

CHAPTER I

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACEHOLDER

Reidon “Rei” Ward didn’t think he had ever been in greater danger. Not any of the times he’d been put under the knife on the surgical tables that had been the nightmare of his childhood. Not when he’d nearly had his face kicked in by Mateus Selleck and some other jealous classmates a few months back. Not even when he’d faced Christopher “Lasher” Lennon across the 30-yard expanse of an SCT Dueling field, much less the likes of Logan Grant.

No. Now, as Rei’s slate-grey eyes flicked to every bustling corner of the massive room he stood in, finding no easily attainable exit, he was sure of it.

He had never been in greater danger.

“Rei. *Rei.*”

Rei blinked and looked straight again, hoping the terror didn’t show on his face as he took in the tall, green-eyed girl standing before him like nothing was remotely wrong with the situation. A plain black baseball cap, identical to his own, covered her vibrant red hair, and she was looking at him expectantly.

“Yeah?” he asked, his voice forcibly calm.

“Are you going to tell me? Which one do you think would look better?” Aria Laurent, the ace of The Galens Institute first year cadets, held up a pair of pretty button-up blouses that Rei would have bet his S-Ranked Growth were identical. “The ‘Heaven Blue’? Or the ‘Afternoon Sky’?”

Obviously, there was only one thing to do in a situation like this.

“The Sky,” Rei stated with *distinctly* false confidence, dipping the brim of his cap at the blouse in the girl’s left hand. “I think it would work better with your hair.”

Aria blinked at him, a brief look of confusion passing across her face.

Then, slowly, she grinned.

“You can’t tell the difference can you?”

“Not even a bit,” Rei answer promptly, keeping up his air of bravado.

Aria laughed, then, the sound more satisfying than any Rei had ever known it his life, even if it made him scowl in the moment.

“Sorry, *sorry*,” Aria managed to get out finally, still grinning even when she was done. “You could have just said as much, you know?”

“And ruin your fun? Not happening.” Rei laughed. “You’ve bought more clothes *today* than I think I’ve owned in my *life*, lady. I’m not about to jeopardize that kind of commitment.”

It was Aria’s turn to eye him, and she hefted the three *full* bags of apparel that hung from her elbows proudly, each of them sporting a different brand design in shimmering neon holo-displays that were only visible through their NOEDs. “Are you judging me?”

“Not even a *little*,” Rei assured her with a laugh, bringing up the *four* bags he himself was carrying for the girl so that she could keep shopping with both hands. “I’m just teasing. We have to wear our regulars at all times at school, so I find it a little baffling, that’s all.”

The pair of them were standing in “Swallowtail”, a massive, single-room clothing boutique that might have fit half an SCT Wargames field. The space was a wide-open two stories, and sported so many displays of such a variety of garments that Rei couldn’t imagine there wasn’t a person in the entirety of the ISC who couldn’t have found *something* to wear from among the selection around them alone.

And it was only *one* store.

Easthold Mall, it had turned out, was one of the single largest shopping centers in the entirety of the Astra system, feeding off the vibrant populace of Castalon and thriving tourism that was often fed by the Galens Institute and the pro SCTs the school occasionally hosted. The mall took up no less than three of the city’s towering

skyscrapers, and comprised of some *11000* different outlets, shops, and foodcourts, many of whom were represented multiple times through the sprawling center. Even if they had spent the entirety of their winter vacation exploring, Rei was fairly convinced he and Aria wouldn't have been able to visit a quarter of the massive complex, for which he was both grateful and disappointed. On the one hand, he'd never been much of one for shopping, even if he did have a decent amount of credits saved up from the small stipend he'd all-but-forgotten the military provided its cadets.

On the other hand, while he might miss Viv and Catcher—and even Chancery Cashe, who was quickly growing on all of them—spending the entire vacation stuck inside with Aria didn't seem like the *worst* was to pass the break...

Whether fortunately or unfortunately, though, Aria herself had other plans.

“Rei I have *three weeks*—well, two, now—to *not* have to wear those damn regulars, and I'm going to take advantage of it. Just because *you* can pull off black and gold every day, Mr. White-Hair-and-Grey-Eyes-for-Days, does not mean the *rest* of us can.” She had moved on from the blue blouses, and was now steadily moving along a line of colored tank-tops. “If Uncle Ram and the rest of the staff are nice enough to let us wear civies on breaks, you damn well better believe I'm gonna take advantage of it. Besides—” she plucked a simple, pink top from where it was suspended, the magnetic latch that held the hanger in place releasing without a sound “—not *all* of this is for me. You think Viv is any more partial to our uniform than I am?”

Rei watched Aria scrutinize the top for a moment before replacing it with a *click* to pull down another one. “Viv? Not me? I thought this was supposed to be *our* date.”

Aria froze, then. Immediately her face flushed, ears going nearly the color of the dark red hair she had hidden under the black baseball cap, and it took her a second to look at him, her gaze flick away again almost immediately.

“Tease,” she muttered at last, replacing the top again as a group of 4 boys in matching uniforms jackets who might have been about their age passed them on the

other side of the suspended rack. After a moment, though, she found her composure, and turned her green eyes on Rei's own clothes. "Actually... Something for you... That's not a bad idea."

He made a face at her, lifting both arms in display. "What? Why? What's wrong with what I'm wearing?"

In response, he got an arched eyebrow.

Aside from their matching hats—provided for them by Bashir Sattar, the Institute quartermaster—Rei and Aria couldn't have been dressed more differently. They both wore long-sleeves, partially to ward off the December chill and partially to hide Shido and Hippolyta's colored bands from the eyes of curious passersby, but while Rei thought he'd looked smart in a white half-zip, a black jacket, and black jeans—the nicest clothes he honestly owned aside from their regulars—Aria had, predictable, put him to shame from the moment they'd met up in the lobby of Kanes a couple of hour before. Her green bomber jacket was artfully too big for her, buttoned over a low-cut shirt, and her own jeans were fashionable ripped and worn around her thighs and knees. Rei was glad, too, that with his new 5'7" frame he was used to being towered over by everyone in his life, because Aria had kept to her black military-issue boots, adding nearly an inch over him and his simpler sneakers. All-in-all, the girl cut every inch the picture of a voguish teenage model, looking like she might have dropped right out of one of the ads scrolling across the massive smart-glass screens that made up the ceiling of the shop above their heads.

It was a different side of her Rei had never seen, and he was enjoying every second of it.

"Rei... We wear black all day, all year." Aria was looking at him almost pityingly, now. "I can't convince you to try a splash of color at least? Even blue? To match your C—to match your bracelets?"

Aria had caught herself, obviously about to say the word “CAD” out loud, which had enough of a chance of causing trouble that Galens cadets were discouraged from mentioning their Devices beyond the ground. When they’d notified the school of their intention to leave, in fact, Rei and Aria had been surprised by the list of “recommendations” the Security Center had sent back along with their approval. Galens was famous, they knew, across the system but *especially* on Astra-3, and the Institute took the safety of their students seriously. While the list had been non-enforceable, each point had come with reasonings that had had the pair of them following it to a T.

Especially when they’d seen the custom note added at the bottom of the list, pointing out that Rei and Aria were—aside from perhaps a handful of second and third year cadets like Anatoli Sidorov and Christopher “Lasher” Lennon—the *most* recognizable students the school currently hosted among its body.

And so the pair of them had hidden their most distinguishing features, tucking their white and red hair under the provided hats respectively. The jackets concealed their CADs, and in Rei’s case served the double-purpose of covering the now-long-healed scars of over 160 past surgeries, markings that had apparently become a “signature” distinction of his according to the forums and feeds that followed intra-school and the collegiate level SCTs. They avoided all mention of CADs, Devices, Users, and the like, and did their best to keep their conversation private while they moved about the mall. If he’d been with anyone else, Rei might have found the restrictions oppressive.

Instead, he’d been more than happy for the excuse to stick close to Aria, keeping to themselves all afternoon as they’d bounced from place to place, laughing and talking as easily as any other day, so long as Rei didn’t remind the girl they were on an actual *date*.

Eyeing Aria's outfit, Rei grinned as he answered her. "It's not like I'm *opposed* to other looks, you know? I'm down for it, as long as you don't hold on to the hope that there is a shot in hell I'm ever going to look as stylish as you."

Aria managed to keep her composure this time as she looked him up and down. "I don't know about that..." She lifted her gaze over his head then, taking in the projected signs that labeled the different sections of the store. "'Men's'... Where's the 'Men's'... Ah! There!" She pointed further into the shop even as she replaced the pink top she'd still be holding onto, obviously eager. "Come on!"

"Yeeeah... Not happening," Rei answered with a laugh, catching her by the arm as she made to step past him. "I'm all for shopping for *you* anywhere and any day of the week, but if you think I can afford a place like this, you're insane. I haven't touched the stipend we get all year, and I still think I'd have to take a loan out to buy a *sock* from this shop."

"That's no problem!" Aria started brightly. "I can just get it for—"

She stopped those, as he cocked his head at her.

"Ooor not...?" she said tentatively.

"Or not," Rei snorted. "You want to buy me boxers sometime in the future, we can talk about it. But no *way* are you dressing me on your dime on our—" he paused for dramatic effect "—First. Date."

Aria flushed again, so brightly Rei could have sworn he felt the girl's *arm* heat up, still in his grasp.

"You're the *worst*," she muttered, looking away at once.

Then, almost immediately, she perked up, whirling back to face him.

"Oh... *Oh*...!"

"What?" Rei asked, taken aback by her sudden enthusiasm.

"It's just *me* buying it that's the problem, right? If I find something you like, and you can get it yourself, you would?"

“I’d... consider it,” Rei answer, choosing his words carefully as he finally let go of Aria’s elbow. “Like I said, if you think I can afford anything in a fancy place like this—”

“Nope!” the girl cut him off though, and suddenly Rei found himself being pulled along, Aria having spun on her heel and switched the bags from one arm to the other so fast he was sure she’d accidentally engaged her specs. The next thing he knew, he’d been taken by the hand to be led—rather enthusiastically—towards Swallowtail’s front exit. “Not like this! Not at all like this!”

Rei was so caught off guard he couldn’t say anything until well after Aria had half-dragged him into the busy, brilliant-white fairway of the mall floor’s packed main hall. He wasn’t sure she’d even noticed that she’d grabbed him *by the hand*, but *he* certainly had, and the warmth of her fingers around his was enough to scramble his usually-clear head.

Eventually, though, he managed it, laughing as his feet finally caught up under him. “Aria! Where are we going?!”

In answer, the girl looked back over her shoulder.

“To the Meccah of affordable fashion, duh!” She grinned at him. “Have you never been thrift shopping?!”

Jay Taylor was feeling pretty good about himself. It had been a while since he’d felt this good, in fact. His loss in his final match of the Pennview Military Academy’s intra-school SCT had knocked him out of qualifying individually for the first year brackets of the Sector-2 Sectionals tournament, and he hadn’t been picked to compete as one of the non-qualifiers on any of the Academy’s three squad groups even *despite* his parents attempted interventions on his behalf. As a result, he’d spent the last week

of term sulking and training with his friends, and the days at home since doing much the same.

Then, after a private training session with a former Systems Champion Lancer his mother had found to instruct him over break, Jay had managed to not only manage an impressive—in his opinion—D4 CAD-Rank, but also achieve his first evolution since his assignment back in May, one of only a handful of cadets to manage it in the whole of the Academy’s first year class.

His parents had, predictably, wanted to celebrate in extravagance, and what better way to do so than to send Jay—along with his friends Dabeet, Milo, and Colson from school—on an all-expenses paid trip to the most thriving city on the planet?

Yeah... Jay Taylor was feeling pretty good about himself.

Especially after crossing paths with the tall, green-eyed girl that had all but taken his breath away.

“Yo, these guys are *legit*,” Colson Meadows had been saying behind his back as they’d explored the Easthold Mall. The black-haired Saber, along with Milo Kent, had apparently caught the tourist bug from Castalon’s towering cityscape, because the pair of them had been watching reruns of some of that year’s Galens Institute intra-schools ever since they’d reached the shopping complex. “This is *insane*. Half of these first years are already C-Ranked, and well into them!”

“It’s nuts right?” Milo, a massive, hulking boy with narrow eyes and orange-and-blue hair who could have been a perfect specimen of what someone might have thought a Brawler should *exactly* look like, agreed from behind Jay’s left shoulder. “And did you see the upper year matches? That ‘Lasher’ guy is on another level. Apparently he’s a top favorite for ISC Champion this year.”

“Woah.” It was Dabeet Anand this time, his towering, green-haired frame walking tall on Jay’s other side, who’d finally entered the conversation. “I forgot Lennon was a student at Galens! Think there’s a shot in hell we could meet him while we’re here?!”

The silence that followed had had Jay looking back at the trio, not-unexpectedly finding them watching him hopefully.

He'd smirked. "How about I call my dad after we're done here? Maybe he can get us a tour of the Institute, if we're lucky."

"Nice!" Colson and Milo had said together even as Colson nodded along in eager agreement.

Shoving his hands into his pockets—careful to let the white of Ephrodite's vysetrium gems shine unhindered in its blue-green bands—Jay had looked forward again, feeling like the day was only getting better and better. Truth-be-told he doubted his father—despite being a high-ranking official in Sector-2's local government—would have the kind of pull to get them anywhere near *Galens*, but ever since assignment his parents had been fawning over him even more so than usual, so it never hurt to ask. He liked, too, feeling like the lynchpin of his little group, like Dabeet, Milo, and Colson would eagerly follow him through any door he could get open for them.

So when he'd seen the girl, Jay was feeling sure enough of himself to take a swing even he—confident as he was—might have thought twice about any other day.

After all, she hadn't been alone...

It was the flash of green that had caught his eye, a brilliant shade of emerald that sparkled even under the brim of the plain black cap she had tucked tight about her head. To call her stunning would have been an understatement, an athletic form—obvious even under the loose jacket she was wearing—complimenting a face that stood out even in a world of engineered attractiveness. She'd hadn't been far when she'd passed by to head into a shop on the right side of the crowded hall they were making their way along, so Jay had found himself brought up short about as much by the way she moved—graceful and quick as a dancer—as any other part of her.

Then again, maybe she *was* a dancer, for all he knew... It would have made sense given her companion—wearing a matching hat, if nothing else of any style—moved

with a similar poise and confidence. Jay, in fact, would have suspected the pair were Users like him and the other three, except for a simple fact:

They guy looked to be barely more than five-and-a-half feet tall, and wiry despite his straight shoulders and self-assured air.

“Woah...” Dabeet said again, but this time Jay knew it had nothing to do with the Galens tournament recordings. “Who is *that*, and how do I get to know her?”

“Great minds think alike, man...” Jay said, glancing back as the girl and her short friend vanished into the store—the “Swallowtail”—all while chatting animatedly. Dabeet looked to have been the only one to have seen her of the other two, because Colson and Milo were looking between the two of them, blinking away the playback from the neuro-optics.

“What are you guys talking about?” Milo grunted, frowning around them as he searched for the reason they had come up short. “Get to know who?”

“Let’s find out, shall we?” Jay answered, running a strong hand through his long, grey-black hair before heading for Swallowtail, not surprised when he heard his friend hurrying along behind him.

It didn’t take them long to find the girl and her friend. Despite the shop being a sizable one even by the standards of Easthold Mall, the matching black hats moving through the artfully-suspended displays wasn’t too hard to pair out of the colored hair and flashy clothes of the store’s other shoppers. After about a minute of weaving casually throughout the aisles, the four of them found the two in the “Women’s” section looking at shirts, the girl apparently in the process of asking the boy his opinion. When Milo and Cooper got an eyeful of her, their matching expression of “Oooh” had Jay smirking again.

He’d seen her first, and he knew none of the other three were dumb enough to try and claim his dibs on this opportunity, lest he ditch them to find their own—rather expensive—ride home from the city.

Pretending as best they could to be looking for a selection for themselves—which might have been easier if any of them had been wearing anything but jeans and the casual jackets Pennview had provided them with, embalmed with a proud crest of the school on one side—they listened in on their pair, exchanging sidelong looks of surprise every now and then. As it turned out, the short boy was more than a friend, or at least angling to be. It sounded like the pair of them were on their first date, and Jay had to stifle a grimace more than once as the boy—“Rei”, the still-nameless girl called him—teased her more than once. She was obviously a shy thing, and Jay almost felt bad for her. If she was so timid that someone as diminutive as *this* punk could convince her to go out with him...

Unfortunately, Jay had just made his choice to interrupt—or maybe try to catch the the girl on her own if he got the chance—when the pair of them high-tailed it out of the store, she dragging “Rei” off by the hand like he was some kind of school boy.

“Pathetic,” Jay snorted out loud at last as the two disappeared out into the hall again, already moving to follow. Behind him, Dabeet, Milo, and Colson all fell in quickly. “The hell is she doing with a guy like that? 100 credits says I get her away from him inside of a minute.”

Had he looked over his shoulder, he might have seen the other three exchange an less-than-sure look.

“Uh... You sure about that, Jay?” Milo asked uncertainly as they, too, stepped into the hall and turned left. “They seemed pretty tight to me...”

“*Really* tight...” Dabeet agreed, just as carefully.

Jay only laughed. Ahead of them he could still see the paired black hats, and he picked up his pace, engaging his Speed spec slightly, which forced the others to do the same in turn. He didn’t even bother keeping an eye out for city security, enjoying the widening eyes of the civilians who hurried to get out of their foursome’s way. Sure, it was frowned upon for a User to draw on their specs in public, but it wasn’t *illegal*.

“Girl’s probably just never had someone show proper interest in her,” he said over his shoulder as they moved, lifting a wrist to shake Ephrodite’s CAD band pointedly. “Another hundred says her jaw drops when she realizes I’m a User. If anything, she looks in need of rescuing, don’t you think?”

In answer, Jay got only silence, which satisfied him plenty. Again, though, if he’d looked back he might have noticed the other three trade another look, as well as Colson muttering under his breath. “Rei’... ‘Rei’?... Why do I feel like I’ve heard that name before...?”

“Now *this* is what I’m talking about,” Rei couldn’t help but exclaim some 45 minutes later, half-walking, half-skipping out of “Olson’s Second-Hand”. While he still carried Aria’s four bags, his load had now been added to with a pair of his own, and not for the first time he thanked Shido for the added Strength spec he could politely call on even out and about. “I might be starting to look like a pack mule, but I’m gonna be a *sexy* pack mule once we get back to school!”

Aria, following a couple steps behind, laughed at that. “Good thing Viv’s not around to overhear you. I don’t think you’d live that particular image down for days.”

Rei grinned, turning and waiting for her to catch up. “Worth it. How did I not know this was a thing?! Seriously!”

Aria laughed again. All her bags were on one arm, now, and with only a brief hesitation she slid her free one into the crook of Rei’s elbow. “I’m glad you had fun. Not gonna lie, I was second-guessing myself all the way down here. I mean *I’m* a fan of thrifting, but it can’t be everyone’s vibe, you know?”

“Nah! That was *way* cool! You had me a little worried there with how badly you wanted me put on that pink top hat, but aside from that I was *here* for it.”

Aria nodded approvingly. “Good, I’m glad. Now though…” She looked to check the time in the corner of her frame. “It’s a getting a little late. If we want to get back in time to have dinner with the others, we might need to catch a flyer in the next hour or so.”

Rei only barely kept himself from sighing out loud in disappointment, pulling up his own NOED as he led them along aimlessly up the nearest hall. He quickly had a map of Easthold up to scan it briefly, pleased when he made note of their location.

“There’s actually a port just two floors up, it looks like. Won’t even take us five minutes to grab an elevator and call a ride.” He blinked the frame away to look at Aria again. “Seems like this floor has a bunch of other second-hand places, though. Wanna check out a couple more before we head out?”

