

## CHAPTER 18

PLACEHOLDER

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“GOOOOOO!”

Rei roared his encouragement out along with tens of thousands of other spectators, Aria, Viv, and Cashe on either side of him as they leaned into the railing that overlooked the main floor of the Kenneth Academy Arena. All around the qualifying cadets of the 103rd Military College had been considerate enough to make space for the four of them after noting their armbands and who they were cheering for, and a few of the school’s closest had even gotten caught up in their energy to scream right along with them.

Catcher would probably have liked that, Rei was sure, watching the Saber rip across the Grasslands zone raised up before them.

On the south Dueling field before them—the Kenneth Arena was oriented in the same way Galen’s was—Catcher was in the middle of a vicious class with a tall, green-haired first year from Sermont’s Point, a Lancer named Sam Moroz. It was a utterly skewed match—Catcher was the smarter fight, four ranks higher than Moroz’ B9, *and* had been practicing against Aria and Cashe for months now—but to her credit the girl was quick on her feet and did an excellent job of using the steep incline of the tilted zone variation to stay above the Saber, where the longer reach of her red-and-black spear could work best to keep him at bay. The white vysetrium edge of her Device’s narrow blade flashed in weaving arcs against the purple of Catcher’s Artus, and from a ways down along the rail Rei could hear what had to be the rest of Moroz’s own squad screaming animatedly, even if the Lancer couldn’t make out their shouts and cheers.

He could appreciate their efforts, but couldn't help but want to tell them it was in vane.

Moroz reach on Catcher, true, but was where any advantage ended. They'd been going at fore barely more than a minute now, and while Catcher's sword had only sped up and improved it the accuracy of its strikes as he'd started to get familiar with the patterns in Moroz's style, the Lancer had slowed down steadily, and was starting to outright lag.

"GO!" Viv howled by Rei's right ear, making him wince and almost bring a hand up to shield it. "GOOO! CUT HER DOWN! CUT! HER! DOWN!"

"Bloodthirsty, much?" Cashe yelled with a laugh over the enthusiastic rumble of the crowd around them, but if Viv heard her she didn't respond. Catcher had just leapt forward into an opening, closing the distance Moroz had been forcing him to keep for most of the match, and the Sermont's Point Lancer was backpedaling desperately.

"He's got her!" Aria exclaimed in glee.

"Yup!" Rei agreed with a grin. "He's got her!"

It took another 10 seconds or so, but Catcher kept the pressure on, ruthless and unforgiving. He didn't let Moroz regain her distance, and eventually she'd retreated so far up the incline of the hill that her back struck the limit of the field and she had to throw herself sideways to keep from getting cut and half, Artus' blade slamming inward to send ripples through the barrier exactly where her midriff had been a fraction of a second earlier. Catcher followed in a blink, though, and the Lancer no longer had the high ground. She slashed desperately, white flashing in the projected sunlight of the zone, but Catcher blasted the spear up and away. Moroz was knocked off-balance, the armored boot of her heel catching in earth and grass as her feet failed to keep up with the shift in her weight. With a yell that echoed another roar from the crowd she started to fall backwards, and Catcher was on her before her ass had even hit the ground. Artus cleaved through the air, catching the girl fully in the chest, cutting clean through.

“Fatal Damage Accrued,” the cool voice of the Arena, identical across all stadiums, announced. “Winner: Layton Catchwick, the Galen’s Institute.”

“YEEEEESSS!” Viv erupted, dancing and pumping the air with both fists as the students of the 103rd around them cheered in vicarious glee as well. “YES YES YESSSSS!”

Rei didn’t join her in her yelling, instead keeping an eye on Catcher as the Grasslands started to fade and the Saber began to drop alongside the laid-out form of Sam Moroz. They touched down onto the black projection plating together, and Catcher only took the time to recall Artus before offering the Lancer a hand and what looked like a word of encouragement as he pulled her to her feet.

“Nice going, dude,” Rei said under his breath, still smiling from ear to ear.

As Catcher and Moroz started off the field together and the Arena having announced who the next fight would involve—a pair of second years from Kenneth and the 105<sup>th</sup> Military College—there was a rapid slap of bare feet from the left, audible only with the dying sound of the stands.

“Did I miss it?” came the breathless question.

As one Rei, Aria, Viv, and Cashe all turned to find Grant hurrying around the curve in the railing towards them, the Mauler’s eyes turned towards the Arena floor with a frown, his black hair plastered across his forehead with sweat. His right hand was wrapped in a loose layer of gauze, and despite his one and only match having ended several minutes ago—he’d been seeded higher than Catcher in these last-chance qualifying rounds—he was breathing hard, like he’d run up and around from the north Dueling field on the opposite end of the stadium.

“Yeah, but it’s all good!” Viv was giddy with adrenaline, practically bouncing up and down as she answered. “He did it! He won! He’s in the tournament! You’re *both* in!”

Whether because of Viv’s enthusiasm, because of Catcher’s success, or some combination of both, Grant actually let slip the smallest of smiles and a genuine “Nice!” as he reached them. Rei didn’t think whatever the true reasoning was mattered much, though, at least not in the moment. Grant had reason to be a little giddy, just as Catcher had, now.

With this last fight, they were *both* in the *official* Dueling brackets of the tournament proper, Catcher having ripped through three 1-on-1 fights that morning to claim his spot, Grant having trounced his single opponent not 5 minutes before.

Now—with the non-qualifiers rounds wrapping—team Firesong were all in the fight together.

Rei grinned again, watching Catcher disappear into one of the underwork access tunnel as the next fight started, then turned to look up into the Arena stands with a prickling thrill that just didn’t seem to want to go away no matter how many time he took the space in. The Kenneth’s stadium might be a third the size of the Galens dome—at “only” about 50,000 seats—but it what it lacked in comparative size it made up for in the moment with sheer activity. The eight ISCM academies of Astra-3’s ninth sector comprised of probably just over 400 students—384 of which would be in the Dueling brackets divided between the first-year and combined second- and third-year rounds—plus maybe another half-a-hundred staff or so. Beyond that, however, nearly half of the stadium seats—carved out of black-and-red metal and stone that was a sharp contrast what Rei was used to on his home field—were already filled with spectators, and they were still in the last 30 minutes or so of the non-broadcasted fights for the cadets like Catcher and Grant who’d still needed to qualify for the actual tournament. Some of them were probably Kenneth staff and students—and looked like it based on

the pockets of black-and-gold Rei could see even just standing at the railing—and a good number more were probably families or other supporters of individual cadets. Still, Rei didn't need to have been to a live SCT event before to know a majority comprised of a totally different group:

Civilians come to take part in the excitement and action for themselves.

There were *thousands* of them, and more came pouring in ever minute from the four smaller entrances the stadium had at every cardinal entrance to the building. They were all ages, and arrived alone as often as they did in pairs or groups of as many as a dozen or more. There were kids, too, their parents taking their little ones out for an action-packed family day, and Rei had seen more than one elderly fan being helped along the walkway to specialized seating sections by lesser officers of the Kenneth staff.

