

## CHAPTER 15

PLACHEHOLDER

-PLACEHOLDER

What followed was a brief—and ultimately unproductive—interrogation of Rei by Cashe, which had him dodging so many questions he soon felt like he were in a full-on fisticuffs with some S-Ranked Brawler. The Lancer had only just finally started to tire—obviously beginning to understand that she wasn't going to get any more of an answer from any of them that afternoon—when a medical tech with cropped black hair and a long nose arrived and announce that he was there to remove the recovery device from Rei's chest. It was a welcome interruption, and Rei actually felt relieved when the technician seemed to notice he was looking a little haggard, because even as the man peeled the machine's lower arms out from under Rei's back he told Aria and the others that it was time for them to go. Cashe gave a half-hearted protest—Viv offering a more full-throated one at the same time, if for entirely different reasons—but the hospital worker was firm, especially after Rei shot him a subtle “Thank you!” look when the man leaned over him again, briefly blocking his face from view.

Honestly, tired as he was in the moment, he was only sad to realize that meant Aria would have to go too.

“Ashton said get out tomorrow, right?” She asked as the others started to file from the room behind a grumbling Viv. “I'll bring you your uniform in the morning. I think I remember what locker you left it in.”

Some of the feeling had come back to his face, so Rei managed to give her a much closer approximation to a true smile this time as he reached out to brush her bare shoulder, hoping to convey his appreciation. She returned it, then glanced around, and Rei only realized she'd been making sure everyone else was distracted—the others as

they left and the tech as he started wiping down the device with a cloth that smelled of alcohol—when she leaned in quickly, bringing a hand to one side of his face and her mouth to his other ear.

“I’m glad you’re ok,” she whispered, briefly pressing his head into hers. “I’m really glad you’re ok.”

Then, before Rei could think to say anything in answer, she turned and planted a quick kiss on his cheek, disengaged, and made a beeline for the door Catcher had just stepped through. Even *if* Rei had been able to speak he very much doubted he could have found his voice, staring after Aria with mouth hanging open even once the door had closed, face on fire until the tech gave a polite cough and muttered something like “Nice to be young...” under his breath.

After Rei had gotten control of himself again, the rest of the afternoon was spent largely in boredom, with even a review of recent top-level SCTs fights becoming monotonous enough that he decided to catch up on what little schoolwork he’d been behind on from the morning. After that, he studied the coding of his NOED for a bit—mostly just looking over the spots in the script he thought he might still be able to adjust to suit Type Shift a little better—but without a proper desk or smart-glass screen to display anything he got frustrated and gave up in favor of just trying to get to sleep early. Pleasantly the room reacted to him bringing the bed back down and closing his eyes, because before he knew it the full-length window had faded into a black sheen to block out the day’s dying glow, and the rest of the walls had shifted to do the same as the solar lights dimmed and went out over head.

Unfortunately, on the other hand, sleep wasn’t so easy in coming.

Rei was certainly tired enough for it. That wasn’t the issue. Even early as it was—just after 0700, and half an hour since another tech had brought him a tray with soft foods for dinner—the afternoon had taken a *hell* of toll on him, and fatigue wasn’t any kind of issue. Comfort was more of a problem—an aching had slowly grown in his

chest since the removal of the recovery device—and toss and turn as he might he couldn't find a position that kept him from feeling like a someone was slowly pushing a needle under his right ribs, even when he messed with the bed angle. Then again he doubted he would have slept much if he'd been floating on a perfect pad of silken roses.

His mind just didn't want to stay quiet.

Central... So they were showing their hand a little at last. Rei grunted in irritation at the thought as he plumped the pillow under his head and shifted yet again to try and get comfortable. He couldn't blame Cashe for finally breaking the unspoken agreement the six of them—and the rest of the school, to an extent—had been bearing for some time, now. Maybe if nothing else had happened they could have gone on pretending, but with Central Command now casting its shadow on the situation of course Cashe's concerns would start to outweigh anything else. Grant, too. Rei had been surprised when the massive Mauler had voiced the question—or started, at least—that had been hanging like a sword over his head for half-a-year now, but he supposed he shouldn't have been. A split in the road was coming, Rei knew now, and while he had managed to have pump the brakes enough to keep from crashing headlong into disaster that afternoon, he knew he wouldn't be able to hold the collective curiosity of the other students at bay much longer.

No... It wasn't even that he wouldn't.

He *couldn't*.

C7... In a flash that Rei otherwise thought should have taken through Sectionals, he and Shido had suddenly tied Aria as the strongest Users among the Galens first years. It was only on paper, sure—his average specs were still lagging thanks to the artificial average boosted by his Growth—but very few other people knew that, and Rei doubted many more would care even if they did.

No. What they would focus on was the number they could see, the metrics they could measure. It wouldn't be long before someone outside of the squad realized he'd

hit C7, and Rei could already hear the whispers of his classmates and the questions—relatively quiet until now—starting to get louder. Worse, too, was the fact that such a discourse wasn't going to be limited to the school, either. He had fans, Rei knew—strange as the idea was—and while he'd largely avoided looking up what was being said on the feeds about him since Aria had told him about his “Iron Prince” moniker, he wasn't naive enough to think others weren't watching.

If anything, hadn't the parameter testing proven that *too* many were watching?

“Dammit...” Rei muttered at the thought, then again when the ache in his lungs stabbed at him suddenly. “*Damn. It.*”

He didn't even realize they were the first words he'd spoke since waking up.

Lucky for him, the brutality of Central's interference won over his body in the end, and after an hour or so of fighting, sleep finally caught up, and it seemed like only a blink in time between when Rei was staring at the darkness of the window-wall and when he opened his eyes to find himself squinting at the hearty light of a new winter morning. He blinked several times, not understanding, then shot up out of bed with a yelp, checking the time. It was after 0900?? When the hell was the last time he'd slept in passed—?

“Relax, Ward. Keep moving like that and you'll be coughing up blood again before you even get out of bed.”

Rei turned to find Ameena Ashton walking towards him, the room door closing behind her. Apparently her arrival had been what had woken him, and he lifted a hand to wave at the corner of his vision in indication of the time.

“Ma'am! Classes have already started! I need to—!”

“You need to take it easy is what you need to do, Cadet,” she answered firmly, reaching the bed and depositing a pile of folded clothes she'd been carrying by his feet, then a pair of boots on the floor closer to him. “Laurent came by this morning with

these. If you're a good boy I'll let you out before noon, and you can join your squad for lunch."

Rei spluttered, only glancing at what he now realized were the pieces of his promised uniform, cap and all. "But you said you'd clear me in the morn—!"

"In the morning, yes," Ashton cut him off again without even blinking. moving up the bed to take him in with a critical eye. "But you'll notice I didn't say *when*, and since one of us has a bad habit of doing things too fast too soon, I imagine you will understand why I'm going to keep your ass here for *every* spare second I can, Cadet. Consider it a lesson. Now—" she pointed at his pillows "—lay back down and lets take a look at you, or am I going to have to threaten to withhold your breakfast as well?"

Rei groaned, but did as instructed. Ashton was quick with her review of his condition, and it was only as her fingers prodded at his chest and abdomen that he realized the ache of his injured lung was all but gone. He tensed a little when she palpated under his ribs, the thin fabric of the combat suit no hinderance to the exam, but nothing came of the added pressure, leaving him breathing a low sigh of relief as she nodded in approval and pulled back from him. Next came the imaging device she'd used before to check on the regression of his fibro, and after a couple more minutes the woman seemed wholly satisfied, pulling the wand-like sensor free from his body again and moving around the bed to the counter and sink in one corner of the room by the window.

"Good," she said as she started to clean the device with soap and water. "Your CAD seems to be working overtime. You're in better shape than I'd hoped."

Rei perked up at this, reaching back to press the button that would have his bed sitting up again. "Does that mean I can train?" he asked hopefully as the gears whirred into life.

Even with her back to him, he thought he could tell Ashton was rolling her eyes.

“We never said you couldn’t train,” she answered as she turned to him, setting the imaging device under a small nearby ion scrubber that would further sterilize it before reaching for a towel to dry her hands. “We said you would be on light duty for a couple of days. What that means will be up to Dent and your sub-instructors.”

