

## CHAPTER 31

PLACEHOLDER TEXT

-PLACEHOLDER TEXT

“Four-Team First-Year Wargame,” the Arena announced smoothly. “Red Team: ‘Daggerfall’. Blue Team ‘Firesong’. Green Team: ‘Red Crown’. Yellow Team: ‘Valormade’. Elimination bout. Combatants... Call.”

*Damn. It. All.*

Cursing internally was all Rei could do as he muttered “Call” quietly, Shido coming to life around his arms. Still in his red starting circle in the grass, he crouched low, not wanting to give away his position to any unseen Users from the other teams who might have ended up nearby. He had been hoping—practically *praying*, actually—that the match format would be anything *but* Elimination. Given the situation, an alternate win condition might have been an ideal solution to Firesong’s problem, but when the only path to victory was total annihilation of all opponents, the were in serious trouble...

And that was without Viv acting so off.

*No*, Rei chided himself for the hundredth time that day. He needed to *focus*. He could worry about Viv later. Right now there was nothing he could have done even if he’d had a clue what was going on with his best friend, which he didn’t. He knew she’d ranked up—she hadn’t told anyone, but he’d checked her ISCM profile on a whim—and was at a loss as to why she wasn’t celebrating the fact. Part of him had been hoping Grant was going to clue him in over lunch—the big Mauler had obviously had some idea of what was going on with his girlfriend, given his obtuse efforts to find her some privacy after the fight against Vademe—but another part was glad Grant hadn’t. If it

wasn't something Rei could have addressed immediately, then it would have just hung over him like a storm cloud all damn d—

*NO*, Rei practically yelled in his own head, realizing he'd let his worry spin him of *yet again*.

He just didn't have the luxury of letting anything by the fight at hand weight on his mind for at least another 20 minutes or so. None of them did.

“Combatants... Fight.”

The starting circle vanished, and Rei whirled northward—or his best guesstimation of where ‘northward’ was—to take off in a spray of dirt and grass, hissing into his coms as he did.

“I ended up in some kind of clearing on what I *think* is the east side of the field. Heading to rendezvous now. Anyone have eyes on anything?”

He was pretty sure he had his directions right. The field was a dense variation of the Woodlands zone, with a distinct rise in the direction he was running, like the steady north-climbing slope of a forested mountain. While the Arena had indeed transported him to an empty gap among the trees—at the time making him squint under the sudden bright sun that had been lingering in a clear sky directly overhead—in a heartbeat he was in the darting shadows woods themselves, moving as quickly as he could through the light underbrush while staying relatively quiet. It didn't matter that he was probably the strongest fighter on the field other than Aria. There were *eighteen* other cadets scattered about the field that wanted his head, and if he bumped into anyone before he regrouped with at least *part* of the rest of his team, he would be in trouble.

After all, anytime any of them had brought it up during strategizing, not a one among them had voiced any illusion that the rest of the teams would be going after anyone but Firesong off the go.

A brief buzz of noise in his ear, then Aria answered first.

“I’m with Catcher. We ended basically on top of where we think the rendezvous point is. He’s moving a bit to see if he can build up some charge for Blade Break, but otherwise we’re holding tight.”

“Not a bad idea.” Cache now. “I’m on my own, and I think I ended up opposite Ward on the west side. Headed north now.”

“Alone, too,” Viv followed up, and Rei hoped he was imagining the lack of spirit in her voice. “On the other side of the world, though. Definitely on the south end of the field, and I’ve seen members of Valormade *and* Red Crown pass me by already. We called it. They’re definitely teaming up...”

Any sullen silence at this news was kept short by Grant cutting in.

“Can confirm. Seen the same thing here. I think I’m a little behind you, Cashe. Found the edge of the west wall and following it north. Trying to stay quiet.”

“Yeah, quiet is gonna be key on this field, I think,” Rei agree under his breath, leaping over a deer trail in favor of continuing more directly north through the trees. “Viv, you moving?”

“Not yet. Copy-and-pasted our earlier playbook. I recalled and tucked myself between some boulders until it’s all clear. Other than Martin and Jang I’m pretty sure I’m still fast enough to get some distance between almost any other User even without Gemela, at least until I can call her.”

“Smart,” Aria agreed. “Gonna leave you to it, then. Might be good to have you come in from the back if we ended up getting—*Oh shit!*”

“CONTACT!” Catcher shouted, the sound of steel hitting steel screaming briefly through the com before it stopped picking up sound.

