

CHAPTER 2

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACEHOLDER

10 years would be gone in a flash.

That was the thought that had Valera Dent so distracted in the moment, she barely noticed the flash of vysetrium blades and the scream of steel on steel rising up from the first year students battling it out below her. Indeed, her gaze was far away as she looked down on the massive Wargame zone—an aggressive variation of “Grasslands” with a healthy number of stone outcropping and rolling, dipping hills—too consumed with the exchange she was watching play out before her as rapidly scrolling text in a trio of colors across her frame.

10 years cannot be right. Kes’ words typed themselves out in bright blue. *Your calculations are flawed. Run them again.*

My calculations are never flawed. The answer came in red. *If anything, this is a conservative estimate. Additional data has been consistently leading us to a shorter and shorter timeline.*

Meaning what?

Meaning that—extrapolating the trend of information for the last 50 years—a closer estimation would be 5 years, perhaps as much as 7. But that only if we’re lucky.

Valera balked at that, eyes going so wide that Chief Warrant Officer Michael Bretz, the Brawler sub-instructor for the first year Galens cadets, gave her a sidelong glance even as he shouted down feedback to one student or another. She missed the look of concern, of course. After all, Bretz was as blind to the conversation playing out before her as she was to the scene of the Wargame, in that moment.

5 years... Forget 10. If they really only had 5 years remaining to them...

With her left hand Valera typed out a rapid interruption of the rapid-fire argument the other two parties, the message posting in green as soon as she approved it.

And you're sure it's still best not to conscript all Users? I understand the SCTs have their place, but removing our most proficient soldiers from the combat still seems like a massive misuse of firepower...

The red text flashed into being so quickly, it might as well have been typed thought.

Yes. I'm sure. 2.3% of my processing function is currently devoted to running further simulations pairing our SCT professionals differently—and against various combat situations—but 98.6% are resolving with a reduction in that time, with 65.6% resulting in cutting those extrapolated 5 to 7 years in half, another 12.6% even further.

Meaning the professionals stay where they are, Kes' script typed out only slightly slower than the red.

Yes.

Valera took a breath at that, forcing herself to take in the data she knew without a shred of doubt had to be accurate. Even if she had her own qualms with the SCTs—even if every ounce of human common sense screamed that keeping most of the *strongest* 20% of the ISCM's Users away from the front lines was folly—she knew the data would be accurate.

With a slow breath, she let her fingers flash across the invisible keyboard once more.

If that's true, then we're out of time.

There was a pause—one Valera knew was only artificially inserted, given the nature of the conversation, before the answer came, green and red arriving one after the other.

Yes.

Meaning we really do only have once chance left to us... Valera's thought was to herself now, and at last her attention was finally diverted from the conversation, her focus moving beyond the text and down to the Wargames field. Below her, the battle taking place might have looked like mass chaos to any common onlooker, but her trained eyes only need a fraction of a second to find the form she was looking for. He was in the

melee, the flashing blade in his hand lined with green—a color that was even more alien against his otherwise black-and-white Device than the weapon—battling nearly back-to-back with Viviana Arada as Layton Catchwick applying his own sword to against another opponent under an outcropping nearby. For a while, Valera just watched, seeing less the match and more the movement of the young man who was finally *visibly* taller now than he had been when she'd first taken him in on a dirty gym floor more than 6 months ago.

You need to get stronger. Valera thought as the conversation started to script itself out in rapid succession once more, dim and blurred in the forefront of her vision as she ignored the resumed debate. *You need to get stronger, and fast...*

Rei didn't know if it was a good thing that he could say with confidence that he had definitely been in *worse* spots. In training, in combat, even off the field, he had definitely been in worse spots. Unfortunately, though, that didn't mean his current situation was ideal. Viv was at his back, which was good, and Catcher sounded like he was doing a fair job of crossing blades with Lena Jiang nearby, but that was about where the positives of the trio's circumstances ended. Among the three Users he and Viv were currently holding at bay, after all, were *both* squad leaders of the Red and Blue teams.

The fact that the third was Jack Benaly—widely considered the best Brawler in the first year class, other than Rei himself—meant they were basically one mistake from being totally screwed.

Woosh! Whoom! Woosh!

Kastro Vademe, ace Lancer that he was, demonstrated no drop in speed and dexterity despite the length of his Lancer-Type weapon. The carbonized, green-and-yellow steel of the wide, 2-foot blade flashed with a narrow edge of red light as it cut

and cleaved at Rei, forcing him to draw every ounce of his reduced Speed and Cognition to bear to keep from getting sliced in half. The Lancer had forced him to Type Shift Shido into its Saber Mode, but even with the longer sword in his right hand and greater Strength, there was little opportunity to counter attack.

Not with Benaly constantly keeping him on his toes from the right.

Shit! Rei thought as the Brawler indeed chose that moment to close the gap he'd put between them only 2 seconds before to allow Vademe his assault. Despite the fact that Benaly's vysetrium glowed blue compared to the Lancer's red, they were working in sync to wear him down, not giving him even a moment where he might go on the offensive safely. As he caught the Brawler's punch on his sword, redirecting the solid pistons of green-and-gold with *great* effort, Rei thought he heard Viv, too, curse from where Laquita Martin would be challenging her two Duelist's blades with a matching set.

It made sense, of course, Rei had to admit as he slammed Vademe's next punching thrust aside with the black plate of his left arm even as he twisted to deliver a heavy kick up at Benaly's face, forcing the Brawler to turn his followup swing into a defensive block. It might not have been "fair" or "sporting", but the team-up definitely made sense, even if it had been obviously planned off the field before the match. For one thing, the squads complimented each other well—Vademe's reach-heavy Users lacking in the firepower and in-your-face combat ability that Martin's brought—and would have been an ideal grouping of teams in a real combat situation. For another, though, even if this *wasn't* a real combat situation, it was obvious Red and Blue both knew they really had no other choice if either of them intended to come out on top of the sparring match.

If *his* squad had suffered a full week of straight losses—even in these free-for-all rounds—Rei supposed he would have given ganging up some serious consideration as well.

“AAH!”

There came a yell—a familiar yell—over the combat coms that was echoed in Rei’s own ears, and he knew with a thrill that Catcher had either fallen, or was about to. Foreseeing the match spinning out of control, Rei redoubled in his effort to draw every ounce of power of agility he could out of Shido’s specs, fighting to keep his focus on the 2-on-1 fight before him. He knew it was only a matter of time before he was overpowered at this rate—Vademe and Benaly were terrifying fighters in their own right, after all—which meant there was only one choice to be made.

“Viv, I’m going to do something stupid,” he said as loudly as he dared while slamming another two punches from Benaly aside, trusting the coms integrated into his NOED to pick up his words without cluing his opponents in. “Gonna see if I can give you a shot at one of these guys. Think you’ll be able to take it?”

There was a pause, extending so long Rei was afraid the girl hadn’t heard him.

Then, as he ducked under a wheeling kick from Vademe, Viv’s voice grunted back at him with effort.

“Obviously—*urk*—not, but since when would that stop you? Just—*buff*—say when.”

