

# THE MOSTEST METAL DUDE IRON PRINCELIEST OF PRINCES

(Aka: Stormweaver III)

## PROLOGUE

Early January, 2469

Sol System – Venus – Sector 1

Khalanasy Vallis Resort

“Arrogance is a poison in the vines of this family. Its grip is so vile that there are times I find myself wishing the money didn’t exist, that the company didn’t exist. Even before I was a father I prayed to gods most of the rest of mankind has long since stopped believing in for the strength to keep it from taking hold of me or my future children.

...There is nothing more painful now than reflecting on how thoroughly I have failed in that endeavor...”

-Doctor Kamiya Hiroto,  
Private Journals

Bliss was a private resort suite with a view of the wilds of Venus, Kamiya Keiji had long since decided.

To be fair, anyone with the fortune of experiencing the sight before him now would have agreed that there wasn't much that could compare. Due to the unique composition of its atmosphere and soil, even after its terraforming some 2 or 3 centuries before Venus was a world of color and life unlike any other in the ISCM, within the Sol System and beyond alike. Whereas most planets humanity had taken hold of had been transformed to match in some close proximity to the lush greenery of Earth, Venus was a place of brilliant pinks and bright reds and oranges. The trees—monolithic, 100-story beasts that had never seen a cutting since their planting—swayed far below where Keiji stood before the clear smart-glass window of his and Samantha's corner room, an undulating ocean of strangely-colored forest that seemed to breath with the planet. In the distance, a line of vibrant blue so artificial it was magnificent indicated the pristine edge of one of the planet's many man-made oceans, and the sky above reflected the distant sun in a wash of gold clouds shadowed with black where the boiling churn was thickest.

Keiji could have stood at that window for hours taking in the sight. He had stood at that window for hours, in fact. It had been under the influence of a multitude of the various hallucinogenics and stimulants that were the heart of a healthy silent market in and around the venusian resorts, sure, but even without the drugs he suspected the view would have been enough to keep him enamored for as long as the day was bright.

Unfortunately... that experience would have to wait.

Maybe next time, Keiji thought with a smirk, turning away from the woods of Venus to make for the room's massive bed, upon whose stark white linens one of the two private maids their accommodations included had already laid several potential outfits for his and Samantha's evening plans.

It was their last night planetside. Not because they wanted to leave, of course. In years past the pair of them would have booked the suite indefinitely, heading home—or to whatever next destination fit their fancy—at their leisure. Infuriatingly, however, Keiji's father had very recently become something of a significant pain in the ass, and had made it clear that morning that if the two of them weren't back in Tokyo by evening the next day there would be hell to pay. Given the old man turning a blind eye to their indulgences was regrettably essential for the two of them to enjoy their stylized lifestyle, Keiji and Samantha had begrudgingly assured Abigail Smith—the family steward—they would be there, though not before setting themselves up for one more night of gratification. First would be dinner in one of the private rooms at The Valley, Khalanasy Vallis' best restaurant where even a member of the Kamiya family had to well-grease the right hands to get in last minute. After that there were still several clubs in the south tower the pair of them hadn't yet had a chance to visit, a fact they planned to change before the evening was over. Finally—assuming they were still functional by the time the next morning—there was sunrise party in one of the permanent penthouse suites Samantha had gotten them invitations too. Keiji had no idea whose home it was—nor, he suspected, did his wife—but it hardly mattered. They were on the list.

And being on the list was one of the few things Keiji had really ever cared about.

The blue one, he decided, bending to pluck the silky suit from the bed and holding it up to examine further. Satisfied, he pulled up his NOED and turned to face the window again, inputting eye commands even as he held up the jacket and pants. In a blink the sight of Venus in all its colorful glory vanished, replaced by a perfect reflection of the crisp white room. Keiji took a moment—as he often tended to—to appraise himself, smiling into the mirror. He might not have been a User like his father, but even despite that and being 45 years old, he didn't think anyone would scoff at the frame he cut. He was tall and fit, with jet-black hair that wouldn't fade for some decades yet if the family doctors could help it, and his slate-grey eyes—identical to every born

member of the Kamiya family lineage—were as piercing as they’d ever been. Even if his father had never done much of anything else for him all his life, at the very least Keiji could thank the old bastard for his handsome frame and—

CRASH!

Keiji jumped at the sudden sound of what could only be glass shattering in the hall outside, nearly dropping his suit to the polished marble floor. Before he could begin to wonder what the hell was going on, though, there came the muted sounds of a woman yelling and the rushed clack-clack of heels on stone. At once Keiji suspected who it was, and he frowned. For someone to be so loud they could be heard through the subtle muffling tech built into the resort walls...

His suspicion was confirmed not 5 seconds later when the suite door flew open with a bang outside in the living area.

“KEIJI!” Samantha was howling, obviously furious. “KEIJI!”

Tossing the suit back on the bed, Keiji hurried to bedroom door.

“I’m in here. What’s wrong?”

Samantha was a sight, even angry as she looked. Then again, she was angry often enough for him to be used to it. She was of Old American decent, with light skin that held the hint of a handsome tan year-round, and long, red-pink hair that was currently wound in a pretty bun atop her head. Her eyes too, were pink, but specked with shattered black that had always made Keiji think of a neon universe.

Right now, though, those eyes were ablaze with a fire that would have burned out any stars he’d ever saw in them.

“Keiji, she put in for a transfer!” Samantha continued to yell as she stalked towards him, her green-blue dress hitched up with one hand up above her black heels so as not to trip on the hem. “A transfer!”

Keiji blinked at this, not understanding a word.

“She...? What? A transfer...?” he repeated, trying and failing to follow. “What are you talking about? I thought you said you were headed to the restaurant early to grab a drink with Aarna and that new guy she met at the pool the other—”

“Are you not listening?!” Samantha interrupted him with a shriek, looking positively demented. “She put in for a transfer! You think I was going to sit around for some shitty cocktail after that?!”

“Samantha,” Keiji growled, starting to get irritated himself now and stepping fully out of the room to face his wife. “You aren’t make any sense. Who put in for a transfer? What are you talking about?”

Samantha swelled with irritation, looking all the more livid that he wasn’t following her poor explanation.

“Sarah!” she hissed back. “Your daughter! Sarah. Has. Put In. For. A. TRANSFER!”

Finally Keiji froze, understanding at last. For a long moment he gaped at his wife, having trouble registering what she’d said despite her poignant spelling out of the situation.

“I’m sorry,” he snarled at last, feeling his anger spike. “She what?!”

## CHAPTER 1

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACHOLDER

“GAAAH!!”

Valera Dent’s rise from sleep was violent and cold, as it had been so often for too long. Even as she came to she wrenched herself up and away, scrambling with all speed

from her bed and its entrapping covers. In a fraction of a heartbeat she found the wall, then the corner of the room she deliberately kept clear of any obstacle. At once the motion-sensor setting she'd set for herself triggered, and the hefty band of smart-glass that encircled the entirety of the room began to lighten slowly, rising from being blacked out for sleep to a dim, cheerful hue of brightening yellow and blue.

It didn't help. Not for a solid minute, at least.

And that was more than enough time for Valera to relive the moment, relive the nightmare, trembling and pressed into the corner as tightly as she could, eyes wide and unseeing under the loose curtain of short-cropped brown hair that had fallen in front of her face in her mad scramble.

The figure. The flash. The pain. The figure. The flash. Her teammates, dead. The pain. The figure. All of them, dead. The flash. The pain.

And then the outline of a shapeless limb reaching towards her, seeking her, and the two words that echoed like a silent malediction through Valera's mind as she felt formless, cold metal smother the shattered, bloody mess that was all that was left of her face.

Those words. Those words...

"Guuuh!"

The breath came all at once, held unknowing in her chest from the moment Valera had awoken. With it, mercifully, came clarity, and with the brightening of the lights she drew back to herself, drew back from the horror and agony and the blurry, broken shapes of her squad scattered around that cursed cave. She heaved in another gasp of air, then another, until her shaking had steadied to an uneven shiver and she was back, back in her room, back to blinking around at the corners and shadows for ever-absent sign of that horrible outline.

You're alright, Valera. You're alright.

Valera started as the words popped across her NOED in bright blue. It took her a moment to read them, took her a moment to process them. When she did, though, she breathed easier, relaxing ever so slightly. It helped, not being alone.

And in her own unique way, Valera was never, ever alone.

“I’m alright,” she repeated. “I’m alright... Yeah...”

She stayed crouched like that for some time yet, though, and Kes let her be. In fact, the text didn’t intrude again until Valera had shakily started to get to her feet at last, still unable to stop herself from scanning the room as she did.

They seem worse than ever. I’m sorry.

“S’ok...” Valera muttered back, trying to focus more and remember that she was alright. She was. “They were getting better for a while. I’ll get back to that.”

Kes didn’t answer. She didn’t need to. Yes, the nightmares had been worse over the last week, but neither of them needed to voice what the trigger had been. They knew. Of course they knew.

There were probably a lot of people amongst those who’d been present at the Sector 9 Sectionals tournament the week before where having trouble sleeping, these days...

At last Valera truly started to feel herself again, and she finally took her hand away from the wall to move shakily and retrieve her covers from where here flailing had kicked them off to the far side of the room. Tossing them back over the mattress, she stood for a moment looking down at the bed, hands still trembling slightly, a dangerous unease tight in her gut.

Dr. Forester's words of encouragement were in her ears as she eventually crawled back in and slipped under the blankets, telling her avoiding the act would only be harder in the end.

For a long time Valera lay like that in the quiet of her room, staring unblinkingly at the ceiling, unwilling for a while yet to dim the lights again. She was safe, she had to tell her self. She was safe. She was in her quarters in the staff housing of the Galens Institute. Nothing could reach her here. Nothing.

At least not yet.

Valera took another deep breath at that, shoving the fearful thought away. Unwillingly she closed her eyes at last, and behind her lids put the commands into her NOED to turn the lights off. At once the glow she could still see faded, and she was left in the dark, forcing herself all the while to remember that was was alright. That she was safe.

It took her nearly an hour to start to doze off again, and unfortunately it was in those lingering moments as she'd just begun to fall away that her frame came to life all its own once more.

And it wasn't Kes this time...

Valera sat bolt upright again, alarmed and alert. Like most sane individuals she had settings to prevent herself from being disturbed at night. To overrule them, one had to ring her three times in succession, and most everyone understand that such interruptions should only be kept for extreme emergencies.

So when she saw who it was that was calling, she didn't hesitate to pick up.

"Maddie? Is everything okay?"

The quick, worried tone Maddison Kent answered with had the hair on Valera's arms standing on end in an instant. She listened for a few seconds, a weight like solid lead forming in her throat.



Then Valera Dent, S-Ranked Knight Class User and Chief Combat Instructor at the Galens Institute, was tearing from her quarters with all haste, grabbing whatever clothes she had on hand and cursing the MIND as she ran.

## CHAPTER 2

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACHOLDER

In the middle of Castalon, there was never a true night. Not even in winter. Yes, the sun set—just like on every one of the 42 worlds the Intersystem Collective had terraformed across its 7 claimed solar systems—and yes, global rotation had been incrementally adjusted over decades so that Astra-3 spun in a 24-hour cycle to emulate the turn of Earth in Sol. Theoretically, that should have provided at least a handful of hours of darkness every day.