Rei would have redoubled his speed, would have pushed himself to close what had to be only another 20 or 30 meters through the trees to meet the pair of them, but the Arena chose just that moment to deliver him his own first fight of the match.

*SHING!*

It was the sound of the blade, frighteningly enough, that stopped him from getting beheaded then and there, the hint of the incoming strike instinctively getting Rei to drop. His knees hit the earth, and the clean steel combined the momentum of his rush had him sliding several yards as he tore twin swaths into the forest floor, crashing through a couple of bushes as he did.

Still, he'd ducked the massive sword, edged in red vysetrium, that had been going for his neck, and was on his feet in a flurry of slashing claws before his opponent—who'd been cleverly laying in what behind a particularly wide-trunked maple—could take advantage of his ground.

“Oh damn—!” the Saber started the exclaim, realizing who it was he had failed to spring his trap on.

Then Rei was on him with a vengeance.

Reed Cook had blue-grey hair that did not match the crimson team color of his CAD, a bulky thing that oddly covered both arms, most of his chest, and practically nothing else. A two-handed Saber-Type on the Daggerfall squad—Kenneth Academy's top first-year team—he was a lower C-Ranked fighter who knew the strengths and weaknesses of his Device, and toed their line well. He didn't have the boost in Speed the leg armor of most other Users at his level did, but when standing his ground he could maintain a defensive posture as strong as most Phalanxes and *still* hit with as much power as some Maulers.

Of course, Rei knew all of this already, meaning it didn't do Cook any good.

He attacked fast and hard, using Michael Bretz's drilled-in footwork as much as he did his fists to loop right around the Saber. Cook had been smart enough to keep his back to the tree he'd originally been hiding behind, but Rei used that to his advantage too, keeping on the boy's left side. He might be of the two-handed variety, but he was still right-hand dominant, meaning his range of motion would be more limited there.

Combine that with the trunk of the maple limiting his ability to swing his larger weapon, and it was only a matter of time before the Kenneth first-year—

With another curse Cook swept his blade across his body, trying to ward Rei's gatling attacks off for a second, and leapt away from him and the tree to try to move to more open ground. It was exactly what Rei had been waiting for.

And so he turned on his heel again and, without so much as glancing back, bolted through the woods again.

"What the—Hey!" he heard Cook yell in surprise, clearly not having expected a retreat. Rei heard the Saber start pounding after him, and silently commended the boy for his guts. If their exchange had gone on much longer, they both knew who would have come out on top.

But that was only assuming reinforcements hadn't arrived, and that Aria and Catcher didn't get swarmed in the meantime.

Rei could hear the fighting, now, the cursing and yelling and the sound of clashing blades. He adjusted his trajectory only slightly, then promptly skid to a halt as he bolted free to the tree line only to run almost face-first into a sheer wall of stone he hadn't expected. The cliff was maybe 25 feet high—taller than he could jump in one go—and the sounds of fighting were coming from atop it. He'd have to find away around, or—

High, high above him Rei caught a flash of red hair in the sunlight, framed in arching blue as Aria's form briefly appeared, then vanished again. An idea came to him, borrowed from some months back, and Rei snorted.

Then he set his legs, crouched, and leapt straight up, calling on Shido as he did.

"Type Shift: Saber Mode!"

He was driving the sword forward before it had even finished manifesting, the blade just finished to take form when it struck the stone point-first with all the boosted Strength of the Device's alternate mode.

The impact of the strike was jarring, and Rei realized that while he'd given Aria credit for the *idea* when she'd pulled a very similar stunt during Team Battle training the previous semester, he'd never granted her enough respect for the *execution*. Newton's third law was a bitch, because while Rei did manage to spear the sword deep into the solid rock, the resulting opposite force jerked him back so hard he nearly wrenched the weapon right out of the cliff as he held onto it for dear life. He yelped as his body was jarred, scrabbling at the handle with his left hand too until he got a decent twin grip of the thing, then pausing for just a moment to stop the haphazard swinging of his legs and torso as he hung there. Below, he heard Cook reach the bottom of cliff too, and probably would have appreciated the Saber's open-mouthed upward gaped if he'd glanced down.

But Rei's attention was on the top of the cliff above him, neuroline whirring in his head as he calculated quickly. Opting to have faith in his Saber's Strength again, he set his arms, braced himself, then kicked his legs up and pulled with all his might in the same motion.

