

CHAPTER 36

“Oh *man* that fight was so. Damn. EPIC!” Catcher was still crowing almost an hour later, head hanging back and arms slung across the translucent tops of their seats on either side of him, behind Cashe and Rei respectively.

“Which one?” Rei asked him with a smirk. “The Lasher’s? Or Aria and Grant’s?”

“Both!” Catcher exclaimed, lifting his head with face screwed up as those the question had been borderline insulting. “Both of them! Lennon is a damn *terror*, but I think everyone was just as loud for them as they were for him!”

“That’s a bit of an exaggeration,” Viv muttered from Rei’s left, a little quietly. While she seemed to come to herself during the matches, she had still been a bit reserved in the more somber minutes between. She was talking more, though, so Rei had called it a win and didn’t prod at her shell any more. He’d done what he could, he knew, and Aria had doubly assured him of that via whisper in his ear just before she and Grant had headed out.

“Is it, though?” Cashe asked from Catcher’s other side. She looked almost shell-shocked, leaning forward in her seat with her hands over her face, eyes peeking through spaces she’d made between her fingers. She’d been sitting like that ever since the fight had ended, staring down at the Arena in open amazement.

Rei couldn’t blame her. It had been a *hell* of a fight.

Aria had done her best to control the battle from the go, only barely coming out of her starting circle even as Grant had charged her headlong across the basic, open Neutral Zone that had been their randomized field. She’d managed it, too, for the most part, moving with the Mauler only as necessary, shielding herself perfectly from almost every hit, her spear a blur of jabbing thrusts into whatever openings she could find in between. In that fashion they’d made a slow circle around the edge of the field, step by slow step as Grant did everything he could to overpower Aria’s defenses, making it

halfway around the in the space of 2 minutes and leaving a trail of destruction in their wake. It had been *spectacular* to watch, and while Rei did think Catcher was exaggerating the stands' enthusiasm a bit—at least by comparison—he could say with confidence that no one had been bored even as the fight slipped into 3, then 4 minutes. It was a testament, in fact, to the growth they'd all seen over the last 6 months. Not just Rei, but everyone. Only when the fight hit a full 5 minutes did Grant start to show any signs of slowing down, and by that point Hippolyta's shield was a ragged ruin of sheared metal. Still, that didn't stop either of the pair from giving it their all, and for a full 2 more minutes the fight raged in a blur of flashing red and green light over colored steel.

Only when Grant had absolutely nothing left in the tank, in fact, had he pulled out his ace.

The Mauler's Overclock, triggered in a wheezing shout that had almost been lost to the stands, return him to full form and then some. Ion flames rippled in a crimson wash over his CAD, and suddenly Grant was hurtling at Aria again with a level of speed and power he hadn't even had fresh from the start. Aria had been expecting it, of course, and had saved her Third Eye for that exact moment, but the weight of Honoris' axe had soon proven too much for Hippolyta's ruined shield, because a massive horizontal slash caught the weakened wall of steel in the side with such force it sheered most of the top half clean off. Aria had only kept her head by apparently realizing that the strike would be too much, jerking away even as it landed to drop and roll back before coming up with only half a shield left. Hippolyta seemed to account for this because Third Eye reacted as though having adjusted for this change in weight and heft when blocking Grant's follow-up swings, but it was still a disaster. Whereas Aria had only been giving one step at a time under the Mauler's onslaught the whole match, she'd suddenly been in total retreat, backpedaling as quickly as she could to dodge the his ripping attacks as often as she struggle to block or deflect them. Rei had thought that a good enough tactic already. Grant had triggered Overclock at the end of his rope, and would therefore

probably burn out quicker than usual. If she could just keep herself clear of his axe for long enough, she would have the fight easily in hand.

Aria, though, had had other plans, and the “Fatal Damage Accrued” announcement calling her out as the match victor had come so suddenly that the stands had *exploded* in enthusiasm as Grant toppled to the ground.

Rei had to actively stop himself from facepalming as he recalled.

“She threw it,” he said under his breath for the hundredth time, trying not to laugh. “I can’t believe she actually *threw* it.”

“Hey. It’s not stupid if it works,” Viv muttered from his left, clearly having overheard.

Fair enough, Rei thought with a nod, though he couldn’t help but grin. The fight had ended so abruptly because Aria had taken the chance—a fraction of second’s opportunity—to *throw* Hippolyta’s broken shield at Grant’s head. The Mauler had been wide open, losing himself in driving her back and back, with his axe high above him in two hands, ready to come down in a cleaving stroke that would have cut Aria in two had she been caught it in. Instead, however, the hunk of thick steel had come spinning at his face, striking him in the forehead with *thunk* that sent him momentarily reeling and cursing. It hadn’t been enough to finish the job, of course, with Grant’s reactive shielding long-developed enough to take such a hit without much trouble.

