

## CHAPTER 5

For a long, *long* time—longer than might otherwise have been prudent in the presence of a superior officer—Rei stared, dumbstruck, at Ueno Jasper. Had he been able to see himself he might have facepalmed at the character he cut, mouth slack and eyes wide.

Then again... it was pretty damn understandable.

His shock, though, was further overpowered by his disbelief at what he'd just heard, and the incomprehension was enough to find his words eventually.

“I’m sorry... *What?!*”

He hadn’t meant to raise his voice, but his astonishment was just that great. A sponsorship? *Him? A first year Cadet?!* And by a company that clearly had enough of a stake in the Intersystem Collective to be able to pull strings in the highest echelons of the military?!

No. No way.

“Abrupt, I know,” Jasper answered his incredulity with a laugh, sitting up as she held one hand out and back. “I *did* tell them you might find that a little hard to believe.” In a flash a small pad appeared in the woman’s waiting grasp, handed off by the bodyguard who had stepped forward so quickly Rei suspected the man’s Speed was in the As, if not higher. Just as swiftly, however, the figure backed off again to resume his rigid stance closer to the wall while Jasper uncrossed her legs to lean forward.

“I, Reidon, am what you call a ‘fixer,’” she explained as she tapped the screen, blue light reflecting suddenly in her eyes as the pad came to life. “Basically: I’m a go-between for powerful people and the actions they want to see accomplished.”

Rei had guessed as much—from the start the woman had clearly been careful not to say “we” when referring to Kamiya—but that did nothing to alleviate his disbelief.

“That—” Jasper continued, apparently finding what she was looking for with nothing but a few quick swipes and giving the screen a quick once over “—makes me

perfect for a situation like this. An *unprecedented* situation like this, to be exact.” Once she was satisfied, she flipped the pad around and offered it to Rei to take. “A situation in need of a more delicate hand than the massive machine of corporate bureaucracy.”

More automatically than anything, Rei accepted the tablet, finding himself looking at a wall of text. As though in a dream he glanced over the initial clause headlines and bolded details of the contract, even reaching up to scroll further along the document to read. 15 seconds wasn’t nearly enough to find the bottom of the text skimming, but it *was* enough to solidify one absolute fact.

“You’re serious,” Rei muttered, still tracing along the dense lines of blue. “You’re *actually* serious.”

“Oh, honey. We’re *dead* serious,” came the laughing answer.

No. No way.

And yet there, slipping away upward before his very eyes, was the indisputable evidence.

It made no sense to Rei. How was this possible? Third years was one thing, and he *had* heard of some second years getting approached for sponsorship by companies and powerful families in the past. Christopher Lennon had been hounded with offers after ranking in the top 100 at the Intersystem SCTs the previous summer, apparently. But even those were few and far between, with only a handful passed out each season to the absolute *best* of the rising stars of the collegiate tournaments.

And Rei had *never*, not once in his life, heard of a *first year* getting extended an offer, much less one who hadn’t competed at any level higher than his own school’s Intra-Schools.

It made no sense.

In the pro circuits, sponsorships were hardly a rare thing. Almost every professional SCT combatant had some kind of backing, contributed by everyone from smaller businesses looking to get their name out at their local Sectionals all the way up

to the quadrillion-credit brands that backed the King- and Queen-Class fighters who competed for the ISC Championship title every year. There were even individual families in possession of enough private wealth to try—and not infrequently succeed—at establishing their legacy by sponsoring the User with the right future.

The collegiate level, though, was a completely different story.

For one thing, there was a risk attached to sponsorships. If something happened to a User's reputation—if they fell out of favor, if they were caught in a scandal, if they were arrested or even just dishonorably discharged from the military for some reason—the influence of the SCTs was such that any name associated with said User was often tarnished as well. Backing teenagers—even *ISCM-trained* teenagers—could only redoubled that risk. What was more, sponsorships were expensive, with even minimally-competitive offers on a Sectional scale providing a yearly stipend multiples of times greater than a User's typical military salary, not to mention other benefits.