Rei grinned, the half mask of black steel over a white underlayer hiding the smile from the two before him. For another 7 or 8 seconds they continued their exchange like that, he only barely keeping them at bay.

Then, as Vademe powered forward for another heavy thrust that seemed to be his only consistent attack, Rei took a hard step to the right and snapped his left hand up even as he twisted inward.

There were pros and cons to his plan. Pro one: the clawed fingers of Shido’s Saber Mode had no issue finding and gripping the haft of the Lancer’s spear as high up on the weapon as he could find purchase. Pro two: his bonus Strength—which leapt from C0 to a whopping C5 in his Device’s current form—made it easy to use Vademe’s

momentum to advantage, pulling the boy through and along the direction of the thrust to send him staggering by as the Red Team squad leader instinctively held onto his CAD, not wanting to risk being disarmed. Pro three: Viv was as dependable a teammate as they came, so when Rei shouted “LEFT!”, she disengaged with a brief flash from Martin, stepping back for just long enough to slash with one blade leftward, almost blindly. Her phantom-called short sword—lacking the actual solidity of a true-call—caught Vademe in the right arm above his bare elbow and passed straight through, immediately depriving the Lancer of his main-hand as the Arena assigned total neural interruption, imitating a complete severing of the limb.

When it came to the *cons*, on the other hand... Rei’s plan also left his back almost completely open to Jack Benaly.

WHAM!

The blow came thunderous and unforgiving, and Rei only kept himself from surfing an immediate “Fatal Damage Accrued” announcement by twisting as violently as he could even as he’d pulled Vademe through and past him. As a result, instead of a crushing blow to his spine that would have had his CAD registering complete loss of function from his neck down, Rei took the impact of the Brawler’s piston in the left shoulder.

The strength behind it sent him flying, half-spinning, half-tumbling, the jarring impact of the rock and grass coming up to meet him almost making Rei miss the notification that flashed red in the combat log in the top left of his frame.

Skeletal muscle damage registered.

Left glenohumeral compound fracturing registered. Left acromionclavicular compound fracturing registered. Multiple soft-tissue ruptures registered.

Applying appropriate physiological restrictions.

Immediately Rei's left shoulder seized up, and he hissed in pain as the agony of the simulated destruction of bone and tissue raced up his neck and into his chest like fire. His left arm went limp, and he realized it was probably only his boosted Defense—raised from C1 to C4—that had kept him from registering FDA even despite his dodging of the more-dangerous hit.

Absent a limb, now, Rei had a bit more trouble gaining his footing again than he would have liked as he slid across the field. Fortunately for him, though, his reactive shielding proved more than enough to weather the jolting hits of the stones beneath the grass, making the uneven ground more of an advantage than anything. As he struck one particularly large rock, he used the lift of the impact to shove his right fist into the earth—still holding the handle of Shido's sword—half-pushing and half-bouncing himself up onto his feet, clawed toes digging in to cut his slide off within another yard or so.

Jack Benaly, though, was predictably close behind.

Rei's blade came up even as he finally caught his balance, deflect the haymaker that would have taken his head clean off otherwise. His NOED flashed red in warning, and he ducked under the kick the redirected impetus turned into. Another flash, and this time he leapt straight up, avoiding the Brawler's other leg as it came sweeping at his ankles. In midair Rei took advantage of their proximity to plant a foot on Benaly's closest shoulder, shoving up and off the larger boy in backwards flip that got him another 10 feet of clearance or so. The Brawler came again, however, and Rei knew he had to think fast as the piston rocketed at his face again. Even with only one arm, he was pretty sure he could take Benaly in Saber Mode. The real problem was going to be—

“Rei! Behind you!”

Viv's shouted warning was all that saved him. Rei dropped like stone into a sideways roll, hearing the scream of steel rip over his head as he did. There was an

SHLUNK, followed by an “URK!” from Benaly, and Rei stood once more to find the Brawler staggering to one knee, arms and legs both going limp. Before him, Lena Jiang sucked on her teeth in annoyance as she wrenched her red-lined blade from where it had taken the Blue-team Brawler through the chest, snapping it up at the ready again even as she turned on Rei.

“Tag-team unless you’ve got a clean shot,” Rei muttered to himself, summarizing what he suspected Vademe’s commands had been to his squad, now. “Guess teamwork can only take you so far...”

Then, though, Jiang was lunging at him, and Rei’s tone changed as he hissed a quick verbal command.

“Type Shift: Brawler Mode!”

In a flash that didn’t take more than half a second, blue lightning arced up the green-lined steel that encased Rei’s arms, legs, and the lower half of his face. In a rippling wave that matched the release of energy, Shido changed, first condensing as it absorbed the sword and heavier plating of the Saber Mode, then expanding into finer, thinner lines until a trio of black, dagger-like claws extended from the knuckles of Rei’s hands, lines with wickedly sharp vysetrium. In the same moment, Rei felt a now-familiar weight leave his body as his Strength and Defense faded in favor of his Speed, and his NOED seemed suddenly to react infinitesimally more cleanly as his Cognition maxed out again.

It wasn’t an ideal solution, given his still-limp left arm, but Rei only had a month of scattered training with Shido’s secondary form, and he was *not* about to take on one of the best Sabers in the class at her own game.

Shing!

Jiang’s first cut glanced off Rei’s forearm, brought up at an angle, but her second came around again with blinding Speed, thrusting for his chest. Rei spun leftward, the blade barely slipping by the red griffin that adorned his grey combat suit, and he

punched at the Saber's side with Shido's functioning claws as his left arm continued to flop useless by his side. Jiang swept the blow aside with a the shorter curved tips of her left hand, trying to claw open his wrist as she did, but Rei hadn't forgotten the lesson from their last fight, more than 2 months ago now.

Even with all the training they'd had since the opening week of the Galens intra-schools, Jiang's Offense still had to lagged compared to her other specs, and the false-red vysetrium that edge her fingers skittered harmlessly off his black arm.

Unfortunately, though, where Jiang *didn't* pale was in Speed.

Wham!

The kick—while not half-as-heavy as what Benaly might have landed had his body not been in the process of being drawn down into the FDA'd waiting area under the field—was lightening fast, faster even than Rei might have managed. He'd committed to the punch, leaning into it with his right arm, which mean his left was wide open given the Arena-applied limitation. A rainbow-blue, steel-clad shin took him cleanly in the side, and once again Rei was thrown sideways under the impact. He managed to keep his feet at first, but this time the roughened Grasslands variations *did* betray him when his ankle caught on a rock beneath the grass, tripping and taking him down with a *thud*.

Of course, Lena Jiang was right behind him with a shout as she brought her sword down a killing stroke, red mixing with green and white as she cleaved at his head.

Wait... green and white?

CRUNCH!

The impact of the hit, dealt by a massive, two-handed axe that seemed to have come out of nowhere, took the Saber with such force that it almost *literally* sent her flying despite having cut her cleanly in two. Rei just had time to see the girl's eyes go wide in confusion as she was lifted off her feet and sent arcing up some 10 feet in the air and twice that back. Her weapon flew from her hands, and she struck the very

outcropping of rock where she'd likely downed Catcher not a half-a-minute before with her own painful *thud*.

