

Chapter 38

PLACEHOLDER TEXT

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50,000 people were on their feet, screaming in terror and confusion into the empty dark. The Arena was a lightless eruption of chaos as people yelled and frantically looked around with NOEDs flashing, everyone trying to figure out what had happened, what was going on.

Salista Laurent stood, mouth open and staring at the place she had seen Reidon Ward fall, as horrified as any of them.

It was the lights at last coming back on in the dark of the stadium that brought her momentarily back to her senses, the blinking brightness that returned with staggered *thoom, thoom, thooms* of solar power and machinery going online. Even then it was a second before she realized with a start that at some point in the chaos she'd instinctively brought one hand up to her temple in horror, and she snatched it from her face.

Her face, and the mono-molecular remote switch she'd never convinced herself to actually activate.

For almost a minute Salista stood like that, trying in her own fashion to understand what had just happened. A dozen times during the fight she'd been tempted to trigger the switch, but some whisper of emotion had stilled her decision every time. She wasn't sure what it had been even now—she preferred the idea that it was guilt at meddling rather than any sense of awe upon witnessing Reidon Ward's willpower—but it didn't matter either way. *Had* she triggered the backdoor it wouldn't have done anything more than “thicken” the Arena-projection around the target, slowing them down in a way that would have been invisible to any outside viewer or recording. It wasn't designed to

hurt anyone, just hamper Aria’s opponent enough to give her an advantage. Salista was a meddler—she knew that, and bore no shame for it—but she wasn’t a madwoman.

Someone, on the other hand, had obviously been at least a *little* out of their mind.

There was no blood. That was good. In the moment of utter chaos Salista—like many of the other spectators around her, she was sure—had been half-convinced Ward had *actually* been skewered a hundred times before their very eyes. Still, the knowledge that the projected figures had been as holographic as the field didn’t change the fact that Salista had distinctly seen the “S1” symbols in black on their backs. On top of that, gravity and physics had been against the Iron Bishop after she’d managed to finally shatter the zone barrier, and as quick as the Knight-Class was she didn’t look to have managed to reach Ward before he hit the ground. He lay in a crumpled heap on the black projection plating, his Device recalled from around his body in unconsciousness, Valera Dent crouching over him still in her own distinct CAD and screaming “MEDIC! MEDIC!”. Her calls were unnecessary, of course, with the floor of the Arena already abuzz with movement. Officers—CAD-assisted and unassigned alike—were rushing towards the pair from every direction. More than one medical drone was already ripping out of the tunnels towards the field, and Salista saw Sara Takeshi bolting from the Galens’ seating section for the underwork stairs.

Worst of all, Aria was yet clad in her own Device as she scrambled forward from where she’d landed, trying to get to the still shape of Ward, mouth still open in a scream of fear that her mother couldn’t hear now.

Salista watched the proceedings as though in a dream, a sensation she—a woman very much used to having control of her surroundings at all times—was neither familiar with nor enjoyed. It took a minute for the swarm of medics and drones to assess Ward, but then a lift-stretcher was called for and he was carefully hoisted onto it before being guided quickly towards the underworks. Dent went with him—having recalled Kestrel at some point in the rush—but Takeshi stayed behind to hold Aria back, who seemed

to want to follow the boy. Salista was shocked to see her daughter like that—wild-eyed and screaming in turn after Ward and at the Captain who was restraining her—but the events of the moment were such that she couldn't process Aria's state enough to be disappointed or alarmed or whatever emotion might have been appropriate for the situation. She could only stand and stare, one of tens of thousands to do so all around her, as at a loss as any of them.

“What happened?”

It was just as Ward and his entourage vanished into the tunnels that the first of the distinct questions began to be heard. At first it was just those most curious and most concerned, but as a minute passed with no answer the tone of the crowd changed. Confusion started to shift to concern.

And concern rapidly began to turn to anger.

“What happened?! What's going on?!”

