

## CHAPTER 2

They did not, as Rei had anticipated they were going to, make an accelerated trip to the Institute Hospital after Dent ordered them both into the flyer, joining them before shutting the door behind her, cutting off the wind and noise. Instead, the moment they were in the air the vehicle swung eastward, zipping right over the closest of Galen's walls before climbing almost straight up to join one of the lower skylanes that led into Castalon proper.

"Ma'am... Where are we going?" Aria asked nervously once they'd slipped into glow of the city, the smallest of the towering skyscrapers lining up in rows on either side of them no less than 400 or so floors in height. As they did, world became bright in a way only the nightlife of a planet's most-thriving metropolis could provide for.

And yet Dent's face only seemed to darken in the seat across from them, hearing the question.

"Cadet Arada was found unresponsive in West Center about twenty minutes ago," she answered in a subdued tone after a moment. "She's alive—" she brought up a hand quickly as Rei and Aria both open their mouths in alarm at this statement "—but both medical drone that alerted us to the situation assessed her condition as beyond what the Galens is capable of treating safely, which Lieutenant Colonel Mayd has since confirmed this. She's been rushed to a specialized unit at Altmore Medical Center in the city, designed for Users."

None of this did anything to help Rei's stomach, of course. If anything, he was starting to feel nauseous. *He'd* been in bad shape before. He'd been ganged up on by *six* of his classmates the semester before, and ripped a hole through his lung not a week ago. And that was wasn't even *mentioning* the hellish state he'd woken up in the previous weekend after his body had largely torn itself apart after the hack at Sectionals. And yet

on those occasion, the Galens Institute—and Kenneth Academy for the latter incident—had clearly beed judged more than adequate to address his needs.

So for Viv to be in such bad shape that she was beyond the school’s ability to treat her...

“What *happened?*” he asked hoarsely, feeling he was voicing the question for the thousandth time among them even in the 10 minutes it had been since Shido had sent that alert. “What was she *doing?*”

“We’re... not completely sure,” the Iron Bishop answered, though she sounded hesitant, looking out the window to her left at the passing scycrapers. “We don’t have enough information yet to paint the whole picture, so I’m not going to speculate. The Lieutenant Colonel is ahead of us though, so I’m hoping he’ll have more to share once we reach Almore.”

There was a moment of quite after that, a tense silence as all of them—Dent included, Rei was pretty sure—couldn’t help but contemplate the worst. Rei almost reached out to take Aria’s hand for comfort in fact, but restrained himself as he swallowed and looked out his own window.

He’d barely taking in the afterglow of Castalon’s neon lights for a few second, though, before the Bishop spoke again.

“Ward... I need you to answer me this time. How did you know?”

Rei turned back to the woman, but she hadn’t actually taken her own gaze away from the city even as she’d asked. He trained a glance with Aria, but she could only return a nervous look, which he could understand. His CAD was a tricky subject to navigate, no matter who it was that was asking. The nature of Shido’s S-Ranked Growth spec made it consistently astonishing to those in—and often even those out—of the know about it, but just the same he had to be careful, in *particular* when it came to knew developments.

Still... even setting aside the fact that Valera Dent was already aware of the CAD's greatest secret, the woman had long since been someone Rei considered well and truly in the fold of the Device's extraordinary influence.

"Shido, ma'am," he answered at last, looking back to Dent. "It gave me an alert maybe seven or eight minutes ago."

"An alert?" Valera did turn back to him now, frowning. "What sort of alert? It told you that Arada was hurt?"

"Not... not exactly..." Rei responded uncertainly.

And then he explained as best he could.

It only took a minute or two—and a screenshot of the notification—but when he finished explaining what had happened in more detail, neither Dent nor Aria seemed to be able to say a word. The latter only gaped at him, mouthing at the air as her red hair and cap were framed against the city lights outside her window. She'd been quick enough to take him at his word that something had happened when he'd inadvertently dragged her out of bed, but now that she had all the information, Rei rather thought it looked like Aria's brain had short circuited.

Dent, on the other hand...

As he took in the Bishop in silence, waiting for someone else to speak, Rei saw an expression at once both strange and familiar flash across the woman's prosthetic features. There was shock, there, yes. Maybe not as pronounced as Aria's but presence all the same, and there might also have been just a hint of alarm, a hint of concern at the information he'd just provided to the woman.

But deeper still, layered behind those clearer feelings like Dent didn't want anyone to see them, Rei—not for the first time—though he saw something very much like triumph flaring in the Iron Bishop's brown eyes...

"'Link manifestation'...?" Dent repeated slowly, not looking away from Rei. "And you have no idea what that's about, Cadet? You're sure?"

“A hundred percent, ma’am,” Rei said automatically, but before he could continued he stopped, considering this answer. Again he glanced at Aria, but unfortunately he girlfriend seemed still a little too shellshocked to help him, in the moment.

So he made the call himself.