Before Rei could watch the girl's body tumble to the ground, though, his vision was obscured by a massive form, legs and arms clad in white metal accented in red, the vysetrium lining the armor glowing the same alien green as his own.

“Get up, Ward,” Logan Grant grunted irritably, voice doubled over the coms as his red-black eyes glared down at Rei through loose locks of dark. “If you can't even handle a User four ranks under you, what good are you?”

And then, before Rei had a chance to respond, the Mauler was thundering away again, every step a crushing *thump* of sound even through the grass as he sprinted towards where Viv was still having it out with Laquita Martin in an eye-watering blur of green and blue light.

Gritting his teeth in annoyance—and not a little bit of pain—Rei shoved himself up once again, watching the Mauler go. To say that Grant was an essential part of the squad was an understatement, to be sure. He was the hammer, the battering ram that so often formed the tip of any assault the team made, especially in objective-based formats. During elimination bouts like this, too, he was no less of an ace, not infrequently taking down as many as three or four opponents all on his own, especially when Valera Dent had all three of the Sectional-qualifying squads battling it out on the same field.

Still, that didn't mean there were *whole days* that Rei didn't regret having pushed Aria to invite the Brawler onto the team.

With a grunted curse, Rei forced himself to focus on the fight again, looking around. The last hint of Kastro Vademe's form was in the process of being drawn down into the ground, likely having succumbed to the quick bloodless of his missing right arm, leaving only Rei, Viv, Grant, and Laquita Martin “alive” in the semi-circular bowl of broken stone the entirety of the battle had taken place in. Deciding the Mauler and

Viv were more than enough to finally take down Martin together, Rei turned and sprinted up the nearest incline, intending to get a clearer view of the entire Wargames field even as he shouted into his com.

“Aria! Cashe! How are things looking?”

There was only a short pause before Chancery Cashe responded first, answering just as Rei crested the top of the hill to look out over the windswept plains.

“I’m clear! Heading east to rally at center! Is it just me, or are Red and Blue *definitely* working together?”

“Sure are,” Rei answered, turning west to peer over the craggy edges of the Grasslands. “Catcher and I ran into Martin *and* Vademe. Viv found us just in time to save our asses, and Grant’s with us now too.”

“Any casualties?”

“Catcher, and I’ve lost function of one arm, but we took out Benaly, Vademe, and Jiang. Viv and Grant are handling Martin as we—” There was a scream of pain, and Rei look over his shoulder into the dip below to see Laquita Martin drop her swords to claw at the paired blades Viv had just planted in her gut and chest respectively. “Scratch that. Martin *is* handled.” He looked east again, and this time caught a flash of silver and green between some of the outcroppings. “I see you. 75 yards and 30 degree east. Rally to me.”

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

Raising his right hand to make sure she didn’t miss him, Rei scanned the rest of the field around them as he kept the com line open. “Aria? Come in, Aria. Status update?”

Nothing, though, and Rei grimaced. While Aria had only been downed *twice* in the half-a-hundred or so Team Battle and Wargames matches their squad had utterly dominated since the start of winter break, it wasn’t impossible she’d been taken out.

Given the fact that Vademe and Martin had clearly been in cahoots, in fact, it might even be likely.

“Rei!”

Rei turned in time to find Viv and Grant taking the hill behind him quickly. In 2 seconds they were standing beside him, reaching him almost at the same time as Cashe.

“Aria’s not answering?” Viv asked breathlessly as they all came to stand together. Despite her impressive C4 ranking, Rei suspected Endurance would ever be his best friend’s weakest spec, at least by comparison.

“Na,” Rei affirmed, only giving her the once-over to check for obvious combat limitations, then stopping himself from frowning in annoyance as he did the same to Grant. “Could be she’s in too deep to talk.”

“Or could be she’s been downed,” Grant grunted, grimacing as he, too, looked out over the sweeping Grasslands. “With Catchwick out and Ward injured, we should assume that basically puts us three short.”

The slight had Rei gritting his teeth again, but he forced himself to keep his tone level. “For the most part, yeah. Either way, I’m enacting decapitation protocols until we regroup with Aria, or FDA whoever’s left.”

At once Viv and Cashe nodded. Unsurprisingly, Grant made no such indication of acknowledgement, but that was hardly surprising. The command structure of the squad had been established since day one by Aria, and while the Mauler had admittedly been marginally less of a dick since losing in the final match of the intra-schools, it was very clear he’d never liked being sixth—and therefore *last*—on the list.

Even more obvious, though, was it that he didn’t like Rei being *second*.

“What’s your call, bossman?” Viv asked, but the joke came tense. Glancing at her, Rei couldn’t help but notice she seemed to be standing a little further from Grant than she usually did when the two were in proximity.

Thinking he knew the reason, he suddenly suspected the Mauler as going to be paying for his attitude one way or another.

Unable to stop himself from feeling a little satisfied at the thought, Rei took a step down off the crest of the hill, heading northwest. “We move,” he said as he took the sloop towards the center of the massive, 150-yard field. “And we keep moving. If Red and Blue are legitimately tag-teaming, we’re going to need to work twice as hard to bait out pairings we can take down, not to mention keep them from grouping en mass.” Reaching the flat of one of the Grasslands many valleys, he picked up his pace as he heard the others following quickly behind. “Jiang *did* take out Benaly, though, so with any luck their truce is so solid that we can’t—”

Before he could finish the thought, though, a cool, familiar voice rang out clear and calm across the field.

“All Red and Blue Team combatants eliminated. Winner: Green Team.”

As one, Rei, Viv, Cashe, and Grant all came to a steady halt, looking upwards. The moment the Arena made the announcement, the field had started to deform, and almost at once the blue sky of the windswept plains faded to reveal the geometric, well-lit plating of the stadium’s roof, closed off to the December chill. Within seconds the hills around them, too, started to depixelate, and then all four of them felt themselves start to drop down as the artificial gravity of the projection field slowly coming into view below began to withdraw.

“Nice!” came a shout from beneath them.

Looking down, Rei saw Catcher jogging the short way across the Arena floor from where he’d been FDA’d. His CAD, Arthus, was still called, but the vysetrium that lined the Device’s greaves and sword and tipped the clawed gauntlet of his left hand was rapidly shifting from the artificial green of their Wargames team color back to its natural

purple over yellow and white. Shido's vysetrium, too, was returning to its usual ice-blue glow, with Viv's Gemela and Cashe and Grant's Zion and Honoris turning back to silver, black, and red respectively.

Glad—if unsurprised—to see that his friend was ok, Rei turned his attention back to the Arena as they dropped the last of the 10 feet to the black projection plating.

It didn't take him long to find Aria, of course. Unlike the rest of them, her Hippolyta's natural emerald accents were only a few shades off from the team-assigned green, and stood out starkly against the red-and-gold of the Device's steel. She was a ways away from them—some 50 yards to the south—and as Rei watched her drop he almost let out a laugh that probably wouldn't have been taken too kindly by Vademe, Martin, Jiang, and Benaly standing nearby.