But in the middle of Castalon, there was never a true night.

For what might have been 5 minutes or 2 hours, Reidon Ward stood under the eaves of the great tree that was the centerpiece of Kanés' open courtyard. Through the unshifting leaves of the red-orange branches he watched—entirely without seeing—the passing lights of the flyers and transports that made up the traffic of the skylines high above him, dense even though it had to be past midnight. Some part of Rei knew he was cold, too. The space was open to the January night three stories above him, the chill of the season trapped in by the intangible barriers that kept the lobby floor of the first-year dorm warm despite a total lack of walls or doors between the red-carpeted sitting area and the stone floor of the courtyard. It didn't help that he was barefoot,

either, nor that he'd left his military-issue jacket upstairs, having decided instead to leave his room wearing nothing but his black slacks and an unbuttoned shirt. Not that it mattered.

Rei couldn't feel anything but heat, in the moment.

"Dammit," he growled through clenched teeth at the sky, not for the first time in however long he'd been standing there. Above him, several of the pink and blue spotlights from Castalon's unseen skyscrapers swung a broken pattern across the sky through the leaves. He didn't see that either, though, just like he didn't see the other pulsing lights of the city, nor hear the bustle and noise of the nightlife that could usually just be made out even from the very center of the Galens Institute. Rei was gone, taken away by an emotion he was proud to say—or at least proud to think—he very rarely lost himself to.

Anger.

"Dammit," he repeated, more forcefully this time, and at last he turned from the city glow and his misting breath to make his way out of the courtyard. The warmth of the building proper did nothing to soothe his irritation as he stepped back into the lobby, unfortunately, nor did the dim ceiling lights that brightened automatically for him at his reentrance. Nothing much in the world could have helped, in that moment, to be fair. Maybe punching something, sure, but as of a week before Rei was on the cusp of becoming a B-Ranked CAD User. Even if his specs were still on average skewed a ways lower than that—closer to C5 or 6 probably—he knew there wasn't a single piece of furniture in the room that would have survived his abuse. Maybe the nearest of the square, polished columns might have made a better target of his ire, but Rei was pretty confident even the clean cement couldn't wether a hit from him unscathed anymore, unless he dialed back his Strength spec.

And Rei had zero desire to dial back his Strength spec, in the moment.

He'd done it. He'd actually done it. The one lever he would have liked not to pull, never to pull. It wasn't like he'd had much of a choice, to be fair, but that hadn't made the decision any simpler, nor the following fire easier to swallow. Rei wasn't stupid, either—far from, in fact. He knew it was the right call, or at least knew it was the only call.

And he still hated that he'd done it.

“DAMN. IT!” he snapped at the air as loudly as he dared, dropping down onto one of the the lobby's couches without thinking to lean over his lap and ball his fists against his temples.

The Kamiya Corporation's offer of sponsorship was... extensively in his favor. He was aware of that. Even after he'd rejected their million-credit-a-year stipend provision, and even after he'd insisted that the company would be backing all six members of Firesong instead of just him. Even after that, the offer was extensively in his favor. It was why he'd accepted it, why he'd called Ueno Jasper and told her he would be taking Kamiya up on the deal.

But that didn't mean there wasn't a cost.

Rei ground his teeth, trying and failing not to regret having signed the paperwork as soon as Jasper had provided him the modified documentation. The changes had been made, as requested. The guarantees were there. Only the meeting he'd been promised hadn't been put into writing, but Rei had taken the woman at her word that he would get it. He felt—for some odd reason—the fixer could be trusted, even if he rather suspected there was a good chance that was just a feeling she had a talent for cultivating. But even if that fell through, the really important parts had been in ink, and would take effect the following Monday, in just over a week. Rei didn't know yet how it would happen, but he and Firesong had been promised trainers of a particular caliber, and that was all that mattered to him. Between them and the extra sessions Galens was already providing with Michael Bretz, Claire de Soto, and Catori Imala—the first year Brawler,

Saber, and Phalanx sub-instructors respectively—Rei was feeling much more sure that he and the others would meet the expectations Central Command had so theatrically laid out for the squad. Maybe even surpass them if they could. Yes, he still hated that he'd done it, even if it had been the right choice. It had to have been the right choice.

... Right?

“Dammit...” Rei muttered one last time, then he brought himself up to lean back against the couch, sliding down into it with his hands in his lap now, head resting against the top of the cushions. The cement ceiling of the lobby was a few shades darker than the walls, and Rei let his thoughts get lost in the near-black for a minute or two, let himself feel the anger, the disappointment, the bitterness. He let himself burn, let himself want to scream and curse and punch something again. He couldn't let it all out in the moment maybe, but morning would come eventually, and with the squad's early training hours would come an outlet. So for the time being, just letting himself feel was enough.

After a while, Rei started to calm down, and with another sigh he sat up straight again.

“Sorry, man,” he muttered aloud, thinking of what his friend Catcher's take would probably be on the evening's development once there was the chance to share. “Not so sure about that promise not to become the evil emperor of the universe any m—”

But then Rei went stiff, his episode of self-berating interrupted as his NOED came alive of its own volition in his eyes, a wash of blue text suddenly threading itself down across his vision.

...

ALERT: New link established.

Processing networked information.

...

Calculating.

...

Results:

Singular link capacity has reached 100%.

Combat Assistance Device 'Shido' max link capacity has reached 62%.

...

Checking networked data acquisition.

...

Adequate data acquirement met.

Device initiating link manifestation.

...

Processing.

...

Manifestation complete.

Singular link has been designated as "Shard 1"

Shard 1: ACTIVATED

Shard 1: ASSIGNED

...

Display Device Links?

YES/NO

"What the hell?" Rei breathed, so taken aback he hadn't even noticed he'd jolted to his feet to stand rigidly on the red carpet even as he'd processed the very first lines. He read the full alert once, then twice, but only after the third review was he 100% sure he couldn't make heads or tails of the information laid out before him. 'New link established'? 'Shard 1'? What did any of that even mean?? And what the hell was this about Shido's 'max link capacity'?? Strange enough that Rei didn't have clue what that

could be, but even more so that it apparently was at the seemingly-random point of being at '62%' of its potential? Rei couldn't help but read everything a fourth time, but when this again provided no additional clues he made the choice to hover over the 'Display Device Link?' question and select 'YES'.

And then he went cold.

Device Link Request acknowledged.

...

Device Link Assignments:

SHARD 1: Gemela

...

"Viv," Rei got out hoarsely, stunned only for the breath it took for him to read the name of the CAD.

Then his call log was up, and he was ringing 'Viviana Arada', heedless of the lateness of the hours.

"Come on," he hissed as the line rang once, then twice. "Come on, Viv."

Nothing though, so he tried again, then again, then again. With each failed attempt to contact his best friend, a weight developed in Rei's gut, getting heavier and heavy.

A bad feeling. He had a very bad feeling...

After the fourth call didn't get through, Rei was off, tearing from the spot in the lobby so quickly he thought he felt the carpet tear under his bare feet.

It had fallen into place mostly as he'd tried to reach her, but the conviction solidified in the mere seconds it took him to bolt from the bottom floor of the dorm all the way up the stairs to the third, his Speed spec unleashed to the highest capacity Rei could pull from it without outright calling on Shido. 'Singular link', the alert had said. Stupid. Stupid of him not to make the connection. Hadn't he and Aria been

muttering for weeks now about how Shido seemed to be affecting the Devices around it? Hadn't they been alarmed by Catcher and Chancery's acquisitions of Ruinous and Warband—incredibly rare Abilities—and then Aria's own jaw-dropping evolution at the end of Sectionals not a week prior? Stupid. So stupid of him not to have made the connection immediately, to have realized what it was. He and Aria had even said—sometimes joking, sometimes not—on more than one occasion that Viv would be the decided factor, that Viv would be the defining variable. Viv, who had been around Rei and Shido the longest. Viv, who had trained with him for months before any of the others had entered the fold.

And now something had happened. Something had happened to seemingly manifest the very thing Rei and Aria had been suspicious of, something big enough to give Shido cause to produce an alert of the change for the very first time, the likes of which Rei had never seen before. “Singular link capacity has reached 100%,” the notification had said...

A bad feeling. A very, very bad feeling...

Rei reached 304 inside of 10 seconds, crashing through the door so violently it hit the wall of the suite's short entry hallway with a trembling BANG. He didn't even notice, just as he didn't notice when he did the same thing tearing into his own room, jolting A half-dressed Aria out of bed with a yell so that she looked around in alarm, frazzled and blinking rapidly.

“Rei??” she demanded once she seemed to realize she wasn't under attack, reaching up to push her red hair out of her eyes. “Wha—? Wait, what time is it? What are you—?” But then she must have caught the look on his face as Rei scrambled around his room for his jacket and boots, and her demeanor changed in flash. “What happened? What's going on?”

Rei considered for a moment not telling her, considered for a moment that there wasn't the time. Something had happened, something bad. He was sure of it. The more

he thought about it, the more he was sure of it. To create that alert out of the blue... Whenever Shido had done anything even remotely similar, it was almost always after something major. And he was pretty sure Shido wasn't the one who'd triggered this change for once, not to mention Gemela wasn't nearly as prone to reacting to stimulus as Rei's own CAD. Then there was how tired Viv had seemed over the last week. Increasingly so day after day. And now she wasn't picking up his calls? Something had happened, and he didn't have time to explain.

But when he looked at Aria, thinking to apologize and just tell her that he had to find Viv, he stopped short. His girlfriend was taking him in with such alarm—with such concern—that he was abruptly reminded that it had indeed been her who'd affirmed his suspicions about Shido in the first place.

That, and the fact that he wasn't Viv's only friend. No anymore.

"Something's happened," he said quickly, returning to wrenching on his jacket even as he slid one bare foot into his right boot. "Shido just sent me an alert. Something about a 'link' manifesting. I don't actually know what it means."

"What?" Aria looked as confused as he'd ever seen her. "A 'link'? To what?"

"To Gemela," Rei answered even as he bent down to tie up his laces. "And when I try to call Viv, she isn't picking up."

He was pretty sure it took Aria even less time than it had him to put the pieces together.

"Oh... Oh no."

And then she was out of bed too, scrambling just as quickly as Rei to find her own clothes. He didn't stop her. For one thing he didn't think she would have heard anything to the contrary, but for another he felt a little better about the situation with the idea of Aria being at his side. Of all of them, even him, she was the one who tended to be able to keep her head on straight in shit situations, and he suspected the girls' friendship was



long past a point that Viv would be as grateful to see his girlfriend's face as she might be his own, wherever she was.

“Dude, Rei...” a groggy voice grumbled out of nowhere. “It’s like 0100... What are you—Oh.”

Rei and Aria both paused in their mad dash to get dressed, looking around at the door. Only barely illuminated in the dim light of the smart glass band that encircled the room, a tall, bare-chested boy with blond hair was blinking between the pair of them in surprise. Layton “Catcher” Catchwick had one hand up by his handsome face like he’d been rubbing his yellow eyes when he’d realized Rei wasn’t alone, and wasn’t the only one. Even as they’d looked around, another shape joined him, the dark skin of one of the girl’s shoulders exposed through the neck hole of an overlarge pajama shirt, silvery braids in a tight bun atop her head.