And—if Rei wasn't wrong—the contract before him would have been competitive at *much* higher than a Sectional scale...

*One million credits a year?! Rei thought his head might have exploded at that number alone, around 40 times higher than his paltry cadet stipend. MILLION?!*

It made no sense. It just made no sense.

Except, of course, for one, single fact...

*Ab.*

All at once Rei felt his shock fade as the thought, the realization, took hold of him. He closed his mouth and forced himself to focus.

“Do you mind if I take a moment to review this, ma'am?” he asked, looking up at Jasper briefly.

The woman's bright answer was prompt even as she kept smiling. “Of course! Take all the time you need. It's not like we don't expect you to have questions.”

Nodding his thanks, Rei looked to the colonel for approval next, receiving an immediate—and pointed—dip of the officer’s head.

*Be. Careful*, Rei thought he could read in the gesture, doubly sure as Guest met his eyes intently.

Rei gave his own, smaller nod, looking back to the pad as Jasper promptly engaged Maddison Kent in enthusiastic small talk. He had every intention of being careful, though not in actually reading the contract. Rather, what Rei had needed was time.

Time to think.

It *did* make sense, at least to an extent. It was well known that sponsoring parties—especially the larger ones—often had whole *teams* of people dedicating to scouting the SCTs of every system, professional and collegiate both. If anyone had been bothering to watch the Galen’s first years during the Intra-School, if anyone had been paying attention, it made *perfect* sense, in fact. So much so that Rei could have kicked himself for not preparing for this exact eventuality. Even if Shido’s Growth spec wasn’t public knowledge with the ISCM doing everything it could—short of locking him away far from the light of day—to keep the exact circumstances of his CAD a secret, the truth would have started to leak out, by now. If the whispers on the forums—the same ones who had given Rei the unofficial name of “Iron Prince”—didn’t put it together, doubtless the sharp eyes or virtual intelligence networks of those larger parties looking for the next great User to back would have. Kamiya, if anything, was just ahead of the game.

Still... Weren’t they just a little *too* ahead...?

Rei’s eyes narrowed as he stared at the tablet in his hands, thumbing the text upward every couple of seconds in a careful imitation of reading. All the while, he thought, wishing cadets learned partial-calls earlier than their second year.

His neuroline would have been helpful, in that moment.

Kamiya... A company he'd never heard of. That bothered him. Not because he thought he *should* have, per se, but rather because of the information the fact that he *didn't* know of them presented him with all on its own. The corporation had means and ability—that much was clear—and Jasper and the colonel had given good reason why he wouldn't have heard of them. They provided tech to other entities, rather than direct sales. They clearly weren't afraid of taking action behind the scenes. They were far away, situated in the Sol System.

Sol... The system with a condensed wealth as substantial as any pair of the other six systems combined, and home to thousands of companies Rei *had* heard of...

It bothered him. And the longer he sat there, the more the shock-turned-realization morphed once again into something else.

Suspicion.

10 minutes of rolling every angle and question he could think of over in his head, Rei had come to the very conclusion his gut had been screaming from the moment Jasper Ueno had handed him the contract. That it was too soon. Way too soon. Even for his and Shido's circumstances, it was *way* too soon.

And Kamiya was indeed too far ahead of the game.

Which probably meant...

"I do have a question, ma'am." Rei spoke at last even as he continued to pretend to read the contract, pleased to find that his voice had regained its steadiness.

Jasper—who had somehow managed to get both Guest and Kent involved in a perfectly-pleasant discussion about the weather—looked around at him with interest again. "Really? Just one?"

"For now."

The woman laughed lightly at this. "Alright. Let's hear it."