“Oh I’m *so* in,” she agreed at once, giving a little skip of excitement. “I came here with my sister a few years ago, before she volunteered for the front lines. There’s a *bunch* of good spots! First though—” she pointed to a glowing holo-sign up the hall a little ways, displaying the minimalist shape of a human form that morphed every second or two from a roughly masculine outline into a more feminine one featuring the shape of a dress “—nature calls, if that’s ok?”

“Na. Gonna make you hold it all the way back to school,” Rei joked absently even as he shifted them to head for the bathrooms, earning himself a poke in the ribs. He might have chuckled at her blushing again, except for the fact that he was a little distracted. As they’d crossed the hall, he thought he’d seen a familiar set of school uniforms drifting along in the throng nearby…

Keeping an eye out, Rei turned them down into the narrow, emptier alley off the main way, plain aside from the advertisements that played across the walls between the half-dozen open bathroom entrances and a trio of double-sided benches thoughtfully provided for partners and families left to guard purchases. Agreeing to keep an eye on their things, Rei didn’t watch Aria hurry round the privacy corner into the nearest of

the restrooms, choosing instead to toss his stuff on the plasteel seat beside where she'd dropped hers before easing himself down by the bags. As he did, he eyed the end the fortunately-one-way hall, wondering if he'd been imaging things.

He didn't have to wait more than 10 seconds to be disappointed.

The four boys took the corner as a group, rounding it with a purpose that told Rei immediately their appearance was no coincidence. Indeed, they to-a-one locked eyes with him even as they approached, and Rei forced himself to ease back and rest one arm across the top of the bench behind him, hoping to cut a casual air.

He'd learned a long, long time ago that it didn't always take much to throw troublemakers off their game.

Sure enough, he saw the division at once. The shared, uncomfortable look between the three trailing boys—sporting black, green, and orange-and-blue hair respectively—told him there was a mastermind behind whatever was about to go down. Indeed, as they approached, it was on the leader of the group that his eyes fell, a tall, handsome youth probably his age, with a square, strong chin that framed his face well along with his own black-and-grey locks. The boy was smirking as he neared, but that was hardly the first thing Rei took note of.

Much more alarming, after all, was the CAD...

Shit, Rei thought privately, eyeing the matching bands of blue-green, steel accented with white vysetrium. The other three, too, sported Devices, but Rei only watched the leader as the four of them finally came to stop before him, spreading out to pin him in with a practiced efficiency that said this was not the first time this game had been played by them.

Rei's certainty in this fact redoubled when the leader smiled at him and spoke with the absolute confidence of someone very, *very* used to getting their way.

“Get lost, pipsqueak.”

There might have been time, in a past life, where Rei would have risen to that bait, where he'd had something to prove by standing up to this *exemplary* example of a pompous prick. As it was, though, he instead blinked at the boy, then looked around over his shoulder as though making sure there wasn't anyone behind him who might have been being addressed instead. There was no one, of course, and—taking the opportunity to double check that Shido's bands were still hidden under the sleeves of his own jacket—Rei looked around again in feigned confusion.

“Sorry... Are you talking to me?”

The tall boy's smirk redoubled. “Small and stupid to boot.” He looked around at his friends. “See? Told you I was right.” There came only shared nods from the others who—Rei made sure to note—never looked away from him.

Possibly only one real idiot here... he thought to himself even as he considered his options. He'd been worried he—or Aria, more likely—had been recognized by cadets from a rival school looking to pick a fight, but obviously that wasn't the case.

Which likely meant something much more devious.

“Oh was this your bench?” Rei asked, playing for time and putting on a genuine air of concern as he motioned to the plasteel beside him. “Sorry. I can move our stuff, if you need to a load off?”

The smirk faded a little at that, as though the boy wasn't used to this level of difficulty getting his *very* obvious point across.

“No, it isn't our *bench*, you moron. Are you *actually* this slow? Let me make it clear for you, then.” He bent low to cock his head in Rei's face. “We're—” he motioned to the other trio “—of the opinion that your friend is in need of better company than yours. In case it wasn't obviously, that would be us.” He lifted a hand to show off the CAD band. “I'm assuming you know what this is?”

“I know what that is, yeah,” Rei said calmly, eyeing the Device.

“Good, then you should also know it means that *you need to get lost*, shouldn't you?”

There was an opportunity, and Rei took it at once. It had been drilled into him for 5 months now, after all, that information was often more valuable than strength in a fight.

So, instead of answering, he peered at the boy's jacket.

“Pennview Military Academy’,” he read off out loud, the emblem stitched into the cloth over the left breast clear now that it was so close. “Is that one of those ‘SCT’ schools? That’s cool. You guys look pretty badass, too. I’m guessing you’re like...” he looked between them, snagging quick snaps of the groups faces with his frame as he pretended to ponder “...fourth years, maybe?”

“First,” the tallest of the other three, green-haired and olive-skinned, grunted in answer. “There’s no fourth year for ISCM cadets.” He looked at the ring leader. “Ok, Jay, I’m convinced. This guys is definitely an idiot.”

Rei, though, had stopped listening, pulling up his frame again the moment the second boy had spoken. He’d intended to do an image scan using his surreptitious camera work, but the name was *way* more useful.

Pennview Military Academy. A school he’d never heard of, which—despite the fact that there were a *lot* of schools he’d never heard of, even on Astra-3 alone—was a good sign. It took barely a second for the name “Jay Taylor” to get pulled up on the feeds, and Rei was pleased to find that Pennview actually displayed its cadets’ publicly-accessible information on the students’ profiles, saving him the precious seconds it would have taken to do a search the ISCM User database.

Jay Taylor. First year. Lancer.

D4.

Rei couldn’t help himself from smiling, letting the tension go with a breath as he sat back more comfortably in the bench.

“The hell are you grinning at?” The leader—“Taylor”, Rei knew now—half-snarled as he caught Rei relax. He was standing straight again, hands balled into fists at his sides. “I said to get lost, didn’t I? Walk away, or—”

“Or *what*, dumbass?” Rei cut him off sharply, staring the boy down even as Taylor towered over him. “You’ll call your Device on me? Try to kick my ass in a *public mall*? Pretty sure the only moron here is *you*, and that’s being kind to your friends.”

Taylor blinked at him, then, obviously completely taken aback by this sudden shift in tone. Of course he was, though. Bullies never handled being shoved back into line, and it had been months since Rei’s bravado in situations like this had been all sham.

D4. What a joke. After his final duel against Logan Grant in the Galens intra-schools had won Rei an individual qualifying spot at Sectionals, Shido had made numerous individual spec jumps, including Endurance and Strength. It hadn’t been enough to upgrade his CAD-Rank after his training with Christopher Lennon the Sunday before had *just* gotten him to C4, but the fight combined with a week-plus of Team Battle training since *had* done the trick. Assuming Jay Taylor was the strongest of this foursome—which tended to be the case with groups like this, in Rei’s experience—Rei was ranked a full *tier* higher than any of them.

Even if his combat specs were skewed closer to C1 or 2 due to his S-Ranked Growth, he was pretty sure he could have taken any two of these guys on on his own without much trouble if worst came to worst.

As it happened, though, it had been *years* since Rei had had to pick his fights alone...

“Rei... What’s going on?”

As one Rei and the four Pennview first years looked around. Aria was standing just outside the entrance to the bathroom, looking a little alarmed at the sight the five of them must have cut. Before Rei could get a word out, though, Jay Taylor changed tactics in a flash, moving so fast to stand in front of her it couldn’t have been more

obvious he'd deliberately triggered his Speed. In a heartbeat the others, too, had left Rei to join him, surrounding the girl in a half-circle, her back to the opening.

"Hey," Taylor greeted the girl, and even from behind Rei could tell he was offering Aria what had to have been a dazzling smile. "I'm Jay. Don't worry about your friend. He was just telling us he had to get going." He lifted one hand with what Rei admitted was artful subtlety to brush a lock of loose hair out of his eyes, making sure to show off the CAD around his wrist again as he did. "What's your name? My friends and I would be happy to hang out, if you still have shopping to do? Or... Maybe just you and me?"

Aria only blinked at the boy, clearly processing what was going on. After a second or two of catching up the bewildering situation, though, she slowly leaned around him to look at Rei again.

"Is this *actually* happening?" she asked him in a stage whisper.

"Yeah," Rei answered back in equal tone, trying not to laugh as he did. "You might want to consider it, though. That guy is a *D4* User. Must be the real deal!"

Aria snorted at that, taking Taylor in again, who had glanced over his shoulder to look between the two of them in obviously confusion. Whatever he'd been expecting to happen, this was *definitely* not it.

Aria spoke to Rei again before he could say anything to save face, though.

"So... Are you not gonna help me?" She eyed him, still sitting casually with an arm draped across the back of the bench. "Seems like pretty bad form on date. A *first* date, as you keep reminding me."

Rei couldn't stop himself laughing out loud. "Aria, you could take the four of them on *without* Hippolyta called, and you know it."

She made a pouty face at that. "Well yeah, obviously. Still... That doesn't mean a little help wouldn't be *nice*..."

Rei rolled his eyes even as one of the boys—the black-haired one—suddenly tensed, the color seeming to drain from his face all at once. “Fiiiiine... I’ll take the two the left. You take the right.”

“Your left? Or mine?”

“Mine.” Rei stood up, giving an exaggerated stretch as he did. “Don’t hurt them, though, ok? I *really* don’t want to get brigged again.”

“Wait,” the black-haired boy spoke up, sounding very, *very* nervous. “‘Aria’? Aria *Laurent*? And ‘Rei’? As in—?” His eyes went wide in realization, looking between the pair of them. “Oh. Oh, shit...”

“What?” Jay Taylor demanded, sounding more irritated at being left out of whatever was happening around him than anything else. “*What*, Milo?!”

As ‘Milo’ opened his mouth to speak, though, Aria cut him off sweetly.

“Oh, no. No, no, no. It’s too late now, I think.”

And then she and Rei were both moving in synch.

Wham-wham-wham-WHAM!

Engaging his C4 Speed, Rei closed the short gap between him and the group in a fraction of a second. He saw the boys respond, saw them draw on their own specs, but it was too late. Speed was tied for Cognition as his best spec, and likely outranked any of theirs by a full tier. His Strength, too, was up to C0, having been only trailed by Endurance as his last spec to reach the Cs in the last week.

In short, it meant that he had enough agility and power behind his steps to not only take both of the left-most Pennview boys—Taylor and the tall, green-haired one—by the necks of their jackets before they could respond, but also twist them around and slam them up against the smart-glass wall at their backs with enough force that the projected advertisements there glitched and flickered for a moment before resuming their silent play-through.

“*OOMPFI!*” was the only sound either of them got out as the wind was knocked from their lungs even through their reactive shielding.

Rei didn't let them recover.

“Sounds like ‘Milo’ is the quickest of the four of you,” he said through a smile that bared all of his teeth. “Surrounding a pretty girl like a pack of dogs in heat. Are you freaking kidding me? You're lucky we *are*, in fact, on a date, or I'd drag your sorry asses into one of these bathrooms and waterboard every one of you in the toilet stalls.”

“Oh don't let me stop you, Rei,” Aria chimed in, still speaking in that sickly sweet voice.

Deciding he could afford to glance away from the still-recovering pair he had pinned, Rei stole a peek sideways just long enough for his grin to widen further. Aria—who's C6 CAD-Rank wasn't skewed in *any* way—had ‘Milo’ similarly held to the wall with one hand, while the large boy with orange-and-blue hair appeared to be struggling in vain to get off his back from where he'd been thrown to the floor.

He might have had an easier time of it had the girl not had one military-issue boot planted firmly on his chest, pinning him to the ground as firmly as might a steel piston.

Shaking his head in amusement, Rei looked back to his own charges.

“Hear that, friends? The lady says I can give you both a swirly and she'll still let me walk her home. What do you say?”

Despite the impact they'd just suffered, the two boys *were* Users, and so had recovered quickly from the blow that had been mostly absorbed by their shielding.

“W-what the *hell?*” Taylor managed to get out first, one hand coming up to grab Rei around the wrist while the other pressed at his chest in an attempt to help him catch his breath. “Y-you're a *User? You?*”

“Oh, yeah,” Rei said with a nod. He had to work not to wince as the Lancer squeezed his wrist in an attempt to get free—their difference in Strength wasn't so great as to make him invulnerable, it seemed—but his grip didn't budge even when Jay

wrenched at the arm. “You bet your ass I’m a User. Might have been smart to ask that before you decided to try and crash our party.”

“But... *how?*” Jay snarled. His breath was back, and he was half-staring, half-glaring at Rei. “How did *you* even get past the assignment exam?”

“J-Jay.” The one called “Milo” had started to recover as well, apparently. “St-stop talking. Now. *Please*. They’re—”

Before the boy could finish whatever he was about to say, though, there came a shout from the end of the hall.

“Alright, that’s *enough!*”

Together Rei and Aria looked around to see a pair of men in matching blue and black uniforms shove through a staring crowd to come storming towards them. Unbeknownst by any of them, the scene the Pennview boys—and then the two of them—had made had clearly not gone unnoticed by the other shoppers, because whereas the bathroom hallway had completely cleared out, a veritable throng of gawkers had formed at the edge of the main way, more than one pair of eyes bright with actively recording NOEDs.

Knowing he and Aria had nothing to worry about despite the commotion, Rei let go of Jay and the second boy at once, stepping smartly away from them as Aria did the same with her pair. The security officers—common citizens that they were—took several seconds to get to them, but to their credit immediately took up position between them and the four now gathering themselves against the wall.

“You and you,” the closest of the officers—a short, older man dark red eyes whose long hair was combed behind his ears under his blue cap—pointing at Rei and Aria as light flashed across his retinas while he met their gazes. “Reidon Ward and Aria Laurent. Step away, or I’ll be forced to detain you.”

They did as instructed, backing up a further few steps until they were even with the bench and their things again. Rei might have imagined it, but he thought he saw the

other officer—a younger man with cropped maroon hair under his cap—stiffen and glance around at them from where he was addressing the Pennview boys.

Before he could guess as to what *that* was about, though, the older officer was snarling in their faces.

“You’d best explain yourselves, cadets, and you’d best explain yourselves *fast*. Galens students calling specs on ordinary citizens. You better have a *damn* good reason for your behavior, or you’re about to be in a world of hurt with your superior officers after I have a word with them.”

At this, Rei and Aria exchanged a glance.

“Uh... Sir...” Aria spoke up first, pointing past the man to the foursome now being questioned by the other officer. “They’re not ‘ordinary citizens’. They’re Users... Like us...”

The older man blinked at her for a second. Then he looked over his shoulder, then around again to fix Rei with a look this time, as though seeking confirmation.

“It’s true, sir,” Rei assured him at once. “Ask your partner. *They* came at *us*. We just dealt with it before anything could get started.”

Again there was a second of silence.

Then the older man half-turned to bark at the second officer.

“Garret! These two say your lot are Users. That true?”

“Y-yeah!” the one called “Garret” answered unsteadily, not meeting Rei or Arias eyes for some reason. “Pennview Military Academy, they say.”

“Huh,” the older officer grunted in answer to this. “Fancy that.” When he looked back around at Rei and Aria, he appeared distinctly less ruffled. “Well that changes things. *And* saves me a hell of a lot of paperwork. You say they came at you?” As the pair of them nodded together, he lifted a hand to one breast pocket to pull out a small, palm-sized pad and stylus. “Let’s hear it, then. What happened?”

Aria let Rei lead this time, having missed most of the confrontation. Only when he got to the part where the four boys had penned her in did she take over, and the officer's grunt of irritation at her description of the surrounding seemed like a good sign to Rei. Indeed, as soon as they were done with the quick recounting the man didn't even bother checking with his partner whether or not the story was true, opting instead to lift his gaze to the top of the opposite side of the hall, where the wall met the tiled ceiling. As his NOED went live again, Rei and Aria didn't have to look around to know what he was doing.

In a place like Easthold, after all, there were probably more security cameras spread through the trio of skyscrapers than any of them ever had a prayer of counting.

"Idiots," the officer muttered finally, closing his frame once he'd skimmed what could only have been the footage of the incident. "Officer Garret and I will review this in detail later, but I don't foresee any trouble for you. Wish you hadn't almost broken one of our walls, but seems like a legitimate preemptive defense to me, given the situation."

Rei and Aria nodded in thanks at once. "Does that mean we're free to go, sir?" Rei asked as the officer replaced the pad in his pocket. "We were planning to catch a flyer back to school soon anyways..."

"Unless you've got anything to add to your statement, yeah." The man waved towards the end of the hall, where some of the crowd has started to disperse now that the excitement was obviously over. "Then again, I ain't gonna stop you listening in as I give a call to *that lot's* school administration, if you want." He jerked his head over his shoulder to indicate Taylor and the others.

Rei almost chuckled, about to answer that he would *love* to bear witness *that* horrifying moment in the boys' lives, but Aria cut him off with a hand on his arm, obviously seeing his response coming.

“No, thank you, officer. We’ll head out as soon as we gather our things. I imagine—” she gave Rei a pointed look at this “—that Galens will hear about this one way or the other, and we shouldn’t press our luck. Isn’t that right, *Rei?*”

Disappointed but seeing her point, Rei hold back a sigh and nodded. With a shrug the officer turned away from the pair of them, and they could virtually *see* his hackles rising again as he stormed towards the Pennview boys, who looked suddenly very sheepish.

Exchanging nothing more than a glance, Rei and Aria turned and gathered their things quickly, wrapping up their bags before starting for the main hall again. They hadn’t made it more than a half-dozen steps, though, when they were stopped short.

“H-Hold on, if you please!”

With a traded frown they turned again, this time finding the second officer—Garret—jogging after them. The older of the two well into tearing Jay Taylor and his friends a new one, the man seemed to have stolen a moment for himself.

And plucked up some courage judging by the fact that he was managing to look Rei and Aria in the face now, if with some difficulty.

What’s this about...? Rei couldn’t help but wonder silently.

Aria, fortunately, was more tactful.

“Can we help you, officer?” she asked with a smile that might have lit up the sunless side of a cold moon.

“Err...” coming to a stop before the pair, the younger man again seemed to have some trouble finding his tongue, his eyes flicking between them. Strangely, they lingered more on Rei even as he addressed Aria. “You’re... You’re Aria Laurent, right?”

“I... am...?” Aria answered cautiously, like she was unsure of how she was supposed to answer this inquiry. “Your partner already got our statements, though, so—”

“Oh, no!” Garret flushed suddenly. “No statements! Nothing like that! It’s just...” He hesitated, then reached up and pulled his own small pad from the breast pocket of his uniform. “Could you... Would you mind signing this for me? Well, for my daughter, actually. She’s eight, and you’re her absolute *favorite* right now.”

Aria stared at him, mouth dropping open slightly. She stood dumbstruck for so long, in fact, that Rei ended up having the elbow her in the side to bring her back with a jump.

“Oh!” she almost squeaked, half-scrambling to put her bags down. “*Oh!* Sure! Sorry! I... uh... I didn’t expect that...”

As she accepted the officer’s pad with both hands, he seemed finally to relax. “Really? Thank you so much! You have no idea how excited she’s going to be! We’ve been watching your fight against that Mauler kid Logan Grant on repeat for weeks now, along with most of your others.”

“*Really?*” Aria sounded genuinely bewildered—though not displeased—at the prospect of such an enthusiastic fan, no matter what their age might be. “Well tell her I said I hope she keeps watching!”

“I doubt I’ll need to,” Garret said with a rushed laugh, watching Aria finish a quick signature with the stylus and accepting the pad as she handed it back. “She’s glued to every fight they stream these days, especially among the Astra System cadets.”

“Sounds like me, when I was her age,” Rei said with a chuckle as Aria bent to pick up her bags again. “Careful there. You might have a future User on your hands.”