“The hell, guys?” Chancery Cashe seemed much more awake—a quite a bit more annoyed—than Catcher. “What was the noise? We’ve got to be up early for train—”

But then Firesong’s Lancer too, stopped, mouth dropping open as she took in Rei and Aria, the former paused in the process of buttoning on his jacket, the latter having only just gotten her pants on over her waist.

“Oookay then...” Chancery got out after a second, purple-green gaze flitting first to Rei, then Aria, then back again. “Right... Not our business. Come on, Catcher.” She grabbed the speechless Saber by the elbow and started to pull him away from the door. “You two just do us a favor and keep the noise to a minimum next time you—”

Rei didn’t let her finish. It was past the time of secrets amongst the squad, and this was something they needed to know.

“Something happened to Viv.” He interrupted quickly, resuming his buttoning, fingers nimbly flying up his jacket. “We’re going to find her.”

Catcher and Chancery stopped together, looking back at him.

“What?” the Saber asked sharply. The mischievous look that had been building in his eyes before Chancery had made to pull him back was instantly gone, as was any sign of fatigue. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know.” Rei, fully-dressed now as he grabbed his cap from his desk, glanced over his shoulder to see Aria starting to tie her boots, her shirt and jacket already buttoned. “Shido... did something weird.”

“Weird...?” Chancery repeated. “Weird how? More weird than usual, you mean?”

Rei opened his mouth to answer, looking back at them, but in that moment a third shape appeared in the doorway, face half-scrunched at the unwelcome light of the room, even dim as it was.

“Guys, can y’all keep it down?” Jack Benaly, their fifth and final suitemate—and the strongest Brawler among the first year Galens students—mumbled. “Martin’s got Red Crown doing some late practice nights, and I—”

But then he, too, stopped at the sight of the scene.

“... Laurent?” he muttered, squinting at Aria like he didn’t believe what he was seeing. “What are you doing—?”

But Aria cut him off.

“Rei, let’s go,” she said quickly, stepping passed him in a flash and slipping between the trio outside the, though she addressed Catcher and Chancery as she moved by. “You two stay put in case Viv comes back here. We’ll message you as soon as we figure out what’s going on.”

“Like hell you will,” Catcher growled, already turning on his heels and making for his room. “I’m coming w—”

“Catcher. Stay. Here.” Rei half asked, half insisted as he followed Aria. “There’s no time, and someone needs to be here if she comes home. We’ll explain when we know what’s happening.”

And then, before anyone could voice any other protest, he and Aria were out the still-open door of the suite and into the hall, bolting for the stairs.

“Any idea where she would be?” Aria asked even as they vaulted over the railing to the second floor, not bothering with the actual steps. “Any at all?”

“West Center,” Rei answered without hesitating, following right behind her. He’d already considered this exact question for himself. “I’ll bet you anything she was training when whatever it was happened.”

“Training?!” Aria hissed. “Seriously? This late at night? What about curfew?!”

“Aria, I don’t know,” Rei answered as they jumped again down to the bottom floor. “But I think she’s actually been doing it all week. Think about it. She’s been so tired. And like you said at Sectionals, she’s been stressed about everyone having an Ability but her and stuff. I think she’s been pushing herself even more than the rest of us, and without letting us know.”

“Hence West Center,” Aria muttered, catching on. “Too much of a chance of running into one of us in East. Oh Viv, what have you gotten yourself into...?”

Rei only grunted in agreement before the double doors of Kanes were opening for them, and they were sprinting out into the winter evening.

They’d barely made it 10 feet beyond the building’s overhang when they were forced to stop, sliding to an awkward halt on the cobblestone as a blast of unnatural air and a blinding light cut downward through the night.

“Woah!” they both yelled in surprise, each forced to snap a hand up and take hold of their caps to keep them from blowing away, squinting up into the wind. Descending sharply from above, a flyer was dropping towards the path in the grounds they’d been about to take, its headlights blazing and the force of its vertical engines clearing what little leftover snow was left between the stones under their boots. Both at a loss, Rei and Aria watched with mirrored open mouths as the vehicle touched down—the whir

of it only minimally dimming as it did—and the hatch door at its back swung open almost before it had finished settling.

Then they were snapping up into matching, automatic salutes as none other than Valera Dent herself stepped out of the flyer, standing tall in the rushing blast of icy wind, noise, and brightness.

The stone in Rei's gut redoubled. It wasn't the flooding light of the flyer that silhouetted Galen's Chief Combat Officer in a halo as she moved in their direction at a quick clip. It wasn't even the Captain's disheveled state he could make out once she was closer, her jacket the only part of her regular black-and-golds she was wearing, unbuttoned over a loose shirt and jeans that looked like they'd been hastily pulled on. Rei barely registered either of those things.

Instead, what had Rei suddenly scared was the look on the woman's face. The expression, especially strange as it strained the handsome features of the famous 'Iron Bishop' of the Astra System, the S-Rank who claimed the title of the strongest User in the entirety of Castalon. He'd never seen that look before on Dent's face. Not when he'd been spasming on the floor of the training field after his last parameter test had gone south. Not even when he'd woken up in the Kenneth Arena hospital wing after Central had hacked his finals match against Aria to set six S-Ranked holograms against his immobilized body. Both of those times, Valera Dent had looked worried, and looked furious.

But he'd never seen the woman look afraid.

Bad, Rei couldn't help but think again even as Dent seemed to realize for the first time that they were there. Very bad...

"Cadets?" The Chief Combat Instructor's brown eyes went wide at the sight of them, stopping short. She had to shout to be heard over the flyer's still-whining engine, and it seemed to be in genuine surprise that she took Rei and Aria in over the black

line that bisected her face and marked the full-frame prosthetic that made up her jaw and most of her nose and cheeks. “What are you doing out here?”

“Something’s happened, ma’am!” Rei called back, deciding it wasn’t the time to beat around the bush. “To Viv—to Cadet Arada, I mean! We were just going to look for her!”

If Dent had been astonished before, it only redoubled now. “To Ara—Ward, how did you know that?”

Again the weight got heavier, and again Rei felt the cold. She knew. Dent already knew. That wasn’t a good sign. He opened his mouth to repeat the question right back at the woman, but Aria beat him to it.

“Ma’am!” she called out over the noise “What’s happened?!”

The Iron Bishop tensed, and a hitch in the howl of the engines at her back had the woman’s jacket billowing around her as she took them in. There was that fear again. Rei could see it even more clearly now as the woman finally answer.

“I was coming to get you. Both of you...” She looked more pained with every word. “It is Arada. Like you said. She’s been hurt, Cadets... She’s been hurt bad.”

### CHAPTER 3

They did not, as Rei had assumed they were going to, make an accelerated trip to the Institute Hospital after Dent ordered he and Aria both into the flyer, joining them before shutting the door behind her to cut off the wind and noise. Instead, the moment they were in the air the vehicle swung eastward, zipping right over the closest of Galen’s stone walls before climbing almost straight up to join one of the lower sky lanes that led into Castalon proper.

“Ma’am... Where are we going?” Aria asked nervously once they’d slipped into glow of the city, the smallest of the towering skyscrapers lined up in rows on either side of them no less than 400 or so floors in height. As they did, the world became bright in a way only the nightlife of a planet’s most-thriving metropolis could manage.

And yet Dent’s face still only seemed to darken in the seat across from them at the question.

“Cadet Arada was found unresponsive in West Center about twenty minutes ago,” she answered in a subdued tone. “She’s alive—” she brought up a hand quickly as Rei and Aria both opened their mouths in alarm “—but the medical drone that alerted us to the situation assessed her condition as beyond what the Galens is capable of treating safely, which Lieutenant Colonel Mayd has since confirmed. She’s been rushed to a specialized unit at Altmore Medical Center in the city, one specifically designed for Users.”

None of this did anything to help Rei’s stomach, of course. If anything, he felt abruptly nauseous. He’d been in bad shape before. He’d ripped a hole through his lung not three weeks ago, and been ganged up on by six of his classmates the semester before that. And that was wasn’t even mentioning the hellish state he’d woken up in the previous weekend after his body had largely torn itself apart after the hack at Sectionals. And yet on those occasion, the Galens Institute—and Kenneth Academy respectively for that most recent incident—had clearly been judged at least minimally adequate to address his needs.

So for Viv to be in such bad shape that she was beyond the school’s ability to treat her...

“What happened?” he asked hoarsely, feeling he was voicing the question for the thousandth time among them even in the 10 minutes it had been since Shido had sent that alert. “What was she doing?”

“We’re... not completely sure,” the Iron Bishop answered, but she sounded hesitant, looking out the window to her left at the passing buildings. “We don’t have enough information yet to paint the whole picture, so I’m not going to speculate. The lieutenant colonel is ahead of us though, so I’m hoping he’ll have more to share once we reach Altmore.”

There was a moment of quiet after that, a tense silence as all of them—Dent included, Rei was pretty sure—couldn’t help but contemplate the worst. Rei almost reached out to take Aria’s hand for comfort in fact, but restrained himself as he swallowed and looked instead out his own window.

He’d barely taken in the afterglow of Castalon’s neon lights for a few seconds, though, before the Bishop spoke again.

“Ward... I need you to answer me this time. How did you know?”

Rei turned back to the woman, but she hadn’t actually taken her own gaze away from the city even as she’d asked. He traded a glance with Aria, but she only offered a nervous pinching of her brow, which he could understand. Shido was a tricky subject to navigate, no matter who it was that was asking. The nature of his CAD’s S-Ranked Growth spec made it consistently astonishing to those out of—and often even in—the know about it, but just the same he had to be careful, in particular when it came to new developments.

But even setting aside the fact that Valera Dent was already aware of the Shido’s greatest secret, the woman had long since been someone Rei considered well and truly in the fold of his Device’s extraordinary nature.

“Shido, ma’am,” he answered after a second, looking back to the Bishop. “It gave me an alert maybe ten minutes ago.”

“An alert?” Valera did turn back to him now, frowning. “What sort of alert? It told you that Arada was hurt?”

“Not... Not exactly, no...” Rei responded uncertainly.

And then he explained as best he could.

It only took a minute or two—plus a screenshot of the notification—but when he finished explaining what had happened in more detail, neither Dent nor Aria seemed able to speak. The latter only gaped at him, mouthing at the air as her red hair and cap were framed against the city lights outside her window. She'd been quick enough to take him at his word that something had happened when he'd inadvertently dragged her out of bed, but now that she had all the information, Rei rather thought it looked like his girlfriend's brain had short-circuited.

Dent, on the other hand...

As he took in the captain in silence, waiting for someone else to speak, Rei saw an expression at once both strange and familiar flash across the woman's prosthetic features. There was shock there, yes—maybe not as pronounced as Aria's but present all the same—and there might also have been just a hint of alarm, a hint of concern at the information he'd just provided to the woman.

But deeper than that, layered behind those clearer feelings like Dent didn't want anyone to see them, Rei—not for the first time—could have sworn he saw something very much like triumph flaring in the Iron Bishop's brown eyes...