As it turned out, he'd *underestimated* things, because instead of making a neat—and rather cool-looking, he'd hoped—landing just at the edge of the cliff where he'd seen Aria a moment before, Rei sent himself flying almost 10 feet above the lip and right over the chaos that was the fight raging there, arms and legs flailing as he did.

“Oh shit! Type Shift: Brawler Mode! *Brawler Mode!*”

Shido's lighter armor had *just* plated itself back around his arms, legs, and body when he crashed down into the fight, landing on top of Red Crown's poor—and utterly unsuspecting—Pacey Clayton.

“OOPH!” the Saber exclaimed as she went down under his weight, and Rei—equally as surprised in the moment—shouted a rushed “Sorry!” as he tried to untangle himself from the girl.

Then Clayton twisted on the ground under him and slashed at his face with her green-lined sword, and Rei remembered where he was.

Just managing to keep the top of his skull on by flinging himself back and off the girl, Rei rolled to his feet in the middle of a total shitshow. At a glance, there were three positives. First: Aria and Catcher were both still up. Second: Cashe had reached them already, which hopefully meant that Grant wasn't far behind. Third: those three had managed to position themselves so their backs were to the jutting edge of the cliff, providing their assailants only about 90 degrees or so from which to assault.

On the other hand...

*Red, green, yellow*, Rei ticked off for himself as he ducked a high slash from Hannah Tether's spear, backpedalling out of the heart of the fight even while parrying away the thrusting shortsword from a Kenneth Phalanx he was pretty sure was called Subhaan Hirst. *That's all of them.*

Firesong was putting up a fight, but at least two members of Daggerfall, Red Crown, *and* Valormade each were all already there with them, and making no attempt to fight each other until the monster was slain.

"Shit," Rei could only mutter and he retreated enough to find himself falling in line between Cashe and Catcher, Aria on the Saber's other side.

"YUP!" Catcher shouted in agreement, eyes wide as he jerked his head to one side to avoid a thrust for *Kay's* spear, this time. "WE'RE SCREWED!"

"Quick question, though," Cashe asked from the other side, face screwed up in concentration. "Am I crazy, or did Ward just *fly* into the fight?"

"Did he 'fly'?" Aria grunted from her other side as she turned away a Kenneth Mauler's axe with her shield and drove Hippolyta forward to gauge the boy in the hip. "Looked more like 'fell' to me."

"FLOPPED!" Catcher agreed, still yelling as he fought.

"Flailed," Cashe confirmed, finally.

“Can we—*urk!*—focus, guys?!” Rei demanded, sucking his gut in to keep from being eviscerated as Kay’s spear cleverly flicked away from a feint at Catcher towards *his* stomach. “Also, you’re all assholes.”

He thought he heard a couple snorts, but then the other teams were on then in a solid wave.

The battle was not a pretty one, Rei knew. There was none of the grace one could witness in the one-on-one Duels, nor any of the strategy teams usually had to employ in multi-squad formats. On the contrary, the “war” in “Wargames” was on full display, because Rei felt like part of an army on the front lines, engaging with the enemy in the slow misery of bloody attrition. Actually no, even that wasn’t accurate. It wasn’t a true war in that romantic sense of the concept. Despite the joking, despite the forced attempt by the four of them to find humor in the moment, their situation wasn’t remotely that balanced. This wasn’t a battle at all.

It was a siege.

Rei slashed and struck and kicked right alongside his friends, keeping away the multi-colored tide of the enemy. He ended up acting as support and defense most of the time, because Shido’s Brawler form didn’t have the range to engage any of the other Types without closing the distance, and stepping out of their defensive line would probably have turned him into an instant pincushion. He could have called on the Saber Mode again for a bit more reach maybe, but Rei was pretty sure that wouldn’t have been any more of a help. These weren’t the early teams of the tournament, the D-Ranked fighters that he and Firesong had both collectively *and* individually ripped through. These were the other Galens qualifiers and those their leaders had judged good enough to stand alongside them, as well as one of the best among the non-Institute teams to have made it this far. Rei didn’t have the sword practice he needed to feel comfortable going against the majority of these cadets, much less the strongest among them. In fact,



even as he thought this, Rei caught sight of yet another figure leaping up over a distant edge onto the clifftop, and he shouted as he recognized the boy.

“Benaly’s here!”

“Great,” he thought he heard Aria, Catcher, and Cashe all mutter in unison, not one of them so much as glancing up from their own engagements. They were packed tight enough on that edge that Jack Benaly would have a hell of a time reaching them, at least immediately.

Then again, bodies were finally starting to fall.