Garret, though, stiffened a little as Rei addressed him, looking suddenly nervous again.

“Y-yeah...” Oddly enough, he hadn’t put his pad away. “Um... Speaking of...”

And then, with another pause, he was thrusting the tablet at Rei.

Rei blinked at the smart glass, then up at the officer, unsure of himself. After a second or two, though, it was Aria’s turn to but an elbow in his ribs.

“Oh!” Rei put down his own bags to accept the pad with a grin. “Mine, too?”

“If you don’t mind...” Garret mumbled hopefully. Unlike with Aria, Rei’s agreement didn’t seem to have steeled his nerves. “I would be very grateful...”

“Sure thing!” It felt strange, taking up the unfamiliar stylus to sign his name on a stranger’s pad, but not unpleasant. “I’m surprised your daughter knows who I am, though. Aria’s the rockstar of the first year class, but I’m not much of anybody.”

Beside him Aria opened her mouth to say something very likely to the contrary, but Garret—funny enough—beat her to it.

“Not true,” the officer said, sounding suddenly like he were trying to suppress his elation. “You’re Reidon Ward, right? The ‘Iron Prince’ of Galens?” When Rei nodded, feeling himself flush a little at the nickname, the man grinned. “Thought so. Your signature’s not for my kid.” He tucked the pad away, looking distinctly pleased with the day’s events. “It’s for *me*.”

And then he spun on his heel and hurried back towards the other officer and the Pennview foursome, leaving Rei struggling to decide if he was smiling harder because of the pleasant surprise of meeting a fan—his *first* fan—or at the dumbfounded look on Jay Taylor’s face.

CHAPTER 2

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACEHOLDER

10 years would be gone in a flash.

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

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

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

Meaning what?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Yes.

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

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

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

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

Yes.

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

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

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

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

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

Woosh! Whoom! Woosh!

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

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

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

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

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

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

“AAH!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WHAM!

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

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

Skeletal muscle damage registered.

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

Applying appropriate physiological restrictions.

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

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

Jack Benaly, though, was predictably close behind.

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

“Rei! Behind you!”

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

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

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

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

“Type Shift: Brawler Mode!”

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

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

Shing!

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

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

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

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

Wham!

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

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

Wait... green and white?

CRUNCH!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Aria! Cashe! How are things looking?”

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

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

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

“Any casualties?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Rei!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Nice!” came a shout from beneath them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Taking a breath, he steeled himself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Not today, though.

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

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

Rei hesitated.

"... No," he admitted after a second.

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

Rei sighed. "Sure. Most of the time. But this—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He could practically *feel* Viv roll her eyes.

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

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

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

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

“What are you two whispering about?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ward!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 3

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACEHOLDER

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The worst of them, though...

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

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

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

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

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

“Ward!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He, on the other hand...

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

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

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

His...

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

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

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

At least for the moment.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Hey.”

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

No. Not stared, he realized.

Glared.

CRASH!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sadness.

“Logan... You can't keep doing this.”

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

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

Logan swallowed.

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

“You know better than that.”

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

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

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

"What are you talking ab—?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Viv, at last, looked up at him.

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

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

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

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

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

Yes.

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

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

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

"Because he reminds of him."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fury... and grief.

“I know...” he said quietly.

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

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

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

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

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

“Promise?”

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

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

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

Viv smiled at him, at that, sad again.

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

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

CHAPTER 4

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACEHOLDER

Rei—fortunate as he was to have possessed a mind as curious as his body had been frail growing up—understood why Astra-3 had a winter. Every terraformed planet in the ISC had a winter, though they all varied broadly in length and intensity, depending on various factors. There was an element of nostalgia to it, of course, an element of the desires of the first colonizers to carry the seasons of “home” into their new lives, their new worlds. More practically, however, the allowance of variation in climate not only required less battling by technology against the forces of planetary rotation and the natural orbits of every star system, but also provided for a much more varied—and therefore sturdier—range of ecosystems that balanced any given atmosphere. For these reasons and more, winter—just like spring, summer, and fall—was an important part of not only the terraforming process, but the long-term survivability of a planet as a whole.

Of course, that didn’t mean that Rei had to *like* it.

“Son of a *bitch!*” Rei half-grumbled, half-shouted as he took hold of his hood in both hands, pulling it more securely in place as the roar of a frigid wind that hadn’t been present earlier that morning threatened—for the third time—to rip it right off his head. Worse, it was still snowing, the subtle drift of the soft shower that had been pretty on the light-lit paths before training having turned into a full-blown blizzard, pelting at his exposed face if he didn’t keep it bowed. Had he been in uniform, it would have been ten times worse, and not for the first time Rei found himself cursing the CAD scientists who hadn’t bothered figuring out yet how to turn reactive shielding into a weather resistant barrier yet.

With nothing much to be done about it, sadly, Rei plowed on, braving a full jug through the elements north-by-west along the snow-strewn paths that wound their way through the Institute buildings. He passed several of the structures he and the others had sat for class in during the past semester, and was pretty sure he'd made out the outline of the hospital at one point through the storm, but Rei didn't slow down to admire anything as he moved. The ground was slick in places, the service drones having apparently not gotten to this part of the grounds yet, and if he didn't watch his footing he was pretty sure he would be presenting himself to the Administration building banged up and wet from slipping and falling.

If he'd been honest with himself, though, Rei would have admitted he didn't mind that part of his traitorous trek, in the moment.

Keeping an eye out for ice and slush helped him from dwelling on where he was headed, not to mention *why* he was headed there...

After a minute more of cursing the storm—and himself for not having thought to don his boots that morning at the very least—the grand structure of the Administration came into view, at last Rei let himself bring his head up to take it in. Situated largely in the northwest corner of the grounds, the structure was one he'd seen before while doing laps of the campus for Endurance training, but otherwise hadn't had much chance to observe. It was a little out of the way, somewhat separate from the Institute's other buildings, this accentuated by the fact that a wide, open square of flat stone—now covered in tumbling white—led up to the wide line of entrance doors.

It did nothing to help the imposing presence of the place—all artfully-angled steel and jutting edges, like stone ledges growing outward with each of the 10-plus stories—as it loomed out of the blizzard.

Crossing the courtyard in a dozen quick strides that left damp footprints in the shallow snow, Rei didn't risk losing his nerve by pausing outside the closest of the transparent doors. As they slid open for him the moment he crossed under the slanted

overhang that shielded the entrance, he stamped he sneakers clean on the carpeted threshold only briefly before stepping inside, only then pulling his frost-crusting hood off his head to look around. He was a little surprised to find himself in a large, brightly-lit lobby of white marble and polished wood, the open space above his head extending what had to have been 2 whole stories upwards. Lining the walls of the top 20 feet of this space, massive smart-glass panels flashed with color and light, some displaying the rotating shape of the school's red griffin, others the familiar clips and stats of past alumni, the recordings identical to those one could find playing in the underworks of the Arena, just on a much larger scale. What was more, the space was *busy*, with more than a score of officers and what had to have been civilian staff—judging by their lack of regulars—crossing this way and that across the polished floor as they conversed or perused wide tablets in both hands. Barely anyone gave Rei so much as a glance as they passed by, though he felt the gazes of those that *did* always linger a long moment on him before looking away again.

It didn't matter. Rei was used to funny looks, even on campus. At a healthy 5' 7", he was more than 2 inches taller now than he'd been before Shido had been assigned to him at the end of the previous school year, when he and Viv had still be students and Grandcrest Preparatory Academy in Sector 3. Despite this fact, though, he was still the shortest User on campus—and likely well beyond—by a good bit, making him instantly recognizable even if his white hair hadn't made him stand out in a world of engineered color. If the majority of these staff—very few of them sporting CADs, even among the officers—were administrative workers, it stood to reason this was probably the first time most had set eyes on him in person.

Get your staring in, yeah, yeah, Rei thought to himself, uncaring as he looked around. More importantly in the moment, Michael Bretz had only told him to report to Administration, not what to do after he *got* there. Which meant...

Spotting a kiosk at the far end of the lobby, Rei made a line for it at once, eyeing the trio of officers standing behind it, apparently manning the building entrance.

If this place is this busy on breaks, I'd hate to see what it looks like during the year, he thought, watching even as one of the attendants looked to take a call on their NOED briefly, nodding at once and hurrying off with a word to the other two.

“Reidon Ward?”

Rei was almost in the exact middle of the atrium when the voice brought him up short. Intending as he had been to ask for directions—or maybe even the purpose of his summonings—at the kiosk, he was surprised when he looked around to find a slender woman with blonde hair approaching him with a purpose from one corner of the chamber, high heels *clicking* lightly over the stone as she walked. She wore a skirted business suit—marking her as a civilian even despite the red-on-white armband above her left elbow—but the way several of the other people quickly made to move around her as she neared told Rei at once that she was someone important, at least within the confines of this building.

“Yes, ma’am,” Rei answered after a brief pause of confusion, deciding on the safe bet of saluting the woman sharply before she was within 10 feet of him.

The smile that earned him told him it had either been the right choice, or she’d found it funny.

“Manners. I like that.” Coming to stand before him, the woman brought up her pad with one hand even as she briefly pointed at his face with the other, the bright red of her painted nails flashing in the atrium’s light. “Eyes up. You’re something of a standout, but I’m not about to get chewed out for bringing the wrong cadet up.”

Holding back a frown of curiosity at these words, Rei met the woman’s eyes dutifully as her neuro-optic flared. When the scan was complete, she pulled the data up her the smart glass-tablet to review, apparently preferring not to keeping it in-frame.

“No surprises, you *are* indeed Reidon Ward,” she said with a touch of amused sarcasm. “You got here quick. We only put the call out for you ten minutes ago.”

“First years just finished morning team-training, ma’am.” Rei hadn’t yet brought his hand down from the salute, keeping his gaze over the woman’s shoulder now that he wasn’t obligated to look her in the eye. “Second Lieutenant Bretz knew where I was.”

“At ease, soldier,” she said with a laugh. “I’ll let the ‘ma’am’ stuff go, but in case it wasn’t obviously, I’m *not* rank and file.”

Rei relaxed, though he assumed the *actual* “At ease” position out of habit, earning him another chuckle.

“You can lead a horse to water, I guess,” the woman muttered before holding out a hand. “I’m Maddison Kent. I’m here to escort you up, if you’ll follow me.”

“Oh!” Rei said in realization even as he automatically shook, then started to follow the woman—Kent—when she promptly turned and made for the same corner of the chamber she’d appeared from. “I know who you are! Aria’s told me about you.”

That drew a smile from Kent, looking back over her shoulder at him as she moved. “Is that so? Good. I would have felt bad being the only one in the know. I heard you two had *quiet* the first date over the weekend...”

“Ah... Uh...” Rei felt his ears grow hot, recalling the incident with Jay Taylor again. “Yeah... that was... definitely something.”

The woman laughed, looking forward again as she brought him around a well-disguised wall behind the kiosk where a smaller open space led to a set of stairs standing beside of bank of elevators.

“Don’t worry, it was mostly good things,” Kent teased as she opted for the elevators, swiping up on a small pane of smart-glass between the nearest pair to summon them a car. “Though she *did* mention some disappointment about a... pink hat?”

Rei finally cracked a smile at that, deciding it was alright to relax a little in front of the woman.

“Oh, yeah. *That*. I thought she wasn’t going to let me leave the store without trying it on. *Not* my color, regrettably.”

Kent snorted, giving a nod of understanding as the quiet sound of the car reached them just before the doors opened silently. “Good for you.” She stepped in and to the side, immediately swiping at the inside panel. “I’m glad she’s having fun, but don’t spoil her *too* much, you hear?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Rei answered, following promptly and claiming the back of the small compartment. “How did you meet Aria, though, if you don’t mind me as—?”

The words, however, caught in his throat just as the doors shut behind him, closing him in. It had just struck him, as he’d asked the question.

The question he already knew the answer to.

Yes... Yes. He *did* know Maddison Kent. “Maddie”, Aria always called her. “Maddie”, the one person on campus she teased that she liked more than him. “Maddie” who she’d encountered through Aria’s uncle, as the man’s chief assistant.

Aria’s uncle, who was none other than...

“Well... shit...” Rei muttered, feeling the car start to rise beneath them, zipping them upwards at breakneck speed. He didn’t even have time to take in the Galens grounds in storm behind him as the elevator brought them up into the open again, riding up the side of the building, hopping in and out of the uneven, jutting floors. He didn’t have time to steel himself, didn’t have time to get over his alarm before the car was slowing again, having very clearly taken them to the very top floor.

What he *did* have time to do, on the other hand, was taken in the slight smile Maddison Kent had offered him as she’d seen him make the realization.

“Colonel Guest is expecting you,” she said as the doors opened again, motioning him through first. “Let’s not keep him waiting.”

“Yeah... Let’s not...” was all Rei managed to get out in answer, feeling some of the blood drain from his face as he stepped out in a quiet hall accented with red carpet and black wallpaper, the windows on one side only supplementing the circular lights above with a dim grey illumination.

Colonel Guest. Colonel *Rama* Guest.

Apparently, Rei was there to meet with the commanding officer the *entirety* of the Galens Institute...

Not sure whether to feel elated or terrified—was it possible to feel both in tandem?—Rei waited for Kent to take the lead again. The woman walked briskly for a civilian, and Rei’s anxiety grew as he followed in silence now. One turn, then another, until they came to a plain wooden door marked simply with the words “Commanding Officer” on a black metal plate. Opening it, Kent led Rei into a small waiting room with a few angular chairs set against the walls, offset by the wide, tidy desk in the far corner upon which rested a nameplate unsurprisingly engraved with the woman’s name on it. Not bothering to pause, Kent led him straight through and left down another, smaller hall that ended with a single door in the right wall behind which Rei could make out what he thought were several voices.

“Chin up,” the woman said quietly, giving Rei another, kinder smile this time as she put a hand on the doorknob. “Keep your head on straight, and don’t be afraid to lean into those manners you’ve already showed off. Got it?”

“Got it,” Rei whispered back with a nod of thanks, swallowing down the stone in his throat.

After pausing to give him one final moment to compose himself, Kent opened the door with a *click*, stepping right in.

“Cadet Reidon Ward is here to see you, Colonel,” she announced clearly, moving aside to let Rei enter behind her, working as hard as he could not to walk like he was made of wood.

The room they entered was a pristine space, befitting the man of highest rank in the entirety of the school. Longer than it was wide, the two walls opposite the corner door Kent closed behind Rei were comprised of full floor-to-ceiling windows accented by red curtains, while those on either side of him were solid bookshelves of a dark timber displaying a variety of awards, trophies, and oddities. At the far end of the room, a lacquered desk made of the same wood dominated the last fifth of the space, with a pair of long, burgundy couches taking up the rest of the floor.

It was a gorgeous study, to be sure, but Rei was more interested in the trio of figures scattered about the space, clearly having been waiting for them, all three heads turning to the door the moment Kent had made the announcement of their arrival.

The first—and most obvious presence—was Colonel Rama guest himself. A powerfully-built man with brown skin and a greying beard that matched the long ponytail of hair protruding behind the nape of his neck, the commanding officer of the Galens Institute was seated on the edge of his desk, arms crossed over his broad chest. His uniform was prim and proper—lacking only the tall cap that sat on the wood next to him—and despite the easy air he was cutting, Rei could sense at once that the man was tense.

Given the Colonel was the only other S-Ranked User in the school other than Valera Dent—a Pawn-Class Lancer, to be precise—Rei *immediately* felt the hairs of his arms stand on end under his jacket.

Taking in the other two figures in the room, then, he thought he could understand a bit of what it was that had put Guest on edge.

The first of the pair he noticed was simultaneously the least interesting, and yet most alarming. Dressed in black from head to toe, the only thing Rei could venture a guess at was they were probably male, and even that only judging by the figure's outline under their strange apparel. If the black boots, pants, and synthetic jacket—which Rei would have bet anything hid skin-tight carbonized-steel body armor that worked in

pinch if one's Device wasn't called—weren't enough to alarm, the tight, oblong helm of clean black glass definitely did the trick, the curved faceplate completely obscuring the figure's features even though it was turned precisely in his direction. There, along one side of the glass, the only splash of color on the entirety of the imposing uniform could be made out, a branded logo that Rei thought spelled out "Kamiya" in a holo-displayed of neon green.

The nature of the single word—whose phonetic origins Rei didn't miss—immediately had him wound more tightly than he'd thought possible.

The last of the three figures, seated easily upon the furthest couch and so utterly different from the guard—for what else could the man in all black have been—only set off further alarm bells.

The woman was *strikingly* beautiful, and seemed to understand how to surgically apply that fact to advantage. Her attire was hardly immodest, but the white skirt rode just above the one knee she had crossed over the other, and her matching shirt cut an artful angle across her chest. The skin there teased at bare shoulders, but she'd covered up with a stylish, sea-green jacket complimented with a pair of black half-gloves, which worked well with her dark choice of necklace, high-heeled shoes, and earrings that glimmered under a healthy length of straight black hair tied up in a tight knot behind her head. Her eyes offered the only other contrast, a vibrant, brilliant blue that glimmered between narrow, slanted lids.

Looking into them, Rei immediately felt—despite the pleasant smile playing across the woman's lips that actually seemed quite genuine—that the bodyguard, who was likely a high-Ranked User privately hired out of retirement after a run of the SCT circuits, was the *less* dangerous of the pair of them.

And that *despite* the fact that the woman wasn't wearing a CAD...

"Cadet Ward. Thank you for coming so quickly."

The Colonel's gruff addressal brought Rei back to himself in a blur, and it was only with a touch of unsteadiness that he snapped up once more into a salute.

"Yes, sir!" he answered at once, looking over the commanding officer's head at the storm still raging beyond the window behind the man's desk. "If I may, I feel I have to apologize for my attire, sir! If I'd known I would be called to—"

Guest, though, cut him off with a raised hand from under his crossed elbow even as Rei thought he could make out Maddison Kent chuckling quietly behind him.

"Your attire is fine, Cadet. I was the one who granted the Sectional qualifiers leave to go plain-clothed for the duration of the break, so none of us expected anything else. If you would, though—" the broad man dipped his chin at the second, unoccupied, couch before him, across from the strange woman and the guard hovering a step behind her, neither of whom had ever looked away from Rei "—have a seat."

Rei, a little less stiffly after the Colonel's gracious tone, did as he was told, forcing himself to sit in the center of the wide couch despite an urge to curl up in the corner of it, as far from the other three as he could. In that room, even *Kent* held a presence that had Rei on edge, and he realized it felt not unlike being watched by four Valera Dent's all at once.

Once he was comfortable, Rei looked around expectantly, trying to keep his eyes on the Colonel, though failing as he found himself unable to stop from glancing across to the other couch more than once.

"Cadet," Guest started after a pause as he seemed to choose his words carefully, "I imagine you're a bit at a loss as to what you're doing here, so I'll cut to it. An... offer has been presented to me. Well... *you*, more directly, but given the atypical nature of it, I feel the need to be a bit more involved than I would be usually with this sort of thing."

'This sort of thing'? Rei repeated silently to himself, far from understanding.

"This—" the Colonel fortunately didn't keep him hanging as he indicated to the stunning woman who was still smiling at Rei brilliantly "—is Ueno Jasper."

“Ueno is my family name,” the woman interrupted briefly, her voice a little huskier than Rei had anticipated given her appearance, the words tinged with the faintest hint of an accent he wasn’t surprised to recognize. “Call me Jasper, please.”

“Jasper—” the Colonel continued even as Rei nodded in acknowledgment to the woman “—is here as a representative of her employer, the Kamiya Corporation. Have you heard of them?”

“No, sir...” Rei answered tentatively, frowning between Guest and the woman. “Should I have...?”