Rei deflated, recalling with vanishing hope the hard lines of the Bishop’s face as she had told him in *no uncertain terms* was he going to be pushing himself until Thursday. He grumbled something under this breath, not exactly sure what he wanted to say. He wanted to train, *needed* to train. Sectionals started in less than a week. If he wasn’t ready...

*Splat.*

To avoid overtaxing synthetic neuroline and the like, a User’s Cognition spec only engaged on demand, much like Strength and Speed. For that reason, Rei didn’t react fast enough to the damp towel thrown at him, and squawked in surprise as the cloth took him in the side of the face and neck with a wet, flapping sound. He flailed momentarily before wrenching the thing off in disbelief as he turned to Ashton with wide eyes.

“Are doctors allowed to throw things at their patients?”

The woman, smirked at him. She was leaning back against the counter, arms crossed and head tilted to one side. “Oh so you *are* my patient, then?” she asked him pointedly. “Does that mean you’re going to admit you’re hurt? Or are you going to keep being a colossal dunce and push yourself into an early grave? Because you can’t have it both ways, Ward.”

Rei had to struggle to try and find an answer to this, but Ashton kept on before he could put the words together.

“Just be careful, Cadet,” she said with a sigh, pushing herself off the counter again and making for the door without so much as looking back at him. “That’s all we’re trying to tell you. Be careful.”

And then she was gone, and Rei was on his own again, her parting statement lingering in the silence of her departure.

True to her word, Ashton didn't reappear for most of the morning. Luckily, though, 1-A's first class had been a short period in Device Evolution, so when Rei rang Aria between periods she picked up quick enough. After a brief assurance that he was in one piece again, it didn't take much convincing to get her to livestream the rest of the pre-lunch lectures for him, at last giving him *something* to do at the very least. Between some lingering discomfort in his side and not actually being *in* the class it was a little hard to pay attention, but Rei managed it, and as though on cue the bell indicating the end of the last lesson rang just as a the same tech from the previous day poked his head into the room to tell Rei he was free to go.

Thanking the man in a rush, Rei told Aria he'd meet her and the other at the mess even as he kicked his legs off the bed and stood, standing up and wincing as tight muscles protested the sudden change in position. He'd only risen thus far that day to use the bathroom—fearing Ashton's wrath if he pushed his luck more than that—so he wasn't surprised by the soreness of the previous day he hadn't so much as had the opportunity to walk off after the testing. Giving himself a minute or so to stretch and roll out the discomfort, Rei reached for his uniform, intending to get dressed and hurry off to meet the others, when the gleam of Shido's blue vysetrium caught the noon sun.

Shido...

Rei swore, not believing he'd forgotten. It said something about how far he'd come from the early days of being awestruck by every little change the Device made as it grew, but he still wanted to punch himself. Dropping his arm, Rei looked around eagerly, not exactly sure what he was searching for. There was mirror in the bathroom—a small, private chamber hidden behind a section of the wall by the door—but it was barely large enough to reflect his face and shoulders. No, what Rei needed was—

And then his eyes fell on the large interior wall that hid the hall outside, and in two strides he was standing by it.

Working the smart-glass wasn't complicated. There were a number of functions hidden behind biometric security—obviously to limit access to the hospital feeds, patient information, and the like—but finding the “Display” settings only took a few taps after the initial menu popped up on the wall at Rei's first touch. He scrolled through, not for the first time marveling at the incredible nature of the technology—which allowed everything from a full-screen monitor to a livestream of the school Arena's now-empty main floor—until he found a “Reflective” option. Tapping it, he selected the first choice that popped up, and as desired the wall changed in a rippled of light, the opaque white giving way to a metal-like array that worked as a perfect, massive mirror.

Rei stepped away from the wall, pleased with himself, and excitement building in his chest. He took a breath, shaking his arms out and taking himself in in the reflection. He really *had* changed, hadn't he? He was over 5'7”, now, and while he was still wiry compared to most—*all*, actually—of his classmates, not one had called him “skinny” in a good long while. His hair was getting long, too, and Rei had to shake away a chuckle thinking on the number times he'd overheard Aria and Viv both muttering that he needed to get it cut. It wasn't the moment.

Instead, Rei set his feet shoulder-width apart and turned his palms towards the mirrored wall to give himself the best view. Only then did he considered, just for a second, if he should wait, if he should hold off until Aria, Viv, and Catcher were with him. Aside from his last evolution, at least one of them had almost always been there, and it felt a little strange standing there in front of the mirror all by himself.

Then again, the last time he'd hesitated they'd all ended up giving him an earful, so instead Rei just grinned as he spoke the word.

“Call.”



Shido responded in a rush, and inside of a heartbeat the Device's black and white armor had whirled into place, blue vysetrium shining between the steel plating and along the edges of his Brawler-Type claws. Rei had to stop himself from whooping, too, because while the change wasn't huge, it was obvious, and *definitely* a solid upgrade.

In the center of his chest, hiding most of the red griffin of Galens from view for the first time, was a narrow strip of metal that was widest at the top and narrowing before growing again towards the bottom, fitting perfectly—as always—against the swell of chest muscles. It was all black—except for a sizable wedge of vysetrium set in the thickest part of the metal, between his collar bones—and provided a healthy line of protection for vitals that had otherwise been largely exposed until then. Shido had prioritized mobility and combat over almost everything, so far, and while that had come with great benefits it had also left Rei's torso wholly open to direct assault. Now, though, even if it wasn't a *huge* change, opponents would have to be more careful with their attacks, or risk their body-shots getting caught by the new plate of carbonized steel.

"Nice!" Rei barely managed to keep his voice under control, pumping the air victoriously with a clawed fist.

And realizing, at the same time, that what he saw wasn't all that had changed.

Something felt... different. Something was off, particularly when he moved. At first confused, Rei lowered his arm and started slowly twisting this way and that as he watched the mirror, trying to deduce what was going on, but seeing nothing else different. It took him a second, but eventually he realized it was his *back* that felt odd, and with a surge of anticipation Rei whirled, craning his head around to look at his shoulders and neck.

He didn't manage to keep his excitement down, this time.

"Oh *hell* yeah!"

All along his spine, from the base of his skull to just above the armor that had encased his hips since the last evolution, a smooth line of metal plating now snaked. There was no vysetrium there, but the black steel over white twisted smoothly even as awkwardly turned as Rei was to see it, not hindering him in the slightest. Still keeping one eye on the mirror, he bent this way and that, spending a full minute marveling at the flexibility of the joints by flexing and jump, finally even spreading his legs and doubling over to look between upside down, utterly thrilled. Shido had done as promised, making a *definite* improvement to its Defensive capabilities, but hadn't sacrificed any of the mobility that was essential to his Brawler-Type combat style especially.

He couldn't have been more pleased.

Rei was all smiles, therefore, and still looking at himself between his legs like that, when a familiar, wheezing cough cut across his excitement, making him freeze. Slowly, too mortified to even think to straighten up, he turned his head towards the room door whose opening he hadn't heard in his excitement.

There, standing just inside the frame, was and upside-down Willem Mayd, one hand behind his back, the other politely held as a fist over his mouth as the old man obviously fought to keep a straight face.

"Cadet, can I give you a piece of advice?" the Lieutenant Colonel asked, his amusement obvious despite the lightness of his tone.

"Yes, sir?" Rei squeaked out, still too embarrassed to think to righten himself.

Permission given, Mayd reached for the mirrored wall. "Next time, keep in mind that high-end smart glass has *two* options of reflective display. Your standard mirror, and—" he tapped the glass, bringing up the menu and navigating it with familiar speed "—a one-way version."

And then, as Rei felt all the blood rush from his face, the man made a selection, letting the wall go clear. With an explosion of embarrassment he finally snapped up

straight, horrified to find that no fewer than a half-dozen hospital workers had stopped to gawk, mouths hanging open, at what Rei realized had been the sight of him bending and twisting and admiring himself. Of all of them, only Ameena Ashton wasn't staring, and only because the Lieutenant Major was busy facepalming, shaking her head into her open hand.

