

CHAPTER 16

About 10 seconds earlier, Rei would have bet the world that *nothing* was going to be able to distract him from his recognition of the old woman standing in the middle of who he knew had to be the not one, not two, but *three* top-class trainers the Kamiya Corporation had gathered together for him and Firesong. It was *stupid* that she was there, after all. It was beyond any reason or logic, and in any other moment Rei was positive absolute nothing in the entirety of the known universe could have kept him from mouthing at the air in shock while he stared.

As it turned out, unexpectedly coming face to face with Aria's older brother—Aria's S-Ranked, *extremely powerful* older brother—was enough to do the trick.

Rei felt his face warm, his mind suddenly scrambling to clear itself of his jumbled astonishment and emotions. Meeting *Carmen* Laurent—Aria's father—had been bad enough, but at least he'd had a minute or so to gather himself before *that* particular encounter. This, somehow, was worse—*way* worse—not the least because Rei knew Aria was still close to her brother and sister in a way she wasn't with her parents.

He wasn't sure he'd ever felt more at a tumbling loss than in that moment, standing before this particular gathering of incredible Users while his top worries were hovering between regretting how long it had been since he'd gotten a haircut and hoping he was standing straight enough to make a good impression.

His trepidation clearly wasn't missed, either, because he went stiff as Kalus Laurent's attention flicked briefly to him, lingering just long enough to feel—if only in Rei's own head—like an appraisal.

Luckily, that was the moment Aria managed to find her tongue again, have been standing for a good several seconds staring in disbelief at her brother.

“Kalus, what are you *doing* here?” she asked, taking a tentative step forward, like she wasn't sure whether she wanted to rush the man and hug him or stay put.

Fair dilemma given present company, Rei thought weakly.

“That—” Kalus told her, not moving from his place as he glanced sidelong at the two women next to him “—is a story. Probably one for another time. But as you can see—” he gestured down at his combat suit, the pale green vysetrium of his CAD bands

gleaming against red and black steel “—I’m here on a... er... job” His sheepish grin grew a bit more roguish, and his eyes flicked to Rei again. “That and obviously I was keen on meeting a certain guy *someone* can’t seem to shut up about every time we chat.”

Rei’s cheeks only burned hotter, and Aria’s one ear that he could see turned almost the color of her hair.

That was the moment, mercifully, that the last of the strangers decided to interrupt them with a cackle of laughter.

“Holy hell, look at their *faces*.” The woman—probably in her late 20s with brown-streaked grey hair and matching eyes—guffawed in a carrying voice that was in total opposition to her slender frame. “Kalus, you couldn’t ease into it? You’re gonna put the poor kids in therapy!”

In answer, Kalus Laurent scowled at the woman. He was of a height with her, maybe 6’3” or so, but with wider shoulders and more muscle on his arms. Shaken a little out of his shock, Rei was also able to see that—while the man’s eyes matched his sisters pretty much to a T—his long hair—straight and reaching just past his shoulders—was darker than Aria’s, more of a color more like the burgundy Rei recalled their father sported in his own.

This recognition—and reminder—of the familia tie did nothing to help his heart rate.

“And what was I *supposed* to do, Jay?” Laurent grumbled. “Make a sign? ‘Hello, boyfriend! I come in peace!’?? Just how much of a weirdo do you think I am?”

“No comment,” ‘Jay’—who’s name clicked recognition into place in time to send Rei into *another* tailspin—answered with her hands on her hips, sticking her tongue out at Aria’s brother. “I’m just saying *maybe* a heads up would have been nice.”

Laurent grit his teeth, clearly frustrated. “I *couldn’t* do that and you damn well *know* it. Or were you *not* under the same gag order as—?”

“That’s quite enough, I think.”

The interruption was smooth and polite, but as unyielding as steel. Aria’s brother stopped talking immediately, and Jay—Jay ‘Jetway’ Wainwright, Rei knew now—snapped up straight and at ease. The instantaneous response was completely understandable, of course.

What else were you supposed to do when someone who could probably *sneeze* you through a steel wall told you to get it together?

