

Chapter 21

PLACEHOLDER

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“*Unbelievable* behavior from ICSM cadets, much less *representatives of the Galen’s Institute!* Not in eighteen *years* as an officer at this school have I seen such disrespectful actions taken on a field! You’re lucky *I* was not the arbiter of your match, or the lot of you would long since be on your way back to the hotel after being disqualified and banned from participating in the rest of the tournament!”

With an internal sigh Valera picked up her pace, hurrying down the stairs from the stands and into the tunnel of the Kenneth Arena’s underworks. Much like Galen’s, the passages were a clean white, but the smart-glass walls depicted the emblems of the ten Sectionals competing schools, fight schedules, and the swords and stars of the ISCM rippling across holographic banners every few panels. The narrow space was busy, too, lined with milling students of all three years waiting for their turn on the south Team Battle field, as well as a handful of school chaperones, ISCM tournament staff, and even a couple medical drone on steady patrol, ready for the occasional emergencies that did unfortunately happen in competitive combat, phantom calls or no.

Regrettably, the drones were the only ones not turned southward, in the direction Reese was continuing to lay into his victims, so loud he was audible long before the group came into view around the bend of the tunnel.

“The Maston’s Combat Academy chaperones have put in a complaint with the tournament supervisors, and *rightly so!* Even if what you did was legal, it was *despicable*, and all six of you will be drafting formal apologies to every member of Boneyard before I let any of you set foot on the floor again!”

“But, sir! We’ve got a Wargames fight this afternoon! We need to—”

“I *could not care less*, Cadet Laurent! *You* made this bed, so *you* will sleep in it! And count yourselves lucky in doing so! I have half-a-mind to send all of you back to the Institute as is, where you can explain to your friends how the ‘aces’ of the Galens’ first years got themselves sent home on the first day of Sectionals! Do not test me, or you’ll be able to count that fight as your first *and* last at this tournament.”

“That decision isn’t remotely in your power to make, Major Reese, and you are well aware of it.”

Valera had heard enough, and despite still being 20 feet away and with several squads of students from the other academies between them, she decided it was time to cut the man’s power trip down to size. Ordinarily she might have tried to call him out in a more private setting, but Reese himself had picked this particular battleground. He could just as easily have waited for the squad to return to their seats and berated them quietly there, or even dragged them to the nearest professional’s locker room Galens had access to—not 50 yards up the hall—if he *really* felt the need to yell. Instead, however, he had decided to make a public display of them, facing off with the six members of Firesong at the base of the ramp that led up to the Arena floor, crafting a spectacle of ripping into them even as he blocked half the hall. Still partially on the ramp, Laurent’s team were all standing at attention, though their range of expressions were anything but complacent. Arada and Grant—and *Catchwick*, almost amusingly—looked livid, while Cashe looked resigned and Laurent herself was white in the face at the front of the group, taking the brunt of the tongue-lashing. Just behind her, Ward’s features were dark, and Valera had to wonder if she would have been able to do anything at all for them if the boy ended up punching Reese in face.

But she was there now, and two could play at the game the major—who was now whirling to face her rigidly—had dragged them into.

“*Captain* Dent,” Reese snarled, for once making no effort to keep his cool as he yet again put emphasis on her lower rank. “If I see fit to punish the cadets under my

charge, I will do so, and I would politely ask you from refrain from sticking your nose where it doesn't—”

“*Major* Reese,” Valera cut him off flatly, determine to play the calmer party in the eyes of so many witnesses. “I understand that you have been cooped up in the comforts of the Institute for a long time now, but that is no excuse for forget what ‘field command’ means. Should I remind you? Actually no, better yet: shall we call Colonel Guest and have *him* remind you?”

Reese glowered at her, teeth half-bared. Before he could answer, though, Valera stopped in front of the man and kept right on.

“As for them being your charges, *I* am of half-a-mind to see *that* responsibility brought to an end, given the shameful way in which you’ve opted to discipline them. Look around!” She raised a hand to indicate the stares of the score-or-so of students and officers in the tunnels around them. “For someone so keen on ‘maintaining the reputation of the Institute’, you’ve sure picked an interesting place to have it out with a bunch of teenagers!”

Reese’s cheeks flushed red, but he wasn’t about to go down without a fight.

