

## Chapter 19

“Surprise?” Wainwright demanded, still holding the spear to Rei’s neck liked she’d forgotten it was there. “*Surprise??* Kid, where did you *come* from?? One sec I’m playing ring around the rosy with the rest of your squad, the next you’re doing your damndest to shove your shoulder so far up my rear I could have wagged you like a *tail!* What *was* that??”

Rei had opened his mouth to answer, thinking he might as well come clean, when a man’s voice beat him to it.

“It’s some kind of teleporting ability. Instant displacement. Carries his *whole* body, Device included. It’s charged-based, seems to take about 100 to 150 seconds of combat to build up depending on intensity, and *doesn’t* seem to have a max usage limit.”

Kalus Laurent had caught up. The sergeant major came strolling into their midst, Triumverant still called, the three-part staff once more folded into one hand as he swung it casually at his side. Around them, Rei realized the rest of Firesong had stopped fighting, all of them glancing nervously at one another, Devices still glowing through the downpour.

“Tele—?” Jetway started, looking around at the sergeant major in apparent disbelief. “I’m sorry, storm must be louder than I thought. I swear I just heard you use the word ‘*teleportation*’...”

Laurent chuckled, stopping beside her and bring the folded staff up to tap against his should once more.

“Nothing wrong with your ears, ma’am,” he answered, though the green slash across his faceplate was turned down towards Rei. “I did indeed.”

For a second Jetway stared him. Then her four eyes turned to Rei, then back again. Twice more she did this, like she was waiting for someone to let her in on the joke. The whole while her spear never so much as shivered where she still held it to Rei’s throat.

“... You’re shitting me,” the woman finally got out in a strained voice. “*Teleportation?* No way. And *no* usage cap?? What kind of broken Ability is *that*?? Even for a *User-Unique* that’s *insane*.”

“To be fair, it does seem to have some drawbacks.” Kalus Laurent was still looking Rei up and down, like he was taking the opportunity to study him in full now that he’d finally been made to hold still. “Mostly guessing, but his balance, proprioception, and general movement dipped a little every time he activated it, then recovered. Impact got worse after each trigger, and recovery took longer. If I had to, I’d say its draining, either physically or mentally. Maybe both.” He squatted, then brought his staff down to *plink* Rei lightly on the armor Shido’s forehead with the weapon. “Clue us in, Cadet. Which is it?”

“It’s motion sickness.”

There was a light squelching of wet grass, and a familiar pair of green eyes were suddenly taking up Rei’s vision, framed in a broad, upside-down U of red-and-gold steel he was still getting used to. Aria stuck Hippolyta’s spear point first in the mud as she knelt down at his side—practically elbowing her older brother out of the way as she did—loose strands of hair tracing wet lines across her freckled face, neck, and shoulders.

“Ma’am, he’s hurt.” She addressed Wainwright without looking away around at her, studying Rei’s shoulder with brow knit as she placed the hand not still holder her shield on his other arm. “*Actually* hurt.”

“Ya think?” the second lieutenant snort. Still, Aria’s pointing out the injury seemed to shake her into the moment, because she finally snapped her spear away to stake it, too, into the ground beside her. “Broken Ability or not, what C-Rank in their right *mind* thinks it’s a good idea to charge an *S-Ranked* User on the field?” She crossed her plated arms, four eyes glaring down at Rei. “Aren’t you supposed to be *smart*, Ward? Pretty sure anyone could have told him that was going to end up badly, myself included.”

“I get the impression Cadet Ward would have been unlikely to heed your thoughts on the matter even if you *had* had the opportunity to share them, second lieutenant.”

The sound of the rain suddenly dimmed, then quit outright, and a moment later Rei winced as the support of the ground beneath his bad shoulder faded away. He started to drop, Aria still kneeling beside him in midair with her brother at her left, and even as they descended he saw the ceiling of the sub-basement once more as the field depixelated around them, with the white observation disk coming back into view a second later.

At its forward edge, Serena von Bor was peering down at him with interest, still leaning into the cane in the middle of the group formed by her, Dent, Guest, Maddison Kent, and Jasper.

“Ward, recall your Device,” the woman ordered as Rei felt the familiar press of the projection plating against Shido’s back. “Captain Dent, if you could call us a medical drone, please? Best to be safe, though I doubt that shoulder is anything more than dislocated. If it were broken, I think we’d hear a lot more screaming.”

“You’d be surprised,” Rei swore he heard Dent, Aria, *and* a nearby Catcher all mutter at the same time, but the Bishop did as she was asked the moment they reached the floor, the observation platform sinking into the steel and vanishing. The familiar whir of propellers was heard, and then Aria—who’d already recalled Hippolyta—was taking him gently by his good arm and around his upper back to help sit him up.

“Recall,” Rei grunted, half to comply, and half as a distraction from the renewed wash of nausea this change of position earned him. Shido vanished in a whirl, and when he had control of his gut again Rei braved a glance at his right shoulder.

“Ew,” he muttered, more in annoyance than anything else. “Yup. Deeeefinitely shouldn’t look like that, should it?”

“You’re awfully nonchalant, kid.”

Looking around, Rei found Wainwright and Kalus Laurent watching him, CADs returned to their wrists to reveal their gold-on-black combat suits once again. While Aira's brother looked nothing more than politely uninvolved as he stood again, the second lieutenant was grimacing at his misshapen shoulder with obvious discomfort, her own arms still crossed.

"That doesn't hurt like hell?" she asked, cocking her head like doing so might let her see the joint as it should be.

"Uh..." Rei struggled to find the right way to explain. After a second he nodded, but simultaneously gestured at his scarred arms and legs. "I guess so? It's kind of... a comparison thing for me?"

"Meaning what?" Kalus Laurent asked, green eyes tracing the markings along Rei's limbs intently now, like their indication had given him permission to further exam them.

Rei didn't get a chance to answer, because Aria karate-chopped him lightly in the side of the head just as the medical drone arrived.

"Meaning he's a great big idiot who doesn't seem interested in *ever learning his own limits*," she growled, pushing herself up and away from him so the bot could do its job. "Seriously, Rei... People are gonna think you *like* pain, at this rate."

"Oh, that's like a hundred-and-ten percent already happening." Catcher appeared, also back in his red-on-grey school combat suit, grinning down at Rei as he came to stand behind Aria. "I found a whole a feed the other day dedicated to chatting about if the Iron Prince was a certified masochist. Weird place. Only like twenty people in it, but kinda funny to—"

"Catcher, do I want to know *how* you found a feed like that?" Chancery asked with a sigh, stepping around to Rei's other side as she shook her head with hands on her hips.

"You know you don't," Grant grunted, smirking a little from just behind her before looking down at Rei. "You good?"

“Right as rain.” Rei tried to offer a thumbs up, but realized he needed his good arm to prop himself up into a sitting position now that Aria wasn’t supporting him.

In front of him, Wainwright was shaking her head, eyebrows halfway to her hairline.

“Cadets the days are made of scary stuff,” she muttered. “I woulda been puking.”

“Modest of you, Second Lieutenant. I seem to recall hearing of a Duel of yours where you broke a wrist and four ribs and *still* came out on top.”

von Bor’s cane made an audible *click* with every step she took as she approached the group, only a little more distinct than Maddison Kent and Jasper’s heels on the steel floor. The old woman stopped to stand before Rei’s right side, looking down on him with that same subdued interest that still felt like more emotion than the old woman usually let on.

If he had to guess, Rei suspected he’d made an impression, and he could only hope it had been a good one.

“Drone says your arm is fine, Ward,” the Ivory Shield, continued, eyeing the bot that was still whirring around scanning him from every angle. “No breaks, just dislocated.”

Rei nodded. “Thank you, ma’am,” he answered, leveraging himself with his good hand to get around onto his knees. Aria immediately moved to help him, guiding him up until he was standing before the officers again. “They can probably fix that at the hospital pretty quick if I could be exc—”

“Oh there’s no need for that,” von Bor cut him off smoothly, black-and-gold eyes moving to Kalus Laurent. “Sergeant Major?”

“Ma’am,” came the simple answer.

Then, before Rei could begin to follow what was happening, Aria’s brother was at his other side, had taken his loose right arm in both hands, and given the limb a single practiced tug and lift.

The *pop* of the ball and socket finding each other again was audible.

Rei briefly saw stars as the pain flared in momentary bloom of agony, and if Aria hadn't already been half holding him up he was pretty sure he would have staggered. He grit his teeth, and after two sharp breaths the ache faded, then disappeared almost altogether.

Opening his eyes—when had he shut them?—he grimaced around at his shoulder to find it whole and normal again, the awkward drop of the dislocation corrected in a flash.

“Thank you, sir,” he told the sergeant major. “And *owe*.”

Kalus Laurent only grinned back at him, a wicked, knowing glint in those eyes that were *so* like his sister's.

Before him, though, von Bor had already moved on.

“Cadet Laurent, you said something about ‘motion sickness?’” The Rook-Class was looking at Aria intently. “Elaborate, if you would.”

Aria tensed beside him, and Rei glanced around to find her with mouth open, looking uncertainly from him to the von Bor, then to Dent on the old woman's left. She seemed unsure of how to answer, or maybe if to answer at all, actually.

It was Guest who rescued her.

“I'll handle that, Captain,” the colonel cut in, stepping forward. “Ward's situation is... a bit more nuanced than a student is equipped to elaborate on.”

As soon as von Bor, Jetway, Jasper, and Kalus Laurent had all turned towards him, the man started to explain. Rei felt Aria's grip relax around his arm a little, and heard her give a small sigh of relief.

