

PLACEHOLDER
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Late December, 2468

Astra System – Astra-3 – Sector 9

“Simulated Combat Tournaments, more commonly known as ‘SCTs’, were established in the year XXX by the Intersystem Collective Military as means to bolster the ‘ISCM’s’ financial means, and as a way to assure the people of the collective systems of our combative capabilities and strength.” Layton “Catcher” Catchwick was visibly bored as he rested one cheek on his fist, elbow leaning against the back of the red couch he sat on in the living room of the Kane’s dorm suite 304 while he read. “The popularity of the simulated tournaments, however, was unexpectedly explosive, and within a few short decades the events had become the sole source of funding for the military and its subsidiaries, freeing it of the limitations and red tape of Intersystem Collective’s bureaucracy and thereby’ yeaaaaah no... I can’t do this.”

From where she sat opposite the blond-haired Saber, Viviana “Viv” Arada watched Catcher toss the pad he had been reading from—or attempting to read from, at the very least—onto the cushion beside him. The smart-glass of the device shown bright with the condensed blue text of the review material, and while ordinarily she would have found a way to poke fun at her friend at any opportunity, Viv found herself completely sympathetic to his lack of enthusiasm.

She herself, after all, had zoned out about 10 seconds into the reading, mind going numb at the sheer density of the material.

From Viv’s left, their third reading companion giggled.

“How you guys manage to keep up with our classes is beyond me, if this is how you study...”

Viv look around, throwing the dark-skinned girl she shared 304's second red couch with a good-natured glare. "Oh come on," she said, lifting her own pad. "School's one thing. At least that's *interesting*. Don't tell me this isn't a different beast, Cashe."

Chancery Cashe, one of the strongest Lancer-Types in the whole of the Galen's Academy, shrugged, her genetically designed purple eyes laughing behind the reading she had chosen to pull up on her NOED—her neuro-optical electronic display. "It's bad, sure, but not much worse than some of the reading we have to do on quantum compression equations for John Markus."

"Yeah, but when we have to do *that*, we usually have Rei around to help us out," Catcher grumbled. He seemed to have completely given up, both arms now resting along the top of his couch, his casual attire consisting of a pair of white pants and blue shirt clashing well with his hair and yellow eyes. As Viv watched, the Saber even slid down in his seat, leaning his head back to grumble at the ceiling. "And this isn't even worth our time! If I'd known we'd have friggin' *homework* over the break, I wouldn't have stayed!"

"Liar," Viv snorted.

Without looking at her, Catcher shot her two middle fingers, but snorted even as he answered. "Ok yeah, fine. Obviously I wasn't going to pass up Aria's invite. Only way I was going to make it to Sectionals after the shit Dyrk Reese pulled at the Intra-School locked me out individual. But *still*. Is this—" he waved a hand in annoyance at the pad still glowing beside him "—really of any use?"

"Apparently someone thought it was, if it was assigned to us," Cashe offered with another shrug. She leaned back in the couch herself, apparently going back to reading as she spoke. "It can't hurt to review the basics, right?"

Despite her first impression of their suitemate having been a rather poor one, Viv couldn't help but be pleased that the Lancer was keeping up with her and Catcher's banter. For the first half of the year, even after she'd realized the ass she'd made of

herself when she'd accused Rei of being the benefactor of nepotism—the same Reidon “Rei” *Ward* who was actually a former government dependent—Cashe had largely kept to herself despite sharing a room with the three of them. While Viv and Rei had assumed the girl just want a huge fan of socializing, it had transpired that the Lancer had actually had a credible chip on her shoulder when she'd arrived at Galens: she'd been an exception to a commonly-held belief that anyone who failed a CAD-assignment exam—the rigorous physical and cognitive test that decided if a military hopeful would receive a Combat Assistance Device—would never pass any other attempt.

Chancery had, but only after spending an extra year of her life training herself into someone the MIND—the AI that oversaw a majority of the Intersystem Collective's and military's infrastructure and day-to-day systems management, including the assignment exams—had deemed worthy enough to not only grant a CAD to, but grant a CAD that had gotten her accepted to the Galens Institute, one of the best military academies in the entirety of the Astra System. Cashe had carried that mentality over into the first half of their school year, too, and it had earned her an invite to the very same Sectional squad that Viv and Catcher were a part of.

And, in the week since, the girl had opened up, steadily becoming a welcome part of the group Viv, Rei, Catcher, and Aria had formed early on in the year.

Now if only someone else could get his head out of his ass and play nice, Viv thought, eyes flicking unbidden to the notification that lingered red in the top corner of her own NOED frame, indicating a message waiting to be responded to.

“You can't convince me. If anything, this stuff is just wasting time we could be spending training.”