Catcher had claimed the first FDA of the match, at least that Rei knew of. The Saber had managed to turn a redirect of Hirst’s shortsword into a surprise stab at the face of another Kenneth fighter, a Duelist Rei only remembered was called “McGregor”. The boy had jerked back in time to avoid getting blinded, but had misjudged Artus’ reach, and instead just gotten himself stuck in the neck, taking him to his knees in the mess almost immediately. Aria scored second and third, taking down Jasmine Ranja *and* Amelia von Leef with sneaking thrusts of Hippolyta’s spear through the front line as she defended herself with her shield, and Cashe took out a second Kenneth Duelist with a straight parry and counter that took the girl through the eye. Over 20 seconds or so four of the enemy were down and being drawn out of the fight through the ground by the Arena.

Immediately, though, they were replaced, and not with lesser threats.

“SHIT!” Catcher yelled as a yellow spear snaked out of the melee at his heart, managing to deflect the killing blow but still screaming as the weapon drove into his left shoulder, rendering his arm and clawed hand immediately useless. Vademe had appeared out of nowhere, somehow, taking the east flanking side of the attack while Benaly had finally pressed through the engage Aria on the west edge. Meanwhile Kay was still in the middle, and had been joined by Lena Jiang at some point, created a wall

of top-tier individual qualifiers against Rei, Aria, Cashe, and Catcher that was complimented by several other bodies.

*Yeah, we're totally screwed,* Rei couldn't help but think, already convinced of the fact even before a followup thrust from Vademe *did* take Catcher in the chest this time, downing him in a blink.

And then came the roar, so loud it could be heard even over the crashing sounds of the siege.

In a blaze of blue Grant's massive form hurtled over the west edge of the cliff, Honoris' artificially-blue vysetrium aflame. Overclocked, the Mauler charged straight into the rear of the assaulting teams, axe ripping a swathing horizontal sweep into the enemy as he did. There were yells of alarm from many of the fighters who'd turned to face him, and Rei saw Reed Cook instantly FDAed when the Saber couldn't get his blade up in time to defend. The rest survived—though a few blades shattered under Grant's boosted Strength and Honoris' weight—but the Mauler waded recklessly forward anyway, heedless of the danger to himself.

It provided Rei the distraction he personally needed, at least, to enter the fight in earnest.

As Lena Jiang caught Cashe a severing blow to the neck beside him, Rei ducked low and stepped into the battle. Pleasantly—the girl had never done much to endear herself to him, to say the least—Jiang herself was his first victim, not surviving long enough to relish her own kill before Shido's claws punched in and up through her stomach and lungs, piercing her heart. Not pausing, Rei slipped under a sweep from Kay and darted passed her westward. Vademe's eyes went wide as he found Rei suddenly in front of him, and while he managed to deflect a punch at his side, the Valormade leader left himself open to a followup kick that sent his staggering back and over the edge of the cliff, arms spinning as he fell with a yell. He'd be back Rei knew as

he spun to meet Kay, but at least it bought them a little time without him adding to the fray.

If only that offered any kind of respite.

Aria, Rei, and Grant all fought with an angry focus, uncaring the stabs and cuts, of the kicks and punches they took. Kay went down, but not before she got a good slash in that not only rendered Rei's left arm useless, but also allowed Hirst to get a shallow stab into his side. Aria had managed to disengage from Benaly, who was now Grant's problem, but she looked to have triggered Third Eye as she took on Jengo Kwasi, Clayton, *and* Daggerfall's squad leader, the C4 Lancer Harun White. There were more bodies, downed by someone, and in the midst of it all Rei heard Viv wheezing weakly into the coms that Laquita Martin and another Daggerfall User were both out of the running.

None of it mattered to Rei. Whether because he was too focused in the moment or because he saw no real hope on the horizon, it didn't matter.

All he could do was fight.

With a shout he did finally call for Saber Mode, concluding that if he was only going to have one hand to work with, he might as well take advantage of it. Hirst didn't even have time to get his shield up when Shido's blade passed through his neck, severing his neutral connection to most of his body, and the Phalanx's eyes were still wide in surprise as he tumbled limply to the earth. Clayton was the next to fall as Aria spun and clubbed the Saber in the side of the head with a surprised strike with the back end of Hippolyta's steel haft, but unfortunately that was the last of the enemy to drop before there was a flicker of blue light from the middle of the fight and Grant staggered as his Overclock started to fade. Someone shouted from the chaos—Benaly, maybe?—and the Mauler was instantly swarmed by every remaining User who wasn't otherwise engaged. He went down like a giant felled under a hundred blades, not even having the time to scream in pain.

