

CHAPTER 33

PLACEHOLDER TEXT

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Despite the disappointment of the Wargames loss, a part of Rei knew that the Saturday matches ended on a better note than his mood was allowing him to admit. For one thing, Shido saw yet *another* double-jump in stats after that all-out-battle—Speed and Cognition in both modes this time, amazingly enough—his NOED flaring to life as Firesong had been making their dejected, plodding way towards the elevators to warm down. For another, the Team Battle they had later that afternoon brought with it a *decisive* win over Red Crown, numbing the sting of the earlier victory Jack Benaly had clutched for Martin and their squad. It had been something of a cold affair—with not one of the Firesong members speaking throughout the fight other than to relay tactical information or acknowledge one of Arias orders—but the clean execution and subsequent qualification for the format’s finals match seemed to make almost everyone feel a little better. Even Viv, who’d barely spoken a word since the Wargame, managed a weak high five and something that was almost a smile as Aria congratulated all of them on the well-earned W.

Rei, though, just couldn’t bring himself to let his mood improve.

While the others spoke a bit more as they packed up their stuff and left the Arena, he stayed out of almost all conversation, fuming silently. The entire flight back to the hotel he was quiet, too, even when Aria and Catcher took turns trying to draw him into discussion, and he didn’t say much even after they’d reached the Chevaron and dropped their stuff off in their rooms to shower and change into civies before heading for dinner. The meal was an odd balance of excitement and somberness, with Red Crown obviously wanting to celebrate their finals qualification, but not a one among them—

or Valormade, for that matter—seeming able to meet any of Firesong’s eyes. That was fine, though. Rei wasn’t angry at Martin or the others, at least not measurably. Was it frustrating that Firesong had been eliminated from the Wargames brackets because they’d been completely ganged up on? Yes. Very. But that was also part of the reality of the SCTs and—more poignantly—the reality of *war*. Had the three other squads in the semi-finals *not* mounted a collective effort against Aria and her team, everyone in that Arena knew what would have happened. Red Crown and the others had merely identified a critical threat, and done what they had to to eliminate it. Rei just couldn’t fault them for that.

Then again, what he just *couldn’t* get out of his head was the smug, all-too-pleased look on Dyrk Reese’s face as the man had pleasantly informed them of the details of the match the day before, along with the *immediate* downturn in moral the Major’s words had effected of Firesong.

It stuck with Rei all through dinner and after, when Aria had all six of them gather in her room to review the day. It was nice to to have affirmation that the Team Battle victory had indeed boosted the other five’s spirits as they discussed the day’s fights—Duels and multi-squad formats both—and Rei even managed to force himself to participate a little to fill in the details of his early participation in the Wargames and what his decision-making process had been like. After that they only briefly touched on the following morning’s matches—Rei vs. Vademe first, then Aria vs. Grant, then finally whatever pairing came out of those two fights for the finals—before diving into the Team Battle finals against Valormade, but Aria was starting to seem distracted, glancing Rei’s way every minute or so from her place on the bed to where he sat in the room’s sole desk chair. He pretended not to notice, wanting to convince himself he was doing a good job of hiding his frustration, but after another 10 minutes or so it was Catcher who made the suggestion that they should head to bed since “Everyone seems a little out of it after the day.”

This was met with a general consensus of nodding heads and muttered agreements, and the members of Firesong said goodnight and made to take their leave, all but Aria and Viv heading for the door room.

At least until Aria told Viv quietly that she'd be back in a bit, followed Rei out into the hall, and took him firmly by the elbow just as he and Catcher started making for their room. Her grip might as well have been a hundred steel bolts anchoring him to the floor, and he let out an involuntary grunt of surprise as he was brought up short.

"Rei's gonna catch up, Catcher," Aria told the Saber sweetly when he turned around in concern. "I'm just gonna steal him for a bit."