“*I* am not the one you should be accusing of damaging the reputation of our academy, Captain,” he snapped back. “I decided that the other schools needed to see that Galens does *not* tolerate the kind of behavior Firesong displayed in that fight. If anything, I am attempting to *salvage* our reputation after that shameful display of unsportsmanlike conduct and—”

Valera took a step forward, her irritation causing her to lose her cool for a moment and engage her Speed spec. She was nose-to-nose with the major so fast that the resulting blast of displaced air nearly knocked his cap right off his head.

“I bet you didn’t even ask them *why* they acted in such a manner, did you?” she half-whispered, half-hissed. The two of them were of a height, but Valera was well aware of the impact her presence—the presence of a rare S-Ranked *Knight-Class* User—

tended to have, and she leaned into it now. “I bet you started yelling the moment you had them down here, without bothering to give them an opportunity to explain.”

Reese’s mouth shut tight with a *snap*, though whether out of surprise at her approach, momentary fear at her proximity, or because he didn’t have a good answer, she couldn’t be sure.

She decided to go with the option that fit her narrative best in the moment.

“Yeah... Thought so.” She sneered into his face for a moment more, then stepped around him to stand in front of Firesong. It was a little gratifying to see the hint of relief on all their faces—other than Arada’s, predictably, given the girl was staring at the back of Reese’s head like she was calculating what size plaque she would need to hang it on her dorm room wall—but Valera couldn’t let *them* know that. The behavior they’d displayed *had* been outrageous—Grant and Ward’s most obviously, with the rest of them complacent in their inaction—but it had also been *completely* out of character. That alone should have given Reese pause, but the man clearly didn’t know how to let go of a grudge.

Valera, on the other hand, was already well aware of what had happened. She’d known since the evening before, and had been patched into—through back channels only one entity in the entirety of the ISC could have granted her access too, of course—the conversations that had taken place in the Boneyard v. Firesong match. She saw the logic, and she approved.

But—again—she couldn’t let *them* know that.

“One of you,” she said sharply, not wanting any listening ears to accuse her of favoritism later. “Explain what happened. Now.”

She hadn’t let them drop to at ease, so the six first years had to exchange awkward side-glances with whoever stood beside them.

Eventually, Ward himself spoke up.

“It’s on me, ma’am,” he said steadily, looking only slightly less inclined to break Reeses’ nose now that Valera stood between them. “I shouldn’t have played any games with Biggs. I should have ended it as soon as I dropped down into the—”

“I didn’t say I wanted a play-by-play of what you should have done, Cadet Ward,” Valera interrupted him unforgivingly. “I said I wanted an explanation. So... *Try again.*”

It was Aria Laurent who answered first this time.

“Daniel Biggs attempted to provoke Cadet Ward at dinner last night, ma’am,” she said quickly, like she wanted to get something unpleasant off her chest as fast as possible. “He and several members of Boneyard—though we didn’t know it was them at the time—came by our table and made... accusations.”

“Accusations?” Valera pretended she didn’t already know exactly what Laurent was talking about. “What sort of accusations?”

“They called him a ‘stand-in’” It was Catchwick who snarled out in anger, now. “Said there was no way of he could be who he was.”

“They tried to pick a fight,” Cashe added, clearly not intending to leave her teammates hanging even if she still look a little morose. “They were trying to throw us—or at least Ward—off our game.”

“That is *no excuse* for the way you behaved on the field just now!” Reese cut in, taking a step up to stand beside Valera as he started to lay into them once again. “If anything, you should have made an *extra* effort to prove to them—”

“Major,” Valera said coldly, not taking her eye off Cashe. “I’ll ask you to leave this to me now, if you please.”

For once, Reese went silent at once, and as Valera let the silence hold for a second to ensure he stayed that way, she found herself having to ignore the brief lines of text that popped into the corner of her frame momentarily, the first in blue, then next in red.

Maybe you should try scaring him more often.

Agreed. It seems to do wonders.

“I agree with the major in this fact, at least,” Valera continued as though nothing had interrupted her train of thought, slipping her hand into her pocket to surreptitiously type out a “*MUTE ALL INCOMING MESSAGES*” command into her NOED. Immediately her frame went grey, letting her focus without distraction again. “That is *not* enough of an excuse to explain away your behavior. So someone needs to elaborate.”

