

Chapter 40

PLACEHOLDER TEXT

-PLACEHOLDER TEXT

...

Processing combat information.

...

Calculating.

...

Results:

Strength: Severely Lacking

Endurance: Severely Lacking

Speed: Severely Lacking

Cognition: Severely Lacking

Offense: Severely Lacking

Defense: Severely Lacking

Growth: Not Applicable

...

Checking combat data acquisition.

...

Adequate data acquirement met.

Device initiating adjustments to:

Strength. Endurance. Speed. Cognition. Offense. Defense.

...

Adjustment complete.

Strength has been upgraded from Rank C3 to C5.

Endurance has been upgraded from Rank C2 to C4.

Speed has been upgraded from Rank C7 to B0.

Cognition has been upgraded from Rank C7 to C9.

Offense has been upgraded from Rank C3 to C5.

Defense has been upgraded from Rank C4 to C7.

...

Calculating.

...

CAD "Shido" has been upgraded from Rank C7 to C9

...

Checking combat data acquisition.

...

Adequate data acquirement met.

Prioritizing reasonable evolution parameters.

...

Selected Prioritization:

Strength. Endurance. Speed. Cognition. Offense. Defense.

...

Recategorizing for future parameters.

...

Processing.

...

Evolving.

...

Evolution complete.

...

Checking combat data acquisition.

...

Adequate data acquirement met.

Prioritizing reasonable Ability assignment.

...

Ability "Type Shift" has been redesignated "Type Shift I".

Ability "Type Shift I" has been upgraded to "Type Shift II".

Additional Mode integration added to "Type Shift II".

...

User-Unique Ability Assigned: "Temporal Step"

The first thing Rei took notice of when he came to was that he *hurt*. He *really* hurt. That was pretty concerning given he was beyond used to waking up in pain. It seemed to be a semi-regular occurrence for him ever since he'd started school at Galens, and before then his surgeries had seen him going down and waking up only in various levels of extreme discomfort. This time, though, the pain was different. Stranger. Unlike anything he'd known before. It wasn't *worse*, he didn't think. That would have been incredibly unfortunate. No... What was odd about it was that it was... everywhere? Yeah, that was it. *Everything* hurt. Without exception. Every limb. Every joint. Every

length of muscle. Even his damn *face*. It *all* hurt. Rei felt like a building had collapsed on him, and he'd somehow managed to survive by the skin of his—

And then he remembered, and Rei's eye flew up as he jerked up to sit with a strangled cry, flailing in panic as the images of the monochrome figures flashed before him like nightmares made real.

“Oh hell, he's up!” someone yelled, and Rei felt hands grab at his arm and shoulders. Instinctively he tried to wrench himself away, not seeing anything but grey and a bright white that made his eyes water.

“A LITTLE HELP!” someone else yelled, but he ignored them, shouting as he fought. He felt even more hands, and one pair in particular took hold of him like iron, pushing him back down. That only made things worse as the panic set in ten-fold, as his mind screamed against being so absolutely caged.

Not again! NOT AGAIN!

“Ward! WARD!” someone yelled. A woman's voice, and known.

But far gone from his awareness.

“What's happened?!” Another woman, also familiar, but it reached Rei through his terror with no more efficacy than the first.

“He's panicking!” the first voice shouted. “Anyone NOT a User, GET OUT! NOW! Sarah, get the girls!”

“Laurent? Valera, do you think that's a good—?”

“SARAH!” the first voice roared, and there was a power in the words that almost reached Rei. Almost. “GET. THE. GIRLS!”

There was a scramble of feet, but he didn't hear them. He was gone. Far gone. All he knew was panic and pain. Every movement hurt. Every wheezing breath. Every jerk. Every twist and turn of his body as he bucked against the hands that held him down. That was nothing, though, compared to the fear. To the terror. The memory of grey blades rising and coming to down to—

“REI!”

And then, like that, the world snapped back into place.

Rei froze, blinking rapidly. The white he'd seen started to clear, turning into the bright lights of a well-lit room, and the grey darkened until it wasn't grey at all but *black*. Black and gold. There were figures standing around him, maybe a half-dozen in total, and one in particular was leaning over him and holding him down. It took a moment for him to focus, took a moment for him to make out Valera Dent's unique features, her hair loose and cap gone, face framed against the ceiling. She had him pinned down—pinned down to a *bed*, he realized—and the steel feel of her hands on his shoulders was still frightening. Rei managed to tolerate it, though, managed to ignore it as he looked widely around, searching for the voices that had brought him back, one he'd last heard screaming in a very different way, one he wasn't sure he'd ever hear again.

He found them at the foot of his bed, Captain Takeshi's holding each back with a blocking arm.

“Aria,” he croaked, and even that single word hurt his throat. “Viv...”

Aria girl looked a mess. Her hair was in tangles to the point that she'd obviously been twisting it in knots, and her green eyes were red and puffy. Her cheeks were dry, though, like she'd run out of tears some time ago, but she was still in her combat suit with Hippolyta recalled around her wrists. Viv, in black-and-golds, look a good deal more put together, but Rei wasn't sure he'd ever seen her face so pale in his life as she stared at him with wide eyes.

“Ward. Look at me.”

Rei blinked, and had no choice but to turn from the girls as one of Dent's hands took him by the jaw, forcing his face around towards hers.

“You’ve been through something horrible, Cadet. I’m sorry. But I can’t let you go until you can show me you’re in control.” She squeezed his shoulder with her other hand, still holding him down pointedly.

Rei stared for a second.

Then the panic started to build up again.