“Someone tell us *what's going on!*”

“Hello?! HELLO?!”

The throng began to get agitated, and Salista found herself finally looking away from the Arena floor to eye the stands a little nervously. All around her people were shouting or discussing worriedly amongst themselves. A few seemed even looked to be attempting to contact the local authorities, a vane action given the ISCM had sole jurisdiction over its sanctioned academies. She could understand the frustration, though. 50,000 spectators had gone from watching a tremendous match between two intersystem-level first years to witnessing one of those fighters utterly brutalized by some obvious glitch or hack in the SCT systems, a first according to Salista's knowledge of the history of the fights. It didn't matter that the figures in grey had been holograms. It didn't matter that they'd been no more “real” than a phantom call. It didn't matter that Reidon Ward hadn't *actually* been ripped to shreds.

What mattered was the terror of the witnessed event and the confusion it bore with it.

Fortunately the tournament organizers seemed to have caught wind of the rising ire of the crowds, because just as the shouting from the stands reached a new level a single figure in military black and golds all but ran back out onto the Arena floor. Pulling up her frame to zoom in on them, Salista realized it was the arbiter who'd been overseeing the morning Duels, and that he was making a b-line for the middle of the Wargames area. In one hand he held a strange black device, a sort of metal stick that seemed to have foam on one end, and Salista couldn't identify it even after the officer turned and lifted the thing to his mouth.

Then he spoke, and she realized instantly that the problem was probably much greater than any of them had realized.

"Ladies and gentleman, if I could have your attention." The arbiter's voice was as loud as it had been all morning, but also tinny and uneven. "It is my duty first to assure you that Cadet Reidon Ward is being assessed as we speak, though all early indications from our field medics and drones are that he is in no critical danger. Cadet Laurent is also being looked over, though only as a precaution."

"WHAT HAPPENED?!" one particularly loud voice roared out in answer to this, and a thousand other questions followed in a cascade.

"I apologize, but at this time we cannot say as to what has occurred here today, though we *can* assure you all this was neither a prank nor some kind of planned event by the ISCM. At this time our best guess is that some kind of hack was executed on the Kenneth Arena, allowing an outside party access to the SCT programming. I apologize again, but all I can say at this time is that we've requested addition oversight from the MIND to review all our security parameters for a potential breach, as well as all software for additional tampering. Members of the ISCM themselves are currently making a security comb of the Arena for *direct* tampering as well."

Salista tensed, and had to cross her arms to keep her right hand from twitching up towards her temple again.

“That is why you see me with this.” The officer raised the strange black stick in his hand a little as he spoke, and even that movement seemed to change the pitch of his voice until he returned it to the spot in front of his mouth. “The Kenneth Arena is fortunate enough to have some old redundant systems that are self-enclosed, include this microphone and the speakers I’m talking to you through now. All other systems have been taken offline until the MIND can complete it’s assessment and our officers and security drones have done a thorough sweep of the building. For that reason,” he raised his voice a little as though he wanted everyone present to make sure they heard him, “we have unfortunately made the decision to postpone the final upper bracket Dueling match till this afternoon, and I must at this time ask you to stay in your seats for the time being outside of emergencies. Should the MIND tell us there is no further concern, the Iron Bishop and several A-Ranked ISCM officers have agreed to thoroughly test all field systems before resuming collegiate matches this afternoon. I thank you for your patience, and we will keep you informed as we procure further updates.”

And with that the man lowered the microphone—Salista was a little astonished at the size of the thing, having never seen such old tech in her life—and promptly strode from the floor, leaving the stands abuzz again, though mostly nullified. Some people still shouted angrily after him, but most everyone seemed to have understood that the situation was bigger than them and had started taking to their seats again. Those that initially refused only did so until they noticed that a trio of ISCM officers had appeared at the bottom of each section, with many more moving quickly to line the lower walkways and stairs before taking the at-ease position to scan the crowd, eyeing the troublemakers in particular until all of them quieted down to. They weren’t threatening,

per se, but they certainly formed enough of a presence to convey it was in everyone's best interest to stay calm.