"Why me?" Rei still hadn't looked up, continuing to thumb the screen slowly upward before him. "I'm curious as to why a group like the Kamiya Corporation would

be so interested in me? I'm a first year, and haven't even had my first Sectionals tournament yet. Even if I had, that's the extent I'll be fighting this season. I won't even be allowed to *qualify* for Globals until my second year, and we all here know that very few cadets manage that, much less get to go further."

Even without looking at her, he could see the woman's smile turn wry.

"Reidon, please. I did you the courtesy of acknowledging the intelligence both my research *and* my observation tell me you possess. I would appreciate it if you extended me the same kindness."

At last Rei stopped pretending in favor of finally lifting his eyes from the pad, and for the first time he thought he saw Ueno Jasper as the person she truly was. The smile hadn't faded from her lips, nor had the genuine edge of it that threw him a little, but her eyes had changed. Gone was the glib cheer of the woman who'd been sitting across from him a moment before. Gone was the casual posture she'd had when he'd walked into the room. Jasper's gaze now felt more like the study of one of earth's great, predatory cats waiting to see if he would prove friend or food. Despite leaning towards, him, too, there was no eagerness to her body language, no hint of need. If anything, she seemed *expectant*, as though the woman were trying to say with even the angle of her bearing that there was only one direction for him to take.

If he hadn't been before, Rei was suddenly very certain that the Kamiya Corporation did not pinch its pennies when it came to the quality of the "fixers" it hired, at the very least.

"Fair enough," he agreed, looking from Jasper to Colonel Guest as he set the pad aside. "Permission to speak freely, sir?"

The colonel's eyes narrowed ever so slightly at this, but he nodded after a moment. "Within reason, Ward."

*Be. Careful,* the words said again.

“Yes, sir.” Rei, too, leaned forward, addressing Jasper once more. “Your offer is generous—*very* generous, even—but I mean no disrespect when I say that that sets off more alarm bells for me than you’re going to get leaps of joy.”

“Oh?” Jasper asked, and for some reason Rei thought she caught a glimpse of something like satisfaction flit across the woman’s face. “Is that right?”

“It is,” Rei said with a nod. “On the one hand there’s the adage that ‘if something seems to be too good to be true’, and all of that, but on the other... Compensation *that* generous is very high even for the circumstances—circumstance you and Kamiya clearly have a decent grasp of—and that’s *with* completely setting aside the entire fact that I’m largely unproven as a fighter. What does that say about this offer?”

“That Kamiya hopes to give you not only every reason to take advantage of the opportunities they can provide you with now, but in the future as well,” Jasper answered at once, indicating the pad he’d set aside with a gesture. “Is it so suspicious that they want to invest in a way that would encourage you to always consider them first and foremost for sponsorship long-term?”

“Closer to the truth, I think, but I’m not buying it.” Rei was frowning once more. “Here’s another question, then: does the Kamiya Corporation sponsor any other Galens cadets?”

“It has not had the pleasure, as of yet,” the answer came, as confident as it was craftily diplomatic.

*Man* this woman was good.

Rei, though, didn’t let himself get distracted, looking to the Rama Guest again. “In that case... Colonel, can I ask how many of the third years have sponsorships?”

“Seven,” the man answered, glancing at Maddison Kent and waiting for the woman to nod in confirmation before adding to this. “With an eighth in negotiation as we speak, I believe.”

“And among those sponsors, are there names you would say are stronger than Kamiya’s when it comes to influence and ability?”

Guest raised an eyebrow at that, but answered anyway. “Only one or two, but yes.”

“What about the previous graduating class? Or the one before that?”

“More than one or two.”

Rei nodded, theory confirmed. “Then—given those parties’ existing ties to the school—is it fair to say that they keep a close eye on the rest of the Galens cadets year-over-year?”

He might have imagined it, but Rei thought he saw the barest hint of a smirk start to play at the corner of the commanding officer’s beard as the man seemed to realize where he was taking this line of questioning. “Almost always.”