It *was* pretty funny, though, to see her drop alongside the three semi-prone forms of Sandree Kay—their blue-and-red haired Lancer friend from the 1-A class block—Duelist Zain Kadniss, and Mauler Jasmine Ranjha.

Especially since Saber Amelia von Leef and Lancer Hannah Tethers were already waiting on the floor below, heads tilted up to watch Aria and the others' controlled drift down towards them.

“Daaaamn,” Viv said with a whistle as she, Rei, and the other two all reached the projection plating together. “Aria looks like she did *work!*”

“She totally did,” Catcher agreed, coming to join as he, too, looked east towards where Aria was now offering Kay the butt of Hippolyta's spear to help her up. “I think von Leef and Tethers were already going at it when she hit them, but the others were pretty much all her, and almost all at once.”

“She *definitely* had to call on Third Eye,” Cashe muttered. “No way even *Laurent* could manage that without it.”

“Recall,” Rei said before jumping in, flexing his left arm—which was quickly regaining its usual function again—as Shido whirled out of being to take the familiar

form of its twin bands around his scarred wrists, leaving him wearing nothing but the grey combat suit of the Galens first years, the red griffin of the school embalmed across its chest. “And agreed. Plus, even with Third Eye I’ll bet that was a hell of a fight.”

“Definitely was. Kay’s been doing double hours in the training centers ever since she lost at the intra-schools.”

Rei and the others looked around to find Kastro Vademe approaching them, his own attention turned to Aria and the distant group even as he neared. His CAD—which Rei didn’t know the name of off the top of his head—had been recalled, the recently-red vysetrium turned back to orange over green and yellow.

“Nice fight, by the way,” the Lancer said, finally turning his gaze on Rei once he’d reached them, holding out a hand. “And Kay’s not the only one who’s been burning the candle a bit more intensely, lately. We’re *all* pushing it. Won’t have a shot in hell of beating you guys at Sectionals if we don’t.”

“Nice fight,” Rei echoed, reaching up to shake the offered hand briefly. Vademe—like most every other male User at Galens—stood a good half-foot taller than him, with silver-blue hair tied into a knot above his head and pale eyes bright even in a complexion as palid as Chancery Cashe’s was dark. “And I gotta say: keep it up. You and Benaly would have had me down *real* quick if Viv hadn’t been nearby, so whatever you guys are doing is definitely working.”

“Maybe you’ll even be able to take us on *without* teaming up, next time,” Grant muttered darkly from behind Rei, but fortunately Vademe had the grace only to frown.

“Yeaah... About that... Sorry. Didn’t enjoy it, but I’ll admit it was my idea. Had a chat with Martin last night, and we decided to give it a try. I know it’s not exactly good form, but...”

Rei shrugged. “Do what you gotta do, man. You’ve got to use what information and advantage you have, and we’ve got to be ready for it.”

“Not like we aren’t all gonna have teams trying to gang up on us at Sectionals,” Catcher added with a nod, Arthus back around his wrists along with everyone else, now. “Especially in the later rounds, assuming we make it that far. It’s good practice, if anything.”

“That’s an excellent way of looking at it, Catchwick.”

The familiar, gruff voice of the woman, come from above, had every one of them whirling at once and snapping to automatic attention. Overhead, the wide, white disc of the physical hologram that made up the instructors’ observation platform was descending quickly, bearing with it the two figures who’d been overseeing the match. One was a shorter, massively-broad shouldered man with a short-cropped beard, standing at ease in the red-on-white combat suit that denoted him as a Galens Academy staff member. *Second Lieutenant* Michael Bretz—the first-year Brawler sub-instructor had received his promotion not long after joining Phalanx-instructor Catori Imala as an A9-Ranked User—had his eyes set forward, dutifully half-a-step behind his superior even before the platform touched down to melt into the black plating of the floor. Even had it not been his prerogative as a soldier, though, Rei doubted the man wouldn’t have been rigid beside the woman.

Captain Valera Dent, the famed “Iron Bishop” of the Astra Systems, had the kind of presence you could almost *feel*...

Sporting her usual ISCM regulars—it was a rare treat that the Chief Combat Instructor of the Galens Institute donned a training suit—the Captain was regal and poised in her black and golds. The sheen of the uniform glinted in the Arena’s overhead lights as she and Bretz finally strode towards Rei and the others, the red-on-white armband denoting the same griffin of the school stark around her left arm. In her late thirties, Rei would have called her a handsome woman—though Viv liked to use the more simple description of “hot”. She was tall and fit, with her brown hair cut shorter on one side of her head and tucked neatly under the standard military cap that only

accented her height. The only blemish in the entirety of her baring, in fact, was a thin black line that trailed from outside her right eye before cutting across her cheek, over the bridge of her nose, and all the way to her left ear.

The distinct mark of a full-frame prosthetic that made up most of the Iron Bishop's lower face, earned—along with many more terrible wounds whose scars were hidden under her uniform, they all knew—on the front lines of the war she volunteered to take part in.

“All of you, on me!” Valera Dent called out, her voice ringing strong in the vast openness of the otherwise-empty black-and-white of the Arena's 150,000-seat stands. “Time to review!”

It took the rest of the Sectional squads barely more than 5 seconds to reach them, even from as far away as the very northern edge of the Wargames field where some additional fighting had apparently gone down at some point. With the slowest among them likely sporting a Speed spec no lower than D5, the three teams gathered in quick succession, Martin's to Rei and the other's left, Vademe's tight to their right. Not having turned away from the Captain, he jumped a little when some pinched his back in passing, glancing around in time to catch a wink from Aria as the girl took her expected place at the head of their six.

Once they were all gathered, Dent looked around at them with a nod of approval. “At ease, all.” Immediately, all 18 squad members joined Michael Bretz to stand more comfortable with legs spread slightly and hands clasped behind their backs as the Captain kept on. “First of all, excellent effort by everyone. While the Second Lieutenant and I do have some commentary, we agree that we have seen nothing but continued improvement over the last week-and-a-half. Cadet Vademe—” she turned her brown eyes on the tall Lancer now standing at Aria's right “—the Endurance training your group has been maintaining seems to be working. Keep it up. Additionally, did I overhear it was your idea to ally with Cadet Martin's squad?”

“Yes, ma’am!” Vademe answered clearly, earning himself his own personal nod from the woman.

“Good thinking. When faced off with a tougher opponent, finding allies wherever you can is sometimes the only options. Cadet Martin—” Dent looked to the Martin, a slender girl whose bright-red dreads matched her eyes over deep black skin “—I commend you for taking Vademe up on his offer. It seems you’ve been paying attention to the feedback about listening to outside ideas and suggestions.”

“I have, ma’am!” Martin answered at once.

“Fantastic. All around. Now, Laurent—” it was Aria’s turn to be fixated by the Captain’s gaze “—I know the field manifestation split you off pretty far from your squad, but once you see the replays I think you’ll be pleased with everyone’s performance. Ward, Arada, and Catchwick held a good central position until Grant could reinforce, and then made to regroup with Cashe who downed two of her own without injury. Was there an issue with your coms, though? Ward ended up enacting decapitation protocols after you didn’t answer...”

