

DEFINITELY NOT-ANEMIC MORE-IRON PRINCER PRINCE

(Aka: Stormweaver II)

PROLOGUE

PLACEHOLDER
-PLACEHOLDER

Late December, 2468

Astra System – Astra-3 – Sector 9

The Galens Institute

“Simulated Combat Tournaments, more commonly known as ‘SCTs’, were established in the year XXX by the Intersystem Collective Military as means to bolster the ‘ISCM’s’ financial means, and as a way to assure the people of the collective systems of our combative capabilities and strength.” Layton “Catcher” Catchwick was visibly bored as he rested one cheek on his fist, elbow leaning against the back of the red couch he sat on in the living room of the Kane’s dorm suite 304 while he read. “The popularity of the simulated tournaments, however, was unexpectedly explosive, and within a few short decades the events had become the sole source of funding for the military and its

subsidiaries, freeing it of the limitations and red tape of Intersystem Collective's bureaucracy and thereby' yeaaaaah no... I can't do this."

From where she sat opposite the blond-haired Saber, Viviana "Viv" Arada watched Catcher toss the pad he had been reading from—or attempting to read from, at the very least—onto the cushion beside him. The smart-glass of the device shown bright with the condensed blue text of the review material, and while ordinarily she would have found a way to poke fun at her friend at any opportunity, Viv found herself completely sympathetic to his lack of enthusiasm.

She herself, after all, had zoned out about 10 seconds into the reading, mind going numb at the sheer density of the material.

From Viv's left, their third reading companion giggled.

"How you guys manage to keep up with our classes is beyond me, if this is how you study..."

Viv look around, throwing the dark-skinned girl she shared 304's second red couch with a good-natured glare. "Oh come on," she said, lifting her own pad. "School's one thing. At least that's *interesting*. Don't tell me this isn't a different beast, Cashe."

Chancery Cashe, one of the strongest Lancer-Types in the whole of the Galen's Academy, shrugged, her genetically designed purple eyes laughing behind the reading she had chosen to pull up on her NOED—her neuro-optical electronic display. "It's bad, sure, but not much worse than some of the reading we have to do on quantum compression equations for John Markus."

"Yeah, but when we have to do *that*, we usually have Rei around to help us out," Catcher grumbled. He seemed to have completely given up, both arms now resting along the top of his couch, his casual attire consisting of a pair of white pants and blue shirt clashing well with his hair and yellow eyes. As Viv watched, the Saber even slid down in his seat, leaning his head back to grumble at the ceiling. "And this isn't even

worth our time! If I'd known we'd have friggin' *homework* over the break, I wouldn't have stayed!"

"Liar," Viv snorted.

Without looking at her, Catcher shot her two middle fingers, but snorted even as he answered. "Ok yeah, fine. Obviously I wasn't going to pass up Aria's invite. Only way I was going to make it to Sectionals after the shit Dyrk Reese pulled at the Intra-School locked me out individual. But *still*. Is this—" he waved a hand in annoyance at the pad still glowing beside him "—really of any use?"

"Apparently someone thought it was, if it was assigned to us," Cashe offered with another shrug. She leaned back in the couch herself, apparently going back to reading as she spoke. "It can't hurt to review the basics, right?"

Despite her first impression of their suitemate having been a rather poor one, Viv couldn't help but be pleased that the Lancer was keeping up with her and Catcher's banter. For the first half of the year, even after she'd realized the ass she'd made of herself when she'd accused Rei of being the benefactor of nepotism—the same Reidon "Rei" *Ward* who was actually a former government dependent—Cashe had largely kept to herself despite sharing a room with the three of them. While Viv and Rei had assumed the girl just want a huge fan of socializing, it had transpired that the Lancer had actually had a credible chip on her shoulder when she'd arrived at Galens: she'd been an exception to a commonly-held belief that anyone who failed a CAD-assignment exam—the rigorous physical and cognitive test that decided if a military hopeful would receive a Combat Assistance Device—would never pass any other attempt.

Chancery had, but only after spending an extra year of her life training herself into someone the MIND—the AI that oversaw a majority of the Intersystem Collective's and military's infrastructure and day-to-day systems management, including the assignment exams—had deemed worthy enough to not only grant a CAD to, but grant a CAD that had gotten her accepted to the Galens Institute, one of the best military

academies in the entirety of the Astra System. Cashe had carried that mentality over into the first half of their school year, too, and it had earned her an invite to the very same Sectional squad that Viv and Catcher were a part of.

And, in the week since, the girl had opened up, steadily becoming a welcome part of the group Viv, Rei, Catcher, and Aria had formed early on in the year.

Now if only someone else could get his head out of his ass and play nice, Viv thought, eyes flicking unbidden to the notification that lingered red in the top corner of her own NOED frame, indicating a message waiting to be responded to.

“You can’t convince me. If anything, this stuff is just wasting time we could be spending training.”

Catcher and Cashe, it seemed, had continued their conversation through Viv’s distraction, and she returned with a blink to find that the Saber had picked up his pad and was waving it pointedly again.

“What’s it gonna tell us?” he asked rhetorically. “That the ISC has been at war with the archons for hundreds of years? That we encountered them in the Sirius System—the most recent solar system to be explored—and we were getting our ass kicked until the ISCM developed CAD technology? It’s probably going to remind us that CADs grow and develop with time and combat experience, too, and that their wielders—‘Users’, let’s make sure not to forget—have some control in guiding that development depending on the kind of training they undergo.” Catcher made a face. “You might as well be reminding us all that Rei’s CAD is a monster that’s grown more than a score of ranks since we started school while the rest of us have only grown four or five at *most*, that Aria—the Aria Laurent—is the school ace and made it through the Intra-School with about as much difficulty as I have brushing my teeth, and that Viv is the team firecracker and kind of a dunce.”

“Catcher.” Viv narrowed her blue eyes at him and raised a wrist to present one of the shining, purple-and-yellow bands of her CAD threateningly, its silver vysetrium gems

glowing in a trio along the outside the metal. “I don’t care how many days it’s going to get me brigged. One day I *will* call Gemela on you, and I *will* shove her so far up your ass you’ll be able to use her blades as permanent toothpicks.”

In answer, Catcher pretended to be terrified.

“By the MIND, anything but *that!*” Then his face cleared in feigned realization. “Oh wait, I actually don’t have to worry, because this incredibly informative reading—” he pointed dramatically to his pad again “—also reminded me that phantom-called Devices can’t deal permanent damage, and only achieve neural interruption of any part of the body they cut into, and even *that* only for a brief time outside and sanctioned combat Field. Did you know that only *true*-calls are actual physical manifestations of a CAD? Not that it matters since, since we don’t learn how *make* a true-call until our second year.”

Catcher frowned, then, his sarcasm having at some point morphed into genuine annoyance again as he spoken.

“Seriously, though!. We could be learning something valuable. I know some six year olds who don’t need to be reminded that CADs and specifications are rank F to S, and that the six Types are Brawler, Mauler, Saber, Duelist, Lancer, and Phalanx.”

At that, Viv stared pointedly at her friend, waiting. Beside her, she thought she saw Cashe too, blink away her NOED frame to cock an eyebrow at the Saber.

“... What?” Catcher finally asked after a moment, shrinking slightly into the couch under the girls’ paired gaze. “Do I have something on my face?”

“Catcher... There’s *seven* Types of CADs,” Viv said slowly. “Brawler, Mauler, Saber, Duelist, Lancer, Phalanx... and *A-Type*. Something you should deeeefinitely know given that one of your best friends *is* an Atypical.”

“Oh...” Catcher muttered, looking down at his pad again, contemplating it like maybe he *should* have been paying attention to the review material just a little more.

Then, though, he gathered himself with a shake of his head.

“Na, I don’t feel bad about that one. A-Types are super rare. There’s... what... *three* at school here, right?”

“That I know of,” Cashe agreed with a nodded, pulling up her frame again to start reading once more. “Valera Dent, Christopher Lennon, and Ward, yeah.”

“*And* Rei’s CAD wasn’t presenting anything abnormal until like a week ago,” Catcher pressed his advantage, shrugging at Viv. “Until he developed Type Shift, he was basically a Brawler-Type. He was even practicing with the Brawler group in the 1-A class block all last semester, wasn’t he?”

“He was, yeah, but that doesn’t mean you should be skating over the fact that he’s an Atypical.” Viv frowned at her friend. “Maybe this was the exact point of this review... to make sure we *don’t* forget the basics.”

“That or to weed out the weaklings among the three squads via an S-Class *boredom* challenge,” Catcher grumbled, seeming to give in as he picked up his pad had. “But fiiiine. I’ll do the stupid review.” It took him a moment to find his place, but once he had he started reading again aloud. “SCTs are—aside from the privately hosted and sponsored events that are a common form of entertainment among the ISC’s elite—generally divided into four competitive tiers at the professional level. Any ISCM designated ‘pro’ may compete at the Sectional rank of the tournaments—a ‘Sector’ being the subsection of any given planet—but from there must qualify in turn for Global competitions, System competitions, and finally *Intersystem* competitions. The collegiate circuits—which include only those military cadets still in training—function much the same, except that qualification for Sectional-levels are decided by a combination of Intra-School tournaments and staff selection. While first-year CAD recipients participate in their own bracket at Sectionals and are limited to competing at that level—with some exceedingly rare exceptions—second- and third-year cadets are combined into one larger bracket, and—”

For about 15 minutes more the three of them took turns passing the responsibility of reading around, finding it easier to keep focused on the dense material by sharing the burden of keeping each other awake rather than trying to get through it all individually. No matter what they did, though, Viv couldn't help but find her train of thought drifting off every minute or so, unable to keep her mind on track when the text *indeed* not only started going into the ranking system of CADs, but also broke down the basics of the specifications that quantified a Device's potential—Strength, Endurance, Speed, and Cognition on the User side, with Offense, Defense, and Growth on the CAD's—and the numerical breakdown of each, not only the F to S like Catcher had joked about, but also the 0-9 value assigned to each spec within every letter tier to further break it down.

By the time that quarter-hour had passed, Viv was pretty sure she was actively *losing* Cognition levels by the minute. She didn't even hear herself automatically reading aloud about the ISC's 42 livable planets across 7 solar systems and 250 billion lives they hosted, and a brief recap of humanity's expansion out of the Sol System into the Milky Way did nothing to help. If anything, the reading seemed to be taking a turn for the worse, delving now into history lessons that Viv would have bet her CAD—Gemela—all three of them had learned in elementary school.

Not half a minute later, though, one passage finally caught her attention enough to focus on as she kept reading.

“For a vast majority of this period of exponential human growth, our spread across the galaxy happened in relative peace. The ISC came into being quickly, building out of the global government Earth developed in the 2100s, with what few conflicts and rebellions did occur handled by local peacekeeping forces or—in extreme circumstances—unmanned global defense systems. It wasn't for another 100 years that the military branch of the Collective was established, and then only with very good

reason: humanity's encountering of the greatest threat our kind has ever faced, the archons of the Sirius System.”

“Neuro-linked, semi-organic lifeforms with electromagnetic shielding capabilities and an alarming ability to adapt to external threats and hostile environments both,” Catcher kept on, and for once he was just as alert as Viv had found herself, “the archons were first encountered by terraforming forces in the early 2200s, and proved themselves violently territorial. What followed was the start of an ongoing conflict that continues to this day, with humanity on one side and the archons' hive-mind on the other. For decades the battle was largely considered a losing fight, mankind striving to contain the extraterrestrial threat, until the research corp of the newly established ISCM developed what turned out to be our ultimate defense weapon: the Combat Assistance Device.” Catcher looked up briefly at Viv. “Finally getting to the good part.”

“Tell me about it,” Viv muttered in agreement, not lifting her eyes from the reading as the Saber continued.

“Partially modeled to imitate aspects of archon abilities, Devices allowed humanity to regain a foothold in the battle, providing a means of assault that had been largely lacking after it was discovered the enemy's shielding abilities nullified all by the most powerful projectile weapons. The discovery—and subsequent years of research into—the material commonly known as ‘vysetrium’ within the Sirius System was key in this development. Capable of storing incalculable amounts of energy due to its unique—and as-of-yet not completely understood—molecular makeup, vysetrium allowed for a multitude of technological advances in the space of half-a-decade, including—but hardly limited to—the quantum calculation and substance compression that allows a User not only to draw and stow on their CAD as needed, but provides the Device with the ability to ‘evolve’ over time, assuming a certain level of information input, which is usually achieved by combat.” Catcher groaned, then. “We jinxed ourselves. This is starting to sound like one of those stupid data dumps out of a bad

fantasy book. Go back to the archons! Why doesn't stuff like this ever delve deeper into *them?*!"

"Either because we still don't know enough about them, or because the ISCM keeps a tight lid on information regarding the war," Viv grumbled, feeling equally dejected.

"Or both." Catcher sighed. "Whatever. I'm over this. Cashe, it's your turn to—"

The blond boy stopped, though, and his snort of amusement had Viv looking from the text at last to frown at him, then around when she saw he wasn't looking at her.

She had to stifle a laugh, therefore, when she realized that Cashe, after teasing them not 20 minutes ago about staying on task, had completely nodded off, her silver hair falling to partially cover her face as her head drifted sideways, eyes closed and breathing deeply.

"Too funny," Catcher grunted, leaning forward and making to reach over the table, obviously intending to wake the girl up.

Viv, though, caught his wrist before he managed it.

"Let her sleep," she said quietly. "I'm pretty sure she's *still* been doing extra time in the West Center, even though we're training like eight hours a day right now."

"Seriously?" Catcher hissed, yellow eyes going wide. "*Why?* She's proven her point, hasn't she? She qualified *individually* for Sectionals."

"And she failed her assignment test the first year, and probably had to work as hard as Rei has to get to where she is now. Let her sleep."

Catcher shrugged at that, and sat back again as Viv let him go.

"So long as you let me use this as an excuse to call it a day on this freaking studying." Closing out of the reading, he placed his pad on the coffee table that sat between them quietly, returning to looking up at the ceiling again. "Sunday is the only day off we get. I'd rather be doing *anything* else anyway."

“You and me both,” Viv muttered, putting down her own tablet as she willed her eyes not to again drift up to the red notification that still lingered in the top corner of her frame. “Got any ideas?”

Catcher scowled. “Well if Rei and Aria had invited us along to head into the city...”

Viv cocked her head at the boy. “Catcher... They’re out on a *date*. Their *first* date. Do you really want to crash *their first date*?”

At that, the Saber’s attention snapped back downward again so abruptly Viv was sure he’d accidentally triggered his Speed spec.

“Wait... *What*?!”

Catcher’s mouth was hanging open, and he looked positively dumbfounded at this news.

Viv narrowed her eyes at him. “You didn’t know? Seriously? How could you not know? It’s all Aria’s been talking about all week.”

“Maybe to *you*!” Catcher hissed. “You know as well as I do all it takes to get Aria to turn as red as the Galens griffin is ask her ‘on a scale of 1 to 10, how cute is Rei today?’! I haven’t heard *squat* about this.”

Viv frowned. “Rei didn’t tell you?”

“*No*!” Catcher insisted, apparently a little too loudly, because at Viv’s elbow Cashe twitched, causing both Viv and the Saber to freeze.

After a few seconds the girl seemed to settle again, and Catcher repeated himself more quietly.

“No, he didn’t.” He looked rather put out by this fact. “He said they were going into Castalon, just the two of them, with plans to do some shopping and stuff. Something about dinner, too. Nothing about a *date*, though!”

Viv had to work hard not to roll her eyes. “Catcher... The city? Shopping? Dinner? I’m surprised at you. You’re usually pretty quick on the pickup. That *was* him telling you there were going on a date. *Obviously*.”

Catcher blinked at her for a moment, contemplating.

Then his eyes went wide.

“Ooooh,” he breathed. “*Oooooob!* Yeah, I guess it was!” He paused with a frown, though. “Still, can you blame me? Those two have been dancing around each for like three months now. I was starting to wonder if anything was ever gonna happen.”

“Na,” Viv shook her head, “Rei would have made his move eventually. I’ve told him before: he’s never suffered from a lack of self-confidence, even with his fibro and the surgeries stunting his grown.”

“You could just say the dude is nuts and leave it at that.” Catcher chuckled, leaning back in his chair to look to his right, northward. “Still. Good for him. Good for both of them. I won’t even complain about being left behind, even if I *am* a little jealous they’re getting off the grounds...”

Viv turned to follow the boy’s gaze, then, joining him in looking out the great window of the suite’s living room, an entire wall made of smart-glass that could be turned opaque and double as a monitor for feed-access and NOED control if needed. It was the end of December, and Astra-3’s first real snowfall—late even by the atypical seasons of the terraformed planet—had coated the grounds of the Galens Institute in 6 inches of fine powder the day before. Despite that, the early afternoon was clear with not a cloud in sight, making it easy to distinguish the rapidly trailing lines of flyers and other public and personal transport vehicles that made up the traffic of the sky-lines high, high above them. Barely more than 75 yards from the window the massive, 100-foot stone wall that encircled the Institute in a perfect square could be made out, capped with frost along its top, and beyond that—overtop the tress of the surrounding woodlands that made up the 100-yard buffer between Galens and the city proper—the skyscrapers of Castalon rose like narrow, angular titans. The shortest among them being no less than 400 stories tall—and packed together as they were to surround the school on all sides—Viv not-infrequently got the feeling of looking up out of hole whose sides

were made up of steel and glass. It didn't bother her, of course. The city was beautiful, especially when the buildings caught the light of any decent day, and the sight of the skyline at night was well worth the early shadows it brought to the grounds.

Abruptly, Viv was too envious, and as that feeling settled in her gut, a wicked idea began to form...

"Catcher... Did Rei tell you where they were going? Aria only ever said it was one of the shopping districts."

Catcher blinked and looked around at her. Her enthusiasm for the budding plan must have shown plain on her face, because he gave her an odd look even as he answered. "Yeah...? Easthold Mall. Apparently you guys flew by it on the way into school, and he remembered." As Viv felt herself begin to grin, it was the Saber's turn to narrow his eyes at her. "Ok, I know that look. You're either planning a murder, or you're about to get us in a lot of trouble. Probably both. What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking—" Viv started as she pushed herself up from the couch, careful not to wake a still-dozing Cashe and planning to make for her room to grab as inconspicuous a jacket and hat as she could find "—that if you're half as interested as I am in how the two of them are doing, it might be good to spy—er, *check* on them. You know... As concerned friends, obviously."

She didn't have to wait long for Catcher to process, and an instant later he, too, was on his feet.

"Oh *hell* yes. Count me in." His grin mirrored Viv's evilly. "As a concerned friend, *obviously*."

CHAPTER 1

PLACEHOLDER

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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.

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. “I think it would work 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 a remotely,” Rei answer promptly, keeping up his air of bravado.

Aria laughed, then, the sound more satisfying than any Rei had ever known it 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 laughed. “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 an SCT 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 exclusive to wigs, for those in the mood for a more-drastring 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, feeding off the vibrant populace of Castalon and thriving tourism that was often fed by the Galens Institute and the pro SCTs the school occasionally hosted. The mall took up no less than three of the city’s towering skyscrapers, and comprised of some *11000* different outlets, shops, and foodcourts, many of whom were represented multiple times through 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 me the *rest* of us can.” She had 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, her gaze flicking away again immediately.

“Tease,” she muttered at last, replacing the top again 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 moment, 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—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 thought owned aside from their regulars—Aria had, predictably, put him to shame from the moment they'd met up in the lobby of Kanes a couple of hour 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 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 an 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 different 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. 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 hats 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" distinction of his according to the forums and feeds that followed Intra-School and collegiate level SCTs. They 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, you know? 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 even as she replaced the pink top she'd still be holding onto with a *click*, obviously eager. "Come on!"

"Yeeeah... Not happening," Rei answered with a laugh, catching her by the arm as she made to step past him. "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.