“Captain...” he hissed. “The sparring partners... They came out of the field... They—”

“I know.” Dent’s voice was soothing, a frightening sound coming from the usually-stern woman. “I know, kid. It’s okay, though. You’re safe now. We got you out of there. But now *you* need to come back to *us*. Can you do that for me?”

Rei’s breaths were coming sharp again, but he forced himself to look into Valera Dent’s eyes. She was scrutinizing him carefully, her gaze as absolute as her grip. It was steady. Comforting. After a second Rei felt himself slipping back into the moment, back away from the memory of what had transpired.

Eventually he managed to do his best to nod against her hand.

“You good?” she asked one last time. “You sure?”

Another nod.

“You’ll have to let go of me if you want me to believe that.”

That was when Rei realized, with a horrible jolt of guilt, that he had taken hold of the Captain far more harshly than she’d had of him. One of his hands was on her wrist by his shoulder, the other high around her other arm like he was trying to keep her at bay. He let go with a jerk, noting with alarm as he did that he’d had NO control over himself in the moment. He’d been holding onto her with all his CAD-boosted Strength, with every ounce of power his terror had fed through him. He knew, now, why she’d told all non-Users to clear the room.

Had anyone but Dent been the one to hold him down in that moment, Rei was pretty sure he would have crushed their limbs to splinters.

“I’m sorry,” he managed in a pained hissed as he let his hands drop. “I’m so sorry.”

“You’ve got nothing to apologize for, Cadet,” Dent told him quietly. “Not a damn thing.” She eased off of him, though, letting go before sitting at the edge of the bed for a moment to take him in. When he made not further movement, she finally turned to Takeshi. “Let them come.”

Takeshi seemed hesitant, eyeing Rei with a mixture of worry and concern, but did as she was told. Viv stood numbly, still staring at Rei with a pained mix of sadness and horror, but the instant the Captain dropped her arm Aria was at his side, her Speed slipping through so obviously that Dent’s hair fluttered around her face from the force of the air being shoved out of the way.

“Rei! Rei!” Aria was gasping, her hands moving all over his chest and shoulders and neck like she had to make sure that he was really truly there. “Are you okay?! Tell me you’re okay!”

“I-I’m here,” he got out, bring his hands up with a wince to take hold of her. He couldn’t make himself say he was “okay”, no, but he could assure her he wasn’t lost anymore. “I’m here. Don’t worry.”

At the words Aria found her tears again, because she burst into sobs and bent herself abruptly down over him to bury her face in his neck. Rei winced in discomfort as her body’s weight on his chest made his ribs ache, but she didn’t notice, too preoccupied was she with crying in what he thought was relief. Helpless to do anything else, Rei wrapped his arms around the girl to hold her tight, hugging her to him as he, too, realized how much better he felt having her there. The last he’d seen her, she’d been screaming. Screaming in terror, struggling as the grey figures had come.

Rei shivered at the thought, and didn’t let go of Aria as he fully looked around himself for the first time.

He was laying in what could only be the Kenneth Arena’s medical bay, because it had all the hallmarks of a hospital space. He was in an adjustable bed with his head by

the wall, and on either side of him privacy curtains had been pulled around to block him from view from the rest of the room. From the quiet, though, Rei guessed he was the sole patient in the chamber, with the only people aside from him, Aria, and Viv being the officers around them. Aside from Dent and Takeshi, the others were largely strangers to him, and the Iron Bishop seemed to take note of his searching gaze.

“You may recognize Captain Hinde, who was arbitrating your match before the attack,” she said kindly, pointing at the only other figure he thought he recognized. From there she indicated the other two. “To his left are Major Jones—” a broad-shouldered woman with braided blue hair nodded briefly “—and Lieutenant Colonel Williamson—” a bald black man with light green eyes who couldn’t have been much shorter than 7 feet tall dipped his head, looking concern. “Major Jones is the Kenneth Academy’s chief arbiter, while the Lieutenant Colonel is the school’s commanding officer. They’ve come to see how you’re doing, and to talk.”

It was going to take a *lot* to shake Rei, Aria, and Viv from their mutual state of shock, but being faced with not only Kenneth’s *commanding officer* but *also* his Arena manager was enough to do the trick. Viv stiffened by the group while Rei and Aria went still. Then Aria pulled away slowly into a sitting position on Rei’s left, opposite Dent. One hand she left resting on his chest like she was afraid not touching him would mean he’d slip away again, but with the other she managed a shaky salute.

“S-Sir,” she got out. “Ma’am. A-Apologies. If I’d known who you were I-I wouldn’t have—”

“That’s quiet alright, Cadet,” Williamson interrupted her sympathetically, holding up one hand to Rei and Viv each as they too opened their mouths to voice their own regrets. “These are very obviously extenuating circumstances.”

“If anyone should be apologizing, it’s *me*.” Major Jones had a light accent Rei thought might have been European out of Sol, but couldn’t be sure because her words

were literally *shaking* with fury. “Oversight of this event and the Arena are *my* responsibility both. The fact that this attack happened under my nose...”

“*Our* nose, Major,” Captain Hinde said quietly, though it was Rei he was looking at, a sort of haunted expression deepening the hint of bags under his eyes. “Ward... I’m so sorry. As soon as I knew something was wrong I tried to end your match, but I was completely locked out of the SCT systems. If I had reacted quicker, maybe I could have...”

He trailed off miserably, and the Major reached out to put a comforting hand on his shoulder.

Rei, though, was less concerned with apologies than he was with the new information that had just been presented to him.