He was pretty sure that by the time the Team Battle rounds started after lunch, the Kenneth Arena would be packed to the brim, and Rei couldn't imagine what the experience of walking out onto the field under the raptured gaze of *50,000* thousand spectators was going to be like.

Then again, he also could barely stand the wait.

The Galens cadets arrival in Ganos the evening before had been a bit more exciting that Rei suspected their chaperones would have preferred. Unlike Castalon, Ganos City still thrived most closely to the planet's surface, with its largest buildings not rising more than 200 and 300 stories tall. For this reason the single massive transport carrier that had flown the collective body of the Institute's nine squads from local orbital station had touched down directly in front of the towering hotel the ISCM had apparently booked out for all the visiting schools—a great, round pillar of a building at “The Chevaron”—and Rei thought he'd been among the first to notice that there was something of a crowd gathered around the hotel entrance, partially blocking the way.

Only after Dent had descended, soon followed by Christopher Lennon, had that crowd started thronging and shouting out questions, and Rei had stared into the hovering lights suspended over several of the people's shoulders—simple anti-grave devices obviously meant to help illuminate a target of interest—as he'd realized that they were *paparazzi*.

“Oooh boy...” he remembered Cashe muttering at the sight, watching the excitement and yelling redoubling when Sidorov and his team left the flyer next.

By some unspoken agreement from the others, Rei and Aria found themselves penned in by Viv, Catcher, Cashe, and Grant, and they actually made it halfway to the hotel—staying tight to Captain Takeshi's guiding heels as the woman urged them along quickly—when the throng took notice of *them*, and all hell broke loose.

“WARD!” someone from the crowd yelled. “REIDON WARD! LOOK HERE! HERE!”

“IT'S ARIA LAURENT!” someone else called. “THEY'RE HERE!”

“THE PRINCE! THE IRON PRINCE!”

Even had the lights not been half-blinding and hot in their brightness, Rei thought he might have fallen flat on his face from sheer embarrassment several times if the others hadn't been there to get them through the mass of pressing bodies. In fact, by the time they reached the hotel lobby—mercifully devoid of any recording NOEDs or screamed questions—he was feeling outright frazzled, his cap at a tilt on his head from being jostled, the straps of one bag having slipped uncomfortably from his shoulder into the crook of his elbow. The others, too, were looking the worse for wear—even Takeshi, who Rei *swore* he heard mutter curses under her breath—with only Grant appearing to have gotten through the push outside without too much ruffling.

Then, though, Rei had noticed the other cadets, and his face flushed all over again.

In retrospect, he supposed he should have expected the attention. Hell, he'd *known* they would be staying in the same building as *six* other schools—Kenneth's squads were

obviously staying in their dorms—each consisting of a team of more than half-a-hundred students, but Rei suspected he'd failed to *really* register two things about the situation, even after wading through the paparazzi outside.

First, they were the *Galen's Institute*. Largely revered as the best military school on the planet, and often the best in the *system*.

Second—and *much* more awkward—Christopher Lennon and Anatoli Sidorov might be legend, but they weren't the only cadets of interest.

As he looked around, Rei saw that the eyes of every person in the expanse of the lavish, green-and blue-lobby were fixed alternatively on him and Aria, their arrival obviously having been foreshadowed by the older Galens students who were already disappearing into the booth of elevators ahead of them. Collectively a hundred stares—from three or four different schools, judging by the variation in the colored armbands—took the pair of them with an array of expressions ranging from awe to surprise to incredulity, and as others came in behind them from the flyer and Takeshi called over her shoulder for them to follow her, Rei heard the whispers start almost on cue.

“Is that them? That can't be them...”

“It's gotta, be right? But no way...”

“I heard he was small, but *come* on.”

“No way that's him.”

Not sure if he wanted to laugh or crawl under one of the nearby lounge chairs to hide, Rei kept his chin up and his eyes forward ahead, much like Aria right beside him.

They settled into their rooms—doubling off into pairs that had Rei with Catcher, Aria with Viv, and Grant and Cashe with Vademe and Kay respectively—then were called to a massive luncheon by Dent and the others that involved every one of the visiting teams, where Rei and Aria were subject to scrutiny all over again. Even the older students from the other schools were often staring openly at the pair of them, not

helped when Lennon and his squad—Steelbound, the whispers on the tram had said they'd been named—took the other half of the table Firesong had claimed.

Then again, Rei had felt a little better when the Lasher had caught his eye again, spun a short finger in a circle to indicate everyone around the massive, high-ceilinged room the lunch was being hosted in, and rolled his eyes pointedly.

“Forget them,” the third year seemed to be telling him, and Lennon’s immediate, careless involvement with the surrounding members of his squad following this had helped even more, almost adding “You’ll get used to it.”

“Here’s to hoping,” Rei had muttered under his breath, then pretended he hadn’t when Catcher asked him if he’d said something through a mouthful of turkey-and-tomato sandwich.

Despite the point of the lunch having clearly been to encourage intermingling and the development of cross-school friendships, Galens seemed largely left out of any mixing or discussion—aside from those that were *about* the Institute. As a result, Firesong—and a number of the other teams whose names Rei and the others hadn’t found out yet—finished quickly and were gathered back in one room or another shortly thereafter. The hotel was gorgeous—much better than any accommodations Rei was used to, much less the simpler living quarters of his Galens room and Grandcrest’s before it—and the paired queen beds penned in by four walls and a *ceiling* of manipulatable smart-glass offered not only ample sitting space for a team of six, but also plenty of display real estate on which to pull up whatever any of them could have wanted. Rei suspected some of the teams would be trying to follow Dent’s advice and relax with SCT feeds or the like, but he wasn’t *remotely* surprised—or displeased, for that matter—when Aria immediately took charge when the six of them came together in her and Viv’s room to announce that they all going to help Catcher and Grant study for their pre-tournament matches. No one complained, and with the help of the full list of the schools and students who would be participating that they’d just been granted access



to on the way to Ganos—along with a LOT of Intra-School fight recordings—they spent a relatively quiet afternoon discussing different tactics and strategies Catcher and Grant might find valuable depending on whoever it was they were matched up against the previous day. No one had told them what the combat schedule was yet, but they all knew the non-qualifiers were battling it out first to see who would make it into the limit slots saved for them in the true Sectionals brackets. Cashe had been the one to suggest that the following morning—Monday’s—would probably be devoted to those non-broadcasted fights before the real Duels started up Tuesday.

Team Battles and Wargames, on the other hand, they all agreed would begin without delay, probably tomorrow afternoon.

