

## CHAPTER 2

They did not, as Rei had anticipated they were going to, make an accelerated trip to the Institute Hospital after Dent ordered he and Aria both into the flyer, joining them before shutting the door behind her to cut 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 stone 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 lined up in rows on either side of them no less than 400 or so floors in height. As they did, the world became bright in a way only the nightlife of a planet's most-thriving metropolis could manage.

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

"Cadet Arada was found unresponsive in West Center about twenty minutes ago," she answered in a subdued tone. "She's alive—" she brought up a hand quickly as Rei and Aria both opened their mouths in alarm "—but the 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. She's been rushed to a specialized unit at Altmore Medical Center in the city, one specifically 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 three weeks 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 been judged at least 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, but she sounded hesitant, looking out the window to her left at the passing skyscrapers. “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 Altmore.”

There was a moment of quiet 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 taken in the afterglow of Castalon’s neon lights for a few seconds, 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 traded a glance with Aria, but she could only offer a nervous pinching of her brow, 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 out of—and often even those *in*—the know about it, but just the same he had to be careful, in *particular* when it came to new developments.

But 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 his Device's extraordinary nature.

"Shido, ma'am," he answered at last, looking back to the Bishop. "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, no..." 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 captain 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 present 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 than that, layered behind those clearer feelings like Dent didn't want anyone to see them, Rei—not for the first time—thought 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 continue he stopped, considering this answer. Again he glanced at Aria, but unfortunately his 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 flyer slowed, then started to descend. A quick look outside had them all taking note of the solid wash of green light that lined the massive building whose upper floors they seemed to be dropping vertically along, and Rei realized they must have been arriving.

“Ward, you *are* going to explain what you mean by that later,” Dent told him quickly, making it very clear she wasn’t making a request. “No dancing. No beating around the bush. This is important. Possibly even a thousand time 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—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 likely 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, Rei couldn’t let himself forget 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.

The flyer soon slowed further, then came to a brief, hovering halt before setting down gently onto a massive protruding platform some 300 stories up the tower that had to have been the Altmore Medical Center. 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 senses 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 jogged 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 when they caught sight of them. Most seemed to notice the Bishop first, as was to be expected, but Rei had to ignore those attentions that fell on him 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 so, given the circumstance—put off by the Bishop's presence. That was probably doubly so when a short man in green scrubs caught sight of the three of them from where he hugging himself for warmth by the doors, lifting a hand when he did to wave them down. As they hurried his way, the word 'ALTMORE' became clear over his right breast pocket under, 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 by the time they reached him.

“Captain,” he said in gruff greeting, clearly recognizing Dent on sight and turning once they were at the doors to immediately start leading the way 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 on the way. We're already dealing with your cadet."

"Any news?" Dent asked briefly.

The nurse—Alberty—made a noncommittal shrug even as they ducked through the mill of patients and other stuff to hurry 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 the 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 all-*too*-extensive experience—was a winding maze of halls, tunnels, stairs, and the like. Alberty 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 a 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 the doors opened with a hiss of decompressing air. They swung outward quickly—an

impressive feat given each of them wasn't less than 3 feet thick and looked to be made of solid steel—and once the gap was wide enough for them to fit, Alberty led the way inside quickly.

The User Treatment Unit—or the 'UTU', apparently—was at once underwhelming and utterly impressive. It was tiny—some five or six rooms in a circle around a single nurse's station—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 as far as Rei could tell, either, with the only illumination coming from the white strip of solar lights that ringed the hall ceiling, splitting a line off 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 amount of tech that line the floors, walls, and ceiling of each of the spaces, making the UTU 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 such metrics—and one of the rooms housed a massive arching machine with a thousand different mechanical arms that could only have been some kind 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 to the walls for easy access and use to form 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 been proving himself as avid an SCT enthusiast as either of them—could have fawned over every square inch of the place the marvels it contained.

Instead, Rei had eyes only for the brightly lit room on the other side of the nurse's station—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 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 shirt with a sweater pulled hastily over it, and rather even than 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 shoes.