Except for Salista, who suddenly very much felt like a trapped fox.

The switch burned at her temple like it was on fire, even if she was only imagining it. She hadn't tried to trigger it—she *hadn't*, she was sure—but what difference would that make to the ISCM if they started sweeping the *spectators* for potential bad actors? It was bad enough that she'd already touched the filament instinctively when things had gone south, but she might get away with that even if the MIND did a sweep of the Arena recordings. Now, though, even if she surreptitiously peeled the transparent trigger off her NOED module and discarded it it would be found and traced right back to her. But if she didn't do anything and they started searched Sectional attendees, it would be found *on* her, which would be no better. Even if she hadn't triggered it and even if she wasn't responsible for the horror show the Arena had made of Reidon Ward, she had no doubt the ISCM would figure out what the trigger was for and charge her with intent.

Salista felt her stomach flip at the thought. Powerful as the family name might be, there would be no recovering from that. Maybe she could tie her own charges up in the legal systems for years with the right council, but she had no ability to stop the military from court-martialing her husband just for being associated with her and her plan to—

MESSAGE FROM "UNKNOWN".

Salista increasingly panicked thoughts were interrupted as a notification pinged her NOED unexpectedly. She frowned, seeing the alert blink once before fading to nothing but the alert dot in the corner of her frame. She'd told all company and house staff not to bother her while she was "vacationing in Sol for the week", and she trusted

no one was stupid enough to disregard such an explicit instruction. Combine that with the message coming from an unknown contact... And the timing...

Suspicious, Salista opened the notification, blinking as the text came up in white across her vision.

Wait ten minutes. The man behind you will ask if you're alright. Tell him you aren't feeling well.

Salista swallowed, adrenaline coursing through her. Was this an extraction? Was this planned by the people she'd employed to create the trigger for her? If that was the case what did it mean? Were they just looking out for themselves, or was it something else? The knot in her gut tightened as all kinds of alarm bells began sounding off in Salista's head. What if she *had* activated the switch and this had been the result? What if she hadn't had a choice from the start, and it had been activated remotely for her with all of this planned from the beginning? Had she been played? Had she just been used as a pawn?

That sparked something in Salista, and her panic cooled. No. Salista Laurent was no one's pawn. If anything, she was the player.

And that meant she had to be good at knowing when she was out of other viable moves.

Salista checked the time, noting it. Then she forced herself to sit, forced herself to pull up the feeds to see if anything about the event had leaked yet, to see if she could find any recordings of the fights, since she hadn't bothered to grab it herself. Partially it was to pass the time without stewing in her own anger and anxiety, but partially to it was to look normal, so she wasn't the only one among tens of thousands just sitting on her hands staring into space.

After 8 minutes, she decided it might be best to at least give prying eyes—present or future—some context, and she start grabbing a her stomach and doing her best to look uncomfortable. She even—to her own great mortification—let out a groan as the 10 minute mark hit.

On cue, she felt a hand come down lightly on her shoulder.

“Excuse me, ma’am... Are you alright?”

Salista froze, and had to make herself not give up the game then and there by whipping around. That voice... She *knew* that voice. It had been *years* since she’d last heard it, a thought that brought with it its own sort of nervousness.

For moment, though, she had a part to play, and if nothing else she was at least pretty sure now that she wasn’t going to be black-bagged and taken off to some dump site by shady actors looking to tie up loose ends.

She shook her head without turning around, grunting out a “No... My stomach...”

“Oh...” the voice was perfectly uncomfortable, formidable in the part it was playing. “Uh... Should we get you to a bathroom? The officers said they would let you by for an emergency...”

The people in the seats surrounding them were looking around in concern, now, and Salista’s face burned despite the awareness that her actual features were hidden by the projection device around her neck. She just nodded again, and she heard the man behind her stand up.