A silence again. One that stretched into three, then four seconds. It went on long enough for Valera to be sure, now, that every nearby ear in the hall was trained on their conversation.

Good, she thought. They need to hear this.

And sure enough...

“They needed to be proven wrong.”

Valera’s attention snapped to Logan Grant. The towering Mauler, on the other hand, seemed to having a hard time meeting her gaze, his red-black eyes hovering on the ceiling over her head somewhere.

“Proven wrong?” she repeated pointedly.

Granted only nodded at first, but when she said nothing more he seemed to understand he was expected to expound on this simple answer.

With a breath, he did so, though obviously unwillingly.

“Ward is small. At least compared to the average User. He’s short, he’s thin, and he’s light. That’s the only thing anyone sees when they go up against him at first. Because of that, he’s underestimated. Every time. Just like when Biggs picked a fight at the table yesterday. Just like at school.” The Mauler grimaced a little at this subtle admission, but didn’t stop. “Would the other squads have come to grips with how

things really are eventually? Sure. But until then every win we have—and every win Ward has on his own—would have been... questioned.”

“How so?” Valera prodded. “People underestimate him, you say. That’s an advantage. Why would you want to give up an advantage?”

It was the best way she could subtly encourage the boy to keep going.

Even for her, though, the answer was a pleasant surprise.

“It’s an edge that comes at a cost, ma’am. One Ward should have stopped paying when he... when he caught up to us.”

When he beat me, Valera translated silently, appreciating that—despite the leaps Grant had been showing of late in his attitude—there was a pride there that wasn’t so easily swallowed.

She didn’t take her eyes off the boy, willing him to keep on with her continued silence, but she didn’t miss Ward and Laurent stiffen a little at his words, nor Catchwick and Cashe frown in surprise or Arada’s mouth drop open as she obviously fought—still in full salute—not to turn to look at Grant.

“At school, Ward keeps the peace with—and pardon my language—dicks like Daniel Biggs on the regular. I would know. Distinctly, ma’am, I would know. But school is home base. You don’t shit where you eat, so to speak. But here... Here, it’s not fair. He shouldn’t have to deal with that crap here, too.”

“Is that the only reason you have?” Valera pressed him, pleased but still wanting more. “‘It’s not fair’? Because that’s weak reasoning, Cadet.”

“No, ma’am,” the Mauler answered at once. “I have another reason.”

“Which is?”

“Because you’re always telling us to reach for more, ma’am. Because you want us stronger.”

Valera, at last, smiled at Grant then, which promptly elicited an amusing sort of relief that was alien on the usually-somber boy's face. It was also, it seemed, enough to have him pressing forward with more confidence.

“We don't *want* to be underestimated, ma'am, and we sure as hell don't *need* to be. We might have gotten through the first half of this tournament with people not taking Ward seriously, but how does that serve us in the later rounds against fighters how have sized up to the fact he's twice the threat of any of us but Laurent, and we've had no practice against outside teams adapting to that understanding? We're not here to win because our opponents keep tricking themselves into believing Ward's Intra-School performance was a fluke once they see him. We're here to win because they can't stop us, even when they take every member of this squad seriously. *That's* my reasoning. *That's* why Ward needed to be the one to take Biggs down.” Grant was looking Valera full in the face, at some point having met her eyes with an iron kind of certainty. “They needed—all of them—to be proven wrong.”

Valera raised an eyebrow at this.

“And you think you've achieved that with this little stunt? You think you'll be taken seriously?”

The answer came with just the hint of a grin, a sort of pleasure in the words that was both frightening and heartening to see.

“I'm pretty sure the show Ward but on is the kind you only need to take in once. Don't you, ma'am?”

And then Valera *did* smile again, unable to stop herself.

Anything, the familiar voice whispered in her head, the same voice that ticked off one more day from the 5-year countdown every time she woke up in the morning. *Anything to make him stronger.*

Unfortunately, on the other hand, Reese chose that precise moment to find his courage again, and had caught the look on her face with outrage.

“*Enough!*” he snarled, stepping forward and just passed Valera in an attempt to assert himself once more. “You can make whatever excuse you feel like, all of you, but it doesn’t change the fact that you displayed *unfathomable* behavior on the field! I stand by my decision! If you all want to fight in your Wargames match this afternoon, then I expect six written apologies from each of you, addressed to each member of Boneyard, before the start of your match. Otherwise, you can kiss your chance to fight again goodb—!”

