

Chapter 20

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACEHODER

Candice “Dice” Meyer had once heard somewhere that—in long gone centuries—school students irritated with their studies would pick up their textbooks—their actual printed, *paper* textbooks—and chuck them across the room as a means of venting frustration. Most any other time, Dice would probably have thought the idea silly, even wasteful. Paper was valuable, so the thought of potentially *damaging* a book made her wince. What was more, what if the student lost their page? Wouldn’t it be a pain to find it again? She couldn’t imagine the tedium of sifting through that many words just to find where you’d left off.

Then again... At the moment Dice could only regret that technology had advanced so far as to make such an outlet largely impractical.

“Uuuurrrggghhhh!” she let out in an annoyed groan, swiping a hand across her vision to scatter the dozen-or-so molecular formulas, mathematical functions, and tedious text blocks she’d been reviewing across the living room wall across from her. “Remind me: *Why* do we need to know the average rate of psuedo-organic regeneration across the different ranks??”

From her lap, a gravelly chuckle answered her.

“Someone gets hurt in the field, it’s good to have an idea how long it’ll take for them to recover if it’s healable. You can’t always count on being able to get a squadmate back to base.”

Looking down, Dice stuck her tongue out.

“I wasn’t looking for a good, logical answer, you know?”

“I know,” Christopher Lennon—ace of the Galens Institute, A9 monster of a third year, and her munchkin of a boyfriend—answered her with a grin from where he had his head in her lap, blue eyes on the ceiling above her, his own study materials pulled up for review across its own smart-glass surface.

They’d claimed one of the two couches that took up most of the common area of Dice’s suite, a space not all that different from the dorms they’d spent their first and second years living in other than being a bit more spacious. Her housemates were all out, either getting in some late-afternoon training or with their own study groups, so it was just the two of them for the time being. That suited her just fine. Of course. Lately it had been getting harder and harder for her and Chris to spend time together. Classes always took up part of the day, but with this being their third and final year of school—and both their teams having qualified for Globals later in the semester—training felt like it was taking up more and more of their already-limited free hours with every passing week. And that was just *her* schedule. Chris’ was even more nightmarish. He had additional Dueling practice with Valera Dent once week, for one thing, and Steelbound—the squad he led—was a favorite for a potential Systems and maybe even *Intersystems* championship, meaning they did more hours in the training center than any other group Dice knew of. On top of that, it seemed like every other day he had to take one meeting or another with some family or company representative—from Astra and beyond alike—inquiring about his interest in sponsorship. He’d been turning them down left and right, saying he was holding out for the “right fit”.

That had made Dice laugh out loud more than once after he’d shown her some of the offers a few of the parties had brought to the table, and almost faint outright when he’d turned down the *million credits* Veragoth Industries—a weapons manufacturer out of Sol—had offered him for the *single year*.

Still, Chris knew what he was doing. That Dice believed wholeheartedly. It was one of her—admittedly many—favorite things about the guy, right alongside his gentle

demeanor and how easily he laughed, at least around her. Despite his reputation—no, his *legend*, at this point—he was one of the best people she’d ever met, with a smile that always made her feel like the luckiest girl in any room.

Of course, now and then none of that held a candle to where her head went whenever he switched on what she—very privately—called his “Lasher mode” out of the blue, but she wasn’t about to say *that* out loud, was she?

“What’s up?”

Dice blinked, realizing she’d been staring down at her boyfriend without meaning to.

“Nothing,” she said quickly, putting a hand on his chest and squinting. “Just taking in your ugly mug.”

In answer, Chris only snorted. “Brave of you to say that, considering.”

“Considering what?”

“Considering who’s the bigger moron? The one with the ugly mug, or the one who voluntarily decided to *date* that ugly mug.”