“No, no issues, ma’am,” Aria answered with a shake of her head. “I was being pressed by Kay and Ranjha, and I didn’t have the ability to respond and hold focus on Third Eye. I knew Rei and Viv—my second and third—were still up, so I trusted in the command structure if something were to happen to me.”

“Good call,” Dent agreed. Then she looked around at all of them. “I was a Dueling specialist, so while I personally don’t find the idea of ganging up an appealing one, it was the right choice, and almost perfectly executed—and responded to—by all parties. Still, like I said, we *do* have some criticism, which will be addressed by the Second Lieutenant.”

She stepped back, giving Bretz the floor, and he took it with a directness that Rei knew all-too-well after having spent half-a-year under A-Ranked Brawler’s instruction.

“Cadet Jiang,” the man start with a bark, finding Lena Jiang out of the pack behind Vademe. “Care to explain to me what your logic was is downing Benaly when you did, given Ward’s vulnerability against a two-on-one assault? In those circumstances—”

Twenty minutes—and at least some minor feedback for every one of the students—later, the morning’s second match commenced, and Aria’s team took the victory once again. Whereas the Grasslands Elimination bout had scattered them across the field on manifestation—a dizzying transition that Rei hadn’t quite gotten used to suffering, yet—the next round was a Capture Point, objective-based battle that had them all starting together and vying against the other two teams to seize at least half the six available nodes scattered around the map. Using Grant as a punching force with support from Viv’s damage-dealing speed, they’d wasted not time in stealing a base out from under Martin’s team—playing as Green this time—losing Cashe to an FDA but suffering no other major losses. It made the encounter with Vademe’s Green team tough when it came two nodes later, but Catcher managed a brilliant surprise attack in the middle of the fight that took down Phalanx Xander Philips *and* Hannah Tethers in quick succession, more than evening the field for them. Not a minute later, the Arena called the match for them, and Dent and Bretz had the first years all to gather once again.

This process continued for the remainder of the 2 hours of the morning team-training period, as Rei knew it would repeat later that afternoon. After 2 more matches, forms started to appear among the stands, and no one had to look around to know that the second-year squads had started to gather up in preparation of their own practice time. Rei could admit to a little jealousy. The first years’ daily Team-Battle periods ran from 0600 to 0800, then 1300 to 1500, which meant an early rise 6 out of 7 days of the week. Given their personal regimen had consisted of at *least* 3 or 4 additional hours of training a day on average for most of the last semester, he, Aria, Viv, Catcher, and Cashe—as it transpired—had been more used to the pre-dawn practices than most, but

the consistency of them was still rough. All the same, everyone was adjusting, and no one stayed sleepy long when the Iron Bishop herself was watching.

At long last, and with another healthy congratulations on a morning well spent, Dent and Bretz dismissed the first-years to the showers. It was a bit of a hike—they'd been assigned the locker room in SB3 for the duration of the break—but the walk and elevator ride was always a lively one, so no one really minded. While Martin's group mostly kept to themselves, as seemed to be their habit, only Grant didn't participate in the banter among Aria and Vademe's squads as they made their way down to the third of the Arena's seven training subbasements.

This, of course, surprised no one, as the Mauler hadn't been much more than a sullen presence among them all break.

"Kay, you *have* to show me that trick you pulled on Rei in the third match later," Aria called down the lockerroom aisle all of them were changing in after showering. "I'm surprised you didn't take his head off with that bait and switch!"

"She almost did," Rei said with a snort, one foot up on the bench as he tied up the laces of one sneaker by hand. It still felt strange being allowed to wear civies, but he wasn't about to complain, *especially* after he and Aria's healthy shopping spree over the previous weekend. "Cut my nose clean off. Hurt like a bitch the rest of the match."

"Sure thing," Kay answered Aria from where she was changing between Vademe and Phillips, hopping up and down as she pulled a pair of skinny jeans over muscular legs. "Even better, I think we've got Allison Lake overseeing Dueling training tomorrow. She'd be a better person to ask, given she's the one who taught it to me."

"That lady is *intense*," Catcher chimed in from where he was pulling on bright-red baseball cap over his blonde hair. "Only worked with her in cross-training, obviously, but your sub-instructor always makes me feel like I'm minutes away from stepping onto the front line, Kay..."

Kay laughed at that, answering something about Claire de Soto—the Saber sub-instructor who’d once fought under the name “Iron Lily” in the professional SCTs—being even scarier, but Rei tuned them out. He gotten distracted, noticing that Viv seemed to be taking her time getting dressed beside him, and didn’t miss her shooting annoyed glances up the aisle from them every few seconds. Looking around her, he was unsurprised for see Grant pulling a shirt over his muscular arms a ways away, choosing—as usual—to stay a few paces separate from the group.

Taking a breath, he steeled himself.

“Viv... If you want to go talk to him, it’s fine. Seriously.”

Rei had said it before, of course. A few times, in fact. Ever since Viv had had something of a run-in with the massive Mauler a few months back, it had become more and more obvious the girl saw Grant in a very different light than most of the rest of them. She’d never confided in him about it, sadly—then again, Grant *had* been nothing short of a dick to Rei ever since coming to Galens—but the signs were there, not to mention Grant himself had once asked, almost awkwardly, if Rei and Viv were “a thing”. He didn’t get it in the moment, sure—and he suspected she knew that, given she’d never brought it up—but Viv had been Rei’s best friend for going on 5 years, and had pulled his ass out of more fires than he could count in that time. That kind of trust didn’t shake easily.

If there was something going on between the two of them, there was a reason for it, and Rei had attempted frequently in the last month or so to let her know he knew that.

Viv, though, only ever turned to stone when he brought it up.

She stiffened, clearly not having expected to be caught looking, the button of her pants slipping between her fingers. After a moment, though she resumed tidying herself up, promptly pretending she didn’t hear him even as she glanced his way.

“So... You and Aria got a second date planned yet?”

Instantly Rei felt hot around the color of the long-sleeved t-shirt he'd pulled over his scarred shoulders. As the others continued to shout and talk around them, he hid his face, pretending to tie his left shoe for a second time.

She *definitely* knew how to distract him, at the very least...

Not today, though.

“Viv... When are you going to stop dancing around this? You're one person when you're just with us, and another when he's around. That's not healthy. Whatever's going on, you know you can—”

“Rei,” Viv cut him off smoothly, her voice suddenly artificially bright as she smiled at him mechanically. “Have you ever known me *not* to talk about something I want to talk about?”

Rei hesitated.

“... No,” he admitted after a second.

“No.” Viv repeated the word pointedly. “Then, in so many words: when I want to talk about something, I will. Right?”

Rei sighed. “Sure. Most of the time. But this—”

“This is no different. When I want to talk about it, I will. *Ok?*”

The finality of it left Rei with nothing but the option to nod sullenly down at his shoe. It wasn't the outcome he'd been hoping for, but it *was* a step closer to Viv addressing the situation than he'd ever gotten before, which he suppose he could count as a win.

“Awesome,” Viv said shortly. “Now—” her tone dropped back to her normal tenor, and her grin was more genuine, now “—answer the question: Are you two going out again?”

The flush returned, and Rei finally gave up on mock-tying his shoe in favor of turning to face the lockers, putting his back to where Aria stood laughing at some passing joke of Chancery Cashe's just across the aisle from him.

