple low, short channels carved straight through some of the cliffs—and he felt a little better. If Viv could get the drop on Vademe, if she could keep a low profile and stay patient, she might make a clean end of the match before he had a chance to put up a fight. Speed was her forte, and the zone favored a guerrilla assault.

They were told to call, and two CADs manifested around the pair. There was a silence, and only then did Rei notice that the stands, too, had gone dead quiet.

The power of the SCTS...

“Combatants... Fight!”

In a cloud of dust and shale, Viv took off.

And Rei went cold.

“Viv!” Aria hissed quietly from beside him, her hands going cold around his. “No! No!”

The others, too, were cursing, and Grant had even leapt to his feet. In the corner of his eye Rei saw the massive boy half-lunge, half-sprint over to the stairs, then down and to the railing, where he must have growled enough threats that a number of other cadets—including some second- and third-years—made a space for him.

It didn’t matter. It wasn’t like he could help.

Viv had already committed.

What the hell?? Rei could only wonder, dumbstruck as he watched the girl bolt right up the middle of the zone, sprinting full-tilt up the hill towards where she knew Vademe’s starting point would be.

Absent seemed any consideration of tactical thought. Missing was any applied combat logic, or even anything that might have been called common sense. Instead of taking the natural upper hand offered by a field that was wholly to her benefit, Viv appeared hellbent on throwing aside any edge she might have had in the fight in favor of taking Vademe head on. Rei was so thrown by this, so surprised, that he couldn’t wrap his head around any of it. Viv was hot-headed, yeah, but she only *really* flew off the rails when she had real reason. As *pissed* as they all were at Reese for his gloating, the major’s petty arrogance was nothing compared to when his best friend had gone full brimstone and hellfire after Rei had almost been killed by Central Command in the

parameter testing, much less the time after Selleck and the others had done their best to kick his teeth in.

No... This was something else. Something more than the major.

And Rei—*again*, he realized, recalling Viv's disappointed air after their fight the previous day—had no idea what it could be.

On the field, Viv had gotten her wish. Vademe—who would have lost the advantage of much of his weapons' range and maneuverability in the field's tighter side-lanes—had bolted right up what could have been called the “middle” run. He took a corner, and Viv almost won with a surprise attack by accident anyway as she found herself sprinting right at her quarry. In a flash both of Gemela's blades came up, parrying dagger driving forward, sword cutting diagonally down in an angled cross-strike.

Vademe, though, was one of the best for a reason.

Rather than freeze at the sudden sight of his opponent ripping towards him up the valley, the Lancer dipped into some Strength or Speed reserve to blitz right by the impact point of their trajectories, spinning as he did. His spear came around in an arc, chasing Viv's back, but when her weapons caught only air she had the sense to drop into a flying roll, dodging the spear to come up on her feet again with minimal momentum lost.

She used it to continue her careening run towards the curve in the lane, leapt, planted both feet on the rugged surface of the stone wall, and catapulted up and into the air with a graceful spin to drive both blades down at Vademe again.

Rei only had time to wince at the rashness of such a move against someone of the Valormade leader's caliber when the Lancer swept the falling attack aside with his longer weapon, then turned the angle of the deflection into a whirlwind kick that caught Viv mostly in the side and back before she even hit the ground, rocketing her sideways towards the wall.

Then again, Viv wasn't in the running for best Duelist at the tournament for nothing.

Her Speed and Cognition had her twisting before she struck rock, managing to hit on her feet again and accept the impact, though Rei thought he saw her wince as she did so. She lunged off the wall into a roll that brought her up a body length in front of Vademe, and only then did the fight start in earnest.

"Holy *hell*," Catcher muttered from Aria's other side. Rei, Aria, and Cashe, for their part, were all too dumbstruck to say anything, while Grant roared encouragements and unheard callouts from the railing below them.

It was the Team Battle all over again, but with *every* eye on Viv, now. Though Vademe never let her get close, she fought with a vicious energy that was as terrifying as it was mesmerizing. Every movement was sharp and focused, every cut and kick and punch like the calculated assault of a machine built to kill. While Rei had seen it the previous afternoon—he cursed, realizing he'd never taken the time to fulfill his promise to himself that he'd watch the match recordings—he had to admit it was on another level now that it was set directly before him. Viv danced like she'd never danced before, all edge and sharp grace, all speed and lethal elegance. It was like there was nothing in the world to her in the moment other than the opponent in front of her, and Rei had doubts he—and maybe even Aria—would have come out of a comparable fight without a couple missing limbs if they didn't lean into their Abilities.

Unfortunately... Abilities could make all the difference, sometimes.

"Break Step!"

The first time Vademe called out the trigger, Viv was mostly ready. He'd telegraphed the move a little too clearly, leaping away in a moment he managed to slap her back a step with the edge of his spear. Even with her Speed Viv didn't have a chance to get out of the way, but she was smart enough—no, *skilled* enough, rather—to time a two-bladed sweep of Gemela's weapons before her, giving most of her body some

coverage. The move saved her life, catching the Lancer's blade with her parrying knife as his Break Step jettied the boy forward with such power that he left a bilateral cloud of dust along the short path of his close. The spear was pulled wide, the killing blow avoided.

But Vademe had apparently accounted for such a possibility, because his shoulder took Viv in the chest with all of the force of his Ability.

Viv didn't manage to save herself this time as she was sent flying once more, her back striking the wall full-on with a *crunch* that had many of the 50,000 spectators groaning or joining into a collective "Ooooh..." of sympathy. The blow very obviously rattled her, because her parrying blade went clinking away and she half-crumpled to the ground as gravity took hold of her. Again, though, her topped-out Speed and Cognition came to the rescue, because she managed to throw herself sideways before Vademe's follow-up rush could skewer her through the chest.

Even if Rei had noticed Aria's painful grip around his hand, he wouldn't have cared.

Viv came up on her feet once more—10 yards from her dagger—and lunged. Rei's heart sank as he noticed a sluggishness in the attack, at the lack of acceleration that usually drove her forward, and he could only hope that it was a registered concussion that Gemela would be working to overcome. The larger part of his logic, however, wouldn't stop reminding him that one of Viv's weakest specs was Endurance, and that Vademe's shoulder check and the subsequent blast into the valley wall would have done nothing to help what would soon be waning stamina.

To her credit, though, and despite only having one blade to work with, Viv waded back into the fight with just as much fervor and need as she had at the start of the match.

Time hit 3 minutes, then 4. Viv indeed started to lag, but Vademe did as well, seeming more intent on keeping his opponent at bay long enough to recover a little

than he did on trying to close out the bout. At 5 minutes the shouts and cheers of the crowd had peaked, with voices coming from everywhere calling for one cadet or the other, anticipation at what Rei thought had to have been a tournament-high for a first-year match. Possibly he was making that up, but Viv and Vademe were demonstrating a powerful example that low Endurance could—to a certain degree—be compensated for with will and skill, because even as the pace of their encounters slowed the methodical approach to attack and defense become only more deliberate, more calculated and sharp.

And then Viv made a mistake.

Whether it was a realization that Vademe was struggling almost as much as she was or just a lapse in judgement brought on by fatigue, Rei didn't know. Whatever the case was, Viv managed to snake a forward kick through the Lancer's defense while his spear was engaged with her sword, catching him in the gut. He half-doubled, staggering back with an "Ooph!", but instead of pressing the advantage, Viv hesitated, freezing for a fraction of a second. Maybe it was fear of a trap, or maybe just indecision. Whatever the case was, it gave Vademe the opportunity to get his spear before him one-handed, warding any opportunity of a direct assault.

So Viv did what she had to think was the next best thing, and bolted for the place where her parrying dagger still lay among the rocks several body lengths away.

"NO!"

It wasn't even Firesong that shouted at that, but a thousand voices from all around the stadium. Rei had seen this exact mistake before—a hundred times, in fact—and he could only marvel at how tired Viv had to be, how far she had to have pushed her limited Endurance for her to stumble so badly. To his left he saw the five other members of Valormade leap to their feet, yelling for Vademe to take this golden opportunity.

The Lancer needed no such encouragement, having already planted his feet and taken up a firm grip of his spear in one hand even as the other clutched at his gut.

“Break Step!”

CRACK!

Rei watched as though in slow motion as Vademe’s vysetrium blazed, the Lancer screaming forward in a streak of orange light. Ahead of him, Viv had just snatched up her parrying blade and was turning to face the boy, both weapons coming up at the ready.

Too slow, Rei knew, himself on his feet with Aria and the others beside him, though he didn’t know when he’d jumped up to stand.

Sure enough, Viv wasn’t fast enough, and Vademe’s spear caught her full in the chest, wrenching her backwards to smash her against the wall of the valley and pin her there against the stone. Incredibly she managed to hold onto her blades this time—even the smaller weapon she’d just recovered—and Rei felt an irrational grief tug at his gut as he saw his friend’s body spasm where it had been impaled to the rock. For a long moment Viv and Vademe were both still, the dipping sound of the crowd matching their unmoving forms as all waited, but the Arena was long in its announcement. Apparently the Lancer must have just missed her heart, because after a second, then 2, then 3, Viv brought her face up to look at Vademe, staring at him with wide eyes. Then, incredibly, she lifted a shaking arm. Her sword came up, rising above her head. Rei saw Vademe’s face register shock, saw the Lancer’s gaze lift with the weapon, watching it fearfully as it rose in a display of sheer will Rei wasn’t sure he had ever seen.

But then the blade slipped from Viv’s fingers to clatter to the stone, her head drooped forward, and the Arena finally spoke.

“Fatal Damaged Accrued. Winner: Kastro Vademe, the Galens Institute.”

From a distant, dark place Viv heard the words, and a part of her was relieved as the pain that had ripped through her chest, stealing her breath and focus, faded and blinked away. Despite that, though, she knew she was passing out, knew that she was slipping. It didn't matter. None of it mattered.

She'd lost.

An unpleasant wash of emotions claimed her last thoughts as she registered this fact. Disappointment. Sadness. Regret. Fear. Logan had done a wonderful job of bolstering her spirits the last couple of days, but the fight against Vademe—the very target of much of her apprehensions, if even indirectly—had presented Viv with a golden opportunity to shed much of the worry plaguing her when Logan wasn't around to prod a smile out of her. If she could beat Vademe, if she could just prove to *herself* that she was the strongest, she would have felt safe. Would have felt serene. She could have brushed off the fears and accepted Logan's words—echoed by that usually-confident voice in her head that had been getting quiet for some days now—that it was only a matter of time, that her turn would come.

In retrospect, Viv realized she'd put way too many fragile eggs in that very precarious basket.

Shit, was her last conscious thought as everything went black, and she hoped she was only imagining the feeling of a tear forming in the corner of one eye, then trailing down her cheek as her head fell to her chest.

Then she was gone, slipping away, her utter exhaustion and the agonizing shock of that final blow taking such a toll that she didn't hear Vademe recall his CAD, nor feel the boy kindly catch her as she fell forward while the field started to dematerialize around them. She didn't hear the sounds of the Arena return, and was still out cold by the time they touched down on the projection plating and Vademe handed her carefully off to a couple of ISCM medical offers who'd rushed over as they dropped. Even Logan's bellowed shouts of her name were lost to her when a gurney was called for and

she was hauled atop it and hurried off the Arena floor while the announcer assured the stands that she would be fine, that she'd just pushed herself a little too hard, and that everyone should give a resounding round of applause for both the victor *and* the gallant defeated.

In fact, the first thing Viv registered after passing out was some time later, as she came to slowly in the bright bustle of the underworks, having been roused in large part by familiar text scripting itself out across her vision, demanding her attention no matter what state of consciousness she might have been in...

CHAPTER 30

“There are ways, believe it or not, to contact the MIND. They aren’t always easy—the Mass Intellect can’t be expected to delegate meaningful processing power to the individual qualms of any single citizen of the ISC, after all—but it’s not impossible. Members of the military in particular have in the past been granted access for specific reasons, sometimes critical, sometimes mundane if a higher-enough ranking officer has deemed their need or question pertinent to the healthy maintenance of the individual’s responsibilities. I myself have recently been allowed a brief interview with the MIND, ironically to discuss these very conversations it has had with lesser soldiers and officers, and at some point I found it impossible not to ask what the most interesting questions it had been posed were. I remember it smiling then—or doing the best imitation of a smile it could, in that odd white form it took during our talk. Apparently, it finds it amusing when Users ask if there had been some mistake, if they really should have been assigned the CADs they were. It’s not like any competent officer of the ISCM would allow the Mass Intellect’s time to be wasted by egos in need of deflating, though, so such questions never come from those many Users convinced they could have been more, could have been great, had they been assigned a stronger Device.

On the contrary, the MIND only hears such concerns from those soldiers whose officers feel just need that next echelon of assurance that yes, they did indeed earn themselves the power they’ve been handed, and may well have the potential to ascend to the greatest of heights if they can master it...”

-Lieutenant Colonel Hana von Geil, Ph.D.

“The Presence of the MIND” Lecture

Annapolis, Earth, Sol System

2457

Fake smile. Fake laugh. Fake energy. All of it fake.

And Logan could see right through it.

He'd wanted to rush from the railing the moment Viv had been taken away on the stretcher, wanted to sprint for the stairs and be there in the tunnels when she came to. Unfortunately, he'd somehow managed to catch the eye of none other than Major Reese as he'd turned—who hadn't even bothered to stand from his front-row seat to watch Viv's match—and the man had almost been smirking as he'd "kindly" reminded Logan that "Cadet Arada will be fine" and there was "no reason to get distracted from the upcoming fight".

The fact that Reese was technically right on all counts had made it impossible to argue, even when the mention of their impending Wargame stoked Logan's hard-wrangled anger for a moment.

And so, seething and worried, he'd returned to his own seat with the rest of Firesong, consoled himself only mildly by shooting a message off to Viv letting her know it had been an amazing fight and he hoped she was okay, then waited.

It was almost 10 minutes later that she'd finally appeared at the top of the underwork stairs, and the moment she turned to look at them Logan's stomach had dropped.

Her smile was bright. Her smile was wide. Her smile was strong.

And her smile was fake.

Oh no... was all Logan could think before Catchwick, too, caught sight of Viv and lifted an arm to wave her down.

She joined them as though nothing in the world was wrong, even graciously accepting every congratulation on a good fight and every assurance that it had been an incredible, incredible match to watch despite her initial rush. Even the other members of Valormade—Vademe was probably still warming down in SB2—leaned around Firesong to echo their praise, with most of Red Crown and a couple of nearby second- and third-years doing the same. Viv accepted it all, laughing and thanking everyone in

turn and assuring them that she would do better if she ever had a rematch. To almost anyone else, it probably seemed like she was basking in the attention and proud of her display.

To Logan, it was like watching a glass statue crack a little with every passerby that touched it, its strength and beauty and poise nothing more than a varnish for the impending disaster of its collapse...

Unable to help himself, Logan glanced down the row after everyone finished addressing Viv and she'd taken the seat beside him, wondering for a moment if maybe—just maybe?—he was imagining it.

The look on Ward's face, though—all tight concern as he, too, took Viv in wordlessly—confirmed Logan's every fear, and once they'd all settled again he pulled up his NOED. Unsurprisingly, he found no response to his last message, but that didn't stop him from pinging Viv again despite her sitting right next to him.

Hey... You okay?

He didn't have to wait long. On his left her eyes flashed briefly, and she frowned as she must have seen and read the question. For several seconds she didn't budge, and Logan actually started to fear she would ignore this query too.

Then, though, her eyes began to move.

Yeah, came the reply. *Just a little disappointed.*

How so? he typed back. *No one's blowing smoke up your ass, Viv. You were awesome.*

This time there *was* a pause as she read, and even though he'd looked away from her to pretend like he was watching the newest fight—a match between two A-Ranked

third-years Logan would have ordinarily been on the edge of his seat for—he could feel her tensing beside him. Yeah... something was up.

He could only hope Viv wasn't going to clam up again and—

Nothing happened, came the response.

Logan's brow furrowed, not understanding. At first he thought Viv was trying to appease him just like he'd feared, but a sidelong glance said otherwise.

She was shivering.

It wasn't overt or anything. It wasn't like she was shaking in her seat or her lips were trembling. On the contrary, she was doing such a good job of keeping up her facade that even Ward looked to have thought better of trying to discern what was going on behind Viv's mask. But the fingers of her right hand, resting atop her thigh, were trembling ever so slightly, and Logan got the impression she was working hard—*really* hard—not to ball both hands into fists. In what though? In anger? In fear? Obviously Logan hadn't done as good a job assuaging her concerns about her place on the team as he'd thought, or—

And then it clicked. He'd told Viv all she needed was time.

But she'd said '*Nothing happened*'...

It took a bit for Logan to gather the courage to send the message.

Gemela upgraded?

No response for a while again, but the shaking in Viv's hands got so bad that she actually brought them together in her lap to keep anyone from noticing. Logan hesitated, glancing up the way where Laurent was still holding onto Ward's hand like he was some anchor to sanity and reason. Ironically, despite suspecting he and Viv were a

few paces—or lightyears—ahead in certain other areas of their own relationship, he didn't know if he had the guts to be that open as they sat there in the stands with 50,000 thousand people cheering and screaming and watching.

Then again, what the hell did *his* comfort have anything to do with the situation?

Taking a breath, Logan shifted as subtly as he could—a hell of a thing to pull off when you're well over 6-and-a-half feet tall—and slid a hand under Viv's arm. Gently he worked on the white-knuckled grip she had around her own fists until she reluctantly allowed his fingers to push her palms apart, letting him slip his fingers between hers.

Then they sat like that, not saying a word, Logan hoping to convey that he understood, that he was there, and that it was okay to be upset.

Gemela had ranked up... Talk about terrible timing. Under any other circumstance a bump in rank would have been cause for celebration for Viv *and* the team both, but the situation was about as cursed as it could have been. Logan knew that she'd been stressed about things ever since Cashe and Catcher had developed their Abilities, and she'd *specifically* made mention of Vademe potentially replacing her, hadn't she? And then to be matched against him? Logan knew Viv well. He knew that for all the help he hoped he'd been talking her off the ridiculous cliff of fear that she was in any danger as a part of the team, Viv would have seen a chance to prove it to herself in that fight. She would have staked her confidence—intentionally or not—on the outcome of the semi-final match, seeking to show *herself* that she could go toe-to-toe with anyone who might have chance of usurping her even without an Ability. It was why she'd charged in, Logan realized now. Viv had wanted to claim victory on equal footing, not by leveraging the advantages the field had just so *happened* to provide her with.

And when she'd lost, the gamble had come crashing down on her.

That all would have been bad enough, but...

Nothing happened, Logan repeated to himself, feeling Viv's shivering grow a little stronger with every passing minute they sat like that.

Gemela had ranked up. A precious opportunity to make everything better, to make Viv the third on the team to get her first Ability at Sectionals. Cashe had managed it. Catcher had managed it. Why not her? Logan swallowed, imagining what that must have been like, what the crush of the loss, then the brief rush of excitement, then the collapsing disappointment as 'nothing happened' must have been like.

It made his heart hurt.

Not helped, either, when Viv let out a quiet snuffle beside him, and he turned in horror to see her eye growing wet.

Without thinking, Logan leapt to his feet.

"We're headed to SB2," he told the rest of Firesong in a rush, tugging Viv to her feet so quickly she let out a quick breath of surprise. "I think Viv needs a bit more warm down. Aria, Catcher, we'll try not to miss your match, but just in case: kick each other's asses."

And then he turned and was off through the crowds, headed back for the underwork stairs with Viv being pulled along behind him, intent on finding somewhere, anywhere, that she could have a moment to herself. He'd get her there if it was the last thing he did, and he'd stay with her no matter what she needed, whether that was to yell at him for being dramatic or to all-out cry on his shoulder.

Logan was so intent on his mission, in fact, that he didn't hear Cashe's shocked question as the two of them left.

"... Uh... Did he just call you guys 'Aria' and 'Catcher'...?"

CHAPTER 31

“They say that when it rains, it pours.

... They should add ‘also increased risk of flash floods and landslides’ to that crap...”

-Colonel Rama Guest

To Maddison Kent

Following the 2468 Galens First-Year Commencement Day

“Wargame,” the Arena announced smoothly. “Red Team: ‘Daggerfall’. Blue Team ‘Firesong’. Green Team: ‘Red Crown’. Yellow Team: ‘Valormade’. Elimination bout. Combatants... Call.”

Damn. It. All.

Cursing internally was all Rei could do as he muttered “Call” quietly, Shido coming to life around his arms. Still in his red starting circle in the forest clearing he’d ended up in, he crouched low, not wanting to give away his position to any unseen opponents among the trees who might have ended up nearby. He had been hoping—practically *praying* to the universe, actually—that the match format would be anything *but* Elimination. Given the situation, an alternate win condition might have been an ideal solution to Firesong’s problem, but when the only path to victory was total annihilation of all opponents, they were in serious trouble...

And that was without Catcher feeling down after his loss to Aria.

... Not to mention Viv acting so off...

No, Rei chided himself for the hundredth time that day. He needed to *focus*. Catcher had put up a hell of a fight—he’d even shattered Aria’s spear hand with Ruinous before

she took him out with a shield to the head—and Rei could worry about Viv later. Right now there was nothing he could have done for either of them.

Even if he *had* had a clue what was going on with his best friend...

He knew she'd ranked up—she hadn't told anyone, but he'd checked her ISCM profile on a whim—and was at a loss as to why she wasn't celebrating the fact. Part of him had been hoping Grant was going to clue him in over lunch—the Mauler had obviously had a better idea of what was going on with Viv, given his transparent efforts to find her some privacy after the fight against Vademe—but another part was glad he hadn't. If it wasn't something Rei couldn't have addressed immediately, then it would have just hung over him like a storm cloud all damn day and distracted him from—

DAMMIT! NO!

Rei practically yelled in his own head, realizing he'd let his worry spin him off *yet again*. He just didn't have the luxury of letting anything but the fight at hand weigh on his mind for at least another 15 to 20 minutes or so. None of them did.

“Combatants... Fight.”

The starting circle vanished, and Rei whirled northward—or his best guesstimation of where ‘northward’ was—to take off in a spray of dirt and grass, hissing into his coms as he did.

“I ended up in some kind of clearing on what I *think* is the east side of the field. Heading to rendezvous now. Anyone have eyes on anything?”

He was pretty sure he had his directions right. The dense Woodland variation had a distinct rise in the direction he was running, like the steady climbing slope of a forested mountain. While the Arena had indeed transported him to an empty gap among the trees—at the time making him squint under the sudden bright sun that had been lingering in a clear sky directly overhead—in a heartbeat he was in the darting

shadows of the woods themselves, moving as quickly as he could through the light underbrush while staying as quiet as he could manage. It didn't matter that he was probably the strongest fighter on the field, maybe tied with Aria. There were *eighteen* other cadets scattered about the zone that wanted his head, and if he bumped into anyone before he regrouped with at least *part* of the squad, he would be in trouble.

After all, anytime any of them had brought it up during strategizing, not a one among them had voiced any illusion that the rest of the teams would be going after anyone but Firesong off the go.

A brief buzz of noise in his ear, then Aria answered first.

"I'm with Catcher. We ended basically on top of where we think the rendezvous point is. He's moving a bit to see if he can build up some charge for Ruinous, but otherwise we're holding tight."

"Not a bad idea." Cashe now. "I'm on my own, and I think I ended up opposite Ward on the west side. Headed north now."

"Alone, too," Viv followed up, and Rei hoped he was imagining the lack of spirit in her voice. "On the other side of the world, though. Definitely on the south end of the field, and I've seen members of Valormade *and* Red Crown pass me by already. We called it. They're definitely teaming up..."

Any sullen silence at this news was kept short by Grant cutting in.

"Can confirm. Seen the same thing here. I think I'm a little behind you, Cashe. Found the edge of the west wall and following it north. Trying to stay quiet."

"Yeah, quiet is gonna be key on this field, I think," Rei agreed under his breath, leaping over a deer trail in favor of continuing more directly north through the trees. "Viv, you moving?"

"Not yet. Copy-and-pasted our playbook against Boneyard. I recalled and tucked myself between some boulders until it's all clear. Other than Martin and Jiang, I'm pretty

sure I'm still fast enough to get some distance between almost any other User even without Gemela, at least until I can call again."

"Smart," Aria agreed. "Gonna leave you to it, then. Might be good to have you come in from the back if we end up getting—*Oh shit!*"

"CONTACT!" Catcher shouted, the sound of steel hitting steel screaming briefly through the com before it stopped picking up sound.

Rei would have redoubled his speed, would have pushed himself to close what had to be only another 20 or 30 meters through the trees to meet the pair of them, but the Arena chose just that moment to deliver him his own first fight of the match.

SHING!

It was the sound of the blade, frighteningly enough, that stopped him from getting beheaded then and there, the hint of the incoming strike instinctively getting Rei to drop. His knees hit the earth, and the clean steel combined with the momentum of his rush had him sliding several yards as he tore twin swaths into the forest floor, crashing through a couple of bushes as he did.

Still, he'd ducked the massive sword, edged in red vysetrium, that had been going for his neck, and was on his feet in a flurry of slashing claws before his opponent—who'd been cleverly lying in wait behind a particularly wide-trunked maple—could take advantage of his ground.

"Oh damn—!" the Saber started to exclaim, realizing who it was he'd just failed to spring his trap on.

Then Rei was on him with a vengeance.

Reed Cook had blue-grey hair that did not match the crimson team color of his CAD, a bulky thing that oddly covered both arms, most of his chest, and practically nothing else. A two-handed Saber-Type on the Daggerfall squad—Kenneth Academy's top first-year team—he was a lower C-Ranked fighter who knew the strengths and weaknesses of his Device, and toed their line well. He didn't have the boost in Speed

the leg armor of most other Users at his level did, but when standing his ground he could maintain a defensive posture as strong as most Phalanxes and *still* hit with as much power as some Maulers.

Of course, Rei knew all of this already, meaning it didn't do Cook any good.

He attacked fast and hard, using Michael Bretz's drilled-in footwork as much as he did his fists to loop right around the Saber. Cook had been smart enough to keep his back to the tree he'd originally been hiding behind, but Rei used that to his advantage too, keeping on the boy's left side. The Saber might be of the two-handed variety, but he was still right-hand dominant, meaning his range of motion would be more limited there. Combine that with the trunk of the maple limiting his ability to swing his larger weapon, and it was only a matter of time before the Kenneth first-year—

With another curse Cook swept his blade across his body, seeking to ward Rei's gatling attacks off for a second, and leapt away from him and the tree to try to reach more open ground. It was exactly what Rei had been waiting for.

Immediately he turned on his heel and, without so much as glance back, bolted through the woods again.

"What the—Hey!" he heard Cook yell in surprise, clearly not having expected a *retreat* of all things. Rei heard the Saber start pounding after him, and silently commended the boy for his guts. If their exchange had gone on much longer, they both knew who would have come out on top.

But that was only assuming reinforcements hadn't arrived, and that Aria and Catcher didn't get swarmed in the meantime.

Rei could hear the fighting, now, the cursing and yelling and the sound of clashing blades. He adjusted his trajectory slightly, then promptly skidded to a halt as he bolted free of the tree line only to run almost face-first into a sheer wall of stone he hadn't expected. The cliff was maybe 20 feet high—taller than he could jump in one go—and the sounds of fighting were coming from atop it. He'd have to find a way around, or—

High, high above him Rei caught a flash of red hair in the sunlight, framed in arcing blue as Aria's form briefly appeared, then vanished again. An idea came to him, borrowed from some months back, and Rei snorted.

Then he set his legs, crouched, and leapt straight up, calling on Shido as he did.

“Type Shift: Saber Mode!”

He was driving the sword forward before it had even finished manifesting, the blade just finishing taking form when it struck the stone point-first with all the boosted Strength of the Device's alternate mode.

The impact of the strike was jarring, and Rei realized that while he'd given Aria credit for the *idea* when she'd pulled a very similar stunt during Team Battle training the previous semester, he'd never granted her enough respect for the *execution*. Newton's third law was a bitch, because while Rei did manage to slam the sword deep into the solid rock, the resulting opposite force jerked him back so hard he nearly wrenched the weapon right out of the cliff again as he held onto it for dear life. He yelped as his body was jarred, scrabbling at the handle with his left hand too until he got a decent twin grip on the thing, then paused for just a moment to stop the haphazard swinging of his legs and torso as he hung there. Below, he heard Cook reach the bottom of the cliff too, and probably would have appreciated the Saber's open-mouthed gape upward if he'd glanced down.

But Rei's attention was on the top of the cliff above him, neuroline whirring in his head as he calculated quickly. Opting to have faith in his Saber's Strength again, he set his arms, braced himself, then kicked his legs up and pulled with all his might in the same motion.

As it turned out, he'd *underestimated* things, because instead of making a neat—and rather cool-looking, he'd hoped—landing just at the edge of the cliff where he'd seen Aria a moment before, Rei sent himself flying almost 10 feet above the lip and right over the chaos that was the raging there, arms and legs flailing as he did.

“Oh shit! Type Shift! Brawler Mode! *Brawler Mode!*”

Shido’s lighter armor had *just* plated itself back around his arms, legs, and body when he crashed down into the fight, landing on top of Red Crown’s poor—and utterly unsuspecting—Pacey Clayton.

“OOPH!” the Saber exclaimed as she went down under his weight, and Rei—equally as surprised in the moment—shouted a rushed “Sorry!” as he tried to untangle himself from the girl.

Then Clayton twisted on the ground under him and slashed at his face with her green-lined sword, and Rei remembered where he was.

Just managing to keep the top of his skull by flinging himself back and off the girl, Rei rolled to his feet in the middle of a total shitshow. At a glance, there were three positives. First: Aria and Catcher were both still up. Second: Cashe had reached them already, which hopefully meant that Grant wasn’t far behind. Third: those three had managed to position themselves so their backs were to the jutting edge of the cliff, providing their assailants only about 90 degrees or so from which to assault.

On the other hand...

Red, green, yellow, Rei ticked off for himself as he ducked a high slash from Hannah Tether’s spear, backpedaling out of the heart of the fight even while parrying away the thrusting shortsword from a Kenneth Phalanx he was pretty sure was called Subhaan Hirst. *That’s all of them.*

Firesong was putting up a fight, but at least two members of Daggerfall, Red Crown, *and* Valormade each were all already there with them, and making no attempt to fight each other until the monster was slain.

“Shit,” Rei could only mutter and he retreated enough to find himself falling in line between Cashe and Catcher, Aria on the Saber’s other side.

“YUP!” Catcher shouted in agreement, jerking his head to one side to avoid a thrust from *Kay’s* spear, this time. “WE’RE SCREWED!”

“Quick question, though,” Cashe asked from the other side, face screwed up in concentration. “Am I crazy, or did Ward just *fly* into the fight?”

“Did he ‘fly?’” Aria grunted from her other side as she turned away a Kenneth Mauler’s axe with her shield and drove Hippolyta forward to gouge the boy in the hip. “Looked more like ‘fell’ to me.”

“FLOPPED!” Catcher agreed, still yelling as he fought.

“Flailed,” Cashe confirmed, finally.

“Can we—*urk!*—focus, guys?!” Rei demanded, sucking his gut in to keep from being eviscerated as Kay’s spear cleverly flicked away from a feint at Catcher towards *his* stomach. “Also, you’re all assholes.”

He thought he heard a couple snorts, but then the others were on them in a solid wave.

The battle was not a pretty one, Rei knew. There was none of the grace one could witness in the one-on-one Duels, nor any of the strategy teams usually had to employ in squad-format matches. On the contrary, the “war” in “Wargames” was on full display, because Rei felt like part of an army on the front lines, engaging with the enemy in the slow misery of bloody attrition. Actually no, even that wasn’t accurate. It wasn’t a true war in that romantic sense of the concept. Despite the joking, despite the forced attempt by the four of them to find humor in the moment, their situation wasn’t remotely that balanced. This wasn’t a battle at all.

It was a siege.

Rei slashed and struck and kicked right alongside his friends, keeping away the multi-colored tide of the enemy. He ended up acting as support and defense most of the time, because Shido’s Brawler form didn’t have the range to engage any of the other Types without closing the distance, and stepping out of their defensive line would probably have turned him into an instant pincushion. He could have called on the Saber Mode again for a bit more reach maybe, but Rei was pretty sure that wouldn’t have been

any more of a help. These weren't the early teams of the tournament, the D-Ranked fighters that he and Firesong had both collectively *and* individually ripped through. These were the other Galens qualifiers and those others their leaders had judged good enough to stand alongside them, as well as one of the best among the non-Institute teams to have made it this far. Rei didn't have the sword practice he needed to feel comfortable going against the majority of these cadets, much less the strongest among them. In fact, even as he thought this, Rei caught sight of yet another figure leaping up over a distant edge onto the clifftop, and he shouted as he recognized the boy.

"Benaly's here!"

"Great," he thought he heard Aria, Catcher, and Cashe all mutter in unison, not one of them so much as glancing up from their own engagements. They were packed tight enough on that edge that Jack Benaly would have a hell of a time reaching them, at least immediately.

Then again, bodies were finally starting to fall.

Catcher had claimed the first FDA of the match Rei had seen. The Saber had managed to turn and redirect Hirst's shortsword into a surprise stab at the face of another Kenneth fighter who'd showed up, a Duelist Rei only remembered was called "McGregor". The boy had jerked back in time to avoid getting blinded, but had misjudged Arthur's reach, and instead just gotten himself stuck in the neck, taking him to his knees in the mess almost immediately. Aria scored second and third, taking down Jasmine Ranjha *and* Amelia von Leef with sneaking thrusts of Hippolyta's spear through the front line as she defended herself with her shield, and Cashe took out a second Kenneth Duelist with a straight parry and counter that took the girl through the eye. Over 20 seconds or so four of the enemy were down and being drawn out of the fight through the ground by the Arena.

Immediately, though, they were replaced, and not with lesser threats.

“SHIT!” Catcher yelled as a yellow spear snaked out of the melee at his heart, managing to deflect the killing blow but still screaming as the weapon drove into his left shoulder, rendering his arm and clawed hand immediately useless. Vademe had appeared out of nowhere somehow, taking the east flanking side of the attack while Benaly had finally pressed through to engage Aria on the west. Meanwhile Kay was still in the middle, and had been joined by Lena Jiang at some point, creating a wall of top-tier individual qualifiers against Rei, Aria, Cashe, and Catcher that was complemented by several other bodies.

Yeah, we're totally screwed, Rei couldn't help but think, already convinced of the fact even before a follow-up thrust from Vademe *did* take Catcher in the chest this time, downing him in a blink.

And then came the roar, so loud it could be heard even over the crashing sounds of the siege.

In a blaze of ion fire Grant's massive form hurtled over the west edge of the cliff, Honoris' artificially-blue vysetrium aflame. Overclocked, the Mauler charged straight into the rear of the assaulting teams, axe ripping a swathing horizontal sweep into the enemy as he did. There were yells of alarm from many of the fighters who'd turned to face him, and Rei saw Reed Cook instantly FDAed when the Saber couldn't get his blade up in time to defend. The rest survived—though a few weapons shattered under Grant's boosted Strength and Honoris' weight—but the Mauler waded recklessly forward anyway, heedless of the danger to himself.

It provided Rei the distraction he personally needed, at least, to enter the fight in earnest.

As Lena Jiang caught Cashe a severing blow to the neck beside him, Rei ducked low and stepped into the battle. Pleasantly—the girl had never done much to endear herself to him, to say the least—Jiang herself was his first victim, not surviving long enough to relish her own kill before Shido's claws punched in and up through her

stomach and lungs, piercing her heart. Not pausing, Rei slipped under a sweep from Kay and darted past her. Vademe's eyes went wide as he found Rei suddenly in front of him, and while he managed to deflect a punch at his side, the Valormade leader left himself open to a follow-up kick that sent him staggering back and over the edge of the cliff, arms spinning as he fell with a yell. He'd be back, Rei knew as he spun to meet Kay, but at least it bought them a little time without the best Lancer on the field adding to the fray.

If only that offered any kind of respite.

Aria, Rei, and Grant all fought with an angry focus, uncaring of the stabs and cuts, of the kicks and punches they took. Kay went down, but not before she got a good slash in that not only rendered Rei's left arm useless, but also allowed Hirst to get a shallow stab into his side. Aria had managed to disengage from Benaly, who was now Grant's problem, and she looked to have triggered Third Eye as she took on Jengo Kwasi, Clayton, *and* Daggerfall's squad leader, the C4 Lancer Harun White. There were more bodies, downed by someone or another, and in the midst of it all Rei heard Viv wheezing weakly into the coms that Laquita Martin and another Daggerfall User were *both* out of the running.

None of it mattered to Rei. Whether because he was too focused in the moment or because he saw no real hope on the horizon, it didn't matter.

All he could do was fight.

With a shout he did finally call for Saber Mode, concluding that if he was only going to have one hand to work with, he might as well take advantage of it. Hirst didn't even have time to get his shield up when Shido's blade passed through his neck, severing his neutral connection to most of his body, and the Phalanx's eyes were still wide in surprise as he crumbled limply to the earth. Clayton was the next to fall as Aria spun and clubbed the Saber in the side of the head with a surprise strike with the back end of Hippolyta's steel haft, but unfortunately that was the last of the enemy to drop

before there was a flicker of blue light from the middle of the fight and Grant staggered as his Overclock started to fade. Someone shouted from the chaos—Benaly, maybe?—and the Mauler was instantly swarmed by every remaining User who wasn't otherwise engaged. He went down like a giant felled under a hundred blades, not even having the time to scream in pain.

And then it was just Rei and Aria.

Viv wasn't coming. That was clear, now. She'd likely succumbed to whatever injuries she'd suffered taking out the Red Crown leader and her Daggerfall support. Almost worse, Benaly looked practically unscathed as he rose from where he'd been working to punch in the back of Grant's skull, turning inward along with Jengo Kwasi and a female Mauler who was the last of the Kenneth cadets left other than Harun White, a girl whose name Rei was too tired to try and remember. That made five on the cliff with them. Five fighters left of the original eighteen. Against him and Aria. Ordinarily, Rei would have thought those odds not *too* bad.

But as Benaly locked eyes with him, he allowed himself no delusions.

Galens' top Brawler—Rei hadn't really counted himself in the category since developing Type Shift—shot forward, shouting for Kwasi to “Leave Laurent to the others!” as he did. Even one-handed and limping, Rei managed to ward off the larger boy's opening salvo with his sword's superior reach, but Kwasi was a different story. The Duelist ducked under Benaly's punches and went for Rei's gut with both blades, glowing green tips stabbing forward. Half in desperation Rei threw himself leftward as best he could, away from the pair. He flopped more than rolled to Aria's side, managing to catch Phillips a surprise blow in the back of the leg as he did, severing the limb below the knee. The Phalanx went down with a scream and Rei staggered to his feet on Aria's right, their backs to the edge of the cliff, but then the pair of them were still facing down Benaly, Kwasi, White, and the other Daggerfall survivor, a full foursome of skilled fighters. Aria was flagging, too, Rei could tell. The head of her spear had shattered at

some point to leave only a jagged point at the end of the shaft, and she appeared to be having a hard time keeping her shield up. She looked as exhausted as he felt, her face flushed, hair a mess, breath coming hard.

And yet Benaly and the others still paused as they squared off, eyeing the pair of them warily.

“If you have *any* of those genius ideas to share, Rei, now would be a *brilliant* time to do so,” Aria wheezed beside him, flicking her broken spear back and forth between their lined enemies threateningly.

Rei chuckled grimly, blinking away a sudden bout of acute fatigue that almost had him staggering.

“I got nothing,” he managed to groan back, not caring if the others could hear. “I’m pretty sure I’m already bleeding out as is. I’m good for maybe 30 seconds. Maybe.”

He wasn’t sure, since neither of them ever looked away from the foursome before them, but he thought Aria might have smirked.

“Hopefully that’s not a chronic problem.”

And then she lunged, almost leaving Rei to choke back a tired laugh before he followed right on her heels.

They fought like dogs, all six of them. Kwasi, White, and the Mauler—Ariel Jax, Rei recalled in the heat of it all—were obviously just about as worn down as he and Aria, but Benaly seemed to have made a point of not exhausting himself this fight, like he’d been saving his energy for this exact moment. It made what would have ordinarily been an already imbalanced fight only more skewed, but inevitable loss had never been the kind of thing that deterred Rei, and Aria was right there with him that day. They slashed and swung, parried and blocked and deflected, taking every opening they could and doing everything to minimize their own. 10 seconds in and Benaly took a hit to the face from Aria’s shield, but he managed to get an arm around it and rip it from her grasp as he tumbled away. Soon after Rei cut off one of Kwasi’s arms, but the Duelist

still drove forward as he screamed in agony, managing to punch his other blade into the side of Rei's chest, driving it so deep it ripped out his back. Rei saw black for an instant and his breath became suddenly much harder to draw in, but he ignored the red text in his combat log that undoubtedly told him his right lung had been punctured. Instead he slammed the pommel of his sword into Kwasi's temple, dropping the boy in a limp heap, and spun to face Jax as she bore down on him. He smacked her axe aside with a grunt and a heavy swing of his sword, and was about to elbow her in the nose with his bad arm when he stiffened. Pain. A rare pain. Coupled with a washing cold out of his chest.

Numbly, Rei looked down, deaf to Aria's shouts, deaf to the sounds of fight that seemed to be leaving him behind.

There, so perfectly planted it had shattered the narrow sternal guard added with Shido's latest evolution, a spear seemed to have appeared out of thin air. Unable to breathe, Rei only gaped as the weapon was wrenched out of him with a twist, marveling at the two feet of steel that had run him through. The blade came out last, blazing yellow, and understanding dawned with it.

Damn... was his last thought as his knees gave way and he slipped backwards, feeling himself start to fall. *Break Step is pretty damn cool.*

And then he was tumbling down off the cliffs, not even seeing Aria get swarmed by the others, nor Kastro Vademe's weary expression of exhausted triumph.

CHAPTER 32

“I think I was about 30 when I realized that adults don’t actually have all the answers in the world, don’t actually have some mystical power that lets them distinguish right from wrong, truth from lies, etc.

If anything, most of them—well... most of ‘us’, I guess I should say—are only better at hiding from the world just how often we mess things up...”

-Matron Avalyn Kast

After a few too many drinks

From her spot in the stands, Salista clenched her teeth as she watched Aria get pounced on by three of the four remaining first-years left on the field. The last—Valormade’s squad leader, ‘Vademe’, she recalled—didn’t move to join in, instead half-collapsing to one knee after his surprise attack succeeded. Salista hadn’t expected anything less. Even without the Arena announcer’s commentary it was obvious the Lancer had landed badly when he’d been kicked off the cliffs in the first place, because his return to the fight had been slow and arduous, and the Break Step he’d triggered from the back of the group had to have cost him enormously. It had paid off, though, finishing Ward in spectacular—if abrupt—fashion.

Ward...

Salista frowned, that symbolic name like lead on her tongue as she chewed on it, vacantly watching as the first-years from Red Crown and Daggerfall straightened over her daughter’s now-limp body and promptly turned on each other. She’d heard the suspicions from her spies in the Institute, but had done her best to ignore them. It was concerning enough that Aria had apparently gone out of her way to get the boy on her

squad, but Salista hadn't believed it when she'd been told they'd apparently made plans—*private* plans—several times in the months since the end of the Intra-Schools. In person, though, the pair's interactions were all too obvious—and had been all week, frankly—and Salista's irritated concern had reached new heights. What was Aria thinking, engaging with a boy like that?! Yes, he was a talented User—*very* talented, Salista had been forced to admit to herself frighteningly quickly—but what could he offer her daughter otherwise? Aria was capable enough for ten Users, and she was a *Laurent* for MIND's sake! What she saw in a small, scrawny, unnamed *ward of the state* was beyond Salista.

But she certainly saw something, and that knowledge was troublesome.

Salista's frown deepened, and her right temple—where she'd placed the molecule-thin remote access trigger over one of her two NOED ports—itched suddenly. Instead of sating the urge, though, Salista only reached up to pull the shawl she had tugged over her red hair down a little more snugly, checking as she did that the projection unit hanging under her shirt was still registering as “ENGAGED” in her frame. Not wearing her own face felt strange every time she caught a glimpse of herself in the bathroom mirrors, but it was better than the alternative of getting recognized. She may not have been a truly public figure, but the Laurents were known in many of the system circles, particularly on Astra-3, and it would serve no one to know she was at the tournament.

Least of all given what she had planned.

Salista sat and waited long enough to watch the Wargames come to an end. The Galens Brawler—Benaly—had cleverly played it safe through most of the fight, so once Aria's Firesong were all accounted for he made relatively short work of the lingering survivors. The two Daggerfall first-years had never been on the same level as the Institute students to start with, so coupled with their exhaustion, they went down fast. Vademe, to his credit, managed to find the energy to shove himself up and give a good showing of himself before he, too, went down to an armored fist. After that the Arena

announced “Red Crown” as the winners of the semi-final match—though they’d have to face off against Valormade again in the Wargame finals the following day, since both teams had technically placed in the top two of the match—and the zone began to fade. After that Salista only waited for the last of the FDAed Users to stand, wanting to make sure Aria got to her feet without issue. When all 24 fighters who’d been involved in the match started gathering to exchange polite handshakes with congratulations and appreciations, Salista finally took her leave, abandoning her seat for some other soul to claim and starting down the nearest steps to join the scores of others stretching their legs or headed for the bathroom during the brief intermission. Intending for the Arena exit, she didn’t allow herself to see Aria gather with her team. It was already disappointing enough to know that Ward was only the worst of them, if Salista was being honest with herself. Arada and Catchwick she was fine with—thrilled, in fact, given the history of those families—but the others? Not only was Cashe not of any distinguished background, but Salista had also dug up the fact that the girl had *failed* her assignment exam the first time around. And as for Logan ‘Grant’... Well, the less Salista thought of what she’d uncovered about *that* situation, the better. If anything, Ward was only the largest cracked jewel on a tarnished crown...

Salista clenched her teeth upon reaching the traffic of the walkway. No, on the whole it was a bad situation, and she would have to do something about it, one way or the other.

Starting with the very immediate threat to Aria’s career, one that needed putting in its place ...

As she made her way to the exit, Salista never looked back, never turned around. Part of her focus was merely distraction—she had her youngest daughter’s future weighing on her after all—but more largely was the fact that she knew that surreptitious glances over her shoulder would have made her look suspicious, something she wanted to avoid at all costs.

Then again, had Salista looked back even once—even just to try catch of glimpse of Aria taking leave of the field with her team, for example—there was the slimmest of chances she might have caught the gaze of the hooded figure who'd been watching her leave from a nearby spot by the railing, eyes alive with light.

Either way, given the noises of the shifting crowd, she never would have heard them muttering through an irritated frown.

“Third time’s the charm, I guess. Hello, Mother...”

CHAPTER 33

“All joking aside... There is only one person in this dimension—or any other—who I would actually be willing to burn the universe down for.”

-The Stormweaver

Despite the disappointment of the Wargames loss, a part of Rei knew that the Saturday matches ended on a better note than his mood was allowing him to admit. For one thing, Shido saw yet *another* double-jump in stats after that all-out-battle—Speed and Cognition in *both* modes this time, amazingly enough—his NOED flaring to life as Firesong had been making their dejected, plodding way towards the elevators to warm down. For another, the Team Battle they had later that afternoon brought with it a *decisive* win over Red Crown, doing good work to numb the sting of the earlier victory Jack Benaly had clutched for Martin and her squad. It had been something of a cold affair—with not one of the Firesong members speaking throughout the fight other than to relay tactical information or acknowledge one of Aria’s orders—but the clean execution and subsequent qualification for the format’s finals match seemed to make almost everyone feel a little better. Even Viv, who’d barely spoken a word since the Wargame, managed a weak high five and something that was almost a smile as Aria congratulated all of them on the well-earned W.

Rei, though, just couldn’t bring himself to let his mood improve.

While the others spoke a bit more while they packed up their things and left the Arena as the day ended, he stayed out of almost all conversation, fuming silently. The entire flight back to the hotel he was quiet, too, even when Aria and Catcher took turns trying to draw him into discussion, and he didn’t say much even after they’d reached

The Chevaron and dropped their bags off in their rooms to shower and change into civies before heading for dinner. The meal was an odd balance of excitement and somberness, with Red Crown and Valormade both obviously wanting to celebrate their finals qualification, but not a one among either squad seeming able to meet any of Firesong's eyes. That was fine, though. Rei wasn't angry at Martin or the others. At least not measurably. Was it frustrating that he and the others had been eliminated from the Wargames brackets because they'd been completely ganged up on? Yes. Very. But that was also part of the reality of the SCTs and—more poignantly—the reality of *war*. Had the three other teams in the semi-finals *not* mounted a collective effort against Firesong, everyone in that Arena knew what would have happened. Red Crown, Valormade, and Daggerfall had all merely identified a critical threat, and done what they had to do to eliminate it. Rei just couldn't fault them for that.

Then again, what he just *couldn't* get out of his head was the smug, all-too-pleased look on Dyrk Reese's face as the man had pleasantly informed them of the details of the match the day before, along with the *immediate* downturn in morale the major's words had effected on the team.

It stuck with Rei all through dinner and after, when Aria had all six of them gather in her room to review the day. It was nice to affirm that the Team Battle victory had indeed boosted the other five's spirits as they discussed their fights—Duels and multi-squad formats both—and Rei even managed to force himself to participate a little to fill in the details of his early participation in the Wargames and what his decision-making process had been like. After that they only briefly touched on the following morning's matches—Rei vs. Vademe first, then Aria vs. Grant, then finally whatever pairing came out of those two fights for the finals—before diving into the Team Battle finals against Valormade, but Aria looked more and more distracted with every passing quarter hour, glancing Rei's way often from her place on the bed to where he sat in the room's sole desk chair. He pretended not to notice, wanting to convince himself he was

doing a good job of hiding his frustration, but after another 20 minutes or so it was Catcher who made the suggestion that they should head to bed since “Everyone seems a little out of it after the day.”

This was met with a general consensus of nodding heads and muttered agreements, and the members of Firesong said goodnight before making to take their leave, all but Aria and Viv heading for the door.

At least until Aria told Viv quietly that she’d be back in a bit, then followed Rei out into the hall where she took him firmly by the elbow just as he and Catcher started heading for their room. Her grip might as well have been a hundred steel bolts anchoring him to the floor, and he let out an involuntary grunt of surprise as he was brought up short.

“Rei’s gonna catch up, Catcher,” Aria told the Saber sweetly when he looked back to see what the holdup was. “I’m just gonna steal him for a bit.”

Catcher didn’t so much as hesitate. With a grin and a double thumbs up in Rei’s direction he spun on his heels again and hurried after Cashe and Grant, who hadn’t noticed Aria’s intervention. In silence the pair of them waited, not saying anything until the other three had turned a corner in the hall.

Then Aria slid her fingers down from Rei’s elbow to his hand and promptly started pulling him along in the opposite direction.

“Woah, hey!” It took Rei a second to get his shorter legs moving on pace with hers. “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see,” was the only answer he got, which didn’t help his mood.

“Aria, it’s getting late, and if I want to be ready for Vademe tomorrow I should really get to b—”

“You and I both know you could probably take Vademe on with your eyes duct-taped shut, Rei, so shush it and just come with me.”

Her tone, firm but concerned, was enough to indeed shut Rei up, and he didn't say another word as she continued to pull him along. They passed a number of students as they moved, some from Galens and some from the other schools, and Rei had to work for once to ignore the stares and the whispers that started up as they passed. He really *was* in a pretty shitty mindset, if the eyes and mutterings of a bunch of other cadets was getting to him. Even the knowing smirks and nods he got from some of the boys pricked at him for some reason, though the wink he got from Candice Meyer—Lennon's girlfriend—as they crossed her coming out of a room wasn't so bad, he supposed.

Soon they were at the elevators, and Aria didn't let go of his hand as she called them a car, Rei noting as she did that she'd hit the option for "UP". One came in short order, and they climbed in along with a scattered few other hotel guests, tucking themselves into a back corner to wait. Oddly, Aria didn't actually make a floor selection, and when someone asked her politely where they were headed she smiled and gave them the highest number already displayed as having been selected by the other passengers.

Rei's curiosity finally got the better of him, and he brought up a new message to her in his frame, typing it out quickly with his free hand before sending it off.

Where are we going? he repeated.

Aria didn't even blink when he saw the notification hit her, but she did read it.

You'll see, was the only response he got, coming with an accompanied squeeze of his hand, and Rei resigned himself to waiting it out.

They lingered in that car for several minutes, stopping every dozen floors or so as they climbed. The Chevaron, like every modern metropolis building, had dozens of elevators, but the sheer scale of the building meant that even accelerating upwards as quickly as was safe for non-Users meant they were still in there for a while. In fact at some point Rei realized out of the blue that he and Aria had been holding hands for probably 5 minutes without him even really noticing, and that thought alone lifted more of his annoyance at the day—and Dyrk Reese—than any Team Battle victory ever could have.

Whatever other bullshit might have happened, the tournament had brought them closer together in a big way.

Eventually the car reached the highest floor that had been selected by any of the passengers coming in and out while they'd climbed, and only then did Aria finally lift her other hand to touch the nearest wall, bringing up the elevator controls for herself. As Rei watched, she poked the highest button on the display—a bold, carefully-designed “R” in the middle of a red circle—and then they were the last of the passengers and the doors were closing again. They climbed one last time, moving faster and faster as the car skipped more than 30 floors without stopping now, and then started to slow, eventually coming to a steady stop. Finally the doors opened again, and Rei peered dubiously out of them.

“Uh... Are we allowed to be up here?” he asked hesitantly.

Aria laughed quietly, but started stepping out of the elevator, pulling him along with her as she answered.

“Definitely not.”

They exited into what was obviously some kind of rooftop restaurant. The center of the massive room—it looked like it took up the full top *two* floors of the building—was occupied by a sizable square bar, but the scale of the place meant that left a wide swath of open, polished cement floor to walk around on. The ceilings were double-

height and hung with decorative, unlit old-world lamps, and the outside walls were clear panels of glass angled slightly outward, artistically complemented with an elbow-high wooden counter that would have allowed patrons to share drinks while taking in the spectacular view the windows provided of Ganos, obvious even from where Rei stood. It was already a stunning sight, the lights of the city playing on the floor and ceiling. There was only one issue.

If the hundred cloth-covered tables, scattered power tools, and half-demolished center bar didn't clue one in that the place was under renovation, the blazing, hip-height strip of yellow light that displayed a scrolling "CONSTRUCTION AREA. DO NOT ENTER." sure as hell would have.

Not that that stopped Aria when she pulled him right through the slowly trailing warning sign—displayed purely in their NOED—and over towards one of the closer windows. For a second Rei thought he might have protested, worried about what would happen if they got caught.

But then the *full* scope of the city started to reveal itself, and Rei could only mutter a low "Woah..." of amazement as he gave into temptation.

The view was *spectacular*. Ganos didn't quite have the size or height of Castalon, but it was still a thriving metropolis, and the fact that such places only came *more* to life at night seemed to be as true here as anywhere. Everywhere below them light blazed, illuminating the buildings and sky lanes in place of the sun that had long since slipped away below the horizon. Flyers and other vehicles gave motion to the scene, most moving in trailing lines, but some dipping or turning as they changed lanes or came and went from the traffic. The neon advertisements and the highlighted labels of the structures added a plethora of colors to everything, and from where he stood Rei realized he could see a dozen other hotels, several malls, a hundred marked restaurants, and probably a good score of different residential towers without even turning his head.

It was astounding, and yet taking it all in he for some reason felt like he could breathe a little easier than he had all day.

Standing there, so high above the world that the even the largest transport vehicles looked like the toys he remembered sharing with the other children on the Estoran Center, made him feel separate from it all in a way he'd really, *really* needed.

“How did you *find* this place?” he asked without looking around at Aria, watching as the blaring lights of what looked like an emergency medical flyer blazed through open air, skipping the usual travel lanes far below them.

“Luck.” She was beside him, having at some point finally let go of his hand, and as she answered she leaned her elbows on the window counter to watch the world below. “First night we got here. I was so nervous I woke up at like midnight and couldn't get back to sleep. Ended up wandering around the hotel.”

That was an admittance Rei hadn't expected, and he lifted his eyes to her reflection in the angled glass.

“Really? I actually remember thinking you seemed really well held together Monday morning...”

Aria snorted and brought a hand up to gesture at her face dramatically. “The modern miracles of sweat-proof makeup. You should have seen the bags under my eyes before I covered them up. Add that to having grown up around my mom and, well...” She shrugged. “I got good at ‘seeming’ like I have it all together in preschool, probably...”

Rei nodded, following now as he let his gaze drift back down to the city. “And so you ended up here? Hell of a find...”

“Yeah I kinda thought so... Came back last night, too...”

Rei frowned, starting to understand what they were doing there. The anger returned sharply, and he couldn't stop his fingers from twitching and digging slightly into the wood of the counter he'd rested one hand on.

Aria didn't miss the motion, and turned to face him directly.

"Rei... can I be honest with you?"

The question came quiet and calm, but still took Rei a little by surprise. Just the same, he nodded almost immediately. "Always. You know that."

"Good... Then don't take this the wrong way but..." She brought up her left hand to poke one finger pointedly into his shoulder, leaving it there. "You're a damn hypocrite."

That took Rei completely aback, and he blinked as he turned to her too. Aria's green eyes, sparkling in the light of the city, hadn't left him, and there was something between a smirk and a sad smile on her face as her finger stayed extended, stretched out to hover over his heart.

"Excuse me?"

"I told you not to take it the wrong way."

"How can I *not* take that the wrong way...?"

"Cause it's true." Finally she let her hand drop to take his, squeezing his fingers comfortingly. "You yelled at Viv for not talking about what's been going on with her—"

"I didn't yell at her!" Rei interrupted indignantly, earning himself nothing more than a pair of rolled eyes.

"Fine. You *very politely* requested that Viv talk about what's been going on with her—"

"Fat lot of good it did, too. 48 hours later and she's locked me out ag—"

"Rei, I'm trying to have a serious conversation here. If you cut me off one more time there is a non-zero chance that you are going to 'trip' and go flying out this window." She smiled icily at him, lifting her free hand to rap a knuckle on the thick glass. "We're getting pretty high in rank. You might even live."

A chill ran up Rei's spine, and he was suddenly reminded of another recent conversation with a very different person. Even more frightening, however, was the fact that he had less of a hard time imagining *Aria* chucking him off a building than Rama Guest, for some reason...

"Yes ma'am, sorry ma'am," he said, trying at an apologetic salute with his free hand.

"Being a smartass is only cute *some* of the time, Ward," *Aria* told him, that lethal smile not leaving her face.

Rei chuckled darkly, relaxing and giving her hand a little reciprocating bounce to show he understood. "Got it. Sorry. You were saying I'm a hypocrite."

"I was. Can I explain why without you interrupting?"

Rei nodded sheepishly, and *Aria's* expression softened.

"You've been pushing *Viv* to talk to you for weeks. I get it, and I agree with it. She definitely needs to open up. *But...* it's a bit rich of you to ask that of her when you clam up the minute something gets to *you*."

"I don't clam up!" Rei protested. "When do I clam up??"

"Oh right. Totally. Today was just you practice-running for some future vow of silence, obviously. My mistake."

That had Rei's mouth snapping shut, and he glowered at *Aria* resentfully.

"That's different," he grumbled after bit. "It's different."

"Yes, it is," *Aria* agreed, but rather than seem any kind of frustrated at his pushback, she looked worried. "That's kind of my point, Rei. You *don't* usually go quiet when something is bothering you. You don't. If anything you're like a crowbar when it comes to wedging open the doors to uncomfortable conversations, as *Viv* and I can *both* attest to."

"And that's a bad thing?" Rei asked, making a half-hearted attempt to derail the topic *Aria* was *actually* after.

She saw right through him, of course.

“No, it’s not.” She raised an eyebrow in warning. “And don’t try to change the subject. I’m serious, Rei. You sealed up today. It was bad before the Wargame, and I got that. Reese being a smug prick. That shit-matchup. Viv. Everything. But after... That was next level.” She stepped closer, letting go of his fingers to bring her hand higher up his arm, letting it come to rest above his elbow as she watched him worriedly. “I just want to know what’s going on? Talk to me. Please.”

For a little while longer Rei didn’t answer, jailed by a kind of pride he was surprised to discover he possessed. He still wanted to argue that she *was* wrong, that he *didn’t* “clam up” when something was raking at him. The truth, though...

The truth wasn’t so simple, and a moment later Rei found himself letting it all out at once.

“I feel like it’s on me, Aria,” he said, not even hearing his voice crack a bit as the anger and guilt of the admittance fell down on him all at once at the words. “All of it. All the bullshit. Reese being an ass to the team, yes, but also people like Biggs poking and prodding to figure out if we’re legit. Us getting ganged up on in the Wargames. We never had a *shot* in that fight, Aria. From the start. And Viv? You want to talk about Viv?” Rei scoffed. “My best friend for *years*, dating a guy I hated? But I’m not sure I do anymore? Maybe? And if that’s not confusing enough: because *she* doesn’t know either, I feel like it’s partially *my* fault she’s been so shut up.”

“*How* is that your fault?” Aria asked him, her voice gentle. “How is *any* of that your fault, Rei?”

“How is it not, Aria? How is it *not*?”

She didn’t answer for a second, looking at him incredulously. Then she seemed to realize he was *actually* looking for some kind of answer.

“Oh you’re serious? Like actually? Okay, do I start with Dyrk Reese? The guy is an asshat of *interstellar* proportions. You know it, I know it, everybody knows it, and if

you needed any confirmation of that, how about the fact that Dent had to *publicly* tear him a new one for unprofessional conduct Monday? Since he can't get back at her easily I'll bet you anything he's been looking for a chance to take it out on us."

"But he wouldn't *be* trying to 'take it out on us' if it wasn't for me and this stupid grudge he's had since—!"

"Rei!" Aria half-yelled, cutting him off. "Again! *How is that your fault??* Yes, Reese has obviously had it out for you since day one! But what could you have done about that?? *Not* stood out like a sore thumb at school? Yeah right. *Not* applied to Galens? Viv would have forged your name on the admission paperwork. *Not* been assigned Shido? Don't be an idiot. Dyrk Reese is the one walking around pretending to be an adult while seemingly unable to get over the fact that you not only *belong* at the Institute, but are now the *strongest* first-year in the school."

"Second strongest," Rei muttered, hearing what she was saying but not totally willing to acknowledge it.

Aria rolled her eyes again, letting her hand drop from his elbow so she could cross her arms. "Maybe. We'll probably see soon enough, won't we? But my point stands: Dyrk Reese's stupid obsession with you isn't your fault. And if my uncle is as smart as I think he is, he's probably going to do something about it eventually. You're too valuable for Reese to be toying with like this. To Galens and the ISCM. *Furthermore!*" she continued forcefully, stopping Rei short as he opened his mouth to try and interrupt. "My point holds true for *Biggs* too. And the rest of them. Were you *not* supposed to come to Sectionals? Or pretend the feeds are wrong and you're actually a bad fighter? Or were you just supposed to sprout another six inches overnight so you didn't look out of place here?"

"Hey now, watch it with the short jokes," Rei muttered, grimacing.

"Rei, it's not a joke." Aria scowled at him. "And even if it were, you're growing like a quarter-inch a month or something, so don't go there. What I'm trying to say is

that you were *always* gonna cause a stir, and that couldn't be helped. Plus, you dealt with Biggs on day one."

Rei shrugged, maybe starting to feel a little better but not quite sure he wanted to admit that just yet. It *was* true the only solution to Reese's attitude and the likes of Biggs and the other disgruntled students was to have never come to school—much less Sectionals—in the first place, an idea so ridiculous Rei almost laughed at it.

On the other hand, that still left the fact that Firesong had been targeted by Red Crown and the others largely because—

"And if you're trying to come up with some stupid reason to blame yourself for us getting ganged up on in the Wargames, save it. You'd be reaching, and you know it."

Rei blinked at Aria, taken aback.

"... Does Third Eye also let you read minds, or is that a whole new Ability you didn't tell me about?"

Aria laughed humorlessly. "I can just tell. You're looking for a reason to stay mad at yourself. Don't. It's not your style. And even if you *did*, blaming yourself for us getting eliminated from the Wargames would be the *stupidest* reason. Not to mention a little—no, a *lot*—arrogant."

Rei spluttered at that. "What?? H-How is that arrogant?"

Aria narrowed her eyes at him. "You're concerned it's your fault we got ganged up on, correct?"

Rei was suddenly very much on guard. "... Yeah? I guess?"

"Meaning that if you *weren't* a part of the team, we wouldn't have been the target from the start?"

It clicked, then, and Rei saw where she was going. "Wait. Hold on. That's not what I was trying to say. I just meant that—"

But Aria had set her trap well, and wasn't interested in letting him get away.

“Meaning that you think that if you weren’t on the team, Firesong wouldn’t have been enough of a threat to warrant being considered the primary problem. Meaning you think *you’re* the deciding factor in what makes us go from ‘just another good squad’ to ‘the squad to beat?’”

“Aria, that’s not what I was trying to—”

“Oh?” Aria opened her arms wide, as though inviting him to give her another answer. “It wasn’t? Then you should enlighten me as to what you *were* trying to get at, Rei. Because you really only have two choices, don’t you? Either you think you’re *so* integral to Firesong’s threat level that you’re the sole reason we get picked on in Wargames, or you *don’t* think that and you’re just being an idiot for feeling like us getting ganged up on is your fault. Which is it?”

Rei mouthed at the air, scrambling for an answer for several seconds before finding any point to cling to. “I mean do I have to be the *linchpin* in order to feel like I’m the reason everybody is always going after us? That seems a little extreme, if you ask—”

“Replace yourself with Vademe,” Aria told him, crossing her arms again. “Or Laquita Martin. Or Jack Benaly. Replace yourself with any of them. Go on, I’ll wait.”

Rei was quiet again, seeing her point at last. When he didn’t answer, she nodded sternly.

“Do you get it now? None of them can replace you, Rei—not even damn *close*—but you’re not the reason Firesong gets all the hate of the field. None of us are. Not individually. It’s all of us put together, Rei. *All* of us. You, me, Viv, Catcher, Cashe, *and* Grant. We’re a *team* that has to be taken down at all costs, nothing less. And if you agree with that—and you *better* agree with that, or you’re walking back to your room *very* alone tonight—then you also have to agree that us *getting* taken down isn’t your fault. It’s no one’s fault. It’s everyone’s fault. But it’s not *your* fault.”

For a long time after that, Rei stood in silence, watching Aria stare him down. What she was saying made perfect sense, of course—hell, he'd argued many of those same points to himself throughout the day, if entirely unsuccessfully—but as always it was different coming from her. Maybe it was that he just needed someone else to say it, or maybe it was that he needed *Aria* to say it, he wasn't sure, but either way it was... uplifting. Stabilizing. Like she was sealing up the cracks in his confidence and mood one at a time with brutal precision. He felt... taller, all of a sudden, and even though Aria still stood 3-plus inches over him despite his growth he felt of a height with her, at least in that moment.

It was a good feeling for *many* reasons.

“Okay, *Obi-wan*,” he sighed after a second. “If you're *so* wise, what about Viv? You gonna lay some sage words on me there?”

Aria gave him a look. “Uh... Not until you tell me what ‘O-bee-wan’ means...?”

Rei paused, considered the question, but could only shrug after a second. “No idea, actually. Something I've heard Dent say a few times in training when someone was being a smartass.”

“Ah,” Aria said with a nod, apparently satisfied by this. “Bet you it's old-world, then, knowing her. Be careful picking those up or you're gonna get weird looks.”

“Weirder looks than I get now?”

Aria smirked, cocking her head at him. “I don't think you get weird looks. I think people just think you're cute and can't help but stare. Like a puppy. Or a really handsome potato.”

Rei *had* felt his ears start to go a little warm at Aria using the word “cute”, but she lost him immediately as he stared at her deadpan.

“A potato? Seriously?”

“It's about as ridiculous as you making Viv's problems yours, isn't it?”

Rei flinched. “Clever,” he muttered as he mentally rubbed his face after running right into *that* wall. “Reeeeeal clever.”

“Are you going to tell me I’m wrong?”

“Comparing me to a potato? Yes. I’m too scrawny. Comparing *comparing me to a potato* to me feeling guilty about Viv?” He stared at her. “Do I really have to answer?”

Aria shook her head, still smirking. “No, ’cause I’m right.” She lost her smile a little. “Rei, you’re walking around like the fate of the damn *universe* rests on your shoulders. Stop it. It’s worrying, and it’s honestly a little frustrating. Viv has to make her own choices. We’ve talked about this. And besides—” She hesitated, looking unsure of herself all of a sudden.

“And besides...?” Rei pressed after a bit, watching her carefully.

Aria took a moment more, than seemed to make her decision. “And *besides*,” she repeated, “I don’t get the impression what’s going on with her has anything to do with Grant—or ‘Logan’? I don’t know anymore. He threw me for a loop calling me ‘Aria’ today...”

Rei, though, was more interested in the first part of her statement.

“Nothing to do with Grant?” he asked. “What does it have to do with, then?”

“Oh I don’t know,” Aria said sarcastically. “Maybe—just *maybe*—the fact that she lost to Vademe? And that she wasn’t a big part of the Wargames action? *AND* that she’s the only member of Firesong *without an Ability* now?”

Rei was completely lost. “What? Why would *that* bother her?”

Aria rolled her eyes. “Rei, not everyone has your... perseverance. Not *everyone* can take every punch and broken bone and severed limb and just walk it off. Sectionals has been huge for Catcher and Cashe, and you, Logan, and I were already ahead of the game. Viv’s the only one left who hasn’t seen that first *really* big jump on the team. How could she *not* feel a little left behind?”

“That’s dumb,” Rei said flatly. “Viv probably has a good shot of taking on Catcher or Cashe even with their Abilities. And if the three of us didn’t have ours, it would be a pretty even playing field too.”

“First: that’s bull. Your Type Shift is borderline useless in a fight where people know it’s coming, and will be until you get a hang of mental commands and Saber-Type combat. Second: so what? How does that help how Viv is probably feeling right now? In the moment—in *this* moment—she is the one left out. It won’t be forever—or probably even for long—but...” Aria paused again, but this time didn’t have to be pushed to continue after a second. “Rei... have you considered that we’re probably *all* going to feel that way, at some point? Shido’s Growth—” she glanced around as she spoke, as though instinctively searching for potential spying ears “—it’s going to take you some place a lot higher than us a *lot* faster, and it’s not going to stop...”

Rei, not expecting this poignant statement, went a little stiff.

“If you’re trying to make me feel like stuff *isn’t* my fault, Aria, then that’s not really doing a good—”

“No, *nooo*,” Aria said with a laugh, and all of a sudden she was right in front of him, both hands on his face, cupping his jaw like she wanted him to really *hear* what she had to say. “That’s not what I meant, and that’s stupid too. Again, were you just *not* supposed to get Shido? Were you *not* supposed to meet all of us? Make friends with all of us? My *entire point* is that how other people feel—how Reese feels, how Biggs feels, how Viv or even *I* feel—that’s not on you, Rei. It’s never going to be on you. Not unless you make it.”

“Not even if I act like a total dick?” he asked, unable to help himself from bringing his hands—his awkward, slightly-shaky hands—up to rest on Aria’s hips. He didn’t pull her close—he didn’t have the guts to do *that*—but he didn’t really have to. She was barely a few inches away. He could almost count her freckles and the flecks of broken green in her emerald eyes, and might have tried to had the neon lights of the living city

below not been playing a wonderful dance across one side of her face as he looked into them.

“Do you plan on being a dick, Reidon Ward?” Aria asked, her voice suddenly quieter. Her expression had stilled, the smile fading to something calmer, more wanting. She too, apparently, had realized just how close they stood, and she hadn’t moved her hands off his face.

“To you? Not particularly?”

“To others?”

“Only if they deserve it.”

That got a smile out of her again, a brief glimpse of that brightness that had always been so taking to Rei. It was all his heart—and will—could take, because in the next moment he *had* in fact pulled her close, closing the gap between them in a quick rush that had her letting out the smallest of surprised breaths.

Then, though, Rei was kissing her, and Aria was kissing him right back.

It wasn’t the terrible, clumsy thing he’d been turning over with frightened excitement in his head for weeks now. Not at all. Was it a *little* stiff, a *little* awkward? Sure. Made doubly so by the fact that while Rei was acutely aware that *he* had no idea what he was doing, Aria very much seemed to know her way around the act. After a second of his lips on hers he let her lead, let her bring her hands back from his jaw to his hair, emulating her by raising his own up to her middle, then upper back to pull her in even closer. They stayed like that, locked into place in the quiet of the empty room, the only sound the very distant noise of sirens and the faintest thump of music rising from one of the closer rooftops below. Rei thought he could have paused time forever, then, his eyes closed but his vision still full of the city’s colors, feeling the girl who had been making his heart hurt for months in his hands, holding her like he’d never had the chance to before. Everything melted away. Everything. The world. The tournament.

Dyrk Reese and his bullshit. The prying eyes and whispers of the other students. Even Viv and his worries about her.

And when the pair of them broke apart, 10 seconds and one eternity later, they *stayed* away.

“Woah...” Aria breathed, and Rei opened his eyes to find hers still closed as she dropped her forehead to his, smiling. “Not bad, Ward. Took you long enough, though.”

“It’s the 25th century, Laurent,” he responded in turn, working SO hard not to speak in a squeak as he took her in even from so close. “Who says you couldn’t have taken the lead?”

Aria sniggered at that, pulling her head back and opening her eyes at last, but not letting go of him. On the contrary, she let her hands hang behind him, elbows resting on his shoulders, clearly more than content to stay pressed to his chest.

“Fair enough,” she got out, looking his face up and down for a second. “Guess it *is* a two player game.”

“I’m gonna say officially now?” he asked with a grin, glad the relative darkness of the empty restaurant probably did wonders to hide the flush of his face. He’d seen the opportunity, and he’d jumped on it before thinking.

Aria laughed out loud at that, a real, true laugh as she tilted her head to one side, her red hair falling over her shoulder.

“Yeah. I’d say so,” she told him with a grin.

Rei smiled back at her for a while, content to take her in, happiness washing through him from head to toes.

Then, unable to stop himself, he brought one hand off her back and allowed himself an exaggerated fist pump behind her. “Score!”

Aria laughed again, bringing her own arms back to make to push him away, but he wouldn’t let her. They play fought for a moment, both of them smiling and neither *really* wanting to have any distance from the other, until at last they stopped with his arms

around her waist and hers resting on his chest. Aria watched him a few seconds longer, then finally spoke.

“You feeling better?”

Rei raised an eyebrow at her. “Is that a serious question?”

She nodded. “Yes. It is.”

Rei sighed. “Then yes. I am. Very much.”

“Would you still be feeling better if I hadn’t kissed you?” she half-teased, half-prodded.

“Hey, hold on. Didn’t we *just* decide I was the one who kissed *you*?”

“Semantics.”

“Semantics my ass, lady! Now you’re just taking credit for—”

“Rei!” Aria interrupted with another laugh. “Seriously. As fun as that was, I didn’t bring you up here to make out against the bar. Are you *actually* feeling better?”

Rei thought of pushing the joke further, but stopped himself. He allowed his face to fall a little, but there was no *completely* erasing the thrill of the moment.

“Yeah. I’m feeling better. Thank you. I get what you were saying. I don’t know if I *agree* with what you were saying, but I get it. I’m sorry. I know I don’t usually sulk like that, but I think it’s been getting to me for longer than I realized.”

“And it all came to a head today…” Aria added with a nod. “Yeah. I can understand that. But it’s not your fault, Rei. It’s really not. You need to get that through you head. *And—*” she kept on, again stopping him as he made to interrupt “—you *definitely* need to let Viv handle her own shit from time to time.”

Rei sighed at that, then nodded, running a thumb up and down along Aria’s back. “Easier said than done, but yeah. Okay.” He pondered that thought a little longer though, and couldn’t help but continue. “You think she feels *left behind*? Seriously? *Viv*? *Viviana Arada*?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.” Aria brought her arms up around his neck again. “I would be, especially in a group like ours.”

“But *why*?”

“Because. We. Are. Not. All. Like. *You*. Rei!” Aria intoned with a snort. “We don’t have your iron will. Your damn *confidence*. If anything *you’re* the weird one.”

Rei grimaced at that, but nodded. “Yeah, alright... Still... I just wish she’d *talk* about it. Like she said she’d try.”

“Who says she isn’t?” Aria asked, looking at him pointedly. “She doesn’t just have you, Rei. Not anymore.”

Rei gave a huff at that, not sure if he was jealous at the thought or if he just needed to acknowledge it in some disgruntled form or fashion. “Fair.” He nodded once more as he repeated Aria’s words back to himself, really trying to let them sink in. “Either way, it’s not my fault.”

“Either way, it’s not your fault,” she echoed. “And either way, you need to let her carry her own baggage sometimes.”

“Sometimes,” he agreed slowly. “Yeah. Got it.”

They stood like that in silence, then, watching each other in the shifting light of the Ganos night. Eventually Rei plucked up the courage to open his mouth, about to ask Aria if he could kiss her again, when she beat him to the punch.

“So... You know when I said I *didn’t* bring you up here to make out against the bar...”

CHAPTER 34

Kastro Vademe was good people. Frankly, Rei liked the guy a lot. The Lancer had never given him a hard time early in the year when he'd been lagging behind the rest of the class, and he'd equally been nothing but friendly since Rei had caught up. He was a talented User *and* a skilled leader, and there was a very good reason the Galens higher ups had picked him to head the squad that became Valormade. Kastro Vademe was good people.

It didn't stop Rei from turning him into mincemeat in their semi-finals match the following morning.

Vademe was a nice guy, but he'd also built up a debt Rei needed to see paid back, especially after Aria had clued him in on what was probably going on with Viv. For that reason the moment the Arena gave them the command to "Fight!", Rei bolted in the direction of Vademe's starting circle—blocked from view by the manifestation of the handful of decrepit, crumbling buildings that was the Deserted Settlement zone—making a beeline as directly across the map as he could. It was a little dumb, sure. In fact it was equally as dumb as Viv's charge against the Lancer had been the day before. Vademe had range on Rei, and was a *very* skilled User. It was silly not to take advantage of all the cover offered by the crumbling buildings and try to close in without giving away his presence in a hail of pounding footsteps.

But the debt needed to be paid.

It took a bit to locate the Lancer, unfortunately. Either because Vademe saw Rei's approach coming and reacted or just knew a head-on fight wasn't something he could win, the boy was nowhere to be found as Rei found the spot his starting circle had been, made obvious by the footprints in the dry dirt of the zone. Those same footsteps, though, led east, and Rei only had to follow the trail with his eyes to identify one

particular two-story ruin, its cement walls crumbling down to the rusted rebar, into which they vanished.

Rei also didn't miss the subtle flutter of the tattered curtains shifting on the top floor window—strange given the lack of wind—nor the briefest glimpse of orange light beyond them, juuuust poorly hidden enough to see.

Vademe was too smart and too well trained to make such a mistake without deliberate intent, so Rei assumed a trap. He didn't pause, though, his Cognition snapping an idea into place in a fraction of second, and one that *didn't* involve him running recklessly right onto the head of the Lancer's spear.

"Type Shift: Saber Mode," he muttered even as he bolted to the building just on the other side of the road from the one Vademe was hunkered down in. Shido had shifted by the time he reached it, and making his selection fast Rei picked one heavy, loose chunk of fallen rubble from among the crumbling foundation, stuck his sword into it, and wrapped both hands around the most solid-looking of its broken edges.

Then—praying all the while he hadn't miscalculated his Saber Mode's boosted Strength—he heaved the hunk of debris up, twisted, and hurled it with all his might at the failing wall just to the right of the window Vademe had been baiting him out of.

Rei was running, jumping, and calling on his Brawler form again by the time the rubble struck and blew clean through the crumbling concrete with a deafening *CRUNCH*. He almost didn't hear the shout of alarm from inside the building on the impact, nearly losing it over the crashing and the quieter electric hum of Shido's Type Shift. It wouldn't have mattered either way, of course.

Rei had already tucked his legs, ducked his head, and crossed his arms over his face to protect it as he hurtled into the mess and billowing dust right through the nice little entrance he'd oh-so-subtly made for himself.

He hit the ruin-strewn floor awkwardly, unable to see anything as he landed, but he'd anticipated about as much and just stayed tucked, trusting his reactive shielding to

handle the initial impact. He tumbled once, twice, then caught himself on his hands and feet, still sliding over dirty wood another yard or so while he squinted through the dust to find what he was looking for. He locked on almost immediately.

After all, orange vysetrium glowed like a beacon through the kind of settling chaos Rei had made of the room.

He lunged and heard Vademe curse. It was clear the Lancer had been expecting a little less violent of an entrance—probably for Rei to try to come through the window or floor so he could get the drop on him—but in a confined space with no advantage the fight could only become the exact head-to-head the boy had been very deliberately trying to avoid. It was initially a little puzzling, in fact, that Vademe would choose to sacrifice some of his reach by confining himself so tightly, but as he broke through much of the billowing dust Rei understood a little better. There was a massive hole in the back of the decrepit chamber—*another* massive hole, now, actually—that provided a clear point of egress by which to escape. Vademe had clearly thought this out, had judged that if things went south, he'd have the opportunity to retreat outside where he could more easily put some distance between the two of them.

Rei made sure the cadet didn't have the time to so much as remember his plan B.

Horizontal sweep, Rei thought calmly as he closed the distance in a blink. Firesong's group studies—plus a personal early-morning refresher—of Vademe's tactics paid off at once. If he'd been more level-headed the Lancer might have varied his defenses, but coughing and staggering as he was he fell into drilled instinct, slashing across his body in an attempt to ward off Rei's rush. Rei ducked low, feeling the blade rip overhead with maybe an inch of clearance.

Pivot and upper-cut.

He was already reacting, right arm swinging across and away from his own body when Vademe twisted to bring the butt of his spear forward and up in a low, vertical arc, not wasting the momentum of his missed strike. Ordinarily it might have connected

precisely with the underside of Rei's chin—and probably ended the fight there and then—but instead the haft hit the solid steel plating along the back of Rei's deflecting forearm, knocking the blow aside.

Recovery attempt.

Vademe flailed only briefly in the fraction of a second left to him. His weapon out of position completely and Rei now well inside his guard, he could only try to save himself by bringing a leg up and around at Rei's head. It was a good correction, the only one that might have clutched him a win if the kick had landed.

Unfortunately for Vademe, he wasn't anywhere *near* fast enough to keep up with Rei.

Dead.

Then Shido's claws *thudded* into the Lancer's body in echoed hits, the left sinking into his open side first, the right into his belly. Rei didn't stop there—and couldn't even if he'd wanted to—the momentum of his rush carrying him forward to shoulder Vademe and slam him straight into the cracking wall at his back.

The cracking wall that didn't hold.

CRUNCH!

The concrete gave, and for the second time Rei found himself crashing through a hole he'd made in the building, though this time inadvertently. Since they were only two stories up, he simply grit his teeth as he and Vademe plummeted down towards the hard-packed ground of the dusty road below, wrenching the boy's thrashing form more securely under his. Their combined weight brought them hurtling down, and they slammed into the earth with a sickening *thud* so hard that Rei literally *bounced* off Vademe's chest, his claws dislodging from the Lancer's torso as he did. Landing again—a little more gently this time—Rei logrolled away to get some distance between the two of them, then shoved himself up with fists leveled just in case. He needn't have worried.

Vademe lay where he'd fallen, his spear lost in the drop, as unmoving as the rest of the scenery around him.

The fight couldn't even have lasted 45 seconds.

"Fatal Damage Accrued," came the announcement, echoing slightly through the empty buildings. "Winner: Reidon Ward, the Galens Institute."

Rei managed a couple steps towards Vademe's prone form before the ground beneath his feet went translucent, and he started to descend as the sky above faded and the roar of the crowd resumed. As they dropped towards the projection plating he looked up and around, taking a second to place himself before he found Firesong along the railing of the north Dueling field, and he lifted a hand in acknowledgement. Before any of them could return the gesture the stands—packed to their limit on the final day of Sectionals as they were—boomed out their approval, 50,000 people obviously mistaking the motion as one meant for them. Rei almost winced at the noise even as Aria, Cashe, and Grant waved back and offered thumbs up—yes, the Mauler too—while Catcher did a little jig standing just behind the two girls. Viv, meanwhile, didn't seem to be looking at him, her intense focus apparently instead on Vademe, both hands gripping the rail. A twinge of guilt tugged at Rei as he hoped he hadn't actually made things *worse* by taking down the Lancer so quickly, but he dismissed it as he caught Aria's eye and the smile she was giving him.

Right, he recalled. Viv has to carry her own baggage sometimes.

As Rei touched down he recalled Shido and walked over to where Vademe was groaning and starting to sit, one armored hand clutching at his stomach, the other helping to get himself up.

"Good fight, man," Rei told him, offering him an arm.

Vademe gave a pained laugh, face scrunched up in discomfort. “You call that a fight? How is it that you just keep getting *faster*?”

Rei chuckled while the Lancer finally took his proffered hand, hauling the boy onto his feet. “What can I say? I’m squirrely.”

“Recall.” Vademe’s CAD whirled out of being back into the bands around his wrist. “I think you’re a bit past that point, Ward. Don’t know how many squirrels can throw *boulders* through walls...”

Rei grinned, but didn’t answer that, instead indicating the closest of the underworks tunnel in question while the announcer gave them the usual congratulations—announcing Rei as “the first finalist for the first-year Dueling brackets!”—and requested they exit the field. To his surprise, Vademe shook his head.

“No way, dude. Don’t you know who’s up next? I’m gonna grab a wall to watch.”