After going through all fifty or so last-chance fighters until Catcher and Grant were both satisfied they had at least some vague thought on their approach in every possible matchup, they moved on to multi-team format review, and were in the middle of a complicated discussion about what the Zero-Grave zone might look like in the Wargames match when Reese opened their door—without knocking—and barked that dinner would be served in the main dining at 1900. Given it had been just passed 1830 already, 20 minutes later the Galens cadets were suffering the stares and glares of the other schools again—Rei not missing that even *more* eyes seemed trained on him in particular, now that people probably knew for sure who he was—but the attention came with some perks, this time. Aside from the buffet dinner being a delicious assortment of Luhman System delicacies Catcher was particular thrilled by, the rest of the Institute squads had obviously taken note of the unwanted attention during lunch, because every first, second, *and* third year made a deliberate effort to surround Firesong, Steelbound, and King’s Law—Sidorov’s team, as they’d learned the group had been name from Kay in the dinner line. It made the meal a more comfortable affair by far, with Rei almost forgetting about the dubious looks shot their way from the table packed by the other academies.

At least until a few questionably-headstrong first years bearing the mirrored green lions of Maston's Combat Academy—Rei had made a point of learning all the logos of every academy at the event—decided to brave the walk between the two section's Galens had claimed in a corner of the hall by the back wall, coming to stand behind Aria and Rei silently until Firesong—along with every nearby team—had all lifted heads or turned in their seats to look at them.

“You the ‘Iron Prince’?” the boy at the front of the group asked Rei in an overly-pleasant voice. There were six of them—a squad, Rei decided as he took them all in at a glance from where he'd remained sitting—and most of them had smiles plastered unconvincingly on tense faces. The two at the back, though, looked a bit more honest with their emotions, *their* expressions strained and glowering.

“I'm Rei Ward, if that's what you're getting it...?” Rei decided to ask after giving himself a chance to swallow the spinach-wrapped scallops he'd been sharing a plate of with the table. “Can I help you?”

“Na,” the leader of the team said with a shake of his head. “Just checking is all. We weren't convinced.”

Rei—having dealt with his share of assholes *and* having suspected at least a few such interactions would come about over the course of the tournament—didn't so much as blink at the not-so-subtle insult. At his side, however, he could feel Aria tense, and he thought he heard the clink of metal as someone—Viv, probably—slowly put down their fork and knife across from him.

“Well now you should be,” he said by way of answer, turning away from the Maston's first years and immediately asking Catcher if he could pass the dish of spicy potatoes that was across the table by the Saber's elbow.

If they weren't gonna bother being respectful, why should he?

Unfortunately, however, that wasn't quiet the end of the conversation.

“Are you *really* the Prince?” the same boy asked, sounding outright amused now. “I mean we’d heard he was small, but come on. Are you a stand-in? Did they pay you to die your hair like Wards?”

Rei would have laughed out loud had Catcher not stiffened in the middle of passing the plate as request, his fingers suddenly latched onto the potatoes so firmly Rei couldn’t pull them from his friend’s grip.

“Come again?” Catcher asked the Maston’s cadet, who was lucky it was the *Saber* who had gotten a word in first. Viv looked ready to *murder*, and glancing sideways Rei noticed that even Aria and Cashe had gone pale.

“Hey man, I’m just checking,” the Maston’s boy answered, and ven without turning—and as he fruitlessly continued to tug the dish from Catcher’s frozen fingers between them—Rei could tell the he was smiling. “It would make sense, wouldn’t it? Galens keeping their secret weapon out of sight?”

No, it made no sense, but the first year knew that. They *all* knew that. For one thing *Aria* was still probably seeded higher than Rei despite their matching ranks, given she’d qualified undefeated for Sectionals. For another, there wasn’t a single person in that hall that could image a world where the ISCM would allow such asinine theatrics in our around their precious SCTs.

The Marston group had come angling for some kind of reaction—maybe in some desperate bid to throw Firesong off their game—and they was getting it.

What was more, when no one spoke for a moment—every Galen’s student in the vicinity at a loss given the logic that had just been presented to them—the boy decided to press his advantage, addressing the back of Rei’s head now.

“I mean even if you *are* the Prince, that’s only good for us. Must mean Galen’s is slipping. How else could—”

Then, though, he was interrupted by a cool, clear voice.

“What’s your name, first year?”

There was an audible *snap* of a jaw closing, and Rei had to suppress a choke of laughter as everyone within a 10 foot radius of them went completely still immediately. Even Catcher jerked, *finally* allowing the potatoes to be freed from his grip, and as soon as they were safe on the table again Rei couldn't help but look down the table.

Lennon was looking over him at the Maston's group, taking them in with the sort of bored expression one tended to keep for a particularly plain breadth of cement wall.

After a second of no reply, he asked his question again, tilting his head slightly over his plate so that his grayish dreads shifted out of his blue eyes.

"I asked you what your name was, first year."

This time, the answer came, though in a *much* higher pitch than Rie suspected the boy had ever previously spoken in his life.

"A-Adam, sir..."

Rei almost felt bad for the poor guy. He knew all too-well what it was like to catch the Lasher's attention when you didn't want it, just like he knew all too-well how hard it was not to call the *A9* "sir" even if they were technically the same rank.

"Your *last* name, first year," Lennon pressed coolly.

"Uh... Digs, sir."

"Adam Digs..." Lennon muttered with only the faintest hint of annoyance, frame coming to life in his eyes as the other third years of Steelbound looked to be trying hard not to snickered all around him. "Digs... Ah, here you are. Maston's. Mauler. C..." He smirked suddenly "My apologies. *D9*." He closed his NOED again and jerked his head pointedly up the aisle towards the rest of the milling schools. "If you've got something of value to say to our underclassman, Digs, you can spit it out now. Otherwise, move on. At *D9*, I can assure you're about as interesting to Cadet Ward as you are to *me*."

The tension broke, and there was a roll of laughter from up and down the rest of the Galen's table at this, echoed by a choke of noise from behind Rei and a stammering

of apology. Next thing he knew the Maston's first years were gone—all but sprinting away—and Rei looked at Lennon with a grin.

“I could have handled them, you know?”

The Lasher nodded and shrugged, returning his attention to his plate. “I'm sure. But *you* get to punch their lights out on the field. I don't. Let me have my fun.”

Rei—and Aria beside him—laughed at that, the two of them and the rest of the squad ignoring the obvious surprise of many of the other teams around them as eyes went from him to Lennon and back again, obviously not understanding what could have prompted such friendly banter. A few, Rei noted, also looked less than pleased with the exchange, and he felt a little of the humor turn cold when he noticed one stare in particular leveled on Lennon, not even bothered with looking at *him*.

From the other side of Steelbound, Sidorov was frowning in barely-concealed disapproval while, around him, the other five members of his King's Law had their heads down without looking at anyone.

On the flip side, though...

*CRACK.*

Rei and Aria both started, Cashe outright yelping in surprised from Aria's other side as the sharp sound of metal snapping completely drew all attention away from anything else. Opposite them, Catcher jumped and cursed, much like Viv did.

