

## CHAPTER 5

Dent only gave the transparent wall a glance when the colonel had her retrieve Rei and Aria from the room, raising an eyebrow at them both but not saying a word when she beckoned them out from the doorway. The pair of them barely noticed, dumbstruck as they were even a minute's wait after Abel's exit.

"And now you've had the pleasure of 'meeting' General Shira Abel," the colonel spoke with something like a sigh as they were led back to wall of Viv's room. "Given our discussion this past evening, I'm going to assume you two recognize the name?"

Rei and Aria could only offer unsteady nods of confirmation.

"I would have introduced you, but that may have led to some... unnecessary complications." Guest snorted dryly. "I'm sorry I had Dent dragged you away like that, but I don't think Abel finding the pair of you here would have led to anything good. At least not right now."

Rei found his tongue at last, at that.

"Is she...?" he started uncertainly, still struggling with the layers of complications the encounter had just added to the situation. "Is the general... someone to look out for, sir?"

Rei might have imagined it, distracted as he was, but he thought he caught the three officers all trade a glance at this question as Dent came stand at Guest's right.

"General Abel is... a complicated subject, Cadet." The colonel offered after a second, somewhat carefully. "Toeing the line, I think I can only go as far as to recommend that you and Cadet Laurent avoid crossing paths with her, whenever possible. Not that you should ever have had the occurrence." He frowned around at the doors Abel had left through. "Trying to catch General Laurent, she said? Whether or not that's true, it's a hell of a coincidence."

"You don't think she...?" Aria started from Rei's side, eyes wide as she looked from her uncle to Viv still floating in her tank on the other side of the wall, watched now by a much-relieved-looking nurse.

"What? Oh. No, no." Guest shook his head, then paused before continuing in a grumble as he faced his niece. "She seemed genuinely surprised at the situation. Though not displeased..."

“Sir, she was practically dancing under those black and golds,” Dent all-but-snarled, and Rei again couldn’t help but take note of the anger that Abel seemed to have brought out in the Bishop.

“What a miserable soul,” Mayd mumbled as though in agreement. As the colonel had, he too was watching the UTU doors. “One must feel for her, I think.”

“Must one?” Dent asked with venomous sarcasm.

“Careful, Captain,” Guest warned, turning his attention on her briefly with a frown. “She is still your superior. And to be fair to her, her responsibilities *do* eclipse those of any of us standing here.”

Dent offered no answer to that, like silence was the best response she had to give. After a second the colonel seemed to decide this was acceptable, because his attention drifted back to Viv and her nurse through the smar glass “... A *User-Unique* Ability? Unbelievable...”

It made Rei feel a little better about his own shock that *Rama Guest* could still be so shaken by the news. At the very least, it helped him find his tongue again.

“Sir... Aria and I were saying, while the general was here... About Viv’s Ability... We think that confirms something we’ve been wondering about for a while now...”

The tension returned twice over at his words, though of a different sort that had lingered after Abel’s parting. The three officers—Dent having moved around to stand at Guest’s side so she could face them now—all took in Rei and Aria with an intensity so sharp it was like they were all trying to see through them.

“Yes, you were saying, Cadet,” Mayd pressed gently from their left. “Shido has... ‘linked’ with Gemela, did you say?”

“Yes, sir...” Rei answered uncertainly. “I got the notification about ten minutes before Captain Dent picked us up.”

“Notification?” Mayd repeated, brow furrowing. “Might we request to see that, if you please, Cadet?”

This time, Rei didn’t hesitate, bringing up the very screenshot he had taken for Dent and Aria on their flight from Galens. The captain, sure enough, didn’t do more than frown slightly when he resent it to a channel Guest opened for all five of them standing there, but the colonel and lieutenant colonel respectively both had eyes the

size of their fists by the time they'd finished reading—and then *rereading*—the notice.

“By the MIND...” Mayd was the first to get out. “I certainly had my own suspicions but... By the *MIND*...”