“Honestly, no.” Jasper laughed as she answered, this time. “The Kamiya Corp isn’t a conglomerate I expect most anyone outside of the Sol System would be very familiar with. How about this, though—” her smile really *was* striking, making it hard for Rei to look away “—have you heard of Yen Pressure? Or Seven Oceans?”

“Uh... Y-yes, ma’am.” Rei couldn’t help but trip over his response. *Had she just said ‘the Sol System’?! “The two biggest manufacturers of hole drives in the ISC, I think?”*

“Correct. What about VIZIA? And One Peace Visuals?”

“NOED makers. Again, the biggest in the Collective.” Rei looked around at the Colonel again. “I’m sorry, sir... *What* does this have to do with me, exactly?”

“Kamiya is a nano-tech fabricator and distributor, Cadet,” Guest answered with a bit of a grimace, as though he was aware that his answer was hardly satisfactory. “They provide parts not only to every one of the companies Jasper has just listed off, but directly to the ISCM.”

“And several thousand other significant entities,” Jasper herself confirmed with a nod. “Chances are you have Kamiya tech in your head right now, Reidon.” Rei didn’t miss her casual address of him as she indicated at her temple with a finger, where her neuro-optic would be implanted. “Not to mention—” the woman’s gaze drifted down to where Rei’s hands were in his lap. “—the Kamiya Corp also had a hand in the development of Combat Assistance Technology, in its infancy stages.”

That had Rei's eyes going wide, but he frowned, too. CAD tech? Really? If that was the case, he was *sure* he would have heard the name "Kamiya" before. Even before a semester's worth of classes under John Markus, the head of the Device Evolution Department, Rei—and Viv, too, to lesser an extent—had *poured* over the history of User and SCT development.

After a moment racking his brain and failing to recall the company ever being mentioned in any old or new text he was aware of on the subject, Rei caved to the itch of doubt.

"Pardon me, ma'am, but I'm... uh... *atypically* well-acquainted with the history of Device tech development, even for a Cadet. I'm fairly confident I would recall the name 'Kamiya' if it had been a significant part of the process, even early on."

If it was possible, Jasper only smiled wider at that.

"Yes... I *was* made to understand that you were a bit of a special case when it comes to Users, even among the renowned quality of the Galens Institute students. Happy to here my information was accurate." Her eyes seemed to bore into him for a moment before she continued. "The Kamiya Corp is not at liberty to disclose *how* it was involved with CAD development, only that it *was*. Fortunately, Colonel Guest here has been given leave to confirm this for us." She waved to Guest in indication.

Given leave? Rei thought privately again, looking to the Colonel curiously. If that was true, then that meant this woman—or her employer, at least—had connections very, *very* high up in the military. Maybe even Central Command...

"It's true, Cadet," Guest confirmed with a grunt. "But that *is* all I am at liberty to say. Similarly, *you* are barred from disclosing that information to anyone outside this room. And I do mean *anyone*." He stared at Rei pointedly. "Am I making myself clear, *Ward?*"

The way the man said his name had Rei very abruptly wanting nothing more than for Shido to have the ability to warp him anywhere but there, sitting on that couch, in

that room. Abruptly, he recalled that he not *only* was in the presence of the Institute's highest ranked officer, but also the knowingly-dotting uncle of the girl he had just had his first date with.

"Yes, sir," he finally got out, too momentarily terrified to hear the squeak in his own voice.

Fortunately, though, the Colonel clearly had more important things in mind than pursuing Rei's relationship with Aria, for the moment.

"Good." The man said with a poignant finality. "Then to heart of the matter, if that's all right?" He glanced at Jasper, waiting for the woman to nod curtly before continuing. "All of this beating around the bush isn't without reason. I—or the Galens Institute, rather—wanted you to have a good sense of who it was you might be getting in bed with, Cadet. The Kamiya Corporation is a *highly* respected company within the ISC, and powerful. Their reach is extensive, as is their influence."

"Oh, you flatter, Colonel!" Jasper said with a titter that somehow managed to be both diplomatic and flirty at the same time.

Rei, though, could only blink at his superior officer. In the corner of his vision he thought he saw Kent's face go still from where she had moved to stand along the wall perpendicular to the colonel, and he was the glad he wasn't the only one who seemed to have been kept out of the loop.

'Get in bed with', Guest had said? Rei knew what that implied, of course, knew what that meant, but there was no way. No way.

"I-I'm sorry, sir," he started uncertainly after a second of disbelief. "I don't really follow..."

Once again, though, it was Jasper who answered him.

"Reidon, the Kamiya Corporation would like to offer you access to their resources and funding. They would like to extend to you their influence and capabilities, and provide you an income to supplement your military stipend. In other words—" her

smile was as dazzling as it was imposing “—if you’re amenable, the Kamiya Corp would like to sponsor your career as a User.”

CHAPTER 5

For a long, *long* time—longer than might otherwise have been prudent in the presence of a superior officer—Rei stared, dumbstruck, at Ueno Jasper. Had he been able to see himself he might have facepalmed at the character he cut, mouth slack and eyes wide.

Then again... it was pretty damn understandable.

His shock, though, was further overpowered by his disbelief at what he'd just heard, and the incomprehension was enough to find his words eventually.

“I’m sorry... *What?!*”

He hadn’t meant to raise his voice, but his astonishment was just that great. A sponsorship? *Him?* A *first year* Cadet?! And by a company that clearly had enough of a stake in the Intersystem Collective to be able to pull strings in the highest echelons of the military?!

No. No way.

“Abrupt, I know,” Jasper answered his incredulity with a laugh, sitting up as she held one hand out and back. “I *did* tell them you might find that a little hard to believe.” In a flash a small pad appeared in the woman’s waiting grasp, handed off by the bodyguard who had stepped forward so quickly Rei suspected the man’s Speed was in the As, if not higher. Just as swiftly, however, the figure backed off again to resume his rigid stance closer to the wall while Jasper uncrossed her legs to lean forward.

“I, Reidon, am what you call a ‘fixer,’” she explained as she tapped the screen, blue light reflecting suddenly in her eyes as the pad came to life. “Basically: I’m a go-between for powerful people and the actions they want to see accomplished.”

Rei had guessed as much—from the start the woman had clearly been careful not to say “we” when referring to Kamiya—but that did nothing to alleviate his disbelief.

“That—” Jasper continued, apparently finding what she was looking for with nothing but a few quick swipes and giving the screen a quick once over “—makes me

perfect for a situation like this. An *unprecedented* situation like this, to be exact.” Once she was satisfied, she flipped the pad around and offered it to Rei to take. “A situation in need of a more delicate hand than the massive machine of corporate bureaucracy.”

More automatically than anything, Rei accepted the tablet, finding himself looking at a wall of text. As though in a dream he glanced over the initial clause headlines and bolded details of the contract, even reaching up to scroll further along the document to read. 15 seconds wasn’t nearly enough to find the bottom of the text skimming, but it *was* enough to solidify one absolute fact.

“You’re serious,” Rei muttered, still tracing along the dense lines of blue. “You’re *actually* serious.”

“Oh, honey. We’re *dead* serious,” came the laughing answer.

No. No way.

And yet there, slipping away upward before his very eyes, was the indisputable evidence.

It made no sense to Rei. How was this possible? Third years was one thing, and he *had* heard of some second years getting approached for sponsorship by companies and powerful families in the past. Christopher Lennon had been hounded with offers after ranking in the top 100 at the Intersystem SCTs the previous summer, apparently. But even those were few and far between, with only a handful passed out each season to the absolute *best* of the rising stars of the collegiate tournaments.

And Rei had *never*, not once in his life, heard of a *first year* getting extended an offer, much less one who hadn’t competed at any level higher than his own school’s Intra-Schools.

It made no sense.

In the pro circuits, sponsorships were hardly a rare thing. Almost every professional SCT combatant had some kind of backing, contributed by everyone from smaller businesses looking to get their name out at their local Sectionals all the way up

to the quadrillion-credit brands that backed the King- and Queen-Class fighters who competed for the ISC Championship title every year. There were even individual families in possession of enough private wealth to try—and not infrequently succeed—at establishing their legacy by sponsoring the User with the right future.

The collegiate level, though, was a completely different story.

For one thing, there was a risk attached to sponsorships. If something happened to a User's reputation—if they fell out of favor, if they were caught in a scandal, if they were arrested or even just dishonorably discharged from the military for some reason—the influence of the SCTs was such that any name associated with said User was often tarnished as well. Backing teenagers—even *ISCM-trained* teenagers—could only redoubled that risk. What was more, sponsorships were expensive, with even minimally-competitive offers on a Sectional scale providing a yearly stipend multiples of times greater than a User's typical military salary, not to mention other benefits.

And—if Rei wasn't wrong—the contract before him would have been competitive at *much* higher than a Sectional scale...

One million credits a year?! Rei thought his head might have exploded at that number alone, around 40 times higher than his paltry cadet stipend. MILLION?!

It made no sense. It just made no sense.

Except, of course, for one, single fact...

Ab.

All at once Rei felt his shock fade as the thought, the realization, took hold of him. He closed his mouth and forced himself to focus.

“Do you mind if I take a moment to review this, ma'am?” he asked, looking up at Jasper briefly.

The woman's bright answer was prompt even as she kept smiling. “Of course! Take all the time you need. It's not like we don't expect you to have questions.”

Nodding his thanks, Rei looked to the colonel for approval next, receiving an immediate—and pointed—dip of the officer’s head.

Be. Careful, Rei thought he could read in the gesture, doubly sure as Guest met his eyes intently.

Rei gave his own, smaller nod, looking back to the pad as Jasper promptly engaged Maddison Kent in enthusiastic small talk. He had every intention of being careful, though not in actually reading the contract. Rather, what Rei had needed was time.

Time to think.

It *did* make sense, at least to an extent. It was well known that sponsoring parties—especially the larger ones—often had whole *teams* of people dedicating to scouting the SCTs of every system, professional and collegiate both. If anyone had been bothering to watch the Galen’s first years during the Intra-School, if anyone had been paying attention, it made *perfect* sense, in fact. So much so that Rei could have kicked himself for not preparing for this exact eventuality. Even if Shido’s Growth spec wasn’t public knowledge with the ISCM doing everything it could—short of locking him away far from the light of day—to keep the exact circumstances of his CAD a secret, the truth would have started to leak out, by now. If the whispers on the forums—the same ones who had given Rei the unofficial name of “Iron Prince”—didn’t put it together, doubtless the sharp eyes or virtual intelligence networks of those larger parties looking for the next great User to back would have. Kamiya, if anything, was just ahead of the game.

Still... Weren’t they just a little *too* ahead...?

Rei’s eyes narrowed as he stared at the tablet in his hands, thumbing the text upward every couple of seconds in a careful imitation of reading. All the while, he thought, wishing cadets learned partial-calls earlier than their second year.

His neuroline would have been helpful, in that moment.

Kamiya... A company he'd never heard of. That bothered him. Not because he thought he *should* have, per se, but rather because of the information the fact that he *didn't* know of them presented him with all on its own. The corporation had means and ability—that much was clear—and Jasper and the colonel had given good reason why he wouldn't have heard of them. They provided tech to other entities, rather than direct sales. They clearly weren't afraid of taking action behind the scenes. They were far away, situated in the Sol System.

Sol... The system with a condensed wealth as substantial as any pair of the other six systems combined, and home to thousands of companies Rei *had* heard of...

It bothered him. And the longer he sat there, the more the shock-turned-realization morphed once again into something else.

Suspicion.

10 minutes of rolling every angle and question he could think of over in his head, Rei had come to the very conclusion his gut had been screaming from the moment Jasper Ueno had handed him the contract. That it was too soon. Way too soon. Even for his and Shido's circumstances, it was *way* too soon.

And Kamiya was indeed too far ahead of the game.

Which probably meant...

"I do have a question, ma'am." Rei spoke at last even as he continued to pretend to read the contract, pleased to find that his voice had regained its steadiness.

Jasper—who had somehow managed to get both Guest and Kent involved in a perfectly-pleasant discussion about the weather—looked around at him with interest again. "Really? Just one?"

"For now."

The woman laughed lightly at this. "Alright. Let's hear it."

"Why me?" Rei still hadn't looked up, continuing to thumb the screen slowly upward before him. "I'm curious as to why a group like the Kamiya Corporation would

be so interested in me? I'm a first year, and haven't even had my first Sectionals tournament yet. Even if I had, that's the extent I'll be fighting this season. I won't even be allowed to *qualify* for Globals until my second year, and we all here know that very few cadets manage that, much less get to go further."

Even without looking at her, he could see the woman's smile turn wry.

"Reidon, please. I did you the courtesy of acknowledging the intelligence both my research *and* my observation tell me you possess. I would appreciate it if you extended me the same kindness."

At last Rei stopped pretending in favor of finally lifting his eyes from the pad, and for the first time he thought he saw Ueno Jasper as the person she truly was. The smile hadn't faded from her lips, nor had the genuine edge of it that threw him a little, but her eyes had changed. Gone was the glib cheer of the woman who'd been sitting across from him a moment before. Gone was the casual posture she'd had when he'd walked into the room. Jasper's gaze now felt more like the study of one of earth's great, predatory cats waiting to see if he would prove friend or food. Despite leaning towards him, too, there was no eagerness to her body language, no hint of need. If anything, she seemed *expectant*, as though the woman were trying to say with even the angle of her bearing that there was only one direction for him to take.

If he hadn't been before, Rei was suddenly very certain that the Kamiya Corporation did not pinch its pennies when it came to the quality of the "fixers" it hired, at the very least.

"Fair enough," he agreed, looking from Jasper to Colonel Guest as he set the pad aside. "Permission to speak freely, sir?"

The colonel's eyes narrowed ever so slightly at this, but he nodded after a moment. "Within reason, Ward."

Be. Careful, the words said again.

“Yes, sir.” Rei, too, leaned forward, addressing Jasper once more. “Your offer is generous—*very* generous, even—but I mean no disrespect when I say that that sets off more alarm bells for me than you’re going to get leaps of joy.”

“Oh?” Jasper asked, and for some reason Rei thought she caught a glimpse of something like satisfaction flit across the woman’s face. “Is that right?”

“It is,” Rei said with a nod. “On the one hand there’s the adage that ‘if something seems to be too good to be true’, and all of that, but on the other... Compensation *that* generous is very high even for the circumstances—circumstance you and Kamiya clearly have a decent grasp of—and that’s *with* completely setting aside the entire fact that I’m largely unproven as a fighter. What does that say about this offer?”

“That Kamiya hopes to give you not only every reason to take advantage of the opportunities they can provide you with now, but in the future as well,” Jasper answered at once, indicating the pad he’d set aside with a gesture. “Is it so suspicious that they want to invest in a way that would encourage you to always consider them first and foremost for sponsorship long-term?”

“Closer to the truth, I think, but I’m not buying it.” Rei was frowning once more. “Here’s another question, then: does the Kamiya Corporation sponsor any other Galens cadets?”

“It has not had the pleasure, as of yet,” the answer came, as confident as it was craftily diplomatic.

Man this woman was good.

Rei, though, didn’t let himself get distracted, looking to the Rama Guest again. “In that case... Colonel, can I ask how many of the third years have sponsorships?”

“Seven,” the man answered, glancing at Maddison Kent and waiting for the woman to nod in confirmation before adding to this. “With an eighth in negotiation as we speak, I believe.”

“And among those sponsors, are there names you would say are stronger than Kamiya’s when it comes to influence and ability?”

Guest raised an eyebrow at that, but answered anyway. “Only one or two, but yes.”

“What about the previous graduating class? Or the one before that?”

“More than one or two.”

Rei nodded, theory confirmed. “Then—given those parties’ existing ties to the school—is it fair to say that they keep a close eye on the rest of the Galens cadets year-over-year?”

He might have imagined it, but Rei thought he saw the barest hint of a smirk start to play at the corner of the commanding officer’s beard as the man seemed to realize where he was taking this line of questioning. “Almost always.”

Satisfied, Rei turned back to Jasper, who was watching him with an air that was something between subtly amused and impressed. “So... Do you get where I’m going with this?”

“I believe so, yes.” Her smile was reaching her eyes again, brilliant as ever. “All the same, do please enlighten me.”

“Fine,” Rei said with a shrug. “Basically, here’s where my gut goes: if there are other parties with closer ties to the Institute, *and* some with larger war chests than your employer—” he watched the woman intently, trying to read her expression “—what is it that made Kamiya beat them to the punch? What is it that has *you* sitting here, beating out anyone else, and that *despite* the fact that you have no previous ties to the Institute?” He met her gaze leveling. “Again: Why. Me?”

He repeated the question with emphasis, hoping to drive home the point. He wasn’t reaching, he knew. It *was* reasonable that potential sponsors would be keeping eye on him, after all, but even with the momentum of his Growth and improvement—not to mention the fact that Type Shift was public knowledge, now—bigger and stronger entities with more cash to throw around had existing ties to the Institute. If

they, therefore, had yet to develop the confidence to approach him, why had Kamiya? And why with a contract that would have had most Global-level SCT pros salivating?

Despite the money, despite the *healthy* list of tremendous benefits Rei had caught a glimpse of as he'd pretended to peruse the text, these questions burned hot enough to steel his hand.

Without so much as a twitch in her smile, it was Jasper's turn to take Rei in in silence. For a long moment the woman seemed to study him, to examine every line of his face, eyes lingering on what he thought were probably the few scars visible along his neck and peeking up from the collar of his shirt and jacket.

When she finally spoke again, it was with a quiet, dry laugh.

"What if I told you you were nothing more than a calculated risk? That you were a gamble?"

"All due respect, ma'am, but I'd say *bull*," Rei answered at once. "You have access to every data point any other potential sponsor of mine—present or future—has, and you're the only one sitting here, throwing a contract like *this*—" he gestured to the pad at his side "—at me. If I *am* a gamble, that would have to mean I'm probably some rogue element's gamble, wouldn't it? Maybe some specific person's? Which, yet again, leads us right back to the same question. Why me?"

"Why you indeed..." Jasper muttered, nodding as though in approval. "I have to say, Reidon, you exceed my expectations, and I'm a *very* hard person to take by surprise."

Rei, unsure how to respond to this, only shrugged again. "Thanks, I guess? Assuming that's a compliment...?"

"Oh it is," Jasper said, and to his surprise she got to her feet, smoothing her skirt down over her knees before standing straight. "It definitely is." She held out a hand, then. "Could I have my pad back, if you please? You obviously won't be needing it any further today."

A little taken aback by the confidence of this statement, Rei picked up the tablet to hand to the woman just the same, watching her promptly take to swiping across its surface again.

“Wait, is that it?” It was Maddison Kent, funnily enough, who spoke up. “He hasn’t even turned down your offer.”

“No, but he’s going to,” the fixer said with another laugh, typing something quickly across the smart-glass. “And unlike most negotiations, attempting to improve on the terms would only be counter-productive. Isn’t that right, Reidon?”

Rei nodded slowly, still thrown by the sudden shift in the conversation’s direction. “Probably. But how do you know I’m going to turn you down?”

“Because I’m under very strict—and rather annoying orders—not to lie to you, ironically enough.”

The words had an immediate impact on the room, already tense as it had been. Over his shoulder Rei thought he saw Kent stiffen, while Guest at long last uncrossed his thick arms to push himself up from the edge of the desk, standing tall and ominous in his black-and-golds.

“I recommend you explain that statement, Ms. Ueno,” the man rumbled, his earlier, casual air immediately replaced by the presence of the commanding officer of the Galens Institute, more powerful and threatening than even the storm outside that still pelting the windows with snow. “As it stands, it seems you’re implying you would have preferred to con my cadet into signing your contract, had you been at liberty to do so. That’s hardly in line with how the Kamiya Corporation was presented to me by General Abel when I agreed to take this meeting.”