“Ooooooh *right!*” Rei felt a jolt of excitement, moving with the Lancer to clear the floor. Candice Meyer had already been eliminated from the upperclassmen brackets that morning to crown the Galens Phalanx Paul Williams—the only User other than Aria Rei had met who possessed Third Eye—as the first finalist of the older years. Among all the second- and third-years at the tournament, every one of the four semi-finalists had been from the Institute, just like in the first-year bracket. It wasn’t unexpected, but it was still impressive.

Especially given that not all of them were actually *third-year*...

Lennon vs. Sidorov. That was the next match. Rei knew without a shadow of a doubt who would come out on top—by a mile, probably—but the fact that Anatoli Sidorov had made it through every round of Sectionals all the way to the top was mind-blowing, especially given some of the matchups he’d had. As an A0-Ranked User—the only A-Rank among the second-years at the tournament—the Lancer had been paired repeatedly against stronger combatants in the latter half of the week, and each time had come out on top. Every one of those fights would have been worth recording if the

Arena hadn't been doing it for them already, because it was proof again and again and again that raw physical ability wasn't necessarily what made a User. Was it an edge? Definitely. But Sidorov had won every single up-paired fight so far—even one against an A5 Mauler—with cunning, skill, and strategy. And with Sector 9 of Astra-3 having the strongest subsection of student combatants in the system, that meant he was well on his way to representing Astra in the Intersystems, just like Lennon had before him.

It would be exciting to see if the second-year had a plan for going up against the Lasher, futile as it might be...

"You're staying down here?" Rei asked of Vademe as they reached the wall and the Lancer started towards one of the observing officers.

Vademe looked back around at him. "That's the plan. Gonna see if they'll let me. No better view in the house, right?"

"Fair," Rei said with a laugh, but he gestured over his shoulder towards the tunnels. "I'm gonna head up. See if I can grab a spot with my squad."

"Roger that." But the Lancer didn't immediately walk away, instead pausing to offer his own hand this time. "I should have said it too, sorry. Good fight, man. And good luck against Laur—well, good luck in the finals, *whoever* your opponent may be." He grinned knowingly, drawing a chuckle out of Rei as he accepted the offered shake.

"Hey now, who knows? Grant doesn't have *no* chance."

"Uh huh. Just like *I* didn't have 'no chance', I'm sure."

They did part ways there, then, Vademe turning back to head towards the officer again as Rei jogged for the tunnels. It was a little strange stepping out of the light and noise and into the relative darkness of the ramp. The underworks were quiet, almost silent, with no one but a passing patrol bot and a single pair of ISCM officers having a private discussion a little ways up the hall as Rei reached it. He saluted these two automatically when they turned to him, answering with "Thank you, ma'am!" when one of them briefly congratulated him on his win, then turned and made for the closest

stairs. The tunnel was bright with its white plasteel walls and holo displays, but lacked all of the hubbub and life it had hosted all week, even as recently as just the day before. It was dull, almost sad, and Rei realized that—despite all the drama of the week—he wasn't looking forward to the tournament coming to an end.

It had been intense and stressful—and yes, made not a little bit *frustrating* by certain parties—but it had also been an enormous amount of fun.

Rei was glad when he reached the stairs up, taking them three at a time quickly to pop out onto the crowded walkway above the main floor. He was pretty sure he was a known figure by most, now, because everyone he passed as he pushed into and through the crowd seemed to recognize him. Most were amicable, giving way so he could get by or even voicing a congratulations to him at various volumes as they crossed paths, but there were more than a few who had the opposite reaction, students, chaperones, and SCT fans alike glowering or muttering something unintelligible his way. It didn't bother him. Not since the night before. Aria had nailed his confidence back into place—if via metaphorical hammer—and he took not a small amount of pleasure in smiling at these people when he passed them, making sure they knew he'd taken notice of their rudeness.

It paid off in dividends whenever most of them—even the chaperones and the older cadets—would glance away quickly, or else flush and try to stare him down until they were swept away from each other by the crowd.

“There he is!”

Catcher was the first to find him as Rei made his way around the walkway to where he'd seen the rest of the team lined up at the railing. Short as he was he hadn't even spotted any of them when a slim arm snaked between the milling bodies to grab him by the elbow, and Cashe offered a polite “Excuse us,” as she pulled him through to join them.

“Nice fight, dude!” Catcher exclaimed at once, bouncing up and down excitedly. “Only you could put all the excitement of a ten minute match into thirty seconds!”

“Forty,” Cashe corrected him, though she was smiling at Rei too. “Give Vademe some credit, Catchwick.”

“I’m not dissing him!” Catcher exclaimed. “If that guy can kick *Viv’s* ass he can sure as hell whoop *mine!* I’m just saying Rei did a good job of—!”

“It *was* a good fight,” Aria, dressed alongside Grant in her combat suit, interrupted loudly before the pair could get into it, elbowing Catcher half to get him to quiet down, half to nudge him out of the way so she could get to Rei and take him in. “You good? That was a big hit, dropping off the second floor like that.”

“Picture perfect, no worries,” Rei answered, lifting one scarred arm to flex it dramatically. “*Definitely* ready to kick the butt of whoever I’m matched up with next, at the very least...” He grinned as Aria raised an eyebrow at him.

“You’re hilarious. If you think it’s gonna be that easy then that hit *definitely* knocked your brain out of place, given your options.”

“Or maybe he’s just sleep deprived...?” Catcher offered slyly, treating Aria to a meaningful look. “I seem to recall him not getting back to the room until past midnight last night...”

On cue Aria turned about as red as the griffin on her chest, losing all composure and whirling on the Saber. “Layton Catchwick, *say another word. I dare you.* Dent’s seen war. I’ll bet she’d say one team casualty is an acceptable loss, and we’d probably still have a good chance against Red Crown in the Team Battle even if we’re down *our mouthy Saber.*”

Catcher laughed at that, lifting both hands to ward off any further threats, while Cashe looked from him to Aria in confusion.

The Lancer had just opened her mouth—about to ask what Catcher was talking about, no doubt—when Grant swooped in to save the day.

“Don’t think either of us is gonna let you steamroll us, Ward,” he growled, though there was a hint of anticipation in his warning. “You took Vademe by surprise. Laurent and I both know better.”

“I’m sure you do,” Rei answered with a chuckle, looking between the pair of them. Aria was still glaring at Catcher, but the Mauler was watching him levelly. “Don’t worry, I’m not planning on taking anyone for granted, *whoever* it might be.”

That seemed to satisfy all parties, because Aria finally looked away from Catcher with a “Hmph!” while Grant nodded.

Of course, that was the moment that Cashe decided to get caught up.

“So... someone want to tell me why one of our *aces* was apparently up till *midnight* the night before *our finals matches??*”

“Oh not just *one* of our aces, my dear Cashe,” Catcher jumped on the chance with a grin. “What if I told you that *both* of them stayed up past their bedt—?”

“Catcher, I will *literally* end you!” Aria snarled while Grant gave a resigned sigh from behind her, and Rei took the opportunity to slip by the lot of them to where Viv was still standing at the inside edge of the walkway, having not moved from her spot even after he’d joined up with them again.

Coming up beside her, Rei put his back to the rail and leaned his elbows over it, watching her sidelong. She didn’t look his way, and may not have even noticed he was there for all the attention she gave his presence. She was staring, all too intently for Rei to think it was healthy, down at the cleared Arena floor, obviously lost in some heavy thought or another. He looked away and let her linger there for a time, not feeling it was entirely his place to interrupt whatever was going on in her head, but after almost of minute of watching the flow of the crowd—and trying to avoid listening in on Aria half-pleading, half-threatening Catcher into silence about their escapade the night before—Rei nudged an elbow over to bump against where his best friend’s hand was still clutching the metal.

Viv jumped like he'd given her an electric shock, blinking several times as she seemed to come to herself before looking around at him.

"Oh, hey," she said, sounding genuinely surprised to find Rei standing there. "How long you been up here?"

"Long enough to start wondering if that projection plating down there did you a personal harm."

Viv looked confused.

"You're staring at the Arena floor like it murdered someone you know, Viv," Rei clarified for her.

"Oh, that." Viv made a face. "Yeah... Sorry. Just thinking."

"What about?"

"Nothing important."

It took everything Rei had to let it go, once again channeling Aria's words from the evening before, but he managed it, and the pair of them stood like that in silence for a bit longer. Rei was just trying to figure out something else to say, actually, when Viv spoke again.

"Thanks, by the way..."

Rei glanced at her. She'd finally taken her hands from the rail to jam them into the pockets of her uniform—she, Cashe, and Catcher wouldn't be allowed change into their combat suits until it was time to warm up for the Team Battle—and she was looking back down at the Arena floor.

Rei didn't have to ask what she was talking about.

"I got you," he said, turning and facing the floor with her to lean over the railing. "Felt kinda bad doing it, but the dude knocked my best friend out of the running. He had it coming."

Viv grimaced. "You saying I need defending?"

“Hell no,” Rei answered with a snort. “I know better than anyone, Viviana Arada, that you do *not* need defending of any kind. Seen you break the noses of too many guys that outweighed you by fifty pounds to ever think that.”

Viv nodded then, placated. Rei watched the floor with her a bit longer—a cleaning drone was doing a sterilizing sweep in the off time below—before saying anything else.

“You’ll get him. Maybe not tomorrow, maybe not in a month. But you’ll get him.”

He didn’t expect a response, much less an immediate one.

“You really think so?”

Once again Rei looked at Viv askance, and a small lump formed in his throat as he took the girl in. She hadn’t so much as glanced away from the floor, but her face was scrunched up into something he very, *very* much wasn’t used to seeing.

Viv, for maybe the first time in the years Rei had known her, looked utterly unsure of herself.

Aria, you might have hit it on the head, he thought even as he answered firmly.

“Damn sure. Didn’t bet on Vademe going into your match, and wouldn’t bet on him now. Or anyone our year that you got pitched up against.”

It took a moment, but Viv seemed to relax a little at that at last.

She even looked around at him, though she didn’t meet his eyes right away.

“Thanks, bud... Don’t know if I believe you, but it’s good to hear...”

“Don’t doubt it. But once you kick his ass can I remind you of this? Of how I walked up to find you all haunted and forlorn at the edge of the Arena, pining for the opportunity to prove yourself once more against the—”

“Okay, you and Catcher *really* need to stop spending time around each other.” Viv scowled, her usual self snapping back into place all at once, gaze abruptly having *zero* issue meeting his. “Nobody is ‘haunted’ *or* ‘forlorn’ around here, got it?”

“If you say so.” Rei grinned. “Too bad. I was thinking you needed cheering up, so I was gonna share some news with you.”

Viv didn't lose her scowl, but Rei thought he saw a sudden shine of interest in her eyes at this.

"News? What news? Spill."

"Oh no no. I'll save it for a time of actual need, when you're legitimately down and I've got to—*owowowowow!*"

Rei was sure, then, that he'd managed to at least temporarily snap Viv out of her funk, because her hand moved in a blur as she reached out to grab him by one earlobe, regrettably made an easy target since his hair was still up in his combat ponytail. She tugged on it, applying juuuust enough pressure to give him a warning that she *could* pull it clear off his head if she wanted to, and he caved at once.

"I give! I give! I'll tell you!"

"Damn right you will," she growled, but she didn't let go. "And if this doesn't have something to do with where the hell Aria disappeared to last night, I'm gonna take this ear as payment. I tried grilling her about it when she got back to the room, but she didn't give me anything."

Rei—leaning into the threatening tug of her fingers—gave her a meaningful look, unable to stop himself from smiling despite his vulnerable position.

"Oh it *does!*" Viv was suddenly all in, finally letting go of him and stepping closer as she lowered her voice so that none of the others still talking nearby were at risk of overhearing. "Tell me *everything.*"

And so, for roughly the next 15 minutes Rei did exactly that, happy to have the usual Viv back. He only spared the details he suspected Aria wouldn't have been too keen on making public—few and far between, given they hadn't *completely* lost their heads the night before—and the two of them had a good time whispering back and forth just like they used to when they'd make fun of the bullies and other asshats back at Grandcrest. It felt good—felt *normal*, even—and they were both taken by surprise when the announcer came back over the speakers to start the next match.

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your patience and your attendance! Our initial first-year semi-final round was kept short and sweet, but it is now nearly time for the second upper bracket fight of the morning! If you would please return to your seats, our combatants will be called on shortly, and I promise you it will be a fight you don’t want to miss!”

“Ooooh man, here we go!”

Catcher appeared, coming over from the rest of the group to stand beside Rei, deliberately leaving a little room between them. It was a good thing, too, because Aria squeezed in—openly pressing her arm up against Rei’s as she did—while Cashe grabbed a spot on the Saber’s other side and Grant contented himself with standing just behind Viv.

“Lennon’s gonna steamroll him,” Viv announced, and Rei was pleased she hadn’t immediately closed off again the moment they were joined.

“Don’t be so sure,” Aria disagreed. “The Lasher’s got this in the bag, yeah, but Sidorov is good for his year.”

“Insanely good,” Grant echoed with a nod.

For a minute or so they all chatted like that, everyone taking one side or the other as if the second-year Lancer had a prayer of making any kind of decent showing of himself. The crowd around them had dispersed into the stands or tightened along the rail where they could, and the whole of the Arena was on the edge of their seats long before the announcer came back on. Rei could almost taste the electric energy of the place, the rumble of 50,000 spectators echoing in one unanimous, churning roar like an ocean threatening a storm.

And then a single figure came briskly out from the tunnels, reached the top of the north Dueling field across from where Rei and the others stood, and turned to face the crowd. A middle-aged, fit captain lacking any CAD bands, the man had been the acting

arbitrator for all of the morning's matches thus far—Rei and Vademe's included—and was more than competent at his job.

In commenting on the fights, *and* in riling up the spectators in equal measure.

“Ladies and gentlemen, as promised it is now time for our last upper-bracket semi-finals match of this 2469 Sector 9 Sectionals tournament!” The officer had reached the crown of the circle and had preemptively activated the projection plating to bring himself up from the floor of a glowing white disk. “We’ve seen some true up-and-coming titans so far this morning, and you can look forward to Cadets Williams and Ward having it out with their respective opponents in the upcoming finals—” Aria and Viv both nudged Rei from either side at the mention of his name “—but you don’t have to wait any longer for another clash worth every credit you spent on your seats! Two monsters, one a legend who competed in the Intrasystems as a second-year, another looking to follow in those very footsteps! Please, if you would, put your hands together to welcome, from the west, a young man undoubtedly destined for an incredible future in the SCTs should he choose it... CADET CHRISTOPHER ‘LASHER’ LENNON OF THE GALENS INSTITUTE!”

Rei and the rest of the squad howled together with the whole of the stadium, the Arena one undulating, resonant voice of enthusiasm as Lennon’s familiar, slight form appeared from the tunnels along the right side of the floor. He didn’t lift a hand as he closed the distance to the Dueling field, but he did look up and flash a smile into the stadium from behind his grey dreads, resulting in an immediate redoubling of noise.

“I’ll never get used to it,” Grant muttered as Lennon reached the west edge of the fighting ring, his third-year combat suit a splash of red-on-blue against the black of the floor. “I mean the guy is still fit, but if you told me *that* was the most dangerous cadet in the system and I didn’t already know you were right, I’d laugh.”

No one disagreed. It was a common, unspoken fact that Lennon just didn’t have the typical bearing of your average User, much less your *well-above-average* User.

Honestly, it always made Rei feel a little better, taking in the third-year.

“AND FROM THE EAST, LOOKING FOR YET ANOTHER IN A LINE OF UPSETS AT THIS TOURNAMENT... CADET ANATOLI SIDOROV, ALSO OF THE GALENS INSTITUTE!”

The enthusiasm for Sidorov’s entrance wasn’t lacking in comparison to Lennon’s, likely half because of his own merit, half because it was a Lasher fight. Ironically Lennon’s smaller, softer stature was made only more diminutive with the Lancer’s appearance from the tunnels, all tall and regal in his red-on-green suit, all poise and grace despite the breadth of his shoulders as he strode for the other edge of the field. Sidorov made neither gesture nor acknowledgement of the crowd as he moved, and Rei might have thought he heard a few of the cheers turn to boos and catcalls from the roar just before the second-year came to a stop himself.

He thought that a little unfair. He didn’t particularly like Sidorov—and over the course of the week had been growing more and more convinced the Lancer definitely didn’t like *him*, for some reason—but he would have enjoyed seeing any of those vocal haters among the stadium stand before an opponent like the Lasher and show an ounce of the focus the second-year was now.

The two faced off across the 30-yard ring, and all sound quickly faded from the Arena. It was almost frightening, in fact, to go so quickly from the cacophony of enthusiasm and cheers to the near-utter silence that followed. In that dramatic pause, even a few nervous coughs could be heard from high among the stands.

“Combatants, take position,” the announcer said into the quiet, voice echoing through the Arena.

Lennon and Sidorov were both over the silver boundary lines and inside the red starting rings that had appeared for them in a few short strides.

“This is as an official Duel. Do you condone and agree to the rules of this fight?”

The briefer confirmation required of the upper bracket was quickly followed by two nods, one calm and steady, one tense and quick. For a second there was silence again, the stillness of the floor disrupted only by the faint flash of light in the announcer's eyes.

Then the two cadets began to rise, and the stadium came alive again as Firesong became only a handful of voices in tens of thousands to start to shout out their field guesses.

"Not Neutral," Catcher called out unhelpfully over the roar.

"No shit!" Cashe answered. "I see green? Woodlands?"

"Nope, no trees!" Rei yelled. "Red! Dirt!"

"Canyons!" Viv guessed.

But it was Grant who beat them all to it this time.

"Cliffs! And... woah... a weird one, too!"

Sure enough, a second later Rei could make it out as well, and had to agree. Lennon and Sidorov were both climbing much faster than usual, something like a pillar of earth rising up between and under them as they ascended. Just as they started to slow he saw blue, too, and Aria and Catcher both whistled from his right as the final form of the field took shape.

"It's like a moat!" someone from the stands behind them shouted, which Rei supposed was a fair summation.

In the center of the field, standing 30 feet high or so, a tower of earth and stone jutted skyward, capping at a flat, roughly-circular top. The edge of this apex was probably 5 yards from the limit of the actual field wall and plunged down at a concave angle to vanish into a rushing, clear roar of water that was obviously the fierce current of a heavy river. All in all it looked like a rough-hewn cone of rock cut at by nature and the passing flow, and Rei doubted there were many fighters who could take a fall from the top of that field and have a chance of recovering before FDA was called.

“Field: Cliffs.”

The Arena’s cool voice replaced the arbiter’s, raised automatically to be heard over the emulated sound of water rushing over stone. Rei realized he was holding his breath, but didn’t care as he stared upward, taking in Lennon and Sidorov through the rock, made automatically translucent for him and the others by the stadium’s specialized display systems. Aria had reached over at some point to grip his forearm in excitement, while on his other side Viv was bouncing up and down in barely-repressed enthusiasm. It was so bad, in fact, that Grant finally reached up to take her by both shoulders to hold her still, though not once looking down himself from the two older cadets.

“Cadet Christopher ‘Lasher’ Lennon versus Cadet Anatoli Sidorov. Combatants... Call.”

Neither fighter opened their mouths, and yet in a blink their forms were clad in the clashing armor of their Devices. The Lasher’s red vysetrium glowed against the black full-body suit that his Ouroboros had encased him in completely, the place where his eyes should have been made obvious only by a trio of crimson, glowing lines. In each hand he held the handle of one of his signature chain swords, their loose blades lying in an expectant curl around his feet, and over his shoulders his externals hovered, unmoving but ready. Opposite him, Sidorov had seen at least an evolution since the Intraschools, because he, too, now had full-body armor, his CAD covering him from head to toe in silver-grey steel, his tower helm not unlike Lennon’s. Instead of red, though, the Lancer’s vysetrium glowed yellow, the single horizontal line across his face echoing the cool edges of his long spear.

“Ooooh, here we go...” Cashe half whispered, half squealed just before the Arena spoke one last time.

“Combatants... Fight.”

CHAPTER 35

The impact of Lennon and Sidorov's initial exchange might have been mistaken for a bomb going off.

Sidorov triggered an early Break Step out the gate, but Lennon very nearly matched him for Speed with natural agility. As a result, both tore out of their starting circles with such incredible acceleration that they might as well have been two bolts of red and yellow lightning. The Lasher, high-ranked and trained as part of the third-year Duelist groups because of his CAD's form, met his boosted opponent just short of halfway across their reduced 20-yard stage. Sidorov, incredibly, looked to have anticipated this, because Rei had seen his spear start to swing even before he'd left the circle. The timing was perfect, the thorough study the second-year must have made of his older opponent shining clear, because the weapon curved out and in at *exactly* the right time to strike for Lennon's side. It would have been a hell of an opening hit, possibly doing all the damage Sidorov would have needed early on to even out the match, if not outright end it.

Too bad for him, the Lasher was a master of weapons and timing all his own.

Like two separate, living things the A-Type's chain swords moved in unison. His left ripped up in a line along his side, catching and wrenching Sidorov's spear up and away even as the disjointed segments of his right came hurtling down in a straight, swung line at the Lancer's head. Despite the weapon being as limber as—well, as a *chain*—Rei was reminded more of a felled tree crashing down as it dropped, or maybe a tumbling building. Sidorov managed just to get out of the way in time, leaping up and sideways to follow the redirected momentum of his spear just before the second chain sword struck earth, causing the erupting *boom* of that first encounter.

And all in less than a second.

Rei didn't even hear Viv and Aria gasp in awe on either side of him as Sidorov landed, rolled, then bolted for the Lasher again, taking him on head-long, spear leading the way. Another fraction of a second, another block by Lennon with one blade and a swing with the other, and another charge.

"Dude's like a bull." Catcher's bemusement did, on the other hand, reach Rei. "What's he thinking?"

"That his plan is working," Cashe had to yell over a unified gasp from the crowd when a ripping cut from Lennon's blade just missed taking the second-year's arm at the shoulder.

In the corner of his eye Rei saw Catcher give the Lancer a confused look, and Cashe leaned over to explain, loud enough for them all to hear without having to scream this time.

"Lancers have the greatest reach among all the Types, right?"

Catcher nodded.

"Yeah," Cashe echoed. Then, though, she pointed up at the fight. "So what happens when we suddenly *don't*?"

Rei and Aria were both nodding along as Catcher's jaw dropped in understanding, turning back to look up in renewed amazement.

It became more and more clear as the first few seconds of the fight became 20, then 30. Sidorov, master of grace and an elite through-and-through at using the advantage of his spear's reach in every other fight they had seen him in, had adapted in a big, ugly way. It wasn't pretty, but the Lancer had forced himself into the position of the *close*-combat fighter between the two of them, pushing their exchanges to happen as near to the Lasher's body as he could manage. Studying the fight further, Rei was impressed to realize that the second-year had even adjusted the grip on his spear, bringing his hands a good foot up the haft of the weapon to keep the distance at a minimum. It would have been pure madness against any other fighter.

But against Christopher Lennon, who sported a combat range largely beyond any other User Rei knew of?

“Friggin’ *brilliant*,” Catcher summarized adequately. “No wonder the Lasher’s half on the defensive.”

It was absolutely true. While the back-and-forth of the match was no less of a blur than any other upper-bracket fight, it *was* a good deal more close-knit than Rei would have expected given the two fighters. Sidorov stayed tight and as far inside Lennon’s range as he could manage, moving and prodding and poking at the Lasher more like a Duelist or Saber than his own Type, sometimes going so far as to wield his spear one-handed. The resulting proximity forced Lennon to keep one chain sword constantly engaged in the rippling, spherical defense that was one of his signature specialties, which further served to hinder his “free” sword from any clean attacks. It *was* brilliant.

And yet...

“I think I’m more impressed that Sidorov has Lennon on edge,” Rei told the group after another couple of exchanges above them in which the Lasher’s slash cleaved a crater out of the plateau.

“I was just thinking that,” Aria muttered in agreement beside him.

“Huh?” it was Viv’s turn to ask, and Aria’s in turn to point.

“Lennon’s being careful. *Really* careful. He could try to put some distance between them, or try to find a space to use both swords on the assault, but he’s not. He’s sticking to a solid defense that he knows Sidorov can’t break. He’s waiting.”

“For what?” Cashe this time, face still tilted towards the fight.

“For Sidorov to tire out. Or mess up.”

“Why?”

“Cause he thinks Sidorov is good enough to do real damage if he gives him the opportunity,” Rei answered. “Even as a second-year.”

That seemed to register with everyone, because Viv, Catcher, and Cashe's eyes all went wide in realization as Grant nodded from where he still stood with his hands on Viv's shoulders. Above, the battle continued on, with the Lasher indeed playing it very safe, holding the center of the plateau firmly as he turned in place to meet Sidorov's ever-aggressive attacks. With any other pair of fighters at the tournaments, it might have felt monotonous.

With these two, it instead felt like a rising tsunami challenging a storm wall, every single spectator waiting with bated breath for the moment one unwilling force or the other would give first.

A hundred times Sidorov attacked, and a hundred times he was rebuffed and forced to counter or dodge an incoming response from Lennon's free sword. The exchanges were so quick, so flawlessly connected, that the *WHAM* and *CRUNCH* of the A-Type's weapon blasting through earth and stone came like a deafening wash of rapid-fire explosions. Dust rose, and furrows were carved into the field. Rocks and stone shook loose from the underside of the cliff with every hit, dropping down to splash into the wrench of the flow below. The madness of the fight took on a monstrous feel, like Sidorov was battling some tentacled titan whose many arms were lashing out in a chaos of drumming attacks. The fact that Lennon only had *one* blade to extend beyond his defenses was lost to all in the speed of the fights, as was the fact Sidorov wasn't fighting in his elements. The cheering started to get louder from the stands again, shouts for one side or the other to overcome the daunting talents of their opponent, until the booming strikes of the chain sword were only part of the deafening roar of the Arena as a whole. The announcer—whose voice had been largely lost to Rei from the start—becoming nothing but a droning noise in the background of the rest, and then everything was a constant, deafening note of solid enthusiasm.

And Rei and the others were along for every second of the ride.

Aria hadn't let go of his forearm, and he winced more than once as her grip tightened instinctively whenever Sidorov dodged a particularly close call. Viv was actually about as animated as he'd seen her all week, jumping up and down while she held onto the hugging arm Grant had ended up looping around her upper chest from behind, the Mauler himself hollering along too and pumping his free hand in the air. Catcher and Cashe, meanwhile, were mirror images of each other, subtly ducking and weaving imaginary blows without realizing it and alternatively yelling out encouragement and shouts of alarms. Rei grinned to himself as Aria's fingers dug into his bare skin yet again when Sidorov leapt clean over a low sweep of the Lasher's free sword, thinking he wouldn't have minded if they'd all stayed like that for a good while more. It was a little sad, therefore, that he only got about a minute and a half in the end.

Because at the 90-second mark, Lennon walked away from the fight.

"Wha—?!" Rei and pretty much every spectator all around him, his friends included, started to shout out in amazement before understanding dawned on them. The Lasher, just as Sidorov leapt clear of yet another crossing swing, retreated in a blitz away from the center of the field, leaving another curving trail of dust in his wake as he backpedaled towards and then around the outside edge of the cliffs. The thing was, though, that his *blades* didn't come with him. Instead they hung suspended in the air exactly where he'd been standing a moment before, and with no actual *User* to have to protect now, both swords began whipping and churning at Sidorov.

"Invisible Hand!" Catcher and a thousand others called out the Ability trigger with enthusiasm.

"Sidorov's done!" Grant yelled in answer, sounding half-ecstatic, half-disappointed.

The Lancer, to his credit, hadn't let out so much as a grunt of surprise at the sudden change in pace, instead resetting his grip on his weapon to a comfortable length

before bringing it to bear in a blurring defense. His footwork became a dancing pattern across the dirt, his whole form slipping and snaking through the whirling maelstrom of hits as the spear snapped and struck out to flick away any blows he didn't manage to deflect. For a few seconds he held like that, keeping at bay the black and red gale of destruction, and then the chain swords were coiling, slithering around him in a unified, quickly-closing tunnel of death. With nowhere to go but skyward, Sidorov set himself, then rocketed up at a slight angle, arcing free and clear of the spinning blades. Even as he ascended, Rei could make out his armored head flicking this way and that, looking for Lennon, looking for where his opponent had disappeared to. The Lancer knew, obviously, that he was exposed, and was trying desperately to at least get a bearing on how the fight would renew when he landed.

He never touched the ground.

The match's first true hit was also its last. With a sound somewhere between a gunshot and a rocket engine starting up, a small section of the cliffs cracked and collapsed, starting to fall completely free of the rest of the field. The stone, it turned out, couldn't handle the enormous force of Lennon triggering his own Break Step, placing the momentum of the Ability into a carefully timed, lancing leap of his own. Rei saw it then, saw the trap even as it was triggered. The Lasher had let his swords reap open havoc on Sidorov just long enough for the Lancer to get his bearing. Then they'd formed the tunnel, and Sidorov had—as any logical fighter would in the same situation—launched himself clear of the blades at an angle that would bring him further into the field and towards secure footing. Who in their right mind, after all, would have jumped in any other direction but *into* the plateau, risking landing on unstable ground or near enough an edge to be easily knocked off the cliffs and into the water below? Sidorov had reacted exactly as he should have.

And Lennon had planned for it.

A roar of screams and cheers rang out as the linear streak of red and black that was the Lasher impacted with Sidorov's leaping form right at the peak of his jump. The Lancer didn't even have time to react, the speed of an A8's Break Step probably faster than sound. The *CRUNCH* of it even swallowed the actual hit, and Rei couldn't tell if Lennon had struck in any particular way or if he'd just put a shoulder or knee or whatever part of his body had been leading the launch into the first piece of Sidorov he could reach. The result was the same either way, as Sidorov was blasted away, flung up and sidelong like he'd been hit by a rail gun, spear flying from his grasp and body spinning like a top.

In his wake, a trail of silver-grey fell like a metal rain, the shattered armor of his Device a shimmering announcement that the match had definitely come to an end.

All sound vanished for Rei as he watched the Lancer's "demise" as though in slow motion. First Sidorov struck the invisible wall of the field limits, hitting it on his back with such force that the transparent barrier warped and rippled once in a pulse of bright light. He hung there for a second—or maybe a 100, Rei wasn't sure—then started to slip, tumbling down, down, down. Above him Lennon had similarly found the top of the field, but he'd flipped to land in a catlike crouch, momentum sticking him there just long enough to gaze down on his defeated opponent like some ravenous, monstrous bat.

And then Sidorov hit the raging water with a heavy splash, and the Arena didn't waste time in making the call.

"Fatal Damaged Accrued. Winner: Christopher 'Lasher' Lennon, the Galens Institute."

CHAPTER 36

“Oh *man* that fight was so. Damn. EPIC!” Catcher was still crowing some 45 minutes later, head hanging back and arms slung across the translucent tops of their seats on either side of him, behind Cashe and Rei respectively.

“Which one?” Rei asked him with a smirk. “The Lasher’s? Or Aria and Grant’s?”

“Both!” Catcher exclaimed, lifting his head with face screwed up as though the question had been borderline insulting. “Both of them! Lennon is a damn *terror*, but I think everyone was just as loud for them as they were for him!”

“That’s a bit of an exaggeration,” Viv muttered from Rei’s left, a little quietly. While she seemed to come to herself during the matches, she had still been a bit reserved in the more somber minutes between. She was talking more, though, so Rei had called it a win and didn’t prod at her shell any more. He’d done what he could, he knew, and Aria had doubly assured him of that via whisper in his ear just before she and Grant had headed out.

“Is it, though?” Cashe asked from Catcher’s other side. She looked a little shellshocked, leaning forward in her seat with her hands over her face, eyes peeking through spaces she’d made between her fingers. She’d been sitting like that ever since the fight had ended, staring down at the Arena in open amazement.

Rei couldn’t blame her. It had been a *hell* of a fight.

Aria had done her best to control the battle from the go, only barely coming out of her starting circle even as Grant had charged her headlong across the basic, open Neutral Zone that had been their randomized field. She’d managed it, too, for the most part, moving with the Mauler only as necessary, shielding herself perfectly from almost every hit, her spear a blur of jabbing thrusts into whatever openings she could find in between. In that fashion they’d made a slow circle around the edge of the field, step by slow step as Grant did everything he could to overpower Aria’s defenses, making it

halfway about the space over 2 minutes and leaving a trail of destruction in their wake. It had been *spectacular* to watch, and while Rei did think Catcher was exaggerating the stands' enthusiasm a bit—at least by comparison—he could say with confidence that no one had been bored even as the fight slipped into 3, then 4 minutes. It was another testament, in fact, to the growth they'd all seen over the last 6 months. Not just Rei, but everyone. Only when the fight hit a full 5 minutes did Grant start to show any signs of slowing down, but by that point Hippolyta's shield was also a ragged ruin of sheared metal. Still, none of that stopped either of the pair from giving it their all, and for a full 100 seconds or so more the fight raged in a blur of flashing red and green light over colored steel.

Only when Grant had absolutely nothing left in the tank, in fact, had he pulled out his ace.

The Mauler's Overclock, triggered in a wheezing shout that had almost been lost to the stands, returned him to full form and then some. Ion flames rippled in a crimson wash over his CAD, and suddenly Grant was hurtling at Aria again with a level of speed and power he hadn't even had fresh from the start. Aria had been expecting it, of course, and had saved her Third Eye for that exact moment, but the weight of Honoris' axe had soon proven too much for Hippolyta's ruined shield, because a massive horizontal slash caught the weakened wall of steel in the side with such force it sheared most of the top half clean off. Aria had only kept her head by apparently realizing that the strike would be too much, jerking away even as it landed to drop and roll back before coming up with only half a shield left. Hippolyta seemed to account for this because Third Eye reacted as though having adjusted for this change in weight and heft when blocking Grant's follow-up swings, but it was still a disaster. Whereas Aria had only been giving one step at a time under the Mauler's onslaught the whole match, she'd suddenly been in total retreat, backpedaling as quickly as she could to dodge his ripping attacks as often as she struggled to block or deflect them. Rei had thought that a good enough tactic

already. Grant had triggered Overclock at the end of his rope, and would therefore probably burn out quicker than usual. If she could just keep herself clear of his axe for long enough, she would have the fight easily in hand.

Aria, though, had had other plans, and the “Fatal Damage Accrued” announcement calling her out as the match victor had come so suddenly that the stands had *exploded* in enthusiasm as Grant toppled to the ground.

Rei had to actively stop himself from facepalming as he recalled.

“She threw it,” he said under his breath for the hundredth time, trying not to laugh. “I can’t believe she actually *threw* it.”

“Hey. It’s not stupid if it works,” Viv muttered from his left, clearly having overheard.

Fair enough, Rei thought with a nod, though he couldn’t help but grin. The fight had ended so abruptly because Aria had taken the chance—a fraction of a second’s opportunity—to *throw* Hippolyta’s broken shield at Grant’s head. The Mauler had been wide open, losing himself in driving her back and back, with his axe high above him in two hands, ready to come down in a cleaving stroke that would have cut Aria in two had she been caught it in. Instead, the hunk of thick steel had come spinning at his face, striking him in the forehead with a *thunk* that sent him momentarily reeling and cursing. It hadn’t been enough to finish the job, of course, with Grant’s reactive shielding long-developed enough to take such a hit without much trouble.

On the other hand, the spear that had followed, catching him under the chin to run his skull through top to bottom as he’d been wheeling back trying to catch his balance, had certainly done the job.

And so Aria, not at all unexpectedly, had become the first-year’s second finalist, joining Rei in what would be their first ever *real*, sanctioned fight on an SCT field.

He didn’t know if he’d been this excited for a match since he’d jumped up at Commencement, shouting out his request to fight her then, still as an E-Ranked User.

Rei grinned again, glancing down at the rings of blue vysetrium over black and white steel around his wrist, thinking that he'd come a long way...

“Hey hey! The glorious victor returns, valiant defeated in tow!”

Rei looked up, and sure enough Aria and Grant—still in their combat suits—were picking their way through the last of the crowd along the walkway to reach the stairwell. They were moving somewhat gingerly, because like Rei before them people kept rubbernecking to voice congratulations, or even—apparently—ask to shake one of their hands or the other. He almost snorted when he noticed that neither of *them* had anyone giving them sidelong glares, but shrugged that minor annoyance off before the two finally made the stairs and hurried up as quickly as they could, obviously trying to be free of the enthusiastic throng.

“*Wom*, that was something,” Aria grunted as she gratefully accepted the seat Viv budged over to free up for her next to Rei. “No one was like that after any of my other matches. What the hell?”

“Not as bad at least,” Grant agreed as he scooted passed their knees towards the still-open spot on Viv’s other side. “I *lost* and I still got asked if I could take a picture with like four people...”

“You’re in the big leagues now, both of you!” Catcher laughed. “Better start polishing your autographs for when *that* starts to be a thing.”

Rei and Aria exchanged a glance at that, but didn’t say anything as they mutually hid a shared smile. Instead Rei congratulated both her and Grant on a good match, and Cashe jumped in quickly to drill them both on their fight, specifically asking about their Abilities and their strategy for triggering them. Given she’d only had minimal opportunity to practice with Warband and Firesong was still in the running for a Team Battle championship, Rei got where she was coming from, and actually appreciated the girl taking control of the conversation.

It meant he didn't have to bring up the fact that, rather than sitting next to each other, he and Aria would very soon be standing across an empty Dueling zone.

The excitement welled up again, but something else came with it, this time. As Cashe leaned forward to talk with Aria and Grant across him and the others, it took Rei a second to recognize the feeling, a sensation he realized he wasn't at all used to in context.

He was *nervous*.

It was bizarre. It wasn't like he wasn't *capable* of being nervous, of course. He was good at keeping his cool around Aria, but there were definitely times—especially when he'd *first* asked her out—that he'd been a hot mess on the inside. He recalled, too, his CAD-Assignment Exam. Waiting for the test to begin, anticipating his disastrous physical results, unexpectedly sitting across from the Mass Intellect itself. Even more so he thought about when that ISCM captain—'Loren', Rei thought he remembered, realizing with a moment's disappointment that he hadn't seen or heard of the woman since his arrival at school—had approached him in the Grandcrest gymnasium with a letter from Galens held in her hands. So out there, out in the real world, Rei *could* be nervous.

But he couldn't recall a single instance of such anxiety before a fight, simulated or otherwise.

All his life Rei had been on either side of a black-and-white coin. For as long as he could remember he'd never had anything to lose, so he'd gone into every fight with the mentality that there was no reason to worry, that there was no reason to be afraid. Even if he got his ass kicked—on the mats, on the field, or plain, bloodied concrete—it didn't matter.

But on the flip side, more recently Shido had granted him the opposite experience, had provided him with the strength he needed to enter more and more fights with the confidence of someone with no reason to think he couldn't come out on top...

The exceptions to either of these circumstances had been few and far between, but even when he'd been paired with Grant during the final loser's matchup of the Intra-Schools he hadn't felt "nervous". Maybe he should have, but at the time he'd just still been too stunned by Shido's recent evolution and the acquisition of Type Shift to feel anything so basic.

And yet now, here he was, looking out over the empty Arena with a clench in his stomach he very much wasn't used to...

"What are you smiling at?"

Rei snapped back from his musings to look around and find Aria studying him, at some point or another having disengaged from the conversation with Cashe and Grant in favor of watching him with an expression that was half-concern, half-amusement. At her question, Rei realized abruptly that he *was* indeed smiling, and almost from ear to ear.

And he couldn't stop himself from doing so even when he tried.

"I... don't know," he said after a second, laughing quietly. "I was just thinking about something dumb."

"...Dumb?"

Rei nodded. "Nothing bad. I don't know..." He considered his words a moment before continuing. "Are you... Are you nervous?"

Aria stared at him like she couldn't believe her ears. No, that wasn't quite accurate. She started at him, open-mouthed, like she was witnessing something she'd never expected to have the chance to see.

Then she leaned in to whisper teasingly, "Well I never. Reidon Ward, nervous about a fight. Or..." she brought a hand up to rest under her chin in a cutesy kind of manner, batting her eyelashes at him with exaggerated care "... is it just that it's a fight against *me* that's got you in a tizzy?"

“Someone’s *awfully* confident in themselves today,” Rei answered with a smirk, pressing two fingers into her cheek to push her face away from his. “If you’re looking for me to tell you you give me butterflies or whatever, there’s better ways to ask.”

Aria sniggered, cheeks only going a little red as she looked back at him a little more seriously. “In that case, I guess I just have to assume I’m witnessing a miracle.”

Rei made a face. “Oh come on. It’s not *that* big a deal.”

“Rei, I’m pretty sure you could pair off with an *army* of S-Ranks and not blink. It’s kinda scary, actually. It’s *definitely* a big deal.”

Rei opened his mouth to retort, but paused, considering it for a moment.

“... Do they have phantom calls?” he finally asked. “Or true calls? ’Cause it would make a difference.”

Aria *actually* guffawed at that, earning themselves not just the attention of the rest of Firesong, but also every other Galens student and spectator in the vicinity.

Unfortunately, that included the chaperones.

“Laurent. Ward.”

Rei and Aria both tensed in their seats, realizing they’d messed up even as they turned rigidly to face forward. Below them Dyrk Reese was glaring around at them from his own spot along the bottom row of the Galens section, but it fortunately wasn’t *him* who had called them out.

Samsus was standing at the edge of the moving crowd, facing the stands and watching them with arms crossed and eyes narrowed.

“If you two have extra time to flirt, you have extra time to get ready for your match. Either go hit the sub-basement or go get yourselves lined up in the underworks. I don’t care.”

“Yes, ma’am!” the two of them said together, standing as one and saluting automatically before sidling their way by Catcher and Cashe towards the stairs. Each gave them hisses of “Ooooh, you’re in trooouble” and “Good luck” respectively, while

Viv and Grant wished them a good fight from further along the row. Aria waved back as Rei gave the four one last thumbs up before hurrying down the steps to join the walkway crowd.

In actuality they'd been approaching the time the two of them would have needed to start getting ready regardless, so the captain's call-out was less of a slap on the wrist than it might have seemed. The tournament organizers had been clever in their design of the final morning's Duels, having started the 4 semi-final rounds with an upper bracket match, but having scheduled the first of the two *finals* round as a *first-year* bracket match. Not only did that mean that the morning bouts had started with a bang that even Rei and Vademe's fight could never have managed, but everyone would be on the edge of their seats for the Lasher to face Paul Williams for the upper bracket championship round *and* both third-years would have an extra half-hour of rest and prep time beforehand. Maybe it was a little unfair to Aria—who'd only just come off a match, after all—but Rei didn't doubt that the organizers had from the start been as aware as anyone that the high C-Rankers who were most likely to make up the first-year final pairing would have the Endurance spec to be up and ready to go either way.

“Rei. You're still grinning. I can see it from back here.”

Rei started, but more because Aria had leaned over from where she'd been walking closely behind him through the moving lines of students and spectators to whisper right in his ear. They'd already had a dozen different people pause to watch them slip by or shout after them in recognition, so the additional curious glances this earned them were hardly noticeable. And besides, Rei decided he didn't mind *that* kind of staring. It made him feel warm and fuzzy inside.

Especially not after the night before.

“So? I can't help it,” he finally answered back as the two of them dodged a bunch of older civilians who'd all but stopped traffic to watch them pass. “I'm excited! Can you blame me?”

Aria didn't respond until they made it to the top of the underworks stairs and started heading down, the empty tunnel a breath of fresh air for them both.

"Blame you? No. But if being nervous makes you giddy, that would explain a lot about why it took you so long to ask me out."

Rei rolled his eyes as he reached the bottom of the stairwell and popped out into the entirely empty tunnel. "Contrary to popular belief, I am *not* a masochist, Aria. I was slow 'cause I'm an idiot, not 'cause I get off on anxiety."

Aria snickered at that, but Rei was looking around a little dejectedly. *No one* was down here, now, at least that he could see. There would probably be some officer or another by the access ramps, but again he missed the energy of the early week, of the excitement of every student and fighter ready to show the world what they could do, some for the first time, many maybe even for the last. The smart-glass displays flickered on the walls all around them, showing off the various school emblems and the now-outdated schedules for the week. It was a little depressing.

And yet Rei still couldn't seem to lose his grin.

"I mean *come on!*" he let out abruptly, turning on Aria so quickly she actually stopped short in surprise. "Do you realize this is our first *real* match? Like actual *real* match?"

"Rei, we fight literally *all the time* at school."

"Not the same." Rei shook his head. "You can't tell me that's the same. Can you blame me for being psyched? The last time we were on a real field against each other was Commencement."

"And I foresee this being an easy repeat of that fight," she offered with a wicked titter.

"Oh them's fighting words, lady. You're *on*."

For the next 20 minutes or so the two of them play fought like that, though not at the bottom of the stairs. Partially because of Samsus' order and partially because it

was just a good idea, they picked a direction and started doing steady loops around the main way of the underworks, passing the officers who were indeed waiting at each of the east and west access ramps to the north Dueling field and walking through the north and south elevator lobbies two or three times each as they talked. It might have been odd to witness—*was* odd to witness, rather, judging by the looks shot their way each time they crossed the officers—but Rei didn't know if it could have really been any other way. They would be fighting in all of 10 minutes probably, sure, but to Aria's point that was nothing *really* new to them.

And she was just so damn *easy* to be around...

Only when they were wrapping what was probably their third loop of the tunnels, starting to stretch and roll their arms in preparation even as they chatted, did something finally interrupt their conversation.

"There you are," a familiar voice called out. "On me, if you please. Both of you."

Rei and Aria broke off a discussion about some of the stronger non-Galens first-years they'd taken note of to look forward and find that Valera Dent herself had appeared around the bend in the tunnel, standing at the foot of the very stairs they'd first come down. She was watching them expectantly, and they moved double-pace to hurry over to her.

"Samsus said she'd sent you down here to stay loose, but I couldn't find you. Where have you two been?"

There was a note of suspicion in the captain's voice, but one accompanied by the hint of an upward curl at the corners of her prosthetic lips. Rei glanced sidelong at Aria—who looked to have automatically fallen into a state of horror as she realized that Dent was possibly subtly implying that she knew *exactly* where the two of them had been—and hurried to correct any potential misconception.

"The captain wanted us to keep moving, ma'am, so we've been doing loops," he said quickly. "The officers at the ramps will confirm this, if needed."

“Good to know,” Dent said with a curt nod and a warning look between the two of them. “It would be a hell of a story on the morning feeds if the two Section 9 first-year finalists had to be written up for impropriety while *at the tournament*. Especially if they were both *Galens* students. Catch my drift?”

“Yes, ma’am!” Rei and Aria both said together, saluting quickly. Given that they had, in fact, been doing nothing ‘improper’ at the time didn’t reduce the weight of the warning in any way. ‘I know, and everyone knows,’ Dent was telling them, probably along with ‘Don’t be stupid, stupid.’

The captain nodded in a satisfied sort of way. “Good. At ease.” She waited for Rei and Aria to both drop their salutes to stand more comfortably before continuing. “Obviously this is a bit of an atypical situation. A Galens versus Galens final isn’t unexpected, obviously, but ordinarily I would have had one of the other captains or Major Reese—” her left eye only twitched a *little* at the name “—handle one of your pep talks while I did the other, but I think the circumstances will forgive me. You both ready to go?”

“Yes, ma’am!” the pair of them said together once again.

“You both have your strategies in place? You both know what you’re doing?”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“You both ready to kick each other’s asses to the next system and back again?”

This had Rei grinning again, seeing Aria doing the same in the corner of his eye. “Yes, ma’am!”

“Perfect.” Dent looked between the pair of them. “I don’t think I have to tell you that each of you has something special. That you’re both at the very top of your class, on this planet and far beyond. If first-years were allowed to compete at a higher level than Sections, I would have long-since put my credits down that the two of you could make it to the very top, even against whatever Sol System might throw at you. For that reason I expect nothing less than every *ounce* of effort and heart in this fight. I know

you still have the Team Battle coming up, but this is your last chance to show those people out there—” she pointed along the stairs beside her, up towards the low, constant thrum of the stands “—what *you* can do. What *you* can do *alone*. Them and the *millions* of watchers who are keeping an eye on you two, as well as the *tens* of millions who will come along to watch the match recordings later. It will be a year before either of you has this opportunity again, and even then it’s not a guarantee. Are you ready to take this shot?”

“Yes, ma’am!” Rei and Aria answered again, a little louder this time.

Dent stared them down, taking the two of them in like she was trying to push them into the ground with the weight of her gaze. Rei felt that force, felt the pressure of anticipation and expectation there.

Neither he nor Aria looked away.

Eventually, Dent smiled.

“You both have what it takes to win this. That means I don’t expect victory more from one than the other. Ward.” She looked at Rei with mock ferocity. “If you don’t come out on top of this, I’ll have you running your ‘loops’ down here until it’s time for the Team Battle. Laurent.” She turned to Aria. “Lose, and it’ll be pushups for you. Good luck keeping that shield of yours up this afternoon with your arms turned to jelly.” Her eyes passed over each of them slowly. “Is that understood, cadets?”

“Yes, ma’am!” came the expected answer, *actually* shouted this time.

“Who’s gonna take home this fight?”

“I am, ma’am!” Rei answered at once.

“Me, ma’am!” Aria responded at the same time, doing her best to drown him out.

“That’s what I want to hear.” Dent threw a thumb over her shoulder as her eyes settled on Aria. “Fight will be announced soon. Laurent, you’re on the east entrance. Get over there and get ready.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Aria said. She started to take a step by the woman, but paused and braved a look over her shoulder at Rei. “I’ll see you after I kick your ass?”

“You’ll see me, yeah,” Rei returned with a grin. “From flat on the ground after I kick *yours*.”

Aria let out a “Ha!” like he’d made a good joke, then was gone, hurrying off at a quick jog around the bend of the tunnel towards the east side of the field she’d be called from.

When she was gone Rei was left alone with Dent, and she didn’t immediately dismiss him. Instead, the woman watched him for a long moment more, and this time her attention was different. It wasn’t as heavy, but it was no less acute, like she was studying every inch and angle of his body, sizing him up.

“Ward, do you remember what I told you last semester? After Logan Grant made a fool of the both of you in combat training?”

The question came as a surprise, requiring a second for Rei to realize what she was asking.

That didn’t mean he didn’t have the answer.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said quietly. “You told me I needed to get stronger.”

Dent looked pleased that he remembered. “So you were listening.”

“Very much so, ma’am.”

“Good. Then you probably already know what this fight is, but I’m going to spell it out for you anyway. It’s more than a match against Laurent for you, Ward. It’s an opportunity to show me how *much* you’ve grown. This is the fight that started this journey. I want to see how much you’ve changed. Clear?”

“Crystal, ma’am,” Rei answered with absolute certainty. In fact it was *perfectly* clear to him. More than ever before. *That* was why he was so excited. *That* was why he was so nervous. It *was* more than his first clean fight against Aria, wasn’t it? It was also his first chance to perfectly compare where he’d been to where he was...

No wonder he couldn't stop grinning.

Dent nodded one last time, then jerked her head in the direction of the tunnel behind him.

“Then show me what you've got, Cadet.”

Valera watched Ward take his leave, headed in the opposite direction she'd sent Laurent, towards the north field's west ramp. When he was gone, she continued to stare after him, wondering what it was that was scratching at her, like an itch at the nape of her neck.

After most of 10 seconds or so of staring after him, Kes pinged her.

Something wrong?

“I don't know,” Valera allowed quietly, only glancing over her shoulder briefly to double-check that she was definitely alone. “Just... a bad feeling, for some reason.”

Why?

“If I knew I would say so, wouldn't I?” she answered with a grunt. She paused, though, considering. “Not sure, but I think it just hit me. This is the big stage. The first real moment he's going to be seen. *Really* seen.”

This time it was the familiar red text that responded.

I assure you he's already been taken notice of, the MIND answered. The ISCM has been suppressing a good portion of the feed reshares and recording uploads from the week in fact, just to slow the spread a bit.

That didn't make Valera feel any better.

“Yeah... I know. He's been on a lot of radars since the Intra-Schools. The Kamiya offer already proved that. Still...” She considered the concern again, still not able to place the tightness in her gut. “I don't know... I just feel like if someone's out there looking to knock him down a peg, it would be now, wouldn't it...?”

An interruption from Central Command is unlikely, at this stage, the red text spelled out. The parameter testing was one thing. If they are trying to control spreading the awareness of Ward's existence, they wouldn't do anything publicly overt enough to land him even more explosively in the feeds.

“Sure, but I think that's kinda why I'm stressing all of a sudden,” Dent muttered, finally turning away from the tunnel the boy had vanished down to start heading up the stairs again. “He *is* known, isn't he? So why are we still assuming Central is the only threat...?”

CHAPTER 37

“The marks humans leave are too often scars.”

-John Green

Pre-ISC author and philosopher

c.2010

“Ladies and gentlemen, it is with *distinct* enthusiasm that I welcome you to the penultimate Dueling event of this year’s Sector 9 Collegiate Sectional Championships! You’ve waited! You’ve watched! You’ve fidgeted in your seats for long enough! It is now time for the first of our *final* rounds of one-on-one matchups, and I hope you’re all as excited as I am!”

Inside the steadying darkness of the ramp, Rei paced while he listened to the announcer. He’d tried sitting still, tried settling into his usual spot leaning against the wall, but he just couldn’t manage it. Whenever he attempted to, his mind buzzed and his nerves started to claw at him, almost making it hard to breathe. He at once couldn’t bear to wait for the doors at the top of the incline to open and yet dreaded the light that would flood over him.

“Get ahold of yourself,” he mumbled to the emptiness, too low for the staff officer at the bottom of the ramp to hear. “Come *on*.”

The announcer’s continued intro helped distract him.

“We’ve spent the morning showing you everything our contestants have to offer, but it is time for the absolute best of the best! The young fighters who have already proven to be head and shoulders above the pack! Ladies and gentlemen, the two pairs of cadets you’re about to see go head-to-head will one day be among the greatest SCT

combatants you're ever likely to witness on your feeds! I hope you're watching carefully!"

On second thought, maybe it didn't help at *all*.

"Now then! It's time to bring out our first matchup! They may be young! They may have a long way to go! But these two first-years have given us a thrill time and time again this week, and the moment has come to pit them against each other and see who can come out on top! From the east, the spear-wielding wall of grace and death! From the west, the well-known terror of guile and unpredictability! LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, FROM THE GALENS INSTITUTE BOTH, I GIVE YOU... CADETS ARIA LAURENT AND REIDON WAAAAARD!"

Rei flinched at the sound of his own name like he hadn't expected it. The doors at the top of the ramp slid open, and with a gulp he hurried up the incline. Yet again the sound that greeted him was a *physical* thing, but it was more powerful a blow now than it had been at any point before. The Arena, too, had changed, all the lights dimmed to bare glints in the stands and ceiling he could see save a single column of illumination shining down directly before him as he stood there, briefly dazed. Realizing what was expected of him, Rei hurriedly stepped out into the roar, trying not to blink at the blinding light that fell over him to wreath his every step in shadow. The only reason he knew where to go, in fact, was that—along with the glowing disk upon which an individual announcer *and* match arbiter were already standing high above the ground—the Dueling field had been highlighted in pulsing white, the ring's edge warping up and down like a living thing.

And there, across the floor from him and moving in her own column of light, was Aria.

Whereas seeing her had almost always calmed him before, such was not the case now. Rei's stomach clenched, and he had to be glad he couldn't make out more of the

packed stands than the merest wash of glimmering light as NOEDS were set to record the fight or flashed while taking some picture or another.

By the time he reached the edge of the ring, he would have bet anything that he was probably as green as Catcher or Cashe had ever been.

Come ON, he repeated to himself again, privately this time.

Rei stopped just outside the circle almost at the same time as Aria, turning to face her in full. Despite his nerves, despite his sudden rising nausea, he didn't look away from her, and didn't know if he was pleased or only made worse off when she met his gaze evenly. He tried to channel Dent's words of encouragement, tried to get himself to focus, but it was no good.

And then the noise of the stadium started to die, and something like a calm descended. Rei didn't know if he was imagining it, but what felt like a *true* silence fell across the Arena for what seemed like the first time all week. He suddenly found himself able to think again, able to—

“Combatants, take position.”

The match arbiter—the same man who'd been overseeing all the morning fights—spoke into the quiet. It jolted Rei out of his momentary improvement, and he ended up half a second behind Aria in stepping through the undulating light that marked the Dueling field. It surely wasn't enough for anyone to notice, but all the same Rei felt a flush rise in his cheeks to add to all his other anxiety. As he moved forward, the pillar of light stayed behind, and by the time he was inside the red ring—this circle rising and falling in only a slightly lesser fashion to the large white one just behind him—it had faded to nothing, leaving him only illuminated by the crimson light from below. Still he didn't look anywhere but across the field from him, never so much as glancing away from the form that was Aria, little more than a silhouette now inside her own ring. He cursed inwardly, struggling to find his center, to get his head in the game. Again he

almost managed it, had just started to bring everything he could to bear when the arbiter interrupted again.

“This is as an official Dueling event. It is therefore subject to regulation ruling. Once the field is formed, you will be ordered to call, then engage. Premature Device manifestation will result in a penalty. Premature approach, attack, or the like will result in a match loss. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir!” Nodding seemed useless, so Rei and Aria both called into the dark at the same time, and Rei was pleased he’d managed not to bite his own tongue despite himself. Their words rang clear, unanswered for a long moment.

And then the floor began to change.

Oh... Rei thought in surprise.

Thanks to the unexpected dimness of the stadium, maybe for the first time in his life he truly understood the incredible nature of the solid hologram that made up the SCT fields. No lights came on overhead or around them as the zone took form, and yet everything was suddenly alive. Colors bloomed beneath his feet as Rei felt himself lifted off the ground, and he realized in full that the world being built around him *was* light, bringing with it its own illuminated majesty. The red ring rose with him, but everything else was suddenly bright and alive, almost blindingly so. For a few seconds the blackness beyond the circle of the zone lingered, but then that too was swallowed as the Arena painted the scene around them.

Sand. Ocean spray. The colors of dusk enveloping the heavens above.

Sunset Beach, the Arena had decided, was where this culminating fight would take place.

Even as he rose, however, Rei couldn’t help but almost forget that what was surrounding him wasn’t real. Maybe it was the stark difference of the unlit shadows of the stands that were suddenly awash with oranges and reds and greens. Maybe it was the silence that had been replaced by the sound of lapping waves and the distant cry of

gulls. Maybe all of it was in his head, and he'd finally had a breakdown and was deluding himself into forgetting where he was.

Whatever the case, it ended up being exactly what he needed.

By the time the zone had stopped its climb, Rei was himself again. He hadn't found his center, so much—and didn't think he would—but he'd recalled something more important. Something he hadn't realized he'd almost forgotten. As his eyes finally left Aria to take in the rest of the scene, Rei didn't even notice he'd started grinning once more. How could it have slipped his mind? *How?* Why had it taken this moment, this instant of going from a world of black and silent pressure to an open, breathtaking sky and the sounds of the ocean?

How could he have forgotten, even for a minute, that SCT combat was just so damn *COOL*?!

“Field: Sunset Beach.”

The Arena's voice wrenched him back down to earth, and Rei brought all his attention forward again. It had been the wakeup call he'd needed, but it had also distracted him. In half a second he took in the scene before him, noting the layout of the space. The zone was a total variation on the more common Sunset Beach. Instead of an *actual* beach, Rei was standing on one tapering end of what could only be a sand bar at low tide. Aria was across from him, tensed in her red circle, and between them the sand was rippled and patterned with countless small puddles of salt water. To both sides of them, maybe 5 meters in either direction, the terrain slipped beneath a dark blue tide that lapped gently at the bar.

“Cadet Aria Laurent versus Cadet Reidon Ward. Combatants... Call.”

“Call,” Rei breathed, and Shido came to life as Hippolyta responded to Aria’s similar summons on the other side of the zone. In a heartbeat the Devices were around them both, Rei’s CAD encasing his limbs, lining his spine, and closing around the bottom of his face. The smell of brine and sea vanished, but he didn’t let himself pine for it as he settled down into a ready position.

Field presence detected. CAD-call detected.

Reprioritizing all processing to combat functionalities.

And just like that, he could *think* again.

Shido’s Cognition functionalities automatically whirred into action the moment the CAD was in place, and Rei found his head clear, his thoughts finally in action as the last of his nerves were swallowed by the tech. He took in the zone again in the still pause after the command to call, registering a great deal more now that he was fully online. The rippling in the sand would make for treacherous footing, yes, but it was dark, like the tide was receding to leave it wet and solid, meaning it should at least be firm. The bar was about 10 meters across like he’d guessed, but the water was clear enough to see that it wasn’t more than a foot or so deep within the 5 meters beyond that to either side, something that would pose both advantages and disadvantages. Most importantly, however, was the fact that the fading dusk was to his left, the distant shore only an inaccessible hologram a long way beyond the edge of the zone to the right.

And Aria had planted her armored boots in a very specific way, gold and red steel set in the sand, Hippolyta’s shield hefted before her at a ready tilt with spear brought up and over to rest on its edge. She looked prepped to meet him, but her legs had already given her away.

Rei knew exactly how this fight would start.

He was glad for Shido's mask as his grin widened and all that vanished nervous energy was abruptly replaced with nothing less than electric anticipation.

“Combatants... Fight.”

Rei tore out of his starting circle with every ounce of Speed and Strength he could put into his legs, the sand—hard-packed as it was—still giving at once between his clawed toes, but not enough to stop him from getting going. Instantly he was crossing the zone in a blizzing flash of black steel and blue light, ripping over the length of the bar at a slight angle, not bothering to bring up his fists in favor of leaning into his run.

He was well over the middle point of the sandbar's length when he saw that he'd been right.

Instead of charging him or letting him come, Aria also moved the moment the Arena had called for a start to the match. Rather than forward, though, she shot laterally, to her right, barreling only slightly away from the wall in favor of making mostly towards the lapping water. It was smart, of course. It was the exact move she'd made against Grant on a very similar field when she'd knocked him out of the Intra-School winners bracket the semester before. Phalanxes didn't care about Speed, didn't care about having their movements restricted, at least not when a similar restriction was placed on their opponents. If she could get to the deepest part of the tide she could safely stand in, she'd have an iron-clad defensive position that would be impossible to circle around, not to mention force Rei to wade in after her. And that wasn't even *mentioning* the fact that the sun would be in his eyes. It *was* smart, and it *was* the right play. It just had a couple of flaws.

For one thing, Hippolyta was heavier than Shido, weighing Aria down. The sand betrayed her more than it had Rei, giving under her boots and stealing away her impetus more than he was sure she would have liked.

For another, Rei was a *lot* faster than Grant.

He caught Aria before she could take her third step into the water, before her ankles were more than 6 inches deep in the tide. She saw him coming and pivoted to face him, but even slight as he was Rei and Shido combined had a *lot* of weight behind them as he rocketed forward and up from the edge of the bar to drive a flying knee at her head. Aria did get her shield up in time, but the impact of steel-on-steel along the top of it was so heavy that a sound like a gong rang out across the sea, and she grunted in pain as the highest edge of her own defenses collapsed to slam back into her forehead, sending her staggering a pace. It might have been a perfect opportunity to strike, but the hit had also sent Rei flipping over. That was fine, though. That was anticipated. He tucked, twisting as he spun, and landed on his feet with a splash at her back. Instead of lunging, though, he shot sideways, which turned out to have been the right call even if he hadn't had a plan. He just barely dodged the hammering fall of Aria's spear coming up and over her head as she turned to meet him. If he'd gone for the opening, he would have been flattened.

Instead, as the spear fell with a great explosion of water that drenched them both, Rei was between Aria and the deeper tide, the sea up to his shins, yes, but the sun at *his* back.

That was probably when Aria very clearly realized what had happened, because there was something like a smirk in the corner of her mouth as she cursed and ripped the spear up and around to bring it swinging at his side. Rei slammed it up and away with both clawed fists, taking the opportunity to shift forward half a step, and then the fight began in earnest.

For the better part of 2 minutes or so the pair of them battled it out right there in the water beyond the lip of the bar, neither taking nor giving an inch. Rei wasn't about to let Aria gain the advantage she was looking for, but Aria was a *Phalanx*, and about as indomitable as the wall the commentator had aptly compared her to at the start

of the match. As a result, their weapons tore a brilliant blaze through the air as both refused to move, refused to budge, spear coming in to be ducked and dodged, claws lancing forward to be blocked and knocked aside. A hundred fired blows were traded back and forth, the shallows around their feet and ankles rapidly turning to foam and violent spray.

And then the stalemate gave.

Aria was the first one to take a chance, to try to change things up. Rei almost didn't see it, almost missed the moment as he sucked in his gut to avoid an eviscerating sweep of the spear that left a trail of green light in its wake. The change was subtle, with Aria tucking her shield back just a little too tightly, a little too close. He *did* see it, though, *did* notice the shift, the fraction of a pause in the fight.

So he was ready when she charged.

Shield held before her in a solid span of red and gold metal, Aria lunged, obviously aiming to ram him. The ocean churned around his shins as Rei sidestepped, but not before he shot both hands out to grab either side of the shield, shouting as he did.

“Type-Shift! Saber Mode!”

Shido crackled and changed, white electricity arcing into the damp air and water as the Device's plating thickened around his limbs and chest all-but-instantly. The sword didn't appear—he'd long since learned that the CAD could read if his hands were already occupied—and Rei felt everything speed up fractionally, like time had dilated for him ever so slightly.

It didn't matter. A boosted Cognition wasn't remotely what he needed in the moment.

Rei twisted into his sidestep, allowing Aria's momentum to carry her by for a heartbeat before his vastly improved Strength accepted the weight of her passing rush through his arms. Straining, he let out a roar of effort as he wrenched on the shield with everything he had in the moment.

It paid off when Aria yelled in alarm and was hauled off her feet, completely clear of the tide, then pulled around by the shield she didn't even have the time to think of letting go of before being tossed bodily up and through the air.

She flailed as she arced up and away, but she wasn't as nimble as Rei. Gravity reclaimed her, and she came down on her side with a heavy *thud* in the middle of the sand bar some 20 feet off. Rei hadn't expected it to be enough to do any damage, and sure enough she was scrambling to her feet in an instant.

But now *he* had the advantage.

Shido's Saber Mode blade had materialized the moment his right hand had been freed of the fistful of shield, and Rei threw the weapon at Aria just as she came to stand, already rushing her. She made to smack the sword out of the air with her spear, but it dematerialized mid-flight as he shouted for his Brawler form again.

When he hit her, it was once more with pummeling, clawed fists and the renewed clarity and quickness of boosted Speed and Cognition.

On the sand bar, Rei found his true rhythm at last. Even that foot or so of water had been incredibly constricting, but now that he was free of it he could slip and slide this way and that under and around Aria's attacks, dodging and ducking with twice-again the finesse and ease he'd had seconds before. He kept a metaphorical line in the sand, of course, kept his back to the dusk and didn't give Aria a foot in either direction to get around him, but he *could* move again, now.

And he leaned into that with a fervor.

Despite his lack of range, despite his wanting power in Brawler Mode, Rei took the offensive, pummeling Aria left, right, and center to keep her turtled behind her shield. The spear still snaked out or over, still cut into the fight at every opportunity, but it never managed more than a shallow cut or scrape before Rei was rolling off the green-lined blade to strike out again. Another minute passed like this, then 2, until Rei realized with an odd mix of thrill and alarm that he and Aria weren't in the center of

the bar anymore. They were back, not a pace from the other side of the rippled sand and the gentle waves opposite the sunset. At some point, without realizing it, he'd pressed Aria, pushed her hard enough to force her to give without even realizing it. That should have been good news, *was* good news...

But it also woke him up to another realization.

At Aria's next swing, Rei not only ducked under the spear, but actually tucked and rolled away from it. Both of them were already sopping and sticky with sand, but more of it sloughed and splattered off Shido's black steel as he came back up onto his feet several yards back, nearer to the middle of the bar again. From there he watched Aria with narrowed eyes and considered himself carefully, then swore under his breath as he saw her plan, her very simple, obvious plan. Brawler Mode was lacking in reach and power, yes.

But it was more acutely lacking in *Endurance*.

Rei had lost himself too much in the fight, in the advantage of having regained favorable ground. He was breathing heavily, his lungs only just starting to burn, and his arms felt a lot heavier than they had at the start of the match. His legs were still mostly good, but his whole body was also tingling from a dozen small "cuts" along his thighs and chest and forearm, that particular sensation not helped by the salt water. At the rate he was going, Rei realized he would falter and fail, probably a *long* time before Aria did with her monstrous Endurance and Defense specs, and that was if he didn't accidentally "bleed out" from the thousand small wounds he would accrue in the meantime.

All these thoughts registered inside of a second, but even in that short pause Aria—still standing by the water—had clearly noticed the shift. She stared at him for a moment, like she was wary of a trap.

Then she must have realized he'd seen her end goal, because she shot him a brief grin that *very much* said "Oops. Caught me."

And lunged.

Rei grimaced even as he swept an armored forearm around to slam the lancing spear up away from his chest. He was *definitely* slowing down, because he felt the sting of the weapon's tip rip through his reactive shielding to nick one of his cheeks before it went wide. He retaliated with a heavy forward kick that did manage to set Aria back a foot despite catching it on her cut and battered shield, but then her spear was retracted and shooting forward again. Abruptly Rei wondered if he'd made a huge mistake giving up his advantage, but thought better of the doubt when something cramped in his side as he ducked the strike yet again. He'd been a fool, been an idiot to lose himself. Aria and Grant had gone forever earlier in the morning, but just like they couldn't compare to him in Speed, he didn't hold a candle to their Endurance. Which meant he was probably in trouble.

A lot of trouble.

Rei went on the defensive, conserving what energy he had as he deliberately pushed his Cognition to the max, trying desperately to think of something, anything that would pull him out of the predicament he'd suddenly realized he was in. As Aria took her own turn to pummel at his blocking arms he considered every trick he had, every plot he could come up with, discarding them one after the other after the other. The field wasn't conducive to backing off long enough to catch his breath, and regardless he could only have disengaged for a limited time before the arbiter probably called him for a penalty. He could feign exhaustion or injury, but Aria knew his fighting style better than *anyone*, and she would see right through him. Maybe he could make a calculated sacrifice, like he had against Grant during their own Intra-School match? No, probably not. Aria knew that play too, and would undoubtedly take the advantage of whatever injury he took on and leave it at that. If he let her spear him she'd just drop the weapon and back off at double pace. Maybe she'd even ditch and let him bleed out. If she couldn't manage that for some reason, she still had Third Eye primed, and could probably outlast whatever final battering he could give her.

No. This would have to be a straight fight. Without a stroke of inspiration, Rei was going to have to win this fight head on. It was a hard realization to make when he was already in the middle of mildly getting his ass kicked by a still relatively fresh Aria, but with it came clarity. Clarity that if Rei was going to come out on top of this match, he was going to have to push himself to his limits.

And if there was anything Rei was good at...

A reaffirmed sort of will rose up through him, welling into being as this new plan and the conviction it brought with it settled into place. Whether it was confidence or frustration or just common adrenaline, Rei's thoughts narrowed to a singular focus. Shido seemed to respond to this, because as Aria's spear lanced forward once again Rei thought he felt his neuroline tingle along his spine, and everything seemed to tighten around him. No longer did he see the pretty redheaded girl in front of him. He saw only his opponent. No longer did he concern himself with the building ache of his arms. He knew only what he could and could not do. No longer did the zone pose anything but tactical advantages and disadvantages, the colors of the sunset almost fading as Rei and Shido trimmed all thought down to one acute point.

He would win this. No matter the cost. No matter the pain. He would win this.

And so it was with almost reckless abandon that he again changed the pace of the fight in a split second to something Dalek O'Rourke, the Gatebreaker himself, would have been proud of.

Aria's spear drove forward, but instead of blocking or dodging, Rei slipped into its range with a twist. He felt the blade of the weapon cut through his reactive shielding and gash him in the back, but it was a small price to pay for the momentary opening. He lashed out of the end of the spin, bringing the back of his left arm right at Aria's face, and he knew the strike had caught her by surprise when she grimaced as she hauled her shield up to block. The massive hit landed hard, forcing a sidestep out of her, and Rei ignored the jarring pain of the impact, turning instead to follow it up with a

thunderous punch of his strong arm. He hit the shield again, straight on this time, and Shido's claws slammed through the battered metal. Hauling sideways on them he managed to wrench the shield away from Aria for the briefest moment, and his foot came up to slam in a forward kick at her gut. She managed to get the haft of Hippolyta's spear in the way in time to keep from being doubled over, but Rei's steel-clad heel still caught her a glancing blow to the hip, sending her twisting away with a grunt of pain, freeing his claws from her shield as she did.

From there, he didn't let up.

Blow after blow he rained down on Aria, empty of all thought and feeling other than the fight. He all-but-ignored every counterstrike she gave in return, dodging or blocking only when he suspected the blow would incapacitate him in a way no amount of will could overcome. He disregarded, too, the fire that had started building in his arms and chest the moment he'd started hammering at her, disregarded the weight of his fists and the raging, angry ache in his shoulders and back.

No matter the cost. No matter the pain.

Steadily, one step at a time, Rei drove Aria back. She couldn't keep up, couldn't keep pace with his endless torrent of attacks. More than once he broke through, managing to get in a slashing cut to her chest or a kick to her knees or even several inches of blue-lined steel buried into one thigh. Every time she would be forced to try to retreat, to try to regain her range and her defenses, but Rei wouldn't let her. He followed in step, hurtling blow after blow after blow, utterly uncaring of it all. Even when his chest began to tighten. Even when his arms screamed that they would fail, screamed that they were at their limit and beyond. He didn't care, couldn't care. This was nothing, *nothing*. He knew pain. Intimately. This was nothing.

And in the end, it was Aria who gave first.

Only in retrospect would Rei realize that she had long since triggered Third Eye, just like only in retrospect would he take note of the alertness of her expression as his

own face had gone hard and focused. It was almost 2 minutes of fluid battering and bashing that he managed, eventually forcing her to call on her Ability, then completely overtaxing it. It was this failure that put Aria on the ground, in fact, this shattering of her ace-in-the-hole that became too much on her body and mind before Rei gave into his own agony. One moment his strikes were ringing off her shield again and again and again, and then her defenses crumpled, and his next blow ripped through. He was so surprised at the feeling of his blade sinking fully into flesh, in fact, that he was partially jolted out of his reverie, half-kicked from that odd realm Shido seemed to have taken him to that was so similar to the dark, empty place in the back of his mind he'd sunk into as a child when the pain of his disease and all the surgeries it brought with it became too much to handle. He blinked as his fist slammed into Aria's side, blinked and found himself looking at her, at her face twisted in pain and fatigue. She was a mess, sand in her hair and caking her cheeks, and even as he watched she opened her mouth to let out a strangled cry. He blinked again and finally saw Shido up to the knuckles through ribs and muscle and lung, and he realized with a jolt that the match was his to take. Before he could manage it, though, Aria showed she still had more than a little fight left in her, because even as she screamed she brought her head back, then forward again in a vicious hit, catching him full in the nose. Even through his shielding and mask the pain of it was staggering, and Rei went reeling back, tripping as a heel caught a ripple in the sand to tumble and land sprawled upon the wet bar. He was himself now, completely, and his struggle to find his feet—eyes still watering from the hit—brought with it an acknowledgment of the fire ripping through his own body. His arms gave completely when he tried to shove himself up, and he was forced to awkwardly get his legs under him before he could stand. His breaths came in ragged gasps, the taste of the salty breeze managing to at last slip through again as he heaved in lungfuls of air, and he stumbled sideways. It took everything he had not to collapse then and there, and it was hard to find Aria through the pain and blurred vision.

When he did, though, he realized he wasn't the worse off of the two of them.

Aria was done. If the fact that she'd crumpled to kneel in the sand wasn't enough to tell him that, the sight of Hippolyta's shield and spear fallen to either side of her certainly did. She was taking in every breath sharply, but looked to want more than she could get while one hand clutched to the side his claws had ripped into. Her other was limp at her side, like she had nothing more to give.

And yet, despite all that, when he found her eyes she was smiling at him. Grimacing, yes, but also smiling through it.

"Thanks... for the fight," she managed to get out between pained inhales. "I had... fun..."

It hurt his face—and his smarting nose—but Rei grinned back at her as widely as he could manage, trying to tell her with his eyes how much those words meant to him.

And then, with a final heave of effort and a half-stagger, half-lurch forward, he brought one agony-riddled arm up to drive Shido's claws forward at her heart.

The blow never fell.

Instead, the world stood still. Not in any psychological way, this time. Not like when Shido's growing specs tweaked his thoughts to narrow his focus or assist his perception. No. The world went *literally* still, and Rei gave a small "Urk!" of surprise as his momentum was cut totally short practically in mid-air. He was frozen, at an angle with his arm still lifted to end the fight, and he wasn't the only one. Everything around him had stopped moving, from the slow waves that hung in the tide on either side of the sand bar to the distant shape of gulls that had been circling high overhead and in the distance. Even the sunset felt suddenly more like a picture than a hologram, now, and the sounds of the zone had gone silent, too.

Then there was Aria before him, eyes wide in surprise, almost as still.

Almost.

“What... the hell?!” she gasped, looking around in shock. She could move her head, and Rei realized then that he could as well.

Which also answered her question.

“A... penalty pause?” he wheezed right back. He’d seen it before, on the feeds and in person. If a match arbiter deemed it necessary to deliver a penalty mid-match—or, much more rarely, actually *end* the match—they had the ability to “pause” the zone, freezing everything but the combatants’ ability to move their heads and communicate. Rei had never experienced it for himself before, and didn’t like the sensation one bit, but that wasn’t the real issue here. Nor was it even that he couldn’t imagine what he—or either of them, he supposed—had done to earn a penalty.

The real issue was that the arbiter hadn’t appeared yet to explain himself.

For a long moment Rei and Aria just held like that, largely frozen, unable to do so much as twitch anything but their heads. After several seconds without so much as a sound from anywhere, though, it became clear that something was going on, and Aria was the first say so.

“Something’s wrong,” she said, her expression suddenly frightened despite her Endurance having already helped her to catch her breath. “Rei, something’s definitely wr—!”

Before she could finish, though, the world regained motion in all the wrong ways.

With a painful crack of movement Rei was wrenched backward and away from Aria, so quickly he might have been shot from a cannon. Just as quickly all motion was cut short again, and he yelled in pain and confusion as his aching body protested, his insides sloshed around nauseatingly, and his brain rattled in his skull. His vision had cleared, though, and Shido was still called around him, so it didn’t take long to register that he seemed to be in the exact middle of the field. Odder still, his body had been wrenched to stand perfectly straight, legs slightly spread, arms at a low angle with palms forward, like some living anatomy model. Before him, 10 yards away now, Aria was

much the same, held in place by the field, shield and spear back in her hands as though by magic. Around her feet, the red ring of the starting circle had reappeared, making Rei realize that he, too, had a circle below him.

He started to get a very, *very* bad feeling...

“REI!” Aria screamed in fear.

“It’s okay!” he called back, doing his best to comfort her even as he forced himself to again ignore his still-aching lungs. “It’s fine! I’m sure everything is going to be fine!”

As though in disagreement with this assurance, however, there came a *thud* from over their heads, and before either of them could so much as look up it was followed by another sound.

BOOM!

Rei felt his teeth shake as the entire field—still frozen in place—rippled outward from a place above their head. Almost at once there was another *BOOM*, and he realized that something with more power than he could imagine was *bitting* the top of the zone wall 30 yards above their heads, striking it like they were trying to break in.

But why the hell would someone outside be trying to break in when they could just as easily deactivate the—?

“*REI!*”

Aria’s second scream was different from the first, truly terrified this time, and Rei snapped his attention back earthward. Instantly he saw what was wrong, and a chill unlike anything he’d ever experienced shivered up his spine. Both of them stood in red rings, but while he hadn’t thought twice about the fact that he was in the middle of the zone while Aria was at the edge, he abruptly understood exactly why. Aria’s zone was a starting point for Duels. Rei’s was a starting point too, but not the type programmed for any kind of sanctioned match.

The two red rings that had manifested to the north and south respectively, glowing over the frozen tide beyond either edge of the sand bar, clued him in.

“The parameter test...?” he wondered aloud, utterly at a loss and growing more frightened by the second.

That fear manifested into terror, in fact, when shapes materialized out of the rings, rising up from the space above the water, cold and familiar in their grey, monotonous coloring.

Sparring partner projections. The kind Rei used to fight in the summer before he and Viv had headed to Galens.

The kind that manifested for their quarterly Offense & Endurance test...

Aria was screaming again, but Rei didn't hear her as the figures appeared and stood tall. To his left, the male partner model was expressionless, but its gaze was fixed on him in the same way the female's was to his right. Instinctively Rei tried to move, tried to get out of the way of that stare, but the Arena held him firm. His heart started to hammer in his chest, and something very much like panic began to well up inside him. He had to move. He *had to move*.

But he couldn't.

And then the two figures stepped out of the red rings at the same time, dropping down to their waists into the still tide, and Rei didn't think he'd ever been so scared in his life.

“No. No,” he started to say, wrenching at his limbs as best he could, looking desperately side-to-side as another *BOOM* echoed overhead. “No no no no.”

He had to move. He *had to move*. The figures were walking towards him now, the water glitching and pixilating around them like it didn't know how to react to the contact while frozen in time, and as they climbed the shallow incline of the floor towards the sand bar another grey form materialized behind each of them. Worse, as the figures rose out of the water with every step, their hands came clear of the tide gripping weapons that hadn't been there when they'd fallen in. A sword in the woman's, an axe in the man's. The second pair dropped into the tide, and another two materialized.

Rei still didn't hear Aria screaming, didn't hear the titanic strikes of something massive pummeling the zone wall high above them again and again and again. He could only see the grey figures continue their steady approach, heedless of his own yelling of "No! No!" as they neared. He didn't know what rank was displayed in black on their backs, but something about the way they moved had a voice in his head—and maybe Shido itself—screaming at him to run, *RUN!*

But he couldn't. He couldn't move. He couldn't get free of the grip of the Arena, no matter what he did.

And then the first two figures were there, standing before him, their grey faces empty of all emotion as he continued in vain to struggle to get away, *away!* They waited, ignoring Aria's shrieks at their back and the impacts from above, until the next two were at Rei's sides, and the last stood at his back.

"NO!" Rei was screaming at this point, utterly at a loss for anything else he could do, desperate for a way out. "NO!"

There was a pause, a moment of stillness from the six forms surrounding him, their varied weapons held at their sides like they were waiting for some kind of order.

Then it came, and six blades flashed grey as they came up and drove into Rei's body from every angle.

The pain was unlike anything he had ever experienced in his life. Ever. It was beyond the agony of his fibro or the surgeries, beyond the misery of the compromised parameter test. It erupted inside of Rei from every point the swords and spears and axes tore into him, blooming along every nerve like a thousand scalpels were shearing into each one individually. He couldn't breathe, couldn't think. He could only feel the agony of it, so great that it didn't even give him the chance to fall away, to faint into shock. There was nothing in him left in that moment, nothing but the horror of the blades sinking in, then pulling out, then driving in again. He was blind even to the motion of the grey figures before him, blind to their callousness, empty strikes other

than the *pain* each one brought. Something cold started to climb up through Rei again, but it was different this time, empty and hollow.

He was dying, he realized.

He was dying.

BOOM! CRACK!

There was a flash of light, so brilliant it even registered briefly with Rei despite the hell he'd fallen into. It roared in a fracturing spiral like the world itself had shattered apart. His face had been upturned, he realized, his mouth open in a scream of torment, and for a fraction of an instant he thought he saw a shape through the blaze, a slender silhouette descending from the heavens themselves, the faint outlines of what might have been wings extended to either side, one hand outstretched towards him.

And then the white faded, and everything went black. The six figures froze, lingered for a moment mid-swing, ready to strike yet again, then vanished to leave nothing but the darkness.

And then Rei was gone, not feeling the Arena release its grip on him, not hearing Aria's final scream through the lightless world, not seeing the steel plating of the stadium floor come rushing up as he fell into nothingness.

CHAPTER 38

“I’ll never forget that day... Not as long as I live... I’ve never heard anyone scream like... like that...”

I hope I never do again...”

-2469 Sector 9 Sectionals Attendee

Interviewed by Alicia Wolg

“Life of the Storm” Documentary

50,000 people were on their feet, screaming in terror and confusion into the empty dark. The Arena was a lightless eruption of chaos as people yelled and frantically looked around with NOEDs flashing, everyone trying to figure out what had happened, what was going on.

And Salista stood, mouth open and staring at the place she had seen Reidon Ward fall, as horrified as any of them.

It was the lights at last coming back on in the dark of the stadium that brought her momentarily back to her senses, the blinking brightness that returned with rapid *thoom, thoom, thooms* of solar power and complex machinery coming online. Even then it was a second before Salista realized with a start that at some point in the chaos she’d instinctively brought one hand up to her temple in horror, and she snatched it from her face.

Her face, and the mono-molecular remote switch she’d never convinced herself to actually activate.

For almost a minute Salista stood like that, trying in her own fashion to understand what had just happened. A dozen times during the fight she’d been tempted to trigger the switch, but some whisper of emotion had stilled her decision every time. She wasn’t

sure what it had been even now—she preferred the idea that it was guilt at meddling rather than any sense of awe upon witnessing Reidon Ward’s willpower—but it didn’t matter either way. *Had* she triggered the backdoor it wouldn’t have done anything more than “thicken” the Arena-projection around the target, slowing them down in a way that would have been invisible to any outside viewer or recording. It wasn’t designed to *hurt* anyone, just hamper Aria’s opponent enough to give her an advantage. Salista was a meddler—she knew that, and bore no shame for it—but she wasn’t a madwoman.