Satisfied, Rei turned back to Jasper, who was watching him with an air that was something between subtly amused and impressed. “So... Do you get where I’m going with this?”

“I believe so, yes.” Her smile was reaching her eyes again, brilliant as ever. “All the same, do please enlighten me.”

“Fine,” Rei said with a shrug. “Basically, here’s where my gut goes: if there are other parties with closer ties to the Institute, *and* some with larger war chests than your employer—” he watched the woman intently, trying to read her expression “—what is it that made Kamiya beat them to the punch? What is it that has *you* sitting here, beating out anyone else, and that *despite* the fact that you have no previous ties to the Institute?” He met her gaze leveling. “Again: Why. Me?”

He repeated the question with emphasis, hoping to drive home the point. He wasn’t reaching, he knew. It *was* reasonable that potential sponsors would be keeping eye on him, after all, but even with the momentum of his Growth and improvement—not to mention the fact that Type Shift was public knowledge, now—bigger and stronger entities with more cash to throw around had existing ties to the Institute. If



*they*, therefore, had yet to develop the confidence to approach him, why had Kamiya? And why with a contract that would have had most Global-level SCT pros salivating?

Despite the money, despite the *healthy* list of tremendous benefits Rei had caught a glimpse of as he'd pretended to peruse the text, these questions burned hot enough to steel his hand.

Without so much as a twitch in her smile, it was Jasper's turn to take Rei in in silence. For a long moment the woman seemed to study him, to examine every line of his face, eyes lingering on what he thought were probably the few scars visible along his neck and peeking up from the collar of his shirt and jacket.

When she finally spoke again, it was with a quiet, dry laugh.

"What if I told you you were nothing more than a calculated risk? That you were a gamble?"

"All due respect, ma'am, but I'd say *bull*," Rei answered at once. "You have access to every data point any other potential sponsor of mine—present or future—has, and you're the only one sitting here, throwing a contract like *this*—" he gestured to the pad at his side "—at me. If I *am* a gamble, that would have to mean I'm probably some rogue element's gamble, wouldn't it? Maybe some specific person's? Which, yet again, leads us right back to the same question. Why me?"

"Why you indeed..." Jasper muttered, nodding as though in approval. "I have to say, Reidon, you exceed my expectations, and I'm a *very* hard person to take by surprise."

Rei, unsure how to respond to this, only shrugged again. "Thanks, I guess? Assuming that's a compliment...?"

"Oh it is," Jasper said, and to his surprise she got to her feet, smoothing her skirt down over her knees before standing straight. "It definitely is." She held out a hand, then. "Could I have my pad back, if you please? You obviously won't be needing it any further today."

A little taken aback by the confidence of this statement, Rei picked up the tablet to hand to the woman just the same, watching her promptly take to swiping across its surface again.

“Wait, is that it?” It was Maddison Kent, funnily enough, who spoke up. “He hasn’t even turned down your offer.”

“No, but he’s going to,” the fixer said with another laugh, typing something quickly across the smart-glass. “And unlike most negotiations, attempting to improve on the terms would only be counter-productive. Isn’t that right, Reidon?”

Rei nodded slowly, still thrown by the sudden shift in the conversation’s direction. “Probably. But how do you know I’m going to turn you down?”

“Because I’m under very strict—and rather annoying orders—not to lie to you, ironically enough.”

The words had an immediate impact on the room, already tense as it had been. Over his shoulder Rei thought he saw Kent stiffen, while Guest at long last uncrossed his thick arms to push himself up from the edge of the desk, standing tall and ominous in his black-and-golds.

“I recommend you explain that statement, Ms. Ueno,” the man rumbled, his earlier, casual air immediately replaced by the presence of the commanding officer of the Galens Institute, more powerful and threatening than even the storm outside that still pelting the windows with snow. “As it stands, it seems you’re implying you would have preferred to con my cadet into signing your contract, had you been at liberty to do so. That’s hardly in line with how the Kamiya Corporation was presented to me by General Abel when I agreed to take this meeting.”