And then it was just Rei and Aria.

Viv wasn't coming. That was clear, now. She'd likely succumbed to whatever injuries she'd suffered taking out the Red Crown leader and her Daggerfall support. Almost worse, Benaly looked practically unscathed as he rose from where he'd been working to punch in the back of Grant's skull, turning inward along with Jengo Kwasi and the last of the Kenneth cadets left other than Harun White, a female Mauler whose name Rei was too tired to try and remember. That made five on the cliff with them. Five fighters left of the original eighteen. Against him and Aria. Ordinarily, Rei would have thought those odds not *too* bad.

But as Benaly locked eyes with him, he allowed himself no delusions.

Galens' top Brawler—Rei hadn't really counted himself in the category since developing Type Shift—shot forward, shouting for Kwasi to “Leave Laurent to the others!” as he did. Even one-handed and limping, Rei managed to ward off the larger boy's opening salvo with his sword's superior reach, but Kwasi was a different story. The Duelist ducked under Benaly's punches and went for Rei's gut with both blades, glowing green tips stabbing forward. Half in desperation and half strategically, Rei threw himself leftward as best he could, away from the pair. He flopped more than rolled to Aria's side, managing to catch Phillips a surprise blow in the back of the leg as he did, severing the limb below the knee. The Phalanx went down with a scream and Rei staggered to his feet on Aria's right, their backs to the edge of the cliff, but then the pair of them were still facing down Benaly, Kwasi, White, and the other Daggerfall survivor, a full foursome of skilled fighters. Aria was flagging, too, Rei could tell. The head of her spear had shattered at some point to leave only a jagged point at the end of the shaft, and she appeared to be having a hard time keeping her shield up. She looked as exhausted as he felt, her face flushed, hair a mess, breath coming hard.

And yet the Benaly and the others still paused as they squared off, eyeing the pair of them warily.

“If you have *any* of those genius ideas to share, Rei, now would be a *brilliant* time to do so,” Aria wheezed beside him, flicking her broken spear back and forth between their lined enemies threateningly.

Rei snorted, blinking away a sudden bout of acute fatigue that almost had him staggering.

“I got nothing,” he managed to groan back, not caring if the others could hear. “I’m pretty sure I’m already bleeding out as is. I’m good for maybe 30 seconds. Maybe.”

He wasn’t sure, since neither of them ever looked away from the trio before them, but he thought Aria might have smirked.

“Hopefully that’s not a chronic problem.”

And then she lunged, almost leaving Rei to choke back a tired laugh before he followed right on her heels.

They fought like dogs, all six of them. Kwasi, White, and the Mauler—Ariel Jax, Rei recalled in the heat of it all—were obviously just about as worn down as he and Aria, but Benaly seemed to have made a point of not exhausting himself this fight, like he’d been saving his energy for this exact moment. It made what would have ordinarily been an already imbalanced fight much more even, but inevitable loss had never been the kind of thing that deterred Rei, and Aria was right there with him. They slashed and swung, parried and blocked and deflect, taking every opening they could and doing everything to minimize their own. 5 seconds in and Benaly took a hit to the face from Aria’s shield, but he managed to get an arm around it and rip it from her grasp as he tumbled away. Rei cut off one of Kwasi’s arms, but the Duelist still drove forward as he screamed, slamming his other blade into Rei’s gut. Rei saw black for an instant and his breath became suddenly harder to get it, but he ignored the red text in his combat log that undoubtedly told him his right lung had been punctured. Instead he slammed the pommel of his sword into Kwasi’s temple, dropping the boy limply, and spun to face Jax as she bore down on him. He slammed her axe aside with a grunt, and was

about to elbow her in the nose when he stiffened. Pain. A rare pain. Couple with a washing cold out of his chest.

Numbly, Rei looked down, deaf to Aria's shouts, deaf to the sounds of fight that seemed to be leaving him behind.

There, so perfectly planted it had shattered the narrow sternal guard of Shido's last evolution, and spear seemed to have appeared out of thin air. Unable to breath, Rei only gaped as the weapon was wrenched out of him with a twist, marveling at the two feet of steel that had run him through. The blade came out last, gleaming yellow, and understanding dawned with it.

*Damn...* was his last thought as his knees gave way and he slipped backwards, feeling himself start to fall. *Breakstep is pretty damn cool.*

And then he was was tumbling down off the cliffs, not even seeing Aria get swarmed by the others, nor Kastro Vademe's weary expression of exhausted triumph.