Between them, Grant swore too, if for very different reasons.

The knife—the *steel* knife—he'd been holding in his right hand had cracked clean in two in what had to have been a grip fed with an accidentally-triggered Strength spec.

“You *moron!*” Viv yelped, sounding concerned and reaching out in a blur to snatch several clean cloth napkins from where they were piled in a neatly offered stack in the middle of the table, having been replenished several times by passing serving bots over the course of the meal.

That's when Rei saw the blood.

With a jolt of concern—though whether it was Firesong's prospects in the tournament, Grant himself, or some combination of both, he couldn't say—he was on his feet, quickly followed by Aria, Catcher, and Cashe. All around them several of the other students were gasping in alarm as well.

"I'll get someone!" Catcher said hurriedly, stepping over the seating bench and bolting up the aisle towards where Dent, Reese, Takeshi, and Samsus were seated with the staff officers of the other schools in a table section of the hall designated specifically for them.

"Wait, don't bother with—!" Grant started to call after the Saber in the loudest voice Rei thought he'd ever heard the Mauler speak in levelly. He understood, though. While it had been alarming at first, as Viv took Grant's hand and forced his strong fingers open to dab at the cut, it was obvious the wound wasn't anything to be concerned about. It was narrow and shallow along the inside of his palm, and only bled just enough to drip onto the white table cloth. Between their plates.

Rei decided not to say as much to *Viv*, though.

"Moron," she was muttered under her breath again, although she looked more agitated than angry. "Moron, moron, *moron*. The hell did you do that for? You could have completely screwed yourself."

"Sorry," Grant muttered under his breath, wincing a little as she pressed to corner of the napkin to the cut.

"He ok?" Vademe asked from Rei's right, the Lancer and the rest of his "Valormade" leaning over their plates with concern. Turning towards them, Rei saw that even Laquita Martin and her "Red Crown"—sitting beyond Vademe's group—looked a little worried.

“His *fine*,” Viv answered before Rei could get a word in, sounding a little more herself now that it was obvious Grant wasn’t about to bleed out at the table next to her. “He’s just an idiot who clearly wants me to die of heart attack before I’m *twenty*.”

There was a smattering more of laughter from the rest of the squads who had looked around in concern, and most everyone returned to their meals. Aria seemed unable to stop herself from pestering Grant and Viv both to make sure the Mauler was ok, but Rei was distracted by something else, finding his attention frequently drifting to the two halves of the steel knife Grant had broken and caused the scene with. He frowned at them, wondering.

He got his answer later that night.

Reese was the one to come running after Catcher, and he dragged the Mauler away despite Grant’s protests with a genuine concern that Rei found simultaneously gratifying and infuriating. It was a half-hour later—a bit after the rest of Firesong had left their plates for the bots and taken leave of the dining hall—that he joined them again in Aria’s room, assuring Viv in particular that he was fine, that the Major had had him patched by a medical drone, and that the bandage around his palm would have to stay on for a couple days but it wasn’t worth fussing over, much less be any issue for fighting. Once they were all satisfied with these promises, they spend another hour or so reviewing the last-chance fighters for Catcher and Grant, then Aria called it for the night, dismissing them to their rooms with a very squad-leader-like sternness that had everyone but the Mauler sniggering.

It was after they’d said goodnight to Aria and Viv, the other four of them heading for their own quarters, that Grant spoke to Rei directly.

“Ward. Can I have a second?”

It wasn’t completely unexpected, but Rei was still a little surprised as he told Catcher he’d catch up and bid goodnight to Cashe. When he and Grant were alone in

the hall—except for a couple of older girls who seemed unable to stop themselves from staring between the pair of them as they passed—the massive boy made a face.

“Was that what I was like?” he asked flatly, for once not hesitating. “Like that? Like those kids?”

Rei frowned. “Like Bigs?” he asked, making sure he understood. It was clearly what had most likely been bothering the Mauler, but there was no sense in risking a misunderstanding.

“Yeah. The asshole from dinner.”

Rei didn’t hesitate.

“You were worse man. A lot worse.”

If he’d expected this statement to hit Grant hard, he was mistaken. On the contrary, the larger boy’s grimace only deepened, then he nodded.

“Yeah... I guess I can see that, now...” It took him a second more to meet Rei’s eyes again. “I’m... sorry. I don’t think I ever told you that. Not directly, at least... It’s something I’m working on.”

It was Rei’s turn to nod, and after a moment of silence he decided the guy deserved a bone.

“I’m starting to get that, yeah. And I appreciate the apology. Can’t be easy.”

Grant grunted a begrudging agreement, and for the first time there was a little color in his chiseled cheeks. He said nothing more, though, and after a bit Rei took a step back and started to turn towards his room.

“Alright, I’m gonna head to bed. You should too, since you’re probably fighting in the morn—”

“I didn’t get it,” Grant interrupted him, a little more loudly than he’d probably intended given he stiffened up as soon as the words left his mouth.

Rei paused again, looking back at the Mauler.

“Get what?”



Grant chewed on his words a moment, eyes shifting around the hall and refusing to meet Rei's again.

“Get... *you*, I guess?” he managed after a moment, then grimaced at the inadequacy of answer and immediately continuing. “Not that I do *now*—at least not completely—but I’m definitely getting more of the picture.”

“And what picture is that?” Rei asked coolly, unwilling to let Grant completely off the hook even if it was clear the boy was trying to be genuine in his apology. Despite the obvious intention, the conversation was scratching at some old wounds. It hadn't been *that* long, after all, since the Mauler had gotten himself brigged for a week for excessive engagement with Rei in combat training, and even less time since he'd had pinned him to a wall to growl that—though he'd had nothing to do with Rei getting jumped by Selleck and the other choice shitbags from 1-A—Grant still thought of him as a waste of space and an anchor to Aria and the others.

Yeah... *definitely* scratching at old wounds...

This time, though, Grant met his eyes as he answered.

“You're not a coward.”

Rei blinked, admittedly a little taken aback by this as he frowned.

“No...” he responded slowly. “No... I'm not.” He considered Grant a bit longer. “Is *that* what you thought of me? That I was a coward? That I was afraid?”

“You ran,” Grant started to insist, bringing his hands up emphatically and taking half a step forward as though trying to make his point. “From everything, Ward. You ran from Laurent at Commencement. You ran from me in training. You ran when you should have—”

Then, though, the boy caught himself, and a chagrin flashed across his face. He stopped and dropped his hands at once. As Rei watched in amazement, Grant proceeded to take a long, slow breath in and out, and when he was done he seemed to have centered himself again.

“Sorry,” he repeated—probably the third time Rei had ever heard the Mauler say the word—dipping his head in apology. “Like I said... I’m working on it.”

Rei nodded again, watching Grant carefully.

There was something else going on, he could tell. Something hung over the massive boy in front of him, making him seem almost... small?