There was a second of silence as the gaze of the speaker slid slowly first from Laurent to Wainwright, then back again, the gently warning clear. The woman might have been tall once—maybe nearly as tall of either of the pair—but time appeared to have taken its toll on her in the way it came for all eventually. She stooped slightly, both hands firm atop the plain wooden cane she was leaning into. Her hair—braided into a flat plate behind her head—seemed to have been allowed to get naturally grey, and her face was worn with age, her wrinkles matching the lines and pocked skin of her bare limbs. By all rights the woman should have looked out of place in her black combat suit, old as she appeared.

Instead, Rei wasn't sure even Carmen Laurent had possessed such an imposing a presence.

Not even Carmen Laurent.

Under the loosening skin of the old woman's arms and legs, the shape of well-formed muscle could still be made out, nearly as prominent as the lean cut of Wainwright's own toned figure. Her CAD bands—those famous loops of clean white and gold—shown in the subbasement lighting with every promise of power and danger. Even the woman's stoop was too strong, too certain, like a trap set to dare anyone to question it. Her eyes, too, were too set, still and confident in an absolute sort of way, a gaze of black filled with speckled gold that were as certain as the strength of gravity itself. Looking at the woman, Rei couldn't help but be reminded of stories he'd read of the old gods of ancient Earth who would grow bored and descend from their grand halls to walk among the mortals. *That* was he felt, he decided, then.

He felt that standing before Serena von Bor—Rook-Class S-Rank, and Galens' most famous graduate after the Gatecrusher himself—was like standing in front of a deity who'd chosen, for whatever reason, to disguise themselves as something less than what they were.

And then, all of a sudden, those dark eyes were on him.

“Hello, Firesong.” von Bor's voice—in contrast to the power of her presence—was kindly, almost soothing, and matched by a smile accented with a firm sort of warmth. “By the look on your faces, I'm assuming at least a few of you already know who one or two of us are?”

Rei knew he wasn't the only one to nod numbly, and Catcher saved anyone who *wasn't* aware by getting the name out in a rasp of disbelief.

"The Ivory Shield. You're—You're the Ivory Shield."

von Bor's smile widen ever so slightly, and she dipped her wizened head in acknowledgement. "Bonus points for the Arena name, Mr. Catchwick. Not that I'm surprised. The Kamiya Corporation *was* thorough in the profiles we were provided. And speaking of..." She glanced over her shoulder expectantly. "Ms. Ueno. Perhaps you'd like to get started with introductions?"

If Jasper was at all intimidated to have the Rook-Class address her so directly, the fixer didn't show so much as a flinch of it. On the contrary the handsome woman smiled like she couldn't have been more delighted, clapping her manicured hands together enthusiastically and stepping forward.

"Of course! We *should* get things moving, shouldn't we?" Moving up to stand between von Bor and Wainwright, she gestured for Rei and the others to approach. "Firesong, let's go. I promise no one here is going to bite you."

"We'd be dead if they did..." Rei heard Logan grunt, still sounded stunned.

They did as they were told, however, Aria leading them forward as steadily as she could, even if Rei was pretty sure she still barely ever took her eyes off her brother. Soon they were standing before the seven adults in the standard triangle presentation of a ISCM squad, Viv's absence made extra conspicuous in the gap in the formation at Rei's right. Even Jasper's eyes lingered on this empty space for a second before she started speaking like nothing in the world was odd about the current situation.

"For those of you who don't know me, my name is Ueno Jasper." The woman's smile was dazzling, her light accent warm and endearing in a way that only made Rei wary. "I have been retained by your sponsor to organize the training program agreed-upon in the partnership Mr. Ward here was gracious enough to enter into with my employer."

In front of Rei, he thought he saw Aria's gaze finally tear away from her brother at this introduction, and she let out a quiet "Oh" of recognition at the name.

Jasper's smile grew ever so slightly, but she continued like she hadn't heard.

“Apparently most of you are indeed already familiar with one or two members of your training team—” her vibrant blue eyes gleamed with amusement as they flicked briefly to Laurent “—but it never hurts to make proper introduction. Firstly, may I present Sergeant Major Kalus Laurent.” She gestured towards the young man, who smiled as genuinely as he could managed while clearly doing his level best to avoid the stare Aria had returned to him. “While he has no Arena name as of yet, we are all sure it’s only a matter of time. He is an S-Ranked Pawn-Class, and—” Jasper winked knowingly at Firesong “—he happens to be an Atypical.”