“Ease up, colonel,” Jasper said with a sidelong glance and another smile, finishing her manipulation of the pad with a swift swipe in Rei’s direction, which was followed by a ping on his NOED telling him he had been sent a file. “It’s *because* I’m currently representing the Kamiya Corporation that I’m... let’s call it *‘limited’*. You’ve been too

far removed from the bureaucracy of Sol if you think scheming and politics isn't how most things still get done at the heart of this beautiful mess we call human civilization."

Before Guest could say anything more, though, Jasper was addressing Rei again, who had opened the message to find the very same contract he'd just—if indirectly—turned down.

"Those are the terms offered. My contact information is attached, for when you change your mind."

"When?" Rei repeated with a bare laugh, closing the file again to look the woman in the yes. "That's a lot of confidence, isn't it?"

"Says the boy who just turned down a *million* credits a year without so much as blinking," the fixer answered with a chuckle. Then she grew serious, looking Rei over carefully again even as she handed the pad back to the guard behind her, who accepted it with another quick step forward. "I should probably tell you you're too sharp for your own good, Reidon Ward, but something tells me that's not really the case..."

The way she said it...

"I'm right, aren't I?" Rei pressed with a frown. "There's a reason Kamiya is interested in me. A reason other than those other parties would have?"

Even as he asked it, he felt a tension he'd only passively been aware of on entering the room tighten in his gut. Jasper momentary silence didn't help it, much less the slow, single nod she offered him in answer.

"Yes, you're right. There is a reason."

"But you won't tell me..."

She smiled again.

"No, I won't. I might not be military, but I have my own set of rules I have to follow, too. And in my line of work—" she winked at him "—you never know who might be listening."

And then, with that and a brief word of gratitude for taking the meeting—accompanied by a polite bow from both Jasper and the guard towards Colonel Guest—the woman took her leave, exiting the room so quickly with her black-clad shadow that Rei was left feeling almost windblown at the departure. Clearly he wasn't the only one, because it was a solid few seconds before any of the three remaining among them finally spoke.

“Ooookay... Is there a ranking for ‘quickest-meeting-that-should-have-taken-hours’? Because that had to be some kind of a record.”

Maddison Kent's confused humor broke the spell of surprise Ueno Jasper's sudden departure had cast, and Rei turned to find the chief assistant scrunching her nose at the door. Colonel Guest, on the other hand, was watching Rei, and it was with the jolt of realizing that he was the only one left seated that he jumped to his feet to take an at ease position before the man.

“Apologies, sir,” Rei got out quickly. “I hope nothing I said was cause for offense...”

For a moment or two more, the colonel studied him, staring him down much in the same way Jasper just had.

Then, at long last, the man relaxed with a snort, waving Rei down again even as he moved to the seat the Kamiya fixer had just vacated.

“Sit, Cadet,” Guest grunted, dropping down himself and leaning forward to rest his elbows on his bent knees, gaze now on the closed door of his office as well. “You said nothing wrong. If anything, I think you handled that situation as well as could be expected, given the circumstances.”

Doing as he was told, Rei found himself moving stiffly again when he sat, and forced a slow breath in and out before responding.

“Yes, sir. I'll admit that was... er...”

“Unexpected?” Kent offered, coming around to stand behind the Colonel, who still hadn’t looked away from the door.

“Haa...” Rei got out tightly. “That’s one way to put it, I guess?”

“It is. Another would be as Jasper herself stated.” Guest finally turned to Rei again. “*Unprecedented.*”

Rei swallowed, then nodded. Now that the fixer was gone the adrenaline he hadn’t even felt from the moment she’d announced the Kamiya Corp’s offer was taking its toll. His hands were cold, and he was pretty sure his heart would have broken free of his chest had Shido not been steadily improving his skeletal tissue integrity for the past half year. His head, too, a moment ago so clear and aware, was suddenly flooded with questions and doubts, including not a few nagging voices screaming at him that he should have taken the money and run, rather than ask stupid questions.