Catcher didn't so much as hesitate. With a grin and a double thumbs up in Rei's direction he spun on his heels again and hurried after Cashe and Grant, who hadn't noticed Aria's intervention. In silence the pair of them waited, not saying anything until the other three had turned a corner in the hall.

Then Aria slid her fingers down from Rei's elbow to his hand and promptly started pulling him along in the opposite direction.

"Woah, hey." It took Rei a second to get his shorter legs moving on pace with hers. "Where we going?"

"You'll see," was the only answer he got, which didn't help his mood.

"Aria, it's getting late, and if I want to be ready for Vademe tomorrow I should really get to b—"

"You and I both know you could probably take Vademe on with your eyes duct-taped shut, Rei, so shut up and just come with me."

Her tone, firm but concerned, was enough to indeed shut Rei up, and he didn't say another word as she continued to pull him along. They passed a number of other students as they moved, some from Galens and some from the other schools, and Rei had to work for once to ignore the stares and the whispers that started up as they passed. He really *was* in a pretty shitty mindset, if the eyes and mutterings of a bunch of other

cadets was getting to him. Even the not-so-bad knowing smirks and nods he got from some of the others boys pricked at him for some reason, though the wink he got from Candice Rice—Lennon’s girlfriend—as they crossed her coming out of a room wasn’t so bad, he supposed.

Soon they were at the elevators, and Aria didn’t let go of his hand as she called them a car, Rei noting as she did that she’d hit the option for “UP”. One came in short order, and they climbed in along with a scattered few other hotel guests, tucking themselves into a back corner to wait. Oddly, Aria didn’t actually make a floor selection, and when someone asked her politely where they were headed she smiled and gave them the highest number already displayed as having been selected by the other passengers.

Rei’s curiosity finally got the better of him, and he brought up a new message to her in his frame, typing it out quickly with his free hand before sending it off.

Where are we going? he repeated.

Aria didn’t even blink when he saw the notification hit her, though she did read it and respond in short order.

You’ll see.

The answer came with an accompanied squeeze of his hand, and Rei resigned himself to waiting it out.

They lingered in that car for several minutes, stopping every dozen floors or so as they climbed. The Chevron, like every modern metropolis building, had dozens of elevators, but the sheer scale of the building meant that even accelerating upwards as quickly as was safe for non-Users meant they were still in there for a while. In fact at

some point Rei realized abruptly that he and Aria had been holding hands for probably 5 minutes without him even really noticing, and that thought alone lifted more of his annoyance at the day—and Dyrk Reese—than any Team Battle victory ever could have.

Whatever other bullshit might have happened, the tournament had brought them closer together without him really even realizing it.

Eventually the car reached the highest floor that had been selected by any of the passengers going in and out and they'd climbed, and only then did Aria finally lift her other hand to touch the nearest wall, bringing up the elevator controls. As Rei watched she poked the highest button on the display—a bold, carefully-designed “R” in the middle of a red circle—and then they were the last of the passengers and the doors were closing again. They climbed one last time, moving faster and faster as the car skipped nearly a hundred floors without stopping now, and then started to slow, eventually coming to a steady stop. Finally the doors opened, and Rei blinked in surprise.

“Uh... Are we allowed to be up here?” he asked hesitantly.

Aria gave a dry laugh, but started stepping out of the elevator, pulling him along with her as she answered.

“Definitely not.”

They exited into what was obviously some kind of rooftop restaurant. The center of the massive room—it looked like it took up the full top *two* floors of the building—was occupied by a sizable square bar, but the scale of the place meant that left a sizable swath of open, polished cement floor to move around on. The ceilings were double-height and hung with decorative lights, and the outside walls were clear panels of glass angled slightly outward, artistically complimented with an elbow-high wooden counter that would have allowed patrons to share drinks while taking in the spectacular view the windows provided of Ganos, obvious even from where Rei stood. It was

brehtaking even just standing there, the lights of the city playing on the floor and ceiling. There was only one issue.