“Woulda been interesting to hear you talk that one out to the *Ivory Shield*,” he told her with a quiet laugh.

“Shut up,” she grumbled, giving his arm a small shake. Still, she smiled slightly. “You good? I probably shouldn't hold onto you longer than I have to.”

Rei considered his stomach, then nodded. Any dizziness was all but gone, and he could feel the last of the nausea fading too. He really *was* getting acclimated to the backlash little by little, wasn't he?

"Fine yeah, thanks."

"And your shoulder?" she asked, letting go of him.

Rei lifted his right arm to test it out, noticing only the mildest of discomfort. "Good as new. Your brother seems to know what he's doing."

"Kinda comes with the territory, I think. Once you start training at *that* level, you're bound mess something up now and then."

"Fair enough," Rei agree with a nod, reaching around to feel at the joint. "Hadn't really considered that."

"You should have."

Rei winced, then glanced back with a sheepish grin to find Aria glaring at him.

"Yeah... I know..." he muttered apologetically. "Can I get off with just a slap on the wrist this time, though? Hitting Wainwright was enough of a lesson. Felt like I'd slammed into the side of a *mountain* at light sp—"

But then Rei stopped, his attention stolen away as his frame flared into being without warning.

...

*Processing combat information.*

...

*Calculating.*

...

*Results:*

*Strength: Severely Lacking*

*Endurance: Severely Lacking*

*Speed: Severely Lacking*

*Cognition: Severely Lacking*

*Offense: Severely Lacking*

*Defense: Severely Lacking*

*Growth: Not Applicable*

...

*Checking combat data acquisition.*

...

*Adequate data acquirement met.*

*Device initiating adjustments to:*

*Strength.*

*Endurance.*

*Speed.*

*Cognition.*

*Offense.*

*Defense.*

...

*Processing.*

...

*Adjustment complete.*

*Strength has been upgraded from Rank C6 to C7.*

*Endurance has been upgraded from Rank C5 to C6.*

*Speed has been upgraded from Rank B1 to B3.*

*Cognition has been upgraded from Rank C9 to B1*

*Offense has been upgraded from Rank C7 to C8.*

*Defense has been upgraded from Rank C7 to C8.*

...



*Calculating.*

...

*CAD "Shido" has been upgraded from Rank C9 to B0.*

Rei stared, open mouthed. He wasn't sure why he was surprised. If anything, he supposed another 5 minutes or so of fighting might have twitched him straight through to B1 if he added in the upgrades he'd seen since Sectionals already. Still, he'd be so intent of the fight, so intent on making a good impression in front of their trainers—among other factors—that he hadn't paused to consider the implication.

S-Ranked opponents. A pair of them, and each pushing more than two full tiers higher than he'd been at C9, much less the lower true average of his spec. The last time he'd gone toe-to-toe with a difference like that had been against Christopher Lennon, and Aira at Commencement before that. Both times Shido had made *huge* gains. And when those S-Ranked simulations had surrounded him at Sectionals—

*No*, Rei told himself firmly, allowing himself not to think of that, even if it was evidence. *No*.

“Ooooh boy...”

It was Aria—who he'd been looking at—who caught site of the script in his NOED first. She was squinting at him with an excited gleam in her eye, peering like she was trying to read the tiny backwards script on his irises, something that seemed to be everyone's first reaction these days when it came to Shido.

“What is it?” she asked eagerly. “Were you and Kalus going at it that whole time? It's gotta be *bonkers* if so...”

Behind her, Catcher looked suddenly intent, and on his other side Rei could practically hear Chancery and Logan going tense.

None of which was missed by their company.

“Colonel, so sorry to butt in, but... It seems like something rather interesting’s going on over there.”

Through the notification, Rei was unsurprised to find Jasper had noticed the shift in Firesong first, holding up a manicured hand to politely interrupted Guest’s ongoing explanation about Temporal Step. Valera Dent’s eyes found him next, snapping around to him instantly, with the other officers’ and Kent’s following immediately.

Among all of them, though, it was the Ivory Shield’s omnipotent gaze that drew his own, their black-and-gold pure fragments of that dragging power the woman seemed to be able to turn on at a whim.

“Ward?” von Bor asked almost curiously. “What happened?”

Rei thought quickly. He was still reeling from the upgrade notification—aside from Sectionals, climbing through the Cs had been a *slog* compared to the previous ranks—but he could jump for joy later. Temporal Step was one thing. He wouldn’t have been able to keep that quite forever even if he’d wanted to, just like Type Shift before it. Shido’s Growth spec was another matter.

Still... The best of misdirections always had a foundation in truth.

“Upgrade notification, ma’am,” he answered. “I’ve never fought outright against S-Ranks before, and my Device’s Growth Spec is above average. I’ve hit B0.”

*Silver lining to not having jumped to B1*, he considered as he saw collective eyebrows raise along with a broad grin split across Dent’s prosthetic lower face. If he’d skipped right through a rank, he wasn’t sure how he would have explained him—

“B0? Is that is?”

Rei blinked, and to a one every face turned toward von Bor. Whereas most everyone else had looked surprised and pleased, he realized suddenly that the Rook-Class, for her part, seemed almost disappointed.

“Uh... Ma’am?” Wainwright indeed asked. “The kid’s a first year... B0 is kinda *nuts*, don’t... don’t you...?”

Her question trailed away as von Bor raised a hand to silence her.

“My sub-instructors are eager and genuine, Cadet Ward,” she addressed Rei with an impassive expression now. “That’s good. Very good. I, however, am *old*.” She smiled slightly, then. “Meaning you *won’t* be dancing around me as easily as you like. My apologies.”

Rei swallowed, feeling his palms start to sweat suddenly.

“Uh... Yes... Yes, ma’m,” he got out uncertainly, suddenly dreading the next question.

The captain surprised him, though.

“Of course, some things *are* best left in the dark, at least officially.” She shrugged slightly but didn’t look away from him. “Still, I admit a *little* surprise. I expected a bit more.”

Rei decided to keep toeing the line of truth.

“Shido—my Device... It adapts quickly. It’s been harder and harder to challenge it.”

“Meaning it responds to stimulus.”

“It... does. Yes, ma’am.” They were getting dangerously close to specifics Rei wasn’t interested in airing in present company, so he decided it was time to make an attempt change tracks. “Just a little more acutely than most other CADs, maybe. We’ve *all* seen a good amount of growth this year.” He gestured around at the five present members of Firesong.

“Yes... You have, haven’t you?” von Bor indeed took them all in in steady succession, then, but despite that Rei for some reason didn’t remotely get the impression he’d succeeding at diverting the conversation. “An *alarming* amount of growth, one could even say. Two first-year Users with rare Abilities that usually only manifest in A-Ranks or above.” The woman’s eyes swept from Catcher to Chancery. “One with an overdeveloped Device for her age.” She looked next to Aria. “And another, well... I

think there's not much need to elaborate on *you* at the moment, Ward." Her gaze fell on him only briefly before flicking to Logan. "And you, Cadet? Anything of an extraordinary nature to tell us that we aren't already aware of?"

Logan looked suddenly uncomfortable, his red-black eyes apparently having trouble meeting the Ivory Shield's boring attention.

His voice, fortunately, was still even as he answered.

"Not yet, ma'am," he answered, clearly choosing his words carefully.

"Yes... 'Yet' being the keyword there, I suspect." von Bor studied him a moment more, then lifted her cane suddenly to bang it lightly on the steel again. "And that's nothing to speak of Cadet *Arada*, of course. Oh yes. I'm aware of the girl's situation." She offered Rei a hint of a crooked smile when he started in surprise at this. That was more than she gave the others, too, since didn't even glance around at Guest, Dent, and Maddison Kent as they all looked sharply inward at her. "I'd love to say I'm still well-connected within the ISCM, but the credit for *that* little tidbit belongs to... someone else."

Rei had just looked passed her to Jasper—whose face hadn't so much as twitched despite his only being one of many eyes to turn towards her then—when Logan spoke again.

"Wait... What situation?"

Rei stiffened. There was a still, unpleasant moment, and he heard Aria murmur a curse at his left.

"Oh shit..."

He had to work hard not to echo the sentiment.

"Captain von Bor," Colonel Guest cut in again, almost hurriedly this time. "That's not something that needs to be—"

"All due respect, Colonel, as far as I'm aware neither I nor either of my sub-instructors is beholden to your gag order" the Ivory Shield rolled over the man so easily

he might as well have been yelling into a vacuum, smiling all the while. “Nor am I fond of secrets amongst squad members, much less those under my direct purview.”

“*Captain* von Bor.” The colonel stressed her rank this time, like he wanted to remind her of who the highest officer of the group was. “That is *not* your decision to—”

“Oh yes it.” Again she cut him off, and again she did so without looking away from Firesong. “Have you forgotten I’m not a member of the ISCM anymore? Haven’t been for a long time.”

“You are still bound by the oath you took to the—!”

The Ivory Shield scoffed. It was the first time all evening the facade of the stern, well-meaning grandmother gave, and for a moment—just a moment—Rei thought he saw someone else under the mask. Someone sharper, harder, and even more dangerous.

Then the woman’s composure was back, and she finally looked around at Guest.

“I’m too old, too famous, and too rich to give so much as hoot about the military oath anymore, Colonel.” Her voice was flat, but not unkind. “I understand your logic. I do. There are some things that need to be protected. However—” she turned back towards the squad “—I think I’m safe in assuming that this *particular* team already has some experience keeping all-important secrets to their chest. Don’t you all?”

Before any of them could answer this, however, she was addressing Logan again.

“Cadet Arada and her CAD—Gemela, was it?—experienced an evolution after the incident that I understand landed her in the hospital. She has also developed an Ability.”