“Well... Maybe more like... seventy percent?”

Dent’s gaze sharpened abruptly, and she’d opened her mouth—very clearly with the intent to order him to clarify this statement—when their fly slowed, then started to decent. A quick look outside had them all taking note of the solid wash of green light that lined the massive building they seemed to be approaching, and Rei realized they had to be arriving.

“Ward, you are going to explain what you mean by that later,” Dent told him quickly, making it very clear she was not requesting. “No dancing. No beating around the bush. This is important. Possibly even more so than you realize.”

“Yes, ma’am,” was all Rei answered with, nodding. He had to agree, after all. Obviously he’d never been the only one interested in Shido’s growth and progress, but in the past week he’d—especially after the Sectionals attack—that fact had been brought into extra sharp relief for him. He had no *doubt* whatever was going on with his Device would be of keen interest to a thousand other eyes, some of them possibly even more knowledgeable about his situation than he was. It felt a little unfair, but he’d come to terms with it. At the end of the day, he couldn’t forget that he was a soldier of the ISCM, a cog in the great machine of war and entertainment that kept the Collective safe at any cost.

It was a brief descent before the flyer slowed further, then came to a brief hovering halt before setting down gently onto a platform about halfway up the tower that had to have been the Altmore Medical Center, some 300 stories above the ground. Sure enough, as Dent opened the door for them once more and stepped quickly out, the

hospital's name came into view in a curving neon line over top the half-circle entrance that formed an intruding divot in the side of the building, leading to a long series of doors already opening and closing as dozens of people came and went even this late at night. Waiting just long enough to make sure Aria had come to her sense enough to realize they were exiting, Rei followed the Captain out into the cold again, and when all three of them were clear of the flyer they hurried together towards the entrance. Several heads turned their way as they passed, a dozen pairs of tired eyes from staff and civilians alike snapping awake and wide to when they caught sight of them. Most seemed to notice the Bishop first, as was only natural, but Rei had to ignore those attentions that fell on he and Aria after that, many people looking only further surprised—and some even more excited—as they were recognized. It was still a strange feeling, but even if Rei hadn't been singularly focused on why they were there, Sectionals had been a hundred times worse. At least they weren't outright *accosted* by paparazzi this time, and he suspected that those few people who might have been keen on approaching them were likely—and fortunately, given the circumstance—put off by the Bishops presence, and maybe doubly so when a short man in a black coat over green scrubs caught sight of the three of them from where he stood by the doors and waved them down. As they hurried his way, most of the word 'ALTMORE' became clear over his right breast pocket under the jacket, displayed in clear white in all their NOEDs. There was a name there, too, Rei thought, but the man moved too quickly as they approached, already backpedalling into the building.

“Captain,” he said in gruff greeting, clearly recognizing Dent on sight and turning once they'd reached the doors to immediately start leading into a grand lobby of black and white marble, the lights hanging from raised ceiling above them so bright it might as well have been daylight out. “I'm Josh Alberty, one of the nurses in the User Treatment Unit. They sent me to come get you when we heard you were coming. We're already dealing with your cadet.”

“Any news?” Dent has briefly.

The nurse—Alberty—made a noncommittal shrug even as they hurried down one of the innumerable halls that led out of the lobby. “Not much, sorry. I wasn’t in the room long. She’s definitely not out of danger, but I can tell you she was stable when she got to us. Medical transport did a good job with her on their way, which is always a good sign.”

“She’s okay, though?” Aria seemed unable to stop herself from asking in a rush.

Alberty looked over his shoulder to take her and Rei in with one blue-green eye, then, like he was assessing them. After a second, he offered something that might have been a smile.

“She’s being seen by the best the UTU’s got. I always say you shouldn’t worry until there’s reason too.”

Rei was grateful for the man, then, because the answer seemed to appease a bit of Aria’s concern at the very least. *He*, on the other hand, hadn’t missed the diplomatic choice of those particular words, nor it seemed had Dent, because he thought he saw the woman’s jaw clench slightly.

The hospital—as was the nature of such places in Rei’s experience—was a winding maze of halls, tunnels, stairs, and the like. The nurse led them deftly, but just the same it was a half-dozen turns and a elevator ride down about 100 floors before they seemed to reach their destination, coming to the end of a longer double-wide passage to set of reinforced steel doors marked with yellow and black tape. Along the wall over these the name ‘Lindon C. Wight Wing - User Treatment Unit’ was bright in green letters atop the white paint, and reaching them it took a second of Alberty standing and looking up at a small back box set under the words before they opened with a hiss of decompressing air. The doors swung outward quickly—an impressive feat given they were each 3-feet thick and looked to be made of solid steel—and once the gap was wide enough for them to fit, the nurse led the way inside quickly.