“Oh, and congratulations, by the way,” Willem Mayd said from the door, finally caving and grinning broadly behind his white beard. “An impressive change as always.”

Then the old man was gone, chuckling as he left, leaving Rei spluttering and as red as the wings of the griffin still partially visible on his chest.

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*One* good thing, at least, came out of the humiliation Rei suffered as he'd finally rushed to get dressed and outright fled the hospital. When he reached the mess, the story was the perfect ice breaker to mutter to Aria and the others after they'd met up in the lunch line, sidestepping any awkwardness that might have been lingering from the previous day's discussion. Catcher—bless his predictably, for once—was laughing so hard he was crying as they reached their usual table in the southern quarter of the arboretum, and even *Grant* looked to be working hard to hold back snicker, something than neither Viv nor Aria bother to try. Best of all, Cashe—who had been almost as tense when they'd met up as she'd seemed when Rei had first met the girl—relaxed, and eventually chose to join in on grilling Rei first about Shido's evolution, then on specifically *what* possess he had struck for all of the hospital staffers to see.

By the time lunch was done, Rei was pretty sure he could have charred his plate of pork chops and greens on his face, if he'd wanted to.

After lunch he, Aria, Viv, and Grant parted with Catcher and Cashe as usual, and it was a brisk walk through a cold afternoon to the Arena, then down to the

subbasement. Unsure of what he could expect from the day, Rei changed with the others—noting as he did that he *really* needed a shower judging by Viv’s scrunched up nose beside him as he pulled *back on* the combat suit he hadn’t been able to wash yet—and walked out onto the training floor with the other three. He hadn’t miss the stares of the rest of 1-A at lunch and on the walk to the Arena, and they certainly weren’t lost on him now, but he was careful not to acknowledge any of the gazes. Instead, he stayed in careful conversation with Aria as Viv glared around at the rest of the class in open threat, helped out by Grant’s resting glower.

In a way, it was a familiar experience. Pretend as he might to be unbothered by the attention, Rei found himself falling back into a mix of unpleasant memories, ones in which he’d walked out onto a similar combat floor in a different colored suit. Back then, of course, the stares had been for entirely different reasons, but without detail or distinction the muttering and whispers that chased their arrival still sounded much the same to his ears, marking him once again as *different*. For a moment, just a moment, he wanted to snarl at the rest of 1-A, to join Viv in fixing everyone around them in turn with a promising threat.

Aria, perfect as she was, stopped him with a cool hand on the back of his shoulder, smiling at him as she read the frustration in his eyes even as he fought to pay attention only to her.

What he’d done to deserve this girl in his life, the MIND only knew...

Fortunately, unlike most of the first years, Valera Dent seemed about as impressed with Rei’s recent ascent to the coveted top spot in the class as she might have been a sweat stain. Without so much as an extra glance in his direction she called class to order shortly after, and a minute later Rei, Aria, Viv, and Grant were splitting for their usual fields. Once there, any lingering hope Rei had of ducking Mayd’s and Ashton’s orders were dashed when Bretz paired him up with an E-ranked holographic opponent for

warm ups, the Second Lieutenant even going so far as to laugh out loud when Rei weakly asked if he could at *least* bump the opponent level of to D.

In this fashion the rest of the afternoon training passed, with even the interest in Shido's subtle upgrades—shown off for all to see as soon as he'd called on the Device—dying down eventually. The rest of the day was much the same, and after a dinner in which Rei was only sniggered at *half* as often, he and the rest of Aria's squad made for East Center, where absolutely *no one* let him believe even for a second that they were going to let him get off light duty just cause there were no instructors around. At least the five of them let him fight live, though, with even Grant cycling out of the 1-on-1 pacings they were putting themselves through to spar at half speed, and by the time curfew neared Rei was feeling a little less frustrated with the situation.

The next day, Wednesday, slipped by in the same way, the only notable deviation being that Rei was halfway through breakfast before he realized the ache in his chest was *completely* resolved. The morning classes passed without anything to note, as did combat training in the afternoon and evening. Thursday morning came and went, and to Rei's relief Dent came over to Field 1 to let Bretz know he was clear to resume regular conditioning. It was good timing, too, because the Type-groups were scattered for cross-training, and Rei had a chance to really put his new Defense upgrades to the test when he was placed under Lieutenant de Soto's care along with Viv, Kay, Mateus Selleck, and Selleck's gossipy Phalanx crony Leda Truant. It brought Rei's spirits up *immensely* when he trounced both Selleck *and* Truant back-to-back without so much as calling on Type Shift, and he had a chance to get some great feedback from de Soto on his bouts with Viv and Kay in turn, both lost because he took them on *solely* in Saber-Mode, but neither without a healthy fight. That evening, too, things were back to form, Rei and Aria spending most of their extra hours duking it out with a rare vigor even for them, eventually getting told by the others to claim half of their training room's Dueling field so they could practice on a healthier variety of zones. It had taken some

convincing, by the pair of them had acquiesced in the end, not displeased to blast their way through more than the smaller section of the Neutral Zone they usually kept their evening conditioning limited to.

By the time afternoon training Friday ended, Rei was feeling wholely himself and confident again, and it was with more excitement than anxiety that he heard Dent call an end to the class, followed up by a shout of “All Sectionals participants! On me!”

With a range mutterings that were both eager and disappointed, most of 1-A took their leave of the combat floor, Sense giving Rei and excitable double thumbs up before hurrying to find Leron Joy in the departing crowd.

When they were gone, on Rei, Aria, Viv, Grant, and Kay were left gathered around Dent, even the sub-instructors having probably gone to prep for whatever class section would be arriving next for training.

“How are you all feeling?”

The Iron Bishops question was easy, but pointed, obviously not meant as a platitude as she took the five of them in deliberately, hands on her hips and eyes clear beneath the brim of her cap.

There was an exchange of looks from Rei and the others before Aria spoke up for them, hesitating only long enough to glance at Kay.

“Good, ma’am. Err... nervous, but good.”

“Unsurprising.” Dent looked to Kay expectantly. “How about you, Sandree? Cadet Vademe was in morning training, but he seemed confident with how your squads extra hours have been going in particular.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Kay bobbed her head as she agreed, tucking a few errant strands of her purplish hair behind one ear. “Don’t know how much of change we have catching up to this lot, but we’re feeling good.” She motioned to Aria’s squad with mock-grimace before grinning at them.

“Focus on the win,” Dent said with a bit of a smile. “Fight to win, and everyone has a shot. Fight not to lose, and you might as well not step on the field in the first place. But anyway—” the captain turned to all of them “—I didn’t call on you to lecture you. I called on you to let you know what travel plans are.”

Rei wasn’t sure if he was the only one of the five of them whose heart rate sped up, suddenly. It might be a small thing, but planning to leave Galens for their first *actual* inter-school competition...

It suddenly made the looming presence of Sectionals much more realistic.

“Tomorrow, all squads are excused to from regular combat training and classes. Instead, you’ll report to the SB1 for one last Team Battle and Wargames training. It’ll be light-pace—we don’t want any last-minute injuries—but it’ll be all day, so be ready. You’ll have the chance to recover before Monday, because we leave Sunday morning at 0900 from the south gate. That means eat beforehand, or miss breakfast.” She paused, just to ensure there were no questions. When no one said anything, Dent continued. “Pack for the week. You will be allowed to wear civies in the hotel the ISCM has put us up in, but uniforms or combat suits will be mandatory at the Arena. Obviously, even when *not* in your regulars, you are expected to comport yourselves as proper members of the military. Understood?”

“Yes, ma’am!” came the unanimous reply.

“The school has booked flyers to get us to the orbital station, where we’ll be taking a tram to Ganoth and the Ganoth Academy. It’s not a long trip, but I encourage you to use it to relax. Once we’re settled in the city, it will be go-time, and you will be expected to stick to your squads from morning to night, and take every moment you can to prep and strategize.” She stopped again, and this time that hint of a smile came back. “There have been some changes this year that I think will make it a little easy to keep that team-oriented mindset in place over the course of the week, and I’m looking forward to hearing what you think of them.”

*That* got Rei's ears to perk up, but Viv beat everyone else to the punch.