If the hundred cloth-covered tables, scattered power tools, and half-demolished bar didn't clue one in that the place was under renovation, the blazing, hip-height strip of yellow light that displayed a scrolling "CONSTRUCTION AREA. DO NOT ENTER." sure as hell would have.

Not that that seemed to bother Aria as she pulled him right through the warning sign—displayed purely in their NOED—and over towards one of the closer windows. For a second Rei though he might have protested, worried about what would happen if they got caught.

But then city came into sight, and Rei could only mutter a low "Woah..." of amazement.

The view was *spectacular*. Ganos didn't quite have the size or height of Castalon, but it was still a thriving metropolis, and the fact that such places only came *more* to life at night seemed to be as true here as anywhere. Everywhere below them light blazed, illuminating the buildings and skylanes in place of the sun that had long-since slipped away below the horizon. Flyers and other vehicles added motion to the scene, most of the lights moving in trailing lines, but some dipping and swerving and turning as they changed lanes or came and went from the traffic. The highlighted labels of the structures added a plethora of colors to everything, and from where he stood Rei realized he could see a dozen other hotels, several malls, a hundred marked restaurants, and probably a good score of different residential towers without even turning his head. It was astounding, and yet, taking it all in, Rei felt like he could breath a little easier, than he had all day.

Standing there, so high above the world that the even the largest transport vehicles looked like the toys he remembered sharing with the other children on the Estoran Center, made him feel separate from it all in a way he'd really, *really* needed.

“How did you *find* this place?” he asked Aria without looking around at her, watching as the blazing lights of what looked like an emergency medical flyer blazed through open air, skipping the usually travel lanes far, far below them.

“Luck.” She was standing beside him, having at some point finally let go of his hand, and as she answered she leaned her elbows on the window counter to watch the world below. “First night we got here. I was so nervous I woke up at like midnight and couldn’t get back to sleep. Ended up wandering around the hotel.”

That surprised Rei, and he raised an eyebrow as he lifted his eyes to her reflection in the glass.

“Really? I thought you seemed really held together Monday morning...”

Aria snorted. “The modern miracles of sweatproof makeup. You should have seen the bags under my eyes before I covered them up. Add that to having grown up around my mom and, well...” She shrugged. “I got good at ‘seeming’ like I have it all together in preschool, probably...”

Rei nodded, following now as he let his gaze drift back down to the city. “And so you ended up here? Hell of a find...”

“Yeah I kinda thought so... Came back last night, too...”

Rei frowned at that, starting to understand why they were there. The anger returned sharply, and he must have stiffened because Aria look around at him directly.

“Rei... Can I be honest with you?”

The question came quiet and calm, but Rei still wasn’t sure what to make of it. After a second, though, he nodded. “Always. You know that.”

“Good... Then don’t take this the wrong way but... You’re a damn hypocrite.”

That took Rei by surprise, and he blinked as he turned to Aria too. She hadn’t looked away, and there was something between a smirk and a sad smile on her face as he met her eyes.

“Excuse me?”

“I told you not to take it the wrong way.”

“How can I *not* take that the wrong way...?”

“Cause it’s true.” She reached out her left hand, taking his right to squeeze his fingers comfordingly. “You yelled at Viv for not talking about what’s been going on with her—”

“I didn’t yell at her!” Rei interrupted in protest, earning himself nothing more than a pair of rolled eyes.

“Fine. You *very politely* requested that Viv talk about what’s been going on with her—”

“Fat lot of good it did, too. 48 hours later and she’s locked me out ag—”

“Rei, I’m trying to have a serious conversation here. If you cut me off one more time I’m going to throw you out this window and make it look like an accident.” She smiled venomously at him, bring her free hand up to rap a knuckle on the thick glass. “We’re getting up there in rank. You might even live.”

A chill ran up Rei’s spine, and he was suddenly reminded of another recent conversation with a very different person.