Someone, on the other hand, had obviously been at least a *little* out of their mind.

There was no blood. That was good. In the moment of utter chaos Salista—like many of the other spectators around her, she was sure—had been half-convinced Ward had *actually* been skewered a hundred times before their very eyes. Still, the knowledge that the projected figures had been as holographic as the field didn’t change the fact that Salista had distinctly seen the “S0” symbols in black on their backs. On top of that, gravity and physics had been against the Iron Bishop after she’d managed to finally shatter the zone barrier, and as quick as the Knight-Class was she didn’t look to have managed to reach Ward before he hit the ground. He lay in a crumpled heap on the black projection plating, his Device recalled from around his body in unconsciousness, Valera Dent crouching over him still in her own distinct CAD, screaming “MEDIC! MEDIC!”. Her calls were unnecessary, of course, with the floor of the Arena already abuzz with movement. Officers—CAD-assisted and unassigned alike—were rushing towards the pair from every direction. More than one medical drone was already ripping out of the tunnels towards the field, and Salista saw Sara Takeshi bolting from the Galens’ seating section for the underwork stairs as Dyrk Reese and Elean Samsus worked to keep the other Institute students—in particular the rest of Firesong—calm.

Worst of all, Aria was yet clad in her own Device as she scrambled forward from where she’d landed, trying to get to the still shape of Ward, mouth still open in a scream of fear that her mother couldn’t hear now.

Salista watched the proceedings as though in a dream, a sensation she—a woman very much used to having control of her surroundings at all times—was neither familiar with nor enjoyed. It took a minute for the swarm of medics and drones to assess Ward, but then a lift-stretcher was called for and he was carefully hoisted onto it before being guided quickly towards the underworks. Dent went with him—having recalled Kestrel at some point in the rush—but Takeshi stayed behind to hold Aria back, who seemed to want to follow the boy. Salista was shocked to see her daughter like that—wild-eyed and screaming in turn after Ward and at the captain who was restraining her—but the events of the moment were such that she couldn't process Aria's state enough to be disappointed or alarmed or whatever emotion might have been appropriate for the situation. She could only stand and stare, one of tens of thousands to do so all around her, as at a loss as any of them.

“What happened?”

It was just as Ward and his entourage vanished into the tunnels that the first of the distinct questions began to be heard. Initially it was just those most curious and most concerned, but as a minute passed with no answer the tone of the crowd changed. Confusion started to shift to concern.

And concern rapidly began to turn to anger.

“What happened?! What's going on?!”

“Someone tell us *what's going on!*”

“Hello?! HELLO?!”

The throng began to get agitated, and Salista found herself finally looking away from the Arena floor to eye the stands a little nervously. All around her people were shouting or discussing worriedly amongst themselves. A few seemed even to be attempting to contact the local authorities, a useless action given the ISCM had sole jurisdiction over its sanctioned academies, Kenneth included. She could understand the frustration, though. 50,000 spectators had gone from watching a tremendous match

between two intersystem-level first-years to witnessing one of those fighters utterly brutalized by some obvious glitch or hack of the SCT systems, a first according to Salista's knowledge of the history of the tournament. It didn't matter that the figures in grey had been holograms. It didn't matter that they'd been no more "real" than a phantom call. It didn't matter that Reidon Ward hadn't *actually* been ripped to shreds.

What mattered was the terror of the witnessed event and the confusion born of it.

Fortunately the tournament organizers seemed to have caught wind of the rising ire of the crowds, because just as the shouting from the stands reached a new level a single figure in military black and golds and with braided blue hair all but ran back out onto the Arena floor. Pulling up her frame to zoom in on them, Salista realized it was one of the arbiters who'd been overseeing the tournaments earlier in the week, and that she was making a beeline for the middle of the Wargames area. In one hand she held a strange black device, a sort of metal stick that seemed to have foam on one end, and Salista couldn't identify it even after the officer turned and lifted the thing to her mouth.

Then she spoke, and Salista realized instantly that the problem was probably much greater than any of them had realized.

"Ladies and gentlemen, if I could have your attention." The arbiter's voice was as loud as it had been all morning, but also tinny and uneven. "My name is Major Aisling Jones. I am the Kenneth Academy's chief SCT arbiter. It is my duty first to assure you that Cadet Reidon Ward is being assessed as we speak, though all early indications from our field medics and drones are that he is in no critical danger. Cadet Laurent is also being looked over, though only as a precaution."

"WHAT HAPPENED?!" one particularly loud voice roared out in answer to this, and a thousand other questions followed in a cascade.

"I apologize, but at this time we cannot say as to what has occurred here today, though we *can* assure you all this was neither a prank nor planned event by the ISCM.

At this time our best guess is that some kind of hack was executed against the Kenneth Academy Arena, allowing an outside party access to the SCT programming. I apologize again, but all I can say at this time is that we've requested emergency oversight from the MIND to review all our security parameters for a potential breach, as well as all software for additional tampering. Finally, members of the ISCM themselves are currently doing a physical security comb of the Arena in case of *direct* tampering."

Salista tensed, and had to cross her arms to keep her right hand from twitching up towards her temple again.

"That is why you see me with this." Jones raised the strange black stick in her hand a little as she spoke, and even that movement seemed to change the pitch of the woman's voice until she returned it to the spot in front of his mouth. "The Kenneth Arena is fortunate enough to have some old redundant systems that are self-enclosed, including this microphone and the speakers I'm talking to you through now. All other non-necessary systems have been taken offline until the Mass Intellect can complete its assessment and our officers and security drones have done a thorough sweep of the building. For that reason—" the major raised her voice a little as though she wanted everyone present to make sure they heard her "—we have unfortunately made the decision to postpone the final upper bracket Dueling match till this afternoon, and I must at this time ask you to stay in your seats for the time being, outside of emergencies. Should the MIND tell us there are no further concerns, the Iron Bishop and several A-Ranked ISCM officers have agreed to thoroughly test all field systems before resuming collegiate matches this afternoon. I thank you for your patience, and we will keep you informed as we procure further updates."

And with that Jones lowered the 'microphone' and promptly strode from the floor, leaving the stands abuzz again, though mostly mollified. Some people still shouted angrily after her, but most everyone seemed to have understood that the situation was bigger than them and had started taking to their seats again. Those who initially refused

only did so until they noticed that a trio of ISCM officers had appeared at the bottom of each section, with many more moving quickly to line the lower walkways and stairs before taking the at-ease position to scan the crowd, eyeing the troublemakers in particular until all of them quieted down too. They weren't threatening, per se, but they certainly formed enough of a presence to convey it was in everyone's best interest to stay calm.

Except for Salista, who suddenly very much felt like a trapped fox.

The switch burned at her temple like it was on fire, even if she was only imagining it. She hadn't tried to trigger it—she *hadn't*, she was sure—but what difference would that make to the ISCM if they started sweeping the *spectators* for potential bad actors? It was bad enough that she'd already touched the filament instinctively when things had gone south, but she might get away with that even if the MIND did a sweep of the Arena recordings. Now, though, even if she surreptitiously peeled the transparent trigger off her NOED module and discarded it, it would be found and undoubtedly traced right back to her. But if she *didn't* do anything and they started searching Sectional attendees, it would be found *on* her, which would be no better. Even *if* she hadn't triggered it and even *if* she wasn't responsible for the horror show the Arena had made of Reidon Ward, she had no doubt the ISCM would figure out what the trigger was for and charge her with intent.

Salista felt her stomach flip at the thought. Powerful as the family name might be, there would be no recovering from that. Maybe she could tie her own charges up in the legal systems for years with the right counsel, but she had no ability to stop the military from court-martialing her husband just for being associated with her and her plan to—

MESSAGE FROM "UNKNOWN".

Salista's increasingly panicked thoughts were interrupted as a notification pinged her NOED unexpectedly. She frowned, seeing the alert blink once before fading to nothing but the alert dot in the corner of her frame. She'd told all company and house staff not to bother her while she was "vacationing in Sol for the week", and she trusted no one was stupid enough to disregard such an explicit instruction. Combine that with the message coming from an unknown contact... And the timing...

Suspicious, Salista opened the notification, blinking as the text came up in white across her vision.

Wait ten minutes. The man behind you will ask if you're alright. Tell him you aren't feeling well.

Salista swallowed, adrenaline coursing through her. Was this an extraction? Was this planned by the people she'd employed to create the trigger for her? If that was the case, what did it mean? Were they just looking out for themselves, or was it something else? The knot in her gut tightened as all kinds of alarm bells began sounding off in Salista's head. What if she *had* activated the switch and this had been the result? What if she hadn't had a choice from the start, and it had been activated remotely for her with all of this planned from the beginning? Had she been played? Had she just been used as a pawn?

That sparked something in Salista, and her panic cooled. No. Salista Laurent was no one's pawn. If anything, she was the player.

And that meant she had to be good at knowing when she was out of other viable moves.

Salista checked the time, noting it. Then she forced herself to sit, forced herself to pull up the feeds to see if anything about the event had leaked yet, to see if she could find any recordings of the fights, since she hadn't bothered to grab it herself. Partially

it was to pass the time without stewing in her own anger and anxiety, but partially too it was just to look normal, so she wasn't the only one among tens of thousands just sitting on her hands staring into space.

After 8 minutes, she decided it might be best to at least give prying eyes—present or future—some context, and she start grabbing at her stomach and doing her best to look uncomfortable. She even—to her own great mortification—let out a groan as the 10 minute mark hit.

On cue, she felt a hand come down lightly on her shoulder.

“Excuse me, ma’am... Are you alright?”

Salista froze, and had to make herself not give up the game then and there by whipping around. That voice... She *knew* that voice. It had been *years* since she'd last heard it, a thought that brought with it its own sort of nervousness.

But for the moment she had a part to play, and if nothing else she was at least pretty sure now that she wasn't going to be black-bagged and taken off to be ejected out an airlock by shady actors looking to tie up loose ends.

She shook her head without turning around, grunting out a “No... My stomach...”

“Oh...” The voice was perfectly uncomfortable, formidable in the part it was playing. “Uh... Should we get you to a bathroom? The officers said they would let you by for an emergency...”

The people in the seats surrounding them were looking around in concern, now, and Salista's face burned despite the awareness that her actual features were hidden by the projection device around her neck. She just nodded again, and she heard the man behind her stand up.

“I'll help you. I can let them know what's going on.”

Then the hand was under her arm, and Salista let herself get “helped” onto her feet, careful to keep her mouth twisted into a grimace and her own hands around her

stomach. She moved along the row—her “guide” walking stooped along the one above her—until they reached the section stairs.

As expected, they were brought up short by an ISCM soldier almost immediately.

“Folks, I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to ask you to return to your seats. We’re in the process of clearing the Arena and I promise we’ll be letting you guys out as soon as we—”

“Officer, this woman is in need of the restroom. She’s complaining of stomach issues.”

Salista cheeks were on fire, and she decided she was only making up the hint of vengeful amusement she could hear in that damn voice.

“O-oh.” The officer, a man, was clearly discomfited by this revelation, and even with her eyes on her feet she could see him turn to her. “Are you unwell, ma’am?”

She nodded, forcing out a pained, “Yes, sir. Seeing that... The stress of it... It has my stomach acting up...”

“Understandable, of course,” the officer said, still obviously trying to find his footing. “Er...” He looked desperately around for what might have been assistance from the other soldiers along the steps, but they were all either too far away or engaged with some member of the stands or another.

After a second, he gave in.

“Alright,” he pointed up the walkway. “I believe the closest restrooms are up a level, in the vendor area. Please return to your seats as soon as you’re... uh... feeling better. I’ll let the others know what’s going on.”

Salista nodded at the floor again, and the man with his hand under her arm thanked the officer for them both, then started to pull her up the stairs. Salista let herself be led, and didn’t make eye contact with any of the other soldiers they passed even after they’d been waved by, clearly already informed the two of them had good reason to be out of their seats. They reached the mid-level walkway, stepping onto the landing where

a wide arch led under the stands into the massive vending area corridor, a broad tunnel Salista was pretty sure encircled the entirety of the stadium, its walls comprised of permanent and semi-permanent food and drink stalls for spectators' enjoyment throughout the day. Even here, though, the sellers and staff were gone now—the ISCM had apparently herded *everyone* they could into the Arena for supervision—so Salista and the man didn't have to walk more than fifty paces down the hall before the noise of the stadiums was largely gone and they were completely alone.

“This way,” the man said gruffly, all false concern very abruptly gone from his voice. “Blind spot.”

Salista had no choice but to be led this time as the grip of his fingers turned to iron, and she was half dragged towards the outside wall and a three-foot lane of space between an SCT-themed kettle corn stand and a pop-up stall whose cotton candy machine looked to have been left half-full when the staff had been shepherded out of the vending area.

Once they slipped into the narrow alley, shaded from above by the metal and cloth overhang on either side of them respectively, the grip on Salista's arm became outright painful, and she was snapped around to face her 'rescuer' full-on for the first time.

“Was this you?!” he snarled into her face. “And *don't* try to bullshit me! Was. This. *You?!?*”

For a long time, though, Salista could only stare.

The man before her was wearing a projection device like she was, but his features hadn't been so drastically changed that she couldn't recognize the face beneath them. He'd kept the differences subtle, tweaking the breadth of his nose, the thickness of his eyebrows, the width of his chin, but his eyes he'd opted to keep the same. That was smart, if one was confident they could get away with it. Eye color was the one place personal projection tech hadn't *quite* mastered yet, where someone looking for a disguise could most easily discover it.

In this case, however, it confirmed Salista's every suspicion when she found herself looking into those emerald eyes, the same eyes her husband had been born with.

The same eyes she and Carmen had agreed *all* their children would have.

"... Kalus..." she breathed at last, not quite believing it despite what she could see very clearly in front of her.

The face—just so subtly different it felt strange to look upon—twisted in annoyance at her voice, but the hand let off its harsh grip around her arm slightly.

"Hello, *Mother*," Kalus Laurent, her middle child and only son, growled in answer, not looking away from her. "I wish I could say it's good to see you, but we both know that would be a lie. Given the circumstances I'm not exactly feeling the celebratory spirit anyway. Now, if you would please *answer the question*."

Salista blinked, coming to herself slowly. Dressed in a stylish blue jacket and black pants, Kalus wasn't taller than when she'd last seen him at his Galens graduation 2—no, almost 3—years prior now, but other than that he seemed like an entirely different person. Setting aside his face, he had a number of black and gold earrings in each ear that made her want to faint, and his red hair—darker than hers or her daughters' to match his father's—was shaved along the sides but long at the top and back, kept out of his face in a short, stylish ponytail behind his head. His shoulders were a little broader too, but Salista supposed that was to be expected. While he hadn't had quite the promise Aria had shown entering Galens, Kalus had been the ace of his own graduating class, and had taken less than a year out of school to achieve S-Rank and his Pawn-Class designation. It made Salista swell with pride looking at him, even if that joy was tinged a bit with sadness.

And even more irritation.

"You think *I* would have something to do with *that*?" she snapped, wrenching at Kalus' grip around her arm. "Is that supposed to be a joke?"

Her son didn't give her so much as a millimeter.

“Not even a little bit, *Mother*,” he half-snarled back, straining the last word again in a determinedly distasteful way. “If you’re under the impression that I would *ever* think you beyond suspicion, then you’re even more delusional than you were when Amina and I changed our ID codes to cut you and Father off.”

That hurt a little, but Salista didn’t let him see that. She’d never let any of them see how much their words stung sometimes. It was the duty of a mother to take that pain. It was the duty of a mother to accept when her children did not understand that what she did, *everything* she did, was for them and their futures.

“Then let go of me, and I’ll answer you,” she said coolly. “You’re hurting me, and it’s not like I can outrun you, can I?”

Kalus didn’t let go of his glare, holding on as though out of spite. Then he released her, standing straight and crossing his arms in front of his chest expectantly. For a while they just stood there in the little alley, neither looking away from the other, locked in a battle of wills Salista was neither used to nor enjoyed.

Finally, she decided it was best to give. The man before her seemed to hold himself with an iron confidence she didn’t recall 3 years ago...

“Of *course* I had nothing to do with what happened out there,” she spat, waving a hand back behind them to indicate the Arena they’d just left. “And I take offense that you would even *think* that!”

“Oh?” Kalus asked, raising an eyebrow. “So you really do think there’s no reason I should suspect you? At all?”

“Of course not!” Salista snapped back. “What have I ever done that would make you think—?”

“Then what are you doing here, Mother? Why are you at this event? And *don’t* tell me it’s to cheer Aria on, or some bullshit like that. We *both* know the only time you’ve ever bothered to show up for any of us was when you had a reason to.”

Salista—who'd indeed been about to present just this exact argument—shut her mouth with a snap and glowered at her only son.

“You think that little of me? That I can't just show up to support my daughter?”

“Oh I think less of you than that,” Kalus snarled, narrowing his green eyes at her. “You give yourself too much credit if *that's* where you think the bar is.”

Salista felt that sting again, felt that hurt, but didn't so much as blink. Instead, she changed tactics.

“What in the MIND are *you* doing here, then, Kalus? If you're such a saint, why are *you* here?”

“Call it a premonition,” the man responded in a growl. “Aria reached out to me a few weeks ago with a request, and I haven't had the chance to respond. I was already thinking of surprising her, and then a little birdie told me that *you* just so happened to be taking a ‘week-long vacation’ over the course of her Sectionals. I'm not a fan of coincidences like that. So... here I am.”

Salista grit her teeth. “Clearly someone under my employment needs to learn a thing or two about keeping my itinerary to themselves.” She looked her son up and down. “And what was this request of Aria's? It's the first time I'm hearing about it.”

“I'm *shocked*,” Kalus answered dryly. “I cannot *imagine* why she wouldn't reach out to *you* for advice on something important. It's not at all like *you'd* immediately try to figure out how to leverage the situation to *your* advantage now, is it?”

Salista ignored this, pivoting again as she glanced around the vending area, realizing something else. “Then you can at *least* tell me how you found me? 50,000 people and you just *happen* to stumble on me? In *disguise*?”

Kalus snorted. “Hell no. I had help. There are perks to being an S-Ranked SCT fighter on the way up the ladder, Mother. Combine that with you being about as predictable as a well-worn foot path, and it honestly wasn't that hard.”

“Predictable?!” Salista half-hissed, taking more offense to this than anything else said so far. “I’m not predict—!”

“Mother, switching up what section you sat in for each of Aria’s fights isn’t exactly master-class espionage tactics. A friend of mine is a staff officer at Kenneth, and has access to the security feeds. Literally *all* I needed to tell her was that a 5’11” woman would be leaving promptly every time Aria Laurent was done for the day, squad-formats included. She tossed that into the world’s most basic extrapolation algorithm, and gave me three matches by Wednesday. *Three*. Out of 50,000.” He sneered. “Go ahead and tell me you’re not predictable though. Please.”

Salista seethed, glaring up at her son, but before she could think to get another word in he was continuing.

“Maybe now we can try again? I’ve given you a good, healthy example of what it’s like to answer a question directly, so I’m wondering if you’ll actually be able to manage it for once?” His eyes never left hers. “I’ll ask again: If you didn’t have anything to do with what happened out there, then *what are you doing here?*”

Salista’s face burned, but not in embarrassment now.

It burned in anger.

“None of you will *ever* understand, will you?” she seethed. “Not a *one of you* will *ever* appreciate the lengths your father and I have gone to protect you! To protect this family!”

“Oh here we go,” Kalus sighed, rolling his eyes to the ceiling.

“No!” Salista snapped, bring a finger up to jab towards his face. “You will *not* disrespect me like this. You will *not* disrespect your *mother* like this! I have given too much—*sacrificed* too much—to be treated in this way, much less by my own child!”

“You’re worse at dancing around the bush than you used to be,” her son grunted, clearly unperturbed by her tone of voice as he reached up with one hand to rub his eyes with thumb and forefinger. “You also seem to be under the impression that you hold

more cards than you do in this conversation. I *know* you're not here out of the goodness of your heart, Mother. I know it even more firmly than I know that Triumverant will come to me the moment I call for it. I know it so well, in fact, that I *literally* just bet my own skin that you needed an exit plan after everything went belly up in that last fight, *whether that was your fault or not.*" He looked at her in a tired sort of way from above his fingers, then. "And look at that. You leapt on the chance. Which tells me everything I need to know."

And then, without warning, he turned and slipped out of the alley, startling Salista as he started walking back down the hall,

"Wait, where are you going?" she demanded furiously, hurrying to the edge of the lane. "You can't just leave me here!"

"Why not?" Kalus called back without looking around. "If you're so pure of heart and you're only here to support your daughter, you don't need me, do you? You can just go back to your seat, no questions asked."

Salista's stomach bottomed out at that, and she looked frantically around. The stalls were empty, sure, but what was she going to do? Stick the trigger under a counter like old gum? The drones would eventually sweep here, too, and even if she was *currently* in a blind spot she and Kalus had likely been the only people to walk this hall in the last 10 minutes. In a way, she was more exposed than ever.

"Wait!" she hissed furiously, caving and taking a step after her son. "Just... *wait.*"

Kalus stopped and half-turned to look at her. He didn't say a word, though, and once more they battled for a moment, until again Salista was the one forced to speak.

And with nothing else to do for it, she told him everything.

"I didn't use it," she gave the half-truth first. "I wasn't going to unless it was absolutely necessary."

Kalus frowned, but after a second moved to rejoin her in the alley. She stepped back to let him in.

“It?” he intoned dangerously the moment he was under cover again. “What is it?”

“I have a... a trigger,” she said hesitantly. “Back door-access to the SCT programming at this Arena.”

“I’m sorry... You *what?*!”

“It’s not what you think! It’s nothing like what happened back there to Ward. It’s just a script that limits the movement of the target slightly, making it easier for their opponent to—”

“Are you *kidding me*, Mom?!” Kalus absolutely snarled, even slipping from the cold formalities into an older, more familiar tone in his shock. “Are you KIDDING ME?! ‘Just limits the movements’?! You’re talking about *combat tampering*! You’re talking about a *felony*! Tell me you’re joking! *Please* tell me you’re joking!”

“It wasn’t going to harm anyone! It was just so Aria—!”

“Just so Aria could get a leg up?! Just so Aria could win more easily?!” Kalus let out a weak, icy laugh. “Holy shit... You really have learned absolutely *nothing* from me and Amina, have you? Nothing at *all*.”

“This SCT is *important*, Kalus!” Salista snarled back. “This is Aria’s *first ever* chance to make an impression on the feeds! It might seem silly to you now, in the pro circuits, but Sectionals is where it begins, where Aria will have the opportunity to get important eyes on her! Even *you* didn’t get sponsorship offers till your third year! If I can help Aria do better, then you can be damn well sure I’m going t—”

“No! Shut up!” Kalus snapped, and Salista almost took a step further back into the little alley as her son’s eyes blazed with a sudden green light, like emerald fire had engulfed his irises. “Shut up, and listen to me! You have to stop. You have to STOP, dammit! Forget anyone pointing out that you’re just going to lose Aria like you lost the two of us. Forget anyone pointing out that you could be incarcerated for this bullshit! Did you even stop to think about the other people involved in this?! About Aria? About

Dad?! What the *hell* would have happened to *them* if you'd been caught? If the military thought she was involved, then Aria could have lost her *CAD*, Mom! Her *Device*! And Dad!" He scoffed. "Not like *Dad* does anything important, does he? Not like risking *his* career has any potential consequences for anyone, does it?!"

Salista grit her teeth again. "Nothing was going to happen to them," she ground back. "I had a plan, and—"

"MOM! OPEN YOUR EYES! YOUR PLAN WENT TO SHIT TWENTY MINUTES AGO! WHAT NOW, HUH?"

It was lucky the faint drone of the Arena was so distant, because Kalus only barely seemed to keep himself from screaming at her outright, which would have earned them all the wrong kinds of attention. Salista, for her part, could only stand rigidly before her son, at once furious and frightened as his gaze continued to burn green.

After nearly 10 seconds of heavy silence between them, Kalus seemed to get ahold of himself, because he took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, they were back to normal.

"This trigger. Where is it?"

"Over my right NOED module," Salista answered through a clenched jaw.

Kalus peered at her temple. "Where?"

"It's completely transparent."

Her son's eyes went wide. "Mono-molecular? Where the hell did you get tech like that?!"

"From an associate. One who I won't be needing further contact with after today."

"That better be the case," Kalus growled. Then he looked around, seeming to consider for a moment. Eventually his eyes settled on some distant part of the curved corridor wall opposite their alley.

Then, with a resigned sort of sigh, he held one hand out.

"Alright. Give it to me."

Salista blinked. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me. Give it to me. Go to the restroom and take it off.” He tossed the thumb of his other hand over his shoulder, in the direction he’d been looking. “There’s no cameras in there. I’ll bet that’s where you picked it up in the first place, isn’t it?”

She hesitated, then nodded.

“Thought so. I can partial call without Central taking much notice. They tend to assume we’re showing off part of our Device for a fan who wants a picture or something. Flushing that thing doesn’t guarantee it won’t be discovered, but Triumverant’s vysetrium will definitely fry it.”

Salista could barely believe her ears. “You want to... You’re going to destroy it?”

Kalus looked at her like she was crazy. “Yes? Obviously? Do you see a different option?”

Salista shook her head unsteadily, and Kalus nodded.

“Glad we understand each other. Now go take it off.”

And Salista did just that, making her way a little numbly to the bathroom not too far away, where she locked herself in a stall to carefully peel the translucent circle from over her NOED. Once it was off—the only assurance that she had it between her fingers being the slighted discoloration in the air where it was hanging if she turned her hand at a specific angle—she met Kalus back outside and handed it off. After examining it for a bit with some interest, her son vanished into the restroom himself, and not a minute later returned looking a great bit less stressed than he had before.

“There. That’s done,” he grumbled, looking up and down the hall. “We’ve taken enough time as is. We should head back to our seats, but don’t talk to me again. I’m leaving as soon as they let everyone go, and I don’t want you coming after me.”

That hurt again, but Salista brushed it off. Still, it was enough to spark the anger again.

“Why help, then?” she demanded, glaring at her son. “If I’m that bad, why bother helping?”

Once more, Kalus stared at her like she was the most ridiculous thing he’d ever seen.

“Seriously?” he asked after a second.

Salista continued to watch him with narrowed eyes, unwilling this time to be the one who bent.

In the end, if only that once, she won.

“Someone just made a butchery of the Iron Prince, Mother. Don’t believe what they said about it maybe being a glitch. It wasn’t. That was an *attack*, and one perpetrated through the best firewalls ISCM software can throw up again outside influencers for *exactly* the reasons you saw. *Anyone* caught in the crossfire of this is going to get thrown into a very deep, *very* dark hole.”

“You don’t seem to mind if that was me,” Salista growled. “In fact you’re so clear about that I’m surprised you didn’t turn me in yourself.”

Kalus’ eyebrows shot up at that, clearly shocked.

“Wow... You really are broken, aren’t you?” he asked after a second. “If that’s where your head goes—if *that’s* what you think family is capable of, even one as broken and deranged as ours—then you’re even further gone than I thought.” He shook his head sadly. “But fine. Even if you don’t believe I would do it for you... maybe you can believe I did it for Aria. To give her a chance at a future without you mucking things up for her.” He turned, then, and walked away once more. “Goodbye, Mother. MIND willing, I hope I never see you again.”

And this time he didn’t stop when Salista called after him.

CHAPTER 39

Sol System – Earth – Sector 1

Central Command

“Why me? Why is it always me? At some point I’m gonna drag me in for questioning about why I’m always the one...”

-Cassidy Maran

After a few too many drinks

In a way, Chief Warrant Officer Cassidy Maran had had it pretty good for the last couple of months. Having been the one to catch Reidon Ward’s unprecedented Ability assignment late the previous year—and, more importantly, having had the sense to bring it directly to General Abel the moment she’d seen it—Cassidy had earned herself not only a double promotion, but also a rather unique special assignment. There were definitely perks to that, sure, and the biggest among them was easily that she no longer had to work the graveyard shift. A couple of weeks working standard hours had gotten her sleep schedule back in line with normal humans, and that alone was worth almost anything. She saw daylight again, could *finally* catch up with some local friends at events other than awkward breakfasts for them—previously “dinner” for her—and had even started seeing a really sweet guy she’d met at a holiday concert in December. Things were almost perfect.

Almost.

“So. Damn. Boooooored!” Cassidy grumbled into her crossed arms, her head on the smart-glass desk in front of her monitoring station.

Her office was *stellar* for a soldier of her rank status. It was no corner suite in the Central Command tower, but it *was* spacious and *did* have a window wall that let her turn her chair around and stare out of the 41st story any time she wanted, which was pretty often. The view had taken her breath away for the first week or so, but there was honestly only so much of Seattle one could take in from *any* height before even the sight of the city and bay eventually became mundane, and so Cassidy had quickly gone back to being bored of that too. The monotony was so visceral that she'd even started finding excuses to involve herself in the work of the officers in the units around her, something that had made her rather popular right out the gate despite being the new girl on the floor. Still, everyone in the monitoring division had their own assignments, and there was only so much she could help with before she'd be inadvertently nosing into business that wasn't under her purview, so back to the desk it was. The issue, at the end of the day, was the job. Unlike the other officers who made up the division, Cassidy only had *one* CAD User to oversee, exclusively tasked to do so by Abel herself.

Reidon Ward.

It wasn't that Ward wasn't without his moments of interest, mind you. Only a couple weeks before Cassidy had nearly fallen out of her seat when the boy had gone through his most recent evolution, so soon after his CAD had last upgraded. On top of that, watching his level of growth was astounding, and there were times that Cassidy felt like the kid was seeing spec improvement every day of the week. The fact of the matter, though, was that Ward could have been the most interesting User in the ISC—and kind of *was*, honestly—but there was only so much of sitting and staring at a largely-unchanging monitor that Cassidy could do before she went mental.

“Maybe I'll take a vacation,” she muttered to herself, lifting her head and blinking blearily at the screen. “Somewhere sunny. And warm. Bora Bora. Or Mercury. Yeah... Mercury...”

Unfortunately, she only managed that daydream for a couple of seconds before she caught herself and shook her head to clear her thoughts. No. None of that. She was a recent Chief Warrant Officer and pretty much as new as you could get to the assignment at hand. It wouldn't do to wish for leave she doubted she would have been granted even if she'd been dumb enough to ask for it. For the time being she was stuck in that office, and she'd best get used to it.

With a sigh Cassidy pushed herself to her feet and stretched, letting her chair roll across the patterned carpet while she groaned as her lower back—sore from sitting all day even despite her C-Ranked CAD—strained and popped. Deciding caffeine was the only solution to her ennui, she stepped around her desk out of her little office, only pausing to ask her neighbors, First Lieutenants Garret and Wekesa, if they wanted anything before heading straight for the break room. She took her time while she was there, checking her NOED notifications and dumping about four too many sugars into her coffee before resigning herself to having to go back.

“Just get through it,” she muttered to herself for the thousandth time in a month. “It's an opportunity, and you won't be here forever. Just get through it.”

Reentering her office and kicking the door closed behind her, Cassidy only grumbled a little as she plopped herself down in her chair and made herself comfortable. Holding her mug in both hands, she allowed herself one blissful sip before forcing herself to look at her monitor once again.

And promptly spewed it all back out over her work station.

Cassidy hacked and coughed, the coffee falling from her grasp onto the desk, steaming liquid flying everywhere to splatter the glass, floor, wall, and her own uniform. She didn't notice. She just sat there trying not to choke, but even as she worked to clear her lungs she couldn't help but stare, completely transfixed by the bright blue text inside the blinking orange alert frame that took up the entirety of the screen. For a full 10

seconds or so she sat like that, shaking and gaping, mouthing at nothing and not so much as feeling the heat through her soaked black and golds.

And then she was gone, bolting from the office at full tilt, already ringing General Abel's personal NOED. She left so fast, in fact, that Garret and Wekesa both got up from their own desks to stick their heads out into the hall in unison to see what was going on, where they exchanged a curious glance before both affirmed they had no idea what had happened. Cassidy had left her office door open, though, and so Garret deliberately stepped inside to close it, careful not to look around as he did. It was an open secret that the Chief Warrant Officer was on special assignment, and any ISCM officer worth their salt typically knew not to stick their nose in other people's projects without invitation. For that reason, Garret pretended he couldn't see the pulse of the orange light in the reflection of the window wall behind the desk. That was for the best, in the end, because if he'd taken the time to peer at the distorted words in the glass, taken the time to try to make them out backwards, he would have understood immediately that he had likely seen something he *very* much wasn't supposed to.

Priority Case: Ward, Reidon. C9.

User-Unique Ability Upgraded.

User-Unique Ability Assigned.

CHAPTER 40

“There are few great leaps in the advancement of humankind that did not come at some great cost...”

-General Shira Abel

Private Journals

...

Processing combat information.

...

Calculating.

...

Results:

Strength: Severely Lacking

Endurance: Severely Lacking

Speed: Severely Lacking

Cognition: Severely Lacking

Offense: Severely Lacking

Defense: Severely Lacking

Growth: Not Applicable

...

Checking combat data acquisition.

...

Adequate data acquirement met.

Device initiating adjustments to:

Strength. Endurance. Speed. Cognition. Offense. Defense.

...

Adjustment complete.

Strength has been upgraded from Rank C3 to C5.

Endurance has been upgraded from Rank C2 to C4.

Speed has been upgraded from Rank C7 to B0.

Cognition has been upgraded from Rank C7 to C9.

Offense has been upgraded from Rank C3 to C5.

Defense has been upgraded from Rank C4 to C7.

...

Calculating.

...

CAD "Shido" has been upgraded from Rank C7 to C9

...

Checking combat data acquisition.

...

Adequate data acquirement met.

Prioritizing reasonable evolution parameters.

...

Selected Prioritization:

Strength. Endurance. Speed. Cognition. Offense. Defense.

...

Recategorizing for future parameters.

...

Processing.

...

Evolving.

...

Evolution complete.

...

Checking combat data acquisition.

...

Adequate data acquirement met.

Prioritizing reasonable Ability assignment.

...

Ability "Type Shift" has been redesignated "Type Shift I".

Ability "Type Shift I" has been upgraded to "Type Shift II".

Additional Mode integration added to "Type Shift II".

...

User-Unique Ability Assigned: "Temporal Step"

The first thing Rei took notice of when he came to was that he *hurt*. He *really* hurt. That was pretty concerning given he was beyond used to waking up in pain. It seemed to be a semi-regular occurrence for him ever since he'd started school at Galens, and before then his surgeries had seen him going down and waking up usually in only

various levels of extreme discomfort. This time, though, the pain was different. Stranger. Unlike anything he'd known before. It wasn't *worse*, he didn't think. That would have been unfathomable. No... What was odd about it was that it was... everywhere? Yeah, that was it. *Everything* hurt. Without exception. Every limb. Every joint. Every length of muscle. Even his damn *face*. It *all* hurt. Rei felt like a building had collapsed on him, and he'd somehow managed to survive by the skin of his—

And then he remembered.

Rei's eyes flew open, and he jerked up to sit with a strangled cry, flailing in panic as the images of the monochrome figures flashed before him like nightmares made real.

"Oh hell, he's up!" someone yelled, and Rei felt hands grab at his arms and shoulders. Instinctively he tried to wrench himself away, not seeing anything but grey and a bright white that made his eyes water.

"A LITTLE HELP!" a second voice yelled, but he ignored them, shouting as he fought. He felt even more hands, and one pair in particular took hold of him like steel, pushing him back down. That only made things worse as the panic set in ten-fold, as his mind screamed against being so absolutely caged.

Not again! NOT AGAIN!

"Ward! WARD!" someone yelled. A woman's voice, and known.

But far gone from his awareness.

"What's happened?!" Another woman, also familiar, but it reached Rei through his terror with no more efficacy than the first.

"He's panicking!" the first voice shouted. "Anyone NOT a User, GET OUT! NOW! Sarah, get the girls!"

"What? Valera, do you think that's a good—?"

"SARAH!" the first voice roared, and there was a power in the words that almost reached Rei. Almost. "GET THE GIRLS!"

There was a scramble of feet, but he didn't hear them. He was gone. Far gone. All he knew was panic and pain. Every movement hurt. Every wheezing breath. Every jerk. Every twist and turn of his body as he bucked against the hands that held him down. That was nothing, though, compared to the fear. To the terror. The memory of grey blades rising and coming down to—

“Rei!”

“REI!”

And then, like that, the world snapped back into place.

Rei froze. The white he'd seen started to clear, turning into the bright lights of a well-lit room, and the grey darkened until it wasn't grey at all but *black*. Black and gold. There were figures standing around him, maybe a half-dozen in total, and one in particular was leaning over him and holding him down. It took a moment for him to focus, took a moment for him to make out Valera Dent's unique features, her hair loose and cap gone, prosthetic-lined face framed against the ceiling. She had him pinned down—pinned down to a *bed*, he realized—and the unyielding iron that were her hands on his shoulders was still frightening. Rei managed to tolerate it, though, managed to ignore it as he looked wildly around, searching for the voices that had brought him back, one he'd last heard screaming in a very different way, one he hadn't been sure he'd ever hear again.

He found them at the foot of his bed, Captain Takeshi holding each back with a blocking arm.

“Aria,” he croaked, and even that single word hurt his throat. “Viv...”

Aria looked a mess. Her hair was in tangles to the point that she'd obviously been twisting it in knots, and her green eyes were red and puffy. Her cheeks were dry, though, like she'd run out of tears some time ago, but she was still in her combat suit with Hippolyta recalled around her wrists. Viv, in uniform, look a good deal more put

together, but Rei wasn't sure he'd ever seen her face so pale in his life as she took him in wide-eyed.

“Ward. Look at me.”

Rei blinked, and had no choice but to turn from the girls as one of Dent's hands took him by the jaw, forcing his face around towards hers.

“You've been through something horrible, Cadet. I'm sorry. But I can't let you go until you can show me you're in control.” She squeezed his shoulder with her other hand, still holding him down pointedly.

Rei stared for a second.

Then the panic started to build up again.

“Captain...” he hissed. “The sparring holograms... They came out of the field... They—”

“I know.” Dent's voice was soothing, a frightening sound coming from the usually-stern woman. “I know, kid. It's okay, though. You're safe now. We got you out of there. But now *you* need to come back to *us*. Can you do that for me?”

Rei's breaths were coming sharp again, but he forced himself to look into Valera Dent's brown eyes. She was scrutinizing him carefully, her gaze as absolute as her grip. It was steady. Comforting. After a second Rei felt himself slipping back into the moment, away from the memory of what had transpired.

Eventually he managed to do his best to nod against her hand.

“You good?” she asked one last time. “You sure?”

Another nod.

“You'll have to let go of me if you want me to believe that.”

With a horrible jolt of guilt, only then did Rei realize that he'd taken hold of the captain far more harshly than she had of him. One of his hands was on her wrist by his shoulder, the other high around her other arm like he was trying to keep her at bay. He let go with a jerk, noting with alarm as he did that he'd had NO control over himself

in the moment. He'd been holding onto her with all his CAD-boosted Strength, with every ounce of power his terror had fed through him. He knew, now, why she'd told all non-Users to clear the room.

Had anyone but Dent been the one to hold him down in that moment, Rei was pretty sure he might have crushed their limbs to splinters.

"I'm sorry," he managed in a pained hiss as he let his hands drop. "I'm so sorry."

"You've got nothing to apologize for, Cadet," Dent told him quietly. "Not a damn thing." She eased off of him, though, letting go before sitting at the edge of the bed for a moment to take him in. When he made no further movement, she finally turned to Takeshi. "Let them come."

Takeshi seemed hesitant, eyeing Rei with a mixture of worry and concern, but did as she was told. Viv stood numbly, still staring at Rei with a pained mix of sadness and horror, but the instant the captain dropped her arm Aria was at his side, her Speed slipping through so obviously that Dent's hair fluttered around her face from the force of the air being shoved out of the way.

"Rei! *Rei!*" Aria was gasping, her hands moving all over his chest and shoulders and neck like she had to make sure that he was really truly there. "Are you okay?! Tell me you're okay!"

"I-I'm here," he got out, bringing his hands up with a wince to take hold of hers. He couldn't make himself say he was "okay", no, but he could assure her he wasn't lost anymore. "I'm here. Don't worry."

At the words Aria found her tears again, bursting into sobs and bending abruptly down over him to bury her face in his neck. Rei winced in discomfort as her body's weight on his chest made his ribs ache, but she didn't notice, too preoccupied was she with crying in what he thought was relief. Helpless to do anything else, Rei wrapped his arms around her to hold her tight, hugging her to him as he, too, realized how much

better he felt having her there. The last he'd seen her, she'd been screaming. Screaming in terror, struggling as the grey figures had come.

Rei shivered at the thought, and didn't let go of Aria as he fully looked around himself for the first time.

He was lying in what could only be the Kenneth Arena's medical wing, because it had all the hallmarks of a hospital space. He was in an adjustable bed with his head by the wall, and on either side of him privacy curtains had been pulled around to block him from view from the rest of the room. From the quiet, though, Rei guessed he was the sole patient in the chamber, with the only people aside from him, Aria, and Viv being the officers around them. Aside from Dent and Takeshi, the others were largely strangers to him, and the Iron Bishop seemed to take note of his searching gaze.

"You may recognize Captain Hinde, who was arbitrating your match before the attack," she said kindly, pointing at the only other figure he thought he recognized. From there she indicated the other two. "To his left are Major Jones—" a broad-shouldered woman with braided blue hair nodded briefly—"and Lieutenant Colonel Williamson—" a massive, bald, dark-skinned black man with light green eyes who couldn't have been much shorter than 7 feet tall dipped his head, looking concerned. "Major Jones is the Kenneth Academy's chief arbiter, while the lieutenant colonel is the school's commanding officer. They've come to see how you're doing, and to talk."

It was going to take a *lot* to shake Rei, Aria, and Viv from their mutual state of shock, but being faced with not only Kenneth's *commanding officer* but *also* his chief arbiter was enough to do the trick. Viv stiffened by the group while Rei and Aria went still. Then Aria pulled away slowly into a sitting position on Rei's left, opposite Dent. One hand she left resting on his chest like she was afraid not touching him would mean he'd slip away again, but with the other she managed a shaky salute.

"S-Sir," she got out. "Ma'am. A-Apologies. If I'd known who you were I-I wouldn't have—"

“That’s quite alright, Cadet,” Williamson interrupted her sympathetically, holding up one broad hand to Rei and Viv each in turn as they, too, opened their mouths to voice their own regrets. “These are very obviously extenuating circumstances.”

“If anyone should be apologizing, it’s *me*.” Major Jones had a light accent Rei thought might have been European out of Sol, but couldn’t be sure because her words were literally *shaking* with fury. “Oversight of this event and the Arena are *my* responsibility both. The fact that this attack happened under my nose...”

“*Our* nose, Major,” Captain Hinde said quietly, though it was Rei he was looking at, a sort of haunted expression deepening the hint of bags under his eyes. “Ward... I’m so sorry. As soon as I knew something was wrong I tried to end your match, but I was *completely* locked out of the SCT systems. If I had reacted quicker, maybe I could have...”

He trailed off miserably, and the major beside him reached out to put a comforting hand on his shoulder.

Rei, though, was less concerned with apologies than he was with the new information that had just been presented to him.

“Attack?” he repeated, and he didn’t notice his hand coming up to grip Aria’s over his chest, instinctively seeking comfort at this revelation. “So it *was* deliberate?”

Jones nodded as she answered. “Very. The MIND completed its sweep of all our software and firmware and found a breach. Someone used a back door we’ve never seen to access our SCT routines.”

“The Arena was hacked,” Dent, still at the edge of the bed, translated gently as Rei stared at the major, struggling to register this. “By an outside party. We don’t know when, but the MIND believes it happened days ago. Central’s cyber-security team has gone through what was found and—”

“*Central?! Why was Central involved?!?*”

The question, nothing short of snarled, had every single person in the room looking around at Viv. Abruptly she'd stepped closer to the bed and whirled on the officers in fury. Her former fear and grief were gone in a flash, replaced by hot anger. Rei thought he even saw a spark of silver in her blue eyes, but Takeshi answered before he could be sure.

“Protocol, Arada. The Mass Intellect can't allocate significant resources to something like this infinitely. The moment it uncovered the starting point, it passed the investigation off to the Central team. Cyber-ops is best-suited for—”

“Best-suited for *hacking the system in the first place!*” Viv practically yelled, and Rei winced as Aria's fingers twitched around his painfully. “How do we know it wasn't *them*?! How do we know Central wasn't involved in this from the—?!”

“Cadet Arada. Calm. *Down.*”

Viv froze and stopped talking all at once. With a creak of the bed Dent had taken to her feet and was staring the girl down in steely warning. Her voice stayed calm, but there was a level of threat in her words that said a line had been crossed.

Sure enough, all three Kenneth officers were frowning between Viv and the captain.

“Central involved?” Major Jones asked, somewhere between bemused and alarmed. “What is she talking about?”

Neither Dent nor Takeshi answered for a long moment, both gazes very deliberately on Viv, who seemed to have realized she'd overstepped. She shrank away from the two captains, but the fire didn't leave her face, a defiant “I'm not having it!” that wasn't willing to be quelled even by the Iron Bishop herself.

Eventually Dent replied to Jones without looking away from her.

“There was an incident at Galens not long ago. An issue with our parameter testing. It's been elevated to the appropriate parties.”

“An ‘incident?’” Williamson repeated, eyes narrowing as they settled on the Bishop. “Explain, Captain.”

It was almost strange, seeing Dent respond with a snap around and a salute to the Lieutenant Colonel. In retrospect, Rei had always had the impression of the woman being somehow *outside* of the regular chain of command within the ISCM. Something of her own entity. Maybe it was that she seemed to have so much leeway at the Institute—she was always pretty quick to give Major Reese a piece of her mind on occasion, for example—or maybe it was just that her Knight-Class made her larger than life. Now, though, here she was, forced to answer the command of a superior officer.

Then again...

“Apologies, sir, but I’m unable to do that at this time.”

Williamson looked momentarily surprised, then displeased. But just as he opened his mouth—likely to clarify that he had not been *asking*—Dent’s NOED flashed in her eyes, and the lieutenant colonel blinked as his own frame lit up with what must have been a notification. With a couple ocular commands some kind of window opened in his vision, and a second later both eyebrows rose so high Rei thought they might punch through the ceiling that was already too close to the top of the towering man’s head.

“‘Classified’...” he read aloud. “Well *there’s* something...”

“Apologies, sir,” Dent said again, not dropping her hand. “All I can tell you is that Cadet Arada has spoken out of turn.” She shot Viv a warning look. “I’ll have words with her about discretion shortly. For now, though, I ask that you trust myself and Captain Takeshi when I say the issue has been elevated to the appropriate parties.”

“What party is over Cent—?” Hinde started to ask, but the answer seemed to dawn on him halfway through the question. “Oh... *Oh...*”

“I would request that we move on from this topic to the matter at hand if you please, sir,” Dent asked pointedly of Williamson. The lieutenant colonel still didn’t look pleased, but was clearly aware that he had little choice as he nodded.

Rei decided that was his opportunity.

“Can someone... Can anyone tell me what happened?” he asked tentatively into the brief pause as Dent finally relaxed her salute.

There was a long, tense silence.

“Captains, we’ll leave you with your charges,” Williams said at last, looking to Hinde and Jones as he gestured them towards the door. “We’ve said our piece for now. If you have need of us, I’ll be leaving a school officer outside, but I think this might be a conversation best had in familiar company.”

“Thank you, sir,” Dent and Takeshi both said together, and the Kenneth captain and major took their leave with a last nod to the group. As he followed them out, however, the lieutenant colonel hesitated, then looked around at Rei.

“You have my apologies again, Ward. As a soldier and as commander of this school. We will do everything we can to make it right, I promise.”

And then he was gone, following his subordinates beyond the edge of the privacy curtain towards what must have been the room’s exit.

Dent waited for the door to shut with a low hiss and click before she turned on Viv slowly.

“Arada,” the Bishop’s words were calm, but hard, “I understand that your teammates—and your *friends*, more appropriately—have been through something traumatic, and that emotions for all parties are running high as a result. However, you need to *get abhold of yourself*. Galens is aware that Ward has trusted your discretion regarding certain elements of his Device, and we have trusted you with that information in turn, but apparently you need to be *told* that what is happening with Shido—and everything around it—is *not* something to be brought up outside of *very* select company. Is that *clear*?”

This time Viv shrank under Dent’s reprimand more completely. She looked like she was having a hard time seeing the captain’s eyes as she mumbled in answer.

“Yes, ma’am. Sorry, ma’am. I just thought that getting Central involved was—”

“Was nothing we had any choice over, Cadet,” Takeshi finished for her sternly, stepping up to the end of Rei’s bed to take the place Captain Hinde had vacated. “And even if it was, there is no ‘you just’ in this moment. You slipped, and you’re lucky Captain Dent was able to smooth things over.” Takeshi looked sidelong at the Bishop, though. “That being said, apparently there are things about this situation that even some of the *staff* are being kept out of the loop on, Captain?”

“Many of the staff, yes.” Dent answered curtly, turning her own eyes on Takeshi to fix her with a steady look. “And forgive me, Captain, but even though we’re the same rank, I have to tell you that I *do* have the authority to order you to end any questions regarding that fact there, if you please.”

“Roger that.” Takeshi nodded immediately, bringing both hands up to show that she wasn’t looking to pry further. “Loud and clear.”

Rei, on the other hand, felt *very much* like prying.

“The MIND...” he wheezed out as he started to try and sit up again. “You said the MIND was here?”

Dent looked suddenly discomfited. “Yes. It’s always here to some extent. You know that.”

“No, I meant—”

“I know what you meant, Ward,” Dent interrupted as Aria hurried to find the bed controls somewhere above Rei’s head so she could bring the top up for him.

“And someone other than Central is looking into—?” he tried to continue, putting two-and-two together, but the captain cut him off again.

“Ward. I’m sorry, I know it’s not fair, but you are no more likely to be read in on certain parts of what’s going on with your Device than the lieutenant colonel or Captain Takeshi. Much *less* likely, in some ways, in fact.”

“But it’s *my* Device!” Rei protested as the bed slowly brought him up to sit so he could look at Dent more easily. “Shido is *mine*! How can I not be read in on what’s going on with it? Especially after—”

He froze, though, finding himself unable to voice the experience on the Dueling field. Aria and Dent both appeared to register his sudden apprehension, too, because the former squeezed his hand in hers as the latter’s expression softened.

“Like I said, I *know* it isn’t fair, but I need you to trust me on this.” The captain’s voice was gentle again, soothing. “I know it’s frustrating. I do. And if it makes you feel better, the ISCM frankly doesn’t know much more about what’s going on than you do. But there are *some* things that we need to keep close to the chest, at least for now.”

Rei grit his teeth at that, but was pretty sure Dent wasn’t about to bend even if he pushed the matter. She’d given him no leeway, no space to maneuver in.

“Will I know at *some* point?” he decided was a safe question. “That’s fair to ask, right? That I be told at some—”

“Yes. I promise you that.”

The answer came so firmly it was almost alarming. Dent had taken a quick step forward, like she wanted him to understand how earnestly she meant that answer. Rei blinked in surprise, and even exchanged a look with Aria and Viv, both of whom seemed equally as taken aback.

“Fine, then,” he muttered after a second, turning back to Dent. “In that case, how about someone finally tell me *what the hell happened out there*?”

He might have imagined it, but he thought the Bishop looked a little relieved at the return to the more pressing topic. She almost sighed, in fact, leaving enough time for Takeshi to take the lead.

“I hate to ask, Ward, but... what do you remember?”

Unbidden, the question made Rei shiver.

Aria brought her other hand up to rest on his shoulder in assurance that she was there with him. Viv, too, moved closer to stand right behind her, like she wanted him to know she was in his corner.

Rei didn't think he'd ever be able to put his appreciation of the two in that moment into words.

"I... I remember the fight stopping," he got out after a second's hesitation. "Freezing. Like a penalty pause. We could still move our heads and talk. Then Aria and I were... *moved*, I guess is the word?" He swallowed nervously, recalling the feeling of the Arena snapping him back to the center of the zone and holding him there. "I couldn't *do* anything. I couldn't even twitch. It held me—*us*—like that, even after..." He trailed off, feeling his pulse quicken, feeling his breath start to come too fast again.

"Hey. It's okay."

He found himself, then, looking around at Aria. She'd pulled the hand on his chest carefully from his and cupped his cheek, turning his face up to look at her and Viv. Her eyes were still red, but they were deep and concerned, and he let himself fall into them, let himself forget anything but the broken emerald green there.

It helped to separate himself from the rest he had to say.

"The sparring partners dropped out of starting rings to the north and south." He spoke almost automatically. It was the only way he could keep going even while looking at Aria. "Kind of like the Offense & Endurance test. The field was still frozen, but they could move. They had... weapons. Not immediately, but by the time they surrounded me. And then..."

But he couldn't keep going. He couldn't. Aria's expression was pained before him, like she could feel every ounce of his hurt. Beyond her Viv's face had grown stony, the color draining from her checks once more.

"Do you remember the attack, Ward?" Dent asked quietly from his other side. "You can just nod if that's easier."

Slowly, jerkingly, Rei did just that.

And then he remembered something else.

“And you...” he said, managing at last to look away from Aria in favor of turning to the Bishop again. “That was *you*, wasn’t it? At the end? Coming out of the sky?”

Dent took a long, slow breath, briefly—oh so briefly—looking as heartbroken as Aria and Viv did. “Frankly I’d hoped you’d passed out a long time before that, Cadet. Yeah. That was me.”

“It was what we think shut down the hack,” Takeshi continued for the captain. “It’s a security protocol. If the zone limits get breached, an Arena will go through a hard reset.”

“Breached?” Viv asked, sounding surprised and turning to the woman. “You can do that?”

“Me?” Takeshi scoffed. “No way in hell. But Dent?” She nodded to the Bishop, who stayed silent. “It takes a *lot* of power to overload a zone wall. A *lot*. Unless you’re King- or Queen-Class, you definitely have to be doing it deliberately. And even then no Pawn or Bishop-Class that I know of could do it.”

“I *barely* managed it,” Dent cut in. “Gave it everything I had, too.”

“And the reset?” Aria asked.

“Security protocol,” Takeshi explained. “If you assume an S-Class fighter is *trying* to break a zone wall, you have to assume something’s gone wrong. Fights like that almost always have security forces and other S-Ranked Users around. Not many CADs can do much against gravity, and if an Arena shuts down abruptly that gives a second or so that the guilty party is in free fall *and* their vysetrium is highlighted in the dark.”

“More than enough time for high-ranked Users to take advantage,” Viv muttered, voicing her understanding out loud for all of them as it clicked for Rei, too. It was a concept similar to why CAD ditches weren’t common in higher-level fights. Even a

moment of vulnerability was enough to completely turn matches when it came to A- and S-Ranked fighters.

“And more than enough time for *you* to hit the ground,” Dent muttered bitterly, crossing her arms. “I tried to catch you before then, Ward, but I didn’t manage it. *And* your CAD’s phantom call was automatically recalled when you passed out. So...” She grimaced, and Rei winced at the thought. If he’d been set and ready for it, it would have been no issue, but rag dolling down at least 10 feet to slam onto solid steel...

Then again... Shouldn’t his reactive shielding have absorbed most of a hit like that? Or all of it, even...?

“Is *that* why I hurt all over?” Rei asked. “I feel like I got thrown off the top of The Chevaron.”

It was almost more alarming than anything else he’d seen or heard since waking up that Dent, Takeshi, and *both* girls *all* traded concerned glances at that.

“Rei...” Aria was the one to speak first. “I mean... I’m sure the fall didn’t *help*, but...” She hesitated, looking to the others for assistance.

Dent took pity on her.

“Ward, you mentioned the Offense & Endurance test,” she said slowly. “You know how those partners are labeled? With their equivalent rank?”

“Yeah...” Rei answered, frowning as he thought back. “I remember thinking of that, too. But I... I couldn’t see...”

He trailed off, understanding where they were going with this. Aria squeezed his shoulder as he started to recall the nightmare again.

“You couldn’t see because they were always facing you, yeah.” Dent nodded in understanding. “Thing is, Ward... the MIND had the same thought about the parameter testing, and confirmed it. The hack used that specific program as the basis of the attack.”

“They were ranked, Cadet,” Takeshi clarified as Rei started to go cold. “Not the highest level they can go, but high...”

Rei was scared to ask, but he got the words together just the same.

“... How high?”

Viv was the one who refused to leave him hanging even as Aria and the two older women looked unsure of themselves.

“Rei... From the stands... all the ones we could see were S0...”

It almost helped, hearing that. It was horrifying, sure, but it was also something very much like liberation, a confirmation that what Rei had been through had been real, had been more than just what he'd known inside his head. He suddenly wanted to feel himself up and down, wanted to make sure he wasn't full of slashes and holes even though he logically knew there would be nothing. They'd been sparring partners, after all, holograms designed to *imitate* damage, not actually dole it out.

And S0...

When he'd trained with Lennon, the Lasher's hits had been terrible, and Rei would have been willing to bet the third-year's Offense was somewhere under his A8 rank since he knew Lennon had other S-Ranked specs. Those hits had also been staggered, and one at a time. So to think about getting struck simultaneously from six different sides again and again and again...

It did help, actually. A lot. It made it all real, made it more than a nightmare, which was exactly what Rei needed. Reality he could beat. Reality he had faced down a thousand times even when it sucked and hurt. Even when it had almost killed him.

It also explained a lot...

“I'm a mess, aren't I?” he asked of none of them in particular, bringing up one scarred arm to study it. Even that motion made the limb and most of the left side of his body ache. “Physically, I mean?”

“You’re not as bad as it could be.” Dent’s voice was assuring. “The hole in your lung didn’t reopen, and the medics were worried about brain damage for a while, but your head scan was clear. They think Shido was working overtime to help control your blood pressure. Other than that, though...” In the corner of Rei’s vision he saw her expression grow dark. “Yeah... You’re a mess, kid.”

“They think it’ll take a week or two for you to be back to full function,” Takeshi picked up for the Bishop. “Your body kinda... It ripped itself apart, Ward. What you were going through... Just think of every single muscle you have spasming on all cylinders all at once. With *zero* control of your Strength spec. Drone scan says that 86% of your muscle tissue is showing mild to moderate damage, with another 8% showing severe damage. It’s about the same percent for tendon tears and strains.”

“That’s not counting skeletal microfractures and avulsions,” Dent started again. “Places where your bones couldn’t handle the strain, even after months of CAD adaptation. You went through hell, Ward. And I bet you’ve come out the other end feeling like it.”

Rei could only grunt in affirmation, still looking at his own hand. Only when Aria sat down next to him to wrap her arm fully around his shoulders and pull him tight to her did he realized he was shaking.

Okay, knowing what had happened had helped, but obviously it wasn’t going to insta-cure the memory of it...

“So... what now?” he asked after a moment, suffering the discomfort of bending his elbow to take hold of Aria’s hand on his shoulder as he looked between Dent and Takeshi. “What happens now?”

Takeshi gave him a questioning look. “Now? What do you mean?”

“I mean the tournament’s not over, right? Or how long have I been out? Did the Team Battles already happen?”

Takeshi's mouth fell open, and even Dent stared at him openly. Around his shoulders, Rei felt Aria's arm tense.

"Rei..." she started quietly, letting the warning trail off.

"What?" he demanded, looking around at her and Viv fiercely. "I'm hurt, sure. But so what? Does that mean I can't fight?"

"Ward, you're not just *hurt*," Takeshi hissed like she couldn't believe her ears. "You're practically in *pieces*. Did you not hear anything we just said? And that's not even considering how this might affect your diagnosis!"

"My fibro's been in check basically since Shido was assigned to me," Rei countered, frowning around at the woman. "And again, so what if I'm hurt?" He looked to Dent. "You say it all the time. How you're not training us for the SCTs. You're training us for *combat*. Are the soldiers on the front lines always 100%? Are they always at peak ability?"

Dent seemed to give him that, cocking her head at him. "No. I wouldn't say so."

"So how is this different?"

"It's different because there's a point at which even *soldiers* have to get pulled for medical reasons, Cadet. And if you're under the impression any commander would deploy a User who with documented damage throughout *94%* of their musculoskeletal tissue, guess again. You think they patched me up and put me right back on the field after I had my little incident?" The Bishop indicated her face and left arm, sounding almost amused.

"I didn't get a limb sheared off," Rei contended.

"No, you just got assaulted by a half-dozen S-Ranked projections and landed yourself in the hospital. *Again*. And this time in the worst condition you've *ever* been in. And no, don't try to argue that." Dent raised a hand to forestall further argument as Rei started to protest. "Doctor Ashton has been advising the local medical team from the Institute, and has already confirmed it. Plus, I know your file, Ward. I had it pretty much memorized before you were even brought up for consideration at Galens. You may

have had worse acute individual surgeries and the like in the past, but we're not talking about a medical procedure here. You have *systemic* damage. Your *whole body* is in shreds. What kind of combat instructor would I be if I let you back on the field in that state?"

"One who listens to her students and trusts their judgment," Rei insisted, realizing he was starting to get desperate, though he wasn't sure why. "Captain, if I leave Firesong hanging, it will be *my* fault if they—"

"Ward, if you want to argue front line judgement, I would tell you that sometimes squads are a man down. It happens. Never for fun reasons, but it happens."

"And Firesong *will* be allowed to fight as a five-man team," Takeshi added. "It's not common, so we looked up the rule. Yes, that will obviously put them at a disadvantage, but the alternative option isn't acceptable at this time."

Rei looked from one to the other again, searching frantically for a chance, any sign that one or both of the women would give. He hated it, hated feeling so hopelessly in need of... something...

What was it? What was it that he needed?

"Rei. Rei, look at me."

Rei flinched, but turned to look at Viv. Despite the fact that they were right beside him, despite the fact that Aria still had her arm around him and his best friend was standing just behind her, he had momentarily forgotten the two girls were there. That wasn't normal. That wasn't okay. What was wrong? Something was wrong. He stared at Viv, unsure. She seemed to search him for a second or too, seemed to be looking for something.

She didn't appear to find what she was looking for, but obviously realized *something* was going on.

"What is it?" she asked gently, leaning slightly over Aria to look at him more closely. "What's going on?"

Still Rei just stared at her, not completely sure how to answer. What *was* going on? Why was he so desperate? Was it Firesong? That he didn't want to leave them in a bind? Yes. Partly. But also...

And then Viv's face settled, the concern and confusion falling away, her expression flattening into a sad sort of determination.

"Rei... Do you need to go back on the field...?" she asked softly.

And it clicked. Before anyone else, before Dent or Aria or even *Rei*, Viv had figured him out. No. No, he *didn't* want to go back on the field. Not now. Not ever again.

Which meant that he had to. Above all else, and no matter what it cost.

He *had* to.

"I need to..." he answered in a whisper, so low that Takeshi and Dent had to lean in behind him to listen. "Right now. Right *now*. I need to."

Viv nodded, but next to him Aria looked suddenly frightened.

"Or else... what?" she asked slowly.

"Or else I don't think I'm ever going to step onto a field ever again..."

It was true. Rei knew it as soon as he voiced it aloud. The nightmare had been dragged into the daylight by information and explanation, yes, but it still had its claws in him. The idea of stepping out onto the field, of stepping over the silver ring and waiting for the Arena to take hold of him again... Rei was nauseous just thinking about it. His stomach churned at the idea, and he felt himself break out into a cold sweat. The figures in grey appeared before him once again, like shades to flicker in and out of being from Aria and Viv's shadows across the curtain at their backs, bad memories super-imposed on the world.

He had to. He *had* to face it. Now.

Or he was never going to again.

It was Aria's turn to study him, to take him in with pained concern, not understanding. For a long few seconds they looked at each other, she confused and scared, he only the latter of those two emotions.

But then Aria, too, saw what was going on, and her face at once settled into grim lines in the same way Viv's had.

She took a deep, steadying breath. She was *definitely* frightened, yes, but her expression was one of understanding now. Of course it was. She knew. *She* knew. Better than anyone else. She knew what it had been like, what had transpired. She hadn't been attacked, hadn't felt that pain, but she'd been forced to watch, forced to stand there, utterly helpless, utterly unable to move, and watch.

If anything, Rei thought he might not be the only one who needed to reclaim the field...

"Captain, has the Arena been cleared for combat?" Aria asked, at last looking away from Rei over to Dent.

"It has..." the Bishop answered carefully, sounding like she knew where Aria was headed. "The MIND patched the back door and has confirmed there are no other discrepancies in the security or SCT codes."

"None at all?"

"Nothing," Dent confirmed. "But that doesn't change the fact that Captain Takeshi and I have already said we won't allow Ward to fight, Laurent. I don't know what kind of secret code the three of you are silently sharing over there, but—"

"I have a proposition, ma'am, if I may."

Rei hadn't looked away from Aria, but the pause at her words was enough to tell him both officers were surprised by this.

"And what might that be, Laurent?" Takeshi asked, a note of warning in her voice.

"The last time Rei got hurt, Doctor Ashton said that he needed to move. That he needed to get on his feet. She said activity would help with the healing process."

“As Captain Dent has said, the lieutenant major has been a part of the conversation. As has Lieutenant Colonel Mayd, I might add. And I can assure you based on our exchanges that they would *both* tell you getting Ward up and walking around is a *very* different concept than having him fight in a Team Battle right after—”

“Not the Team Battle, ma’am,” Aria interrupted Takeshi boldly. “Not yet. The sub-basement fields.”

Rei’s heart leapt at the words even as his stomach sank. Yes. That was perfect. The warm-up fields. Even a Neutral Zone. Anything. And if he could show that he was strong enough to fight there then maybe, just maybe...

“Laurent, you’re pushing your luck.” Takeshi sounded like she was finally starting to lose patience. “I understand you and Cadet Arada have faith in Ward, but if anything as his *squad leader* you should be looking out for him even more closely than we are.”

“I *am* looking out for him, ma’am,” Aria answered without an ounce of hesitation. “As his squad leader, I am informing you that he needs this. That he *very much* needs this. And—” she did pause, then, but only for a second “—I’m informing you that *I* need it too.”

Still Rei hadn’t turned around, half-mesmerized, half-stunned by her gall as he was. Behind her, Viv was staring at the captains with just as much fervor, arms crossed sternly across her chest while she nodded in agreement with Aria. He thought Dent and Takeshi might have caught on, then, too. When she spoke again, at least, the latter’s tone was more understanding.

“I don’t know if we can recommend that, Laurent... The captain and I are not professionals in that space. We would do better to ask Doctor Ashton for a referral to one of the school psychologists, or—”

“Ma’am—” Aria was officially proving that neither Rei *nor* Viv had *ever* been the ballsiest of the Firesong squad “—with all due respect, this has to happen now. Right *now*.”

Rei finally looked around at Dent and Takeshi, then, intending to get his tongue unstuck and affirm in his own words what Aria—with Viv as a silent, unbending ally behind her—was arguing for. It had to happen. He *needed* to get back out on the field. There was nothing in the world he wanted less in the moment, and that feeling was only growing more certain by the second as every ache and pain of his body reminded him of his last moments trapped on that Sunset Beach. He *needed* this. They *both* needed this.

He had just faced both captains—each looking like they were fighting with themselves—when a commotion that sounded to be going on just outside the room interrupted them.

“He’s in there, isn’t he??”

“Cadets, you shouldn’t be down here. Please return to your section and wait for—”

“Like hell we’re doing that! Is he here? Rei? REI?!”

“What in the MIND?” Takeshi snarled, turning and vanishing around the edge of the privacy curtain towards the front of entrance. Rei, Aria, Viv, and Dent, meanwhile, only looked on in confusion as the door hissed open, all of them having recognized the voice.

“Cadet Catchwick!” Rei heard Takeshi snap. “This is a *medical ward*! What do you think you’re—CATCHWICK!”

The captain’s angry shout clearly had good reason, because with the sound of hammering boots Catcher came ripping into view, almost skidding to a halt. He looked tousled and winded, and had apparently bolted straight past the Kenneth officer at the door *and* Takeshi—ignoring all common sense in doing so—to reach them.

“Catchwick!” It was Dent’s turn to snap. “What the *hell* are you doing?!” Before anyone could answer, though, Takeshi appeared behind Catcher, looking livid and leading Grant and Cashe right behind her. The sight of these two appeared to shake

Dent's alarm, because her next question was more even-keeled. "Cadets? What's going on?"

Incredibly, Catcher didn't answer her directly.

"Rei..." He, Grant, and Cashe were all looking equally pale. "Have you seen? Have you checked?! Everyone upstairs is talking about it! The whole stadium...!"

"Seen *what*?!" Takeshi demanded. "Cadets, if someone does not explain *what in the MIND* the three of you think you're doing barging in here like this, Captain Dent and I will make sure Major Barnes strings every single one of you up by your damn *ankles* when we get back to—"

"*Shido*," Catcher hissed in answer, still not looking at either of the women as he gaped at Rei in nothing short of shock. "*Dude... Your rank...*"

That was when Rei saw it for the first time. He wasn't sure how he'd missed it, but then again he'd been a little preoccupied. There, in the top corner of his frame, an alert was waiting for him, and for a second all the apprehension and anxiety became muted, replaced by electric realization. He froze, staring at the notice, and neither Aria nor Viv looked to miss the change in him.

"Oh..." Aria breathed in understanding as Viv's eyes went wide.

Takeshi and Dent were both faster on the uptake, each of them with their NOEDs already live in their eyes, pulling up what Rei could only imagine was his ISCM profile.

For his part, he himself finally selected the alert, opening it.

And almost choked as he read.

There was so much. So *much*. Rei didn't even know he was holding his breath, eyes bulging as he took in line after line after line. Two upgrades at *least* in every spec?? *Three* in Speed and Defense?? What was going on? What the *hell* was going on?? He'd ranked up *twice*, careening right past C8 straight to C9, firmly establishing himself all at once as the top-ranked first-year at Galens, even well above *Aria* now. And that wasn't all. Shido

had evolved. *Again*. And prioritized... *every* specification?! How was that even possible?? Rei felt his jaw go more slack with every word, felt his mouth go dry.

It wasn't till he reached the very end of the upgrade notification, though, that his whole body went numb.

Then he *did* choke.

For a long time he stared, completely dumbfounded. It wasn't possible. How was it possible?? He read the lines again. Then again. Then *again*. He could have done so a hundred times, he suspected, and still not believed what he was seeing. Catcher—and Viv, now—were shouting for him from somewhere, and even Aria was shaking him as firmly as she dared in his condition, trying to get his attention. He couldn't give it to them. He was too stunned.

It took the Bishop's clear voice over all their collective noise to draw him up from his reverie.

"This is Dent."

Everyone stopped talking at once, and Rei managed to blink and look around with them to take in the captain through the upgrade notification. Dent's eyes were still alight, but now with what all of them recognized at once was a video call, and clearly an important one given the woman's formal tone.

"Yes, Colonel," she said crisply, and Rei knew then that it could only be Rama Guest on the other side of the line. "Yes, I've just been informed of his ranking. I was just about to—"

She stopped, though, tensing suddenly. Rei had never seen the Bishop go so still, like a coiled steel spring. It was alarming, and the effect wasn't helped when her brown eyes flew to him through the display, her prosthetic jaw dropping suddenly. She looked as shocked as he felt, and Rei knew that she was being read in. Of course she hadn't known. None of them had known. They'd probably been cooped up with him for

however long he'd been out, as distracted by his condition as he'd been made unconscious by it.

Now, though... Now the word was spreading.

"Of course, sir," Dent answered in a strained voice, obviously working through her surprise. "Of course. I'll ask him. I agree. We need to know as soon as possible."

Then, with that, her frame went dim.

"... Valera?" Takeshi asked tentatively, so taken aback by everything that was going on that she forgot to be formal. "What's going on?"

Dent, however, seemed unable to look away from Rei. There was something in her eyes, too, he could see. Now that she'd closed out of her NOED, there was something in the way she was taking him in. She was as surprised as he was, sure—more so, even, probably—but there was more there, too. Excitement. Anticipation. And...

Valera Dent looked proud.

"Ward... is it true?" she asked, clearly struggling to keep her voice even.

It took a second for Rei to nod, not even feeling the discomfort in his neck and back at the motion.

"All of it?"

He nodded again.

At that, Aria seemed to have had enough.

"Is *what* true??" she demanded, clearly at a loss as she looked around at them all.

"Someone tell me *what's going on!*"

"C9."

It was Grant who got it out from over by where he and Cashe still stood next to Takeshi, sounding completely dumbfounded, like the knowledge of it had blown a fuse in his head.

Aria went still. Viv, though, blinked.

“I’m sorry... What?”

“He’s C9, Arada,” Cashe breathed this time, staring at Rei just like everyone else. “It’s getting shouted up top. Someone apparently got bored and started checking stats, and it’s spreading like wildfire...”

“C9...” Aria had found her voice again, whispering and turning back to look at Rei, stunned. “... Really?”

Again, though, Rei could only nod.

“That’s not the half of it,” Dent said, bringing their collective attention back around to her. She, though, still only had eyes for Rei. “Ward... are you willing to show them? *All* of them?” She didn’t look towards Grant and Cashe, but he knew who she was referring to.

This time, Rei fought to find his voice.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said weakly. He was still numb, but somewhere down in his chest a spark lit. Would he have the chance, then? Would she let him?

“And you’re sure you’re up for it? On a practice field, I mean...”

Aria gave a little gasp, though whether because she understood what was happening or because he was being allowed to step back out onto the floor, Rei didn’t know.

“Yes, ma’am,” he confirmed again, a little more firmly this time.

“Valera...?” Takeshi tried again, sounding at once worried and totally at a loss.

Still, though, Dent never so much as glanced away from Rei.

“Sorry, Captain, but you and I have been overruled.” She graced him with a small, dark smile. “You win, Ward. Your squad can help you get down to the sub-basement. Time to show us what you’ve got...”

CHAPTER 41

The trek down to the sub-basement was agony. At least in large part. For one thing every step sent a jolt of pain through Rei's legs and body, and even with Aria helping to support him on one side with Catcher on the other, Rei only made it by squeezing his eyes shut and willing himself to tolerate every movement. It was fortunate that the underworks and elevators had apparently been cleared while the MIND had done its sweep of the Arena, because he didn't know if he would have had much tolerance for the extra stares and whispers their group would have been bound to be graced with otherwise. Then again, Rei probably wouldn't have cared. Everything hurt just too damn much.

On the other hand, that thought was challenged in turn when *Reese* met them in the north lobby, looking grim and taking Rei in with a nasty sort of frown as they approached. As chief arbiter of Galens himself, it made some sense to have the major join in the observation, but Rei would have given his arm for it to have been Samsus instead at the very least.

"Sub-basement 2?" was all the man had asked, looking to Dent for confirmation once they'd been close enough and reaching a hand up to summon them a car when she'd nodded. He'd kept glancing sidelong at Rei, however, and even only catching the looks now and again it was apparent the major's interest centered on anything but concern. Irritated seemed more accurate, like the hack and their resulting situation both were not only Rei's fault, but also extremely inconvenient to Reese's busy day.

But no... No, that wasn't entirely fair, Rei realized as the car reached them and the doors started to open before them. He was projecting his own assumptions on the major, and so as they stepped inside he made one deliberate effort to try to catch the man's eye, to try to figure out what the hell his problem could be *now*. He managed it,

and though Reese looked away again quickly, Rei was completely taken aback by what he thought he *actually* saw in the man's expression this time.

Was that... uneasiness?

Well that's new, Rei thought to himself as Aria and Catcher helped him into the elevator, considering that the *last* thing he probably wanted on top of everything else going on was for people to start being *afraid* of him.

All in all, the journey was a miserable one, with only a single silver lining to make it any better. One single, *massive* silver lining.

“Oh...” Aria breathed in surprise from Rei's left after all nine of them had squeezed into the car. He managed to look around at her, as did the rest of Firesong, both captains, and the major. She was flushed, and at first Rei was worried his added weight was taking a toll on her, but he quickly corrected himself. Firstly, Aria was a Phalanx, and closing in on B-Rank. She probably could have thrown him over her shoulder and jogged 10 miles uphill before getting so much as winded.

Secondly, her face had been bright, alight with excitement that seemed to momentarily wash away the lingering worry and fear that had still been clinging to her.

“C8...” she'd said quietly. “And an evolution...”

And just like that the anticipation was back for Rei, twice over now, pulling him away from the pain of his broken body enough to whisper a thanks to Catcher on his left and pull his arm down from around the Saber's shoulders.

Aria helped him alone out of the elevator after that, limping down the hall—had it always been so damn *long*?—before reaching the wide gap in the curved wall that led them out onto the sub-basement practice field. It was a little eerie, stepping as a group into the massive space. Even with Aria's announcement not a one among them had spoken more than a few words on the way down, and the silence only added to the emptiness of the place. Rei realized he'd never seen a sub-basement space like this, devoid of movement and noise. They'd always been full whenever he'd stood on the

projection plating before, in class and during tournament warm-ups or warm-downs both, and the expanse of it made him feel suddenly very small.

Rei didn't like being made to feel small.

"This is good enough," he mumbled sidelong to Aria as they reached the edge of the closest of the six Dueling fields marked within the Wargame border. "I need to do it from here."

Aria wavered, but it wasn't him she was looking at. She'd stopped short even before he'd said anything, bare toes maybe a foot from the silver line of the field, and it was that metal she had her eyes on, that limit. Rei could tell what she was thinking.

The fear was back, and stronger than before.

It almost made Rei feel better that he wasn't the only one...

"Hey," he told her, injecting as much false certainty into his voice as he could. "It's okay. We'll be okay."

She flinched under his arm, then nodded without looking at him. Then she eased his weight off her as he'd asked, pausing only when he groaned involuntarily the moment his legs and spine protested this shift. By the time he was finally on his own two feet, however, she seemed to have steeled herself, her jaw set and her expression more ready.

Good timing, because Dent came to stand beside them just then.

"Take to the starting rings when you're ready, Cadets," she said gently. "Obviously I'm going to ask that you both hold off on your calls until after we get the discretionary walls up."

Rei and Aria nodded together—he working not to wince at the motion—and before them the two red circles marking the Dueling starting points flared to life against the black steel. They were plain things, very unlike the pulsing, decorative waves of light that had marked their finals match not too long ago.

They were also terrifying.

Rei couldn't move a muscle, looking at those crimson circles. On his left, Aria was just as immobilized, her hands having even started to tremble very slightly when the rings had appeared. Side by side they stood like that, neither wanting to do anything less in the moment than cross over the boundary, and yet both knowing there was nothing they had to do more.

And Dent read them like a book.

“Major Reese, if you could join me.”

The major stepped up on command—apparently the situation was enough that he wasn't even interested in being smart about the rank and file for once—and crossed over the silver line as the captain did the same. Rei couldn't help but wince as the two officers did this, feeling his heart start to race again.

“We have every assurance from the Kenneth staff, Central Command's cyber ops unit, *and* the MIND that there is no danger,” Dent told Rei and Aria, facing them now. “You are safe here. You have my word. The major is an A4 User. I'm a Knight-Class. Even if every assurance we got turned out to be wrong—which could not be more unlikely—it would take an army to get to either of you.” She didn't wait for either of them to say anything, lifting her eyes to the group still standing at their backs. “Captain Takeshi will be supervising, and has control of the field systems. If there's so much as a *flicker* in the projection that shouldn't be there, she'll let us know.”

“Without hesitating,” came Takeshi's confirmation from their backs.

Rei couldn't nod this time, too tense was he with his gaze still on the silver line. He couldn't, he just couldn't. But he had to. But he couldn't. But he *had* to. Every time this circled in his head—every time he thought he got close to taking the step over the boundary—he saw the grey forms of the sparring partners rising from the very red ring he was supposed to be heading for.

No. No way. He couldn't.

But he *had to*...

And then, with a long, shaking breath, Aria's hands balled into fists at her side...
... and stepped forward, clear over the line, and into the field.

She didn't stop there, and Rei was at last able to lift his eyes to watch her move shakily, one rigid stride after another, to the far circle, where she was about as flexible as steel when she stepped into it. From there she spun on her heels to face them all, face pale and chest rising and falling in an uneven pattern, like she was working hard to keep her breathing steady.

And despite all that, she managed to give Rei the slightest of smiles.

It was almost enough. Almost.

Viv did the rest.

"Rei."

Rei just managed to look around, the ache in his body momentarily forgotten by the fear. Viv was right there, having moved unnoticed to stand at his side, and was facing him with one eyebrow raised expectantly. He could see right through the expression, of course. Right through it to the worry and uncertainty in his best friend's eyes. It only made things worse for a second, but then Viv reached up to take his face in both hands and bent so that their foreheads were almost touching.

"Don't make me punt you over that line."

There was a moment of stunned silence.

"Cadet Arada!" Reese was the first to recover. "Now is *not the time*."

Viv paid about as much attention to the major as she might a split hair. Not that she got those.

"I'm dead serious. I'll do it. And if you think you're sore now, just wait till you've ass bruises shaped like my right boot."

"CADET!" Reese almost snarled as he went red in the face. "This is a *serious* matter, and if you can't comport yourself long enough to even handle—!"

But Dent cut the major short, lifting a hand to stop him.

Because Rei had laughed.

It wasn't a *happy* laugh, per se. Not even close. But it wasn't a miserable one either. It was more a laugh of relief, of recognition of the moment of levity—however forced it might be—in the circumstances he found himself in.

And it was a laugh that got him over the line.

Ice washed through his veins as Viv let him go so he could step away from her and onto the field, tingling up from his fingers and toes. Fear. Adrenaline. Anticipation. It all hit him in a rush to mix with the absolute agony that was that first movement, then every stride that followed. He was half grinning, half grimacing as he walked, forcing himself to think only of the image of Viv booting him into the far wall and looking nowhere but at Aria, who was still smiling at him tensely. In doing so, he managed it. It was long. It was painful. But he managed it.

He stood in the red circle, heart beating a million miles an hour, every inch of him screaming in protest at the mere fact that he was upright, but ready.

“Alright.” Dent called out at once, speaking more loudly than she had since Rei had woken up. “The rest of you know the drill. Find a spot. Captain, whenever you're ready.”

True to Takeshi's word, there wasn't a pause. Rei actually thought he heard Cashe let out an unexpected “Woah!” when the circular discretion wall rose up under her and the others' feet in a solid white ring all around him, Aria, Dent, and Reese. It finished manifesting, and to his right Rei thought he saw figures move to ease themselves down and sit along the inside edge in observation. He didn't turn to look. He had made it, had survived the hard part. The fear abated with every moment he stood in that red ring without incident, and across from him Aria too, seemed to be relaxing little by little. They were safe. Just like Dent had said. They were safe.

Which meant the gravity of what was about to happen finally started to settle on them both.

Rei's breath started to quicken, but not for any clinging terror or anxiety now. Rather, the excitement started to take over everything, the real, solid understanding weighing down that something big—really *stupid* big—was about to happen. The cold fled Rei's chest and limbs, replaced by a restlessness that surpassed the aches and pains.

Oh man, he thought to himself. *Oh man oh man oh man oh man oh—*

“Cadets,” came Takeshi's voice. “Call.”

Aria beat him to the punch, speaking clearly into the quiet so that all of them could hear.

“Call.”

And then there were shouts of excitement and a *whoop!* of delight that could only have come from Catcher, and Rei was so distracted by the sight before him that he forgot himself completely. Hippolyta had evolved. He'd known that. That's what Aria had said.

But what he saw before him now seemed like a lot more than that.

It wasn't an evolution. It was *overhaul*. Where the CAD had originally only covered Aria's legs and forearms, it now encased her hips and both arms *and* shoulders. What was more, her *face* was now partially framed, red steel lining the back of her jaw on either side before rising as matching straight plates just in front of her ears, which in turn connected with a two-finger-thick band of gold metal and green vysetrium that conformed to her forehead. It looked like the very beginning of one of those open-faced helmets Rei knew the Greek warriors of ancient Earth used to sport in battle.

“*Head* manifestation?” Rei heard Reese hiss in surprise, which was completely understandable. Rei had been the only User he'd ever heard of to develop any kind of CAD armor around his head and face as a C-Ranker. Typically that started to form in the Bs, and sometimes as late as the As if a Device's evolution took an atypical path. So for *Aria* now, too, to have developed it...

Something itched at Rei for a moment, that same curiosity that had been tapping at his mind all week. First Catcher, then Cashe, and now *Aria* showing atypical developments? She might not have gotten a second Ability, but if anything head manifestation as a C8 was even stranger, wasn't it?

Rei managed to shake the confusion though, because the thing was... Hippolyta's *armor* wasn't the true shock.

For as long as he'd known her, *Aria's* shield had been about the size of her torso, maybe a little wider. It had been a bit irregular in shape, but on the whole had been larger at the top before narrowing to a point at the bottom, much like most Phalanx's early manifestations.

Now, though, *Aria* was hefting nothing short of a full-body kite shield.

The absolute *wall* of red, gold, and glowing green stood resting on a sharp point that provided only a vague resemblance of the Device's old shield. It wasn't much wider, but it was nearly twice as long, with a semi-flat top whose inside corner had a cut-out to form an open viewing channel that would help *Aria* see even as she defended with the massive thing. And her *spear*! Whereas Hippolyta's weapon had before been nothing of any particular note for its kind, what she held in her hand now had Rei taking pause even within the "safety" of the starting circle. The haft had shortened, if only a little, but that was obviously a necessary change to maintain balance with the blade that was now twice as thick and half-again as long as it had been. On top of that, the spear now had a cross-guard at the base of its head, formed by two shorter, 3- or 4-inch prongs of vysetrium extending perpendicular from the base of the main blade with a *third* identical spike gracing its bottom end. The weapon had always been a terror in *Aria's* hands, but even on its own now it inspired caution at nothing more than a glance, assuring anyone who took it in that they were about to have a *hell* of a fight on their hands.