“Ooooo 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, 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 Aria’s elbow. “Like I said, if you think I can afford anything in a fancy place like this—”

“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 so fast he was sure she’d accidentally engaged her Speed. 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, though, 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 Meccah 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 the 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 that had 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 massive, hulking boy with narrow eyes and orange-and-blue hair who could have been a perfect specimen of what someone might have thought a Brawler should *exactly* look like, 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 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 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'd seen 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 hadn't been alone...

It was the flash of green that had 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 even under the loose jacket she was wearing—complimenting a face that stood out even in a world of engineered beauty. She'd hadn't been far when she'd passed by to head into a shop on the right side of the crowded hall they were making their way along, so Jay had 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 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 said, 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, 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 wasn’t too hard to pair 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 “Oooh...” 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 had provided them with, embalmed 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 an infrequent grimace 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 the girl on her own if he got the chance—when the pair of them high-tailed it out

of the store, the girl dragging “Rei” off by the hand like he was some kind of school boy.

“Wow,” Jay snorted in annoyance at last as the two disappeared out into the hall again, already moving to follow, 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 sure about that, 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 notice 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, laughed 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 put on that pink 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 frame. “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 his own NOED 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 ok?”

“Na. 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 narrow, emptier 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 imaging 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-and-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 privately, 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 likely meant 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 other trio “—of the opinion that your friend is in need of better company than yours. In case it wasn't obviously, 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. “Ok, 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 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 relax. 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 Team Battle 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 on his own without much trouble if worst came to worst, 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 with 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.

“Yeah,” 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 had glanced over his shoulder to look between the two of them in obviously 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 date. A *first* date, too, as you keep reminding me.”

Rei couldn’t stop himself chuckling, then. “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, ok? I *really* don’t want to get brigged again.”

“Wait,” the black-haired boy spoke up, sounding suddenly 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 and black uniforms shove through a staring crowd to come storming in their direction. Unbeknownst by any of them, the scene they’d all made had clearly not gone unnoticed by the other shoppers, because whereas the bathroom hallway had completely cleared out, 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—pointing 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—stiffen 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 pointing 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 once he'd 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 fight against that Mauler kid Logan 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 were 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

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACEHOLDER

4 days later

10 years would be gone in a flash.

That was the thought that had Valera Dent so distracted in the moment, 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 trio of colors across her frame.

Ten years cannot be right. Kes’ 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 conservative 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 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 rapid interruption of the rapid-fire argument between the other two parties, 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 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 year, 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 out of time.

There was a pause—one Valera knew was only artificially inserted, given the nature of the conversation, before the 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 applying 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 had definitely been in *worse* spots. In training, in combat, even off the field, he had definitely been in worse spots. Unfortunately, though, that didn't mean his current situation was ideal. Viv was at his back, which was good, and Catcher sounded like he was doing a fair job of crossing blades with 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 Lancer-Type weapon. The carbonized, green-and-yellow steel of the wide, 2-foot blade flashed with a narrow edge of red light as it cut and cleaved at Rei, forcing 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 counter attack.

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, of course, Rei had to admit as he slammed Vademe's next punching thrust aside with the black plate of his left arm even as he twisted to deliver a heavy kick up at Benaly's face, forcing the Brawler to turn his followup 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 complimented 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—*huff*—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 acromionclavicular 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 dodging of the more-dangerous hit.

Absent a limb, now, Rei had a bit more trouble gaining his footing again than he would have liked as he slid across the field. Fortunately for him, though, 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, though, 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 backwards flip that got him another 10 feet of clearance or so. The Brawler came again, 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 an *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, blue lightening 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, lines with wickedly sharp vysetrium. In the same moment, 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 his grey combat suit, and he punched at the Saber's ribs with Shido's functioning claws as his left arm continued to flop useless by his side. Jiang swept the blow aside with a the shorter curved tips of her left hand, trying to claw 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 lagged 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 FDA'd waiting area under the field—was lightening fast, faster even than Rei might have managed. He'd committed to the punch, leaning into it with his right arm, which mean his left was wide open given the Arena-applied limitation. A rainbow-blue, steel-clad shin took him cleanly in the side, 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 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, 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 grunted curse, 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 bloodless 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 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 only a short pause before 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 look over his shoulder into he 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 degree east. Rally to me.”

“Copy,” the answer came promptly, and almost at once Cashe’s form appeared over the edge of a flatter ledge of jutting stone as she leapt clean up and over the lip of the hill before her.

Raising his right had 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 his best friend’s weakest spec, at least by comparison.

“Na,” Rei affirmed, 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 marginally 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.

Even more obvious, though, was it that he didn't like 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 mass.” 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 all came to a steady halt, looking upwards. The moment the Arena made the announcement, the field had started to deform, and almost

at once the blue sky of the windswept plains faded to reveal the geometric, well-lit plating of the stadium's 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 start to drop down as the artificial gravity of the projection field quickly coming into view below began to withdraw.

“Nice!” came a shout from beneath them.

Looking down, Rei saw Catcher jogging the short way across the Arena floor from where he'd been FDA'd. 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 Sandree Kay—their blue-and-red haired Lancer friend from the 1-A class block—Duelist Zain Kadniss, 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 embalmed 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 turned to Aria and the distant group 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 at Sectionals 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 palid as Chancery Cashe’s was dark. “Gotta say: keep it up. 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 CADs, 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 disc 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, massively-broad-shouldered man with a short-cropped beard, standing at ease in the red-on-white combat suit that denoted him as a Galens Academy staff member. *Second Lieutenant* Michael Bretz—the first-year Brawler sub-instructor had received his promotion not longer after joining Phalanx-instructor Catori Imala as an A9-Ranked User—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 finally 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 thirties, Rei would have called her a handsome woman—though Viv liked to use the more simple description of “hot”. She was tall and fit, with her 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 baring, 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 comfortable 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 of 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—my second and third—were still up, so 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 A-Ranked Brawler’s instruction.

“Cadet Jiang,” the man start with a bark, finding Lena Jiang out of the pack behind Vademe. “Care to explain to me what your logic was is 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* minor 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 not 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 to 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 2 more 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 of their own practice time. Rei could admit to a little jealousy. The first years' daily Team-Battle 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 subbasements.

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 lockerroom 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 he 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 up and down as she pulled a pair of skinny jeans 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 on 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 “Iron Lily” in the professional SCTs—being even scarier, but Rei tuned them out. He 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 a ways away, have chosen—as usual—to stay a few paces separate from the group.

Taking a breath, Rei steeled himself, the 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 him about it, sadly—then again, Grant *had* been nothing short of a dick to Rei 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 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 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... 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 voice suddenly 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 shoe. 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, now “—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. She’s right there,*” he hissed out of the corner of his mouth.

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

“For you, maybe,” Rei grumbled, reaching into his open locker to pull 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 *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 the 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 look.

Then Viv’s face brightened.

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

“I was not!” Rei answered 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 avoided his eye by looking at the ceiling, 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 curiously. 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-or-why, the second lieutenant had turned and left again, vanishing in a blink into the wide hall that surrounded the Wargames floor taking up 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 he was—were both smart enough not to miss the other’s 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 something entirely different.

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

Shido. Someone—likely pretty high up the chain at the Institute, 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 school 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, man, 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* 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 forehead.

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, 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

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACEHOLDER

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 separated 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, he *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 6-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.

"It's you're own damn fault, though, isn't it, idiot?" he muttered to himself, angrily tugging the shirt down over 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 sideways. 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 embarrassment. 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 up with a frown to find the sub-instructor standing in full regulars near the locker room entrance.

"Sir?" Ward answered, sounding—rightful, 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 privately, looking around to see Ward exchanging a serious look with Laurent, Catchwick, and Viv. Even Cashe seemed tense despite Sandree Kay 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.

Then again, Reidon Ward wasn't any kind of ordinary student, was he...?

Again Logan felt that feeling of being out of place as Ward and the others had a quick exchange, culminating in the A-Type taking his leave of them quickly. Logan watched him hurry by, staring at the slighter boy 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 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 inserting herself into the group.

He, on the other hand...

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

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...

“Na. 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 as they finished dressing—much less speaking—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 hazel 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’re 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 quite 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 loosing 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, not looking up again even as she spoke. “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 quite, cooler one.

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

“Shit...” Logan got out after a few seconds of silence.

Viv, at last, looked 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 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 pressed on.

“Because Ward reminds me of *him*, ok? 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 this. You *know* this... 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...”

It flashed across his mind again, then. Not the face... Not the smug, taunting face of the man he hated, but the dark outline of a much more slender figure.

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

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

“Promise?”

Taking a breath as he forced the image 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 can 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

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACEHOLDER

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 a planet as a whole.

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

“Son of a *bitch!*” Rei 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 on the light-lit 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 jug 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 grounds yet, and if he didn't watch his footing he was pretty sure he would be presenting himself to whoever had someone 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 loosing 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 he sneakers clean on the carpeted threshold only briefly before stepping inside. Tugging his gloves free to shove them into his pockets, he finally pulled they frost-crustled 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 Galen's griffin, others the familiar clips and stats of past alumni, the recordings identical to those one could find playing in the underworks of the Arena, just on a much larger scale. Just as astounding, too, was the fact that the space was *busy*, with well over some score of officers 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, though, 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 even 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 people nearest to him. Intending as he had been to ask for directions—or maybe even the purpose of his summonings—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 staffs quickly made 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. Good. 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 bringing the wrong cadet up.”

Holding back a frown of curiosity 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 her 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 obviously, 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 *quiet* the first date over the weekend...”

“Ah... Uh...” Rei felt a knot of embarrassment grow in his gut, recalling the incident with Jay Taylor and his entourage again. “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 of 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 to summon them a car. “Though she *did* mention some disappointment about a... pink 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 doors opened silently. “Good for you.” She stepped in and to the side, immediately swiping 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 in 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 the *entirety* of the Galens Institute.

Not sure whether to feel elated or terrified—was it possible to feel 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” 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 one 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 her, working not to walk like he was made of wood.

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 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 Colonel 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 they were probably male, and even that 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 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 one 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 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 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.”

The Colonel’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 glass 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—”

Guest, though, 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-clothed 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 ever 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 Dent’s all at once.

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

“Cadet,” Guest 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 be usually with this sort of thing.”

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

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

“Ueno is my family name,” the woman interrupted 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?”

“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 think?”

“Correct. What about VIZIA? One Peace 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, Cadet,” 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 *poured* 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, even for a cadet. 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. Abruptly, he recalled that he not *only* was in the presence of the Institute’s highest ranked officer, but also the knowingly-dotting 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 had moved to stand along the wall perpendicular to the colonel, and he was the 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 up as she held one hand out and back. “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 had stepped forward so quickly 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 and giving the screen a quick once over "—makes me perfect for a situation like this. An *unprecedented* situation like this, to be exact." Once 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 in a dream 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. We're *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 was 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 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 an offer, much less one who hadn't competed at any level higher than his own school's 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 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 redoubled 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 the gesture, doubly sure as Guest met his eyes intently.

Rei gave 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 dedicating to scouting the SCTs of every system, professional and collegiate both. If anyone had been bothering to watch the Galen’s 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 away far 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 ones who 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 just 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, wishing cadets learned partial-calls earlier than their second year.

His neuroline would have been helpful, in that moment.

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.

10 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 Jasper Ueno 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 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 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 finally lifting his eyes from the pad, 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, predatory cats 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—circumstance 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 the 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 an 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 said with a shrug. “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, beating out anyone else, 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 eye 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 *bull*,” 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, then. “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 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 saw Kent stiffen, 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

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 Abel 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 had opened the message to find the very same contract he’d just—if indirectly—turned down.

“Those are the terms offered. My contact information 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 eye. “That’s a lot of confidence, isn’t it?”

“Says the boy who just turned down a *million* credits a year without so much as blinking,” the fixer answered with a chuckle. Then she grew serious, looking Rei over 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 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 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 again 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 shakily, 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, then. “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 guiltily “... 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, 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... 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 User’s will see in most of their lifetime. Your S-Ranked Growth might not be public 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 for 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 continued.

“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?”

“Ueno? No, but I do know her kind.” It was Rei that the woman addressed as she spoke, though. “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, look 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 to not go rigid at this question. He did, in fact, have a suspicion—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 wasn’t even sure he was right about this nagging inkling, 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 bases 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 were 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 colonel, 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 still hadn't looked away from 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 had 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 were 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

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACEHOLDER

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 controlled 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 robotic 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 start 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 pro on Earth, even at his age Kamiya Hiroto could have trounced the vast majority of the 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 my 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’s 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 mutter admittance, turning to grimace 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 case, though, Jasper suspected it might be both.

“Yes,” she answered simply, carefully to keep her voice even. “I did tell you we were coming on too strong, and you know I wouldn’t say that lightly. It’s not like you go dive 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 in 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 tensing in her seat, and she knew she had, for once, *actually* taken it a step to 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 were 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 bare forms of Castalon's skyscrapers they could just make out through the blizzard, the day seemed to brighten, and Jasper let go of the breath she hadn't realized 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 clear her throat 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 yourself 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 we 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, then. “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 me 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 great, 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 rigid 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 wholey 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. Even fewer will be good.”

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* or 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 know—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 of every product Kamiya might be providing them, now and forever. If they aren't already a customer, then *their* parterres 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 partners—hundreds of partners, even—just for *making* that threat. ATTALIS, Verogoth, Wyre Industries... 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, partnerships, 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 redouble, 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 fire?”

CHAPTER 7

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACEHOLDER

It was Viv who found Rei first.

It had been a gamble, but she wasn’t completely unsurprised when it paid off. Four-an-a-half years spent mostly glued at the hip was enough time to get a good sense of where Rei’s 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 finally had had Viv getting to her feet.

“Idiot’s probably in a huff somewhere,” she’d grumbled over her shoulder as she’d 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 too and from breakfast earlier fortunately having 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 scrunched nose at 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 never been inside, Viv could tell at a glance that the floors were taller, which she imaged was likely to grant 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-hair dummy, maybe—were unlikely to 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 fair corner what looked 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. Sure enough the polished stone of the ceiling above was at *least* 15 yards over her head, and the inside of the space was a clean and spartan as any other building on the Galens grounds, all white marble, steel, and smart-glass. Look

around 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 a group of third years was training. It was harder that it should have been, because the screaming sounds of the clash combining with the shouted feedback of onlookers to ring 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 had 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 a couple inches below 6-feet-tall, which actually put him at 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, though, 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 the beast he was.

“Sir!” Viv offered a sharp greeting to him, still saluting. “Sorry to distract. I didn’t expect to run into you.”

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. 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 or retired SCT's competitors that made up their CAD-Type sub-instructors.

It had made those instructional evening 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 decided *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 on the grounds.”

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 second team training session 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 as she spoke, 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 than one way 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 small 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 had 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 had the balls to try. The girl 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 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 answer with 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 Rice, my girlfriend. She also a third-year Sectionals qualifier, so don’t piss her off.”

“Who’s teasing now?” the girl retorted at once, glaring sidelong at Lennon even as she address Viv. “Call me Dice. I hate Candice. And between you and me—” she leaned

in with one had 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’s be blatant favoritism. And I knew you’d be fine. If Ivanov or Esku didn’t pull you onto their squad, 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, looking a little confused. Then she brighten, catching on. “Oh! Yeah! The white-haired one. Reidon 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 said, 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 my 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 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 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 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 fury 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 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 moment of distraction to be on 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, peeling off the hologram with an “urk!”, he tumbled to the floor to hug at his gut and gasp for air as the Arena made the expected announcement.

“Fatal Damage Accrued.”

At once the field began to depixelate, the form of the B0 woman fading into nothingness as the white of the floor dissipated. Feeling a little bad, Viv pushed herself off the door and started walking around the hand-wide line of silver that marked the edge of the field. Reaching Rei in brief order, she stood over his curled form for a few

seconds, watching his continued fight to reclaim the breath the finishing blow and very obviously stolen from him.

“If I could give some unsolicited, highly-advanced 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 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 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. Only after that did Rei finally climb to his feet, turning to her 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: none-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 indicated 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 slip from 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 Rei didn't answer, still studying the now-drying blood across his raw 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 frowned 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 looked 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, hurdles he'd had to clear, hair-pin turns he'd had to managed, Reidon Ward 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? Not 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’s grew serious, at that. “You’re one to talk. Weren’t you just saying this morning there are some thing 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, and didn’t give him a chance to answer. “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 in Administration?”

Rei nodded unsteadily, looking away again 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 then this...

“Rei... Just tell me what’s go—”

Again, though, Rei interrupted her, but this time it was by finally looking her way again, NOED alive with blue light flashing script across his grey eyes.

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, not realizing she’d said that part out loud.

“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’? How 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—”

She froze, though, finding the number.

“Yeah...” Rei agreed with her silent astonishment. “Yeah...”

Viv had no words for a long moment, staring at the number—the *million dollar 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, maybe higher. There were guarantees of housing as needed, both permanent 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’s 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 more than any *pro* Sectional fighter I know of makes, and promising *S-Ranked* trainers?! My parents looked into 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 a regular trainer.”

“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 so far. It had Viv closing out of the text immediately, studying him intently as she asked the obvious question.

“Suspicious about what, Rei...?”

Rei, though, hesitated again. Viv let him take his pause, this time, guessing they’d finally gotten to whatever it was that had 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 Rei’s 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, Viv?”

“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 gods of lighting, thunder, and storms.”

“Ok...?” Viv said, 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, though, 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 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 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 profiles, 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 of the Corporation. There was a sparing of other information as well set in a brief bio, 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 year old, by the looks of his face—but there was something about the fall of his straight 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 that I exist, Viv...”

CHAPTER 8

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACEHOLDER

“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 booked 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-shoulder 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.

Steeling 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's or Catcher's gaze as they did Dent's or Imala's. When they were within the circle of the waiting cadets, they finally stiffened up into a salute, eyes rising above the officers' heads automatically.

"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 captain 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 a step behind the tall woman until she turned to face 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 reason 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 on 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 him from beyond Dent.

“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 a way out. 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's eyes narrowed a little. 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, 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's and Catcher's gaze following them around the closest edge of the field, but Cashe's 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 he 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 of blue:

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 freshman 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 new 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 coming 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 brawler 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, as the two squads converged on the spot 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 the others, who collectively only cast one or two sidelong glances their way. Still not meeting any eyes, though, the pair of them waited at ease expectantly.

“Cadets, enter the field. We’re going to give Vademe’s group a couple minutes 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—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. 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 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 sideways sheepishly. Sure enough Aria was glaring lightning at him from a few yards to his left, 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 abilities 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 former 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 hope that she would see that he genuinely meant every word of it, which he very much did. “I promise. But now’s *not* the time.”

“Dude, you get dragged off to a mystery meeting with who-knows-who, then go total AFK 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, fists clenched tight by her sides.

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 stiffened, 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 waited 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 silent for a moment, ice-cold words ringing as clear through their NOEDs as they might had the tall woman be standing next to each of them. When no one was dumb enough to answer, she nodded stiffly. "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 their 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 notification hit his frame just before he was about to cave, letting him know he’d gotten a message.

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 worry 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. His response was more firm 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 red, 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 two 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. 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 hold onto 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 the 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 single full moon hanging over the a 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 his NOED. “Come on...”

Their finally ascent halted, starting positions having shifted only slightly so that they found themselves in a deep valley between two steep, sandy slopes. 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 The Galens Institute: Blue Team." The clear voice spoke out of the dark. "Elimination Bout. Combatants... Call."

"Call," Rei and five other voices said out loud, and the night was suddenly ablaze with crimson light.

Shido, just like each of his squadmate's other CADs, had adapted to their team-assigned colors. Instead of the familiar aquamarine-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 bright red. Before him, Aria's typical green was gone as well, and over his shoulder he knew each of the other four—other than Grant, who's vysetrium might on barely have changed shades, if that—would be similarly matched. It was always strange to see, with Rei only just starting to get 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-theme, more red-script appeared in the top left corner of Rei's vision, starting off what would be his in-action 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 whole-heartedly.