“Attack?” he repeated, and he didn’t notice his hand coming up to grip Aria’s over his chest, instinctively seeking comfort at this revelation. “So it was deliberate?”

Jones nodded as she answered. “Very. The MIND completed its sweep of all our software and firmware, and found a breach. Someone used a back door we’ve never seen to accessed our SCT routines.”

“The Arena was hacked,” Dent, still at the edge of the bed, translated gently as Rei stared at the Major, struggling to register this. “By an outside party. We don’t know when, but the MIND believes it happened days ago. Central’s cyber-security team has gone through what was found and—”

“*Central!* Why was *Central* involved?!”

The question, nothing short of snarled, had every single person in the room looking around at Viv. Abruptly she’d stepped closer to the bed and whirled on the officers in fury. Her former fear and grief were gone in a flash, replaced by hot anger. Rei thought he even saw a spark of silver in her blue eyes, but Takeshi answered before he could be sure.

“Protocol, Arada. The MIND can’t allocated significant resources to something like this infinitely. The moment it uncovered the starting point, it passed the investigation off to the Central team. Cyber-ops is best-suited for—”

“Best-suited for *hacking the system in the first place!*” Viv practically yelled, and Rei winced as Aria’s fingers twitched around his painfully. “How do we know it wasn’t *them*?! How do we know Central wasn’t involved in this from the—?!”

“Cadet Arada. Calm. *Down.*”

Viv froze and stopped talking all at once. With a creak of the bed Dent had taken to her feet and was staring the girl down in steely warning. Her voice had been calm, but there had been a level of threat in her words that said a line had been crossed.

Sure enough, all three Kenneth officers were frowning between Viv and the Captain.

“Central involved?” Major Jones asked, somewhere between bemused and alarmed. “What is she talking about?”

Neither Dent nor Takeshi answered for a long moment, both gazes very deliberately on Viv, who seemed to have realized she’d overstepped. She shrank away from the two Captains, but the fire didn’t leave her face, a defiant “I’m not having it!” that wasn’t willing to be quelled even by the Iron Bishop herself.

Eventually Dent replied to Jones without looking away from her.

“There was an incident at Galens not long ago. An issue with our parameter testing. It’s been elevated to the appropriate parties.”

“An ‘incident’?” Williamson repeated, eyes narrowing as they settled on the Bishop. “Explain, Captain.”

It was almost strange, seeing Dent respond with a snap around and a salute to the Lieutenant Colonel. In retrospect, Rei had always had the impression of the woman being somehow *outside* of the regular chain of command within the ISCM. Something of her own entity. Maybe it was that she seemed to have so much leeway at the

Institute—she was always pretty quick to give Major Reese a piece of her mind on occasion, for example—or maybe it was just that her Knight-Class made her seem larger than life. Now, though, here she was, forced to answer the command of a superior officer.

Then again...

“Apologies, sir, but I’m unable to do that at this time.”

Williamson looked momentarily surprised, then displeased. But just as he opened his mouth—likely to clarify that he had not been *asking*—Dent’s NOED flashed in her eyes, and the Lieutenant Colonel blinked as his own frame lit up with what must have been a notification. With a couple ocular commands some kind of window opened in his vision, and a second later both eyebrows rose so high Rei thought they might punch through the ceiling that was already too-close to the top of the man’s head.

“‘Classified’...” he read aloud. “Well there’s something...”

“Apologies, sir,” Dent said again, not dropping her hand. “All I can tell you is that Cadet Arada has spoken out of turn.” She shot Aria a warning look. “I’ll have words with her about discretion shortly. For now, though, I ask that you trust myself and Captain Takeshi when I say the issue has been elevated to the appropriate parties.”

“What party is over Cent—?” Hinde started to ask, but the answer seemed to dawn on him halfway through the question. “Oh... *Ob...*”

“I would request that we move on from this topic to the matter at hand if you please, sir,” Dent requested pointedly of Williamson. The Lieutenant Colonel still didn’t look pleased, but was clearly aware that he had little choice as he nodded.

Rei decided that was his opportunity.

“Can someone... Can anyone tell me what happened?” he asked tentatively into the brief pause as Dent finally relaxed her salute.

There was a long, tense silence.

“Captains, we’ll leave you with your charges,” Williams said at last, looking to Hinde and Jones as he gestured them towards the door. “We’ve said our piece for now. If you have need of us, I’ll be leaving a school officer outside, but I think this might be a conversation best had in familiar company.”

“Thank you, sir,” Dent and Takeshi both said together, and the Kenneth Captain and Major took their leave with a last nod to the group. As he followed them out, however, the Lieutenant Colonel hesitated, then looked around at Rei.

“You have my apologies again, Ward. As a soldier and as commander of this school. We will do everything we can to make it right, I promise.”

And then he was gone, following his subordinates beyond the edge of the privacy curtain towards what must have been the room’s exit.

Dent waited for the door to shut with a low hiss and click before she turned on Viv slowly.

“Arada, I understand that your teammates—and your *friends*, more appropriately—have been through something traumatic, and that emotions for all parties are running high as a result. However, you need to *get ahold of yourself*. Galens is aware that Ward has trusted your discretion regarding certain elements of his Device, and we have trusted you with that information in turn, but apparently you need to be *told* that what is happening with Shido—and everything around it—is *not* something to be brought up in random company. Is that clear?”

This time Viv shrank under Dent’s reprimand more completely. She looked like she was having a hard time seeing the Captain’s eyes as she mumbled in answer.