“A million credits...” he muttered, and it was only as he noticed Guest and Kent both blink at him that he realized he’d said it out loud.

“S-sorry!” he stammered in quick apology, going rigid. “I just—”

Before he could finish, though, Guest held him up again with a hand again.

“At *ease*, Ward. You’re an odd one, I’ve gotta say. Cool as can be when you’re staring a shark in the face, only to start shaking the moment you get to dry land again.” He was watching Rei carefully. “A million, you say, though? Is that what they were offering you?”

Rei nodded shakily, working to keep the number from playing across his head on a loop. “You weren’t aware?”

“No.” The colonel shook his head. “The ISCM allows these sorts of things to usually be handled largely independently. Given that you’ve been in my care for a lot less time than most cadets who end up sitting where you are now, I just thought I should be a least a bit more present.” Guest grimaced, then. “Still... A million credits...”

You did even better than I thought, with that on the table. What the *hell* are they playing, throwing an offer like that around?”

“Right?!” Kent’s disbelieving answer came in a hiss. “Why are they even approaching him in the first place?! I mean, well...” she glanced at Rei guiltily “... aside from the obvious, I guess...”

The irritation by the pair on his behalf—coupled with this surprising reminder of his circumstances,—was enough to pull Rei away from the risk of daydreaming about how much thrift shopping he and Aria could have done with a *million* credits.

“You know?” he asked of the woman, looking from her to the colonel and back again.

“She knows,” Guest confirmed for his assistant with a nod before Kent herself could answer. “Maddison was in the room, when you were accepted to Galens. As was I, obviously.”

That much Rei had assumed, but it still helped him gather to courage to ask his follow-up.

“Then... I’m not crazy, right? For them to come in swinging like that... My—*Shido’s* Growth spec, rather—it’s not enough to have warranted that kind of offer *this* early alone... Right?”

In answer, Guest made a face even as Kent nodded fervently over his shoulder. “Honestly... No. It’s not. Still, one can follow their logic. In the time you’ve been here, Ward, in the six months you’ve spent at this school, you and your Device have ascended through more CAD Ranks than a lot of User’s will see in most of their lifetime. Your S-Ranked Growth might not be public knowledge, but the fact that you—as a first year—have an active following on the feeds—”

“And a *kickass* nickname,” Kent added, earning a brief glare for Guest over his shoulder even as he continued.

“—is an indication that word is going to spread quickly. It makes sense that sponsors would come knocking earlier than any Cadet we’ve had at this school. I’ve been aware of that for some time, and had even thought to ask Valera Dent or Dyrk Reese to take you aside to make mention of it. Unfortunately, I got word about Kamiya’s interest before I believed it would be an impending issue. For that, I suspect I owe you an apology.”

The mention of Major Dyrk Reese—the principal arbiter of all of Galens’s hosted SCTs and the man who had actively worked to make Rei’s life hell throughout the Intra-Schools during the previous quarter—only briefly brought up a flare of anger Rei quickly shoved aside as the colonel continued.

“Still... I have to agree with you. It’s too early. Prior to that meeting, I made much the same assessment of the situation that you just did on the fly, so kudos for that as well. Don’t know if you noticed, but I was a little... on edge, when you arrived.”

“I may have noticed, yes, sir,” Rei managed to get out with a weak smile, earning himself a grunt from the S-Ranked User.

“No surprises there, I suppose. Then maybe you can understand what I mean when I say I feel a certain relief that you turned down that offer. Not many people would have, I think, in your stead...”

“More like it was turned down for me,” Rei said with a disbelieving shake of his head. “If you don’t mind me saying it: that woman was terrifying, sir. It felt like everything I did was being dissected a micro-second at a time.”