Rei decided to press the issue.

Carefully.

“You hate cowards that much?” he asked cautiously. “No. I’m *not* a coward. But even if I *was*, the way you acted... It’s not easily excusable, Grant. And from the start I’ve watched you treat everyone else differently. Better.” He cocked his head. “Why do you hate cowards *that* much?”

He never took his eyes from the Mauler’s face, and as a result didn’t miss the briefest—absolute *briefest*—shift in Grant’s features. Whereas one moment the boy had held the resolute calmness he’d forced himself to achieve, in the next there was something terrifying in his eyes, something both cold and hellishly hot, something so sharp Rei was almost tempted to take his own step away in alarm.

Then, though, Grant got ahold of himself, and expression was gone.

But not before Rei recognized it, having seen it before on the very day Grant had come after him in training, and having heard it described by Viv when she’d described the night the Mauler all but hunted down Selleck and the rest of his old entourage before beating them to a pulp for having jumped Rei 6-on-1.

Anger. Anger like nothing Rei had ever seen, much less experienced. Something deep, something etched so keenly into Grant’s heart that it felt like it had life of its own.

*What in the MIND...?* was all Rei could think, cautiously watching the Mauler despite the moment having passed.

He even barely kept himself from flinching when Grant spoke.

“I had... a bad experience,” came the answer, and the effort the boy was putting into tempering his tone was audible as he clearly fought, too, to keep meeting Rei’s eye. “A... A *really* bad experience. I...” He paused, looking like he was having trouble putting the words together, then he lifted a hand to wave at Rei’s body in indication. “I get you didn’t have an easy time, growing up. I should have gotten that from day one—the scars, and everything—but it took Viv clueing me in about your fibro for it to take hold.”

Rei wasn’t sure he liked *that*, but he’d never hidden his diagnosis from the rest of their classmates, so he supposed he couldn’t blame Viv for passing *that* bit of information. In fact, it was more and more apparent that the girl’s walls had been as absolute with Grant as anyone else, the only holes in her defenses seeming to be where Rei himself had given her—if indirect—leave to punch and kick them in.

“But you’re not the only kid who it rough, Ward.”

Rei blinked, staring at Grant. The anger was leaking through again. He could almost imagine faint trails of red wisping away from the boy, escaping like smoke someone was desperately trying to hold in a clenched fist. That invisible weight, too, seemed to have redouble, because despite the simmering fury Grant looked to be trying not to sag as he continued.

“I’m not saying you had it easier, mind you. I don’t know that, and I’m not interested in comparing traumas. I’m... I guess I’m trying to ask you to understand that you’re not the only one with baggage. You’ve just got a handle on yours. A much better handle than me, at least, and I’m a little jealous of that...”

Rei waited for the Brawler to say more, but that seemed to be the last of what words Grant had left in him. In the end, he nodded.

“But you’re working on it,” he said carefully, not quite a question, but not quite a statement of fact either.

Grant took another slow breath before answering. “Yeah... I’m working on it.”

Rei considered the boy. Another pair of cadets—identifiable only as boys not from Galens given they were wearing sweats and well-worn hoodies—passed them without a word and linger stares.

Finally, Rei braved the question.

“You wouldn’t tell me what happened even if I asked, would you?”

There wasn’t so much as a pause to consider. Grant shook his head, red-black eyes steady again as he clearly got hold of the anger once more.

“Not now?” Rei decided to push just a little. “Or... not ever?”

Whereas the first question had obviously been expected, he could see in the slight opening of Grant’s mouth that *this* one, contrastingly, had take the Mauler completely by surprise. They stood there for a full 5 seconds, in fact, alone in the hall again, the only sounds coming as muffled conversation and laughter through the smart-glass walls around them.

Finally, Grant stammered out an answer.

“You would... You would want to... to know?” He sounded completely bewildered. “Eventually?”

Rei cocked an eyebrow at him. “I would ‘want to know’ *now*, dude. But that’s clearly not an option. So yeah. Eventually.”

Grant’s clear perplexion only deepened at this.

“But... why?”

Rei snorted, deciding it was time to take his leave. Turning away from the Mauler, he started for his and Catcher’s room again.

As he walked, though, he answered over his shoulder.

“I don’t know if you and I are ever gonna be ‘friends’, Grant, but we’re teammates. Probably will be as long as we’re at Galens, the way things are shaping up. That means you’re important to me, even if I’d rather anything else in the world be true.” Rei reached the door of the room, a plain black thing in the green-and-purple display of the

walls some 50 feet up the hall. Putting his hand on the handle, he looked back at Grant in full. “If something’s eating at you *that* badly, we all deserve to know. Eventually.” He considers, then added, “Not just Viv.”

And with that, Rei opened the door and stepped into the room without saying goodnight, leaving Grant to stare after him in silent shock.

He slept well that night, if a little fitfully, and even then only because *Catcher* spent most of the night in the room’s second bed tossing and turning and grumbling in his sleep about “No... Viv... Stop throwing things at me... I’m in the middle of a fight...” When Reese arrived to wake them up at 0600—again opening the door without knocking to shout into the room that breakfast would be served in half-an-hour—Rei had already been up for a bit staring at the ceiling, frowning and recalling the conversation with Grant, or else worrying about the start of the fights that morning. The way Catcher did nothing more than slowly sit up at the Major’s yell implied that the Saber, too, had been laying awake for a bit, and as they got dressed Rei saw with some concern that the boy was looking green again, possibly even more so than he had as they’d left Galen’s the morning before. Funnily enough, walking into the dining hall for breakfast was a *relief* for once, because as soon as Catcher noticed half the cadets of the other schools were looking worse off than he was—and not a few others from Galens’ own group—he seemed to cheer up.

Breakfast was eaten quickly by all, the only comfortable discussion seeming to come from the third year squads to whom the pressure was old news. For the first years it was their first true SCT, and it could be argued the second years had even more on the line now that they were bracketed into the main tournament, with a shot at Globals and beyond for the first time in their collegiate career. As people started passing dishes off to cleaning bots, though, Valera Dent made an appearance in their midst, smiling around at them even as she made sure to meet the eye of those who looked most nervous among them.

“You’ve got this,” she said simply. “All of you. There isn’t a doubt in my mind that you’ve got this.”

Then—leaving those words to hearten them all—she explained the itinerary for the rest of the day, including their travel plans and the combat schedule.

As it turned out, the members of Firesong had been right to suspect that the last-chance fights would be held in the morning, as they’d been to think squad and multi-squad formats would start in the afternoon. Within a half hour of wrapping breakfast not only were they all in the hotel lobby in their regulars waiting on the flyer that would take them from The Chevaron to the Kenneth Academy Arena, but Catcher and Grant had both received notices of their morning combat schedule. The former had his first match almost first thing at 0915, while the latter wasn’t scheduled till much later in the morning at 1130. Aria was the one who put forward the theory that Catcher was seeded lower in what had to be uneven brackets, and a little digging by Rei and Cashe on the public feed sites of the SCT eventually brought them to a tournament layout that confirmed this. If Catcher was going to qualify to the Dueling competition proper, he was going to have to beat out three opponents over the course of the morning, while Grant’s pairing had him only needing one.

