

CHAPTER 61

“I have found there is only one universal secret to success. One truth I’ve discovered spans across every industry, every line of work, every type of company and team we have ever had a hand in. Surround yourself with people who are smarter and more capable than you.”

-Kamiya Hiroto

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For the first time in a while, Jasper was fairly sure she *hadn’t* come out on top of a conversation as she bid Reidon Ward good night. Hanging up, she admitted to feeling a little played, and it miffed her even *if* it wasn’t her fault. As she’d suspected, Hiroto had given himself away by providing her carte blanche when it came to his grandchild, granting her permission to tap into the company coffers as needed to bring Ward under the Kamiya wing, and the boy *was* clever. Jasper had thought he hadn’t missed so much as an ounce of the overenthusiasm she’d had no real way of sidestepping in their face-to-face.

Now she knew it for a fact.

And that was before you pulled out all the stops a week ago, Hiroto, she thought with a sigh as she closed out of her NOED.

Still... she chalked it up as a win just the same. Sure Jasper was ruffled, but the reality was that this was a *very* good outcome. Spectacular, even. She didn’t know how Ward figuring out his ‘family’s’ involvement would play out, but that was a problem to leave to her teacher. Setting that aside, Jasper had always been confident Ward would

come around eventually, but the timing couldn't have been more fortunate. He was on board, which would have been enough regardless.

But it was also a fact that his latter demands were going to be a *lot* less costly than the cliff she probably would have had to shove Kamiya off of if the call had come even an hour later.

Jasper looked around at the company guard—the *actual* company guard—standing at ease over her shoulder by the polished stone bench she was occupying. They were alone under an arched ceiling in the grand marble hall, and had been for nearly 40 minutes. Not even a drone had passed by, much less anyone to politely assure her they knew she was still waiting. It was deliberate, of course, a power play to let her know the person she'd been there to see was *acutely* aware of who she was and who she'd come to represent. Jasper smiled.

Karma could be *such* a pleasant little thing.

“We're leaving,” she told the guard briskly, standing up and shaking out her flowing, blue-green skirt with one hand, her pad held in the other.

“Ma'am?” the woman behind the standardized black of the visor asked, the neon green Kamiya logo on its left side coming into view as she looked around at Jasper.

“We don't need to be here anymore,” Jasper clarified, straightening and starting down the hall at once, high heel clicking over the stone. “This meeting is no longer of any value.”

If this statement took the guard by any kind of surprise, she didn't show it.

“Understood. I'll call the flyer.”

They were 20 feet up the massive chamber, very near the closed stone archway that led out into the building proper, when there came the sounds of an old latch lifting and a creak. Looking over her shoulder, Jasper saw the single large, wooden door at the other end of the wall open slightly, and a young aid with reddish hair and an unpleasant smile poked his head out to call after her.

“Ms. Ueno, the chairman will see you now.”

So they were waiting for me to lose patience, Jasper realized with a raised eye. They would probably have left her sitting there for hours if they could have...

This was going to be sweeter than she'd thought.

“My regards to the chairman,” she called back in a simpering tone. “Unfortunately, the matter I was hoping he could help me with was attended to while I was waiting.” She let every ounce of sugary venom she had leak into her smile. “By a competing party.”

The drop in the man's face would have been worth every *minute* wasted in that hall even if Jasper wasn't telling the truth. Working hard not to snigger, she turned back to find the guard with one hand on the large brass handle of one of the entrance's own double doors, waiting.

Jasper nodded, and a second later they were both stepping out into the loud, bustling churn of a corporate hellscape.

She'd known on arrival that the doors undoubtedly hid impressive dampening technology, because the top floor of Veragoth Industries' New London headquarters was a surgical madhouse of constant activity. People were hurrying left and right, shouting on NOED calls here and waving pads over their heads to get someone's attention there. Smart-glass panels made up every meeting room and office wall, and hardly any were blank as individuals and groups alike worked on whatever project was consuming them in the moment. Keeping her eyes straight ahead—she had no interest in being accused of corporate espionage at some later time—Jasper led the way across the boorish black of the thin synthetic carpet, heading for the other side of the floor. As she walked, heads turned towards her, but she ignored them all. For one thing, she was aware of the effect she tended to have on men—and not a few women, for that matter. It was part of her arsenal.