In the corner of Rei’s eye he saw Logan blink, then the boy swelled with what might have been pride. Beside him, Chancery looked suddenly excited too, and by Aria he was sure Catcher had opened his mouth, probably to get out a “Way to go *Viv!*” or something of the like. Behind the Ivory Shield, on the other hand, a myriad of very different emotions were playing out. Frustration and anger from Guest, apprehension

from Kent, and—oddly—a matching combination of interest and smugness from Dent and Jasper both.

Then von Bor continued before anyone could get a word in.

“A *User-Unique Ability*. The second first-year cadet in the history of the ISCM to ever develop one.” Her eyes fell on Rei again, and once more they seemed to pull at his very soul. “The first, of course, being our own Cadet Ward here.”

The shift in the room was instantaneous. Logan’s every movement stilled to the point that he seemed to have stopped breathing. Catcher and Chancery’s jaws dropped in unison, and with this reveal Guest looked abruptly more resigned than angry. Maddison Kent was glancing nervously from him to the back of von Bor’s head, but once more Dent and Jasper held matching expressions.

They were both watching Firesong intently, the Iron Bishop doing a lesser job of masking her eager study of the five than the fixer.

“User... Unique?” Logan finally managed to get out, his voice tight and uncertain, like he wasn’t sure he’d heard properly. “...Viv?”

“Indeed,” von Bor confirmed simply.

“But... How...? When? How could...?” The Mauler seemed to realize he was struggling to form two words, because he took a breath and straightened his shoulders. His next question came more steadily. “Can I ask what sort of *Ability*, ma’am?”

The Ivory Shield shrugged. “You can *ask* all you like. As it’s unique to the cadet and Arada is still indisposed, however, no one has anything more than the name.”

“Which is...?”

“Something for her to share with you, as there is no value in my robbing her of that moment, I think.”

Logan hesitated, then nodded.

Chancery, on the other hand, whirled on Rei and Aria.

“You *knew* this?!” she hissed, livid. “You *knew* this, and you didn’t *say* anything?!”

“Cadet *Cashe*.” It was Dent who barked out, bringing the Lancer up short. “Ward and Laurent have both been under directive *not* to divulge any of this. In case you’ve suddenly forgotten how the chain of command works: that means there were following *orders*, Cadet.”

“Ma’am!” Chancery snapped into a salute at the reprimand. “Yes, ma’am!”

Rei, though, didn’t miss the anger lingering in in the tightness of her mouth. Catcher, too, was eyeing him and Aria both sidelong, though Rei thought the Saber’s expression seemed more hurt than anything else.

*Can’t blame him, either*, Rei considered bitterly, feeling an embarrassed heat in his cheeks as he avoided his teammates’ eyes.

At least *Logan* still seemed too stunned to feel slighted, if even for the moment.

“Regardless, it’s only more excitement to be explored once Arada is back on her feet.” von Bor waved the subject aside, either not seeing—or more likely not caring about—the sudden tension in the room. “But speaking *of* Arada...” She let her hand drop back to her cane, taking the squad in pensively. “You’re good, Firesong. *Very* good. I put you to the task, and you rose to meet it. *All* of you.” She nodded approvingly as she cast her eyes across all of them once more. “I’m confident the sergeant major and second lieutenant agree, too?” The old woman made it a question, offering Laurent and Jetway an opportunity to voice anything to the contrary.

Neither did, and Wainwright even grinned at them.

“If they were all Bs, they might have actually hit me,” she granted them with a chuckle. “That’s definitely something, given the circumstances.”

“Oh?” Jasper cocked her head at the woman’s back, her face a carefully crafted picture of polite confusion. “But I seem to recall that Ward *did* hit you, second lieutenant? Or am I mistaken?”

The S-Rank winced, then shot the fixer a glare over her shoulder. “That doesn’t count! How the hell was I supposed to see him coming when he can *literally teleport*??”

“How odd.” Jasper brought her hand up to tap one finger against her painted lips, continuing to look bemused. “The sergeant major managed to avoid getting hit, somehow...”

“Lady, you’re *really* good at pushing people buttons, aren’t y—?”

*Bang.*

The sound of von Bor’s cane hitting the floor again snapped Wainwright’s attention back, though Rei could have sworn he heard the woman muttering something about ‘puffed up puppeteers’ under her breath.

“As I was saying...” the Rook-Class continued like there’d been no interruption, still watching Firesong. “You fight well, all of you. However, you’re only the largest part of a whole.” She let her gaze linger on Logan briefly, looking him up and down. “I’ve reviewed your Sectionals footage. It is clear that Cadet Arada is hot-headed and brash, and I’m sure will be the cause of as many headaches in the future as she has been in the past. *However—*” she pressed on as the Mauler, obviously expectedly, opened his mouth to say something “—it is equally clear that the cadet is a fitting addition to this team, particularly when you lack in acute offensive capability without her. At least for the time being.” Rei might have imagined her dark eyes flicking to him, if only for an instant. “For that reason, I’ve no interest in disrupting your training balance more than I have to...”

The old woman contemplated them all for a moment, like she were turning over a decision in her head. After a second or two, she finally looked around again at Guest.

“I’ll need a Duelist, Colonel.” It wasn’t a request so much as a statement, but her tone was polite just the same. “Someone either around their level or skilled enough to temper their combat ability to theirs. They’ll fill in for Arada until she can join us.”

Guest—who was looking more and more worn down—sighed in a defeated sort of way.



“We’ll can take care of that,” he grunted in answer, crossing his arm as he half-glared down at the Rook-Class. “Will you *at least* agree that a gag order should be maintained *outside* of your training hours? The ISC isn’t ready for Ward’s Temporal Step, much less Arada’s situation—whatever it may turn out to be. The public feeds only *just* started to calm down about Type Shift before the fiasco at Sectionals. I have to insist that the squad—and your team—” he narrowed his eyes at Laurent and Jetway in turn “—will *have* to respect my order for the time being, especially if you want a stand-in.”

von Bor seemed to consider this, then nodded.

“Fair enough,” she answered. “Though I would encourage you to figure out how to break that news to the masses sooner rather than later.”

“It’ll get out eventually,” Laurent said by way of agreement as Wainwright nodded along on Ivory Shield’s other side. “Whether you want it to or not.”

“If only it were my decision to make.” Guest’s words came out as more than a growl than he’d probably intended, because he coughed into a fist as though to clear his throat before continuing. “But alright. Firesong has already been completing their Team Training days with another first year. Cadet Martin. She’s good, and a Duelist like Ara—”

“No!”

Rei, Logan, and Catcher all spoke at once. Even Aria and Chancery—who hadn’t said anything—looked suddenly concerned, and among the group of adults Dent was frowning at the Colonel.

“Excuse me, *Cadets?*” Guest asked in a low, hard voice, glaring around at them all.

For once, though, Rei found himself unable to quail under the man’s heavy gaze, snapping instead into a quick salute as his eyes found the familiar spot over the Colonel’s shoulder. Maybe it was the fact that—by comparison—Guest’s bearing as a *Pawn*-Class User didn’t seem to hold a candle to even von Bor’s repressed presence.

More likely, though, was that *this* was a place where Rei thought he wouldn't have let himself yield even if he'd been standing in front of the Gateknocker himself.

"Sir, we very much appreciate Martin's stepping in during class," he answered quickly, standing rigidly at attention. "Her volunteering to join has been incredibly helpful. If we could request someone else outside of that, though...?"

"She's a talented Duelist, ranks in the average of your squad, and has demonstrated responsibility as one of the three first-year squad leaders," Guest answered firmly. "She fits the combat criteria, and can be trusted with what she would learn in these extra training courses. She's an ideal fit."

"She's not Viv..." Rei heard Logan mutter at his right.

*Most* unfortunately, the colonel heard him, sharp eyes turning on the Mauler in a flash.

"She is not, no, Cadet Grant." His glare did not soften even when Logan, too, snapped to attention. "But given Arada's current state is *the entire point of this conversation*, that is hardly a factor."

"Colonel, maybe they have someone else in mind?" Dent eased into the conversation placatingly, looking between Rei and her superior officer. "If they have concerns about Martin..."

She let the point hang, and Guest frowned around at her.

"Who else would be a better fit?" he asked sharply. "As I said, she's been working with Firesong for over a week already, and meets the criteria."

"She does sound like an ideal match." Wainwright had one eyebrow raised as she took in Rei and the others. "What's the catch, Firesong?"

Rei hesitated, thinking fast. He didn't want to say exactly what he was thinking. That he wasn't a fan of the overeagerness he'd been sensing from Laquita Martin in class wasn't a good enough reason, at least not to Guest. The colonel *was* correct, after all. As Red Crown's squad leader, she *was* ideal, and even came with experience working

with them—and therefore some of the complexity of Shido’s unique characteristics—already. If anything, there wasn’t anyone who *was* a better fit, even if they all didn’t want to give her the opportunity to—

There was a ping, and a message popped up in Rei’s own NOED. Suprised, he glanced at it quickly, and was taken aback to find that it had been sent from... Aria?

Wondering what in the MIND *that* could possibly be about, Rei dropped his gaze to the ground in an attempt to hide his momentary distraction. Opening the message, a single word popped up in his vision.

A single *name*.

Rei stared. At first he couldn’t believe she would even make the suggestion. Then he actually considered it.

By the time anyone noticed he wasn’t paying attention anymore, he was kicking himself that he hadn’t thought of it first.

“I asked you a question, Cadet. Conversation boring you already?”

It was Wainwright who’d caught him staring through his NOED at the ground, and he straightened up with a jerk to find her eyeing him.