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

"This is where I leave you," Alerty said by way of farewell when they were halfway around 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 door for a second biometric lock, then slipped inside. His appearance must have alerted 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, having even forgotten to salute themselves.

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 combat suit, because her modesty was only currently being shielded by a white sheet that barely covered her lithe 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 others 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 steady beeping of a heart monitor and the low thrum of the small anti-grav engine that had to be in the floor.

And that wasn’t even the worst of it.

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... Her head...”

He frowned and 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, Rei 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 a sleek, sterile-white module that capped the girl's skull like the upper part of a helmet to 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 once before, he recognized it immediately. A DTRU. A "deep-tissue reparative unit". A device that specialized in helping localized healing of truly traumatic organ damage.

And there was only one part of the body this particular DTRU could have been designed for.

"Oh no..." Rei heard himself choke out.

In the early phases of CAD-tech development, he was aware that brain damage had been a pervasive issue. First in the test subjects in the initial phases, with things improving quickly until only older Users—who had called on their Devices thousands on thousands of times over decades of entertainment and services—were still at risk of developing cognitive complications. The fact was that CADs were hardware that interacted directly with organic tissue, something so taxing on the nervous system that NOEDs were the only other remotely similar technology commonly integrated into the human body even after 500 years of access to quantum computers. Only the improvement of neuroline growth and a multitude of other small changes to Devices had eradicated the problem for Users entirely, and that had taken a 100 years.

But in extreme circumstances...

"You *idiot*, Viv..." Rei muttered to himself, so quietly he was pretty sure not even Aria beside him had heard.

He thought he knew, now, what had happened. Thought he had some sense of the situation, seeing the DTRU and thinking of Shido's notification again. It was possible to overtax a CAD's sensory input, of course. Rei had managed it himself on more than one occasion, the first of which had been in the Commencement fight at the

start of the previous semester against Aria herself. He'd woken up on a stretcher in the underworks, in fact, having passed out from overstimulation after refusing to go down even after Aria—then only a new classmate—had run him through belly to spine with Hippolyta. It wasn't *smart*, but it happened, and passing out was the body's warning—just like falling unconscious if one held their breath too long—that what had just happened was stupid, and should not be repeated. To be fair, Rei himself had ignored such biological warnings before, and not infrequently.

But Viv seemed to have taken it to an entirely new level...

"She cooked her neuroline," he croaked out. He looked around passed Dent at the Colonel. "Didn't she? She pushed herself until she basically fried her wiring."

Guest cheek twitched, and Rei realized for the first time that there was something more than concern there, in the mans face.

There was anger, too.

"That is the working theory, yes," the man growled, at last pulling his hands around from behind his back to cross his arms over his chest. "We're not sure how, yet, but the activity logs in the training chamber she was found in indicate as much as well."

Between Rei and the Colonel, Dent tensed at that.

"Meaning what, sir?" she asked slowly.

"Meaning that somehow, some *way*, Cadet Arada got access to S-Ranked training simulations, and was *foolish enough* to try her luck against them. *Repeatedly.*"

"Oh, *Viv...*" Aria breathed in disbelief on Rei's other side, bringing a hand up to touch her fingers to the glass, like she wanted to reach out to the girl floating in the middle of the chaos of the room on the other side of the glass.

Rei, on the other hand, could only stare, cold drenching every inch of his body.

*Bad*, he thought again for the hundredth time. *Very bad.*

It was just as he'd suspected, and he wanted to kick himself for not seeing the signs. Viv, who he'd already been clued in on was feeling like she was being left behind.

Viv, who'd been looking more and more tired over the course of the last week, like she hadn't been getting enough sleep. He hadn't put the pieces together at the time, but they'd been there, right there. *How* his best friend had gotten access to S-Ranked simulations—a training level Rei doubted any Galens student other than the very top levels of the third years had permissions to use—the MIND only knew. He didn't have the capacity to worry about it, in the moment. More important to Rei in the immediate future was that Viv would make it through this, would make it through and wake up so that he could kill her himself for being such a dumbass.