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 of flaring light, though, someone bolted by Rei at breakneck speeds, feminine form leaving trails of red across his vision in 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 just caught a glimpse of the look in Viv's eyes as she ripped by, *just* caught a hint of the anger that blazed there against what might have been the faintest glow of red...

If Catcher wanted to be worried about anyone, Vandeme and the others might be more worth praying for, 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 standing over Rei, looking down at his all-but-unrecognizable face, taking in a body so bruised and battered he could barely lift his head from the hospital bed to tell her 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 loops in silence, witnessed as his unyielding spirit had worked its magic behind his grey eyes, as it always did. She'd seen the change, as subtle as it was,

seen the conviction settle back into the 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 expanding 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 blooming fire of *anger* that was all Viv felt, and she didn't care about the linger shouts of her friends as she sped away, nor the sound of someone who could only have been Rei giving chase barely twenty 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 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 incline with every step, finding their grip in the cold, harder-packed earth 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 cold of the night as a new, frigid wind caught in her hair.

She didn't feel it, of course. 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 there were all six of the Vademe's Blue Team set up in a perfect line there below her, their shared attention in all directions but 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 had been picked to be a part of the squad. Indeed, as they moved they were vigilant, Vademe having clearly instructed them to keep their eyes peeled. Unfortunately, though, none of them 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 and 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 bent to 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 other two by the fall of her two squamates.

Viv was on the Lancer in a blink, uncaring about her own open back as she flew at the poor girl with blades flashing.

To her credit, Tethers 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. Unfortunately for her, though, Viv was too quick for the Lancer, ducking under the CAD's glowing blue blade even as she closed the distance. Her sword flashed at the girl's gut, but Tether's 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 intact—and probably her spine—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 external and internal injuries. Still blind to everything else, Viv lunged at her failed opponent, fully expecting to feel three blades take her through the back at any moment.

Instead, though, her sword fell unhindered, and Tethers 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 tensed 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.

Then, though, she registered the blazing roar of red through mirrored flashes of blue before her, 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 and 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 followup 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 back on

the weapons. 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 a 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 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 blurring for some reason again, and partially because they didn’t seem 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 were draining everything she had from the inside out.

Then, though, Aria brought a hand back down to wipe off on 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 wet mascara on Aria’s suit.

Fortunately for her, though, the three standing before her weren’t the only ones alarmed by her state, apparently.

“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 both hands up 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 said again. “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 loud, 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

second 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 ignoring my *every* instruction,” 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 new 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* but 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.”

Imala, though, 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 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, bring 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 this 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 argue 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, Imala 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 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 Captains

maintained her stony silence, brown eyes unflinching as she stood with arms crossed where the observation platformed had deposited her, not having taken so much as a step in their direction.

This is the bed you made, her posture and 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 her sleeve, but Viv barely felt it. She couldn't look away from Dent, couldn't look away from the steady displeasure in the captain's stare that was unlike anything she'd ever seen. She wanted to shout, wanted to scream that she had reason, that she wasn't a loose cannon, but her words seem to fail her again. Even as Rei and Catcher both called her name quietly from her side, 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 out that emptiness.

Avoiding the eyes of the rest of the first years, 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.

“Ooookay... I want someone to tell me what the hell is going on. *Now.*”

It was Cashe who spoke, and Viv supposed she couldn't blame the Lancer from letting a little anger *finally* seep into her words. Of all of them, she was the *only one* without some small fault for what had just happened, and therefore had the most reason to resent being denied most of an afternoon of Team Training. Their squad might have been head and shoulders above Vademe and Martin's teams—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 fighting. They all knew that, with Cashe happening to be particular 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 some... conditions to the contract.”

“Conditions like what?” Cashe apparently couldn’t help herself from asking, looking almost 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 narrowed in 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?”

“None of your business,” 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 image—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 didn’t deny it, nodding slowly. “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.”

“Really? No shit?” Cashe asked sardonically. “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 notice, keeping stuff from the squad isn’t exactly good for our performance.”

Instantly Viv bristled, some of the anger from early that morning rising quick. She half-turned on the boy beside her, intent on letting him have it for the *second* time that day, but for once Catcher beat her to it.

“That’s a little 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 stiffened, 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 he 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 to get out that 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 he’d 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 the Logan’s 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*—blushing??

Before she could make sure she’d seen right, though, Logan 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 feeling 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

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACEHOLDER

“Dude...” Catcher intoned 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 still wore—stared at the feed pulled up on his NOED. Beside him, Aria had been quiet for nearly a full minute, and he didn’t have to look at her to

know she, too, would be taking in the static profile image of Kamiya Hirito 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 SCTs Galens often hosted—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 an massive fish tank that took up a quarter of the entire 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 SCTs fighting. 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 training. It had take 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.

“*Duuuuude...*” Catcher intoned yet again, apparently unable to get out anything more eloquent in the moment even as he closed his frame to stare at Rei clearly, obviously hard hit by the evidence.

“Yeah...” was all Rei could say.

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’s CEO’s bio so many times she appeared to want to commit it to memory.

Finally, at long last, the shock seemed to fade 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 love another 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 stony he wondered how long it would take for the steel 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 again.

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 indignation 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 raised hand. “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 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 shared 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 with a shake of his head.

“Thing is... *I’m* not *Rei.*”

He'd never looked away from Rei the entire time he'd spoke, but now Catcher took him in sharply, more seriously than he might have ever before. Even when he'd told the Saber about his S-Ranked Growth, Rei wasn't sure he'd every 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, obvious interested in his answer—he sighed and nodded slowly.

“Yeah...” he muttered. “A lot, actually.”

“I'll be you know why, too, right?”

Rei grimaced. “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 had 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 realized his gaze had drifted 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 smirked grimly. “Even when Selleck and the other jumped me. My Defense ranked up after that. Plus—” he finally looked around at Aria “—even fighting *you* stopped doing much more 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 *three 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, was that the gap between them had closed substantially. It was mathematically normal 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, 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 the mixing here and there with Viv and Catcher—Rei *should* have gotten more from his fights with Aria.

Which left him—unsurprising—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.” 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 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.

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 ignore the clauses about expenses—he was a student with minimal costs—and medical facilities—he would sell Shido before walking away from the care he'd received from Willem Mayd and Lieutenant Major Ameena Ashton—the *training* aspect of the contract wasn't something he could so easily disregard. If we 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 the 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 out loud 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 Sectionals, Rei suspected he was going to have *very* minimal opportunity to face off against anyone who would strain Shido's learning algorithms 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 arrived at school was painful to contemplate.

And yet—as Catcher *had* rightfully pointed out, Rei acknowledged now—he already had what seemed like the ideal out in his hands...

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, elbows on his knees and 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. “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 evenly. "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 back 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 eye 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 an 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 NDA 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 the Ueno Jasper had *wanted* him to talk about it, had wanted him to ask people.

And had wanted them to tell him right back what the offer 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 suggestions.

“It’s... not a bad idea...” she finally 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, on finger ticking up and down on Rei’s knee while she thought. As she did, Catcher’s gaze drifted down to her hand, staring at it for a second before looking 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 too finally not tripping over each other in embarrassment whenever your brush shoulders or something...”

Rei stiffened, glaring at the Saber, trying to remind Catcher with his eyes that he knew where the boy slept at night. Beside him, he thought he caught a moment of confusion flash across Aria’s face, the girl not following.

Then, all at once, 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 rigid with embarrassment beside him. Across from them, Catcher's smile broadened, and he laughed even as he pushed himself to his feet.

"Yeeeeeah, that's more like it. One of these days, though." He winked at the pair of them.

Then he grew somber one final time.

"Seriously, though, Rei. 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 said quietly, looking like he himself were 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 this 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 back right now, and his face is calling to me."

Rei snorted at that, and nodded again. "Sounds good," he started to get to his feet. "We'll come with. Bugs me that we're missing out on team training, but we can make it up a bit if we—"

Then, though, he stopped, because a hand had taken him by wrist even as he'd made to stand.

Half-turning around, he found Aria not looking at him, eyes on the glowing fish in the back wall of the locker room, her fingers around his arm firm despite her obvious continued embarrassment.

“Yeeeeeah... Maybe you should hang out here for a bit, ” Catcher said, sounding like he were hiding another smile. “Catch up when you can.”

And then, before Rei could answer one way or the other, the Saber was gone, 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 ok?”

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, but her eyes were red, and her expression was one of barely controlled anger. 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 in the girl. “But you didn’t answer me... You ok?”

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 before hand, 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 unanimously 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 the 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? Sorting 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 usually 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 ok 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 little 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 at him.

“Yeah. You *definitely* do.”

CHAPTER 10

The reminder of the week passed without any great excitement or incident, as did the following one. Rei and the rest of Aria's squad were allowed to resume team training the following day, with Dent and Sergeant Major Liam Gross—the first-year Duelist sub-instructor—clearly aware that the six of them had taken the loss of the previous afternoon to heart. 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 an embarrassed announcement from Catcher:

His mother had gotten back to him about the contract.

Obviously mortified, the boy share 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 a 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, every one 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.

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 an Elimination round to cost the squad one of the only two matches they lost the entire week.

Fortunately—or at least Rei thought so, at least—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 coming 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 eek out as much training as they could from the last day of the break, and partially in order 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, too, 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 track 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 being raised from their classmates.

Abuzz, that is, until almost all discussion faded over the 5 or 10 seconds it took for people to notice that they were there.

Rei wasn't surprised, looking around as the four of them reached and started up the steps that bisected to room's hundred-or-so 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 excitingly 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 low 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.

What was stranger, though, was that Rei couldn't bring himself to be as displeased about this fact as he might have been a week or two ago...

"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 quietly. "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 freed 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 the situation.

Catching Warren's gaze briefly as she looked their way, Rei couldn't stop himself from grinning, and was about to wave sarcastically up at the treacherous Brawler when his vision was suddenly blocked by a wide, familiar form.

"Before you say anything: Kay made me *swear* not to ask you about Sectionals, so don't worry about that."

Looking up into the grinning face of the tall 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" Senson, a wide-shouldered Brawler with a shaved head who had arguable been Rei's first friend at school after Viv and Catcher, made a face even as he lower himself down to sit behind them. His cap and bag weren't with him, but Rei knew they would be over by were 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 suite-mates, 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, though—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 not too high above Emily Gisham, the other of 1-A 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 the first 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, he frowned.

“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 were contemplating a whole new reality.

Then he seemed to come back to himself.

“Like Rei was gonna tell you ‘no’, though,” he got out with a dry laugh, looking at Aria again. Then 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 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 quite 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 and yellow-haired, in full black-and-gold 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 teaching podium on the far side of the hall, so he made no further comment as he came to stand before them. With a tap of the lectern it 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 Colonel came alive, and Rei had a 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 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’ stat-dense 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 Wargames 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 Galen’s curriculum that he shot Catcher and Cashe a message that they were all headed to eat before afternoon 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 that was about a third the size of the Arena in the center of campus, each quarter of the building used some sort of invisible zoning tech Rei had yet to complete figure out to host its own unique flora and climate. Whereas the east quadrant—mostly frequented by first years—had been designed after the tropics, with bright colors, palm trees, and a healthy warmth to the air, the *south* section of the structure held a deeper, calmer air. Pines and other evergreen rose above their heads from beds of mose 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 air, too, was cooler, and this despite the fact that their six-person table—secluded in nook the second years who made up a majority of the quarter’s frequenters tended to ignore—sat not 3 feet from the rounded wall of rectangular glass panels that formed the massive dome rising up and over their heads.

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 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 asked with a groan from beside the Lancer and opposite Rei, forkfull 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 cut into 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 leave Sunday, but that does leave them the whole week.”

“Na, it’ll be today,” Catcher chimed in again. “They dropped it on us day one of last semester, and Monday again in the second quarter. I’ll bet they’ll 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 the 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 as the Mauler spoke. 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 participating in their conversation not once but *twice* in a single morning was practically unheard of. Grant 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 partook in. It had admittedly been awkward for the first week of break or so, but they’d gotten used to it eventually, settling on the understanding that the Mauler 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 that chance.

“You think that’ll have that much of an effect?” he asked Grant diplomatically as the Mauler popped half of the rather-larger 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 whole-heartedly 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 his own olive branch to the Mauler, 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 the boy swallowed and answered anyway.

“Definitely.” His response was terse but civil as he started to cut into the large 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 between them all a little confused.

“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 own 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 this time 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.

"Yeah... 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 temper—*owe!*"

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, 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 surprised, but pleased. "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 a little 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 to Easthold yet again 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 feeling about donning the uniform again that morning, and especially hadn't missed being able to pull or 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 they reached the top of the entrance 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 subbasements that extended probably 200 yards beneath the building. One last familiar walk to the shared lockerooms, 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 subbasements—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 small exception. 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 train 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 that he'd experienced whenever he and the others had prepped for Team Battle 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 dropping 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, 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. "Christ she is *hot*..."

"Keep it in your pants, Viv," Rei snorted over his shoulder, earning himself a grunt of ascent from Grant as he did.

Dent and her sub-instructors—their eyes following every arriving student in turn as they entered the chamber—had picked Field 3 to present themselves, as was the chief combat instructor's habit. Despite having seen and spoke to *all* of the staff frequently over the course of the break, the site 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.

Then 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 subbasement after the last of the 1-A stragglers—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 not 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 the 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 this year did more than sit on your asses for the last three weeks. I can assure your twenty-one classmates who will be attending Sectionals with me next week have been doing anything but.”

Rei felt a small knot form in his stomach at these words, some of the nerves coming back as silence 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 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, and sure enough the Bishop finally smiled, apparently satisfied with what she saw.

“Good. 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 on every test 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 woman, then a quick order without looking away from her charges.

“Instructors, the floor is yours!”

On queue, 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 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 your 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 content as the

two of them stood still, the only ones moving in the bustle of the other 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 for 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, elbow, 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 loop half of the field. The only thing that Rei didn’t count was the time, pacing himself deliberately,

pushing himself here only to apply the breaks 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 kick flip 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 up to look skyward, finding the Second Lieutenant obviously struggling to hold back his delight.

"47 discs 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 forgoed 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 that his second and third attempts had gained him and additional 3 discs—the black, circular targets that had disappeared from the Speed & Agility testing field the moment his 15 seconds had been up—that was pushing on *twice* his total score of 26 after the previous quarter's testing! What was more, Sense had only achieved 45 discs, officially marking Rei as the fastest User among among 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 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 that he'd always been friendly with—leaned forward to listen around the boy. “Shido replotted after seeing 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 a 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 C8 and C9...

His Device Growth spec wasn't just accelerated Rei's specification improvement. It had also *additionally* improved his evolution pacing, with a rough calculation indicating he was likely to achieve between 50 and 100 percent more alternations to Shido's manifestations than the average User in his lifetime. And that didn't even count the transition 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 discs: 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 wrap. 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 suppressed the gloating warmth of victory bubbling in his gut. 41 wasn't bad by any means. It wasn't far shy from Sense's 45 and Gisham's 43, 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 had finished his third attempt. 41 wasn't bad, sure...

But a final score of 36 would have had Rei feeling sickly, too.

"You know the drill, cadets!" Bretz shouted the moment the platform had brought him down the projection plating again, vanishing into the black steel before them. "Five minutes of rest and recuperation, then it's time of Offense & Endurance. Any questions?" As always, 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 recover 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—stiffening of Gisham's frame beside him told Rei this was a query they both had been waiting eagerly to get an answer to.

He couldn't blame them, of course. 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 him on this second test...

"'Shift,'" he repeated Sense's offhand abbreviation of his Ability with a laugh, giving himself a moment to contemplate his answer. "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 snorted at that, 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 in with a furrowed brow.

"—we just apply what we learn," Gisham finished, nodding sagely. "Mind you the Defense test is a little different. We can copy you easy 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,” he 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 you’re last Offense & Endurance exam, so we’re going to do a thorough review before he 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 meter floor. “You stand there. Bad guys pop up to the north and south of you. Bad guys need to be FDAed. Bad guys get strong 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 Lieutenants eyes as he pulled something up in his frame. “Your score to beat is first B0 in 4:28.83. Ready?”

“Yes, sir!” the girl announced loud and clear, unsurprisingly eager as she stepped forward. Gisham’s score—which had involved ripping through *twelve* 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, only coming in behind Aria, Grant, Viv, Kay, and a handful of others. Though Rei thought he had a good chance or 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 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 extend from just above her wrists over articulated gauntlets, extending 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 and what had to be a heavy Offense spec, as well as the added bonus of free use of her hands that some Brawler's—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 10 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 pixilated into being, completely monotone grey other than the plain black "F0" Rei knew 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 every 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 3 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 to the Es, then Ds. There she slowed down a bit as the projections gains 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 for 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 here. "The hell are you talking about, cadet? You cut more than 30 seconds off your previous time. You might not have taken on a strong 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 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 the Gisham a grin and two thumbs up, which he hoped would further tell her she'd done better than she thought. He got the disappointment, of course. The easiest measure of improvement in the Offense & Endurance test was what rank of opponent you manage 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, include 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 and Grandcrest Prep when they'd been in high school.

Man he'd hated those days...

“Cadet! Call!”

Bretz expected shout came, and Rei settled into his standard pose, bringing both hand 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 as 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 10 blink into being, ticking to 9 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 C5s and both 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 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 achieved that particular achievement.

His distraction, unfortunately, 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 her 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 bases 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 was 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.

“*Dude*. Could you try *not* to make us look bad in at least *one* test?”

Rei looked around at Gisham as he half knelt, half fell to his circle, chuckling when he found her smirking at him in a dejected sort of way.

“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 over 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 taking in matching breaths of anticipation.

“Cadet. Call.”

“Call,” Rei echoed, but even as Shido's CAD band dissolved from around his wrists, he kept going. “Type Shift. Saber Mode.”

It was lucky that, unlike some other Abilities like Repulsion, Type Shift wasn't dependent on a buildup of electromagnetic energy that naturally accumulated over the course of a fight. It was more like Break Step or Third Eye in this way, drawing instead on the vysetrium that lined the CAD as it settled over Rei, allowing him 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 didn't even have a chance to manifest as 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 “10” 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 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 offensive capabilities and overall endurance, both of which were now markedly improved.

Despite his drop in agility, the Fs fell in shorter order, as did both of the Es and 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 now, 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 crumbled 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 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 Bretz.

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. On the whole, though, the entire experiment was a 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 he'd wrapped his first attempt in roughly 4 and a half minutes, 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—grinned as he plotted.

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 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 as 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 them one after the other 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.

When he was 5 yards from the woman, he leapt, launching himself in an arching blur some 10 feet into the air.

As Rei flew, though, he ground out the words through clenched teeth.

“Type Shift! Saber Mode!”

CHAPTER 12

Shido rippled as it changed with arcing bolts of white electricity, first reclaiming the Brawler's claws, the reforming into the Saber's heavier plating and sword just as Rei slammed into the C5 woman. Having been in midair as the Device had shifted, the drop in Speed didn't immediately effect 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 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 flicked 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 test rules.

Then, though, Bretz announced his score, and Rei couldn't have complained even if he'd wanted to.

"Second B0! 4:28.76! Hell, how about that?"

The Second Lieutenant's genuine surprised—and 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. In the end he wasn't even 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 have demolished 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 had 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 return, 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, evidence by the slower progress his recovery was taking, this time. He breathed, watching the boy rip through the lower ranks of the exam, trying to will 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 wrist.

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 on improvement on your second run, Senson, 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 himself for 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.

"Ok! 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 taking this one 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 take a different approach 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 of them to their respite as 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 Saber... 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 every *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 over her head 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 a 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 continue. “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 to a turn for the safer, with the three of them exchanging suspicions of 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 hydrated—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 to announce the last test, his expression was a bit more grim.

“No jokes on this one, ladies and gentleman,” 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 a standardized test. So... Everyone ready?” For once, he actually paused to take them all in, waiting for the chorus of “Yes, sir!” that came a little more staggered, all of them not expecting to

actually have to reply. When they had, he nodded. “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 under his breath, addressing no one in particular and 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 looked away to shout loud and clear.