“You’re all dismissed, cadets,” Valera interrupted the man smoothly, not even bothering to look around at him. “I want you to head to the sub-basements and grab a field to warm down on. You wanted to be taken seriously? Well you probably got it. Don’t regret it during the Wargames this afternoon.”

“Captain *Dent!*” Reese snarled, his fury so visceral now she could actually *feel* low pulses of energy thrumming from the bands of his CAD around his wrists, his Device responding autonomously to his anger. “I *refuse* to allow you to let them get off without reprimand, much less a *slap on the back!* Not after such ill-conceived behavior put on full display for all the world to see!”

“I saw no ill-conceived behavior,” Valera replied, careful to maintain her even tone as she met the eyes of the six members of Firesong slowly, one after the other. “On the contrary, with context I now know that what I saw was a deliberate and well-executed maneuver to ensure that my top first-year team is not potentially put at disadvantage later in this tournament in exchange for the chance at an early easy lead. If anything I completely agree with Grant’s assessment. Had Biggs’ attitude been allowed to echo in the opinions of the rest of the schools, it could have been a problem. Now... it’s not.” At last she turned to Reese, steeling her smile so that there was nothing but ice left for the man. “They made an example of one cadet. An example that won’t have to be repeated, and one cadet who seemed to think belittling and bullying—*off the field*, no less—is an appropriate tactic in SCT combat. Given what they might have had

to do to the other teams to achieve the same result otherwise, I actually think they did quiet well, don't you?"

Reese was practically vibrating with indignation. "And Maston's?!" he demanded sharply. "Their complaint?!"

Valera considered a moment, then looked sidelong at Aria Laurent. "Cadet, you say Biggs tried to pick a fight at dinner. Were you with other students at the time?"

Laurent, obviously not expecting the question, blinked before answering a little hesitantly. "Uh... Yes, ma'am. Basically everyone from school."

"Oh?" Valera looked back at Reese, letting her smile widen a little. "Everyone, you say? So there were very likely any number of witnesses who will corroborate Cadet Bigg's attempt to goad Ward and your team?"

Laurent caught on then, abruptly standing a little straight as she understood what Valera was fishing for.

"Yes, ma'am! In fact, I believe Christopher Lennon spoke to Biggs right before the cadet... er... took his leave."

"Well... If that's not just *so* convenient," Valera mused sarcastically, still watching Reese with a grin. "I do have to imagine, Major, that the Maston's chaperones will be *much* less inclined to let their complaint stand after they hear *that* little tidbit. If needed, I'm sure Cadet Lennon would be willing to offer his account of the interaction. Therefore... Matter settled."

Reese only glared at her, fists clenched at his side and lips twitching. For a long few seconds they stared each other down like that, neither willing to give an inch to the other. If she'd thought to ask any of the observers around them after, Valera would have been told witnessing the pair's stand off—each of them A- and S-Rank Users respectively—had been like watching two storm clouds brush in passing, prodding and testing to see if either could risk trying to swallow the other.

The potential calamity passed, though, when Reese looked away first, spinning on his heels and stalking off up the tunnel at last, back unusually hunched even as he sent a group of poor second years from the 103rd scurrying with a snapped “Get out of my way!”

Valera watched him go, careful not to let *too* much of the smugness show even after the man had vanished into the bodies of the waiting fighters and their attendant staff.

Then, at last, she turned to take in the closest of the throng, those that were still starting at her and Firesong like they might have a lion pawing at the loose lock on its undersized cage.

“Back to your business, if you please,” she said coolly, keeping the ice in her smile a moment longer.

An instant later the hall was buzzing and bustling again, everyone moving around or passed them like time had suddenly become unfrozen, some actually returning to necessary preparations, others just hurrying to look busy so they could pretend like they definitely hadn’t been ogling the scene all of half-a-second before.

There were definitely *some* advantages to being an “the Bishop”, Valera had to admit...

“Now that that’s dealt with...” she returned her attention to Firesong again at last. “I do believe I already dismissed you, cadets. What are you still doing here?”