But here, in this place, she was an infamous—and therefore *appalling*—sight for entirely different reasons, and sure enough she didn't miss more than a few workers tilting tablets away from her, or even hurrying to wipe their walls clean as she passed. Jasper smiled to herself, but didn't blame them.

The Kamiya Corporation might not be her only client, but here in the belly of their largest competitor she might as well have been Hiroto's personal bloodhound.

Without a word Jasper and her escort found the exit to the corporate landing pad, and it was only a brief minute's wait in front of the polished steel doors before the guard let her know their flyer was inbound. With another nod from Jasper the woman hit the release in the left wall, and the first exit opened for them almost silently. Stepping inside the segregation chamber beyond, they were briefly locked in as the doors sealed at their backs. Then the second set opened before them, and Jasper winced at the winter chill.

"Help you to the flyer, ma'am?" the guard asked, offering her an arm.

"I'm all right, thank you," Jasper answered with a smile and a shake of her head.

Then she stepped out to overlook a dusk-lit world.

New London, counter to its name and the trends of the last 400 years, had never succumbed to the bi-directional sprawl that had claimed Tokyo, New York, Venusia, and most of the rest of the Sol System's largest cities. As a result, much of the place had yet remained as relatively "untouched" as it had even before humanity had taken to the stars. The old streets were still there, the ancient buildings and the history kept whole with an almost-sacred reverence. There even remained some shadowy vestiges of the monarchy that had so long ruled as figureheads when Earth still held onto the political divisions of the countries whose boundaries now only denoted geographical borders.

That though, was only *below* the clouds.

Above them, the world was a different place. Only a handful of New London structures had been granted the necessary permits to build in the modern style, and so Veragoth's headquarters were maybe one of a score of variously-shaped forms rising up around Jasper and her guard. In the fading light of the day, it was breathtaking to see these sparse titans cast their shadows *atop* the clouds, leaving their mark in a place that humankind really had no business lingering. Everything was red and pink and purple, and as Jasper strode across the plain square platform of the landing pad towards their waiting flyer, she allowed herself to look around, taking it all in while she could. It was refreshing, in a way.

It was nice to be reminded that there yet remained some pleasures no person could *always* partake in.

The flyer recognized their signatures as they approached, the rear and front doors unlatching and opening upwards for them both. Her escort waited until Jasper had slid comfortably into the closest of the two leather seats in the back compartment, then claimed the front, the two spaces deliberately segregated for confidentiality and privacy. Once they were settled, they lifted off at once, dipping laterally and down to make for the sky lanes cutting patterns way above the clouds below them. As they dropped, Jasper continued to treat herself to the view of the sunset a while longer, enjoying the sensation of smallness that came with the tops of the buildings rapidly rising all around them until they felt like giants that could dwarf the world.

Once they were settled into the trailing lines of traffic, though, she looked forward again, pulling up her NOED as she did.

She'd considered calling Hiroto immediately, but had decided against it after some contemplation. The old man was brilliant, but he was starting to border on irrationality when it came to his estranged grandson. No. In particular given Ward's request for a meeting, it would be better to at least present her teacher with the pre-prepared solution to the boy's second demand she'd already constructed in her head. For that reason it

took Jasper a minute to sort through her compiled files, though the first name she went looking for was one she'd settled on for some time already, and conveniently near the top of the list.

The line rang, then picked up.

"Hello?" A man's voice, notably cautious.

Understandable. How often could SCT up-and-comers receive unknown calls of any positive nature, after all?

"Sergeant Major." Jasper was already swiping through her recruitment portfolio to gather the other calls she would have to make. "My name is Ueno Jasper. I'm assuming you know who I am?"

The answer came promptly, all doubt rapidly vanished. "I do. Yes, ma'am."