“Ease up, colonel,” Jasper said with a sidelong glance and another smile, finishing her manipulation of the pad with a swift swipe in Rei’s direction, which was followed by a ping on his NOED telling him he had been sent a file. “It’s *because* I’m currently representing the Kamiya Corporation that I’m... let’s call it *‘limited’*. You’ve been too

far removed from the bureaucracy of Sol if you think scheming and politics isn't how most things still get done at the heart of this beautiful mess we call human civilization."

Before Guest could say anything more, though, Jasper was addressing Rei again, who had opened the message to find the very same contract he'd just—if indirectly—turned down.

"Those are the terms offered. My contact information is attached, for when you change your mind."

"When?" Rei repeated with a bare laugh, closing the file again to look the woman in the yes. "That's a lot of confidence, isn't it?"

"Says the boy who just turned down a *million* credits a year without so much as blinking," the fixer answered with a chuckle. Then she grew serious, looking Rei over carefully again even as she handed the pad back to the guard behind her, who accepted it with another quick step forward. "I should probably tell you you're too sharp for your own good, Reidon Ward, but something tells me that's not really the case..."

The way she said it...

"I'm right, aren't I?" Rei pressed with a frown. "There's a reason Kamiya is interested in me. A reason other than those other parties would have?"

Even as he asked it, he felt a tension he'd only passively been aware of on entering the room tighten in his gut. Jasper momentary silence didn't help it, much less the slow, single nod she offered him in answer.

"Yes, you're right. There is a reason."

"But you won't tell me..."

She smiled again.

"No, I won't. I might not be military, but I have my own set of rules I have to follow, too. And in my line of work—" she winked at him "—you never know who might be listening."

And then, with that and a brief word of gratitude for taking the meeting—accompanied by a polite bow from both Jasper and the guard towards Colonel Guest—the woman took her leave, exiting the room so quickly with her black-clad shadow that Rei was left feeling almost windblown at the departure. Clearly he wasn't the only one, because it was a solid few seconds before any of the three remaining among them finally spoke.

“Ooookay... Is there a ranking for ‘quickest-meeting-that-should-have-taken-hours’? Because that had to be some kind of a record.”

Maddison Kent's confused humor broke the spell of surprise Ueno Jasper's sudden departure had cast, and Rei turned to find the chief assistant scrunching her nose at the door. Colonel Guest, on the other hand, was watching Rei, and it was with the jolt of realizing that he was the only one left seated that he jumped to his feet to take an at ease position before the man.

“Apologies, sir,” Rei got out quickly. “I hope nothing I said was cause for offense...”

For a moment or two more, the colonel studied him, staring him down much in the same way Jasper just had.

Then, at long last, the man relaxed with a snort, waving Rei down again even as he moved to the seat the Kamiya fixer had just vacated.

“Sit, Cadet,” Guest grunted, dropping down himself and leaning forward to rest his elbows on his bent knees, gaze now on the closed door of his office as well. “You said nothing wrong. If anything, I think you handled that situation as well as could be expected, given the circumstances.”

Doing as he was told, Rei found himself moving stiffly again when he sat, and forced a slow breath in and out before responding.

“Yes, sir. I'll admit that was... er...”

“Unexpected?” Kent offered, coming around to stand behind the Colonel, who still hadn’t looked away from the door.

“Haa...” Rei got out tightly. “That’s one way to put it, I guess?”

“It is. Another would be as Jasper herself stated.” Guest finally turned to Rei again. “*Unprecedented.*”

Rei swallowed, then nodded. Now that the fixer was gone the adrenaline he hadn’t even felt from the moment she’d announced the Kamiya Corp’s offer was taking its toll. His hands were cold, and he was pretty sure his heart would have broken free of his chest had Shido not been steadily improving his skeletal tissue integrity for the past half year. His head, too, a moment ago so clear and aware, was suddenly flooded with questions and doubts, including not a few nagging voices screaming at him that he should have taken the money and run, rather than ask stupid questions.

“A million credits...” he muttered, and it was only as he noticed Guest and Kent both blink at him that he realized he’d said it out loud.

“S-sorry!” he stammered in quick apology, going rigid. “I just—”

Before he could finish, though, Guest held him up again with a hand again.

“At *ease*, Ward. You’re an odd one, I’ve gotta say. Cool as can be when you’re staring a shark in the face, only to start shaking the moment you get to dry land again.” He was watching Rei carefully. “A million, you say, though? Is that what they were offering you?”

Rei nodded shakily, working to keep the number from playing across his head on a loop. “You weren’t aware?”

“No.” The colonel shook his head. “The ISCM allows these sorts of things to usually be handled largely independently. Given that you’ve been in my care for a lot less time than most cadets who end up sitting where you are now, I just thought I should be a least a bit more present.” Guest grimaced, then. “Still... A million credits...”

You did even better than I thought, with that on the table. What the *hell* are they playing, throwing an offer like that around?”

“Right?!” Kent’s disbelieving answer came in a hiss. “Why are they even approaching him in the first place?! I mean, well...” she glanced at Rei guiltily “... aside from the obvious, I guess...”

The irritation by the pair on his behalf—coupled with this surprising reminder of his circumstances,—was enough to pull Rei away from the risk of daydreaming about how much thrift shopping he and Aria could have done with a *million* credits.

“You know?” he asked of the woman, looking from her to the colonel and back again.

“She knows,” Guest confirmed for his assistant with a nod before Kent herself could answer. “Maddison was in the room, when you were accepted to Galens. As was I, obviously.”

That much Rei had assumed, but it still helped him gather to courage to ask his follow-up.

“Then... I’m not crazy, right? For them to come in swinging like that... My—*Shido’s* Growth spec, rather—it’s not enough to have warranted that kind of offer *this* early alone... Right?”

In answer, Guest made a face even as Kent nodded fervently over his shoulder. “Honestly... No. It’s not. Still, one can follow their logic. In the time you’ve been here, Ward, in the six months you’ve spent at this school, you and your Device have ascended through more CAD Ranks than a lot of User’s will see in most of their lifetime. Your S-Ranked Growth might not be public knowledge, but the fact that you—as a first year—have an active following on the feeds—”

“And a *kickass* nickname,” Kent added, earning a brief glare for Guest over his shoulder even as he continued.

“—is an indication that word is going to spread quickly. It makes sense that sponsors would come knocking earlier than any Cadet we’ve had at this school. I’ve been aware of that for some time, and had even thought to ask Valera Dent or Dyrk Reese to take you aside to make mention of it. Unfortunately, I got word about Kamiya’s interest before I believed it would be an impending issue. For that, I suspect I owe you an apology.”

The mention of Major Dyrk Reese—the principal arbiter of all of Galens’s hosted SCTs and the man who had actively worked to make Rei’s life hell throughout the Intra-Schools during the previous quarter—only briefly brought up a flare of anger Rei quickly shoved aside as the colonel continued.

“Still... I have to agree with you. It’s too early. Prior to that meeting, I made much the same assessment of the situation that you just did on the fly, so kudos for that as well. Don’t know if you noticed, but I was a little... on edge, when you arrived.”

“I may have noticed, yes, sir,” Rei managed to get out with a weak smile, earning himself a grunt from the S-Ranked User.

“No surprises there, I suppose. Then maybe you can understand what I mean when I say I feel a certain relief that you turned down that offer. Not many people would have, I think, in your stead...”

“More like it was turned down for me,” Rei said with a disbelieving shake of his head. “If you don’t mind me saying it: that woman was terrifying, sir. It felt like everything I did was being dissected a micro-second at a time.”

“You’re not the only one, don’t worry,” Guest turned to look back at his chief assistant. “Do you know anything about her, Maddison?”

“Ueno? No, but I do know her kind.” It was Rei that the woman addressed as she spoke, though. “I hope you’re not dumb enough to think that Users are the only dangerous people out there, Ward. She wasn’t wrong, implying that the Collective has

more back alley deals and plots woven into its systems than a bad mystery novel. The MIND isn't actually all-seeing, and it's certainly not all-powerful."

"Yes, ma'am," Rei answered quickly. "I'll remember that, ma'am."

"Do so," Guest said, look around at him again. "Especially when you go through that contract in detail, as I'm *well* aware you are going to as soon as you have a spare moment. We clearly share reservations about this offer, Ward. I hope you can remember that in the face of temptation."

"Yes, sir," Rei said again. "I will, sir."

"Good. And speaking of..." the colonel started slowly at this, leaning a little closer over the space between the couches. "I could be wrong, Cadet, but did it seem like you might have a sense of *why* it was that Kamiya would be knocking at our door about you so early? I'm well aware of your academic accolades, but you came to that conclusion awfully fast, even given..."

It took every ounce of willpower Rei had to not go rigid at this question. He did, in fact, have a suspicion—though a weak one at that. It was honestly hardly more than speculation rather than any true theory, in fact, predicated entirely on that single bothersome factor that had caught his eye as he'd entered the colonel's study in the first place. Still, Rei wasn't even sure he was right about this nagging inkling, and doubted he would have put to voice his hunch even if he had been.

After all, in a universe of a quarter of a trillion people, it wasn't *completely* impossible that the name "Kamiya" would seem to share the same phonetic bases as Rei's own first name...

... Was it?

"No, sir," Rei lied with a straight face to the expectant Colonel Guest. "I'm as in the dark as you are there. I just thought it odd Kamiya is obviously so willing to put the cart *this far* before the horse, even with reason. Others should have been here first, if

that was the case. If anything, the best guess I have is that they know about my Growth spec. Know for a *fact*, I mean.”

For another long moment Guest watched him with a slight frown, like he were trying to read something deeper in Rei’s words. Eventually, though, Maddison gave a polite cough from behind the couch, and the colonel sat back with a dissatisfied sort of shrug.

“If you say so, Cadet. Not sure I believe you, but I *am* sure I’m already sticking my nose too far into this as is. Just keep in mind what I said, got it?”

“Got it, sir.”

“Excellent. Now then—” the colonel, without looking away from Rei, pointed at the door “—Maddison, if you could give us moment, I would appreciate it.”

“Sir?” Kent asked in surprise, clearly not having expected this sudden dismissal.

“You heard me. Out, if you please.”

“But... you’re supposed to call the Ellison Academy back as soon as you can, and after that there’s your scheduled meeting with—”

“Push them.” Guest still hadn’t looked away from Rei, who was very quickly remembering, once again, who *exactly* it was he was sitting across from. “You can let them know something important has come up, if needed.”

“‘Important’, sir...?” Kent asked, still obviously uncertain, though she had started dutifully for the door just the same.

“Oh yes,” Guest said, neon-grey fire flashing for a moment in his dark eyes. “*Exceedingly* important. Cadet Ward and I need to have a chat, you see. One involving a certain red-headed niece of mine, and how a simple *outing to a mall* almost turned into a *six-man brawl in front of a public restroom*??”

As Maddison Kent left the room—her confusion replaced by wicked sniggering that was audible until the door closed behind her—Rei found himself calculating that he *could*, in fact, survive the ten-story drop to the snowy courtyard far below.

On the other hand, as the oppressive pressure of Guest's unmoving gaze started to feel like it were crushing his very soul, he was *much* less certain as to whether that possible exit via the nearest window would be a voluntary means of escape... or an assisted ejection.

CHAPTER 6

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACEHOLDER

As the door to the flyer finally closed behind them, cutting off the wicked bite of the wind and snow outside, Jasper had to stop herself from cursing in every language she knew. Despite whatever her trimmed, confident appearance might say to the contrary, it was *work* to pull off the look she liked for in-person jobs like this, and anything that messed with that effort could fall to the archons for all she cared. Still, as much as Jasper would have liked to scream profanity at the frost-crusted window in French, German, English, and Japanese most fluently, she kept her poise, choosing instead to brush the snow from her jacket shoulders and hair delicately before scooting back further into the luxury leather of the personal transport's wide seats.

Her self controlled was made much easier by the sense of triumph that had been burning in her cheeks from the moment she'd realized Reidon Ward wouldn't be signing that day.

"Lose the smirk if you please, Jasper," her companion said, his voice distorted and robotic through his helmet. "I will admit it: you were correct."

With a smile—a real, true smile, rather than the perfected mask of one very few people could tell from the other—Jasper looked around from the full-frame window to the figure sitting across from her, facing the back of the flyer. She could see her own reflection in the clean black of the glass that obscured the man's features, distorted and made ugly by the curve and spattering of melting snow that peppered the otherwise-smooth surface.

"Oh? Not even going to let me get in an 'I told you so', then?"

In answer, the man sighed in tired exasperation, reaching up as he did to finally release the hermetic seal of the helmet along the line of his jaw before pulling it carefully free of his head even as the flyer start to lift beneath them with a quiet *whir*.

Doctor Kamiya Hiroto had been a handsome man for all of the nearly 3 decades Jasper had known him. Even now, at just over 70, the CEO of the Kamiya Corporation cut a notable figure, his slate-grey eyes and long, white-streaked black hair sharp alongside the dark uniform whose skin-tight underlayers reached all the way up his neck to the edges of his thinly-bearded chin. It was a strange look to sport for someone she had only ever rarely seen out of either custom-tailored suits or a karate gi, but it worked well for the man.

Maybe because, as an A8-Ranked User and a former Global-level pro on Earth, even at his age Kamiya Hiroto could have trounced the vast majority of the guards his company *actually* employed to wear that uniform.

“No matter how many years pass, your sass never does cease to amaze me.” The man shook his head as he set the now-empty helmet on the seat beside him, leaving one hand atop it to keep it from sliding to the cabin floor as the flyer tilted slightly in their ascent. “Interesting way to treat your former teacher, I must say.”

“My apologies, *sensei*,” Jasper responded with a laugh. “Very well. I shall graciously elect *not* to bask in my righteous vindication, just as I shall graciously elect *not* to point out that that meeting went exactly—*exactly*—as I said it would.”

“How noble of you to spare me,” Hiroto answered darkly.

Jasper only grinned wider.

Then, though, she felt the smile slip.

“So... What did you think?”

For a long time Hiroto sat in silence, seeming to contemplate the question.

“... I think... ‘unsettling’ is the right word,” he finally answered just as the flyer started to level out a couple thousand feet above the ground, slipping into the snow-

obscured traffic of the skylanes flawlessly. “He is at once nothing like what I expected, and yet everything I could have hoped for...”

Jasper nodded slowly. “I can see that. I wasn’t kidding. The kid took my by surprise. We knew he was smart—his Assignment Exam scores said as much, even the lowered one he *thinks* he got—and there’s obviously something going on with that CAD of his that’s going to have the SCT’s world buzzing soon enough. But he’s more than that. He’s clever, too. Saw right through us.”

“Just like you said he would...” the doctor gave a mutter admittance, turning to grimace out the window, fingers starting to drum at the top of the helmet still sitting beside him in what was usually a telling sign of either deep thought or frustration.

In this case, though, Jasper suspected it might be both.

“Yes,” she answered simply, carefully to keep her voice even. “I did tell you we were coming on too strong, and you know I wouldn’t say that lightly. It’s not like you go dive in full-bore like this. You *know* money can’t solve everything, better than anyone. I’ve poached enough assets for Kamiya—for *you*—to know you give people what they need, not what someone else *thinks* they need. People like Abigail Smith don’t simply work for whoever offers the highest bid on their talents. The best need more than that.”

“Reidon’s file suggested that—”

“Reidon’s file is *shit*, Hiroto. I told you that, too. What little we managed to get out of our *combined* contacts at Central isn’t enough to give a clear picture of the kid. Like I suggested, we should have waited, or at least approached this in another way.”

“What way?” Hiroto snorted, though Jasper knew the anger that tinged the man’s voice as he continued wasn’t directed at her. “What other way did we have?”

“I don’t know,” Jasper admitted placatingly, “but if you’d given me more time, I could have figured it out. We only *just* got his exam results. If we’d waited I could have found a way in through his friends, or maybe that foster house that took care of him,

the Estoran Center. Those kinds of places are usually tight on funds. If we'd applied the right pressure—”

“No.”

The single, ringing word instinctively had Jasper tensing in her seat, and she knew she had, for once, *actually* taken it a step to far. Hiroto was looking at her directly now, and though there was no glimmer of color in his eyes, the sheer force of his resolution was enough to make her swallow.

“Of course. I'm sorry, I just—”

“You are very dear to me, Jasper,” the doctor cut her off, voice as cool as it was calm, “as a former student and friend both, and you have proven time and time again to have no limit of value to my company and personal estate alike. For these reasons I overlook the tactics you stoop to with your other employers. However—” the black of Hiroto's disguising uniform seemed to be drawing in the light, somehow, tricking Jasper into feeling like the cabin were darkening around them “—I will not *tolerate* such suggestions when it comes to my own interests. *Is that understood?*”

“Yes, sensei.”

The response was so automatic, ingrained in her from over 20 years of instruction under the man, that Jasper didn't even realize she'd slipped into their shared native tongue. Hiroto, for his part, watched her a moment more, clearly intent to drive his point home.

When he looked away at last, eyes shifting to the bare forms of Castalon's skyscrapers they could just make out through the blizzard, the day seemed to brighten, and Jasper let go of the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

“So... What do we do now? Do we come at him a different way, as you suggested?”

The question came calmer, bringing Jasper back to herself a bit as she blinked. With a cough to clear her throat she folded her hands over her lap, forcing herself not

to look away from her employer—a difficult feat in that moment even despite his averted gaze.

“No. We don’t. We’ve swung this door open too wide and too loudly. It’s clear that Reidon was already put on edge by our offer. If he gets so much as a *whiff* that we are coming at him from another angle as well, those walls are only going to get higher. Given the situation...” Jasper paused, choosing to give herself a moment to pick her words carefully “...I don’t think you want to make any more hurdles for yourself than there already are...”

Before her, the doctor made a rare face at that, one lip curling up in an expression lingering somewhere between disgust and annoyance. He muttered something in Japanese, of which Jasper only caught “*fool of a son...*” before the man spoke more clearly.

“So, what? We wait? For him to come to us?”

“It’s not without its risks, but... yes...” Jasper nodded, feeling her usual confidence and pep returning steadily. “The money may have been too far a swing, but you we smarter with the rest of the offer. There are opportunities in there that Reidon will likely have great use for, *if* our deductions regarding his abilities are correct.” She hesitated, then. “There is, however... a risk to that.”

Hiroto nodded knowingly, still looking out the window as hundreds of other transports zipped over and around them in every direction. “A more enticing offer.”

“Or even just a more *appropriate* one,” Jasper said. “It doesn’t have to be better, at this point—let’s be honest, how could it *get* better?—it just has to be... real.”

“Because how could ours have been, yes...” Hiroto muttered at the glass, his eyes narrowing at his own reflection. “Yes... I do see it now... I suppose I let me desire for forgiveness cloud my better judgment, didn’t I?”

“Just a little...” Jasper answered carefully.

The doctor didn't respond for a long moment, clearly contemplating the issue. After nearly a minute, he at last gave another sigh—one more resigned, this time—and turned to face her once again.

“I'm starting to think it might have been better off just introducing myself directly. Face to face. None of this sneaking around.” He looked suddenly annoyed. “I often wish you hadn't dissuaded me from that.”

“You needed a softer entry, Hiroto. You *still* need one. What we do know about Reidon isn't great, sure, but...” Jasper offered him as sympathetic a look as she could muster “... Keiji and Samantha... They all but left him to die, Hiroto. And the life he's lived since... The surgeries. The pain. The stunted growth. I can't even find any real evidence of *friends* other than this 'Viviana Arada' before he came to Galens...” She shook her head. “I'm sorry, I don't care how strong the boy is and how steadfast his spirit seems. You don't just hammer down the doors on a history like that. You can't. You just *can't*.”

Hiroto grimaced again, though Jasper didn't miss the rigid tension that had snapped into place at the mention of the man's son and daughter-in-law.