Catcher and Cashe, it seemed, had continued their conversation through Viv's distraction, and she returned with a blink to find that the Saber had picked up his pad and was waving it pointedly again.

“What’s it gonna tell us?” he asked rhetorically. “That the ISC has been at war with the archons for hundreds of years? That we encountered them in the Sirius System—the most recent solar system to be explored—and we were getting our ass kicked until the ISCM developed CAD technology? It’s probably going to remind us that CADs grow and develop with time and combat experience, too, and that their wielders—‘Users’, let’s make sure not to forget—have some control in guiding that development depending on the kind of training they undergo.” Catcher made a face. “You might as well be reminding us all that Rei’s CAD is a monster that’s grown more than a score of ranks since we started school while the rest of us have only grown four or five at *most*, that Aria—the Aria Laurent—is the school ace and made it through the Intra-School with about as much difficulty as I have brushing my teeth, and that Viv is the team firecracker and kind of a dunce.”

“Catcher.” Viv narrowed her blue eyes at him and raised a wrist to present one of the shining, purple-and-yellow bands of her CAD threateningly, its silver vysetrium gems glowing in a trio along the outside of the metal. “I don’t care how many days it’s going to get me brigged. One day I *will* call Gemela on you, and I *will* shove her so far up your ass you’ll be able to use her blades as permanent toothpicks.”

In answer, Catcher pretended to be terrified.

“By the MIND, anything but *that!*” Then his face cleared in feigned realization. “Oh wait, I actually don’t have to worry, because this incredibly informative reading—” he pointed dramatically to his pad again “—also reminded me that phantom-called Devices can’t deal permanent damage, and only achieve neural interruption of any part of the body they cut into, and even *that* only for a brief time outside and sanctioned combat Field. Did you know that only *true-calls* are actual physical manifestations of a CAD? Not that it matters since, since we don’t learn how *make* a true-call until our second year.”

Catcher frowned, then, his sarcasm having at some point morphed into genuine annoyance again as he spoken.

“Seriously, though!. We could be learning something valuable. I know some six year olds who don’t need to be reminded that CADs and specifications are rank F to S, and that the six Types are Brawler, Mauler, Saber, Duelist, Lancer, and Phalanx.”

At that, Viv stared pointedly at her friend, waiting. Beside her, she thought she saw Cashe too, blink away her NOED frame to cock an eyebrow at the Saber.

“... What?” Catcher finally asked after a moment, shrinking slightly into the couch under the girls’ paired gaze. “Do I have something on my face?”

“Catcher... There’s *seven* Types of CADs,” Viv said slowly. “Brawler, Mauler, Saber, Duelist, Lancer, Phalanx... and *A-Type*. Something you should deeeefinitely know given that one of your best friends *is* an Atypical.”

“Oh...” Catcher muttered, looking down at his bad again, contemplating it like maybe he *should* have been paying attention to the review material just a little more.

Then, though, he gathered himself with a shake of his head.

“Na, I don’t feel bad about that one. A-Types are super rare. There’s... what... *three* at school here, right?”

“That I know of,” Cashe agreed with a nodded, pulling up her frame again to start reading once more. “Valera Dent, Christopher Lennon, and Ward, yeah.”

“*And* Rei’s CAD wasn’t presenting anything abnormal until like a week ago,” Catcher pressed his advantage, shrugging at Viv. “Until he developed Type Shift, he was basically a Brawler-Type. He was even practicing with the Brawler group in the 1-A class block all last semester, wasn’t he?”

“He was, yeah, but that doesn’t mean you should be skating over the fact that he’s an Atypical.” Viv frowned at her friend. “Maybe this was the exact point of this review... to make sure we *don’t* forget the basics.”

“That or to weed out the weaklings among the three squads via an S-Class *boredom* challenge,” Catcher grumbled, seeming to give in as he picked up his pad had. “But fiiiine. I’ll do the stupid review.” It took him a moment to find his place, but once he had he started reading again aloud. “SCTs are—aside from the privately hosted and sponsored events that are a common form of entertainment among the ISC’s elite—generally divided into four competitive tiers at the professional level. Any ISCM designated ‘pro’ may compete at the Sectional rank of the tournaments—a ‘Sector’ being the subsection of any given planet—but from there must qualify in turn for Global competitions, System competitions, and finally *Intersystem* competitions. The collegiate circuits—which include only those military cadets still in training—function much the same, except that qualification for Sectional-levels are decided by a combination of intra-school tournaments and staff selection. While first-year CAD recipients participate in their own bracket at Sectionals and are limited to competing at that level—with some exceedingly rare exceptions—second- and third-year cadets are combined into one larger bracket, and—”

For about 15 minutes more the three of them took turns passing the responsibility of reading around, finding it easier to keep focused on the dense material by sharing the burden of keeping each other awake rather than trying to get through it all individually. No matter what they did, though, Viv couldn’t help but find her train of thought drifting off every minute or so, unable to keep her mind on track when the text *indeed* not only started going into the ranking system of CADs, but also broke down the basics of the specifications that quantified a Device’s potential—Strength, Endurance, Speed, and Cognition on the User side, with Offense, Defense, and Growth on the CAD’s—and the numerical breakdown of each, not only the F to S like Catcher had joked about, but also the 0-9 value assigned to each spec within every letter tier to further break it down.