On the other hand, the spear that had followed, catching him under the chin to run his skull through top to bottom as he’d been wheeling back trying to catch his balance, had certainly done the job.

And so Aria, not at all unexpectedly, had become the first year’s second finalist, joining Rei in what would be their first ever *real*, sanction fight on an SCT field.

He didn’t know if he’d been this excited for a match since he’d jumped up at Commencement, shouting out his request to fight her then, still as an E-Ranked User.

Rei grinned again, glancing down at the rings of blue vysetrium over black and white steel around his wrist, thinking that he'd come a long way...

“Hey hey! The glorious victor returns, valiant defeated in tow!”

Rei looked up, and sure enough Aria and Grant—still in their combat suits—were picking their way through the last of the crowd along the walkway to reach the stairwell. They were moving almost gingerly, because like Rei before them people kept rubbernecking to voice congratulations, or even—apparently—ask to shake one of their hands or the other. He almost snorted when he noticed that neither of *them* had anyone giving them sidelong glares, but shrugged that minor annoyance off before the two finally made the stairs and hurried up as quickly as they could, obviously trying to be free of the enthusiastic throng.

“*Wow*, that was something,” Aria grunted as she gratefully accepted the seat Viv budged over to free up for her next to Rei. “No one was like that after any of my other matches. What the hell?”

“Not as bad at least,” Grant agreed as he scooted passed their knees towards the still-open spot on Viv’s other side. “I *lost* and I still got asked if I could take a picture with like four people...”

“You’re in the big leagues now, both of you!” Catcher laughed. “Better start polishing your autographs for when *that* starts to be a thing.”

Rei and Aria exchanged a sidelong look at that, but didn’t say anything as they barely held back a grin. Instead Rei congratulated both of her and Grant on a good match, and Cashe jumped in quickly to drill them both on their fight, specifically asking about their Abilities and their strategy for triggering them. Given she’d only had minimal opportunity to practice with Warband and Firesong was still in the running for a Team Battle championship, Rei got where she was coming from, and actually appreciated the girl taking control of the conversation.

It meant he didn't have to bring up the fact that, rather than sitting next to each other, he and Aria would very soon be standing across an empty Dueling zone.

The excitement welled up again, but something else came with it at the thought, this time. As Cashe leaned forward to talk with Aria and Grant across him and the others, it took Rei a second to recognize the feeling, a sensation he realized he wasn't at all used to in context.

He was *nervous*.

It was bizarre. It wasn't like he wasn't *capable* of being nervous, of course. He was good at keeping his cool around Aria, but there were definitely times—especially when he'd *first* asked her out—that he'd been a hot mess on the inside. He recalled, too, his CAD-Assignment Exam. Waiting for the test to begin, anticipating his disastrous physical results, unexpectedly sitting across from the MIND itself. Even more-so he thought about when that ISCM captain—"Loren", Rei thought he remembered, realizing he hadn't seen or heard of the woman since his arrival at school—had approached him in the Grandcrest gymnasium with a letter from Galen's held in her hands. So out there, out in the real world, Rei *could* be nervous.

But he couldn't recall a single instance of such anxiety before a fight, simulated or otherwise.

All his life Rei had been on either side of a black-and-white coin. For as long as he could remember he'd never had anything to lose, so he'd gone into every fight with the mentality that there was no reason to be nervous, that there was no reason to be afraid. Even if he got his ass kicked—on the mats, on the field, or off of either—it didn't matter. On the flip side, more recently Shido had granted him the opposite experience, had provided him with the strength he needed to enter more and more fights with the confidence of someone with no reason to think he couldn't come out on top. The exceptions to either of these circumstances had been few and far between, but even when he'd been paired with Grant during the final loser's matchup of the Intra-Schools

he hadn't felt "nervous". Maybe he should have been, but at the time he'd just still been too stunned by Shido's recent evolution and the acquisition of Type Shift to feel anything so basic.

And yet now, here he was, looking out over the empty Arena with a clench in his stomach he very much wasn't used to...

"What are you smiling at?"

Rei started and looked around at Aria. At some point or another she'd disengaged from the conversation with Cashe and Grant in favor of watching him with an expression that was half-concern, half-amusement. At her question, Rei realized abruptly that he *was* indeed smiling, and almost from ear to ear.

And he couldn't stop himself from doing so even when he tried.