"Polite. I like that." She pulled the 'WAINWRIGHT' profile, then went looking for the last as the flyer rolled slightly to join a different lane. "I have two questions for you, if I may."

"Of course, ma'am."

"First, are you sure about this application? My understanding is you're starting to make quite a name for yourself in the professional circuits..."

"I am, ma'am." She couldn't hear an ounce of hesitation in the man's voice. "Honestly... Permission to speak freely?"

"I'm not a member of the military, Sergeant Major. Much less your superior officer."

"Fair enough." A low laugh, and he sounded to relax a little. "I'll keep it casual then... I looked into the circumstances of the job a bit. Obviously it was lacking in detail, but I was lucky enough to be privy to some... let's say 'private' information I'm going to assume is relevant, given you're reaching out to *me* specifically. I think I've put the important bits together." His tone grew serious again. "If I'm right, it's an opportunity to be involved in something I don't want to miss out on."

“Polite *and* well connected.” Jasper smiled slightly. “Keep it up and you’ll have me swooning by the end of this conversation.” She pulled the “VON BOR” profile. “In that case, in regards to my second question: I should tell you that few of those ‘circumstances’ you mentioned have changed. In a way that may impact your decision in particular.”

“Oh?”

“Indeed.” Jasper memorized the two IDs quickly, then closed the files to look out the flyer window again. The sky was darkening, and the stars were just starting to wink into being at the far edge of the New London sunset. “So I have to ask... Do you have any concerns with being involved in your younger sister’s training?”

A pause.

But when the answer came, she could hear the grin in the man’s voice.

“Not in the least, Miss Ueno,” Kalus Laurent answered. “In fact, I think I would very much look forward to it...”

EPILOGUE

“Catcher was only the first sign we noticed. There were others, I think, in retrospect. A lot of them. In fact, looking back on it, I’m pretty sure the truth was under our noses the entire time...

But it was what happened to Viv that finally convinced us were definitely—definitely—right...”

- Aria of Flames

Concerning the Stormweaver

SCHLUNK!

The grey axe took Viv through the gut, cleaving her clean in two even as it sent her hurtling backwards. Pain exploded through her abdomen, but she didn’t have much time to register it before she struck the training field wall with such force that Gemela’s armor partially shattered around her arms and legs. Her weapons she’d lost before to the one weak block she’d already barely managed against her opponent, but that wasn’t any consolation as she crumpled to the white floor, her useless legs collapsing under her to send her toppling face-first to the ground with an “Oomph!”.

“Fatal Damage Accrued,” came the cursed announcement for the hundredth time that night.

Viv would have liked to lie there, would have liked to curl up into a ball and stay on the ground, unmoving and trembling while the agony subsided. The floor was nice. The hologram was pleasantly warm, and the brightness of the Neutral Zone helped to keep her alert, keep her awake.

Then again, it did nothing to stop now-familiar clenching of her stomach that struck Viv only a second later, and she barely managed to shakily shove herself up on weak arms before she vomited.

“HURK!”

Sick splattered the Neutral Zone floor, and at once the background buzz of the ever-present medical drone pitched as it closed on her in a blink. Only then did Viv let herself fall sideways, rolling onto her back to blink blearily up at the training room ceiling. The lights of the drone were already over her, but she didn’t so much as twitch when the ion scanner swept her face and body, cleaning her up with a thin sizzle of sound and the brief smell of burning. Then the drone dipped to the right, and the scanner went again, atomizing the half-digested contents of what had been her already-meager dinner.

In 15 seconds, Viv and the practice field were as clean as they’d been when she’d first called the field into being 2 hours earlier.

The pain had finally started to fade, and after a little while more Viv gave her legs a testing nudge. Her feet moved and her knees bent, so with a groan she forced herself up, muttering an exhausted “Recall” as she did. Gemela’s broken remnants vanished from around her limbs, resuming their passive forms around her wrists.

When she was sitting cross-legged, Viv looked over her shoulder.

The grey of the training partner was stark against the pristine nature of the Neutral Zone. It—the male model of the projection—stood empty-handed and passive in the very middle of the training field, having apparently recalled its own “Device” and moved back to its starting position when the room had declared Viv’s FDA. She glared at it, livid and half-desperate. She glared, and waited.