“Ok, cadets! Here we go!”

And then the number 5 appeared before Rei’s eyes—mirrored in front the faces of each of the 1-A Brawlers, he knew, and the countdown began.

There had been no shout 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 recall 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 summing 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 shouted “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 way, but they simply didn’t compare to the actually *physical* discomfort of the third and final exam. Using the Arena’s projection technology, the Field steadily ratcheted 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 the three of them an eye roll as they grinned at each other.

What *was* a surprise, on the other hand, was what came immediately next, hinted at as Sense and Gisham both blinked in surprise.

“Ok!” came the Second Liutenants 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, turned. 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 gape, 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 advance 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. His score, 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 snorted, typing out his response—as he had often during Team Battle 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. Mostly. I don't think they're very happy with their performances so far. That 36 disk 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?

I've 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 on everyone's pride, in the end.

The call came a couple minutes later.

“Ok! Up you get! Attempt two in thirty seconds.”

Rei, along with the 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 the man, waiting in silence for the “5” to appear once more. Eventually, it did, and eventually it 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 a hiss of irritation and a sigh of exasperation, and this time Rei thought it smart not to chance so much as *looking* at Sense or Gisham for risk of incurring the sub-instructor'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 started, 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 measure way that spoke to much the same irritation as Bretz was currently suffering.

Rei had to work hard not to laugh 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 the Second Lieutenant 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, explain that—despite whatever protests he might have—she had to prioritize a functional environment for *all* her students, not just him. Give that he had apparently been *screaming* by the end of the first quarter's test—and result of his tendency to fall into himself, leaving the conscious world behind whenever pain threaten 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 silent, focusing on that number, trying to sear it into his mind to give him something to fixate on later.

Unfortunate, "later" turned into "soon" pretty damn quick...

"Third and final go, cadets! Get your asses up and show my what you've got, and hopefully I don't need 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, not looking at the Second Lieutenant or 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 imaging 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 Rei started to suspect something was wrong.

"What the hell?" he muttered to himself. The pain had arrived in the Es as expected, and as well as the awareness of the increasing gravity. As the test slipped into the Ds, though, there had felt like a *definite* jump in discomfort, with Red 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 a little 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 conscious 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.

“C5!”

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 C6 passed, but with the call for “C7!” 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 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, and with his thoughts screaming at him to keep going, *keep going*.

The trouble was... Rei 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, even the subconscious part of Rei that allowed him to free float 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!”

That though, was the moment Rei's body gave in, the moment his willpower shattered. As the test notched up, the burning, screaming pain that encompassed his

whole body seemed almost to redouble, like the acid he had been dunked into had suddenly been shocked with 100,000 volts of electricity. Rei 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.

“Gwahhhh!” he got out, feeling his eyes budge as he at once attempted to drag in a breath and 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 experience 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’s A-ranked Strength was suddenly 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 blow twitches—boarding on thrashing—his arms clenched across his body and his legs kicking.

Then, at last, his chest released, and he got his real breath in in what had to have been several minutes.

“Guuuuuuh!” Rei gasped painfully, taking in one lungful, then another, not seeing Sense or Gisham standing nearby with wide eyes, not seeing Emble and Warren looking

on almost equally as 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 nearly a minute, 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 started, though 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 twitch 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, the first real crack in the Captain's stoicism he'd ever born witness to.

As it was, he was still preoccupied maintaining control of his limbs.

“B3,” Bretz hissed back in a hushed tone. “I mean that's *definitely* high, don't get me wrong, but this? After he climbed from C2 to B0 last quarter, I kind of 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 and Laurent can take you to see Willem Mayd. Is that understand?”

Despite the question at the end, the Captain 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 medical drone approaching, reaching his ears of 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 soften 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 even as 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: Adequate

Cognition: Adequate

Offense: Adequate

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 quite 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, laying 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 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 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, and so it pained him a little to find the woman staring down at him with a frown that was somehow simultaneous all concern and all anger.

Anger... There was that anger again... What the hell was going on?

It didn’t help Rei’s 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 nit 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, and 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 chords 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 by this news. He had 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 loosing 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.

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—probably in this very bed, in fact, judging by the familiar scene of the still-sunlit grounds through the window behind the Colonel—but there was some newness to take in, this time. 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. “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 still on 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 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 moment before bravely lifting one hand to his temple curiously, 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 step 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 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 muffled, obstructed by the glass when she caught sight of him, but at her shout Viv, too looked up, then leapt 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 carrying her words through, probably 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 we 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 recover, 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 Colonel 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 slip 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,” the Colonel 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 later—and a brief flare of light in Guest’s eyes—a notification pinged Rei’s NOED. Looking up at it, he realized that it wasn’t the only notice he had, and without a thought he pulled the menu down in his frame, intending to glance briefly over the previous message before accepting the Colonel’s group invite.

Then, though, his jaw dropped, realizing what it was.

Forgetting all about Guest’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 occasion, but rank ups in everything but Strength and Endurance, and *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 recovery device was removed from his—

“Cadet?”

The fact that the Colonel’s question was easy coming implied it was obvious just by Rei’s expression that something had distracted him—now for probably 20 seconds or so—from the original purpose of pulling up his notifications. Starting, Rei immediately 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 surprised to irritated.

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. I don't know if I've gotten a jump like that from simulations since I was in the Es.*

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, fury still simmering behind her brown eyes.

“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 recall.

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’.” 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. 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 an 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 that man had already—and pretty much *openly*—manipulated the Institute’s systems more than once

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 better in a clear attempt to make up for it all.

But no... Even before anyone answered him, Rei knew just by the looks on all four of the officer's faces 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?"

And then it clicked.

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 also keep it to himself. Looking around at Dent, Mayd, and Ashton, though, 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 ICSM's highest authority—had messed with his exam. The top officers in the military had back-channeled the coded defenses of the Galens parameter test and manipulated it, probably live.

And Rei didn't have to ask why.

It was the second time, now, that Central had reared its head when it came to Rei's placement at Galens, or at least the second time that he was aware of. The first had never been outright confirmed for him, but Maddison Kent had made it clear—through Aria—that the last-minute change-up during the semi-finals of the Intra-School's loser's

bracket had been no coincidence. Given it had ended up pairing Rei against Catcher—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 him in silence.

That, though... That had been one thing. A test. A challenge presented to Rei, probably meant to stress him and identify if he had it in him to do whatever he had to to advance, even if it mean knocking one of his best friends out of qualifying for Sectionals. He'd met that challenge head on, and exceeded it, he suspected.

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, and was about to argue, but decided 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 kinda 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 understand 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 nod, his body tensing up instinctively like some poor woodland mouse in the presence of a wolf several thousand 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 was 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 had briefly been in an uncertain danger. It wasn't any of those things, however.

It was warning.

Central Command was—as the name implied—the primary authority in the ISCM. The Colonel might swing the biggest stick at school—and probably in the entirety of Castalon, as 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 quiet 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. Quiet 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 circumstances, as well as 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’s 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. “First: 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 curfew. Should you require additional supervision for mornings or the like, I am giving Ar—*abem*—that is to say I am giving *Cadet Laurent* permission to reach out to my chief assistant directly to request an instructor.”

“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 *remotely* missed the selection of officers who just so happened to have “volunteered” for those extra hours Rei and the others always spent in East Center in anyway. 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 during Team Training over break, 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* training...

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 were all that outdid you in Speed & Agility—Laquita Martin, Jack Benaly, and Arada—while Laurent was the only one to best your Offense & Endurance score, though Logan Grant wasn't far behind. 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 “unique circumstances”, as Mayd had called them.

Then again... It was doubtful to be worse than actually doing his next parameter testing for all eyes to see.

Fourth in Speed & Agility. *Second* in Offense & Endurance. He'd been expecting something along those lines, sure, but Rei still couldn't help but mentality 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 he spoke up first, apparently keen on making this point absolutely clear to *all of them*, not just Rei. “You are going to lay 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 opened airway and a very sudden lack of breath.

Even as he struggled to catch it again, though, he typed furiously, loosing 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, 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. He went stiff 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 he had absolutely *zero* room to negotiate with 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 SCT *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 wrenching 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 Madison 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 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 take down a 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 come in 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 allowed to visit—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 hid a curl in one 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,” he said quietly, some of that earlier anger returning to his voice. “They pushed you to A1, Ward.”

After letting Laurent, Arada, and Grant in behind the last of them, Valera Dent 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 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 the 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, then:

Oh. That was enjoyable. However, I fail to follow the metaphor.

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.

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 cadets in that room knew it.

And whether or not she wanted it to.

For once, though, she had an target she could aim this particular font of anger at.

“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

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACEHOLDER

“*Reidon DIPS HIP 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-1, 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 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 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 alright.

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 the 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 *dance* if I wanted to, so will you *sit still* and *tell me what you want?*”

That mollified Ward, and after a second of the boy 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 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.

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, 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 short, shallow breaths, putting together the fact that Ward couldn’t expand his ribs enough to inhale all the way. More

concerning, though, was the fact that he 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 at roughly a 60 degrees 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 tract.

"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*, asshole," 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 had no sympathy for him. Even only seeing half her face with her back to him Logan could tell her lips were tight and her forehead was creased with worry. Ward, after second, seemed to give in, because his fingers started moving again. When he was done, he paused, and Logan understood why when the boy's 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 Ward seemed to make his decision and looked to change a couple of settings in

his frame before sending the message out. A second later the notification pinging Logan's neuro-optic right alongside Laurent's 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 after a moment, breaking the pause. “Explain.”

Before Ward could continue, however, Laurent was speaking, her mouth having apparently caught up to her own thoughts.

“A *hole*?! *How*?!” 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 as 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 answering. 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* tes—

Ward made a sound that might have been a snort, and Logan went stiff, the fists already tucked under his crossed arms tightening 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—before responding, refusing to look away from the boy 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.

“Ok...?” 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, though, 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 violet 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 were 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 over Ward beside Laurent, taking him in with narrowed eyes as he tried—and failed—to understand.

Ward nodded slowly.

It sounds like they tapped some kind of back channel 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 Ward’s chest.

Viv made a sound like a wild animal, demanding more information, while Laurent’s blanched cheeks filled suddenly as she, too, finally started to get angry.

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, begrudging 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—?

Then, though, 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, yeah, 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 Ward.

Assuming the boy 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 *very* good chance Ward 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 ok?! How is that *legal?!?*”

Viv's continued protestations finally brought Logan back, though 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 I have to. There's got to be *something* that we can—!”

Ward tried to have them down with both hands, looking a little stricken, but that only earned him the ire of both girls as they turned on him and shouted “Don't. Move!” in perfect unison. He pushed himself back into the angled bed automatically, as though trying to retreat even those couple inches this could earn him, 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 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 swatch 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 *F*s—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—*technically*—it wasn't...

The answer was there, of course. Had *been* there, tapping at Logan's suspicions for months, now. 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 even 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, Cashe 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, because their faces and hair looked particularly windswept.

“Rei!” Catchwick was saying even as he entered, yellow eyes snapping to the bed Ward was lying in while Logan, Laurent, and Viv continued to hover over him. “Sorry! Takeshi wouldn’t let us out of double period, even after we heard that—Oh, *woab!*”

The Saber stopped short 5 feet from the foot of the bed, forcing Cashe to reflexively side-step him with a squack. An instant later, however, she too was gaping at the sight Ward made. The two of them stood like that, frozen for a second, their appearance sudden enough to have even finally cut Laurent’s and Viv’s spiraling anger short.

“Ward...” Cashe hissed, finding her voice first and stepping slowly up to the bed as her purplish 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, when Viv pressed 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 lingering 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 tied to a falling flyer.

“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 an ‘attack’, per se...”

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. *Now.*”

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 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 caught 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 even though he did glance briefly at Logan as he responded.

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.

“A/!?” 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 grew stony. "Yeah..." she said quietly. "I *thought* that was sketchy... Reese said something about 'injuries' requiring the shuffling, but I don't think anyone ever found out who 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 Rei.

"A1..." she said, sounding simultaneously awed and in total disbelief. "That's... That's something else, Ward..."

"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 Ward that Logan was pretty sure she'd hadn't even noticed Catchwick had been speaking. It hung in the silence that followed, Laurent and Viv stiffening on either side of the been, the Saber going rigid with his arms still up.

Nothing could quite freeze over a fire like addressing the elephant in the room.

For a long, 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 were sizing her up, blue eyes so still on her purple-green ones that after a moment the intensity of her own gaze started to collapse.

"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 two tiers lower than any student ever accepted to Galen’s, 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 somethings 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 everyone else has barely 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. “I need to know why you started school in the low *Es*, and half a year later you’re 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, where *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, the room felt like it was holding its breath, the stillness holding before the onslaught of the storm. Viv was still vibrating with indignance, 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 hand 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 long time—for an *eternity*, it felt like—nothing happened. No one moved or spoke. Only eyes shifted from person to person, mostly Catchwick's and Viv's nervous energy manifesting as they looked from Ward to Cashe to Ward and back again. Outside, a small 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 at this. “Not what?”

I'm not the second strongest 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, though, 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 obviously 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 deeper, 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 paused. After a second he looked around, meeting Laurent’s, Viv’s, 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, though, Laurent stopped her with a word.

“Wait.”

Sure enough, Ward was still typing.

I trust you, too. I do. Both of you. 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 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 promise. “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, narrowed and deadly serious.

After a second, Logan let out a low snort.

“So you did hear me?” he grunted.

Ward nodded.

“Hear what?” Cashe asked quickly, looking between them with wide eyes. “Hear what? What's ‘the right track?’”

Before he answered, Logan watched Ward a moment longer, waiting.

The nod was almost imperceptible.

He looked 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 rank 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 said with a frown, looking back to meet Rei's eye again. "But I think that's kind of the point..."

CHAPTER 15

PLACHEHOLDER

-PLACEHOLDER

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 were in a 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 announce 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 time for them to go. Cashe gave a half-hearted protest—Viv offering a more full-throated one at the same time, 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 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 ok,” she whispered, briefly pressing his head into hers. “I’m really glad you’re ok.”

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 could have found his voice, staring after Aria with mouth hanging open even once the door had closed, face on fire until the tech gave a polite cough and muttered something like “Nice to be young...” under his breath.

After Rei had gotten control of himself again, the rest of the afternoon was spent largely in boredom, with even a review of recent top-level SCTs 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 had shifted to do the same as the solar lights dimmed and went out over head.

Unfortunately, on the other hand, sleep wasn't 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 toll on him, and fatigue wasn't any kind of issue. Comfort was more of a problem—an aching had slowly grown in his chest since the removal of the recovery device—and toss and turn as he might he couldn't find a position that kept him from feeling like a someone was slowly pushing a needle 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 bearing 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, too. Rei had been surprised when the massive Mauler had voiced the question—or started, at least—that had been hanging like a sword over his head for half-a-year now, but he supposed he shouldn't have been. A split in the road was coming, Rei knew now, and while he had managed to have 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 metrics 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, either. He had fans, Rei knew—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. “*Damn. It.*”

He didn't even realize they were the first words he'd spoke since waking up.

Lucky 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, and 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 passed—?

“Relax, Ward. Keep moving like that and you'll be coughing up blood again before you even get out of bed.”

Rei turned to find Aameena Ashton walking towards him, the room door closing behind her. Apparently her arrival had been what had woken 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, Cadet. Consider it a lesson. Now—” she pointed at his pillows “—lay 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 that he realized the ache of his injured lung was all but gone. He tensed a little when she palpated under his ribs, the thin fabric of the combat suit no hinderance to the exam, but nothing came of the added pressure, leaving him breathing a low sigh of relief as she nodded in approval and pulled back from him. 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.

“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 to him, 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 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 deflated, recalling with vanishing hope the hard lines of the Bishop’s face as she had told him in *no uncertain terms* was he going to be pushing himself until Thursday. He grumbled something under this 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 to the damp towel thrown at him, and squawked in surprise as 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 as he turned to Ashton with wide eyes.

“Are doctors allowed to throw things at their patients?”

The woman, smirked at him. 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 Ashton kept on before he could put the words together.

"Just be careful, Cadet," 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 parting 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 a 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 other at the mess even as he kicked his legs off the bed and stood, standing up and 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 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 biometric security—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 rippled of light, the opaque white giving way to a metal-like 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 had to shake away a chuckle thinking on the number 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 considered, 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 metal 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* change, opponents would have to be more careful with their attacks, or risk their body-shots getting caught by the new plate of carbonized steel.

“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 to just above 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 flexibility of the joints by flexing and jump, finally even spreading his legs and doubling over to look between 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 and 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, his 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 fled 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 as they reached their usual table in the southern quarter of the arboretum, and even *Grant* looked to be working hard to hold back snicker, something that neither Viv nor Aria bothered to do. Best of all, Cashe—who'd initially been almost as tightly wound as she'd seemed when Rei had first met her—relaxed, and eventually chose to join in on grilling Rei 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.

Afterwards he, Aria, Viv, and Grant parted with Catcher and Cashe as usual, and it was a brisk trek through a cold afternoon to the Arena, then down to the subbasement. 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 miss 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 the gazes. Instead he stayed in careful 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 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's 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 Aria's 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 cause 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 lost because he took them on *solely* in Saber-Mode, but neither without a healthy fight. 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 zones. 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 Friday ended, Rei was feeling largely himself again, and it was with more excitement than anxiety that he heard Dent called 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 and excitable 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 probably gone to prep for whatever class section would be arriving next for training.

"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 gold 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 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, and you might as well stay at Galens in the first place. But regardless—” the captain turned 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 the 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. You will be allowed to wear civies in the hotel the ISCM has put the visiting schools up in, 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 Kenneth Academy in Ganos. 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 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?”

Dent, though, 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 question, 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 curiosity at her cryptic last hint. “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 filled to the brim with curiosity, 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, 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 a used to it.

“Na,” 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. I know they have *some* double-elim rounds to balance the brackets early on, but if they did it for *every* round 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 said, 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 the sprawling common area of Kanes, the first year dormitory.

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.

Team Combat training, fortunately, was a more comfortable affair, familiar after 3 straight weeks of repetition over break. All of them—Aria, Vademe, and Martin's squad 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 her first ever real 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 with 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 the squads, 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 vane 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 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 he should bring to wear around the hotel—but even then he couldn't stop himself from checking the time every couple of minutes or so.

Finally, 0700 came, and Rei 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 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 two bags out along with him before eyeing Rei imploring. “Do me a favor. If Viv tries to make me wear a dress onto the field, kill me.”

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 sick 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, but if you keep reminding me I’m going to aim for you when I vomit up breakfast on the tram,” Cashe muttered queasily.

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 leafless branches 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 the 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 bag 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 bag. “I swear you lot *want* me to throw up...”

Aria turned to her worriedly, 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,” Cashe said, looking even more discomforted.

Rei laughed, dropping his bags 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 couch 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 wicked humor, 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 was he 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."

"Rei!" Aria whirled on him, the squeak 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 that they see what else they'd missed in the city when they got back from Sectionals—he really *was* feeling impervious—when a grumbled 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 as 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, half-pint, 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, had to force himself not to snigger at the daggers Viv was still shooting him, instead getting up and gathering 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 being waved 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 bags up from the floor by the couch before moving like a mechanical doll in the direction of the doors. "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 chased after the pair. Catcher was left looking utterly at a loss as he stood there dumbfounded, toothbrush still in hand, and Rei could only shaking 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 around with a frown, Rei found the boy not looking at him, but even as he wondered what was going on he thought he heard the Mauler 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 massive 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 still avoided his gaze.

"I'll take that list," he got out at last, yet quiet but audible. "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 the light half-inch of white that had built up overnight. Shido's Speed and Cognitions specs snapped into overdrive with a thought, though, and he just managed to keep his feet, stand up again to walk ram-rod straight, like nothing at all had happened. He coughed and—after a couple of seconds hesitation—nodded, working to keep his voice utterly even as he answered.