“I’ll help you. I can let them know what’s going on.”

Then the hand was under her arm, and Salista let herself get “helped” onto her feet, careful to keep her mouth twisted into a grimace and her own hands around her stomach. She moved along the row—her “guide” walking stooped along the one above her—until they reached the section stairs.

As expected, they were brought up short by an ISCM soldier almost immediately.

“Folks, I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to ask you to return to your seats. We’re in the process of clearing the Arena and I promise we’ll be letting you guys out as soon as we—”

“Sir, this woman is in need of the ladies room. She’s complaining of stomach issues.”

Salista cheeks were on fire, and she decided she was only making up the hint of vengeful amusement she could hear in that damn voice.

“O-oh.” The officer, a man, was clearly discomfited by this revelation, and even with her eyes on her feet she could see him turn to her. “Are you unwell, ma’am?”

She nodded, forcing out a pained, “Yes, sir. Seeing that... The stress of it... It has my stomach acting up...”

“Understandable, of course,” the officer said, still obviously trying to find his footing. “Er...” He looked desperately around for what might have been assistance from the other soldiers along the steps, but they were all either too far away or engaged with some member of the stands or another. After a second, he gave in. “Alright,” he pointed up the walkway. “I believe the closest restrooms are up a level, in the vendor area. Please return to your seats as soon as you’re... uh... feeling better. I’ll let the others know what’s going on.”

Salista nodded at the floor again and the man with his hand under her arm thanked the officer for them both, then started to pull her up the stairs. Salista let herself be led, and didn’t make eye contact with any of the other soldiers they passed even after they’d been waved by. They reached the middle-level walkway, where a wide archway led into into the vending area corridor, a large, open tunnel whose walls were comprised of permanent and semi-permanents food stalls and stands for spectator enjoyment throughout the day. Even the sellers and staff were gone now, though—the ISCM had apparently herded *everyone* they could into the Arena for supervision—so Salista and the

man didn't have to walk more than fifty paces down the hall before the noise of the stadiums was largely gone and they were completely alone.

That was when the hand under her arm tightened almost painfully, and she was snapped around to face her companion.

“Was this you?!” he snarled into her face. “Answer me truthfully. Was. This. *You?*!”

For a long time, though, Salista could only stare.

The man before her was wearing a projection device like she was, but his features hadn't been as drastically changed. He'd kept the differences subtle, tweaking the breadth of his nose, the thickness of his eyebrows, the width of his chin, but his eyes he'd opted to keep the same. That was smart, if one was confident they could get away with it. Eye color was the one place personal projection tech hadn't *quite* mastered yet, where someone looking for a disguise could most easily discover it.

In this case, however, it confirmed Salista's every suspicion when she found herself looking into those emerald eyes, the same eyes she herself had been born with.

The same eyes she and her husband had agreed *all* their children would have.

“... Kalus...” she breathed at last, not quite believing it despite what she could see very clearly in front of her.

The face—just subtly different enough to be unrecognizable—grimaced at the name, but the hand let off its firm grip around her arm.

“Hello, Mother,” Kalus Laurent, her only son, growled in answer, not looking away from her. “I wish I could say it's good to see you, but we both know I'd be lying. And beside, given the circumstances I'm not exactly feeling the celebratory spirit. Now if you please: *answer the question.*”

Salista blinked, coming to herself slowly. Dressed in a stylish blue jacket and black pants, Kalus wasn't taller than when she'd last seen him at his Galens graduation 2—no, almost 3 years—prior now, but other than that he seemed like an entirely different

person. Setting aside his face, he had a number of black and gold earrings in each ear that made her want to faint, and his red hair—darker than any of the Laurent women’s—was shaved along the sides but long at the top and back, kept out of his face in a short, stylish tail behind his head. His shoulders were a little broader too, but Salista supposed that was to be expected. While had hadn’t had quite the promise *Aria* had shown entering Galens, Kalus had been the ace of his own graduating class, and had only take a year out of school to achieve S-Rank and his Pawn-Class designation. It made Salista well with pride looking at him, even if that joy was tinged a bit with sadness.