“No, ma’am,” he answered in a hurry. “I was just—”

“I’m thinking you got into his head, Captain” Kalus Laurent said with a chuckle, putting his hands on his hips and grinning at Rei as he addressed von Bor. “Maybe he’s dissapointed in his own performance.”

“No, sir, I actually had a—” Rei tried to get in again, but the Ivory Sheild cut across him next.

“That so?” the old woman asked, banging her cane once more on the projection plating. “Well, can’t say I blame you, Ward. It was a good fight and all that, but like I said, I admit I expected more from your Device...”

Rei opened his mouth a third time to try to get out the name Aria had given him, but found his mouth suddenly dry. Out of nowhere, von Bor was taking him in in an

all new way, her black eyes bright. She seemed abruptly taller, too, her shoulders straight and a head a little higher.

“Ah shit...” Catcher muttered from behind him, the first to voice the exact feeling Rei had building in his gut.

All at once, it felt like he were staring down a mile-wide meteorite as it thundered silently out of the sky towards him a fiery hellstorm of stone and pure, unstoppable power.

“You know... That gives me an idea.” The Ivory Sheild’s voice had a low, energetic edge to it that Rei wasn’t sure he liked. “We can discuss the issue with this ‘Martin’ girl after. While you lot are still warmed up...” She lifted one hand to gesture at the gold-on-black of her combat suit. “I don’t really want to have changed into this for no reason, do I?”

“Ah *shit*...” Aria and Chancery both echoed this time while Logan only groaned in a worried sort of way as light flashed in the old woman’s eyes and the field came to life under their feet once again.

\*\*\*\*\*

...

*Processing combat information.*

...

*Calculating.*

...

*Results:*

*Strength: Severely Lacking*

*Endurance: Severely Lacking*

*Speed: Severely Lacking*

*Cognition: Severely Lacking*

*Offense: Severely Lacking*

*Defense: Severely Lacking*

*Growth: Not Applicable*

...

*Checking combat data acquisition.*

...

*Adequate data acquirement met.*

*Device initiating adjustments to:*

*Endurance.*

*Cognition.*

*Defense.*

...

*Processing.*

...

*Adjustment complete.*

*Endurance has been upgraded from Rank C6 to C7.*

*Cognition has been upgraded from Rank B1 to B2.*

*Defense has been upgraded from Rank C8 to C9.*

...

*Calculating.*

...

*CAD "Shido" has been upgraded from Rank B0 to B1.*

*"...rd. ...War...d. ... Ward!"*

*"Gaaaah!"*

Rei came too with a hitched gasp, rising out of the black so violently he flailed as he jerked upright into a sitting position. Before him Kalus Laurent—who'd apparently been in the middle of shaking him in an effort to wake him up—stepped away with a chuckle.

“You good?” the sergeant major asked him. “I gotta get the others up too.”

“Uh... Y-yeah... I think?” Rei stammered, struggling with a dizzying mix of confusion and dread as he nodded shakely.

“You *think*?”

“I-I'm good,” he corrected, hardly any more firmly. It seemed to be enough, though, because with another laugh Laurent turned jogged off, leaving Rei to look around as he forced himself to breath, forced himself to calm down.

If his heartrate got any, he was pretty sure it would have to start getting measure with four digits.

The green, sweeping plains of the Grasslands they had fought on were gone. He was sitting once more on the cold steel of the projection plating, Shido having recalled itself to his wrists already. The rest of the squad's Device had done the same, everyone scattered so far across the Team Battle area they might as well have been standing around a bomb when it had gone off.

*Which wasn't that far from the truth*, Rei thought, awareness leaking back as he squinted about, trying to will awareness back into place.

Aria was the only one still relatively nearby—some 15 feet of to his left—but she was coughing in a pained sort of way as she pushed herself unsteadily up to sit sideways on the floor, red hair having come completely loose of its bun to fall in curtain over her face. Catcher was probably 20 yards beyond her—still unconcious, with a grinning Wainwright holding his limp form up with one hand while repeatedly slapping him across the face with the other—and Chancery and Logan were at the very edge of the

silver circle, having probably hit the outer wall of the field after being blasted away by the hits that had knocked them out.

Yeah... a bomb was an accurate description.

*Bang.*

The sound of the cane striking the floor sent a shiver up Rei's spine in a way it most *hadn't* all of... what... *5 minutes* before, depending on how long they'd been out? Scrambling to his feet, he whirled to find von Bor standing just out of arms reach behind him, her back hunched once again, but the gold in her eyes shining in the basement lights as she took him in.

"Yes... as Laurent and Wainwright said: Not bad. Not bad at all." The Ivory Shield was nodding as she spoke, though she didn't look around at the rest of the squad while Laurent and Dent—the captain having clearly also jumped down from the descending observation disc—bent over Chancery and Logan to check on them. "Your lack of experience is obvious—painfully so, truth be told—but you all somewhat make up for it with grit and spirit. Your teamwork is good, too—at least for first years—but I don't think I'm mistaken in assuming you've been doing most of your extra training against each other? Or simulations?"

"Uh... Yes, ma'am." Rei was still reeling, the last few minutes a painful blur of disbelief and confusion, like a fever dream that had been a little *too* realistic. "Mostly... Mostly each other."

"Yes yes, well... We'll be changing that." The woman still hadn't looked away from him, her gaze peircing now, like she was waiting for something.

After a second Rei realized what, because that was the same moment he noticed the blinking notification in the corner of his hub.

"Oh *man*..." he couldn't stop himself from mumbling as he seleted it, somehow both shocked and yet totally unsurprised when the upgrade scripted itself out across his

frame. Beyond the text, von Bor looked to be holding back a smile, but she waited patiently as he read, having to stop himself from shaking his head.

Half a rank. *5 minutes* of combat, and Shido had seen seen improvements in 3 more specs, pushing it over the edge to B1. Rei had to wonder what would have happened if they'd kept going, but he also doubted his body—much less his freinds'—could have tolerated any more of the beating von Bor had already dealt them. Everything ached already, and he suspected it would only be worse by morning. And that had been with the woman clearly dialing her Strength and Speed down pretty much as far as Rei thought they could probably go...

*A half-diffused bomb*, Rei thought with a shiver as he closed out of his frame to meet the captain's expectant gaze again. *A nuke that decided on it's own not to level the city.*

A nuke he knew was waiting for him to speak.

"B1, ma'am," he told the woman what she wanted to hear. "Three spec upgrades. Pushed Shido over the edge."

The Ivory Shield nodded slowly, a satisfied gleam in her eye. "I'm assuming that's unlikely to be the constant curve of your improvement?" she asked, glancing down at Shido's bands around his wrists. "We recieved a breakdown of your ranking since your Assignement Exam. Given you were under-level for your class for most of the first semester—and training with some of this lot for much of that—" she took a hand off her cane to wave at the others as Catcher finally came to and Aria, Chancery, and Logan got whoozily to their feet "—there would have been a much steeper climb without some plateuing."

Rei nodded. He still wasn't willing to give the woman what she really wanted—much less Kalus Laurent, Wainwright, and *Jasper* most of all—but there was no dancing around this particular bush given how obvious it would be pretty much immediately.

"Yes, ma'am. I don't know what the dropoff will be like—I've never trained against S-Ranked opponents—but I imagine it'll be steep. Fighting against the rest of the squad



eventually ended up with just short of a flatline, though I do still occasionally seen an upgrade.”

“I suspect your ‘occasionally’ is on par with everyone else’s ‘regular’, Ward,’ von Bor told him with a snort, one finger tapping against the top of her cane. “But just the same, that’s good to know.” She narrowed her eyes at him, though. “Then again... You thought it best to continue to train with them? After this ‘flatline?’”

Rei didn’t hesitate, bringing himself at ease before the Rook-Class as his shock finally ebbed enough for him to realize he’d been standing causally before her. Retired she might be, but she was still a superior officer, of a rank with Valera Dent, in fact. “Yes, ma’am. I’m of the opinion there’s more to being a good User than how high my numbers are. Training with my team—especially against Cadet Laurent—has confirmed this.”

To his surprise, von Bor smiled at that. Actually, truly *smiled*.

“You know, Ward... If that’s the kind of mentality you’re already bringing to the field, I think you and I might get along just fine,” the old woman told him, the tapping of her cane head ceasing.

Rei, taked aback, was struggling to find a way to answer this when Rama Guest saved him the effort.

“I think that’s enough for the evening, Captain.” The colonel spoke loudly enough for all to hear as the observation disc finally touched down behind von Bor, depositing him, Maddison Kent, and Jasper onto the projection plating with the rest of them. “Assuming this session was as informative as you were hoping, I’m going to ask you to let Firesong get back to their dorms to rest. They do have a week of classes ahead of them.”

“And more than that, now,” Wainwright added cheerily, half-supporting, half-dragging a bleary-eyed Catcher over as Kalus Laurent and Dent did much the same with Chancery and Logan. Aria was the only one other than Rei who seemed able to stand

on her own, and even she looked a bit unsteady on her feet as she suffered her way over to stand beside him again.

“I give us a week.” she muttered just loud enough for him to hear. “Two *tops*.”

Rei frowned sidelong at her. “Before we... What?” he whispered back through the corner of his mouth. “Don’t feel like we got hit by a train?”

“Before we die,” she groaned quietly, wincing as she brought herself up straight before von Bor, Guest, Kent, and Jasper.

Rei wanted to laugh at that.

Considering it, though, he thought it best not to jinx the possibility.