"I... don't know," he said after a second, laughing quietly. "I was just thinking about something dumb."

"Dumb?" Aria asked, obviously not following

Rei nodded. "Nothing bad. I don't know..." He considered his words a moment before continuing. "Are you... Are you nervous?"

Aria stared at him like she couldn't believe her eyes. No, that wasn't quite accurate. She started at him, open mouthed, like she was witnessing something she'd never expected to have the chance to see.

Then she leaned in to whisper teasingly, "Well I never. Reidon Ward, nervous about a fight. Or..." she brought a hand up to rest under her chin in a cutesy kind of manner, batting her eyelashes at him with exaggerated care "... is it just that it's a fight against *me* that's got you in a huff?"

"Someone *awfully* confident in themselves today," Rei answered with a low laugh, pressing two fingers into her cheek to push her face away from his. "If you're looking for me to tell you you give me butterflies or whatever, there's better ways to ask."

Aria sniggered, cheeks only going a little red as she looked back at him a little more seriously. “In that case I guess I just have to assume I’m witnessing a miracle.”

Rei made a face. “Oh come on. It’s not *that* big a deal.”

“Rei I’m pretty sure you could face off with an *army* of S-Ranks and not blink. It’s kinda scary, actually. It’s *definitely* a big deal.”

Rei opened his mouth to retorted, but paused, considering it for a moment.

“... Do they have phantom calls?” he finally asked. “Or true calls? Cause it would make a difference.”

Aria all-but-guffawed at that, earning themselves not just the attention of the rest of Firesong, but also every other Galens student and every other spectator in the vicinity.

Unfortunately, that included the chaperones.

“Laurent. Ward.”

Rei and Aria both tensed in their seats, realizing they’d messed up even as they turned rigidly to face forward. Below them Dyrk Reese was glaring around at them from his own spot along the bottom row of the Galen’s section, but it fortunately wasn’t *him* who had called them out.

Takeshi was standing at the edge of the moving crowd, facing the stands and watching them with arms crossed and one eyebrow raised.

“If you two have extra time to flirt, you have extra time to get ready for your match. Either go hit the subbasements or go get yourselves lined up in the underworks. I don’t care. Just get moving.”

“Yes, ma’am!” the two of them said together, standing as one and saluting automatically before sidling their way by Catcher and Cashe towards the stairs. Each gave them hisses of “Ooooh, you’re in trooouble” and “Good luck” respectively, while did Viv and Grant wished them a good fight from further along the row. Aria waved

back as Rei gave the four one last thumbs up before hurrying down the steps to join the walkway crowd.

In actuality they'd been approaching the time the two of them would have needed to start getting ready regardless, so Takeshi call out was less of a slap on the wrist than it might have seemed. The tournament organizers had been clever in their design of the final morning's Duels, having started the 4 semi-final rounds with an upper bracket match, but having scheduled the first of the two *finals* round as a *first-year* bracket match. Not only did that mean that the morning fights had started with a bang that even Rei and Vademe's fight could never have managed, but everyone would be on the edge of their seats for the Lasher to face Paul Williams for the upper bracket championship round *and* both third years would have an extra half-hour of rest and prep time beforehand. Maybe it was a little unfair to Aria—who'd only just come off a match, after all—but Rei didn't doubt that the organizers had from the start been as aware as anyone that the high C-Rankers who were most likely to make up the first-year final pairing would have the Endurance spec to be up and ready to go either way.

“Rei. You're still grinning. I can see it from back here.”

Rei jumped again, though this time it was more because Aria's had bent over from where she'd been walking closely behind him through the moving lines of students and spectators to whisper right into in his ear. They'd already had a dozen different people pause to watch them slip by or shout after them in recognition, so the additional curious glances this earned the pair were hardly noticeable. And besides, Rei decided he didn't mind *that* kind of staring. It made him feel warm and fuzzy inside.

Especially not after the night before.

“So? I can't help it,” he finally answered back as the two of them dodged a bunch of older men who'd all-but-stopped traffic to watch them pass. “I'm excited! Can you blame me?”

Aria didn't respond until they made it to the top of the underworks stairs and started heading down, the empty tunnel a breath of fresh air for them both.

"Blame you? No. But if being nervous makes you giddy, that would explain a lot about why it took you so long to ask me out."

Rei rolled his eyes as he reached the bottom of the stairwell and popped out in the entirely empty tunnel. "Contrary to popular belief, I am *not* a masochist, Aria. I was slow cause I'm an idiot, not cause I get off on anxiety."

