

## CHAPTER 41

The trek down to the subbasement 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 when 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 he'd have been bound to get in his current condition. Then again he probably wouldn't have cared. Everything hurt just too damn much. That thought was challenged in turn, however, when *Reese* met them in the north lobby, looking grim and taking Rei in with a nasty sort of frown as they approached. Apparently either Takeshi or the Bishop had summoned him, which might have been some cause for concern under normal circumstance since that left no one to supervise the other students.

But these were anything but normal circumstances.

"Subbasement 3?" was all the Major had asked, looking to Dent for confirmation once they'd were close enough and reaching a hand up to summon them a car when she'd nodded. He 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 concerned. Annoyed seemed more accurate, like the hack and their resulting situation both were not only Rei's fault, but also extremely inconvenient to the Major'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 him 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 surprised by what he thought he *actually* saw there.

Was that... fear?

*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.

In the end, there ended up being only one silver lining to the journey. One *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. She probably could have thrown him over her shoulder and jogged 20 miles 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, sounding just short of giddy. “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 even 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 arched wall that led them out onto the subbasement 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 subbasement space like this, devoid of movement and noise. They had always been full whenever he’d stood on the

projection plating before, in class and during warmups 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 hesitated, 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 started under his arm, then nodded without looking at him. Then she eased his weight off her, pausing only as he groaned involuntarily when his legs and spine protested this shift. By the time he was finally on his own to 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 frozen, having even flinched when the rings had appeared. Side by side they stood like that, neither wanting to do anything less in the moment that cross over the boundary, and yet both knowing there was nothing they had to do more.

And Dent read them like a book.

“Reese, join me if you would.”

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 blink as the two officers did this, feeling his heart start to race again.

“We have every assurance from both the Kenneth staff *and* the MIND that there is no danger,” Dent told Rei and Aria gently, facing them now. “You are safe here. You have my word. The Major is an A8 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 have control of the field systems. If there's so much as a *flicker* in the hologram 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, though, 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 she 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 stiffly, one stride after another, to the far circle, where she was about as flexible as steel as she stepped into. From there she spun on her heels to face the rest, face pale and chest rising and falling in an uneven pattern, like she was having trouble breathing.

And despite all that, she managed to give Rei the slightest of smiles.

It was almost enough. Almost.

Viv did the rest.

“Rei.”

Rei started and managed, to turn around, the ache in his body momentarily forgotten by the pain. Viv was right there, having and was looking at 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 moment, 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 with a snarly. “Now is *not the time*.”

Viv paid about as much attention to the Major as she might a spilt 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 got my boot planted up your ass hard enough to—”

“CADET!” Reese almost roared 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 then it was the Major's turn to be cut short, this time by a lifted hand from Dent.

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 he stepped away from Viv and onto the field, tingling from his fingers and toes upward. 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 a “Woah!” of surprise as the circular discretion wall rose up in a solid white ring all around him, Aria, Dent, and Reese. It finished manifesting, and on either side of him Rei thought he saw figures spreading out and easing themselves down to 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. 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 a 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.”

Rei jumped, somehow surprised despite having known the command was coming. As a result, Aria beat him to the punch, speaking clearly into the quite 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 know 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 part 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 into 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 got a second Ability, but if anything head manifestation as a C3 was event 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 know 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 provide 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 been 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 it's kind, what she held in her hand now had Rei taking pause even within the "safety" of the starting circle. The haft has 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 green 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 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.

“Yes, Ward, we're all aware it's impressive, but we'd also rather you didn't keep us waiting all day, Cadet!”

Rei jumped, remembering 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 stop 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 second, but it felt like a hell of a lot longer as Rei witnessed, almost in slow motion, as Shido formed a thousand differently shaped black plates that clicked into perfect place over his body.

His *entire* body...

“Oh, *woah...*” Rei heard himself breathe, eyes wide as he took himself in with nothing short of utter disbelief.

He was a *monster* of black metal and blue vysetrium. The muscles of his abdomen were highlighted as individual 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 suddenly protecting an fatal weakness. It was incredible. Absolutely incredible. And his *claws!* Rei raised an open hand up to the light, marveling at blades that whose vysetrium edge was now wider along ever 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 project to now measuring 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 subbasement ceiling above. He blinked once. Twice. Three times.

*The... display?* he thought slowly, not understand for a long, long moment what he was seeing before him.

It was Dent's quiet hiss that clued 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 standing at the edge of the ring, and blinked again when her figure—cap and all—was abruptly highlight in a narrow band of clean, obvious white. Still not understanding, he looked to Reese, who's stunned looked 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 to the other, sitting in stunned silence above them along the edge of the manifested wall. 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*, for some reason.

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 *more* wild, though, because not only could he see *it's* dimension and impact threat, but also the *total range* the weapon offered Aria around herself in a diameter, which—when Rei looked at this number for a full second or so—*also* took on a dimensional display in the shape of an offset circle that looked centered around her right shoulder.

It was 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 this evolution—but Rei had never heard so much as a hint of a CAD effecting a neuro-optic.

No. There was only one explanation.

And so, hesitantly, Rei lifted slowly both shaking hands to his face.

And touched metal.

“Oh...” he managed weakly, starting to feel around.

A full-face helm. He wasn't sure 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 compounded on and fused, forming a some kind of full-face defense. It didn't cover his entire head—he could still feel his hair above the helm—it encased his mouth, nose, *and* eyes now, and exited around the back of his skull at an equal height.

“Ward. Here.”

Rei started *again*—he was *not* used to being this on edge for *so* many reasons—and 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 the very least tapping into the module's 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 only 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—marveling at the sight of what Shido had become.

Most of his head was encased in a solid black shell, shaped with a slight point to accommodate his nose and with the room he needed to move his jaw in a comfortable enough range to talk. A little white could be spotted here and there as an accent, but the only true distinction in the entirety of the helm was were the two lines of vysetrium—one shorter than the other—that crossed each other 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 stroked down vertically along where the bridge of his nose would be. It reminded him of the armor of some A- or even S-Class Users Rei had seen or made a study of, and wasn't that far of from something like the Lasher's helmet.

*There* was a thought that had Rei almost shaking in his greaves.

“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*.

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 months.

It was 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 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 shook his head. 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 were waiting for him to cave and change his mind.

Then she side.

“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 use some of that Phalanx Endurance right now, I think...”