“Wait... *Laur*—?” Chancery started in surprise.

“Cadet Cashe, you will hold your questions until such time as you are given leave to present them, if you please.”

It was Colonel Guest who spoke, standing with his hands clasped at his back behind von Bor and the others. At his sides, Dent and Maddison Kent were equally still-faced, though Rei thought he could make out a gleam of keen interest in the captain’s brown eyes.

“Not to worry, not to worry,” Jasper said placatingly, smiling over Rei’s shoulder at Chancery. “Yes, the sergeant major *is* indeed the brother of Ms. Laurent here, Ms. Cashe. If you have any concerns about that, however, I have every assurance from the sergeant major that he will have absolutely *no* issue providing you the highest quality training despite that fact.”

“Not what surprised me...” Rei barely heard Chancery mutter in answer, the words fortunately low enough not to be made out by anyone else this time.

“On our other side—” Jasper continued, gesturing over von Bor to the where Wainwright was grinning broadly even as she continued to stand at ease. “Is Second Lieutenant Jayden Wainwright, though if you already know her it may be as ‘Jetway’.”

“They better,” the tall woman added with another bark of laughter. “I worked my ass off to get that name!”

“As you may be aware, the second lieutenant qualified for Intersystems last year. Like Sergeant Major Laurent, she is a Pawn-Class.” Jasper gaze was a bit more intentional as it fell momentarily on Rei again. “She is considered one of the strongest up-and-coming Lancers in the professional SCT circuits, and the Kamiya Corporation felt her expertise might be of particular value given the circumstances of your squad.”

It didn't take much for Rei to read between the lines, there. On the surface he supposed it was possible Jasper was talking about the fact that Firesong had two spear-wielders, and Kamiya was taking its promise to train the *whole* team—not just him—seriously. Which was possible, of course. Even likely.

But that didn't mean the other implication—that Kamiya was considering the future of Rei and Shido's own special kind of growth—wasn't present too.

“Lastly, I of *course* have to introduce to you to your lead trainer.” Jasper had moved on without pause, smiling even more widely as she gestured to von Bor with both hands, her whole body bowing slightly in the woman's direction as though in respect. “May I present Captain Serena von Bor, Rook-Class Phalanx. As I'm sure you are aware, Captain von Bor happens to be a Galens graduate, and has an *extensive* list of accolades to her credit. Mr. Catchwick has already been kind enough to give us her Arena name.” Jasper winked at them all. “She best known, perhaps, as a former Champion of the Sol System SCTs, a title very few User have the opportunity to claim.”

“Bah.” von Bor snorted, banging her can lightly against the steel of the projection plating beneath their feet. “The same can be said for *any* system tournament, Ms. Ueno.”

A half-truth, Rei knew, his attention finally focused on the Ivory Shield. Sure, it was *technically* accurate that there were no less Systems champions in the likes of Astra as Sol, but the two hardly compared. Sol wasn't just the heart of the ISC—and therefore the ISCM. It had Earth and Mars, and was therefore the home of nearly all of the best military academies in the Collective. In fact, statistically Rei was pretty sure the Sol System Champion went on the win the *Intersystem* championship title something... was it 32% of the time?

Needless to say, it was an accolade worth the awe Rei thought he could literally *feel* resonating from Catcher and Logan at his back.

Jasper—as ever—seemed to read his mind.

“You are too humble, Captain,” the woman answered von Bor with another diplomatic little bow. “Knowing what I know of this squad, however, I have to say your withholding is likely to fall on deaf ears. It's my understanding—” she shot Firesong a look gleaming with wicked amusement “—that if nothing else Reidon, Mr. Catchwick, and Mr. Grant at least are very likely to have your tournament history already committed to memory, so modesty will only do so—Oh? Yes, Ms. Laurent?”

To Rei's surprise, Aria had indeed raised a nervous hand, intruding on Jasper's flattery.

"Uh..." his girlfriend started uncertainly. "Me... Me, too... ma'am..." She hadn't lost an ounce of the flush Kalus' earlier teasing had brought on, and seemed only the more lost for words because of it. "I... uh... I know it... too..."

Jasper's smile could have swallowed her whole, and Rei didn't for a *moment* think the fixer hadn't anticipated the potential of such an interrupted.