“Link manifestation'...?” Dent repeated slowly, not looking away from Rei. “And you have no idea what that's about, Cadet? You're sure?”

“A hundred percent, ma'am,” Rei said automatically, but before he could continue he stopped, considering this answer. Again he glanced at Aria, but unfortunately she seemed still a little too shellshocked to help him in the moment.

So he made the call himself.

“Err... Maybe more like... seventy percent, actually...?”

Dent's gaze sharpened abruptly, and she'd opened her mouth—very clearly about to order him to clarify this statement—when their flyer slowed, then started to descend. A quick look outside had them all taking note of the accenting lines of brilliant green



light that lined the massive glass face of the skyscraper whose upper floors they seemed to be dropping vertically along, and Rei realized they must have been arriving.

“Ward, you are going to explain what you mean by that later,” Dent told him sharply, making it very clear she wasn’t making a request. “No dancing. No dodging. This is important. Possibly even a thousand time more so than you could know.”

“Yes, ma’am,” was all Rei answered with, nodding. He had to agree, after all. Obviously he’d never been the only one interested in Shido’s growth and progress, but in the past week—especially after the Sectionals attack—that fact had been brought into extra sharp relief for him. He had no doubt whatever was going on with his Device would be of keen interest to a thousand other eyes, some of them likely even more knowledgeable of his situation than he was. It felt a little unfair, but he’d come to terms with it. At the end of the day, Rei couldn’t let himself forget he was a soldier of the ISCM, a cog in the great machine of war and entertainment that kept the Intersystem Collective safe.

At any cost.

The flyer soon slowed further, then came to a brief, hovering halt before setting down gently onto a massive protruding platform some 300 stories up the tower that had to have been the Altmore Medical Center. Sure enough, as Dent opened the door for them once more and stepped quickly out, the hospital’s name came into view in a curving neon line overtop the large, half-circle entrance that formed an intruding divot in the side of the building, leading to a long series of automated doors already opening and closing as several dozen people came and went even this late at night. Waiting just long enough to make sure Aria had come to her senses and realized they were exiting, Rei followed the captain out into the cold again, and when all three of them were clear of the flyer they jogged together towards the entrance. Several heads turned their way as they passed, scores of the tired eyes of staff and civilians alike snapping awake and wide when they caught sight of them. Most seemed to notice the Bishop first—as was

to be expected—but Rei had to ignore those attentions that fell on him and Aria after that, many people looking only further surprised—and some even more excited—as the two of them were recognized in turn. It was still a strange feeling, but even if Rei hadn't been singularly focused on why they were there, Sectionals had been a hundred times worse. At least they weren't outright accosted by paparazzi this time, and he suspected that those few people who might have been keen on approaching them were likely—and fortunately so, given the circumstance—put off by the Bishop's presence.

That was probably doubly so when a short man in green scrubs caught sight of the three of them from where he'd been hugging himself for warmth by the doors, lifting a hand when he did to wave them down. As they hurried his way, the word 'ALTMORE' became clear over his right breast pocket, displayed in clean white in all their NOEDs. There was a name there, too, Rei thought, but the man moved too quickly as they approached, already backpedalling into the building by the time they reached him.

"Captain," he said in gruff greeting, apparently recognizing Dent on sight and turning once they were at the doors to immediately start leading the way into a grand lobby of black and white marble, the lights hanging from the raised ceiling above them so bright it might as well have been daylight out. "I'm Josh Alberty, one of the nurses in the User Treatment Unit. They sent me to come get you when we heard you were on the way. We're already working on your cadet."

"Any news?" Dent asked quickly.

The nurse—Alberty—made a noncommittal shrug even as they weaved through the mill of patients and other staff to hurry down one of the innumerable halls that led out of the lobby. "Not much, sorry. I wasn't in the room long. She's definitely not out of danger, but I can tell you she was stable when she got to us. EMTs and their drones did a good job with her on the way here, which is always a good sign. Having your chief medical officer in the transport definitely helped, too, I bet."

“She’s okay, though?” Aria seemed unable to stop herself from asking in a rush.

Alberty looked over his shoulder to take her and Rei in with one blue-green eye, then, like he was assessing them. After a second, he offered something that might have been a smile.

“She’s being seen by the absolute best the UTU’s got. I always say you shouldn’t worry until there’s a reason too.”

Rei was grateful for the man, then, because the answer seemed to appease a bit of Aria’s concern at the very least. He, on the other hand, hadn’t missed the careful choice of the words, nor it seemed had Dent, because he thought he saw the woman’s jaw clench slightly.

The hospital—as was the nature of such places in Rei’s all-too-extensive experience—was a winding maze of halls, tunnels, stairs, ramps, and the like. Alberty led them deftly, but just the same it was a half-dozen turns and an elevator ride down about 100 floors before they appeared to reach their destination, coming to the end of a lengthy double-wide passage to a set of reinforced steel doors horizontally marked with yellow-and-black tape. Along the wall over these the name ‘Lindon C. Wight Wing - User Treatment Unit’ was bright in green letters atop the white paint of the walls, and reaching them it took a second of Alberty pausing to stand and look up at a small black box set under the words before the doors opened with a hiss of decompressing air. They swung outward quickly—an impressive feat given each of them wasn’t less than 3 feet thick—and the moment the gap was wide enough for them to fit, Alberty led the way inside.

The User Treatment Unit—or the ‘UTU’, apparently—was at once highly underwhelming and utterly awe inspiring. It was tiny—no more than five or six rooms in a circle around a single wide nurse’s station—and largely absent any of the activity or bustle they’d seen everywhere else as they’d made their way deeper into Altmore. There were no windows as far as Rei could tell, either, with the only illumination coming

from the white strip of solar lights that ringed the hall's black ceiling, splitting a line off into each door like a trail to be followed.

On the other hand, if Rei had been in a state of mind to do so, he probably would have stopped to gawk into every room he could, open-mouthed and salivating at the sheer amount of tech that lined the floors, walls, and ceiling of each of the spaces, making the UTU feel like the belly of some alien mothership.

There were anti-grav suspension tanks—long, transparent containers built to hold a human body still and stable for extended periods with zero risk of pressure sores or the like—along with User-grade treadmills and various other rehab equipment, some of them so massive and solid-looking they had to have been rated for A- or S-Ranked fighters. There were testing bays with more screens than Rei could count—reminding him of the equipment used by the ISCM medical staff during the CAD Assignment Exam to quantify their red blood cell count and other such metrics—and one of the rooms housed a massive arching machine with a thousand different mechanical arms that could only have been some kind of specialized surgical unit. These and more were all complimented by a thousand different tubes, cables, and wired tools that hung from the ceiling in various places, all neatly clipped to the walls for easy access and use to form mesmerizing, semi-mechanized curtains in some of the rooms. Any other day Rei would have begged to be allowed to take pictures so he and Catcher—and maybe even Logan, who'd been proving himself as avid an SCT enthusiast as either of them—could have fawned over every square inch of the place and the marvels it contained.

Instead, Rei had eyes only for the single brightly-lit room on the far side of the nurse's station—the only one showing any signs of activity.

A lone, broad-shouldered figure stood with his back to their newly-arrived group there, taking in the rush of action happening on the other side of the transparent smart-glass wall before him. It took a moment for Rei to recognize the man, and he blinked in surprise as he realized the figure was none other than Galen's own command officer,

Colonel Rama Guest. Even more so than Dent, the Colonel—the only other S-Ranked User among the school staff, though only a ‘lowly’ Pawn-Class to the Captain’s Knight—had never looked less the part of his position. He was in a rumpled black shirt with a sweater pulled hastily over it, and rather even than jeans he was sporting a pair of well-worn sweat pants. His brown hair—usually kept clean and tidy in a long ponytail—was a loose curtain down his back, and he looked to be wearing house slippers rather than any real shoes.

It couldn’t have been more apparent the man had bolted from his bed, grabbing whatever and whichever articles of clothing had been in reach as he’d rushed from his rooms on campus.

“This is where I leave you,” Alberty said by way of farewell when they were halfway around the hall. “I think it goes without saying, but please do not attempt to enter the room without permission from one of the physicians. Understood?”

All three of them nodded, Rei and Aria doing so only numbly. With that, the nurse hurried ahead, pausing again before the room’s door for a second biometric lock, then slipped inside. His appearance must have alerted Guest, because the Colonel seemed to come to from some distant place, standing up a little straighter and turning to face them, hands still at his back.

“Colonel.” Dent stopped only long enough to salute the man before stepping up beside him to peer through the wall herself. “How’s she doing?”

“Breathing,” Guest grunted in answer, turning back to the room himself. “But that’s about all I know...”

He’d only given Rei and Aria the briefest of appraising looks before returning his attention to the situation. Neither of them noticed, having even forgotten to salute themselves.

They were both too busy staring, horrified, at the activity happening within the unit.

Viv was already suspended inside of the one of the anti-grav tanks. She'd clearly been cut out of her combat suit, because her modesty was only currently being shielded by a white sheet that covered her lithe body as she floated in the air on her back in the vessel. She had more lines and wires attached to her arms, legs, neck, and chest than Rei had ever seen, and even as he watched others were being added to the mix. No less than six masked people in either green scrubs or white coats were rushing around the girl in surgically-ordered chaos, shouts and calls for various items, IVs, and data adding to the steady beeping of a heart monitor and the low thrum of the small anti-grav engine that had to be in the floor.

And that wasn't even the worst of it.

Rei felt a pinch at his side, and he blinked around to find that Aria hadn't looked at him, but was instead staring open-mouthed even as she let out a hoarse whisper.

"Rei... Her head... Look at her head..."

He frowned and turned back to the room, not immediately following.

Then his stomach dropped through the floor.

Somehow, in the surging bustle on the other side of the wall, he had missed the most alarming sight of all. At the top of the tank Viv's mouth was slack, and there seemed to be red residue that could only have been dried blood cling to her lips and nostrils. That was all of her face that Rei could see, though, because the rest of her features were obscured by a sleek, sterile-white module that capped the girl's skull like the upper part of a helmet to cover her hair, eyes, ears, and part of the back of her neck. A green light was pulsing steadily from under the metal along the contact line of the unit, and though Rei had actually only seen a similar machine once before, he recognized it immediately. A DTRU. A "deep-tissue reparative unit". A device that specialized in helping localized healing of truly traumatic organ damage.

And there was only one part of the body this particular DTRU could have been designed for.

“Oh no...” Rei heard himself choke out.

In the early phases of CAD-tech development, he was aware that brain damage had been a pervasive issue. First in the animal test subjects in the initial phases, with things improving quickly until only older Users—who had called on their Devices thousands on thousands of times over many decades of entertainment and services—were still at risk of developing cognitive complications. The fact was that CADs were mechanical hardware that interacted directly with organic tissue, something so taxing on the nervous system that NOEDs were the only form of biotech commonly integrated into the human body even after 500 years of access to quantum computers. Only the improvement of neuroline growth and a multitude of other steady changes to Devices had eradicated the problem for Users entirely, and that had taken more than a century.

But in extreme circumstances...