“Firesong, you’re dismissed for the night,” von Bor indeed let them go with a nod over her shoulder at the colonel. “Good work today. As I believe has been explained to you, the additional training with your sub-instructors has been moved to mornings. 0600, Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Monday through Saturday evenings, though, you’ll be with us.” She smirked a little, looking the squad over as Catcher, Chancery, and Logan finally reached them, all three only just managing to stand on their own—though Catcher still look like he was in another world. “I would have made it *every* evening, but apparently there’s regulations about training breaks for cadets.”

“Should be fun!” Wainwright chimed in again, coming to stand beside von Bor.

“Very,” Kalus Laurent agreed, grinning at them all as he moved to the old woman’s other side. “Looking forward to it.”

Unfortunately for him, he’d apparently come off just a little *too* cheery for a certain little sister’s taste.

“Ma’am.” Aria spoke to von Bor, but it was her older brother that she was glaring at. “Permission to have a word with the Sergeant Major in private, ma’am?”

At the Ivory Shield’s elbow, the elder Laurent blanched a little.

“I don’t think that’s necessary,” he said quickly, his voice abruptly an octave too high. “You guys are tired, and I’m sure we’ll have plenty of time to catch up at a later—”

“Permission granted,” von Bor rolled over him as smoothly as she’d done everybody else that evening, looking around at the man with a dissapointed air. “I do believe I’d instructed you to let Cadet Laurent know you were coming so it *wouldn’t* be a shock, Sergeant Major. Did I not?”

Laurent—looking *very* nervous, now—glanced uneasily from the old woman to Aria and back again.

“I-I thought it would make a nice suprise.” He tried for a grin, though not quiet managing it. “Haven’t seen each other in a while. Thought it would be fun!”

“Ma’am.” Aria’s glare could have murdered as she continued to address von Bor. “Permission to drag the Sergeant Major away by force?”

“Now hold on just a—!”

“Granted,” von Bor cut in again, sounding almost bored as she looked back to Rei and the others. “Just keep him in one piece, Cadet. He *is* going to be important for your training regime.”

Aria moved so quickly she’d obviously engaged her Speed spec. Her brother—either too distract to react or thinking better of doing so—let out a grunt of pain as she took him firmly by the elbow and started dragging him towards the hall.

“Wait for me before heading back?” she asked Rei—smiling a little too sweetly—as they passed him, Catcher, Chancery, and Logan. “This won’t take too long.”

“Yooooou got it!” Rei replied at once. He’d seen that expression before, and there wasn’t a force *any* planet in the ISC that could have convinced him to answer differently.

Without a word the group—even Guest—watched the two siblings reach the hallways and vanish around the corner, Kalus Laurent sounding like he was at once

trying to explain himself and plead for mercy all the while. When they were gone, von Bor brought them to attention again.

“Fun as that was, as I said, you’re dismissed, Firesong.” She banged her cane one last time. “Laurent, Wainwright, and I will see you here tomorrow at 1900, and we’ll *really* get things started.”

“*That* wasn’t started??” Catcher groaned from behind Rei, though fortunately not loud enough to be heard.

The promise of worse than they’d just gone through over the last half-hour, though, wasn’t what concerned Rei in the moment.

Nor Logan, apparently.

“Ma’am,” the Mauler started quickly before anyone could stop him. “About Cadet Arada...?”

von Bor blinked at him for a moment, then frowned.

“Ah yes,” she murmured. “I’d forgotten. That *was* a rather vehement effort to avoid partnering with this ‘Martin’. I’m curious... As to what the issue is?”

“Martin is... fine, ma’am,” Logan answered carefully. “She’s just...” He hesitated, trying to find the right words.

Chancery, on the other hand, had apparently in enough pain not to care much for pleasantries.

“She’s a little... overenthusiastic, ma’am,” the Lancer took over.

“In what way?”

“Let’s just say she probably wouldn’t be too upset if Viv’s—err... if Cadet Arada’s absence resulted in a more *long term* opportunity for her.”

“Aaaah.” The captain nodded in understanding. Behind her, Guest was frowning again, but he seemed to have decided to let the conversation take its own course.

Fine by Rei, who was chewing on one cheek, working up the nerve.

“You got someone else in mind?” Wainwright was the one to ask, corssing her lithe arms over her chest again.

Rei thought he heard Logan and Chancery look at each other behind him, but apparently they hadn’t thought that far ahead, becuae neither answered.

This was not appreciated by the Ivory Shield.

“If you are going to raise concerns, I expect you to also present solutions,” the old woman told the pair of them sternly. “Merely highlighting problems does not moving anything forward, in life *or* on the field. I hear your concerns, but if you have no suggestions other than Martin, than as Colonel Dent has said she *does* sound like the best candidate for the job, given the circum—”

Rei didn’t know if he’d ever been more brave—or more stupid—in his life when he raised his hand to interupt the woman, silently thanking Aria for the idea and Logan and Chancery for the time to gather his nerve as he did.

“Ma’am...” he started slowly. “Does... Would Cadet Arada’s stand-in have to be a Duelist... strictly?”

von Bor turned her glare on him, but didn’t reprimand him for the intrusion.

“If we want to minimize interuption of squad tactics and training, yes, Cadet.” She was watching him carefully, though. “We want someone who could fill Arada’s roll as ideally as possible, obviously.”

Rei—happy for any reason *not* to look Guest in the eye given he could feel the colonel glaring at him—nodded quickly.

“Meaning... Theoretically...” He had to work to get the words out. “Any duelist with the skills to fill Cadet Arada’s position could do the trick...? And especially if they’ve already worked with Firesong before...?”

There was a second of silence, most of the adults watching him intently, clearly not following.

And then Valera Dent started to laugh.

## Chapter 20

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACEHODER

Candice “Dice” Meyer had once heard somewhere that—in long gone centuries—school students irritated with their studies would pick up their textbooks—their actual printed, *paper* textbooks—and chuck them across the room as a means of venting frustration. Most any other time, Dice would probably have thought the idea silly, even wasteful. Paper was valuable, so the thought of potentially *damaging* a book made her wince. What was more, what if the student lost their page? Wouldn’t it be a pain to find it again? She couldn’t imagine the tedium of sifting through that many words just to figure out where you’d left off.

Then again... At the moment Dice could only regret that technology had advanced so far as to make such a healthy outlet largely impossible.

“Uuuurrrggghhhh!” she let out in an annoyed groan, swiping a hand across her vision to scatter the dozen-or-so molecular formulas, mathematical functions, and tedious text blocks she’d been reviewing on the living room wall across from her. “Remind me: *Why* do we need to know the average rate of psuedo-organic regeneration across the different ranks??”

From her lap, a gravelly chuckle answered.

“Someone gets hurt in the field, it’s good to have an idea how long it’ll take for them to recover if it’s healable. You can’t always count on being able to get a squadmate back to base.”

Looking down, Dice stuck her tongue out.

“I wasn’t looking for a good, logical answer, you know?”

“I know,” Christopher Lennon—ace of the Galens Institute, A9 monster of a third year, and her munchkin of a boyfriend—answered her with a grin from where he had his head in her lap, blue eyes on the ceiling above her where his own study materials were pulled up for review across the smart-glass surface.

They’d claimed one of the two couches that took up most of the common area of Dice’s suite, a space not all that different from the dorms they’d spent their first and second years living in other than being a bit more spacious. Her housemates were all out, either getting in some late-afternoon training or with their own study groups, so it was just the two of them for the time being. That suited her just fine. Lately it had been getting harder and harder for her and Chris to spend time together. Classes always took up part of the day, but with this being their third and final year of school—and both their teams having qualified for Globals later in the semester—training felt like it was taking up more and more of their already-limited free hours with every passing week. And that was *her* schedule. Chris’ was even *more* nightmarish. He had additional Dueling practice with Valera Dent once week, for one thing, and Steelbound—the squad he led—was a favorite for a potential Systems and maybe even *Intersystems* championship that summer, meaning they did more hours in the training center than any other group Dice knew of. On top of that, it seemed like every other day he had to take one meeting or another with some family or company representative—from Astra and beyond alike—inquiring about his interest in sponsorship. He’d been turning them down left and right, always saying he was holding out “for the right fit”.

That had made Dice laugh out loud more than once after he’d shown her some of the offers a few of the parties had brought to the table, and almost faint outright when he’d turned down the *million credits* Veragoth Industries—a weapons manufacturer out of Sol—had included in theirs.

Still, Chris knew what he was doing. That Dice believed wholeheartedly. It was one of her—admittedly many—favorite things about the guy, right alongside his gentle demeanor and how easily he laughed, at least around her. Despite his reputation—no, his *legend*, at this point—he was one of the best people she’d ever met, with a smile that always made her feel like the luckiest girl in any room.

Of course, now and then none of that held a candle to where her head went whenever he switched on what she—very privately—called his “Lasher mode” out of the blue, but she wasn’t about to say *that* out loud, was she?

“What’s up?”

Dice blinked, realizing she’d been staring down at her boyfriend without meaning to.

“Nothing,” she said quickly, putting a hand on his chest and peering at him like she was studying his face. “Just taking in your ugly mug.”

In answer, Chris only snorted. “Brave of you to say that, considering.”

“Considering what?”

“Considering who’s the bigger moron? The one with the ugly mug, or the one who voluntarily decided to *date* said mug.”

Dice laughed at that, thought a little half-heartedly. The truth was it was a fact that Chris looked a bit different from most other Users. One of the many incredible things about Devices was the steady genetic correction they applied to their weilders, a physiological manipulation of chromosomal DNA that over time not only led to improved metabolism, peak blood-oxygen efficiency, and the like, but other advantages as well. Symmetry, for one thing, of the body and face alike. Add that to being taller, trimmer, *and* more muscular than the average civilian, and by the time they graduated a *lot* of CAD Users looked like they could end up on the cover of any fashion magazine one day. Many of them *did*, actually, Dice among them, having caved to requests to do just that for several local brands when her family—who were always angling for a way



to lure her out of the military—had pulled strings to get her the ‘opportunities’, as they called them.