Ironically, this above all else seemed to calm Catcher nerves.

“Good,” he said. “They’re underestimating me.”

Rei clapped him on the back just as Takeshi started calling into their midst that the flyer was arriving. “They sure as hell are, man. And you’re gonna prove them so wrong.”

“*So* wrong,” Aria, Viv, *and* Cashe all echoed almost simultaneously, earning a laugh from the Saber and even a bit of a smirk from Grant.

While there were no less paparazzi leaving the hotel as their had been arriving the afternoon before, the chaperons had clearly taken a lesson from their last encounter, because after the same large flyer that had brought them from the orbital station to the

hotel touched down again, Dent and Reese marched out at the head of the Galens cadets, Takeshi and Samsus flanking the column. The shouts and lights were just as bad, true, but something about Dent's presence in particular seemed to keep the men and women of the gossip feeds at bay, because they kept a space of distance between themselves and the students this morning. There were still yells of "The Bishop!" or "Lasher! Sidorov! Over here!" and "It's Laurent and the Prince!", but on the whole it took half the time for the *entire* mass of the nine squads to make and board the flyer as it had for Firesong and the other first years to reach the hotel the day before, so Rei didn't complain. Instead, he kept his eyes on the back of Dent's head when he could make her out through the bodies of Lennon and Sidorov's squads before them, feeling a familiar sense of want.

That. *That* was what he desired. He remembered the first time he'd experienced it in full, witnessing the captain lift Grant off his feet with one hand and with no more effort that she might have given a morning stretch, and all without calling on her CAD. Now—and despite her fame—her mere presence was enough to hold at bay the tide of greedy enthusiasm that had nearly swallowed them all whole yesterday.

*That* was what Rei wanted.

The flight out of Ganos was uneventful, the trip taking all of 10 minutes in the ever-moving traffic of the sky lanes. Kenneth Academy, it turned out, had been built on the outskirts of the city some decades after its founding, and so it was that they actually broke out of the tall buildings and bright colors of the adverts and signs over glass and steel into the open, verdant plains of Astra-3. Like the rest of Sector 9, the lands around Ganos were all grasslands and rivers, with only pockets of buildings visible here and there among the greenery. The planet—like most every body terraformed in humanity's explosive expansion into the systems beyond Sol—was still roughly 80 to 90 percent of its "natural" state, with mankind largely settling in the upward-reaching megastructures of the cities that tended always to grow more vertical than horizontal.

As Rei understood it, this was a lesson learned after the nearly-catastrophic decline of Earth's climate in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, and it was what resulted in places like Castalon growing to tower over the likes of the Galens Institute.

It was also the reason Kenneth Academy—while modest in size compared to Galen's sure—was a sight to behold.

“Yoooo...” Catcher breathed from the seat in front of Rei, leaning over Cashe on his left to get a better view out the transport window.

Rei—and Aria beside him, judging by her wide eyes as they both peered downward—was equally in awe.

While the Institute stood on a square, level breadth of land encircle by walls and woods in the middle of Castalon, Kenneth had abandoned almost all semblance of military rigidity. Built up the sweeping incline of a broad hill just outside of Ganos, the school felt almost like it had merely risen out of the grasslands rather than being some man-made addition. The paths and walkways were there, but they were looping, lazy lines of stone through the drifting green, and looked to have been designed to work with the natural pitch and sway of the land. The buildings were proper enough—most of them even newer-looking than Galen's longer-standing structures—but the metal and glass of their design reflected the nature around them, partially camouflaging much of the campus. Despite the winter climate, the entirety of Kenneth felt like a patch of spring made modern, a subtle accent of mankind's passing over the world.

Subtle, that is, except for the Arena.

Rei felt a thrill as he noticed the building for the first time. While Galen's stadium stood as the centerpiece within the school's grounds, the Kenneth Arena held a different place of honor. Situated cleanly at the very top of the academy hill, the fact that it only seated 50,000 people was lost to the glamour of its presence. Instead of the monolithic black Rei was used to, the structure had been designed with the same conscious thought for the freedom of its surroundings, its mirrored, curved surface



reflecting both the green of the grass and the blue the winter sky in what looked like a single, unbroken piece of polished, rising and falling steel. As the flyer descended, aiming for the Arena, Rei realized quickly that that the effect was not the result of a single surface, however, but rather the collective reflection of tens of thousands of a smaller, hexagonal pieces of metal all about the size of his torso. Sure enough, when they made for one of the half-circles of stone that compliment each of the four entrances he'd noticed from the sky, Rei watched in mesmerized fascination while the form of their large flyer reflected unevenly as they descended. They touched down, and the mirror imaged settled, broken into a hundred pieces as a stain of black against the colors of the world.

Aria had to poke him in the ribs to get him moving, so impressed was he by the presentation of the Arena.

No paparazzi looked to have been allowed onto the Kenneth campus for the event, but the platform was still a busy place as the Galens squads disembarked with their bags slung over backs and shoulders. Another flyer was in the process of touching down some hundred yards off on the other side of semi-circle—unmarked, so Rei had no idea what school it belonged to—but the majority of the foot traffic was clearly not the result of the attending cadets and their chaperons. On the contrary, despite the earliness of the hour, Rei couldn't *believe* how many civilians were passing them as they waited for Dent and the other officers, some running eagerly for the large entrance set into the side of the Arena ahead of them, others slowing down or stopping outright to point and gawk when they realize they'd just witnessed the *Galens* students arrive.

“Ok, now *I'm* getting nervous,” Aria mumbled in his ear just as the Captain called for all of them to follow her before starting for the stadium.

Rei only shot her a grin, hoping he didn't give away the flutter in his own gut as hundreds of eyes followed their quick approach of the Arena.

The inside of the building—fortunately for everyone—had a more-familiar feel to it, and despite the pallet and design of the seats being different from Galens, Rei found himself breathing a little easier after they'd mounted the twenty-or-so steps of the entrance. Once in, the place didn't even feel all that smaller than what he was used to, with the black and red rows rising upward in the much the same fashion as they did at home from around the standard SCT field that was the center of everything, 10 feet below the edge of the main walkway. The ceiling was a *lot* closer—almost alarmingly so, at first glance—but the constraint of the space was made up for ten times over by the buzz of noise and activity happening all around them. Everywhere Rei looked, people were moving, many along the paths that ringed the main level or split the seats, a few down on the Arena floor—all uniformed officers of the ICSM apparently doing a last-minute inspection of the projection plating—and most in the stands themselves. The emblems of the schools, too, were cleanly displayed as massive, hovering projections over ten neatly divided sections of the stadium, and Rei had a moment to take in not only Maston's mirrored green lions and Kenneth's own square of symmetrical blue-and-grey shields, but the rest as well. There was Sermont's Point black-and-red serpent, as well as the 105<sup>th</sup> Military College's three black, vertical swords. Oyekan's School of Combat's mirrored hands and daggers were near the 103<sup>rd</sup>'s winged, silver skull, while opposite them the 9<sup>th</sup> Sector Division had its simple yellow-and-orange diagonal cross marking a big X where it sat between the 104<sup>th</sup>'s open blue-on-white eye and Deermond University's golden stag head.