For some reason, he had less of a hard time imaging *Aria* chucking him off a building that Colonel Guest, though...

“Yes ma’am, sorry ma’am,” he said, trying at an apologetic salute with his left hand.

“I think you being a smartass is only cute *some* of the time, Ward,” *Aria* told him, that lethal smile having not left her face.

Rei chuckled, relaxing and giving her hand a little bounce to show he understood. “Got it. Sorry. You were saying I’m a hypocrite.”

“I was. Can I explain why without you interrupting?”

Rei nodded sheepishly, and *Aria*’s expression softened.

“You’ve been pushing Viv to talk to you for weeks. I get it, and I agree with it. She definitely needs to open up. *But...* it’s a bit rich of you to ask that of her when you clam up the minute something gets to *you*.”

“I don’t clam up!” Rei protested. “What do I clam up?”

“So today was just you trial running a vow of silence, then?”

That had Rei’s mouth snapping shut, and he glowered at Aria resentfully.

“That’s different. This is different.”

“Yes, it is.” Aria agreed, but rather than look any kind of frustrated at his pushback, she looked worried. “That’s kind of my point, Rei. You *don’t* usually go quite when something is bothering you. You don’t. If anything you’re like a crowbar when it comes to wedging open the doors to uncomfortable conversation, as Viv and I can both attest to.”

“And that’s a bad thing?” Rei asked, making a half-heartedly to derail the topic Aria was *actually* after.

She saw right through him, of course.

“No, it’s not.” She raised an eyebrow in warning. “And don’t try to change the subject. I’m serious, Rei. You sealed up today. It was bad before the Wargame, and I got that. Reese and the matchup and Viv and everything. But after... That was next level.” She stepped closer, letting go of his fingers finally to bring her hand high upper his arm, letting it come to rest above his elbow as she watched him worriedly. “I just want to know what’s going on? Talk to me... Please.”

For a little while longer Rei didn’t answer, jailed by a kind of pride he was surprised to discover he possessed. He still wanted to argue that she *was* wrong, that he *didn’t* “clam up” when something was raking at him. The truth, though...

The truth wasn’t so simple, and a moment later Rei found himself letting it all out at once.

“I feel like it’s on me, Aria,” he said, not even hearing his voice crack a bit as the anger and sadness of the admittance weighed on him. “All of it. All the bullshit. Reese being an ass to the team, yes, but also people like Biggs poking and prodding to figure out if we’re legit. Us getting ganged up on in the Wargames. We never had a *shot* in that fight, Aria. From the start. And Viv? You want to talk about Viv?” Rei scoffed. “My best friend for *years*, dating a guy I’m not sure I hate anymore? Maybe? But because she doesn’t know either I feel like it’s partially *my* fault she’s been so shut up.”

“*How* is that your fault?” Aria asked him, her voice even but a frown forming now. “How is *any* of that your fault, Rei?”

“How is it *not*, Aria? How is it not?”

Aria didn’t answer for a second, looking at him incredulously. After a second, however, she seemed realize he was *actually* looking for some kind of answer.

“Oh you’re serious? Like actually? Okay, do I start with Dyrk Reese? That guy is an asshat of galactic proportions. You know it, I know it, everybody knows it, and if you needed any confirmation of that how about the fact that Dent had to *publicly* tear him a new one for unprofessional conduct Monday? Since he can’t get back at her easily I’ll bet you anything he’s been looking for a chance to take it out on us.”

“But he wouldn’t *be* trying to ‘take it out on us’ if it wasn’t for me and this stupid grudge he’s had since—!”

“Rei!” Aria half-yelled, obviously frustrated now. “Again: *How is that your fault*?! Yes, Reese has obviously had it out for you since day one! But what could you have done about that?! *Not* stood out like a sore thumb at school? Yeah right. Not applied to Galens? Viv would have forged your name on the paperwork. *Not* been assigned Shido? Don’t be an idiot. Dyrk Reese is the one walking around pretending to be an adult while seemingly unable to get over the fact that you not only *belong* at the Institute, but are now the *strongest* first year in the school.”