Rei couldn't help it. He stared, taking Aria in with open astonishment as she herself gaped down at her armor and armaments with an expression that kept flitting back and forth between shock and glee. He might have even eventually worked up the ability to whoop right along with Catcher had Takeshi not called him out from above.

“Yes, Ward, we're all aware it's impressive, but we'd also rather you didn't keep us waiting all day!”

Abruptly Rei remembered himself and where he stood. Mouthing at the air for only a moment as he fought to think around the amazement at Hippolyta's changes, he finally found the word he was looking for.

“Call!”

Shido responded with a fervor.

And Rei's heart almost stopped.

The CAD's whirling manifestation rippled up his arms and legs like it always did, but it didn't end there. For the first time ever, Rei felt the weight of the Device take hold not only of his limbs and face and spine, but also his torso, his chest, his back, even his *neck*. It only took a fraction of a second, but it felt like a hell of a lot longer as Rei witnessed, almost in slow motion, Shido forming into a thousand differently shaped black plates that clicked into perfect place over his body.

His *entire* body...

“Oh, *woah*...” Rei breathed, eyes wide when he took himself in with nothing short of total disbelief.

He was a *monster* of black and blue. The muscles of his abdomen were highlighted as individual steel parts against the white underlayer beneath. The vertical steel piece that had shielded his sternum was now connected to a sort of metal rope mesh that layered over his pectorals, solid as iron but flexible enough to move without obstruction. He couldn't see them, but he knew just by turning his head ever so slightly that interlocking sections of black had encased his throat and cervical spine, allowing

him to look around without issue all while now offering some protection to a formerly fatal weakness. It was incredible. Absolutely incredible. And his *claws!* Rei raised an open hand up to the light, marveling at the blades whose vysetrium edge was now wider along every black spine, measuring exactly 1.75 inches in width at their thinnest point according to the white numbers on the display. They'd grown longer too, the length of the middle blade projected to now measure 8.5 inches, and the two shortest coming in at exactly—

And then Rei stopped moving, staring at his hand, the shape of it silhouetted against the lights of the sub-basement ceiling above. He blinked.

The... display? he thought slowly, not understanding for a long, long moment what he was seeing before him.

It was Dent's quiet hiss that started to clue him in.

“Holy *shit*, kid...”

Rei looked around, then, the pain of his body completely forgotten for the time being. He looked first around at the captain—now pale in the face—standing at the edge of the ring, and blinked again when her figure—cap and all—was abruptly highlighted in a narrow band of clean, obvious white. He turned to Reese, whose stunned expression was immediately accented as that same highlight encircled him, shaping out even the form of his dark boots against the black floor. For there it was around to the others, sitting in stunned silence above them along the edge of the manifested wall to his right. Takeshi, who had one hand brought up to her mouth in shock, was also white, but not Catcher, Viv, Cashe, or Grant. The members of Firesong, on the contrary, were outlined in *blue*.

And then it hit him, and Rei whirled to look at Aria.

Blue. Aria too, was highlighted in blue, but that wasn't all. As he stared at her, other information began to appear in his vision, popping into being in white text and numbers. Her shield and spear were overlaid in a blinking white for a moment, then the

blinking stopped and a line extended from each of them to information he immediately realized were parameters. Not just the shield's weight, but also its length and what seemed to be maximum impact calculated as pounds per square inch if Aria hit someone with it. The spear data was even wilder, because not only could he see *its* dimensions and impact threat, but also the *total range* the weapon offered Aria around herself in a diameter, which—when Rei's attention lingered on this number—*also* took on a dimensional display in the shape of a banded ring floating about chest height, offset to centered around a single white dot set at her right shoulder.

It wasn't his NOED. He knew that, at least as close to certainly as he could. Shido might be special—even more-so than anyone had thought, in fact, judging by the current moment—but Rei had never heard so much as a hint of a CAD effecting a neuro-optic directly.

No. There was only one explanation.

And so, hesitantly, Rei slowly lifted both shaking hands to his face.

His armored fingers touched metal.

“Oh...” he managed weakly, starting to feel around.

A full-face helm. He didn't know what it looked like—he couldn't see himself, after all—but he was sure of it. His mask and the protective plate that had been in the center of his forehead had been significantly compounded on, forming some kind of full-face defense. It didn't cover his entire head—he could still feel his hair above the helm—but it encased his mouth, nose, *and* eyes now, and circled around the back of his skull.

“Ward. Here.”

Rei turned to find that Dent had closed the space between them in a flash. Her frame was alive in her eyes, and even as he looked at her there was a notification in the top of his vision. It felt no closer or farther than the highlight that still encircled her, as

though whatever Shido was doing was at least adapted to his typical display to keep the information in a uniform space in his sight.

That was considerate, even if it did mean Rei abruptly realized all his plans to tinker with his NOED's coding may have just become completely obsolete.

He opened the notification to find an invite from the captain. Accepting it at once, he had to take a deep breath to calm himself as a window popped up for him in-frame.

A window that displayed... him.

Through Dent's eyes Rei stared at himself, taking in the parts of his newly evolved CAD he hadn't been able to make out. He turned his head this way and that way, noting as he did that his neck was indeed articulated with black steel, and marveling at the sight of what Shido had become.

Sure enough, most of his head was encased in a form-fitting shell of solid black, shaped with a protrusion point to accommodate his nose and with the room he needed to move his jaw in a comfortable enough range to talk. His scalp was still uncovered, his longish hair spilling out and over the metal, and a little white could be spotted here and there as an accent to the black. Aside from that, however, the only true distinction in the entirety of the helm was the two symmetrical lines of vysetrium—one shorter than the other—that formed a perpendicular cross in the upper third of the face plate. The longer of the two cut a horizontal streak of glowing blue right along the height of this eyes, while the other started just above this and stroked down vertically along where the bridge of his nose would be. It reminded him of the armor of some A-Class third-years Rei and the others had been watching all week, and actually wasn't that far off from something like the Lasher's helmet.

There was a thought that almost had Rei's knees—already just barely holding him up even with Shido's help—give out completely.

“Captain...” he barely managed to get out. “What... What the hell?”

Dent could only shake her head, sending the vision of himself bouncing a little in the frame window.

“I’ve got nothing, Cadet. I think your CAD might have even more going on with it than any of us thought...”

Rei nodded, but then the words dropped a stone into his gut. No, not a stone actually. An ember. A hot, heavy, burning ember. This was amazing. This was *wonderful*.

And this also wasn’t the only reason he was standing in that red ring, body still fighting to get him to throw himself to the floor and stop moving for the next several weeks at least.

It wasn’t even the *main* reason.

With a blink he closed the window, then looked to Dent directly. He felt the movement of his head for the first time ever, felt the weight of the steel encasing it.

“I’m... I’m ready to do this, ma’am.”

Dent looked like she almost couldn’t believe her ears.

“*Still?* Ward... This is a *big* change. You may need to get used to this. I can call and let the colonel know he needs to tell Central to give you some—”

“No, ma’am.” Rei tried—and failed miserably—at achieving a stiff stance and salute. The burning need in his gut—lit by the sight of Shido’s changes—wouldn’t have let him back down even if he’d wanted to. “I’m ready to go. Right now.”

Dent looked at him a moment longer, like she was waiting for him to have a stroke of realization and come to his senses.

Then she sighed.

“Roger that, Cadet. In that case—” she raised an eyebrow and looked his new form up and down “—what do you want to test first?”

Rei didn’t have to consider long.

“Let’s start simple?” he asked, trying to make it sound like there was *anything* simple about what was happening with him and his CAD. “And honestly... I could really use some of that famous Phalanx Endurance right about now...”

CHAPTER 42

Under normal circumstances, Rei rather thought he would have enjoyed hefting a shield. It added an incredible new layer to combat, providing a level of near-absolute defense he'd never before experienced in a fight. He'd always been able to block, sure, and Shido's Saber Mode had really upped his ability to take a hit, but even that form wasn't *designed* to tank, wasn't *designed* to accept anything and everything thrown at it with the trust and expectation that Rei would always survive to meet the next one head on just as firmly. Under normal circumstances, he suspected he would have felt an all-new kind of certainty, standing there on that field, letting Aria poke and prod him with her own newly-improved spear.

Unfortunately, all Rei felt instead was pain.

CLANG!

Rei grimaced behind his mask, feeling the blow—at maybe a *quarter* of Aria's usually speed and power—ricochet off his lifted defenses and shiver in a wave of misery up his arm, into his body, and down through every limb. He suppressed a grunt, choosing instead to shift his feet slightly and accept the next swing, then the next, then the next. Everything hurt. Even as kind as Aria was being to him, everything ached with every hit, with every step he took to turn and face her as she circled him with deft grace.

“Laurent, ease up a little more,” Dent called out for the fourth time since they'd started the “bout”—if you could call it that—barely 2 minutes before. Aria's face—set and focused against the thin outline of the now-*red* light that surrounded her figure—flickered briefly to guilt as she immediately let off the gas yet again, her next thrust coming in more like a curious poke than any kind of attack.

It didn't help much, the hit still making Rei's left arm feel like it was about to break.

There *had* been several moments of pure thrill, of course. As Takeshi had called for them to fight, Rei had shouted for Shido's new “Phalanx-Mode!” without ever

leaving the circle, and the response had wowed him—and every other person watching—almost as much as had the base evolution. The armor that encased every part of his body had rippled in an echoing wave, sending arcs of white lightning out in crackling flashes of light. The blades of his knuckles had been absorbed in a blink, and every square inch of metal had reformed probably twice as thick as it had been in Brawler form. The armor alone outclassed even the boosted Defense of the Saber Mode—by miles—in fact, and despite the added weight of the steel Rei had felt almost as light on his feet as he had before the change, pointing at a *massive* restructuring of his specs undoubtedly leaning heavily now into Strength, Endurance, and Defense. Sure enough, the world felt like it had visibly sped up around him as soon as he made the call, his Speed and Cognition numbers very clearly plummeting. But that was alright.

His new weapons had immediately made up for that disappointment.

Rei's Phalanx-Mode, it turned out, had classed him in the less common of the two varieties within the Type. He was a sword wielder, which actually drew a breath of relief from him when he'd realized his training with Claire de Soto would have a *lot* of crossover benefits, as opposed to having had to learn to use the spear *and* sword effectively *at the same time*. Even better, his blade was almost identical to his Saber Mode manifestation, except that the weapon was about a hand shorter and maybe just the slightest bit thicker. Then again, his newly-evolved Saber Mode sword might have thickened as well for all he knew. It didn't really matter.

Because what Rei had cared more about in the moment was the *shield*.

Whereas Hippolyta's call took the form of a thinner, almost elegant kite shield that tapered to that mean point at the bottom, Shido had had no such graceful inclinations. Rei's shield was of the tower variety, a veritable slab of layered black and white metal, the whole thing broader than his shoulders and sporting a curve to its design that was obviously intended to help deflect and redirect incoming hits. It was a *marvel*, and in more than one way. It was striking—beautiful, in fact, from a certain point

of view—but frankly, the more impressive element of the thing that he was *able to heft it*, and so *easily*. Even accounting for Rei’s own smaller stature the shield truly looked like there was enough weight to it to knock a damn *flyer* off course if Rei had found himself in one’s path. Not that he’d have the opportunity to try.

It took everything he had to just keep the damn thing lifted enough to accept Aria’s tentative thrusts, taking the hits on again and again as every one sent a jolt of pain all the way up into his teeth and temples.

The discomfort did improve a little bit, eventually. Either because he was growing numb to the hurt or because his body was loosening up the slightest bit with moving around, Rei was eventually taking full steps without feeling like the ground was going to tilt under his feet in an attempt to pull his beaten body down. Those 2 minutes of fighting turned to 3, then 4, and by the time Aria had been prodding at his new mode for 5 minutes he was feeling brave enough to take a swing back. The glowing green head of Hippolyta’s spear came jetting forward—still at a blistering speed compared to what a civilian might have been used to—and instead of just taking it on against the pockmarked steel of his new call Rei set his jaw and darted into the strike, tilting his shield out ever so slightly. Aria cursed, taken by surprise as her spear went scraping off the metal to cut at nothing. Rei, meanwhile, drove his blade forward—also at quarter speed, because he wasn’t a dick—aiming for the griffin on his girlfriend’s chest.

As expected, Aria’s kite shield was in place with a snap, and the impact of the block jarred Rei’s right arm more harshly than any other hit he’d taken so far.

It didn’t matter. It was only pain.

It was only pain.

Rei pulled back, then brought his shield up as Aria’s spear retracted and drove forward again, maybe with a little more intent this time. He returned to taking the blow head on, but slashed blindly up with his sword parallel to the defending steel, trying to shear off Hippolyta’s head. He didn’t succeed, but he did catch the weapon’s blade as it

was being retracted, his sword slamming into it hard enough to send the spear snapping upward and out of the way. Seeing a chance, Rei shoved himself forward, ignoring the scream of his hips and knees as he drove his shield at Aria.

It was only pain.

But then again...

WHAM!

Rei learned a hard lesson in that moment. Actually, maybe the awareness that there was more to being a Phalanx than leaning into the advantages of the Type had always been there, but just never registered in the way it should have. Whatever the case, shield met shield, as Rei thought might happen, but where he had expected his impetus might at least send an already-off-balance Aria staggering, he couldn't have been more surprised. He struck her, and he might have hit the zone perimeter head-on for all the good it did him. He actually let out a full hiss of agony as *he* was thrown back instead, bouncing off Aria's superiorly-set defenses in a series of staggering steps that each felt like one leg being torn off, then the other, then repeated.

It didn't matter. He found his footing, set himself, and let Aria come at him again.

Had he been thinking about it, Rei might very well have been duly impressed with the fact that—despite the state of his body—the two of them went at it like that for 6, 7, 8 minutes straight. Every moment was torture, sure—hence his lack of awareness at the time—but he could *keep going*. Even at quarter speed the toll on his limbs and back were immense, and yet he could *keep going*. He should have been impressed with his new Endurance spec, and would well have been had he had any space to consider it.

Instead, it took a notification in the corner of his vision to bring Rei around to how long they'd been going.

TEMPORAL STEP: READY

Incredibly, Rei had momentarily forgotten all about the last—and possibly most astonishing—change Shido had undergone with its evolution. Surprised, he came up short, stopping so abruptly Aria cursed as she was actively forced to redirect a lunge she'd obviously expected him to block so that it didn't take him right through the liver. Once she'd caught her balance, though, she looked around curiously.

“Ward?” Dent beat her to asking, calling out again from the edge of the ring of elevated white that made up the walled-in practice field. “What is it?”

“My Ability,” Rei answered. Despite it all, he was awed to realize he wasn't even *winded*. “Temporal Step. It requires an electromagnetic buildup. Like Repulsion.”

“How do you know?”

“Cause my helmet display just told me it's ‘Ready.’”

There was a silence at that, in which Rei was pretty sure Viv, Catcher, Cashe, and Grant all exchanged looks of dueling concern and curiosity, as did even Reese with Takeshi standing on the ledge above him. The Bishop, on the other hand, was chewing her lip as she studied Rei, looking like she wasn't sure whether to be on the edge of her seat or worried about what might happen.

She ended up putting a boot in each camp.

“We need to know what you can do, Cadet, but if you're not up for it...”

She left the decision to him, letting the implication that he *could* say no hang.

Rei suspected she knew what his answer was going to be regardless.

“No, ma'am. *I* need to know, too.”

Dent's nod was almost resigned. “Understood. Do you have *any* idea what it does? At all?”

Rei hesitated. That was the problem—if a very minor one—with undocumented Abilities. CADs didn't strictly spell out what they did, just as they didn't spell out what *any* Ability did for the one acquiring them. With more common assignments that wasn't an issue. Even if it wasn't something as well known as the likes of Overclock—which

any SCT enthusiast could give at least a base definition of off the top of their head—there were public *and* personnel-only databases for every Ability the military was aware of. Catcher’s Ruinous and Cashe’s Warband were two rarer examples, both of which the members of Firesong—other than Rei and Catcher, nerds that they were—had had to look up.

But “looking it up” wasn’t possible with User-Uniques. When he’d been assigned Type Shift, Rei had messaged Catcher—the Saber-Type he trusted most in the world—and the pair had gone to Dent and Claire de Soto for help in figuring out how the Ability worked. It hadn’t been complicated—there’d been ample correlations to be made with the name and Arsenal Shift that had had all of them sharing similar suspicions before he’d even tried it out—but it had still been nerve-wracking.

And yet now here he was, about to test out his *second* User-Unique Ability—a concept absurd in and of itself—with absolutely *no* idea this time what was about to happen.

Well... almost no idea.

“Type Shift had similarities to Arsenal Shift,” Rei finally answered the Bishop. “Should we assume Temporal Step will be parallel to Break Step?”

“Probably a safe bet.” It was Takeshi who answered from above. “‘Repulsion’ and ‘Directional Repulsion’ are another example with very similar properties.”

“Maybe you’re gonna step back in time, dude!” Catcher exclaimed giddily, joking but obviously still excited. He’d regained a lot of his usual brightness once Rei had shown that he could move, and had practically fallen off the wall in excitement when Shido had shown off its new Phalanx-Mode.

“Catchwick, tone it down,” Dent said over her shoulder without looking back at the Saber. She was still watching Rei. “I agree with the captain, Ward. I think building off a Break Step is a good basis. Still, let’s be careful about it.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Rei answered, trying not to sound too grim as he looked back around at Aria. For all any of them knew, after all, Temporal Step was just Break Step dialed up to 11, and he was about to bazooka himself into the discretionary wall.

“You want to come at me?” Aria asked him. “You’re sure?”

He gave her a pained grin. “Yeah... If it *is* like Break Step and I overdo it, I’d rather bounce off a shield than solid light.” He frowned, though, realizing how selfish that sounded, and started to add quickly, “Sorry! If you’d rather I aim elsewhere, I totally underst—”

“Nope,” Aria told him at once, taking two quick leaps back that gracefully landed her some 20 feet or so away from him, where she settled into a ready position with her shield at an angle in front of her. “Just don’t blame me if you end up rearranging your face on Hippolyta.”

Rei’s grin was more genuine this time, even if Aria couldn’t see it. It still hurt—everything still hurt, dammit—but between Viv, Catcher, and Aria, he could feel juuuust a little something that could almost have been normalcy returning.

As normal as things could ever be around Shido, at least.

“Okay...” He took a breath, considering things. He decided to stay in Phalanx Mode. It was the least agile of his *three* modes, now, which ordinarily would have also made it the least ideal to test out what they all seemed to agree was some kind of mobility Ability. On the other hand, given the situation, that was exactly why he picked it. With his shield and thick armor Rei wasn’t only the heaviest—and therefore *slowest*—he could be with Shido called, but also the most well-defended.

Maybe he was more worried about slamming into that wall than he wanted to admit to himself...

A little more complicated was how he wanted to go about this. He’d seen Break Step used before, and seen it triggered right out the starting gate. Common as it was, it was one of the few Abilities that started with a charge, with only subsequent ones

requiring a modest amount of energy buildup before being able to be fired off again. Temporal Step wasn't like that, apparently, but Rei *was* starting from a standstill, so it was functionally the same. That was good, because he was coming apart at the seams as it was, and already wasn't looking forward to the burden the coming boost in Speed they were all expecting would have on his body. If he didn't have to move more than that, he wasn't going to.

So Phalanx-Mode, from a standstill, aiming right at a ready Aria...

No time like the present, Rei thought.

It still took him another few seconds to steel his nerves.

Then he brought his own shield up to protect himself from whatever might happen next, and took a single, aching step forward.

"Temporal Step!"

The vocal command echoed in the emptiness of the sub-basement, all three officers and the other members of Firesong collectively holding their breath as they waited. And waited.

And waited.

After about 10 seconds of utter silence it was Cashe who spoke first, her voice a squeak of nervous anticipation.

"What happened? Did something happen? I didn't see anything."

"None of us did, Cadet," Reese snapped back at the Lancer as Rei stood straight again to look at Dent. "Now be quiet."

The Bishop frowned around at the major for a moment, but apparently decided it wasn't a battle worth picking for the time being. Instead, she looked to Rei again.

"Anything happen you're aware of, Ward?"

Rei shook his head, a little bit confused, a little bit relieved, and a lotta bit disappointed. "Nothing, ma'am." He glanced at his display. "Shido is still telling me it's 'READY', though..."

“So you didn’t blow the charge,” Dent finished for him, looking like she was considering the situation. After a second, she seemed to have a thought.

“When you triggered it, what were you thinking about?”

Rei blinked at her, not understanding.

“Errr... Moving, ma’am?”

“Where to?”

Rei was at a loss, but he waved his sword in the direction of Aria, who was only peeking over her ready shield as she watched the exchange nervously. “Towards Aria, ma’am?”

“Ah.” Dent nodded, sounding like she understood as she started towards him. “That probably explains it. You need a halt-point.”

“A... A what, ma’am?” Rei asked, still not following. He was pretty well versed in CAD-related lingo, but “halt-point” was a new one for him.

Dent seemed to realize this, because she waved his confusion away, coming to stand in front of him. “It’s not a technical term, it’s just what I call it.” She took him by the shoulder and—very gently—turned him to face Aria again. “See Cadet Laurent?” She asked, lifting a hand to point at the girl. Rei nodded. “Then let’s say I’ve triggered a Break Step. My Speed spec skyrockets. It’s in the stratosphere. I’m barreling at her, a well-defended Phalanx. What should happen?”

Rei thought about it. He’d never actually considered the *physics* of something like Break Step, but now that Dent was pointing it out...

“You... You should hit her,” he answered tentatively.

“I should. But that’s probably not what I want, right? I’m a fragile Brawler or Duelist most likely, a Saber with half-decent Defense if I’m lucky. I smash into her, break my neck, and the fight’s done. So—” She let her hand drop from his shoulder, but her pointing finger dropped a little, down from Aria to a spot on the floor just in front of her “—what do I do?”

Rei thought he understood. “You stop short. You aim for a spot in front of her.” He frowned, though. “That’s tricky. The momentum is still behind you. You’d have to calculate—”

Dent cut him off with a chuckle. “That *is* tricky, which is where you’re close, but still off. Break Step is a little more complicated than you know. It’s not an Ability to move you in a direction at top speed.”

Rei’s frown deepened, because that was *exactly* what every textbook definition of Break Step was. And that was without having seen it a thousand times with his own two—

“It’s an Ability that takes you from one point to another, as fast as your body and CAD can handle.”

And then it *did* click. Of course. That made sense. There had to be processes involved in the Ability—maybe some kind of built-in, minor counter blasts of energy, to allow a User to stop dead from something like that. Break Step didn’t just blast you forward at top speed. It accepted where you needed to be, and got you there in a way that didn’t leave you careening by your target point. Maybe that *was* into another User, but sometimes it would be near them, or even far away if you were trying to escape.

“‘Halt-point,’” Rei repeated, getting it now. “The spot you’re trying to get to. The spot you want to end up in.”

“Exactly,” Dent confirmed, finally letting her arm drop. “Think of it like you used to have to think about your CAD when you called on it. Be aware of the place. Hold it in your head. Then trigger. It’s not hard. But it does require deliberate thought.”

“Understood, ma’am,” Rei answered. “I’ll give that a shot, then.”

“Not before I’m far and clear of you,” the captain snorted in answer. Then, as though to make a point, she was gone with a whoosh of air, appearing beside Reese again in a blink to turn and face Rei from the edge of the ring. “Alright!” she called back only then. “*Now* you can try it.”

Orders received, Rei looked to Aria again. The girl nodded to confirm she was prepped and good to go, lifting her shield just a little higher from where it had momentarily dropped as she'd listened to his and Dent's conversation.

Rei himself settled a second time, swallowed his nerves once more, and focused. It was tougher to do than he thought it should have been, because even just holding a ready position was making everything from his feet to his neck ache, but he managed it. He put his eyes on a spot just in front of Aria, concentrating on it.

There, he told whatever calculation may or may not have been listening inside his head. *I want to go there.*

He opened his mouth, not looking away from the point on the white floor in question as he took another step forward, calling out as he did.

“Temporal Step!”

And the world went inside out.

CHAPTER 43

There was a sound like a thunderclap, and Rei was aware—for the most infinitesimal moment in time—of his whole body tingling with what felt like static electricity. The sub-basement around him warped and bent inward on itself, everything pulling towards him as his body moved with that one, single step forward. He saw blue light and the hint of arcing lightning rippling away from Shido's black armor. He saw Aria get sucked into nothingness, then the floor and the walls and Dent and Reese and everyone else. That shouldn't have been possible. His brain was telling him that wasn't possible. Takeshi and most of Firesong had been sitting *behind* him when he'd triggered the Ability. And yet in a bending warp of indistinct shapes he saw them all. Viv, Catcher, Cashe, Grant, the captain. They were all sucked into a point before him, an unmoving singularity until suddenly there was nothing around him. Only black, empty void.

And then, just as he registered a fear of that place, that abyss of dark oblivion, color roared back into his vision from ahead of him, and he saw flashes of scenes that made no sense even in the fraction of an instant he had to register their details.

A shoeless girl, maybe a little younger than he was, stood in a dirt road, one arm missing above the elbow and the other at her side. A well-dressed boy on a cobbled street, crying in the light of an old-world, oil-lit lamp over the still, bloodied form of what looked like a dog. A child with skin the color of night and blue, piercing eyes set against what looked like a broken moon. There were others, too, a hundred, a thousand, a *million* others, but they all collectively came and went in no more time than Rei had to register them all collectively as a thought. They ripped by in a soundless roar, blinding and infinite.

And then there was a flash of white, a blast like displacing air, and Rei found himself in front of Aria, that single step that he'd called the Ability with finishing in a quiet *thump* an inch from the bottom edge of Hippolyta's shield.

Aria yelped, so surprised that she flung herself away from him in a windmill of limbs and armor. She tripped and fell back on her rear, but Rei wasn't entirely aware of this. He was distracted, in large part. Partially by the metallic, charred odor of what might have been ozone, so sharp he could make it out through his faceplate, and partially by the lingering strands of thin white lightning still arcing along his legs, arms, and body, many going so far as to reach out to snap and nip at the floor.

Mostly, though, he was distracted by the nausea.

“Re-recall!” he choked out, and just in time. He didn't know if Shido would have innately pulled back from his head if he hadn't given the order, but it wouldn't have been worth finding out as Rei twisted away from Aria to fall on all fours onto the white field, where he promptly vomited. Everything came up. Everything. He gasped and choked as his whole body spasmed, protesting against no longer just the pain, but also against whatever the *hell* it was that he'd just put it through. He heard the sound of boots approaching and his friends shouting in alarm, but they were even fainter than the agony, with even that pressed aside as his stomach evacuated its contents with an almost-desperate need.

“Reese, call a drone!” he heard someone shout—Dent, he registered belatedly—and not a few seconds later there came a whirring sound as the medical bot undocked from its bay somewhere else in the basement and came ripping towards them with all speed. He was aware, then, of a hand on his back, of a woman telling him it was alright, he was alright, and to let it out, just let it out.

He did so, again and again, until there was nothing left to expel but foamy bile.

Only after that, at long last, did Rei start to come to his senses. His body *screamed* in pain, and that wasn't even counting the shivering response every inch of him was having to throwing up. He did his best to ignore it all, watering eyes shut as tight as his balled fists, still on his hands and knees. The whirl of the drone was clear now, right overhead, and after a second there came a loud buzz and crackle of sound, and much

of the smell of vomit disappeared. The whir dipped closer, and a second buzz—much gentler this time—aligned with a distinct warming of his face and body as the drone sterilized him with surgical precision, cleaning every inch of him its sweeping instruments could reach.

Then Rei was just left wheezing and groaning, taking in great gasps of air when he could, about as miserable in that moment as he'd ever been in his life.

It didn't last long. It couldn't. He had something he had to ask.

Rei opened his eyes. His vision was blurry, and he gave himself a couple seconds more to get a hold of his shivering. Once he'd managed that, he slowly pushed back to sit on his heels, instinctively wiping at his already-clean face with the back of one sore wrist as he did. He looked around, and was unsurprised to find them all standing or kneeling around him, Aria and Viv so close they could have touched him along with Dent on his right, the rest crowding in front of him.

And all of them—to a one and with no exception, even Reese—were staring at him with the same expression of utter astonishment.

“Wh-what the... *hell* was that?” Rei grunted out, chest still heaving.

No one answered. Not Dent, not Aria, not anyone. They were all too busy staring. The drone—now hovering before him and running what looked like a diagnostic screening of his kneeling body—had cleaned up his sick and sterilized every trace of it away, but that keen smell of metal still hung in the air.

It was Grant who finally managed to find his voice first.

“Rei...” Apparently the situation was momentous enough to once again have the Mauler forgetting he never called anyone but Viv by their first names. “One second you were there—” he pointed over to his left, towards where Rei was pretty sure he had indeed been standing originally “—and the next you were... here...” Rei couldn't be sure, but thought Grant's finger was shaking as the boy indicated where he now kneeled.

“No,” Viv disagreed, her voice hoarse. “No. That’s not what happened. There wasn’t any kind of time in there. Rei... You just... You *appeared*. But you never went away. For a second it was almost like there were *two* of you...”

“That’s because there *were* two of you.”

Everyone, even Rei, turned to look at Dent. The woman had composed herself enough to speak, at the very least, though her brown eyes were still wide over the line of her prosthetic.

“Or at least it seemed that way,” she clarified quickly as Rei took her in without understanding. “It’s not possible to be in two places at once, obviously, but the brain doesn’t know that. When you go from one place to another without delay, it takes a moment—*neurologically*—to register that. No matter how high your Cognition is. You see it sometimes with Users with S-Ranked Speed when they use Break Step. For a second any spectator might *perceive* that there are two people, when in reality it’s just your mind catching up to how fast they’re moving.”

“Is that... Is that what happened?” Cashe wheezed, sounding like she could barely get a breath out for the shock. “Is *that* what Temporal Step is? An immediate boost up to S-Ranked Speed that—?”

“No. That’s not what happened.”

It was, to the shock of all, Dyrk Reese who cut the Lancer off. He was staring at Rei in a strange way, in a *frightening* way. He was tense, his face pale, his hands slowly clasping and unclasping by his side.

He looked, for all the world, like a man deciding if it was better to fight or to flee...

“The smell,” the major continued. “The sick. The electromagnetic discharge.” His eyes flicked to the space around Rei, like he half-expected more lightning to come arcing out of his combat suit and scarred limbs. “You didn’t *move*, did you, Ward? You didn’t take more than that one step, did you?”

Rei hesitated. Then, though, as all eyes turned back to him and with no other answer he could give, he shook his head slowly.

Takeshi let out a hiss of what might have been realization.

“Reese... You don’t mean...?”

She let the question hang, but the major answered her anyway.

“I do. But there’s an easy way to confirm it.” His eyes narrowed on Rei. “Ward... What did you see? When you activated that Ability? What did you see?”

The thought almost made Rei retch again, and images flashed across his vision once more in a thunderous blink that had his head spinning.

“I-I saw... everything.” It was the only way he could describe it. “Everything in this room...”

He saw Reese’s jaw clench.

“And then?” the major pressed.

“And then...” Rei swallowed. “Other things. I saw... I saw other things... I don’t know how to describe them.”

“Just tell us what you remember, Cadet.” Dent’s voice was kind, but tense, and her own expression had sharpened as she listened. “Whatever you can recall.”

So Rei did. He told them about the girl with one arm. The boy and the still form of the dog. The child with black skin and blue eyes framed against a broken sky. Another girl, red-haired, standing under the neon lights of a dirty, towering city. There were others, so many others, but the more he thought about them the more Rei’s head hurt. When he’d had to bring a hand up to his mouth in an attempt to keep from getting sick again, Dent finally stopped him.

There was a moment of silence, one in which Rei and the rest of Firesong looked on while the three officers stared at him with equal measures of disbelief and understanding.

It was Takeshi who spoke first.

“*Hole* visions?” she breathed, like she couldn’t fathom that she was saying those words aloud. Rei and the others all turned to her, not understanding, but both Dent and Reese were nodding.

“*Hole* visions...” Dent confirmed, never having looked away from Rei and letting her hand fall from his back for the first time. “Incredible...”

“‘Incredible?’” Reese repeated with a growl, looking to the Bishop in alarm. “Captain, this is hardly ‘*incredible*’! Do you know what this means?! Do you *realize* what this means this boy will be able to—?!”

“I do, Major, and watch your tongue.” Dent’s answer was cool, but her eyes blazed white so suddenly that Rei, Aria, and Viv all flinched before her as she looked around at the man. “This is neither the time *nor* the place, as you well know.”

“*As I well know*?!” Reese half-roared, taking a step towards her, his own eyes suddenly glowing a deep, unsettling green. “Are you out of your damn *mind*, Bishop?! If this boy—if this *monster*—is allowed to have free rein over that CAD, it will mean the end of the—!”

WHOOM!

Reese let out an “*Urk!*” of strained alarm as Dent appeared before him in a blink, taking him in both hands by the front of his jacket as the wind of her movement rippled through their clothes. He was off his feet in the same instant, lifted up with no more effort than the woman might have needed to lift a newborn child, and the major grabbed at the Bishop’s wrists as he slid down in his uniform, feet kicking limply under him.

“I’ve had just about enough of you, Major.” Dent words were as venomous as they were quiet. She brought him close so that their glowing eyes mirrored each other. “Me, and just about every single person that ends up in your orbit, I think. I told you to hold your tongue, and instead you go and say something like *that*. In present company. That’s a line you shouldn’t have crossed.” She held him like that for another second.

Then she let go of the man, giving him just enough of a shove as she did that Reese had to catch himself with a stumble as he landed on his feet.

“Major Reese, I find you in contempt of field command,” Dent announced formally. “As such I’m relieving you of your duties as chaperone of this event, and will be promptly—”

“You can’t *do* that!” Reese snarled, straightening himself up to his full height before Dent while Takeshi looked on nervously from not far away.

“—and will be promptly communicating as much to the Galens Institute’s Commanding Officer,” Dent repeated smoothly, like she hadn’t heard him. “You are to return to the hotel immediately, and await further instruction from myself or a school superior.”

“You *aren’t* my superior, *Captain!*” the major shouted. “You can’t do th—!”

“I just did,” Dent snapped at him. “And if you’re *still* under the impression that’s not within my purview, then a conversation with Colonel Guest should snap you out of that.” She looked around to Takeshi. “Captain, please escort the major out and ensure he finds safe transport back to The Chevaron.”

Takeshi looked unsure of herself, but it wasn’t Reese she had her attention on now.

It was Rei and the others.

“Are you sure, Valera...?” she asked pointedly. “If it’s what we think...”

Again she let the point hang, and Dent nodded in assurance.

“Sarah, I’m sure. Please see to the major.”

Reese, though, didn’t look like he had any intention of being frogmarched away without a fight. He was red in the face, and a vein was bulging in his temple. He opened his mouth, obviously about to argue further.

Dent cut him off one last time.

There was a whirl of red and blue, and this time when she took him by the front of his uniform with one hand, her right arm was encased in Kestrel's iconic, fluid steel form. It was only a partial call, covering just the one limb from fingers to shoulder, but it made the impression Rei suspected she was going for.

The red fled from Reese's cheeks, and he looked suddenly very pale.

"Major, I am warning you right now not to say another word. This situation is more delicate than even *you* are aware of, and if you continue to push the envelope I will have no choice but to consider this entire situation a risk to ISC security." She wrenched him close so that their noses almost touched. "Just so you understand perfectly clearly: That means that when Captain Takeshi takes you out of here, it would be unconscious, under additional guard, and it won't be to the *hotel* that you're going. Is that what you want? Because—despite whatever you might believe—I can *very much* make it happen."

Reese was frozen in her grasp. Whatever he had expected to happen, the Iron Bishop summoning a partial call—a partial *true* call, probably, too—had very clearly not been in the cards. His eyes had returned to their usual sunken colors, and his outrage had been replaced with alarm.

Alarm, and fear.

After a moment, he shook his head.

"I will go with Takeshi," he mumbled.

"Glad to hear it." Dent let go of him with a jerk, dropping her arm as Kestrel recalled around her wrist. "Then do so. Now."

There was no more hesitation. The display had clearly made its mark, because Reese immediately turned and made for the closest wall. Captain Takeshi only paused long enough to take in Rei one more time, then hurried after him, the two officers leaping over the white discretionary barrier one after the other.

And then they were gone.

For a long time Dent didn't turn to look from the spot where the two had vanished. If Rei had to guess, he would have said she seemed to be preparing herself, seemed to be centering some shaken element of her willpower. No one pushed her. No one demanded answers. Not even Rei, whose questions burned on his tongue.

It was worth the wait when Dent finally turned to face them again, her expression set, and said one word.

“Ask.”

Rei didn't pause. Not even the sight of Reese's unceremonious dismissal could have distracted him in that moment.

“‘Hole visions?’” he repeated from where he still knelt, Aria and Viv on his right, Catcher, Cashe, and Grant not far away. “What are ‘hole visions?’”

Dent sighed like she'd seen the question coming from a mile off, but had been praying it wouldn't.

“We're not sure,” she answered, moving towards them again. She had to hold up a hand to keep Viv at bay as the girl opened her mouth to argue. “No. Easy, Arada. I'm not playing any game. It's the truth. No one is sure.” She came to a stop to stand over the three of them, looking down at Rei. “They're well-documented, but they're a complete mystery to us.”

“Who is ‘us?’” Aria asked with a frown, reaching out to take Rei's hand in one of her own. She'd recalled Hippolyta at some point without him noticing. “And how can they be well-documented *and* a mystery?”

“The ISCM,” Dent answered promptly. “And its technological development partners. As for them being well-documented, it's not something shared with the public, though if you look hard enough you'll find examples of them. Typically from intersystem travelers who somehow slipped through transport security protocols.”

This explanation, of course, didn't help at all.

Or so Rei thought.

“Wait...” Catcher’s voice was low. “Security protocols? You mean the weight centerings?”

Almost everyone looked around at him, with only Grant frowning like he, too, was catching on.

“Weight centerings?” Rei asked, confused. “What are ‘weight centerings?’”

“It’s what you have to do on inter-system transport ships,” Viv answered, though she—unlike the two boys—still looked perplexed. “Just before the jump. In-system you can be in your cabins, or pretty much wherever you want to be, but during the jump they gather everyone in the center of the ship. Wormhole jumps are sensitive. If the ship isn’t balanced, it can throw things off course.” She looked to Dent. “But what’s that got to do with Rei?”

Rei understood, then, at least in part. Viv’s family went to Venus every summer for a resort retreat, and Catcher and Grant were both from different systems. Luhman and Centauri respectively. All three of them, therefore, would have had cause to be on an inter-system transport when it—

And then it clicked for Rei, and his mouth went dry even as Dent spoke.

“Hole jumps aren’t sensitive,” the Bishop said carefully, like she really wanted them all to hear—to take in—every word. “They’re just doors. From one place to another. Once one is open, whatever goes through will end up where intended. As surely as stepping out of one room into another.” She was watching Rei again. “But they *are* complex, and we don’t know half as much about them as the ISCM would have you believe. That includes what happens when you go through...”

Rei nodded. He’d never been on an inter-system jump—he’d never had reason to, having only traveled between Astra-2 and 3 in his life—but he still understood.

“It’s not to balance the ship...” he said quietly, looking at—but not really seeing—the captain. “It’s to get people away from the windows.”

Dent nodded. “Exactly.”

Everyone, then, seemed to catch on.

“Oh... Woah...” Cashe breathed while Catcher and Grant exchanged an uneasy glance. Viv had gone pale, and Aria’s hand was squeezing Rei’s as she, too, stared at Dent.

The captain, fortunately, didn’t leave them hanging long.

“We don’t know what the visions are. We might never. Apparently they tend to cause acute nausea and motion sickness until you get used to them, so all transports—public *and* military—protect their passengers from them in one way or another. Only ship commanders and the flight crew are exposed to get acclimated to them. I haven’t even seen them myself.” She paused, considering. “What I *can* tell you, though, is that everybody sees something different, but the same thing every time. You can do a hundred jumps holding hands with someone—” she waved loosely at Rei and Aria as an example “—and while you’ll both see different things, it’ll be the *same* thing every time.” She sighed. “That’s not the important part, though, obviously.”

“Obviously,” Aria and Viv hissed in agreement together, and the latter, now, brought up a hand to rest on Rei’s shoulder, though it might have been more for her own balance than his comfort as Dent nodded, then continued.

“Ward... hole visions... They tell us what you did. What Temporal Step is...”

Rei nodded again, unable to speak.

“You jumped, kid... From one spot to the other. Not a Break Step. A *jump*...”

Another nod.

“Do you understand what that means? *Really* understand what that means...?”

This time, Rei hesitated, his breath coming uneven. After a second he finally looked away from the captain in favor of lifting one screaming arm—the motion so painful it was almost enough to shake him from his shock—to taking in the band of white, black, and glowing blue around his left wrist.

“A hole drive...” he finally answered. “Shido’s turned into a miniature hole drive...”

CHAPTER 44

It wasn't *complete* nonsense, Rei decided as Aria and Viv helped him back up to the main floor of the Arena a little while later, half carrying him out of the sub-basement and to the elevators again. He didn't know all that much about hole drives—a gap he would be correcting as soon as possible, obviously—but to the best of his knowledge they were insanely complicated engines that worked by creating a rip—a “wormhole”, if you would—from one place in the known spacetime to another, through which things could pass in relative safety. As a result, the likes of civilian transports, combat ships, and even the massive, hulking military frigates of the ISCM fleet could cover vast distances in a blink, exponentially cutting down on inter-system travel even in an age of universal lightspeed movement.

Aside from that, the only other thing Rei knew—and much more relevant to his current situation—was that hole drives ran on vysetrium.

Vysetrium...

Before its discovery in the Sirius System—and the subsequent war with the archons—quantum mechanics breakthroughs in the early 21st century had already allowed for *some* faster-than-light travel, just with limits. Travel had still been linear—and not without risks—with trips between systems still taking months, and often being treated as grand events on par with what Rei had read about colonizers from the old European countries setting off on great ships for their ironically named “New World”.

Vysetrium had changed all of that for the better.

The miracle of the material also tied into Rei thinking Dent's theory had an element of sense to it. In addition to knowing that hole drives ran on the stuff, he was also aware that said vysetrium cores were typically no smaller than a human body, and that was for the lightest jump-capable military crafts. Recon ships and the like. The larger vessels, like the combat frigates and transports, had cores as large as 20 times that

size. That meant, as basic math dictated, that mass was in some way proportional to a hole drive's requirements to allow for a jump. A massive cruiser would require X amount of vysetrium, smaller spy ships would require Y—some deduction of X related to it the vessel's size—and so on and so forth.

If anything, the amount of vysetrium that lined Shido's new combat armor was probably enough to jump ten times Rei's body mass, if needed.

Yeah. It wasn't *complete* nonsense.

Of course, that didn't mean it wasn't utterly and completely *insane*.

No one said a word the entire way up to the stands. Not even Catcher, though his silence—judging by the fact that he seemed to be practically *vibrating* with excitement every time Rei caught the Saber glancing at him—appeared to be for everyone else's sake. That was smart, because Catcher was the only one left among them who seemed to have the ability to think, much less talk, Dent included. That was what really drove it home for Rei, in fact. Shido's transformation had been incredible, but not completely beyond expectation given the CAD's past history, and the Temporal Step jump was just too surreal to have really registered completely yet. But the Iron Bishop's silence, the shock that still lingered in her eyes as they made their slow way through the underworks, was a different story. Valera Dent wasn't an old woman, but Rei knew she'd seen a lot in her life. From some of the highest echelons of the SCTs to the worst fronts of the war. She'd all but witnessed her own death, and at least experienced it in part.

So for *this* to leave her speechless...

Yeah... That put some weight to the slow dawning of just how big of a deal this was.

They were at the top of the stairs from the main underwork tunnel—every step an excruciating nightmare despite Aria and Viv's help—when the captain finally seemed to come back to them. They paused there, and she appeared to shake herself free from

wherever her private contemplations had taken her before turning to look around at them.

When she spoke, her words were as expected as they were unwelcome.

“Ward, I’m pulling you from the Team Battle.”

This announcement brought the smallest amount of life back to Firesong, because Rei felt Viv’s grip on his right arm tighten as Aria straightened under his left. Behind him, too, Catcher made a small, choked sound while Cashe let out a hiss. Even Grant got in a grunt of protest. Before any of them could form any actual words to argue with, however, the captain headed them off.

“I know it’s a disappointment, and for what it’s worth, I’m sorry. But you can’t go out there right now.”

“Ma’am, I’m good.” Rei knew pleading his case would be in vain, but couldn’t stop himself. Painfully he tugged one arm from around Aria’s shoulders and tried to stand tall, ignoring the protest along every joint of his spine that came with the movement. “I can still fight.”

“No, Cadet, you can’t.” Dent shook her head dejectedly. “Even *if* I set aside the fact that you’re moving like every bone in your body is broken—which I’m not, largely because many of them technically *are*, I’ll remind you—there’s other considerations to be made now.”

“I can keep Temporal Step under wraps, ma’am,” Rei pressed, considering trying to drop his other arm from Viv, too, but thinking better of it. Despite his words, he felt just shy of falling into a thousand broken pieces. “Not like it’s actually useful in a fight right now.”

“That’s hardly the issue,” Dent shook her head again. “Ward, I appreciate your tenacity—as does your team, I’m sure—but you’re also smart enough to know that things have just changed for you. You leapt from C7 to C9 in one go. That’s unheard of, Cadet.”

“Shido’s done that before...” Viv argued, though she sounded like she knew it was a weak point to stand on. “No one made a big deal about it...”

“That’s only half true,” the captain answered sternly. “And even then only because Cadet Ward was unknown, and his rank wasn’t anything that ever caught the greater public’s eye. That’s not the case anymore.” She looked at Rei. “You’re not some ‘nothing E-Ranker’ who somehow got himself snuck onto the Galens roster anymore, Ward. You’re the Iron Prince, now more than ever. If anything, the fact that you ever *were* a ‘nothing E-Ranker’ in anyone’s eyes is only going to make the realization of what’s been going on with you that much more widespread.” Rei thought he heard Grant shift uncomfortably at his back, but the captain indicated the walkway behind her, along with the empty Arena floor. “I’ll bet you every credit to my name it’s going to be bad enough just getting you back to your seat. If I let you step onto a field and you called Shido right now, it would be a riot. I’m sorry, but even if you were in *peak* condition I’m not sure I would be willing to let you go out there, given the situation.”

The entirety of Firesong was quiet at that, collectively seeing her point. Temporal Step might be the most astounding of Shido’s changes, but it was also the least apparent one. Catcher, Cashe, and Grant had all basically broken down the infirmary door to get to Rei because the stands had been ablaze with the fact that he’d jumped 2 full ranks in one go, nearly landing himself in the Bs as a first-year cadet barely more than half a month into his second semester of school. If he walked—or crawled, more like—out onto the floor and called Shido’s new full-body armor up, the Arena would probably erupt, and not in a good way. And that was if he *didn’t* trigger Phalanx-Mode.

Abruptly, Rei felt like he was standing on the edge of a knife, trying desperately not to slip.

“Does that mean we’re dropping from the Team Battle finals, ma’am?” Cashe asked quietly after a moment of silence, sounding rather disappointed at the prospect.

Dent frowned, looking like she hadn’t considered that.

“... I suppose that *would* be an option,” she admitted after a second. “Not one I’d recommend, though. The rest of you *are* allowed to participate, but you’d be a man down.”

“If Rei isn’t allowed to fight, I’m not getting on that field,” Viv said, maybe more sharply than would have been recommended given who she was addressing.

“Viv...” Grant started up from behind them in warning, but Viv shot him a glare over her shoulder, unable to turn further given she was still holding Rei up.

“No,” she snapped. “This is bullshit. If Rei says he can fight, then he can fight. What does it matter about Shido? What’s he supposed to do, never call it again? What’s happened is going to get out eventually either way, so why worry about it now?”

“Because there is a time and place for this kind of thing to be made known, Arada,” Dent said coolly. “A fact I told Major Reese, and a fact I think you’re already intimately aware of given the circumstance, wouldn’t you say?”

The captain stared at Viv levelly, clearly trying to make her point in as few words as possible. Viv went pink, not missing the woman’s intention—how could she, with one of Shido’s CAD bands resting on her shoulder?—but pushed on anyway.

“And who says this *isn’t* the time and place?? Shouldn’t that be *Rei’s* decision to make? Why does anyone but *him* get to decide—”

“Viv. Ease up.”

Even Rei’s throat was starting to hurt, the words coming out hoarse. Just the same, he did his best to look at her sidelong.

“The captain’s right... The stands are probably a powder keg right now, and showing Shido off would be... not good.”

“Not good at all...” Aria mumbled from his left, the words so quiet and concerned Rei was pretty sure he was the only one who heard her.

“Even setting that aside... I’m talking a big game.” He managed to force his face into a twisted mess of a grin and turn to Viv more fully. “I’m coming apart at the seams.

I *want* to fight—I really do—but I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t be much more than a liability right now.”

Viv’s expression fell, and it took her a second to find her words again.

“Okay, fine then. But I’m still not fighting. If we can’t go out there as a team then we shouldn’t go out there at—”

“Absolutely not.” Rei spoke as firmly as he thought he’d managed since waking up in the infirmary. “You *have* to get out there. All of you.” He did his best to look back at the rest of Firesong. “We’re in the *finals*. Of our first SCTs *ever*. No way I’m gonna let you guys miss that just ’cause I’m dead weight.”

“Hard to consider you dead weight when you’re a third of the reason we’re *in* the finals in the first place, Ward,” Cashe grunted, cocking her head at him like he’d made a bad joke. “But still... Especially if you’re okay with it, I have to agree. I’d rather fight a man down than not fight at all.”

“Seconded,” Grant said, though more quietly than Rei would have expected, and the Mauler turn to Viv. “Viv, Ward *is* a big part of why we’ve gotten this far. I get why you want him to go all the way with us. But even if he can’t, if we don’t at least *try*... Doesn’t that kinda give the finger to all the work he put in to get us here? The work we *all* put in...?”

Viv looked pained at that, and she glanced at Catcher and Aria as though looking for support. The Saber, for his part though, was eyeing Rei.

“You sure that’s what you want?” he asked seriously. “Cause if it’s not, I’m with Viv. Going out there when you’re stuck in the bleachers feels wrong as hell to me.”

Rei nodded. “It’s what I want. I’d feel like crap if you guys got stuck there with me when you could be fighting.”

Catcher watched him a second longer, like he was testing Rei’s resolve, then shrugged and nodded. “Okay. Then I’m for fighting.”

And then all of them, even Dent, turned to Aria. Like Catcher, however, she was watching Rei, and she looked something between disappointed and proud. He was just about to ask her what she was thinking, in fact, when she looked to the captain with wide eyes as she pointed out of the tunnel along the walkway.

“Oh! Ma’am. There’s an officer waving us down over there.”

Dent turned expectantly, looking for whoever it was Aria had seen. In the same moment, Aria bent closer to Rei, and before he could so much as blink she’d kissed him. It was a quick, hurried thing, but when she pulled away she took his arm to give it a squeeze.

“You’re an idiot,” she whispered as Catcher gave a low whistle and Cashe choked back a squeak of surprise. “But you’re the best kind of idiot.”

Then she straightened, standing separated from Rei and his burning face again just as Dent turned back to them with a frown.

“Oh, was he not waving at us?” Aria asked with an innocent smile at the woman. “My apologies. More importantly, though.” She looked suddenly all-too serious. “Firesong will be fighting.”

The cacophony of their appearance was as bad as Valera had feared, and she made a mental note to find and send a bottle of wine to whichever Kenneth upper staff member had had the forethought to leave the supervising ISCM personnel in place even after the Arena had been cleared for activity again. Those officers—lining the walkways and every set of stairs up into the stands—were about all that kept the peace from the moment she and Firesong stepped out from beneath the relative protection of the underworks entrance. The second they were visible to the stadium there was a roar of sound, an eruption of noise that was something altogether different from the boom of

enthusiastic cheering and shouts that usually echoed around the Arena. It was a mix of excitement and confusion, a combination which fueled a fervor that had thousands jumping to their feet in every section as they moved quickly—or as quickly as Ward’s body would allow, even assisted by Laurent and Arada again—towards the Galens seating.

“Ward! Ward! What happened? What’s going on with your Device??”

“C9?? Is it true??”

“Hey Prince! Iron Prince!”

The calls and questions came as an unending barrage with every step. It was fortunate that the bottom aisle of seats were all dedicated to the various schools, but even that only offered a pseudo-buffer from the common spectators. Valera didn’t look, but she also had to pretend she didn’t see the wide eyes of the students from those other institutes as they passed each one in turn, matched all too often by stares from the present chaperones. No one blocked their path, no one reached out to grab them or anything like that, but Valera would have bet it wasn’t for lack of desire.

The secret, after all, was all but out.

Reaching the Galens seating section offered a modicum of peace, at the very least, but only just. Takeshi had apparently had to recruit Samsus into seeing Reese off, because both captains were absent. Fortunately, the women had clearly had the wherewithal not to leave the group completely unattended, as all three third-year squad leaders were standing at ease before their rows, glaring into the group of 50-something students with a warning intensity a drill sergeant would have been proud of. In between Annika Ivanov and Mira Esku, Christopher Lennon stood out at nearly half a foot shorter than either of his compatriots.

It might have been an amusing comparison if most of the nervous glances shot from the seated cadets weren’t reserved exclusively for him.

“There they are!”

Valera didn't see who caught sight of them first, but the shout had every single head among the Galens group turning in their direction well before they reached the section. Managing it at last, however—and still ignoring the cacophony of the rest of the stands—Dent looked back at Firesong.

“Find your seats. There's still time before your match.”

The six first-years all nodded—with the exception of Ward, who just gave a weak jerk of acknowledgement—and started slowly up the stairs towards their aisle. Valera forced herself not to watch them get settled in, wanting to give the appearance of normality as best she could. It was a chore, what with her being the only chaperone left. And the stands being all but on fire around them. *And* Ward moving like he'd been dropped from a building...

Valera sighed internally, but addressed the third-year squad leaders briefly.

“Thank you, you three. I'll make sure to let Colonel Guest and your sub-instructors know how helpful you were once we're back at school. You can take a seat.”

Ivanov and Esku nodded and saluted at once before doing as instructed, but not completely unexpectedly Lennon hesitated to look from her up to where Ward was fighting to edge painfully along the aisle to a seat away from the stairs.

Probably smart, given that even as Valera watched one of the ISCM officers further up in the stands have to give two men firm orders to sit back down as they stood and looked about ready to make a break for the Galens section.

“Ma'am... with all due respect... what the hell is going on?” the Lasher asked of Valera in a low voice.

Another internal sigh.

“Not a question I can answer for you, Cadet,” she answered carefully, raising an eyebrow at him in warning. “At least not in the way you want.”

She'd been training Lennon personally twice a month for most of the last half-year or so—an easy price to pay for a rather large favor he'd done her the previous

semester—and the two of them were close, but there were still lines that couldn't be crossed.

Lennon looked disappointed. “Is he good, at least? Ward?”

What do you think? Valera almost responded, but she bit her tongue at the last minute.

“Probably something you should ask him yourself, Lennon,” she answered more diplomatically. “I'm assuming you saw what happened, just like most everyone else. I wonder if any of us would be ‘good’, don't you?”

Lennon's cheeks lost some of their color at that, then glanced once more at Ward before saluting Valera and moving to find his own seat among the rest of his Steelbound squad. When she was on her own before the students once more, she turned to them all.

“I will be brief,” she growled pointedly, raising her voice just enough for them all to hear over the shouts. “We do not have all the answers to your questions yet, so we will be answering none of them. And by ‘we’, I mean myself, Captains Takeshi and Samsus, *and* Cadets Ward and Laurent.”

She paused to let that sink in, and Satō Yuji raised his hand from beside Candice Meyer.

“Major Reese, ma'am?”

Valera blinked at him. “What about Major Reese, Satō?”

The boy looked abruptly nervous. “You didn't mention him...? And he and Captain Takeshi passed us 10 minutes ago looking... troubled. Takeshi even asked Captain Samsus to join them when she could...”

“Oh. Right.” Valera decided she didn't have the patience left to play the diplomat. “Major Reese has been relieved of his duties as a chaperone for the remainder of this trip. Captains Takeshi and Samsus are seeing him off, and will be returning shortly.”

A dozen mouths fell open in surprise, including Satō's, but Valera didn't give anyone the opportunity to voice so much as a follow-up.

"Each of you saw what happened. At this time we unfortunately do not have additional information to share regarding the first-year Dueling finals *or*—" she very deliberately glared at them all as she pressed her greater point "—Cadet Ward's situation. You are not to hound Ward or Laurent—or any member of team Firesong, for that matter—on the topic. If they want to talk about it, they are at liberty to do so, but that is not your choice to force on them. Is that understood?"

To their credit, these were the best students Galens had to offer. Which meant they were on their game even when they were on edge.

"Yes, ma'am," came the crisp answering chorus from everyone except for Ward and his team.

"Good, now—" with a mix of effort and relief, Dent looked to Lennon, hoping against hope to inject just a little normalcy back into the afternoon "—what have we missed?"

Unsurprisingly, the Lasher had come out victorious from his own finals match, a fight Valera was more than a little disappointed she'd failed to catch. Similarly, the Arena arbiters had apparently made the quiet decision to start the afternoon with the upper-bracket Team Battle match, where Steelbound had come out on top of their final's pairing with Dreadquest, a fight that had only ended all of 20 minutes ago. Valera privately ground her teeth at this news, only then realizing just how much time had been lost to the hack fiasco and subsequent fallout, not to mention Ward and his CAD's situation. She might have bigger things to worry about, but she was still the Chief Combat Instructor of the Galens Institute, and owed it to all her students to play that part well for them. This was the last Sectionals event for her third-years, meaning she'd missed two of what might be among many of their final matches ever. Fortunately most of them would be going on to compete at Globals—and all *three* squads were in the

Wargames final, of course—but she'd be making an extra effort to make it up to them regardless.

She offered her apologies to the students whose fight she'd missed—and thorough congratulations to Lennon and his squad for their collective championships—then confirmed that the upcoming lower- *and* upper-bracket Wargames final were still imminent, coming after the lower-bracket Team Battle match. At that point Reese must have finally caught a flyer back to the hotel, because Takeshi and Samsus reappeared together, taking over supervision of the group with a nod to Valera as the stands—which had been in constant chaos around them—finally started to settle down a bit, even the spectators seated directly above their section seeming to realize they weren't going to get an ounce of attention from the Galens students or their chaperones. It gave Valera the opportunity to turn away from her cadets at last, pretending to look over the Arena as though inspecting the work of the half-dozen Kenneth officers who were running through what was probably the tenth redundant floor inspection since Ward and Laurent's disastrous match.

In reality, however, Valera opened the alerts she'd been ignoring for the last hour, bracing herself as she did.

Sure enough, a wall of blue and red text streamed out before her eyes, and she was glad she was facing the emptiness of the stadium. Anyone who caught a glimpse of *that* in her frame would have definitely looked at her askance, and Valera was now more than ever keen on not looking suspicious.

With the fingers of her right hand wrapped around the rail of the walkway, she typed out her message.

You both seem to forget I'm human. I couldn't read all that in a lifetime. Someone summarize.

Kes was the first to answer. We have been arguing.

About what? Valera asked. *Did you figure out who did this?*

No, the MIND's answer came in red. *But that in-and-of-itself is telling.*

Meaning what?

Meaning that whoever executed this attack not only had access to the Kenneth Arena systems, they knew exactly how to tamper with it in such a way that it would leave no trace for even me to find.

That had Valera's hair standing on end.

Central, she typed out, and the metal of the railing gave a quiet keen of protest under her hand as she momentarily forgot her own strength in anger. *I thought we agreed it was unlikely they'd get involved.*

We did, came the MIND's unexpected answer. *And I hold to that assessment. I am still unsure at this point.*

How are you unsure?!

Because I can find no indication in any of the systems I have access to that any kind of order to tamper with the SCTs was given. Not a one.

Valera paused, at that, her fingers freezing as she considered this implication.

Kes voiced her thoughts for her.

It is the parameter testing all over again, is it not?

Precisely, the MIND answered. *I grow less and less certain that it is Central Command that is involved in these attacks on Reidon Ward, and more suspicious that there may be a rogue element among the hierarchy.*

Someone specific is targeting the kid, Valera summarized, her hands trembling with anger at the very thought. *Who would be insane enough to do that?*

I only have suspicions, the MIND said. *All the evidence we have is circumstantial, and there are hundreds of ranking members of the military acutely aware of Reidon Ward, at this point.*

But how many of them have the power to pull off an attack like this without you knowing about it? Valera asked.

A much less daunting number, the Mind assured her. *In the meantime, I have fortified the Galens Institute SCT systems once more. The vulnerability exploited here has been patched, as have 178 other minor back doors that might have been used later. I'm also assigning .013% of my functionalities in the Astra System to monitoring any field Ward is or will be using. This will not happen again.*

Valera almost coughed in shock. More than a *hundredth* of a percent of the MIND's local capability devoted *just* to this? That might seem like nothing on paper, but that was an *enormous* amount of energy being allocated for one User's protection. Then again, the kid had very nearly died this time...

And if he was indeed the key to everything...

A good choice, Valera agreed. *Secoded. I wish I could tell him that. It would probably make it easier for him to step onto the field...*

The time will come, the MIND answered. *But Reidon Ward has enough secrets on his plate at the moment without bearing that burden too. And once he's aware of me...*

He'll want to know the rest, Valera finished the AI's hanging implication with a nod. *Yes. I'm aware.*

Kes chose that moment to pop in again. *Which highlights my point, I believe.*

Valera frowned, not understanding, now pretending to watch the officers clearing off the Arena floor. Before she could word her confusion, however, the MIND responded.

It is not the time. As I have stated.

I disagree, Kes' response was instantaneous. If anything it is the ideal time.

My calculations have the chances of their team bonds surviving at 82.3%. That is not an ideal likelihood.

And mine have a survival rate of 94.4%. And while you may know how many liters of water evaporate from Mar's oceans every microsecond, I have more data compiled on this subject.

Valera was blinking rapidly, then, as the wall of text started flying up her frame again, too fast for her to ingest even when she triggered her Cognition to try. The two intelligences were arguing again, and it would have been amusing to witness in any other circumstances. They had no need to present their volleying in any visually digestible medium—they could have just fought back and forth with data packets, and probably faster—which meant they were doing so for her benefit.

Forgetting once again that she was only human.

STOP, she typed out in aggravation. *I can't follow what you're talking about.*

The wall of text ceased abruptly, and there was a fraction of a second's pause that said both parties were calculating the best way to summarize their argument for her.

Kes' local processing won out.

Reidon Ward requires support. More than you can provide him. More than he has.

Valera raised an eyebrow at that, not expecting this. She considered it, then frowned.

You're referring to the Kamiya offer? she asked tentatively.

I am not. Another surprising answer. *Though that is an option I believe we may wish to consider soon. No. Rather, it is my belief that it is time Ward bring the remainder of Firesong into the fold.*

Valera went quiet at that. She didn't notice the MIND reenter the conversation, nor the argument restarting between the two. Instead, Valera looked over her shoulder, finding Firesong in the third row. Catchwick and Arada were having a hushed, hurried conversation—though whether discussing the coming fight or Shido's most recent absurdities, she didn't know—and Laurent was watching Ward in concern as she held one of his hands in both of hers in her lap, the boy himself leaning back into his projected seat with closed eyes and a permanent grimace of discomfort. But it wasn't these four that Valera watched most carefully, for once. Not this time.

This time, it was Logan Grant and Chancery Cashe she studied, making note of the Mauler's dark expression and the Lancer's stiff shoulders and apparent inability to blink as she stared off into space. The pair might have voted in favor of fighting, but Valera was quite sure the upcoming Team Battle was the last thing on either of their minds, in the moment...

Not that you can blame them...

With a strained smirk, under her breath Valera interrupted Kel and the MIND's continued back and forth out loud.

“I don't think either of you need to be arguing. I'm pretty sure *that* bird has all but flown the coop already...”

CHAPTER 45

“We’re still in touch. I consider him a great friend. He was a groomsman at our wedding—the pictures are funny to compare to our school days, seeing him standing taller than most of the other guys now—and he was one of the first people to call to congratulate us when Alan was born. Even took the time to stop in at the hospital on Earth to see how Dice and I were doing.

I’ve said before that thinking back on it is a bit surreal, given who he’s become, but I think I should have picked my words more carefully. At the end of the day, you have to remember that he’s just a guy, people. Just a person like me, just like you, just like anyone one of us...”

*- Christopher “Lasher” Lennon,
S-Rank Knight-Class*

Aria beside him and Viv and Catcher’s whispered back and forth at his elbow had been more comforting to Rei than he’d realized, because when they left all that remained to him was the pain. He’d barely managed a smile when Takeshi had called up to the first-years to let both Firesong and Valormade know it was time to get ready for their Team Battle finals, and even got a “Good luck” out to both his team and Vademe’s. Aria and the others only tentatively departed—with even Grant looking hesitant to leave him there on his own—and the Lancer’s group sidled by pretending not to be giving him sidelong glances every chance they could. When they were all gone, Rei was left in a gap in the seats, empty bench all the way to the stairs at his right, and even more space between him and where Martin’s Red Crown was similarly shooting him surreptitious looks to his left. He would have liked to say he didn’t mind the solitude, but he’d have been lying to himself.

Left to his own devices, his body—not for the first time in his life—felt like it was out to kill him.

He'd asked too much of it, he knew, thinking about the trip down to the sub-basement. But what the hell could he have done otherwise? It wasn't like he wouldn't have noticed the evolution and new Abilities himself, much less since the ISCM had apparently known about them both even before he'd noticed. Hell, even the *civilians* in the stands hadn't missed his rank jump. Rei wouldn't have had much of a choice in the matter even if *he* hadn't been the one begging for a chance to get back out on the field in the first place.

Still... Did his willpower have to punish him so damn *much*?

He shifted slightly in his seat, that minute attempt to get a little more comfortable drawing a groan from him he couldn't help. Everything was on fire. Everything was either broken or torn or bruised, and on fire. Those S-Rank hits had been no joke, and Rei felt a queasiness that had nothing to do with some lingering Temporal Step-related nausea squeezing his stomach. He gave up, then, deciding that—at least until his squadmates were called to the field—he'd let himself slip away, let himself slide back into that dark, quiet place he'd gone to so often before Shido had been assigned to him, where the world—and the pain—couldn't reach him. It was better than passing out at the very least, and *way* better than sitting there stewing in his own misery.

Unfortunately, Rei wasn't given the chance to drift away.

There was a *thump* of someone sitting down beside him, and he started painfully, opening his eyes and blinking against the brightness of the Arena light. He looked around a little blearily, wondering if maybe one of the other first-years had come to keep him company, or even if he'd have to argue with a stubborn Viv that *yes*, she *did* actually have to get off her ass and go and fight. The latter might have been an unlikely sight, sure, but it was about a thousand times more plausible than the reality.

Next to him, his silvery eyes placid and cold, was none other than Anatoli Sidorov.

“Ward,” Sidorov said flatly, as though this sufficed as a greeting. “How goes the basking in the spotlight? Again.”

Rei was so taken aback by this question he spent a solid few seconds just staring at the broad-shouldered second-year.

“S-sorry?” he finally spluttered, completely at a loss.

“Don’t be coy, first-year.” Sidorov’s voice was low, his lips a flat, unamused line that had the hair on Rei’s arms standing on end. “You’ve been the golden boy of the Galens Institute for a while now. Must be nice.”

Rei couldn’t have been more confused if he’d opened his eyes to find that he’d accidentally Temporal Stepped himself into some medieval fantasy world. He glanced around to find both Dent and Samsus gone—probably off with Aria and the others—and Takeshi cleverly engaged with her back to him by the rest of Sidorov’s King’s Law, all of which only served to alarm Rei further. “Golden boy”? *Him?* Ever since the Intra-Schools maybe it was true that there wasn’t anyone left in his class that didn’t take him seriously, but given what *most* of the first semester at the Institute had been like, calling him “Golden boy” seemed a little out of touch...

Then and there, staring at Sidorov with wide eyes as he tried to figure out what the hell was going on, Rei finally decided he didn’t like the second-year.

Not one bit.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Rei got out at last, and he was pleased to hear that his voice had steadied. The jolt of adrenaline that had come with finding the ace of the second-years seated next to him had taken the edge off his pain, too, so he was able to glare back at Sidorov in turn. “Actually, let me rephrase that. *What* are you talking about?”

Sidorov’s expression didn’t change.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about, Ward.” The cool tone of his voice had taken on an icy edge. “You’ve got everyone wrapped around your little finger, don’t

you? Laurent, Dent, the colonel. I've heard a rumor you're even getting special instruction from the sub-instructors once we get back to school. That true?"

"And what's it to you if it is?" Rei asked flatly.

Sidorov didn't answer. Instead, he looked Rei up and down, his eyes lingering momentarily on Shido's paired bands.

"That CAD... You really won the lottery, didn't you? How the hell did you get assigned something like that? What did you say in the third portion of the exam?"

The hair on Rei's arms stood on end at that, and this time for an altogether different reason. He wasn't surprised in the least that Sidorov was assigning Shido all the credit for his meteoric rise. Rei was used to that and then some, and it would take willful ignorance at this point for people not to start whispering that there was something special going on about Device. No. Rather, it was Sidorov's last question that was toeing a dangerous line.

A very dangerous line...

"Third part of the assignment exam isn't something we talk about," he said slowly, watching Sidorov's apathetic face. The second-year's expression could have been made of stone, though, for all he reacted.

"The MIND's not gonna swoop in and take your CAD back because you let something slip about the test, Ward. Users are too valuable to get the boot for something like that, especially cadets like us."

Rei raised an eyebrow at that. "Cadets like us..." he repeated carefully. "Wanna tell me what that means, Sidorov...?"

Again, however, the Lancer didn't even flinch. Not a hint of a frown, of a smile, of pride or shame. He just... looked. Like a statue. A very dangerous, very *close*, statue.

"Some things don't have to be spelled out," he answered after a moment. "But I think you're smart enough to know what I mean. And you didn't answer my question. What did you say to get assigned that CAD?"

“I didn’t answer your questions because I’m not *going* to answer your question. What’s your baggage, man?” Rei forced himself to sit up straight, working hard not to wince in discomfort at the movement. “You’ve got balls to be ignoring Dent’s orders, I’ll give you that.”

“What orders?” Sidorov asked flatly. “We’re just not allowed to ask you about what happened out there.” He waved a hand lazily over where the rest of his squad was still keeping Takeshi distracted, indicating the still-empty Arena floor. “Didn’t mention anything about that particular subject, did I?”

“That’s a thin argument,” Rei growled.

Again, Sidorov didn’t react. It was like the guy didn’t know what emotion was, like the only thing that mattered to him was what was directly in front of him. Sure enough, he opened his mouth, undoubtedly about to push further for an answer.

Then, though, he froze, and for the first time his expression changed just a little as something on Rei’s other side claimed his attention. His eyes narrowed ever so slightly, and his whole body tensed as though involuntarily.

Before Rei could look around to see what had taken the second-year so aback, a familiar voice spoke up from his left, and he understood immediately what had put the Lancer on edge.

“You’re in my seat, Sidorov. Move.”

Rei turned, the agony of that motion utterly worth the relief at finding Christopher Lennon standing there. He wasn’t alone, either, with Candice Meyer standing just behind him. Neither of the two third-years’ attention was on Rei, though. Instead, both were leveled evenly on Sidorov, and Rei was surprised to find something like disdain in their matching expressions.

How the hell they had gotten there, he wasn’t sure, but by the ruffled shifting of the second-years in the row below them, Rei thought the pair might have *literally* jumped to intervene.

“We’re just having a conversation, Lennon,” Sidorov said smoothly. He might have reacted the slightest bit to the older students’ appearance, but to his credit his voice didn’t so much as waver. “Nothing for you to worry about.”

“Anything to do with you is something to worry about,” Meyer said sweetly, bending around the Lasher to give the second-year a razor-sharp smile. “Or are you under the impression people actually like you for your charm, dude?”

There might have been—just *maybe*—a hint of an annoyed twitch in one of Sidorov’s cheeks. “People like me because I’m good. I don’t care about anything else.”

“Yeah, we’re aware.” It was Lennon who answered this time, having never looked away from the Lasher. “Just like we’re aware of just how *much* you care about that.”

Sidorov’s eyes flicked from Meyer to the Lasher. “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

Lennon grinned, then, and once more Rei felt a chill. It wasn’t the calm, pleasant smile the A-Type usually sported out and about, seen between matches or on the transport or in the hotel dining room where the Galens students had all been eating together for the last week. Instead, it was a devilish, dangerous look, all teeth and no mirth, and Rei once more could only see the A8-Ranked monster so cleverly disguised in the boy’s slighter frame.

“What was that you told Ward just now?” the Lasher asked, one hand gesturing at Rei with slow precision, like the calculated movement of a stalking predator. ““Some things don’t need to be spelled out?”” And then the monster was gone, replaced by the softer smile of Christopher Lennon as the third-year plopped himself down to sit next to Rei, right where Viv had been a minute or two before. “Don’t be an idiot, Sidorov. Walk away.”

For a moment the second-year didn’t move, just like he didn’t look away from Lennon with that empty, hollow gaze. Rei couldn’t even begin to guess what the guy was thinking, no more than he could have guessed what any of those S0 sparring

holograms had been thinking when they'd appeared one after the other from their red starting circles.

Then, though, Sidorov was gone, standing and striding swiftly off so abruptly he might as well have been a machine acting on some mathematical decision that had just clicked into place.

“Man, what a *creep*,” Candice Meyer muttered, sliding by Lennon and Rei both before dusting off the spot where Aria had been on his right and sitting down. “Every time I look him in the eye it’s like I’m staring at one of those freaky antique porcelain dolls at my grandmother’s house.”

“Oh I *hate* those things,” Lennon snorted, leaning back and crossing one leg over the other. “Dice, I love you, and you *know* I love your gran, but if we never *ever* go back to that place I would be 110% okay with that.”

“But Paris is so pretty! And you can get anywhere on Earth from there in like an hour!”

“Sure, but we could also go and stay in a house that was built *after* they invented electricity, and maybe even has more than *one* functioning bathr—”

“Uh... Sorry to cut.” Rei painfully raised a hand as best he could, as lost now as he had been when Sidorov had all but appeared out of thin air. “Paris sounds great and all... but what the hell was that about?”

Lennon and Meyer both tried to hold onto their casual cheer for a moment, like they could ignore what had just happened and keep on talking bubbly nonsense until Rei forgot about it.

Then their expressions darkened together, and Dice leaned back into the projection seating to cross her arms.

“Ward, do yourself a favor and stay away from Anatoli Sidorov. Okay?”

“Okay...?” Rei hesitated as he answered, trying his best to turn his head as little as possible to look from the girl to Lennon questioningly.

The Lasher frowned, offering up half a shrug as he agreed. “What she said. Sidorov isn’t worth your time, man. Especially not anymore, if he ever was.” Lennon’s eyed Shido’s bands sidelong to make his point.

Rei didn’t miss the implication, but it seemed like a premature opinion.

“The guy’s an A-Ranked *second-year*...” he muttered. “And even if that wasn’t true, doesn’t seem like he’d be keen on just letting me ignore him. What’s his deal? I’ve been getting the feeling he doesn’t like me all week.”

Dice snorted. “Cause he *doesn’t* like you. And probably for the same reasons he doesn’t like Chris.”

It took Rei a second to figure out who the girl was talking about. It felt odd, somehow, for anyone to address *Christopher Lennon* so casually, somehow, in the same way it would have been odd to hear Dice call Captain Dent “Valera” to her face.

Then again, Rei would have felt like a bit of an idiot if he went around calling Aria “Laurent” all the time, he supposed...

“Yeah... I got the feeling he wasn’t your biggest fan...” he said instead, looking at Lennon again. “Hasn’t been for a minute, actually. What’s that about? And what’s it got to do with me?”

The Lasher grimaced slightly, looking like he was thinking over his words. After a second he, too, crossed his arms. “Sidorov’s... a little off,” he said diplomatically. “You wouldn’t think so based on how he acts on the field, but he likes the glory.”

Rei frowned. “Of the SCTs? How is that stra—?”

“No, you don’t get it.” Lennon looked at Rei with both eyebrows raised, clearly wanting to drive the point home. “He *really* likes the glory.”

“Oh...” was all Rei could say, starting to catch on.

“The guy is obsessed,” Dice grumbled from his other side. “He was always a bit much, but after he won the first-year bracket last year, rumor is it got pretty overboard. Leveraging the other second-years to help him train. Bullying the better ones into

forming groups with him in and out of class.” She sucked on her teeth. “Did you notice how his squad was keeping Takeshi busy? Classic Sidorov move.”

“The hell?” Rei blinked around at the end of the second-year row below him, where the Lancer and the rest of King’s Law had taken to their seats again to sit in silence, not even looking at each other. “What is he? Some kind of mafia boss?”

“Worse,” Lennon answered with a sigh. “He’s a narcissist.”

And then Rei was sure of it.

“He thinks I’m gonna take the spotlight,” he said, considering it. “Especially after—” He stopped though, realizing he was about to say too much. On either side of him the two third-years looked at him sidelong, but didn’t press. “That’s why he doesn’t like you,” Rei continued instead, ignoring the ache in his neck to turn to Lennon again. “He’s in your shadow.”

The Lasher nodded. “I’d go so far as to say he hates me for it, actually.” His blue eyes were on the back of Sidorov’s head. “Never really cared, though. He’s got half the school fawning over him even *with* me around, and he was going to have his chance to shine next year.”

“Keyword being ‘was,’” Dice muttered darkly.

“Yuuuup...” Lennon agreed.

And then both of them turned to stare pointedly at Rei, who immediately felt the blood rush to his ears.

He didn’t bother denying their mirrored implication. It was too late for that, now. Shido had leapt from C7 to C9 all too publicly, and the minute the world caught wind of the Device’s full-body evolution the news would only spread further and faster. And that wasn’t even counting what would happen once the feeds learned he’d not only seen an upgrade to his first User-Unique Ability, but also gained a *second*. On the other hand, Lennon and Dice’s deliberate looks drove the pair’s meaning very firmly home, making

Rei realize there was an aspect to his growth he'd never considered. The attention he'd expected. The hate he'd expected. The disbelief, even, he'd expected.

But *jealousy*... Jealousy was something he hadn't put much thought into.

"Ah, *dammit*," Rei grunted, letting his head fall back to the projected seat and closing his eyes again, half to curse himself in silence for not considering it, half to try and ignore the continued protests of his every motion.

Lennon chuckled humorlessly at his left. "Don't tell me you thought everything was gonna be hunky-dory after Shido pulled *that* bullshit this morning."

"Not even close," Rei grunted in answer. "But I didn't think I'd be getting Anatoli-friggin'-*Sidorov* sicced on me because of it. How is *that* fair??"

"Probably the same question Sidorov is asking himself, Ward," Meyer pointed out. "And the rest of us too, to a certain extent."

Rei opened his eyes to look at her sideways with a frown, and Lennon leaned around him to glare at his girlfriend. Meyer rolled her eyes and waved a hand between them as though to clear the air.

"Don't make me the bad guy here. I'm just saying it like it is. And—" she narrowed her eyes at Lennon "—he needs to hear it from someone who doesn't have skin in the game, don't you think?"

It didn't take more than half a second before Lennon crumpled a little under that scowl, nodding with his own grunt, as though to confirm something he would rather not have had to.

"Ward," Meyer kept on, and her gaze was kinder as she turned to Rei. "I don't know what's going on with you and your CAD—not any more than anyone else does at this point, at least—but whatever's happening... Sidorov is gonna be the *least* of your worries."

“He already is,” Rei grumbled, raising one finger to point limply at the Arena. “Don’t know if you missed me getting turned into a pin-cushion or not, but Sidorov getting in my face doesn’t really compare...”

He’d meant it as a joke, but the girl’s expression fell.

“That was awful,” she said quietly. Then, for some reason, she looked past him to her boyfriend. “If only *someone*—maybe a *friend of yours*—would check on you. Maybe *see how you’re doing after that?*”

Rei blinked at her, then looked around at the Lasher again, who—for the first time Rei could ever recall—looked ever so slightly awkward as he squirmed a little in his seat.

“I was *getting to that*,” he insisted, sitting up straight and brushing a couple grey locks out of his eyes in a way that was all too obviously a play for time. “Not my fault Sidorov decided to make himself the center of conversation there.”

“Chris was worried about you,” Meyer explained as a still-confused Rei glanced between the two of them. “It’s the reason we were coming up to sit with you. But then we saw Sidorov and... well...” She gestured towards the second-year row in annoyance as though to say “We... expedited our visit.”

“O-oh,” Rei stuttered, a little embarrassed too as he turned back to Lennon, who was resolutely looking anywhere but right at him. “I’m good, though. I’m fi—”

But then the Lasher *was* looking at him, cutting him off.

“No. Don’t do that.”

Rei stopped talking, his mouth closing with a quiet *click*. Wow, even his damn *teeth* hurt. He didn’t say anything more, though, as Lennon continued to stare him down.

“You’re pretty damn far from being ‘good’, man,” the third-year growled. “So don’t bullshit me. I’m not gonna ask you what happened—Dent already shut me down directly when I asked *her*—but don’t forget who was there the last time something crazy happened with your CAD. You don’t have to tell me what’s going on, but you also *don’t* get to tell me you’re ‘fine’. Understood?”

“Chris...” Meyer started quietly, but Lennon staved her off with a shake of his head. He didn’t say anything more, though, and just looked at Rei instead, waiting.

That was the moment a particularly nasty twinge of pain decided to race up Rei’s back, which had him caving pretty quickly.

“Yeah... Okay,” he got out after he’d managed to unlock his clenched jaw. “Maybe I’m not so great. Those projections... They messed me up pretty good.”

“No shit,” Lennon snarled, his expression starting to border on anger. “You got *attacked*, Ward. In broad daylight. I don’t think there’s anyone in this Arena who could have come out of that in one piece.”

“I sure as hell didn’t,” Rei agreed with another wince as his head throbbed, this time. “Dent pulled me from the Team Battle, actually. Guess that’s obvious, though...”

“Little bit,” Meyer agreed. “I’m surprised she hasn’t sent you back to the hotel...”

“He wouldn’t go even if she did,” Lennon said with a dry snort. “And there’s only her, Takeshi, and Samsus left to chaperone, now that Reese is... uh... gone...”

He let the sentence trail, looking like he realized he was getting close to a dangerous subject, and turned to face the Arena again. On Rei’s other side Meyer looked the pair of them up and down in concern.

And Rei realized he had a decision to make.

It wasn’t a hard one, to be fair. Meyer being there complicated things a little bit, since he barely knew her, but it didn’t take long for him to decide he trusted Lennon enough to have faith in turn in the people *Lennon* trusted. And the two *had* helped him just now, maybe even in a bigger way than he was yet aware of.

And so Rei decided.

“Yeah... About Reese...” he sighed. “That’s my fault too... kinda.”

The two third-years both looked around sharply, all attention and not a word spoken by either, offering him a silent invite to keep talking.

And Rei took it.

He didn't tell them everything. He kept Shido's Growth spec to himself, and he didn't go into the details of what had happened when he'd triggered Temporal Step, but the rest he laid all out for them. The jump to C9. Shido's evolution. The change and upgrade to Type Shift and his new Ability. He told them, too, about his brief talk with the Kenneth Academy higher ups, then about the clash Dent and Reese had had that ended with the major's dismissal from his role as chaperone.

By the time he finished quietly filling the pair in, Lennon had slumped to a slump in his seat with both hands brought up to massage his temples, and if Meyer's mouth had hung open any wider Rei was pretty sure it would have been a world record.

"You're joking..." the girl got out after a pause, repeating herself for maybe the fifteenth time since Rei started talking. "You've got to be joking..."

He settled it all in one go, pulling up a spec request and screenshotting his Ability listings—and *only* his Ability listings—before sharing it with the pair of them. Lennon—who was on his *second* rodeo with Shido now—only muttered something like "Not even surprised anymore..." under his breath, but Meyer looked like she'd stopped breathing altogether as she gaped at her NOED display.

"Ward... This is *insane*..." she hissed after a little while.

"Yeah," Rei nodded gingerly. "Believe me, you're not the first person to say that."

Meyer's attention sharpened at that, and she looked cautiously through her frame at him. "... Meaning other people know about this?"

Rei nodded again. "Viv's known forever. Catcher too, at this point, and Aria for a while as well. Plus Grant and Cashe were downstairs when we tested everything, so the cat's kinda out of the bag..."

"Honestly, that's for the best," Lennon grunted from Rei's other side, finally seeming to shake himself back to normal and sitting up again. "Secrets can tear a squad apart, so I'm glad the rest of them know. Still..." He turned to glare at Rei. "You're keeping this to yourself otherwise, right? *Right?*"

Rei didn't need the warning, but he appreciated it. It made him feel like Dent had probably made the right call to pull him from the Team Battle, as had he in not fighting her harder on it in the end.

"Yeah. That's half the reason I'm here." He gestured at the seat stiffly. "The Bishop was worried what would happen if I called on Shido right now."

"Full-body?" Meyer asked like she needed confirmation, still sounding half-stunned. "Like... top-to-bottom full-body?"

"Almost. Top of my head's still uncovered."

The girl turned to fall back heavily against her projection seating. "*Still*. As a *first-year*?"