Nothing.

“DAMMIT!”

Viv's frustration exploded out of her briefly, and she slammed a fist down on the floor beside her. The solid light gave slightly under the blow, caving with a *crunch*, but Viv ignored it. She was tired. So tired. She was giving it everything she had. *Everything*. Why couldn't she break through??

But then the anger vanished as quickly as it had come, replaced with an emptiness that suddenly had Viv wanting to cry.

"Only one night left..." she muttered to no one in particular, dropping her head to her knees and hugging them against herself, a position she felt like she found herself in more and more of late.

It was one of the two conditions Valera Dent had set for her, when the captain had sent her instructions related to her request the very night they'd returned from Ganos. That and the medical drone. Viv had a *single* week of completely unfettered access to a guaranteed training room every night, and her curfew had been suspended for the same amount of time. Viv—as when she'd asked the favor in the first place, standing there in the billowing storm—got the distinct impression Dent hadn't been happy about the permission, but she'd given it just the same. It was the reason she hadn't tried to negotiate when she'd received the instructions.

But what was she supposed to do with just a *week*...?

Viv pulled her legs in more tightly, feeling herself shiver as she did. The pain in her gut had subsided, but just the same she couldn't stop herself from shaking.

She *had* improved, admittedly. Frighteningly so, in fact. She hadn't missed so much as a minute of class combat training *or* the extra hours with Bretz and the other sub-instructors all week, and that combined with five mostly-sleepless nights in a row spent in this very chamber had resulted in *three* of her specs seeing a jump. Her Speed had ranked up first, unsurprisingly, but over the course of the week Cognition *and* Defense had followed. Offense hadn't budged, though, much less her ever-lagging Endurance, and with Growth not having seen even a single increase since assignment Viv suspected

she would need at least three more rank-ups elsewhere before Gemela made the jump overall.

Made the jump... and gave her another shot...

Viv swallowed at that thought, and closed her eyes. She was improving, she told herself. She *was*. Maybe not as fast as she needed—much less as fast as she *wanted*—but she *was* improving.

She took hold of that fact, cupping it like a flame, as she had so many times before all week long. It warmed her, gave her life. Whenever she'd thought she was too tired to keep on, whenever she'd thought the pain was too much, it had brought her back to the promise she'd made herself and her team.

Viv refused to be left behind. She *refused*.

The conviction returned, and with it her shaking stopped. She lifted her head again, taking in the room wall beyond the invisible wall before her. She barely saw it. Just like she barely saw the scars carved in the hexagonal patterns of the floor around her, built up over 2 hours, nor even the drone now returned to where it was always hovering out of the way, 20 feet above the floor or so. Viv was too busy gathering herself.

After all... *had* she actually given it everything, yet...?

"... Dammit," she muttered, starting to climb back to her feet.

There *was* a place she hadn't ventured. A level she hadn't pushed herself to. It was the reason, actually, that she was so mad at herself, because it had been the *whole point* of asking Valera Dent this extreme favor. It had been the whole point, and yet Viv still hadn't had the guts to make herself do it.

But now she only had one more night left...

Even if the captain went for it, Viv knew she couldn't handle more, either. She'd barely functioned in class all week, she hadn't been able to eat much—and lost what little she'd managed three of the five nights so far—and she suspected the others were

starting to notice, especially Logan. Even setting aside the external factors, though, Viv had to admit to herself that her body and mind were just about at their limit as it was.

No. Tonight and tomorrow. That was all that was left to her. Those last two chances to push herself to the extreme, in a way she didn't know if she'd ever be able to do again.

It was time.

“Oh boy...”

Viv turned, then. Turned to face the projected sparring partner waiting for her in the middle of the field. She couldn't see it, but she knew the symbol “A5” was emblazoned in black on its broad back. She'd started at A0, intending to build up quickly in the first few nights, but the constant shock of A-Ranked attacks had shaken her, had made her lose confidence in herself and in her plan.