“You idiot, Viv...” Rei muttered to himself, so quietly he was pretty sure not even Aria beside him had heard.

He thought he knew, now, what had happened. Thought he had some sense of the situation, seeing the DTRU and thinking of Shido’s notification again. It was possible to overtax a CAD’s sensory input, of course, especially early on. Rei had managed it himself on more than one occasion, the first of which had been in the Commencement fight at the start of the previous semester. He’d woken up on a stretcher in the Arena underworks, having passed out from overstimulation after refusing to go down even after Aria—then only a new classmate and his opponent in the exhibition bout—had run him through belly to spine with Hippolyta. It wasn’t smart, but it happened, and passing out was the body’s warning that what had just occurred was stupid, and should not be repeated, just like falling unconscious was if one held their breath too long. Yes, Rei had ignored those physiological warnings before, and not infrequently.

But Viv seemed to have taken it to an entirely new level...

“She cooked her neuroline,” he hissed, looking around passed Dent to the Colonel. “Didn’t she? She pushed herself until she basically fried her wiring.”

Guest’s cheek twitched, and Rei realized for the first time that there was something more than concern there, in the man’s face.

There was fire, too.

“Full marks, Cadet,” the man growled, at last pulling his hands around from behind his back to cross his arms over his chest. “That is the working theory, yes. We’re not sure how, yet, but the activity logs in the training chamber she was found in indicate as much as well.”

Between Rei and the Colonel, Dent tensed at that.

“Meaning what, sir?” she asked slowly.

“Meaning that somehow, some way, Cadet Arada got access to S-Ranked training simulations, and was foolish enough to try her luck against them. Repeatedly.”

“Oh, Viv...” Aria breathed in disbelief on Rei’s other side, bringing a hand up to touch her fingers to the glass, like she wanted to reach out to the girl floating in the middle of the chaos of the room on the other side.

Rei, on the other hand, could only stare, cold drenching every inch of his body.

Bad, he thought again for the hundredth time. Very bad.

It was just as he’d suspected, and he wanted to kick himself for not seeing the signs. Viv, who he’d already been clued in on was feeling like she was being left behind. Viv, who’d been looking more and more tired over the course of the last week, like she hadn’t been getting enough sleep. He hadn’t put the pieces together at the time, but they’d been there, right there. How his best friend had gotten access to S-Ranked simulations—a training level Rei doubted any Galens student other than a very select few at the absolute top levels of the third years had permissions to use—the MIND only knew. He didn’t have the capacity to worry about it, in the moment. More



important to the immediate future was that Viv would make it through this, would make it through and wake up so that Rei could kill her himself for being such a dumbass.

And ask her if she actually thought he would ever leave her—her, arguably the sole reason he'd escaped Grandcrest and gotten to step foot onto the Galens grounds in the first place—behind...?

Rei couldn't help himself, then. Even conscious of Dent and Guest at his left, he reached out to take Aria's free hand, deciding as he did not to think too hard as to whether the trembling he felt as he did so was his, hers, or theirs to share...

He wasn't exactly sure how long the four of them stood outside the room like that. Maybe 15 minutes, maybe an hour. At one point one of the nurses came over to let them know they were temporarily making the wall opaque, but even after their view was blocked still none of them spoke. Then when the glass became clear again—revealing that Viv had been changed into more-considerate grey-and-white hospital gown that still accommodated all the wires and IV's attached to her—they still didn't say a word. For a while after that the bustle continued in the room, if a bit more subdued, until at long last a yellow-haired woman in a white coat—who looked to have been giving most of the commands—stepped away from Viv and seemed to make the call for the others to do the same. For nearly half a minute the six members of the care team stood in silence like that, every eye on a different monitor somewhere in the room. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the doctor spoke again from behind her mask, and the team all seemed to relax at once, then started to make for the room door, leaving only one female nurse behind with her NOED alive in her eyes, clearly staying to supervise.

“Are they done?” Aria asked immediately, the first of the four of them to speak. “Is she okay? What's happening??”

Neither Dent nor Guest answered her, and Rei could only squeeze her hand in a reassuring sort of way as the door in the wall to the right released and slid open again,

momentarily heightening the sounds of the monitors and anti-grav engine. The care team had a brief discussion in the hall, then four of them split away in a hurry without so much as glancing towards Rei and the others, which might have been odd if the fifth hadn't promptly turned to them to speak in a familiar, wheezing voice.

“Thank you all for coming so promptly. I am pleased to report that Cadet Arada is out of immediate danger.”

Lieutenant Colonel Willem Mayd, Galen's aged Chief Medical Officer, was removing his mask with gnarled hands even as he approached them. An elderly figure with a white beard and rare spectacles, the man's face was pale despite his assuring words, cutting short the rush of relief Rei had started to feel.

“That is not to say she is not still at risk,” the Lieutenant Colonel continued with a gentle look at Aria, who had started to perk up. “The cadet's condition is severe, and she will need to remain in observation here until she wakes up, at which point we will be able assess what, if any, damage may have occurred to her system.”

“Damage, sir...?” Dent asked from behind Rei, still sounding more subdued than he thought he'd ever heard the woman speak. “What sort of damage...?”

Mayd seemed only able to shake his head, though. “I can only speculate, unfortunately.” He looked around at Viv through the glass, whose pulse the supervising nurse seemed to be double-checking manually. “The largest concern we have by far is that Arada is currently suffering some moderate cerebral edema. Brain swelling. It's to be expected in cases like this—a significant overdraw of Cognition, particularly when combined with excessive input of a Device's sensory systems—but it is still problematic. It's why she was brought here.” The man lifted a hand to indicate the UTU. “Galens lacks the tools required to optimize prognosis in such situations. The fact that we managed to get the cadet here so quickly is a good sign—a very good sign—but she is certainly not out of the woods just yet.”

There was a pause at this, all of them taking in the Lieutenant Colonel's explanation, but it was kept short when the Bishop spoke again.

"You didn't answer the question, sir," she said quietly. "What sort of damage are we talking...?"

Mayd looked momentarily pained, then let out a sigh, like he'd been hoping Dent wouldn't push the issue.

It was clear why as he answered.

"If Cadet Arada suffers any lasting damage—and I do mean if—her complications could range from practically imperceivable memory deficits to severe physical or cognitive disabilities. Or both." He grimaced slightly. "It is apparent from the logs and the information we've gathered from the medical drone she had on hand during her training that the cadet put herself through something... terrible. The outcomes of which could be very, very dire..."

Another quiet, longer this time.

And then Aria asked the question Rei didn't think he could have brought himself to.

"Sir... Could she... Could Viv... die?"

Willem Mayd's eyes were as steady and calm as Rei had ever see them as he took Aria in carefully.

"Such an outcome is very doubtful, Laurent. Very doubtful. And certainly not worth dwelling on unless we have any indication that Cadet Arada is slipping in that direction."

'Yes', Rei translated for himself, squeezing Aria's hand again as it twitched in his own grasp, she too clearly understanding the answer for what it actually was. The kindest way to say 'yes'...

"Lieutenant Colonel, you say you've gathered information from the drone as well?" Colonel Guest's usual strength sounded to be returning to his voice. "Madison

hasn't had the opportunity to pull those logs for me yet, as I've put her on contacting Arada's parents. Any idea how this happened?"

Mayd shook his head again. "I'm afraid not. I did pull the information myself on the way over here, but..." He looked back towards Viv. "It's odd. Cadet Arada should not have had the ability to access any combat simulations ranked above the middle Bs, much less S. She would have had to get special permission for that, and even then supervision should have been provided. And yet..."

"And yet?" Guest's press was angry, distant thunder, and Rei and Aria both looked over their shoulder's to find the Colonel too, watching Viv intently, the barest hint of orange light in the dim reflection of his face in the glass.

"And yet there's no record..." Mayd finished, sounding grim. "Nothing. No mark of access granting other than metadata indicating it was done. No permission signed, or even sent for signature. It's actually the reason I asked the Captain to fetch these two." His eyes were still kind as they shifted to Rei and Aria. "I was hoping for... information."

He left the request open-ended, not making a question or demand out of it, nor pressing them. Just the same, Rei felt the sudden urge to shout, to tell them all everything, anything he could think of that might help the situation, dangerous as it could be put out in the open.

Aria beat him to it.

"Cadet Arada has likely been overextending herself all week, sir," she answered in half a whisper, half a rush. "We... We didn't realize it. Not until tonight."

"Overextending herself how, Cadet?" Mayd pushed gently.

"It's possible she hasn't been sleeping. At least not much. Instead, she's probably been staying up training."

"Yes. She has. That much we are already aware of just from the activity logs. The fact that she also seems to have been granted permission to ignore curfew is another

mystery, for the moment. Another allowance apparently given without any staff being directly linked to that allowance. Could you, perhaps, enlighten us as to why Cadet Arada chose to put herself through this, though?” Mayd lifted a hand to wave through the glass. “Even a suspicion?”

“We think she’s afraid of being left behind...”

The words slipped out before Rei could so much as consider them. They refused to be held back, refused to be suppressed. They’d fallen from his mouth like his guilt needed desperately to escape along with them.

“We think she’s pushed herself to ‘catch up’, whatever that means,” he answered quietly, finding himself having a hard time meeting the Lieutenant Colonel’s eyes as they fell on him, now. “After Catcher and Chancery at Sectionals... then Aria... We think Viv’s afraid of being left behind...”

“Is that so...?” Mayd looked to be considering this. “Hmm... I do suppose one can follow the logic...”

“You think so?” Guest barked, though Rei couldn’t help but doubt his anger was being directed at Viv in the moment. “Viviana Arada is rapidly proving the most promising Duelist the Institute has seen in a generation. What would possess her to feel like she could ever be ‘left behind?’”

“A multitude of factors, Colonel, the least of which being the extraordinary circumstances of the situation that child in there has found herself embroiled in, I suspect.” Mayd hadn’t looked away from Rei even as he answered. “If anything, one can sympathize, I believe. An odd thing though, Cadet Ward... Laurent mention you’d developed some of these suspicions tonight? Is that correct?”

Rei swallowed, seeing the question coming.

He decided to head it off.

“Yes, sir,” he answered, finally finding it himself to let go of Aria’s hand. “I— we—put it together after... after Shido notified me it had linked with Gemela...”

There was a silence at this. Whatever Mayd had expected to hear in answer to his query, it clearly hadn't been that, because the old man was staring at Rei with genuine surprise for once, eyes going a little wide behind his glasses. Behind them, too, the Colonel had gone quiet, while Dent—who seemed for some reason only to have grown more and more withdrawn throughout their discussion—didn't say a word.

It was Mayd who found his tongue first.

“Cadet Ward...” he started slowly, like he wasn't sure he'd heard properly. “I would ask you to explain what you mean by that, if you pl—”

But then the Lieutenant Colonel paused, blinking and straightening in surprise as his NOED lit up suddenly in his eyes. Behind them, Rei thought he felt Guest and Dent shift too, and he and Aria both looked around to find the pair's frames alight as well, both expressions puzzled while they read whatever notice had just flared across their vision.

And then Dent's jaw clenched.

“She's here?” she snarled like she couldn't believe what she was reading. “Here?”