“Yes, ma’am. Sorry, ma’am. I just thought that getting Central involved was—”

“Was nothing we had any choice over, Arada,” Takeshi finished for her sternly, stepping up to the end of Rei’s bed to take the place Captain Hinde had vacated. “And even if it was, there is no ‘you just’ in this moment. You slipped, and you’re lucky Captain Dent was able to smooth things over.” Takeshi looked sidelong at the Bishop,

though. “That being said, apparently there are things about this situation that even some of the staff are being kept out of the loop on, Captain?”

“Many of the staff, yes.” Dent answered curtly, turning her own eyes on Takeshi to fix here with a steady look. “And forgive me, Captain, but even though we’re the same rank I have to tell you that I’m cleared to order you to end any questions regarding that fact there, if you please.”

“Roger that,” Takeshi nodded immediately, bringing both hands up to show that she wasn’t looking to pry further. “Loud and clear.”

Rei, on the other hand, felt *very much* like prying.

“The MIND...” he wheezed out as he started to try and sit up again. “You said the MIND was here?”

Dent looked suddenly discomfited. “Yes. It’s always here to some extent. You know that.”

“No, I meant—”

“I know what you meant, Ward,” Dent interrupted as Aria hurried to find the bed controls somewhere above Rei’s head so she could bring the top up for him.

“And someone other than Central is looking into—?” he tried to continue, putting two-and-two together, but the Captain cut him off again.

“Ward. I’m sorry, I know it’s not fair, but you are no more likely to be read in on certain parts of what’s going on with your Device than the Lieutenant Colonel or Captain Takeshi. Much *less* likely, in some ways, in fact.”

“But it’s *my* Device!” Rei protested as the bed brought him up to sit so he could look at Dent more easily. “Shido is *mine*! How can I not be read in on what’s going on with it? Especially after—”

He froze, though, finding himself unable to voice the experience on the Dueling field. Aria and Dent both seemed to register his sudden apprehension, because the former squeezed his hand in hers as the latter’s expression softened.

“Like I said, I know it isn’t fair, but I need you to trust me on this.” The Bishop’s voice was gentle again, soothing. “I know it’s frustrating. I do. And if it makes you feel better the ISCM frankly doesn’t know much more about what’s going on than you do. But there are *some* things that we need to keep close to the chest, at least for now.”

Rei grit his teeth at that, but was pretty sure Dent wasn’t about to bend even if he pushed the matter. She’d given him no leeway, not space to maneuver in.

“Will I know at *some* point?” he decided was a safe question. “That’s fair to ask, right? That I be told at some —”

“Yes. I promise you that.”

The answer came so firmly it was almost alarming. Dent had taken a quick step forward, like she wanted him to understand how earnestly she meant that answer. Rei blinked in surprise, and even exchanged a look with Aria and Viv, both of whom seemed equally as taken aback.

“Fine, then,” he muttered after a second, turning back to Dent. “In that case, how about someone finally tell me *what the hell happened out there?*”

He might have imagined it, but he thought the Bishop looked a little relieved at the return to the more pressing topic. She almost sighed, in fact, leaving enough time for Takeshi to take the lead.

“I hate to ask, Ward, but... what do you remember?”

Rei shivered, and Aria brought her other hand up to rest on his shoulder in assurance that she was there with him. Viv, too, moved closer to stand right behind her, like she wanted him to know she was in his corner.

Rei didn’t think he’d every be able to put his appreciation of them in that moment into words.

“I... I remember the fight stopping,” he got out after a second’s hesitation. “Freezing. Like a penalty pause. We could still move our heads and talk. Then Aria and I were... *moved*, I guess is the word?” He swallowed nervously, recalling the feeling of

the Arena snapping him backwards to the center of the zone and holding him there. “I couldn’t do anything. I couldn’t even budge. It held me—*us*—like that, even after...” He trailed off, feeling his pulse quicken, feeling his breath start to come too fast again.

“Rei. It’s okay.”

He found himself, then, looking around at Aria. She’d pulled the hand on his chest carefully from his and cupped his cheek, turning his face up to look at her and Viv. Her eyes were still red, but they were deep and concerned, and he let himself fall into them, let himself forget anything but the broken emerald green there.

It helped to separate himself from the rest he had to say.

“The sparring partners dropped out of starting rings to the north and south.” He spoke almost automatically. It was the only way he could keep going even while looking at Aria. “Kind of like the Offense & Endurance test. The field was still frozen, but they could move. They had... weapons. Not immediately, but by the time they surrounded me. And then...”

But he couldn’t keep going. He couldn’t. Aria’s expression was pained before him, like she could feel every ounce of his hurt, her eyes growing wet. Beyond her Viv’s face had grown stoney, the color draining from her cheeks once more.

“Do you remember the attack, Ward?” Dent asked quietly from his other side. “You can just nod if that’s easier.”

Slowly, jerkingly, Rei nodded.

And then he remembered something else.

“And you...” he said, managing at last to look away from Aria in favor of turning to the Bishop again. “That was *you*, wasn’t it? At the end? Coming out of the sky?”

Dent took a long, slow breath, briefly—oh so briefly—looking as heartbroken and Aria and Viv did. “Frankly I’d hoped you’d passed out a long time before that, Cadet. Yeah. That was me.”

“It was what we think shut down the hack,” Takeshi continued for the Captain. “It’s a security protocol. If the zone limits get breached, an Arena will go through a hard reset.”

“Breached?” Viv asked, sounding surprised and turning to the woman. “You can do that?”

“Me?” Takeshi scoffed. “No way in hell. But Dent?” She nodded to the Bishop, who stayed silent. “It takes a *lot* of power to overload a zone wall. A *lot*. Unless you’re King- or Queen-Class, you definitely have to be doing it deliberately. And even then no Pawn or Bishop-Class that I know of could do it.”