"Sure, man. I'll send it to you."

Grant nodded once—having granted Rei the dignity of pretending not to see him almost eat snow—muttered a low "Thanks," and then doubled his pace to hurry 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 quietly, watching Grant's broad back, not managing to hide *all* 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 could only nod.

Catcher hesitated, and even in the corner of his eye Rei could tell he was struggling with himself.

“Do we...?” he finally started uncertainly, still watching after Grant as Viv slowed down to fall back and walk beside him ahead of them. “... 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 to him. He was a little disappointed, therefore, when the six of them 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 the stone wall that towering above them. It was so tall in fact, that from where they stood the wall and its banners—depicting the Galens griffin under the 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.

“Laurent, Aria,” Aria answer promptly, have 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 obviously flashed into being across the screen. “Laurent. First-year squad leader. Confirmed. And you're with...” He looked up at Rei and the others, eyes 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 is in 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, not having expected the passing 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 forming a knot in Rei's gut.

“The Major?” the boy grunted darkly after moment. “Don't tell me...”

“*Don't* jinx it,” Viv hissed, going to elbow him in the side only to barely reaching reach above his hip.

“Tooouoo 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 directly.

“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, as though 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. Shouldn’t be long.”

Aria only nodded, eyes undoubtedly set dutifully over the Major’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,” allowing the six of them to take 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 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 long, 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 not indication that he cared.

That was when something struck Rei, watching the Major greet Lennon's squad a fair bit more cordially as 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 quite, 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, tall 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. Like Lennon, too, 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 could have among its cadets.

"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 delegated 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 indignation behind him.

Steady, he willed himself, as he willed his best friend. *It's not worth it.*

He had risen to Rees's baiting before. He wasn't eager 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, though 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 onto the field of an SCT proper, you are in combat, 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 Head 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 time, too. Our ride is here.”

On cue there was a *whoom* of noise, and a single, massive flyer that could have easily held twenty-plus people plus cargo was suddenly descending on them, sending the edges of jackets ripping 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 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 stuff 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 started 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's jaw went slack, Catcher scoffed. "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* the information about 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, then followed 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 issues, 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 on the inside as it seemed from without, and Reese—blessedly—apparently had no other speech to give even after all 18 members of Galen's top-seeded squads had gotten comfortable in their seats. As such, it wasn't another couple of minutes of waiting and quiet conversation amongst themselves before their turn to take off came, 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 the snow with obvious delight and interest, while Rei and Aria exchanged a empathizing 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 tubes and 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 straight through the grand lobby and the milling throng of civilians within—almost all of who stopped to a one to gawk at their very recognizable uniforms and armbands as they went by—and directly to the terminal entrance. They didn't so much as have to pause at security, as 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 as 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 docking platform.

The flyer schedule had clearly been deliberately crafted so that all of the Galen's qualifiers arrived at the station around the same time, because their trio of squads were among the last to arrive. The cadets weren't alone on the platform—there were a number of individuals, groups, and families all staring at them from up and down the way—but two adjoining cars looked to have been set aside for the Institute, because Takeshi and Samsus were already waving their charges on board.

“Come on, all of you,” Reese said with crafted patience, moving them forward.

A minute later they were aboard, with their squad claiming three double rows of seats very near the 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 with 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-grave compartments above their heads and taken a seat. “This is actually happening...”

Rei could relate. Now that they were there, on the tram, with 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. What was more, 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, a little surprised to find 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 neutral 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, each of your squads has been assigned a supervisor. Major Reese, Captain Takeshi, and 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—” Rei didn’t know if he imagined Dent’s eyes glancing 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 coming days.”

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 imagine it, this time. He was *sure* he had seen the Bishop’s eyes flick to him ever so briefly.

“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 claw of your squad and all collectively as a limb of the Institute. You aren’t here to prove you’re the 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 SCTs. 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 a 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 peaked 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 started 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 compliment 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 perpendicular down the length of the shield. The Lancer-Type was much the same with a spear, with the Mauler's shown as a massive, two-handed axe. Duelist and Brawler were a little different, but kept in the same theme, the former shown as 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 of 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 provided 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 one corner of the woman's prosthetic lips twitched up.

“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 SCTs—the Intra-Schools and the Duelists she’d seen there had opened her eyes to them 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...

“Like ‘the Gatecrasher?’” she asked, looking up at him. “And ‘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 get 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 rest of the collective enthusiasm appeared at last to grip her. “I hope our name is cool...”

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 closet wall before taking a nearby seat by Takeshi without another word, leaving the cadets to the growing rumble of their once-again mounting conversation. 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 of the time, Aria, Catcher, Grant, and Cashe were clearly all staring at the clock in the corner of their own frames..

It was 0929. Not even a minute 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. 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 the feet rumbled into true life on an clear 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.

Third, 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.

And lastly, as Rei immediately opened the expected alert, he barely registered Valera Dent turning in her seat ahead of him, looking back to watch—with open interest—as he read.

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, apparently at a 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 said, 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

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACEHOLDER

An alert of an incoming call, and the woman picked up before the second ring had had a chance to chime.

“Speak.”

“It’s done,” came the voice on the other side of the line, distorted through so many different quantum scramblers it was doubtful even the MIND 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. How will I access the system?”

“Remotely. A back-door program will be provided to you in the Arena. The south end woman’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 programed 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 first 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," the woman 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 when the day's fading light caught against the steel and glass of the oblong towers of Ganos, the city growing larger and more distinct as Salista Laurent descended.

CHAPTER 18

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACEHOLDER

"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 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 school's closest 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 before them—the Kenneth Arena was oriented in the same way Galen's 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' B9, *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 incline of the tilted 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 had to 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, but couldn't help but want to tell them it was in vane.

Moroz had reach on Catcher, true, but was where any advantage ended. They'd been going at 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, ruthless and unforgiving. 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 and 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, though, and the Lancer 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, and Catcher was on her before her ass had even 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 Galen’s Institute.”

“YEEEESSS!” 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 YESSSSS!”

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 question.

As one Rei, Aria, Viv, and Cashe all turned to find Grant hurrying around the curve in the railing towards them, the Mauler’s eyes turned towards 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 the smallest of smiles 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 5 minutes before.

Now—with the non-qualifiers rounds wrapping—team Firesong were all in the fight together.

Rei grinned again, watching Catcher disappear into one of the underwork access tunnel 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 time he took the space in. The Kenneth's stadium might be a third the size of the Galens dome—at “only” about 50,000 seats—but what it lacked in comparative size 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 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 were probably Kenneth staff and students—and looked like it based on the pockets 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:

Civilians come to take part in the excitement and action fore 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 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 raptured 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 that 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 and 300 stories tall. For this reason the single massive transport carrier that had flown the collective body of the Institute's nine squads from the local orbital station had touched down directly in front of the towering hotel the ISCM had apparently booked out for all the visiting schools—a great, round pillar of a building called “The Chevaron”—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, soon followed by Christopher Lennon, 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-grave 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 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. The others, 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 squads were obviously staying in their dorms—each consisting of a 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 *Galen’s 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 legend, 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 alternatively 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, 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 ahead, much like Aria right beside him.

They'd settled into 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 involvement 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 who’s 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 to announce that they 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 Intra-School fight recordings—they’d spent a relatively quiet afternoon discussing different tactics and strategies Catcher and Grant 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 limit slots saved for them in the true Sectionals brackets. Cashe had been the one to suggest that the following morning—Monday’s—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 tomorrow 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 multi-team format 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 at 1900. Given it had been just passed 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—but the attention came with some perks, this time. Aside from the buffet dinner being a delicious assortment of Luhman System delicacies Catcher had been particular 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 name 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 table 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 at the front of the group had asked Rei in an overly-pleasant voice. There were four of them—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 it...?” 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?”

“Na,” 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, however, that hadn’t quiet 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 die your hair like Ward’s?”

Rei would have laughed out loud had Catcher not stiffened in the middle of passing the plate as request, his fingers suddenly latched onto the potatoes so firmly Rei 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 hadn't been a single person in that hall that could image a world where the ISCM would allow such asinine theatrics in or around their precious SCTs.

The Marston 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 Galen's 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 Galen's is slipping. How else could—?"

Then, though, 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 choke of laughter as everyone within a 10 foot radius of them went completely still. Even

Catcher had jerked, *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 look down the table.

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 grayish 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 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, first year," 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. "Bigs... 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 roll of laughter from up and down the rest of the Galen's 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. “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 laughed 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 started, Cashe outright yelping in surprised 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.

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 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 in alarm as well.

“I’ll get someone!” Catcher had said hurriedly, stepping over the seating 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 table cloth 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 to corner of the napkin to the cut.

“He ok?” Vademe had asked from Rei’s right, the Lancer and the rest of his “Valormade” leaning over their plates with concern. Turning towards them, Rei saw that even Laquita Martin and her “Red Crown”—sitting beyond Vademe’s group—looked a little worried.

“His *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*.”

There'd come 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 ok, 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 joined them again in Aria's room, assuring Viv in particular that he was fine, that the Major had had him patched by a medical drone, and that the bandage around his palm would have to stay on for a couple days but it wasn't worth fussing over, much less be any issue for fighting. Once they were all satisfied with these promises, they'd spend another hour or so reviewing the last-chance fighters 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 spoke 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 hesitate.

“You were worse, man. 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 stiffened up as soon as the words left his mouth.

Rei had paused again, looking back at the Mauler.

“Get what?”

Grant chewed on his words a moment, eyes shifting around the hall and refusing to meet Rei’s again.

“Get... *you*, I guess?” he’d managed after a moment, 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 coolly, 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 excessive engagement with Rei 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—”

Then, though, the boy had caught himself, and a chagrin flashed 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 massive 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 the boy 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 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.

He’d even only barely kept himself from flinching when Grant spoke.

“I had... a bad experience,” had come the answer, and the effort the boy was putting into tempering his tone audible as he clearly fought, too, to keep meeting Rei’s eye. “A... A *really* bad experience. 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 it rough, Ward."

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 boy, escaping like smoke someone was desperately trying to hold in a clenched fist. That invisible weight, too, seemed to have redouble, because despite the simmering fury Grant looked to be trying not to sag as he continued.

"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 a little jealous of that..."

Rei had waited for the Brawler 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 of fact either.

Grant took another slow breath before answering. "Yeah... I'm working on it."

Rei had considered the boy. 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 take the Mauler completely by surprise. They’d stood there for several long second, 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 away from the Mauler, he’d started for his and Catcher’s room again.

As he’d walked, though, he answered over his shoulder.

“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 important to me, even if I’d rather anything else in the world be true.” 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 deserve to know. Eventually." He'd consider a moment, then added, "Not just Viv."

And with that, Rei had opened the door and stepped into the room 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... Viv... 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, or else worrying about the start of the rounds that morning. The way *Catcher* had done nothing more than slowly sit up at the Major's yell implied that the Saber, too, had been laying awake for a bit, and as they got dressed Rei saw with some concern that the boy was looking green again, possibly even more so than he had as they'd left Galen's 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 looking worse off than he was—and not a few from Galen's 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 most nervous among them.

“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 travel plans and the combat schedule.

As it turned out, the members of Firesong had been right to suspect that 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 the Kenneth Academy Arena, but Catcher and Grant had both received notices of their morning combat schedule. 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 to 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 needing one.

Ironically, this above all else seemed to calm Catcher nerves.

“Good,” he’d said. “They’re underestimating me.”

Rei had clapped him on the back just as Takeshi 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 smirk from Grant.

While there had been no less paparazzi leaving the hotel as there’d been arriving the afternoon before, the chaperons had clearly taken a lesson from their last encounter because 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!" or "Lasher! Sidorov! Over here!" and "It's Laurent and the Prince!", but on the whole it had taken half the time for the *entire* mass of the nine squads 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 squads before 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 that 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 yesterday.

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 turned out, 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 body adapted in humanity's explosive expansion into the systems beyond Sol—was still roughly 80 to 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 had growing more vertical than horizontal. 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.

“Yo000...” 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 some 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 Galen's 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 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 winter 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 that the effect was not the result of a single surface, however, but rather the collective reflection of tens of thousands of a 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 compliment 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 imaged settled, broken into a several hundred pieces as a stain 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 squads 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 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 chaperons. On the contrary, despite the earliness of the hour, Rei hadn't quite *believed* how many 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 realize they'd just witnessed the *Galens* students arrive.

“Ok, now *I'm* getting nervous,” Aria had mumbled 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 as hundreds of eyes followed their quick approach of the Arena.

The inside of the building—fortunately for everyone—had a more-familiar feel to it, and despite the pallet 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 of the entrance. Once in, the place hadn't even feel all that smaller than what he was used to, with the black and red rows rising upward in the 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 ICSM 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 as they faded to nothing along their top edge—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 its 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.

Almost immediately, though, Rei had once *again* been distracted, though to be fair he wasn't the only one.

“Oh!” Cashe whispered even 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 with interest 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 had been marked as well. It had been kind of neat, taking it all in. Only those who'd been clearly designated chaperones—maybe as a distinction in and off itself—had been lacking the emblems, and Rei had himself a fun minute as 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 realize he'd chuckled out loud after noting that Maulers in particular were easy to pick out, usually all shoulders and big hands and 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 south 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 gave Firesong the slightest of resigned grimaces 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."

56 students had straightened against the solid-light supports that the Arena had project behind them as they sat, and though no hands came up to salute, Rei would have bet every credit to his name that all eyes were hovering somewhere over the Bishop's shoulder. She'd had a large pad in one hand, and Reese, Takeshi, and Samsus were all standing around her at ease, but expectant.

Without pause of fanfare, the Captain dove right in, not looking up from the tablet as she'd read.

"Non-qualifiers, you're up first. First fights start at 0900, with brackets divided into fifteen minutes 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 clenched tight in his lap.

Dent had nodded, then looked back to her pad. “After that it will be Harrison at 0930—” a third-year girl Rei though was called “Tabitha” perked up in the front row “—followed by Nomura and Rosario at 0945.” Two second years sitting next to each other had exchanged a look off to Rei’s 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 team formats in the afternoon, so I expect everyone to be cheering themselves hoarse for your schoolmates. Understood?” She hadn’t so much as glance up at them again, but there was shadow of a smile along the line of her mouth as she spoke.

“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 moral with nothing more than well-timed shift in tone.

After that, she’d 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 not easy to worry about—half because he only had one fight against a C2 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 the nothing but the other Galens last-chancers as the only real challenges on the field that morning, none of whom Rei would have put money on if they got matched with Catcher.

15 minutes later, Catcher and Grant had returned with the rest—having changed into their combat suits—with the information that the Kenneth Arena had two subbasements, both which had been partitioned. First years had been designated the locker rooms on SB2, second years SB1, while third year 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—naturally—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 enough 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 bathroom stalls off the locker room 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's voice 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 qualifiers, staff, and spectators, we will remind you that final qualification rounds are not broadcasted, so we recommend manually 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 silence 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 bandaged 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 chose 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 60-yard Team Battle area. The two layered silver circles were mirrored in exactly the same fashion on the far and of the floor, too, forming either end 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 with a smirk. “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 had smiled too, then settle back to wait.

He hadn’t complain 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 Team Battle 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. As soon as 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 even after the field had manifested in 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 double thumbs up before walking 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 name 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 Grant 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 axed down between her eyes even as they'd spun 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, Grants'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 if 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 from one to the other. “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 Sectional simulated combat tournament of this 9th Sector of Astra-3, hosted by Kenneth Academy! The ISCM 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 boom of cheering 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... TEAM NAMES!!”

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, scared 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-sanction academies of Astra-3’s 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 as 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 FIGHTERS!"

This time the noise was practically deafening, even down in the closed-off tunnel, and Rei could actually *feel* 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 twisting 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 the band of one CAD bracelet around his wrist, then the other.

"ON THE SOUTH FIELD—" the announcer's voice boomed over roar of 50,000 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 more and more of late.

"Here we go, people," Aria got out as loud as she could manage—which was barely audible enough to heard over the noise.

Sure enough...

“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, brighting the darkened tunnel in a wash of light, and Aria had pushed herself off the wall to lead them up the incline 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 utterly staggering.

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 weren’t *quite* filled—Rei and Aria had overheard some of the third years talking about how they probably wouldn’t be 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 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 you 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, and the exact right fit to lead the squad.

But then again, he was probably more grateful in the moment because it let him to openly 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 grayer than the rest of his "Boneyard" teammates.

"Looks like someone got a reality check," Cashe muttered 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, the coms system having activated as soon as they'd stepped onto the Arena floor. This was a change compared to their training days—when 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 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 *Lasber* had told me off.”

“Should we leave Biggs for Rei?” Viv joked, and without looking at her Rei could tell she was *definitely* smiling at their opponents, probably even more widely than he was.

Once again, Aria brought them to heel.

“Focus,” she commanded 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’s 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* 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.

Unsurprisingly, he was 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, only verbally pointing out the pair of boys he knew to be the Marston’s 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—” he called out the Maulers next “—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 in 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 the field looks like yet.” She paused, and Rei looked sideways at her to find her brows scrunched together as she thought.

It only took a second for her to make up her mind.

“I say stay flexible. Rei, you and Viv take 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 catching 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* stay 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 an actually chuckle.

“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 laugh 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 than any of them had probably expected from her, but it was also a good plan. 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 they encounter trouble—like the full six-man squad taking a surprise loop around the field. Grant—on his own—didn’t have the speed to regroup in the same fashion and therefore *would* probably go down in a similar situation. Especially with Overclock in his back pocket, though, it wouldn’t be without taking one or two with him—at minimum—resulting in not only maintaining or *improving* the numbers balance, but also probably giving the surviving members of Firesong Boneyard’s team position before he died.

Yeah. It was a good plan.

So when a white disc of light manifested at the south edge of the field, drawing all their attention, 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 disc, she stepped on, then strode to its inner edge to stand at ease. Greyish eyes took Firesong and Boneyard in one after the other, studying them carefully, and for a second Rei wondered what this deliberate 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 First Lieutenant Sandra Neelson, 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 Neelson. “No, ma’am!” he answered clearly. “Ready to go!”

The lieutenant major 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, and she knew how much time they had 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 as the Arena picked them up automatically.

“Combatants, take position.”

Though there was no physical change to the field as of yet, Rei felt his hands tingle as he crossed 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 circle that had appeared at the officer’s words in a line before them. As they placed themselves at the ready, Rei watched Boneyard do the same, Bigg’s 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 switch up, 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 on.

“This is as an official Team Battle event.” The lieutenant major was high above them now, her observation disc 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 frustration. All through the Intra-Schools Major Reese—who had 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 as 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 lieutenant major, Biggs doing the same on the other side of the circle from them. There was a pause after that as Neelson’s eyes flashed with light once last time.

And then the six members of Firesong began to rise into the air, and the field began 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 as they

climbed, knowing 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, he wasn't the only one to be consider thing this factor, apparently.

"Let's get this over with before all of us but Ward freeze our asses off," Grant growled through the coms.

There was an echo of agreement 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 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 in the—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 as a gust pelted him with snow and hail, making it easy to ignore the usual notifications about “reprioritizing all processing to combat functionalities” that blink 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 a pulverized of 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—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 might 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 Cashe’s Device 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 once again.

“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 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 at half-a-sprint and with the other boys of Boneyard in tow, looking ghost-white and muttering something about Christopher *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 as she ran through the snow, willing the flare of hope not to trip her up. Was Boneyard *likely* to win this match? No, of course not. But the odds that had been so skewed 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 Mauler 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 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 basically been drilled into her blood by then.

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 to her. "Nothing."

Gena cursed again, doing the same and starting to retreat in his direction, intending to put them back-to-back. Nothing? How was that possible? 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 backstopping 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. Their CAD glow would have given them away.”

“We haven’t seen anything either,” offered Greg Bock, who had gone down the middle 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 kite them 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. “*Owe!* Shit that *hurt*...” A brief pause and the roughs 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 the strongest Duelist 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 as she closed 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 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 snow 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 her. White. Everything was white. “Shit shit SHIT!”