And ask her if she actually thought he would ever leave her—her, arguably the sole reason he'd gotten to step foot into the Galens grounds—behind...

Rei couldn't help himself, then. Even conscious of Dent and Guest at his left, he reached out to take Aria by her free hand, wondering if the shaking he felt as he did so was his, hers, or coming from them both.

He wasn't sure how long the four of them stood outside the room like that. Maybe 20 minutes, maybe twice that. At once point one of the nurses—maybe Alberty, Rei wasn't sure—came over to let them know they were temporarily make the wall opaque, but even after their view was blocked none of them spoke. Even when the glass became clear again—revealing that Viv had been changed into more-considerate grey and white hospital gown that still accommodates all the wires and IV's attached to her—they still didn't say a word. For a while after that still the bustle continued in the room, if a bit more subdued, until at long last a woman in a white coat—who looked to have been giving most of the commands in the room—stepped away from Viv and seemed to make the call for the others to do the same. For nearly half a minute the six members of the care team stood in silence like that, ever eye on a different monitor somewhere in the room. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the doctor spoke again from behind her mask, and the team all seemed to relax at once, then started to make for the

room door, only leaving one nurse behind with his NOED alive in his eyes, clearly staying to supervise.

“Are the done?” Aria asked immediately, the first of the four of them to speak. “Is she okay?? What’s happening??”

Neither Dent nor Guest answered her, and Rei could only squeeze her hand in a reassuring sort of way as the door in the wall to the right released and slid open again, momentarily tightening the sounds of the monitors and anti-grave engine. The care team had a brief discussion in the hall, then four of them split away in a hurry without so much as glancing towards Rei and the others, which might have been odd if the fifth hadn’t promptly turned to them and spoke in a familiar, wheezing voice.

“Thank you all for coming so promptly. I am pleased to report that Cadet Arada is out of immediate danger.”

Lieutenant Colonel Willem Mayd, Galen’s Chief Medical Officer, was removing his mask even as he approached them. An elderly figure with a white beard and rare spectacles, the man’s face was pale despite his words, cutting short the rush of relief Rei had started to feel.

“That is not to say she is not still at risk,” the Lieutenant Colonel continued with a gentle look at Aria, who had started to perk up. “The cadet condition is severe, and she will need to remain in observation here until she wakes up, at which point we will be able assess what, if any, damage may have occurred to her system?”

“Damage, sir...?” Dent asked from behind Rei, still sounding more subdued than he thought he’d ever heard the woman speak. “What sort of damage...?”

Mayd seemed only able to shake his head, though. “I can only speculate, unfortunately.” He looked around at Viv through the glass, whose pulse the supervising nurse seemed to be double-checking manually. “The largest concern we have by far is that Arada is currently suffering from moderate cerebral edema. Brain swelling. It’s to be expected in cases like this—a significant overdraw of Cognition, particularly when

combined with excessive input of a Device's sensory systems—but it is still of concern. It's why she was brought here.” The man lifted a hand to indicate the UTU. “Galen's lacks the tools required to optimize one's prognosis in such situations. The fact that we managed to get the cadet here so quickly is a good sign—a *very* good sign—but she is certainly not out of the woods just yet.”

There was a pause at this, all of them taking in the Lieutenant Colonel's explanation, but it was kept short when the Bishop spoke again.

“You didn't answer the question, sir,” she said quietly. “What sort of damage are we talking...?”

Mayd looked momentarily pained, then let out a sigh, like he'd been hoping Dent wouldn't push the issue.

It was clear why as he answered.

“*If* Cadet Arada suffers any lasting damage—and I do mean *if*—her complications could range from minor memory issues to severe physical or cognitive disabilities. Or both.” He grimaced slightly. “It is apparent from the logs and the information we've gathered from the medical drone she had on hand during her training that the cadet put herself through something... terrible. The outcomes of which could be very, *very* dire...”

Another quiet, longer this time.

And then Aria asked the question Rei didn't think he could have brought himself to.

“Sir... Could she... Could Viv... die?”

Willem Mayd's eyes were as steady and calming as Rei had ever see them as he took the girl in carefully.