"His age is less alarming than his rank," Lennon muttered. "Setting aside the jump, a full-body CAD—even *almost* full-body—as a C-Rank is unheard of... I don't know anyone but you who's ever even *started* to develop facial armor before the Bs, and now *this*?"

A thought struck Rei, then, a realization. There was, in fact, one more thing he'd forgotten to mention. He squirmed a little, trying to figure out how to tell the two, when Meyer noticed his fidgeting.

"Waaard?" she asked suspiciously. "What is it?"

Rei trying for a guilty smile, but only managed a wince. "I... uh... I might have forgotten to tell you guys something. Maybe..."

Lennon's blue eyes narrowed, now, looking equally wary. "What? What did you forget?"

Rei shrank down in his seat a little. "Soooo... the thing is... Speaking of facial armor and ridiculous CAD changes and stuff... It's not a *huge* deal, so don't get mad. But Aria—"

Before he could finish, though, the lights in the Arena suddenly dimmed. The fervor of the stands—which had never really fallen below a low boil—abruptly spiked,

and the crowd began to shout and yell in anticipation even before the announcer's voice came on through the dark.

“Ladies and gentlemen! We appreciate your patience, and apologize for the delay! We know many of you have come far and wide to see the best of our students going head to head, and it is our *great* pleasure to present to you the very future of the SCTs! Without further ado... THE FIRST YEAR TEAM BATTLE FINALS WILL BEGIN!”

There was a roar from the crowd, and two wide columns of light descended from the ceiling straight down to highlight the still-closed underworks doors on either side of the north Team Battle area. On the floor itself, color pulsed into life, the outline of the 70-yard field rippling white as twelve smaller red circles, six to either side, appeared in two mirrored lines, their crimson outlines shifting and rolling.

If nothing else, the ISCM sure as hell knew how to put on a show.

“What was that?” Meyer had to yell over the shouting, her features hard to make out in the sudden dark. “I didn’t hear that last thing you said!”

“Never mind!” Rei called back to her and the Lasher both just before the announcer began to speak once more. “Just watch!”

CHAPTER 46

“People talk all the time about the Stormweaver like he’s the only scary User out there, these days. I never really got that. Can you imagine how good you have to be to be a part of Reidon Ward’s squad? And he’s not even the leader!

It might be an unpopular opinion, but I don’t care that the guy could raze a country if he really wanted to. Firesong as a whole is a hell of a lot more impressive together than the Stormweaver is alone...”

-Jordy “Blitzer” Corban

Former SCT Combatant

Content Creator and Feed Streamer

Try as he might, Logan just couldn’t get his head on straight.

He tried everything. He tried focusing on the fight ahead. He tried catching Viv’s eye. He tried to steal a second to talk to Cashe, and even went so far as to exchange some mumbled small talk with Catchwick about how empty the underworks felt now. Logan even eventually gave in and settled on taking a shot at some more of Captain Forester’s breathing techniques. They worked well enough for his anger management, so why not this? Right?

Unfortunately, even that tried and true method failed Logan in the end.

He just couldn’t wrap his head around what was going on...

Actually... that wasn’t entirely accurate. The fact was that—despite what some people had always assumed about him growing up, big as he was—Logan was anything but stupid. He knew—*knew*, now—what was happening with Ward, about as certainly as he knew the weight of Honoris’ steel-and-vysetrium bands around his wrists and the

feel of the cool ramp wall at his back. Cashe too, he suspected, given the few private words they'd manage to steal while the others had been otherwise preoccupied. And that was the problem.

Logan just couldn't wrap his head around what he *knew* was going on...

Unbelievable, was the only word that kept coming to mind, the same thought that had repeated itself like a broken script since he'd seen Ward summon Shido's new full-body armor. *Unbelievable. Unbelievable. Unbel—*

“Grant.”

Logan blinked and looked up, surprised. Laurent stood before him, one hand on her hip, the other picking nervously at the thigh hem of her combat suit. In the dim lighting of the underworks ramp her expression was only just discernible, and Logan was a little alarmed to find the girl watching him with what might have been... concern?

Even less expected, though, were her next words.

“I know it's a lot... Trust me, I do. And I know you have questions. Both of you.” She glanced to Logan's right, where Cashe was watching the pair of them from the wall just a step up the tunnel. “But this isn't the moment to get bogged down by what... by what you don't understand.”

“Easy for you to say...” the Lancer muttered, looking away again. She didn't sound angry, or even upset. She just sounded... confused.

If he'd been more like Catchwick, Grant thought he might have yelled “Right there with you, girlfriend!” at the top of his lungs.

“Fair,” Laurent answered Cashe more evenly, her fidgeting ending as she appeared to find her confidence when neither of them started immediately yelling foul. “Obviously Viv, Catcher, and I are somewhat up to speed, so I'm a little more clear-headed than you two. But still—” she lifted a hand to point up the ramp, towards the west doors that led out onto the Arena floor “—do you really want to go out there in the state we're in right now? We're all off-balance—maybe for our own individual

reasons, sure—but we said we’d fight. And to do that, I need you guys to be present. I need you both *here*.”

Neither Logan nor Cashe had anything to say to that.

Laurent sighed, then glanced over her shoulder. Catchwick was watching her from the other side of the ramp, and even Viv had lifted her gaze from the floor to take in the exchange warily. Laurent hesitated, chewing on her lip for a second as she took in the pair, then turned back to Logan and Cashe.

“I know what’s going on with Rei. *Exactly* what’s going on. So do Viv and Catcher.”

Logan blinked at that, and the Lancer beside him stiffened. Behind Laurent, Viv stepped away from the wall with a low snarl, and Catcher’s “Ariaaa…” was soft, like he was gently warning her against saying more.

She ignored them both.

“It’s not for me to tell you,” Laurent kept on. “Not for any of us to tell you. But we’ve been training together for months now. All *six* of us. I hope, at the very least, that you’ll believe me when I say there’s a *very* good reason the two of you haven’t been brought into the loop yet. Rei’s not holding back because it’s fun, or because it’s easy. If anything, the longer this all goes on, the harder it is on him to keep certain things to himself.”

Logan stopped himself from raising an eyebrow, having not missed the most important detail in Laurent’s statement.

Just like Cashe hadn’t.

“‘Yet?’” the Lancer repeated cautiously. “There’s a very good reason we haven’t been brought into the loop ‘yet?’ That implies there’s a chance we’re going to be, Laurent…”

Laurent nodded, not looking back again at where Viv and Catcher still stood tense. “Like I said, it’s not for me to tell. *But*—” she hurried on as Cashe opened her mouth to argue “—that doesn’t mean I don’t think you guys should know.”

Logan pulled away on the wall slightly, then, as did the Lancer beside him. Before he could get a word out, however, Viv had stepped forward to grab Laurent by the arm, half pulling the girl around to face her.

“What the *hell* are you doing, Aria?!” she growled, teeth all but bared.

“What I think I need to,” Aria answered back smoothly, not even trying to free herself from Viv’s grasp. On the contrary, she brought a hand up to rest gently on her friend’s gripping fingers. “Viv... the sub-basement... After that, you don’t think there’s no going back...?”

“What *I* think doesn’t matter two shits,” Viv answered, but her tone was mollified. “It’s not up to me *or* you to decide who gets told what. It’s up to *Rei*.”

Logan felt a sting at that, looking at his girlfriend, but he’d been getting better at handling those flares of whatever emotion they were—jealousy, probably, when it came to Ward—so he brushed it aside.

“And I *agree*,” Aria answered calmly, her hand still resting on Viv’s. “Completely. I do. But I hope you’re not going to pretend that what’s happening is still something we can brush off. Like ‘Rei’s just catching up’, or some crap like that? Look at them.” She finally lifted her hand to gesture towards Logan and Cashe. “Even the *stands* were in an uproar because of Shido. Do you think *they* don’t realize? Do you think *they* don’t understand?”

Viv wasn’t backing down, though.

“Then Rei can talk about it *in his own time*.”

“Viv... he’s out of time.”

But it wasn’t Laurent who’d answered.

It was Catchwick.

As all eyes turned towards the Saber in surprise, the blond boy lifted a hand to scratch awkwardly at the back of his head, grimacing in discomfort under their collective eyes. It didn’t stop him from pressing on, however.

“Viv, I hear what you’re saying. I do, and I agree too. But... The dam is breaking. Little by little. Has been for months. And today was a big, *big* crack.” His expression was pained as he gestured towards Logan and Cashe. “People are going to figure it out—people probably already *have*, to some extent—and there’s gonna be a point where Rei’s going to have to make a choice about what he says and who he says it to.”

“He’s had to make that choice longer than either of you know,” Viv snapped, finally dropping her grip on Laurent’s arm to turn on the Saber. “From the start he’s had to make that choice, Catcher. From the *start*.”

“Okay, yeah. He has. To a degree. But Viv... Like Aria said, you can’t tell me things aren’t different now? Even without Rei stepping out onto that field with us and the Arena *exploding* when he would have called on Shido, you can’t tell me that things are very, *very* different now?” Catchwick nodded towards Logan and Cashe again. “Rei is going to have to start letting people in on what’s going on. He *has* to.”

“Why?” Viv insisted, but she sounded more sad than angry now. “*Why* does he have to, Catcher? Do you not get it? Do you not *get* what will happen when it gets out that...?”

But she trailed off, her fists tight by her sides, shoulders shaking slightly as her gaze dropped helplessly to the ground.

Catchwick hesitated—glancing uncertainly at Logan—then stepped forward and gently took Viv by both arms.

“Viv... I *do*.” The Saber was crouching a little to try to peer under the curtain of Viv’s curled hair that now hung over her face. “Maybe not as well as you, but I *do*. And that’s *why* I’m saying he’s out of time. When it gets out—’cause it’s *gonna get out*—what’s Rei supposed to do? Lean on the three of us for all eternity? How’s that gonna work out?”

Viv didn't answer, her shaking only getting worse in Catchwick's hands. Logan's heart hurt looking at her, but he stopped himself from stepping forward, stopped himself from pulling the girl slowly from the Saber's grasp to comfort her himself.

This was necessary. Even if he didn't know what was going on for a fact, he knew at the very least that this was necessary.

"He's going to need more than us..." Laurent reentered the conversation, moving over to Viv and Catchwick to place a hand lightly on Viv's back. "And if he can't trust them... who else is he going to trust, Viv...?"

For some reason, the words had an effect on Logan. At once a sudden warming of delight in his gut, and a sinking chill down his spine. It made him happy, he realized. Aria Laurent, insisting that he was worthy of her—of *their*—trust. It made him so, *so* happy.

But it hurt, thinking about why it made him that happy, about the hole he'd dug himself that even just being worthy of said trust was enough to make him feel so elated.

And what was more... He wasn't all that sure he deserved it...

"If you want to tell Ward he needs to come clean, I can't stop you..." The words fell from Logan's mouth before he could stop himself. "But it's gotta be his decision. *Entirely*, his decision."

It was like time stopped. Laurent, Catchwick, and even Viv froze, shocked, while it took a full 3 seconds for Cashe to turn to him, eyes wide and ablaze. "What are you doing, Grant??" those eyes said, but Logan could only keep right on.

"Cashe and I aren't stupid," he said as he stepped further away from the wall. "I would bet Honoris that we could tell you what's going on with Ward now, at least in broad strokes. But if I'm right—" he did reach out to Viv now, taking her by the shoulders and pulling her carefully away from the other two, turning her towards him as he did "—then it's really not something anyone but him has the right to share, is it?"

He brought his other hand up under Viv's hair, cupping her cheek and lifting her face up lightly so he could look at her. She didn't fight him, but she didn't meet his eyes either. Her skin was wet under his fingers, and he brushed the tears from one cheek carefully with his thumb as he waited. After a second she finally met his gaze, and it was incredible to see the conflicted emotions there. The anger—the ever-present fire that he'd been so attracted to in the first place—colliding with something that he could only describe as heartbreak. No... Actually...

Grief, Logan realized.

He didn't say anything, waiting still.

Until she nodded slowly into his hand.

“You two,” he brought Viv's head to his chest so she could shake against him, looking over her at Laurent and Catcher. “I appreciate what you're saying. More than you know. Frankly, while I think Cashe definitely deserves your trust, I'm having a harder time saying the same thing about myself. But if you feel that way, it's not like I'm going to tell you otherwise. But—” he could feel Viv's tears soaking through his combat suit “—it's *got* to be Ward's decision. Completely. He shouldn't feel like he *has* to tell us, even if it's only minimally so because that's what you want. What's going on with him... If I'm right, then Ward's only ever got one shot to tell that kind of secret when he decides to, and it's an important shot. If he feels anything but *100%* confident in his decision, and he does it anyway... he might never have the same kind of faith in us as he does in the three of you.” He brought a hand up to rest on Viv's head as he nodded towards Laurent and Catchwick. “So I appreciate you... I *really* do... But I've gotta ask you to let Ward make his own choice...”

The silence held as Grant finished, the quiet ringing against the dim lighting and the buzz of the stadium outside. Laurent and Catchwick were staring at Logan like he'd suddenly sprouted a second head, and Logan himself started to feel awkward as the stillness stretched on.

And then Cashe let out an aggravated noise.

“*Aaaargh!*” she erupted, bringing both hands up to pull at her silvery braids in frustration. “You all are going to drive me *crazy!* You! Laurent!” She glared at Laurent, who started and turned to her. “You’re a great squad leader, but when you’re not confident it’s obvious, and it affects us. Don’t fidget when you’re trying to give a pep talk. You know we’re good, *we* know we’re good, the whole damn *planet* knows we’re good! That’s all you need to remind us of, and we’ll take it from there. You, Catchwick!” She turned her blazing attention to the Saber, who instinctively recoiled away from her. “I’m pretty sure you’re secretly the smartest of all of us other than maybe Ward, especially when it comes to how people are feeling. Would it kill you to *lose the pom-poms* on occasion and do what you did right there—” she gestured vehemently at Viv with a hand still tugging at her hair “—more often? It would be really good for when we’re not coming together as smoothly as we should. And you, Arada!” Viv jumped slightly in Logan’s arms and peeked just a little over her shoulder at the Lancer. “Yeah, you know Ward best. No one’s arguing that. But for some reason that also means you tend to coddle him, even when he doesn’t need it. I don’t know what kind of life you guys led before Galens, but he doesn’t need a protector. He needs a friend—*friends*—not people who are going to throw themselves in the line of fire whenever they’re worried he might get hurt. And as for *you*, Grant—” Logan couldn’t help but feel a chill when Cashe’s purple-green eyes turned to him “—*stop* flogging yourself so obviously, would you?? Do I think you deserve a little punishment? Hell yeah. *I* was the first person to find Arada after you apparently beat the *piss* out of Selleck and his goons last semester, so I know more than most about the shit you pulled with Ward. But you’re working on it. A blind guy raised in a cave with no understanding of human language could see that.” She let go of her braids with one hand to point aggressively between Laurent and Catchwick. “If *they* think you can be trusted, then believe them, and stop trying to fall on your damn axe all the time. Got it??”

Logan blinked, not really sure how to answer that, hesitating so long that Cashe pressed him with a growl.

“I *said*... Got. It?”

“Y-yeah...” Logan managed to get out, barely stopping himself from yelling “Yes, ma’am!” on instinct and wondering if he was imagining feeling Viv smile slightly against the muscles of his chest.

“Good.” Cashe stood straight, then, letting go of her hair completely to put her hands on her hips before looking to Laurent and Catchwick again. “I’m not as goody-two-shoes as mister ‘I need to take the high road’, over here.” She indicated Logan with a jerk of her head. “If you guys think we should know, then you should tell Ward that. *Not* because I think it will pressure him into telling us, mind you,” she pressed on quickly as Viv finally started to turn away from Logan in alarm. “Maybe Grant and I don’t know him as well as you three, but I apparently have a better sense of Ward’s stubbornness than any of you if you think that guy would ever let himself be pressured into telling us something as important as ‘whatever is going on.’” She threw air quotes up around the last four words with one hand, solidifying Logan’s feeling that the Lancer, too, had figured things out. When Cashe dropped her arm, though, she continued more gently. “Ward trusts you guys. More than he probably trusts himself. You telling him you think we should know is only going to help him decide *if* he’s making the right decision. Nothing more than that.”

The silence returned, then, but less heavily this time. Still, apparently it was the Lancer’s turn to feel awkward, because after a few seconds of nothing but the drone of the stadium she started up again, a little flustered.

“A-and one more thing!” She seemed to be trying and failing to keep her voice steady as she pointed jerkily at the lot of them once more. “My name’s not ‘Cashe’! I-it’s ‘Chancery’! Please and thank you!”

There was another second of silence, shocked and still.

And then Catchwick raised an unsure hand.

“... But you just called all of *us* by our last names...”

And just like that, the tension broke.

Viv snorted into Logan’s suit, then stepped away from him while wiping at her face with the back of one hand, the other lingering on his chest appreciatively. Laurent let out a tense laugh, looking from the Saber to Cashe, while the Lancer herself flushed, her dark complexion reddening ever so slightly.

“W-well then *you* call me ‘Chancery’, and I’ll... I’ll call you ‘Layton!’” she announced with utterly false bravado, looking like she was trying mightily not to crumble into a million mortified pieces.

Catchwick, though, was very clearly nothing short of horrified about *this* proposition.

“Oh *please* no,” he practically yelped, shaking his head vehemently. “Uh *UH!* You call me ‘Catcher’, or you can stick to what we’ve got going now. ‘Layton’? *Seriously??* Do you *know* how much I got picked on in grade school for having a weird-ass name?? *No thank you!*”

“Traumatized much?” Viv asked with a wet snort, finally finishing rubbing her face clean and dropping her hand from Logan’s chest.

“I don’t wanna *hear* it from you, *Viviana* ‘I’m a badass with a killer name to boot’ *Arada!*” Catchwick turned on her. “Come *on!* Look at all of you! ‘Reidon Ward’. ‘Aria Laurent’. ‘Chancery Cashe’! Everyone sounds so cool on the announcements, and then they get to ‘Layton Catchwick’ and I just wanna hide in a corner.” He gestured wildly at Logan. “Even Grant! ‘Logan Grant’?? Come on! Let me have my own little nickname, and we can all be happy! Deal?”

“Deal, Layton,” Viv answered with a snigger.

“I hate you.”

Laurent laughed again at that. Even Cashe gave a nervous little chuckle, looking between them all half in uncertainty, half in relief.

She paused, though, when she looked at Logan, being the first to notice.

“... Grant?” she asked hesitantly.

They all turned to him, then, every one of them. For a second he didn't know what they were staring at, but then Viv's hand was back on his chest, and he winced as he realized his face had contorted involuntarily in anger. He blinked, alarmed at the flare of heat in his chest, and immediately he pushed it down, not understanding.

It only took a second for it to click.

Logan looked at the others. At the rest of his squad, missing only Ward. From Viv he looked to Laurent, then Catchwick, then Cashe. These classmates. These teammates. These people who apparently trusted him more than he trusted himself, and wanted him to know that.

These... friends, Logan realized.

And that was where the anger came from.

Logan didn't say anything for a long, long moment, the others all staring at him with a mix of concern and apprehension. At last, he looked down at Viv again, seeking her blue eyes almost desperately. He found them, and for a second there was only confusion and worry there, her own gaze searching his.

And then she, too, seemed to understand, and her fingers stiffened against him.

“Logan...” she said cautiously, something between a warning and an assurance.

You don't have to, that word said. But I'm here if you do.

Logan hesitated a second more, searching himself, trying to decide.

In the end, he could only find one way to stop the edge of anger, that sharp bite of fury that had flared for a simple enough reason.

These people trusted him. To an extent that may not be as much as he'd like, but more than he'd ever hoped for. And yet he hadn't taken even a step towards showing that he trusted *them*, too.

And it was time to change that...

With a deep breath, Logan looked up from Viv at the others as he did.

"That's not my name..." he said quietly.

There was a stunned pause.

"Sorry... Say that again." Laurent sounded bewildered as she turned to face him fully, bewilderment written all over her face, just as it was Catchwick and Cashe's.

"That's not my name," Logan answered, a little more firmly this time. "Logan Grant'. I mean it *is*, technically, but..." He trailed off, suddenly having to work hard to find the words. That admission was the easy part.

The hard part was yet to come.

"That's not *your name*?" Cashe repeated like she hadn't heard him correctly. "What do you mean, *that's not your name*? How is that possible?"

"I-it's 'Logan'!" Logan said quickly, trying to salvage his flub and having to forcibly stop himself from reaching up and grabbing Viv's hand for strength. "But 'Grant'... That's not my—"

But then the sound beyond the doors above them died away, replaced almost at once by the booming voice of the finals commentator.

"Ladies and gentlemen! We appreciate your patience, and apologize for the delay! We know many of you—"

All five of them glanced up the ramp as the booming voice kept on, echoing even through the underworks. There was a pause, a second's wordless debate as they all stood there, totally at a loss as to what to do.

Then Laurent took charge.

“Shit timing.” She looked sharply at Logan. “Grant—Logan—I’m sorry, but you’re gonna have to put a pin in that. I get the sense you’re trying for a little quid pro quo, yes?” She waited for Logan to nod unsteadily. “Okay. I appreciate that, but it turns out it’s not the moment, I’m sorry. Needless to say we *all* have a lot to talk about when we get back to the hotel tonight, but right now we have to get our head in the game.” Laurent paused, her expression serious as she looked to the rest of them. “We’re all off-balance. I already said it. But we’re also the *best damn team* by a mile here, even with Rei on the bench. Six people. Five people. What does it matter? Squat. We go out there, we tear Valormade apart, and then we can sort everything else out. Got it?”

No one answered her. Everyone, Viv included, was still staring at Logan as the announcer kept on above them.

Laurent wasn’t having that.

“FIRESONG!” she roared. “NOT THE TIME!”

Every one of them jumped, even Logan, who’d been looking right at her. It did the trick, though, and Viv, Catchwick, and Cashe all turned to the girl.

“Back with me?” she demanded, then kept on before anyone answered. “This is the *final*. We don’t have the luxury to worry about Rei, about Gr—about *Logan*, about anything. For the next fifteen minutes, none of that exists. Understood?”

Only Catchwick gave Logan a quick sidelong glance before they all nodded.

“Okay!” Laurent continued. “Then get your heads in the game and get ready to move. Fifteen minutes. That’s all I’m asking. Give me fifteen minutes, and then we can all have our ‘what the ever loving *hell?!*’ moment together!”

More nods, from every one of them this time, and with no distractions.

What the ever loving hell?!, Logan repeated to himself as Laurent started moving towards the top of the ramp, liking the phrase.

It was definitely better, at the very least, than the lingering voice still shouting ‘*Unbelievable!*’ in the back of his mind.

CHAPTER 47

“When they ‘travel’ to those other places together, I don’t wish I could tag along. The journey sounds like a nightmare, and I’ve never been a fan of throwing up. Still... they couldn’t bring us back a souvenir just once? One time? Come on.

How cool would something like that look on the mantelpiece?”

-Viviana “Witchwalker” Arada

Years later, Viv would look back on Firesong’s exit from the underworks that afternoon a little wistfully. She’d made the march from the doors to the field line any number of times before, sure, but that had been her first as an SCT *finalist*, her first as the best of the best, and recognized as such. Unfortunately, Viv would never recall it feeling like it probably should have, stepping out of the dark into the column of blooming white that highlighted her and her four squadmates as they left the shadows of the ramp for the floor. Even the roar of the crowd was lost to her, the fervor of 50,000 spectators finally being presented with what they had *really* all come to see.

Viv was too busy seething.

She was proud of herself, of the brave face she’d kept up in the tunnel. It had given a bit when Aria had given her a scare, and the whiplash of that had even had her breaking down into Logan’s chest for a minute, but on the whole she thought she’d largely kept it together, even managing to crack a joke or two at Catcher’s expense, not to mention get a laugh out here and there.

But on the inside it was all fire.

How dare they. How *dare* they! Shido’s evolution and Logan’s attempt at coming clean had shaken her momentarily, but now that the chance to fight—the chance to *let*

go—was approaching, Viv could only replay the end of Rei and Aria’s ‘match’ again and again in her mind. She would never forget it, *never*. Not as long as she lived. The confusion. The alarm. The sheer, cold horror as she had watched those grey holograms come falling one after another from their starting circle and into the frozen waters, approaching Rei where he’d been stuck frozen like empty, walking corpses. She saw again the lift and fall of the blades, recalled once more Logan and Catcher having to grab her each by an arm as she lunged up from her seat like there was something she could do, like there was some way she could help Valera Dent, who’d already called on Kestrel and leapt to hammer at the top of the field wall with her twin blades.

How *DARE* they!

And it only made it that much worse that no one seemed to know who ‘they’ were...

Cashe—*Chancery*, rather—was right, Viv knew. She was too careful with Rei, too often treating him like some fragile thing that would break the moment it was touched. It was stupid, yes—Rei had officially *eclipsed* her as a User as of about an hour ago, after all—but she couldn’t help it. For years Viv had watched him struggle, had watched him fight not only his ravaged body, but also the stigma, judgement, and ridicule that came with it. For *years* she had watched him take all of those punches, internal and external alike, and only grow stronger for it. Viv knew Rei, yes. Better than anyone. So she knew that in a couple of days he would probably just shoulder what had happened, only grin a little grimly and say that it had obviously been a great opportunity to push Shido to new heights. The thought was at once relieving, at once sickening. Someone needed to be angry, after all.

And while Viv wasn’t great at everything, she was very, *very* good at angry.

For that reason she didn’t hear the announcer after he called Firesong out from the ramp. She didn’t see the pulsing white light of the Team Battle field outline, nor the red of the awkward full six starting circles. She moved automatically with the four others

around her, not even noticing Vademe and the rest of Valormade being summoned to mirror them on the other side of the zone, 70 yards away across the black. She heard the rest of Firesong talking over their coms now, yes, and even managed a grunt and a ‘yeah’ that looked to be enough to have them think she was listening, but the truth was that Viv was gone. Far, far gone.

Then again she apparently wasn’t as convincing as she thought, because a notification pinged her NOED unexpectedly.

Viv. Fifteen minutes. Please. That’s all I need.

Viv blinked and finally looked around. Only then did she realize with a jolt that the five of them had edged up to just outside the ring, Rei’s usual space left automatically empty between her and Aria at the right end of their line. Logan, Catcher, and Chancery were on the coms mumbling about ways they might be able to turn their “man-down situation” into an advantage, but Aria was very deliberately looking right at her.

Viv nodded jerkily. The girl didn’t look away, raising an eyebrow in silent question.

Viv took a breath through her nose, focusing this time.

Then she nodded again, slower and more intent this time.

I’m good, she tried to say, and this time Aria seemed to believe her, turning away to look across the field to Valormade again.

“Guys, quiet on the coms,” she said firmly. “Love the energy, but save it for when we need it. Thinking too far ahead is just gonna make us scramble twice as much if the field doesn’t work for our plan, here.”

Logan and the other two both went silent, waiting as commanded. It was just in time, too, because the arbiter—already floating above them on his clean white observation disk—stepped forward, speaking into the silence Viv hadn’t noticed had long-since descended on the stadium.

“Combatants, take position.”

Viv recognized Captain Hinde, then, one of the Kenneth officers who'd been down in the hospital ward with them. That, irrationally, pissed her off too as she stepped over the Team Battle line towards her starting circle. How could the guy go from what he'd seen back to his job like it was nothing? How could he be standing there like—??

“Wait a sec, people.”

Catcher's voice brought Viv up short just as she was about to enter her starting ring. She looked over her shoulder in annoyance, wondering what the hell could have the Saber interrupting this ceremonial start to the fight.

And then she saw Aria, and her heart sank.

All at once the fire drained from Viv. Not voluntarily, of course. She would have given anything to keep it in that moment, actually, given anything to hold onto the heat. It would have made it easier to take in her friend. Her friend, standing two paces behind the rest of them, rigid beyond the pulsing white line she was staring at with wide eyes. It would have made it easier to stand there in the ringing silence, the attention of every man, woman, and child in the stadium undoubtedly trained on the girl, which could only have made the moment that much harder. No one had to speak. No one had to say anything. Every one of them could just barely imagine what was going through Aria's mind in that moment...

Before she knew what she was doing, Viv was standing in front of the girl again, holding out a hand to her without a word.

Aria blinked and lifted her eyes to Viv, and the blatant fear there was chilling. This had to be different than downstairs in the sub-basement, Viv realized. That had been a bright, clean slate. A new field, surrounded by friends and all three of the Galens chaperones, including Captain Dent. That had probably felt like a cozy, warm paradise compared to *this* challenge.

After all, this was the same floor...

“I-I don’t...” Aria said quietly, looking at Viv’s hand. “I don’t... I don’t think I-I...”

Gone was the brave, crisp countenance of their squad leader from a moment before. Gone was the bubbly iron and steel that was the Aria Laurent Viv knew so well. In her place, a scared teenage girl stood instead, and Viv had to privately retract any anger she felt towards Hinde as she realized that the arbiter was holding off from making any comment at the delay, probably realizing what was going on too.

“Yes you can,” Viv told her friend gently, nudging her hand forward in offer again. “Yes you can.”

There was another second of silence, and Aria’s eyes dropped back to the floor and the pulsing white line that marked the edge of the Team Battle field. Viv felt a lump in her throat, seeing will battling that fear and watching it slip and start to lose...

And then someone yelled from the north end of the stands, words ringing out of the dark.

“YOU’VE GOT THIS, ARIA!”

There was no mistaking that voice, of course. Viv doubted even the Captain above them had missed who had shouted, but again the man appeared sympathetic, not calling Rei out deliberately even as he addressed the stands.

“Spectators, please refrain from interruption until the match has begun. Any distraction of our cadets will result in prompt expulsion from this event, and possible—”

But then he was suddenly being drowned out.

“You got this, Laurent!” some random woman squeaked from the western side of the stadium.

“YOU CAN DO IT!” a less timid man’s voice echoed from the east.

“You got this!” another man, from the west again.

And then the silence was gone, and the black of the shadowy Arena was alive with hundreds—no, *thousands*—of people chorusing their support.

Viv felt goosebumps run up her arm, listening to the stands shouting, listening to them call to Aria that she had this, that she could do it. No one had needed an explanation. No one had needed a reason. They were there, all there. Maybe it was because some just wanted to see her fight. Maybe it was because more than a few understood—for their own reasons and better than they wanted to—what it was that had brought the girl up short. It didn't matter. They were all there.

And they were all calling her name.

For a while still, Aria stood in that cacophony of affection and support, blinking rapidly down at the pulsing line of white between her and Viv. For so long, in fact, did she stay frozen like that that Viv started to fear not even the chorus of the stands would be able to help.

And then, all of a sudden, Aria took a breath, looked up from the floor to meet Viv's eyes, and took her hand firmly.

Then she stepped over the line in one stiff go, and the stadium erupted in rolling cheers and applause.

Together the two of them walked through the flood of sound, Aria's head held high now, her posture ready again. Only the tightness with which she held onto Viv's fingers conveyed her lingering trepidation, but Viv wasn't worried about that. The hard part was done.

Aria *did* have it, after all.

“Settle, please! *Settle!*”

From atop his disk Hinde brought up both hands as Viv and Aria found their starting spots, and the man turned slowly in place above them, waving the stands down as he did. It took a little bit, but eventually the quiet returned again, markedly less oppressing than it had been a minute before. Only when the silence was absolute once

more did the officer face the field again, but even then Viv didn't miss him pausing to glance down at Firesong, where all five of them were in line now, she and Aria having let go of each other to take their place on either side of the empty circle in which a certain someone should by all rights have been standing.

Only when the captain seemed sure that all was well—or well enough, at the very least—did he press on like there'd been no grand interruption.

“This is as an official Team Battle event,” he called into the darkness. “It is therefore subject to regulation ruling. Once the field is formed, you will be ordered to call, then engage. Premature Device manifestation will result in a penalty. Premature approach, attack, or the like by any squad member will result in a match loss. Is that understood?”

He looked to Valormade, waited for Vademe to nod curtly, then turned to Firesong.

To her credit, Aria didn't stall in giving her own confirmation, even if her own nod was a little shaky.

There was a pause, a moment in which every single soul in the crowded Arena held their breath.

And then Hinde's eyes flashed, and Firesong started to rise as the world blazed white.

“*Om!*” Catcher was the first to call it. “Neutral Zone! But *damn* that's bright!”

Viv was glad she wasn't the only one to have sworn as she'd automatically brought up a hand to shield her face from the blinding light. Ordinarily it wasn't a problem, but going from the darkness of the finals match set to the brilliant clean white of the Neutral Zone was hard on her eyes in a way she hadn't expected.

Fortunately, Aria was apparently back on the ball.

“*Focus,*” she said across the coms. “Squint if you have to, but everyone *look.*”

Viv groaned, but did as she was told, peering blearily at the zone as she rose and her eyes adjusted. Sure enough they would be fighting on a Neutral Zone, but not just *any* Neutral Zone by the looks of it. If the flattening manifestation of the familiar hexagonal pattern was anything to go by, the Arena had decided that the first-year Team Battle finalists would be having it out on what was largely considered the *original* SCT field. As Viv's eyes adjusted, the unlit Arena vanished, and a simple, plain expanse of white extended in all directions around them, even the wall of the field that surrounded the fighting area going completely unmarked. The only disturbances in the endlessly repeating pattern of this flat world, in fact, were Vademe and his five squadmates, all still climbing barefoot in their line 50 yards away, tense and ready.

Looking at the six of them, Viv felt a spark of her anger come back, like the opportunity to fight begged for the fire to return and fuel it. There was nothing but empty space between her and their opponents. Nothing to obstruct. Nothing to distract. Nothing to get in the way at all.

Perfect, Viv thought to herself.

Naturally, the others—being more level-headed in the moment—didn't remotely agree.

"Well *that's* not ideal..." Logan muttered as they all settled down atop the empty white.

"It's not," Aria agreed quickly. "Nothing we can do about it, though. Anyone have any ideas?"

"Charge them." It was Cashe, surprisingly, who suggested it before Viv could. "Before they have a chance to spread out and encircle us. Get one down, then regroup."

"Too risky," Catcher countered to Viv's disappointment. "Vademe *plus* Sandree *and* Tethers? That's enough Lancers with measurable range on most of us to be able to hold a good defensive position against a straight-on attack. They'd probably get one of *us* down before anything."

“Agreed,” Aria said. “In that case—”

The Arena, though, cut her off.

“Field: Neutral Zone.”

Viv could imagine the anticipation that must be building beyond the hologram they stood within. No tricks. No cover. No respite. There was an excellent chance the spectators were in for an all-out, head-to-head match.

Unless Firesong could be tricky in their own way...

Viv didn't like it, but she was a Duelist, and Liam Gross had long since hammered into her head the advantages of precision and speed when it came to their Type. It was probably for that reason she'd seen the opportunity the others hadn't yet, and despite her own desires telling her to shut *her damn trap*, she ground out her suggestion just the same.

“We could let them come to us. Pick a target ahead of time.”

She saw the others glance around at her, but the Arena spoke up again before she could explain.

“First-Year Red Team ‘Firesong’ versus First-Year Blue Team ‘Valormade’. Elimination bout. Combatants... Call.”

“Call,” the word echoed from eleven mouths into the void of the zone, and CADs whirled into being. As Gemela closed in around Viv's arms and legs, its twin blades taking familiar shape in her hands, she eyed their assigned red glow, with Valormade across from them all a matching blue.

That wasn't the only thing shared between Vademe and his team now, though.

“Oh,” Viv snorted as she took in the shocked expressions and hanging mouths on the other side of the field before looking sidelong at Aria. “Right. That.”

Admittedly the crimson glow lighting Hippolyta dampened the effect of the CAD’s new form somewhat, the vysetrium blending into the red steel that made up most of the Device, but the sight of it was still just about as impressive now as it had been when Aria had first revealed the evolution. The additional armor, the improved spear and larger shield. Even if her face *hadn’t* been framed in those unmistakable beginnings of a helm, Aria was a sight to behold, all anxiety gone again now that her CAD was around her, standing graceful and tall like some great warrior of myth and legend.

No, Viv chided herself, doing her best to stay on task despite that renewed anger growing by the second. *Focus*.

Elimination bout. There was that at least. An objective-based match would have made things even worse for them given their number.

So Viv hurried.

“Let them come to us,” she repeated in a rush. “*Let them* encircle us. But pick *one*. As soon as they spread out at all, we rush that *one*. Don’t worry about anyone else, don’t think about anyone else. Get one of them down, and then it’s our fight to win.”

There wasn’t even a pause before Aria responded, though her choice was a little surprising.

“Vademe,” she said. “He’s their strongest fighter. He’s most likely to be on his own *and* he’s the one they’d least expect us to go after. Get him down, and then unleash everything. Don’t give them a chance to recover.”

“Everything?” Catcher asked, surprised. “You mean—?”

“You heard the girl, Catcher,” Chancery answered in Aria’s stead, hefting her spear and crouching down at the ready. “Everything.”

Then, though, they were out of time.

“Combatants... Fight.”

“Hold, squad!” Aria gave the command even as Valormade started bolting across the field. “I’ll take right flank. Chancery, you’re left! Catcher, support as needed!”

“Roger!” Chancery and Catcher echoed, leaping to reposition. Viv and Logan, for their part, collapsed into the space automatically provided between Chancery and Aria’s defensive posture on either side of them, Catcher at their backs. Neither of *them* asked what they were supposed to do, of course. They were the offense. The damage dealers. As Valormade rushed forward in six blurs of the same streaking blue, Viv forced herself not to stare at Vademe, not wanting to give away the plan.

Yeah... Her and Logan’s job was already crystal clear.

In a tight group Firesong held like that, a bristling ball of blades and tense assessment of the approaching enemy. Even when Vademe, leading the pack, came within 10 feet of them not a one of them budged. Even when he gave a shout and Valormade spread out like opening wings to start circling them, they didn’t so much as twitch. Firesong waited to a one, every heart hammering and every grip on their weapons shaking with adrenaline.

And then, just as Lena Jiang and the Phalanx Xander Philips was about to close the ring at their backs, Aria gave her own command.

“NOW!”

As one the squad moved. Without a step out of place or a doubt in their lunge. As one all six of them were suddenly blitzing at Vademe, who’d held his central position, Aria and Chancery leaping sideways and Catcher backstepping to stay on their six with sword and claws held at the ready. Viv and Logan, of course, hurtled forward head-first, charging the unwary target who was unlucky enough to be the victim of the only real plan they’d had time to come up with.

And as Viv was the fastest of the two of them by a long shot, she got there first.

She was rewarded for her speed with the exquisite surprise that flashed over Vademe's face as the entirety of what remained of the best first-year team at Sectionals was suddenly bearing down on him with deliberate urgency. He recovered instantly, of course, and started retreating at once, shouting for his team to collapse on Firesong's weaker rear as he did. His spear came up, thrusting at Viv with blinding speed, but she was ready for it, deflecting the attack with a hard swipe of Gemela's left blade before bearing down on the boy. He would correct, she knew, would redirect his attack to swing the butt of his weapon up at her, and she was in a bad position to defend from that. It didn't matter. She could take at least one blunt hit from him, probably, and it would leave the Lancer much more open to the beast that followed behind her. She braced even as she closed on Vademe, her right blade coming up to drive towards his chest, wanting at least to force him to respond to her, force him to react as expected.

Viv was taken aback, therefore, when Vademe's expression turned horrified, and he completely failed to retract his spear in time to defend against her.

Her sword slammed into him with such direct force that it ripped through his reactive shielding without so much as a hitch, plunging into his chest and tearing clean through the Lancer's body sternum to spine. Viv had been expecting *anything* but that, in fact, and as a result she slammed into Vademe at a full sprint, her legs catching in his as they went limp beneath the both of them and tripped her up. She went down with a yelp, but even in the confused tumble her Cognition whirred to keep her head clear, and she was tucking and rolling off of Vademe the moment they hit the ground, releasing the blade wedged into his body in favor of getting immediately free of him.

She had a clean view, therefore, of Logan grinning triumphantly down at her when she found her feet to whirl around, one massive hand wrapped around the end of Vademe's spear, having apparently caught hold of that first thrust meant for her chest and not let go, providing Viv one hell of an opening.

She didn't have time to grin back.

"EVERYTHING YOU'VE GOT!" Aria bellowed.

And all hell broke loose.

"OVERCLOCK!" Logan roared, dropping the spear and already turning to face the fight behind him now as his red vysetrium bloomed with ion flames.

"WARBAND!" was shouted next, and the north flank was suddenly a rippling mirage of three Chancerys all moving and thrusting from her upper half at an *incredibly* unlucky Hannah Tethers.

"RUINOUS!" Catcher howled almost at the exact same moment. It was a clever feint—Ruinous required a charge time, unfortunately—but it seemed to do the trick because through the mess Viv caught just a glimpse of Philip's face going white with horror as Catcher and Logan charged him together. Catcher dipped low, stabbing at the frightened Phalanx even as he rushed by to lock blades with a shouting Jiang, while Logan's Overclocked swing came horizontally from the other side. There was a shattering explosion of metal on metal, and Philips howled in agony as he was blasted sideways, his spear going flying along with what looked like half his shield, the rest of it still barely attached to his arm.

And then there was Aria, who hadn't needed to call aloud to trigger her Third Eye, and was now taking on both Kay Sandree *and* Jasmine Ranjha like some perfect goddess of war.

Her left arm moved with fluid precision even when she wasn't looking, newly-grown shield twisting, dipping, and angling to accept and deflect the massive blows from Ranjha's two-handed hammer. Her right arm wielded her spear with equal precision, keeping Kay at bay despite the talented Lancer's better reach and exquisite skill. Both fighters hammered at Aria with a determined fervor, shouting as they did for the others, clearly trying to regroup. They didn't seem to realize that Vademe was already FDAed, was already being pulled into the floor, nor that Philips, Jiang, and Tethers were

in massive trouble. How could they, after all, when the fight that had been to their advantage a moment before had flipped on its head in all of 5 seconds?

Then again, the fight *wasn't* won yet, was it?

With a grunt Viv lurched forward, moving to help Aria as Catcher battled it out with Jiang, Logan rushing to help him. Blitzing by Vademe's still form, she reached out and wrenched her lost blade from his chest just before it fell loose of his sinking body of its own accord. In a blink she was beside Ranjha, who was too focused on the shield before her for her own good.

Once Gemela rose, then fell. Another step, and Viv was inside Kay's guard.

Twice Gemela rose, then fell. Nearby a flaming axe tore into an unguarded chest, and both spear and sword sank into flesh with mirrored, wet *sblunks*.

Aria had asked them for 15 minutes. 15 minutes to be there. To be present. To be on the field and in that fight with her.

In the end, Firesong hadn't even needed 15 *seconds*...

CHAPTER 48

“Few things can help an individual more than to place responsibility on him, and to let him know that you trust him.”

*-Booker T. Washington
Pre-ISC Educator and Advisor*

Lennon and Meyer had both returned to their seats by the time the rest of Firesong and Valormade rejoined the Galens students in the stands. Both third-years had walked away shaking their heads in disbelief, not even noting the grin that was so broad on Rei’s face it would probably have hurt his cheeks even if his body wasn’t *already* protesting anything he did that wasn’t lying flat on the floor. Unfortunately he didn’t manage to get to his feet when the two squads finally reached the stands some 5 minutes after their lightning-quick match, though the rest of the students all gave them a standing ovation—mostly for Firesong’s benefit, admittedly—joining with the rest of the spectators that had only just started to settle before Aria remade her appearance on the walkway, resulting in renewed jubilation all over again.

“Good fight, guys,” Rei told the Valormade team quietly as they nudged past him, heading towards their empty seats by Red Crown. He hadn’t been sure how his acknowledgement would be received given the circumstances, but Kay Sandree offered an amused, semi-pained smile back, while Vademe looked at him with both eyebrows raised.

“Laurent?” the Valormade squad leader asked under his breath, pausing just passed Rei.

“Yeah... Sorry...?” was all Rei managed to awkwardly answer with.

Vademe just shook his head, looking like he was still having trouble processing what had happened even now. “The hell do they need *you* for, man?”

“Absolutely nothing, apparently,” Rei got out with a laugh that hurt his lungs, and Vademe offered a sad snort back before joining the rest of his squad again.

Which left Rei to look around, grinning from ear to ear, at where Aria, Viv, Catcher, Cashe, and Grant were following right behind them.

“Oh hey, *champs*,” he greeted them as they sat down around him, Aria at his right and the others taking whatever spot was closest. “Should I be worried about my spot on the team? That fight made me feel kinda... well...”

“Optional?” Catcher offered from his aisle seat next to Cashe.

“Nah. More like pointless?” Viv pretended to correct the Saber from Rei’s left, between him and Grant.

“Guys, come on,” Aria started as she settled down next to him. “Be nice.”

“Yeah, *gmys*. Come on.” Rei was still smiling as he looked around at the team, unabashedly glowing with pride.

But Aria wasn’t done.

“It’s not like he’s *completely* useless. I think he’s proven he could make a good cheerleader, at least.”

“Hey!” Rei exclaimed, turning on Aria in mock outrage.

That got a chuckle out of everyone, amusingly enough, but it was also the moment Rei realized something was off. Something wasn’t quite right. Their laugh was off...

“Seriously, you guys killed it,” Rei kept on, not sure if he was imagining the hint of awkwardness in the air or not. “I thought we were in trouble when that original Neutral Zone came up, but that was a *hell* of a pivot.”

“Viv’s idea,” Aria told him with a sidelong nod by him at his best friend. “Totally won the match for us.”

“Our only other idea was to rush,” Cashe added with her own nod. “Which *definitely* wouldn’t have worked out half as well.”

“Oh, yeah, no way.” Rei made a face. “With Vademe *and* Kay *and* Tethers on their side? That many Lancers with support from the others? They could have held a defensive position as long as they—”

“Yeah, yeah,” Viv cut him off with a wave, eyeing Rei for some reason. “You and Catcher are peas in a pod, you know that?”

“What?” Rei looked around at her, confused. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

But that only got him another laugh from the group. Another tense, tight laugh...

Rei let it hang for a couple of seconds, looking from Viv and Grant to his left to Aria, Cashe, and Catcher to his right. He didn’t say anything else, giving them the opportunity to speak up.

No one did.

“Okay... What’s going on?” he asked the lot of them. “You guys just won Firesong a Sectional *championship title*, and every one of you looks like your smiles have been carved out of wood...”

It was like a switch had flipped. Viv and Grant both went a little pale, while the others all traded anxious looks on his other side. Before Rei could press the issue, though, Aria reached out and touched his leg.

“I’ll message you,” she said so that only he could hear her. “But mostly we need to talk when we get back to the hotel tonight. All of us.”

Rei’s mouth had gone dry even before her eyes flashed. There was really only one thing *that* could be about, after all...

Right?

By the time he got her ping, the other four were all resolutely looking anywhere but at them. The only exception was Viv, who Rei could tell was shooting him furtive glances every couple of seconds, like she was worried about something.

Aria's message confirmed his suspicions.

Have you thought about telling Logan and Chancery?

That one question, that one sentence, caught Rei up pretty abruptly. All of a sudden he remembered where he sat—literally just as much as figuratively—remembered that while the Team Battle had distracted him for a moment, the morning's events and the time spent in the sub-basement after that had been a *lot*.

And not just for him.

Did they ask?

His response was probably shorter than Aria would have liked, but Rei couldn't care in the moment. Yet *another* weight was settling on his shoulder. This one had been long in coming, in its own way, but just the same it had arrived so suddenly and so much sooner than he could have anticipated.

But then again... of course it had.

Not exactly. Aria's answer came. *I told them I thought they should know.*

Rei looked around at Aria so sharply his neck spasmed in protest. He didn't care, his eyes narrowed on his girlfriend, who met his gaze without so much as flinching. Her hand moved from his leg to his hand, giving it a squeeze.

I didn't tell them anything, she assured him. *But they've figured it out, Rei. Both of them. At least the gist of it. Lots of people have, probably. And the longer you keep it from them now, the harder things are going to be.*

Rei didn't stop glaring, but neither did he pull his hand away from hers. Aria, in turn, didn't look away, and after a second even gave him a resigned kind of smile, like she understood why he might be angry with her, and didn't blame him.

Curse his fluttering heart. It didn't make it any easier to *actually* be angry with her.

The fact of it, after all, was that Rei *hadn't* thought about telling Grant and Cashe about Shido since waking in the hospital ward. It had been something on his mind for a while *before* that, though, obviously. In particular ever since the Lancer had semi-interrogated him after the parameter test disaster. He'd been firm, then. Firm that his Device's secrets weren't something so easily shared. Now, though...

Now he suspected Aria spoke the truth.

Rei finally looked away from her, turning to take in the Arena before him without really seeing it. He was too busy considering, thinking.

He'd told Viv about Shido just about as soon as he'd found out himself, and not a moment later than he'd been able to. They'd been stuck at the hip for years, after all, and she'd been his rock for most of that time. Catcher he'd told when he'd realized the Saber was someone the secret wouldn't change, was someone who would fight with—and for—Rei in hell and high water no matter what. And Aria...

Aria Rei had told because he hadn't been able to stand her not knowing for even one more day...

When he thought about Grant and Cashe, Rei wasn't sure either of them fell into any of those categories. They hadn't been friends for years. In fact, he still wasn't 100% sure he and Grant *were* friends yet, given their history. He also couldn't tell himself with certainty that either of them would have his back forever and always, like he could with Catcher. He just didn't know them that well. And given that looking at the Mauler or the Lancer in the same way he looked at Aria made him want to laugh out loud, that was obviously a nonfactor.

And yet...

They deserve to know.

At first Rei wasn't sure where the small voice came from, much less the clarity it rang with. It was weighty, despite its quiet presence, and as Rei considered it, considered Aria's request—because even without her asking, when else could it have been?—he found himself shooting down any real argument to the contrary. Shido's specs should remain a secret? Maybe they were *technically* still a secret, but at this point even an SCT newbie would have *some* sense of what was going on with the Device. He wanted that information to be special, to stay between him, Aria, Viv, and Catcher? That was stupid, not the least because plenty of ISCM higher ups already knew.

He didn't trust Grant and Cashe?

... That just wasn't true.

He realized it, then. The fact of it, for the first time. Considering it, down in the sub-basement, Rei had only paused at the field line, had only hesitated when the recollection of the disastrous fight with Aria had rooted him to the spot for a moment. He hadn't even *thought* about Grant and Cashe's presence nearby when he'd called, much less worried that they were there watching. On the contrary, Rei suspected he'd been as excited to explore what changes the Device had gone through with his team as he'd been excited to discover them for himself.

His *whole* team.

They deserved to know.

Because—and Rei let out an aggravated grumble, given there was a time not so long ago when he would *never* have thought he could say such a thing about Logan *Grant*—he trusted them. Plain and simple.

And they'd earned that trust. They really had. Not just by fighting back to back with him and Aria and Viv and Catcher. They'd earned it by not hounding him, too. By

respecting his choice *not* to tell them, even though it had long since been made clear that wasn't an easy thing to do.

Yeah... It did seem like the right time, didn't it?

Rei sighed, not sure if he felt more relief or anxiety as he typed his message out with his left hand, his right still held in Aria's.

I'll tell them tonight.

He couldn't bring himself to look at her, but he could still tell when she'd read his answer, because her smile was finally genuine even in the corner of his vision. He'd thought that would be the end of the conversation—at least for the time being—but Aria promptly surprised him with another message.

Good. I think Logan has something to share too.

Rei looked around at her with a frown, but this time Aria just shook her head, offering him half a shrug. "Not the time, and I don't know much even if it was", she seemed to be telling him.

Like that was enough.

'Logan' has something to share? he asked, emphasizing the second time she'd used the name pointedly. *And don't think I missed you calling Cashe 'Chancery' either.*

We had a good chat before the match, Aria replied simply. *Let's talk tonight.*

And then she stopped answering even when Rei pressed her for more information, only shaking her head again and squeezing his hand even as she ignored his messages.

Only when Rei was sure he wasn't going to get anything else out of her did he sit back again with a huff, forcing himself not to notice that Viv was still glancing at him nervously from his left, which didn't help at all.

What in the hell had he been left out of?

Cliffhangers are mean, Aria, was the last thing he sent before letting his aching body settle again just as the Arena announcer called for the upper-bracket Wargames finalists to prepare for their match.

The rest of the early afternoon slipped by in a sort of torturous blur. While Rei couldn't see himself doing much else, sitting through the rest of the tournament was uncomfortable at best, agonizing at worst. If he moved too often, everything hurt, but if he didn't move for too long, everything hurt a hell of a lot more when he finally *did*. On the plus side Aria and the others didn't leave him again—except briefly when Samsus ordered all of them but Rei to go change out of their combat suits—and having them there made the passing hours at least a bit more tolerable.

The only thing that helped more, in fact, were the fights themselves.

Whether it was a blessing or curse, Rei wasn't sure, but whatever the case *both* Wargames finals ended up very nearly cracking 30 minutes each. The reordering of the afternoon fights had things kicking off with the upper-bracket match first, with Steelbound coming out on top of one of the most epic bloodbaths any of them had ever had the pleasure of witnessing. Even Rei found the will to yell a little when Lennon ended up as the last man standing from his squad in a King of the Hill match against *both* Annika Ivanov and Mira Esku. Injured though they already were, the two girls working together had very *nearly* felled the Lasher in a tremendous confrontation single-

flagpole objective in the center of a multi-level, rice paddy variation of Flood Zone. Esku, a Mauler, had actually managed to ‘crush’ Lennon’s left arm with her massive hammer, and a stab to the hip from Ivanov had brought the boy to one knee at nearly the same time. The two squad leaders had leapt, then, weapons driving down, probably already planning on how their own fight would go after the tentative truce needed to put down the beast that was Christopher Lennon was over.

Unfortunately, critically wounded though he was, they’d underestimated their opponent.

Ivanov died in a flash when the chain sword that had fallen from Lennon’s useless left hand exploded unassisted out of the shin-deep water with a blast of spray and mist. The whirling blades caught her from below and ripped through her armor with a scream of shearing metal, splitting her in half in mid-air. At nearly the same time, Esku was sent flying as Lennon triggered a built-up Repulsion—an Ability *not* innately his own—the erupting barrier of electromagnetic energy catching her with so little warning that she lost hold of her hammer as she went wheeling in an arc over the flooded fields. She’d hit the ground several levels down, but the water and mud of the paddy had softened her landing enough to have the girl pulling herself right back to her feet with a rapid, ugly *squelch*.

Still, Esku hadn’t even had the time to wipe the muck from her visor before the same chain sword that had cleaved Ivanov in two took the Mauler in the chest point-first, tearing through all her defenses like a serrated spear until the weapon’s handle caught in her armor, slamming her back down into the mud.

Invisible Hand and Echo once again proved a deadly combination.

After that match was called for Steelbound, it was a half hour or so before the lower bracket final started up, and again the fight proved brilliant even if it did end without upset. Vademe and his Valormade proved themselves more than what they’d shown in the Team Battle against Firesong, with only two casualties to their name by

the time they claimed the final required objective of the Capture Point match. It took place on another Neutral Zone, but this time the field had been a complex jungle of sharply rising and falling hexagonal pillars, with hardly a stable step to be had the entire fight. The result was a Wargame rife with acrobatics and quick thinking, but also with missteps by combatants from every team that had resulted in not-infrequent rolls of laughter out of the stands whenever some poor soul had been abruptly shot 20 feet in the air or dropped into a hole that hadn't been there a moment before.

To be fair, Red Crown would have had a shot at the title had it not been for a hefty dose of bad luck. Laquita Martin had gone down in the first minute of the fight when she'd manifested within a stone's throw of *several* members of "Soulpaw" from the Kenneth Academy *and* "Hellbrought" from the 103rd Military College, taking two of them with her before being FDAed, as well as injuring another. Almost more unfortunately, Jack Benaly had fallen next when a poor choice of footing sent him spinning as the column he'd just put his weight on jettied upward suddenly, giving Kay—who he'd been duking it out with—a chance to spear him skillfully right out of the air. After that Kadness, Von Leef, Kwasi, and Clayton managed to find each other and rally for a time, but the last of them were out before the 20-minute mark.

Leaving Valormade to clean house.

Rei had to admit that Vademe and the others were a terrifying group. If it hadn't been for Firesong's presence, he was pretty sure he would have told anyone who'd asked that Valormade would have been the reigning Team Battle Champions, and their leader very likely the Dueling equivalent. They surgically paired their way through the remains of Soulpaw and Hellbrought after that, picking their members apart in steady, calculated fashion despite the two squads teaming up to face their stronger opponents together. Even then they were helpless, though, because the disparate group couldn't fight as a unit with half the skill Valormade brought to bear, resulting in a breathtaking clash with desperate, brute panic on one side and cool, lethal confidence on the other.

Despite having had to follow up the Lasher's performance and the third-year final as a whole, by the time Valormade claimed the third of the three zones they needed for the win, half the stands were on their feet. Even Catcher had forgotten the somber mood long enough to leap up and down, screaming his head off for them along with much of the rest of the Galens students.

And then they were done.

It was bittersweet, Rei realized as he listened to Captain Hinde's congratulating Valormade on their victory. A part of him was glad it was over—mostly the part of him that needed to lie flat on his back in a bed *asap*, probably—but there was a not-insignificant disappointment, too. Their first SCT. Their first *true*, public tournament. It seemed to have taken forever, and yet simultaneously no time at all, and Rei couldn't decide even in his discomfort if he really wanted it to end.

Hinde didn't give him much choice, however, as he was already thanking the spectators for their patronage and letting everyone know that the awards ceremony would start in short order, followed by a request that all Sectionals champions please descend to the Arena floor in uniform.

"Laurent!" Dent barked from the walkway. "Team Battle awards are accepted by the squad leader! Down you get!"

"Oh! Yes, ma'am!" Aria answered, a little flustered as she jumped to her feet. Below her Lennon was already making for the stairs, and he was nice enough to wait for Aria to hurry after him, nodding towards the underworks entrance to indicate that they should go together. Again it was bittersweet watching the pair set off, because Rei at once couldn't be prouder, but also suddenly couldn't help but feel a little slighted.

And he apparently wasn't the only one...

"Rei... Did they tell you if you won the Dueling finals?"

Rei looked around at Catcher at the end of the row. Catcher, who could read his mind about as accurately as Aria or Viv, apparently.

“I was just thinking about that,” he said with a wince as he repositioned himself in his seat. “No, they didn’t. I’ll bet they’ll call it a draw, though.”

“Well *that* wouldn’t be fair!” Cashe said with a frown, her eyes on Aria and Lennon as they made their way along the walkway below them. “You had that fight in the bag. Aria would be the first to say so.”

“But there wasn’t a conclusive winner.” Rei shrugged. “They probably would have called for a rematch, ordinarily, but...” He offered the Lancer a pained smile to make his point.

“They still should have offered you the chance, at least,” Viv muttered from his left.

Rei didn’t answer that. He wasn’t even sure how he wanted to. Most of him wanted to yell that yes, *YES*, of course they should have, and of course he would have liked the chance to cleanly prove himself the strongest first-year in the tournament.

But the rest of him was the part that had seen the stands respond to Hippolyta’s new manifestation with almost-dangerous enthusiasm, and knew that Dent and the others were right to keep him off the field even if he *had* been in fighting form...

Firesong sat quietly after that, and fortunately it wasn’t too long before the lights dimmed one last time and the stands quieted. Once the Arena was silent there was a beat of stillness in the dark, holding just long enough for a couple of people to start calling out loud if something had gone wrong again.

And then the floor below them bloomed to life, every line of the different areas highlighted in pulsing white.

The spectators started cheering once again, and doubly so when a disk in the very center of the floor glowed into being. The white lines started to strobe, then dance in shifting plumes of skyward-pointed spot light. There was no music or fanfare, because nothing could have been more deafening than the crowd, especially when the disk

flickered to black again for a second, then blazed once more to outline a single figure Rei didn't recognize until the man started to speak.

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you! Thank you one and *all!*”

The blinding glow of the disk faded a little as it began to rise, revealing Lieutenant Colonel Williamson standing in its center, his smile strained but bright, his arms stretched wide.

“As this Sectionals tournament comes to a close, I cannot express how appreciative we of Kenneth Academy are for your being here, spectators and participants alike! My name is Lieutenant Colonel Williamson, and I am the commanding officer of this school! My staff and I are *so* thrilled to have had the opportunity to host this tournament this year, and hope you had an entertaining time despite our... uh... hiccups...”

The strobing of the lights faded, and there was a rumble of low chuckles from all around as even Rei smirked. He supposed it wasn't like the higher ups could sweep anything under the rug, so “address and disarm” was as good a tactic to take as any.

“Of course, we are only a *fraction* of the reason this tournament was brought to fruition! If you would all join me in putting your hands together, please give an *enthusiastic* applause and congratulation to... THE 103RD MILITARY COLLEGE!”

To one side of the stands the lowest section of seating was illuminated as the 103rd's winged skull glowed bright, bathing the students and officers of the school in silver light. All of them took to their feet—some more hesitantly than others, giving away the first-years among them—and after a moment and a motion from one of their chaperones they all bowed towards the floor. As soon as they stood straight again, Williamson was shouting a second time.

“THE 104TH MILITARY COLLEGE!”

The blue-on-white open eye of the 104th bathed another section in light, and the process was repeated.

“THE 105TH MILITARY COLLEGE!”

Three black vertical swords outlined in white were met with cheers.

Sermont’s Point was next, then Maston’s Combat Academy, then Oyenkan’s School of Combat, the 9th Sector Division, and Deermont University. Williamson then called for his own Kenneth students to take a stand, and the group earned the loudest applause yet as their four symmetrical shields illuminated them in blue-grey light.

And then...

“And lastly! A group of students you all know and adore! The champions of every format and bracket at these Sectionals, many of whom will be going on to compete at the Globals later this year... THE GALENS INSTITUTE!”

The roar that greeted the wash of red light over Rei and the rest of the Galens students matched anything else he thought he’d heard so far throughout the tournament. It was deafening, practically making his teeth hurt, and Rei wasn’t sure if he wanted to laugh or cover his ears. As everyone started getting to their feet around him, though, he was sure of at least one thing.

“Viv, can you help m—?”

But he didn’t finish his sentence, because Viv had already been in the process of looping one hand under his arm. Almost at the same time someone else took him by the other, and Rei turned to see that Catcher had hurried by Cashe to help him, too. What was more, as the pair of them pulled him to his feet—as gently as they could, he appreciated—Rei thought the roar of the crowd might have redoubled. Then again, he was one of very few students in the entirety of the stands still in his combat suit, so it couldn’t have been hard to figure out exactly who he was.

He couldn’t help it, then. Couldn’t help it as the glow of the griffin above washed them all in crimson light, as the sounds of the 50,000 cheers rolled over him.

Despite his pain, despite the grip of his friends helping to keep him up, Rei felt abruptly larger than life.

CHAPTER 49

“Auuuughhh...” Aria was still groaning nearly an hour later as their transport descended towards The Chevaron’s main landing pad with a thrum and repeated *thunks* of engaging landing gear. “That was *awful*...”

Rei couldn’t help but snigger in his seat beside her as Catcher did much the same on the other side of the aisle. Viv, on the other hand, reached up from behind them to pat Aria on one shoulder.

“There there,” she said with mock kindness. “I’ll say it again: You’d best get used to it, given how things are going, miss squad leader.”

“*Noooo*,” Aria only moaned in response, sitting back and shielding her face with a hand even as they touched down and Takeshi barked for everyone to disembark from the middle of the transport. “You don’t *get it*. Do you know how *embarrassing* that was??”

“Nope. And probably won’t ever have to so long as we’re hanging out with you two freaks of nature,” Cashe answered genially, standing up from her window seat beside Catcher and nudging him with a boot to do the same. “But I was a *lot* more bummed about that idea *before* the ceremony, I admit.”

Aria only groaned again at that, both hands coming up now to cover her face as her cheeks and ears burned crimson, bending forward until her forehead was resting on the back of the chair in front of her. Rei, taking pity on her, brought a hand up with some difficulty to rub at her back, whispering comforting words even as he hoped she couldn’t hear the grin on his face.

As it turned out, team names and their CAD-Type emblems weren’t the only things the ISCM had pivoted on for the collegiate SCTs that season. According to a somewhat-embarrassed Dent—who Catcher had had to ask through wheezes of laughter as they’d initially left the Kenneth Arena for the last time a quarter hour before—tournament award ceremonies often came with a drop-off in online

viewership, resulting in the higher ups apparently deciding to “spruce things up a bit”. For that reason, not only had the champions of each upper and lower-bracket format been called up onto the disk with Williamson individually, but they’d done so under a spray of holographic confetti color-coordinated to the student’s CAD, with trumpets playing in the background, and been handed a *comically* oversized silver trophy that had each been almost as tall as the cadets themselves. Trophies they hadn’t even gotten to *keep*. And if *that* wasn’t bad enough, they had then been *literally* crowned by the Lieutenant Colonel, each of them in turn, as what seemed to be some kind of symbol of the promise the students showed as cadets and squad leaders to reach the very greatest heights of CAD Users the galaxy over. On the plus side, the crowns were unisex and rather subtle, so they weren’t overtly obnoxious or anything like that.

Then again, they also seemed to have been made from *very* light metal, because Rei had been debating the entire ride back to the hotel whether or not he should let Aria know she’d forgotten all about hers in her embarrassment, and was still wearing it...

“Look at the bright side,” Catcher said as he got up and out of Cashe’s way, letting her go by while he pulled his cap on over his yellow hair. “At least you’re not Lennon. He had to go up *three times*.”

It was true, too. In the end, Williamson had indeed made the announcement that, “due to the unfortunate events earlier that day,” the first-year Dueling finals had been called as a draw by tournament arbiters. It had been disappointing, but not surprising all thing considered, and had at least resulted in the small silver lining of Aria only having to ascend to join the Lieutenant Colonel on that central disk a *single* time to accept the Team Battle championship, Vademe doing the same for the Wargames right after her.

Poor Lennon, on the other hand...

“Oh it was *so* awkward when he kept having to pull his crown off to get the second and third one,” Viv added, sounding mortified *for* the poor Lasher. “You’d think someone would have seen that coming...”

“Pretty sure I saw him wearing them like bracelets over his uniform on the way out of the Arena,” Rei added, hoping Aria would get the hint as he kept rubbing her back, having gotten somewhat control of his face.

She didn’t.

“I am learning—” Aria mumbled through her hands without leaning back from where her head was still resting on the seat in front of her “—that the ISCM may be *slightly* less competent in *several* areas than I may have been led to believe growing up.”

That got a chuckle out of all of them, and Viv got up behind Rei and Aria as Catcher and Cashe headed down the aisle behind the rest of the students. Aria came to herself a little, then, sighing before sitting up and dropping her hands from her still-pink face. After another breath she looked around at Rei, and had just opened her mouth—probably to ask if he wanted help standing up—when she was beaten to the punch.

“Need a hand, Ward?” Grant asked in a low voice from behind him.

Rei blinked, doing his best to look over his shoulder at the Mauler, who’d stood up but hadn’t yet followed the others. Viv paused in the aisle, and was watching the exchange with that same mix of nerves Rei had seen after the Team Battle.

Needless to say, despite all the excitement of the day and the ever-overwhelming desire to lay down and not move for several weeks, Rei’s curiosity was still killing him.

“Uh... yeah,” he answered Grant tentatively. “Thanks...”

The boy just nodded, then took Rei under the arms and “helped him” to his feet—which largely involved Grant more or less picking him up like he weighed no more than a small toddler—setting him down once Rei got his legs under himself. From there the

Mauler quickly took his leave, looking a little embarrassed, and Rei ended up accepting Aria's offered hand to sidle painfully out from between the seats.

"*Now* can someone tell me what's going on?" he whined as Viv caught him by the other arm, helping him along.

The girls exchanged a glance on either side of him as they reached the transport door, but didn't have the opportunity to say a word. Rei wasn't sure they were going to, to be fair, but even if there'd been a chance it was stolen away the minute they started to descend the steps onto the landing pad.

Almost at once, the world became a brilliant blaze of flashing lights and shouting voices.

"WARD! REIDON WARD! CAN YOU COMMENT ON THE ATTACK YOU SUFFERED THIS MORNING??"

"CADET LAURENT! YOU WERE THERE! CAN YOU DESCRIBE WHAT HAPPENED FROM YOUR PERSPECTIVE??"

"WARD! CADET WARD!"

"You three, hang tight."

Takeshi was suddenly in front of them as they reached the last step, putting herself bodily between Rei, Aria, and Viv and the veritable *horde* of reporters that crowded the platform like a milling ant colony. Rei couldn't believe he'd missed them as they were landing, but the bite of a mean winter wind nearly took all their caps off—the latter of which had somehow been placed *over* Aria's crown while still not being noticed—and he supposed they'd all probably been hunkered in the lobby waiting for the Galens group to descend.

Whatever the case was they were all four very suddenly nearly completely penned in, the reporters having closed in behind Catcher and Grant ahead of them to form a complete half-circle around the door of the transport.

Not that that lasted long.

“WHAT THE *HELL* IS THIS?!”

Forget the wind. Valera Dent’s roar from behind them had even Rei’s blood turning to ice as he, Aria, and Viv all glanced back to see that the captain had pressed her way through the other students still filed behind them to get out. She’d taken hold of the top of the door to lean out from the middle step of the stairs, and her eyes were threatening and white as she took in the reporters before them, all of whom had very suddenly gone dead silent.

Then one brave idiot—red in the cheeks from the cold and looking just young enough to want to make a name for himself at any foolish cost—raised his voice.

“Bishop! Is it true that you disrupted the assault?? Can you comment on—??”

Then the man shut up again as Dent suddenly appeared in front of him, having slipped down the steps, by where Rei and the girls stood with Takeshi still body blocking them, and into the crowd in a blink. Her movement was so abrupt, in fact, that the reporter yelped in fright and tried to leap back from her, but only achieved an awkward hop into the press of bodies behind him and several curses from the owners of offended toes.

“A *comment*?!” Dent snarled, looking around at the gathered reporters like they were the most disgusting things she’d ever seen. “How about a comment on how to find some common sense?! Every one of you is so keen on getting your scoop that you’re holding an injured *teenager* hostage in the wind and cold! What the *hell* is wrong with you all?! How’s *that* for a comment?!”

No one braved a response this time, and there was a lot of awkward shuffling as not a few of the reporters glanced nervously at Rei, who imagined he must have cut a pretty haggard sight. On Catcher’s arm he’d limped his way to the nearest bathroom after the awards ceremony to *try* and remove his combat uniform, but even with the Saber’s help and the extra space of a borrowed handicap stall the pair hadn’t even gotten an arm out before Rei threw in the towel. In the end they’d just pulled his dress shirt

and jacket loosely over the red-on-grey of the school griffin—which could still be seen through his unbuttoned clothes—then eased on his slacks and boots before getting his cap over his loose hair as cleanly as they could.

Rei had deliberately *not* glanced at the mirror on their way out of the bathroom, suspecting he looked like the most disheveled soldier ever to disgrace the ISCM's black and golds.

“And suddenly none of you have anything to say,” Dent growled into the wind and silent reporters. “How shocking. In that case, make a space, or Captain Takeshi and I will not hesitate to *make one for you.*”

Whether or not their chaperones would *actually* have manhandled themselves a way out of the throng, Rei wasn't sure, but the reporters moved fast enough that no one had to find out. In short order there was a 5-foot-wide line leading through to the hotel doors, and as the bodies and cameras and lit NOEDS moved, Catcher, Grant, and Cashe were all revealed to have been standing just beyond the group, all of them holding onto their caps with one hand and their bags with the other as they looked on in concern. Seeing them, Rei realized they hadn't even had a chance to grab their own things before having been accosted.

“Oh, our bags,” he said, thinking he'd at least make the *attempt* to carry his own things in as he started to try and turn towards the open storage space under the transport. “Can we—?”

“Don't even think about it, Ward,” Takeshi growled, shooting him a glare. “I'll ask one of the other first-years to bring them. For now, get inside. Laurent. Arada. Go. Drag Ward in if you have to.”

“Yes, ma'am!” the two girls said together before Rei could voice any kind of protest, turning and frog-marching him through the lane Dent had carved out of the reporters for them. The platform was wide, and Rei actually *did* lose his cap to the wind, but Cashe was quick as lightning to snatch it out of the air before it tumbled away.

Before she could even get it back on his head, however, the doors of the hotel were hissing blissfully open for them, and Firesong stepped as a team inside the light and warmth of The Chevaron, each with no small amount of relief.

Unfortunately, they found themselves surrounded by no less prying eyes than there had been outside.

Rei didn't have to look around the hotel lobby long to tell that everyone was staring. From the staff at the concierge desk to the guests to the scattering of students from the other schools who looked to have arrived ahead of them. Every head was turned towards their squad, and most towards Rei in particular. It was an odd feeling, taking them in. Some of their expressions—especially from the civilian staff and guests—were surprised and enamored, like they'd stumbled on a celebrity. Others were alarmed, undoubtedly at the state he was in. The cadets, too, showed an equal mix of emotion, but *they* ranged more from glowers to awe, though whether because he was now more the “Iron Prince” than ever before, or because they'd witnessed the attack, *or* because he looked like absolute shit, Rei wasn't sure.

Whatever the case, Aria was the first one to shake the awkward pause that had had them stopping momentarily short on the threshold of the lobby.

“Catcher,” she said quietly. “Get the elevator, will you?”

Catcher leapt to at once, muttering an affirmative even as he hurried off towards the hall to call them a car. Aria and Viv started after him as the rest of the Galens students stepped in through the doors behind them, helping Rei along—both of them glaring at anyone who stared—while like bodyguards Cashe and Grant fell in in front and behind the three, the Lancer still holding onto Rei's loose cap. It felt like forever and a day before they reached the elevators under all those stares, and Rei had to pretend he didn't hear the little girl by the desk reach up to tug at her father's shirt cuff and ask—in a carrying whisper that only children could achieve—“Daddy... What happened to him...?”

The car, mercifully, didn't take too long in coming, and by the time the double doors opened more of the Galens cadets had gathered to wait for their own rides. No one spoke—not even Takeshi or Samsus, when the two chaperones joined the group as well—but Rei did catch Vademe's eye long enough to see the Lancer heft a familiar trio of bags hooked around one elbow, his own slung over his other shoulder. Rei nodded his thanks, and then Firesong was stepping into a mostly-empty car with the majority of Valormade.

Again he ignored the small group of civilians who'd already been on their way up, each of whom had gone immediately bug-eyed at the sight of them all.

They reached their floor with *almost* no further incident—Catcher and Grant, funny enough, got asked to sign a pad offered to them by a pretty young woman who'd apparently been cheering for the pair all week—and it was in similar silence that they all made down the hall together. Now that they'd reached the hotel, the weight of the day was starting to lean heavily on Rei again, just like he knew it was on the others. Gone once more was the cheer they'd managed after the trophy ceremony, robbed partially by the abrupt encounter with the reporters, partially by the impending pressure of the conversation Firesong all knew was coming. Around them, Valormade either felt the tension or were bearing their own exhaustion after the day's events, because not one of the team said anything either, splitting off too as they reached their rooms. In the end only Vademe was left to tag along, and even then just until he could hand Rei, Aria, and Viv's bags off to Grant once they reached Aria and Viv's room. He did pause, though, before taking his leave, to look Rei up and down.

“You good, Ward?” he asked, sounding not a little bit concerned.

Rei managed a bit of a weary smile. “Will be. Thanks, man.”

It wasn't the best answer he could have given, but it was an honest one, and Vademe seemed to accept it because he nodded once, then took his leave.

Catcher opened the door, and all of them filed in. They got Rei to Aria's bed, where lying down was at once the most painful and joyous of feelings. Rei couldn't help grunting in discomfort through gritted teeth, actually, when the two girls eased him back, with Catcher hurrying to get a pillow under his head as they did. Once he was settled, Aria sat down next to him—dammit, even the shifting of the mattress like that hurt—and pulled her cap off to toss on Viv's bed beside where Cashe had already placed Rei's and Grant had dropped their bags. Then Aria looked around at the others.

“We'll only have access to the dining hall for a limited time. Go grab dinner. We'll talk after.”

“But—” Grant started, looking uncertain. Rei felt for him, sharing an odd sense of kinship with the Mauler in the moment.

It was the first time he apparently wasn't the only one with a secret to share...

“Take a hint, Logan,” Aria interrupted the boy gently, pointedly resting her hand atop Rei's by her hip.

It did the trick. Grant still hesitated, but a light prod from Viv and a glance at her nodding for him to do as he was told was enough to get him moving. Cashe, too, needed a look from Aria before she took her leave with a sigh, and Catcher followed the other three out, only pausing at the door.

“We'll ask for permission to bring you guys back a couple plates. I doubt Dent will give us a hard time about it.”

And then they were gone, leaving Rei alone with Aria in the first moment of true calm he realized he'd had since before they'd left for the Arena that morning.

He only wished he was in a state to have enjoyed it a bit more.

“How you feeling?”

Rei hadn't even realized he'd closed his eyes against the ache, noticing only when he opened them again at the sound of Aria's voice to find her looking down at him, half-turned on the edge of the bed.

“Like I’ve been drawn and quartered,” he grumbled, managing a single dry laugh. She cocked her head at him. “Huh?”

Rei opened his mouth to elaborate, but decided it wasn’t the time. “Not great,” he clarified simply. “Those projections packed a *punch*.”

Aria swallowed, but didn’t say anything. Instead she just nodded and took proper hold of his hand, sliding her fingers into his. Quietly they stayed together like that for a time, neither saying anything. For Rei, it was exactly what he needed, and he was grateful she’d had the wherewithal to find a way to dismiss the others and give the two of them that reprieve. It was nice—even better than chuckling at the awkward trophy handoffs had been—and after a little while he closed his eyes once more.

Aria didn’t let him drift off.

“Rei... I know you’re gonna yell at me, but let me say it once. Please... I’m *really* sorry.”

He blinked and looked at her again. Aria’s face was half-hidden behind a sheet of her red hair, but he could still make out her eyes. She wasn’t crying—nor looked like she was near doing so as she stared down at his scarred hand, pulled into her lap now—but she was biting her lip like she wanted to keep it from trembling.

Rei raised an eyebrow at her. “For what?”

“For being right there,” she said quietly.

He got it, then.

“Aria, if *I* couldn’t do jack, why the hell would I expect *you* to have been able to? We couldn’t *move*. You don’t have anything to be sorry f—”

“I know!” Aria almost yelled, shutting her eyes tight and squeezing his hand abruptly. “I *know*, okay?! But... that doesn’t change how I feel. I was *right there*. And I couldn’t do *anything*!”

Scrambling for a response to this, Rei found himself only able to make a desperate swipe at humor. “I mean... I was closer. If anyone was going to punch those things in the face it should have been me.”

Aria opened her eyes again to glare at him, green fractals flashing dangerously through her crimson hair. “Not funny.”

He offered her the best shrug he could manage. “If you’re allowed to say sorry for something that’s not your fault, I’m allowed to make jokes you don’t like.”

She ground her teeth, still glowering at him. After a second, though, she let out an annoyed huff. “Fine. I don’t apologize again, and you don’t joke around about those... about those things...”

Rei thought her cheeks might have paled a little bit at the mention of the sparring partners, which was something he could definitely appreciate. He felt okay, talking to Aria about what had happened like this—she *had* been right there, after all—but he still didn’t like it. It chilled him, remembering those forms again, those still, empty faces, those blades as they rose and flashed in the sunset and—

No, he told himself firmly, pushing the memories aside. *No*.

But he wasn’t the only one suffering.

“Is that why you sent the others away?” he asked, squeezing her hand in turn. “Before the Team Battle, you—”

“No, it’s not,” Aria said a little too quickly, looking away again.

Rei didn’t bother hiding his disbelief as he stared at her from his pillow, and after a bit she sighed.

“It’s not,” she told him, more honestly this time. “Really. But I *do* owe you a ‘thank you’ for that, I guess.”

“For the Team Battle?”

“Yeah...”

“Don’t mention it.”

Another silence, and Rei didn't push. Watching her, he got the impression Aria was gathering herself, trying to find the right words. His patience paid off, because she eventually scooted around to face him in full.

“Rei... Hippolyta's evolution isn't normal.”

It wasn't a question, or framed in any way remotely as such. It was a statement, a fact, voiced with a firm conviction that told Rei this was a topic Aria had probably been stewing on all afternoon.

And for good reason, he knew.

While Hippolyta's most recent upgrades hadn't exactly been high in his thoughts given everything else going on that day, they did indeed parallel those distinct suspicions he and Aria had been discussing already. Catcher's Ruinous. Cashe's Warband. Now *these* drastic changes? Aria had said before she thought she'd probably been one of their year's top 25 assignees in the ISCM after their CAD exam, but—while Rei *completely* believed that—it didn't explain Hippolyta's extreme upgrade. Head armor... It might seem like a small thing, but before Shido Rei had never heard of anyone below B-Rank starting to develop head armor on call, and that was completely setting aside the plethora of other changes the Device had gone through. A C-Rank evolution, even if it was a User's second in that echelon, would ordinarily have come with minor changes. *Maybe* some armor improvement and *maybe* some adaptations to Aria's spear or shield. Instead, though, Hippolyta had seen major changes in *all* those areas. Nothing could have explained that.

At least ordinarily.

Rei grimaced, considered trying to sit up, and again thought better of it. This wasn't a conversation he wanted to have lying down, but his body just wasn't giving him much of a choice in the matter.

And there were things to be said.

“It's Shido. It has to be.”

Voicing the speculation out loud for the first time felt like a weight lifting off Rei's chest. Like he could suddenly breathe easier. It helped that Aria didn't so much as hesitate before she nodded in agreement.

"Has to," she echoed. "What else could it be? Catcher and Cashe's Abilities, and now Hippolyta... It's too much of a coincidence. And there's no other variable significant enough to account for it."

"Yeah..." Rei grumbled. "My thoughts exactly. But *why*?"

"Forget 'why'?" Aria shook her head. "How about '*how*'? Have you ever heard of a CAD *interacting* with another Device like this? Much less an entire squad-full?"

"Not at this level," Rei admitted. "There are a couple *really* rare Abilities that can disrupt a CAD's motor functions and visuals—System Lock and the like—but I'm pretty sure the catalyst is more like an EMP than anything like... like this..."

He let the concept hang, not really understanding how to voice what 'this' was.

Fortunately, Aria was apparently feeling a bit more eloquent.

"It's like Shido's... I don't know... *influencing* our CADs," she whispered, her eyes moving to Hippolyta's band around her wrist as she lifted her free hand to take it in. "Like it's *infecting* them."

"Uh... Let's stick with 'influence' over 'infect', yeah?" Rei said with a tight grin. "The latter makes me feel like a parasite, and I'm already too short as is."

Aria looked away from her band to glare at him again. "If you weren't already one big bruise I'd punch you. You're plenty tall, thanks. And Shido's helping there too." Then she blinked, seeming to realize something.

"What?" Rei asked, noticing the change. "What are you thinking?"

"Shido is making you grow..." Aria mumbled, sounding lost in thought as her thumb absently started tracing slow circles along the side of his hand. "That makes sense, I guess... It's making corrections to your genetic code, and probably stimulating

your growth hormone production to catch you up to a size that will be able to bring the most out of it as a Device...”

“... And?” Rei pressed. That was pretty much the exact explanation provided to him a dozen times already by Ameena Ashton and Willem Mayd, after all.

“So another way to put it would be... Shido is bringing out your potential, right?” Aria refocused on him then. “But like... *all* of it. Every single *ounce* of it.”

Rei followed, then.

“And you think it’s doing the same to the CADs around it?” he asked.

Aria shook her head with a “Ha!” of amusement. “Definitely not *all* CADs, and *definitely* not at the same level. Think of Vademe. Break Step is great for him, obviously, but it’s not something as versatile as Ruinous or Warband. So far, only Catcher, Cashe, and I—” she lifted a finger of her free hand with every name to count the three of them off “—have shown any kind of effect, *if* we’re right in thinking it’s Shido.”

“So it’s only Devices it... what?... has *acclimated* to?” Rei asked, feeling more and more at a loss with every passing moment. Sure, he’d had his suspicions, but stating them aloud like this...

If he and Aria were right, this was potentially as big a deal as Temporal Step would be, and Type Shift had ever been...

“And even then it’s not the *full* effect.” Aria reached down then to tap at Shido’s nearest band. “If it was, you never would have caught me in rank, much less passed me. It’s like it... I don’t know, like it’s *leaking* your Growth spec. Like being around you for a long period of time is enough to get infected with—”

“Again, *not* loving that choice of words.”

“—Like it’s enough to tap into your Growth spec, but just a little,” Aria corrected herself, but otherwise ignoring him.

Rei nodded, contemplating that for a moment.

There was a *big* flaw in the theory, after all...

“But if that’s the case... there’s an inconsistency...”

Aria was apparently right there with him, because she nodded.

“Viv.”

“Viv,” Rei agreed. “She’s been with me the longest by a mile, even *if* we only count the months I’ve had Shido. Her parents got her private coaching at Grandcrest, so it’s not like we did a ton of training together, but we were around each other pretty much every second of every day otherwise, and about that much since. So if Shido is ‘rubbing off’ on other CADs... wouldn’t she be our main point of evidence, instead of the exception?”

Aria didn’t look convinced.

“I don’t know...” she started slowly after a moment, her thumb still moving over his hand while she thought. “What if... What if it’s less that she’s the exception, and more just that she just hasn’t had a chance to prove our point for us...?”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning every CAD and User grows at a different rate, right? Isn’t Viv’s Growth spec D... D3?”

“D4.”

“D4, right. That’s a little above average, but what if Cashe and Catcher are different? Higher or lower, it would affect their development rate?”