“Second strongest,” Rei muttered, hearing what she was saying but not totally willing to acknowledge it.

Aria rolled her eyes again, letting her hand drop from his elbow so she could cross her arms. “Maybe. We’ll see. But my point stands: Dyrk Reese’s stupid obsession with you isn’t your fault. If anything if my uncle is as smart as I think he is he’s probably going to do something about it soon. You’re too valuable for Reese to be toying with like this. To Galens and the ISCM. *Furthermore!*” she continued forcefully, stopping Rei short as he opened his mouth to try and interrupt. “My point holds true for *Biggs* too. And the rest of them. Were you *not* supposed to come to Sectionals? Or pretend the feeds are wrong and you’re actually a bad fighter? Or were you just supposed to sprout another six inches overnight so you didn’t look out of place here?”

“Hey now, watch it with the short jokes,” Rei muttered, grimacing.

“Rei, it’s not a joke.” Aria scowled at him. “And even if it were you’re growing like a quarter-inch a month or something, so shut it. What I’m trying to say is that you were *always* gonna cause a stir, and that couldn’t be helped. Plus, you dealt with Biggs on day one.”

Rei shrugged, maybe starting to feel a little better but not quite sure he wanted to admit that just yet. It *was* true the only solution to Reese’s attitude and the likes of Biggs and the other disgruntled students was to have never come to school—much less Sectionals—in the first place, and that concept was so ridiculous Rei almost laughed at it.

On the other hand, that still left the fact that Firesong had been targeted by Red Crown and the others largely because—

“And if you’re trying to come up with some stupid reason to blame yourself for us getting ganged up on in the Wargames, save it. You’d be reaching, and you know it.”

Rei blinked at Aria, taken aback.

“... Does Third Eye also give you physic powers, or is that a whole knew Ability you didn’t tell me about?”

Aria laughed humorlessly. “No, I can just tell. You’re looking for a reason to stay mad at yourself. Don’t. It’s not your style. And even if you *did*, blaming yourself for us getting eliminated from the Wargames is the stupidest reason. Not to mention a little—no, a *lot*—arrogant.”

Rei spluttered at that. “What?? H-How is that arrogant?”

Aria narrowed her eyes at him. “You’re concerned it’s your fault we got ganged up on, correct?”

Rei was suddenly very much on guard. “... Yeah? I guess?”

“Meaning that if you *weren’t* a part of the team, we wouldn’t have been the target from the start?”

It clicked, then, and Rei saw where she was going. “Wait. Hold on. That’s not what I was trying to say. I just meant that—”

But Aria had set her trap well, and wasn’t interested in letting him get away.

“Meaning that you think that if you weren’t on the team, Firesong wouldn’t have been enough of a threat to warrant being considered the primary problem. Meaning you think *you’re* the deciding factor in what makes us go from ‘just another good squad’ to ‘the squad to beat?’”

“Aria, that’s not what I was trying to get at...”

“Oh?” Aria opened her arms wide, as though inviting him to give her another answer. “It wasn’t? Then you should enlighten me as to what you *were* trying to get at, Rei. Because you only really have two choices: Either you think you’re *so* integral to Firesong’s threat level that you’re the sole reason we get picked on in Wargames, or you *don’t* think that and you’re just being an idiot for feeling like us getting ganged up on his your fault. Which is it?”

Rei mouthed at the air, scrambling for an answer for several seconds before finding any point to cling to. “I mean do I have to be the *linchpin* in order to feel like I’m the reason everybody is always going after us? That seems a little extreme, if you ask—”

“Replace yourself with Vademe,” Aria told him, crossing her arms again. “Or Laquita Martin. Or Jack Benaly. Replace yourself with any of them. Go on, I’ll wait.”