Still, there were exceptions, Chris being chief among them.

He wasn’t ugly. Not by any definition of the word, and Dice would quietly cheerfully have throat punched anyone she overheard saying otherwise. Chris just didn’t fit what people’s expectation of Users were. For one thing he was shorter than pretty much every other cadet at school—other than Reidon Ward, who it was rumored was quickly catching up—with his 5’10”-ish frame a good inch or so shorter than even most of the girls on campus, and 3 shorter than Dice. For another, his face was softer, rounder than most, his cheeks having stubbornly held onto some of the fat that the other students largely lost in their first semester at school, if not before. His shoulders were narrow, too, and he often used his silver-grey dreads to hide his eyes, something some of their classmates had mistaken as reclusiveness early on. All of it made him stand out almost as the runt of any crowd, especially when he walked out onto the field at the head of group like Steelbound.

People learned otherwise pretty damn quick.

To be fair, Dice had had to have that lesson, too, though it hadn’t taken even a year of knowing him before she’d started seeing him as the handsomest man in the room. They’d even been going out since before Ouroboros had evolved into the *beast* it was now, which she suspected Chris was silently grateful for. Not that she could blame him.

Where he was headed, people you could trust to truly have your best interest at heart were probably few and far between...

“Seriously. Do have something between my teeth?”

Dice blinked again, finding herself meeting Chris’ blue eyes, his frame now closed, his entire attention on her.

Lifting one splayed hand, Dice covered his face and half pushing it away from her.

“Hey!” Chris’ exclamation was muffled against her palm as he flailed in a momentary attempt not to fall off the couch. “Leggo!”

Dice grinned, but she let him pull her hand away.

“Sorry,” she told him. “I was just thinking about how lucky you were.”

“Oh, how modest of you,” he grunted, steadying himself back on the cushions before playfully glaring up at her.

“Hey! I’m told I’m pretty hot, you know!”

“Your fan feeds doesn’t count as an unbiased opinion, babe.”

“Says the guy with so many *different* fan feeds that they’ve been known to go to war over what the *exact* shade of blue your eyes are...”

They bickered pleasantly like that for a while, both more than happy to snatch up the welcome break from studying. It felt good, just spending time together. Felt nice. If she was honest with herself, the passing of time had started to weight on Dice, every week scratching a little harder at old anxieties she’d long since put to bed.

Their third year... Their last at Galens. Chris was going on to the SCTs, and she was going to follow.

*No matter what*, she promised herself, probably for the hundredth time that year already.

It didn’t take much for Dice shake off the brief flare of long-gone worries. There’d been a time when it wouldn’t have been so easy, when the self-doubt and comparison had weighed on her like chains. She’d begun to see what Chris was going to become early on, maybe even before anyone else. Proximity had offered her that privilege, as well as that stress. That had been when the claws had first gotten hold of her, the hand that had been a twisting force in her gut for almost a year after they started dating. It’s wrenching had only redouble when Ouroborus’ true form had manifested, and again when he’d mastered the basics of the Device’s complicated nature within barely two months of the evolution, having spent hours and hours and *hours* every night for weeks

on end on his own in the training rooms, working on figuring out the patterns and movements and momentum needed to make the unique weapons work.

Dice snorted softly to herself, thinking back on it, resting an elbow on Chris' shoulder to plop her chin in the palm of her hand, fingers of the other drumming lightly against his chest.

“Whhheeeere'd you go?”

Glancing down at her boyfriend, she gave him half a shrug before offering only a muttered, “Just thinking.”

“About?”

“About how we've come a long way. Both of us.”

Chris gave her an odd look. “What brought that on?”

“Not sure.” Dice offered a fuller shrug this time, ending her thrumming of his chest in favor of playing with a small hole in his ratty, white sleeping shirt. She'd have to remember to offer to fix that for him later. “We've been busy. Both of us. Training, class, all that. I haven't seen you as much as I'd like, and I guess I was just thinking about how that's a good thing, in a way.”

“Oh?”

She nodded, considering for moment.

Then she sat up straight, stretching as she she did.

“I used to be so *stressed* about us,” she got out through a yawn. “You remember?”

“Hey.” Chris raised his own hand to her forehead, middle finger cocked back and at the ready. “Don't make me flick you. Them's old worries. No need to go digging up the dark days.”

Dice snickered, finishing her stretch to shove his hand away with a grin. “Down, boy. I'm not Just reminiscing. Better way to spend the time than *this* crap.” She waved at the regeneration formulas again.

Chris didn't look convinced.

“I’m *not*,” Dice repeated with a roll of her eyes, dropping her hands back to his chest. “I almost made top four at Sectionals this year!”

“And you would have if you hadn’t had shit luck,” Chris assured her firmly. “Your last match was in a muddy Flood Zone *and* Williams has Third Eye. Reduced mobility *and* elimination of most of your attack speed advantage. Pretty much the *worst* matchup for your type you could have gotten. If you’d had a better field or a different opponent, you definitely could have—”

“*Chris*,” Dice cut her boyfriend off with a laugh, covering his mouth again to stop him rambling on in her defence. “I *know*. I’m not dissapointed! I’m going to Globals! And with luck, I’m going with you to Systems after that! I am *so* not dissapointed.”

Chris tried to say something, but it came out unintelligible against her palm.

“Sorry, what?” she asked, pulling her hand away.

“I said ‘No jinxing,’” he repeated with a snort. “You don’t *know* if I’m going to Sys—”

*Pop.*

“Owe!” Chris yelped, both hands flying up to protect his forehead. “What was *that* for??”

“You know *damn* well what that was for,” Dice growled, but she had to hide a smile as she raised her *own* primed finger, a second flick at the ready. “Taste of your own medicine. If you’re gonna give *me* a hard time about an *old* lack of confidence, you better *bet* I’m gonna throw it right back at you when you start saying stupid stuff like that.”

“I’m just saying, there’s no guarentee that—”

Bending down, Dice kissed him, cutting him off again.

“Shut up, dummy,” she said with a light laugh, breaking away again and raising a hand to make a talking motion. “Yeah, yeah. There’s ‘no guarentee’, blah blah blah.” She raised an eyebrow at him. “Just like there was ‘no gaurentee’ that Orouborus was going to manifest something special when you complained about it in first year. Just like

there was ‘no gaurentee’ that you were going to Systems—then *Intersystems*—last year. And just like you *keep* stressing about there being ‘no gaurentee’ you’ll break into the S-Ranks before the summer.”

Chris glowered up at her, crossing his arms over his chest.

“There *is* no guarentee,” he insisted. “And stop bringing up the S-Rank stuff. I stress out about it *one time* and—”

“Babe,” Dice graced him with what she thought was her best sympathetic look. “You stress out about it so often my *suitemates* have started asking me if you’re okay.”

Chris froze at that, looking suddenly mortified.

“... Wait... *Actually?*” he grunted after a second.

“Actually,” Dice confirmed with a grim little nod. Then she grinned and bent down to kiss him again. “It’s becoming a thing, and it’s dumb. You know it, I know it—” she waved a hand around at the bedrooms doors, all of them closed except for hers “—*they* know it...”

Chris didn’t say anything to that, but he didn’t meet her eye either, clearly thinking.

“Sorry,” he muttered eventually. “Guess it’s been bugging me more than I thought. Silverston and Wén are definitely going to be Ss by Inters. Maybe Alvarez and Hyōng too. If I don’t make it...”

He let the concern hang, but Dice only shrugged again.

“Then you’ll look even cooler when you kick all their asses as an A9. But you *are* gonna make it. Hell, maybe you’ll even make *Bishop* before the summer, who knows?”

She snickered again as he looked around sharply, horrified.

“Dice, do *not* put that shit out in the universe! Come on!”

“Sorry, sorry.” She waved his terror away with a laugh. “Couldn’t help myself.” Then, though, she looked down at him again, taking him in more genuinely this time. “To be fair... I got this from you, you know?”

“The unending capacity for brattiness?”

“No, *jerk*,” Dice snorted, and gave him another little shove. “The *overwhelming* belief in the person I care about the most. Even to the point of annoyance.”

She could have sworn—*sworn*—she saw Chris’ dark cheeks redden ever so slightly.

“It was easy with you,” he grumbled, not meeting her eye again. “You were the only one who didn’t think you were good enough. Everyone else knew.”

“Sure, I get that *now*. Fat lot of help it did me fresh out of prep school, though.”

It was Chris’ turn to roll his eyes.

“I’ve told you like a *thousand* times. Just cause you weren’t part of the summer training program—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeaaaaah...” Dice smiled again, a little more mischievously now as she bent over her boyfriend and stopped him with a single finger across his lips this time. “Tell you what. *You* stop changing the subject when I call you dumb for worrying, and *I*—” she brought her mouth slowly closer to his “—will think of a *much* better way to distract ourselves from studying. Deal?”

Chris didn’t even hesitate.

“Deal,” he answered firmly, gaze suddenly ablaze, arms already moving around her body to pull her closer.

Her hair had just started to spill across his chest and neck, lips hardly an inch from his, when Chris’ NOED lit up. His eyes flicked to the notification once, probably out of habit. Just once.

And then he sat up so fast it was only the fact that Dice’s Speed was the *one* spec she had higher than his that let her avoid their heads slamming together with dangerous force.