“Ward, do you know what any of this means?” Guest asked of Rei, though the man was still staring wide-eyed at the picture in his frame. “*Other* than the obvious.”

“Other than the link with Gemela, sir?”

“That, and the fact that your Device is likely in the process of forming the same with other CADs in your vicinity?”

Rei swallowed at that, at once made only more anxious *and* relieved by the fact that Guest had clear come to the same conclusion he had in what little opportunity there had been to consider it.

“I would agree with that,” Mayd added. He too was still reviewing the notification when Rei turned to look at him. “Cadet Arada has been nearest to you and your Device the longest, Ward, but my understanding of the situation is that the both of you have been close to Layton Catchwich for some time now. And Cadet Laurent here similarly so.” He gestured towards Aria without looking away from his frame. “If we assume this ‘Shard 1’ link that has formed with Gemela means it is taking up some portion of whatever that ‘max link capacity’ is, the possibility that it would be taking up the *entirety* of this percentage value is... remote.”

It was, Rei agreed silently, nodding along. It didn't seem correct that Gemela's link would be filling all 62% of the max capacity, whatever that meant. Not when Rei had *also* been training with Catcher for the better part of half a year, and Aria again for most of *that*. More likely was that Gemela was taking up some fraction—big or small—of the capacity, while the rest was filled by links that were already in process...

That wasn't all the evidence they had, though, was it?

“It... may go deeper than that, sir...” Rei said slowly.

Guest blinked at that, finally looking through the notification. “Oh?” he asked slowly.

Not exactly sure how to explain it, Rei took a second.

Enough time to let Aria get bluntly to the point.

“Chancery, sir,” she said quietly. “Cadet Cashe.”

Guest, Dent, and Mayd all frowned at that, then nodded together.

“Cashe,” Guest repeated. “And her Warband...”

At that, at last, he closed out of his NOED and turned his attention in full back on Rei and Aria.

“Tell us everything you know, Cadets,” he ordered steadily. “*Everything.*”

\*\*\*\*\*

It didn't take long for Ward to fill them in on the suspicions he and Laurent had been harboring. In quick order—and with frequent help from Laurent herself—he told the three of the curiosity that had started mounting after Chancery Cashe had developed Warband so oddly close to Layton Catchwick's earning the Saber's own rare Ability, Ruinous. At the time they *had* apparently told themselves the possibility of it being a coincidence was certainly possible—Cashe and Catchwick both had innate skill *and* had been putting in an incredible number of extra training hours even outside of class, after all—but after Laurent's own incredible evolution when she'd hit C8 not a few days later, they had grown more certain. No solid evidence, however, had ever made itself known.

At least not until that evening.

Valera had almost found it in herself to smile a few times, listening to the pair, listening to how they had pieced things together for themselves. They were echoing suspicions she happened to know for a fact a tight circle of the Galen's higher ups—present company included—had been whispering about for a week now. They weren't the only ones, either, given Central clearly had their eye on the situation.

Central and... others...

Yeah... Valera didn't have it in her heart to smile, in the moment. Not when it was taking every ounce of her self control not to let leak out the torrent of other emotions that was already collecting like a building flood in her chest.

As a group they reviewed the alert Ward's CAD had given him, trying collectively to glean any information that might have been missed in the first dozen passes they'd all made, anything that might provide a better clearer picture as to what was going on. After an extra half-hour theorizing themselves in rapid circles,

however, they had gotten no further in their assessment of the situation, with the only conclusions being the ones they'd already come to. Yes, it couldn't be denied, now, that Shido was indeed interacting with the CADs it had contact with—or at least had the *most* contact with. What was more, however, that connection was manifesting in some psuedo-tangible way in the form this 'Shard 1' that had developed with Gemela.

And, to highlight and evening of impossibilities with an accent of oddness, they all agreed that General Abel lack of mention of this fact meant that—for whatever reason—Central Command was unaware of the specifics of that development, even despite knowing of Arada's evolution and Ability before anyone else.