Rei was quite again, seeing her point at last. When he didn’t answer, she nodded sternly.

“Do you get it now? None of them can replace you, Rei—not even damn *close*—but you’re not the reason Firesong gets all the hate of the field. None of us are. Not individually. It’s all of us put together, Rei. *All* of us. You, me, Viv, Catcher, Cashe, Grant. We’re a *team* that has to be taken down at all costs, nothing less. And if you agree with that—and you *better* agree with that, or you’re walking back to your room *very* alone tonight—then you also have to agree that us *getting* taken down isn’t your fault. It’s no one’s fault. It’s everyone’s fault. But it’s not *your* fault.”

For a long time after that, Rei stood in silence, watching Aria stare him down. What she was saying made perfect sense, of course—hell, he’d argued many of those same points to himself all day, if he allowed himself to admit it—but as always it was different coming from her. Maybe it was that he just needed someone else to say it, or maybe it was that he needed *Aria* to say it, he wasn’t sure, but either way it was... uplifting. Stabilizing. Like she was sealing up the cracks in his confidence and mood one at a time with brutal precision. He felt... taller, all of a sudden, and even though Aria still stood a few inches over him despite his growth, he felt of a height with her, at least in that moment.

It was a good feeling, for many reasons.

“Ok, *Obi-wan*,” he sighed after a second. “If you’re *so* wise, what about Viv? You gonna lay some sage words on me there?”

Aria gave him a look. “Uh... Not until you tell me what... O-bee-wan... means?”

Rei paused, considered the question, but could only shrug after a second. “No idea, actually. Something I’ve heard Dent say a few times in training when someone was being a smartass.”

“Ah,” Aria said with a nod, apparently satisfied by this. “Bet you it’s old-school, then. Be careful picking those up or you’re gonna get weird looks.”

“Weirder looks than I get now?”

Aria smirked, cocking her head at him. “I don’t think you get weird looks. I think people just think you’re cute and can’t help but stare. Like a puppy. Or really handsome potato.”

Rei *had* felt his ears start to go a little warm at Aria even using the word “cute” in reference to him, but she lost him in the second half.

“A potato? Seriously?”

“It’s about as ridiculous as you making Viv’s problems yours, isn’t it?”

Rei flinched. “Clever,” he muttered as he mentally rubbed his face after running right into *that* wall. “Reeeel clever.”

“Are you going to tell me I’m wrong?”

“Comparing me to a potato? Yes. I’m too scrawny. Comparing *comparing* to a potato to me feeling guilty about Viv?” He stared at her. “Do I really have to answer?”

Aria shook, still smirking. “No, cause I’m right.” She lost her smile a little, then. “Rei, you’re walking around like the fate of the world rests on your shoulders. Stop it. It’s worrying, and it’s honestly a little frustrating. Viv has to make her own choices. We’ve talked about this. And besides—” but she hesitated, looking unsure of herself all of a sudden.

“And besides...?” Rei pressed after a second two, watching her carefully.

Aria took a moment more, than seemed to make her decision. “And *besides*,” she repeated, “I don’t get the impression what’s going on with her has anything to do with

Grant—or ‘Logan’? I don’t know anymore. He threw me for a loop calling me ‘Aria’ today...”

Rei, though, was more interested in the first part of her statement.

“Nothing to do with Grant?” he asked. “What does it have to do with, then?”

“Oh I don’t know,” Aria said sarcastically. “Maybe—just *maybe*—the fact that she lost to Vademe? And that she wasn’t a big part of the Wargames? *AND* that she’s the only member of Firesong *without an Ability* now?”

Rei was completely lost. “What? Why would *that* bother her??”

Aria rolled her eyes. “Rei, not everyone has your... perseverance. Not *everyone* can take every punch and broken bone and severed limb and just... walk it off. Sectionals has been huge for Catcher and Cashe, and you, Logan, and I were already ahead of the game. Viv’s the only one left who hasn’t seen that first *really* big jump on the team. How could she *not* feel a little left behind?”