"But of *course*, dear," she crooned sweetly, stepping forward to stand between Aria and von Bor. "How *could* I have assumed otherwise, given your 'Type?'" She turned her attention to the three S-Ranks, then. "A perfect transition. I believe. Sergeant Major, Lieutenant, Captain. May I present to you Aria Laurent, C8 Phalanx and squad leader of Firesong." She gestured to Aria, then behind her. "Viviana Arada, the team's C? Duelist, is unfortunately indisposed, but along the back you will find Logan Grant, C? Mauler, Chancery Cashe, C? Lancer, and Layton Catchwick, C? Saber—who prefers 'Catcher', if you prefer to be a little less formal with your trainees." Then, lastly, she indicated Rei. "Lastly, of course, is Reidon Ward, C9 Atypical and our..." Jasper paused, seeming to choose her words carefully "...resident oddity, shall we say."

Rei didn't know whether to glare or roll his eyes.

"S'pose that's one way to put it," Wainwright chuckled, her nonchalant eyeing of Rei not entirely hiding a sharp, quick study of him. "You're taller than I thought, Ward. That CAD of yours *is* wicked piece of tech, isn't it?"

Rei, fortunately, had finally managed to get his heart rate under control. Standing a little straighter, he kept his eyes over the Lieutenants shoulder as he answered.

"It's worked for me so far, ma'am."

"Yeah... Damn right it has..." Wainwright answered, continuing to eye him with interest.

It was von Bor, however, that took up the conversation from there.

"Thank you, Ms. Ueno." The old woman dipped her head towards the fixer. "That was most... thorough."

The fixer must have heard the polite dismissal in the words, because she bowed out of the way to stand a little to the side.

Not before throwing another wink Rei's way, of course, double up his sudden desire to sight.

"You'll find I'm not once for much idle chit-chat, Firesong." The Ivory Shield dove right in, dark gaze sweeping over the squad. "It *is* unfortunate that Cadet Arada is currently unable to join us, but just the same I see no reason for that to delay anything." She banged her cane again, eyes lingering on Rei for a moment before moving to settle on Aria. "As Ms. Ueno has stated, I have the pleasure of having been assigned the opportunity to be your lead trainer for this little journey of ours. As such, I will be expecting the same degree of eagerness and enthusiasm from you as Captain Dent and Colonel Guest have just spent the last twenty minutes ensuring us your team is known for. I'm assuming that won't be an issue."

Not a question so much as a statement, but Rei was pleased to hear he wasn't the only one who seemed to have shaken himself of much of his shock.

"Yes, ma'am!" five voices answered in unison.

"Excellent." von Bor's smiled slightly, still watching Aria. "With that in mind, let us clear the air a little, shall we?"

Rei barreled stopped himself from frowning at that, his gaze dropping for the briefest second to the woman's lined face. 'Clear the air'?

Obviously he wasn't the only one taken by surprise either, because for the first time since he'd met the woman, Ueno Jasper looked suddenly just the tiniest bit disconcerted.

"Captain?" she interjected sweetly. "I was under the impression you were eager to get started with—"

"Oh we are, Ms. Ueno," von Bor cut the woman off without looking at her. "All of us here, I imagine. You will excuse this old bag of bones, however, for not having much patience for elephants taking up all the air in the room."

Jasper's concern grew suddenly real, her smile fading ever so slightly.

"Captain, I think it might be best if—"

The Ivory Shield spoke over her like she hadn't even been talking.

"On paper the Kamiya Corporation has enlisted our services to train you, Firesong. To train *all* of you to the greatest of our ability, to squeeze out every ounce of talent and

potential we can from your meek little bodies. We intend to do just that” Another bang of the cane. “However... I’ve read your files. Not a one of you is anything *close* to stupid, and I therefore am going to choose to believe that not one of you is prone to delusion. For that reason, I will make the assumption that each of you is already aware of what our dear employer is *actually* after. The *only* thing they are after.”

To her credit, Jasper didn’t lose an ounce of composure, still standing off to the side. On the contrary, she looked on with something like polite interest, her smile returned and her attention sharp as she took in Serena von Bor like there was no great pleasure than to hear the woman speak.

Rei could practically see her reassessing the woman before his very eyes.