“Such an outcome is very doubtful, Laurent, and certainly not worth dwelling on unless we have any indication that Cadet Arada is slipping in that direction.

'Yes', Rei translated for himself, squeezing Aria's hand again as it spasmed in his own grasp, she clearly understanding the answer for what it actually was. *The kindest way to say 'yes'...*

"Lieutenant Colonel, you say you've gathered information from the drone as well?" Colonel Guest's usual strength seemed to be returning to his voice. "Madison hasn't had the opportunity to pull those logs yet for me yet. Any idea *how* this happened?"

Mayd shook his head again. "I'm afraid not. I *did* pull the information myself on the way over here, but..." He looked back towards Viv. "It's odd. Cadet Arada should *not* have had the ability to access *A*-Ranked combat simulations. Much less *S*. She would have had to get special permission for that, and even then supervision should have been provided. And yet..."

"And yet?" Guest's press was angry, distant thunder, and Rei and Aria both looked over their shoulder's to find the Colonel too, watching Viv intently, the barest hint of orange light hinted in the dim reflection of his face in the glass.

"And yet there's no record..." Mayd finished, sounding grim. "Nothing. No record of access granting other than metadata indicating it *was* done. No permission signed, or even sent for signature. It's actually the reason I wanted to see these two." His eyes were still kind as they shifted to Rei and Aria. "I was hoping for... information."

He left the request open ended, not making a question or demand out of it, nor pressing them. Just the same, Rei felt the sudden urge to shout, to tell them all everything, *anything* he could think of that might help the situation, dangerous as it might be put out in the open.

Aria beat him to it.

"Cadet Arada has likely been overextending herself all week, sir," she answered in half a whisper, half a rush. "We... We didn't realize it. Not until tonight."

“Overextending herself how, Cadet?” Mayd pushed gently.

“It’s possibly she hasn’t been sleeping. At least not a lot. Instead, she’s probably been staying up training.”

“Yes. She has. That much we are already aware of just from the activity logs. The fact that she also seems to have been granted permission to ignore curfew is another mystery, for the moment. Another allowance apparently given without any staff being directly linked *to* that allowance. Could you, perhaps, enlighten us as to *why* Cadet Arada chose to put herself through this, though?” Mayd lifted a hand to wave through the glass. “Even a suspicion?”

“We think she’s afraid of being left behind...”

The words slipped out before Rei could so much as consider them. They refused to be held back, refused to be suppressed. They’d fallen from his mouth like his guild needed desperately to escape along with them.

“We think she’s pushed herself to ‘catch up’, whatever that means,” he answered quietly, finding himself having a hard time meeting the Lieutenant Colonel’s eyes as they fell on him, now. “After Catcher and Chancery at Sectionals... then Aria... We think think Viv’s afraid of being left behind.”

“Is that so...?” Mayd looked to be considering this. “I suppose one can follow the logic...”

“Can they?” Guest barked, though Rei couldn’t help but doubt his anger was being directed at Viv in the moment. “Viviana Arada is the most promising duelist the Institute as seen in a generation. What would possess her to feel like she could be left behind?”

“A multitude of factors, Colonel, the least of which being the extraordinary circumstances of the situation that child in there has found herself embroiled in, I suspect.” Mayd hadn’t looked away from Rei even as he answered. “If anything, one



can sympathize, I believe. An odd thing though, Cadet Ward... Laurent mention you'd developed some of these suspicions *tonight*? Is that correct?"

Rei swallowed, seeing the question coming.

He decided to head it off.

"Yes, sir," he answered, finally finding it himself to let go of Aria's hand. "I—*we*—put it together after... after Shido notified me it had linked with Gemela..."

There was a silence at this. Whatever Mayd had expected to hear in answer to his query, it clearly hadn't been that, because the old man was staring at Rei with genuine surprise for once, eyes going a little wide behind his glasses. Behind them, too, the Colonel had gone quiet, while Dent—who seemed for some reason only to have grown more and more subdued throughout their discussion—didn't say a word.

It was Mayd who found his tongue first.