“That’s dumb,” Rei said flatly. “Viv probably has a good shot of taking on Catcher or Cashe even with their Abilities. And if the three of us didn’t have ours, it would be a pretty even playing field too.”

“First: that’s bull. Your Type Shift is borderline useless in a fight where people know it’s coming, and will be until you get a hang of Saber-Type combat. Second: so what? How does that help how Viv is probably feeling right now? In the moment—in *this* moment—she the one left out. It won’t be forever but...” Aria paused again, but this time didn’t have to be pushed to continue after a second. “Rei... have you considered that we’re probably *all* going to feel that way, one way or the other? Shido’s Growth—” she glanced around as she spoke, as though instinctively searching potential spying ears “—it’s going to take you someplace a lot higher than us a *lot* faster, and it’s not going to stop...”

Rei, not expecting this poignant statement, went a little stiff.

“If you’re trying to make me feel like stuff *isn’t* my fault, Aira, then that’s not really doing a good—”

“No, *nooo*,” Aria said with a laugh, and all of a sudden she was right in front of him, both hands on his face, cupping his jaw like she wanted him to really hear what she had to say to him. “That’s not what I meant, and that’s stupid too. Again: were you just *not* supposed to get Shido? Were you *not* supposed to meet all of us? Make friends with all of us. My point is that how other people feel—how Reese feels, how Biggs feels, how Viv or even *I* feel—that’s not on you, Rei. It’s never going to be on you. Not unless you make it.”

“Not even if I act like a total dick?” he asked, unable to help himself from bring his hands—his slightly-shaky, awkward hands—up to rest on Aria’s hips. He didn’t pull her close—he didn’t have the guts to do that—but he didn’t really have to. She was barely a few inches away. He could almost count the fleck of broken green in her emerald eyes, and might have tried to had the neon lights of the living city below not been playing a wonderful dance across once side of her face as he looked into them.

“Do you plan on being a dick, Reidon Ward?” Aria asked, her voice suddenly quieter. He expression had stilled, the smiling fading to something calmer, almost more wanting. She too, apparently, had realized just how close they stood, and she hadn’t moved her hands off his face.

“To you? Not particularly?”

“To others?”

“Only if they deserve it.”

That got a smile out of here again, a brief glimpse of that brightness that had always been so taking to Rei. It was all his heart—and will—could take, because in the next morning he had in fact pulled her close, closing the gap between them in a quick rush that had her letting on the smallest of surprised breaths.

Then, though, Rei was kissing her, and she was kissing him right back.

It wasn't the terrible, clumsy thing he had been turning over with frightened excitement in his head of weeks now. Not at all. Was it a *little* stiff, a *little* awkward? Sure. Made doubly so by the fact that while Rei was acutely aware that he had *no* idea what he was doing, Aria very much seemed to know her way around the act. After a second of his lips on hers he let her lead, letting her bring her hands back from his jaw to his hair, emulating her by bring his own hands up to her middle, then upper back to pull her in closer. They stayed like that, locked into place in the quiet of the empty room, the only sound the very distant noise of sirens and the faintest thump of music rising from one of the closer rooftops. Rei thought he could have stayed like that forever, his eyes closed but his vision still full of the city's lights, feeling her in his hands like he'd never had the chance to before, with Aria or anyone. Everything melted away. Everything. The world. The tournament. Dyrk Reese and his bullshit. The prying eyes and whispers of the other students. Even Even Viv and his worries about her.

And when the pair of them broke apart, 10 seconds and one eternity later, they *stayed* away.

"Woah..." Aria breathed, and Rei opened his eyes to find her still closed as she dropped her forehead to his, still smiling. "Not bad, Ward. Though it took you long enough."

"It's the 25th century, Laurent," he responded in turn, working SO hard not to speaking a squeak as he took her in even from so close. "Who says you couldn't have taken the lead?"