I 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 fell from her hands as 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 storm. 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 right shoulder was shattered, as one of her knees. Pain erupted through her, and if she’d been able she would have screamed, but her shocked lungs didn’t allow her to.

Fortunately, the end came quick.

Through a vision blurred by what was probably a registered concussion, Gena watched two shapes erupted 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 in a heartbeat, like wolves pouncing on a downed deer. Even unfocused as they

were she recognized Arada at once, and only took a moment more 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 first 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 FDA by the Arena. "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 said with a snort before turning north, in the direction Grant had gone. "Logan? How 'bout you? All good?"

In answer there was only silence, and 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.

“If you can hear us, we’re on our way,” Viv shouted into the wind. “Hold on! We’ll be there in a sec!”

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 more easy to manage as their armored legs and steel-clad toes powered forward with easier purchase.

Then, not 2 seconds later, the coms came on 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 alarming 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. Then:

“Uh... 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, there a blaze of red light cresting the top of hill just in front of them, and they forget 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* for the chest of the figure before Rei when he squawked and turned them away, slamming shoulder-first into *Grant* as Honoris blazed blue around his squadmate. Of course, that meant Rei basically *bounced* right off the hulking boy, 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, getting to his feet. Ignoring the jab, he turned to Grant.

"So..." he said, coming over 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?"

Grant, after all, had a giant *warhammer* in one hand, its massive head in the snow, Honoris' axe resting 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—not too far from the Mauler's usual color in fact.

The point, however, was that it very clearly wasn't *his* hammer...

"Er..." Grant looked down at the alien weapon in his hand, then—for some reason—over his shoulder. "Might be best if you just saw for yourself..."

Rei and Viv exchanged a glance, then together bent to look behind 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 Biggs, looking like he was shivering from both anger and cold, stood at the bottom of a 10-foot 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. It was a bulky looking thing, two shades of green other than the red vysetrium, made marginally more visible by the limited snow dropped by the storm into the gully. 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 nubs of vysetrium—were currently clenched at his sides 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, looking down into the valley.

"Kicked him down there accidentally," Grant answered with something of a shrug, squinting down into the ravine with them. "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 for a second, and Rei would 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 muttered after a second. “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 scrutinizing eyes of tens of thousands of spectators, their match arbiter, *and* the Galens chaperones, even if they couldn’t see them—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 gully 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 Marston’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. “Here we are.”

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—and back again.

“*And?*” he demanded after a second. “What about it?”

“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. “Seems my teammate granted your wish.”

Biggs snarled at this. “You want to *fight*?! Like *this*?! I don’t even have a weapon!”

“And who’s 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 thought maybe the Boneyard squad leader 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. Get your hammer back. 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

enough to 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 Rei 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* 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 one last desperate move to try to take advantage of his lack of CAD and turned back.

Rei's specs, on average, were closer to C3 or C4 than his actual C7 Rank. Add that to the fact that Shido was indeed *not* called around his limbs and his potential in a fight might have been pretty similar to Bigg's with *his* CAD manifested, at least a 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 Marston's had been stitched into the ICSM standard first-year grey. Then, twisting into his deflection and using Biggs' lunge to 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 down-stream, 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 give then 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 2 seconds, spluttering and coughing up 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 attempted 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 tumbled 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 now, outlined in the matching glow of blue light, but he deliberately ignored all of the figures but one.

“Grant!” he called up over the wind he knew was still howling above, hold out a hand in indication.

Grant didn’t hesitate.

Red vysetrium flashed as Bigg’s hammer thundered down into the gulley, kicked off the edge of the cliff above just like it’s 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 he was still drenched, and when he looked back only the haft of the hammer was visible, sticking out of the flow like a crimson beacon.

Moving towards it, Rei spoke again.

“Type Shift: Saber Mode.”

Shido sparked as it responded, short bursts of blue static arching 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 had 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 much 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 steam bed 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 event that he 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's 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 bellowed as he charged 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 turn into a dropping strike of his own. The Shido's vysetrium-line 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 the Bigg's 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 ever again.

In the end, Rei was left standing behind Biggs, his back to the boy, Shido's sword swept out 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 with a deafening roar 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

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACEHOLDER

“Unbelievable behavior from ICSM cadets, much less *representatives of the Galen’s 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 a clean white plasteel and smart-glass, but the walls 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 50 yards up the hall—if he *really* felt the need to yell. Instead, however, he had decided to make a public display of them, facing off with the six members of Firesong 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 looked 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 snarled, 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 from refrain from sticking your nose where it doesn’t—”

“*Major Reese*,” Valera cut him off flatly, determine 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 institute, 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 Reeses' 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 of he could be who he was.”

“They tried to pick a fight,” Cashe added, clearly not intending to leave her teammates hanging even if she still look 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, the 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 three, then four 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 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... Here, it’s not fair. 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. “It’s not fair”? 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 boy’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 twice the threat of any of us but Laurent, and we’ve 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 but on is the kind you only one ticket to. 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 forward and just passed 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 you 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. You wanted to be taken seriously? I’ll bet you got your wish. Hope you don’t regret it in the Wargames this afternoon.”

“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 slowly, 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 early easy 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 with other students at the time?”

Laurent, obviously not expecting the question, blinked before answering 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 Cadet Bigg’s attempt to goad Ward and your team?”

Laurent caught on then, abruptly 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. If needed, I’m sure Cadet Lennon would be willing to offer his account of the interaction. Therefore... Matter settled.”

Reese only glared at her, fists clenched at his side and upper lip twitching. 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 stand off—each of them 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 their attendant 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 coolly, keeping the ice in her smile a moment longer.

An instant later the hall was buzzing and bustling again, everyone moving around or passed 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 half-a-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 started 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 start off at once, Laurent and Ward in the lead, all of them looking a little dazed.

Valera chuckled under her breath. “Firesong.”

The squad stiffed and turned again, instinctively saluting once more.

“Ma’am?” Laurent asked from the back now.

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 she looked suddenly 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.

Rude. Kes’ disgruntlement was obvious even through text.

Hardly. The disagreement was in red. *If anything it was 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 simply 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.

I 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—as Valera had been unable to stop herself from coming to think of the CAD as female—understanding of man 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.*

“Ok fine, it was *partially* ego, sure,” Valera huffed, reaching the top of the stair and stopping there, not stepping out onto the walkway. 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 pair 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 could have sworn she could somehow make out the most powerful AI in human history chuckling in her ear.

CHAPTER 22

“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-boar on them in *public* like that. It had had his blood boiling from the go—and most of the others’, he bet—and the Captain 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 reaction 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 ok?” 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. 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 appearance, 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 red 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 subbasement or another.

Really gonna have to work on getting used that 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 surpassed anticipation as he considered it.

Two rank-ups. Against a weaker team. There was only one factor he could think of that might had 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 lobby to find Aria waiting for him with arms crossed 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 ogling 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 a part.

"Ok. 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 shut 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 after a second, bring 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 it’s 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 stared 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 adding some amusement to her expression. “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 started.

“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 as he cut her off.

Aria stopped talking, at last looking him straight in the face again. For a second she didn’t say anything, taking him in with wide eyes.

“Ookay 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 furrowed her brow 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 snorted.

“I’m wondering if it’s because you 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 facets and second and traded blows, 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 that 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, no longer looking at her as he stared off at nothing while contemplating the implications, nodded slowly.

Yeah... Yeah, he sure as hell *did* know...

You need to get stronger, Valera Dent's words echoed—for the hundredth time—in the back of his head.

And if he was right—if *they* were right, since he couldn't discount Aria helping to convince him of the fact—Rei may just have discovered 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 huff of frustration.

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 subbasement'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 sidelong 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 massive, underground 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 even as they turned the corner, caught by surprised at the raised voice. Immediately Rei found the officer—a blue-haired Kenneth Academy second lieutenant, going by his shoulder 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 second lieutenant had had the gall to try and ream Firesong—a team from another school—for their actions in the Team Battle, but it was *only* Viv and Grant the officer 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 she’d believed *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 a 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 was out of earshot. “What. Did. You. *Do*?”

Viv, though, seemed surprisingly hesitant to answer. She was red in the face, but expression wasn’t angry or surprised. It was something like...

Embarrassed...?

Suddenly suspicious, Rei turned his attention to Grant, and his theory was immediately confirmed. 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 an *actual* fight where he’d taken on two Users at once 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 keeping moving, Aria. They've already been yelled at, people are staring, and we're gonna have a rap after Reese's stunt upstairs as is. Let's not make another scene...”

Aria looked at a loss for a second or two longer, then threw her hands up before turning away 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 at their heels 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, about to turn and follow the others, and instead held back to watch the girl steadily as he waited.

“Rei... I’m really 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 before—he decided to try to give the girl room to lead the way herself to what she was trying 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 feeling marred by bad memories and a grudge he didn’t think 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, Rei,” 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 as she fought 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 could 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 long way, 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 ways 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, 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 this best friend 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 fibro, 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 eventually started to fidget again, and had to look away.

"There really was no other way things could have gone?" he asked after a bit.

Viv 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 where he was standing. He turned, and Rei locked eyes with the boy. For a second Grant looked taken aback to find him and Viv standing there, clearly in the middle of some kind of discussion that absolutely involved him.

Then the Mauler looked to register the seriousness of the moment, because his face grew dark and after a second he turned away again in favor of approaching Aria, Catcher, and Cashe in a hunched sort of fashion that made Rei feel like the boy had been... ashamed to look him in the eye?

The bell 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—and with a sigh he looked 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 than the frustration he felt at not being given the whole picture.

“Just... *Talk to me* about it next time, ok? 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 week.’? 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 snorted, 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 least we would have *talked about it*. Instead of... dancing this stupid dance for the last couple of months...”

Viv looked more apologetic now. “Yeah... Okay... I know. I know I should have said something. It's just...” She hesitated, 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 just an *inkling* more of whatever was happened 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?”

“Nope.”

She gave a dry laugh, bring her hands up in defeat. “Then yeah. I promise.”

Rei smirked.

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.

“*Owe!*” Viv yelped, leaping back in surprise and bring 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. “Yeeeeah ok... Fair enough.”

They shared a grin, then, and after another could second turned without a word and walked in silence through the busy room, 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 good bit of a weight he hadn’t realized was hanging between the two of them had lifted.

They were halfway to the zone Aria and the others had claimed 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. 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

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACEHOLDER

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 almost 50,000 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.

“GOOOO!” Aria bellowed 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!!”

It only made Aria grin.

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 taken on Martin *and* another cadet at the same time and come out on top, after all—but that didn't mean it was going to be easy, and the Duelist had obviously brought her A-game.

It only made Aria, and the rest of Firesong to her right, bellow even louder.

“GOOOOO!”

Rei didn't disappoint.

His Speed really *was* a frightening thing. He and Martin's stats were probably about even with 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 and leg sweeps. Despite the two of them being first years, Aria didn't think she'd heard the crowd get this riled since either Lennon or Sidorov had had take 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 were really made of.

It all made Aria want to laugh 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 Control match—an objective-based fight that could be won by one team capturing and holding various sections of a zone for a certain amount of cumulative time—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 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 Firesong was about to get cut from the multi-team format brackets early on, but *Grant* had ended up saving the day,

growing 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 her preemptively triggered his Overclock Ability. 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 and gone down, with Viv a few seconds later, but in the end Rei and Catcher had been left relatively unharmed against only *half* of the second Deermont squad, Grant and his Overclock having cut down *three* opponents all on his own before he'd been FDA'd 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 and Sidorov's Steelbound and King's Law had done particularly well, with the former promptly knocking out a Kenneth Academy squad who had been one of the stronger teams at the tournament, and the latter coming out on top in a Wargame that had had not one but *two* third-year teams mixed in among the four-squad Elimination bout. In fact, only *one* of Galens' squads 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, which 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 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.

Honestly, Aria wasn't sure even the passing night had done much anything to sober anyone up after the Dueling tournament proper had started that morning.

“Yes! YES!” Viv was shouting beside her, and she glanced sidelong to find the others jumping up and down in excitement, with even Grant having cupped both hands around his mouth to shout 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 approaching, knowing the other would be able to keep pace with any retreat and take advantage of any backpedalling 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 as Rei or Martin struck, block, countered, punched, kicked, ducked, or dodged more than dozen times in 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 defense, 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 telegraph 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 would have shot Rei fifteen feet...

... if his knee hadn't caught her in chin on the way up, of course.

There was a collective "OOOOOOH!" of sympathy from the stands as Martin's head snapped back, Rei letting go of both of Duelist's wrist just as the blow landed. She was lifted several feet off the ground under the impact of the hit, and Aria thought it like the match was already over. Rei, however, clearly wouldn't be holding 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 bubbling surface of the stream, then come to a crashing, tumbling halt up the shallow incline of 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 where the spot she lay crumbled at the stream's edge, the stillness of her body echoed in the relative quite 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 as 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 flood of clapping and howling, and Aria was right there with the rest of them, smacking the railing before her with both hands to show her enthusiasm. Even Benaly and the rest of Red Crown sounded to be applauding, and she glance sidelong to find 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, the 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 Catcher'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 closes 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 groaned and draped herself dramatically over the railing, arms and hair hanging limply.

“North field *again*? At this point it feels like we’re basically doing conditioning laps for combat training...”

Cashe gave a huff 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’s, Catcher’s, 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 on their shoulder, now—were expected for any cadet not actively prepping for anything.

Aria gave the girls a sympathetic half smile at the complaints, glancing down as she did to see where Rei was. 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 school emblems she couldn’t make out easily from where she stood—were walking towards the Dueling field already, it stood to reason he was on their way up to them.

“Rei said he’d shower after you and Catcher are done, since you’re right after him,” Aria told Cashe, Viv and Grant included by proximity. “Let’s grab him at the underwork stairs, then head over.”

The three of them of them nodded, and Aria took the lead, heading east around the walkway while the Arena announced the south field fight as two cadets from Sermont’s and Maston’s respectively. It took 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 Rie was waiting for them as expected at the

top of the stairs, waving as they approached before stepping in behind Aria once they reached him.

“*Great* fight, munchkin!” Viv exclaimed the moment he was with them, 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 little 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 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 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 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 said a minute later, pointing along the bend ahead of them just as they reached the north end of the Arena. Sure enough what looked 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 pressed her forward, then slipped around her back as he took hold of the barrier and pressed his body gently up against hers.

Aria felt a tingly along the back of her neck that had *nothing* to do with Hippolyta’s neuroline, and she looked around at him—as close as the two had *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 looked turned away to pretend to look for... whatever. Anything.

“Just don’t sweat on me to 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 arrived between fights, and it was two more matches before Catcher's turn came up. The Duels were good, and all five of them ended up picking one cadet or another to cheer for—though not always the same one, amusingly—so they were already feeling the thrill again by the time a second year from Kenneth put up a valiant—but sadly fruitless—effort against a third year 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-meter circle.

“He looks nervous again,” she muttered so that only Rei could hear, and he nodded beside her.

“Can you blame him?”

Aria hesitated, then shook her head, 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'd been one of the strongest fighters coming into Sectionals, 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 would have a familiarity with Catcher's fighting style that could only have been bested by another one-handed Saber. That wouldn't have been too problematic, and even the fact that Boone was a C5, a full tier 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 with a slow nod 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 concert flooring manifested beneath Catcher's 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 everywhere 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’s 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.

Boon 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 wall Hippolyta offered Aria.

Catcher was going to have to play this very, *very* carefully.

Then again, they'd all known that, and had been preparing him for it accordingly.

“Combatants,” came the Arena’s voice one more time. “... Fight.”

And with that, Catcher 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, 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 his blade at Boone's eyes over the edge of the Phalanx's shield, then twisted into a sweep of his clawed left hand at his opponent's sword arm, hoping to sneak in enough damage to disarm the cadet.

Not 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, 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 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 born fruit. After what seemed like a thousand vicious hits, Arthus' edge had apparently caught at just the right angle in Boone's chipping shield, because the sword had cleanly sheered 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 told 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...

WHAM!

“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 a moment 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 off 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 still thrown back, arms and legs flailing to find his balance. Catcher followed, bringing Arthus up again and lancing forward, angling to drive the sword straight through Boone's ribcage and ending the fight then and there. The 9th Sector cadet, however, provide atypically nimble for his Type, because he found at least a decent balance just before the blade hit and pivoted, sweeping his shield around to catch Arthus and redirect the plunge by and passed him. Boone's own sword cleaved horizontally in a clean followup, but Catcher was ready for it, diving forward into a roll that had him coming up dirty and socking 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 goood..." Cashe muttered in a worried sort of singsong, her own dark knuckles blanching 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 oooon..."

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 again promptly put on the defensive. He'd adapted to the weight of the imbalanced shield

now, though, and was clearly skilled enough to make due even with the reduce 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 a option the moment it was brought online, having built up though 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

PLACEHOLDER TEXT

-PLACEHOLDER TEXT

Ab fu—!

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

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

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

The result, at the very least, was similar.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

At least for now.

With the advantage distinctly his, Boone changed his strategy. With a 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 morning training.

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

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

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

Catcher was the weak link of team Firesong. He knew that, and he knew it in a way he wasn't sure anyone else on the squad did. He suspected they might have had the thought now and then, but knowing Rei and Viv and Aria it 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, 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 mothers coaching all his since he'd been old enough to swing at a hologram. Catcher had always been the best, or at least *close* to the best, when it came to competitive fighting for as long as he could remember.

And yet, somehow, he'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. 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 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 second for Boone to built it up, too, and with Catcher fight one-handed it seemed unlikely the match would last that long again. He had to find a way to turn the tide now, or it the 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 one-on-one. For that reason Catcher had taken as many notes as they'd collided as he'd accepted actual blows, and as the match wore on—Boone being pressed back a little now, after the hit to the face—a few observations in particular stood out.

Firstly, the Phalanx depended heavily on his shield. Even moreso than most of his CAD-Type. It was a big, heavy thing, and he used it to almost as effectively as he might have by hiding behind a wall.

Seecndly, 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 opening’s Boone allowed to the Phalanx’s shield itself.

If Boone saw the trick, he didn’t know what to make of it, and Catcher suspected after a second or too that the tactic hadn’t registered with his opponent when the cadet found his footing again and came to a fast stand. Immediately the tiny amount of momentum Catcher had gained from the elbow to the boy’s face was lost, and immediately Boone was in his element again, take the assault with relative easy despite the shield missing a chunk of 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 building up as the fight pushed into 2 full minutes, Catcher continued to hack and slash at the shield, dropping Arthus again and again and again on the 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 suspected his time might be shorter than anticipated, if Repulsion was being charged again at an accelerated pace due to his assault.

Whatever. It was too late to shift tactics now.

And then, 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. Catchers sword screamed off the metal after only leaving a mild gauge, but the shield was before him now, perfectly angled to face him straight on. With a 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 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 the instant Repulsion had come on line. 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 *leg go* of Arthus just as the sword being ripped from his fingers would have pulled him off balance.

He saw, then, the instant Boone 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 is 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 crumple of limp limbs as the force of the hit sent him sideways even as his still-moving shield twisted his body around. From there, though, he didn't move for a full second, then two, then three.

Then...

"Fatal Damaged Accrued," the Arena called out. "Winner: Layton Catchwick, the Galens Institute."

Catcher—who'd spun through the kick to finish at at ready stand 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.

Whether it was the same level of enthusiasm for the likes of Rei or Aria's matches earlier in the day, Catcher had no real way of telling, because the state of going from nothing but the sounds of rain and splashing water to the eruption of applause 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, and found 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 the hint of an actual *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 taken 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, as though the man knew what he was thinking. Feeling a little guilty but having no choice, Catcher offered a quick

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

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

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

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

But Catcher had *won*...

For a long time he stood there, taking it in. It was a strange sensation, thinking about it. In a sense, despite all the bravado he'd talked himself up with during the match, Catcher was used to *losing*. He lost to Viv and Cashe most of the time, and 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 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.