And even more irritation.

“You think *I* would have something to do with *that?*” she snapped, wrenching at Kalus’ grip around her arm. “Is that supposed to be funny?”

Her son didn’t give her so much as a millimeter.

“Not even a little bit, *Mother,*” he half-snarled back, straining the last word in a determinedly distasteful way. “If you’re under the impression that I would ever think you beyond suspicion, then you’re even more delusional than you were when I changed my identification codes to cut you and Father off.”

That hurt a little, but Salista didn’t let Kalus see that. She’d never let any of her children see how much their words stung sometimes. It was the duty of a mother, to take that pain. It was the duty of a mother to accept when her children did not understand that what she did, *everything she did*, was for them and their futures.

“Then let go of me, and I’ll answer you,” she said coolly. “You’re hurting me, and it’s not like I can outrun you, can I?”

Kalus glared a second more, holding on as though out of spite. Then he released her, standing straight and crossing his arms in front of his chest expectantly. For a while they just stood though, neither looking away from the other, locked in a battle of wills Salista was neither used to nor enjoyed.

Finally, she decided it was best to give. The man before her seemed to hold himself with an iron confidence she didn't recall even 2 years ago...

"Of *course* I had nothing to do with what happened out there," she spat, waving a hand back behind them to indicate the Arena they'd just left. "And I take offense that you would even *think* that?"

"Oh?" Kalus asked, raising an eyebrow. "So you really do think there's not reason I should suspect you? At all?"

"Of course not!" Salista snapped back. "What have I ever done that would make you think—?"

"Then what are you doing here, Mother, hmm? Why are you at this event? I *do not* tell me it's to cheer Aria on, or some bullshit like that. We *both* know the only time you've ever bothered to show up for any of us was when you had a reason to."

Salista—who had indeed been about to present just this exact argument—shut her mouth with a snap and glowered at her only son.

"You think that little of me? That I can't just show up to support my daughter?"

"Oh I think less of you than that," Kalus snarled, narrowing his eyes at her. "You give yourself too much credit if *that's* where you think the bar is."

Salista felt that sting again, felt that hurt, but didn't so much as blink. Instead, she pivoted tactics.

"What in the MIND are *you* doing here, then, Kalus? If you're such a saint, why are *you* here?"

"Call it a premonition," the man responded in a growl. "I hadn't planned on it, I assure you. But—" he continued, cutting off Salista's attempt to jump in "—a little birdie told me that you just so happened to be taking a 'week-long vacation' over the course of Aria's Sectionals. I'm not a fan of coincidences like that, so here I am."

Salista grit her teeth. "And how did you find me? 50,000 people and you just *happen* to stumble on me? In disguise?"

Kalus snorted. “Hell no. I had help. There are perks to being an S-Ranked SCT fighter on the way up the ladder, Mother. Combine that with you being about as predictable as well-worn foot path and it honestly wasn’t that hard.”

“Predictable?!” Salista half-hissed, taking more offense to this than anything else said so far. “I’m not predict—!”

“Mother, switching up what section you sat in for each of Aria’s fights isn’t exactly master-class espionage tactics. A friend of mine has access to the Kenneth Arena security feeds, and *all* I needed to tell her was that a 5’11” woman would be leaving promptly after every time Aria Laurent was done for the day. She tossed that into the worlds most basic extrapolation algorithm, and gave me three matches by Wednesday. *Three.*” He sneered. “Tell me you’re not predictable though. Go ahead.”

Salista seethed, glaring up at her son, but before she could think to get another word in he was continuing.

“Maybe now we can try again? I’ve given you a good, healthy example of what it’s like to answer a question directly, so I wonder if you’ll actually be able to manage it?” His eyes never left her. “I’ll ask again: what are you doing here?”