"Changes, ma'am?" She sounded both intrigued and worried, which was probably and apt summary of all their emotions. "What kind of changes?"

Dent, though, only shook her head and grinned outright, apparently pleased to have been able to tease them. "Nothing you need to worry about till Sunday. Now, if you don't have any question, I need to get ready for the next class." Perfectly pulling a page out of Michael Bretz's book, though, she didn't so much as give them a chance to voice any other curiosity at her cryptic last hint. "Perfect! Dismissed, and I will see you all in the morning."

With that, of course, the five of them had no choice but to salute and turn on their heels, taking their leave as one. All of them, of course, were filled to the brim with curiosity, and Kay prove the least able to contain herself, erupting in what could just *barely* be considered a whisper as soon as they were out of earshot, about to turn the corner around the main chamber wall into the sub-basement hall.

"Changes?" she hissed, looking around at the rest of them. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"No idea," Rei muttered quietly, contemplating it. "Sectionals are pretty straightforward, especially for first years. Not a lot of fanfare..."

"Which means there's a lot they *could* change," Grant grunted in agreement, letting his voice rise to a normal level now that they were in the hall. "Sectionals are usually single-elim, right? Maybe they've moved to double?"

Rei was a little amused to find himself less surprised than usual at the Mauler's unhesitating participation in the conversation. It was still strange to bear witness to, but maybe—just maybe—he was getting a little used to it.

"Na," Viv answered with a shake of her head as they neared the locker room doors. "That would take forever. Our Intra-Schools took three weeks on their own, and there's



going to be *more* teams *and* squad-formats on top of Dueling. If they went to double-elim we'd be there until February.”

“Fair,” Grant muttered in answer, looking pensive when Rei glanced back him.

“School team-up?” it was Kay’s turn to offer, sounding suddenly hopeful. “*That* would be cool!”

“Like Wargames, but with sides?” Aria asked, obviously interested. “Yeah... that *would* be cool...”

“But unlikely...” Rei said, leading the way into the locker room to be greeted by the rumbling chatter of the rest of 1-A, most of those in the closes aisles turning towards them at once on their arrival. “That would basically be a whole new format. They’d probably want to establish the rules for that in training beforehand, so it wasn’t a mess live.”

“True...” admitted Kay, starting to look around as they headed of the back of the room and the last line of lockers that had become Rei, Aria, Viv, and Grant’s usual spot. Spotting Sense waving her down in one of the middle rows, she broke away to wards him and Joy. “Well, whatever going on, we’ll find out Sunday! See you guys later!”

She left them, in the end, to nothing more than further speculation, and by the time the connected with Catcher and Cashe again—both of them having received their own lectures in their respective training times with the other Sectional qualifiers—all six of them had theorized everything from special uniforms to first-years being given their own bracket in Globals and higher for the first time. It was fun to gossip about what could be going on, and the chattered carried them all the way through dinner and an intense evening of additional training that culminated in the six of them, even Grant, staying up curfew to discuss in the sprawling common area of Kanes, the first year dormitory.

Saturday dawned bright and late for Rei, with the squad having decided the evening before to forgo any discussion of morning hours if they were expected to do team

training all day. They met outside of 304—since four of the six of them roomed there—and took their time making for the mess, Catcher claiming all the attention with a new, wild theory that all the Sectional SCTs were going to be held on Earth, and that they would be making a hole jump that afternoon to the Sol System. They laughed the idea away, but it filled an otherwise quiet breakfast, made strange by the lack of students in the arboretum, the vast majority of whom were already in class. They even took a different table that day, grabbing a spot next to Vademe's group—who were also eating late—so they could trade theories and chat about what they thought Ganoth Academy was going to be like.

Team Combat training, fortunately, was a more comfortable affair, familiar after three straight weeks or repetition over break. All of them—Aria, Vademe, and Martin's squad together—were practically vibrating with excitement, and the anticipation manifested just as often as recklessness as it did in adrenaline-ruled genius. Even Aria wasn't immune to the feverish enthusiasm, making her first ever real mistake as squad leader and losing them a match she made an ill-advised call that sent Catcher and Rei into the full body of Martin's squad, costing them the match. In her style, though, the stumble only seemed to serve to clear Aria's head after she'd gotten through with apologizing to them, and despite several blunders here and there by the others, it was the only match they lost all day. By the time the afternoon came around, Catori Imala—who had cycled out with Allison Lake and Liam Gross over the course of the extended training session—had nothing but praise for every single one of the squads, and they all left the Arena not long after feeling rather proud, and maybe just a tad *too* confident for their own good.

And then, before they knew it, it was Sunday morning.

Rei was up well before his alarm, which he'd set the previous night for 0700 in the vane hope that he might be able to sleep in again. On the contrary, anticipation had him up even *earlier* than usual, and he spent nearly an hour packing, unpacking, and

repacking the bag he'd brought with him from Grandcrest Academy, which had barely seen the outside of his room closet since the start of the year. He was *actually* getting nervous, now, to the point where he eventually sat himself down at his work desk and forced himself to get through what assignments Sense had been kind enough to send all of them from the previous days missed class. It was something to do that wasn't outright fidgeting over which hoodie he should bring to wear around the hotel, but even then he couldn't stop himself from checking the time every couple of minutes or so.

Finally, 0700 came, and Rei practically bolted up from the desk, gathered his school and clothes bag, and was out of his room into 304's common area before he'd properly put on his cap.

Benaly was the first to come out of his own room not a minute or so after, greeting Rei with a grunted "Morning..." that gave him the distinct impression the big guy hadn't slept a wink all night. Similarly, as soon as the Brawler was gone, Catcher's door open, and he stepped out looking a little green.

"Dude, I had the *weirdest* dream..." he muttered, hitching his bag higher over his shoulder and eyeing Rei dubiously. "Do me a favor. If Viv tries to make me wear a dress onto the field, kill me."

Rei snorted, but before he could promise any such thing, Viv and Cashe's own doors opened, probably in response to the sound of Catcher voice.

"Oh good, you guys are ready." Despite her dark complexion, Cashe looked almost as sick as Catcher did. "I've been up since like 0300. So much for a good nights sleep."

"Same," Viv said through a yawn, hitching her bags over both shoulders, the underside of her eyes indeed a little baggy. "Rei and I did combat team for *years* at our old school. You think we'd be used to a competition."

“It’s a little different,” Rei said with a chuckle, bending his head in question in the direction of the hall that led to the suite door, then heading towards it as the others all nod with various level of enthusiasm. “This is an SCT. An actual *SCT*.”

“Ward, I like you, but if you keep reminding me I’m going to aim for you when I vomit up breakfast on the tram,” Cashe muttered queasily.

Given they were more heavily laden than usual, it had been agreed the night before that they would meet up in the lobby, and so after a quick walk down the hall, an elevator ride down, and not a few “Hey! Good luck!” calls from various other first years they crossed paths with, they found Aria waiting for them on one of the red couches of the main common area. She was watching snow fall through the leafless branches of the tree in the courtyard that took up the middle of the building—some kind of invisible barrier Rei had never really looked into keeping the heat inside despite the semi-illusion of an open-air cloister—but looked around when Viv called out to her in greeting. Watching her turn and stand, Rei was a little relieved to find that she, at least, looked composed, because between his barely contained excitement, Viv’s fatigue, and Catcher and Cashe’s nerves, *someone* had to at least *appear* level headed on their squad.

He decided, approaching, that he would pretend not to notice the energetic twitching of Aria’s hands, fingers bouncing over side of the her black slacks like a child told to sit still for too long.

“You guys ready to go?” she asked as they came together, her voice a little *too* even. “Everyone pack a toothbrush?”

“Oh, damn,” Catcher grumbled, dropping his bag and promptly turning back towards the elevators.

Aria laughed, but stopped when Catcher didn’t turn around with a grin to say he was joking.

“Wait, seriously??” she demanded after him.

“Leave me alone!” he called back as he hurried away. “I’m *nervous!*”

“Not. *Helping!*” Cashe responded through clenched teeth, clutching at the straps of her bag. “I swear you lot *want* me to throw up...”