She didn't have time for fear anymore, though. She didn't have time for hesitation, or nerves, or even pain.

It was time.

Viv didn't realize she was holding her breath as she opened her frame, pulling up the training field systems menu. The variability of the access Dent had gotten her granted was astonishing, and it had taken Viv the better part of 30 minutes that first night just to calibrate her options to the training level she was going for. She was familiar enough with the system, therefore, to find the rank adjuster for her combat partner relatively quickly, the “A5” already highlighted in red, pleasantly complemented further with a small yellow warning sign hovering above its right corner, displaying a black exclamation mark.

It took everything Viv had to select the adjuster, confirm she wanted to make changes, and start to nudge the rank up.

A6.

A warning flash in red and yellow, and a message displayed over the options menu.

COMBAT DIFFICULTY EXCEEDS RECOMMENDED LEVELS. PLEASE CONFIRM TO PROCEED.

Viv confirmed, and increased it again to A7.

COMBAT DIFFICULTY EXCEEDS RECOMMENDED LEVELS. PLEASE CONFIRM TO PROCEED.

Confirmed. A8.

COMBAT DIFFICULTY EXCEEDS—

Confirmed.

COMBAT DIFFICULTY EXCEEDS—

Confirmed.

And then she was done.

Closing out of her frame, Viv stared across the field, taking in the sparring partner. Nothing visually had changed about the projection—it never did—but just the same she couldn't convince herself there wasn't something different, something off. At A5, the hologram had felt dangerous, had felt like a threat she should have avoided.

At S0, Viv found her whole body telling her she needed to run.

S0...

She started to shake once more, but forced herself not to think about it, not to dwell on the memory of Rei screaming as the blades descended, carving into him again

and again and again. This wasn't that. This wasn't that at all. This was controlled. FDA would end the match, resetting the partner. The drone was there, and would undoubtedly set off a broader alarm in the absolute worst-case scenario. This wasn't the same.

And so Viv held her hands out to either side of her.

“Call.”

Gemela took form in an instant, whole and intact again. The CAD's armor shaped itself around her arms and legs, its thin sword as familiar and comforting in her right hand as the parrying dagger was in her left. She felt better, then, more confident and sure of herself.

It was enough of a lie to get her to trigger the session with a flick of her eyes, confirming it quickly and bringing her weapons up in preparation for the—

“GUUHHHH!” Viv heaved in a breath as she came to face down on the ground. It took a moment to center herself, to figure out where she was, the blandness of the Neutral Zone spinning even in its uniform white. After a second, she slowly became aware of three things.

Firstly, she wasn't sure what had happened. One second she was starting the training session, and the next she was waking up, Gemela returned to her wrists.

Second, everything was fire. Everything hurt, and in a way Viv had *never* experienced. Her chest in particular ached, but even her limbs screamed in protest as she brought one arm up from the floor beside her to feel at her body, wondering if she hadn't *actually* been cut in half.

Third, though...

Third was the blinking notification in the corner of her vision that had Viv's heart leaping as she rushed to open it.

...

Processing combat information.

...

Calculating.

...

Results:

Strength: Severely Lacking

Endurance: Severely Lacking

Speed: Severely Lacking

Cognition: Severely Lacking

Offense: Severely Lacking

Defense: Severely Lacking

Growth: Severely Lacking

...

Checking combat data acquisition.

...

Adequate data acquirement met.

Device initiating adjustments to:

Growth.

...

Processing.

...

Adjustment complete.

Endurance has been upgraded from Rank D4 to D5.

Viv stared, not quite believing her eyes. Growth. *Growth* had increased?? It wasn't unheard of, sure, but it *was* rare. Incredibly so. As far as she knew, even the Users who attained the *highest* ranks only saw two or three Growth bumps over the course of their careers, four if they were *really* lucky. So for it to jump now...

Viv started to smile, but flinched and stopped herself. Holy hell... Even her *face* hurt. She'd been more than sympathetic to Rei's situation the last week, she'd thought, but in retrospect Viv couldn't help but wonder if she hadn't actually been shorting her best friend on credit. She'd taken *one* hit from an S0, while he'd taken countless times more than that.