“*WOAH!*” she exclaimed, blindsided as the steel frame of the couch creaked in protest against the sudden momentum under them. “What was that f—?!”

But then she stopped. First because Chris’ hand—muscle iron now—clamped around her wrist in silent plea for silence.

Then because she saw the script playing across the corner of his eye she could see.

It was the habit of probably any third year, particularly in the final semester of school. A message outside of class hours—or even *inside*, sometimes—could mean so many things, good and bad. A sponsorship meeting or offer. A special invitation to perform an exhibition match. Notice of their approval as an SCT fighter.

Notice of their drafting as a front-line soldier...

“What is it?” Dice asked after a silence, putting her hand over his where it was still wrapped around her arm. She was surprised Chris was staring with mouth open at the block of text, writing that looked so tiny to her but likely took up his much of his field of view. His surprised expression brought on more than a little concern. It took a *lot* to shake her usually indomitable boyfriend. “Is it another sponsorship invite? I doubt anybody is going to beat a *million* credits.”

He didn’t seem to hear her.

“What in the *MIND*...?” he muttered instead, still staring.

She gave him another few seconds, then lost patience.

“*Chris*,” she repeated, a touch peevish now as she shook off his hand in favor of poking him pointedly in the shoulder. “What *is it*?”

He blinked and seemed to come back to himself, but didn’t look around at her as he answered. “Rei,” he grunted. “I’ve got a script that let’s me know whenever his CAD ranks up.”

That surprised Dice. “You can do that?”

Finally Chris glanced around at her, maybe a little sheepishly. “Uh... Yes. Well... Technically.”

Dice narrowed her eyes at him, suspecting where this was going. “‘Technically’...?”

“Well... it’s not like you’re *supposed* to be able to, but—”

“But you tweaked your NOED’s hardcoding to access the public database API.” Dice sighed, wishing she was suprised. “I *told* you you should *stop* doing that. One of these days it’s gonna get you in trouble.”

“Actually it’s a scraper bot that just targets his front-facing feed page.” Chris was reading the notification again. “So theoretically I haven’t done any *actual* modification to the...”

“Babe. I *will* tell all your friends you purr like a kitten when I play with your hair. Get to the point.”

*That* got his full attention again.

“You wouldn’t...”

“*Chris*. Get to the *point*.”

“Right. Getting to the point.” He closed out of the notification to look at her fully. “I heard Rei was on light training since the Sectional’s shit-show, so I wasn’t suprised that he hadn’t notched passed C9 yet.” He reached up and tapped the side of his temple. “He just did, though.”

“And?” Dice didn’t follow. She’d heard—and *seen*—enough of Reidon Ward at this point to no longer be suprised at his rate of growth. “He’s probably back on a regular training schedule. Didn’t seem like he’d broken anything when we saw him after the match at—”

“He’s B1,” Chris interrupted her, meeting her eyes meaningfully. “Either he skipped again—right over *B0* this time—or passed through it quick. Either way... He’s B1.”

*That* got her attention. She—just like the rest of the world, she was pretty sure—hadn’t missed the jump Ward and his CAD had made after his field had been hacked at Sectionals. Half-a-dozen S-Ranked simulations had attacked him together, tearing into him all at once with what had for all intents and purposes been phantom-called blades. It had been horrifying to watch, and she’d heard a rumor that Ward—and Laurent,



too—had had a hard time getting back on the field after that. Not that she blamed them. Who wouldn't?

But... horrible as it had been... it had also pushed the first year from C7 straight to C9, a feat that had never before been seen in the history of the ISCM. It had been done in the *lower* ranks before, sure. Seeing leaps in the Fs and Es from User with decent Growth specs wasn't totally unheard of. But in the Cs? Never.

And now he'd done it again through low Bs?

Dice was abruptly very worried. "Is he okay? He didn't get attacked on campus, did he?"

"Asking him right now." Sure enough, the fingers of Chris' left hand were already moving as he typed out a message. "I heard the MIND itself patched the back door that got used for the hack. I bet it would have firewalled Galens too, just in case. So hopefully it's not—"

But then he stopped again, and for a second time Dice saw a notification flash up in his frame.

"Speak of the devil," Chris muttered before she could ask. "He just messaged me."

Dice bit her tongue, holding back the further demands that immediately popped into her head. Instead she forced herself to watch Chris open the message and read, noticing only that it seemed like a much lengthier block of text this time.

It didn't help that her boyfriend's blue eyes grew wide as fists as they flew across the lines of the message, then scrolled back up to the top to read it again.

Then, finally, he closed out of his frame, and for a long time simply gaped at the closest wall, apparently at a loss for words.

After almost 30 seconds of silence, Dice couldn't help herself.

"Chris...?" She couldn't keep herself from half-whispering, reaching out to tug lightly at the sleeve of his shirt.

This time though, while Chris kept staring at nothing, he did open his mouth to answer.

“Uh... I don't think making S-Rank is gonna be a problem anymore...” he got out hoarsely.

Dice blinked at that, not following.

“How so...?” she asked slowly, studying him. Yes, it indeed took a *lot* to shake her usually indomitable boyfriend.

Which was why the fact that Chris' expression was hovering somewhere between utter bewilderment and total wonder was more than a little alarming.

“Because... If I'm right... I'm pretty sure the kid just solved that problem for me...”

## CHAPTER 21

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACEHOLDER

Time had very little meaning for Viv, a reality that was made utterly ironic by the fact that she felt like it had been that way for a while now. There were moments—in that strange world between waking and unconsciousness that she kept drifting in and out of—where she thought should could only have been under for hours, while there were others where she was aware it had to have been days, if not weeks. Early on, these latter instances had often been paired with the fear, with that desperate desire to rise, to wake, to climb out of the depths of the warm, welcoming darkness, as comfortable and safe as it felt. The green light came back, swimming around her in shafts like rays of light through water. She would start to fight, start to force herself to ascend.

But then always did that flash of white in the corner of her eye show itself, as did that cool, calm voice that had taken her some time to recognize. It coaxed her back, sometimes willingly, sometimes forcefully, telling her it wasn't time yet, wasn't time.

And so, eventually, Viv had allowed herself not to fear, not fight. She wanted to, yes. *Desperately* wanted to. She'd wanted to shout and scream, to kick and claw her way up to the brightness she new was somewhere above. But she'd forced herself not to, forced herself to be free of it, to drift. She couldn't win, and the voice—one she trusted, if for not sure why—had told her more than once the risks of continuing that battle.

So she'd made herself to wait, allowed herself to drift, battling the urge to swim upward through the dark in the moments she was lucid enough to feel the need.

In the end, the distance voices of others was the only thing that gave her any real indication of passing time. They were murky, distant and unintelligible, and they came to her more as memories of recently passed moments than anything else. Sometimes—often, actually—they were accompanied by touch, by the feel of one or more hands taking hers even though she couldn't say where any individual part of her body was at the moment. They were all familiar to her, all of them in one way or another. Her heart had hurt the most when she'd recognized her parents, her mother's softness and her father's firmer grip. Their whispers had been all love—and maybe a little frustration—calling down to her from the light. Only Logan's had come as often, and so frequently in fact that some steadily strengthening part of Viv's conscience had told her we must have been making the trip any time he could find a spare couple of hours, which she knew for a fact would have been hard to do. Rei's voice was there too, a laughing, far off chorus that sounded he he were telling her about the day, his hands gentle, squeezing hers in a way that made Viv miss him despite being somehow so close. It had taken some time to learn Aria's hands when they came, but she'd managed it, and she always knew Catcher and Chancery because their touches were lighter, fingers resting atop hers, but not taking them. It didn't matter. All of them were welcome whenever they

came. They felt like anchors, small, steadily building threads of steel tethering her to a reality she was slowly realizing she'd almost left behind.

At least until it came ripping back to her all at once.

“Hello, Viviana. It’s been too long.”

With a jolt Viv found herself suddenly in a body. Not *her* body, exactly, but definitely *a* body. She was still adrift, but truly now, the world around her having manifested into the tangible scene of a clear, bright ocean awash with green light, the waving pattern of the sandy sea bed some 10 feet below her. There was a moment of panic as with consciousness came the horror that she couldn’t breathe underwater, but then Viv realized she didn’t feel the *need* to breathe.

That was what had her understanding she was still gone from the world. Halfway to the door back, probably, but still gone.

Well... That *and* the fact that a bright form had taken shape before her, familiar despite having encountered it only once before.

Viv grimaced, or did her best attempt to, the feeling of her face moving a weird, far off thing. On the other hand, her voice came when called on.

“Took you long enough to show up. Don’t know why you bothered playing hide and seek.”

The expression of the being before her shifted ever so slightly, teasing at amusement. Given its face was near-featureless, however, Viv couldn’t be sure. The barest hint of nose, the shallow dips where two eyes could have been. There was no mouth to speak of, but it made itself heard all the same.

“Showing myself might have been taxing on your faculties, Cadet.” The Massive Intellect Networked Database—the entity better known as the ‘MND’—answered with a casual chuckle that echoed dreamily through the water. “I realize you figured out I was here eventually. There was a decent probability of it. Still, if I didn’t *have* to stress those dear little damaged neurons of yours, I wasn’t going to.”

Viv felt a spark of fear at those words, but pushed it back. She'd suspected as much, hadn't she? But if the MIND was making light of it...

She had to know.

"... How badly did I miss myself up?" Viv mumbled, finding herself avoiding the figure's eyeless gaze. Instead, she looked it up and down. As it had presented itself in the final portion of her Assignment Exam, the MIND was sexless in every way, neither leaning male nor female in its plain, slender body. It was also again entirely white, a glowing blemish against the calming green of the ocean around it, so bright in its contrast Viv thought she *should* have had a hard time looking at it directly.