“Apparently,” the colonel answered in a growl. “How convenient for her...” Then, for some reason, his eyes fell on Rei, taking him in like he was considering something.

It was only a second before he made his decision, and the order came before Rei or Aria could ask what was going on.

“Dent. Get them out of sight.”

WHOOM!

With a blast of air and a shout of shock from both of them, Rei and Aria found themselves each taken up by one arm in an iron grip and wrenched painful along at a terrifying speed. In a blink, though, the captain had them in front of a nearby room, the door already open since the space wasn't occupied.

“In here, both of you,” Dent said quickly, half guiding, half shoving the pair of them in, one hand moving to the inside wall by the door the moment it was free. “Do not come out, do not make a sound. She probably doesn’t know you’re here.”

“She?!” Rei demanded even as he and Aria both stumbled back to catch themselves against the momentum of the Bishop’s strength. “Who is ‘she’?!”

“Ward,” Dent snapped even as her fingers blurred through the controls that had popped up at her touch, pulling up the wall display options and turning the transparent glass opaque in a blink. “That was not a request, that was an order. Do not come out. Do not make a sound. We’ll explain after.”

And then she was gone again, leaving the door—perhaps deliberately?—open behind her.

For a second Rei and Aria just stood there, staring out into the clear hall and the empty nurse’s station that was all they could see from where they stood. Rei wanted to march right back outside and demand to know what was going on, but something kept him from doing so, something held him back...

Had that been... fear in the Bishop’s voice?

“Rei... come on...”

Aria’s quiet voice—couple with her tugging on his sleeve—had him stepping back away from the open door. They were in one of the less-crowded patient rooms—the one with a large, multi-armed surgical device that hung over an empty suspension tank—so it was a simple act of moving away from the door along the wall to get completely out of sight. It wasn’t a second too soon, either, because before they’d made the corner Aria seemed to be aiming for there was a clunk and the sound of releasing air.

The UTU doors were opening, Rei realized with a thrill he couldn’t explain.

Click-click-click...

The sounds was all too familiar. Heavy soles across a hard floor. Leather military boots, confident in their stride. It shouldn't have stood out, and even if it had it should probably have been comforting.

And yet, for some reason, it made the hair on Rei's arms stand on end...

Click-click-click...

And then the footsteps stopped.

"Colonel Guest," a woman's voice, clear but tinged with the hint of an accent unknown to Rei, greeted Guest politely. "It's been too long. How nice to see you."

"And you, ma'am," Guest's answer was smooth, but guarded. "Though I have to apologize for my and my staff's presentation. I don't think we were aware you were in-system, much less planetside. Had we been informed you were coming, we would have—"

"It doesn't matter," the woman cut him off easily, tone as even as it was firm, like there was nothing else to discuss on the matter. "I'd been hoping to catch General Laurent before he took his leave of the city. I missed him, regrettably, but as a result I was already in Castalon when I was notified of the situation."

"Yes," Guest again, and it sounded like he'd turned back to face the room Viv was in. "It's unfortunate, but Lieutenant Colonel Mayd here has a handle on it, along with the team here. Cadet Arada is being well looked after, though we appreciate—"

"Ah. I'm sorry. Cadet Arada's unfortunate condition is not what I was referring to. I only found out about that a moment ago."

There was a moment of silence.

And then, despite having been snubbed of greeting, Lieutenant Colonel Mayd's voice came polite as could be.

"Then might you enlighten us on the 'situation' you are referring to, General Abel?"



Rei's mouth went dry, his whole body stiffening. In front of him, Aria, too, tensed, and she whirled in silence to stare at him with wide eyes, like she wanted to yell out the connection she, too, had just made.

“Of course, you wouldn't have been informed yet,” the woman who could only be Shira Abel, Central Command general and one of the signatories of the very transfer orders that had oh-so-recently turned Rei's world upside down, answered smoothly. As she continued, there was a dull sound like a finger tapping on glass. “As it happens, you may be pleased to know that Cadet Arada in there just became the second first year student at Galens to get assigned a User-Unique Ability...”

## CHAPTER 4

“... Excuse me?”

Guest's question came in something that was just louder than a growl, breaking the several seconds of a silence so deafening it had seemed to drown out even the faint beep of Viv's heart monitor Rei could still make out from her room.

Fortunately, Shira Abel proved herself anything but a coy sort of woman.

“It's as I said, Colonel,” the general answered smoothly. “As of about forty-five minutes ago, Viviana Arada was assigned a User-Unique Ability. The second first year at Galens to receive one. The second first year ever in fact, and only one of a stark handful of sub-S-Ranked User in the history of the ISCM, much less students. ‘Endwalker’, it's apparently called, though obviously we have no idea what it does just yet. I was on my way to try and ascertain just that information when I was made aware of the Arada's condition. Unfortunate circumstances, to say the least.”

Through his own stunned haze, the words—despite being well-chosen—left Rei with the nasty impression it wasn't the actual danger Viv was in that was 'unfortunate' to the general.

"User...User-Unique?" Mayd sounded as lost for words as Rei had ever heard the man. "General... Are you quite sure?"

"Entirely sure, Lieutenant Colonel. I was notified the moment Central caught wind of it. For the last week or so I have had several officers in Sol on specific assignment to monitor the Galens Institute. For good reason, apparently."

Another silence, though this time Rei couldn't be sure if it was a lack of response to this particular statement, or simply lingering shock at Abel's announcement.

For his part, he was certainly feeling the latter...

A User-Unique Ability. User-Unique. That was... unreal. Utterly and completely unreal. Shido was one thing. As largely unfathomable as the Device was, as constantly mind-warping as its progress had been over the last half-year, Rei's CAD was in possession of an S-Ranked Growth spec. As impossible a concept as it might be, there was at least some semblance of a tangible reason Shido had made the leaps and bounds it had, and even developed not one but two of its own User-Unique Abilities. Impossible opportunity could lead to impossible outcomes, after all. Yes, Shido was one thing.

But Gemela...

That settled it. That had to settle it. There could no longer be any argument to the contrary. Rei and Aria had already had their suspicions. Shido had already spelled it out for them. 'Shard 1'. 'New link'. 'Manifestation'. And now a User-Unique Ability in a lowly C-Ranked CAD that just happened to be in Rei's orbit?

That settled it.

Aria put words to the conclusion a second before he could.

“Rei...” she whispered, so quietly he barely heard even standing at her elbow as they stared at the grey wall of the room. “It’s Shido. It has to be Shido.”

He could only barely manage even to nod.

“Do we... Do we know why? Or how, rather?”

Colonel Guest was speaking again from outside in the hall, and he sounded to have steadied himself a little bit following the initial shock.

“The observation team has their suspicions.” Abel’s voice was still amicable and even, like they were discussing nothing more than the choice of flooring tile under their feet. “Undoubtedly in the same realm of your own, unless I’m overestimating the quality of the staff at Galens. We started taking note of it at Sectionals, after Layton Catchwick and Chancery Cashe’s unexpected developments. I had thought the physical manifestation of Laurent’s C8 evolution was the cherry on top, but now... well...” there came the sound of a finger tapping on glass again. “Now things are a little different, aren’t they?”

Something itched at Rei, at those words. Scraped at him through his shock. He couldn’t help but imagine Abel staring through the glass at Viv like his best friend was some fascinating animal at the zoo. He ground his teeth, hands balling into fists at his sides. He wished he could see the woman, wished he had it in him to defy Dent’s orders and brave a glance around the frame of the door, to at least get a look at this witch that seemed to be making Viv out to be some kind of specimen that—

But Rei stopped, letting out a quiet “Oh” as a realization popped into his head.

Then he reached out to touch the wall, pulling up the smart-glass options.

“Rei,” Aria hissed under her breath, starting as he moved. “What are you—?!”

He shushed her silently with one finger of his other hand to his lips, though, not looking around as he brought up the display options even as Abel continued outside.

“I commend you, Colonel. I have to admit I did not believe your Institute was willing to push the students under your care to this extent. You’re making me wonder if I put my name to Ward and Arada’s transfer orders prematurely.”

Rei’s hand twitched over the choices he was rapidly scrolling through, but he didn’t stop. Not until he found what he was looking for. Mayd had said once that there was a one-way mirror option for the hospital walls, hadn’t he? Could that mean there was a similar option that might work?

“... Ma’am?” Guest answered the general like he didn’t understand what she was saying.

Come on, Rei hoped silently, still scrolling. Come ooooo... There!

He found the button he was looking for and punched it. Without so much as a flicker the wall turned transparent, though not quite as clear as it would have been in window mode. He’d been lucky. One-way glass had been one of the public options accessible, probably for the entertainment and stimulation of bed-ridden patients.

And as a result, he and Aria were suddenly taking in the hall without so much as a glance from any of the now-four people standing outside of Viv’s room, not 20 feet from where the two of them were hidden.

Rei didn’t know if he’d ever seen Guest or Mayd so tense. They both looked like they were still coping with the absurdity of the news that had just been delivered to them, a little pale as they were, but other than that the pair looked so stiff they might have been standing over the edge of 1000-foot cliff. On the other hand, Dent—standing between them—had a very different expression, a sort of quiet, seething hostility that the captain seemed only barely to be masking behind the features of her full-frame prosthetic.

Rei didn’t pay attention to any of them, though. He was too busy taking in what little of the stranger was mostly turned away from him and Aria, one hand still raised

to press a single finger ponderously to the clear glass wall of Viv's room, the other casual resting in a fist at the crook of her back.

Shira Abel was no User—there wasn't a hint of a CAD around either wrist Rei could see—but she possessed a powerful presence all the same. A tall, regal woman, her black-and-golds were pristine and her posture twice as clean and sharp as even the officers who had taught the Galens cadets proper military decorum at the start of the year. Her hair was a thick sheet of pure black, only artfully streaked with two narrow white stripes along the side of her head Rei could see, and was cut in a clean line to just above her shoulders to match the straight bangs obvious even in profile. She had light brown skin, and the one eye he could make out was strikingly blue and set over a handsome, straight nose. Despite her age—likely in her 50s, if Rei had to guess—he might have called the woman 'beautiful' were it not for what he could make out of her expression, a look so distinct it clenched at his gut even if he could only see half her face.

He'd been wrong, Rei realized suddenly. He'd thought Abel would be looking at Viv like some petting zoo prize, like some coveted owned thing. He'd thought he'd look on the general and hate her, hate her with a fire already started by the theater of transfer "orders" that Abel had added her signature to earlier that very evening. He'd been wrong. The general wasn't looking at Viv like a caged animal.

She was looking at Viv like a starving soul presented with a feast.

Something cold—so cold it was almost sharp—trickled up Rei's spine, in that moment. He wouldn't realize what it was till later, after he'd return to the dorms and his bed again to lie awake until morning, staring at the ceiling and thinking. In the moment he was too distracted, too intent on listening to the conversation and finding out more about what was going on with Viv, the general, and beyond.

But later, as the dim lights of his room swam eerily against the white cement overhead, he would think back on that instant and know.

Afraid.

For some reason, for some awful reason, looking upon Shira Abel made Rei feel nothing but afraid.