Aria turned to her worriedly, opening her mouth to clearly say something sympathetic, but Viv through an arm around the Lancer’s shoulders before she could, pulling Cashe in close.

“Relaaaaax,” she said, clearly a bit more awake now and pointing between Aria and Rei. “We’ve got this couple of freaks. If any of us shit the bed, Thing 1 and Thing 2 here will just carry us to gloooooorious victory.”

“Seriously, *seriously* not helping,” Cashe said, looking even more discomforted.

Rei laughed, dropping his bags by the couch and moving around Aria to plop down not he spot next to where she’d been sitting. “Then don’t think about the tournament,” he offered helpfully, putting an arm across the back of the couch to half-turn towards his still green teammates. “How about you just focus on the fact that we’re gonna get off the school grounds for a bit? I mean, I like it here plenty—” he waved his other hand around at the lavish setup of the Kanes lobby “—but we’ve been stuck on campus for most of a year now.”

“Not *all* of us,” Viv said wickedly, finally pulling her arm from around Cashe’s neck to grin pointed at Rei and Aria. “*Some* of us have been into the city a couple of times of late, if I recall correctly.”

For once, though, Rei was feeling impervious to his best friend’s teasing, to excited was he to get going.

“Jealous?” he asked with his own crafty smile. “We checked out some pretty cool shops in Easthold. I can make some recommendations if you want.”

“Rei!” Aria whirled on him, the squeak in her voice sounding like it couldn’t decide if she was pleased or mortified.

Rei turned his grin on her in turn, about to suggest that they see what else they'd missed in the city—he really *was* feeling impervious, as excited as he was—when a grumbled voice interrupted him.

“What shops?”

Rei turned, surprised to find Grant standing on the either side of the couch across from him, carrying not two but *three* bags across his shoulders. Then again, given his frame, Rei supposed it wasn't a surprise he'd need more space for enough clean clothes to last the week.

And he couldn't help but smile even more broadly at the Mauler's question, unexpected as it was.

“I'll get you a list,” he said brightly, deliberately turning back to look Viv in the eye even as he continued. “I'll bet I can come up with a few spots that beanpole here would like to—”

“Say another word, half-pint, and I will ensure that awkward dates and handholding is the *only* couples activity you two ever get to partake in,” Viv growled at Rei, having gone deathly still as her cheeks flushed. “And since you might be too thick to catch my meaning, I'm saying I take Gemela, shove her down your pants, and cut off your d—”

“OKAY THEN!” Aria practically shrieked, clapping her hands together and not looking at either Rei *or* Viv as her face once more turned the color of her hair. “I'm sure Catcher won't be long, so let's get ready to go. I want to eat and make it to the south gate with plenty of time, and the snow might slow us down a little.”

Rei, feeling his own ears burning a little, had to force himself not to laugh at the daggers Viv was still shooting him, instead getting up and gathering his bag. Oddly, he felt Grant hovering over his shoulder, but before he could turn to ask the Mauler if he needed something Catcher did in fact make an appearance, sprinting out from the hall that held the elevator booths, toothbrush waving over head.

“Got it! Got it! Can’t believe I forgot to—”

He stopped almost dead, though, yellow eyes flashing first to Aria’s red face, then to Viv, then to Rei, who still hadn’t stopped grinning.

“Wait what did I m—”

“OKAY!” Aria squeaked again, snatching her own bag up from the floor by the couch and moving mechanically for the doors. “LET’S GO! *PLEASE!*”

Cashe hurried after her at once, seeming eager to get out into the fresh air, and Viv—rarely silent—avoided all eyes as she chased after the pair. Catcher was left looking utterly at a loss as he stood there dumbfounded, toothbrush still in hand, and Rei could only shake his head at the poor Saber as he, too, started for the dormitory exit.

And, as he did, finding Grant falling into step beside him.

Looking around with a frown, Rei found the boy not looking at him, but even as he wondered what was going on Grant seemed to mutter something. Facing away, however, and with a winter wind picking up as the doors opened to the outside for the girls ahead of them, he didn’t hear a word.

“What was that?” he asked, trying to sound polite.

Grant, funnily enough, tried again, a little louder this time, but Rei still didn’t catch more than the word “list”.

“You gotta speak up man, sorry.”

The Mauler looked momentarily annoyed—though seemingly more with himself than anything else—and as they stepped together out in the morning snow he finally looked around to face Rei, though still avoided his eyes.

“I’ll take that list,” he got out at last, still quiet, but audible. “The shop list. If you’re offering.”

Rei was so surprised, he almost stopped dead just as his boots crunched into the light half-inch of white that had built up overnight. Managing not to, however, he nodded, working to keep his voice utterly even as he answered.

“Sure, man. I’ll send it to you.”

Grant nodded once, muttered a low “Thanks”, and then doubled his pace to hurry after the girls, like he couldn’t handle anything more than this one—there was no other word for it—*friendly* interaction with Rei. For his own part, Rei could only stare after the Mauler, and didn’t even blink when Catcher caught up to him, toothbrush tucked behind one ear, half-under his cap. Apparently Aria’s desperate exodus hadn’t given him enough time to put it away properly.

“So... That happened...” Catcher said quietly, gaping after Grant just as openly.

“Sure did...” was all Rei could mutter in response. “You heard that?”

“Yeah... Barely. If he’d been any quieter I’d have thought he’d taken a vow of silence or something.”

Rei could only nod.

Catcher hesitated, and even in the corner of his eye Rei could tell he was struggling with himself.

“Do we...” he finally started uncertainly, still watching after Grant as Viv slowed down to fall back and walk beside him ahead of them. “Do we still hate him?”

Rei, at last brought back from his surprise at this question, snorted.

“Dude, I have no idea anymore...”



## CHAPTER 16

As it turned out, none of them had much of an appetite for breakfast, least of all Cashe, so the six of them ended up sitting around in mostly-nervous silence for the better part of an hour before Aria called them all to march again. She'd finally started meeting Rei's eye again halfway through the meal, and eventually seemed to have forgiven him his part in the morning antics when she let her knee rest against his under the table, making him feel hotter around the collar than anything Viv could have said to him. He was a little disappointed, therefore, when the six of them all got up and left the mess, bags over shoulders, to make for the southern gate, following a hearty breadth of flattened snow that indicated a hundred other students making that very trek ahead of them.

"Name?" a sergeant holding a pad in gloved hands asked unnecessarily as they finally reached the great, open exit to the campus, the steel teeth of the colossal gate all that showed out of where it was rolled sideways into the heavy breadth of the stone walls that towered above them.

"Laurent, Aria," Aria answer promptly, stepping forward to answer the man. To their left, another officer was asking a group of second years Rei only recognized in passing much the same thing, while beyond the wall the broad half-circle of flat stone that made up the southern landing zone was already thick with students, staffers calling out names, and flyers dropping down from the sky-lanes above.

"Laurent..." the sergeant repeated, first meeting Aria's eyes so that his fram could scan her own NOED, then looking down at his pad as identification information obviously flashed into being across it. "Laurent. Got you. First-year squad leader. Very nice. So does that make you all...?" He looked up at Rei and the others, eyes flashing five more times in quick succession. "Yup. Arada, Catchwick, Cashe, Grant, and Ward. The Major is your chaperone for the trip, so behave yourself. Obviously Captain Dent

is in command of the outing, but don't push your luck." He threw a finger over his shoulder, indicating that they should pass through. "Off you get. And don't forget to kick ass for us. Everyone's gonna be watching here."

"Yes, sir!" they answered a little disjointedly, not having expected the passing encouragement, then stepped by as the officer waved a squad of third years forward who had lined up behind them.

It Grant who voiced the question that had already formed a knot in Rei's gut.

"The Major?" the boy grunted darkly. "Don't tell me..."

"Don't jinx it," Viv hissed, elbowing him in the side—and barely reaching above his hip.

"Too late..." Catcher grumbled, and Rei's heart fell as he, too, saw the figure standing on the far side of the circle from them, voice raised as he called out over the heads of the milling students.

"Squad Lennon! Squad Sidorov! Squad Laurent! On me!"

"*Dammit*," Rei hissed under his breath, but even as Aria reached a hand back to take his hand and squeeze it every so briefly, she turned them to head in the man's directly.