“I *barely* managed it,” Dent cut in. “Gave it everything I had, too.”

“And the reset?” Aria asked.

“Security protocol,” Takeshi explained. “If you assume an S-Class fighter is trying to break a zone wall, you have to assume something’s gone wrong. Fights like that almost always have security forces and other S-Ranked Users around. Not many CADs can do much against gravity, and if an Arena shuts down abruptly that gives a second or so that the guilty party is in free fall *and* their vysetrium is highlighted in the dark.”

“More than enough time for high-ranked Users to take advantage,” Viv muttered, voicing understanding out loud for all of them as it clicked for Rei, too. It was a concept similar to why CAD ditches weren’t common in higher-level fights. Even a *moment* of vulnerability was enough to completely turn matches when it came to A- and S-Ranked fighters.

“And more than enough time for *you* to hit the ground,” Dent muttered bitterly, crossing her arms. “I tried to catch you before then, Ward, but I didn’t manage it. *And* your CAD’s phantom call was automatically recalled when you passed out. So...” She grimaced, and Rei winced at the thought. If he’d been set and ready for it, it would have been no issue, but rag dolling down at least 10 feet to slam onto solid steel...

Then again... Shouldn't his reactive shielding have absorbed most of a hit like that? Or all of it, even...?

"Is *that* why I hurt all over?" Rei asked. "I feel like I got thrown off the top of the Chevaron."

It was almost more alarming than anything else he'd seen or heard since waking up that Dent, Takeshi, and *both* girls *all* traded concerned glances at that.

"Rei..." Aria was the one to speak first. "I mean... I'm sure the fall didn't *help*, but..." She hesitated, looking to the others for help.

Dent took pity on her.

"Ward, you mentioned the Offense & Endurance test," she said slowly. "You know how those partners are labeled? With their equivalent rank?"

"Yeah..." Rei answered, frowning as he thought back. "I remember thinking of that, too. But I... I couldn't see..."

He trailed off, seeing where they were going with this. Aria squeezed his shoulder as he started to recall the nightmare again.

"You couldn't see because they were always facing you, yeah." Dent nodded in understanding. "Thing is, Ward... The MIND had the same thought about the parameter testing, and confirmed it. The hack used that program—a *Galens* program, mind you—as the basis of the attack."

"They were ranked, Cadet," Takeshi clarified as Rei started to go cold. "Not the highest level they can go, but high..."

Rei was scared to ask, but he got the words together regardless.

"... How high?"

Viv was the one who refused to leave him hanging even as Aria and the two older woman looked unsure of themselves.

"Rei... From the stands... all the ones we could see were S1..."

It almost helped, hearing that. It was horrifying, sure, but it was also something very much like liberating, a confirmation that what Rei had been through had been real, had been more than just what he'd known inside his head. He suddenly wanted to feel himself up and down, wanted to make sure he wasn't full of slashes and holes even though he logically knew there would be nothing. They'd by sparring partners, after all, holograms designed to *imitate* damage, not actually doll it out.

And *S1*...

When he'd trained with Lennon, the Lasher's hits had been terrible, and Rei would have been willing to bet the third year's Offense was somewhere under his A8 rank since he knew Lennon had other S-Ranked specs. Those hits had also been staggered, and one at a time. So to think about getting struck simultaneous for six different sides again and again and again...

It did help, actually. A lot. It made it all real, made it more than a nightmare, which was exactly what Rei needed. Reality he could beat. Reality he had faced down a thousand times even when it sucked and hurt and even when it had almost killed him...

It also explained a lot...

"I'm a mess, aren't I?" he asked of none of them in particular, bringing up one scarred arm to study it. Even that motion made the limb and most of the left side of his body ache. "Physically, I mean?"

"You're not as bad as it could be." Dent's voice was assuring. "The hole in your lung didn't reopen, and the medics were worried about brain damage for a while, but your head scan was clear. They think Shido was working overtime to help control your blood pressure. Other than that, though..." In the corner of Rei's vision she saw her expression grow dark. "Yeah... You're a mess, Cadet."

"They think it'll take a week or two for you to be back to full function," Takeshi picked up for the Bishop. "Your body kinda... It ripped itself apart, Ward. What you were going through... Just think of every muscle in your body spasming on all cylinders

all at once. With *zero* control of your Strength spec. Drone scan say that 86% of your muscle tissue is showing mild to moderate damage, with another 8% showing sever damage. It's about the same percent for tendon tears and strains."

"That's not counting microfractures and avulsions," Dent started again. "Places where your bones couldn't handle to strain, even after months of CAD adaptation. You went through hell, Ward. And I bet you've come out the other end feeling like it."

Rei could only grunt in affirmation, still looking at his own hand. Only when Aria sat down next to him to wrap her arm fully around his shoulders and pull him tight to her did he realized he was shaking.

Okay, knowing what had happened had helped, but obviously it wasn't going to insta-cure the trauma...

"So what now?" he asked after a moment, surfing the discomfort of bending his elbow to take hold of Aria's hand on his shoulder as he look between Dent and Takeshi. "What happens now?"

Takeshi gave him a questioning look. "Now? What do you mean?"

"I mean the tournament's not over, right? Or how long have I been out? Did the Team Battles already happen?"

Takeshi's mouth fell open, and even Dent stared at him openly. Around his shoulders, Rei felt Aria's arm tense.

"Rei..." she started quietly, letting the warning trail off.

"What?" he demanded, looking around at her and Viv fiercely. "I'm hurt, sure. But so what? Does that mean I can't fight?"