“I need a softer entry,” he echoed. “Yes... I suppose you're right...”

Another pause, and Jasper got the impression the man was steeling himself for something.

Sure enough, when he looked around at her again at last, his face was stony.

“I can provide the circumstances by which Reidon isn't offered another sponsorship opportunity. At least not anytime soon. You're confident that he'll come around to us, if I do so?”

“I am.” Jasper smiled, feeling wholly herself again at long last. “He has to. If he continues on the trajectory he's headed, Galens can only provide him so many opportunities. Eventually he'll need more, and the choices won't be many. Even fewer will be good.”

Hiroto nodded yet again, slower this time.

Then his hands, still gloved, balled into fists.

“If I had just *been there*,” he growled. “If I’d just prioritized him over the damn *company*. After Sarah was born, though, I thought it was fine. I thought I could meet him a few days later, and it would be fine...”

Jasper offered him a sadder smile, now. “Hiroto... everyone makes mistakes. Hell, look at me.” She indicated herself with both hands even as she batted her eyelashes dramatically. “The doctors told *my* parents I was a boy when I was born. Just because of some silly thing between my legs. See how that turned out?”

Hiroto, though, wasn’t in the mood to be appeased.

“You had a supportive family and access to the best medical therapies and doctors money could buy, Jasper. If anything, you are the *antithesis* or Reidon’s circumstances.”

Jasper waved away the man’s foul mood. “Fine. You don’t want to be cheered up. I get it. In that case, we move forward.” She dropped her hands back into her lap to watch the doctor seriously. “If you can make it so that he has little choice but to turn to us, I assure you he will. That being said—and I’m a little afraid to know the answer to this—how you are going to do that?”

It took a moment, but Hiroto’s expression changed, then. From a quiet, still anger he rose, mouth twisting slowly upwards at the question.

Then he was grinning darkly, the ugly smile making Jasper think of a man enjoying his last meal.

It terrified her in an entirely different way, and she knew the answer even before he opened his mouth.

“Simple enough. You will make Kamiya’s interest in Reidon known. You will make it know—through the right channels, of course—and you will make it clear that *any* party who attempts to join us on this dance floor will find themselves cut off of every

product Kamiya might be providing them, now and forever. If they aren't already a customer, then *their* parterres will be cut off, and so on, and so forth."

Even though she'd seen it coming, Jasper's hands went numb.

"Hiroto... That's barely a short step from economic suicide... You might lose partners—hundreds of partners, even—just for *making* that threat. ATTALIS, Verogoth, Wyre Industries... Every one of you competitors will flock to fill that void!"

The doctor nodded briefly, as though this were hardly a passing concern. "I'm aware of that. But we deal in *tech*, Jasper, not canned food and vacuums. The contract negotiations for a changeover like that would cost any company weeks of time and revenue, and that's on top of the months lost to fully adapt and update hardware and software both."

Jasper pushed harder. "You would trash your reputation. You would *trash* every ounce of good will you've built, not to mention your mother and grandfather and every other member of your family before you."

Hiroto *did* wince at that—as she suspected he might—but didn't otherwise budge. "So be it. Reputation can be salvaged. All of it—money, partnerships, contracts—all of it can be salvaged."

Jasper could only stare at the man, dumbstruck for the first time in what had to have been years. She thought she had seen it all, in her 2 decades working in the back alleys of industry plots and politics. She had seen the greatest rise and fall, had seen those with the most potential cut off at the knees by those with the least merit, and those with the lowest chance lifted by titans who had already made it.

But she had never—*never*—seen a man with as much to lose as Kamiya Hiroto look into the abyss of destruction, laugh, and begin to juggle everything he had while standing on one foot at its very edge.

"You would burn it all down?" she asked quietly, as horrified as she was awestruck. "You would burn it all down? Just for him?"

Without so much as moment's hesitation, Hiroto nodded. Outside, the storm seemed to have redoubled, the raging bellow of the wind through the monoliths of Castalon like a scream made by the universe in an attempt to drown out his answer.

“Of course. How could I not, when those that should have been his family already tried to throw him into the fire?”

CHAPTER 7

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACEHOLDER

It was Viv who found Rei first.

It had been a gamble, but she wasn't completely unsurprised when it paid off. Four-an-a-half years spent mostly glued at the hip was enough time to get a good sense of where Rei's head would be at depending on how the mysterious meeting with Administration went, and an hour's wait after breakfast turned into 2, then started threatening to encroach on the lunch break before afternoon training.

That was when Viv suspected something had gone sideways.

Well that and the fact that not even *Aria* had heard from Rei yet, which was way more alarming.

Eventually, even Cashe had started to voice some concern over the low audio of the SCT recordings the 5 remaining members of the squad had decided to review in their morning free time, which finally had had Viv getting to her feet.

"Idiot's probably in a huff somewhere," she'd grumbled over her shoulder as she'd made for the door of the Tactical Studies classroom they'd commandeered for their study session. "Aria, can you check 304? It's the most likely place he's at. Catcher, you and Cashe look around East Center. He might be blowing off steam for some reason. Or maybe the mess hall? Grant—" she was careful to use Logan's last name, partially not to give their familiarity away and partially to let the boy know she wasn't anywhere *near* over her morning's irritation "—can you spin by the Hospital, please? Just in case."

To his credit—even if the others were more enthusiastic in their agreement and hurrying to follow after her—Logan nodded at once even as he shoved himself up from his chair a row back from where the rest of them had been seated. They were down two floors and outside in short order, the blizzard that had made their way too and

from breakfast earlier fortunately having abated somewhat, and all split off at once to check their designated area. Viv lingered a moment, feeling a little bad as Aria in particular took off at a faster clip than most patrolling staff officers might have approved of.

Even if it had been with good intentions, she was pretty sure she'd lied...

Turning west, Viv hurried through snow, ignoring the cold with nothing more than a scrunched nose at the still-blasting winds. It wasn't long before she'd passed the Arena, then the second- and third-year dorms, ignoring them all. Instead, she made a beeline around Vellus—the towering third-year residence—the moment she could, aiming for the handsome, oversized three-story building some 50 yards from the frosted Institute wall. Maybe it was because its location made it more frequently used by the school's upperclassmen, but the West Center was both a larger and more-polished training facility than East, where all of them—except Cashe—were more accustomed to spending their additional conditioning and combat hours. Though she'd never been inside, Viv could tell at a glance that the floors were taller, which she imagined was likely to grant the fields inside a healthier gap between projection plating and ceiling. Made sense. While it was unlikely any of the first years—with the exception of one white-hair dummy, maybe—were unlikely to develop enough Speed or Strength to need more than the 10 yards of vertical clearance East Center offered anytime soon, Viv knew for a *fact* there were a good number of third years who could have easily topped out that kind of height from a standstill, and probably some second years who could have managed it with a running start. On top of that, the walls of the West Center were less stone and more glass, offering wide, sweeping views into the training rooms along the bottom floor of the facility, or at least into those whose occupants hadn't decided to turn their walls opaque for privacy. One of the chambers closest to the double doors of the entrance was largely whited out, allowing only sneaking hints of blistering colors that told Viv it definitely wasn't Vademe's or Martin's squad in the middle of training, while

in the fair corner what looked two of the second-year squads seemed to be taking turns sparring in groups. Viv had to stop herself from pausing to watch, momentarily distracted as she noted several Duelists she'd cheered for during the Intra-Schools taking to the field, and cursed Rei for his bullheadedness as she headed inside.

The doors opened for her with a hiss of air, then shut again the moment she was in the warmth of the facility. Sure enough the polished stone of the ceiling above was at *least* 15 yards over her head, and the inside of the space was a clean and spartan as any other building on the Galens grounds, all white marble, steel, and smart-glass. Look around around, a blue holo-sign that showed stairs at the far end of the hall blinked against her frame, and Viv made a line for it at once, working hard again not to look to her left as she passed the opaque room where she was almost positive a group of third years was training. It was harder that it should have been, because the screaming sounds of the clash combining with the shouted feedback of onlookers to ring clear through the door that looked to have been propped open as a source of fresh air.

Viv almost leapt clean out of her boots, therefore, when a familiar voice caught her off guard as she passed.

“Arada?”

Something almost like fear prickled up Viv's spine, and she whirled even as she snapped into a salute. It was more of a habit than anything, particularly since the person who had stepped out of the blocked-out training room as she'd passed was an ISCM cadet just like her, and therefore didn't technically warrant the formal greeting.

Protocol only went so far, though, when it came to the dark-skinned young man standing before her now, looking at her with a sort of perplexed interest.

Christopher “Lasher” Lennon cut a strange figure for a User. He was small compared to other male CAD wielders, standing a couple inches below 6-feet-tall, which actually put him at shorter than Viv. His face, too, was soft, stubbornly holding onto a bit more of the fat that most other cadets burned off within a few months of

arriving at school, *if* they'd had any left to shed in the first place. His skin was pocked with sweat where his body wasn't covered with his red-on-blue combat suit, and his sky-hued eyes were watching Viv curiously from under short, grey dreads.

Despite all that, though, it was well known that Christopher Lennon was a favorite to bring home the collegiate Intersystem Champion title that year, and it had been some time since Viv had been able to see the shorter boy as anything other the beast he was.

“Sir!” Viv offered a sharp greeting to him, still saluting. “Sorry to distract. I didn't expect to run into you.”

She could almost *see* Lennon working hard at not rolling his eyes, the mix of exasperation and amusement cutting across his features in sharp contrast to the cool, cold soldier Viv was more used to seeing him as. Valera Dent—apparently as a reward for the extra effort Viv, Rei, Aria, and Catcher had been putting in since the start of the school year—had hooked the four of them up with more than a half-dozen training sessions with the third year midway through the fall quarter. It might have been strange from the outside, a cadet training cadets, but the Lasher was no common student. His A8 ranking made him one of the strongest Users in the school, counting even the former front-line fighters or retired SCT's competitors that made up their CAD-Type sub-instructors.

It had made those instructional evening invaluable to all of them.

“Put your hand down, Arada,” Lennon told her with a snort, stepping barefoot a little further into the hall and half-closing the door to the training room behind him. “If all of you are going to salute me every time we cross paths, it's going to make for an uncomfortable rest of the year for everyone.”

“Uh... Yes, sir...” Viv answered, dropping her hand as instructed and decided *not* to voice that doing so felt about as awkward as casually addressing Rama Guest.

“Lose the ‘sir’, too. I'm a cadet, like you. You want to call me that on the training field, fine, but not on the grounds.”

Viv relaxed a little at this, even managing not to slip into the at ease position. Lennon didn't miss the shift, and nodded in approval. "Good. Now: what are you doing here? I thought the first year squads had their second team training session in an hour? Don't tell me you guys have taken to skipping lunch for extra combat hours..."

There was something almost like a threat in the boy's voice as she spoke, and Viv had to swallow nervously as his eyes bore into her with a lethal edge. It was familiar, of course. It was the same way the Lasher had taken them all in whenever he'd been acting as their instructor, those seven Friday evenings the Captain had cobbled together for them.

Fortunately, the look no longer stole Viv's tongue.

At least not completely.

"I'm looking for Rei, actually," she admitted, glancing around at the other fields she could see from where she stood, all empty aside from the second years going at it on the other side of the hall. "He was in training this morning, but got called to Administration after. We thought we'd see him at breakfast, but he never showed..."

Anyone else might not have gotten the full and honest story, but Lennon had earned Viv's respect—as well as that of the rest of them—in more than one way over the course of the last quarter. Aside from the sessions he'd promised through Dent, the Lasher had also taken it on himself to see Rei pushed to the limits in the final days before his last match of the Intra-School, where he'd faced off with Logan. Rei himself had said more than once—on the increasingly-rare occasions when it was just the four of them again—that the third year was the sole reason he'd won that match, and probably developed Type Shift to boot.

While Viv had found herself a little torn on the outcome of that last bout at the time, Lennon had at least cemented himself in her esteem, that day.

"Ward got called to Admin?" the Lasher asked with a small frown. "Why?"

“No idea. That’s kind of the reason we’re worried. We thought someone from higher up in the ISCM was looking for a word with him, but that was hours ago. Even if he got breakfast after, it wasn’t with us.”

The frown deepened. The third year didn’t ask why an ISCM officer from outside the school might want a talk with a first year cadet. Lennon knew better than most that Rei was special, even if he’d never asked—under threat of Dent’s wrath, apparently—about the specifics of the circumstances. That made the young man’s concern genuine, though, and he had just opened his mouth to ask something else when a tall, slender girl with silver-black hair and olive skin popped through the narrow gap of the still-ajar door.

“Chris, you coming? Yuji says he wants to try and—Oh. Hello?”

The newcomer’s smile was bright under dark eyes as she caught sight of Viv, turning her attention from Lennon—who she was clearly familiar with enough to address more casually than Viv suspected she’d ever personally had the balls to try. The girl was a stunning beauty in her third-year combat suit, even for a designed child of the modern age, with the genetic correction offered by her CAD having rendered her features into a perfect symmetry not even every User was blessed with. Viv had the impression, for a moment, that she was looking into the sun as the girl beamed at her, and had to blink away her surprise to return the greeting.

“Uh... Hello.” She tried to return the smile, feeling like a clay doll in the face of third year.

Fortunately, Lennon didn’t leave her hanging.

“Dice, this is Viviana Arada,” he introduced Viv promptly, waving at her as the girl stepped up to stand beside him in the hall. “She’s one of those first years I was working with last semester.”

“Oh!” the girl—“Dice”?—exclaimed again, looking excited now. “Another one? Cool!” She offered Viv a mock scowl, then. “I’ll have you know I didn’t appreciate you all stealing him every Friday night for two months. Not cool.”

Unsure how to answer this, Viv had opened her mouth to answer with an automatic apology, but the Lasher saved her again.

“Don’t tease. I made it up to you.” He was grinning—another new expression—when he turned back to Viv. “Arada, this is Candice Rice, my girlfriend. She also a third-year Sectionals qualifier, so don’t piss her off.”

“Who’s teasing now?” the girl retorted at once, glaring sidelong at Lennon even as she address Viv. “Call me Dice. I hate Candice. And between you and me—” she leaned in with one hand to her mouth as though passing along some great secret “—I only qualified on a squad invite. And not even *his*.” She pointed through her palm to Lennon, who *actually* rolled his eyes this time.

“You *know* Dent and the Colonel would have thrown me through a wall if I’d invited you onto *my* team,” the Lasher snorted. “That’s be blatant favoritism. And I knew you’d be fine. If Ivanov or Esku didn’t pull you onto their squad, I would have punched them.”

Dice looked at Lennon flatly. “And *that’s* not favoritism?”

“Different kind. That’s allowed.”

“How convenient for you.”

Viv was, for a moment, reminded of Rei and Aria as the pair began to bicker good-naturedly in front of her, but the thought only brought her back to the reason she was standing there in the West Center in the first place.

“Sorry,” she said quickly, looking to Dice as she cut across the couple’s banter. “Did you say ‘Another one’? Have you seen anyone else from my group today?”

“Hmm?” the girl asked, looking a little confused. Then she brighten, catching on. “Oh! Yeah! The white-haired one. Reidon Ward, right? He was walking in when I was heading back from the bathroom. Were you two not meeting up? I just assumed.”

A touch of relief—flavored with just the smallest hint of pride—had Viv letting out a huff. “We are, he just doesn’t know it. Can you tell me which way he went? Do you know if he’s still here?”

“He was headed towards the stairs when I saw him. That was a couple hours ago, though, so I don’t know if he’s still here...”

“He is.”

Viv and Lennon said it together, and the Lasher offered her a smirk as he continued.

“He is. That guy’s got a pigheaded streak wider than Astra-3.”

“More like the entire star system,” Viv said, starting to turn away from the pair of them with a wave to Dice. “Thanks. At least there’s a silver lining to him being recognized on sight, now.”

“Sure thing,” Dice answered with another smile, obviously pleased to have been able to help. “Although that kid’s been pretty noticeable from day one, not gonna lie...”

“Fair enough,” Viv answered with a laugh.

Before she could step away, though, Lennon fixed her with another of his sharp looks.

“Arada. Keep my apprised, if I can help. Knowing Ward, if he’s avoiding you lot... There’s a good reason. Or at least what he *thinks* is a good reason.”

Viv grimaced, but nodded. “Yeah... That’s what I thought too. Will do.”

Then she was off, jogging now as she left the two third years behind, making once again for the holo-sign that indicated the stairwell at the back of the building.

True to his nature, Rei didn’t make himself easy to find even after Dice’s help. Viv almost didn’t bother searching the second floor, but thought better of it when she

imagined missing him by coincidence if he happened to decide lunch wasn't worth skipping. As suspected, though, he wasn't there, and it was a couple minutes later that she stepped onto the third floor landing and immediately made out the distant thuds and grunts of what sounded like a single person in intense combat. Following the sounds, Viv found herself in the very back corner of training center, facing another opaque wall. Through it, she could just barely see the flash and pulse of dark blue light, the lines of familiar vysetrium all that hinted at the figure inside.

For safety reasons, while the students who booked the training rooms could block out the chambers for privacy, they couldn't lock the doors, so it was with nothing more than glance over her shoulder to see if anyone else had happened to join her on the otherwise empty third floor that Viv slipped inside without a sound. Sure enough, there was Rei, his back to the room entrance, Shido's innate Brawler Mode called around his arms, legs, and face as he fought alone on a sterile white floor that only hinted at the outline of the hexagonal pillars that made up every variation of the Neutral Zone.

Well... Almost alone.

Viv held back an impressed whistle as she crossed her arms and leaned up against the inside of the smart-glass door, catching sight of the solid-grey form of Rei's sparring partner. The figure was female, but her expression was as blank as her lack of color, the only details across her entire body forming as the mock outline of a Galens combat suit and the digits on her back that spelled out "B0" Viv only caught when the solid projection whipped a spinning front kick at Rei's chest.

B0? Viv thought as she watched her friend slam the offending leg aside with a parrying arm before countering with a fury of blows with Shido's claws. *That's brave even for him...*

Which, she decided at once, didn't bode well...

Viv forced herself to wait, though, forced herself not to call out to Rei as he fought. The B0 figure was unarmored, so their back-and-forth was pretty linear for about 30

seconds longer, the pair of them slipping up and down the the field as they each gave as good as they got. That was impressive enough even with the sparring dummy not having a weapon, because Viv was pretty sure Rei's own specs couldn't have actually averaged higher than C2 or C3 by now. As it was he was obviously having to focus with all his might, having to zero in on his opponent's every move, drowning out all other distraction.

Then again, Viv suspected drowning everything else out was exactly the point...

It also ended up being the reason for Rei's abrupt and brutal loss, the moment he finally caught sight of her.

After dipping and dodging through a series of quick jabs that had been aimed at his face and shoulders, Rei dropped to kick at the B0's ankles with a sweeping leg. She leapt back deftly, but immediately snapped forward again, bringing a diving punch downward at Rei that was probably backed enough enough force to shatter the floor if it connected. Capitalizing on his Speed, though, Rei planted both feet again and launched himself into a low roll by the woman, coming up again behind her with hands up, ready to take whatever the hologram would throw at him next.

That, of course, was when he saw Viv, and the obvious surprise in his eyes—the only part of his face exposed between the metal-plated band around his forehead and the half-mask that covered his nose and mouth—was enough to have her grin and start to lift a hand in greeting.

She hadn't even gotten it all the way up when the B0 took advantage of Rei's moment of distraction to be on him like a cannonball, a flying knee catching him so hard in the gut that Viv winced as she heard the impact of it.

WHAM!