"Here, sir!" she said flatly as soon as they were close enough to be respectful, executing a salute that was as rigid as it was perfect. Rei barely managed to do the same, and he heard Viv and Catcher muttering outright under their breaths behind him as the others followed.

It took no more than a second for Rei to be sure that—despite not having seen each other for well over a month, now—his placement hadn't changed in the least in Major Dyrk Reese's esteem. As ever, the man's deep-set eyes them all in levelly, as though nothing at all in the world was wrong with the situation, offering the only hint of his displeasure in the form of his gaze lingering just a fraction of a moment longer on Rei than on the others. He wore full black-and-golds, as did the other officers—

Captains Sarah Takeshi and Elean Samsus—calling to their own groups from around the plaza, and his hands were crisply folded behind his back.

“Good,” the Major said in the same flat tone Aria had offered him, providing the minimum level of civility either of them could get away with without there being any risk of accusations of insubordination or abuse. “You’re the first to arrive, so we’ll wait for the others. Shouldn’t be long.”

Aria only nodded, eyes over the Major’s head as expected, and it was a few seconds longer than strictly necessary before the man said “At ease,” allowing the six of them to take up the more relaxed posture of putting their own hands behind their backs. It was a little awkward given their bags—especially for Grant—but fortunately they didn’t have to wait long.

“Major,” a cool familiar voice said from the right, and Rei had to work hard not to whip his head around to look.

Christopher Lennon stepped into view, offering Reese his own salute there in the snow. Small as he was for a User, the “Lasher” looked especially diminutive in proximity to Grant’s towering form, but it had been a long, long time since Rei had been able to see anything less of the third-year than a beast who only kept himself leashed and chained when he deemed fit. Lennon didn’t look around at them, of course, but a couple of the other students following at his back did, sneaking a peek in Rei’s direction even as they copied the older boy’s salute, the red-on-blue griffin armbands of the school depicting them all as third years.

That was when something struck Rei, watching Reese greet Lennon’s squad as cordially as he had their own, realizing he’d been too distracted to take it in before. Reese had called the third year to him, the strong User among the Galens cadet and his teammates, just as he’d called Aria and her group. In addition, he’d called...

“Major,” a quite, steady voice spoke from the left, and this time Rei had no chance of keeping himself from looking.

There, standing on their other side, was another squad, this time comprised entirely of second years. Unsurprisingly—at least now that he knew what was going on—at their head a tall, pale boy with his long, bronze hair tied in a ponytail under his cap stood at crisp attention, slivery eyes on set on Reese expectantly.

Behind him, Rei thought he heard Catcher choke, and he couldn't blame him.

Lennon might indeed be the more impressive of the two older squad leaders on paper, but the cadet standing to Aria's left was none other than Anatoli Sidorov, the ace of the second-year class. A Lancer Rei had seen tear his way mostly-effortlessly through the Intra-Schools, Sidorov wasn't just any other student. Like the Lasher, he was a bit of a legend, having been crowned champion of the Sector 9 first-year bracket the previous year. Like Lennon, too, he was a favorite to break through the invisible ceiling of second-year participation in the higher levels of the collegiate SCTs, with expectations that he, too, might just have a shot at being one of the rare non-third-years to qualify for the Intersystems, with the right amount of luck.

In short, Rei and the others were standing sandwiched between the closest thing to royalty Galens could have among its cadets.

“All here. Excellent.” Reese was looking between the three squads steadily, though his dark eyes didn't meet Rei's again. “As you have no doubt realized, I have had the privilege of being delegated by the *Captain Dent*—” he spoke the Bishops rank as though to remind them all that he was still the woman's superior, if only in theory for the duration of the SCTs “—as supervisor the three teams the Galens Institute has the highest hopes for in your respective years. That is not to say the other squads do not have an equal chance of earning merit—” Rei could practically *taste* the forced nature of the mandatory platitudes that didn't sound right even as steady as the Major's tone stayed “—but as you well know, the school provides to those who have shown greatest promise, and greatest... effort.” The man's eyes at last flicked to Rei again, but in show of compliment.

Rei's hands tighter about themselves behind his back, and he thought he could feel the heat of Viv's indigence behind him.

“As arbiter of the Galens SCTs, and an A-Ranked User myself, only the Captain is more qualified to provide combat feedback and criticism on your performance.” Reese was still going, somehow managing to sound both pompous and leveling humble at the same time, though Rei suspected he made out the former only in his head. “I am not, however, your team coach from prep school, nor am I your instructor. Once you step on the field of an SCT proper, you are in combat, and you are solely responsible for your actions and the consequences they bring. For that reason, I expect all of you to pursue your own internal discussions before you seek assistance from me, or any of the other supervisors. We may have the Head of Combat Theory and Tactical Studies along with us, but that is no excuse for you not to figure out your own weaknesses and strengths, and make the necessary adjustments.”

*Nicest way of saying 'don't bother me unless you have to' I've ever heard,* Rei thought, seething. It wasn't *completely* fair, he knew. Dent had told them much the same thing more times than he could count. SCT were supposed to be simulated combat, and as lofty as the goals of the top cadets might be, collegiate fighting was still primarily to prepare soldiers, not entertainers. Seeking thought and feedback had its place at Sectionals and beyond, but there would be a certain level of disappointment—and possibly even subtle consequences—if individuals and squads couldn't stand on their own two legs.

There was a *whoom* of noise, and a single, massive flyer that could have easily held twenty-plus people and cargo was suddenly descending on them, sending the edges of their cloaks ripping and caps almost tumbling off of heads.

“Our ride is here,” Reese announced as though this weren't obviously, finally unclasping his hands and stepping closer as he turned, moving clear of the landing area. “Everybody on. Captain Dent will have additional information and announcements once everyone is on the tram.”

The flyer landed, and a large port opened near its front end, along with a half doze compartments along its sleek black underside. With expected deference Rei and the others waited until Reese had ascended the short stair into the vehicle before slipping their bags off their shoulders, then for the older squads to stow their things and head inside. As the third years shoved their stuff into place, Lennon at last turned and caught Rei's eye, pausing to study the entirety of Aria's squad before offering a short, simple nod, and the hint of a smile.

"Did he just look smile at us?" Cashe hissed, sounding like she'd totally forgotten her nerves for the first time all day as she started after the third year. "The Lasher? At us?"

"Sure did," Rei said, managing something like a laugh at last now that Reese was well out of earshot.

"Why?" the Lancer asked, obviously confused.

Rei, not exactly sure how—or if he wanted—to answer this, decided to let someone else tackle the question.

"He... uh... He's a... friend, I guess?" Aria managed, looking back at Cashe and Grant apologetically as Sidorov's group loaded up next. "Sorry. I guess you guys wouldn't know..."

As Cashe's jaw went slack, Catcher scoffed. "Is that what we're calling it? The dude whipped the floor with us for like two months straight."

This did nothing to help the girl's confusion, obviously.

"I'm sorry... *What?*"

"Agreed... What?" Grant echoed, and Rei looked around in time to see him frowning at Viv, who was pointedly staring off in the opposite direction.

Obviously, some secrets had remained secret, which Rei couldn't help but feel jointly relieved and concerned about. Catcher had voiced his mounting confusion when it came to Grant well on the way to breakfast, but no matter *how* he felt about the guy,

he knew it couldn't be easy for Viv to do whatever she was doing *and* keep things from the Mauler...

But, as much as he trusted Viv with his life, it was still nice to have confirmation that she'd clearly kept her lips shut tight when it came to certain things.

Then again, he was on opportunity to open the veil even just a little bit...

Rei sighed internally, then followed Aria towards the now-available luggage compartments as she stepped towards them. "Dent got us a bunch of training nights with Lennon last year, during the Intra-schools," he said over his shoulder to Cashe and Grant. "We didn't ask *how*, but yeah... We definitely know the guy."

*Better than I'd like to remember*, he added privately, wincing internally at the memory of the absolutely *brutal* last training day the Lasher had put him through, the very event that had unlocked Type Shift for him.