"Cadet Ward..." he started slowly, like he wasn't sure he'd heard properly. "Explain what you mean by that, if you pl—"

But then the Lieutenant Colonel paused, blinking straightening up in surprise as his NOED seemed to light up of its own accord. Behind them, Rei though he felt Guest and Dent shift too, and he and Aria both looked around to find their frames alight as well, both expressions puzzled as they read whatever notice had just flared across their vision.

And then Dent seemed to go stiff.

"Here?" she hissed like she couldn't believe what she was reading. "She's *here*?"

"Apparently," the colonel answered in a growl. "How convenient..." Then, for some reason, his eyes fell on Rei, taking him in like he was considering something.

It only took him a minute to make his decision, and the order came before Rei or Aria could ask what was going on.

"Captain Dent. Get them out of sight."

*WHOOM!*

With a blast of air and shout of shock from both of the, Rei and Aria found themselves each taken up by one arm in an iron grip and wrench painful along at a terrifying speed. In a blink, though, Dent had them in front of a nearby room, the door already open as the space wasn't being occupied.

"In here, both of you," the captain said quickly, half guiding, half pushing the pair of them inside, hand already moving to the inside wall by the door. "Do not move, do *not* make a sound. She probably doesn't know you're here."

"She?!" Rei demanded even as he and Aria both stumbled back to catch themselves against the momentum of the Bishop's strength. "Who is 'she?!'"

"Ward," Dent snapped even as she blurred through the display controls that and popped up at her touch, turning the transparent wall opaque. "That was not a request, that was an *order*. Do *not* move. Do *not* make a sound. We'll explain after."

And then she was gone again, leaving the door—perhaps deliberately?—open behind her.

For a second Rei and Aria just stood there, staring out into the clear hall the empty nurse's station that was all they could see from where they stood. Rei *wanted* to march right back outside and demand to know what was going on, but something kept him from doing so, something held him back...

Had that been... fear in the Bishop's voice?

"Rei... come on..."

Aria's quiet voice—couple with her pulling on his sleeve—had him stepping back away from the open door. They were in one of the less-busy rooms—the one with a large, multi-armed surgical device that hung over an empty anti-grav tank—so it was a simple act of moving away from the door along the wall to get completely out of sight. It wasn't a second to soon, either, because before they'd made the corner Aria seemed to be aiming for there was a *clunk* and the sound of releasing air.

The UTU doors were opening, Rei realized with a thrill he couldn't explain.

*Click-click-click.*

The sounds was familiar. Heavy heels across a hard floor. Leather boots, confident in their stride. It shouldn't have stood out, and even if it had it should probably have comforting.

And yet, for some reason, it made the hair on Rei's arms stand on end...

*Click-click-click...*

And then the sound of the boots stopped.

"Colonel Guest," a woman's voice, husky and unknown to Rei, greeted Guest politely. "It's been too long. How nice to see you."

"And you, ma'am," Guest's answer was smooth, but guarded. "Though I have to apologize for our presentation. I don't think we were aware you were in-system, much less planetside. Had we been informed you were coming, we would certain have—"

"It doesn't matter," the woman cut him off easily, her tone even but firm, like there was nothing else to discuss on the matter. "I had been hoping to catch General Laurent before he took his leave of the city. I was already in Castalon when I got the news."

There was a moment of silence at that.

"News?" Despite having been snubbed of greeting, Lieutenant Colonel Mayd's voice was polite as could be. "And what news might that be, General Abel?"

Rei's mouth went dry, his whole body stiffening. In front of him, Aria, too, tensed, and she whirled in silence to stair at him with wide eyes, like she wanted to yell out the connection she, too, had just made.

"Of course, you wouldn't have been informed yet," the woman who could only be Shira Abel, general at Central Command and one of the signers of the very transfer orders that had oh-so-recently turned Rei's world upside down, answered smoothly. As she continued, there was a dull sound like a finger tapping on glass. "As it happens, you

may be pleased to know that Cadet Arada in there just became the second first year student at Galens to get assigned a User-Unique Ability...”