"Ward, you're not just *hurt*," Takeshi hissed like she couldn't believe her ears. "You're practically in *pieces*. Did you not hear anything we just said? And that's not even considering how this might effect your diagnosis!"

"My fibro's been in check basically since Shido was assigned to me," Rei countered, frowning around at the woman. "And again: so what if I'm hurt?" He looked to Dent.

“You say it all the time. How you’re not training us for the SCTs. You’re training us for *combat*. Are the soldiers on the front lines always 100%? Are they always at peak ability?”

Dent seemed to give him that, cocking her head at him. “No. I wouldn’t say so.”

“So how is this different?”

“It’s different because there’s a point at which even *soldiers* have to get pulled for medical reasons, Cadet. And if you’re under the impression any commander would deploy a User who with documented damage throughout *94%* of their musculoskeletal tissue, guess again. You think they patched me up and put me right back on the field after I had my little incident?” The Bishop indicated her face and left arm, sounding almost amused.

“I didn’t get a limb sheered off,” Rei contended.

“No, you just got assaulted by a half-dozen S-Ranked holograms and landed yourself in the hospital *again*. And this time in the worst condition you’ve *ever* been in. And no, don’t try to argue that.” Dent raised a hand to forestall further argument as Rei started to protest. “Doctor Ashton has been advising from Galens, and has already confirmed it. Plus, I know your file, Ward. I had it pretty much memorized before you were even brought up for consideration at Galens. You may have had worse acute individual surgeries and the like in the past, but we’re not talking about a medical procedure here. You have *systemic* damage. You’re *whole body* is half ripped to shreds. What kind of combat instructor would I be if I let you back on the field in that state?”

“One who listens to her students and trusts their judgement,” Rei insisted, realizing he was starting to get desperate, though he wasn’t sure why. “Captain, if I leave Firesong hanging, it will be *my* fault if they—”

“Ward, if you want to argue front line judgement, I would tell you that sometimes squads are a man down. It happens. Never for fun reasons, but it happens.”

“And Firesong *will* be allowed to fight as a five-man team,” Takeshi added. “It’s not common so we looked up the rule. Yes, that will obviously put them at a disadvantage, but the alternative option isn’t acceptable at this time.”

Rei looked from one to the other again, searching frantically for a chance, any sign that one or both of the woman would give. He hated it, hated feeling so hopelessly in need of... something...

What was it? What was it that he needed?

“Rei. Rei, look at me.”

Rei started, and turned to look at Viv. Despite the fact that they were right beside him, despite the fact that Aria still had her arm around him and his best friend was standing just behind her, he had momentarily forgotten the two girls were there. That wasn’t normal. That wasn’t okay. What was wrong? Something was wrong. He stared at Viv, unsure and eyes wide. She seemed to search him for a second or too, seemed to be looking for something.

She didn’t appear to find what she was looking for, but obviously realized *something* was going on.

“What is it?” she asked gently, leaning slightly over Aria to look at him more closely. “What’s going on?”

Still Rei just stared at her, not completely sure how to answer. What *was* going on? Why was he so desperate? Was it Firesong? That he didn’t want to leave them in a bind? Yes. Partly. But also...

And then Viv’s face settled, the concern and confusion falling away, her expression flattening into a sad sort of determination.

“Rei... Do you need to go back on the field...?” she asked softly.

And then it clicked. Before anyone else, before Dent or Aria or even *Rei*, Viv had figured him out. No. No, he *didn’t* want to go back on the field. Not now. Not ever again.

Which meant that he had to. Above all else, and no matter what it cost.

He *had* to.

“I need to...” he answered in a whisper, so low that Takeshi and Dent had to lean in behind him to listen. “Right now. Right *now*. I need to.”

Viv nodded, but next to him Aria looked suddenly frightened. “Or else... what?”

“Or else I don’t think I’m ever going to step onto a field ever again...”

It was true. Rei knew it as soon as he voiced it aloud. The nightmare had been dragged into the daylight by information and explanation, yes, but it still had its claws in him. The idea of stepping out onto the field, of stepping over the silver ring and waiting for the Arena to take hold of him again... Rei was nauseous just thinking about it. His stomach churned at the idea, and he felt himself break out into a cold sweat. The figures in grey appeared before him once again, appeared like shades to flicker in and out of being from Aria and Viv’s shadows across the curtain at their backs, bad memories super-imposed on the world.

He had to. He *had* to face it. Now.

Or he was never going to again.

It was Aria’s turn to study at him, to take him in with pained concern, not understanding. For a long few seconds they looked at each other, she confused and scared, he only the latter of those two emotions.

And then she, too, saw what was going on, and her face at once settled into grim lines in the same way Viv’s had.

Aria took a deep, steadying breath. She was *definitely* frightened, yes, but her gaze was understanding. Of course it was. She knew. *She* knew. Better than anyone else. She knew what it had been like, what had transpired. She hadn’t been attacked, hadn’t felt that pain, but she’d been forced to watch, forced to stand there, utterly helpless, utterly unable to move, and watch.

If anything, Rei thought he might not be the only one who needed to reclaim the field...

“Captain, has the Arena been cleared for combat?” Aria asked, at last looking away from Rei over to Dent.

“It has...” the Bishop answered slowly, sounding like she knew where Aria was headed. “The MIND patched the back door and has confirmed there are no other discrepancies in the security or SCT codes.”

“None at all?”

“Nothing,” Dent confirmed. “But that doesn’t change the fact that Captain Takeshi and I have already said we won’t allow Ward to fight, Laurent. I don’t know what kind of secret code the three of you are silently sharing over there, but—”

“I have a proposition, ma’am, if I may.”