## CHAPTER 32

PLACEHOLDER TEXT

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From her spot in the stands, Salista clenched her teeth as she watch Aria get pounced on by four of the five remaining first-years left on the field. The last—Valormade's squad leader, she recalled—didn't move to join in, instead half-collapsing to one knee as his own target tumbled from the cliff. Salista couldn't blame the Lancer. Even without the Arena announcer's commentary it was obviously he'd landed badly when he'd been kicked off the cliffs in the first place, because his return to the fight had been slow and arduous, and the Breakstep he'd triggered to take Ward by surprise from the back of the group had to have cost him enormously.

Ward...

Salista frowned, the symbolic name like lead on her tongue as she chewed on it while the Arena announced the match's end. She'd heard rumors from her spy in the Institute, but she'd done her best to ignore them. It had been concerning enough that Aria had apparently gone out of her way to get the boy on her squad, but Salista hadn't believed it when she'd been told they'd apparently made plans—*private* plans—several times in the last month. Now, though, the chemistry was obvious—had been all week, in fact—and Salista's irritated concern had reached new heights. What was Aria thinking, engaging with a boy like that?! Sure, he was a talented User—*very* talented, Salista had been forced to admit to herself quickly—but what could he offer her daughter other than that? Aria was talented enough for ten users, and she was a *Laurent* for MIND's sake. What she saw in a small, scrawny, unnamed *ward of the state* was beyond Salista.

But she certainly saw something, and that fact was more than a little alarming.

Salista's frowned deepened, and her right temple—where she'd placed the molecule-thin remote access trigger over one of her two NOED ports—itched suddenly. Instead of sating the urge, though, Salista only reached up to pull the shawl she had tugged over her red hair a little more snugly, and check that the projection unit hanging under her shirt was still registering as engaged. Not wearing her own face felt strange when she caught a glimpse of herself in the bathroom mirrors, but it was better than the alternative of getting recognized. She may not have been a truly public figure, but the Laurents were known in many circles in Astra-3, and it served no one to know she was at the tournament.

Least of all give what she had planned.

Salista sat and waited long enough to watch the Wargames come to and end. The Galens Brawler—Benaly—had cleverly played it safe through most of the fight, so once Aria's "Firesong" were all counted for he made relatively short work of the remainder

of the other squads, assisted by an injured Duelist teammate. The two Daggerfall first years had never been on the same level as the Institute students to start with, so coupled with their exhaustion they went down fast, but the Valormade leader managed to get himself up and give a good showing of himself before he, too, went down to an armored fist. After that that Arena announced “Red Crown” as the winners of the semi-finals—and likely defacto Wargames champions if they didn’t suffer a taste of their own medicine the following day—and the zone began to fade. Salista only waited further long enough for the last of the FDAed Users to stand, wanting to make sure Aria got to her feet without issue. When all 24 fighters who’d been involved in the match started gathering to exchange congratulations and appreciations, Salista finally took her leave, abandoning her seat for some other soul to claim, and started down the nearest steps, intending for the Arena exit, not allowing herself to see Aria gather with her team. It was already disappointing enough to know that Ward was only the worst of them, if Salista was being honest with herself. Arada and Catchwick she was fine with—thrilled, in fact, given the history of those families—but the others? Not only was Cashe not of any distinguished background, but Salista had also dug up the fact that the girl had failed her assignment exam the first time around. And as for Logan “Grant”... Well, the less Salista thought of what she’d uncovered about *that* situation, the better. Ward was just the largest cracked jewel on a tarnished crown...

Salista clenched her teeth reaching the traffic of the walkway, moving now after some time frozen as everyone in the Arena had watched the Wargames. No, on the whole it was a bad situation, and she would have to do something about it, one way or the other.

As she made her way to the exit, Salista never looked back, never turned around. Part of her focus was merely distraction—she had her youngest daughter’s wellbeing weighing on her after all—but more largely was the fact that she knew that surreptitious



glances over her shoulder would have made her look suspicious, something she wanted to avoid at all costs.

Then again, had Salista looked back even once—even just to try catch a glimpse of Aria taking leave of the field with her team, for example—there was the slimmest of chances she might have caught the eyes of the hooded figure who had been watching her leave from a nearby spot by the railing.

Either way, given the noises of the shifting crowd, she never would have heard them muttering through a worn-out smile.

“And here I was starting to worry I wouldn’t find you, Mother...”