The force of the blow—hitting him full-on since he hadn't even had the presence of mind to block—sent Rei rocketing backwards so hard that gravity hadn't even taken hold of him by the time he slammed into the invisible barrier that marked the edge of

the training field. There was an ugly *thud* of flesh and steel hitting solidified light, coupled with a brief, rippling disruption in the hologram, and for a second his impetus had Rei sticking to the flickering while like a limp starfish.

Then he was tumbling to the floor, already hugging his gut and gasping for air as the Arena made the expected announcement.

“Fatal Damage Accrued.”

At once the field began to depixelate, the form of the B0 woman fading into nothingness as the white of the floor dissipated. Feeling a little bad, Viv pushed herself off the door and started walking around the hand-wide line of silver that marked the edge of the field. Reaching Rei in brief order, she stood over his curled form for a few seconds, watching his continued fight to reclaim the breath the finishing blow and very obviously stolen from him.

“If I could give some unsolicited, highly-advanced feedback, buddy... Blocking is a *really* good idea.”

Rei’s answer only came as a single wheezing laugh, which had Viv feeling a little better. Whatever had happened, it wasn’t enough to blacken the boy’s mood *completely*.

The again, she was pretty sure Rei could have hit by a truck and laughed it off, most days...

It was another 10 seconds or so before Shido and its neuroline finally managed to help the Rei get control of what had to have been a spasming diaphragm, then another 15 before was able to push himself up onto his knees. He didn’t look at her, though, and Viv watched as he took a few steady breaths, eyes closed before finally speaking.

“Recall.”

In a blur Shido vanished from around his scarred limbs, condensing into the familiar loops of his CAD bands around his wrists. Only after that did Rei finally climb to his feet, turning to her at last, red in the face from exertion.

“How’d you find me?”

Viv smirked. “Seriously?”

Rei only stared back, and after a second she sighed, then summarized in quick succession.

“Mystery meeting. Likelihood of it going sideways: none-zero. You not showing up at breakfast: either it went long, or it went sideways. You not showing up *and* not letting even *Aria* know what was up: it went sideways, and probably badly.” Viv lifted her hands to indicate the training chamber. “You probably wanted to vent, and you probably wanted to be left alone. That means a fight, and that means *not* East Center. So... Here I am.”

Rei snorted. “You’re a pain in the ass, you know that?”

“Yeah, but at least I’m cute.”

“Is that what your parents tell you?”

Viv grinned.

Then, though, she felt the smile slip from her face as she looked him up and down.

Aside from the flush of effort that still lingered in his cheeks and neck, Rei was drenched in sweat. His white hair—long enough again now that it needed to be tied into a ponytail behind his head—was sticking to his ears and forehead where strands had slipped out. What was more, there were pressure lines across his nose, arms, and legs where Shido’s presence had pushed into his skin, which—given the perfect fit of the CADs—only happened with *extended* exposure.

“You’ve been here a while, huh?” Viv asked at last, eyeing in particular the redness over her friend’s knuckles, where hitting whatever multitude of enemies he’d thrown himself at had even left long-formed calluses a little bloody.

Rei hesitated, then nodded, looking away from her.

“How long?”

“...What time is it?”

“Noonish.”

“... Little under three hours.”

That caught Viv by surprise.

“Since 0900? Seriously? How long were you at Administration for?”

“Half hour. If that.”

As confused as she was worried, now, Viv stared at Rei. “Half an hour? We thought you’d gotten stuck there.”

Rei shook his head, lifting his hand so he, too, could look at his raw knuckles. “Nope. In and out.”

Viv waited for more, but the silence only stretched on. It lasted so long, in fact, that her concern started to deepen by the second. This was... weird. Really weird. Rei had always carried his own problems, to an extent, sure, but even when he’d been at his lowest he’d been energized, been loud and proud and ready to move forward. Viv had seen him carted in *and* out of major surgeries with a thumbs up, had seen him bullied and beaten and bloodied, only to rise above it all.

But now... Now, something was missing.

Now... It was like some little piece of the light that had always made Rei shine had gone out inside of him...

“Rei... What the hell happened?” she finally asked quietly.

For a long few seconds, Rei didn’t answer. He seemed to be contemplating, seemed to be debating how best to say what he wanted to, or maybe *if* he wanted to say anything at all.

“I’m... not really sure,” he finally got out. “Honestly, that’s the only real truth I can give you...”

Viv frowned at that. “Ok... Well that’s not gonna fly. I sent Aria and the others off on a while goose chase because we didn’t hear from you. Even Lo—even *Grant’s* checking the Hospital to make sure you didn’t find a way to get yourself bedridden again. We were worried.”

“Sorry...” Rei was quick erwith a response this time, and he finally looked back at her, expression a little pained. “Sorry. I should have said something, I just...” He trailed off again, and Viv, watching him carefully, suddenly realized what was so off about her best friend.

He looked... lost.

For as long as she’d known him, for as many hoops as he’d had to jump through, holes he’d had to clear, hair-pin turns he’d had to managed, Reidon Ward had *never*, not once, looked lost.

Viv was in front of Rei in a heartbeat, both hands on his shoulders. With all her Strength she pushed him down, dropping too even as his legs—not expecting the pressure—gave under him as he let out a “Woah!” of surprise. In an instant they were seated in front of each other at the edge of the training field, Viv not letting go of him as the wind they could still hear outside echoed dimly in the expansive emptiness of the chamber.

“You’re going to sit there, and you’re going to tell me what’s going on.” She glared at Rei even as he put a hand out so as not to fall over as he found himself abruptly on the ground. “*Exactly* what’s going on, you hear? Not lies, no beating around the bush. You don’t get to leave until you do.”

“Oh yeah?” Rei countered, trying and failing at a laugh. “You said it’s noon. We’ve got training in an hour. Maybe I’ll just sit here in silence until we have to go.”

“Then we’re both getting brigged for missing team training, and Aria will kick your teeth in herself when she finds out why,” Viv answered promptly, letting go of him to

sit up straight and cross her arms in resolution. “Like I said: you’re not leaving until you tell me what’s going on.”

Rei’s grew serious, at that. “You’re one to talk. Weren’t you just saying this morning there are some thing best left alone?”

“Sure,” Viv was already ready for this argument. “But my problems I can carry around without vanishing for hours only to turn up looking like my soul got sucked out of my ears.”

“That’s a bit dramatic...”

“*Dude...* You look like you could almost play an extra in one of those old zombie movies...”

Rei tried one final time to deflect.

“Then if I talk about it, you *do* have to tell me what going on with you and Gr—”

“Not a chance,” Viv cut him off, and didn’t give him a chance to answer. “Now... *Spill.*”

Another silence, this time with Rei spent staring at her, partly in surprise, partly in disbelief. Eventually, though, he seemed to realize Viv wasn’t going to let go of this bone, so he settled down slowly, frowning at her as he did.

Only when she’d glared at him for a solid 10 seconds more did he finally open his mouth.

“What if I don’t have anything to tell you?”

“You obviously do.”

“No, I mean... What if... What if I don’t have anything *true* to tell you? What if I don’t know *what’s* true?”

“What are you talking about?”

Rei made a face. “That’s exactly what I mean. I’m not sure. I don’t actually know.” He looked to be chewing on his words again, but the pause was brief, this time, before he spoke in a slow, uncertain tone.

“I think someone might be messing with me... And if they’re not, well... That might be a lot worse.”

Viv relaxed a little, then, seeing the door opening. “Rei...” she started more gently this time. “You have to start from the top. I’m not following... What happened in Administration?”

Rei nodded unsteadily, not looking at her again. “Yeah... Yeah... Of course... It’s just... It’s a lot, Viv...”

“We’ve handled wor—”

“No. If I’m right, we definitely haven’t.”

Though he still hadn’t looked at her, Viv tensed at the words. Rei had S-Ranked CAD Growth. *S*-Ranked. The only cadet in the history of the ISCM to be granted an S-Ranked spec on assignment in *any* category, much less in *Growth*. And Viv had been the first person he’d told.

And yet *that* had taken less to get out of him than this...

“Rei... Just *tell* me what’s go—”

Again, though, Rei interrupted her, but this time it was by finally looking her way again, NOED alive even as the blue light flashed over his grey eyes.

There was a ding in the corner of her own frame, and Viv saw that he sent her something. With a mix of fear and anticipation she selected the alert to find a single file, opening it even before she’d finished reading the title of the document out loud.

“Offer of Sponsorship by the Kamiya C—?”

Then, though, the wall of text was scrolling upwards before her eyes, and Viv couldn’t believe what she was seeing.

“Oh... Oh holy, *holy* shit...”

Her muttered curse didn’t even begin to address her astonishment. She knew what this was, had known what it was the moment her brain had registered the name of the

file. Now, though, seeing the lines on lines of legalese flow by in a steady stream, the impact of it rocked her.

A sponsorship offer? A *sponsorship*?!

“For a *first year*?!” she demanded, not realizing she’d said the part out loud.

“Yeah...” Rei answered her slowly. “Yeah... My thoughts exactly.”

“Rei, this is *insane*!” Viv finally looked through the contract at him again, vision partially obscured even as the text went out of focus. “*Insane*! You got an offer! As a *first year*! How does that even happen?! Who is this from?!” Bringing the contract forward again she snapped to the top of the text with a quick command. “The ‘Kamiya Corporation’? How even is that? I’ve never heard of them.”

“Me neither,” Rei assured her, watching Viv steadily. “At least not before this morning. That’s not even half of it, though, Viv. Look at how much they’re offering...”

“Oh man...” Viv hissed again, starting to scroll through once more in search of the “Compensation” clause header she’d thought she’d seen somewhere. “Don’t tell me it’s—”

She froze, though, finding the number.

“Yeah...” Rei agreed with her silent astonishment. “Yeah... It’s pretty crazy...”

Viv had no words for a long moment, staring at the number—the *multi-million dollar number*—in utter shock. She wasn’t as familiar as Rei was when it came to the details of SCTs—who *was* really?—but she knew enough to be aware that the promised value floating there before her wasn’t just high, it was *staggeringly* so.

“What the...?” she breathed, forcing herself to tear her eyes from the number, reading more carefully now through the other, smaller paragraphs underneath it, her shock only increasing by the second.

The promised credits weren’t the only incredible thing about the offering, it transpired. Kamiya—whoever they were—were promising Rei things Viv doubted a lot of Users got to see in writing before they became System-level competitors at least,

maybe higher. There were promises of housing as needed. Expense coverage—because Rei would *obviously* be needing more than 10 million credits a year, why not?—and access to rehab and medical facilities stated to outclass even the ISCMs, in case of any potential injury recovery. There were promises of marketing deals, promotional events, even *merchandise* lines?!

The big one, though, the *really* big one was—

“Trainers,” Viv whispered, reading a clause that had been entirely bolded, as though the drafter of the contract had known this would be an area of acute interest. “Rei, there’s language in here about getting you private trainers. A- and S-Class. They’re even promising to find Atypicals...”

“Yeah... I know... I read it all, on the way over here. Twice.”

“But...” Viv was having trouble finding the words to voice her disbelief even as she continued to read. “But *why*? I mean I get it, to a degree. It’s pretty obvious you’ve got something special going on, but this is *nuts*. That’s more than any *pro* Sectional fighter I know of makes, and promising *S-Ranked* trainers?! My parents looked into when they hired my instructors over the summer, and it was *so* expensive.”

“It would cost more than the compensation they’re offering,” Rei said with a nod. “Probably a couple times more, if they hired a regular trainer.”

“For a *first year*?!”

“Yeah... That was what made me suspicious...”

At last, at long last, Viv’s managed to pull her focus from the contract again to take in at the boy sitting across from her. He hadn’t looked away again, but that lack of light was more obvious than ever, a sort of hollowness behind Rei’s eyes that was more alarming than anything else he’d shown her so far. It had Viv closing out the text immediately, watching him intently.

“Suspicious about what...?”

Rei, though, hesitated again. Viv let him take his pause, this time, suspecting they'd finally gotten to whatever it was that had had her friend secluding himself in the furthest corner of campus that would still let him punch something. The contract was *insane*, sure, but Viv didn't for a second think the unprecedented nature of it was enough to warrant this strange theft of Rei's usual energy.

"Do you know what my name means, Viv?"

Viv blinked at that, not having expected this particular question. It was particularly strange given she was sure Rei already knew the answer.

"... Yeah?" she answered uncertainly. "Of course? It's an identifier. Marks you as a 'ward of the state'. Or it did before you—"

"No," Rei interrupted with a dark laugh. "Not my last name. My *first* name. Do you know what my *first* name means, Viv?"

"Oh..." If anything, this was even more confusing. "I think you explained it to me, once. Something about an old god from Earth, or something..."

Rei nodded. "Yeah. Pretty much. 'Raijin', or 'Raiden'. Ancient Japanese gods of lighting, thunder, and storms."

"Ok...?" Viv said, not sure what she was supposed to make of this.

"And how about 'Shido'? Do you know what *that* means?"

Abruptly, Viv started to see where Rei was going with this, the pieces clicking together.

"No," she answered after a second. "But I'm going to assume it's something in Japanese..."

"You got it. 'Seed'. 'Shido' means 'seed'..."

Ordinary, Viv might have been surprised that she hadn't been aware of this, but any such considerations were swept away as her theory solidified.

"And let me guess... 'Kamiya' is Japanese too, isn't it...?"

“Full marks. Nice job. I’m nor sure the Colonel or Maddison Kent put that together.”

Viv stared at Rei, forcing herself to skate by the fact that both Rama Guest *and* his chief assistant had apparently sat in on the meeting. Alarm was the first thing that registered, shifting quickly into worry, then disbelief.

Then, though, came the *anger*.

“No. No way. There’s no way. It’s got to be a coincidence.”

Rei shook his head. “That’s what I thought, too. At first.”

“At first?!” Viv demanded, feeling the heat of building fury start to burn in her gut. “What do you mean, ‘at first’?! Rei, if you’re saying what I think you’re saying...!”

She trailed off, though, almost afraid to voice the words out loud. She understood, now. She understood what it was that had robbed Rei of his light, that had sent him on a spiral from which he was obviously getting out of. There was only one thing she could *imagine* that might shake Reidon Ward—the *Iron Prince of Galens*—to his core so thoroughly.

“No way...” she hissed, feeling the anger pulse.

“Way,” Rei answered simply, his NOED alive again. “Kamiya’s not a known name way out here, but it’s big. *Really* big. Took me me five seconds to pull it up on the feeds. About the same to to find the leadership profiles. They’re nice enough to be pretty transparent about their head honchos.”

There was another ping to her frame, and this time Viv opened up the notification to find a feed link. Following it, she found herself looking at a brief list of profiles, complete with small, circular pictures that depicted the executives of the Kamiya Corporation. There were a good dozen just in her frame now, with more half-visible to be scrolled through at the bottom of the page, but Viv didn’t have to look past the first face and name before every muscle in her body stiffened.

Dr. Kamiya Hiroto, the profile read, listing the man as the CEO of the Corporation. There was a sparing of other information as well set in a brief bio, but it was the *image* of the man that Viv couldn't look away from. Kamiya Hiroto was handsome for his age—some sixty or seventy year old, by the looks of his face—but there was something about the fall of his straight black hair and the angle of his jaw. His nose and mouth were different, as was the slant of his eyes—more extreme—but those features were all cast aside in favor of one thing.

“His eyes...” Viv managed to get out. “Rei...”

“Yeah...” Rei answered quietly. “You’ve said it yourself, haven’t you? That I’m not exactly ‘all-natural’, just like the rest of you.” He pointed at his face, indicating his own eyes.

His own *slate-grey* eyes, whose shade could have been plucked from the picture of Kamiya Hiroto Viv still had floating before her.

“Pretty sure my family has finally decided to acknowledge that I exist, Viv...”

CHAPTER 8

PLACEHOLDER

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“Arada! Ward! You’re late!”

Lieutenant Catori Imala’s annoyed bark nearly brought Rei and Viv up short as they bolted barefooted onto the main floor of the Arena together, already breathless from having booked it at a full sprint from West Center all the way to the middle of campus, then getting Viv changed in a hurry. The Phalanx sub-instructor—a tall, narrow-shoulder woman with a tanned complexion and pale, orangish hair that hung in a tight braid down to her waist—had caught sight of them the moment they’d run up the ramp and through the double doors that were one of the many entrances led onto the field from the underworks, and her shout had the attention of everyone present turning on them.

Most unfortunately, this included Valera Dent, the chief combat instructor looking like she’d been in the middle of lecturing the other 14 squad members only to have the conversation interrupted by the two’s tardy arrival.

Steeling himself for a thorough berating, Rei didn’t look at Viv as they closed the gap a little slower now, working just as hard not to meet Aria’s or Catcher’s gaze as they did Dent’s or Imala’s. When they were within the circle of the waiting cadets, they finally stiffened up into a salute, eyes rising above the officers’ heads automatically.

“Reporting for training, ma’am,” Rei addressed Dent quickly, not trusting Viv to keep her tone level if she’d spoken first. “Apologies for our tardiness.”

“Apologies don’t cut it, *cadet*.” Imala was the one to answer, stare fierce as she stepped by the captain to stand before them, cutting a frightening figure in her red-on-white combat suit. “You better have a *damn* good reason for why you almost left your

teammates hanging dry for the first match, or you're both going to be running laps around this field until your feet are—”

“Lieutenant, I've been informed Ward may have special circumstances. Take over discussion for me, if you please.”

If Imala was surprised by Dent's calmer interruption, the Phalanx didn't show it. Instead she spun to give the captain her own brief salute, then moved forward smartly to pick up what sounded like a lecture on some minor reoccurring issues the different squads had been demonstrating.

As she did, Dent turned and moved smoothly by Rei and Viv, motioning them to follow her as she did. Complying, the two fell in a step behind the tall woman until he stopped a dozen yards from the others and faced them again, eyes steady over the black line of her prosthetic lower face.

“I understand you had an interesting meeting this morning, Ward. Is that correct?”

The question came quietly despite their distance from Imala and the rest of the first years, the Bishop obviously not wanting anyone else to overhear. It said something about her awareness of his and Viv's relationship, too, given she hadn't bothered to separate them. It was one of the many reason he wasn't remotely surprised the woman had clearly been read in on the situation.

Or at least what aspects of the situation Galens was aware of.

“Yes, ma'am,” he answered simply, not trusting *himself* to keep an even tone, either, if he'd elaborated.

Dent nodded, the gold brim of her black cap glinting in the Arena's lights for a moment. “And is that the reason for your lateness?”

Rei hesitated, unsure of how best to answer this question. In the end, he and Viv *had* actually ended up skipping lunch, but that was fine. Neither of them had harbored much of an appetite after the rest of their pre-training hour was spent half with Rei talking his best friend off from marching on the Administration building with the clear

intent of burning it to the ground, half with both of them trying to disprove his theory about the Kamiya Corporation's intentions and—more distressingly—motivations. In the end, they'd done just the opposite, with Rei having grown more and more convinced of his suspicions until he'd realized they'd completely lost track of time and flown from West Center for the Arena, praying that the wind and snow would discourage any patrolling officers from shouting after them to slow down.

They'd also, in the end, completely failed to message either Aria or Catcher, which Rei suspected was why he thought he could feel at least one pair of eyes—probably green, if he had to guess—staring daggers at him from beyond Dent.

“We—I lost track of time discussing the meeting, ma'am.” He decided sticking as close to the truth as he dared was the best answer to Dent's question, in the end. “It was... a lot. Viv was helping me get a handle on it. It's my fault we're late. I should have kept an eye on the clock.”

Dent looked to Viv, at this.

“That so, Arada?”

In the corner of his vision, Rei saw Viv frown as she offered a very stiff “It's both our fault, ma'am” through half-gritted teeth.