“Catcher’s is a little lower. And Cashe put in a *lot* of training hours on her own last semester,” Rei added, thinking about it. “Maybe even more than we did.”

“Making it totally possible that it’s not that Viv and Gemela haven’t been *infe*—*affected* by Shido, but rather that they just haven’t had the chance to *show* it yet.” Aria was speaking excitedly now, eyes shining with something like... hope?

It took Rei a second to get why.

“You noticed too, huh?” he asked Aria sadly.

Aria blinked, not understanding.

Then she deflated slightly.

“That she’s been down since Catcher and Cashe got their Abilities? Yeah...” She frowned, looking a little sad. “I didn’t know what to say. I think Logan’s been helping her a lot, though...”

There’s that ‘Logan’ again, Rei thought, though he didn’t comment on it this time.

Instead he mulled it all over. About Shido. About Cashe and Catcher’s Abilities. About Hippolyta. About Viv...

After a bit, he voiced the question he couldn’t find the answer to.

“Should we tell her?”

Aria winced, but didn’t look surprised. Like she’d expected the question but had been hoping it wouldn’t come anyway.

“No...” she answered miserably. “I think she’s having a hard time. If we give her that hope and it turns out we’re wrong...”

“But what if we’re not wrong?”

“Doesn’t matter.” Aria shook her head. “*If* we are, and we make her think she wasn’t going to be the only one left behind...”

“If she hits an evolution soon and *doesn’t* get an Ability...” Rei finished for his girlfriend, seeing her point. “Yeah... Probably for the best we hold off, then...”

Silence fell between them again, each lost in their own thoughts for a minute. This was... a *lot*. On top of everything else, now was the fact that Shido seemed to be *influencing* other CADs? And in a *big* way?

Rei found himself wanting to sink down into the soft mattress, down and far, far away from the world, to a place he could just not care, if even just for a little while...

Reality was less kind, unfortunately.

“What do we *do*?” he finally asked aloud. “Who do we even *tell* that too? Dent? The colonel?”

“You’re assuming they don’t know already...” Aria muttered.

Rei laughed darkly at that. “Fair... Given everything else that’s been going on, I’d be surprised if we’re the only ones to realize it...”

The memory of a white, largely-featureless face flashed across his thoughts, and he shivered involuntarily. Aria, noticing this, looked suddenly worried.

“Are you cold? I didn’t even think to ask...”

“No, no,” Rei assured her with a pained shake of his head, looking past her at the ceiling. “Just thinking...”

She looked dubious. “Thinking about things that... make you shiver?”

He chuckled. “It’s not all sunshine and rainbows out there, you know?”

She nodded slowly, not looking away from him. Her eyes drifted slowly from his face, though, down his neck and shoulder, until she seemed to be studying the spot next to him on the bed. Before he could ask her what she was thinking, though, she let go of his hand and stood up.

“I don’t believe you,” she said matter-of-factly, reaching up to pull her hair out of her face and into a ponytail behind her head, tying it off with a tie that must have been hidden on her wrist under the cuff of her sleeve. “You’re cold. Only one way to solve that, too.”

“But I just said I’m not c—?” Rei began, completely at a loss.

Before he could finish, though, Aria was back on the bed, except this time she was lying down beside him, tucking herself tight to his side in the narrow space between him and the edge.

If Rei’s body would have allowed him to go rigid in that moment, he probably would have been stiff as a board. As it was, he could only stare, not even feeling his neck hurt as he’d turned to look at Aria’s red face so close to his on the pillow.

“Warmer now?” she asked quietly, not meeting his eye.

It took him a second, but he finally managed to nod just a little.

“Good.” She hesitated, then tucked one arm under her head before resting the other gently—*very* gently—across his chest. “Do you mind if I stay like this?”

“Not even a little bit,” Rei answered, hoping his voice didn’t sound as weak as it did in his head. He even took advantage of his moment of numbing surprise to bring the hand not stuck between the two of them up, resting it atop hers over his heart.

Aria smiled at that, and didn’t look away from him. Eventually, though, she closed her eyes and shifted a little closer, just managing to rest her forehead against his on the pillow.

“I’m really glad you’re okay...” she mumbled, and Rei couldn’t decide if there was more pain or relief in those words.

Still, he couldn’t help himself.

“Hey, Aria...” he whispered.

“Mmm?” she answered, like she was already heading towards dozing off.

“... I really hate to ask, but... Do you know you’re *still* wearing your championship crown...?”

The two of them woke up with a start when someone knocked at the room door maybe a half hour later.

“We’re coming in!” Viv announced loudly, but there was still a pause of a couple of seconds before the buzz of the automated bolt unlocking and the handle being turned could be made out.

Her consideration was fortunate, because even then it was *just* enough time for Aria’s eyes to fly open and for her to jump up in a panic from her spot at Rei’s side. She moved in a blur, and by the time Viv and the others entered to room again—the delicious smell of whatever was on each of the plates in Grant and Catcher’s hands

wafting in with them—she was sitting at the edge of the mattress, working a little too hard to look cool and composed.

The awkward sight was funny enough to make Rei forgive her for jostling him as she'd bolted up.

“Convincing, Aria,” Cashe snorted dryly after she'd closed the door behind them all, eyeing the pair of them. “Why, if it weren't for the bedhead, ruffled jacket, and the fact that you look like you just got caught with your hand in the cookie jar, we *might* have believed the two of you have only been chatting like old friends since we left...”

Aria didn't seem to have a word of retort for this, and Rei found himself amazed that he'd ever thought he'd seen every shade of red her ears could get.

“Thanks,” she said instead, accepting a plate from Catcher. The Saber was grinning like a mad cat as he raised a questioning eyebrow at Rei, who had the good sense to hold his tongue.

“Ward, we've got dinner for you, too,” Grant muttered, lifting the other plate and looking uncertainly at Rei and the bed. “If you're... uh... up for it?”

Rei definitely *wasn't* up for it, sadly, but he knew he had to make himself. He hadn't had lunch—on account of being out cold—and had vomited what had been left of his breakfast up testing Temporal Step. If he wanted to be able to move in the morning, he would definitely need *something* in his stomach. For that reason he made a face, then forced himself to motion stiffly at Catcher to come closer.

“Help me up, will you, man?”

Catcher was there at once, and Aria put her dinner down momentarily to help. With a lot of groaning and uncomfortable lifting and scooting, Rei was sitting propped up on a mountain of pillows between his back and the headboard. Only then did Grant come forward—he, Viv, and Cashe having only been able to watch uncomfortably throughout the ordeal—to deposit the plate carefully in Rei's lap. As he did, Rei took note that someone had already shredded the roasted chicken, the potatoes had been cut

down to bite-size, and every crown of his seasoned broccoli was somehow half as large as those on Aria's.

He didn't mention it, unsure if he felt more embarrassed or grateful that they'd taken the time.

Using his fork was going to be hard enough even *without* having to pare everything down to size.

The other four all sat talking absently among themselves while he and Aria ate, pretending not to notice him struggling to bend his arm and work his fingers properly with every bite, much less chew with difficulty. No one offered to help him—a fact his pride was *incredibly* thankful for—but Aria did once or twice silently reach up with one of their provided napkins to wipe at the corner of his mouth. He found he didn't mind it, funny enough, especially since he frankly wasn't sure he would have been able to guarantee managing he'd have a clean face for what was coming if she hadn't.

What was coming...

Rei ate slowly, and he told himself it was all because of his discomfort. It probably *was*, but he certainly wasn't about to go to any great pains to speed things up either way. Eventually, however, the conversation between Viv, Catcher, Grant, and Cashe died away, and as Aria finished her own dinner Rei was left slowly picking one bite at a time off his plate, until there was no denying he was delaying the inevitable.

Finally he sighed, asked Aria if she could take away what was left of his food, and waited for her to come back from putting it on the room's desk before he looked around at everyone.

No, not everyone, actually.

"I owe you guys an explanation," Rei told Grant and Cashe carefully, meeting the pair's eyes one after the other.

"Damn right you do," the girl answered, but the sharpness of the words didn't match her crossed arms and tense shoulders. If anything, it seemed more like she was

trying to put up a tough front, like she, too, was doing everything she could to prepare herself for whatever was coming.

Rei nodded, opening his mouth to start, hoping he would have the words he'd need to make them understand.

He was stopped short, though, by Grant.

“Ward... Do you mind if I go first...?”

Rei blinked at the Mauler, taken by surprise. He knew the guy had something to share, and it wasn't like they could compare secrets before getting them out in the open, but there was something unsettling about the boy wanting to speak first. Grant had the broad strokes of what Rei was going to have to tell them—he'd said so himself already, after all—so for him to not be on the edge of his seat like Cashe...

Was there more in the balance than Rei had assumed...?

“You sure?” Rei asked, but he found himself not knowing if he was checking if Grant wanted to share first, or if he wanted to share *at all*...

What *was* this sudden uneasiness...?

But the Mauler nodded, and seemed about as certain as a man could be, black-red eyes meeting Rei's grey without so much as flinching.

“Yeah. I am. Thing is... It kinda hit me today. Down in the underworks, before the Team Battle.” Grant turned to look at Aria. “I meant it when I told you I appreciated what you guys were saying. I really did.”

“And what is it that ‘they’ said?” Rei asked.

Beside him, Aria turned and opened her mouth to explain, but Grant beat her to it.

“In so many words: I was told I was trusted, Ward. A lot more than I thought I'd ever be, and definitely more than I thought I *was*...”

Rei nodded slowly, understanding even without the specifics. It was exactly along the lines of what he'd decided himself, after all. Grant—as equally as Cashe,

somehow—*was* someone he trusted. He was still working on the ‘someone he *liked*’ part, but the Mauler *was* someone he trusted.

They wouldn’t all be sitting in that room, having this conversation, if he wasn’t.

“The thing is... I don’t think I’ve done much to *earn* that trust,” Grant continued, and suddenly he seemed a bit less sure of himself.

“Logan...” Cashe growled as though in warning, but the boy shook his head.

“I’m not ‘falling on my axe’ here, Chancery. I’m just telling you how I feel. I appreciate that you guys know I’m working on... on stuff. I really do. Makes me feel seen in a big way, and that means a lot. A *lot* a lot.” He grimaced slightly. “But it doesn’t change the fact that I don’t think I’ve actually *done* anything to earn that. It’s more like what I... *haven’t* done, I guess?”

“Like how you *haven’t* been a total dick?” Catcher asked, saying the quiet part out loud.

“*Catcher!*” Viv snapped, but she stopped as Grant put a hand on her knee. She looked around, and the Mauler shook his head.

“No. He’s right. He’s *exactly* right.” Grant turned to Catcher, who was leaning against the desk with his arms crossed and eyes narrowed, and nodded. “That’s exactly my point, man. I’m glad you guys think I’m headed in the right direction, but right now ‘the right direction’ is kinda just letting myself... rebound back to not being an ass?” He shook his head again. “It’s not enough.”

Then, at last, his attention fell on Rei again

“First off... I’ve never said it, and I should have: I was wrong about you, Ward. From top to bottom. I was wrong about you from the second we bumped into each other on Commencement day.” His face grew suddenly pained. “And I’m sorry.”

Rei could only nod, feel a small, aching lump swell in his throat at the words. He remembered that day, thinking back on it. How he and Viv had turned a corner on campus without looking, and run right into Grant.

It hadn't been a pleasant first impression, to say the least.

But it made the apology carry that much more weight.

Rei swallowed. "Can I ask why?" he got out, forcing his voice to stay even. "Can I ask *why* you acted like that?"

He hadn't intended it to be that heavy of a question, and yet the color drained from Grant's face. In fact, for the first time ever Rei suddenly realized that Logan Grant—just like all of them—was still half a kid. Strong as steel and fast as lightning, maybe, but still a kid. He looked like it too, in that moment. He *looked* like a scared, weak child, sitting in that chair, eyes wide and mouth hanging half-open.

Grant didn't say anything for a long moment, and the room as a whole held its breath. Rei had only been looking for an explanation, but he got the feeling now that he had inadvertently pushed them straight into the heart of whatever was going on with the Mauler.

It took Viv to get the boy talking again.

"Logan," she said quietly, putting her hand on *his* knee this time.

Grant flinched and blinked, and Rei realized he'd gone somewhere in those lost seconds, had gone somewhere unpleasant and painful. The boy turned to Viv, who was looking at him so sadly Rei was suddenly unsure he wanted to know what was coming.

She didn't try to stop Grant this time, though.

"It's okay. They trust you. It's your turn to trust *them*..."

While Rei wasn't sure what that meant, it was obviously enough for the Mauler, because he swallowed before putting a grateful hand on top of Viv's.

Then he turned back to Rei, still grey in the face, but surer now.

"I... I don't like cowards, man..." he said somberly.

"Rei isn't a coward," Aria spoke up for the first time, an edge of steel in her voice.

Grant held her up with another shake of his head.

“No. I know that. Now. I think I knew that a long time ago, actually, but...” He licked his lips, and Rei got the impression he was trying hard not to slip back to whatever dark place was clawing at him with every word. “Once I got it in my head... Once I *believed* that you weren’t someone who should have been at school with us... it was hard for me to let that go.” He blinked, and his expression cleared a little, some color returning to his cheeks. “You entered *the Galens Institute*—one of the absolute best military colleges in the ISC—as an *E-Ranked User*. You fought Laurent at Commencement, yeah, but I just saw that as you trying to act tough, trying to pretend like you belonged there. It didn’t make sense to me. You had to have cheated, somehow, had to have tricked your way in, the same way you tricked your way through every fight you ever won, and most of the ones you lost. I hated it. I hated *you*...”

Over by Catcher, Cashe was squirming a little too, looking uncomfortable as she glanced from Grant to Rei. No one paid her any mind, though.

The Mauler was still talking.

“I couldn’t get it out of my head. That someone like you could connive your way into a school like ours. That someone like you could con yourself into a place at the Institute. Or at least as far as I was convinced.”

“Rei proved himself from day one, Logan.” Aria only sounded *more* annoyed now. “I almost lost that Commencement fight, and you know it.”

Logan hesitated, then nodded.

“I do now. Maybe I did then, to an extent. I’m not sure. Hindsight twenty-twenty, and all that. But... The thing is... The fact that you *thrived* at school only had me more convinced that you didn’t belong there.”

No one said anything at that, and Grant took advantage to draw in another steadying breath before continuing.

“Instead of failing, you started surrounding yourself with people. *Powerful* people. You started with Viv—” his hand squeezed hers slightly, still on his knee “—and then

Catchw—sorry, *Catcher*. Dent was in your corner too, I could tell, and there were rumors you were popular with some other big names around the school, like Mayd. And then...” Grant shook his head, his eyes far off like he still had trouble figuring it out. “... And then *Aria Laurent* herself was suddenly part of your crew, and instead of thinking that maybe there was a *reason* all those people liked you—”

“You thought I was manipulating them...” Rei finished for him.

And Grant nodded. “Yeah... Yeah, I did. I really did. And that only made things worse...”

Another silence, but Rei didn’t let it linger as long this time.

“But that doesn’t answer the question, man. You hated me ’cause you thought I was a coward? I’m sorry but... that’s not enough. If you want me to understand, you need to give me more than that, Grant...”

Once again the Mauler nodded, but his eyes weren’t on Rei anymore. They weren’t on anyone anymore, actually. They were on the floor between his feet, and once again the boy looked lost, scared, and alone.

But it didn’t stop him from speaking this time.

“My name...” he started quietly. “Grant... That’s not... That wasn’t my name...”

At those words, Rei went cold.

He couldn’t explain it, sitting there and staring at Grant. He didn’t even notice the others looking on with more anticipation than surprise, or he might have realized *this* was the thing the Mauler had been trying to get at. Rei was too preoccupied with battling back something odd churning in his stomach, something dark and horrible and so, *so* cold.

What was this? What *was* this uneasiness that wouldn’t settle? What was it about the way that Grant was speaking that told Rei something bad was on the horizon? Something very, *very* bad.

Then the boy was looking at him again, and for the first time in a while Rei saw the anger there, the rage that had defined the Mauler for him for a long time.

“My name wasn’t always Logan Grant,” he said, almost fiercely now, the heat of his words seeming somehow only to feed the ice growing in Rei’s chest. “I was born Logan *Galt*.”

CHAPTER 50

“WARNING. The following materials contain description and imagery of self-harm and suicide. They may not be suitable for all audiences. If you or someone you know is in crisis, call the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988. Help and support is available free and confidential for people in distress.”

*-Quote from Sol System ISCM training course
Has remained unchanged since the 21st century*

Viv’s hand on his knee was like an anchor for Logan. The only reason he didn’t get swept away by boiling heat that was burning again in his stomach. She kept him there, present, close enough to the anger to use it, but far enough away to keep it from eating him alive.

“I was born on Centauri A. My mom was... a pretty significant person, on-planet. She was the only daughter of one of the global government ministers, and really well-liked. Looking back on it, I’m pretty sure she had plans to go into politics herself, when the time was right.” Logan worked to remember his mother as she had been—all gorgeous yellow-green hair and matching eyes that were nothing like his own—for a moment. “The way she used to tell me, meeting my dad was just one of those flukes life hands you sometimes. He was a low-ranked officer in the ISCM, tasked with ‘regional security’, or some crap like that. Basically one of those useless inner-system postings they hand out to the crop of Users too good to be cannon fodder on the front lines, but not quite good enough to have any *real* use or responsibility, you know?” He smirked a little at the thought. “My mom was on some kind of state trip when they met.

He was in charge of running her security team, I think, and apparently ‘cut quite the figure’. Long story short: ‘They got together, dated for a couple years, then got married.’

Logan grimaced.

“Thing is... my dad wasn’t a great person, even back then. Even from what I remember. He could be charming, and it wasn’t like he was abusive or anything at home, but... there was something a little wrong with him. I knew it then, in retrospect. *Definitely* know it now.”

He hesitated, but Viv’s hand squeezed his knee slightly, encouraging him forward.

“See, my dad didn’t have a ton going for him as a soldier. His career probably would have stalled if he hadn’t met my mom, actually. But what the guy did have was one thing.” Logan lifted a single finger of his other hand, laughing darkly even as he never looked up from the floor. “One damn thing. My dad was *ambitious* as all hell.”

Memories were coming. Ones he would much rather have left locked in the dark. Broken mirrors. Screams of frustration. Anger.

A man who couldn’t understand why things didn’t always go his way.

“I don’t know if my grandfather—my mom’s father—liked my dad for that, or was just embarrassed to have a low-ranked officer in the family. Whatever the case, my understanding is that he started ‘helping’ after I was born. He started pulling strings, lifting my dad along as best he could. By the time I was old enough to remember, he was a lieutenant major—*way* higher up than he had any right to be in the first place—and maybe a couple of years after that we were at a ceremony celebrating him becoming a full-blown major.”

Logan shook his head in disbelief. Even then he’d felt ill-at-ease. He couldn’t have been more than 4 or 5, probably, but he still remembered all those false smiles and laughs, all the fake bravado and overdone congratulations filling a ballroom so big the decorated ceiling felt like a million miles away to him. Even his mother had participated

in the flattery and charm he was pretty sure she'd hated, but then again what else was she supposed to do?

“Mom was pregnant again...” he said quietly. “Newly announced. Probably not even halfway along at that party...”

He stopped, then, not because he had to, but because the memories got hold of him for a moment. Just a moment. The silence. The empty apartment. The closed door.

The feet swinging gently, inches off the floor.

At last Logan looked up. The room was quiet around him. Not a one among the other members of Firesong made so much as a sound, and only Viv wasn't staring at him with rapt attention. On the contrary, she had her head bowed, face hidden behind her hair.

“My sister was born that winter. Kaya. I don't even know the year. I don't try to figure it out. I just know it was around the same time that my dad's new rank caught the attention of Central Command. My grandfather was probably clever about it, I bet. He's smart like that. Helped my dad climb the ladder quick, but not *too* quick, you know? Fast enough to be impressive, but not fast enough to be suspicious.” Logan's eyes moved across the others, sliding from Chancery to Catcher, then on to Aria. “He got deployed maybe a month after Kaya was born. Straight to Sirius, straight to the front lines, where fighting with the archons was the heaviest. I remember my mom took it okay for the first year or so, but after that I think it got... hard. I wasn't an easy kid—I already had a temper, not that that's gonna surprise anyone—and being on her own...” He shook his head. “Even with my grandparents helping and all the support the family's money could buy her, it wasn't easy. My mom wasn't like my dad. There was a reason everyone liked her. She was a good person. She was kind, caring. She never let my grandfather talk her into hiring nannies or whatever. I don't even remember a *babysitter* for the three years my dad was on the front lines. She took care of me and my sister herself. Always.”

A stone started to form in his gut, hard and heavy.

“And then it all went to hell...”

This time he *did* stop because he had to, unable to keep going as his jaw locked up.

And at last his eyes found Reidon Ward. Ward, who Logan suspected now, with clear eyes and a clear head, had suffered every injustice the world could throw at him and come out on top.

Well... *almost* every injustice.

By the time Logan found his voice again, it was hard to speak, a pain in the back of his throat growing with the stone.

“It was June. I do remember that. Couldn’t forget it if I wanted to. I was out of school and we were all at my grandparents’ vacation home on Centauri B. Big lake house tucked away in the mountains they terraformed into the northern hemisphere there. We’d only been at the place a couple days when the flyers just... *poured* out of the sky.”

He couldn’t see Ward anymore, his mind back to that moment as he’d watched something like a full ten or fifteen sleek, small ships descend on the lake house in a roar of noise that shattered the peace of the place. He remembered being amazed by them, amazed by the black sheen of their hulls marked with the gold insignia he would realize only later had been the seven stars and crossed swords of the ISCM. He remembered laughing in delight—actually *laughing*—even as his mom and grandparents and all the others around them were leaping to their feet in what had to have been a panic.

The joy didn’t last long.

“My dad...” Logan forced out, struggling with every word now. “My dad had finally shown the military his true colors. And everyone else, too. His battalion had been holding the airspace of a civilian sector of S-Charlie—Sirius’ third planet—for most of a month without much support, from what I understand now. They kept getting told reinforcements would be coming, but those kept getting redirected to try to keep the

archons from getting a foothold on S-Delta, the planet furthest out by far, and more vulnerable. I don't know if the MIND miscalculated or if the higher ups were just doing their own thing, but they probably thought the likelihood of the enemy breaching an established inner-planet's defenses were pretty low." Logan swallowed, and he didn't feel his quivering lips curling back to bare his teeth. "They didn't know my dad."

"Connor Galt."

Ward was the one to say it, the first other than Logan to speak since he'd started talking.

"Your dad..." the boy said quietly, his gaze something between horrified and miserable. "Your dad was Connor Galt..."

Logan nodded, shaking with anger and grief both, now.

"Is', unfortunately," he snarled. "As far as I know he's rotting in a penal compound on Pluto, which is more than he deserves." Viv's hand tightened under his again, and it brought him back, calming him enough to focus. He stopped, and breathed. In. Hold. Out. Just like Forester had taught him. In. Hold. Out...

No one rushed him, and after a bit Logan was able to speak again.

"My dad was supposed to hold the sector until support arrived or the archons gave up on planetary entry, whichever came first. He could have done it, too. It would have been dangerous, but everything I've ever found—and I've found *everything*—says that he *could* have done it. Every expert. Every surviving officer testimony. Even the report the *MIND* put out after the incident. *Everything* says he could have done it. He just... didn't."

Logan shook his head again, his gaze drifting far off once more.

"He... left. Just... abandoned his post. He didn't even take any significant number of his men with him. Just a light frigate—the smallest ship in his battalion that was still big enough to be equipped with a hole drive—and its crew. Apparently all of them were told he'd had an emergency order from Central Command for a classified debrief in

Sol that required him to be there in person, and that they'd be returning 'the moment the meeting was over'." Logan's hands were shaking despite every effort to make them not, and he balled them into fists on his knees to try to steady them. "He vanished on Earth. No one was ready for it. Honestly it should have been manageable—he was only a *major*—but in the investigation after..." Grant's knuckles were white. "Apparently my dad had spent most of a year largely gutting every protocol and redundant measure the ISCM had in place. Not out of malice. Out of *laziness*. Because he couldn't be *bothered*. He couldn't be *bothered* to maintain a proper chain of command. Because he couldn't be *bothered* to hold mandatory drills and practice scenarios. As a result, there was a total breakdown in communications in his sector of S-Charlie. Again, it *should* have been manageable... but..."

"But the archons attacked..." Aria finished for him, her words quiet and horrified.

"But the archons attacked," Logan echoed grimly. "Nothing I can find tells me that we know if it was just a coincidence, or if they were somehow aware that the local command structure was momentarily disrupted. Whatever the case, *that* was the day they dropped into orbit over the civilian sector. More all at once than had ever made the attempt before." The tendons on the back of his hands were taut as steel. "A million people. They made landfall, got a foothold, and over a *million* people died..."

"A million?" Catcher breathed from beside Chancery by the desk, speaking up for the first time too. "It wasn't... I thought it was less...?"

Logan snorted savagely. "A hundred thousand? That the number you know? Yeah. That's what the textbooks say." He shook his head. "The ISCM might be less of a bureaucracy than the government, but it can still put a hell of a spin on things when it needs to. A hundred thousand was the *immediate* loss. Those killed in the process of the archons securing their first major position on S-Charlie since we beat them off the planet in the first place. That number includes the rest of my dad's battalion and all the smaller civilian hubs closest to the military bases where they made landfall. But it took

months before they were routed again. *Months* in which almost *ten times* as many civilians and soldiers fell fighting them. Oh those numbers are in a report somewhere, I'm sure. Not even the ISCM could get away with hiding nine *hundred* thousand deaths. They're just cleverly filed and manipulated to look like any number of different skirmishes and battles, which look a bit more reasonable to the outside eye until you add them all up and put them together."

Logan had to take another pause, holding onto Viv. His anchor. He didn't think he could have said any of that without her hand there.

And that wasn't even the hard part.

"The ISCM came for us in June, like I said. It didn't matter who my grandfather was. They *literally* ripped the house apart looking for my dad, like they thought we might be hiding him under the kitchen floorboards or something. It couldn't have been more than a couple of hours before the place was basically rubble. When they didn't find him, they dragged my mom and I onto the ships, and we were just... gone."

Logan blinked slowly, struggling to remember what happened next. It was the only part he ever had trouble recollecting.

"The next bit's a blur. I still don't know where we were held, but it was probably some black site on Pluto, ironically. I didn't see my mom or my sister for days. Maybe weeks. I don't know. They put me in a room that was probably *supposed* to be kid-friendly, but pink and blue were never my colors, much less the stupid games and shows on the pad they gave me like they were doing me a favor." He clenched his teeth, the fire blazing hotter than the weight of the stone for a moment. "They probably had a dozen different people try and talk to me. Ask me if I knew where my dad was? Why wouldn't I tell them where my dad was? Why was I helping my mom hide my dad?? I kept telling them I didn't know, and I just wanted to see my mom and my sister, but they didn't care. All they cared about was my damn *dad*, and they wouldn't tell me why."

Then the heat cooled all at once, and Logan felt himself sag.

“Then... they just let us go. One day they came to my room and told me I was leaving. Next thing I knew I was on a ship again, and my mom was there...”

The ache in his throat was almost impossible to talk around, now.

“She was... thin. Really thin. Like she hadn’t eaten since we’d been dragged off. Her hair looked like it was about to fall out, and I remember it took her a second to recognize me. Her eyes... It was like she wasn’t there, at first, like she was somewhere else completely, and had been for a really long time...”

“Don’t tell me they...” Chancery started, horrified, but seemed unable to finish her statement.

Logan, though, shook his head. “Tortured her? Nah. Not a civilian. The military wouldn’t stoop that low. I think she just... stopped, after they told her what my dad did. Stopped eating. Stopped sleeping. Stopped caring. When she recognized me some of that came back... for a while...”

And then Logan was at the foot of truth. The actual story he needed to tell, needed to say out loud.

Needed to explain to make them understand why he hated—*hated*—cowards.

“We were told they’d caught my dad, which was why we were being let go. Apparently he’d made it all the way to the Barnard’s System, and was trying to lose himself among the workers in the mines there. They took us back to Centauri A, but... it wasn’t a good place for us. Not even close. I knew what my dad had done by then, even if I didn’t really understand it, but my grandparents had probably known for weeks, either ’cause they’d been told or they’d found out when news hit about S-Charlie’s defenses collapse. They’d looked after Kaya while my mom and I were gone, but the *minute* we showed up on their doorstep they were screaming for us to get out, *get out.*” Logan’s breath started to come uneasily, remembering the roar of his grandfather’s voice, the *crash* of something being hurled and striking the wall by his mother’s head.

“They shoved my sister into my mom’s arms and threw us out. Didn’t give her a chance to explain or ask why or anything. Just... out.”

Viv’s hand was the anchor.

“My mom had enough friends in the city we lived in to get by for a while. We had places to crash. To move to from week to week. She was still liked, and I think me and my sister needing her gave her something to hold onto for a while.” Logan had to focus on every word to get them out now. “But that didn’t last either.”

“What happened...?” Aria asked, though it sounded like she didn’t actually want to know the answer.

Logan laughed grimly. “My grandfather. As it turns out, the man cares more about perception than anything in the world, even his daughter, much less his *grandchildren*. Within a month he’d done every interview a man of his stature had easy access to in-system, denouncing my dad and what he’d done. That would have been fine, but he also talked about how he’d ‘excised the cancer’ from the family, that he’d ‘cleaned house’, and was proud of doing so.” Logan looked at Aria. “Do I need to explain?”

“He implied your mom might have known something.”

Ward was again the one to say it, and his expression had darkened further as Logan turned his attention on him.

“He implied that your mom might have been partially at fault for what happened, for the treason and the deaths. In doing so, he pushed any attention off himself... and onto her.”

“He fabricated himself a scapegoat,” Logan growled in confirmation. “And in doing so ruined our *fucking* lives.”

Again he had to pause. Again he had to breathe. In. Hold. Out.

Again he only found his voice when he’d gained control of the fire.

“My mom had no friends within six weeks of getting cut off. Even if she did, none of them were willing to help her. I don’t blame them. I can’t. The planet—literally,

the *entire* planet—had turned on her in a matter of days, and any time we were recognized we had to run for it, to hide in the corners and alleys and trash-filled nooks to get away from whoever was screaming and cursing us that day. We would have been in the streets completely if it wasn't for Kaya, I bet. She was so young the shelters took pity on us enough to have someone care for me and her every night.” He thought his fists would break if he clenched them any harder. “My mom, they weren't so kind to. She left us wherever we would get fed every afternoon, and picked us up after breakfast the next day. Every morning, though, I remember thinking she looked a little less like herself. A little less like a person, like the nights on the street and the days spent running were breaking her down little by little.”

He stopped, then shook his head.

“No... They *did* break her. I think they broke her long before I realized it.”

In. Hold. Out.

“I think we did that for about a year. Maybe two. I'm not sure. Eventually my mom somehow got me into school. Not the kind of fancy place I remember going to before, but still a school. I think she did everything to pull it off just to help keep me fed, 'cause I was already growing fast.” Logan lifted his free hand to wave down at himself absently. “I don't know what she did with my sister during those days. Never asked. All I know is that one afternoon she picked me up from school and told me we were going to see a lawyer. Someone who could change who we were.” He shook his head, remembering. “It was a sleazy, hole-in-the-wall place on the bottom level of the city, but it must have been legit because the guy got the job done. I don't know how she paid for it, but one day I was Logan Galt, and the next my civil profile said ‘Logan Grant’.”

A false sort of elation filled Logan for a second, recalling the following months.

“Things got better, after that. A *lot* better. I changed schools so that no one would ever even know. My mom didn't look like the same person anymore, so much so that no one blinked when she started applying for jobs with her new name. She got one

working as a server at a local place. On the way to my school, so that we could take the same flyer. Apparently they even let her bring Kaya in most days to hang out in the back, since she was a quiet kid. It was enough that my mom was able to get us a place—a *real* place, shithole that it was—and pay for a sitter on the days she had to leave my sister home. For a year, things were good. Really good, honestly. They were almost normal again. My mom got promoted. Twice. Not surprising. A person like her working in a place like that isn't common. She became a hostess, then almost immediately started desk work in the back, helping the owner with managing the books.”

But Logan was at the truth now, and his world was only ice and pain and the sinking feeling in his gut.

“And then... it was gone. All of it was gone...”

He couldn't do it. He just couldn't. He wanted to. *Needed* to.

He tried again.

“And then... then...”

But he couldn't do it. He just couldn't.

Viv was his anchor.

“Logan...”

Logan blinked, the image of those dangling feet replaced by his girlfriend's blue eyes. Her cheeks were wet, but her other hand had cupped his face and turned his head to face her.

“Let me,” she said, sounding like she was barely keeping it from breaking. “It's okay. Let me. *Please*.”

Logan didn't look away. He couldn't. Half because he was a step from plummeting into an awful, bleak place, and half because Viv's gaze was the only thing keeping him that one step from the ledge.

Why couldn't he do it? Why couldn't he tell them all? Tell them, like he'd told her...?

But Viv had always been special. Logan didn't know why. He wasn't even sure there was a specific reason. All he knew was that from the moment he'd laid eyes on her, glaring at him as she'd passed him with Ward on that Commencement day those months ago, that she and her fire had always been special.

He nodded once. Stiffly, painfully, and only once.

Viv gave him a heartbreaking smile through her tears, then looked to the room.

"Her boss figured it out," she said quietly, picking up where Logan had left off. "Apparently he'd known all along."

And then Logan could only see the story in his head as Viv told it for him.

His mother's boss, the owner of the restaurant she'd been working in, had found out who she really was. Had known the whole time. Apparently there had been some discrepancy in her employment documents, some minor error by the shit lawyer who'd changed their name, giving away who Logan's mom had been not so long before. The guy had waited, bided his time, like some putrid predator lurking in the muck, until she'd been easy to get on her own after hours in the back of the shop. He'd told her, then, what he knew, and he'd told her what it would take to keep him quiet, and for her to keep the job.

Logan's mother, for better or for worse, had told him to eat it.

He was proud of her for that. To this day, he was proud of her. He couldn't imagine what those minutes must have been like, what facing that creep must have been like. And yet she'd stayed strong, and told the guy to go screw himself.

Logan just wished she'd told him all that in any way other than the note he'd found typed out on their one small, cracked pad, the tablet having been resting on the bathroom sink.

He remembered that day so vividly that his nightmares still felt like an echo of the real world when he had them. Logan had come home from school that day like he always had, with nothing seeming amiss. He'd gotten good scores on an algebra test

he'd told his mom he was worried about the night before, so he was all grins and energy as he'd taken the rickety elevator up from the complex lobby to their apartment floor. The building hallway was a crap place with pocked, unfinished plaster and peeling wallpaper that had no business still existing in the 25th century, but it had looked better than usual to Logan that day as he'd rushed from the flyer the moment the doors opened, beelining for their place. He remembered thinking she would be so proud. She would be so happy. They were going to be okay. She liked her job. Kaya was growing up quick. He was smart enough to get good marks on an algebra test.

They were going to be okay.

Logan recalled the first sign that something was amiss only when he looked back on that day, on those minutes. His keycard had opened the door into a quiet apartment, something he shouldn't have been used to. On the days his mom took Kaya to work she always came back to cook him dinner and set them up for the evening before heading out for her second shift, and on all the others one sitter or another would usually be playing with his sister or watching the feeds on the wall display while Kaya napped.

But it had been quiet.

Logan hadn't cared, though, hadn't noticed. In fact he'd half-skipped into the apartment, calling for his mom as he did. It was a day she was supposed to be home, so she was probably just on a call or had her head in the fridge or something, right?

No one had answered, though. Even when he called again. And again.

Only then did Logan remember feeling a twinge of unease.

Their apartment was small. A one room with a hall that led to the windowed, open space that served as both the kitchen and tiny living area where Logan slept on the couch every night. Their bathroom was actually closest to the apartment door, in fact, and Logan had skipped right by it in his rush to tell his mom the good news, not noticing it had been closed...

How hadn't he noticed that? The bathroom was never closed. Not unless someone was using it.

Again Logan called for his mom, and again no one answered. He looked in the living room and kitchen to find no one there, then peeked into the room she and his sister slept in, thinking they might both have crashed after a busy day. He'd felt an odd sense of relief, seeing the little bundle tucked under the too-crisp blankets, like they'd just been washed and the bed had just been made. Approaching, he'd found Kaya fast asleep on her own, which would have been strange enough even if her hair—the same yellow-green color as their mother's—hadn't been cleanly combed and she hadn't been dressed in the best clothes they owned for her. Puzzled, Logan remembered pulling the sheets a little higher over her small form before slipping back out into the hall to try and figure out what was going on.

And that was when he'd noticed the bathroom door.

Only then had it settled in Logan's chest that something was wrong. Definitely, *definitely* wrong. He remembered staring at that door, staring at that handle, that old, brass handle that he'd never really noticed before. For a long time he'd stood there, his bag still on his back, his last call for his mother feeling like it was still ringing in the silence of the apartment. He'd been too young to trust his gut, then, too young to trust his instincts. But even if he had, what would he have done differently?

And so Logan had approached the bathroom, and opened the door.

To be fair, the emergency service workers had done everything right when they arrived not long after he'd finally had the thought to place the call. They'd pulled him from where he'd collapsed on the bathroom floor, numb and limp, seeing nothing but the blue text of the small pad he'd retrieved with small, shaking fingers from the edge of the sink. His sister had been crying when they'd gathered them up in the hall outside, and Logan hadn't been able to form so much as a word to explain even after he'd been wrapped in a heated emergency blanket that had done nothing to chase away the cold.

They'd been taken somewhere bright and warm where they'd been momentarily separated, and a nice, soft-spoken woman had tried to speak with him several times. After a while, though, she'd just ended up sitting with him for an hour there on the soft couch, keeping him company. Logan should have appreciated that woman, *did* appreciate her. He should have asked her name, at least, so that she wasn't just another face in the blur that remained of that horrible day. He hadn't been able to, though. He hadn't been able to think of anything else but what he'd seen in that bathroom.

His mother's form, arms limp and feet dangling under the exposed water pipe where she had tied the fabric lengths she'd stripped from their now-ruined bath curtain.

"I'm sorry," the note on the pad had started with. "I'm so sorry, Logan."

CHAPTER 51

“I’m glad you found your person, Logan. Sometimes having someone who makes you want to let out all those things you’ve never been able to tell anyone else is the best medicine. But I’m also glad she convinced you to go look for a little more help. That more than anything else tells me you have some very good people in your corner, Cadet.

Even if you don’t quite see it yet...”

*- Captain Vorbees Forester, MD, PhD
Clinical Psychiatrist, the Galens Institute*

Viv didn’t think Logan knew that he was crying as she finished telling his story to the best of her abilities. She didn’t try to stop him, didn’t *want* to stop him. He needed this, needed this release, needed this out.

Needed this place of absent judgement, of open minds and open hearts.

That’s what Viv saw as she looked around, after all. As she finished telling Firesong about how one of his mother’s old friends had agreed to take Logan and Kaya in after she’d heard what had happened, that’s what she saw. There was horror, there, sure. There’d been horror on her face too, she was willing to bet, when Logan had finally shared the story with her. The *whole* story. There was sadness, too, and pain, and grief. In Catcher’s eyes she thought she even saw a hint of rare rage, while Aria looked empty, staring at Logan like she couldn’t decide if she wanted to cry herself or get up and hug him.

But there was no judgement.

“Zahra—Logan calls her his ‘aunt’—tried to move them all off-world not long after that,” Viv wrapped in a murmur. “Away from what was left of everything.

Unfortunately, his grandparents were still listed as their next-of-kin, and when they found out they sued for guardianship..." She shook her head regretfully. "He doesn't know if they genuinely felt remorse or if they just wanted to head off any potential negative coverage in case the press got wind of the story and found out who his mother had been. Whatever it was, Logan was old enough to tell the courts what they needed to hear to convince them he was better off with Zahra. But Kaya... His grandparents were granted the rights when it came to her. Nothing he did changed any of that. A couple months later Zahra moved him to Centauri B, found a school where he eventually joined the combat team, and... well... you know the rest." She swallowed painfully. "But he hasn't seen his sister since..."

And then the room was quiet.

For a long time no one moved, the other members of Firesong all still either staring at her or at Logan, either at a loss or still in shock. Eventually Viv began to be able to make out the dim mumble of conversations from the rooms adjacent to them, and she started to get nervous.

They'd done the right thing, telling everyone. She was sure of it. Logan had wanted to, had *needed* to. For the sake of his pride, for the sake of his health, and for the sake of his heart. They'd done the right thing...

... Hadn't they?

And then Aria did get up, and with three quick steps she was kneeling in front of Logan. Viv only caught a glimpse of tears in the girl's green eyes before she'd slid her arms around his massive chest, and then she *was* hugging him, squeezing him tight.

Logan didn't flinch away. He didn't so much as wince.

In fact, he let out a broken, wet gasp of a sob, and brought his free arm to wrap around Aria in turn, hugging her back.

"Logan..." Aria's voice was uneven. "I can't imagine... I just can't... I'm so, *so* sorry..."

And like that, the spell broke.

Chancery took in a deep, shaking breath, and Viv looked around in time to find the Lancer turning her face away as one hand came up to rub at her eyes. Catcher didn't move, still standing with his arms crossed, but his cheeks were tight and his expression anguished, mouth half open like he wanted to say something, but didn't know what.

As for the person whose reaction was *most* important to her, though...

"Viv." Rei's words were hoarse even as she turned to him. "Help me up."

Viv didn't protest. She was all too familiar with the look in her best friend's eyes in that moment, and knew arguing would have been pointless even if she had. At last she slid her hand out from under Logan's, leaving her boyfriend to continue to cry into Aria's hair as the two of them stayed there hugging, Aria on her knees and Logan in his chair. Without a word she approached Rei, and he didn't make a sound this time as she helped him get his legs off the bed and stand. The twisting of his face betrayed his discomfort, but there was no more indication of the pain other than the weight he put on her shoulders while she led him over to Logan and down into the seat she'd just vacated.

The moment he was able to, Rei brought a hand up to rest on the sobbing boy's big shoulder.

For some time they all stayed like that, no one saying a word. Apparently Aria's reaction was more than Logan could have hoped for, because he all but clung to her as she kneeled before him, both arms now wrapped around her slender body. He went quiet after a time, no longer crying audibly that Viv could tell, but he was still shaking, and it took a lot longer for that to settle and go away.

At last, though, Logan looked up from Aria's shoulder, his handsome face splotted and wet, his black-red eyes bloodshot and puffy.

"Thanks, Aria..." he croaked as they broke apart.

Aria didn't say anything back, but Viv suspected it was more because she *couldn't* than because she didn't want to. Instead the girl only nodded, her hand lingering on his arm just long enough to convey the "Anytime" she couldn't get out, then got up and moved to half collapse, half sit at the edge of Viv's bed not far away.

Viv joined her, a little because she suspected Aria could use the company, but mostly because she knew *she* could...

"I get it now..."

Rei's voice was clear again as he spoke, but he looked pained, and his hand never left Logan.

"I get it. I still wish we could have talked things out—I still wish we could have shook hands and gotten to know each other a lot sooner—but I get it. What happened to you... What your dad did to you guys. And your grandfather... Aria said it. I can't imagine. But I understand a lot better now how things got so bad between us..."

"I'm sorry, man..." Logan said in a broken whisper, his head in his hands as he leaned forward in his chair, shoulders still quivering now and then. "I messed up. Bad. I *am* messed up. I'm sorry, and I wish—"

"You're *not* messed up." Rei cut in sharply. "Or at least if you are, then you're not any more messed up than *I* am."

Logan inhaled sharply at these words, but didn't look up.

"We got dealt *shit* hands, man," Rei continued. "In our own unique ways, yeah, but still *shit* hands. Your dad and your grandfather. My parents. Your mom. Everything wrong with my body. Your sister. Absolute *shit* hands. And it messed us *both* up. I don't know when to quit, to the point that I end up in the hospital from pure stupidity *multiple* times a term, and you..." He paused, like he was considering his next words carefully. "You got angry. You got hateful... Am I right?"

Another heartbreaking breath from Logan, but this time it came with a nod. "I always had a temper... But after that... After that *coward*... After my dad..."

“It became more...” Rei finished, patting Logan’s shoulder gently. “Yeah... I get that. Not the same way, obviously, but I get that. I get it *all*.” Viv found him looking at her then, and she blinked in surprise. “I almost feel bad we both found the same person to help us lug around our baggage all this time...”

Viv felt her cheeks go a little pink, but it was all worth it when Logan let out a choked, hard laugh. He let his hands fall from his face, and then he too was looking at her, bent over in his seat with elbows on his knees.

“Don’t feel too bad. She’s a bit of a masochist. Signed up for it all herself.”

The pink bloomed *full* red then, but for the first time since they’d walked into the room the feeling in the air turned just a little lighter. Catcher appeared to hold back a snort as Chancery let slip a tiny half grin, though she was still periodically wiping at her eyes. Aria, seated beside Viv, slid one arm under hers and pulled her a little closer with a quiet laugh.

Rei, though, was serious as he spoke again.

“But she’s not the only one you can lean on, man. Not anymore.” He let his hand drop from Logan’s shoulder at last, gesturing around the room with it as best he could. “I got lucky. Luckier than I knew. Viv. Catcher. Aria. I knew when I got to school that it was gonna be tough for me for more than one reason, but I got lucky. I found my friends. I found my people. The ones that I could trust.” He looked back at Logan. “I’m sorry it took you so much longer...”

Logan took another long, deep breath at that, but it came different this time. Not the sad, shattered sound of someone struggling to keep their head above water as they drowned in the dark.

If anything, it was the sound of a great weight being lifted off one’s chest, like Rei’s words had rolled away some massive boulders that had been squeezing the life out of its victim little by little by little.

“I wish I’d had the guts to tell you all sooner,” Logan said, sounding a little more like his usual self. “If I’d known... If I’d listened...” He glanced at Viv. “*Someone’s* been pushing me for a while. I should have listened.”

“Yes, because you’ve proven yourself just *so* easily swayed in the past,” Chancery said with a bit laugh. “You’re a lunk, Logan. I hope you know that.”

“If I didn’t before, I do now...” Logan answered with his own low chuckle, and Viv felt something squeeze at her heart when she saw the barest hint of a smile playing at his own lips. “But I’ll do better. Or try, at least. I promise.”

“I promise to try to do better...,” Catcher quoted with a raised eyebrow. “That was a smooth dodge, dude. I’m gonna steal that one.”

“Catcherrrr...” Viv growled in warning, narrowing her eyes at the blond boy.

But she stopped when Logan laughed. Actually, *really* laughed.

“It’s *okay*, Viv,” he insisted. “He’s just giving me a hard time. Honestly it’s... nice.”

“Maybe for the first five minutes,” Chancery answered as she, too, glared over her shoulder at Catcher. “After that I’d say a good phantom-called axe to the face is *exactly* what our resident class clown might need...”

“Uh... can we put that to a vote?” Catcher asked, sidestepping neatly away from the Lancer and watching her warily. “Cause I would go ‘nay’ on anything that has the words ‘axe’ and ‘my face’ in the same sentence.”

And then they were *all* laughing.

It was strange, bittersweet thing. The heartbreak wasn’t gone, not by a mile. It was just... part of the moment now, part of them all standing in that room together. It was welcome, as welcome as it may have been unwanted. A price they were all happy to bear, paid precisely so that they *could* move forward, *could* laugh even if every chest still ached and not a single eye was completely dry just yet.

Strangely, Viv found herself wondering how it was possible to at once be so sad, and yet so inexplicably happy...

But they were also a long, long way from done.

“Grant...” Rei started after they’d settled once again. “I don’t know if it’s the right word but... I’m really glad you told us. I’m really glad I get it, now. Even if I wish things had been different before.”

“Me too, man,” Logan answered, his smile fading, but still present. “Even if.”

Rei nodded, then visibly hesitated.

“Still... Not gonna lie... It makes my part a lot easier to get out.”

Whereas the laughter from a moment before had lightened the mood, these words seemed to turn everything to steel. Everyone went still, from Logan beside Rei to Aria still with her arm in Viv’s. Chancery swallowed anxiously, while Catcher stood a little straighter.

They had arrived.

“Like I said earlier, I... I owe you guys an explanation,” Rei started uncertainly, looking from the boy beside him to the Lancer unevenly. “Obviously. I want you guys to understand. Even more now than before.” He seemed about as tense as Viv had ever seen him. “About me. About my CAD... About everything.”

“Like how you just jumped from C7 to C9 in one go?” Chancery asked pointedly. “Or how you even get to the Cs from the Es in half a year? *Or* how you—?”

“Yes, yes!” Rei cut in a little hastily. “All of that. And more. And everything. But before I do...” He looked like he was actively trying to keep himself talking, like if he stopped he wasn’t sure he would be able to get going again. “I’m not going to ask you to keep what I’m about to show you to yourself. I didn’t ask that from any of them—” he gestured stiffly to Viv, Aria, and Catcher again “—and I’m not gonna ask it of you. Instead, I’m just going to say that I’m trusting you. I’m trusting you to understand, once I show you, why it is that we’ve been keeping this quiet. I think you’ll get it pretty quick.”

“Ward...” Logan sounded almost nervous, now. “What the hell is going on with you? I was just guessing that you have some scary Growth spec or something...”

“Same. But...” Chancery had crossed her arms tightly, and was suddenly looking like she was less sure about this conversation she’d been pushing for for so long. “You’re kinda scaring me, man...”

“Haaa...” Rei wheezed, grimacing against a discomfort that had nothing to do with the shape he was in. “It’s just easier to show you.” And then Rei’s NOED lit up. “If you think *that’s* scary, hold on to your socks...”

The handful of seconds it took to grant Logan and Chancery the viewing rights felt like an eternity to Viv. She didn’t even realize she and Aria were full-on clutching at each other in uneasy anticipation, now. Catcher, for his part, was still as stone on the other side of the room, only his yellow eyes moving between the two recipients, almost like he was ready to jump between either of them and Rei if need be.

Notifications were sent. Frames came alive in Logan and Chancery’s eyes. As one they frowned, maybe not having expected this, and then opened the alerts with identical, practiced visual commands. Immediately their NOEDs, too, lit up, and Viv could just make out the listed design of the specifications request Rei must have sent them a screen of. Chancery was faster, ripping through the higher text like there was nothing there she hadn’t expected, while Logan was a little more even-paced. For that reason the Lancer reached the bottom of Shido’s CAD-specific numbers first, where she froze.

“Your specs are lower than I thought,” Logan muttered in the meantime. “Speed: B0. Cognition: C9. Even with those on the top end these don’t balance out to your CAD Rank. Is this Brawler-Type specific? Does it change for—?”

And then he stopped talking, his eyes transfixed just like Chancery’s, on a single, specific spot.

None of the others had to guess what had caught their attention.

“S...?” Chancery got out in a hiss after probably 15 full seconds of dead silence. “Growth... S?!”

And then Logan too, had shaken himself free of the momentary shock, leaping to his feet like the chair he'd been sitting in had suddenly caught fire before whirling on Rei.

“*S?!*” he echoed in a voice that rumbled like thunder despite coming out in a choked wheeze. “Rei... What the hell? What the *hell??*”

“*Logan!*” Viv hissed instinctively. “Keep your voice *down!*”

In any other moment it would have been comical to see Logan—the stoic, bear of a boy best known for his frown and temper—clap both massive hands over his mouth in horror. All of them—even Chancery—stood unmoving for several more seconds as they listened, but eventually the murmur from the other rooms came through the walls again with no sign of change or disturbance, and they all relaxed.

“Sorry. *Sorry.*” Logan sounded like he'd been hit over the head with a rock, eyes wide and his hands still held awkwardly before him like he didn't know what to do with them. “But... But *S. S-Rank*... How is that *possible??* I was guessing As, and I thought that was already pushing it...”

“I thought the same thing, before he told me,” Catcher said from by the desk. “It about blew me away too...”

“Dude...” Chancery's voice was barely audible as she stared at Rei. “Just... *How...?*”

“I don't know,” Rei told them at once with a shake of his head. As Chancery and Logan both opened their mouths to argue, though, he pressed on quickly. “No. Really. I legitimately *do not know*. I took the same Assignment Exam as everyone else, as far as I can tell. But things got... weird...”

And then, at last, Rei was telling them the whole story.

He ended up starting from the beginning with some encouragement from Viv and Aria. He told them about his FOS diagnosis, about his parents leaving him in the hospital at birth and apparently never looking back. He told them about how he'd been

raised a “ward” of the state by Matron Kast and the other staff of the Estoran Center on Astra-2, and how he’d been obsessed with CADs and SCT combat for as long as he could remember. He talked about how he’d gotten himself into Grandcrest Prep on scholarship and a work-study program, how he and Viv had met there. He spoke about how there, despite his fibro and stunted size, he’d just eventually managed to make it on the combat team, where his performance—if admittedly less than stellar—had been adequate enough to not get booted before graduation.

Then he told them about the exam, about ripping through the written portion, and then somehow miraculously passing the second, despite truthfully having no business doing so...

This was where the story took a turn, and where Logan and Chancery both had to sit down as they listened. He returned to his chair and she claimed the edge of Aria’s bed, both doing so just in time to look on in stunned fascination as Rei recounted how Shido had started with F0s in nearly every specification *other* than Growth, and how he had been quickly climbing the ranks from there. They learned about the nearly-nonstop training he’d put himself through using the basic instructional materials the ISCM provided all pre-Commencement cadets, and about how he’d been shocked to receive his acceptance letter to Galens when it had been delivered alongside Viv’s. They learned about how quickly Shido had developed, how he’d made leaps and bounds early on, then again whenever the CAD was put under conditions of particular stress or danger, like during the Q3 parameter testing—which Rei confided in Logan and Chancery both that Valera Dent suspected to have been a deliberate interference made by Central Command—and earlier that morning during the hack of his and Aria’s dueling finals. He talked about the extra hours he, Viv, Aria, and Catcher had been putting in long before all six of them had formed their squad, and even talked about the special training Dent had negotiated for him with Christopher Lennon, the very reason he and Shido had been able to make that final jump that had allowed Rei to just overcome Logan in

the Intra-Schools' losers-bracket the semester before. He told them a little more about Type Shift and its "redesignation" to "Type Shift I" and subsequent evolution to II—*this* was news even to Viv and the others too, based on Aria's small "Oh" from beside her at the explanation—but admitted they knew as much about Temporal Step as he did already, having been there to witness the Ability's test earlier and hear about the hole visions and the experience.

That was when the only odd thing about his recounting happened, earning a frown from Viv.

As Rei finished talking about that visit to the Kenneth Arena sub-basement they'd all been present for that afternoon, there was a moment where it seemed like he wanted to say something more. For a second, just an instant, Viv could have sworn his eyes strangely flicked to her, but then he was looking at Aria, who Viv might have imagined gave Rei the tiniest shake of her head. When she glanced over, though, the girl seemed only to be listening as intently to Rei's retelling as Logan and Chancery, so Viv decided she was probably just overthinking things.

"And so... here we are," Rei finished after what had to have been almost an hour in which not a single person but him had said much of anything. "I've got one foot in the grave—again—and Shido has done something absolutely ridiculous with no logical explanation that I can give you—*again*. I'm sorry. Everything else... you honestly already know."

And then he was done, and he sat back to look with some difficulty from Logan to Chancery, both of whom were sitting limply with their mouths hanging open.

Chancery was the first to recover, lifting a shaking hand in the air.

"I have questions," she squeaked.

"I bet," Rei chuckled weakly. "Go."

"Why... Why 'S'?" she asked uncertainly. "Not 'S0' or 'S5' or even 'S9'? Just... Just 'S'...?"

Hub... Viv thought, frowning as she realized she'd never thought to ask that question. The 'S' *alone* had been so absurd to her that she'd never noticed that Rei's Growth spec indeed didn't follow the standard level classification. It *should* by all rights have certainly provided a sub-rank of the S value, just like any other spec, but didn't...

"You noticed that, huh?" Rei nodded as though impressed. "Honestly it took me a couple of weeks to get over the shock enough to realize it." He shrugged painfully. "I have a theory, but not much more than that. I've been digging into my NOED's coding now and then when I have the time and—"

"You *what?*" Logan and Chancery asked together, this clearly *not* in the least helping their mutual shock.

Rei ignored them. "I can't be sure because I have to be careful about what I mess with, but I think it's just a display issue. Almost every Growth spec I've heard of has been in the Ds and Es, with whispers of some of the fastest-climbing SCT fighters having low Cs. I *think* having an S-rank in that particular parameter just... doesn't compute with the display..."

"Meaning you don't know exactly how high it actually is," Logan muttered, almost to himself. "So you *could* be S9."

"Or I could be S0," Rei countered with another shrug.

"Or it could be something else entirely," Aria added from beside Viv, speaking for the first time in an hour as she looked between the two boys. "You don't know. If all the other specs can display sub-ranks of S—and we know they can—why would Growth be any different?"

This led to a tense pause as they all contemplated this, with Rei looking about as discomfited by the thought as either Logan or Chancery.

"A-anyways, I'm not sure," he finished after a second. "I'm thinking I'll wait till I have a second S-ranked spec to see if it changes anything, then I might find someone to talk to about it."

“A second S-ranked spec...?” Chancery’s deadpan stare said she wasn’t even surprised anymore. “You say that like it’s no big deal. *No!*” She held Rei up as he opened his mouth to answer. “*Don’t* say anything. I don’t think I could handle knowing how sure you are you’re going to hit the Ss in the future. Rather...” her eyes dropped to Shido’s bands around Rei’s wrists. “... Did... Is... How did this happen? Is... Is it the MIND? Do you think *it* assigned you that... that Device?” The Lancer seemed momentarily unable to call Shido by its name, like she felt like she was in the presence of some unfathomable being, but couldn’t decide if it was angel or demon.

“I don’t know,” Rei answered with a shake of his head. “If I had to guess... Probably?”

“It’s pretty broadly agreed that CADs tend to reflect their Users in some way,” Catcher offered. At some point during the recounting he shoved himself up to sit cross-legged on the desk, and had been absently munching on the leftovers of Rei’s abandoned dinner. “That means *someone* has to be doing that processing and computation. Common theory is it’s the MIND, though the ISCM has never confirmed that. Only other explanation is a separate virtual intelligence specifically designed to do those calculations, which I’d bet would still require pretty significant design and more than *human* input. Which brings us right back to you-know-who.” He paused, considering that, several loose slivers of shredded chicken halfway to his mouth. “... Or you-know-*what*, I guess?”

“Either way, like I said: probably,” Rei continued, narrowing his eyes at Catcher. “And leave my food alone, will you? I’m gonna try to finish it later.”

“Oops, my bad,” Catcher mumbled around a full mouth, dusting his hands off before grinning apologetically.

“*But...* I’m not sure,” Rei finished, looking back to Logan and Chancery. “It’s just a best guess.”

“Then *why?*” Chancery followed up. “If it *is* the MIND—hell, *whatever* it is that assigned you that Growth—*why* did it do that?”

Rei looked a little uncomfortable as he shook his head yet again. “I... I wish I knew. All I can say for sure is that if the MIND—or the ISCM, or whatever—had the ability to assign specs like this at will, they would *definitely* have been doing so from the start. I’m sure there’s a reason Shido was assigned to me, and was assigned to me *now*...”

He spoke like he was trying to convey something, something deeper than the words themselves. Viv had gotten that impression before, and had come to the only conclusion she thought plausible: That Rei was being forced to lie. That he *did* know, but that he had no way of communicating that to his friends without some kind of consequence.

And there was a pretty easy explanation as to who was probably behind *that* fun little quandary, given the very particular design of the last portion of the Assignment Exam...

Whether Logan and Chancery read something similar between the lines, Viv didn’t know, though. They might have been too much at a loss already. Rather, Chancery just nodded at that, stiffly and numbly, but didn’t press any further questions. After a moment Rei looked at Logan expectantly, who was still staring with his mouth half-agape.

It took a second for him to find his voice.

“How... How strong do you think you can get...?” he asked, sounding at once wary and totally in awe.

Rei squirmed a bit at that. “Again... all I can do is guess. And today kinda confirmed that all the theories I had before the tournament can definitely be tossed out.”

That wasn’t an answer Viv expected, and so she, too, spoke up for the first time since he’d started talking.

“What do you mean?”

“The C7 to C9 leap,” Rei explained, looking up at her. “So far Shido has made good progress whenever I’m faced with odds and situations that aren’t in my favor. Training with the Lasher, for example. That was a *big* jump for me. But over time my growth kinda... wanes. Even if I’m fighting someone stronger. Like Aria. Like all three of you, actually.” He sort of waved a finger at Viv, Aria, and Catcher in turn. “You were all higher rank than me for a *good* while, but it wasn’t that long into all of us training together that I stopped gaining any kind of real progress from fighting you. Same with Grant and Cashe more rece—”

“Chancery,” Chancery corrected automatically, staring off into space as he spoke.

“Same with Grant and Chancery,” Rei rectified. “So before this week I was honestly kinda thinking that my ‘top-end’ would probably be the ‘top-end’ of any User, right? Like I’d kinda cap out at where the greatest challenge I’ll eventually be able to find is...”

“King-Rank.” Logan looked like he’d been hit by that rock a second time. “You’ve got to be kidding me...”

“That’s not what he’s saying...” Aria’s cheeks had lost some of their color. “That’s the issue...”

“The... ‘issue’?” Chancery asked weakly.

Rei nodded, looking uncomfortable.

“Yeah... See... earlier this week, when we fought Boneyard... I saw a pretty big boost—a *weird* boost—despite all of the Maston’s cadets being lower ranked. And then today in the match, those... those things...” He looked very much like he *didn’t* want to think about it, but pressed on anyway. “All of them were S-Ranked, apparently? And Shido jumped from C7 to C9, with an evolution and new Ability to go with it.”

“A *User Unique Ability*,” Aria muttered, specifying.

“Exactly. But when I was training against Lennon... I spent all day with him, and while he’s not S-Ranked, he’s damn close. And I didn’t see *that* kind of jump...”

Viv caught on, then, as she thought did Catcher, because he’d frozen in the middle of stealing another piece of chicken from Rei’s plate.

But they were at an advantage, having been around Shido for a lot longer than the other two.

“Meaning... what?” Logan asked tentatively.

“Meaning that Shido reacted a *lot* more strongly to the disadvantage of not having a CAD called against Boneyard,” Rei answered grimly. “And the multiple opponents today. Or to my being immobilized. Or to my probably being in *actual* danger, given the shape I’m in now. I’m not sure. Maybe some combination, maybe all of it. Basically—” he blew his cheeks out like he, too, couldn’t believe what he was saying “—there’s probably any number of ways to put enough stress or pressure on me to trigger Shido reacting...”

Logan got it then, too.

“Oh... Holy. Shit...”

Chancery was the last one left in the dark.

“What?” she asked in confusion, looking from Rei to Logan and back again. “*What?* Explain!”

It took a second for Logan to form the words.

“He’s saying he doesn’t know,” he answered quietly, still staring at Rei. “He’s saying he doesn’t know if there *is* a ‘top end’ to how strong he’ll get...”

It was another two hours or so after that that all of Logan and Chancery’s questions were addressed, as well as a few thrown in from Viv and Catcher.

Unfortunately, Rei could largely only repeat over and over again that he had no other answer but “I don’t know” to 90% of what they had to ask, which was disappointing, but not all that unexpected. How soon before you hit B? A? S? “I don’t know.” Type Shift II? Does that mean it will keep evolving? “I don’t know.” Are your other specs going to balance out to your rank eventually? “I don’t know.”

Around and around those circles they went, until Logan and Chancery were resignedly satisfied with the fact that they were going to leave that evening distinctly *unsatisfied*, and of no fault of anyone’s. In the end, Aria suggested they all think about heading to bed and sleeping on it all, which should have been laughable given it was only something like 2000.

To a one, though, everyone nodded, universally looking as exhausted as they might have had they stayed up all night.

The mood, though, was definitely brighter than it had been all afternoon as they started to get to their feet. Slowly as they asked their questions Logan and Chancery’s apprehension had given way to something a little more akin to excitement, until even Rei’s “I don’t know” answers seemed only to feed their curiosity about Shido and everything that had been going on since he’d been assigned the Device. Sure enough, even as Catcher, Logan, and Chancery all took steps towards the door they were already talking hurriedly, keeping their voices down but still unmistakably discussing everything that had been revealed to them that evening.

Only Viv didn’t move.

“Aria...” She glanced sidelong at the girl who’d just started getting up from beside her. “Do you mind giving me and Rei a minute?”

Aria looked at her askance for a second, the question obvious in her eyes. Viv didn’t offer anything further, though, and Aria eventually shrugged and finished pushing herself up off the bed.

“I was thinking of going to congratulate Vademe on their Wargames title anyway,” she said, smoothing out her slacks, the front of their usually crisp creases wrinkled from sitting for so long. “I didn’t really get a chance to.”

“Thanks,” Viv told her quietly, earning a nod from Aria before the girl moved briefly to Rei.

“I’ll be back in a bit.” She touched his cheek gently. “Be nice.”

Rei, for his part, only looked lost for a second, then registered that Viv hadn’t gotten up with the others. He didn’t say anything, but nodded himself, and Aria headed for the door a step behind the others.

Before anyone left the room, though, Logan stopped in the narrow hall, turning back.

“Ward,” he said. “No... Uh... Rei.”

Rei and Viv both straightened in surprise, turning together to face him.

Logan only swallowed once before continuing.

“Thanks,” he got out a little gruffly. “Again. For listening. And for telling us...”

Chancery, too, was nodding from by his shoulder, and Rei smiled at them both.

“No problem, Logan.”

Logan allowed himself a bit of his own smile, then glanced at Viv. She shook her head slightly, trying to tell him silently she’d come by his room in a bit, and he seemed to get the picture. Without another word, Catcher, Logan, and Chancery all took their leave, with Aria going last to close the door behind them, only shooting one more meaningful look at Viv and Rei both as she did.

And then the two of them were on their own again.

Viv had wanted to be the first to speak, the first to say something. She’d had it all planned out in her head, how she’d apologize—*again*—and explain herself once more, hopefully a little more clearly now that everything was finally out in the open.

And yet Rei still beat her to the punch.

“How long, Viv?” he asked her gently from his chair. “How long have you been carrying all of... all of that?”

Viv felt the hairs on her arms stand on end as something washed through her, and all the rehearsing she’d been doing over and over in her head for the last two hours fled. Suddenly—too suddenly—she was right back where she’d started, right back to when *she’d* been the one in that chair, holding Logan’s hand, finishing the story he didn’t have the strength to.

Her eyes started to sting, and she found herself looking at the ground.

“... Not that long...” she answered slowly after a moment, bringing her knees up to hug them against her chest. “A couple months? Maybe three? All of this... I know you won’t believe me, Rei, but it didn’t start as fast as you might think...”

“I do believe you.”

Viv blinked, not expecting that, and lifted her gaze to find Rei watching her intently. Unbelievably, there wasn’t an ounce of anger in his grey eyes, nor even disappointment.

He just looked... sad.

“I believe you,” he repeated, more firmly this time. “And I would have from the start if you’d just *talked* to me...”

Viv swallowed, that strange simultaneous feeling of happiness and hurt welling up in her again. She tried to answer, tried to tell him once more that she would do her best—she would do her absolute *best*—to be open with him again from now on, but she couldn’t get out the words. It was easier said than done, for one thing.

For another, there was still one weight she wasn’t willing to share the burden of just yet. Not with anyone.

So she just nodded gratefully.

Rei gave her a little bit before speaking again.

“How did it all happen? Actually. Do you mind if I ask, now?”

It took Viv another couple of seconds to gather her voice, but then she shook her head.

“I don’t mind. I should have told you from the start.” She took a steadying breath. “Logan told me about his dad, first. The night I went looking for him after you got jumped.”

“The night we thought he was the one who put me in the hospital? The night you punched him?”

“Please don’t remind me,” Viv said, feeling herself flush with embarrassment again and putting her forehead on her knees to hide her face. “But yeah. That night. He had to pin me to the wall before I calmed down enough to tell him why I was there, and he swore up and down that he had nothing to do with it. He even promised to prove it.” She blinked slowly into the darkness of her legs, remembering. “I didn’t believe him, but... there was something wrong. There was definitely something *off* about it all. He seemed so... *angry*. But not at me. Or even you.”

“Selleck,” Rei said, though Viv still didn’t look up at him. “Ah... Yeah. Gra— Logan hates cowards...”

She nodded into her knees.

“It didn’t take him long to gather them up. He didn’t even have to ask who had been there. Before I could really understand what was happening he had the six of them—Selleck, Warren, Emble, Gathers, Perez, Truant—following the two of us out of Kanes. We headed to a spot just north of the dorm, somewhere without any light other than the city, and I actually started to get nervous. Selleck and the others looked pretty pleased with themselves, and I started to wonder if I hadn’t just walked into a trap. But for some reason... I didn’t think I had. Logan just seemed so...”

She didn’t finish, thinking Rei got the point.

“He asked them if it was true,” she continued instead. “Asked them if they’d actually jumped you. Selleck—stupid *prick*—was looking me in the eye the entire time

he promised Logan they'd been careful, that they hadn't called any Devices or given you a chance to record anything. He even told me I could 'tattle all I wanted', because as long as there wasn't any proof even the school couldn't do anything about it."

Viv shook her head in disbelief, remembering what happened next.

"That was when Logan snapped, I think. I don't remember exactly. It was dark, and it was *fast*. SO *fast*. One second Selleck was smirking at me, the next half his body was in the ground. Logan put him down so hard it literally left a dent in the grass. I went back the next day to check, 'cause I wasn't sure I believed what I remembered. The others definitely didn't expect that, either, because they were all standing around gaping like fish out of water until Logan was on them, too."

"Yeah..." Rei murmured. "Yeah... I remember what they all looked like the next day..."

"I thought he was gonna kill them," Viv said quietly. "I really did. After the others had all had their asses handed to them he actually went back to Selleck and looked like he wanted to stomp his skull in. He didn't, though. He just stood over him, everything clenched like he was fighting to *not* put his heel through the guy's face."

Viv could see the moment, in her mind's eyes. The usually-pompous Saber bleeding on the ground, silent and unmoving, having been knocked out by the force of that unexpected single hit that had half-buried him the ground.

And the massive, muscular form that was Logan standing over him in the tank-top and sweats he'd been wearing when Viv had found him, barefoot in the grass and fists shaking by his side as the lights of Castalon's night-life framed him in pinks and yellows and golds.

"I ended up being the one who dragged him away," she continued. "I'm not even sure why. I believed him, though. After that, how could I not? I believed him, and I didn't... I didn't want him kicked out of school, either because someone thought what

happened to you was his fault, or because of what he *actually* did to Selleck and the others.”

She waited, giving Rei the chance to say something. When he didn't Viv finally looked up, finding him watching her intently, clearly taking in every word.

“That was when he told me about his dad. About what happened on S-Charlie. About what his name used to be. He told me a little bit about his mom, too, about how his grandfather had kicked them all out, and how they'd basically been on the streets for a couple of years. How things had gotten hard... really, *really* hard...”

“And the rest?” Rei pressed gently. “When did he tell you about the rest?”

“It was a bit,” she answered, the pain in her throat building as she thought about it. “A few weeks at least. Maybe a couple months. When he asked me out...”

She was finding it hard to keep from squeezing her knees to her chest as hard as she could, thinking about that day.

“I... I didn't mean for it to turn out like this, Rei...” she whispered miserably, her arms starting to shake. “I swear. I really... really swear...”

And then she'd buried her face again. And then the tears started to come.

And then Rei was there on the bed beside her, putting his arms around her, pulling her whole body over to lean against his.

“D-don't,” she hiccupped, though she didn't stop him. “Y-you're gonna h-hurt yourself.”

“I'll be fine,” was all he said.

At that, Viv was crying in truth.

She didn't know how long they stayed like that. If she'd let herself wonder, Viv was pretty sure she would have felt awful about keeping him there, holding her to him, injured as he was. Between sobs she did her best to explain herself, though, to tell him again that she didn't mean for everything to happen like it did, that she didn't mean to fall for Logan, that she didn't mean to keep everything from him.

Rei just kept shushing her.

After a while—maybe a minute, maybe an hour—Viv finally started to calm down.

“I really... I really don’t know how it started,” she mumbled into her knee. “I really don’t. I think... I think I was *proud* of him, in a weird way? And it all just spiraled out of control from there.”

“He needed someone,” Rei said, his chin on top her head. “And you like lost puppies. I can personally attest to that...”

Viv managed a damp snort at that, but nodded against him.

“Maybe. Probably. I think... I think I also realized *you* were the only person he treated like that. And when I started to understand why, it was harder to... you know...”

“See him as an utter, complete, and irredeemable asshole?”

“Pretty much...”

“Like I said. Lost puppies.”

That got another short, cracked laugh out of Viv, and she finally pulled away from Rei to look her best friend in the eyes.

Despite everything, it still took a bit to say what she needed to.

“I’m sorry,” she got out as clearly and firmly as she could manage, in the moment.

“I really, *really* am. I didn’t mean for it all to... to happen like this. I just—”

“Viv. It’s okay.”

It was Viv’s turn to feel the boulder lift from her chest.

“I already told Logan. I get it,” Rei continued with a shrug that he almost managed without wincing. “Do I wish we could have done this all a different way? Hell yeah. We all do. But I *get it*. What he went through—what I get you’ve been helping him with now—that’s not the kind of thing you would walk away from. I know you. You like to pretend you’re all fire—and there’s definitely times it’s true—but there’s a lot more to you. You care. A lot. Too much, sometimes. But it’s also what makes you, you know... *you*.”

Everything felt lighter. Everything. Viv could suddenly breathe again, and in a way that made her wonder if she'd ever really realized how much weight she'd been carrying these last few months.

Now that it was gone, though, she felt like she could fly.

"Thank you," she said, still meeting Rei's gaze. "For hearing Logan out. For hearing *us* out."

"Did I have much of a choice? I'm basically bed-bound right now."

Viv rolled her eyes. "Way to kill the mood, bud." But she grinned.

And Rei grinned back.

And then there was a knock on the door, followed by the sound of the latch buzzing and lifting.

"Uh... All done in here?" Aria asked tentatively, poking her head into the room. She paused when she saw the two of them sitting next to each other, looking uncertain, eyes lingering on Viv's face.

"Yeah, all done," Viv assured her with a smile, reaching up to wipe at her cheeks with the hem of one sleeve. "Asshole just ruined my heartfelt apology, but it's all good."

"I deemed a moment of levity necessary," Rei returned, lifting his chin up pompously.

Then he winced.

"*Ow*... But yeah, all done here." He gave Aria a sheepish grin. "Any chance you'd be up for giving your crippled boyfriend a hand to his room...?"

Aria snorted—her ears only going a *little* pink for once—but approached the bed anyway.

"So long as my 'crippled boyfriend' is okay with being princess-carried down the hall if he takes too long. I want to go to bed, too."

"Double-time on the limping, roger that," Rei said with a promising nod before accepting two hands from Aria to help himself slowly and painfully to his feet.

Before they started for the door, though, he looked back at Viv.

“Hey. You.”

Viv looked up at him.

“I love you. And there’s no one else in the world I’d want as a best friend. Ever.”

And then they were gone, hobbling along out of the room, the door clicking quietly shut behind them.

Viv stared after the pair for a long moment, hearing the echo of Rei’s parting words. It made her feel a lot of things. Proud. Happy. Relieved. Even a little sad and disappointed at herself, though she was able to brush those particular nasties aside much more easily, now.

But most of all... and strangely enough... *scared*.

It took Viv a second to pinpoint that particular emotion, not to mention the confusion that came with it. After a bit, though, she understood, and silently she looked around as she lifted one hand to take in Gemela’s band around her wrist, purple vysetrium glowing against the colored steel.

Best friends... Best friends, no matter what...

Viv believed Rei felt that way. To her core. She believed he would continue to feel that way if hell froze over.

But she also believed there would be a point where that unwritten promise would cost him if she couldn’t keep up with everyone around her.

Viv felt like Aria wasn’t even worth comparing herself to, now, and Logan had been a terror even before developing Overclock months ago. While it was true she thought she still had good odds of taking on Catcher and Chancery, that bet was a lot more tentative than it had been even a week before, with Ruinous and Warband in their respective arsenals now.

Scared. Yeah...

Scared of falling behind. Not just Rei, though.

All of them.

Alone there in the room, Viv made a fist, made a decision, and made a hard, silent promise. To Rei. To the rest of Firesong.

But mostly firmly... to herself.

CHAPTER 52

Sol System – Earth – Sector 10

“There is an unseen world within the one most of us know so well. It overlays everything around us, completely invisible but utterly present. Without us knowing, it touches every aspect of our lives, sometimes for the better, often for the worse. It is the world born from the fall of politics and religion, born from the vacuum left to be filled by those pathologically in need of power.

It is the world of money, status, and greed...”

- “A History of the Collective”

Gilbert France, M.S., Ph.D.

Distributed by Central Command, Earth

There was a low *crunch*, and a number of long, thin cracks spread through the sizable pad Kamiya Hiroto held in both hands before him, standing behind his office desk. The damage didn’t stop the tablet from working, though, which he didn’t know if he was grateful for or regretted.

Had it shattered, he wouldn’t have had to continue watching the blades rise and fall as they ran his grandson through again and again and again, the boy’s screams having been kindly muted by Abigail Smith before his steward had even handed him the device.

Unmoving, Hiroto watched with a mounting, white-hot fury. Eventually the hologram of the Sunset Beach field shattered, and he thought he caught just a glimpse of a red and blue blur diving into the frame as Reidon began to fall. Then the video cut to black.

Without a pause Hiroto swiped a finger back across the cracked screen, rewinding the recording, and watched it again.

Three more times he played it, noticing something new every time. The ‘S0’ clear on all the projections’ backs. The utterly frozen nature of his grandson’s body. The screaming girl with red hair in the background, stuck in the same horrible pose.

As he made to play it back for a fifth time, Abigail spoke up quietly from his side.

“Doctor... I think that’s enough...”

Hiroto stopped with his finger just above the cracked glass. For a long few seconds he stood like that, staring at the black screen that marked the end of the video.

It took everything he had to temper the anger.

Slowly, deliberately he put the pad down on his desk. Bent over it, he rested his fingertips on the smart-glass top, giving himself a moment more to ensure he was calm.

No... It was past time to be calm.

“*Get me Jasper,*” he growled in Japanese, all thought of standard and decorum abandoned. “*Nom.*”

It was like Abigail had been reading his mind. Within two seconds Hiroto’s NOED—connected to his steward’s via a voluntary neuro-link—showed the call getting placed.

Ueno Jasper, prompt as ever, picked up on the second ring.

“Doctor!” the woman answered cheerfully. “I was *just* talking about you! You won’t believe who I am—”

“*Jasper,*” Hiroto cut across her sharply. “*Where are we on getting Reidon sponsored?*”

There was the sound of rustling, like Jasper was getting up and moving from wherever it was she’d been seated when she’d taken his call. Then the response came back in Japanese, and much more seriously.

“*I haven’t heard from him, but I’m not concerned. He’s just finishing Sectionals today, so now is when he’ll probably start to see how limited his training is even at the Ga—*”

“Accelerate things. I don’t care how. Just do it.”

There was a pause.

“There are a few strings I can pull, but they are very costly strings.”

“I don’t care. Do it.”

“I’m not just talking about money, Hiroto. I’m talking about corporate and political currency that may demand a lot of favors from Kamiya down the road.”

“Jasper. I. Do. Not. Care.”

Another brief silence.

“Sensei... what happened?”

In answer, Hiroto swiped a quick hand across the cracked tablet still laying before him, opening the share options. Sending the video to his NOED, he transferred it on to Jasper.

Her response didn’t take more than the amount of time needed to watch the recording.

“Understood. It will be handled.”

And then, without another word, she hung up.

“Abigail...” Hiroto said after a moment, remembering the common tongue of the ISC now, this time. “Leave me, if you would be so kind.”

The steward didn’t need to be told twice. In five quick steps she was out of his office, bowing back at him before closing the double doors leading out of the room. Once they’d swung shut, Hiroto stood for a good minute, still bent over the desk, still staring at the black screen of the cracked tablet on top of it. The glass walls of the chamber were thick, so he didn’t hear the noise and traffic of the Tokyo night behind him, but the city’s purple and pink lights and the flashing blue of neon ads leaked in around him, illuminating the otherwise dark space with strobing colors. Unmoving against that light, Hiroto took hold of the rage, finding it inside himself, gripping it

tightly, refusing to let go. He drew on it, breathing as he did, eyes never closing, but not seeing anything but the echo of his grandson's pain in that recording.

And then, with a snarl of fury, Hiroto drew up a hand, made a fist, and brought it down on the tablet in a single clean, precise blow.

The pad exploded, shattering into a million small fragments so fine it seemed more to erupt into smoke than anything else.

As the dust settled, Hiroto stood tall, straightened his suit with a tug, and strode from the room, trusting in the evening cleaning crew to vacuum and wipe down the unmarred smart-glass surface of the desk that hadn't so much as shivered.

Ueno Jasper was frowning as she disconnected the call with Hiroto, mind already working. This wasn't good. None of it was good. Not the situation Reidon Ward was in, not her teacher's demands, not the things it would cost Kamiya to see them brought to fruition in the time frame the man wanted. What was more, even accelerated all of it would still take a couple of weeks minimum to bring together, and she got the impression Hiroto's legendary patience was nearing its end.

Dammit, Jasper thought to herself.

Then she brought herself up, composed her face, and turned to head back into the lavish locker room she'd quickly vacated when it had become clear the call's subject wasn't one to be shared just yet.

And speaking Japanese wouldn't have kept anything private here.

The girl was still exactly where Jasper had left her, seated rigidly on the black-and-gold bench before the line of white lockers that lined the south wall at her back. Jasper had caught Blademorn in the middle of changing, and a word from their leader had been enough to have the rest of the squad hurrying to finish up and take their leave of

the room. They hadn't needed to ask who Jasper was to understand that the conversation about to happen was none of their business, and probably more risky than was worth overhearing anyway.

"Sorry about that," Jasper said genially as she sat down on the bench next to the girl, facing the other way. "Important call. Couldn't miss it."

No answer.

"Anyway, like I was saying, I wanted to stop by and give you my congratulations. Runner-up in the Team Battle championship as second-years is an *incredible* achievement! And it was *such* a good fight."

Still no answer.

"Your mother and father send their apologies, too, by the way. They know they promised they'd make it, but something came up last minute. They say they watched everything live on the feeds, though, and couldn't be prouder."

Once again, not a word in response.

Jasper sat like that, then, silently, keeping her smile for herself as she watched the girl. The girl with her waist-length, jet-black hair only recently pulled out of its fighting braid, with her wide, slate-grey eyes fixed, unblinking, on the images displayed across her frame.

Images of a white-haired boy with those same grey eyes, sometimes in black and golds, sometimes in a simple first-year combat suit, sometimes with his strange CAD called around his slender form.

It was another minute before the girl finally spoke.

"Jasper..." she growled. "What the *hell* is this...?"

"Oh that?" Jasper asked innocently, like she'd only now remembered she'd sent the pictures a minute ago. "Nothing really. Nothing at all." She finally smiled, then. "Just your little brother."

There was a pulse, then, in the girl's eyes, a flicker of orange light that glimmered dangerously for a moment even behind the glow of her frame.

The same orange as the glow of the CAD bands looped around her wrists.

“Oh I'm gonna kill him.” Kamiya Sarah's words dripped with all the venom the world had to offer, spoken through clenched teeth. “I am *so* gonna kill him...”

CHAPTER 53

“For every action in nature, there is an equal and opposite reaction.”

-Third Law of Motion

Isaac Newton

“Okay! Watch your step on the way out and keep an eye open for civilians coming and going! Second- and third-years, follow Captain Takeshi! First-years, behind Captain Samsus! Move it!”

At Valera’s command the throng of Galens students standing at ease before her in the hotel lobby saluted, then started to take their leave, the third-years leading the way out into the howling nightmare of the snowstorm that had broken out overnight, soon followed by the second-years, then the firsts taking the rear. As this final group left Valera couldn’t help but find Ward and the rest of Firesong, noting as she did that the boy was being helped along by Catchwick and *Grant*, for once, with Laurent, Arada, and Cashe each carrying one of the boys’ bags in their stead.

“Well now... Don’t *they* look chummier this morning?” she muttered to herself, eyeing Ward and Grant in particular. “Wonder why that would be...?”

She hadn’t expected anyone to respond.

I estimate a nearly 86% likelihood that Logan Grant revealed his family history to the squad last night, Kes’ blue text scrolled out across her frame. I can find no other plausible explanation with any measurable likelihood of—

Kestrel, I believe the captain was asking a rhetorical question, the MIND’s red text flashed out before Kes had finished typing at a more considerate pace. There was no need to answer.

Ab, the CAD answered after the smallest of processing pauses—in which she probably scoured half the universe’s dictionaries and 10,000 hours of video data on the subject. *Understood.*

Valera snorted, still watching Firesong. Even laden with bags Laurent and Arada were hovering close to Ward, seeming concerned that he might keel over at any point, which was a fair worry given the kid—while at least moving better than the evening before—was still limping as the squad trailed along behind Valormade and Red Crown. Even Cashe appeared to be fretting a little on Laurent’s other side, glancing at Ward every couple of seconds like she wasn’t sure what she should be doing, or if there was anything *to* be done.

There wasn’t, of course. Ward’s body would heal, and the boy really did have an iron tenacity that put Valera’s own Arena name to shame. All he needed was time. Nothing more could be done for him.

Well... almost nothing, Valera corrected herself, her attention finally shifting to the last of the Galens Sectional attendants as Firesong vanished, too, into the storm.

Dyrk Reese stood off to one side, glowering at her, sunken eyes dark with irritation and dislike.