“I was saying I commend you,” the general repeated, addressing Guest’s hesitant question but still not looking away from Viv. “I’m impressed. As stated, Arada’s condition is unfortunate, but the outcome cannot be denied. Had I known the Galens staff had it in the them to push their cadet’s to achieve something like this, I might have been more hesitant to agree to the request for—”

“General,” Dent’s snarl cleaved like a knife across Abel’s words. “I must be misunderstanding. It seems like you are implying that the Institute deliberately put Cadet Arada in this position, endangering her health—her life—for... what, exactly?”

By the wall, the general didn’t answer, still staring with that ugly, passive hunger. Inside the room, the remaining nurse was now eyeing the four officers nervously, standing unmoving over Viv’s suspended form like some prey animal trying not to catch the attention of the monsters in the hall.

Only after several seconds did Abel finally drop her hand from the glass to join the other at her back, turning to face Guest, Mayd, and Dent with what could only have been a frustrated sigh. Seeing her full-on for the first time, Rei decided that the woman was indeed beautiful, despite the chilling edge of her presence.

When she spoke though, addressing Guest as her keen blue eyes fell on the man, nausea replaced any admiration Rei could grant her appearance.

“Yes... I considered I was giving your staff too much credit on my way over here, Colonel. How unfortunate.” She looked to Dent, her expression as benign and uninterested as anyone Rei had ever seen when taking in the Knight-Class woman. “I stand corrected, Captain. Thank you for pointing that out. I feel better having given my blessing to ensure the future of the assets you currently host at this school. Oh, resent me all you like.” Her voice suddenly took on an edge of impatient fatigue as Dent

bristled visibly before the general. “I do not have the luxury to play parent and teacher to the cadets of the ISCM. You can think me callous, I do not care. I have larger things to be worried about than the wellbeing of a single soldier. Frankly—” she lifted her chin to look down her nose a little at the Iron Bishop, taking her in critically “—of all people, I admit, I had hoped you might understand that. Disappointing.”

Rei could see Dent fighting not to let the fury boil over, then, the tinge of white starting the glimmer around the brown of her eyes. Mayd, too, seemed to notice, because even as the captain opened her mouth to answer this, he cut in with only a sidelong glance at Guest.

“General,” the old man wheezed, his tone clear and polite. “I’m afraid I’m a little in the dark. The chief combat instructor as well, I would guess. May I ask what it is you ‘gave your blessing’ to...?”

Abel had looked around at the chief medical officer, apparently about to answer him, when the colonel beat her to it.

“The general—” Guest must have found his strength again, because his words came in a harsh rumble “—is referring to meeting I had this past evening with Cadets Ward and Laurent. A meeting in which we were all regrettably informed that Central Command is considering transferring the pair of them out of the care of the Galens Institute after the end of the year, depending on certain... contingencies...”

There was no pause, this time.

“What?!”

The demand came mirrored from the captain and lieutenant colonel both. Dent—already clearly straddling the edge of the knife that was her own fury—was expectedly snappish, but it was the faintest hint of a snarl in Mayd’s voice that had Rei’s hands going cold. Mayd, the collected, ever-benevolent figure who he never would have guessed was capable of anger. Mayd, the grandfatherly doctor who had always been the

calming presence even when the likes of Dent or Ameena Ashton had lost a bit of their cool.

Mayd, who was now staring at Shira Abel with a smoldering displeasure that Rei thought might have set his uniform alight.

And yet again the general didn't so much as blink at their rage.

"The colonel is at liberty to explain the situation as he sees fit," she said coolly, not looking away from Guest, her chin still held high. "But yes. Certain concerns were levied against the Galens Institute by the parents of Cadet Aria Laurent. Concerns Central could not easily dismiss, in particular given who her father is. I'm sure you understand."

"No, General." Mayd's voice was still tempered, but there was a seething note that boiled in his answer. "No. We certainly do not. Reidon Ward is not any common cadet. I am positive you are aware of this. Nor is Aria Laurent, in her own right. And I can assure you—perhaps better than anyone standing here—that Ward in particular is progressing at an as-of-yet incomparable rate to any newly-assigned User the ISCM has ever seen. And I don't just mean his rank. Ward's diagnosis has seen a near-complete resolution since his induction at the Institute. Those symptoms he entered school with have demonstrated an organic reversal, as have the minimal ones he's experienced since. He has the best care the school can provide, and the best instructors it can provide. Why in the MIND's name would you deign to attempt to uproot him from a foundation like—?"

"I will 'deign' to do as I see fit, Lieutenant Colonel. Not for you, not for me, not Galens nor Astra-3 nor even this entire system. For the ISC as a whole, I will 'deign' to do as I see fit."

For the first time Shira Abel's tone had changed in truth. No longer was she placidly addressing the other three in turn as though they were having any typically boorish discussion. No longer was she taking them in one after the other with nothing more than mild disappointment and disinterest. Abruptly the woman's entire aura had



shifted, a cold, iron sort of force seeping like venom into her words as she glared openly at Mayd, now. Had she been Dyrk Reese, Rei thought the woman might have tried to leverage her rank, tried to make the lieutenant colonel feel small in the moment. She didn't, though. She didn't have to.

Shira Abel, even lacking a CAD, emanated dangerous conviction so palpable Rei felt Aria tense at his side.

“It is your duty—your responsibility—to see Reidon Ward and those around him as charges in your care. As children, even.” Her words were no less steely when she continued. “That is important. I acknowledge it. For the wellbeing of our soldiers and the military as a whole. But it is not my duty.” She hissed the statement out like a lash. “My duty runs deeper, Lieutenant Colonel. Much, much deeper. Central Command bears responsibilities I lack not only the words to express, but also the desire to do so if I did. You can keep your stumbling protests. I don't care. They matter as little to me as the drowned out cries of any single other person in the Collective. I am not here to serve you. I am not here to serve me. I am here to serve the ISC. And I will do so as I. See. Fit.”

For a few seconds she stared Mayd down. To his credit the old man didn't blink, but he didn't respond either, likely knowing he had already overreached the line of rank and file he should by all rights have been toeing. Abel, for her part, didn't look smug at this lack of answer, didn't seem pleased or even give the sense she had the remotest interest of claiming any sort of victory. On the contrary, she simply stood a little straighter, she looked over her shoulder through the wall at Viv again.

“Besides, as Colonel Guest is already aware, you have made the very points raised by the Laurents. I am not here to besmirch the Galens Institute, Lieutenant Colonel. On the contrary, I give you all the credit you deserve—and more than many in Sol, actually—for having brought Ward this far. For having brought them all this far. But the fact that he is indeed being served by the best Galens has to offer is the problem.”

Abel frowned, watching Viv drift gently within the suspension tank, the hem of her gown and the slack of the cables and tubes extending from all over her body drifting around her like she was swaying in a gentle current. “If things were different, I might even fight to keep them where they are. The Institute has done a tremendous job with Reidon Ward. Truly.” She looked back around at Mayd, but then her eyes were past him and sweeping over Guest and Dent both. “Regrettably, it is not a different time, and I have made my decision. Colonel, I believe you are aware of the expectation General Laurent has for the situation?”

“General Laurent’.” Guest repeated in a growl like he were trying not to laugh, both large hands clenched into fists by his sides. “Yes. Of a sort, ma’am.”

Abel nodded. “Good enough. Then there’s nothing more to discuss.” She tossed a thumb over her shoulder. “I want daily updates on Arada’s condition for my supervisory team. And an immediate notification of when she wakes up.” The woman’s eyes flashed briefly, then something pinged the colonel’s own frame. “That’s the contact for Chief Warrant Officer Cassidy Maran. She can be your liaison. Clear?”

“Yes, ma’am,” came the answer, forced out through clenched teeth.

“Wonderful. Then my job here is done.”

And with that—and not so much as a glance at the other two officers—Shira Abel slipped past Guest to head back toward the UTU’s entrance, boots clicking over the floor again with quick, confident strides. Rei watched her come, watched her round the nurses station, his eyes unable to leave the general’s cool, iron features. She neared the door of the surgical suite they had been hidden away in, then passed it, nearing them with every step.

And then she stopped, coming to a halt directly in front of where Rei and Aria stood on the other side of the wall, and he felt his heart stop.

“I hope there comes a time where you don’t think of me as nothing more than a monster,” she said. Her voice was high and clear, but apparently not so much so that

she was easily heard by the three still standing some 20 feet back around the curve of the hall from her.

“Ma’am?” Guest called stiffly after her, like he hadn’t quite heard.

But Shira Abel didn’t answer him. Instead she was off again, reaching the UTU’s heavy doors in a handful of quick, firm strides, and slipping through them into the hall outside the moment they were opened wide enough to do so.

## CHAPTER 5

Dent only gave the transparent wall a glance when the colonel had her retrieve Rei and Aria from the room, raising an eyebrow at them both but not saying a word when she beckoned them out from the doorway. The pair of them barely noticed, dumbstruck as they were even a minute’s wait after Abel’s exit.

“And now you’ve had the pleasure of ‘meeting’ General Shira Abel,” the colonel spoke with something like a sigh as they were led back to wall of Viv’s room. “Given our discussion this past evening, I’m going to assume you two recognize the name?”

Rei and Aria could only offer unsteady nods of confirmation.

“I would have introduced you, but that may have led to some... unnecessary complications.” Guest snorted dryly. “I’m sorry I had Dent dragged you away like that, but I don’t think Abel finding the pair of you here would have led to anything good. At least not right now.”

Rei found his tongue at last, at that.

“Is she...?” he started uncertainly, still struggling with the layers of complications the encounter had just added to the situation. “Is the general... someone to look out for, sir?”

Rei might have imagined it, distracted as he was, but he thought he caught the three officers all trade a glance at this question as Dent came stand at Guest’s right.

“General Abel is... a complicated subject, Cadet.” The colonel offered after a second, somewhat carefully. “Toeing the line, I think I can only go as far as to recommend that you and Cadet Laurent avoid crossing paths with her, whenever possible. Not that you should ever have had the occurrence.” He frowned around at the doors Abel had left through. “Trying to catch General Laurent, she said? Whether or not that’s true, it’s a hell of a coincidence.”

“You don’t think she...?” Aria started from Rei’s side, eyes wide as she looked from her uncle to Viv still floating in her tank on the other side of the wall, watched now by a much-relieved-looking nurse.

“What? Oh. No, no.” Guest shook his head, then paused before continuing in a grumble as he faced his niece. “She seemed genuinely surprised at the situation. Though not displeased...”

“Sir, she was practically dancing under those black and golds,” Dent all-but-snarled, and Rei again couldn’t help but take note of the anger that Abel seemed to have brought out in the Bishop.

“What a miserable soul,” Mayd mumbled as though in agreement. As the colonel had, he too was watching the UTU doors. “One must feel for her, I think.”

“Must one?” Dent asked with venomous sarcasm.

“Careful, Captain,” Guest warned, turning his attention on her briefly with a frown. “She is still your superior. And to be fair to her, her responsibilities do eclipse those of any of us standing here.”

Dent offered no answer to that, like silence was the best response she had to give. After a second the colonel seemed to decide this was acceptable, because his attention drifted back to Viv and her nurse through the smart glass “... A User-Unique Ability? Unbelievable...”