Salista’s face burned, but not in embarrassment now. In anger.

“None of you will ever understand, will you?” she snarled. “Not a one of you will *ever* appreciate the lengths your father and I have gone to protect you! To protect this family!”

“Oh here we go,” Kalus sighed, rolling his eyes to the ceiling.

“No!” Salista snapped, bring a finger up to jab at his face. “You will not disrespect me like this. You will *not* disrespect your *mother* like this! I have given too much—*sacrificed* too much—to be treated in this way, much less by my own child!”

“You’re worse at dancing around the bush than you used to be,” her son muttered, apparently utterly unperturbed by her tone of face as he reached up with one hand to rub his eyes with thumb and forefinger. “You also seem to be under the impression

that you hold more cards than you do in this conversation. I *know* you're not here out of the goodness of your heart, Mother. I know it even more firmly than I know that Diametrus the moment I call for it. I know it so well, in fact, that I would have bet ever credit I have that you needed an exit plan after everything went belly up in that last fight, whether that was your fault or not." He looked at her in a tired sort of way from above his fingers, then. "And look at that. You leapt on the chance. Which tells me everything I need to know."

And then, without warning, he turned and started walking back down the hall, startling Salista.

"Wait, where are you going?" she demanded furiously. "You can't just leave me here!"

"Why not?" he called back over his shoulder, not looking around. "If your so pure of heart and you're only hear to support your daughter, you don't need me, do you? You can just go back to your seat, no questions asked."

Salista's stomach bottomed out at that, and she looked frantically around. The stalls were empty, sure, but what was she going to do? Stick the trigger under a popcorn counter like old gum? The drones would eventually sweep here, too, and there were most *definitely* cameras in the hall around them. If anything, she was more exposed the ever.

"Wait!" she hissed furiously, caving and taking a step after her son. "Just... *wait*."

Kalus stopped and half-turned to look at her, though he didn't say a word. Once again they battled for a moment, and once again Salista was the one forced to speak.

And with nothing else to do for it, she told him everything.

"I didn't use it," she gave the half-truth first. "I wasn't going to unless it was absolutely necessary."

"It?" Kalus intoned dangerously, facing her fully now and started to walk back towards her. "What is 'it'?"

“I have a... a trigger,” she said as he came to stand before her once more. “Back door-access to the SCT programming at this Arena.”

“I’m sorry, *what?!?*”

“It’s not what you think! It’s nothing like what happened back there to Ward. It’s just a script that limits the movement of the target slightly, making it easier for their opponent to—”

“Are *kidding me*, Mom?!” Kalus absolutely snarled, even slipping from the cold formalities into an older, more familiar told. “Are you KIDDING ME?! ‘Just limits the movements’?! You’re talking about combat tampering! You’re talking about one of the biggest felonies in the ISC! Tell me you’re joking!”

“It wasn’t going to harm anyone! It was just so Aria—!”

“Just so Aria could get a leg up? Just so Aira could win more easily?” Kalus let out a weak, icy laugh. “Hold shit... You really have learned *nothing* from me and Amina, have you? Nothing at all?”

“Don’t talk to me like—”

“No! Shut up!” Kalus snapped, and Salista almost took a step back as her son’s eyes blazed with a sudden green light, like emerald fire had engulfed his irises. “Shut up, and listen to me! You have to stop. You have to STOP, dammit! Forget anyone pointing out that you’re just going to lose Aria like you lost the two of us. Forget anyone pointing out that you could be incarcerated for this bullshit! Did you even stop to think about the other people involved in this? About Aria? About Dad? What the *hell* would have happened to them if you’d been caught? Aria could have lost her *CAD*, Mom! Her *Device*! And Dad!” He scoffed. “Not like *Dad* does anything important, does he? Not like risking *his* career has any potential consequences for anyone.”