“Dude. She’s *right there*,” he hissed sidelong to Viv.

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

“For you, maybe,” Rei grumbled, reaching into his open locker to pull the hooded jacket that hung there, suspended in the gentle anti-grav compartment designed to help keep their regulars wrinkle-free during the regular semester. “And to answer your question: No. We haven’t made plans yet.”

Even without looking around, he could see Viv’s expression slip into a deadpan.

“... You’re a lot of things, Reidon Ward, but I wouldn’t have topped that list with ‘idiot’ until right this second.”

“I *working* on it,” Rei growled back. “We got a little... interrupted... at Easthold. Just want to make sure that doesn’t happen wherever we go next.”

He could practically *feel* Viv roll her eyes.

“She told me she had the time of her life at the mall, moron. And I was there when you got the call from Hadish Barnes about that bullshit with the Pennvale punks, remember?”

“Pennview,” Rei corrected her automatically, slipping an arm into the jacket.

“Whatever. My point is, if the school’s *chief of campus security* cleared you guys of any wrongdoing, why are you still worried about it?”

“I’m not *worried* about it,” Rei insisted, tugging the jacket snug over both shoulders—it was one of the articles of clothing he brought from Grandcrest, and only barely fit his steadily-broadening frame. “I would just rather make sure whatever we do next is perf—”

“What are you two whispering about?”

Aria’s bright question had Rei and Viv both starting before spinning around in unison.

“Nothing!” they said together, exchanging a panicked look.

Unfortunately, the girl was the quicker on the follow up.

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

“I was not!” Rei answered automatically, mortified. Then, though, he caught himself, turning to find Aria watching him with a raised brow. “I-I mean it’s not that I *don’t* think your hair looks nice, it’s just that that now what... what we were... talking about...”

His protest trailed away lamely as Aria’s only rose higher and higher with every word. On either side of her, Catcher and Cashe—who had looked around at them, too—stared at Rei with matching, expressionless face.

“... Dude... You know you’re not fooling anyone, right?” Catcher asked at last.

“Like... *anyone*...” Cashe agreed with a slow nod.

In answer, Rei mouthed at the air for a full few seconds, then finally regained the wherewithal to whirl on Viv.

“You,” he hissed even as the girl avoided his eye by looking at the ceiling, feigning innocence. “You *do* remember that I know where you sleep at night, don’t you?”

This drew a low gale of laughter from Cashe, Catcher, and Vademe’s group nearby, but Rei was fortunately saved by further embarrassment—and explanation—as someone called his name from the far end of the aisle.

“Ward!”

All eyes turned west, towards the front wall of the locker room. Looking Viv again, Rei was surprised to see Michael Bretz in black and golds—a rare sight indeed—standing near the entrance of the locker room, which was still in the process of sliding shut behind him.

“Sir?” Rei called back curiously. He’d never seen an officer in the cadet locker rooms, and suspected—judging by the slight frown that marred every face around him, even Grant’s—that he wasn’t the only one.

“They want to see you in Administration. Get your ass over there, double pace.”

This announcement had Rei’s jaw dropping, but before he could ask so much as a what-when-where-or-why, the Second Lieutenant had turned and left the chamber again, vanishing in a blink into the wide hall the surrounded the Wargames floor that took up the center of every subbasement space.

“Administration?” Rei echoed after the doors had slid shut again, utterly bewildered and staring at the spot the Brawler sub-instructor had just been standing. “As in the Administration *building*?”

“Ooooooh someone’s getting called to the principals office!” Kay called from up the alley, getting a another laugh from the rest of Vademe’s squad.

Around Rei, though, no one cracked a smile. Aria, Viv, and Catcher, after all, were probably thinking along the same lines as he was, while Cashe and Grant—even up the aisle as he was—were both smart enough not to miss the other’s serious faces. If it had been something to do with his fibro, Rei was pretty sure Lieutenant Colonel Willem Mayd—the school’s chief medical officer—would have summoned him to the Institute’s hospital. Or at least his case worker, Lieutenant Major Ameena Ashton, would have. To be called to the Administration building, the center of Galens operations and staff offices, was a first for him, and spoke of something entirely different.

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

Shido. Someone—likely pretty high up the chain at the Institute—wanted to talk about Shido.

Without much choice to it, Rei finished getting dressed quickly, wishing suddenly that he’d had his regulars if he was getting called to where everyone from civilian professors to the commanding officer of the school spent their off hours...

“You... uh... want us to come, man?” Catcher asked uncertainly as Rei pulled the hood of his jacket over his white hair.

“We shouldn’t.” It was Aria who answered first, shaking her head despite not looking away from Rei. “Not to Administration. It’s probably important, and I doubt they’d take kindly to any of us seeming like we’re trying to butt in.”

“Whoever ‘they’ is, yeah...” Rei grumbled in agreement, making sure the cuffs of his jeans were pulled over the lips of his sneakers. It had been snowing lightly when they’d left the first-year dorms that morning, and if he was going to have to suffer this impromptu summoning, he wasn’t about to do it with wet socks. “But I’m good, man, thanks for offering. Whatever it’s about, I’ll fill you guys in later.”

“Assuming you can,” Viv muttered with a frown, watching him step by as he started for the door. “I still haven’t forgotten about then stupid gag order after you first developed Type Shift.”

Unwilling to open *that* can of worms again, Rei only looked back long enough to catch Aria’s eye. “I’ll message you when I’m done. Let me know when you guys are leaving breakfast, if I’m not back before?”

“Sounds good,” she said with an attempt at a smile that didn’t hide the worry creasing her forehead.

Even forced as it was, it still made Rei’s stomach do the smallest of backflips.

“What are *we*, then?” he heard Catcher ask as Rei avoided Grant’s dark gaze when he slipped by the silent Mauler, heading for the door. “Chopped liver? Since when is Aria the one who get’s to tell him where we’re at? We’ve got a group chat for that!”

“But... Aren’t they dating, now, though?” Chancery Cashe’s answering question was hesitant. “Seems pretty normal to me...”

Fortunately for Rei, the hiss of the locker room doors opening before him, letting him out into the hall, wasn’t loud enough to hide Aria’s audible squeak of embarrassment.

CHAPTER 3

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACEHOLDER

To say that Logan Grant felt out of place would have been the understatement of the year.

It was both an old and new experience for him, and one he hated either way. His whole life Logan had always largely been the center of attention, even when he'd wanted nothing more than to disappear. As he'd gotten older that feeling had fortunately faded, and it had been so long since he'd been big enough to prove a terrifying force on his grade school combat team that he'd largely forgotten what it felt like to be an outcast.

Now, though... Now an outcast was probably the nicest way of describing how Logan felt.

Pulling his shirt on over his head, he grit his teeth in annoyance at the thought. By most measures, he *shouldn't* have felt separated from the group that was changing just a few steps up the locker room aisle from him. He was an important part of Aria Laurent's squad, he knew, a *very* important part. He might have argued his position on the team—as the only Mauler—actually made him borderline essential, but he'd been working to temper that kind of arrogance down for a few months now, since it always got him in hot water with a certain someone. Still, he *was* important, and he could at least say he wasn't replaceable, if only because part of the challenge of squad formation was that the 6-person groups were final as soon as they got approved by Dent and Dyrk Reese.