Rei hadn’t looked away from Aria, but the pause at her words was enough to tell him both officers were surprised by this.

“And what might that be, Laurent?” Takeshi asked carefully, a note of warning in her voice.

“The last time Rei got hurt, Doctor Ashton said that he needed to move. That he needed to get on his feet. She said activity would help with the healing process.”

“As Captain Dent has said, the Lieutenant Major has been a part of the conversation. As has been Lieutenant Colonel Mayd, I might add. And I can assure based on our exchanges that they would *both* tell you getting Ward up and walking around is a *very* different concept than having him fight in a Team Battle right after—”

“Not the Team Battle, ma’am,” Aria interrupted Takeshi boldly. “Not yet. The subbasement fields.”

Rei’s heart leapt at the words even as his stomach sank. Yes. That was perfect. The warm-up fields. Even a Neutral Zone. Anything. And if he could show that he was strong enough to fight there then maybe, just maybe...

“Laurent, you are pushing your luck.” Takeshi sounded like she was finally starting to lose patience. “I understand you and Cadet Arada have faith in Ward, but if anything as his *squad leader* you should be looking out for him even more closely than we are.”

“I *am* looking out for him, ma’am,” Aria answered without an ounce of hesitation. “As his squad leader, I am informing you that he needs this. That he *very much* needs this. And—” she did pause, then, but only for a second “—I’m informing you that *I* need it to.”

Still Rei hadn’t turned around, half-mesmerized, half-stunned by his girlfriend’s gall as he was. Behind her, Viv was staring at the Captains with just as much fervor, arms crossed sternly across her chest as she nodded in agreement with Aria. He thought Dent and Takeshi might have caught on, then, too. When she spoke again, at least, Takeshi’s tone was more understanding.

“I don’t know if we can recommend that, Laurent... The Captain and I are not professionals in that space. We would do better to ask Doctor Ashton for a referral to one of the school psychologies, or—”

“Ma’am—” Aria was officially proving that neither Rei *nor* Viv had *ever* been the ballsiest of the Firesong squad “—with all due respect, this has to happen now. Right *now*.”

Rie looked around then, intending to finally get his tongue unstuck and affirm in his own words what Aria—with Viv as a silent, unbending ally behind her—was arguing for. It had to happen. He *needed* to get back out of the field. There was nothing in the world he wanted less in the moment, and that feeling was only growing more certain by the second as every ache and pain of his body reminded him of his last moments trapped on that Sunset Beach. He *needed* this. They *both* needed this.

He had just faced Dent and Takeshi—each of whom were looking like they were fighting with themselves—when a commotion that sounded to be going on just outside the room interrupted them.

“He’s in there, isn’t he?!”

“Cadets, you shouldn’t be down here. Please return to your section and wait for—”

“Like hell we’re doing that! Is he here? Rei? REI?!”

“What in the MIND?” Takeshi muttered, turning and vanishing around the edge of the privacy curtain towards the front of entrance. Rei, Aria, Viv, and Dent, meanwhile, looked on in confused silence as the door hissed open, all of them having recognized the voice.

“Cadet Catchwick!” Rei heard Takeshi snarl. “This is a *medical ward*! What do you think you’re—CATCHWICK!”

Catcher’s name was shouted, and clearly for good reason, because with the sound of hammering boots he came ripping into view, all but skidding to a halt. He looked tousled and winded, and had apparently bolted straight past the Kenneth officer *and* Takeshi despite all common sense to reach them.

“Catchwick!” It was Dent’s turn to snap. “What the *hell* are you doing?!” Before anyone could answer, though, Takeshi appeared behind Catcher, looking livid and leading Grant and Cashe right behind her. The sight of these two seemed to shake Dent’s alarm, because her next question was more even-keeled. “Cadets? What’s going on?”

Incredibly, Catcher didn’t answered her directly.

“Rei...” He, Grant, and Cashe were all looking equally pale. “Have you seen? Have you checked?! Everyone upstairs is talking about it! The whole stadium...!”

“Seen *what*?” Takeshi demanded. “Cadets, if someone does not explain *what in the MIND* the three of you think you’re doing barging in here like this, Captain Dent and I will make sure Major Barnes strings every single one of you up by your damn *ankles* when we get back to—”

“*Shido*,” Catcher hissed in answer, still not looking at either of the women as he gaped at Rei in nothing short of shock. “*Dude... Your rank...*”

That was when Rei saw it for the first time. He wasn’t sure how he’d missed it, but then again he’d been a little preoccupied. There, in the top corner of his frame, an alert was telling him he had a notification, and for a second all the apprehension and anxiety vanished, replaced with electric excitement. He froze, staring at the notice, and neither Aria nor Viv looked to miss the change in him.

“Oh...” Aria breathed in understanding as Viv’s eyes went wide.

Takeshi and Dent were both faster on the uptake, each of them with their NOEDs already live in their eyes, pulling up what Rei could only imagine was his ISCM profile.

For his part, he himself finally selected the alert, opening it.

He almost choked as he read.

There was so much. So *much*. Rei didn’t even know he was holding his breath, eyes bulging while he took in line after line after line. Two upgrades at *least* in every spec?? *Three* in Speed and Defense?? What was going on? What the *hell* was going on? He’d ranked up *twice*, careening right past C8 straight to C9, firmly establishing himself all at once as the top-ranked first year at Galens, even well above *Aria* now. And that wasn’t all. Shido had evolved. *Again*. And prioritized... *every* specification?! How was that even possible?? Rei felt his jaw go more slack with every word, felt his mouth go dry.