By the time that quarter-hour had passed, Viv was pretty sure she was actively *losing* Cognition levels by the minute. She didn't even hear herself automatically reading aloud about the ISC's 42 livable planets across 7 solar systems and 250 billion lives they hosted, and a brief recap of humanity's expansion out of the Sol System into the Milky Way did nothing to help. If anything, the reading seemed to be taking a turn for the worse, delving now into history lessons that Viv would have bet her CAD—Gemela—all three of them had learned in elementary school.

Not half a minute later, though, one passage finally caught her attention enough to focus on as she kept reading.

“For a vast majority of this period of exponential human growth, our spread across the galaxy happened in relative peace. The ISC came into being quickly, building out of the global government Earth developed in the 2100s, with what few conflicts and rebellions did occur handled by local peacekeeping forces or—in extreme circumstances—unmanned global defense systems. It wasn't for another 100 years that the military branch of the Collective was established, and then only with very good reason: humanity's encountering of the greatest threat our kind has ever faced, the archons of the Sirius System.”

“Neuro-linked, semi-organic lifeforms with electromagnetic shielding capabilities and an alarming ability to adapt to external threats and hostile environments both,” Catcher kept on, and for once he was just as alert as Viv had found herself, “the archons were first encountered by terraforming forces in the early 2200s, and proved themselves violently territorial. What followed was the start of an ongoing conflict that continues to this day, with humanity on one side and the archons' hive-mind on the other. For decades the battle was largely considered a losing fight, mankind striving to contain the extraterrestrial threat, until the research corp of the newly established ISCM developed what turned out to be our ultimate defense weapon: the Combat Assistance Device.” Catcher looked up briefly at Viv. “Finally getting to the good part.”

“Tell me about it,” Viv muttered in agreement, not lifting her eyes from the reading as the Saber continued.

“Partially modeled to imitate aspects of archon abilities, Devices allowed humanity to regain a foothold in the battle, providing a means of assault that had been largely lacking after it was discovered the enemy’s shielding abilities nullified all by the most powerful projectile weapons. The discovery—and subsequent years of research into—the material commonly known as ‘vysetrium’ within the Sirius System was key in this development. Capable of storing incalculable amounts of energy due to its unique—and as-of-yet not completely understood—molecular makeup, vysetrium allowed for a multitude of technological advances in the space of half-a-decade, including—but hardly limited to—the quantum calculation and substance compression that allows a User not only to draw and stow on their CAD as needed, but provides the Device with the ability to ‘evolve’ over time, assuming a certain level of information input, which is usually achieved by combat.” Catcher groaned, then. “We jinxed ourselves. This is starting to sound like one of those stupid data dumps out of a bad fantasy book. Go back to the archons! Why doesn’t stuff like this ever delve deeper into *them?*!”

“Either because we still don’t know enough about them, or because the ISCM keeps a tight lid on information regarding the war,” Viv grumbled, feeling equally dejected.

“Or both.” Catcher sighed. “Whatever. I’m over this. Cashe, it’s your turn to—”

The blond boy stopped, though, and his snort of amusement had Viv looking from the text at last to frown at him, then around when she saw he wasn’t looking at her.

She had to stifle a laugh, therefor, when she realized that Cashe, after teasing them not 20 minutes ago about staying on task, had completely nodded off, her sliver hair

falling to partially cover her face as her head drifted sideways, eyes closed and breathing deeply.

“Too funny,” Catcher grunted, leaning forward and making to reach over the table, obviously intending to wake the girl up.

Viv, though, caught his wrist before he managed it.

“Let her sleep,” she said quietly. “I’m pretty sure she’s *still* been doing extra time in the West Center, even though we’re training like eight hours a day right now.”

“Seriously?” Catcher hissed, yellow eyes going wide. “*Why*? She’s proven her point, hasn’t she? She qualified *individually* for Sectionals.”

“And she failed her assignment test the first year, and probably had to work as hard as Rei has to get to where she is now. Let her sleep.”

Catcher shrugged at that, and sat back again as Viv let him go.

“So long as you let me use this as an excuse to call it a day on this freaking studying.” Closing out of the reading, he placed his pad on the coffee table that sat between them quietly, returning to looking up at the ceiling again. “Sunday is the only day off we get. I’d rather be doing something else anyway.”