And then he froze yet again, because his NOED came alive unbidden.

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

Then every hair on his body stood on end.

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

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

“User Ability... Assigned...?”

CHAPTER 25

PLACEHOLDER TEXT

-PLACEHOLDER TEXT

It was 20 minutes or so before Rei started to get worried that something had happened. Four fights had passed on the north field without Catcher coming up to join them again—include a stellar matchup where Kastro Vademe took out another mid-C-

ranker from Deermont—and as another off-balance pair of a second- and third-year were called up for the fifth match, Rei realized he no longer believe 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...?”

Rei almost laughed as Aria muttered the question. More space had opened up along the railing since Catchers fight, so the five of them had spread out a little more evenly absent the reason—or *excuse*, more like—to squeeze together. He was standing to her left, Cashe on his other side now, and as he looked around at her he found Aria frowning over towards the closest underwork entrance.

“Catcher?” he asked, getting a small nod in answer. “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. Now...”

Aria nodded again, obviously a little worried as she turned to look passed Rei.

“Cashe, you’re up in a bit, right? South field?”

Cashe blinked and glanced around, having been watching the setup of the fight before them intently. “Yeah. Another trek. I was gonna head that way after this match...”

Aria frowned. “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, too, suddenly looked a little concern. “I hadn’t realized... Yeah. I’ll head out. Think he’s still by the ramp?”

Aria shrugged before looking at Rei for his thoughts, but he could only mirror the motion.

“Maybe?” he said. “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 too convinced of the notion. “But I’ll do a loop anyway. Let you know if I find him. Otherwise I’ll see you guys after the fight, and we can go looking together.”

And then 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 with a frown, watching the Lancer depart. “Doesn’t she have a bit before her fight?”

“To check on Catcher,” Rei answer, 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. “Somethings going on. He should have been back by now.”

Viv looked surprised, then her gaze flicked briefly to the corner of her frame, probably checking her clock. Surprise turned to worry, and a second later her NOED was alive as she typed out a message with one hand in the air before her.

“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—smirked 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 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 seemed to register the words.

“... Body pillow?” he repeated slowly, 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 the 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 looked around to find her giving him a venomous smile. “Would the idea of you spoon 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...”

Regrettably, however, 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. It did a good job of doubling as a way to cover most of the blood rushing to his cheeks, 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 glance with Aria before frowning. 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.

Especially after Viv had just messaged him...

Rei decided to shoot back a quick message.

You sure? Catcher, everything ok?

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.

Yeah. 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 were trying to read the impossibly minute letters. “What is it?”

It took a second for Aria to responded, and when she did it was with no less surprise.

“‘Arthus evolved’,” she said, reading of 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, eyebrows lifting.

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.

“Blade Break?!” Rei demanded half an hour later later, jaw slack as he gaped at Catcher. “*Blade Break?! DUDE!*”

“Yeah...” was all the Saber managed to answer with, the disbelief still registering on his face almost 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—helped along by matching glowers from Grant and Viv. Cashe had wrapped her fight some 5 minutes before, having come out on top with relative ease in the unfortunate duel-Galens pairing against Valormade’s Hannah Tethers. She was the only one sitting on the aisle bench, massaging a spot in her side

where the 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 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 have been added on almost exclusively with additional vyesetrium edging that gave the weapon a truly dangerous purple glow.

The physical evolution, though, wasn't even closes to the coolest part.

"Blade Break?" 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 not User Unique, but I don't think there's been more than like a *five hundred* people to get it in the history of the ISCM!"

"376," Catcher mumbled, still staring at the sword he was displaying before him. "I looked it up. I'm number 376..."

"Oh..." Viv said, catching on. "Oh! Holy *shit*, Catcher! That's amazing!"

"More-so than you realize... Blade Break 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 with a faint smirk as he looked at Rei and continued.

“You probably know better than I do, but Blade Break is the ‘condensed Overclock’ one, right?”

“Uh... Yeah.” Rei’s 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 Blade Break Deadskull’s thing?”

Rei was *officially* impressed, now.

“Damn dude, you *do* know your shit...”

Aria coughed politely, then glared between the two of them 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 to him, ceding the floor.

“Deadskull was one of the earlier Intersystem champs, like twenty or thirty years after the SCTs were formally established. He was a axe-type Mauler, like Grant, and his whole thing was Blade Break. 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 Blade Break is basically what Grant said: it’s like a condensed for of Overclock. It’s a LOT shorter—like *half-a-second* usable time max—and it’s charged-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 sudden out of nowhere one hit lands with three times the force. 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 know for timing Blade Break so that it would shred an opponent’s defenses and FDA them then and there.” He forgo welding his pretend sword in favor of bring his hand in a chopping motion at his temple. “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 Saber 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 along 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 immediately, but instead 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. It was another 2 or 3 before 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 looked surprised 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 with interest at Aria's approach from where she'd been sitting not far away. The two captains spoke briefly, then Samsus nodded and Takeshi turn 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 warmups 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 a yard or so placing them in a 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 warmups 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 of 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 of 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 were trying to break down a door, the shield accepting the brunt of the attack with the sharp, hacking sounds of crystalline vysetrium clang off—and sometimes cleaving into—metal.

It took about 40 seconds or so, by Rei's count, a number that would probably improve with practice and further CAD upgrades, not to mention in *real* combat...

“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—one of the spec increases that had jumped 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 grim 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.

“Blade Break!”

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 heard the words 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. Arthus blade again its calmer sheen in his right hand, the Saber had stopped, staring at the girl,

And for *damn* good reason.

“Woah...” Rei, Viv, Cashe, *and* Grant all intoned together, taking in Blade Break’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 amazing 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* that,” 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 his arm.

“There is, but not right this second. Still, I *am* a teacher so...” She looked around at Rei and the other, motioning that they join them. After the four of them and 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 Blade Break currently suffers?”

It was a softball of a question. Rei knew it, as did the others, he was sure. Catcher would have to, had he not been so shell-shocked by his newfound Ability.

Sure enough Aria answered at once, only pausing to recall Hippolyta before approaching even 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 silent voiceless 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 largely with them at last, scrunching his face up as he considered. “She braced for to. 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 into her shield with Laurent knowing what was coming. Imagine what you could have done if she *hadn’t* known.”

“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 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 voiceless 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. “Of the six of you, only Laurent has *some* voiceless commands down. The rest of you need to catch up, at 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 man 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 woman could have hinted at more broadly.

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 their 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 at least four or five 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 as he’s shared the big news with the other teams at dinner, and was all smiles when he’d received whoops and shouts of congratulations from everyone 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 the *third* Ability he'd heard had been earned so far during the tournament, and that was just among the first years, the only group Rei was really paying attention to. A Brawler from Deermont had been assigned Overclock Wednesday morning after he'd lost a Duel to Zain Kadness, apparently. While Catcher's Blade Break was still the chief among the whispers—as it had rightfully been since lunch Tuesday—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 a 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 by which to disprove it—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 in one direction or the other, 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 center point 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 attention 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 than him—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 were 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 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 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 passenger carriers he took back and forth from Astra-3 and Astra-1 on the rare occasions he’d gone back to visit the Estoran

Center, the type of vessel so large its hole drive was power 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 as the hall continued to rotate around him. The three fighters ahead—a Brawler and Lancer from the 105th called Barret and Skylar and 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—the three of them obviously hadn't expected Rei to turn and charge *them*.

His trajectory lined up to launch him passed 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 of the weapon 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 forcing it might have, but it still cleaved through the arm Skylar threw up to protect her face, stopping just short of blinding her as 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 registered his lungs being registered 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 blue lightning, and it was with some satisfaction that Rei saw Skylar's pained glare turn to alarm 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-Ranked, 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 10 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. Reaching 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 the fact, using her spear to likewise guide herself around to face him. “Still haven’t run into anyone, friend or foe. Others don’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 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.

Cashe and Rei didn’t hesitate.

“This way,” the Lancer said, pulling herself down to the... ceiling?—man, Zero-Grave 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 passed 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 site.

Everything—*everything*—was a dying, glorious red.

The projected ship was supposed to have been some kind of the luxury liner, he suspected now. All around him the furniture and related accouterments of a splendid eating hall floated freely, tablecloths forming a hundred crimson swimming ghosts, the tables and a single piano drifting like larger animals through a crimson ocean, the silverware a shining, glimmering snow 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 be 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 seemed 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 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 sphere 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—even moreso 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 arched 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 bloodless 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 lifting her one still-functioning hand to point to a corner of the dining area.

“Aria and Grant,” she managed woozily, looking like she were 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 to 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 two of them 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 dents and scars in the walls, ceiling, and green carpet that couldn't have been part of the field aesthetic offered a rough trail to follow. As a result, it took less than half-a-minute or so to locate the battle, though it came as a surprise when they did.

They'd 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 started, then grabbed the wall and scrambled to 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.

"*Owe,*" he grunted. "Cashe what the h—?"

He stopped when he noticed the Lancer giving him bug eyes. When she was sure they would be quiet, she waved her spear at the corner, motioning for them to have a look. They did so, slipping along the wall quietly to peer around the turn, and Rei had to stop himself from cursing.

There—he counted twice—*nine* opponents were 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 seemed to have managed to wedge themselves into a single tiny room at the very end of the hall, likely what had been the trash or laundry shoot 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 nine 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, clearly thinking on the same track as Rei.

“Yeah, it’s a problem,” Rei said 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 the 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, where several chunks of the doorframe were visibly missing even above the heads of the squad members, highlighted by the yellow glow of Aria and Grant’s crouched, ready forms. “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 Blade Break 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. Haven’t had the chance to test it, and 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.

“Ok, here’s the plan,” he said after a second. “We move quick and we move quiet. Hit them fast. Take down at least one each *on contact*, then move *immediately* to the next.

Even if we manage just that it becomes six 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, her gaze 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 grim smirk.

Then, taking a silent pull of his claws in the wall, he drifted 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 them, 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 through the back of a 105th's head before the girl knew what hit her. Rei and Catcher were only a fraction of a second behind with their blades, FDAing both in one hit, but Rei's aim was a little off with the sword he still wasn't completely used to. The Kenneth Lancer 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 lose.

With momentum on their side, Rei, Catcher, and Cashe tore into the back of the remaining six fighter, 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 alarmed, and as Rei cut down of an Oyekan's Duelist 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, quick 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 passed 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—having *still* not had to trigger Blade Break, in the end—locking up with another Saber from Kenneth briefly before dealing the boy a ringing headbutt to the nose. The Kenneth first year went rigid, and was unable to recover before Catcher pushed off and slammed Arthus forward in his place, taking his opponent through the chest and nailing him to the floor.

There was a second of ringing silence, all of them waiting with baited breath. Logically Rei could account for all eighteen enemy cadets that would have been on the other teams, but in the chaos of it all logic had lost most of its meaning. Despite the

fact, 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 groaned from behind him, 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 shown through like a sunrise as always. “Nice timing, by the way. Thanks for the rescue.”

“Your servant, malady,” Rei answered, sweeping Shido’s claws before him in an exaggerated bow in the girl’s direction as they floated down.

“Nerd.” It was Catcher who cut in, grinning as 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 red in the face 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 were fighting our way back the whole way.” She paused, then, before adding—in a whisper to Viv only Rei thought he'd overheard: “Your man did good. I would have been down inside of 15 seconds without him.”

Viv looked 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 uniformly dejected slump. “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.”

“Oh you sonofa—!”

Rei and Aria laughed again, with Cashe and Grant grinning nearby. The match arbiter dismissed them with a brief congratulations, and they left the field to under the rush of 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 talking at the front the group, 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 rigid, 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 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—looking to be reviewing her dual that morning against a highly capable Saber from Sermont’s Point—while Catcher looked to be taking advantage of the evening hours to pick through some of the school work Sense had been sending everyone to keep up on while they were away. Rei barely saw them through the replayed footage streaming through his NOED, even when both looked up and around at him as 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 once again.

An Ability just as rare as Catcher's Blade Break, Warband was at once just 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 Blade Break 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...? *Rei?*”

Rei blinked and started, his focused pulled through the recording to the room around him again as a finger poked 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 quickly. “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.” By the desk, 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 parents 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 ok—which had left Rei alone with Aria and Catcher.

Finally.

“I’m not sure what’s going exactly, but... Nothing feels off to you guys, about all this?”

“About all what?” Aria asked, sitting a little straighter on the end 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 at least 180 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 in all, but Catcher got Blade Break *two days ago*.” Rei pointed at the Saber, who’d suddenly developed a telling frown. “And now Cashe...” 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, Rei?”

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.

“Blade Break is a rare ability, right? Really rare.”

“Yes. I’m aware. You and Catcher haven’t stopped talking about it for two days now. I’m *definitely* aware at that fact.”

“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 Blade Break, except the chances are probably even more skewed.”

“Okay...” Aria said slowly, sounding like she might be catching on.

“So Catcher gets Blade Break, right? Extremely rare. Extremely power. And then—”

“And then Cashe gets 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 Blade Break—and then pumped for Cashe—that I don’t think it hit me...”

“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.”

“Ok 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 would be?”

She had meant it as a humorous poke, but Rei didn't laugh. He didn't say anything, in fact, choosing instead to just watch Aria, waiting.

His silence seemed to be what made it click.

“Oh.” She said quietly. “*Ooooh*... You think this has something to do with Shido...”

Rei exchanged a look with Catcher, who didn't seem all that surprised by 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 seemed 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 on my mind for a bit now. But setting later 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 its 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 Blade Break? *Then* Warband? A one off? Maybe. But *both*?”

“It *could* still be by chance,” Catcher said, but he didn’t sound remotely convinced of that fact. “*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 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 fun-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 example. 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 Blade Break and Warband, or something of the like?”

Another silence, and Rei could tell, this time, that he had convince Aria too. She was staring at him with wide eyes, and he could feel the tension in her body though the knee she still had resting over his thigh.

“Rei...” she breathed after a moment. “If Shido is *actively* effecting our CADs... That’s on another level. Forget Monday’s spec jump. *This...*” She let the thought hang, her obvious 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 Aira 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 bending 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...”

“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. “Once 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 at Aria, each bending or twisting in a slightly different plausible direction of attack, with the *real* Cashe actually landing a clean hit straight through Aria’s chest to score her first ever FDA against the girl.

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 bed board she’d set her shoulders against.

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

“Something up?”

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

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

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

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

“Viv... What's up?”

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

Concerned. Logan was concerned.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Right up until he spoke again.

“Lemme see the pad, Viv.”

His voice, so stoic and lacking emotion when he spoke to almost anyone else, was gentle, and there was that *damn* concern again. Viv tensed, forgetting to answer for a second too long, because Logan nodded as though something had been confirmed for him before starting to reach for 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... What's up? Something's bugging you. You've been a little quiet all afternoon.”

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

No dice.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

After a couple seconds, she kept on.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It didn’t help.

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

But then she was on her back.

In a blink of speed that ever belayed his size, Grant had taken her wrists in both hands and pulled them up and over her head, forcing her back onto the bed. Her arms were suddenly pinned above her 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—and when Grant bent down to growl into her ear, she could only tremble.

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

She nodded shakily, answering automatically. “Yes.”

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

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

“Do you have an Ability? No. Put like Takeshi said the other day, that’s temporary. Even despite that, if you went up against Vademe, I would put your chance of wining 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 shifted her wrists to pin them with one hand, freeing the other to move down, first over her hair and cheek, then her neck, then finally stopping when it lay, fingers splayed, 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 in the hall. You would have to light someone on fire, I think, to get Aria to even consider replacing you, and if that person was Dyrk Reese or Mateus Selleck I doubt even that would be enough."

Viv had at last regained just a little bit of her self control, though she still didn't fight the pressure of 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 just as abruptly as she'd been pushed to the bed Viv found herself standing on her tiptoes. Logan had slipped the hand that had been around her wrists behind her neck, then taken a fistful of the shirt over her chest with the other and hauled her up as he'd stood, pulling her along with him even as his fingers slid into her hair. Gently he tugged her head back until she was looking into his eyes again, and for the briefest of moments Viv wondered if that was an *actual* red glow blazing in their black depths.

She suspected she might have melted into a hot puddle then and there, had he not continued.

"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 try to nod against the pull his fingers, her breath tight in her chest for *multiple* reasons.

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

Attempting another nod was still all she could manage, and he carefully let go of her hair so that she could actually manage it this time.

“Perfect. The friggin *hear me when I say this*: Forget about Cashe’s Ability. Forget about Catchwick’s. Forget about your bullshit eighteen or four percent 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 stood like that, Viv on her tiptoes staring up at him, Logan wearing nothing but a towel as he held her up largely by the shirt she’d borrowed from him. Eventually the fervor cooled, and he eased her down to stand again, letting both hands drop away from her completely.

“You’re not replaceable, Viv. Not to the Institute, not to me, and not to your friends. Give them some credit, and give yourself some time. 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 that afternoon she managed an actual, real smile.

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

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

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

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

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

"Like I said. Working on it."

Chapter 28

Placeholder Text

-Placeholder Text

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 neutral 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 an abrupt wreck of gauges and shattered hologram in the aftermath of Grant's onslaught.

He'd 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 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 upcoming afternoon Team Battle. They'd been paired of with the 9th Sector Division's "Greyfang" squad, who were led by none other than Andrew Boone, the Phalanx who had 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 eventual ceded the field to a waiting group from the 104th and headed back up to the underworks to wait. There they reviewed some combat strategies they'd come up with—Aria leaning against the wall

next to Rei with her arms against his as the others stood in a tight circle around them—until one of the unaffiliated ISCM officers overseeing Sectionals shouted “Firesong! On deck!”. Aria called back a confirmation, and led the six of them up into the relative darkness of the ramp again, where they spread out on either side of their hall now, as was 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 wait 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 sidelong from beside him once the squad had passed by.

Rei made a face. “You saw that too?”

“Oh yeah,” the Saber grunted. “Dude was eyeballing you like you’d punched 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 can answer, though, the announcer's voice picked up once again from beyond the tunnel, and Sidorov was promptly forgotten.

"Ladies and gentleman, 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... GREYCLAW!"

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 still didn't 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 one 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 promptly pushed off the wall and started headed for the top of the ramp. Half-a-minute later they were out in the light, across the Arena floor to their ready spots, and lined up opposite the Team Battle zone from where Greyclaw 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 ‘Greyclaw’ 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, Greyclaw 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 an 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 Cashe somewhere in the middle of the two groups. Greyclaw had made the same decision—or rather had been given no other choice by the Arena—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, roared 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, screamed in pain and dropping her axe to clutch at her stomach where the claws of Shido's right hand had gutted her as Rei had 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—*are* as bloody as it could get without any *actual* blood—with Greyclaw putting up an impressive fight 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 finished 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 as 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 a 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 less 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 just 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 stiff, her appreciation of the compliments automatic and 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 equally confused—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 far this tournament 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 to call them a car, 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 base Strength had translated to a boost in Cognition, 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 in Brawler Mode 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 winced, and turned to find that Aria had detached herself from the rest of the team—probably noticing his distraction—to come over to him. She was studying his face carefully—as she tended to whenever he zoned out, Rei had realized—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 wooden than it had been a minute before.

Choosing again to ignore the pinch of concern at the girl'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 his 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—Owe! *Owe!* 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 growled 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 site 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 and probably looking, like Rei, over the Major’s head into the open car while students and chaperones from other schools claimed it for themselves. 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 warmdown 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 seemed to realize 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 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 sober ever since Dyrk Reese had torn 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 Rice, the Lasher's girlfriend and a fellow third-year individually 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—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. In the moment it hadn't helped much—though Rei had forced out a muttered thanks to be polite—but looking back he was grateful the Lasher had taken the time and made the point of reminding 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, 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 cadets 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 special 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 thousands of new 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, 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—who herself had been quietly seething since the previous afternoon—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 get 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, when he'd 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 name Ashley Wong, one of only two non-Galen's 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 her, and drove Shido's claws into the back of the girl's skull.

