

## CHAPTER 1

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 increment 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 10 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 unseen 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 Rei 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 Rei turned from the city glow and his misting breath to make his way quickly 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 evening lights that brightened automatically for him at his entrance. Nothing much would 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 B0 CAD User. Even if his specs *were* on average skewed a ways lower than that—closer to C5 or 6 probably—there wasn't a single piece of furniture in the room that would have survived his abuse, he knew. Maybe the nearest of the polished walls might have made a better target of his ire, but Rei wasn't actually sure even the clean *cement* could wether a hit from him unscathed anymore, unless he dialed back his Strength spec.

And Rei had *no* inclination to dial back his Strength spec, in the moment.

He'd done it. He'd actually done it. The *one* trigger he would have liked not 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 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 ball his fists against his temples.

The Kamiya Corporation's offer of sponsorship was... extremely in his favor. He was aware of that. Even after he'd rejected their *million-credit-a-year* stipend offer, 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 extremely 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 their offer.

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

"Dammit..." Rei grumbled one last time, trying and failing to not regret having signed the paperwork as soon as Jasper had provided him the modified documentation. The meeting he'd been promised hadn't been put into writing, but he'd taken her word that he would get it. He felt—for some odd reason—that the fixer could be trusted, even if he was rather sure that was just a feeling the woman had a talent for cultivating. But even if that fell through, the *really* important parts had been put into writing, 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 guaranteed 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. But it had been the right choice. It *had* to have been the right ch—

But then Rei went stiff, his episode of self-bareting 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:*

*Initial 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.*

*Initial link has been designated as "Shard 1"*

*Shard 1: ACTIVATED*

*Shard 1: ASSIGNED*

...

*Display Device Links?*

*YES/NO*

“What the...?” Rei breathed, so completely taken aback he hadn’t even noticed he jolted to his feet to stand rigidly on the red carpet even as he’d taken in 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 it 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 of the ‘Display Device Link?’ question and select ‘YES’.

And then he went cold.

*Device Link Request acknowledged.*

...

*Device Links:*

*SHARD 1: Gemela*

...

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

And then he was off, tearing from the spot in the lobby so quickly he thought he felt the carpet tear under his bare feet.

It fell mostly into place in the mere seconds it took Rei 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 he could pull from it without outright calling on Shido. ‘Initial 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 Device’s around it? Hadn’t they been alarmed by Catcher and Chancery’s acquisitions of Ruinous and Warband, and then Aria’s own incredible 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 made a note 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 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. “Initial link capacity has reached 100%,” the notification had said...

For some reason, it gave Rei a bad, *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 massive *BANG*. He didn’t even notice, just as he didn’t notice when he did the same thing tearing into his own room, where he found Aria jolting out of bed with a yell of 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 green 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 was no 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. And then there was how *tired* Viv had seemed over the last week. Increasingly so day after day. Bad. Something bad 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, and stopped short. She was taking him in with such alarm—with such *concern*—

that he was abruptly reminded that it had indeed been *her* who had affirmed his suspicions about Shido in the first place.

That, and the fact that he wasn't Viv's only friend.

"Somethings 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," he answered even as he bent down to tie up his laces.

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 two was out of bed, 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.

"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 Rei's room, Layton 'Catcher' Catchwick was blinking between the pair of them in surprised, one hand up by his face like he'd been rubbing his eyes when he'd realized Rei wasn't alone. He wasn't the only one, either. Even as they watched, another shape joined him, the dark skin of one of the girl's shoulder exposed through the neck hole of an overlarge sleeping shirt, silvery braids in a tight round bun atop her head.

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

But then the Lancer too, stopped, mouth dropping open as she took in Rei *and* Aria, the former 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 eyes looking first to Rei, then Aria, then back again. “Right... Not our business. Come on, Catcher.” She grabbed the speechless Saber by his bare shoulder 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—”

“Something happened to Viv.” Rei told them quickly. “We’re going to find her.”

Catcher and Chancery both stopped, looking back at him.

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

“I don’t know.” Rei, full dressed, glanced over his shoulder to see Aria starting to tie her boots, her shirt and jacket already buttoned. “Shido... Shido did something weird.”

“Weird...?” Chancery repeated. “Weird how?”

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—other than Rei himself—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 by him in a flash and slipping between the trio outside the, though she spoke to Catcher and Chancery as she moved by. “You two stay here. We’ll message you as soon as we figure out what’s going on.”

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

“Catcher. *Stay. Here.*” Rei half asked, half demanded as he, too, followed. “There’s no time. 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 bother with the actual steps. “Any at all?”

“West Center,” Rei answered without hesitating, following right behind her. He’d already considered that exact question. “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. 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 for some reason. Oh Viv, what have you gotten yourself—?”

But she didn't finish the sentence. In fact, she stopped short in the middle of sprinting across the Kanes lobby towards the dorm's front doors. Right behind her, Rei did the same, coming up so short he thought he felt the carpet under his feet rip for a *second* time. There hadn't been a choice though, as the doors opened ahead of them, well before they were in range of automatic sensors.

Opened, and let none other than Valera Dent herself into the building, the woman rushing in in blast of icy wind, noise, and brightness.

A stone formed in Rei's gut, one he hadn't let himself feel yet. It wasn't the flyer hover a foot off the ground just outside the dorm that did it, the vehicle's front headlights flooding the lobby through the glass doors like it had dropped Dent off directly outside and was now waiting for her. It wasn't even the Captain's disheveled state, 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 he saw 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. Rei had 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 been worried and angry, even furious.

But he'd never seen the woman *afraid*.

*Bad*, Rei couldn't help but think again even as he and Aria snapped automatically up into mirrored salutes at the sight of the woman. *Something bad...*

“Cadets?” The Chief Combat Instructor brown eyes went wide at the sight of them. In surprise she took Rei and Aria in over the black line that bisected her face and marked the full-frame prosthetic that made up most of her nose and cheeks and the entirety of her jaw. “What are you—? You know what, nevermind. I was just coming to get you anyway.”

“Coming to get... us, ma’am?” Aria sounded as worried as Rei felt.

*Bad. Something bad.*

“Yes,” the Dent answered curtly, already turning and motioning for them to follow. “Come with me, both of you.”

Rei, though, couldn’t move.

“Ma’am...” he forced out. “What... What’s happened?”

The Iron Bishop paused, but not before she stepped into the range of the doors. They opened again, and the blast of cold air from the winter night and still-active flyer just outside had the woman’s jacket billowing around her when she looked back at him.

There was that fear again. Rei could see it even more clearly now as the woman answered him, confirming his every fear as she did.

“It’s Arada, Ward. Cadet Arada’s been hurt. Bad.”