"You moron..." she muttered, closing the upgrade notification and letting her hand drop away from her chest back to the floor.

Whether she was addressing an absent Rei or herself, though, she wasn't sure.

It took several minutes for the pain to become manageable, for Gemela—undoubtedly working overtime—to start doing its thing. Eventually, though, Viv managed to sit up again, then stand, cursing and wincing in discomfort the entire way up.

And yet despite that, once she'd found her feet, it was towards the center of the training field that she faced again, her mind long since made up.

"Call," she got out through gritted teeth, glaring at the empty-handed grey man standing once more in the middle of space. Gemela came, but this time Viv lifted one finger from the handle of her sword to ready the commencement of the session, refusing to look away from the sparring partner. She would see it move this time, at least. She *would*. If nothing else, she would at least improve that much.

She got her wish. Triggering the fight with a flick of her finger, she did indeed see the grey projection move, see the massive axe begin to manifest in both its hands. She

even caught the start of its body dropping, lowering in preparation of plunging forward at her.

And then all was black again.

No upgrade notification greeted Viv as she woke up the second time, nor the third. Each repetition, too, took longer and longer to recover from, and she'd just told herself she would call it a night and resume the following evening she had left when she came to with another blinking notice in the corner of her frame on the *fourth* try.

...

Processing combat information.

...

Calculating.

...

Results:

Strength: Severely Lacking

Endurance: Severely Lacking

Speed: Severely Lacking

Cognition: Severely Lacking

Offense: Severely Lacking

Defense: Severely Lacking

Growth: Severely Lacking

...

Checking combat data acquisition.

...

Adequate data acquirement met.

Device initiating adjustments to:

Endurance.

...

Processing.

...

Adjustment complete.

Endurance has been upgraded from Rank C0 to C1.

Victory.

Elation coursed through Viv, so visceral and real it actually hurt to experience as she tensed with excitement, every inch of her screaming in protest at this given the battering it had just received. This was it. This was how she would catch up. She pondered, for a moment there on her back, why this kind of brutal training wasn't a regular part of User regimen, but then thought better of it. For one thing she could already tell she'd overdone it, and probably wasn't going to be able to move all weekend, much less *tomorrow*.

For another... For various unvoiced reasons, Viv was starting to suspect that only members of *Firesong* were probably capable of this speed of improvement, torturous though the method was...

Anticipation overruled sense, and Viv ignored the scream of her muscles and bones and joints to climb to her feet and face the sparring partner once more. Managing it, she had to catch herself as she stumbled, her vision spinning, and a second later she found herself blinking blearily at the ground, a curious color lightly splattering the otherwise-white floor.

Was that... blood?

The whir of the drone confirmed it for her even before Viv tasted iron and brought a hand to her nose, pulling it away to see wet red darkening the edges of her fingers.

“Well that can’t be good...” she grumbled even as the drone atomized the blood before her eyes, her lips tingling as the scanner swept her face too.

But just the same she straightened and faced the grey man once more.

“Call.”

Four more times. It took three more times before Viv awoke to that blinking light she’d been desperately hoping for. It was the only thing that convinced her to open her eyes, in fact, the only thing that really brought her to in the first place. She was gone, now. Far, far gone. She’d stopped being able to feel her hands two attempts ago, and her *ears* had started to bleed too, at the last. It hadn’t stopped her. She’d needed this. More than anything.

She’d needed not to be left behind.

With great effort Viv managed the command, eyes fluttering as she fought to stay present. It opened, blue against the white of the ceiling, and at once she knew this time it was different, more than just an upgrade notification, much more.

So much more, in fact, that as Viv’s gaze traced the text, she gave a weak gurgle that was the best she could manage in the moment. The evolution she’d been after was there. Right there.

But that wasn’t all...

“User-Unique Ability... Assigned,” Viviana Arada croaked into the silence of the room, something metallic bubbling at the corner of her mouth even as she fought the dark that was quickly closing in at the edges of her vision. “End... Endwalker...?”