It wasn’t till he reached the very end of the upgrade notification, though, that his whole body went numb.

Then he *did* choke.

For a long time he stared, completely dumbfounded. It wasn’t possible. How was it possible?? He read the lines again. Then again. Then *again*. He could have done so a hundred times, he suspected, and still not believed what he was seeing. Catcher—and Viv, now—were shouting for him from somewhere, and even Aria was shaking him as

firmly as she dared in his condition, trying to get his attention. He couldn't give it to them. He was too stunned.

It took the Bishop's clear voice over all their collective noise to draw him up from his reverie.

"This is Dent."

Everyone stopped talking at once, and Rei managed to blink and look around with them to take in the Captain through the upgrade notification. Dent's eyes were still alight, but now with what all of the recognized at once was a video call, and clearly an important one given the woman's formal tone.

"Yes, Colonel," she said crisply, and Rei knew then that it could only be Rama Guest on the other side of the line. "Yes, I've just been informed of his ranking. I was just about to—"

She stopped, though, tensing suddenly. Rei had never seen the Bishop go so still, like a coiled steel spring. It was alarming, and the effect wasn't helped when her brown eyes flew to him through the frame, looking past the display right at him, her prosthetic jaw dropping suddenly. She looked as shocked as he felt, and Rei knew what she was being told. Of course she hadn't known. None of them had known. They'd probably been cooped up with him for however long he'd been out, as distracted by his condition as he'd been made unconscious by it.

Now, though... Now the word was spreading.

"Of course, sir," Dent answered in a strained voice, obviously working through her surprise. "Of course. I'll ask him. I agree. We need to know as soon as possible."

And then, with that, her frame went dim.

"Valera?" Takeshi asked tentatively, apparently so taken aback by everything that was going on that she forgot to be formal. "What's going on?"

Dent, though, seemed unable to look away from Rei. There something in her eye, too, he could see. Now that her NOED wasn't lit up, there was something in the way

she was taking him in. She was as surprised as he was, sure—more so, even, probably—but there was more there, too. Excitement. Anticipation. And...

Valera Dent looked proud.

“Ward... Is it true?” she asked, clearly struggling to keep her voice even.

It took a second for Rei to nod, not even feeling the discomfort in his neck and back at the motion.

“All of it?”

He nodded again.

At that, Aria seemed to have had enough.

“Is *what* true?!” she demanded, clearly at a loss as she looked around at them all.

“Someone tell me *what’s going on!*”

“C9.”

It was Grant he got it out, sounding completely at a loss, like the knowledge of it had blown a fuse in his head.

Aria went still. Viv, though, blinked.

“I’m sorry... What?”

“He’s C9, Arada,” Cashe breathed this time, staring at Rei just like everyone else.

“It’s getting shouted up top. Someone apparently got bored and started checking stats, and it’s spreading like wildfire...”

“C9...” Aria had found her voice again, whispering and turning back to look at Rei, stunned. “... Really?”

Again, though, Rei could only nod.

“That’s not the half of it,” Dent said, bringing their collective attention back around to her. She, though, still only had eyes for Rei. “Ward... Are you willing to show them? *All* of them?” She didn’t look towards Grant and Cashe, but he knew who she was referring to.

This time, Rei fought to find his voice.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said weakly. He was still numb, but somewhere down in his chest a spark lit. Would he have the chance, then? Would she let him?

“And you’re sure you’re up for it? On a practice field, I mean...”

Aria gave a little gasp, though whether because she understood what was happening or because he was being allowed to step back out onto the floor, Rei didn’t know.

“Yes, ma’am,” he confirmed again, a little more firmly this time.

“Valera...?” Takeshi tried again, sounding at once worried and totally at a loss.

Still, though, Dent never so much as glanced away from Rei.

“Sorry, Captain, but you and I have been overruled.” She smirked at him. “You win, Ward. Your squad can help you get down the subbasement if you need the assist. Time to show us what you’ve got...”

CHAPTER 41

The trek down to the subbasement was agony. At least in large part. For one thing every step sent a jolt of pain through Rei’s legs and body, and even with Viv helping to support him on one side with Catcher on the other, Rei only made it by squeezing his eyes shut and willing himself to tolerate every movement. It was fortunate that the underworks and elevators had apparently been cleared when the MIND had done its sweep of the Arena, because he didn’t know if he would have had much tolerance for the extra stares and whispers he would have been bound to get in his current condition. Then again he probably wouldn’t have cared. Everything hurt just too damn much. That thought was challenged in turn, however, when *Reese* met them in the north lobby, looking grim while he took Rei as they approached.

“Subbasement 3?” was all he’d asked, looking to Dent once they were close enough and reaching and hand up to summon them a car. As though Rei’s situation couldn’t have gotten any worse.

There was, though, one silver lining to the journey. One *massive* silver lining.

“Oh...” Aria had breathed in surprise from Rei’s left after all nine of them had squeezed into a elevator together. He’d managed to open his eyes and look around at her curiously, as did the rest of Firesong, both Captains, and the Major. She was flushed, and at first Rei worried his added weight was taking a toll on her, but her quickly corrected himself. First of all, Aria was a Phalanx. She probably could have thrown him over her shoulder and jogged 10 miles before getting winded.

Second, though, her face had been bright, alight with excitement that seemed to momentarily wash away the linger worry and fear that had still been clinging to her.

“C8...” she said quietly, sounding just short of giddy. “And an evolution.”
And just like that the anticipation was back for Rei, twice over now.