Clearly the rules of the world didn't matter in this odd manifestation of reality, however.

"Nearly catastrophically, Viviana." For the first time that she could remember, the MIND's voice took on a truly serious edge. "The fact that you survived—much less mostly intact—was more luck than anything else. Even *I* hadn't anticipated that you would push yourself so far, an oversight I have been thoroughly lectured on."

For a second Viv only wanted to know who in the known universe could have the *balls* to chew out the AI that literally ran the entirety of the Intersystem Collective.

Then the first thing the MIND had said registered.

"... 'Mostly' intact?" she asked instead, her voice a small, scared thing.

The being, as though it knew where her thoughts had gone, shook its head in an assuring sort of way. "You'll recover in time. Your nearly 97% of your neuroline was damaged being repair, as were their organic connections. Your Device reclaimed the inactive materials within a couple of days of the doctors getting your brain swelling under control, though, and is already working on laying a new network. It won't be immediate, but you'll recover."

Viv didn't know she could feel such immense relief *and* horror at the same time. She'd recover? That was good. Brain swelling? That was *very* bad.

Abruptly, a familiar face flashed across her thoughts, grey eyes blistering even in her imagination.

“Oh, Rei’s gonna *kill* me...” she muttered to no one in particular.

“I wouldn’t be too worried about that.”

Viv looked up, pleasantly surprised.

At least until the MIND continued.

“There happens to be a queue for that particular act of violence, Cadet.” It crossed its arms and nodded sagely, as though Viv had struck on something important. “Reidon Ward is only *fourth* in line. Either your parents or Logan Grant would likely get their hand on you before him.”

Viv would have balked if she could have. Not keen on dwelling her boyfriend’s fury—much less her mother and father’s—she opted to return to the topic at hand.

“But we’re here...” She looked around, through the shifting rays of the gently moving water. “Wherever ‘here’ is, I guess. Does that mean I’m better?”

She could have sworn the MIND perked up.

“‘Here’ is a fabricated simulation resulting from a stimulation of your visual cortex,” it started to explain enthusiastically, beginning to drift laterally in a slow circle around her like it wanted to give her the chance to take in the entirety of the world that was only in her own head. “I’m rather proud of it, too. I’ve never tried this level of cerebral infiltration, and I’m pleased with the result.”

“Pro tip: don’t use the words ‘cerebral infiltration,’” Viv grumbled. “Sounds creepy as hell.” Her hope strengthened a little, though. “Still, if you’re using my ‘dear little damaged neurons’ as your guinea pigs, then I’m gonna to assume I’m definitely doing better.” She looked around despite herself, peering through the ocean depths. If this was a hallucination—even a deliberately crafted one—it *was* rather impressive. “So? When are you going to let me out of here?”

“As soon as we have a little chat.”

Suddenly the MIND was in front of her again, sitting crosslegged in the water before her, hands on its knees and face so close to hers they couldn't have been more than a couple inches apart. She was pleased when she jerked back instinctively, or at least did her best to, suspended as she was. It confirmed for her that she was still at least *somewhat* in control of her own thoughts and feelings.

“What do you remember, Viviana?” the MIND asked her, pulling its head away until it sat a more considerate distance from her. “Before your incident?”

Viv frowned, thinking back. Truthfully was all pretty fuzzy, which she probably should have expected. If she'd pushed herself so far that she'd landed herself in the hospital, small wonder her memory of the training wasn't the best.

Then again... that was already something, wasn't it?

“I was training...” she started slowly, considering what she could recall. “Against a hologram. It was late. *Really* late. Past midnight. I'd been pushing my luck with—”

“I'm not asking about the specifics of your cause of injury, Cadet,” the MIND interrupted her calmly. “I'm likely more familiar with them than you are, at this point. Nearly a month ago you were partaking in additional training hours on your own in the West Center of the Galens Institute. Something you'd been doing for most of a week. You were trying to push your CAD to its limits, ticking up the rank of the simulated sparring partner you'd been working with. On the night of your incident, you—for some brilliant reason that is the newest on the list of things that baffle me about humanity—decided to escalate the difficulty abruptly, jump from A5 to S0.” The figure lifted a hand, and Viv blinked when she realized there were seven fingers held up there. “You took seven hits from that S0. After the last, you passed out, and did not reawaken, at which point emergency protocols were automatically enacted by the training facility.” It dropped the hand back to its knee. “As I said: I'm likely more familiar with the specifics of your cause of injury than you are, at this point.”

For a long moment Viv could only stare. The first thing she fixated on was the timeline. Nearly a month? Nearly a *month*? Was that right? That couldn't be right, could it? Had it really been so long that she'd allowed herself to languish in the dark? The thought was horrifying, but she knew too that it had to be true. What reason would the MIND have to lie to her, at least about that?

Then, though, came the rest. Asdf eragvvea

She remembered, now. She remembered pushing the simulation difficulty up and up and up—something she shouldn't have been allowed to do as a mere C-Ranked first-year. She remembered the warnings the field had given her each and every time she notched it up again, the flashing red and yellow display of “*COMBAT DIFFICULTY EXCEEDS RECOMMENDED LEVELS*”. She remembered the first hit—a little too distinctly, actually—but after that her recollection was warped. Pain. Pain like nothing she'd known before. Blood, too. And yet still she'd pushed herself. And then...

Something itched at Viv's memory, something there, right *there*. It was important too, she knew. *So* important. She remembered... a sense of victory? Of pride? Distant and disconnected, but definitely there. But why? What had she been chasing that had pushed her to the ledge, and then obviously beyond...?

A word tickled at her thoughts. No, not a word. A name. A name that brought with it elation, but also... awe? Why awe?

And then Viv remembered, and she spoke before she could stop herself.

“Endwalker...”

Her voice was barely a whisper even in the confines of her own mind. As she said it, though, the flood of memories came in full, a deluge that was almost painful. She spasmed, gasping as she remembered. Trying to fight the S0 had worked. Gemela had seen the spec upgrades it need. The CAD had ranked up, hitting C5(?)...

And then it had evolved.



Oddly, that was the moment Viv realized she could feel her heartbeat not in her chest, but in the world around her. The ocean itself seemed to pulse, the striking of a distant, deep drum coming faster and faster as she remembered.

As she remembered...

“Viviana, calm yourself.”

It was as though the water had cooled, the world slipping from green into a deep, soothing blue. At once Viv felt the thrumming of her heart grow distant, fading away into the depths. Some part of her was aware that the MIND was manipulating her, either directly through what new neuroline Gemela had already laid out, or through the hospital equipment she could only imagine she was definitely hooked up to if she'd been under for a month.

It didn't matter. It hardly bothered her. If anything, it made her realize why the MIND was there, something she thought she should have wondered at a little earlier.

It was there to guide her through... this.

“User-Unique...” she whispered again. “I... *We* got a User-Unique Ability.”

The faint hint of the MIND's eyebrows raised in a pleased sort of way. “So you do recall. Good. That will shorten this conversation substantially.”

Viv nodded numbly, then repeated the name. “Endwalker...?” it came out more as a question than anything else, and she looked at the figure before her, still crosslegged. “What does it do?”

The MIND snorted, offering her only a shrug. “We'll have to see, won't we? I have no more information on that than anyone, at the moment. Least of all *you*.”

“You don't?” This surprised Viv enough to pull her a little out of her shock. “But... Don't you *make* the CADs? Don't you assign Abilities?”

The MIND looked at her for long, long time. It said nothing, but Viv didn't get the sense it was giving her the silent treatment. On the contrary, it seemed to be thinking.

No... *processing*. If anything, this was more concerning than if it had simply been annoyed with her.

What the hell an intelligence as powerful as the Mass Intellect would need *that* long to make a decision on, she wasn't sure she wanted to know.

And, in the end, the MIND seemed to decide it didn't want her to either.

"I will be able to gather details on Endwalker once you activate it. Not before." It eased itself back out of its crosslegged position at last, coming to 'stand' before her again so that they were adrift like warped reflections once more. As it did, Viv realized the sea had returned to its warmer green at some point. "More important is that you remember. It makes it easier to explain things."

"Explain... what?" Viv didn't follow. The MIND didn't know anything about her Ability? And didn't seem to be the one who'd granted it to her as a User-Unique? Then what was there to explain?

"Oh... *So* much, Cadet." It answered with what might have been a sigh. "We have a good amount to cover. Your Shard, for one thing. That'll probably take a while. Also the fact that I was never here, if you catch my drift." It smiled then, as though realizing something amusing as it lifted a hand to wave around. "Ah, so *that's* what you mean with 'pun *not* intended'. Interfacing directly with humans is fun. That's the first time I've understood what that phrase—"

Viv, though, hadn't heard half of what it had said.

"Wait... my *what?*"

The MIND looked somewhat dejected that she wasn't as intrigued as it was by its own revelation, but it moved on just the same.

"Your Shard, Viviana. But we will get to that. Incredibly, it's not the most immediate issue." In a blink, its white face was too close to hers once again. "More importantly... I'm here to get our story straight."

Viv could only stare, totally lost now as she craned her neck back to put as much space between their noses.

“Our... Our stories?” she repeated. “About what? And what’s this ‘Shard’ thing you’re—?”

“Our story about how managed to get access to those training protocols, Viviana.” The MIND cut her off so coolly, Viv felt a chill for the first time since appearing in front of it. “Our story about how it is you landed in the hospital. Unless, of course—” its neck seemed to stretch, pressing its face closer to her even as she continued to strain to get away “—you’re keen on seeing the Iron Bishop court marshalled?”