“Why are we here, Firesong?” the Ivory Shield asked of the squad. “Tell me. The sergeant major, lieutenant, and myself. Why are we *actually* here?”

There was a moment of silence, and Rei wished for the hundredth time that Viv was there, so he could trade a look with her. As it was, he was instead only able to imagine Chancery chewing on her lip nervous behind him while Catcher and Logan fought themselves not to glance worried at each other.

Aria, of course, had it the worst, taking the brunt of the old woman’s gaze.

Then again, she always was pretty damn good under pressure.

“Ward, ma’am.”

Aria’s answer wasn’t exactly confident, but it wasn’t lacking in certainty. Indeed, Rei watched his girlfriend stand a little straighter as she spoke, chin lifting as her green eyes continued to stare over von Bor’s head.

“Indeed.” The Ivory Shield nodded, smiling a little wider, as though pleased by the curt honesty. “That *is* the reality of this moment, Cadet Laurent, isn’t it.”

Then, at last, her dark gaze moved from Aria to take in the others in quick succession.

Everyone other than Rei.

“Standing before you are not one, not two, but *three* S-Ranked CAD-Users, two of whom have taken valuable time out of their own training for the professional circuits to provide you this opportunity, one a *highly* sought after Atypical who could probably

peddle his services for any price he saw fit given the rare nature of his success as an A-Type. As for me..." von Bor's eyes unwavering orbs of black, gravity itself made real as she looked from Logan to Catcher to Chancery, "I may be retired, but I don't imagine you're fool enough to think *my* time isn't of particular value. Yes, the Kamiya Corporation offered me the moon, and yes, there's a certain nostalgic pleasure at being back under the roof of my alma matter." She lifted a gnarled hand briefly to indicate the subbasement with a wave. "However... At the end of the day, I am standing in front of five *first-year* Cadets—not even a complete *squad*—pledging my time to you. It is unprecedented, and the feeds will have a field day when they catch wind of this. For no other reason—" she lifted her cane to jab it in Rei's direction "—but him." Her eyes settled on him, this time, and Rei's face—having already grown hotter with every passing word—burned.

Still, it wasn't him she addressed with her next question.

"Would you agree that's a fact, sq—?"

She didn't even get to finish.

"No."

It was Aria again, who answered, and this time her response was as steely as Rei had ever heard.

"*Cadet* Laurent..." Captain Dent growled out a warning from behind von Bor and the others, though Rei thought there might have been a hint—just a hint—of amusement in the Bishop's tone.

"No... *ma'am*," Aria corrected through gritted. "Sorry, *ma'am*."

von Bor, though, hardly looked annoyed at having been interrupted. On the contrary, Rei thought—glancing down at the old woman—that she almost looked rather...

Pleased, he thought, surprised.

"That a fact, Laurent?" It was Wainwright who stepped in. "I know *I* took this job cause of Cadet Ward over there." She jerked her chin at Rei without looking away from Aria. "You telling me there's more of interest here than him?"

"There is, *ma'am*."

“You ready to prove that?” The S-Ranked Lancer didn’t wait for an answer from her, lifting her gaze instead to the squads back row. “*All* of you ready to prove that?”

“Can they?” It was Kalus Laurent’s turn to step in, his own green eyes also sweeping across Catcher, Logan, and Chancery. “Baby sis here is one thing. C8 badass who’s out to make me look bad. Don’t know about the rest of ‘em.”

“We can, sir.” Logan’s voice was firm, etched with only the barest hint of anger.

“Definitely.” Catcher’s assurance, on the other hand was level.

Rei suspected the Saber, like him, had started to catch on to the game their new instructors were playing.

Unbeknownst to any of them, training had already started.

“Yeah... We’ll see about that...” Laurent’s gaze flicked only briefly from Catcher to Rei, then moved to Chancery. “What about you, Cashe? Haven’t heard you say if—”

“All due respect, sir: Put us on a field and let us show you.”

The Lancer’s barbed words rang clear, and for a second Kalus Laurent looked surprised.

Then he and Wainwright both laughed, and between them von Bor’s smile too, broadened.

“And we thought you’d never ask,” the Ivory Shield said with a chuckle.

And then blue flashed across her dark eyes, Rei felt the field under his bare feet begin to change.