Aria sniggered at that, pulling her head back and opening her eyes at last, but not letting go of him. On the contrary, she let her hands hang behind him, arms resting on his shoulders, clearly more than content to stay pressed against him.

"Fair enough," she got out, looking his face up and down for a second. "Guess it *is* a two player game."

“I’m gonna say officially now?” he asked with a grin, glad the relative darkness of the empty restaurant probably did wonders to hide the flush of his face. He’d seen the opportunity, and he’d jumped on it before thinking.

Aria laughed out loud at that, a real, true laugh as she tilted her head to one side, her red hair falling off over her shoulder.

“Yeah. I’d say so,” she told him with a grin.

Rei smiled back at her for a while, content to take her in, happiness washing through him from head to toes.

Then, unable to step himself, he brought one hand off her back and allowed himself an exaggerated fistpump behind her. “Score!”

Aria laughed again, bring her own arms back to make to push him away, but he wouldn’t let her. They play fought for a moment, both of them smiling and neither *really* wanting to step away from the other, until at last they stopped his arms around her waist and hers resting on his chest. Aria watched him a few seconds longer, then finally spoke.

“You feeling better?”

Rei raised an eyebrow at her. “Is that a serious question?”

She nodded. “Yes. It is.”

Rei sighed. “Then yes. I am. Very much.”

“Would you still be feeling better if I hadn’t kissed you?” she half-teased, half-prodded.

“Hold on! Didn’t we *just* decided *I* was the one who kissed *you*?”

“Semantics.”

“Semantics my ass, lady! Now you’re just taking credit for—”

“Rei!” Aria interrupted with another laugh. “Seriously. As fun as that was, I didn’t bring you up here to make out against the bar. Are you *actually* feeling better.”

Rei thought of pushing the joke further, but stopped himself. He allowed his face to fall a little, but there was no *completely* erasing the moment's thrill from his face.

“Yeah. I’m feeling better. Thank you. I get what you were saying. I don’t know if I *agree* with everything you were saying, but I get it. I’m sorry. I know I don’t usually sulk like that, but I think it’s been getting to me for longer than I realized.”

“And it all came to a head today…” Aria added with a nod. “Yeah. I can understand that. But it’s not your fault, Rei. It’s really not. You need to get that through you head. *And—*” she kept on, again stopping him as he made to interrupt “—you *definitely* need to let Viv handle her own shit, from time to time.”

Rei sighed at that, then nodded, running a thumb up and down along Aria’s back. “Easier said than done, but yeah. Ok.” He pondered that thought a little longer, though, and couldn’t help but continued. “You think she feels *left behind* though? Seriously? *Viv?*”

“I don’t know. Maybe.” Aria brought her arms up around his neck again. “I would be, especially in a group like ours.”

“*Why?*”

“Because we’re not. All. Like. *You*. Rei!” Aria intoned with a snort. “We don’t have your iron will. You damn confidence. If anything *you’re* the weird one.”

Rei grimaced at that, but nodded. “Yeah, alright… Still… I just wish she’d *talk* about it. Like she promised.”

“Who says she isn’t?” Aria asked, looking at him pointedly. “She doesn’t just have you, Rei. Not anymore.”

Rei gave a huff at that, not sure if he was jealous at the thought or if he just needed to acknowledge it in some disgruntled for or fashion.

“Fair,” he said again, nodding once more as he repeated Aria’s words back to himself, really trying to let them sink in. “Either way, it’s not my fault.”

“Either way, it’s not your fault,” she agreed. “And either way, you need to let her handle her own shit sometimes.”

“Sometimes,” he repeated deliberately. “Yeah. Got it.”

They stood like that in silence, then, watching each other in the shifting light of the Ganos night. Eventually Rei plucked up the courage, and was about to open his mouth to ask Aria if he could kiss her again, when she beat him to the punch.

“So... You know when I said I *didn't* bring you up up to make out against the bar...”