She hadn’t called the major to attend to any of the year groups. She didn’t know if he’d been expecting to after their exchange the evening before, but either way as she turned to him, the man’s mouth twitched, and he stooped to gather his own bags from the ground. This done, he started to head for the door, obviously having assumed her look was some kind of dismissal.

Oh. On the contrary.

“Not you, Major,” Valera said coolly, working very, very hard to keep the satisfaction out of her voice.

Reese froze on the edge of The Chevaron's entrance, framed in the raging white of the snow, his uniform getting tossed around his legs by the wind. After a moment he turned to look at her, his face stretched in actual anger now and—Valera hoped—just a touch of uncertainty.

“Excuse me, *Captain?*” the major growled, yet again intoning her rank. The man really never learned.

This time, though, Valera didn't need to play any games with him.

“Not you, Major,” she repeated, a little louder this time. Bending to gather her bags in one hand, she strode forward, reaching into the inside pocket of her jacket as she did. She could feel the eyes of the milling students from the other schools who hadn't departed yet, come to see *the* Galens Institute take their leave. There were others, too. The staff. The common civilians coming and going from the hotel. Even a scattered few reporters who'd been pitied enough for braving the weather that management had allowed them inside the lobby so long as they stayed respectful of the guests. Good. That was by design.

Let Reese understand what a public crucifixion felt like.

“Are you telling me not to get on the transport?” the major half-snarled. “If so, then you are *significantly* overestimating the bounds of your ‘field command’, Captain De—”

“That is exactly what I'm telling you, Major, but I'm fortunately not the only one.” Valera stopped in front of the man—maybe a little closer than was necessary—and shoved the letter she'd just pulled out of her jacket against his chest as forcefully as she thought she could get away with. A rare paper letter, plain white, and stamped closed with a red wax seal in the shape of the Galens griffin.

Reese went stiff, taking the emblem in, and Valera finally couldn't help but sneer the tiniest bit.

“Yeeeah... I thought you might know what that is. Should I explain for you, or do you want to read it yourself?”

The major, for once, appeared to have no response, gawking wide-eyed down at the griffin still pressed atop the gold buttons of his uniform.

“No answer? I’ll take that to mean you need some translation.” Valera let her voice take on the quick, snapping formality of a career officer while she—very unceremoniously—tucked the letter into the overlap of the man’s jacket. “Major Dyrk Reese, you are hereby relieved of all duties as a staff officer at the Galens Institute, effective immediately. As per the orders provided—” she tapped the wax seal with a finger once “—you are being transferred to the authority of Kenneth Academy, whose commanding officer will oversee the assignment of your new role and responsibilities. You are provided 14 days of paid leave to make arrangements, after which any possessions and personal effects left in your Galens Institute quarters will be collected and forwarded to the most up-to-date emergency address the ISCM has on record. We thank you for your service, sir, and wish you luck on your new path.”

Finishing her assigned speech, Valera snapped up into the mandatory salute of a lesser officer in the presence of her superior, if only to rub a little salt in the wound.

She’d never known she could be so petty...

For a long, long time Reese just stared at the letter, never touching it, his arms lifted slightly to either side of his body despite the bags he carried, like he subconsciously thought keeping his hands away from the thing would stop it from ever being real. When he finally spoke it was without looking up, and his words came in the stuttered, jarring fashion of a man put utterly at a loss.

“W-what...? H-How? What is the meaning of...? *How?*”

Valera let her hand slowly drop, taking in the major, watching him start to spiral. She answered without so much as an ounce of pity.

“You really didn’t see this coming? Really? After everything? After all the bullshit you’ve pulled? Setting aside your stunt during the Intra-Schools—oh, sorry, ‘alleged stunt’—” she corrected herself as the man twitched at the words “—what did you think would come of this week? You not only made a minimum effort to support the students assigned you, but you publicly berated team Firesong in a clear and obvious attempt to tear them down. If that wasn’t enough, don’t forget I was *very much* present for your little tantrum yesterday afternoon. Tack all that on to the general truth that you’re just kind of an *ass*, Reese, and I’m having trouble understanding what it is about this situation you can’t get your head around.”

Again the major was silent for a bit, but the shock seemed to be dissipating. Instead, Valera could see the fury slowly replacing that initial alarm.

“I won’t stand for this,” he finally hissed out through clenched teeth, at last lifting his face to look her in the eyes. “Do you hear me, Captain? I will not *stand for this*. I don’t know what strings you pulled or favors you cashed in, but the colonel will see this righted, and when he does I will make the formal recommendation that you be removed from your role as—”

“I would take a look at who signed those transfer orders before you go invoking Guest’s name, Major,” Valera said smoothly. “There might even be more than one person you’re surprised at. Kenneth Academy owed Reidon Ward a favor—and the Galens Institute, by extension.” She narrowed her eyes at the man. “You do not have as many allies as you think, in this fight.”

Reese froze at that, disbelief slowly registering.

Then the bags fell at last, and his hands moved with the blurred speed of an A-Ranked User losing control of his specs to snatch the letter out of his jacket and rip it open with a precise jerk. Wrenching the papers within free, his eyes snapped over the text Valera knew to be written there, his complexion going more and more pallid with every back and forth. Then, at last, he stopped at the very bottom of the page, where

the formal, hand-written signatures required of this kind of dismissal—because it *was* a dismissal, they both knew—were traditionally penned out. Valera was aware, too, exactly *whose* names closed the letter, and she almost felt bad for the man.

“No,” Reese breathed out like he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. “No... You can’t do this...”

“You’re absolutely right, *Major*,” Valera agreed at once, taking no small amount of pleasure on enunciating his rank. “*I* can’t do anything. *I’m* merely a Captain, as you are just so fond of reminding me. Fortunately for me, though, Colonel Guest, Lieutenant Colonel Williamson, and General Abel of Central Command are all *very much* capable of doing so, as demonstrated.”

“No... *No*. How? Why?!”

Valera’s irritation started to claw at her as the major’s voice rose. She considered dropping her own bags, but thought better of it. With so many eyes on the pair of them, she didn’t want to give anyone—especially the reporters—cause for *actual* concern.

“Major Reese, I would remind you that we are in public. Do *not* make this too much of a scene, if you know what’s good for what’s left of your career.”

Reese’s attention snapped to her again, and his irises were clearly edged with a hint glowing yellow light. For a second—a very long, tense second—Valera stared him down, not calling on Kes just yet, but making sure the major was aware of the fact that she was ready for him if he tried to do anything stupid. *A4* he might very well be.

But the man would be lucky to start taking a swing before she’d have him through the nearest wall.

Either because he knew this or because he just thought better of picking a fight in uniform, the glow dimmed in Reese’s eyes steadily. With it, too, dropped his shoulders, until he was almost sagging before Valera, like the weight of the world had suddenly fallen onto him.

“No... You don’t understand... You don’t *understand*... Over the kid? This? Over that damn *kid*?”

Valera said nothing at that. She hadn't been given liberty to comment on the topic by the powers that be, for one thing, but she also wanted to see if Reese would go any further in his collapse.

He obliged at once.

“You don’t understand!” he hissed again, looking up at her with the same wild gleam in his eyes Valera had seen the day before. “Why don’t any of you *understand*?! He’s dangerous! That kid is dangerous!”

It had clicked for her then already, as she was reminded of it now.

Fear. The major was afraid. Perhaps he even had a right to be.

And yet...

“It’s you who doesn’t understand, Reese,” she told him softly. “You never did, and I don’t know if you ever will. You think you have cause for fear here? *Here*? On a planet systems away from Sirius? *Systems* away from the war? You don’t know what fear *is*, Major.”

“Bull,” Reese snapped at her, some of the color coming back to him now. “Bullshit, Dent! Can you not see it? Can *none of you* see it?! What that boy is?! What that boy could *become*?! He has—!” Reese actually paused, then, seeming to remember his surroundings as he glanced around briefly at the swath of onlookers the pair of them had gathered there in the lobby. When he continued it was in the barest whisper only Dent could hear. “He has S-Rank Growth, Dent! *S*-Rank! Do you know what that means?!”

“No, and neither do you,” Valera growled.

“Oh I know what it means,” Reese snapped back, definitely regaining his usual color, now. “It means that *if* Reidon Ward even *has* a limit to his ability to get stronger, it’s one that defies any concept we have of Users today. Forget the damn war! If he’s

allowed to grow unfettered, he might be the end of us all! Why do none of you see that?!”

Valera bristled, a chill running up her arms at this.

A chill she'd long since known, and learned to set aside.

“Your mistake, Reese, is in assuming that we *don't* see that.” Her voice was steel as she answered. “But unlike you, we can't ‘forget the war’. We can't ‘forget’ the threat we know is there, know is coming. Do you want to guess how I know you've never set a foot on the front lines, Reese? Because you can spew horseshit like that with a straight face.”

“Reidon Ward is *dangerous*.” Reese was almost pleading through his anger now, like he as desperately wanted her to understand his fear as anything else. “That's all I ever needed to see!”

“Which explains why you failed as a mentor, as an officer of the ISCM, and as an adult then, doesn't it? You never even *tried* to see him as anything more than a threat, did you? Not even as a weapon? As a potential key to our strategy? Why do you think Abel—Central Command—is among the signatories on that letter, Reese? You risked the future of what Central is hoping might be one of its greatest assets, and you're surprised you're getting kicked to the curb?!”

“*Central* are the ones who authorized the manipulation of the Intra-School brackets last—!”

“You were useful to them for a moment, yes, but then you proved unable to lay off the gas. You push and you push and you *push* without relent, until it's obvious to anyone watching with any intention that your only aim is to degrade and break down Reidon Ward, even at the cost of those around him.” Valera finally sneered openly at Reese. “On the plus side, at least you've given up on your bullshit ‘in the name of the school’ excuse. It's kind of nice to see your true colors. And they're all yellow.”

The major's expression darkened at that, but Valera was done.

“No.” She bared her teeth, bringing up a hand to stop him as he started to speak. “You’ll get nothing else out of me, much less sympathy or any kind of friend. You have your orders, Major. I was merely the messenger. You made this bed. Enjoy sleeping in it, *sir*.”

And then, with another swift salute, she turned and headed out the door, leaving Reese standing there purple in the face.

Valera had only made it two steps into the snow before she had to stop and turn, yelling back against the wind.

“Actually... you know where you really screwed yourself, Reese? Just so you don’t dig yourself the same hole at Kenneth?”

Reese scowled at her, but didn’t respond. Nor, though, did he turn away, so Valera answered the question for him anyway.

“You forgot that he’s just a kid, Reese,” she shouted over the storm. “At the end of the day, he’s just a damn kid.”

Viv held onto her cap with one hand as she deliberately took her time stowing Firesong’s bags in the storage compartments under the transport. It had taken a little shouting convincing to get Aria and Chancery to let her take care of putting all their stuff away, but telling them she wanted to retrieve a scarf she’d accidentally packed anyway had done the trick, and they’d finally left her to the wind and snow. She felt bad lying, but it couldn’t be helped.

And now, after several awkward minutes poorly pretending that she needed to move stuff around to make space for Firesong’s things, the lingerers from Valormade and Redcrown had also hurried onto the flyer, and she was left on her own in the storm, waiting.

Valera Dent took longer than expected to manifest out of the white.

“Arada?” the captain shouted, stopping and looking at her in surprise as she appeared, black and golds forming from the snow like some dark ghost. “Why aren’t you inside? Get moving! It’s freezing out here!”

Viv though, pretended like she hadn’t heard the order, snapping instead up into a quick salute with the hand not still holding her cap in place on her head.

“Ma’am! I... I have a favor to ask.”

For a moment Dent only looked further taken aback, but then the woman seemed to scrutinize Viv more carefully. She wasn’t sure what the captain saw there. Probably her shivering? Probably her fingers having frozen so stiff she was having trouble keeping them straight to hold her salute?

Hopefully the conviction that had let her stand for so long in the cold in the first place.

Whatever it was, it seemed enough.

“Let’s hear it, Cadet,” Dent finally said, stepping by Viv to toss her bags unceremoniously into the storage compartment.

As the captain pulled the doors down shut, Viv made her request.

The look Dent gave her in that moment didn’t bode well, she thought. There was disbelief there—something she’d expected—but less anticipated and *much* more worrying was the flare of what might have been anger. Dent stood, hand still on the side of the transport, staring her down as a corner of her prosthetic lips twitched irritably. The wind continued to blow, and Viv did her best not to blink against the snow, just as she did her best not to drop the salute. She knew—all too well, even—that what she was asking was beyond reason.

And yet...

At last Valera Dent opened her mouth, and Viv's heart sank. She could see it on the woman's face, see it in the Iron Bishop's expression. She was going to say no. Not only say no, but probably reprimand Viv for making such a stupid, *stupid* request.

But then, before the captain could speak, her frame came alive with the barest hint of red light, and she stopped.

For some 15 seconds Dent's focus shifted, retracting from Viv to whatever it was that had so abruptly lit up her NOED. Viv couldn't be sure, but she thought there was blue there, too, and then just a hint of green when the fingers of Dent's right hand started to flick and jump in the familiar fashion of words being typed out on an invisible keyboard.

A conversation, Viv realized, a little confused. Dent was talking to someone.

And then, abruptly...

"*Fine,*" the captain snarled, seemingly at no one in particular, and certainly not at Viv. Her NOED dimmed again, and the woman's attention was once more focused on her.

"You're mental, kid," she growled. "And you're not the only one. But sure. I'll see what we can do."

CHAPTER 54

Sirius System – S-Delta – Orbit

Berenthal-9

“The greatest fighters of the SCTs are often the most powerful of our Users. It has been that way since the inception of the tournaments, since every exhaustive study and repeated calculation on the subject demonstrated consistently that the value of any individual combatant had on recruitment and funding consistently outweighed what impact they could have on the front lines individually. For that reason, the vast majority of our Knights and Rooks and Kings and Queens have always been front and center, have always been the common bar, the expectation set for the people of the ISC of what it means for a User to be the strongest, to be the most dangerous.

What a laughable misconception, when there are battle-hardened monsters lingering just outside the public eye, few as they may be...”

-“A War in Truth”

Amanda Berenson-Jones, Ph.D.

Captain Sadhil Kalita hurried as quickly as was prudent down the narrow hall of the inner hull. Things were busy this morning, with a minor assault planned on S-Delta’s most problematic moon later that very afternoon, and Sadhil as often had the way to himself as he was forced to share it with groups of soldiers jogging to their various prep stations, or some other officer or another moving from place to place to check to make sure their reports were in position and ready for the day’s upcoming demands.

It didn’t matter. These halls were as familiar to the captain now as the halls of any home he’d ever known.

It only took a minute or so to get where he was going, and as Sadhil approached his destination the way widened slightly and the plain, anodized white-and-grey walls of the space became a bit more interesting. Instead of the flat, simple steel only interrupted by doors or off-ways or ladders leading up or down a level, black, column-like sections were indented 2 feet into the metal every stride or so, giving the last 10 yards of the hall a sort of staggered, stair-like feel. Sadhil was well used to the design, now, but as a newly assigned private he'd definitely found it strange, and had asked his superior officer at the time about the odd space.

"You want as much cover as possible when you're the last line of defense," he recalled Captain Orus grunting in answer.

Then the war-scarred woman had told him he'd be scrubbing the barrack latrines for a week if he asked any more stupid questions.

Sadhil chuckled sadly under his breath, remembering Orus. He was pretty sure she'd died not a year later, in one of the many battles they'd taken to keep Charlie and Delta out of enemy hands.

Reaching the massive door at the end of the hall, he acknowledged the salute from the pair of lower-ranked Users standing guard on either side of it, the chest of their black-and-gold combat suits emblazoned with the stars and swords of the ISCM. Looking up to the silent black bulb of the NOED-scanner set in the upper frame, Sadhil waited, and after a moment there was a *clunk* of the massive magnetic lock in the floor disengaging. The door—all 2-feet-thick of it—slid upward into the hall ceiling and out of the way, and he stepped through quickly.

Forcing himself as he did—and as he'd had to for more years than he wanted to count, now—not to pause and take in the noise and hum and stunning sight all around him.

As an Arbalest-Class frigate, the Berenthal-9's bridge was actually very near the center heart of the ship, rather than having been built along its exterior. This provided

a critical element of protection, because not only would the enemy be required to overcome the actual reactive shielding to take the vessel, but also the maze of halls and the hundreds on hundreds of trained Users within. It would take true disaster for this place to be breached, which was exactly the intention.

Arbalests were built for space combat and orbital bombardment, and were therefore very often in the thickest chaos of the war.

Sadhil's feet took him forward along the diagonal walkway, then up the steps that lead to the highest point in the room. He allowed himself, as he climbed, to peek around the space, fascinated as always by the scene. A massive, clean dome of smart-glass made up the forward wall of the chamber, a hollow half-sphere some 25-yards from top to bottom, tilted 90 degrees onto its side. The walkable portion of the bridge was actually suspended into the opening provided by this dome, with the score of seats and stations all bolted together and secured to the flat, black-paneled steel of the wall Sadhil had just entered through. Everywhere he looked screens and projection displays showed off any number of metrics and parameters, only a handful of which he could decipher at a glance, though all were obviously clear and precise to the officers overseeing them.

That was nothing, though, compared to the dome itself.

It wasn't there to look pretty. It was a display—among the largest of its kind in the entirety of the ISC—that could provide almost any view the bridge officers required. Sadhil had personally been in the chamber enough times to witness everything from live footage of planetary combat to orbital battle viewpoints from partnered ships to POV streams of ground-based Users fighting on land. At the moment, it only displayed the true surroundings of Berenthal-9, the serene calm of the dark side of S-Delta, its terraformed continents pocked with the yellow-white glow of cities connected by trailing lines of light formed from the thickest intra-planetary traffic lanes. Sirius's sun was just starting to show over the eastern edge of the planet, and against its light the outline of its two moons were like shadows in the glow.

A moment of stillness before the coming storm.

Sadhil at last managed the three lower floors of the command platform to ascend the last of the steps onto the top level of the bridge. There, in a lone, complex chair made of steel and synthetic red cushioning, a tall, handsome figure sat watching the planet before them turn, his gaze far away, his thoughts clearly somewhere off and beyond the moment. Sadhil was loathe to drag the man back from what seemed like a brief breath of peace in a life he knew to be mostly violence and strain, but his orders had been clear.

“Sir,” he spoke up once he stood beside the chair. “There’s been a message for you. From Sol.”

The man didn’t flinch. He didn’t even blink. He just seemed to come back in a snap, pulling himself from wherever his attention had been back to the present. He turned to Sadhil with a frown, emerald-green eyes suddenly sharp and clear over his designed, iron-grey beard. His cap was on an armrest beside him, revealing his close-cropped hair, colored in the same fashion except for a stripe of dark red going down the center of his head.

He would have been intimidating even without the black steel of Catastrus’ twin bands peeking out from under the sleeves of his uniform.

“Speak, Captain,” came the rumbled order.

“General Abel of Central Command requests that you contact her as soon as you are able,” Sadhil got out immediately. “She says she would have called you directly, but is aware of our operation this afternoon, and the matter isn’t immediately pressing.”

The man before him did blink then, an even, irritated sort of motion Sadhil knew all-too-well wasn’t directed at him, but made him feel nervous just the same.

No matter how long he’d served on the Berenthal-9, there was no shaking this feeling. It was instinct, an old, animalistic response that humankind would probably never evolve out of.

The tense uncertainty of the weak standing before the truly, terrifyingly strong.

“Did you get a sense of what Abel needed from me?” the man asked slowly.

Sadhil hated that he could only shake his head.

“No, sir. My apologies. I did make several attempts for clarification, but her assistant stonewalled me pretty firmly.”

A grunt, then a short nod.

“Fine. I’ll reach out to her now. Thank you, Captain.”

With that the man’s frame came alive, and Sadhil at once made out the distinct emblem of a call being placed. A slim, graceful hand was lifted, dismissing him silently, and Sadhil saluted again before turning on his heels and making for the stairs once more.

“Ma’am,” came a gruff greeting from behind as he took the first steps down. “I’m told you had something to discuss.”

Sadhil was halfway back down to the door when the next part of the conversation reached him.

“I’m sorry,” General Carmen Laurent, commanding officer of the Berenthal-9 and its three-battalion force, snarled so loudly his voice echoed throughout the bridge.

“You want my daughter to *what?*!”

CHAPTER 55

Early January, 2469 - 1 Week Later

Astra System – Astra-3 – Sector 9

The Galens Institute

“I fail to comprehend the logic. What is the goal? What is the intention?! I worry, the longer this goes on, that they are going to create the very monster I think Dyrk Reese feared would be born of these delicate—and dangerous—circumstances...”

-General Rama Guest

Private Journals

“Just like that, Ward, yes! Good... Good... Now *forward!*”

At Catori Imala’s command, Rei lunged, driving his sword ahead of him in a plunging attack towards his opponent’s chest. The heavier armor of his Phalanx-Mode still felt cumbersome compared to the lighter defenses of the Saber—and much less *Brawler*—form, but he was aware that he was definitely getting better at moving even with that disadvantage. His strike was clean, slipping right through the tiny opening Imala’s instruction had shown him how to carve for himself, the blue-lined edge of Shido’s thickened blade closing the distance in a blink.

Too bad it wasn’t like he’d ever had a prayer against his sparring partner even in the *best* of conditions.

Whap.

Michael Bretz, highlighted in red in Shido’s visor display, slapped the sword aside with a bare hand when its tip couldn’t have been more than millimeters from triggering

his reactive shielding just over the red griffin's head stitched into his staff-white combat suit. His CAD bands still intact around both wrists, the Brawler sub-instructor slid cleanly out of the way of the driving blade, taking hold of Rei's sword arm in a firm grip. With a twist and lurch, Rei was suddenly pinned in a bear hug against the second lieutenant, his weapon useless and his tower shield trapped right alongside him.

“Get out of there, Ward!” Imala called, but Rei was already giving Shido the command, jerking his head to one side to get a clear view of as much of their section of the Neutral Field over his and Bretz's paired shoulders as he could.

“Temporal Step!”

The world warped and vanished. The odd scenes—never different no matter how many times Rei forced himself to trigger the Ability—compressed and exploded by in an instant. The one-armed girl. The boy with his dog. All the others. Rei ignored them firmly, working instead on keeping his head clear, his mind focused. As the field reappeared around him, the nausea struck, but he kept his dinner this time—what little he'd ate of it, at least, having known they had extra training that evening. Instead his attention was already fixed on the second lieutenant's back, having warped in a blink out of the man's arms to a spot behind his right shoulder.

Rei lunged again, slashing this time, and Bretz whirled to meet him with a grin.

For a while more they fought like that, the sub-instructor never trying to take him down, but instead forcing Rei to use every advantage—and face the disadvantages—of the heavy Phalanx-Mode. After about another 2 minutes, though, Catori Imala shouted again.

“Switch!”

Rei had gotten full control of the nausea now, and so didn't have trouble opening his mouth to shout again as he pivoted on a dime.

“Type Shift: Saber Mode!”

His armor lightened in a whirl of metal and arcing electricity. His sword lengthened, and his mind felt like it grew clearer as the Saber form's improved Cognition layered into his neuroline. The shield vanished, the steel and vysetrium of it shifting and reforming into the ice-blue claws that tipped his left hand.

It was the boost in Speed, though, that got him out of the way of Imala's driving spear.

The lieutenant's CAD was only partially called into its weapon form, but the white edge over orange and green steel was still terrifying when it plunged by, missing Rei's left ear by less than an inch. He made to grab at the shaft with his free hand, but it was snapped out of the way in a heartbeat, coming around again at his side this time. Rei's sword barely made it in time to block, but even managing it the impact felt like getting hit by a falling building.

And he knew all too well that Imala—as Bretz had been before her—was only calling on a *fraction* of her actual A9 specs.

The spear and sword blurred against each other. Rei was driven back for a time, then managed to find his pace and started the press in turn, gaining ground. A minute later his display told him Temporal Step was "READY" again, and he called on it for a fourth time that evening, tilting his head to the left while keeping his focus on the right, trying to trick the lieutenant into expecting an attack from the wrong side. She didn't fall for it, and he was left on the defense once more for a full minute as the nausea returned stronger.

Rei pushed through it. As always, he pushed through it.

"Switch!"

Brawler Mode now, Shido's crossed claws coming up in time to block the tearing punch from Bretz as the sub-instructors rotated again. Even against the man's bare fist the vysetrium edges didn't have a prayer of doing any damage, the man's Defense so

high that his reactive shield only flickered on impact. That was fine. All of it was fine. Rei wasn't there to win.

He was there to learn.

Switch. Switch. Switch. Every time Temporal Step was up, he triggered it, and shortly after Imala would call for a rotation. He moved through Shido's forms, and she and Bretz traded places. Whenever he started to feel tired a Phalanx-Mode turn would come, and Rei took the opportunity of the form's bastion-like Defense and Endurance to let his body recover a little bit. He would near exhaustion, then bounce back.

But there was a limit to everything, of course.

"Hurk!"

It happened after his eighth calling of Temporal Step. As Rei stepped through space the world spun as it reappeared, and he found himself suddenly retching. He staggered sideways as his balance betrayed him, and tried and failed to drop to one knee. Instead, he half-tripped, half-fell onto his side, his Saber Mode sword clattering away as he brought his hands up instinctively to his Device-covered mouth.

Fortunately, Rei wasn't the only one who'd adapted over the last week.

There was whirring—unpleasant but familiar—in the back of his head, and even as he knelt there about to hurl Rei felt a calming wash flow through his body. Almost at once the nausea started the fade, and under his helm he closed his eyes against the spinning of the room, allowing himself to roll down to the floor and onto his back. He lay there, Shido still called, until things felt like they weren't turning all around him anymore.

Only then did Rei open his eyes again, not the least bit surprised to find Bretz and Imala standing over him—now highlighted in *white*—and both looking rather pleased.

"Seven successful calls and *eight* attempts, Cadet," the second lieutenant said with a proud nod. "That's the best you've done all week. Still having to use vocal commands

is a big issue for your efficiency, but otherwise it seems like you're getting the hang of things."

"Thank you, sir," Rei mumbled, trying to keep his focus on the ceiling of the training room as the last bit of dizziness started to fade. "I think my Device is more to credit for it than me, though."

It was a half-truth. The fact was that he *had* been making strides to improve his tolerance of Temporal Step's drawbacks, to the point even of having pushed himself during Firesong's *regular* extra hours they had on the days the sub-instructors didn't give up their evenings to supplement their training. It definitely helped, and in the five days since they'd returned to Galens Rei was pretty sure he would have been pleased with just "no longer throwing up" as the main victory.

But it was just as true that Shido was equally responsible for the leap he'd made in controlling the Ability, always engaged to bring things under control when his motion sickness got too bad through what he suspected was some combination of neural stimulation and hormone release.

Above him, Imala dismissed the comment with a wave. The Phalanx sub-instructor's spear was gone, both bands back around her wrists, and while she didn't look as openly proud as Bretz, it was clear she, too, was hardly disappointed with the evening's progress.

"You're a User, Ward. Your CAD is as much a part of you as your arms and legs. Take the compliment."

"Yes, ma'am," Rei managed a little more firmly, offering a shaky salute from flat on his back. "That said... Permission to recall Shido, ma'am? I think I'm done for the night."

"Granted," the lieutenant snorted, her eyes lifting from him to look towards the other side of the room. "The others should be wrapping up relatively soon anyway, so we can call it a day."

Rei mumbled a recall as he started to sit up, looking around, too, as Shido whirled back into itself to leave him sweaty and seated atop the plain white of the Neutral Zone. He, Imala, and Bretz were in the 1/3 portion of the training field the Lieutenant had claimed for them, penned in by a curved, semi-transparent wall that divided the space.

On the other side of the barrier, the rest of Firesong were still in the thick of a heated battle.

They all fought as one, moving and dipping and leaping over each other, Devices all called, vysetrium blades all flashing. Aria in particular was in the middle of it, and though he couldn't hear her over the scream and crash of steel on steel, Rei could see her giving commands that the others all looked to be responding to in quick order. Here Catcher would dip in from the right, then feint to the back, allowing Logan to rip inwards while the Saber repositioned and struck from behind. There Viv would lunge head-on, then leap into the air while Chancery's spear lanced through a blind spot created by the maneuver. Aria was supporting as needed, slipping through the field as quickly as Hippolyta's heavier plate armor allowed, the crowning red steel around her face giving the impression of a commander directing her troops in the field.

It was almost too bad they had about as much chance against *their* opponent as Rei had ever had against his own.

Firesong now had *three* of the Institute's sub-instructors providing additional training. Bretz had been generous enough to commit from the start after the parameter testing fiasco, but when Rei had returned from Sectionals with a new *Phalanx*-Mode, Imala had apparently requested to join as well. When they weren't doing full-on squad training, one or two of the instructors were working with Rei on mastering his Abilities, always leaving at least someone to drill the rest of the team.

And tonight, possibly the scariest of the trio was handling that particular job.

Lieutenant Claire de Soto's massive blade moved like a machine through them all, mowing the five other members of Firesong down again and again and again without

mercy. The Saber sub-instructor's Device was fully called around her, the violent pink-and-grey steel of the CAD highlighted in vysetrium that was the same deep black shade as Chancery's, a mane of the stuff shifting like a living shadow around her helmet to give the woman an impression of a prowling, neon lion. Her sword, two-handed and single-edged, carved a ripping blur around her body, slicing and cutting only half as often as it flicked or twisted to block or redirect some incoming blow. Rei had long since decided that the woman had S5 Defense or higher—an *absurd* spec for anyone, much less a *Saber*—but that didn't make it any less impressive watching the Lieutenant do her thing while she forced the squad to work as a group to try and take her down.

The "Stone Lily" earned her old Arena name every time Rei watched the woman take to the field, even if de Soto's SCT days were long behind her.

The recovery period for the fight must have been set at its lowest possible setting, because every time one of Rei's teammates fell, they were on their feet again within seconds and leaping back in. It hurt to watch, because the shouts and screams as Aria and the others were cut down told Rei de Soto hadn't bothered to dampen the sensory input to match. Again and again the members of Firesong were FDAed, and again and again they stood up like an undying swarm to face the beast in their midst. The battle was a brilliant maze of arcing colors, Firesong's vibrant vysetrium shades cutting at the impenetrable wall that was de Soto's massive, all-steel sword. The field was plain, yes, but the floor was a pockmarked mess of destruction, the solid white of it ripped and cut and smashed to pieces under the squad's onslaught.

At least other than the 3-foot circle of unmarred ground under de Soto's feet, that is, the lieutenant apparently not having taken so much as a single step away from her starting position the entire battle.

In the corner of his eye, Rei saw Imala's NOED flash.

“Lieutenant, we’re calling it a night over here,” the woman’s voice echoed loudly through the training chamber as she tapped into the room’s intercom system. “Could I request that you wrap it up?”

Rei wasn’t sure, but he thought he saw the ink-black of de Soto’s helm tilt slightly in acknowledgement. For a few seconds more she continued to accept the hits and strikes coming at her, blocking and ducking and lashing into every opening, still never moving an inch from her carved circle of undisturbed white.

Then, in a blink, the Stone Lily went on the offensive.

With mid S-Ranked Defense, the woman’s other specs had to balance out somewhere for her to still be an A7-Ranked User, and Rei was pretty sure the biggest toll had been taken from her Speed. He could just follow her as she moved, slipping under a heavy swing from Logan’s axe, then leaving her circle for the first time to launch herself at Aria. It wasn’t like watching Valera Dent fight, where the woman moved like lightning and match recordings had adapted frame rates to help people see the combat properly.

Rather, it was more like seeing a tsunami rip across the field, still terrifying in its speed, but ten times more so in the brutal strength of its passing.

WHAM! WHUMP! WHAM WHAM WHAM!

In a heartbeat, every member of Firesong other than Rei had taken a fist or boot to the gut or chest, and those that could yelled in alarm as they were sent flying. Some were launched across the field to tumble and roll over the undisturbed white of the floor further away, the rest arcing through the air. It happened so quickly and with such force that Rei might have thought a Repulsion had been triggered if he didn’t know de Soto didn’t possess that particular Ability. The result was much the same either way, though, with bodies falling like rain all around the woman as she came to stand straight in the middle of their portion of the field, black visor lowering slowly to follow a yelping Catcher pinwheel with all four limbs as he dropped towards the ground.

Only after the poor Saber hit with an ugly *thud* and the static buzz of his reactive shielding triggered did the sub-instructor recall her Device.

“Firesong!” she barked the moment her face was clear of its helm. “Good work tonight! Gather up...” She grinned unsympathetically. “... once you’re able to.”

Aria, unsurprisingly, was the first to find her feet, though she was wincing and holding her stomach with her shield hand as she stuck her spear in the ground with the other to leverage herself up. Another spark in Imala’s eyes in the corner of Rei’s vision, and the section wall dissipated, almost immediately followed by the raised white of the Neutral Zone. All together the nine of them dropped the yard down to the training room floor, those among the rest of the squad who’d already managed to stand touching down on the black steel plating with bare feet, the others working to get up the moment the field was gone.

“Recall your Devices, Cadets,” Imala called. “We’re done for the night.” She caught Rei’s eye and indicated with a tilt of her head that he could join the others. “Form up so we can review.”

Rei jogged over to de Soto and the others at once. It was their third such extra training session, now, and with practiced efficiency Firesong fell into formation before their instructors, Aria at the front as squad leader, the others behind her to form a short diamond.

de Soto didn’t waste any time.

“On the whole, excellent effort as always. You’re all getting better and better at working cohesively. Laurent, your instructions are getting clearer, and the rest of you are responding much more efficiently. Obviously Team Battle and Wargames won’t always be heavy on group combat, but when it happens it’s the squad that works best as a unit that comes out on top nine out of ten times, so keep it up.” She gave them all an approving nod.

Firesong responded in uniform. “Thank you, ma’am!”

“Now... As for where we can still see a need for *improvement*...”

Despite the Saber sub-instructor’s previous commendation, it took a good 15 minutes for them to get through all of de Soto’s, Imala’s, and Bretz’s feedback, each of the officers taking their turn to highlight what they thought were still weaknesses that needed to be worked on. No one minded. Valera Dent had picked her people well, after all, with all criticism made specific and clear, and as often layered with further praise as any condemnation. Aria still needed to work on making decisions quicker in the thick of things. Rei was still too chaotic at times. Viv still tended to go lone-wolf when she wasn’t focusing. Etc etc. It was all good and fair feedback, and Firesong took it in with silent focus.

These three were already sacrificing several evenings a week for them as it was, and Rei was sure he was hardly the only one to think he’d be damned if he ever let himself come off as anything less than grateful.

“That’s about it for me,” Bretz finally finished after discussing with Logan how the Mauler needed to be more cognizant of his surroundings in multi-person combat, given his strike range. Looking around, the Brawler sub-instructor took them all in one at a time. “Any questions before you’re off?”

A pause, this time, and from at ease Aria glanced over her shoulder to make sure no one had a hand in the air.

When no arm went up, she looked forward again.

“No, sir. Thank you, sir.”

“Then you’re dismissed, Cadets,” Imala took over again, nodding towards the door to indicate they could go. “And we’ll be seeing you Monday.”

After another round of “Yes, ma’am! Thank you, ma’am!”, Rei and the others took their leave at a jog, only delaying to grab bottles of chilled water from two waiting service drones before stepping out into the East Center hall together in silence. After

they were well-separated from the room, though, Aria turned to face them all with a grin, skipping along backwards excitedly.

“Guys... that was *so* much better than Wednesday already!”

Her bubbiness was all the permission the rest of them needed.

“*Right?*?” Viv echoed. She looked exhausted—more so even than the rest of them—but she was still all smiles as she cracked open her bottle. “Another ten minutes and we *definitely* could have scratched the lieutenant.”

“Dream on,” Logan snorted, though he reached up to tug at his girlfriend’s hair with a big hand playfully. “We’re still a long way from that, I bet.”

“I don’t know...” Rei said tentatively, sipping on his own water and looking back at the rest of them as Aria continued to bounce along ahead while they made for the changing rooms. “You guys looked like a *machine* tonight. I know de Soto’s a monster, but I think you’re closer than you think.”

“If we’d had *you* it wouldn’t have been a problem,” Catcher told him in mock frustration. “But noooo... *Someone* had to go and earn themselves *one-on-one* training with most of our instructors.”

“I mean... it’s not my fault I’m this cool,” Rei answered back with a grin, pretending to look down his nose at Catcher as though in disdain. It wasn’t easy, given the Saber was still at least 5 inches taller than him.

“Oh no...” Chancery groaned, finishing her own bottle and looking around for a bin to toss it in. “Aria, pull out Hippolyta again. You’re gonna need to start deflating your man on the regular if he starts getting a big head on us...”

There was general laughter at that, and not long after they reached the sterile white of the changing room and made for their respective lockers to change.

“Do we have time to shower, or are we already past curfew?” Viv asked after she was down to her sports bra and briefs.

“Gonna have to do it back at Kanes,” Aria told her regretfully. “We’re already fifteen minutes over, and Dent only gave us special permission for an extra half hour.”

“Damn,” Viv muttered, hesitating before reaching into her locker to start pulling out her uniform. “I hate walking back feeling grimy.”

“No complaining.” Rei had already gotten his slacks on and was busy looping his belt around his waist. “We’re lucky as hell that we got the extra time. Do you know how tough a curfew waiver is to get? Much less for *all* of us?”

“Yes, yeesssss...” Viv mumbled, frowning and squinting at the buttons of her jacket like she was having trouble figuring out which went where. She really *did* look even more tired than the rest of them, Rei couldn’t help but notice. “I know. I’ve been lectured. Doesn’t mean I’m gonna instantly love the feeling of being sticky all the way home.”

To Rei’s right, Catcher and Chancery exchanged a look as they paused in pulling on their shirts, then turned to Viv.

“Ew,” they said in unison.

“Oh grow up, you two,” Viv grumbled, “You know what I meant.”

That earned another chuckle from the group, but Logan—maybe looking to rescue her—changed the subject quickly.

“Rei, you never told us how your checkup went today...?”

“Oh, yeah!” Rei was tucking his own shirt in now, so he could look over his shoulder at the Mauler. “Sorry, it took longer than I thought so I pretty much had to sprint over here.”

It still felt a little odd, talking like this with Logan Grant. It *was* a little odd, frankly, and a little forced. That was okay though, because it was also getting easier. Bit by bit it was starting to feel normal, and Rei had come at the very least to appreciate when the larger boy tried to hold the conversation.

Working on himself was going well, it seemed.

“All good news?” Aria asked from Rei’s left, and he turned again to find her studying him a little worriedly as she straightened her jacket over her shoulders.

Rei grinned. “Oh yeah. Better than *good*...”

All around him the rest of Firesong paused to look at him curiously. He let them hang, though, wanting to relish the moment.

“... Meaning?” Aria pressed, narrowing her eyes in a way that very clearly stated she knew *exactly* what he was doing.

“Meaning—” Rei stopped buttoning his shirt, choosing instead to plant a bare foot on the bench between the lockers and strike a pose, pointing a thumb at himself with exaggerated pride “—that you’ll never guess who has finally joined the ranks of the great *titans* of the Galens Institute!”

There was a silence at this, and almost everyone looked perplexed. Aria blinked, glancing at Catcher like she wanted to know if he’d understood what Rei meant, but the Saber could only shrug. Chancery and Logan did much the same.

Then, though, Viv sighed.

“... You finally hit 5’8”, didn’t you?”

There was another silence at that.

And then everyone else was laughing again.

Rei glared around at his best friend. “Way to steal my thunder.”

Viv smiled back innocently. “Bud, I’m glad you’re not the size of an above-average squirrel anymore, but I think you’re still a loooong way from having any ‘thunder’ in that particular department.”

They bantered back and forth like that, with the teasing of Rei actually getting worse when a flustered Aria tried to wade into the fray to defend him only to get pulled into the good-natured heckling. By the time they’d all changed into their regulars and were heading out the door of the locker room again, though, they’d somehow gotten

back around to Rei's checkup with Ameena Ashton later that day, and he was filling them in in earnest.

"Zero issues," he assured them all. "Not even sore anymore."

"Really?" Chancery asked, sounding a little impressed. "You were still hurting Wednesday after our extra training..."

"And I'm still *annoyed* you took part in the first half of Monday's," Aria grumbled from beside Rei as they made down the hall.

"Really," Rei decided to answer Chancery deliberately, thinking it best not to open that particular can of worms with his girlfriend again. "And Ashton said she's not seeing any flare ups either. She thinks I'm in the clear."

"Awesome, dude," Catcher said with genuine enthusiasm, stepping forward to throw a heavy arm around Rei's shoulder, nearly knocking his cap off. "That's *seriously* awesome. I mean I think it's a good sign I didn't even think of your fibro after that shit show last weekend. But it's still good to hear."

"Thanks, man," Rei chuckled, straightening his hat with one hand. "But yeah, it's been long enough since I had an issue that the lieutenant major thinks I might be totally in remission. She's not calling it 100% yet, but she says—"

But then Rei stopped short, as did everyone else. They'd turned a corner in the hall that would take them to the front entrance of the East Center and outside into the cold breeze of the winter night, but instead of a clear path they found the way blocked by none other Michael Bretz.

And the man looked anything but pleased.

"Arada, Catchwick, Grant, Cashe. You're all to return to Kanes at double pace. Take Ward and Laurent's bags with you."

"Uh... Sir?" Aria asked uncertainly, starting to step forward.

Bretz held her up with a hand. He was still in his combat suit, which was odd given the lateness of the hour. Rei would have expected him and their other instructors to

have been gone from East Center and headed back to the staff housing, much less not even changed into his black and golds.

Which meant something was going on...

“Cadets,” the second lieutenant’s voice was firm. “That was not a suggestion. Back to Kanes. Now.”

Viv, Catcher, Logan, and Chancery were quick at that. Catcher slid his arm free of Rei’s shoulders and reached for the bag that had been hanging from his left hand. Chancery was closest to Aria so she took hers, but Viv was the one to whisper as the four of them jogged past.

“Let us know what’s going on as soon as you can.”

Neither Rei nor Aria had so much as a moment to nod before the four of them were off, slipping around and by Bretz to make for the East Center door.

Only once they were gone did the man speak again.

“Laurent. Ward. You’ve been summoned to Administration. Your curfew has been rolled back for the evening, and the night patrols have been notified. No one should stop you on the way.”

Rei and Aria exchanged a look.

“Uh... Just us, sir?” Rei asked tentatively.

What the hell was going on...?

“Just you, Cadets. The colonel would like to see you both, apparently.”

That seemed about as much a surprise to Aria as it was to Rei, given her frown at those words. Colonel Guest had participated in a small ceremony congratulating the returning Galens Sectional combatants Monday afternoon—which Rei had mercifully been allowed to sit through much of, given he’d still been in rough shape at the time—but aside from a subtle, affectionate wink by the commanding officer in his niece’s direction when he’d called her name, nothing had seemed out of place at the time. They

hadn't seen him since, either, which Rei thought wouldn't have been the case if anything, big or small, had been on the horizon.

And yet now here they were, being summoned without warning so late at night...

Rei had a bad feeling.

"Sir, do you have any idea what—?" Aria started, but Bretz stopped her again, this time with a shake of his head.

"I have no idea, Laurent." The man's tone was almost worried, though, like he, too, had his own concerns about what could be going on. "So I suggest you get moving so you can find out for yourselves."

Translation: They weren't going to find out anything more from him. The moment Rei understood this, an urgency took hold of him, and he saluted the sub-instructor quickly.

"Thank you, sir," he said before taking hold of Aria's sleeve and looking at her pointedly. "Let's go."

It seemed like she'd wanted to press further, but despite that she allowed herself to be pulled along as Rei started making for the doors, barely managing her own awkward salute to the second lieutenant as she half-stumbled by. The entrance opened for them, and they were met with a clear, cold night, all hint of the sun having long since vanished below the Castalon skyscrapers. The city was a brilliant ring of color and light all around them as always, and it played on the layer of snow that clung to the trees and greens. It hadn't stormed in several days, however, so the path was clear for them.

That made the going easier, and they moved as quickly as they dared.

Neither said much as they hurried northwest through the campus, speaking only when they had to decide what turn or split would get them to Administration faster. For one thing it was too cold to have an easy conversation while all-but-running along the paved stone of the walkway, but for another it wasn't like either of them didn't have a hundred guesses as to why they were being summoned, each as plausible as the next.

The year had been a strange one so far—and only made ten-fold so by the events of the last couple weeks—and as a result Rei was sure that, just like him, Aria was sifting through every possibility that might incite such an odd summons. Shido. The parameter testing. The Sectionals attack. Kamiya and their suspicions about the company's motives. All that and so much more rushed across Rei's thoughts as they hurried. The looming shapes of the instructional buildings were dark in the night aside from the light their metal and glass bodies reflected from the city around them, giving them an eerie presence against the winter white. The Arena, too, once they had a clear line to see it, bloomed with colors, a layer of unmelted snow giving its shining body an icy crown. Rei might have enjoyed the sights, he was sure, if they hadn't been in such a rush.

And if he hadn't been so worried.

No one stopped them even when they crossed two separate pairs of patrolling officers out enforcing curfew, and so it wasn't too long before they reached the angular, titanic presence of Administration building. Unlike the rest of the campus, *this* was a place that was still somewhat alive late into the night, with the lobby lights still on and a single officer manning the reception desk as Rei and Aria stepped inside and out of the cold. Last time Rei had been there, the bustle and business of the space had probably partially accounted for the brief moment it had taken Maddison Kent to find him in the crowd. This time there was no such delay.

She was already waiting for them in the middle of the lobby.

"This way, you two," the woman said quickly, motioning at once towards the large entrance next to the reception desk that Rei knew hid the elevators from sight.

"Maddie, what's happening?" Aria finally spoke, hurrying to catch up to the woman. "What's going on?"

At first Kent didn't answer, and Rei allowed himself a moment to study her. The colonel's assistant—usually so pressed and clean and surgically ready—seemed a little out of sorts. She was in worn flats that looked like the comfortable sort of shoes

probably more typically worn around one's house, and her blonde hair looked to have been braided in a rush, like she'd done it on the move. The real giveaway, however, was the rumpled edge of what looked like an old night shirt sticking out from under the back of the ironed black jacket the woman had clearly pulled over herself as she'd rushed out the door.

Whatever was going on, it had surprised her as much as it had Rei and Aria.

They reached the elevators, and Kent summoned a car for them in a rush. Immediately a set of ready doors opened at their backs, and she shooed them all inside even as Aria continued to ask what was going on. Once in, the woman gave the wall display another few quick taps, and then they were rising quick, up up and up.

Only as they emerged out of the dark lower floors into the open air to reveal the brilliance of Galens and the surrounding city against the winter night did Maddison Kent turn to them.

"Aria, I don't know what's going on, but I don't think it's good." Her hazel eyes were wide in the neon and gold glow of the distant Castalon giants. "He arrived barely half an hour ago. No warning. Not even for the colonel."

"*Who?*" Aria pressed, obviously more worried than ever now. "Maddie, *who* arrived??"

Rei couldn't have guessed Kent's answer even if she'd given him a hundred tries.

"Aria... your father is here."

CHAPTER 56

The walk from the elevator to the colonel's office felt—at least to Rei—like a slog through something like warm, unpleasant jello. Maybe it had something to do with the no less than *twenty* uniformed ISCM soldiers who lined the hall every few paces, their eyes following him, Aria, and Maddison Kent as the assistant led the way swiftly. Maybe it was the ball of worry that had been getting bigger with every step they'd taken from East Center towards the Administration building.

Or maybe, just maybe, it was the scream of totally unrelated panic that had Rei's cheeks feeling like they were on fire.

Oh no... was all he could think. *Oh no no no no no...*

Logically, Rei was aware that there was no way in hell Carmen Laurent was there to chew him out about dating his daughter. The man—as far as he could tell from Aria—was an incredibly important asset in the war against the archons, and not just because he was a general in charge of a not-insignificant part of the military's defensive forces. Laurent, like Valera Dent, was one of the few S-Ranked Users who'd forgone the SCTs in favor of the front lines, and *unlike* the captain he'd actually skipped them completely after graduating, heading straight for Sirius from the Galens Institute.

There was no way a man like that had jumped all the way from another system just to rip his daughter's fresh-meat boyfriend a new one...

... was there?

I'm so not ready for this, Rei moaned privately, unable to shake this new kind of terror he'd never experienced before in his life.

And so it was in a sort of torturously slow motion that Kent led them straight to the plain door of the commanding officer's suite, which already stood open for them. With a glance over her shoulder and motion that Rei and Aria should continue to follow, the woman then guided them through the reception area—full of another half-dozen

sharp-eyed soldiers—and down the short hall where the second door waited for them, this one closed and flanked by two *more* ISCM personnel.

Kent must have been about as stressed as either of them, because despite the wary attention of this last pair—Users both, Rei noted—she hesitated after lifting her fist to the wood as they reached it.

Then, with a quick breath, she knocked twice and announced them.

“Colonel, Cadets Laurent and Ward are here as requested.”

“Come in,” came Guest’s commanding answer, and Kent didn’t wait this time, taking up the handle and opening the door with a click.

The colonel’s high-ceilinged office was unchanged since Rei had last seen it not a few weeks before. The bookshelves. The facing couches. The pristine desk backed up against the smaller of the two smart-glass walls that showed off Castalon’s skyline in the night. It was well-lit, bright and warm despite the lateness of the hour, and Rei felt a little better stepping inside, like he was entering a safe space.

The feeling vanished the moment he took notice of the one variable, of the man seated in the center of the same couch Ueno Jasper had claimed during her own visit, opposite the door.

Purely at a glance, Carmen Laurent might have actually seemed much like Rei had envisioned him. Aria was all height and grace, a stellar beauty even among the designed and CAD-assisted looks of the Galens Institute students, and it turned out she’d taken after the man before them, at least in part. Even seated as he was Rei could tell that the general was taller than Rama Guest, but he had a slenderer figure than the colonel, narrower shoulders complemented by lithe, well-chiseled arms and legs obvious even under his uniform. He sported a dark grey, clean-cut beard that framed a square, handsome chin, with short hair—his cap had been tossed onto the table between the two couches—designed in much the same fashion other than a thick slash of deep red that went right along the middle of his head. As the general started to stand at their

entrance, hands moving to be clasped rigidly at his back, Rei thought his presence and poise should have felt like Aria's. Firm, but elegant, absolute in both confidence and grace.

Instead, however, as Laurent's green eyes fell on him—precisely the same fractured shades as his daughter's—Rei felt more like he was standing in the shadow of a mountain ruling over its domain with titanic conviction.

The pressure. It was the pressure of the man's gaze alone that made him feel like it was suddenly hard to breathe.

He knew it wasn't a physical thing. As far as Rei was aware, there was no Ability that could affect gravity in any kind of way. Just the same, he could have *sworn* an immense weight abruptly took hold of him as he met those emerald eyes, like heavy steel chains getting layered one at a time across his shoulders as they took him in, coming down until his knees wanted to buckle. It was there, and it wasn't, but either way Rei knew what this was, knew what he was experiencing. There was, after all, another way that Carmen Laurent differed from Rama Guest. Differed even from the likes of Valera Dent.

For the first time in his life, Rei was standing in the presence of a Rook-Class User.

From what he understood, Carmen Laurent had graduated Galens a legend, leaving the school an A9 before spending the next few decades surpassing every officer and superior he was ever assigned to in both ability and power. Now, 30-something years later, the man stood as one of only ten or so Rook-Class combatants on the front lines, the strongest fighters the ISCM had in the fight.

And the difference between Laurent and a Knight-Class like Dent was... palpable.

The Iron Bishop had always seemed terrifying. Even Colonel Guest—who Rei barely noticed now was standing over by the bookshelves to their left—could illicit a visceral fear from him as a mere Pawn-Class, and had done so before. But this... This

was an entirely different type of dread. Both Dent and Guest could have lopped Rei's head from his shoulders before he could blink, it was true.

But Carmen Laurent gave the impression he could have turned him to dust, changed into a fresh set of clothes, and taken a seat back on the couch again before what was left of Rei so much as started settling to the floor.

Oooh, I'm SO not ready for this! Rei screamed in the silence even as he and Aria both snapped into what was probably the sharpest salute either of them had ever graced anyone with.

"At ease, Cadets." It was Guest, mercifully, who spoke first from by the shelves before looking to Maddison. "Chief Assistant Kent, you are dismissed. Thank you for coming in so late to help."

"Oh..." Kent was behind Rei and Aria now, but he could hear the hesitation in her voice. "Sir, are you sure you don't need me for—?"

"Maddison." The colonel's tone was gentle, but carried an edge this time. "Go home."

Rei thought he heard the woman swallow, but all she said after that was "Yes, sir," before taking her leave. The door opened again, then shut with a *click*, and Rei and Aria were left standing side-by-side before the slender beast of a man that was Carmen Laurent, neither having noticed they hadn't taken Guest's permission to be at ease.

Rei imagined this was what a mouse must have felt like cowering in front of a tiger.

And then the tiger spoke.

"Cadet Ward..." The general had the deep, firm voice of a man well-accustomed to giving orders. "It's nice to meet you. I followed your progress a bit at Sectionals. Your fighting is impressive."

Rei had to *physically* work not to let his body turn to stone as the general's eyes never left him. That was odd... Of the two of them he'd assumed the man would have

addressed Aria—his *daughter*—first. She was standing not a foot to his right, after all, and yet in the moment it was like the man didn't even see her.

Pulling his own gaze away with some effort, Rei stared over the man's shoulder, barely seeing the lights of Castalon through the tall window behind Laurent as he answered.

“Thank you, General. It's an honor to know you took the time.”

“Seemed like the natural thing to do... I followed everyone who had the potential to be a thorn in Aria's side at the tournament. You just ended up being the largest of them, didn't you?”

Rei had to scramble to figure out how to answer that. Was it a compliment? A slight? A warning? He wasn't sure, so he went with the safest bet.

“Thank you, sir. Cadet Laurent has consistently bested me here at school, so I knew I had to give it absolutely everything while we were in Ganos.”

There was a twitch, just the smallest movement of Laurent's right eyebrow, but Rei couldn't tell if it was irritation or surprise the general was registering. He'd bet on staying humble, and decided a brief compliment of the man's daughter couldn't hurt... right?

Abruptly Rei wished the gods and religions of humanity's past were still around, just so he could have someone—*anyone*—to pray to in that moment.

He didn't breathe easy until the general spoke again.

“Modesty,” the man said with a snort. “Wasn't expecting that. The way things have been going for you I was waiting for something else out of your mouth, Cadet.” Laurent looked over at the colonel. “I see you're still doing a fair job of hammering your charges into shape, Rama.”

The casualness with which the general addressed Guest seemed not only to surprise Rei and Aria—the girl frowning slightly beside him—but the colonel himself.

“Both Ward and Laurent are prime examples of the kind of students we take pride in here at the Institute, General...” Guest started tentatively. “Also, we’re in the presence of cadets, sir...”

“*Bah...*” Laurent shrugged the man’s comment away. “I already told you, I’m on leave. I’m not here as an officer of the ISCM right now, much less as anyone’s superior.”

Again this took Rei aback. Laurent was on *leave*? Starting with the pair who were undoubtedly still standing outside, there had to be almost thirty soldiers between them and the elevators...

Before he could contemplate that further, though, the man continued.

“As I said when I arrived, today I am here—” finally and for the first time, the general’s attention shifted to Aria “—as a concerned father.”

If there’d been any warmth in the room to start with, whatever was left of it vanished at these words. A chill descended across all four of them standing in that office, and Rei thought he heard Aria take in a sharp, short hiss of a breath. He barely stopped himself from looking around at her, from trying to figure out what kind of expression she was making.

Whatever it was, it couldn’t have been good.

“Aria.” Carmen Laurent spoke carefully, like he was trying not to scare off a spooked animal. “It’s nice to see you. Have you been well?”

To her credit, Aria didn’t pause.

On the other hand, she *did* answer through clenched teeth.

“Yes, General. I’ve been well.”

Laurent frowned. “As I’ve stated, I am not here as an officer of the ISCM tonight. In fact—” he eyed Rei and Aria together, like he’d only just noticed they were both still standing sharply at attention “—both of you at ease. Please.”

The “Please” came out like steel grating over cement, obviously not a word the man was used to having to say out loud. Still, it didn’t remotely make Rei feel any better

as he and Aria took a more relaxed position, and he couldn't help but glance at Carmen Laurent for a moment while the man continued to take in his daughter.

Was he imagining it, or did the general look... tense?

"I'm glad to hear you feel things have been going well," Laurent continued to address Aria like there'd been no pause. "I'm sorry I couldn't make it to Sectionals. Hopefully you understand."

"Of course, General," came the stiff reply. "You're a very busy man."

"I followed on the feeds, of course. I caught your finals. Both of them. You fought very well. Particularly given the interruption of your Duel with Ward."

"Thank you, General."

Rei didn't have to be looking right at the man to tell that his expression said that the conversation was not getting the traction he had been hoping for. Impressively, Aria hadn't even taken the bait that had been Laurent letting them all know he was aware of the hack.

Maybe that was why his next swing was a little more precisely aimed.

"Your mother was there. My understanding is she didn't want to distract you, so I don't know if you were aware..."

This was obviously news to everyone but the general, and Rei wasn't at all surprised when Aria started. Even Guest frowned from his place by the bookshelves, looking suddenly worried.

"... Mother was there?" Aria asked after a moment, and her flatness had been replaced by an unsteady waver, like she didn't actually believe it. "When?"

"The whole time, as far as I'm aware. I'm sure she wanted to see how you ended up doing."

Aria cooled at once.

"Ah," she said shortly. "I'm sure she did. Can't have a Laurent giving less than a perfect presentation, can we?"

To their left, Guest's frown deepened, while before them the general's face darkened slightly.

"That's not fair to your mother, Aria. She only wants the best for you and your siblings. You know that."

Rei thought Aria was going to say something more to this. She certainly seemed like she *wanted to*, her upper lip curling back when she opened her mouth, as though ready to answer sharply.

Then, apparently, she thought better of it.

"Yes, General. Of course, General."

Rei almost felt bad for Carmen Laurent as the tall man eyed his daughter for a moment further, like he'd been hoping for more from her. Should he have really been expecting anything else, though? While it was true Rei didn't know *much* about Salista Laurent, what he *did* was more than enough to convince him there was good reason Aria was the only of her three siblings not to have to cut all contact with the woman.

After a bit, the man must have come to terms with the fact that he wasn't getting anywhere with his daughter with this particular approach, and he frowned. It was a grim, hard expression that sent a shiver up Rei's spine, but it also seemed like a sad sort of thing, like the general was genuinely disappointed that he and Aria couldn't converse like father and child.

He looked like a man who had tried and failed to do something the easy way...

A familiar stone of concern started to form in Rei's gut.

"I see we aren't going to be having a simple talk. That's unfortunate. In that case, I won't beat around the bush." For the first time Laurent unclasped his hands, pointing at the couch opposite his. "Sit down. Both of you. Rama, you too. This involves the Galens Institute as well."

Rei might have imagined it, but he could have sworn he heard the man add a muttered “unfortunately” under his breath as the three of them moved to do as ordered.

Rei and Aria sat a couple feet apart from each other while the general shifted to one corner of his couch to allow Guest to claim the other. The casual nature of the situation now finally allowed formality to slip away in truth, and while Rei didn’t quite know what to do with his hands—deciding in the end that letting them rest clenched in his lap was better than slipping them into his pockets, at least—Aria crossed her arms sourly and finally glared straight at her father for the first time.

Along with protocol, though, her patience had apparently also been tossed out the window.

“What are you doing here?”

If the general hadn’t been expecting the question, he did a fair job of hiding it. Leaning forward, he rested his elbows on his knees, interlacing his fingers over the coffee table as he met his daughter’s gaze.

“As I said, I am here as a concerned father. Your mother has expressed some worries to me following Sectionals, and looking into them I decided that they were indeed potential problems we needed to address.”

“Problems?” It was Colonel Guest who asked, taking the general in cautiously from the other side of the couch. “What sort of problems? Cadet Laurent has exceeded every expectation the Galens Institute could have had of her. Her instructors praise her at every opportunity, including Captain Dent.”

“Yes... And therein lies the issue, unfortunately.”

The coolness of the environment intensified instantly.

“... How so?” Aria growled.

“Your mother and I are of the belief that you may not be meeting your potential,” the general stated plainly, not looking away from his daughter as he spoke. “We have concerns that you are being... limited.”

“*Limited?*” Aria all but snarled now. “Limited *how?* Tell me you’re joking.”

“Hardly.”

Aria looked at the man like he was crazy as she spluttered in protest. “What are you *talking* about? My chief combat instructor is a Knight-Class *war hero*. My school is one of the best in the ISC. I *won* the Intra-Schools, I’m the squad leader of the team that took the Team Battle championships at Sectionals by a landslide, *and* I’ve climbed from C0 to C8 here in less than *half a year!*”

That, unfortunately, was the moment Rei knew she’d messed up.

Something shifted in the general’s face, then. Something almost mechanical. It was subtle, so subtle, but for most of his life Rei had had to be quick enough to defend himself with words more than fists when it came to those who’d mocked him and looked down on him.

He saw, therefore, the moment Carmen Laurent—still looking unhappy about it—knew that he would win.

“Aria, that’s the very limit I’m talking about. Captain Dent is impressive—*very* impressive—but she’s not actually the strongest instructor among the ISCM-sanctioned academies, and a far, *far* cry from the most experienced. Similarly, Galens is *very* impressive—I’m proud to call it my own alma mater, obviously—but it is *not* the best, particularly when you compare it to some of the Sol System schools. The schools, I would remind you, that *you* wanted to attend in the first place.”

Guest and Aria both tried to interrupt at this point.

“Carmen, what the hell are you doing?” the colonel demanded, sounding half-furious, half-stunned.

“Father, that’s not fair and you kn—!” Aria began.

Laurent ignored the former and cut the latter off completely.

“As for the Intra-Schools, you won them with *ease*, which is *not* a good thing, Aria. It merely highlights just how far ahead from the rest of the class you are. And that’s *before* I point out that I’m aware the brackets were tampered with.”

To the general’s left, Guest scowled.

“The staff member responsible for that was partially following orders,” he said coolly. “Not orders *I* approved of, but orders just the same. And while he *did* overstep, he has been disciplined accordingly.”

“Not before the man was allowed to partake in *another* sanctioned tournament,” the general answered, still not looking away from Aria.

“As I’m sure you are *well* aware, *General*, there are complications when dismissing a high-ranking officer from a valued post. Even planet-side. We required additional evidence to support the action.”

“Evidence you collected while potentially risking the growth and success of *my* daughter.”

The response came in a growl, like a warning, but still Rei didn’t follow. Something was... off. Still off. He couldn’t put his finger on it—maybe because the weight in his gut was getting heavier and heavier by the moment—but he just couldn’t quite reconcile the general’s apparent anger at the situation with his expression. It was subtle, still so subtle, but Rei could have sworn Carmen Lauren was fighting back something. What was it though? Discomfort? Irritation? But at what?

“But we can set aside the multiple failures involving Dyrk Reese regardless,” the general continued before anyone could say anything else. “He’s the least of my and Salista’s concerns, and the effects of his actions on Aria were minimal compared to other students, I believe.” His eyes flicked to Rei, then, and didn’t look away even though he continued to address his daughter and Guest. “Your other point was that you’re the squad leader of a powerful team, Aria? That’s true enough. And yet—” why was he *still*

looking at Rei? “—despite that, your squad failed to take the Wargames championship title at Sectionals. A dominant team utterly failing to even make *finals* in a major format. How do you explain that?”

“Carmen, the Wargames are the most unpredictable of the three formats.” It was Guest who answered now, sounding at the edge of furious. “You know that as well as *anyone*. Did you *see* the fight? Firesong was mobbed, and mobbed *because* they were the most powerful team in the bracket by far.”

“And?” Laurent asked, finally looking away from Rei around at the colonel. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“You can’t *seriously* expect any group of *first-years* to have the battle knowledge and wherewithal to handle *three full teams* coming at them in coordinated unison, can you?!”

The general’s face was stone.

“And why not?”

Guest seemed only able to stare at the man, apparently at a loss for words at this response.

“Why not?” Laurent repeated, gesturing towards his daughter. “Aria was among the top assigned cadets in the ISC this year, and her growth outpaced several of the few who were granted stronger CADs at the start. She’s now among the top twenty highest-ranked first-years across every military academy in the galaxy. And—” the man’s green eyes fell on Rei again “—she isn’t even the strongest member of her squad anymore.”

There was a silence at this, a frigid stillness at those words. Those words, which could have had so many meanings...

Then, to Rei’s astonishment, Aria reached out and touched his forearm lightly.

“Father,” she almost whispered, her voice like a blade. “If this is about Rei, then you and Mother are sticking your noses where they *distinctly* do not belong.”

That was when something odd happened. For the first time since they’d walked into the room, it was the *general’s* turn to look surprised. His gaze dropped briefly to

Aria's fingers on Rei's arm—Oh he was so, SO not ready for this!—and then back up to his daughter.

“... About Ward?” he asked slowly, like he wasn't sure where Aria's statement had come from. “What do you mean?”

“I mean exactly what I said. Whether it's because we're going out, or because you're willfully blind to how hard he's worked and how high he's going to climb, I cannot *believe* you would use that to tell me that I'm not achieving my—”

“Aria.” The word came out like a rolling wave of distant thunder. “I'm sorry... Repeat what you just said.”

The danger suddenly wasn't just in Rei's head now, he was sure. There had been a flicker, just a hint of greenish light in Carmen Laurent's eyes as he spoke, and as the man's gaze slowly moved back to him from Aria, Rei abruptly realized something truly, *truly* horrifying.

The general hadn't known. He hadn't known that the two of them had started dating.

“Ah... Shit...” Rei swore under his breath, feeling his entire back break out in a cold sweat even as he failed to realize he'd said the words aloud.

CHAPTER 57

“*Ward!*” Colonel Guest snapped at the expletive, giving him a sharp warning look. It was enough to jolt Rei out of his momentary horror, and he sat up straight as steel, lifting his attention back to over Laurent’s shoulder.

“Apologies!” he got out with as firm a voice as he could manage. “I’d intended to... uh... to keep that to... myself...”

It was a lame excuse, but as he felt his shirt get soaked through from neck to rear, he didn’t have the capacity to provide any other explanation.

Dammit, a desperate voice was hissing in partial-panic over and over again in his head. *Dammit dammit dammit dammit...*

“Since when?” Laurent ask in a low, dangerous tone.

Aria, mercifully, still had her guts and her voice, though the latter quavered a little as she answered.

“That’s none of your business, Father.”

“Are you assigned to the same suite?”

“*No!*” Aria got out more firmly in her horror, the suggestion clearly mortifying. “*Father!*”

“Carmen.” Colonel Guest stepped in now, apparently setting aside decorum in favor of trying to plead to his friend’s higher sensibility. “I’ve already had to make certain warnings to *other* parents trying to involve themselves too much in their children’s business here at school. I would rather not add you to that list.” Rei, even stone-still as he was, was pretty sure who he could guess the name of at least one such “other” parent the man was talking about. “You may be a general of the ISCM, but you do *not* have authority—much less the jurisdiction—to involve yourself in the day-to-day of Galens’ *adult* cadets. Please recall that.”

At last Laurent looked away from Rei to glare at Guest. The colonel didn't avert his eyes, though, so for a long moment the two sat like that, and Aria's fingers went from merely resting on Rei's upper arm to gripping his uniform sleeve nervously.

And then, seeming out of nowhere, Laurent snorted dryly.

"Apparently I'm not as well-informed as I'd believed," he muttered, turning away from Guest and once more lifting a hand to wave Rei down, obviously trying to get him to relax. "That's on me. Ease up, Cadet. Fortunately for you, tonight is not an evening in which I have the time to give you the 'not my daughter' speech."

It was a far cry from any kind of blessing, but better than what Rei had been expecting, so he barely managed to take a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding until that second. Still, he could hardly really bring himself to loosen up. He'd been in a *lot* of precarious positions in his life—and especially more than he'd liked in the last month or so—but his paranoid boyfriend-of-the-daughter-of-a-ROOK-CLASS-USER mind was telling him he'd never actually been closer to death than just now.

"Setting that aside for the time being, let me address your question, Aria," General Laurent continued. "Cadet Ward is not part of my concern. Quite the contrary. It's very clear the pair of you match each other well, even if Ward's pacing is... a little out of step." He seemed to pick his words carefully, like there were some obvious things best not said out loud, even in that room. "Clearly there's more to that bond than I thought, but that doesn't matter right now."

Aria's hand, having never released its firm hold of Rei's sleeve, finally relaxed and slipped away.

"Then what could possibly be the issue with my sq—?" she started, confused.

Laurent didn't let her finish.

"The problem is everyone else."

Again there was a silence at that.

And again both Guest and Aria started trying to argue at once.

“*Carmen!*” Guest actually snarled this time. “What is *wrong with you?*”

“What is that supposed to mean?!” Aria demanded, almost shouting now.

The general, however, bulled right on forward.

“It’s my understanding that you’ve bested every one of your teammates—with the exception of Ward—consistently and without much difficulty.” His eyes didn’t leave his daughter again. “Logan Grant seems to have offered some trials early on, but especially with your CAD’s most recent evolution I suspect that’s no longer the case.” He gestured towards Aria’s wrists, where Hippolyta’s bands were only barely visible under the gold detail of her jacket cuffs. “That means that of all the first-years at Galens, Cadet Ward is now the *only* one to pose any kind of measurable challenge to you, much less match up to your mother’s and I’s expectations of squadmates.”

At this, Rama Guest actually leapt to his feet.

“General Laurent, you are *way out of line!*” he practically bellowed. “Where the *hell* is this coming from?! The Galens Institute has some of the finest cadets—of *all* ages—in the ISCM, and a host of the best instructors in galaxy. *Where do you get off* saying otherwise?!”

There it was again. Rei hadn’t been able to help but momentarily drop his attention back to the general’s face, and once more he saw it. Just that hint of something more going on. As Laurent looked away from Aria to frown around at the colonel again—not leaving his own seat as he did—Rei couldn’t help but note the clenching of the man’s jaw under his beard. Was he the only one who noticed?

Was he the only one who thought Laurent’s words were broadly sour in his own mouth?

“I am stating facts, Rama,” the general said evenly. “I’m not arguing that Galens isn’t one of the best schools in the Collective. I’m just arguing that it is not *the* best. And Aria has proven that she deserves to be educated at *the* best.” He paused, then, though.

And looked at Rei again.

“Aria... and Cadet Ward,” the general finished evenly.

Rei understood at last, then. He’d been wondering—in whatever small corner of his mind hadn’t been running around in circles with its arms flailing violently in the air—why *he’d* been summoned to this meeting as well. This was a Laurent family issue, and while at first he—like Aria—had assumed this either had to do with the two of them dating or the fact that he’d been an E-Ranked User not so long ago, the general had thrown all that out the window for them rather quickly. Now Rei followed. Now he understood.

And with that understanding, calm took hold.

Rei finally felt his heart start to settle, and he relaxed at last, forcing himself to pull his gaze down to meet Carmen Laurent’s.

“You’re here to request we transfer,” he said evenly. “*Both* of us.”

Beside him Aria tensed, and Colonel Guest’s hands balled into angry fists from where he still stood on the other side of the coffee table.

“Indeed,” the general said with a stiff nod, hardly looking pleased in the slightest despite them apparently reaching the heart of the issue. “You and Aria both. And given you’re the first to say it out loud... I assume you understand why.”

Rei did. He did understand why. There was a world—a not so distant one, in fact—where every single word the general had said made perfect sense. Dent was *not* actually the greatest mentor in the ISCM. Even if she was certainly among the strongest, it was true she’d only been a combat instructor for half a year. And there *were* schools in the Sol System that did indeed outclass Galens in terms of the quality of their staff, facilities, and alumni. And at those schools it *was* also a fact that Rei and Aria would both likely be able to find squadmates of an entirely different caliber to the likes of Viv or Catcher or Chancery or even Logan. All of these were facts.

And they were also worthless.

“I refuse, sir.”

It slipped out—though fortunately not in the same way the earlier expletive had—and left his tongue before Rei could really formulate his thoughts. Obviously he refused, though, and he could even set aside so many personal reasons before even getting to the crux of it. He would never leave Viv. Never. They'd been through too much together. Catcher, too, had become one of his best friends in but a few short weeks. As for Chancery and Logan, well... Sure that was more complicated, but Rei was comfortable calling them both friends as well, now, just as he was comfortable saying they were all well on the way to become much more than the common definition of that word. They had become teammates in truth. Bound by battle, bound by pain, and bound by shared secrets that weren't so easy to put out in the world.

But even if you set all that aside...

Rei glanced sidelong for a second, braving a look at Aria to find her eyes on him, too. As expected, she was probably thinking the same thing he was. There was, after all, a wholly different reason to keep Firesong together. If the two of them were right—and Rei suspected they *were*, indeed, right—then separating from Viv and the others would jeopardize an opportunity unlike anything the ISCM had ever known.

Not that they could tell either Guest or Laurent that just yet. Not without more proof.

“You refuse, Cadet?”

Rei started, having forgotten himself for a moment. Focusing back on the general, he found the man scrutinizing him carefully, and in that moment he became *sure* that he was right. There was *definitely* something more going on. Something else other than Laurent's desire to see his daughter—and apparently Rei, too—reach greater heights at a school beyond Galens.

He knew this because the general was looking at him in the exact same way he'd looked at Aria earlier when he knew he was going to win the argument.

What in the MIND is going on?? Rei screamed internally for probably the hundredth time.

He responded calmly, though.

“Yes, sir. I refuse. Attending Galens has been a shared dream with a friend a mine for years, and it’s treated me better than any school I’ve been to before.” He decided to take a small swing. “Given you seem to have followed me a little, can I assume you’re read in on my history?”

“Enough of it,” the general said slowly, like he was wondering where Rei was going with this.

Rei nodded. “Galens accepted me despite all of that. Despite my diagnosis. Despite my baseline. Despite everything. Even if I set that aside and pretended I’ve always been a normal student, Captain Dent has shown me a lot of favor, as have many of the sub-instructors. I don’t know if you’re aware, but Firesong is currently doing additional evening training with Second Lieutenant Bretz, Lieutenant Imala, and Lieutenant de Soto. Did you know that?”

“It was brought to my attention, yes.”

“Then I would ask if you could promise me the same kind of individual attention if I transferred to a school where Aria and I were more akin with the crowd? Where we might be strong, but perhaps not the strongest. Maybe not even in the top five strongest.”

“I imagine any school the two of *you* end up at would certainly want to do their best to encourage—”

“But could you *promise me that*, sir?” Rei pushed, feeling his back start to sweat again despite himself as he cut off a Rook-Class User, not to mention his *girlfriend’s dad*. “Can you *promise me* that we’d receive the same treatment as the staff here have gone above and beyond to provide? Because this isn’t the first time we’ve received additional assistance. Christopher Lennon was set up as a training partner for us for several weeks

last year. I've personally been trusted to push myself in class and in parameter testing even when Captain Dent initially requested otherwise. Aria's comparative strength allowed her to fabricate not just a strong team, but the *strongest* team, missing only the other squad leaders from who I think are the best first-years at this academy. Would we have all that somewhere else?"

"And if I told you you would?" Laurent asked evenly. "What would you say?"

"That I don't believe you, sir. And that leaving Galens would be an enormous mistake."

"Even if the Laurent family offered to sponsor you, giving you the backing you need to make such requests?"

The silence that followed this was all the more intense, and lingered as Rei, Aria, and Guest all stared at the general, unanimously at a loss for words.

The colonel was the first to find his tongue.

"Carmen... are you serious?"

"Very," the general answered, once more not looking away from Rei. "I admit it wasn't on the docket to discuss *tonight*, but Cadet Ward brings up some excellent points. So here's my answer." His green eyes were like bores, digging into Rei like they were waiting to read any flinch, any tick that would tell the man a little bit more about the person before him. "What if the Laurent family sponsored you? The *both* of you?"

Rei couldn't help it. He was reeling, completely taken aback by this offer. Not one, now, but *two* offers of sponsorship? As a *first-year*? And now *Aria* too? He supposed he shouldn't have been all that surprised—Firesong had been following the feeds, and Shido and his "Iron Prince" moniker were getting more and more mentions by the day, Rei knew—but offering to sponsor a first-year was so unheard of, so out there, that it was as much a shock to hear now as it had been when Kamiya had extended a similar hand. He'd heard, after all, that Sidorov had only *just* gotten his first couple offers

following his stellar showing at Sectionals. And while the Lancer might be a dick, he was unequivocally a *lot* stronger than both Rei and Aria, possibly combined.

And yet...

"I..." Rei started, unable to form a coherent sentence for a moment. "I-I'm honored, sir... But I would still refuse."

For some reason, Carmen Laurent didn't seem at all surprised by this answer. If anything, the eyebrow the man raised was more like he was... pleased by it?

Rei was officially at a loss as to what could possibly be going on.

"Is that so? Just like that?"

"If your support is contingent on Aria and I leaving Galens... Yes, sir. I would refuse."

Laurent looked to his daughter, then.

"And how about you, Aria? Do you feel the same way as—?"

"I do," she answered before her father could finish, her arms once more crossed over her chest as she stared down the man. "I absolutely do."

Laurent nodded slowly.

"Well... that's unfortunate, then."

And then his eyes flared with light, and a second later Rei, Aria, and apparently even Guest all received a notification to their own frames.

"What is this?" the colonel asked even as Rei selected the alert to find a document waiting for him. Opening it, he started reading, and his stomach fell through the floor.

"This is me playing hardball," Laurent answered simply. "It's true that I don't have the jurisdiction to butt in on the lives of your students, Rama. However... I already have permission from those who *do*."

And it was true. Rei didn't have to read the brief text of the official order more than once to see that, but he did so anyway. It was a clear, straightforward command that said everything it needed to in three simple lines.

Upon enactment of this order, the commitment to the Galens Institute of Sector 9 of Astra-3 of the Astra System by Cadet Aria Laurent and Cadet Reidon Ward shall be terminated. Cadet Aria Laurent and Cadet Reidon Ward are to review the provided list of ISCM-sanctioned academies, and make their selection, either in conjunction or separately, of their new assignment.

This order is effective immediately upon signing of all below parties.

What followed was a brief—but *astonishing*—list of schools, all Sol-based, and most on Earth itself. Anapolis. The 1st Military College. 1st Sector Division on Venus. New London Military Academy, better known as “LMA”. Under that, a half-dozen names were printed in two columns under clean blue lines, taking up half of the document. Every name but one started with either the rank of colonel or general, and every line was already filled with a scrawled digital signature.

Every line... except one.

The section over “General Carmen Laurent” was still blank.

“Father...” Aria’s hiss was so brimming with fury that Rei could have sworn he felt a pulse of heat coming from her as she spoke. “You can’t be serious...”

“What about this situation would give you that impression?” the general asked coolly, his NOED the only one not still alive in his eyes.

“How could you...? You can’t...”

“He can. And he has.”

Colonel Guest was the one to speak, now, his words like the threatening growl of a wounded animal.

“A forced transfer,” he spat, finally closing his frame to look down on the still-seated general like he didn’t recognize the man. “How dare you.”

“I brought my and Salista’s concerns up with the higher powers, and they agreed that something probably needed to be done,” Laurent said simply, not looking around

at Guest as his attention shifted slowly from Aria to Rei and back again. “Obviously I would rather not have had to play this card at all.”

“So that’s why you haven’t signed it?” Disgust dropped from every syllable of Guest’s question. “Carmen... I’m not sure I know who you are anymore...”

Another flicker. Was it... sadness, this time? And anger, maybe, flaring ever-so-briefly in those green eyes?

Then it was gone, and Laurent only shrugged as he leaned back in the couch and crossed his own arms.

“Like I said, I was hoping this wouldn’t be the path I was forced to take. I would rather have done this the easy way.”

“And you wonder why Kalus and Amina ran away from both of you as quickly as humanly possible.”

The cold, hard edge of Aria’s words sliced like a knife as she, too, started to get to her feet before her father. Looking around at her, Rei’s heart broke to see tears in her clear eyes as her fists shook by her sides.

Across from her, Laurent’s expression turned abruptly thunderous, but his daughter didn’t let him speak before she continued.

“One of you can’t stop trying to mess with our lives, the other only gets involved when you think it’s important enough to be worth your time. Even when it turns everything upside down for us. Even when it means taking away *everything* we care about just to fit *your* idea of an ideal future for us. Father, if you do this...” Aria took a long breath through her nose, her knuckles going white. “If you and Mother do this, I am telling you right now that you will be best off pretending you never had *any* children.”

It was Laurent’s turn to sit in silence, staring his daughter down, his face as still as a statue’s. Rei couldn’t tell what the man was thinking, now. He couldn’t tell if the general was turning over Aria’s words with care, or just trying to will her into backing down.

Then again... Was it possible he was trying to will *himself* into *not* backing down...?

A thought struck Rei, then, an odd curiosity. Looking at the order document one more time, it only took him a second to review the names of the signees, none of whom he recognized other than Laurent's. There was, however, one oddity. On reread, he saw again that every signee held the rank of colonel or general. All but one. One with no rank... *at all*.

Was it possible...?

"Caleb Jennings," he deliberately read into the silence, as loudly as he dared.

As one, every other head in the room turned to him.

"Pardon?" General Laurent asked in a growl.

"Caleb Jennings," Rei repeated, finally closing the document to meet the general's gaze directly again. "Who is that? Going by what you said, every other name on this order sounds like a higher up at Central Command, sir. And yet a Mr. Jennings has had to sign off on it as well..."

Laurent held his gaze a moment, studying him. Then, under his beard, there was a flinch of movement, and Rei almost blinked in surprise.

Was the general... pleased?

"A transfer like this is atypical," Laurent answered brusquely. "Unrequested by the parties involved, involving a massive change in the physical distance you both will be from your homes, and—I admit—a bit abrupt. You may be adults, but you are both cadets. You lack independence, living under your guardians' roofs when not at school."

Rei's eyes narrowed, at that. If this explanation was going where he thought it was going...

And sure enough:

"Due to that, it was decided it would be courtesy to notify your guardians of the change before it was enacted."

Rei stared at the general, then, not quite believing his ears. He stared, trying as hard as he could not to voice the multitude of red flags this explanation threw up left,

right, and center. After a second, however, he couldn't stop himself from reaching out to take hold of Aria's sleeve and, without looking away from Laurent, give it a tug.

"Aria," he said quietly. "Sit down a second."

"But *Re!*" Aria practically yelled, whirling on him in disbelief. "He's just here to force our hand! He just wants us to transfer and sponsor us so it looks good for my family to—"

"Aria... I'm not sure your dad wants to be here at *all*."

Before Aria could do more than look confused, though, two things happened.

First, the general smiled—in truth, now, and for the first time. It was a tight, grim thing, but it was real.

Second, Guest proved to apparently be thinking along the same lines.

"Carmen..." he said quietly, his anger apparently having vanished as he took a seat on the couch again. "... What are you talking about? That... That makes no sense."

And it's not supposed to, Rei thought as he continued to pull on Aria's cuff until she, too, finally sat back down again, looking lost.

"I'm assuming Jennings works in the ISCM's social services branch, General?" Rei asked of Laurent.

The man hadn't lost his harsh smile.

"I'd heard you were too clever by half, Ward," he said, sounding a little strained. "But I don't think they expected *you* to be the one to catch on." He looked at the colonel sadly. "I'm sorry, Rama. Truly. Truly I am."

"What?" Aria asked a little desperately. "What do you mean?" She looked between all three of them. "What's going on?"

Guest ignored her for the moment, though. "I'm assuming you're not at liberty to say anything?" he asked the general quietly.

Laurent shook his head. “I’m not. No more than I have already. But...” he eyed Rei expectantly. “I haven’t been explicitly ordered not to deny any speculations anyone might come up with on their own.”

That was the only green light Rei needed.

“Caleb Jennings works for the state,” he explained, turning to Aria. “I’m a ‘Ward’. The social work department would have been my legal ‘guardian’, at least before I emancipated myself.”

“But... What?” Aria asked, only looking more confused at this.

“Central doesn’t care about notifying next of kin, Aria. If they did, they could have gone straight to your mother, who probably would have signed in a heartbeat if it’s true she’s voicing concerns about Galens.” Rei wanted to take her hand, but thought better of it given present company. “They just wanted an excuse to require your father’s signature on the order.”

“But... but *why*?” she demanded, starting to sound angry again. “Why would they do that?”

“To hold it over your heads.”

It was Guest who answered again, but when Rei and Aria turned towards him he wasn’t looking at them.

Instead, he was staring at Laurent, his expression *all* rage.

“Isn’t that right, Carmen?” he asked slowly.

The only answer the general offered was a tight clenching of his jaw. Not a word more.

But also no denial.

And so the colonel finally looked around at the pair of them.

“It’s even more ludicrous than you think, Ward,” he said plainly. “You may be cadets, but you *are* legal adults in the eyes of both the ISC and ISCM. If for some odd reason someone had specific cause to notify your guardians—your *former* guardians,

rather—of any change to your assignment or education, they wouldn't require a signature. They would just send notice. And yet they did this." He waved at his cleared eyes to indicate the order all of them had hidden away now. "They *specifically* required the signature for the order to take effect."

"This order is effective immediately upon signing of all parties?" Aria quoted, sounding like she was starting to follow.

"Exactly," Guest confirmed. "*All* parties. Without all the signatures, the order is moot."

"Meaning... Meaning we *aren't* being transferred?" she asked.

"Meaning you aren't being transferred *yet*."

Carmen Laurent's voice was a growl as he reentered the conversation, apparently seeing an opportunity to speak without defying whatever higher command he was probably already toeing.