Cashe, for her part, however, seemed like she was all out of "that's shocking" energy. Rather than press the issues, she just mouthed at the air for a couple of seconds while the other slid their bags into place, the finally shook her head in disbelief.

"I can't decide if I'm more annoyed no one gave *me* an Intersystem-level User to train with, or that I didn't hook up with you guys earlier," she grumbled, earning a dark chuckle from everyone but Grant.

The flyer was as spacious on the inside as it seemed from without, and Reese—blessedly—apparently had no other speech to give even after all 18 members of Galen's top-seeded squads had gotten comfortable in their seats. As such, it wasn't another couple of minutes of waiting and quiet conversation amongst themselves before their turn to ascend game, and not long after they were whipping through the gleaming towers and neon advertisements of Castalon proper. Viv, Catcher, Cashe, and Grant—who hadn't had opportunity to leave the school since Commencement—took in the passing city through the snow with obvious excitement, while Rei and Aria exchange a

look and a grin before sitting back where they sat next to each other to look out their own shared window.

After a while of level travel, they cleared the city, and their angle of direction shifted upward once again to break away from the main body of traffic that stretched out in heavy lines over the horizon. Instead, they joined a different lane that was quickly taking them straight up, eventually breaking out of the storm and into the clouds. Then the foggy white gave, and they were rising out of the breathable atmosphere, the blue sky rapidly fading until the planet was below and the black of space hung like a dark shroud above them.

*This* not even Rei had had the chance to see in some time, and he found himself leaning over a chuckling Aria to take in the sight with eager interest.

As fast as they were going, they weren't long in arriving the orbital station, their flyer steadily slowing down to pass into the complex structure of networks and tubes and coming and going trams. As they finally came to a stop, Reese called them all off the flyer, and soon after they were crossing the station platform—not so busy as it had been on the day Viv and Rei had arrived together the year before—into the building proper. The Major led them straight through the grand lobby and the milling throng of civilians within—almost all of who stopped and stared at them as they went by—and straight to the terminal entrance. They didn't so much as have to pause at security, as an officer in black and golds—lacking a Galens armband, which marked him as a representative of the military proper—waved them through what was obviously a predetermined checkpoint. More eyes followed them as they made this rapid pass by the lines of waiting people, and Rei was relieved when Reese led them without delay up a single flight of stairs to an open docking platform.

As it transpired, the flyer schedule had been deliberately crafted so that all of the Galen's qualifiers arrived at the station around the same time, because their group was clearly among the last to arrive. They weren't alone on the platform—there were a



number of individuals, groups, and families all staring at them from up and down the way—but several cars had clearly been set aside for the Institute, because Takeshi and Samsus were already waving their charges on board.

“Come on, you lot,” Reese said with perfect, crafted impatience, moving them forward.

A minute later they were aboard, the six of them having three double rows very near the front of the lead car, Aria and Rei next to each other with Viv and Grant behind them, Catcher and Cashe across the aisle. Lennon and Sidorov, and Reese’s direction, and claimed the benches in the middle of the compartment, spots that offered a slightly better view out with windows.

It had been a while, Rei realized, since he’d felt like the second-stringer on a team...

“Woah...” Aria muttered after they’d stowed their thing in the overhead anti-grave compartments and taken a seat. “This is actually happening...”

Rei could relate. Now that they were there, on the tram, with the idle thrum of the orbital engines vibrating lightly beneath them, the reality of what was about to take place settled even more heavily than it had when Dent had first told them the travel plans.

“Feels a little surreal, doesn’t it?” he asked, not looking at her as he turned to look back along the car. 54 cadets, 18 from each class, sat in organized chaos behind them. He couldn’t help but not—seeing Martin’s group just behind Sidorov’s—that the first years all looked distinctly more queasy than any of the second- or third-year groups.

“Veterans,” he said with a low laugh, turning to face forward again.

“What?” Aria asked him.

Rei shook his head. “Nothing. Just hoping I get the chance to feel like this *isn’t* a big deal, one day.”

Aria looked lost. “Why? That’s sounds like no fun...”

“Huh...” Rei said, realizing she was absolutely right. “I guess so...”

She gave him a weird sort of smile, obviously about to ask him if he was feeling alright or something, when a loud, clear voice from his other side cut all other distraction off.

“Sectional qualifiers! Glad you could make it!”

Rei turned quickly, a little surprised to find that Valera Dent had, at last, joined them. She was standing with feet spread across the aisle, smiling down the line of the cars that housed her students, clearly amused at the *very* sudden silence that had taken hold of the Galens students the moment she’d spoken.

“Glad you’re all paying attention. This is important. As you know by now, each of your squads has been assigned a supervisor. Major Reese, Captain Takeshi, and Captain Samsus. They are mostly here to be of assistance and act as support as needed, but I remind you all once again that while you are being granted *some* liberties while at this tournament, you are by no means relieved of your responsibilities as representatives of the Galens Institute and the ISCM. Basically: don’t give any of us a reason to act as anything more than necessary help, if you *please*.”

There was a smattering of “Yes, ma’am!” along with a roll of light laughter from the students.

“Good. We understand each other. On to more important things. Obviously we are head to Ganoth, and will be fighting at Ganoth Academy. It’s a quick trip, and the tournament starts first thing tomorrow. I imagine some of you—” Rei didn’t know if he imagined Dent’s eyes flicking over them and towards where the other first years were seated further back in the car “—have had a little less sleep than others, so I again encourage you to take it easy while you can. I don’t want anyone blaming narcolepsy and dry eyes for losses in the coming days.”

Another, louder, mix of laughter.

“You think I’m kidding?” Dent said with something of a snort. “Look around yourselves. You, and those seated around you, are the best of your year, the best the Galens Institute can bring to the field. That means you are very likely the best this *planet* can offer, possibly even the Astra System. *None of you* got here without pushing yourselves, without breaking your limits again and again and again. I’m proud of you—so *damn* proud of you—but I’m also as aware as anyone sitting on this tram that that sort of drive can be a double edged sword.”

Rei didn’t imagine it, this time. He was *sure* he had seen the Bishop’s eyes flick to him.

“I expect you all to push yourselves once more, this week. I expect you all to break your limits, hopefully again and again and again. But I also expect you to be smart. This is no longer training. This is no longer practice. This is combat. *Team* combat. You are part of a whole, now, both as claw of your squad and as a limb of the Institute. You aren’t here to prove you’re the fastest or strongest or most dangerous. You’re here to prove you’re the *best*.”

Silence this time, as she paused, and Dent obviously expected nothing less. She let the quiet hang there for a bit, let her words ring and drive their way into the cadets. “Be smart” she was saying.

And Rei, for some reason, felt like they were words meant almost entirely for him...

“Now that I’ve hopefully got you thinking clearly about the coming week, there is one last order of business to attend to,” the Captain started again after a full 10 seconds of silence. “As some of you may have heard, there are a few changes to the being made to this year’s collegiate SCTs. While I’m *sure*—” she had to raise her voice as the murmurs started up again at this immediately “—that you have doubtlessly come up with any number of grandiose theories, I assure you the adjustments are hardly major, though still of import. Firstly—” there was a flash in a frame, and a moment later Rei’s

NOED lit up with a notification “—the ISCM has elected to update identification protocols for their SCT-involved combatants. This is the first of two changes that have been made in an attempt to keep interest in the tournaments peaked and relevant.”

Rei might have laughed at this—the SCTs were followed by more than *half* of the ISC’s population with access to the feeds, after all—but he was too busy opening the alert, just as he was aware Aria and the others were doing the same around him.

“Woooah...” came Catcher’s low breath of amazement from his right, joining a number of other voices raised in astonishment.

And Rei was right there with him.

There, floating before in his frame as they spun gently in place, seven solid black emblems formed a horizontal circle of holograms. He knew what they were at once, but was still astounded, scrolling through them one after the other and taking them in.

The Phalanx emblem was the first to be presented, which might have been an odd choice were it not for overall design of the symbols. Symbolized a single great, sweeping shield with a sharpened base and winged top-ends, it was artfully hollowed out and complimented by a bisecting slice right down the middle. This separation was important, too, because it formed the empty space into which the other emblems built their brand, each of them keeping the shape of the shield for consistency, but otherwise shifting in detail.