Salista grit her teeth again. “Nothing was going to happen to them,” she ground back. “I had a plan, and—”

“MOM! OPEN YOUR EYES! YOUR PLAN WENT TO SHIT TWENTY MINUTES AGO! WHAT NOW, HUH?”

It was lucky the drone of the Arena was so loud, because Kalus only barely seemed to keep himself from screaming at her outright, which would have earned them all the wrong kinds of attention. Salista, for her part, could only stand rigidly before her sun, at once furious and frightened as his eyes continued to burn green.

After nearly 10 seconds of heavy silence between them, Kalus seemed to get ahold of himself, because he took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, they were back to normal.

“This trigger. Where is it?”

“Over my right NOED module,” Salista answered through a clenched jaw.

Kalus peered at her temple. “Where?”

“It’s completely transparent.”

Her son’s eyes went wide. “Mono-molecular. Where the hell did you get tech like that?”

“From an associate. One who I won’t be needing further contact with after today.”

“That better be the case,” Kalus growled. Then he looked around. “Alright. Give it to me.”

Salista blinked. “What?”

“You heard me. Give it to me. Go to the restroom and take it off. There’s no camera’s in there. I’ll bet that’s where you picked it up in the first place, isn’t it?”

She nodded.

“Thought so. I can partial call without Central taking much notice. They tend to assume we’re showing off part of our Device for a fan who wants a picture or something. Flushing that thing doesn’t guarantee it won’t be discovered, but Diametrus’ vysetrium can fry it, I guarantee.”

Salista could barely believe her ears. “You want to... You’re going to destroy it?”

Kalus looked at her like she was crazy. “Yes? Obviously? Do you see a different option?”

Salista shook her head unsteadily, and Kalus nodded.

“Glad we understand each other. Now go take it off.”

And Salista did just that, walking a little numbly to the bathroom, where she locked herself in a stall to carefully peel the translucent circle from over NOED. Once it was off—the only assurance that she had it between her fingers being the slighted discoloration in the air where it was hanging if she turned her hand a specific angle—she met Kalus back outside and handed it off.

“Here’s to hoping the MIND isn’t scrubbing those camera’s *too* carefully,” Kalus said with a roll of his eyes as he accepted the trigger by cupping one hand under Salista’s and the other over. “If anyone asks down the line, I’m just taking hold of you now to make sure your feeling alright.”

She nodded, then watched her son vanish into the men’s room. Not a minute later he was back, looking a great bit less stressed than he had been.

“There. That’s done,” he grumbled, looking up and down the hall. “We’ve taken enough time as is. We should head back to our seats, but don’t talk to me again. I’m leaving as soon as they everyone go, and I don’t want you coming after me.”

That hurt again, but Salista brushed it off. Still, it was enough to spark the anger again.

“Why help, then?” she demanded, glaring at her son. “If I’m that bad, why bother helping?”

Once more, Kalus stared at her like she were the most ridiculous thing he’d ever seen.

“Seriously?” he asked after a second.

Salista continued to watch him with narrowed eyes, unwilling this time to be the one who bent.

In the end, it was indeed Kalus who gave.

“Someone just made a butchery of Cadet Ward, Mother. Don’t believe what they said about it maybe being a glitch. It wasn’t. That was an attack, and one perpetrated through the best firewalls ISCM technology can throw up again outside influencers for *exactly* the reasons you saw. *Anyone* caught in the crossfire of this is going to get throne in a deep, dark hole.”

“You don’t seem to mind if that was me,” Salista snapped. “In fact your so clear about that I’m surprised you didn’t turn me in yourself.”

Kalus’ eyebrows shot up at that, clearly shocked.

“Wow... You really are broken, aren’t you?” he asked after a second. “If that’s where you’re head goes—if *that’s* what you think family is capable of, even one as broken and deranged as ours—then you’re even further gone than I thought. Goodbye, Mother. I hope I don’t see you again.”

And then he turned and walked away once more, and this time didn’t stop when Salista called after him.