He'd returned the Galens section to roars of approvals from most of the older students, but only quiet compliments from the first years. The rest of Firesong, rightfully, were all somber, while 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 minute or so before Rei realized she was holding onto him as much in an effort to keep *herself* calm, too.

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 his head, 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 stiffly 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 winner of 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 our victor, and best of luck to the defeated! 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 but 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 damaged, 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 Nealson 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 was 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 of them. There was a silence, and Rei didn't even 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 stiff 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 is going on? Rei could only wonder, dumbstruck, as he watched his best friend 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 holy 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 of 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 blade came up, parrying dagger driving forward, sword cutting diagonally down in an angled crosstrike.

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 momentum 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 Vademe 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 to 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 terrorizing as it was mesmerizing. Every movement was sharp and focused, every cut and kick and punch like the calculated assault of machine built to kill. While Rei had seen it the previous afternoon—he cursed, realizing he’d never taken the time to fulfil 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 phrase, 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 jetted 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 for a second time, her back striking the wall full-on with a *crunch* that had many of the 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 rescued her, 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 didn't think he would 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, kept reminding him that Viv's weakest spec 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 have 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.

The fight 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 the mistake that cost her the match.

Whether it was a realization that Vademe was struggling almost as much as her, a desire to get every advantage she could back, 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 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 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 had needed no such encouragement, having already planted his feet and gripping his spear tight in one hand even as the other clutched at his gut.

"Break Step!"

CRACK!

Maybe it was the rank of his Cognition, or maybe it was just his mind playing tricks on him, but Rei watched as though in slow motion as Vademe's vysetrium blazed, and he screamed forward in a streak of 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 a 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 form 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 lifting a 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 sheer will Rei wasn't sure he had ever seen.

Then, though, 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 ripping through her chest, stealing away 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 worries plaguing her when the Mauler wasn't around to poke a smile out of her recent mood. 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 confident voice in her head that had been getting quieter for 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 too 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

PLACEHOLDER TEXT

-PLACEHOLDER TEXT

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 almost been smirking as he'd "kindly" reminded Logan that "Cadet Arada would 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 reminder of their impending Wargames match stoked Logan's hard-wrangled anger for a moment.

And so, seething and worried, he'd return to his own seat with the rest of the squad, consoled himself only mildly by firing a message off to Viv letting her know it had been an amazing fight and he hoped she was okay, and 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. Even the other members of Valormade—Vademe was probably still warming down in SB2—leaned around Firesong to echo the 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 glance down the row after everyone had finished addressing Viv and she'd settled down in the seat beside him, wondering for a moment if maybe—just maybe?—he was imaging it.

The look on Ward's face, though, a taut concern that reached every line of his features as he, too, took Viv in worriedly, confirmed Logan's every fear, and once they'd all settled into their seats again he pulled 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, Viv's eyes flashed briefly, and she frowned, then tensed as she must have seen then read the question. For several second she

seemed to be staring at his message, and Logan actually started to fear she would ignore this query to.

Then, though, her eyes began to move.

Yeah, came the reply. *Just a little disappointed.*

How so? he shot back. *No one's blowing smoke up your ass, Viv. You were awesome.*

This time there *was* a pause after she read the message, 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 frowned, not understanding. At first he thought Viv was trying to appease him just like he'd feared, but a sidelong glance told him otherwise.

She was shivering.

It wasn't overt or anything. I wasn't like she was shaking in her seat or her lips were trembling or anything. 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, wresting 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 click. He'd told Viv all she needed was time.

“Nothing happened” she’d said.

Gemela upgraded?

No response for a while again, but the shaking in Viv’s hands go so bad that she actually brought them together in her lap to keep anyone from noticing. Logan hesitating, 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 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 given his size—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 push her palms apart, letting him slip his fingers into 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 one to be upset.

Gemela had ranked up... Talk about terrible timing. Under any other circumstance as 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 thing 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 match with him? Logan knew Viv well. He knew that for all the help he hoped he’d been to talk 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. She'd lost, and the gamble had come crushing 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 said in a rush, tugging Viv to her feet so quickly she blinked in 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 ass."

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 find 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 have a prayer of hearing Cashe's shocked question as the two of them left.

"... Uh... Did he just call you guys 'Aria' and 'Catcher'...?"

Rei know Viv leveled up. Looks it up?

Catcher fight with Aria?

CHAPTER 31

PLACEHOLDER TEXT

-PLACEHOLDER TEXT

“Four-Team First-Year 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 grass, he crouched low, not wanting to give away his position to any unseen Users from the other teams who might have ended up nearby. He had been hoping—practically *praying*, 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 Viv acting so off.

No, Rei chided himself for the hundredth time that day. He needed to *focus*. He could worry about Viv later. Right now there was nothing he could have done even if he’d had a clue what was going on with his best friend, which he didn’t. 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 big Mauler had obviously had some idea of what was going on with his girlfriend, given his obtuse efforts to find her some privacy after the fight against Vademe—but another part was glad Grant hadn't. If it wasn't something Rei could have addressed immediately, then it would have just hung over him like a storm cloud all damn d—

NO, Rei practically yelled in his own head, realizing he'd let his worry spin him of *yet again*.

He just didn't have the luxury of letting anything by the fight at hand weight on his mind for at least another 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 field was a dense variation of the Woodlands zone, with a distinct rise in the direction he was running, like the steady north-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 woods themselves, moving as quickly as he could through the light underbrush while staying relatively quiet. It didn't matter that he was probably the strongest fighter on the field other than Aria. There were *eighteen* other cadets

scattered about the field that wanted his head, and if he bumped into anyone before he regrouped with at least *part* of the rest of his team, 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 Blade Break, but otherwise we’re holding tight.”

“Not a bad idea.” Cache 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 agree 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 earlier playbook. I recalled and tucked myself between some boulders until it’s all clear. Other than Martin and Jang 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 her.”

“Smart,” Aria agreed. “Gonna leave you to it, then. Might be good to have you come in from the back if we ended 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 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 laying in wait behind a particularly wide-trunked maple—could take advantage of his ground.

“Oh damn—!” the Saber started the exclaim, realizing who it was he had 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. He 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, trying to ward Rei's gatling attacks off for a second, and leapt away from him and the tree to try to move to more open ground. It was exactly what Rei had been waiting for.

And so he turned on his heel again and, without so much as glancing back, bolted through the woods again.

"What the—Hey!" he heard Cook yell in surprise, clearly not having expected a retreat. 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 only slightly, then promptly skid to a halt as he bolted free to the tree line only to run almost face-first into a sheer wall of stone he hadn't expected. The cliff was maybe 25 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 away around, or—

High, high above him Rei caught a flash of red hair in the sunlight, framed in arching 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 finished to take 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 spear 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 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 of the thing, then pausing 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 cliff too, and probably would have appreciated the Saber’s open-mouthed upward gaped 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 fight 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 on 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, backpedalling 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, eyes wide as he jerked his head to one side to avoid a thrust for *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 gauge 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 other teams were on then 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 multi-squad formats. 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 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 cliff top, 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, at least that Rei knew of. The Saber had managed to turn a redirect of Hirst's shortsword into a surprise stab at the face of another Kenneth fighter, a Duelist Rei only remembered was called "McGregor". The boy had jerked back in time to avoid getting blinded, but had misjudged Artus' 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 Ranja *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 the engage Aria on the west edge. Meanwhile Kay was still in the middle, and had been joined by Lena Jiang at some point, created a wall of top-tier individual qualifiers against Rei, Aria, Cashe, and Catcher that was complimented by several other bodies.

Yeah, we're totally screwed, Rei couldn't help but think, already convinced of the fact even before a followup 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 blue 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 blades 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 passed her westward. Vademe's eyes went wide as he found Rei suddenly in front of him, and while he managed the deflect a punch at his side, the Valormade

leader left himself open to a followup kick that sent his 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 him adding to the fray.

If only that offered any kind of respite.

Aria, Rei, and Grant all fought with an angry focus, uncaring 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, but 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, 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 neural connection to most of his body, and the Phalanx's eyes were still wide in surprise as he tumbled 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 surprised 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 the last of the Kenneth cadets left other than Harun White, a female Mauler 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 and half strategically, 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 the 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 snorted, 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 trio 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 clearly right there with him. They slashed and swung, parried and blocked and deflect, 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. *Breakstep* is *pretty damn cool*.

And then he was 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

PLACEHOLDER TEXT

-PLACEHOLDER TEXT

From her spot in the stands, Salista clenched her teeth as she watch 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 couldn't blame the

Lancer. Even without the Arena announcer's commentary it was obviously he'd 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 Breakstep 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 other first years from Red Crown and Daggerfall straightened over her daughter's no-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-to-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 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 fact was more than a little alarming.

Salista's frowned 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 served no one to know she was at the tournament.

Least of all give what she had planned.

Salista sat and waited long enough to watch the Wargames come to and 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, assisted by an injured Duelist teammate. 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, but Vademe 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 that Arena announced “Red Crown” as the winners of the semi-final match—and likely defacto Wargames champions if they didn’t suffer a taste of their own medicine the following day—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 started down the nearest steps. 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, moving now after some time frozen as everyone in the Arena had watched the Wargames. No, on the whole it was a bad situation, and she would have to do something about it, one way or the other.

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 wellbeing 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 eyes of the hooded figure who’d been watching her leave from a nearby spot by the railing.

Either way, given the noises of the shifting crowd, she never would have heard them muttering through a tense smile.

“And here I was starting to worry I wouldn’t find you, Mother...”

CHAPTER 32

PLACEHOLDER TEXT

-PLACEHOLDER TEXT

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, numbing the sting of the earlier victory Jack Benaly had clutched for Martin and their 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 Arias 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 as they packed up their stuff and left the Arena, 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 stuff 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 obviously wanting to celebrate their finals qualification, but not a one among them—or Valormade, for that matter—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 Firesong 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 squads in the semi-finals *not* mounted a collective effort against Aria and her team, everyone in that Arena knew what would have happened. Red Crown and the others had merely identified a critical threat, and done what they had to 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 moral the Major's words had effected of Firesong.

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 to have affirmation that the Team Battle victory had indeed boosted the other five's spirits as they discussed the day's 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 was starting to seem distracted, glancing Rei's way every minute or so 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 10 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 and made to take their leave, all but Aria and Viv heading for the door room.

At least until Aria told Viv quietly that she'd be back in a bit, followed Rei out into the hall, and took him firmly by the elbow just as he and Catcher started making 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 turned around in concern. “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 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 shut up 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 other 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 not-so-bad knowing smirks and nods he got from some of the others boys pricked at him for some reason, though the wink he got from Candice Rice—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, though she did read it and respond in short order.

You'll see.

The answer came 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 Chevron, 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 abruptly 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 without him really even realizing it.

Eventually the car reached the highest floor that had been selected by any of the passengers going in and out and they'd climbed, and only then did Aria finally lift her other hand to touch the nearest wall, bringing up the elevator controls. 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 nearly a hundred floors without stopping now, and then started to slow, eventually coming to a steady stop. Finally the doors opened, and Rei blinked in surprise.

“Uh... Are we allowed to be up here?” he asked hesitantly.

Aria gave a dry laugh 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 move around on. The ceilings were double-height and hung with decorative lights, and the outside walls were clear panels of glass angled slightly outward, artistically complimented 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 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 seemed to bother Aria as she pulled him right through the slowly moving 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 skylanes in place of the sun that had long-since slipped away below the horizon. Flyers and other vehicles added motion to the scene, most of the lights moving in trailing lines, but some dipping or turning as they changed lanes or came and went from the traffic. The neon advertisement 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 Rei for some reason felt like he could breath 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 blazing lights of what looked like an emergency medical flyer blazed through open air, skipping the usually travel lanes far, 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 surprised Rei, and he raised an eyebrow as 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 at that, starting to understand what they were doing there. The anger returned sharply, and he must have stiffened because Aria look around at him directly.

“Rei... Can I be honest with you?”

The question came quiet and calm, but Rei still wasn’t sure what to make of it. Even so, 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 by surprise, and he blinked as he turned towards her. Arai hadn’t looked away, and there was something between a smirk and a sad smile on her face as her finger stayed extended to indicate him, 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 right and squeeze 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 venomously at him, lifting her free hand up to rap a knuckle on the thick glass. “We’re getting up there 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...

“Yes ma’am, sorry ma’am,” he said, trying at an apologetic salute with his left hand.

“I think you being a smartass is only cute *some* of the time, Ward,” *Aria* told him, that lethal smile having not left 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 of her watching him levelly. "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 quite 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 upper 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 surprise 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 sadness 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 but a frown forming now. “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 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 submission 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. If anything if my uncle is as

smart as I think he is he's probably going to do something about it soon. 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 shut it. 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 his 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 quite 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 a few 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.

“Ok, *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-school, then. 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 really handsome potato.”

Rei *had* felt his ears start to go a little warm at Aria even using the word “cute” in reference to him, but she lost him in the second half.

“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, then. “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—” but she hesitated, looking unsure of herself all of a sudden.

“And besides...?” Rei pressed after a second two, 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 Saber-Type combat. Second: so what? How does that help how Viv is probably feeling right now? In the moment—in *this* moment—she 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, one time or another? Shido’s Growth—” she glanced around as she spoke, as though instinctively searching for potential spying ears “—it’s going to take you someplace 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, Aira, 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 to him. “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 smiling 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 morning he *had* in fact pulled her close, closing the gap between them in a quick rush that had her letting on the smallest of surprised breaths.

Then, though, Rei was kissing her, and Aria Laurent was kissing him right back.

It wasn’t the terrible, clumsy thing he had been turning over with frightened excitement in his head of 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. Rei thought he could have paused time forever, then, his eyes closed but his vision still full of the city's lights, 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, with Aria or anyone. 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 speaking 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 off 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 step himself, he brought one hand off her back and allowed himself an exaggerated fist pump behind her. “Score!”

Aria laughed again, bring 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* decided *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. Ok.” He pondered that thought a little longer though, and couldn’t help but continued. “You think she feels *left behind* though? 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. All. 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 promised.”

“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 said again, nodding 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

Katro 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. Katro 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 Vademe, nice as he was, had a debt to pay.

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 obviously 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 brief flash 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," 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 for his Brawler Mode 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 through. 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 but 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.

Rei's was already reacting, right arm swinging across his own body and out 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, of course, he wasn't anywhere *near* fast enough to keep up with Rei.

Dead.

The Shido's claws *thudded* into Vademe body in echoed hits, the left sinking into his open side first, then the right into his belly a fraction of a second later. 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 hurtling 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 Lancer's limp body 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 themselves from the boy's torso. 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 Galen's 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, thousands on thousand obviously mistaking the motion as one meant for them, and Rei almost wince at the noise as Aria, Cashe, and Grant waved back and offered thumbs up—yes, even the Mauler—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, then stepped quickly over to where Vademe was growning 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 as the Lancer finally took his offered 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 as the announcer gave them the usual congratulations—announcing Rei as “the first finalist for the first year Dueling brackets!”—and requested they clear 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 Rice 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. Siddorov. 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 Siddorov 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-Ranked 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 Siddorov 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," the Lancer paused to turn towards him, offering 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 smirked knowingly, drawing a laugh 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 parted ways there, 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 quite, 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 weekend—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 shoved 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 one 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 study him carefully. "You good? That was a big hit, dropping off the second floor like that."

"All good, no worries," Rei answered, lifting one scarred arm to flex it dramatically. "Ready to kick the butt of whoever I'm matched up with next, at 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, giving Aria 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 acceptably loss, and we'd probably still

have a chance against Red Crown in the Team Battle even if we're a 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, Rei suspected—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, 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 carefully. 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 a 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 started 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 kicked your dog, Viv,” Rei clarified for her.

“Oh, that.” Viv made a face. “Yeah... Sorry. Just thinking.”

“What about?”

She shook her head. “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 sidelong at the girl. 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 would be 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 another chuckle. “I know better than anyone, Vivian 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, looking satisfied. Rei watched the floor with her a bit longer—a medical 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 sidelong, 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 nailed it, 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 a remind you of this? Of how I walked up to find you 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 usually self snapping back into place all at once, gaze abruptly having *zero* issue meeting his. “Nobody is ‘haunted’ *or* ‘forlorn’ around here, go 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 just enough pressure to give him a warning that she *could* pull it clear of 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—give 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 20 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 gentleman, 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 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 to if the second year had a prayer or 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 officer lacking any CAD bans, the announcer 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 gentleman, as promised it is now time for our last upper-bracket semi-finals match of this 2468 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 disc. “We’ve seen some true up-and-coming titans so far this morning, and you can look forward to seeing cadets Williams and Ward have 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! Now please put your hands together to welcome for, from the west, a young man 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 roared together with the whole of the stadium, the Arena one undulating, resonant voice of enthusiasm as Lennon’s familiar 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 you *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 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 liked to see any of those vocal haters among the stands face off against an opponent like the Lasher and show a ounce of the focus the second year was now.

The two faced off across the 30-yard ring, and the sounds 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 the dramatic pause that followed, 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 too it this time.

“Cliffs! And... woah... A weird one, too!”

Sure enough, a second later Rei could see it too, 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.

A moat would probably technically have required a castle of some kind, but the the comparison stood. 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 that if either of the fighters fell from the top of the field there would be much of a chance of recover.

“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 the shoulders to hold her still, though not once looking down himself from the two cadets.

“Cadet Christopher ‘Lasher’ Lennon versus Cadet Anatoli Sidorov.
Combatants... Call.”

Neither fighters 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 once of his signature chain swords, their loose blades laying and an expected curl around his feet, and over his shoulders his externals hover, 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 glowing edges of his long spear.

"Ooooh here we go..." Cashe half whispered, half squealed just as 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, Lennon very nearly matching him for Speed with natural agility. As a result, both tore out of their starting circles at such break-neck speeds that they left twin hollows of billowing dust to sweep across the plateau in their wake. 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 half way 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 that the Lasher was a master of his own weapons and timing.

Like two separate, living things the A-Type's chain swords move in unison. His left came ripping 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 reminder 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 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 charging 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 as 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 managed. Studying the fight further, Rei was impressed realizing 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 minimal. It would have been pure madness against any other fight.

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 that 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 weird his spear one-handed. The resulting proximity forced Lennon to keep one chain sword constantly engaged in with rippling, spherical defense that was one of his signatures 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 blew a crater out of the plateau.

"I was just thinking that," Aria muttered in agreement beside him, not all that surprisingly.

"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 pair of other fighters at the tournaments, it might have felt monotonous.

With these two, it instead felt like a rising rising tide against a storm wall, every single spectator waiting with bated breath for the moment it would all come crashing down to let in the promised flood.

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 in a deafening wash of rapid fire explosions. Dust rose, and furrows were carved into the field. Rocks and stone shook loose of the underside of the cliff with every hit, dropping down to splash into the rip 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 from behind, the Mauler himself hollering along too as 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 encouragements 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 forever. 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 spear 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 weapon snapped and struck out to flick away any hits 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 upward and 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 in 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 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 the cliffs cracked and collapses, 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, saw the strategy 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 that situation—launched himself clear of the blades at a angle that would bring him further into the

field and secure footing. Who in their right mind, after all, would have jumped in any other direction by *into* to plateau, risking landing on unstable ground or near enough an edge to be easily knocked off the cliffs and into the water below by a timed swing of a chain sword. Sidorov had reacted exactly as he should have.

And Lennon had planned for it.

Ten thousands screams and cheers rang out as the streak of red and black of 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 barely slower than lightning. The sound of it even swallowed the 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 launching 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 announcing the end of the match more clearly than anything else.

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 feet first, momentum sticking him there long enough to gaze down on his defeated opponent like some ravenous, massive bat.

And then Sidorov hit the raging water with a massive, heavy splash, and the Arena didn't wait to make the call.

“Fatal Damaged Accrued. Winner: Christopher ‘Lasher’ Lennon, the Galens
Institute.”