Laurent and the rest started as though physically poked, having not once dropped their salutes. With nothing else to be done about it—and all of them recovering from the shock of the exchange at different intervals—she received a staggered series of “Yes, ma’am!”s and “Sorry, ma’am!”s before the six of them start off at once, Laurent and Ward in the lead, all of them looking a little dazed.

Valera chuckled under her breath. “Firesong.”

The squad stiffed and turned again, instinctively saluting once more.

“Ma’am?” Laurent asked from the back, now.

Valera lifted a hand, pointing south, in the opposite direction the group had been headed.

“Elevators are that way.”

Laurent blinked like she didn’t understand.

Then it dawned on the girl, and she looked suddenly mortified, right along with the rest of them.

“Yes, ma’am!” came a more collected acknowledgement, this time.

And with that they were gone, moving into and through the crowd of readying fighters until even Grant’s towering head of jet-black hair had slipped out of sight.

Then, and only then, did Valera unmute her notifications.

Rude. Kes’ disgruntlement was obvious even through text.

Hardly. The disagreement was in red. *If anything, it was a rather inopportune time for us to interrupt.*

“No shit?” Valera asked quietly, passing herself into the crowd. There were only two kinds of situations in which it was safe to speak her answers to the pair. When she was completely on her own—which was preferable—or when she was surrounded by enough bustle and noise that anyone who noticed her would just assume she was on a call, or else simply mumbling private thoughts out loud.

The underworks barely counted as the latter, but she didn’t have the patience to type out her answers in the moment.

I couldn’t be helped, Kes argued. *It was pleasing to see that man put off his game.*

No answer, which Valera knew could only mean a lack of disagreement.

Instead, a question came in red.

*Are you sure that was the right call? It was an opportunity to course-correct an early sign of ego.
If Ward ends up walking the wrong path...*

The statement hung, but Valera shrugged the implied concern off.

“He won’t,” she muttered firmly, reaching the stairs up towards the stands again.

You seem certain...

“Because I *am* so certain...”

How? Kes, this time, which simultaneously irked and amused Valera. There were times where the two presences that flitted through her frame and neuroline could seem so human, but now and then she was reminded that—at the end of the day—there were still more machine than anything else.

Kes had developed consciousness more than a year ago, now, and had made vast improvements in it’s understanding of man and all its complexities, but the Device was still very much learning.

Valera couldn’t help but wonder if another CAD, one with a much greater potential for rapid growth, would be the same when the time came...

“Because I trust him,” Valera explained. “Because I trust the people around him. What we saw wasn’t ego. It was a calculated decision.”

It was mostly the truth, and perhaps another person would have bought it.

Unfortunately, though...

I refuse to believe it was not ego. The disagreement was spelled out in red. *All my data shows that ego is a driving factor in much human activity.*

“Ok fine, it was *partially* sure,” Valera huffed, reaching the top of the stair and pausing there, not stepping out onto the walkway. Before her, the first third-year Team Battle fight of the tournament was raging on a hilly grasslands field, with the red 9th Sector Division squad looking to be slowly whittling down the Sermont’s Point blue team. “But can you blame the kid? It’s been implied—if not outright said to his face—that he’s less than everyone around him his entire life. His *entire* life. He saw a chance to make payback work for him. He took it. I’m not saying it was selfless. I’m just saying that I don’t think we would have seen the same fight if Ward and his team didn’t have something to gain from the lesson they just taught every cadet in this place.”

No response, this time, which could only mean the pair had no answer that would add anything to her the discussion. That was good, but Valera wasn’t done.

“And besides, worrying about Ward taking ‘the wrong path’ is a little rich coming from someone who flung that door wide open for him, don’t you think?”

Whatever do you mean? came the question in red, as innocently and one could convey over text communication.

“I mean that there are *thirty* first-year squads at this tournament. Any of them getting pair with any specific other one has about a three percent chance. Add that to the likelihood that they’re basically the *first* match of the Team Battle brackets... Come one. I’m not an idiot.”

Are you accusing me of something, Captain?

I think she is, Kes chimed in unhelpfully.

Valera rolled her eyes. “Not accusing you, no. *Stating*. You set that up, didn’t you. Didn’t you, MIND?”

... *Maybe*, came the answer, and Valera could have sworn she could somehow make out the most powerful AI in human history laughing in her ear.