It made Rei feel a little better about his own shock that Rama Guest could still be so shaken by the news. At the very least, it helped him find his tongue again.

“Sir... Aria and I were saying, while the general was here... About Viv’s Ability... We think that confirms something we’ve been wondering about for a while now...”

The tension returned twice over at his words, though of a different sort that had lingered after Abel’s parting. The three officers—Dent having moved around to stand at Guest’s side so she could face them now—all took in Rei and Aria with an intensity so sharp it was like they were all trying to see through them.

“Yes, you were saying, Cadet,” Mayd pressed gently from their left. “Shido has... ‘linked’ with Gemela, did you say?”

“Yes, sir...” Rei answered uncertainly. “I got the notification about ten minutes before Captain Dent picked us up.”

“Notification?” Mayd repeated, brow furrowing. “Might we request to see that, if you please, Cadet?”

This time, Rei didn’t hesitate, bringing up the very screenshot he had taken for Dent and Aria on their flight from Galens. The captain, sure enough, didn’t do more than frown slightly when he resent it to a channel Guest opened for all five of them standing there, but the colonel and lieutenant colonel respectively both had eyes the size of their fists by the time they’d finished reading—and then rereading—the notice.

“By the MIND...” Mayd was the first to get out. “I certainly had my own suspicions but... By the MIND...”

“Ward, do you know what any of this means?” Guest asked of Rei, though the man was still staring wide-eyed at the picture in his frame. “Other than the obvious.”

“Other than the link with Gemela, sir?”

“That, and the fact that your Device is likely in the process of forming the same with other CADs in your vicinity?”

Rei swallowed at that, at once made only more anxious and relieved by the fact that Guest had clear come to the same conclusion he had in what little opportunity there had been to consider it.

“I would agree with that,” Mayd added. He too was still reviewing the notification when Rei turned to look at him. “Cadet Arada has been nearest to you and your Device the longest, Ward, but my understanding of the situation is that the both of you have been close to Layton Catchwich for some time now. And Cadet Laurent here similarly so.” He gestured towards Aria without looking away from his frame. “If we assume this ‘Shard 1’ link that has formed with Gemela means it is taking up some portion of whatever that ‘max link capacity’ is, the possibility that it would be taking up the entirety of this percentage value is... remote.”

It was, Rei agreed silently, nodding along. It didn’t seem correct that Gemela’s link would be filling all 62% of the max capacity, whatever that meant. Not when Rei had also been training with Catcher for the better part of half a year, and Aria again for most of that. More likely was that Gemela was taking up some fraction—big or small—of the capacity, while the rest was filled by links that were already in process...

That wasn’t all the evidence they had, though, was it?

“It... may go deeper than that, sir...” Rei said slowly.

Guest blinked at that, finally looking through the notification. “Oh?” he asked slowly.

Not exactly sure how to explain it, Rei took a second.

Enough time to let Aria get bluntly to the point.

“Chancery, sir,” she said quietly. “Cadet Cashe.”

Guest, Dent, and Mayd all frowned at that, then nodded together.

“Cashe,” Guest repeated. “And her Warband...”

At that, at last, he closed out of his NOED and turned his attention in full back on Rei and Aria.

“Tell us everything you know, Cadets,” he ordered steadily. “Everything.”

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It didn't take long for Ward to fill them in on the suspicions he and Laurent had been harboring. In quick order—and with frequent help from Laurent herself—he told the three of the curiosity that had started mounting after Chancery Cashe had developed Warband so oddly close to Layton Catchwick's earning the Saber's own rare Ability, Ruinous. At the time they had apparently told themselves the possibility of it being a coincidence was certainly possible—Cashe and Catchwick both had innate skill and had been putting in an incredible number of extra training hours even outside of class, after all—but after Laurent's own incredible evolution when she'd hit C8 not a few days later, they had grown more certain. No solid evidence, however, had ever made itself known.

At least not until that evening.

Valera had almost found it in herself to smile a few times, listening to the pair, listening to how they had pieced things together for themselves. They were echoing suspicions she happened to know for a fact a tight circle of the Galen's higher ups—present company included—had been whispering about for a week now. They weren't the only ones, either, given Central clearly had their eye on the situation.

Central and... others...

Yeah... Valera didn't have it in her heart to smile, in the moment. Not when it was taking every ounce of her self control not to let leak out the torrent of other emotions that was already collecting like a building flood in her chest.

As a group they reviewed the alert Ward's CAD had given him, trying collectively to glean any information that might have been missed in the first dozen passes they'd all made, anything that might provide a better clearer picture as to what was going on. After an extra half-hour theorizing themselves in rapid circles, however, they had gotten no further in their assessment of the situation, with the only conclusions being the ones they'd already come to. Yes, it couldn't be denied, now, that Shido was indeed interacting with the CADs it had contact with—or at least had the most contact with.

What was more, however, that connection was manifesting in some psuedo-tangible way in the form this ‘Shard 1’ that had developed with Gemela.

And, to highlight and evening of impossibilities with an accent of oddness, they all agreed that General Abel lack of mention of this fact meant that—for whatever reason—Central Command was unaware of the specifics of that development, even despite knowing of Arada’s evolution and Ability before anyone else.

That fact above all else, Valera suspected, was the reason Rama Guest—after ensuring the pair of them hadn’t told anyone else the particulars of Shido’s alert—made the call to order Ward and Laurent to secrecy regarding ‘Shard 1’ and all information relevant to it. The cadets had started to protest, of course, but Guest had been unmoving in his command.

“There is more going on here than any of us are aware of, Cadets,” he had said evenly. “You have to see that. Until we have more information on the situation—and understand why only Ward was the one to be notified about these developments—we have to play it close to the chest. Yes, Ward—” he’d cut the boy off when he opened his mouth to respond “—even from the other members of your squad. I know you understand this already. The gag order when you developed Type Shift was necessary too, if for different reasons, and you followed that. I expect you to do the same here.”

There hadn’t been further arguements on the subject from there—though the two’s grumbled acknowledgements of ‘Yes, sir...’ had been anything but enthusiastic—and Guest had dismissed them all after that, saying he would stay till morning to see if there was any overnight news. This had expectantly triggered an entire new wave of protests from Ward and Laurent—the former in particular all-but-demanding to be allowed to stay in case Arada woke up—and it had been Mayd this time to calm them down, telling them it was unlikely the girl would come to in the next few days, much less that very night. It took the chief medical officer granting special permisison for Ward and Laurent—as well as any other member of Firesong who wanted it—to visit



Arada on their off time before the two allowed themselves to be begrudgingly led by Valera from the UTU again, leaving Mayd and the colonel as they did.

The higher officers quite conversation as the unit doors swung shut was in sharp contrast to the utter silence the Valera and the cadets walked in as they followed a hundred different “Exit” signs through the maze of hospital corridors and back out into the night.

The trip back to Galens was just as quiet, with Ward and Arada seemingly working on processing the evening events with difficulty. Again the pair of them held hands as the city lights whipped by past the windows of the flyer Valera had summoned for them, and again she chose not to reprimand them for the public display. For one thing, she thought it reasonable that the pair sought comfort in whatever way they could manage it, given the circumstances.

For another, she was far too lost in her own head to care.

She dropped the cadets off where she’d retrieved them from, in front the of the first year dormitory in the north east corner of the Institute campus. She’d though one or both of them would have some final question to pose to her as they parted ways, perhaps, but instead Ward and Laurent both only offered her tired salutes as they all stepped out of the flyer together, looking utterly exhausted as they turned away to trod in a defeated sort of way the last few yard to Kane’s front doors. Valera watched them go, feeling the ache of fatigue behind her own eyes as the cadets vanished into the building. She ignored it, though, just as she ignored the temptation to clamber right back into the flyer and have it take her straight to the staff housing block where her bed was waiting.

She needed a clear head, and winter air would do her good for that.

She dismissed the flyer with a few quick eye commands, then watched as the vehicle ripped away skyward again to disappear into the shifting lines of Castallon’s

nighttime traffic high, high above her. Even then she stood for a moment, though, fighting with herself and mounting pressure that had been building all night in her gut.

She lost the battle about a minute after the final faint echoes of the flyer faded off the distant walls of the Institute.

Valera barely made it to the edge of the path in time, as her stomach heaved. Even with her Speed engaged she only just managed to get sick into the leafless bushes that lined the walkway that led up the to dormitory, vomiting into the brush rather than her shoes. Once, twice, three times she threw up, her body seeming to want to expell everything inside it like the act could rid herself of ill, heartwrenching feeling of guilt weighing down on her shoulders.

Guilt... and anger.

“M-MIND!” Valera snarled into the night once she’d gained control of her gut again, standing straight once more to wipe her mouth clean with a sleeve of her jacket.

The red text lit up her NOED at once, like it had been waiting for her to call on it.

An unfortunate outcome, I admit. The likelihood that Cadet Arada would push herself to such an extreme was low, as I stated.

“Apparently no low enough!” Valera only barely kept herself from screaming, hands balled into iron fists by her sides. She could feel the familiar warmth behind her her irises, and she knew her eyes were glowing white hot.

She didn’t care.

“This is what I was afraid of!” she seethed aloud. “This is why I didn’t want to give her permission! She was desperate, and desperate has no place on the field!”

Captain, it could be argued that ‘desperate’ is all we have left, the red text answered. And I do hope you are not concerned about exposure. I was very careful in applying the necessary permissions, as prove by Lieutenant Colonel Mayd’s search

coming up empty. I will likewise take the necessary steps to ensure that Viviana Arada does not make the mistake of naming you when she—

“I don’t give a damn, about my exposure!” Valera snapped, not even bothering to finish reading the MIND’s argument. “You think that’s what I care about?! Arada is in the hospital in critical condition! She could wake up with brain damage! And that’s if she wakes up at all!”

A line of green joined the conversation, now.

The likelihood of that is extremely small, Valera. From the data I was able to gather while we were at Altmore, I would estimate the chance of Viviana Arada suffering longterm damage that would prevent her from continuing her training as a User to be less than 3%.

“Stay out of this, Kes,” Valera snarled. “That’s half the problem, anyway. You—both of you—you don’t understand. You can’t understand. Maybe one day, when you have enough damn data, but until then you just don’t get that humans are more than numbers and equations and percentages! We’re more than a mathematical breakdown of what is likely and not! I told you I didn’t want to give Arada permission! I told you something like this would happen! I don’t care what values and sum you applied to the situation! There is more to people than your damn algorithms!”

She finished, and for a moment there came no answer. Some small part of her appreciated that, in a way. The two AIs could communicate as quickly as they could think, after all, so any pause provided at moments like these were typically for her benefit.

That didn’t make them human, though.

Captain. The MIND answered, and for some reason Valera couldn’t help but read the words like they were hard said. I am merely doing what I have to, with the tools I have, to the very best of my ability.

The anger drained from Valera all at once, at that. In a heartbeat, however, it was replaced it, and by a myriad of feeling she would have traded back for the fire in a second. Grief, frustration, betrayal.

Dissapointment.

“I know,” she answered sadly, turning to start the long walk back towards the staff housing through the frigid winter night. “But until you understand that we have to be more than ‘tools’ to you, MIND, then you aren’t much better than Shira Abel...”