“You and me both,” Viv muttered, putting down her own tablet as she willed her eyes not to again drift up the red notification that still lingered in the top corner of her frame. “Got any ideas?”

Catcher scowled. “Well if Rei and Aria had invited us along to head into the city...”

Viv cocked her head at the boy. “Catcher... Their out on a *date*. Their *first* date. Do you really want to crash *their first date*.”

At that, the Saber’s attention snapped back downward again so abruptly Viv was sure he’d accidentally triggered his Speed spec.

“Wait... *What*?!”

Catcher’s mouth was hanging open, and he looked positively dumbfounded at this news.

Viv narrowed her eyes at him. “You didn’t know? Seriously? How could you not know? It’s all Aria’s been talking about all week.”

“Maybe to *you!*” Catcher hissed. “You know as well as I do all it takes to get Aria to turn the color of a tomato is ask her ‘on a scale of 1 to 10, how cute is Rei today?’! I haven’t heard *squat* about this.”

Viv frowned. “Rei didn’t tell you?”

“*No!*” Catcher insisted, apparently a little too loudly, because at Viv’s elbow Cashe twitched, causing both Viv and the Saber to freeze.

After a few seconds, the girl seemed to settle again, and Catcher repeated himself more quietly.

“No, he didn’t.” He looked a little put out by this fact. “He said they were going into Castalon, just the two of them, with plans to do some shopping and stuff. Something about dinner, too. Nothing about a *date*, though!”

Viv had to work hard not to roll her eyes. “Catcher... The city? Shopping? Dinner? I’m surprised at you. You’re usually pretty quick on the pickup. That *was* him telling you there were going on a date. *Obviously.*”

Catcher blinked at her for a moment, contemplating.

Then his eyes went wide.

“Ooooh,” he breathed. “*Ooooooh!* Yeah, I guess it was!” He paused with a frown, though. “Still, can you blame me? Those two have been dancing around each for like three months now. I was starting to wonder if anything was ever gonna happen.”

“Na,” Viv shook her head, “Rei would have made his move eventually. I’ve told him before: he’s never suffered from a lack of self-confidence, even with his fibro and the surgeries stunting his grown.”

“You could just say the dude is nuts and leave it at that.” Catcher chuckled, leaning back in his chair to look to his right, northward. “Still. Good for him. Good for them

both. I won't even complain about them leaving us behind, even if I *am* a little jealous they're getting off the grounds..."

Viv turned to follow the boy's gaze, then, joining him in looking out the great window of the suite's living room, an entire wall made of smart-glass that could be turned opaque and double as a monitor for feed-access and NOED control if needed. It was the end of December, and Astra-3's first real snowfall—late even by the atypical seasons of the terraformed planet—had coated the grounds of the Galens Institute in 6 inches of fine powered the day before. Despite that, the early afternoon was clear, not a cloud, making it easy to distinguish the rapidly trailing lines of flyers and other public and personal transport vehicles that made up the traffic of the sky-lines high, high above them. Not too far away from them the massive, 100-foot stone wall of that encircled the Institute in a perfect square could be made out, capped with frost along its top, and another 100 yards or so beyond that the skyscrapers of the city proper rose like narrow, angular titans. The shortest among them being no less than 400 stories tall, and packed together as they were the so round the school on all sides, Viv not-infrequently got the feeling of looking up out of a hole whose sides were made up of steel and glass. It didn't bother her, of course. Castalon was beautiful, especially when the buildings caught the light of any decent day, and the sight of the skyline at night was well worth the early shadows it brought to the grounds.

Abruptly, Viv was envious, and as that feeling settled in her gut, a wicked idea began to form...

"Catcher... Did Rei tell you where they were going? Aria only told me it was one of the shopping districts."

Catcher blinked and looked around at her. Her enthusiasm for the budding plan must have shown plain on her face, because he gave her an odd look even as he answered. "Yeah...? Easthold Mall. Apparently you guys flew by it on the way into school, and he remembered." As Viv felt herself begin to grin, it was the Saber's turn

to narrow his eyes at her. “Ok, I know that look. You’re either planning a murder, or you’re about to get us in a lot of trouble. What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking—” Viv said, starting to push herself up from the couch, careful not to wake a still-dozing Cashe, planning to make for her room to grab as inconspicuous a jacket and hat as she could find “—that if you’re half as interested as I am in how the two of them are doing, it might be good to check on them. You know... As concerned friends, obviously.”

She didn’t have to wait long for Catcher to process, and an instant later he, too was on his feet.

“Oh *hell* yes. Count me in.” His grin was just as evil as Viv’s. “As a concerned friend, obviously.”