And yet... Logan Grant felt out of place.

“It’s you’re own damn fault, though, isn’t it, idiot?” he muttered to himself, angrily tugging the shirt down over his chest and abs.

Yeah... Yeah, it was. He was starting to get that now, if slowly. If he was honest with himself, Logan knew he’d had some suspicion of that for a while, and at *least* since Mateus Selleck—coward that the Saber was—had taken upon himself to gather up their little posse of mutual “friends” to jump Ward towards the end of the first quarter of school. In the months since, though, it had been drilled into Logan, with Laurent having been basically saying as much for months, and Ward having beaten it into him in the final match of the intra-schools. Even Layton-friggin-Catchwick—the team clown, by any measure—had grown the balls to call Logan out more than once in the last month, while Chancery Cashe’s silent stares of disapproval had spelled it out just as viscerally.

The worst of them, though...

Logan, not for the first time, stole a glance sideways. A few lockers down from him, Viv was still getting dressed, her brown hair in ever-perfect curls over slender shoulders only loosely covered by an open shirt, and he turned away again quickly, partially out of uncertainty, partially out of embarrassment. He’d thought he’d seen the girl look his way a few times, but she hadn’t yet responded to the private message he’d sent as they’d been making their way down to SB3 asking if she wanted to steal away from the group for a bit and get breakfast.

Then again, he suspected she wasn’t too pleased with him, right now...

“Idiot...” Grant mumbled again as something someone said down the aisle drew laughter from most of the two squads, Vademe’s group only a pace beyond the rest of Laurent’s.

It was his own fault. He was definitely starting to get that, now.

So why could he *still* not stop himself from being a monumental di—?

“Ward!”

The familiar voice of Michael Bretz cut across the amusement of the room, and Grant looked up with a frown to find the sub-instructor standing in full regulars near the locker room entrance.

“Sir?” Ward answered, sounding—rightful, Logan thought—surprised to see Bretz down in the dungeons with them.

“They want to see you in Administration. Get your ass over there, double pace.”

With that seemingly-simple announcement, Bretz was gone again, leaving all of them more than a little stunned.

The hell is that about? Logan wondered privately, looking around to see Ward exchanging a serious look with Laurent, Catchwick, and Viv. Even Cashe looked tense despite Sandree Kay cracking a joke about “the principal’s office” down the way, and he couldn’t blame her. Logan had never heard of a student—at least not a first year—getting summoned to the Administration building.

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

Again Logan felt that feeling of being out of place as Ward and the others had a quick exchange, culminating in the A-Type taking his leave of them quickly. Logan watched him hurry by, staring at the slighter boy as he passed, not missing the fact that Ward didn’t meet his eye. Instinctively the lack of acknowledgment irritated him, but he suppressed the urged to sneer in favor of following the boy’s jog out through the double doors and into the hall beyond.

He still wasn’t exactly sure what was going on with Ward’s CAD, but he had his suspicions. Similarly, he was pretty sure that Laurent, Catcher, and Viv all knew, and were being tight-lipped about it. The only time he’d put a feeler out during one of the few hours he and Viv had stolen to hang out in person during their Sundays off, Logan had found himself shut down so absolutely he’d never braved trying to do so again. Cashe, too, was in dark, he believed, but *she* at least seemed to be doing a fair job of steadily inserting herself into the group.

He, on the other hand...

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

Unbidden, a familiar face drifted across his mind, as cold and hard as it was sickening. In the same instant, another, less-distinct form shaped itself in his thoughts, and Logan stiffened as he saw again the feet that didn't quite reach the floor...

No. The anger in the voice at the back of his head was comforting, welcoming and easy in its heat. *No. It's not your fault. It's his*.

His...

That face... That *damn* face that never quite seemed to let itself be forgotten...

With a deep breath, Logan started to come back to himself from that dark place, finding that he was staring blankly at the large, leather jacket hanging in the otherwise-empty locker before him. Fighting off the memories he would have cut from his brain with Honoris if he'd so much as *thought* the Device might possess such a merciful ability, he reached up to pull jacket free from the anti-grav compartment.

It was pure will that kept his hand from shaking as he closed the locker, just as it was pure will with which he banished the echoes of old pain—and even older hate—away.

At least for the moment.

“Na. You guys go on ahead. I'm being slow. I'll meet you in the mess hall.”

Viv's voice, as it so often tended to, dragged Logan back the rest of the way out of the dark, and the next breath he took was easier. Even though she obviously hadn't been speaking to him, it was enough to be reminded of her presence nearby. It grounded him, reminded him that—for once—he had *something* good to hold onto, even just loosely...

Plus... Was he wrong to hope the girl had ulterior motives in telling the others she'd catch up to them?

“If you’re sure,” Catchwick grumbled, and Logan knew the Saber would be looking between his back and Viv’s pointedly. “Don’t take too long. Can’t promise we’ll find you a seat.”

“In the mess hall?” Aria asked dubiously, clearly not catching on to Catchwick’s implication that he knew *exactly* why Viv was “being slow”. “There’s literally only like... a *fifth* of the usual student body here, right now? Why wouldn’t we be able to find her a seat?”

The sigh that followed might have been Cashe’s, confirmed a moment later as the Lancer spoke gently. “Laurent, you and Ward are *definitely* made for each other. So smart, and yet so often *totally* clueless ...”

“Pardon?” Aria asked with feigned hurt even as the three of them passed behind Logan to head for the locker room door. “I’m sorry, could you remind me: *who* was it that though Rei got let into Galens because of *nepotism*, originally?”

It was Cashe’s turn to squeak in embarrassment as the doors opened to let them out. “I already apologized for that! *So* many times!”

The trio’s banter would have continued, Logan knew, but as they stepped into the hall the entrance sealed shut again quickly behind them, cutting off Aria’s laughing reply. In the end, Logan was left only with Viv in the aisle, along with Vademe’s team a little down the way. In silence they waited like that, not looking at each other as they finished dressing—much less speaking—until at last the Lancer squad leader gathered his group up with a call for breakfast, all six of them making their exit not a minute after Laurent, Catcher, and Cashe.

Then, at last, it was just Logan and Viv, Martin’s team apparently having left unnoticed some time before.

“Hey.”

With a nervous leap in his gut, Logan turned around. Nimble as she was, he'd barely heard Viv moved behind him to stand between him and the aisle bench. As a result, their bodies were barely 6 inches apart as she stared up at him.

No. Not stared, he realized.

Glared.

CRASH!

Even though Logan's Strength ranked in at an astonishing C7, it wasn't much good against the laws of physics. Feet even as they'd been when he'd turned to face Viv, he didn't have the support or Speed to step back and catch himself as she shoved him back, *hard*, with both hands. His back hit the flat of his closed locker, the steel door shaking along with every other one in the line extending to either side of him.

Before Logan could make so much as a sound of surprise, though, Viv was in his face, very—very—obviously livid.