Then, though, Dent was calling their attention back to her again, and they turned left, along the walkway, making for where the red griffin seemed practically to be holding court from its portion of the stands crowning the north entrance of the stadium.

Almost immediately, though, Rei was once *again* distracted, though to be fair he wasn't the only one.

“Oooh!” Cashe whispered even as voices started up from all around them. “Would you look at *that...*”

Rei tore his eyes from the school emblems at last—having been taking in the great red griffin of Galens with no small swell of pride, admittedly—to find the Lancer examining Viv’s right shoulder with interest beside her.

Her shoulder, and the clean glowing white of the Duelist emblem that had suddenly appeared there to hover half-an-inch above the black cloth of her uniform.

Apparently the markers had manifested shortly after they’d reached the walkway, and Rei wasn’t remotely ashamed of how quickly he turned and pulled at the upper sleeve of his own regulars, his stomach doing a little flip of happiness when he saw that—sure enough—the A-Type symbol was there. A quick glance around told him that the others had gotten theirs, too, along with the rest of the Galens students, and peering into the stands he saw that every cadet from every school had been marked as well. It was kind of neat, taking it all in. Only those who were clearly designated chaperones—maybe as a distinction in and off itself—were lacking the emblems, and Rei had a fun minute as they made their way to the north end of the Arena trying to guess what CAD-Type different students were just based of their physique and posture. Amusingly, he was pretty sure he was right roughly four out of five times or so, but that wasn’t all that surprising. Though he’d only been a User himself for less than a year, you picked up on the difference quick if you didn’t want to get left in the dust.

Rei didn’t even realize he’d chuckled out loud after noting that Maulers in particular were easy to pick out, usually all shoulders and big hands and chins lifted maybe a little too high...

“What’s so funny?” Aria asked him sidelong, looking at him out of the corner of her eye as they walked.

“I’ll tell you later,” he promised with another grin.

They reached the south end of the stadium and claimed the bottom three rows of their section quickly, whoever was in charge of the tournament having been kind enough to make their seats clear for them with a green, pulsing box displayed in-frame. A brief set of orders from the chaperones, and the third years took the bottom aisle of chairs, the second and first years claiming the next two respectively. They weren't assigned any arrangement beyond that, but Martin only gave Firesong the slightest of frowns as she led Benaly and the rest of Red Crown down the aisle first to take the six seats furthest into their section, leaving Vademe and Valormade the next half dozen. That left the seats closest to the stairs for Rei and the others, and he didn't miss Aria make a point of thanking Vademe quietly as they stepped in after his group to drop their bags and claim the spot of honor—at least among the first years.

When they were settled, Dent came to stand before them all.

“Cadets, eyes forward.”

56 students straightened against the solid-light supports that had the Arena had project behind them as they sat, and though no hands came up to salute, Rei would have bet every credit to his name that all eyes were hovering somewhere over the Bishop's shoulder. She had a large pad in one hand, and Reese, Takeshi, and Samsus were all standing around her at ease, but expectant.

Without pause of fanfare, the Captain dove right in, not looking up from the tablet as she read.

“Non-qualifiers, you're up first. First fights start at 0900, with brackets divided into fifteen minutes time blocks, as your schedules have already informed you. Make sure to keep an eye on your clocks, since no one will tolerate tardiness. Catchwick—” Rei felt Catcher twitch from where the Saber sat to his right “—you're our earliest match at 0915.” Dent's brown eyes finally lifted briefly to Catcher. “Ready?”

“Yes, ma'am!” Catcher answered at once, doing a fair job of not betraying the lingering nerves given away by the two fists clenched tight in his lap.

Dent nodded, then looked back to her pad. “After that it will be Harrison at 0930—” a third-year girl Rei though was called “Tabitha” perked up in the front row “—followed by Nomura and Rosario at 0945.” Two second years sitting next to each other exchanged a look off to Rei’s left. “That’s the opening round, if I’m not mistaken, so things will get more intense from there. Individual qualifiers, you’re not up till team formats in the afternoon, so I expect everyone to be cheering themselves hoarse for your schoolmates. Understood?” She didn’t so much as glance up at them again, but there was shadow of a smile along the line of her mouth as she spoke.

“Yes, ma’am!” the answer came, just as loud but a little more relaxed, and Rei had to admire the woman’s ability to lift moral with nothing more than well-timed shift in tone.

After that, she dismissed them to their preparations, huddling up with the other chaperones. Catcher and Grant left them to join the other non-qualifiers in search of the locker rooms—walking off beside each other, but not talking—and Rei, Aria, Viv, and Cashe spent a quarter hour with their heads together over the pad Viv had stowed in her bag, working on mapping out the potential opponents the two of them would be facing. Grant was simple enough, and not easy to worry about—half because he only had one fight to make the tournament proper, and half because it was *Grant*—and frankly Catcher didn’t take much more consideration, if they were being honest. While Galens definitely had the strongest fighting presence across the board by far, there were still plenty of mid-level C-rankers among the other schools.

Thing was: almost every single one of them had qualified individually in their respective SCTs, leaving the only real challenges on the field the other Galens last-chancers, none of whom Rei would have put money on if they got matched with Catcher.

15 minutes later, Catcher and Grant returned with the rest—having changed into their combat suits—with the information that the Kenneth Arena had two

subbasements, which had been specially partitioned. First years had been designated the locker rooms on SB2, second years SB1, while third year had been granted the special privilege of using the smaller professional locker rooms spread out through all three floors, with the Galens senior class among those—naturally—who had been granted one of the chambers of the underworks of the main level. Catcher looked even better than he had when he'd left, too, but wouldn't say why, and it took Viv prodding Grant enough times before the Mauler grunted that there had been no less than *three* non-qualifiers from the other schools throwing up in the bathroom stalls off the locker room while they'd been changing.

Rei got a chuckle out of that, fist-bumping a grinning Catcher sidelong, before Aria ask Viv to pull her tablet out so they could review Grant's single matchup and Catcher's most-likely path to qualifying.

Not too long after, and with a flop of Rei's gut that was only matched by Aria's hand flashing out to grip his wrist in excitement, a voice boomed out across the Arena.