Dice laughed at that, thought a little half-heartedly. The truth was that it was a fact that Chris looked a bit different from most other Users. One of the many incredible things about Devices was the steady genetic correction they applied to their weilders, a physiological manipulation that over time not only led to improved metabolism, peak blood-oxygen efficiency, and the like, but other advantages as well. Symmetry, for one thing, of the body and face alike. Add that to being taller, trimmer, *and* more muscular than the average civilian, and by the time they graduated a *lot* of CAD Users looked like they could end up on the cover of any fashion magazine. Many of them *did*, actually, Dice among them, having caved to requests to do just that for several local brands when her family—who were always angling for a way to lure her out of the military—had pulled strings to get her the ‘opportunities’, as they called them.

Still, there were exceptions, Chris being chief among them.

He wasn't ugly. Not by any definition of the word, and Dice would giddily throat punch anyone who said otherwise. He just didn't fit what people's expectation of Users were. For one thing he was shorter than pretty much every other cadet at school—other than Reidon Ward, who it was rumored was quickly catching up—his 5'10"-ish frame a good inch or so shorter than even most of the girls on campus, 3 shorter than Dice. For another, his face was softer, rounder than most, his cheeks having stubbornly held onto some of the fat that the other students largely lost in their first semester at school, if not before. His shoulders were narrow, too, and he often used his silver-grey dreads to hide his eyes, something some of their classmates had mistaken as reclusiveness early on. All of it made him stand out almost as the runt of any crowd, especially when he walked out onto the field at the head of group like Steelbound.

People learned otherwise quick, though. Dice had too, eventually, and it hadn't taken even a year before she'd started seeing him the handsomest man in the room. They'd even been going out since before Ouroboros had evolved into the *beast* it was now, which she suspected Chris was silently grateful for. Not that she could blame him.

Where he was headed, people you could trust to truly have your best interest at heart were probably few and far between...

"Seriously. Do have something between my teeth?"

Dice blinked again, finding herself meeting Chris' blue eyes, his frame now closed, his entire attention on her, hinting at concern.

Lifting one splayed hand, Dice covered his face and half pushing it away from her.

"Hey!" Chris exclaimed, words muffled against her palm as he flailed in a momentary attempt not to fall off the couch. "Leggo!"

Dice grinned, but she let him pull her hand away.

"Sorry," she told him. "I was just thinking about how lucky you were."

"How modest of you."

"Hey! I'm told I'm pretty hot, you know!"

“Your fan feeds doesn’t count as an unbiased opinion, babe.”

“Says the guy with so many *different* fan feeds that they’ve been known to go to war over what the *exact* shade of blue your eyes are...”

They bickered playfully like that for a while, both more than happy snatch up the welcome break from studying. It felt good, just spending time together. Felt nice. If she was honest with herself, the passing of time had started to weight on Dice, every week bringing with it another finger poking at the growing knot of anxiety that had been building in her throat for some months now.

Their third year... Their last at Galens. Chris was going on to the SCT’s.

While she...

Dice shook the worry away, not wanting to revisit a baseless concern. It was pretty much the only downside of dating Chris. The comparison, the ease with which she found herself trying to measure up to him. In reality she was one of the best of the Galens third years, meaning she, too, was very likely headed for the tournaments, and therefore wouldn’t necessarily be seperated from him if they—and for sure if *she*—had anything to say about it.

Still, the fear lingered.

And Chris didn’t miss it.

Pop.

“Owe!” Dice exclaimed, both hands flying up to her forehead. “Don’t *do*, that!”

Chris grinned again, lifting a re-cocked finger threateningly. “Then *don’t* zone out on me about stuipd stuff,” he countered. “We’ve talked about this.”

“I’m *genuinely* going to start watching training videos on poker faces,” she muttered in answer, rubbing at the spot where he’d flicked her between the eyes just lightly enough not to trigger Hydranux’s reactive sheilding.

“The SCT’s pay better than cards sims.”

“Assuming I make it there...”

Aaaaand she'd said it out loud. Dice winched, finding herself not brave enough to meet Chris' eye now that the words had been voiced. She couldn't, however, miss the downturn of his mouth, nor the pinching of his eyebrows.