"Here's the deal," she snarled, and Logan could have sworn he saw the barest hint of silver light shining behind her hazel eyes. "I like you, Logan Grant. The MIND knows why—I certainly don't—but I like you. A lot. You know this, I know this, and I'm pretty sure everyone at this damn school knows this by now. *However—*" she was baring her teeth, the fury palpable in every word "—let's get something very, *very* straight, because apparently I haven't been clear enough about it: If it comes down to picking between you and Rei, you're not even in the *competition* right now."

Unbidden, Logan's irritation—only barely suppressed—flared at this.

"You think I don't know that?" he growled, starting to push himself up to stand from his awkward position still against the locker. "You think I'm not *acutely* aware of that already, Viv?"

"No," came the answer promptly, and the girl snapped up a hand to press against his chest, pinning him back down to the steel door at his back. "No. I really, *really* don't think you do, Logan. Rei and I have known each other for *four years*. We've had each

other's backs for *four years*. Longer, now, actually. I could make the argument—despite whatever my parents might think—that he is the *entire* reason I managed to get into Galens, and maybe even got to become a User in the first place. He has been my *best friend* since the day we met, and I would burn every bridge I've made at this school and beyond if it meant keeping him there.”

“Sounds healthy,” Logan responded with a sarcastic sneer. He regretted it immediately, of course, especially when he saw some of the wrath fade from Viv's eyes at the words, replaced by something much more distressing.

Sadness.

“Logan... You can't keep doing this.”

The statement came quite now, more gentle, and Logan felt the pressure from her hand on his chest ease up a little bit, letting him finally straighten again. As he did, Viv kept on.

“You can't keep doing this. I know you. I've seen *you*. Not the 'you' that makes a mean ass of himself whenever you get the opportunity. Not the you that lashes out whenever someone rubs you the wrong way. Not the you that *insults my friends*—your *teammates*—when they're down.”

Logan swallowed.

“So that *is* what his is about?” He did his best to lower his own voice, his suspicion confirmed. “Because I called Ward out in the first match? He was about to be taken out by Jiang. *Jiang*. A couple months ago he almost beat her in the intra-schools, and you and I both know he's lightyears stronger now than he was then. He beat *me*, and it feels like he barely months from being able to take out Laurent. So yeah, I called him out. He's got no business loosing to—”

“You know better than that.”

Viv's interruption was firm, even though she didn't raise her voice again. In fact, she wasn't looking at him anymore, having dropped her gaze to where it was only her fingertips, now, that rested against his the fabric of his shirt over his chest.

"What?" he asked, not sure he understood.

"You know better than that," Viv repeated, not looking up again even as she spoke. "You know better than to think Rei would get taken down by Jiang at this point, at least not alone. Which means you didn't bother to review the match footage, or even just ask what happened."

"What are you talking ab—?"

"It was three-on-two to begin with," Viv answered before he could finish the question. "Me and Rei against Martin, Vademe, and Benaly."

"Benaly?" Logan asked with a frown, genuinely surprised at this. He'd seen the Brawler after the match had been called, but hadn't realized he'd been in the thick of the fight. "Vademe was bleeding out when I got there, but when did Benaly—?"

"After Rei sacrificed his shoulder so that I could down Vademe. And then only because Catcher lost to Jiang, who was nearby. It was about to be *four*-on-two. Rei had to make a choice, and in the end it left just Martin and Jiang up, and Rei with a limp arm."

Abruptly, Logan felt most of the pent up frustration and irritation that he always seemed to carry with him drain away for a moment. He saw now, in retrospect, the circumstances. It *was* strange, looking back, that Ward hadn't "died" of blood loss shortly after that fight, which would have happened had Jiang—a *Saber*—cut of the arm that had already been limp when Logan arrived. He suddenly saw the fight clearly, playing out a rough dance of what had to have happened in his head.

Four-on-two... Ward had faced four-on-two odds—not counting the fact that Viv looked to have been engaged *solely* with Martin, making the situation basically three-on-one—and come out with nothing but a minor injury by comparison.

It's your own fault, came the words again, echoing not from the comforting anger, but from the other voice that had only started to balance the rage in the last few months, the quite, cooler one.

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

"Shit..." Logan got out after a few seconds of silence.

Viv, at last, looked up at him.

"That's all you have to say?" she asked him with a slight frown. "'Shit'? Really?"

"I'm sorry," Logan corrected himself at once, feeling his cheeks flush in embarrassment and self-directed anger. "Really. I'm sorry. I didn't realize. I didn't—"

"No, you didn't, and that's kind of the point."

Viv stepped back from him at last, dropping her hand from his chest. Her usual fire was back, the anger in her eyes again as she took him in.

"You shouldn't *have* to know, Logan. To act like a decent human being, you shouldn't *have* to know. Do you even realize what you're like, sometimes? How you treat people? *Especially* Rei?"

Yes.

The answer was clear in Logan's head, but he couldn't seem to say it out loud.

His silence, though, was obviously enough of a response.

"And yet you still do it. *Still*. Why? Why do you *still* do it?"

"Because he reminds of him."

This time the words slipped out, and Logan couldn't decide if he was glad they did, or wanted to snatch them back. The moment they were voiced, though, he found it hard to meet Viv's eyes, and he looked away as he forced himself to pressed on.

"Because Ward reminds me of *him*, ok? I can't stand it. The way he does things. The way he fights."

"But... Logan... He *does* fight..."

The words were quiet again, and yet just as sharp as anything else the girl had said so far. Still, though, Logan couldn't look at her, even as he felt the point claw at him, claw at the anger that was always, *always* present.

“He’s not your father, Logan. You know this. You *know* this... Don’t you?”

And there it was. The hammer fell, slamming against the walls that Logan kept up, that he held, eternally bolstered, in order to keep from drowning in fury.

Fury... and grief.

“I know...” he said quietly.

After a moment of silence, warm fingers touched his cheek, cupping his square chin lightly before guiding his face around. He managed to meet Viv’s eyes, now, and saw—with a mix of relief and guilt—that the only emotion left in that gaze now was worry.

“I hope you do...” Viv’s voice was gentle. “I hope you understand that he’s anything *but* your father. I just... I wish you would get to know him. That you would *try*, at least. If you did... If you even just tried, you might realize he’s the kind of person who would have done anything—*anything*, I promise you—to help you, back then. To help you... and stop her...”

It flashed across his mind again, then. Not the face... Not the cold, hard face of the man he hated, but the dark outline of a more-slender figure.

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

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

“Promise?”

Taking a breath as he forced the figure from his thoughts for a second time that morning, all Logan could do was nod.

“Good...” Viv withdrew her hand, leaving the pair of them standing slightly separate, still not looking away from each other. “Because if you don’t... We’re done. I’m sorry, but we’re done. I can’t do this forever. Rei’s too important to me.”

Logan managed a low bark of laughter even as he nodded his understanding. “Wouldn’t we have to actually *be* something first, for us to be done?”

Viv smiled at him, at that, sad again.

Then she finally turned and started for the locker room entrance, giving no indication that she wanted him to follow as she answered without looking back.

“Then I guess that would mean it would be over before it even had a chance to start, wouldn’t it...?”