It was strange, in a way. Rei had left Administration that morning feeling... empty. The moment he'd been excused after the “conversation” with Rama Guest—which had largely amounted to a string of subtle threats on Rei's life, limb, and future in the ISCM if he so much as harmed a *hair* on Aria's head—he'd chased down his suspicions about Kamiya, and found his evidence without much effort. It had stolen something from him, in that moment. Rei wasn't sure how—though maybe he understood *why* a little better—but looking into the still face of Kamiya Hiroto and seeing what could have been his own eyes staring back at him had stolen something. He'd been left feeling hollow, the emptiness only filled by an anger he hadn't felt in a long, long time. Years,

even. It had demanded an outlet, demanded a way out. His fight with training simulations had helped a little, to that extent.

But not half as much as Viv's lingering fury on his behalf, her wrath palpable even now, standing there with the Iron Bishop herself staring them both down.

Dent, too, seemed to sense something in Viv's hard tone, because the captain's eyes narrowed a little. After a moment she looked back to Rei, and he could have sworn the woman was about to ask him something, her expression briefly slipping into what almost might have been genuine concern.

The calm, intent mask of the chief combat instructor of the Galens Institute was back up as quickly as it had gone, though, and Dent lifted one black-gloved hand to point towards the edge of the Arena floor.

"I'll allow some leniency given the circumstances, but you're still not excused for your lateness. You two *are* going to run laps around the Wargames field until your first fight is up, and you're going to hold a C0 Speed pace at minimum. We're practicing Team Battles this afternoon, so I'll hold Laurent and the rest of your squad back from the first round. Is that understood?"

"Yes ma'am!" Rei and Viv answered together. It was a definitely forgiving punishment by any account. Aside from the fact that the captain would have been well within her right to brig the pair of them, they shared speed specs above C5, if equally lagging Endurance. A C0 pace for what was likely to be 15 to 20 minutes would be uncomfortable, but it wouldn't leave them *totally* spent for their first match.

"Good. Get to it. And if you're late again I *will* ensure that Hadish Barnes hosts the both of you for an overnight stay."

With another mirrored acknowledgement, they took off at once, Rei experiencing a twinge of guilt at the relief he felt that he wouldn't have to face the others just yet. Sure enough, as they reached the open 5-yard-wide track that encircled every Arena and started to speed up—in silence despite running side-by-side, as was mandated for such

disciplinary action—he didn't miss not only Aria's and Catcher's gaze following them around the closest edge of the field, but Cashe's and Logan's almost as intently.

Yeah... He definitely still needed a minute to prep for *that* face to face...

In the end, Rei suspected Dent—maybe in full awareness of the fact, knowing the captain—had done he and Viv a favor. While their talk in the West Center definitely got him feeling better than he had when his hollow rage convinced him to call up a B0 training partner to spar with—a combat level that was yet a bit beyond his ability—the fury had still very much been there as the two of them bolted for the Arena. He suspected it would be there for some time, too, but as they ran in silence—the wind rushing by as the C0 pace carried them around the Arena at a speed the Olympic sprinters of centuries past would have fainted to see—Rei got the chance to breathe. He was forced back into the moment, forced back into the present. He'd been lost, for a second there. He'd been lost right up until Viv had shoved him down and all-but-headbutted him into telling her what was going on. He wasn't completely back, yet, sure, but he wasn't gone either, and with every loop around the field Rei was reminded of where he was, and why he was there.

Why he was there...

With a quick series of commands, Rei pulled up a specification request, feeling his resolution solidify as Shido's stats scripted out before his eyes in rapid lines of blue:

Specifications Request acknowledged.

...

Combat Assistance Device: Shido. User identification... Accepted.

Type: A-TYPE

Rank: C6

...

Identifying Preferred Mode.

Preferred Mode identified as: BRAWLER

...

User Attributes:

- *Strength: C1*

- *Endurance: C0*

- *Speed: C6*

- *Cognition: C6*

...

CAD Specifications:

- *Offense: C3*

- *Defense: C1*

- *Growth: S*

...

Display additional Modes?

YES/NO

Not for the first time Rei's eyes lingered on these final two lines of the request. His heart had finally stopped doing a flip every time he read them or the "*Identifying Preferred Mode*" code higher up, but he still wasn't used to seeing any of it. They were a new addition to the script, one he was pretty sure was as unique to him as Type Shift itself was, which had Rei doubting he would ever *completely* get accustomed to the presence of the words.

Still, it wasn't his Ability he was interested in the moment. At least not entirely.

His Offense was up to C3 since the weekend, and Strength had just ticked up to C1 after his 2-plus hours of training against the simulations that morning. While Rei's meteoric growth had certainly slowed down ever since his specs had all broken into the Cs, the fact that he could still generally rely on three or four of his specs ranking up

every week was incredible, and that was putting it mildly. While his average stats *were* still lower than his overall C6 CAD level thanks to his Growth, he was on pace to be break away from Aria before Sectionals and officially become the highest-ranked of the freshman cadets at Galens. The first—and only—time the two of them had faced off on an official field had been when Rei had excitedly—or stupidly, depending on who you asked—offered himself up as a partner for the Commencement exposition match, where he'd promptly gotten himself skewered for his trouble. He'd been an E-Ranked nothing then, though, all those months ago. The next time—which was very likely sooner than either of them had admitted to themselves yet, given the circumstances—they would be *much* more evenly matched.

And Rei knew he had *earned* this new strength. Even if he might never to admit it out loud, with literal blood and sweat—and the endless help of friends who were too good for him—he had *earned* it. F8 to C6, he had risen since assignment.

By the end of Sectionals, Rei knew there was a chance he was going to have clawed his way three full tiers up from the bottom of the barrel to a place very few first-year Users were ever fortunate enough to see...

Rei's jaw clenched at the thought, and he closed the spec request with a blink before dropping his head and picking up speed a little, pushing his pace to C1, then C2, earning himself a grunt of annoyance from Viv as she moved to match him. The slap of their bare feet over the cool metal was soon a rapid-fire song, but Rei barely heard it, too focused was he on his one conclusion.

Whatever happened, whatever came of the coming days and weeks, he wasn't about to let "Kamiya"—and whatever that name might mean to him beyond just the title of a company—be anything more than just another reason to push himself further and faster than he had yesterday.

After 5 minutes of running and with their breath finally starting to coming harder, Rei and Viv heard the first match of the afternoon get announced throughout the

Arena, and taking a loop along the south end of the floor the two of them saw a variation of “Cliffs” rise into being above the 30-yard diameter of the north Team Battle area. Not 30 seconds later, the empty expanse of the stands was filled with the sounds of fighting and shouts of coordination happening as Vademe’s and Martin’s teams went head to head in an Elimination bout, the 6v6 fight escalating rapidly into an all-out brawler across the simulation of stone and dust and mountain vegetation. It wasn’t long, in fact, before the winner was announced as Vademe’s squad, who’d be heralding the Red Team colors, and the zone dissipated to bring both the victors and their fallen opponents back to the ground. Rei and Viv watched more intently, now, as the two squads converged on the spot Aria, Catcher, Cashe, and Logan had been looking on, with Dent and Imala descending from observation to give feedback.

Then, after nearly 20 minutes of running and the burn *very* real in both their legs, now, the Lieutenant’s blessed shout finally reached them.

“Arada! Ward! Get over here! You’re up!”

Neither of them being dumb enough to slow down, Rei and Viv shifted course and were in front of Imala and Dent again in barely more than a heartbeat, standing beside Aria the others, who collectively only cast one or two sidelong glances their way. Still not meeting any eyes, though, the pair of them waited at ease expectantly.

“Cadets, enter the field. We’re going to give Vademe’s group a couple minutes to recoup, then they’ll join you. I want to see every effort, even if a couple of you are worn out.” Imala’s eyes were as sharp as knives as she glared at Rei and Viv pointedly, who both had the sense not to do more than join the other four in shouting a collective “Yes, ma’am!” before dispersing towards the Team Battle zone.

The moment they crossed the silver line that marked the edge of it—spreading out a bit as they headed for the far end of the 30-yard circle and the scattered line of six distinct starting rings waiting for them there—a notification popped up across Rei’s frame, bright in the red text that only displayed in combat circumstances.

Team communications established.

Though he'd expected it, Rei couldn't help but wince as Aria's voice—as concerned as it was angry—rang clear over his NOED.

“I'm assuming I don't need to *ask* for an explanation.”

Rei almost sighed as they crossed the halfway mark of the field.

“We'll talk about it later. We should just focus on the match right now.”

Unsurprisingly, that didn't go over so well.

“Nuh-uh. You skip breakfast, go missing for the better part of the morning without a word, then Viv sends us all off looking for only to go AWOL too. An hour later, here you both are, together *and* late. Again: I'm assuming *I don't need to ask for an explanation.*”

Rei *did* sigh this time, making sure to bring two fingers up to press to the spot where his neuro-optic was implanted as he did.

“Muting yourself won't help, Rei. I'm *looking* at you.”

Wincing again, Rei glanced sideways sheepishly. Sure enough Aria was glaring lightning at him from a few yards to his left, making for her usual flanking position that was the southmost of the starting circles. They had a set order to their initial positions for Team Battle, having quickly deduced how best to take advantage of their various abilities within a few days of the first week of training. While Aria and Cashe held their edges—their reach provide the best opening defense for object-based formats—Viv and Grant comprised of the center to former an ideal piercing point of power and speed if they needed to rush for Elimination or any capture-themed fight. That left Rei and Catcher—the most versatile of the six of them—to take up the spots between Aria and Viv then Cashe and Grant respectively, providing adaptable support for whoever needed it.

It was unfortunate that all went out the window for the Wargames matches that often scattered them all across a broader map, but they had to start somewhere.

“Aria, I *promise* we’ll talk about it later,” Rei swore, finally meeting the girl’s fiery gaze in the hope that he meant every word of it. “I promise. Now’s just not the time.”

“Dude, you get dragged off to a mystery meeting with who-knows-who, then go total AFK on us.” Catcher, for once, sounded almost as angry as Aria. “Can you blame us for being a *little* peeved?”

“Both of you, shut up.”

The harsh words came hard just as they reached their starting points, and each of them—include Cashe and Grant—turned to look with some alarm at Viv. She, for her part, though, only had her eyes set across the empty field from them, having reached her circle first and whirled to set her feet and wait, fists clenched tight by her sides.

It was hard to tell, but Rei was pretty sure he could see Gemela’s twin bands trembling around her shaking wrists.

“...Viv?” Aria asked, her anger suddenly replaced by concern.

She didn’t get an answer, however, and Rei’s earlier appreciation for his best friend’s empathetic fury suddenly turned into his own worry.

“Viv, take a breath...” he told her evenly. “It’s not worth it.”

Viv responded by turning slowly towards him, eyes wide with anger. “Not worth—Are you *kidding me*, Rei?!”

“Guys, *what the hell is going on?!?*” Catcher’s demand was wholly unsubtle, now, as he bent to look around Grant at the three of them.

“I said *shut up*, Catcher!” Viv snarled in answer, whirling on him in turn without leaving her spot. “Rei said we’ll talk about it later, so we’ll—!”

“*All of you*. Shut. Up.”

Grant's voice, a heavy, dark rumble, carried like a threat over the coms, and the boy's powerful presence as he turned black-red eyes on each of them over their heads in turn had every one of them stopping short.

"You want to fight? Fine," he continued, his stare lingering on Viv in warning. "Do it. But how about *after* the match, and after *your coms aren't overheard by the instructors?*"

Rei stiffened, and he heard Aria take in a quick gasp from his left as she, too, recognized their stupidity. Sure enough, looking across the field again Rei found Lieutenant Imala staring at all six of them in silence, clearly having been waited for them to make the realization. Behind her, Dent too was frowning in their direction, having half-turned away from Laquita Martin who she seemed to have just been talking to.

"Are you all finished?" Imala snarled after the six of them were finally silent for a moment, ice-cold words ringing as clear over the coms as they might had the tall woman be standing next to each of them. When no one was dumb enough to answer, she nodded. "Good. Clearly you lot haven't gotten the message that your whole team is *already* on thin ice thanks to Ward and Arada, so let me make it *crystal* clear for everyone one of you: if the captain or I hear another *peep* out of your squad that isn't related to this match, you'll be dismissed from today's training. You two in particular." Even standing so far away, Rei could tell she was glaring between him and Viv. "Is that understood?"

"Yes, ma'am!" the collective answer rang out at once, and Rei decided he would make sure that was the last time he got chewed out, that day.

Without so much as acknowledging their agreement, Imala turned away again, and for a bit they all stood their silently. Viv, Catcher, and Grant all staring sullenly forward as Cashe occasionally glanced nervously around at them all from the far end of the line, while Rei had to work himself not to look at Aria.

Fortunately, a notification hit his frame just before he was about to cave, letting him know he'd gotten a message.

Are you okay?

It was like magic. As he read the question, a weight lifted off Rei's shoulders, some of the building tension in his back releasing. He was worried about Viv, still, but it seemed like her temper had cooled enough of Aria's own irritation to have worry rise predominant again.

Thinking that typing with a hand might push Imala's buttons too much if she caught him, he took the extra time to respond in-frame.

Yeah, he spelled out with his eyes. I've got a handle on it. The meeting was with your uncle and some civilians. Corporate reps. Maddison Kent was there too.

The brief delay in answer told him Aria also wasn't foolish enough to give away the conversation by responding by hand.

Corporate reps?

I'll tell you later. You and Catcher both. Trust me, it's not something we should get into right now.

Rei, what happened?

Aria. Later. Please.

The delay in response was longer this time, and Rei finally gave in to glance around at Aria briefly. She didn't notice, too busy was she frowning at nothing, focus clearly on

the conversation he could barely make out across her NOED. After a good few seconds, he saw her eyes start to move again, and only then did the message finally come.

But you're okay?

Rei wasn't sure why—maybe it was the insistence of the repeated question, or maybe that he just hadn't really registered what the words meant to him—but he felt a familiar emotion squeeze at his chest, reading the words again. He smiled—the first real smile he thought he'd managed to put on since before meeting Ueno Jasper's sharp eyes that morning.

Yes. His response was more firm this time. *Viv got me out of the rut.* He paused, unsure of himself for a moment before adding: *And seeing you helped a lot, too. I'm sorry I worried you.*

He sent the message, and couldn't stop himself from looking sidelong again. Sure enough, Aria's eyes snapped forward the moment she received it, only barely moving as she read his answer.

Then, like clockwork, she stiffened as her cheeks went red, snapping out of her frame to briefly shoot him a glare that somehow seemed all at once annoyed, embarrassed, and pleased.

Chuckling to himself, Rei turned his gaze forward again, indeed feeling much, *much* better than he might have thought he could have not an hour or two before.

It wasn't five minutes later that the Lieutenant's distant call had Vademe and Kay's group getting to their feet from where they'd been taking a well-deserved break on the cool steel of the projection plating. Soon, the half-dozen of them, too, were stepping onto the field, splitting off until they formed a mirrored line across the 30-yard width

of the circle, all standing tall to face Rei and the others. Unlike them, Vademe's six hadn't yet settled on a specific starting ?????, usually changing it up a little every time they fought. This time—perhaps in a bit of an echo to Aria and Cashe—Vademe and Kay had picked flanking positions, with Jiang, Ranjha, Tethers, and Phillips between them. Once they'd settled, the twelve first years stood at the ready, Rei nodding politely to Vademe as he caught the Lancer's eye as he thought he saw Aria, Catcher, and Cashe do the same to some other member of the opposing team on either side of him at Grant, of course, didn't budge, and Rei couldn't say he was surprised when he stole a quick look to his left to see Viv staring across the projection plating with murder in her eyes.

Uh oh, he had just enough time to think, opening his mouth to try to get the girl's attention again, only to be interrupted as the ground around them suddenly changed to light, bluish hue, and several voices rang clear in his head as calls immediately started getting made.

“Volcanic Slopes?” Cashe asked in a rush as the familiar sensation of being lifted from the floor took hold of them, then the Arena manipulated the gravity even as it drew whatever field Dent and Imala had selected for them into steady being.

“No. Desert.”

It was Catcher who called it before they were even a yard in the air, the ground around them indeed turning to uneven sand under their bare feet, but instead of agreeing with him Rei kept the coms deliberately clear, just like they'd practiced a hundred times before. He decided to trust that Viv wouldn't do anything stupid. She could hold onto her temper, when she had to.

... Couldn't she?

“Desert,” Aria confirmed, and at once started making commands even as the field took form before them, rising rapidly before their eyes to swiftly hide Vademe and the others from view even as the stands faded into darkness. “Looks like a nighttime, dune-

heavy variation. I'll call south or north as soon as we get a clear idea of obstacles. Catcher, you and Cashe take the lead and be ready to go on defense. Rei, Viv, and Grant will take middle, and I'll watch our rear. We'll adapt based on the scenario."

There was a chorus of agreement from everyone but Viv, which didn't make Rei feel any better. He grew more nervous even as they climbed higher, the interlocking plates of the Arena's closed-off ceiling indeed disappearing into the dark emptiness of a brilliant night's sky. The field itself as plain, the sand reflecting a pale blue in the bright light of single full moon hanging over the a northern horizon they couldn't see, the rising and falling appearance of stars over their heads marking the tops of tower dunes that would make mobility visible.

"Come on, Viv..." Rei muttered to himself under his breath, low enough not to get picked up by his NOED. "Come on..."

Before long their ascent halted, and their positions having shifted only slightly so that the size of them found themselves in a deep valley between two steep, sandy slopes. Rei looked around, making the deduction even as Aria called it out.

"South," she said simply. "Clear path. Too much possible obstruction to the north."

Six bodies immediately shifted to the right, tense and ready.

The Arena didn't keep them waiting long.

"The Galens Institute: Red Team versus the The Galens Institute: Red Team." The clear voice spoke out of the dark. "Elimination Bout. Combatants... Call."

"Call," Rei and five other voices said out loud, and the night was suddenly ablaze with crimson light.

Shido, just like like each of their other CADs, had adapted to their team-assigned colors. Instead of the familiar aquamarine-blue Rei was accustomed to, the vysetrium

that lined his Brawler Mode claws and the armor plating of his arms, legs, and half-mask glowed a bright around. Before him, Aria's typical green was gone as well, and over his shoulder he knew each of the other four—other than Grant, who's typically-red vysetrium might have on barely have changed shades—would similarly matched. It was always strange to see, with Rei only just starting to get a little used to the change after months of Team Battle exposure they'd started in the second quarter of the school year, but the momentary adjustment was worth being able to tell the difference between friend and foe in nothing but a glance.

Devices, after all, cut down allies just as well as they did enemies, when such unfortunate events became relevant.

“Elimination,” Aria repeated in the bare seconds they had between announcement. “No orders. Stick together. You all know what to do.”

Any other day, Rei would have agreed with her whole-heartedly.

As it was, though...

But then the Arena spoke again, and Rei could only hope against hope that he was worrying for no reason.

“Combatants... Fight.”

The starting circles blinked out, and five of them took a step southward, intending to collapse as Aria had ordered. In a blaze of flaring light, though, one figure whipped by them like lightning, living trails of red across Rei's vision in the night.

He didn't need Catcher's curse nor Aria's shout of alarm to know who it had been.

“Oh shit!”

“Viv! No!”

Dammit, Rei thought before abandoning the orders himself, flying after the faint glow that was all that was left of Viv, his best friend having already turned a corner in the sandy valley they'd been aiming for.

"I'll try to catch her!" he shouted over the coms as he tore away from the others. "I'm the only one fast enough! Collapse on us when you can!"

"She's going to get herself killed!" Catcher yelled after him.

As he ran, though, leaving the four of them behind in all of two seconds, Rei wasn't so sure he agreed. He'd just caught a glimpse of the look in Viv's eyes as she ripped by, just *caught* a hint of the anger that blazed there in what might have been the faintest glow of red...

If Catcher wanted to be worried about anyone, Vandeme and the others might be who he should be praying for...