Aria snorted at that, but Rei was looking around a little dejectedly. *No one* was down here, now, at least that he could see. There would probably be some officer or another by the access ramps, but again he missed the energy of the early week, of the excitement of every student and fighter ready to show the world what they could do, some for the first time, some maybe even for the last. The smart-glass displays flickered on the walls all around them, showing off the various school emblems and the now-outdated schedules for the week. It was a little depressing.

And yet Rei still couldn't seem to lose his grin.

"I mean *come on!*" he let out abruptly, turning on Aria so quickly she actually blinked in surprise. "Do you realize this is our first *real* match? Like actual *real* match?"

"Rei, we fight literally *all the time* at school."

"Not the same." Rei shook his head. "You can't tell me that's the same. Can you blame me for being psyched? The last time we were on a really field against each other was Commencement."

"And I foresee this being an easy repeat of that fight," she offered with a wicked smile.

"Oh them's fighting words, lady. You're *on*."

For the next 20 minutes or so the two of them play fought like that, though not at the bottom or the stairs. Partially because of Takeshi's order and partially because it was just a good idea, they picked a direction and started doing steady loops around the

main way of the underworks, passing the officers who were indeed waiting at each of the east and west access ramps to the north Dueling field and walking through the north and south elevator lobbies two or three times each as they talked. It might have been odd to witness—*was* odd to witness, rather, judging by the looks shot their way each time they crossed the officers—but Rei didn't know if it could have really been any other way. They would be fighting in all of 10 minutes probably, sure, but to Aria's point that was nothing *really* new to them.

And she was just so damn *easy* to be around...

Only when they were wrapping what was probably their third loop of the tunnels, starting to stretch and roll their arms in preparation even as they chatted, did something finally interrupt their conversation.

"There you are," a familiar voice called out. "On me, if you please. Both of you."

Rei and Aria broke off a discussion about some of the stronger non-Galens first years they'd taken note of over the course of the week to look forward and find that Valera Dent herself had appeared around the bend in the tunnel, standing at the foot of the very stairs the two of them had first come down. She was watching them expectantly, and they moved double pace to hurry over to her.

"Takeshi said she'd sent you down here to stay loose, but I couldn't find you. Where have you two been?"

There was a note of suspicion in the captain's voice, but one accompanied by the hint of an upward curl at the corners of her prosthetic lips. Rei glanced sidelong at Aria—who looked to have automatically fallen into a state of horror as she realized that Dent was possibly subtly implying that she knew *exactly* where the two of them had been—and hurried to correct any potential misconception.

"Captain Takeshi wanted us to keep moving, ma'am, so we've been doing loops," he said quickly. "The officers at the ramps will confirm this, if needed."

“Good to know,” Dent said with a curt nod and a warning look between the two of them. “It would be a hell of a story on the morning feeds if the two Section 9 first-year finalists had to be written up for impropriety while *at the tournament*. Especially if they were both *Galens* students. Catch my drift?”

“Yes, ma’am!” Rei and Aria both said together, saluting quickly. Given that they had, in fact, been doing nothing “improper” at the time didn’t reduce the weight of the warning in any way. “I know, and everyone knows,” Dent was telling them, probably along with “Don’t be stupid.”

The captain nodded in a satisfied sort of way. “Good. At ease.” She waited for Rei and Aria to both drop their salutes to stand more comfortably before her before continuing. “Obviously this is a bit of an atypical situation. A Galens vs Galens final isn’t unexpected, obviously, but ordinarily I would have had Captain Takeshi or Major Reese—” her left eye only twitched a *little* at the latter name “—handle one of your pep talks while I did the other, but I think the circumstances will forgive me. You both ready to go?”

“Yes, ma’am!” the pair of them said together once again.

“You both have your strategies in place? You both know what you’re doing?”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“You both ready to kick each other’s asses to the next system and back again?”

This Rei grinned, seeing Aria doing the same in the corner of his eye. “Yes, ma’am!”

“Perfect.” Dent looked between the pair of them. “I don’t think I have to tell you that each of you has something special. That you’re both at the very top of your class, on this planet and far beyond. If first years were allowed to compete at a higher level than Sections, I would have long-since put my credits down that the two of you could make it to the very top, even against whatever Sol System might throw at you. For that reason I expect nothing less than every ounce of effort and heart in this fight. I know

you still have the Team Battle coming up, but this is your last chance to show those people out there—” she pointed up the stairs beside her, up towards the low, constant thrum of the stands “—what *you* can do. What *you* can do *alone*. Them and the *millions* of watchers who are keeping an eye on you two, as well as the *tens* of millions who will come along to watch the match recordings later. It will be a year before either of you has this opportunity again, and even then it’s not a guarantee. Are you ready to take that shot?”

