

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 bad 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 nod, 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. “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*.

Eyeballing 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 by 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 then 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 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-crusting 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 whir 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 forgone 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 pace 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.

“Guuuuuh!” Rei gasped painfully, taking in one lungful, then another, not seeing Sense or Gisham standing nearby with wide eyes, not seeing Emble and Warren 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 braving 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 obvious 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 breath 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. “GOOO! 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 named from Kay in the dinner line. It had made the meal a more comfortable affair by far, with Rei almost forgetting about the dubious looks shot their way from the 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.

“Yoooo...” Catcher had breathed from the seat in front of Rei, leaning over Cashe on his left to get a better view out the transport window. “Look at *that*.”

Rei—and Aria beside him, judging by her wide eyes as they both peered downward—had been equally in awe.

While the Institute stood on a square, level breadth of land encircled by walls and woods in the middle of Castalon, Kenneth had abandoned almost all semblance of military rigidity. Built up the sweeping incline of a broad, grassy hill just outside of Ganos, the school felt almost like it had merely risen out of the windswept plains rather than being 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 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 gulley before anyone—mainly Aria—could have stopped him.

CHAPTER 20

Rei hit a section of unbroken ice some 20 feet downstream of where Biggs stood, crushing through it as expected. He felt the rush of the water through Shido’s steel, but not the cold—CADs were incredible like that—and his clawed boots found good purchase on the rocky bed of the stream. Straightening, he turned towards the 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.