"I haven't signed the order yet. But I will. I won't have choice in the matter. And when I do, you two can kick and scream all you want, but it won't make a difference. You'll either do as you're told... or refuse the order, probably get court martialled, and potentially lose your CADs."

It wasn't a threat so much as a statement of fact, but just the same neither Rei nor Aria were able to stop themselves from touching their respective Devices instinctively, the danger made real by those words.

"But why sign, then?" Aria pressed her father. "Can't you just... not? Why do you have to—?"

"Aria, again. *I will not have a choice in the matter.*"

The general's tone was iron, and his gaze was steady and unwavering as he met his daughter's eyes.

"He means he will be ordered to, Aria," Guest clarified more gently. "He means Central will *make* him sign the order if they need to."

Aria was silent at that, mouth hanging slightly open, staring at her father in some mix of horror and disbelief.

It still didn't all make sense to Rei, though.

"This is a lot of hoops to jump through, isn't it?" he asked, grimacing at Laurent as he tried to make heads or tails of it all. "To achieve this? Why bother involving you, sir? Why not just have any of the other signees be the holdout until they get what they want? Like..." he opened his frame again for a moment to quickly review the document still pulled up "... like this first name? Shira Abel? Why not have her or someone else hold it over our heads?"

"Probably—as the general has implied already—because *you* weren't supposed to be aware, Ward," Guest answered for the man, looking thoughtful. "Neither you nor Cadet Laurent."

"Oh?" Rei glanced around at him. "But someone *was* supposed to be aware?"

"That this was fabricated? Yes. I think so. Otherwise there'd be no need for such theatrics."

That made sense, Rei supposed. If Central had *actually* wanted him and Aria transferred, wouldn't they have just... done it? Adults they might be, but they were soldiers of the military first, and as such would indeed very likely have had no recourse by which to dispute the command. It was an illusion of free will. The ISCM likely rarely had cause to impose themselves on the choices of their students when it came to picking a school, but that didn't mean they *couldn't*.

But then that left an entirely different question...

"But then who are they trying to make aware?" Rei asked, feeling his own ire start to rise.

"I imagine," Guest started with a rough sigh, "that the message was meant for *me*."

Rei and Aria stared at the man at that, *both* not following now. For his part, the general stayed silent with his arms crossed over his chest, watching the discussion

unfold with that odd mix of approval and disdain at the situation he'd clearly unwontedly found himself in the middle of.

"You... sir?" Aria asked at last.

"Me," Guest repeated, getting up again. This time, though, he moved around the couch to come to stand before the office's rear windows, clasping his hands behind his back to stare blankly off over the campus. "More broadly, actually, it's likely the message was meant for the Galens Institute. For myself, for Captain Dent... Probably for anyone aware of your circumstances, Ward."

At this, General Laurent half-turned to look between Guest and Rei.

"'Circumstances?'" he repeated, curious. "What circumstances?"

Rei swallowed nervously as the man's eyes came rest on him, completely at a loss as to how to answer that question.

Fortunately, the colonel was quick to come to his rescue.

"Apologies, *General*, but no one here is at liberty to give you that information," Guest answered quietly.

That was the moment Rei realized the Rama Guest was hardly unfamiliar with the game they were trapped in. If anything, the man was a skilled player.

The way the colonel had emphasized Laurent's rank... And his highlighting of all of them in that room, Rei and Aria included. Guest was clearly providing the general with his own roundabout hints, masterfully skirting the rules set by whatever ears may or may not be listening. And done while never so much as glancing away from the distant lights of Castalon.

Luckily for all, Laurent picked up on it at once.

"Ah..." he muttered, his gaze suddenly taking Rei in with a new sort of intensity. "Which tells me there's likely some truth to the rumors. And you've dragged my daughter into it, somehow, haven't you?"

Rei blinked at that, but Aria was the one to ask first.

“What rumors?” she asked sharply, bristling even as she utterly ignored the general’s second question.

It was amazing—and *incredibly* endearing, Rei realized—how quickly she could turn on a dime when it came to coming to his defense.

Laurent’s brow creased in what was probably amusement, possibly incredulity.

“Easy, Aria. I only mean what’s being talked about on the feeds. It’s making the rounds, even as far as Sirius.”

“Oh,” Aria said, initially calming down.

Then, though she stiffened again as Rei, too, sat bolt upright.

“OH!” she exclaimed. “Wait... *What?*”

“*Sirius?*” Rei demanded, yet *another* pit opening up in his stomach with an almost physical stab of horror.

Laurent snorted. “You’re both living in too safe a bubble.” He glared between the two of them. “Yes. As far out as Sirius, and as far in as Earth, I have no doubt. Did you think the news wouldn’t spread? Don’t be naive.”

Rei swallowed again, stopping himself once more from reaching for Aria’s hand, which he suddenly wanted to hold for his own sake this time.

Yes. Naive. Maybe that was what they’d been. Under the pretext of allowing himself to recover—or at least a pretext in the latter half of the week—Rei hadn’t participated in their afternoon combat training classes since Firesong and the rest of the Sectional qualifiers had returned from Ganos. As a result, no one outside of the squad, their tournament chaperones, and Bretz, Imala, and de Soto knew about Shido’s most recent evolution. He had hoped—desperately, in fact—that that would limit the gossip, that what he and the rest of the squad found on the feeds was the extent of the rumors.

Clearly, however, the very *public* jump from C7 to C9 had been more than enough tinder for the flames.

“Naive” indeed...

None of that was relevant in the moment, though, and Rei forced himself to shove this new hole in his gut aside as he looked towards Guest's back.

“That doesn't matter,” he said as firmly as he could. “What does matter is *why* Central would want you and the Galens staff to be aware of the game they're playing, sir? Do you know?”

For a long, long time, the colonel didn't answer.

Then, for the second time, he sighed.

“I would think it's to put us on notice, Ward...”

“On notice?” Aria asked in concern, frowning around at the man. “On notice of what?”

Another pause, and Rei couldn't help but study the man, growing more worried by the second.

That was when he noticed the colonel's hands. His hands, still clasped behind his back. His hands grasping each other so hard his arms were shaking.

Suddenly, Rei realized that Rama Guest hadn't gotten up from his seat to pace and ponder.

He had gotten up probably to stop himself from breaking the couch in his fury.

“To put us on notice of the fact that we are likely not pushing Cadet Ward as hard as they would like us to,” the colonel answered at last, and in the reflection of the window the man's eyes started to glow a grim, hard grey.

CHAPTER 58

Fear gripped Rei, hearing those words spoken aloud. A familiar fear, but at once altogether different. Abruptly he was thrown head over heels in his mind, wrenched backward in his own thoughts. Pressure. Pressure unlike anything he knew his body could handle. The parameter test all over again. Then the pressure vanished, but the shadows of the office—even brightly lit as it was—twisted and seemed to form the colorless shapes of people. Rei’s eyes started to flick around the room, but every time he looked right at them the figures somehow vanished. In the corners of his vision, though, he thought he could still see them step mechanically forward, coming closer.

His chest grew tight. His breath started to come harder. His heart was leaping into his throat.

“Rei.”

Aria brought him back.

He jumped and jerked around to find her looking at him with wide eyes, her hand on his knee. She’d noticed. Almost at once she’d noticed. He felt weak for it, but he also felt grateful. He’d managed—*both* of them had managed—to step over the training field lines without hesitation since they’d returned to school, but that was different. This was altogether different.

But she’d noticed. She’d seen.

And she’d brought him back.

“Ward?”

Rei flinched again, turning a bit too quick and finding Guest and the general watching him carefully. It was the former who’d spoken, the man having apparently turned away from the window after his words had sent Rei tumbling.

“Ho...” Rei forced himself to take a deep, shaky breath. “I’m okay... Sorry, sir. Sir.” He dipped his head to both of the men dutifully, still working to push down that uncomfortable sliver of panic that had taken hold of him for a moment.

He would control this. He *would*.

“What was that?” Laurent asked, and he almost sounded concerned.

Rei didn’t know whether to be alarmed or touched.

“That—” Guest answered gruffly “—is probably Cadet Ward realizing that he—and only most of all of anyone here—has been Central Command’s plaything more substantially than any of us probably realized.”

Laurent’s jaw tightened at these words, and Aria’s hand twitched against Rei’s knee.

Rei, though, was the one who managed to speak first, unwilling to let the moment rob him of his voice.

His voice, and his anger.

“It *was* them...” he breathed, fighting back the image of the grey forms dropping from their red starting rings into the glitching waves of the unmoving ocean. “It was... The Dueling finals. At Sectionals. We thought it could be, but... It *was*...”

“*What?*” Aria snarled, her hand now gripping him so hard it hurt. That was okay, though.

The pain, combined with her touch, kept him there. Kept him grounded.

“That seems very likely, yes,” Guest agreed with a slow, hard nod. “Or at least someone *within* Central. Just as I think we can now safely confirm for a fact the parameter test incident was before that.”

“*And* the Intra-Schools,” Rei got out through clenched teeth.

“Parameter test?” Carmen Laurent asked with a frown. “Intra-Schools?”

Guest answered, sparing Rei trying to get any coherent words out through the building heat in his chest. As briefly as was possible he filled the general in, with the man’s green eyes going narrower and narrower with every word.

“What in the *MIND*...?” he hissed after the colonel had finished.

“Exactly.” Rei said through gritted teeth, getting ahold of his fury at last. “Are they *nuts*? Are they trying to kill me?!”

Laurent, though, only turned to take him in again. For several seconds he pondered Rei, even looking him up and down slowly.

Then he answered.

“Actually... I doubt that, Cadet. I doubt that very much.”

Rei felt a shiver that cooled some of his anger. While the general’s eyes weren’t glowing like the colonel’s had a minute before, there was a distinct rage in them just the same.

It was an altogether different kind of terrifying to be beheld by that gaze.

“I saw the attack,” Laurent continued after a second, sounding like he was considering his words carefully as he spoke. “At Sectionals, I mean. Live, actually, since it was a finals for Aria.” His attention only flicked to his daughter fleetingly before focusing on Rei again. “Whoever hacked the Kenneth Academy Arena—not that I, as a general of the ISCM, am making any speculation on who that might be—likely had full control of the SCT field and settings. They were able to initiate a penalty pause. They repositioned you and Aria both. They triggered a modified parameter test protocol, or something like it. I’m not a simulation expert, but that would probably require near-total access of the programming, yes?”

Though he was still looking at Rei, the question had obviously not been meant for him.

“It would,” Guest confirmed from behind the couch. “To the best of our knowledge, at least. The Kenneth cybersecurity team investigated the hack alongside the MIND. Hadish Barnes—our Head of Security—had the Galens team review the information after the fact as well. All three parties agreed that the intruder likely had full control of the SCT systems at the time.” He paused. “*Four* parties, actually. It should

be acknowledged that a Central cyber-ops unit also took part, and corroborated all findings.”

“Theoretically... A decoy operation would always be possible with this kind of attack,” Laurent said cautiously. “Probably, in fact. A follow-up to cover one’s trail. Again, *theoretically*.”

“Of course,” Guest played the game, looking thoughtful. “But a rogue agent *within* Central shouldn’t be discounted either. The cyber-ops unit agreed on *all* points with the Kenneth *and* MIND assessment, even initially. If it were a command-wide operation, why not at least try to sow *some* misdirection, if they could? Even minor.”

“About that, sir...” Aria started, though she sounded nervous, glancing around the room like she suspected an eavesdropper. “The MIND... Can the MIND... Can it be trusted? Given... Given Central’s involvement?”

Before them, Laurent and Guest finally exchanged a look.

“The MIND and the ISCM are intertwined, but still mutually exclusive entities,” the general eventually said by way of answer, though Rei thought he’d deliberately dodged the question. “Just because one is involved does not necessarily mean the other inevitably is as well.”

“And given it’s likely actively taking in this conversation as we speak... I don’t know if we have any other choice *but* to trust it, frankly,” the colonel grumbled, waving around at his office. “There’s a price for the peace and security most of the ISC exists in, as I’m sure you’re both aware.”

Rei and Aria both nodded, though neither answer made them any more comfortable.

“Setting aside the Central cyber-ops, at the very least the fact that Kenneth and Galens assets agreed with the MIND’s assessment of the attack on Cadet Ward should give you *some* faith in it, at least in these specific circumstances,” the general kept on. “Which brings me to my original point. If we assume that, first—” he lifted one slender

hand, bringing up a finger “—the intruder had full access to the Kenneth Arena simulations *and* second—” another finger raised “—that they wanted to do you harm... Then why were the holograms that assaulted you only S0?”

“Excuse me?” Aria interceded then, looking at her father furiously. “*Only* S0?”

“No... He’s right.”

Rei hadn’t *seriously* thought whoever had hacked the Dueling finals—some part of Central Command, he supposed they could say almost for a fact now despite Laurent’s own dancing around the idea—had been trying to kill him, and the general’s deduction had him feeling sure, now.

“If they’d actually been trying to put me out of commission long-term, they would have notched the simulation up to S9.” Rei nodded as he contemplated it. “S0 pushed me to the limit as is... If they’d been S9...”

“If they’d been S9, it’s likely your heart would have stopped from the shock,” the colonel finished for him. “And even if that wasn’t the case, it’s not unlikely that your nervous system would have been irreparably damaged, neuroline included.”

Rei just barely kept himself from wincing at *that* particularly unpleasant thought, unable to stop himself imagining his body frying from the inside out.

“Hopefully the heart stopping *would* happen, then,” he mumbled, trying to shake the image as he redoubled his efforts to fight back the clawing panic that was scratching at his throat again. Trying to help himself, he made sure to look Guest and Laurent both in the eyes when he addressed them again. “Which means it was another push. Like the parameter testing. It was another nudge.”

“And likely as much a warning as this transfer ‘order’ is,” the colonel agreed with a nod. “Central is at once pushing you *and* trying to tell Galens we aren’t putting enough pressure on you. Two birds, one stone.”

“Let’s say that were *hypothetically* the case... How can they think they aren’t asking too much?”

General Laurent once again chose his words with caution, but just the same it was apparent his curiosity—and likely broader irritation at not being used to being left out of important context—was getting the better of him.

Another silence answered him, though, and this time it was a beat longer before Guest responded.

“Apologies, General,” he repeated with almost-mechanic deliberateness, “but no one here is at liberty to give you that information.”

Laurent grunted in annoyance, clearly more perturbed the second time around at still being shut out.

“Fine,” he eventually said, perhaps a bit more sharply than was necessary. “In that case, it’s probably best I point out there’s an important question none of you have asked...”

As one Rei, Aria, and Guest all looked sharply around at the general.

“An important question, Carmen?” the colonel asked.

Laurent nodded.

“Such as how, perhaps, to keep me from having to sign the transfer orders.”

Rei’s stomach did a flip at these words, and Aria’s hand—having never left his knee—was suddenly gripping him painfully about the thigh.

“Keep you from signing...” Guest echoed, brow furrowed. “But... I thought we agreed this was just a threat.”

“And have you ever known the likes of Central Command to ever hold a sword over someone’s head they weren’t willing to drop?” Laurent asked quietly, fingers bunched into fists under his crossed arms. “Rama, this may be a shot across the bow, but that doesn’t mean the guns aren’t training on you even as we speak...”

Oh no... Rei couldn’t help but think.

For some reason, he suddenly felt like he was standing on a narrow bridge as some orbital tram came hurtling down the tracks at him.

“*Explain, Carmen,*” Guest almost hissed, glaring at his friend.

“If Aria and Cadet Ward are so insistent that they want to stay at the Galens Institute, I will allow it for the time being.” The general sounded suddenly like he was acting out the lines of a play, and that displeasure that had been barely-hidden earlier was not on full display in every line of the man’s bearded face. “However... there are conditions.”

“And those being?”

“That they both demonstrate that neither the Institute *nor* their squad is limiting their growth. In any way.” The general grimaced openly now, clearly no longer interested in the farce. “And I think it’s generous if I give them through the summer to do so.”

Rei, Aria, and Guest were all quiet at that, each obviously as stunned as the others by this announcement. Demonstrate that the Institute wasn’t holding them back? And the same for the rest of Firesong??

Aria was the first to find her voice this time.

“But... Father... How are we supposed to do that...?”

Guest, too, spoke before the general could answer.

“Do they mean the parameter tests?” he snarled. “If so, that’s hardly a fair measurement! There are only two more tests before the end of the semester, and those numbers can hardly represent what Ward in particular is capable of, given the nature of his Abil—!”

“I don’t mean the parameter tests, no.” Laurent emphasized, managing to remind them that the terms being laid out were technically coming from “him”.

“Then what *do* you mean, Carmen?!” Guest demanded outright this time. “Ward and Laurent are first-years! There are no more collegiate tournaments for them to participate in!”

Laurent’s cheek twitched in irritation.

And then...

“That...” he answered slowly “... is no longer true.”

If the room had been silent before, it was all but dead now. Rei was glad he was only one of three to gawk at the man in total shock.

“No longer... true?” Rei managed to echo first. “General... does that mean they’re opening the higher SCTs to first-years...?”

“It does. Or nearly.” Laurent leaned forward as he spoke now, taking Rei and Aria in with a whole new intensity. “The ISCM isn’t done with their changes for the year. Soon, an announcement will be made. Globals will be skipped. There aren’t enough teams on some planets to make the tournaments worth it. But starting this summer, they will be implementing *Systems* with a first-year bracket.” His eyes were keen and intense as he looked from Rei to Aria. “And the top qualifiers there will be heading... well... to the very top...”

CHAPTER 59

“Intersystems.”

It was Aria who said it, the realization coming as half a wheeze. Across from them Guest yet appeared too stunned to speak, while beside her Rei was still struggling to pick his jaw up off the floor.

Intersystems... His mind was a jumble of confusion, dismay, and—perhaps most prevalently—visceral, sudden exhilaration. *And Systems before that...*

Rei had no idea how to feel, struggling to focus as he turned this new information over in his head. On the plus side the shock of it had struck down any lingering panic that had still been trying to scabble its way up his throat, and even his fury at Central’s apparent meddling had subsided for the moment.

Intersystems... he repeated to himself, the word like a jolt of electricity even only in thought.

No. No... This wasn’t the time for excitement.

This was the time for alarm.

“That’s some change, sir...” he finally managed carefully. “There’s never been a first-year bracket beyond Sectionals that I’ve ever heard of. I thought it wasn’t worth it...?”

“Not until now, apparently.” Laurent’s reply was countered with a scoff from the man, like he couldn’t have agreed more with Rei. “It would seem the higher ups in charge of the ISCM have a different sense of things, now.”

“But why would—?”

Rei cut himself off, though. No. It was getting long past when he should have stopped asking those pointless questions. It was time to face the facts. The facts that only added to his anticipation and excitement, just as equally as his fear and anxiety.

Him. It was because of him.

The ISCM had very likely established an entirely new branch of their collegiate SCT program purely as a means to push Rei.

His chest felt tight again, but for altogether different reasons now.

Colonel Guest, for his part, appeared to be of the same opinion, taking the news a bit more in stride after looking to have recovered from his initial shock.

“So... what?” he asked carefully, crossing his arms to glare once more down at Carmen Laurent. “Central—no, I’m sorry—” he looked hard-pressed not to roll his eyes as the game they were being forced to play continued ad nauseum “—*you* want Cadet Laurent and Cadet Ward to demonstrate that Galens and Firesong are the right place for them by proving themselves in these new SCTs?” He was leering at the general with what appeared to be rapidly fraying patience. “I would like to know *exactly* what that entails, Carmen, if you please.”

Laurent’s answer came both smooth and irritated.

“How else? Winning, obviously.”

If staring was fineable, Rei, Aria, and Guest all would have long since been in debt up to their ears.

“I’m sorry,” Aria half-hissed, half-squeaked out. “Winning? Winning what? Systems?”

Laurent smirked like the suggestion was mildly amusing, then shook his head.

“*Intersystems?!?*” Aria demanded in disbelief.

And the general nodded.

“Your mother and I—” the lies were sounding more and more painful to get out “—believe you have the potential to be nothing shy of the very best of your year, Aria. Perhaps with the exception of Ward, perhaps not. Either way, you’ve correctly pointed out that you and Hippolyta have experienced astonishing growth since you’ve come to school, outpacing several of the few first-years who outranked you on assignment.” Despite his apparent distaste for the words, the man’s gaze was still iron on his daughter.

“We think that means there’s more there that Galens does not have the means by which to tap into.”

Aria’s hand finally left Rei’s knee as she bolted to her feet.

“But I’m only growing so fast because of—!” she started to yell, but she, too, managed to cut herself short, freezing before she could get the words out. The words Rei could anticipate.

I’m only growing so fast because of Shido, she had probably meant to say.

“I’m only growing so fast because of the Institute instructors,” Aria finished instead, not sitting back down again. “Captain Dent and the others. *And* because of my team.”

“Then you’ll have to prove it.” Rei might have imagined it, but the general looked like he was struggling mightily now, like the sight of his daughter in pain was only making things that much harder.

Rei wasn’t sure he *liked* the man, but he respected him a little more for that moment.

“By winning the *Intersystems*?!” Aria demanded again.

“Indeed. And not just as individuals.” Laurent looked to Rei again, finally. “As a team. A whole team.”

“So Team Battle *and* Wargames,” Rei translated, surprised to find he still had control of his voice, given his hands were trembling slightly in his lap.

“Yes... and no.” The general’s green eyes were intense, like he wanted Rei to really *hear* his message. “I mean more that your *entire squad* needs to win the team-formats.”

Rei understood, then. The entire squad. Not just him or Aria, or both of them. Firesong as a *whole*.

Carmen Laurent might not know about Shido’s circumstances exactly, but it was clear he’d been told enough to suspect Rei—at least in combination with Aria—might just have the potential to dominate this distasteful bet on his own by the time the

summer arrived. The general was telling him that that wouldn't be enough. That it wouldn't be enough for Rei and Aria alone to be so strong as to rule the field even on their own.

They would have to prove, without a shadow of a doubt, that Firesong wasn't holding them back.

Rei swallowed nervously, suddenly feeling very unsure of himself. He *would* continue to grow, he was sure of that. But would it be fast enough? Training with Bretz, Imala, and de Soto had already been immensely helpful, upping nearly half his specs each since the start of the week, but he could already notice that advancement slowing down. Apparently even against A-Ranked fighters, Shido could only absorb so much.

But that was only a fraction of the issue. Even at a crawl Rei suspected his CAD-Rank could probably get *well* into the Bs by the end of the semester, and he would have bet anything there wouldn't be another first-year in the ISCM who would be able to say the same. He hadn't looked up the stats from other schools—he hadn't thought he needed to, given first-year SCTs were supposed to be over for the season—but from what Laurent was saying it was clear he was among the top twenty strongest Users his age. Actually, since *Aria* was a top twenty at C8, he was probably higher. If Rei committed—if he studied like he'd studied every fight he and Firesong had ever gone into—he doubted there would be another first-year in the galaxy he didn't have a fair chance of putting down by the time summer came around.

The issue—as Laurent was pointing out—would be the rest of Firesong.

Shit... Rei thought, abruptly finding himself hoping with every fiber of his being that he and Aria were right in their theory regarding Shido...

“They'll do it.”

Rei blinked in surprise, snapping back to the present at this sudden statement. He turned even as Aria did the same beside him.

Rama Guest, though, had eyes only for the general.

“They’ll do it,” the colonel repeated evenly, his words as firm and sure as anything else Rei had ever heard the man say. “We will ensure it. Galens hasn’t yet offered Firesong every advantage we can. If this is the game Central wants to play with our cadets, though, we will make sure they regret it.”

Laurent, too, had looked to the colonel, and he studied the man for a long, still moment.

And then, for only the second time that night, he offered up a real smile. It was the same harsh, unsatisfied one as earlier, but it *was* real.

Getting to his feet, the general nodded to Guest.

“Salista and I look forward to it,” he answered. “Very much so. We were the ones to insist on Aria attending Galens in the first place, after all. If the Institute can prove it has more to give her and Cadet Ward, I would only be pleased not to be forced to sign off on the transfer.”

Rei didn’t miss the double meaning as Laurent looked around at him and Aria.

“You have your instructions, Cadets. You understand my expectations, now. You may go. My wife and I—” another twitch at the forced falsity “—will be following your progress closely. I hope it doesn’t disappoint.”

Rei and Aria both blinked at that, the dismissal coming rather abruptly. They looked to Guest, and the colonel seemed to hesitate.

“Carmen, perhaps it would be best if you provided a bit more information about what—”

“I have no further information to provide,” the general cut Guest off smoothly with a shake of his head. “Aria and Ward know what is expected of them. It will be up to them and their team to figure out how to achieve it.”

While this didn’t seem to satisfy Guest in the least, he clearly didn’t have a good immediate response to give. Instead, after a moment he looked around irritably at Rei and Aria.

“You’re dismissed, Cadets. Chief Assistant Kent will be in touch tomorrow so that we can start planning.” He bent down to take hold of the back of the couch before him, leaning into it with intent as he continued more firmly. “I mean it, though. We *will* get you to where you need to be. Galens has no interest in losing you. *Either* of you.”

And then, with that final note, he gestured for them to go.

Feeling wholly overwhelmed, Rei got to his feet, and he and Aria both offered their salutes to Guest and Laurent each before turning to step around the couch and towards the door.

“Aria.”

They stopped, but Rei let Aria turn back alone as her father called after her. There was a pause, and Rei could imagine the general struggling to find the words to say.

“It was good to see you,” the man finally got out, his voice gentler than it had been all evening.

Aria’s answer—in contrast—was quick, crisp, and lacking all emotion but disappointment.

“You as well, General.”

And then she spun back on her heel, grabbed the handle, and hauled the door open so roughly Rei feared she was going to pull it off its hinges.

Carmen Laurent watched Reidon Ward follow his daughter out into the hall, the door closing shut with an angry *bang* behind them. For a time he just stared after it, a familiar jumble of conflicting emotions taking hold of him. Disappointment. Irritation. Anger. Even regret. And none of them aimed at Aria.

He knew damn well it was his own hard choices that had cost him this...

“Carmen...”

Carmen didn't blink as Rama said his name. He was used to being interrupted, used to pushing aside his private thoughts in favor of whatever demanded his attention in the moment. He had to be.

It was rare that he got more than a couple unperturbed minutes to himself these days other than sleep, and even that came with few uninterrupted nights anymore.

"I wish you would talk to her..." Rama continued as Carmen looked around at his oldest friend. "Especially now. This..." He shook his head in disbelief. "This was a lot. For anyone. Much less an *eighteen-year-old girl*."

"She can handle it," Carmen countered quietly, turning away from Rama to move around the couch and make for the windows himself, taking in the Galens grounds framed against the city lights.

"Yes, she *can* handle it, and she *will*. But that doesn't mean she *has* to." Rama sounded like he was fighting to hide his frustration. "Not alone, anyway."

"She's hardly alone." Carmen's eyes dipped unbidden down from Castalon's towering skyscrapers, dropping to the dimly-lit stone of the Administration entranceway below.

"You mean Firesong? Ward? Carmen... They're basically *all* eighteen. And Chancery Cashe is only a year older. Do you remember what *we* were like at that age? Do you think *we* could have handled what you just thrust upon your child?" Rama hesitated, then, but continued. "The *last* child that still speaks to you, I should add."

It wasn't that Carmen hadn't been expecting it. He'd accepted the distasteful orders from Central with the full knowledge that Rama—Aria's *godfather*, to be fair—was unlikely to let him leave without a lecture. He couldn't blame the man, of course. Not really.

But he bristled just the same.

"You're toeing a dangerous line, Colonel..."

In the reflection of the window, Rama didn't so much as flinch.

“You don’t get to pull rank when it suits you, Carmen,” he answered without mercy. “You already claimed to have been here as a ‘concerned parent’, so I’m answering you now as a concerned uncle. And friend. I’m telling you, just like I’ve told Salista... You *will* lose Aria too if you both keep at this the way you have been.”

Carmen wanted to respond with anger at that, wanted to snap at the man that he was fool, that he didn’t know what he was talking about.

He couldn’t find it in himself to do so.

“... And how do I do that, Rama?” he asked softly instead. “How do I talk to her? How do I tell her about what’s out there?”

“You don’t have to talk about the *war*, Carmen.” Rama was almost pleading, now. “You just need to *be there*. You just need to—”

“The war is all I know.”

It slipped out. Carmen hadn’t meant to let it, but it did. The words that encompassed every fear, every failure and disappointment he’d had for 27 years, from the day Amina had been born. While even Rama had made it, he himself hadn’t been able to be there.

He’d been planet-side on S-Delta, engaged with the enemy, and hadn’t even had the chance to see his first child through video call for nearly 36 hours after she’d come into the world.

“I don’t know when it happened, Rama, but the war is all I know anymore.” Far below, the hint of shadows were starting to play in the light of the building on the courtyard outside. “You don’t understand. And I hope you never do. What I’ve seen. What I’ve had to *do*.” Carmen shook his head slowly. “I can’t bring that to my children’s doorsteps. I *can’t*.”

“So you don’t show up at all?” Rama asked, somehow managing to at once sound both sympathetic and unforgiving. “Except to all but upend your daughter’s entire *life*? How can that possibly make sense to you?”

Carmen was quiet for a moment.

And then, far below, two shapes at last emerged from the building, and Carmen's eyes found the taller of the pair as they started walking east toward the relative darkness of the campus proper.

"There are horrors out there, Rama," he got out finally, following Aria's back as she moved alongside Reidon Ward. "Things you cannot unknow or unsee..."

"And that's an excuse?"

"That's a *reason*."

His daughter's shape began to fade into the night. If he'd tried, Carmen supposed he could have caught her outline passing through the overhanging solar lamps staggered along the path here and there, but he chose instead to simply watch her until she finally slipped into the dark.

Only then, at last, did he turn and meet his friend's hard gaze head-on.

"That is a *reason*," Carmen repeated, more heavily this time. "I may be failing as a father, Rama—I do not deny it—but believe me when I say I am choosing the lesser of two evils. What I risk bringing into my home when I am here—what I risk bringing into *my children's lives*... I won't do it. I can't."

"So you choose to ignore the issue?" Rama had lost the sympathy now, his expression nothing more than barely-suppressed disappointment. "You choose to sit in your chair a million lightyears away, and let Salista's meddling run rampant?"

"Salista is overzealous," Carmen admitted with a dip of his head. "I will speak to her about it, but—"

"No," Rama interrupted, lifting a hand to point at Carmen's chest. "No buts. You say you're trying not to bring the war to your children's doorstep? You're saying *that's* the reason? If that's the truth, then explain how that worked out with Amina."

At this, Carmen's anger finally flared up in truth.

"Rama, don't you dare go—"

“Oh I’m going there,” Rama snarled, taking a step forward. “Because your excuses are bullshit. They’re bullshit and you know it. You aren’t *protecting* your children, Carmen. You’re *running*. You’re fleeing.”

“Rama, I’m warning you...” Carmen snarled.

His best friend kept on like he hadn’t said a word to interrupt him, though.

“Amina ran *to* the front lines to get away from Salista,” he snapped. “Her mother drove her away, and she ran *towards* everything you claim you’ve tried to keep your children away from. Towards *you*. Read into that however you wish to. Kalus, you got your way with, sure. But now you show up and put this on *Aria*? What are you doing, Carmen? Ignoring her most of her life, only to show up to lay *this* at her feet??”

Carmen felt the weight in full, in that moment, felt the knife of the decision he’d made against his throat. He *had* had a choice, in reality. He *could* have said no, could have refused the command to play his part in this risky scheme of Shira Abel’s making. But what would that have won him? Nothing. *Less* than nothing. The reprimand he would probably have gotten for refusing the order could have been shrugged off, but more importantly at least he had a seat at the table now, a place by which to spectate and—perhaps if needed—intercede.

The lesser of evils. Every choice Carmen ever made always felt like the lesser of evils.

“I love my daughter, Rama,” he said through clenched teeth, trying to keep hold of his mounting resentment. “I love *all* my children. It is the reason I do what I do. *Everything* I do.”

“Even when what you do is *nothing*?” Rama countered roughly. “And even when you do something like *this*?”

“*Especially* when I do nothing. *Especially* when I do something like this. Even if you don’t believe me.”

For a long, long time after that the two men glared at each other, neither willing to cede their point, nor keen to let completely loose the frustration building up in both of them.

Rama was the one to give first, finally sighing and crossing his arms.

“They’re using Aria as a pawn, Carmen,” he said as gently as Carmen thought the man could probably manage in the moment. “Central, I mean. Or whatever element of it is plucking at the puppet strings. They’re using *all of us* as pawns, in fact. You included. You know that, right?”

The anger started to leach away, replaced once more with the distaste and sadness that had highlighted every lie Carmen had been forced to spew that night.

“All too well,” he muttered, turning away from Rama towards the window again, though this time he looked to the sky.

“Can you at least tell me why *now*?” his old friend asked. “Do you know why they’re getting so involved *now*? I *know* you’re smart enough to figure out what’s going on with Ward, even if I can’t tell you. The public may only just be starting to notice, but his progress has been astonishing from the moment he was assigned his CAD. So why is Central getting so involved *now*?”

Carmen was quiet at that, watching the traffic of the skylines pass in the mesmerizing grid against the winter night high, high above them. He had answers to that question, of course. Unfortunately, just as there were apparently things Rama couldn’t tell him, there were secrets Carmen, too, wasn’t at liberty to share. Secrets that probably outweighed even whatever extraordinary circumstances revolved around the slowly-unraveling mystery that was Reidon Ward. Secrets that included the *actual* truth behind why Carmen refused to bring the war home with him...

After all, what kind of father had it in him to tell his children none of them had more than 10 years to live at the very most, if things kept going the way they were now?

“I imagine they’re looking for an advantage,” he answered carefully, deftly stepping around the truth he *actually* wanted to give. “*Any* advantage, at this point...”

At that, Rama was quiet again. He was silent for so long, in fact, that Carmen eventually dropped his attention from the lights of the transports and flyers above to look around at the man.

He was instantly concerned to find Rama taking him in with a keen mix of suspicion and—much more alarmingly—fear.

“Carmen, what’s happening that Central would—?”

Carmen cut him off before he could finish the question that couldn’t be answered.

“I have to make a call, Rama. A couple, actually. Would you mind lending me your office for a few minutes? It won’t take long.”

He wished he could have let the man voice his unease. He wished he could have heard the question out, and given him the explanation he deserved. But that, distressingly, was not a liberty he had.

Not as a general of the ISCM, nor as father, husband, or friend who wanted those he cared about to live out what was likely their last few years in whatever blissful ignorance he could afford them.

For several seconds Rama seemed like he wanted to protest, looked like he wanted to say more, but Carmen didn’t look away from him, staring the man down in the same way he stared down his own lesser officers when he wanted to discourage them from pursuing a particular line of curiosity. He hated to do it, but he didn’t have a choice.

And Rama got the message.

“Of course,” his old friend said with a brief nod. “It’s yours for as long as you want. I’ll take my leave for the evening.” He didn’t move for the door just yet, though. “Will you be in Castalon long? I can probably take a day of leave if you’re free at some point this weekend?”

Carmen wanted to smile, but didn't let himself. Instead, he just shook his head. "Sorry, but no. I'll be leaving tonight."

"Understood." Rama still paused, though. "It was good to see you, Carmen. I hope next time it's under different circumstances."

And then, before Carmen could respond, he was heading for the door. As he reached it, however, Rama stopped, then turned around.

"One question..." He eyed Carmen like he wasn't sure what to expect from him. "The sponsorship you offered them... Whose idea was that?"

At this, Carmen at last did allow himself a low, tired chuckle, appreciating his friend's deliberately-chosen phrasing.

It allowed him to answer honestly.

"That one was all me, believe it or not..."

Rama nodded, and for at least once that evening looked satisfied with an answer.

And then he was gone, the door shutting behind him with a kinder *click* than it had as Aria and Reidon Ward had left.

Alone for the first time since he'd made the jump from the Sirius System that morning, Carmen looked back up at the sky, watching the delicate patterns of the lanes a while more as he gathered his thoughts and chose his words with care. Then, when he was ready, he pulled up his call log with a few quick eye commands and selected one of the more recent names from the list, deliberately ignoring the bolded red of the "LOCAL TIME: 0324" warning next to it as he did.

He wasn't particularly concerned with anyone's comfort, currently,

The line started to ring, and Carmen braced himself. He wasn't sure whether the call would be left to go to voicemail, so he prepared himself either way. That turned out to be fortunate, because on the fourth tone there was the sound of the line opening, and his heads-up changed to "CALL ONGOING".

“General Laurent.” The woman sounded tired, but calculatingly civil just the same. “Given the lateness of the hour, I am hoping you have good news for me.”

“It’s done,” Carmen answered simply.

“And Colonel Guest?”

“Seems to be planning to substantially dial up Reidon Ward’s training regimen. As you anticipated it appears he’ll be pulling out all the stops from here on out.”

“Good. That’s good. And fortunate. Ward’s progress has been impressive, but it’s less than what we need. I hope we won’t actually be forced to pull the trigger on the transfer, but it’s a good measure to have in our back pocket if—”

“I won’t be signing those orders, General Abel,” Carmen cut the woman off flatly. There was a pause.

“Excuse me?” Shira Abel answered, and she sounded suddenly much more awake.

“You heard me,” Carmen said. High above, a single cloud cut a shadow over the shifting kaleidoscope of the sky lanes. “I won’t be signing.”

“I don’t know when you were given the impression you had a choice in that matter, General, but—”

“No.” Carmen’s interruption was sharper this time. “You called and I answered. You asked me to leverage my *daughter* for this obtuse cause of yours, and I have. Successfully. Now we’re done. This is my notice, General Abel. Please be informed that if you *ever* try use my family like this again, you will have my resignation effective immediately.”

“You are just as aware as I am how essential you are to our war efforts, General Laurent.” Abel’s words were honey, but her tone was anything but placating. “Your resignation would have a tremendous impact on our initiatives in the coming years.”

“Then you should probably take this seriously, shouldn’t you?” Carmen dropped all pretense of politeness, shifting his gaze to the red “*END CALL*” button to one side of his frame. “Try to pull something like this again, and I’ll be spending a lot more time

with my family while I still can. Good night.” He had a sudden thought, though. “Oh, and please inform the relevant parties that I will be taking two days of leave. Immediately. I’ll return to the Berenthal-9 Monday.”

And then he hung up, not bothered to give Shira Abel the opportunity to make any further attempts at dissuading him. He did, however, immediately pull up his log again.

This time he selected an entirely different name, and *did* actually check the time. It was a little early locally, at just before 0630, but he thought that was probably acceptable. She’d always been an early riser anyway. A few seconds later the line was ringing again, and he waited with a different kind of apprehension.

The call picked up with a *click*.

“... Carmen?” Salista sounded concerned. “Is everything all right?”

His wife’s voice was a like a hot bath after hours spent in the cold. Everything untensed, and Carmen found himself breathing easier than he had all day. He did smile, at last, dropping his gaze from the sky to find his reflection looking suddenly brighter than he’d witnessed in any mirror in the last year.

... Had it really been that long since he’d seen her?

“I’m coming home, Salista,” he said gently. “Not for long. Just the weekend. But I’m coming home.”

There was a long, quiet pause.

“...Really?” she asked, and the hope in her voice filled him with warmth and broke his heart all at once.

“Really.”

CHAPTER 60

“That was the day it started, I think. In truth, at least. In retrospect, I hate to say that that woman got exactly what she wanted, but she’d pressed the right buttons, leveraged the right desires. Imbue probably began dialing up to eleven for everyone, we got what we needed from Galens and beyond, and the Collective as a whole was speaking our names not long after.

That was the day we began to climb...”

-Chancery “The Dreadlight” Cashe

Rei was having trouble thinking straight. What was more, judging by Aria’s silence beside him as they walked, he didn’t think he was the only one. In something of a daze the two of them had crossed half the campus together, neither saying anything more than confirming they should head back to Kanes given the lateness of the hour. In that stupor they moved, not noticing their breath misting in the icy darkness, nor the Institute buildings hanging up and over them as they passed, nor even the several pairs of patrolling officers who again hadn’t stopped them to ask what they were doing out and about so far past curfew.

Only when the Arena loomed out of the night as they turned a corner in the path, its black walls and snow-covered top little more than a crowned, colossal shadow against Castalon’s light, did Rei shake himself from his jumbled thoughts.

And stop.

It was a few steps before Aria realized she was leaving him behind, but when she did she halted and turned, too.

“Rei...?” she asked. Ordinarily there might have been a “What’s wrong?” after that question, but that would have been silly, wouldn’t it?

Because what *wasn't*? What *wasn't* wrong about the position they'd abruptly and acutely found themselves painfully thrust into?

It took a few seconds for him to find his voice.

"Can we do it?" Rei finally managed, his eyes rising up to the great expanse of the Arena that towered behind Aria. "Like... Can we *actually* do it?"

She didn't answer immediately.

"Yes." The words came quiet when she did. "I think so."

"Do you?" Rei wasn't comforted. "You don't sound convinced."

Silence again.

And then Aria sniffled.

Rei's attention snapped back down to his girlfriend in a heartbeat, and he went cold as he saw her bring a hand up to wipe at her eyes with the cuff of one sleeve. It only took an instant to realize what was wrong, and he was in front of her so quickly that some sparse dustings of snow left over in the cracks of the cobblestone path billowed away from his trail behind him. He'd been too focused on the specifics, too focused on the crucible that had suddenly appeared, as ominous and menacing as the Arena before them, in their path.

All while Aria had clearly been struggling with an entirely different weight.

"Hey. *Hey*," he whispered, taking her free hand in his while reaching up with the other to cup her face. This close, the lines of a few rogue tears were clear against her cheeks even in the dark. "I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking. That must have been hard..."

Aria gave a croak of a chuckle, still wiping at her eyes.

"I'm fine," she answered. "Or I will be. I just... I didn't expect that. If I had it would have been easier."

Rei could only imagine. While he knew Aria's mother was overbearing to the extreme, having her largely-absent father show up out of the blue like that was probably more shocking than anything Salista Laurent could ever pull off. Despite her assurances,

it hurt to see Aria struggle with it, and a sense of guilt started to settle over Rei, joining the weight of that confusing combo of excitement and anxiety.

Guilt... and anger.

He didn't say anything else, letting the hand not holding hers linger over Aria's cheek while she finished drying her eyes. When she was done, she took a short breath and let out a rough laugh, trying to blink away the redness.

"It just surprised me," she said, looking at him again. "But I'm okay."

"I'm sorry," Rei repeated. "This is my fault. You wouldn't be getting dragged into this if it wasn't for—"

"Oh no you don't."

Aria stopped him with a finger pushed firmly against his lips, cutting him off. Her eyes—still a little puffy—were suddenly sharp as daggers.

"This is in *no* way your fault, and you know it. This is *Central*. And at least a little bit my father's, as much as he'd like to duck the blame. Orders or not. Got it?"

She waited, refusing to drop her finger from his mouth until Rei nodded slowly.

When she did, she let her hand fall to his chest.

"But as for if we can do this..." she continued a little less firmly, her expression sobering. "... I honestly don't know, Rei. Intersystems... *Systems* we'll have in the bag. I'd bet you anything. Team Battle definitely, and if we focus on tactics for Wargames I bet we can avoid a disaster like Sectionals even if we *do* get ganged up on again. But after that..." She grimaced slightly. "Intersystems is going to be a whole different level, you know? Even if *you're* well into the Bs by the time summer comes around." She shook her head, though seemingly mostly in disbelief at the situation they'd found themselves in. "The inner systems aren't a joke, Rei. They have at least a few squads that can absolutely wipe the floor with us as we are now, and they're only gonna get stronger through the rest of the year."

“Sure, but so will we,” Rei countered. “*Especially* if Shido is doing what we think it’s doing.”

“There’s no guarantee of that, though. Not yet.”

Rei scowled. “You have *head* armor, Aria. As a C-Rank. And Catcher and Chancery—”

“I’m not saying I don’t *think* it’s the case,” Aria interrupted him again. “I’m just saying that’s not enough proof. I *could* be a fluke. I have a decent Growth spec, and I already started way ahead of the curve. Catcher and Chancery are powerful Users, too, and *all* of us haven’t just gotten to fight the absolute best of our age on this planet, but have also been doing record levels of extra practice for months. And that was *before* this specialized training we’re getting now from Imala and the others. Catcher and Chancery could have developed their Abilities all on their own. We can’t know for sure.”

“That would be a *hell* of a coincidence...”

Aria smiled slightly, tapping a finger against his chest. “Maybe. But you can’t know that. How about when Viv develops a User-Unique Ability, I’ll call myself convinced. Deal?”

Rei scoffed. “Don’t joke about that when she can hear you. She’s having a hard enough time as is.”

Aria kept smiling for a second. Then her expression darkened. “She’s gonna have a lot harder time of it if you and I get transferred, Rei. I’m sorry, but we *can’t* count on Shido.”

Rei sighed.

“It’s gonna have to be all us, isn’t it?” he grumbled.

Aria nodded, looking more than a little uneasy at the thought.

But then she brightened slightly.

“Uncle Ram has our backs, though,” she said, finally pulling away from Rei to start leading him down the path again by the hand. “He said he’d get us there.”

“Yeah,” Rei answered, hoping he sounded more hopeful than he felt. “Yeah, you’re right.”

He chose not to voice his worry, chose not to voice his concerns. The fact, though, was that Galens was already doing more for Firesong than Rei suspected the school had ever done for any first-year squad, much less an individual User. There was probably *something* more the Institute could do, sure, but how much? How much further could it really go?

As he started down that fearful train of thought, he regretted that he and Aria had fallen back into silence as they made around the north side of the Arena and east towards Kanes.

Valera Dent could be called in to assist in their training, couldn’t she? But how much of a strain would that be on the Chief Combat Instructor of the entire school? And at what point did the favoritism start to run afoul of people? Rei knew through Aria that *dozens* of parents and other various entities had called in to complain at the start of the year when he—a lowly *E*-Rank—had been accepted to Galens, an academy that had never previously allowed the induction of any new cadet below the mid-Ds. For all Guest’s assurances, how much could the Institute *really* push before it reached its limits?

For some horrible reason, Rei suspected it wasn’t as far as they would need.

The squad... The *whole* squad, Carmen Laurent had driven in. It wasn’t just Galens that needed to prove it wasn’t holding him and Aria back. It was *Firesong*, too. And if the team together couldn’t lift themselves up to a point of being able to compete with first-years who were currently stronger than both Rei and Aria—and would only continue to *get* stronger—then what would happen?

Rei didn’t know what to do. As much as he trusted the man, he just didn’t have faith that whatever the colonel could cobble together for them all would be enough. There was a ceiling there, Rei was sure. Somewhere. There had to be. Be it what Galens

could offer or the likely blowback for providing it in the first place, there had to be a ceiling.

And if what the school could give probably wasn't enough...

Rei grit his teeth, one hand still in Aria's as they walked, the other in his pants pocket as he stared at the ground, thinking. It was frustrating. *So* frustrating. In large part because it felt like they'd been handed an impossible task.

... But also because Rei suspected he did, in fact, have the solution already in easy reach.

The rest of the way to Kanes the two of them walked like that, taking their time. Late as it was they didn't cross anyone else all the way back to the dorm, which turned out to be fortunate, because despite her promise that she was alright Aria started having to dab at her eyes again long before they were home, the evening's events obviously still holding a grip on her in more complicated ways than they were for Rei. He didn't say anything, this time—even when another small snuffle started to come now and then—but held her hand tighter to let her know he was there. He was distracted, but hoped it helped, and thought it did. By the time they made it back there hadn't been any real tears he'd seen, at least, so he called that a win even as he couldn't stop his thoughts from being elsewhere, on a path he wasn't sure he wanted to take.

As the Kanes doors opened for them and they stepped inside the warmth of the building, though, the night's surprises proved hardly over.

“Viv...?”

Rei looked up at Aria's question, and was completely taken aback to find *Viv* standing awkwardly before them, still dressed in her black and golds, and looking no less tired than she had after training. For a second he assumed that she'd stayed up to wait for them—and was about to tell her the shadows under her eyes said only that she should have been in *bed*—but then he noticed the duffle bag slung over her shoulder, not to mention her startled expression.

“Are you... going somewhere?” Rei asked slowly, dropping Aria’s hand and eyeing Viv.

“Wha—Oh!” His best friend straightened quickly. “Oh. Yeah. I’m, uh...” She hesitated, and Rei would have sworn she looked like she was thinking fast. Then, though, her cheeks flushed. “I’m crashing with Logan, tonight...”

Aria and Rei both blinked at that.

“Oh,” they said together, exchanging an embarrassed look. “*Ooooh.*”

Aria recovered first.

“Isn’t he on the fourth floor though?”

“Uh... Yeah.” Viv *definitely* looked shifty now, her eyes refusing to meet either Rei or Aria’s. “I was just downstairs to... uh... relax in the courtyard for a bit.” She seemed to find her footing, then, looking at them a little *too* directly as she threw a thumb over her finger at the open-air enclosure that took up the middle of the square building, where the red-orange branches of the single tree growing from the decorative stones were partially hidden by the lobby ceiling. “Training today was brutal. I just needed a break.”

“In your uniform?” Rei asked, raising an eyebrow.

But Viv had indeed found her pace.

“Easier to wear it than fold it all up and carry,” she said with a firm nod, offering a smile that looked hard to force through her exhaustion.

“Okay...” Rei glanced at Aria again, who seemed about as confused as he was. For a couple of seconds the three of them all stood there awkwardly.

“Alright, I’ll see you guys tomorrow, I guess,” Viv said at last, turning with a stiff wave to make for the stairs on the other side of the lobby from the dorm elevators. “Want to get some sleep before morning hours tomorrow?”

“Sure. Good night,” Aria called after her, she and Rei both watching her go uncertainly.

Viv was almost at the stairs when she paused.

“Hey...” she said, half-turning to look back at them. “I should have asked... Everything okay? What did they want at Administration?”

Rei didn't have to be holding Aria's hand to feel her go still beside him. Viv's tired attention, after all, was on her face, and while her eyes might be dry they were still red, her cheeks still a little splotchy.

Between that and the question he was still struggling with himself, Rei didn't have the energy to explain.

“Everything's fine,” he answered with his own stiff smile, hoping he sounded convincing enough for the hour. “We'll fill you guys in tomorrow.”

He failed, of course, with Viv instantly scowling at him.

“Rei, I've heard better lies from politicians.”

Rei managed the hint of an actual real grin, at that.

“Everything's fine,” he repeated, a little more naturally this time. “Or at least it's nothing worth worrying about right now. We'll talk tomorrow. Good night.”

Viv continued to glare for bit. Whether due to his words or the fact that it was probably closing in on midnight, though—atrociously late given how many hours of training they were putting in each day—in the end she didn't ask any more questions.

“Fine,” she finally said. “Tomorrow. I'll hold you to that. Good night.”

And then she was off up the stairs, leaving Rei and Aria on their own again.

Rei waited a full ten seconds to be absolutely sure she was out of earshot before speaking.

“That was weird, right?” he muttered sidelong, not looking around from the staircase his best friend had just vanished up.

“*Definitely* weird,” Aria confirmed quietly. “If I didn't know better I'd say she was trying to sneak out of the dorm...”

“Yeah... Me too.” Rei stared after Viv a second longer, then sighed and turned to start making for the elevators. “Whatever. I’m too tired to care. She knows she can talk to me if something’s up, so I’ll leave it alone.”

“So mature,” Aria said with a laugh, catching up with a quick step to slide her arm under his. “Are you sure you’re my bull-headed boyfriend? You haven’t been replaced, have you?”

“Sorry, but no. No one else can rock this many scars and not look like Frankenstein, I’m afraid.”

“Hey I *got* that reference. But Frankenstein wasn’t the Monster.”

“Touché.” Rei managed his own chuckle as they reached the lobby and he swiped at the wall between the doors to call them a car. Immediately the bay to their left opened, and Aria released him again as they stepped in so he could hit the display selection for the second level, where her suite was, one floor below his. As the elevator began to rise, they were silent again, neither speaking until the climb stopped and doors opened once more.

“Walk you to your room?” Rei asked, stepping out into the hall.

Aria, though, hesitated.

“... Sure,” came the answer after a second, and only then did she leave the car to join him.

Not sure what to make of that, Rei gave her a look, but Aria was suddenly refusing to meet his eyes. Too tired to push, though, he started down the hall in the direction of her suite, letting her fall into step beside him.

They hadn’t made it 10 feet when she stopped him with a hand on his arm.

“So... actually...” Aria started quietly even as he glanced around to find her still not looking at him. “... It’s been a shit day, right?”

Rei frowned.

“... Right...” he acknowledged, watching his girlfriend carefully.

“A *really* shit day.”

“Went downhill pretty quick I’d say, yeah.”

“And we have to get up early for practice.”

“Morning hours, yeah...” Rei cocked his head at her. “Where are you going with this?”

He might have imagined it—it was hard to tell since her face was still a bit red from crying earlier—but he thought Aria was blushing.

“So we’ve had a shit day, and we’re gonna have a shit morning.” She finally met his eyes, and Rei was surprised at the intensity of her gaze. “I’d rather not have a completely shit night, if at all possible.”

Rei stared, not following. For long time he looked at her, trying to translate and cursing himself all the while. He was tired, he was distracted, and Aria just had a way of sometimes making his brain fuzzy when they were on their own. Eventually he gave up, and opened his mouth to ask again what she was talking about...

Then it clicked.

For a couple seconds more he stared, still. Just to make sure he wasn’t wrong. Just to make sure he was reading the intent in Aria’s eyes right.

“Wait... You mean...?”

“W-we don’t have to *do* anything,” she stammered, looking away again with her cheeks *definitely* blazing now. “Just...” Her gaze dropped to the floor. “... I don’t really feel like being alone, right now, you know?”

Rei didn’t hesitate again.

Without another word, he took her by the hand and started up the hall in the other direction, away from her suite, and back towards the elevator.

Aria was as beautiful asleep as she was any other time, Rei learned not too long after, watching her breathe with her head resting against his bare, scarred shoulder. They lay in bed in the dim stillness of his small room, the only illumination coming from the quiet blue glow he'd programmed the smart-glass window to display. The swimming, drifting light played against her face in a pretty sort of way, and he tried to force himself into the moment, tried to force himself to be present, as he'd struggled to be largely since leaving Administration. He reached over with his free hand carefully, running a finger across Aria's forehead to pull a few loose strands of red hair away from her closed eyes, tucking them behind her ear. It helped, for a little. For a minute or so Rei managed to be nowhere but there, right there, in bed beside her, him in nothing but his boxers, her in underwear she'd snuck into Viv's room to borrow and one of the too-large shirts he used to sleep in.

As breathtaking as she was, though, Rei could only fight the weight of decision for so long.

For a while he just lay there, his mind pulled elsewhere even as he absently ran his fingers gently back and forth along the arm Aria had tucked between them. He didn't want to think, didn't want to have to, but the pull couldn't be ignored, the possibility unwilling to be shoved aside.

He'd have to leave this. If Central got their way—or *didn't*, depending on what the hell their actual intentions were—Rei could see a coming future where he'd have to leave this. Carmen Laurent and the transfer orders had implied he and Aria wouldn't be separated, sure, but Rei didn't think he could trust in that guarantee. It was worth something, but even if it was the case in the short term, what would be there to stop the ISCM's higher ups from leveraging *her* next? They already were, in a way, but there was always the chance—a *good* chance, Rei suspected—that a time would come where Aria's presence in his life might be added to the scales.

But even if they could stay together... he'd have to leave everything else...

Rei stopped running his fingers along Aria's arm and carefully rolled over to stare up at the ceiling of his room. The blue glow from the window created shifting, flowing patterns overhead, like nebulas drifting through open space.

He didn't want to leave this. Not any of it. Galens had at some point become the first place he'd really felt at *home* his whole life. More so than the Estoran Center, and *definitely* more so than Grandcrest ever had. And while the going had been rough at the start, Colonel Guest had only proved tonight that the school would fight tooth and nail to have his back, to keep him there. And he had *friends*. *Real* friends. People he didn't want to leave even *if* Aria would be allowed to go with him. Catcher, Chancery, Sense. Even Logan was getting to that point.

And Viv...

Rei didn't want to leave this. He was proud of the Galens griffin. Proud of his red on grey. Proud of himself, his best friend, his teammates, and Aria for how she led them all.

But in less than 6 months, it might not matter.

... Unless he did something about it *now*.

The light continued to swim against the ceiling, and for a breath Rei couldn't help but be reminded of his assignment exam. That hologram of the grand stone room that would have fit well in some fantasy castle, with the infinite expanse of space and the Crab and Eagle nebulas drifting endlessly around him beyond the absent walls. He remembered the feelings of getting Shido, of his Device forming around his wrists, of the initial disappointment at being assigned an F-Rank followed by the exhilaration of taking in his S-Ranked Growth for the first time. That had been the start, the beginning of his climb, of this ascent that would eventually take him places Rei suspected even *he* couldn't know.

But right now... it had brought him here. Brought him this. All of this.

And he *wasn't* going to leave it.

The decision made itself, in the end. Not easily and not quickly, but unwavering when it did. The path was an uncertain one, admittedly, but it was an *answer*, and the only real one available to Rei that he could find. Whatever hardships were down this road, whatever consequences came, he would handle them then.

Well... Rei turned his head to look at Aria again. *Not just me, anymore, I guess...*

And with that thought, the choice was final.

Rei started to sit up, trying to pull his right arm out from under his girlfriend's head as gently as he could. He mostly managed it, but as he got it free her eyes flickered, and she half frowned, eyebrows pinching together. She made a quiet, disappointed sound, and before Rei could stand she reached out to weakly grab him by a finger.

"Hey..." she mumbled, eyes unopened and obviously still very much mostly asleep. "Where... you going...?"

"Bathroom," Rei lied, bending back over to kiss her lightly on the head. "I'll be right back."

Aria made a grumble of sounds that *might* have been the words "You better", but let go of his hand. Rei pulled the blankets he'd slid out from under back over her shoulder, then quietly found his slacks on the floor by the bed. Socks and shoes he didn't bother with, but his dress shirt he snagged off the back of his desk chair on his way towards the door, pulling it on without bothering to button it.

It was late, and this wouldn't take long.

304's common room was dark, as was the kitchen and the short hall that led to the suite door. Taking his leave as quietly as he could, Rei had to squint against the brightness of the dorm lights outside. Lifting one had to shade his eyes until they adjusted, he turned and headed around the building towards the stairs, not really feeling the elevators again. Walking helped him think, anyway.

And he needed to consider his approach.

Reaching the stairwell, he took them down one floor, then another to the lobby, where he stepped out into the empty luxury of the red furniture and carpeted room, all handsome steel and glass. He'd planned to set himself up on one of the couches, but as he approached them Rei's eyes were drawn instead to the courtyard, and curiosity got the better of him. He passed the manicured rows of seating and coffee tables that during the day were always occupied by some first-year group or another, then stepped out from under the ceiling onto the rough, flat stones of the unlit indoor square, looking up as he did. The air was brisk, here, not quite as cold as outside but definitely cooler than the rest of the doors, and above his head the branches of the strange tree that took up the middle of the space were thick with leaves, their fiery hue unchanged despite the season. Beyond them, an open sky let in the light of the night, illuminating the branches in a dim glow that somehow only brought them more to life.

That was where he made the call, standing with head upturned under the distant brightness of Castalon's unseen monoliths, the unshifting leaves of the tree turning the midnight traffic of the sky lanes far above him into twinkling stars.

The line picked up in record time.

"Reidon." The woman's husky tone was reservedly delighted, like he was some old friend she'd been expecting to hear from. "What a pleasant surprise."

"How did you know it was me?" Rei asked, sliding both hands into his pockets. His voice echoed slightly in the quiet of the empty floor.

The woman chuckled. "It's my entire job to be informed. How poorly would it reflect on me if I wasn't able to get my hands on something as basic as a contact ID?"

Rei didn't answer that, not wanting to give her any more leverage than she had. He wasn't there to negotiate, after all.

And so he dove right in.

"Ms. Ueno, I'm assuming the sponsorship you offered me recently is still on the table?"

He could practically *see* Ueno Jasper smiling at the question.

“Again, call me Jasper,” she reminded him. “And it certainly is. The Kamiya Corporation is *very* keen to offer their support. If you’d like to discuss the possibility, I would be more than happy to—”

“I have a condition. Two, actually.”

Rei interrupted her cleanly, still watching the sky through the leaves above him. His heart was in his throat, but he kept his voice cool, calm and even.

“... Oh?” He might have imagined it, but he thought he had *finally* managed to shake the woman’s perfect poise, if even the slightest bit. “And what might they be?”

“You can keep the funding,” Rei started with. “I don’t need it. The stipend the ISCM provides us is more than enough for me, and you and I both know it will all be a drop in the bucket if I end up competing in the SCTs at the level we’re hoping for.”

There was a brief pause.

“Is that so?” the woman still sounded nothing but pleased, but there might have been the merest hint of suspicious underlying her words now. “These conditions must be significant, if you’re conceding that right out the—”

“Not significant, Jasper. Essential. Without them, there is no deal.”

Another chuckle, a little drier this time. “Well I’m happy to hear out your requests, but our offer *is* very generous already. I can take your counter to Kamiya, but I can’t make any guarantees.”

“Even if I tell you you can tell my family I was offered a second sponsorship this evening?”

This time Rei was *sure* he’d surprised her.

Ueno Jasper was quiet for several seconds, telling him more clearly than any exchange they’d had so far that the statement had an impact. He’d suspected it would. Kamiya had shown more of its hand in its initial offer than he’d thought was probably

prudent. He didn't know if he'd been *meant* to sleuth out the truth he'd been confident enough to put on the table, but it didn't matter.

Rei had never been one not to play to whatever advantages he could find, had he?

"I'm listening," Ueno finally said, and the playfulness was gone from her voice.

Good. She was taking him seriously. It helped to suppress the chill of adrenaline brought on by the woman's silent confirmation.

And so Rei made his demands.

"First, I want to know who's pulling the strings. I want to know whose idea this was, and I want to meet them."

"I can make that happen." The woman sounded sure of herself.

"Good. Because my second ask is bigger."

Rei's hands were fists in his pockets, and Shido's steel was cool against his wrists. He looked up through the tree, imagining what the Galens Institute had looked like from the flyers so high above him, taken in from the freedom of the night sky.

"All of us," he said. "You keep the money. But you sponsor *all* of us."

CHAPTER 61

“I have found there is only one universal secret to success. One truth I’ve discovered spans across every industry, every line of work, every type of company and team we have ever had a hand in. Surround yourself with people who are smarter and more capable than you.”

-Kamiya Hiroto

Tokyo Industrial Symposium Lecture

Tokyo, Earth, Sol System

2461

For the first time in a while, Jasper was fairly sure she *hadn’t* come out on top of a conversation as she bid Reidon Ward good night. Hanging up, she admitted to feeling a little played, and it miffed her even *if* it wasn’t her fault. As she’d suspected, Hiroto had given himself away by providing her *carte blanche* when it came to his grandchild, granting her permission to tap into the company coffers as needed to bring Ward under the Kamiya wing, and the boy *was* clever. Jasper had thought he hadn’t missed so much as an ounce of the overenthusiasm she’d had no real way of sidestepping in their face-to-face.

Now she knew it for a fact.

And that was before you pulled out all the stops a week ago, Hiroto, she thought with a sigh as she closed out of her NOED.

Still... she chalked it up as a win just the same. Sure Jasper was ruffled, but the reality was that this was a *very* good outcome. Spectacular, even. She didn’t know how Ward figuring out his ‘family’s’ involvement would play out, but that was a problem to leave to her teacher. Setting that aside, Jasper had always been confident Ward would

come around eventually, but the timing couldn't have been more fortunate. He was on board, which would have been enough regardless.

But it was also a fact that his latter demands were going to be a *lot* less costly than the cliff she probably would have had to shove Kamiya off of if the call had come even an hour later.

Jasper looked around at the company guard—the *actual* company guard—standing at ease over her shoulder by the polished stone bench she was occupying. They were alone under an arched ceiling in the grand marble hall, and had been for nearly 40 minutes. Not even a drone had passed by, much less anyone to politely assure her they knew she was still waiting. It was deliberate, of course, a power play to let her know the person she'd been there to see was *acutely* aware of who she was and who she'd come to represent. Jasper smiled.

Karma could be *such* a pleasant little thing.

“We’re leaving,” she told the guard briskly, standing up and shaking out her flowing, blue-green skirt with one hand, her pad held in the other.

“Ma’am?” the woman behind the standardized black of the visor asked, the neon green Kamiya logo on its left side coming into view as she looked around at Jasper.

“We don’t need to be here anymore,” Jasper clarified, straightening and starting down the hall at once, high heel clicking over the stone. “This meeting is no longer of any value.”

If this statement took the guard by any kind of surprise, she didn’t show it.

“Understood. I’ll call the flyer.”

They were 20 feet up the massive chamber, very near the closed stone archway that led out into the building proper, when there came the sounds of an old latch lifting and a creak. Looking over her shoulder, Jasper saw the single large, wooden door at the other end of the wall open slightly, and a young aid with reddish hair and an unpleasant smile poked his head out to call after her.

“Ms. Ueno, the chairman will see you now.”

So they were waiting for me to lose patience, Jasper realized with a raised eye. They would probably have left her sitting there for hours if they could have...

This was going to be sweeter than she'd thought.

“My regards to the chairman,” she called back in a simpering tone. “Unfortunately, the matter I was hoping he could help me with was attended to while I was waiting.” She let every ounce of sugary venom she had leak into her smile. “By a competing party.”

The drop in the man's face would have been worth every *minute* wasted in that hall even if Jasper wasn't telling the truth. Working hard not to snigger, she turned back to find the guard with one hand on the large brass handle of one of the entrance's own double doors, waiting.

Jasper nodded, and a second later they were both stepping out into the loud, bustling churn of a corporate hellscape.

She'd known on arrival that the doors undoubtedly hid impressive dampening technology, because the top floor of Veragoth Industries' New London headquarters was a surgical madhouse of constant activity. People were hurrying left and right, shouting on NOED calls here and waving pads over their heads to get someone's attention there. Smart-glass panels made up every meeting room and office wall, and hardly any were blank as individuals and groups alike worked on whatever project was consuming them in the moment. Keeping her eyes straight ahead—she had no interest in being accused of corporate espionage at some later time—Jasper led the way across the boorish black of the thin synthetic carpet, heading for the other side of the floor. As she walked, heads turned towards her, but she ignored them all. For one thing, she was aware of the effect she tended to have on men—and not a few women, for that matter. It was part of her arsenal.

But here, in this place, she was an infamous—and therefore *appalling*—sight for entirely different reasons, and sure enough she didn't miss more than a few workers tilting tablets away from her, or even hurrying to wipe their walls clean as she passed. Jasper smiled to herself, but didn't blame them.

The Kamiya Corporation might not be her only client, but here in the belly of their largest competitor she might as well have been Hiroto's personal bloodhound.

Without a word Jasper and her escort found the exit to the corporate landing pad, and it was only a brief minute's wait in front of the polished steel doors before the guard let her know their flyer was inbound. With another nod from Jasper the woman hit the release in the left wall, and the first exit opened for them almost silently. Stepping inside the segregation chamber beyond, they were briefly locked in as the doors sealed at their backs. Then the second set opened before them, and Jasper winced at the winter chill.

"Help you to the flyer, ma'am?" the guard asked, offering her an arm.

"I'm all right, thank you," Jasper answered with a smile and a shake of her head.

Then she stepped out to overlook a dusk-lit world.

New London, counter to its name and the trends of the last 400 years, had never succumbed to the bi-directional sprawl that had claimed Tokyo, New York, Venusia, and most of the rest of the Sol System's largest cities. As a result, much of the place had yet remained as relatively "untouched" as it had even before humanity had taken to the stars. The old streets were still there, the ancient buildings and the history kept whole with an almost-sacred reverence. There even remained some shadowy vestiges of the monarchy that had so long ruled as figureheads when Earth still held onto the political divisions of the countries whose boundaries now only denoted geographical borders.

That though, was only *below* the clouds.

Above them, the world was a different place. Only a handful of New London structures had been granted the necessary permits to build in the modern style, and so Veragoth's headquarters were maybe one of a score of variously-shaped forms rising up around Jasper and her guard. In the fading light of the day, it was breathtaking to see these sparse titans cast their shadows *atop* the clouds, leaving their mark in a place that humankind really had no business lingering. Everything was red and pink and purple, and as Jasper strode across the plain square platform of the landing pad towards their waiting flyer, she allowed herself to look around, taking it all in while she could. It was refreshing, in a way.

It was nice to be reminded that there yet remained some pleasures no person could *always* partake in.

The flyer recognized their signatures as they approached, the rear and front doors unlatching and opening upwards for them both. Her escort waited until Jasper had slid comfortably into the closest of the two leather seats in the back compartment, then claimed the front, the two spaces deliberately segregated for confidentiality and privacy. Once they were settled, they lifted off at once, dipping laterally and down to make for the sky lanes cutting patterns way above the clouds below them. As they dropped, Jasper continued to treat herself to the view of the sunset a while longer, enjoying the sensation of smallness that came with the tops of the buildings rapidly rising all around them until they felt like giants that could dwarf the world.

Once they were settled into the trailing lines of traffic, though, she looked forward again, pulling up her NOED as she did.

She'd considered calling Hiroto immediately, but had decided against it after some contemplation. The old man was brilliant, but he was starting to border on irrationality when it came to his estranged grandson. No. In particular given Ward's request for a meeting, it would be better to at least present her teacher with the pre-prepared solution to the boy's second demand she'd already constructed in her head. For that reason it

took Jasper a minute to sort through her compiled files, though the first name she went looking for was one she'd settled on for some time already, and conveniently near the top of the list.

The line rang, then picked up.

"Hello?" A man's voice, notably cautious.

Understandable. How often could SCT up-and-comers receive unknown calls of any positive nature, after all?

"Sergeant Major." Jasper was already swiping through her recruitment portfolio to gather the other calls she would have to make. "My name is Ueno Jasper. I'm assuming you know who I am?"

The answer came promptly, all doubt rapidly vanished. "I do. Yes, ma'am."

"Polite. I like that." She pulled the 'WAINWRIGHT' profile, then went looking for the last as the flyer rolled slightly to join a different lane. "I have two questions for you, if I may."

"Of course, ma'am."

"First, are you sure about this application? My understanding is you're starting to make quite a name for yourself in the professional circuits..."

"I am, ma'am." She couldn't hear an ounce of hesitation in the man's voice. "Honestly... Permission to speak freely?"

"I'm not a member of the military, Sergeant Major. Much less your superior officer."

"Fair enough." A low laugh, and he sounded to relax a little. "I'll keep it casual then... I looked into the circumstances of the job a bit. Obviously it was lacking in detail, but I was lucky enough to be privy to some... let's say 'private' information I'm going to assume is relevant, given you're reaching out to *me* specifically. I think I've put the important bits together." His tone grew serious again. "If I'm right, it's an opportunity to be involved in something I don't want to miss out on."

“Polite *and* well connected.” Jasper smiled slightly. “Keep it up and you’ll have me swooning by the end of this conversation.” She pulled the “VON BOR” profile. “In that case, in regards to my second question: I should tell you that few of those ‘circumstances’ you mentioned have changed. In a way that may impact your decision in particular.”

“Oh?”

“Indeed.” Jasper memorized the two IDs quickly, then closed the files to look out the flyer window again. The sky was darkening, and the stars were just starting to wink into being at the far edge of the New London sunset. “So I have to ask... Do you have any concerns with being involved in your younger sister’s training?”

A pause.

But when the answer came, she could hear the grin in the man’s voice.

“Not in the least, Miss Ueno,” Kalus Laurent answered. “In fact, I think I would very much look forward to it...”

EPILOGUE

“Catcher was only the first sign we noticed. There were others, I think, in retrospect. A lot of them. In fact, looking back on it, I’m pretty sure the truth was under our noses the entire time...”

But it was what happened to Viv that finally convinced us were definitely—definitely—right...”

- Aria of Flames

Concerning the Stormweaver

SCHLUNK!

The grey axe took Viv through the gut, cleaving her clean in two even as it sent her hurtling backwards. Pain exploded through her abdomen, but she didn’t have much time to register it before she struck the training field wall with such force that Gemela’s armor partially shattered around her arms and legs. Her weapons she’d lost before to the one weak block she’d already barely managed against her opponent, but that wasn’t any consolation as she crumpled to the white floor, her useless legs collapsing under her to send her toppling face-first to the ground with an “Oomph!”.

“Fatal Damage Accrued,” came the cursed announcement for the hundredth time that night.

Viv would have liked to lie there, would have liked to curl up into a ball and stay on the ground, unmoving and trembling while the agony subsided. The floor was nice. The hologram was pleasantly warm, and the brightness of the Neutral Zone helped to keep her alert, keep her awake.

Then again, it did nothing to stop now-familiar clenching of her stomach that struck Viv only a second later, and she barely managed to shakily shove herself up on weak arms before she vomited.

“HURK!”

Sick splattered the Neutral Zone floor, and at once the background buzz of the ever-present medical drone pitched as it closed on her in a blink. Only then did Viv let herself fall sideways, rolling onto her back to blink blearily up at the training room ceiling. The lights of the drone were already over her, but she didn’t so much as twitch when the ion scanner swept her face and body, cleaning her up with a thin sizzle of sound and the brief smell of burning. Then the drone dipped to the right, and the scanner went again, atomizing the half-digested contents of what had been her already-meager dinner.

In 15 seconds, Viv and the practice field were as clean as they’d been when she’d first called the field into being 2 hours earlier.

The pain had finally started to fade, and after a little while more Viv gave her legs a testing nudge. Her feet moved and her knees bent, so with a groan she forced herself up, muttering an exhausted “Recall” as she did. Gemela’s broken remnants vanished from around her limbs, resuming their passive forms around her wrists.

When she was sitting cross-legged, Viv looked over her shoulder.

The grey of the training partner was stark against the pristine nature of the Neutral Zone. It—the male model of the projection—stood empty-handed and passive in the very middle of the training field, having apparently recalled its own “Device” and moved back to its starting position when the room had declared Viv’s FDA. She glared at it, livid and half-desperate. She glared, and waited.

Nothing.

“DAMMIT!”

Viv's frustration exploded out of her briefly, and she slammed a fist down on the floor beside her. The solid light gave slightly under the blow, caving with a *crunch*, but Viv ignored it. She was tired. So tired. She was giving it everything she had. *Everything*. Why couldn't she break through??

But then the anger vanished as quickly as it had come, replaced with an emptiness that suddenly had Viv wanting to cry.

"Only one night left..." she muttered to no one in particular, dropping her head to her knees and hugging them against herself, a position she felt like she found herself in more and more of late.

It was one of the two conditions Valera Dent had set for her, when the captain had sent her instructions related to her request the very night they'd returned from Ganos. That and the medical drone. Viv had a *single* week of completely unfettered access to a guaranteed training room every night, and her curfew had been suspended for the same amount of time. Viv—as when she'd asked the favor in the first place, standing there in the billowing storm—got the distinct impression Dent hadn't been happy about the permission, but she'd given it just the same. It was the reason she hadn't tried to negotiate when she'd received the instructions.

But what was she supposed to do with just a *week*...?

Viv pulled her legs in more tightly, feeling herself shiver as she did. The pain in her gut had subsided, but just the same she couldn't stop herself from shaking.

She *had* improved, admittedly. Frighteningly so, in fact. She hadn't missed so much as a minute of class combat training *or* the extra hours with Bretz and the other sub-instructors all week, and that combined with five mostly-sleepless nights in a row spent in this very chamber had resulted in *three* of her specs seeing a jump. Her Speed had ranked up first, unsurprisingly, but over the course of the week Cognition *and* Defense had followed. Offense hadn't budged, though, much less her ever-lagging Endurance, and with Growth not having seen even a single increase since assignment Viv suspected

she would need at least three more rank-ups elsewhere before Gemela made the jump overall.

Made the jump... and gave her another shot...

Viv swallowed at that thought, and closed her eyes. She was improving, she told herself. She *was*. Maybe not as fast as she needed—much less as fast as she *wanted*—but she *was* improving.

She took hold of that fact, cupping it like a flame, as she had so many times before all week long. It warmed her, gave her life. Whenever she'd thought she was too tired to keep on, whenever she'd thought the pain was too much, it had brought her back to the promise she'd made herself and her team.

Viv refused to be left behind. She *refused*.

The conviction returned, and with it her shaking stopped. She lifted her head again, taking in the room wall beyond the invisible wall before her. She barely saw it. Just like she barely saw the scars carved in the hexagonal patterns of the floor around her, built up over 2 hours, nor even the drone now returned to where it was always hovering out of the way, 20 feet above the floor or so. Viv was too busy gathering herself.

After all... *had* she actually given it everything, yet...?

“... Dammit,” she muttered, starting to climb back to her feet.

There *was* a place she hadn't ventured. A level she hadn't pushed herself to. It was the reason, actually, that she was so mad at herself, because it had been the *whole point* of asking Valera Dent this extreme favor. It had been the whole point, and yet Viv still hadn't had the guts to make herself do it.

But now she only had one more night left...

Even if the captain went for it, Viv knew she couldn't handle more, either. She'd barely functioned in class all week, she hadn't been able to eat much—and lost what little she'd managed three of the five nights so far—and she suspected the others were

starting to notice, especially Logan. Even setting aside the external factors, though, Viv had to admit to herself that her body and mind were just about at their limit as it was.

No. Tonight and tomorrow. That was all that was left to her. Those last two chances to push herself to the extreme, in a way she didn't know if she'd ever be able to do again.

It was time.

“Oh boy...”

Viv turned, then. Turned to face the projected sparring partner waiting for her in the middle of the field. She couldn't see it, but she knew the symbol “A5” was emblazoned in black on its broad back. She'd started at A0, intending to build up quickly in the first few nights, but the constant shock of A-Ranked attacks had shaken her, had made her lose confidence in herself and in her plan.

She didn't have time for fear anymore, though. She didn't have time for hesitation, or nerves, or even pain.

It was time.

Viv didn't realize she was holding her breath as she opened her frame, pulling up the training field systems menu. The variability of the access Dent had gotten her granted was astonishing, and it had taken Viv the better part of 30 minutes that first night just to calibrate her options to the training level she was going for. She was familiar enough with the system, therefore, to find the rank adjuster for her combat partner relatively quickly, the “A5” already highlighted in red, pleasantly complemented further with a small yellow warning sign hovering above its right corner, displaying a black exclamation mark.

It took everything Viv had to select the adjuster, confirm she wanted to make changes, and start to nudge the rank up.

A6.

A warning flash in red and yellow, and a message displayed over the options menu.

COMBAT DIFFICULTY EXCEEDS RECOMMENDED LEVELS. PLEASE CONFIRM TO PROCEED.

Viv confirmed, and increased it again to A7.

COMBAT DIFFICULTY EXCEEDS RECOMMENDED LEVELS. PLEASE CONFIRM TO PROCEED.

Confirmed. A8.

COMBAT DIFFICULTY EXCEEDS—

Confirmed.

COMBAT DIFFICULTY EXCEEDS—

Confirmed.

And then she was done.

Closing out of her frame, Viv stared across the field, taking in the sparring partner. Nothing visually had changed about the projection—it never did—but just the same she couldn't convince herself there wasn't something different, something off. At A5, the hologram had felt dangerous, had felt like a threat she should have avoided.

At S0, Viv found her whole body telling her she needed to run.

S0...

She started to shake once more, but forced herself not to think about it, not to dwell on the memory of Rei screaming as the blades descended, carving into him again

and again and again. This wasn't that. This wasn't that at all. This was controlled. FDA would end the match, resetting the partner. The drone was there, and would undoubtedly set off a broader alarm in the absolute worst-case scenario. This wasn't the same.

And so Viv held her hands out to either side of her.

“Call.”

Gemela took form in an instant, whole and intact again. The CAD's armor shaped itself around her arms and legs, its thin sword as familiar and comforting in her right hand as the parrying dagger was in her left. She felt better, then, more confident and sure of herself.

It was enough of a lie to get her to trigger the session with a flick of her eyes, confirming it quickly and bringing her weapons up in preparation for the—

“GUUHHHH!” Viv heaved in a breath as she came to face down on the ground. It took a moment to center herself, to figure out where she was, the blandness of the Neutral Zone spinning even in its uniform white. After a second, she slowly became aware of three things.

Firstly, she wasn't sure what had happened. One second she was starting the training session, and the next she was waking up, Gemela returned to her wrists.

Second, everything was fire. Everything hurt, and in a way Viv had *never* experienced. Her chest in particular ached, but even her limbs screamed in protest as she brought one arm up from the floor beside her to feel at her body, wondering if she hadn't *actually* been cut in half.

Third, though...

Third was the blinking notification in the corner of her vision that had Viv's heart leaping as she rushed to open it.

...

Processing combat information.

...

Calculating.

...

Results:

Strength: Severely Lacking

Endurance: Severely Lacking

Speed: Severely Lacking

Cognition: Severely Lacking

Offense: Severely Lacking

Defense: Severely Lacking

Growth: Severely Lacking

...

Checking combat data acquisition.

...

Adequate data acquirement met.

Device initiating adjustments to:

Growth.

...

Processing.

...

Adjustment complete.

Endurance has been upgraded from Rank D4 to D5.

Viv stared, not quite believing her eyes. Growth. *Growth* had increased?? It wasn't unheard of, sure, but it *was* rare. Incredibly so. As far as she knew, even the Users who attained the *highest* ranks only saw two or three Growth bumps over the course of their careers, four if they were *really* lucky. So for it to jump now...

Viv started to smile, but flinched and stopped herself. Holy hell... Even her *face* hurt. She'd been more than sympathetic to Rei's situation the last week, she'd thought, but in retrospect Viv couldn't help but wonder if she hadn't actually been shorting her best friend on credit. She'd taken *one* hit from an S0, while he'd taken countless times more than that.

"You moron..." she muttered, closing the upgrade notification and letting her hand drop away from her chest back to the floor.

Whether she was addressing an absent Rei or herself, though, she wasn't sure.

It took several minutes for the pain to become manageable, for Gemela—undoubtedly working overtime—to start doing its thing. Eventually, though, Viv managed to sit up again, then stand, cursing and wincing in discomfort the entire way up.

And yet despite that, once she'd found her feet, it was towards the center of the training field that she faced again, her mind long since made up.

"Call," she got out through gritted teeth, glaring at the empty-handed grey man standing once more in the middle of space. Gemela came, but this time Viv lifted one finger from the handle of her sword to ready the commencement of the session, refusing to look away from the sparring partner. She would see it move this time, at least. She *would*. If nothing else, she would at least improve that much.

She got her wish. Triggering the fight with a flick of her finger, she did indeed see the grey projection move, see the massive axe begin to manifest in both its hands. She

even caught the start of its body dropping, lowering in preparation of plunging forward at her.

And then all was black again.

No upgrade notification greeted Viv as she woke up the second time, nor the third. Each repetition, too, took longer and longer to recover from, and she'd just told herself she would call it a night and resume the following evening she had left when she came to with another blinking notice in the corner of her frame on the *fourth* try.

...

Processing combat information.

...

Calculating.

...

Results:

Strength: Severely Lacking

Endurance: Severely Lacking

Speed: Severely Lacking

Cognition: Severely Lacking

Offense: Severely Lacking

Defense: Severely Lacking

Growth: Severely Lacking

...

Checking combat data acquisition.

...

Adequate data acquirement met.

Device initiating adjustments to:

Endurance.

...

Processing.

...

Adjustment complete.

Endurance has been upgraded from Rank C0 to C1.

Victory.

Elation coursed through Viv, so visceral and real it actually hurt to experience as she tensed with excitement, every inch of her screaming in protest at this given the battering it had just received. This was it. This was how she would catch up. She pondered, for a moment there on her back, why this kind of brutal training wasn't a regular part of User regimen, but then thought better of it. For one thing she could already tell she'd overdone it, and probably wasn't going to be able to move all weekend, much less *tomorrow*.

For another... For various unvoiced reasons, Viv was starting to suspect that only members of *Firesong* were probably capable of this speed of improvement, torturous though the method was...

Anticipation overruled sense, and Viv ignored the scream of her muscles and bones and joints to climb to her feet and face the sparring partner once more. Managing it, she had to catch herself as she stumbled, her vision spinning, and a second later she found herself blinking blearily at the ground, a curious color lightly splattering the otherwise-white floor.

Was that... blood?

The whirl of the drone confirmed it for her even before Viv tasted iron and brought a hand to her nose, pulling it away to see wet red darkening the edges of her fingers.

“Well that can’t be good...” she grumbled even as the drone atomized the blood before her eyes, her lips tingling as the scanner swept her face too.

But just the same she straightened and faced the grey man once more.

“Call.”

Four more times. It took three more times before Viv awoke to that blinking light she’d been desperately hoping for. It was the only thing that convinced her to open her eyes, in fact, the only thing that really brought her to in the first place. She was gone, now. Far, far gone. She’d stopped being able to feel her hands two attempts ago, and her *ears* had started to bleed too, at the last. It hadn’t stopped her. She’d needed this. More than anything.

She’d needed not to be left behind.

With great effort Viv managed the command, eyes fluttering as she fought to stay present. It opened, blue against the white of the ceiling, and at once she knew this time it was different, more than just an upgrade notification, much more.

So much more, in fact, that as Viv’s gaze traced the text, she gave a weak gurgle that was the best she could manage in the moment. The evolution she’d been after was there. Right there.

But that wasn’t all...

“User-Unique Ability... Assigned,” Viviana Arada croaked into the silence of the room, something metallic bubbling at the corner of her mouth even as she fought the dark that was quickly closing in at the edges of her vision. “End... Endwalker...?”