The Saber-Type emblem was simple, depicting a sword cutting perpendicular down the length of the shield. The Lancer-Type was much the same with a spear, with the Mauler’s shown as a massive, two-handed axe. Duelist and Brawlers were a little different, but kept in the same being, the former shown as crossed short swords atop the matching silhouette, while the latter depicted a clenched fist that managed to be symmetrical by hiding the hand’s thumb behind the silhouette of fingers and knuckles.

And then, capping it all off, was the A-Type emblem.

It was, in essence, designed in the same vein as the other six, but there was no weapon to be found within the emblem, to hint of a blade or promising shape within the shield. Instead, an intricate sort of pattern had been carved out of the black, focusing around a pointed shape in the center that hinted at the letter “A” but did not promise of it. It was different, alien to the rest, and yet still married to the concept of the symbols of the other Types.

To Rei, it was perfect.

“Everyone approve? Great!” Dent had, kindly, given everyone most of a minute to ogle the emblems, obviously aware some leeway of excitement was due. “As you can tell, these symbols have been designed to depict your CAD-Type. Inside the Sectionals Arena, they will be automatically displayed in-frame on your uniforms in white, here.” She pointed at the outside of her right shoulder, at the black clothes under the gold lining of the tassels there. “The main idea is to give viewers and spectators something new to get excited for, even if it’s small, but those of us with boots on the ground are also hoping it will offer a conversation starter between individuals, teams, and schools. I know this is a competition, but at the end of the day you’re *all* cadets of the ISCM, and anything to remind you of that is good in my book.”

Something, though, was clearly amusing, because one corner of the woman’s prosthetic lips twitched up suddenly.

“Then again, the second change that’s been made leans in the other direction, so hopefully you won’t be calling me a hypocrite.”

Rei raised an eyebrow at this, finally closing out of staring at the A-Type emblem to give the captain his full attention.

She made it worth it a moment later.

“Starting this year, registered squads will be allowed team names.”

There was a breath, barely more than second or two, of ringing silence. Even the engines seemed to fade away as all registered what the Bishop had just told them.

Then the already-vibrating aura of nervous energy cracked and overflowed, exploding from the gathered cadets like a damn breaking wide.

“Name?? Did she say we get names??”

“Oh *hell yeah!*”

“Do we get to pick them?? Who gives them??”

Rei was so tempted to join, turning to share an open-mouthed look of exhilaration with Catcher, that he was almost glad when Viv spoke up from behind him and quieter voice.

“Uh... Why is everyone freaking out?”

Rei almost laughed out loud.

“Viv!” he got out through a chuckle. “It’s a name! An *actual* name!”

Viv, though, was still at a loss. “So...?”

“So it’s something for people to recognize! To follow!”

She shook her head, still not getting it. Of late, Viv had been *much* more enthusiastic about the SCTs—the Intra-Schools and the Duelists she’d seen there had opened her eyes to them in a big way—but she was still a long way off from being a *true* tourney enthusiast, obviously.

“You get Arena names, right?”

Rei was pleased to when Grant was the one to ask, frowning around at Viv. He still wasn’t sure how he felt about it, but if *anyone* could get her to see sense...

“Like ‘the Gatecrasher?’” she asked, looking up at him. “And ‘the Lasher?’”

Grant nodded. “Yeah. Even people calling Ward ‘Iron Prince’, to a lesser extent. It’s like... a title. Something that legitimizes a User in the circuits. Makes them more superhero than person, I guess you’d say?”

“Yeah, I guess I get that...” Viv said, her eyes going a little wide.

“It’s like that,” Grant said simply. “And for collegiate-level stuff, it’s a big deal.”

“A *really* big deal,” Rei agreed at once, nodding vigorously, pleased with the summary. He could even forgive Grant the embarrassing reminder of his own unofficial title. “People have been asking for team names for a *long* time. Like... since the SCTs got started, basically.”

Viv’s expression only grew more surprised.

“And they’re only just getting to it *now*?”

“They have to keep things fresh,” Catcher said from across the aisle, himself grinning from ear to ear. “And location-based names have always done the trick. School, planet, system, etc.” He shrugged. “Not gonna complain, though.”

“Oh man... I hope our name is cool...” Viv said excitedly, apparently catching on to the enthusiasm.

Right then, though, Major Reese’s thunderous voice cut across the chatter of the cadets.

“SILENCE!” the man roared, standing up from a seat near the end of the car. Immediately all sound ceased, many faces going white as everyone realized they’d been apparently talking over Valera Dent’s attempts to catch their attention again for some time.

“Thank you, Major,” the captain said politely after everyone had gotten control of themselves, clearly trying not to look cross at the man’s excess.

The Major, smugness leaking out just a little through his usually-perfect mask, sat back down with a sanctimonious little nod.

“As I was saying, the ISCM will be granting team names to squads starting this year,” Dent picked up as though nothing had happened. “While I know some of you would have been eager to put forward your own preferences, I regret to say that monikers this year have been assigned, if only because the powers that be wanted this all kept under wraps until they can collectively announce it tomorrow to the masses.” Her brown eyes flicked to the corner of the screen. “Names, though, go out at 0930

our time, so I promise you won't have to wait long." She looked back to her students. "You're right to be excited for this. You're right to see the possibilities. It's rare for a collegiate-level User to be given any kind of name, and even rarer for it to be made official by the ISCM. Part of the hope of this change, obviously, is to give viewers and SCT fans something more to hold onto, something to follow even from the earliest stages of a User's training and education. For that reason, I encourage you to take pride in the name your given, and fight as hard for it as you do your squad. Who knows?" She smiled at them all one last time. "Maybe it'll stick with some of you longer than you think..."

And then, from all around them, an announcement came over the tram intercom that they would be departing shortly, and Dent sat down without another word, leaving the cadets to the growing rumble of their once-again mounting conversation. Viv tried to ask something more, but the rest of them, even Cashe, hushed her excitedly.

Like Rei, Aria, Catcher, Grant, and the Lancer were clearly all staring at the clock in the corner of their frame, having not missed the time.

0929.

In silence they sat there, letting the other students make the realization behind them in shouts and exclamations. Within seconds, in fact, the tram was silent again save from a escaping squeak of excitement from one overenthusiastic cadet or another. It felt like everyone was holding their breath, in fact, like no one knew what to expect, but the wait of not know was worse than the possibility of disappointment.

And then the clock ticked to 0930, and several things happened at once.

First, the orbital engine that ran the length of the tram beneath the feet rumbled into true life, and without a hitch they started moving, the slow acceleration that would quickly take them to supersonic-speeds a gradual flawless, speed.

Second, voices started up again, shouts of excitement and alarm ringing out from up and down the train.



Third, another notification—the source of the commotion, obviously—blazed into being in Rei’s vision, unavoidable as it spelled out “URGENT ISCM INFORMATION. URGENT ISCM INFORMATION.” in massive red letter that looped across the top of his frame.

And lastly, as Rei immediately opted to open the alert, he barely registered Valera Dent turning in her seat ahead of him, looking back to watch—with open interest—as he read.

NOTICE OF TEAM NAME ASSIGNMENT.

Squad Leader:

*Cadet Aria Laurent*

Squad Members:

*Cadet Viviana Arada, Cadet Chancery Cashe, Cadet Layton Catchwick, Cadet Logan Grant, Cadet Reidon Ward*

Cadet Class:

*First Year*

Assigned Team Name:

Rei froze, staring at the final line of the alert, at the name they had been assigned, for a good 10 seconds. He was aware, distantly, that the others had all done the same, and only Viv beat him to looking up.

Looking up, and around at Aria.

She, even moreso than the rest of them, was unmoving, apparently at a loss for words as she looked to read the moniker again, then again, then again. Rei couldn't blame her. It was... something else.

Catcher, as he was never credited enough for doing, swooped in to save the day with his usual optimism.

“Now *that's* a good name,” he said, obviously as shocked as any of them, but speaking the truth regardless.

Slowly, shakily, Aria nodded.

Then, speaking clearly despite her obvious disbelief, she tried it out for all of them to hear.

“Assigned Team Name... FIRESONG.”