“Yes, ma’am!” Rei and Aria answered, a little louder this time.

Dent stared them down, taking the two of them in like she were trying to push them into the ground with the weight of her gaze. Rei felt that force, felt the pressure of anticipation and expectation there.

Neither he nor Aria looked away.

Eventually, Dent smiled.

“You both have what it takes to win this. That means I don’t expect victory more from one than the other. Ward.” She looked at Rei with mock ferocity. “If you don’t win this, I’ll have you running your ‘loops’ down here until it’s time for the Team Battle. Laurent.” She turned to Aria. “Lose, and it’ll be pushups for you. Good luck keeping that shield of yours up this afternoon with your arms turned to jelly.” Her eyes passed over each of them slowly. “Is that understood, cadets?”

“Yes, ma’am!” came the expected answer, *actually* shouted this time.

“Who’s gonna take home this fight?”

“I am, ma’am!” Rei answered at once.

“Me, ma’am!” Aria responded at the same time, trying to drown him out.

“That’s what I want to hear.” Dent gave one last curt nod, then threw a thumb over her shoulder as her eyes settled on Aria. “Fight will be announced soon. Laurent, you’re on the west entrance. Get over there and get ready.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Aria said. She started to take a step by the woman, but paused and braved a look over her shoulder at Rei. “I’ll see you after I kick your ass?”

“You’ll seem me, yeah,” Rei returned with a grin. “From flat on the ground after I kick *yours*.”

Aria laughed again, then was gone, hurrying off around the bend of the tunnel towards the west side of the field she’d be called from.

When she was gone Rei was left alone with Dent, and she didn’t immediately dismiss him. Instead, she watched him for a long moment more, and this time her attention was different. It wasn’t as heavy, but it was no less acute, like she was studying every inch and angle of his body, sizing him up.

“Ward, do you remember what I told you last semester? After Logan Grant made a fool of the both you in combat training?”

The question came as a surprise, requiring a second for Rei to realize what she was asking.

He had the answer, of course.

“Yes, ma’am,” he answered quietly. “You told me I needed to get stronger.”

Dent looked pleased that he remembered. “So you were listening.”

“Very much so, ma’am.”

“Good. Then you probably already know what this fight is, but I’m going to spell it out for you anyway. It’s more a match against Laurent for you, Ward. It’s an opportunity to show me how *much* you’ve grown. This is the fight that started this journey. I want to see how much you’ve changed. Clear?”

“Crystal, ma’am,” Rei answered truthfully. In fact it was *perfectly* clear to him. More than ever before. *That* was why he was so excited. *That* was why he was so nervous. It *was* more than his first clean fight against Aria, wasn’t it? It was also his first chance to perfectly compare where he’d been to where he was...

No wonder he couldn’t stop grinning.

Dent nodded one last time, then jerked her head in the direction of the tunnel behind him.

“Then show me what you’ve got, Cadet.”

Valera watched Ward take his leave at a jog, headed in the opposite direction she’d sent Laurent, towards the north field’s west ramp. When he was gone, she continued to stare after him, wondering what it was that was leaving her with a pit in her stomach.

After most of 10 seconds or so staring after her, Kes pinged her.

Something wrong?

“I don’t know,” Valera answered allowed, not even bothering to look around to check that she was still alone. “Just... a bad feeling, for some reason...”

Why?

“If I knew, I would say so, wouldn’t I?” she answered with a snort. She paused though, considering. “Not sure, but I think it just hit me. This is the big stage. The first real moment he’s going to be seen.”

This time, it was the familiar red text that responded.

I assure you he’s already been taken notice of, the MIND answered. The ISCM has suppressed some of the feed reshares and recording uploads from the week in fact, just to slow the spread a bit.

That didn't make Valera feel any better.

“Yeah... I know. He's been on a lot of radars since the Intra-Schools. Kamiya coming forward as a potential sponsor already proved that. Still...” She considered the feeling again, still not able to place the weight in her gut. “I don't know... I just had a bad feeling. Like if someone's out there looking to knock him down a peg, it would be now, wouldn't it...?”

An interruption from Central Command is unlikely, at this stage, the red text spelled out. The parameter testing was one thing. If they are trying to control spreading the awareness of Ward's existence, they wouldn't do anything overt enough to land him even more explosively in the fields.

“Sure, but I think that's kinda why I'm stressing all of a sudden,” Dent muttered, finally turning away from the tunnel the boy and vanished down to start heading up the stairs again. “He *is* known, isn't he. So why are we still assuming Central is the only threat...”