“You're *still* worried about that...?”

His voice, which could have been annoyed given how many times they'd had this *exact* discussion, was anything but. It was gentle, full of concern and—if anything—maybe just a hint of disappointment. Not at her, though. She knew that, had heard him give her every reason under the stars why she shouldn't be stressed a dozen times now.

And yet...

“Not... really?” she tried to sound nonchallant. “I mean it's kinda hard *not* to stress about it a little at least, all things considered though. How many sponsorship offers are you up to now? Twenty-two? Twenty-three? *Not* that it's your fault,” she added quickly as she saw Chris open his mouth to say something. “I'm just saying... It's hard not to compare sometimes.”

“Then *don't*,” he told her quietly. He was still holding her hand from when he'd pulled it away from his face. “There's no *point*. It's not like you're not gonna get pulled for the circuits too. You're one of the best third years on campus—meaning you're one of the best *students* on campus. *And* you're probably top... what... *three* Duelists? Instructors included?”

Dice shrugged, but didn't disagree. It was probably true. If you didn't count Valera Dent—who was *technically* an A-Type—there weren't many higher ranked Duelists at Galens, and Dice *did* consider herself good even for her A6 level. Liam Gross could still hand her her ass in training, sure, but she was closing the gap, aside from him she was pretty confident she could have held her own against any of the others.

And yet...

“Fat lot of help that was at Sectionals,” she muttered after a second. “Didn't even make top eight in the Dueling bracket.”

Chris scowled. “That was shit luck, and you know it. You had back-to-back fights in the Flood Zone. Pretty much the *worst* matchup for your type. If you’d had a better field, you could have—”

“Chris, I’m okay.”

She finally looked at him, then, mostly succeeding at a smile.

“I’m just being stupid,” she continued, bringing her other hand up from where it had been resting on the couch to lay it on his chest. “I *know* you’re right. At least I think you are. I’m just... It’s a bit of an uphill battle with my own confidence.”

Chris looked pained, at that.

“I’m sorry,” he started to say. “I wish I could fix that. I know I make you feel like—”

“Oh *absolutely not*.”

Woomph.

It was Chris’ turn to again to yelp as the cushion—pulled from the back of the couch beside Dice—hitting him square in the face. She kept it there for a second, smirking in a morbid kind of way as she squirmed in her lap, trying to get free of it.

“You do *not* get to blame yourself for *my* stupidity,” she told him with a dry laugh, raising her voice to make sure he could hear her through the foam. “I already feel dumb as is, so I’ll carry my own baggage, thank you very much!”

“Heard!” Chris’ muffled answer came. “Heard! I just want to—”

But then, abruptly, he stopped. Stopped speaking. Stopped moving.

Stopped... breathing?

“Chris?” Suddenly worried she’d somehow *actually* managed to smother him, Dice pulled the pillow away quickly. He was fine, though. His mouth was open in looked up surprise, and his eyes were wide, staring at a thin blue text notification glowing on his frame.

“What is it?” she asked, tossing the pillow aside and leaning over him with interest. It took a *lot* to shake her usually indomitable boyfriend. “Another sponsorship inv—
WOAH!”

She jerked back as Chris sat up so quick he’d definitely triggered his substantial specs. The steel frame of the couch creaked ominously under the sudden force, and it was only the fact that Dice’s Speed was the *one* spec she had that was higher than his that let her avoid their heads slamming together with dangerous force.

He didn’t notice any of it.

“What the hell...?” Chris muttered, sitting upright now, staring at the notification Dice could no longer see.

“*Chris,*” she repeated, and touched peeved now as she scooted over to poke him in the shoulder. “What *is it?*”

For a few seconds more, though, he didn’t answer, apparently too taken in by whatever he was seeing. Eventually, though, he blinked and seemed to come back to himself.