“You’re not the only one, don’t worry,” Guest turned to look back at his chief assistant. “Do you know anything about her, Maddison?”

“Ueno? No, but I do know her kind.” It was Rei that the woman addressed as she spoke, though. “I hope you’re not dumb enough to think that Users are the only dangerous people out there, Ward. She wasn’t wrong, implying that the Collective has

more back alley deals and plots woven into its systems than a bad mystery novel. The MIND isn't actually all-seeing, and it's certainly not all-powerful."

"Yes, ma'am," Rei answered quickly. "I'll remember that, ma'am."

"Do so," Guest said, look around at him again. "Especially when you go through that contract in detail, as I'm *well* aware you are going to as soon as you have a spare moment. We clearly share reservations about this offer, Ward. I hope you can remember that in the face of temptation."

"Yes, sir," Rei said again. "I will, sir."

"Good. And speaking of..." the colonel started slowly at this, leaning a little closer over the space between the couches. "I could be wrong, Cadet, but did it seem like you might have a sense of *why* it was that Kamiya would be knocking at our door about you so early? I'm well aware of your academic accolades, but you came to that conclusion awfully fast, even given..."

It took every ounce of willpower Rei had to not go rigid at this question. He did, in fact, have a suspicion—though a weak one at that. It was honestly hardly more than speculation rather than any true theory, in fact, predicated entirely on that single bothersome factor that had caught his eye as he'd entered the colonel's study in the first place. Still, Rei wasn't even sure he was right about this nagging inkling, and doubted he would have put to voice his hunch even if he had been.

After all, in a universe of a quarter of a trillion people, it wasn't *completely* impossible that the name "Kamiya" would seem to share the same phonetic bases as Rei's own first name...

... Was it?

"No, sir," Rei lied with a straight face to the expectant Colonel Guest. "I'm as in the dark as you are there. I just thought it odd Kamiya is obviously so willing to put the cart *this far* before the horse, even with reason. Others should have been here first, if



that was the case. If anything, the best guess I have is that they know about my Growth spec. Know for a *fact*, I mean.”

For another long moment Guest watched him with a slight frown, like he were trying to read something deeper in Rei’s words. Eventually, though, Maddison gave a polite cough from behind the couch, and the colonel sat back with a dissatisfied sort of shrug.

“If you say so, Cadet. Not sure I believe you, but I *am* sure I’m already sticking my nose too far into this as is. Just keep in mind what I said, got it?”

“Got it, sir.”

“Excellent. Now then—” the colonel, without looking away from Rei, pointed at the door “—Maddison, if you could give us moment, I would appreciate it.”

“Sir?” Kent asked in surprise, clearly not having expected this sudden dismissal.

“You heard me. Out, if you please.”

“But... you’re supposed to call the Ellison Academy back as soon as you can, and after that there’s your scheduled meeting with—”

“Push them.” Guest still hadn’t looked away from Rei, who was very quickly remembering, once again, who *exactly* it was he was sitting across from. “You can let them know something important has come up, if needed.”

“‘Important’, sir...?” Kent asked, still obviously uncertain, though she had started dutifully for the door just the same.

“Oh yes,” Guest said, neon-grey fire flashing for a moment in his dark eyes. “*Exceedingly* important. Cadet Ward and I need to have a chat, you see. One involving a certain red-headed niece of mine, and how a simple *outing to a mall* almost turned into a *six-man brawl in front of a public restroom*??”

As Maddison Kent left the room—her confusion replaced by wicked sniggering that was audible until the door closed behind her—Rei found himself calculating that he *could*, in fact, survive the ten-story drop to the snowy courtyard far below.

On the other hand, as the oppressive pressure of Guest's unmoving gaze started to feel like it were crushing his very soul, he was *much* less certain as to whether that possible exit via the nearest window would be a voluntary means of escape... or an assisted ejection.