The User Treatment Unit—‘UTU’ apparently— was at once underwhelming and utterly impressive. It was tiny—*maybe* four or five rooms and a nurses station, from what Rei could see at a glance—and largely absent any of the activity or bustle they’d seen everywhere else as they’d made their way deeper into the hospital. There were no windows that he could tell, either, with the only illumination coming from the white strip of solar lights along the center of the hall ceiling, splitting off in lines into each door like a trail to be followed.

Other the other hand... if Rei had been in a state of mind to do so, he probably would have stopped to gawk into every room he could, open mouthed and salivating the sheer of *tech* that line the floors, walls, and ceiling of each of the spaces, making the wing feel like the belly of some alien spacecraft.

There were anti-grav suspension tanks—long, transparent containers built to hold a human body still and stable for extended periods with zero risk of pressure sores or the like—along with User-grade treadmills and various other rehab equipment, some of them so massive and solid-looking they *had* to have been rated for A- or S-Ranked fighters. There were testing bays with more screens than he could count—reminding Rei of the equipment used by the ISCM medical staff during the CAD Assignment to quantify their red blood cell count and other metrics—and one of the rooms housed a massive arching machine with a thousand different mechanical arms that could only have been some mind of specialized surgical unit. These and more were all complimented by a thousand different tubes, cables, and wired tools that hung from the ceiling in various places, all neatly clipped the walls for easy access and use to form a mesmerizing, semi-mechanized curtains in some of the rooms. Any other day, Rei would have begged to be allowed to take pictures so he and Catcher—and maybe even Logan, who’d steadily been proving himself as avid an SCT enthusiast as either of them—could have fawned over the rooms and uses of the various devices and units.

Instead, Rei had eyes only for the room at the very end of the short hall—the only one showing any signs of activity.

A lone, broad-shouldered figure stood with his back to their newly-arrived group there, taking in the rush of action happening on the other side of the transparent smart-glass wall before him. It took a moment for Rei to recognize the man, and he blinked in surprise as he realized the figure was none other than Galen's own command officer, Colonel Rama Guest. Even more so than Dent, the Colonel—the only other S-Ranked User at school, though a only a 'lowly' Pawn-Class to the Captain's Knight—had never looked less the part of his position. He was in a rumpled black with a sweater pulled hastily over it, and rather even then jeans he was wearing what seemed to be old sweat pants. His brown hair—usually kept clean and tidy in a long ponytail—was a loose curtain down his back, and he looked to be wearing house slippers rather than any real shoe.

It could not have been more apparent the man had bolted from his bed, grabbing whatever and whichever articles of clothing had been in reach as he rushed from his rooms on campus.

"This is where I leave," Alberty said by way of farewell when they were halfway down the hall. "I just ask that you *not* enter the room without permission from one of the physicians. Understood?"

All three of them nodded, with Rei and Aria doing so only numbly. With that, the nurse hurried ahead, pausing again before the room's for for a biometric lock, then slipped in. His appearance must have shared Guest, because the Colonel seemed to come to from some distant place, standing up a little straighter and turning to face them, hands still at his back.

"Colonel." Dent stopped only long enough to salute the man before stepping up beside him to peer through the wall herself. "How's she doing?"



“Stable,” Guest grunted in answer, turning back to the room himself. “That’s all I know, though.”

He’d only given Rei and Aria the briefest of appraising looks before returning his attention to the situation. Neither of them noticed.

They were both too busy staring, horrified, at the activity happening within the unit.

Viv was already suspended inside of the one of the anti-grav tanks. She’d clearly been cut out of her suit, because her modesty was only currently being protected by a white sheet that barely covered her body as she floated in the air on her back in the vessel. She had more lines and wires attached to her arms, legs, neck, and chest than Rei had ever seen, and even as he watched other were being added to the mix. No less than *six* masked people in either green scrubs or white coats were rushing around the girl in surgically ordered chaos, shouts and calls for various items, IVs, and data adding the *beep* of a heart monitor and the low thrum of the small anti-grav engine that had to be in the floor. Rei felt a pinch at his side, and he blinked around to find that Aria hadn’t looked at him, but was instead staring open mouthed even as she let out a hoarse whisper.

“Rei... Is that... Is that a DTRU?”

Rei frowned, then turned back to the room, not immediately following.

Then his stomach dropped through the floor.

Somehow, in the surging bustle on the other side of the wall, he had missed the most alarming sight of all. At the top of the tank, Viv’s mouth was slack, and there seemed to be red residue that could only have been dried blood cling to her lips and nostrils. That was all of her face that Rei could see, though, because the rest of her features were obscured by sleek, sterile-white module that capped the girl’s skull like the letter part of a helmet cover her hair, eyes, ears, and part of the back of her neck. A green light was pulsing steadily from under the metal along the contact line of the unit,

and though Rei had actually only seen a similar machine one time, he recognized it at once. A DTRU, just like Aria had said. A deep-tissue reparative unit. A device that specialized in helping localized healing of truly traumatic organ damage.

And there was on part of the body this particular body could have been designed for.

“Oh no...” Rei heard himself choke out.