“Rei,” he grunted. “I’ve got a script that let’s me know whenever his CAD ranks up.”

That surprised Dice. “You can do that?”

Chris looked a little sheepish. “Uh... Yes. Technically.

Dice narrowed her eyes at him, abruptly suspecting where this was going. “Technically?”

“Well... it’s not like you’re *supposed* to be able to, but—”

“But you tweaked your NOED’s hardcoding to access the public ISCM database API.” Dice sighed, wishing she was surprised. “I *told* you you should *stop* doing that. One of these days it’s gonna get you in trouble.”

“Actually it’s a scraper bot that just targets his front-facing page.” Chris was reading the notification again, but talking to her. “So technically I haven’t done anything to the actually coding of the—”

“Babe. I *will* tell all your friends you like to be called ‘pumpkin’ when it’s just the two of us. Get to the point.”

Abruptly, she had his full attention again.

“You wouldn’t dar—”

“*Chris*. Get to the *point*.”

“Right. Getting to the point. I heard Rei was on light training since the Sectional’s shit-show, so I wasn’t suprised that he hadn’t notched passed C9 since.” He reached up and tapped the side of his temple. “He just did, though.”

“And?” Dice didn’t follow. She’d heard enough about Ward at this point to no longer be suprised at his rate of growth. “He’s probably back on a regular training schedule. Didn’t seem like he’d broken anything when we saw him after the match at—”

“He’s B1,” Chris interrupted her, meeting her eyes meaningfully.

That caught her attention. She—just like the rest of the world, she was pretty sure—hadn’t missed the jump Ward and his CAD had made after his field had been hacked at Sectionals. Half-a-dozen S-Ranked simulations had attacked him all at once, tearing into him with what had essentiall been phantom-called blades all at once. It had been horrifying to watch, and she’d heard a rumor that Ward—and Laurent, too—had had a bit of a time getting back on the feild after that.

But it had also pushed the kid from C7 straight to C9, a feat that had never before been seen in the history of the ISCM.

And now he’d done it... again?

Dice was suddenly worried. “Is he okay? He didn’t get attacked again, did he??”

“Asking him right now.” Sure enough, the fingers of Chris’ left hand were already moving as he typed out a message. “I heard the MIND itself patched the back door that got used for the hack. I bet if firewalled Galens too, just in case. So hopefully it’s not—”

But then he stopped again, and for a second time Dice saw a notification scroll across his eyes.

“Speak of the devil,” Chris muttered before she could ask. “He just messaged me.”

Dice bit her tongue, holding back further demands to know what was going on. She watched Chris open the message and read, noticing only that it seemed like a lengthy block of text.

It didn’t help that her boyfriend’s eyes grew wide as fists as he read the message, then scrolled back up to the top to read it again.

Then, finally, he closed it, and for a long time simply gaped at the closest wall, apparently at a loss for words.

After almost 30 seconds of silence, Dice couldn’t help herself.

“Chris...?” she asked slowly, reaching out to tug gently at the sleeve of his shirt.

This time, Chris kept staring at nothing, though he did open his mouth to answer.

“Uh... So... I haven’t been completely honest with you.” He started unsteadily.

Not expecting this, Dice frowned and gripped the cloth a little tight. “About what...?”

“I’ve been giving you a hard time about being stressed about the SCTs. Truth is... I’ve been a little worried to.”

Dice heart jumped into he throat. “About me getting into—?”

“No, *no*,” he answered firmly, still managing to look completely at a loss even as he did. “Not that. Something else.”

“What?”

“... I was worried I was gonna be stuck at A9 all year. I *really* wanted to hit S-Rank before Intersystems this summer.”

Feeling at once relieved and confused, Dice cocked her head at him. “Really? I didn’t that.”

Chris only nodded slowly.

“And you’re telling me this now because...?”

Chris made a face that hovered somewhere between utter bewilderment and total wonder.

“Because... If I’m right... I’m pretty sure the kid just solved that problem for me...”