"Testing one two. Testing one two." It was a male announcer's voice rather than the cooler tone of the automated system, and once it was clear the speakers were working the young man continued steadily. "If I could have your attention please. Final qualification Dueling rounds will begin in fifteen minutes. Again: final qualification Dueling rounds will begin in fifteen minutes. First round fighters, please refer to your schedules for your assigned field—it will either be north or south—and report to the main floor, if you please. For qualifiers, staff, and spectators, we will remind you that final qualification rounds are not broadcasted, so we recommend recording any fights for review if needed. Thank you."

And with that, the voice faded away as quickly as it had interrupted the activity of the stands, leaving only a second or two of silence before the hubbub picked up again even louder than before.

“Well that was a little underwhelming,” Grant grumbled from the end of the row, frowning up at the Arena’s ceiling as though trying to convey his disappointment to the disembodied voice.

“They probably won’t make a proper announcement of the start of the tournament until the afternoon?” Aria offered, though she looked a little miffed as well. “Probably the same reason they don’t broadcast last-chance fights. They want viewers to be thrown into the higher-level action immediately.”

Grant grunted his agreement with a shrug, absently thumbing at the bandaged around his right palm. Rei eyed it for a second, wondering if the cut was bothering him, but decided not to voice his concern.

The Mauler had said it wouldn’t cause an issue, and Rei chose to believe him.

“What fight are you for your first match?” he asked Catcher instead, looking at the Saber.

“North,” Catcher answered at once, dipping his head to the field directly in front of their section of the stadium. “Already looked it up. You guys won’t even have to get out of your seats.”

“Perfect,” Viv said, leaning back to stretch back into her projected seat in an exaggerated sort of way, then pulling her cap down below her eyes with a grin. “I need a nap anyway. Wake me up when the *real* fighting starts... this afternoon.”

Catcher choked back a word of disbelief, and Cashe, sitting between them, giggled into her hand. Rei smiled to, then settle back to wait.

He didn’t complain when Aria did the same beside him, resting her shoulder against his before pulling her a smaller pad from her own bag and asking him quietly if he’d review some Wargames fields with her.

10 minutes later to sets of ISCM arbiters strode out onto the floor to prep the north and south fields, and 5 minutes after that—at exactly 0900—the first combatants stepped onto the floor.

Even half-empty the stands positively *roared* with excitement.

“I’m headed out,” Catcher half-shouted over the noise as the Arena announced to two fighters matched on the north field before them—a pair of second years from the 105<sup>th</sup> and Kenneth, Rei thought he’d caught. “Wish me luck.”

“Break a leg,” Cashe said with a thumbs up, scorching back to let him by.

“Break *both* legs.” Viv, on the contrary, stuck a foot out to try and trip him as he passed.

“And leave the rest of the team to deal with you all on their own?” Catcher asked in mock disbelief. “I wouldn’t wish that on my worst enemy.”

It was Viv’s turn to splutter, before he was gone with a grin and wave back to Rei and Aria before she could formulate any kind of better comeback, jogging down the stairs to the walkway before heading for the closest Arena entrance. A minute later, they saw him reappear from a tunnel along the edge of the main floor, then take a position along the wall when an officer standing ready to direct indicated that he should do so.

“Think he’s still nervous?” Aria asked Rei sidelong, obviously watching the Saber to.

“Oh yeah,” Rei snorted in answer. “But he’ll be fine. He just needs to get the first match out of the way.”

And he was right. As soon as the first round ended—in brutal fashion when the 105<sup>th</sup>’s second year “decapitated” their opponent Kenneth Academy opponent with a vicious sweep of their spear—Catcher was called up, and the match started without delay. His opponent—a boy from Deermont—was practically shaking even after the field had manifested in a common Neutral Zone and their Devices had been called. Rei felt bad for him, particularly in the seconds after the Arena called “Combatants... Fight?”

Even as a Duelist, at D5 he didn’t even last 20 seconds against Catcher’s onslaught.



Sure enough, after the match was called and the two of them had descended back to the projection plating, the Saber looked around and up at Rei and the others, flashing them a grin and double thumbs up before walking off the field.

“Told you,” Rei laughed sidelong to Aria.

The rest of the morning passed in a similar manner, with Firesong eventually rising from their seats to join one group or another of the other Galens students to cheer the various last chancers from all three years. Catcher’s second fight came and went without a hitch—though the battle lasted closer to a full minute this time—and only two of the Institute cadets were had lost the opportunity to fight in the tournament proper by the time it was finally Grant’s turn to get ready to fight. The match took place on the north field again, and to her credit his opponent—a 9<sup>th</sup> Sector girl name Hanna Steiners—took full advantage of the Zero-Grav field and her nimbleness as a Brawler to make a nuisance of herself. All of Grant’s superior specs and ability amounted to little for the first 4 minutes of the fight as Steiners bounced around the simulated asteroid field, flashing by him a striking as she passed again and again and again. It reminded Rei of the third year fight they’d seen in the opening week of the Intra-Schools the semester before, between Lennon and the Lancer Annika Ivanov. Unfortunately, Grant had little of Lennon’s defensive ability, and he suffered more than one hit here and there that looked to leave him with minor limitations.

He held out though, and just before the 7<sup>th</sup> minute struck Grant managed to grab Steiners by the throat as she’d passed with lagging speed, slamming her to the face in with his forehead to stun the girl before dropping his axed down between her eyes even as they spun through empty space.

“Come on!” Aria shouted as soon as the Arena announced the FDA and the win for Grant—officially qualifying him for the tournament proper—already heading south from where they’d been cheering at the railing of the north walkway. “Catchers up soon!”

Not long after, the entirety of Firesong were officially Sectionals qualifiers, and Rei could admit himself borderline-giddy as he looked up into the steadily-filling stands of the Kenneth Arena. Despite everything, despite the Maston's jerks, Grants injury, and Catchers nerves at the start of the day, Rei had a feeling it was going to be a *really* good week.

Even Reese's voice—shouting at them from around the bend of the walkway as the Major approached while they waited for Catcher to join them after his victory—couldn't ruin his mood.

"Firesong! Food has arrived, and Dent wants you eating first! Report back to the school section!"

All of them looked around to the man, and Rei was pretty sure he wasn't the only one who hadn't followed. Takeshi had informed everyone around 1100 that lunch had been ordered and would be arriving shortly, but it felt weird for them to get first dibs over the second and third years.

"Sir?" Aria ventured. "Dent wants us to eat... now?"

"I don't think I stuttered, Laurent," Reese responded without only the ghost of a sneer, reaching them to glower from one to the other. "Report back."

"Uh... Yes, sir," Aria answered, giving the man a salute the rest of them copied automatically. "Can I ask why though? We expected we'd be eating with the other first years, is all..."

Tactfully done, and Rei could see the Major struggling to find a fault in the question.

Failing to, however, he answered flatly.

"Team format schedules have just been posted." Finally, he allowed himself the smallest or raised eyebrows. "Unless you all want to fight on full stomachs, I suggest you get to it. You're up in the very first round."