That fact above all else, Valera suspected, was the reason Rama Guest—after ensuring the pair of them hadn't told anyone else the particulars of Shido's alert—made the call to order Ward and Laurent to secrecy regarding 'Shard 1' and all information relevant to it. The cadets had started to protest, of course, but Guest had been unmoving in his command.

“There is more going on here than any of us are aware of, Cadets,” he had said evenly. “You have to see that. Until we have more information on the situation—and understand why only *Ward* was the one to be notified about these developments—we have to play it close to the chest. Yes, Ward—” he'd cut the boy off when he opened his mouth to respond “—even from the other members of your squad. I know you understand this already. The gag order when you developed Type Shift was necessary too, if for different reasons, and you followed that. I expect you to do the same here.”

There hadn't been further arguements on the subject from there—though the two's grumbled acknowledgements of 'Yes, sir...' had been anything but enthusiastic—and Guest had dismissed them all after that, saying he would stay till morning to see if there was any overnight news. This had expectantly triggered an entire new wave of protests from Ward and Laurent—the former in particular all-but-demanding to be allowed to stay in case Arada woke up—and it had been Mayd this time to calm them down, telling them it was unlikely the girl would come to in the next few days, much less that very night. It took the chief medical officer granting special permisison for Ward and Laurent—as well as any other member of Firesong who wanted it—to visit Arada on their off time before the two allowed themselves to be begrudginly led by Valera from the UTU again, leaving Mayd and the colonel as they did.

The higher officers quite conversation as the unit doors swung shut was in sharp contrast to the utter silence the Valera and the cadets walked in as they followed a

hundred different “Exit” signs through the maze of hospital corridors and back out into the night.

The trip back to Galens was just as quiet, with Ward and Arada seemingly working on processing the evening events with difficulty. Again the pair of them held hands as the city lights whipped by past the windows of the flyer Valera had summoned for them, and again she chose not to reprimand them for the public display. For one thing, she thought it reasonable that the pair sought comfort in whatever way they could manage it, given the circumstances.

For another, she was far too lost in her own head to care.

She dropped the cadets off where she’d retrieved them from, in front the of the first year dormitory in the north east corner of the Institute campus. She’d though one or both of them would have some final question to pose to her as they parted ways, perhaps, but instead Ward and Laurent both only offered her tired salutes as they all stepped out of the flyer together, looking utterly exhausted as they turned away to trod in a defeated sort of way the last few yard to Kane’s front doors. Valera watched them go, feeling the ache of fatigue behind her own eyes as the cadets vanished into the building. She ignored it, though, just as she ignored the temptation to clamber right back into the flyer and have it take her straight to the staff housing block where her bed was waiting.

She needed a clear head, and winter air would do her good for that.

She dismissed the flyer with a few quick eye commands, then watched as the vehicle ripped away skyward again to disappear into the shifting lines of Castellon’s nighttime traffic high, high above her. Even then she stood for a moment, though, fighting with herself and mounting pressure that had been building all night in her gut.

She lost the battle about a minute after the final faint echoes of the flyer faded off the distant walls of the Institute.

Valera barely made it to the edge of the path in time, as her stomach heaved. Even with her Speed engaged she only just managed to get sick into the leafless bushes that lined the walkway that led up the to dormitory, vomiting into the brush rather than her shoes. Once, twice, three times she threw up, her body seeming to want to expell everything inside it like the act could rid herself of ill, heartwrenching feeling of guilt weighing down on her shoulders.

Guilt... and anger.

“M-MIND!” Valera snarled into the night once she’d gained control of her gut again, standing straight once more to wipe her mouth clean with a sleeve of her jacket.

The red text lit up her NOED at once, like it had been waiting for her to call on it.

*An unfortunate outcome, I admit. The likelihood that Cadet Arada would push herself to such an extreme was low, as I stated.*

“Apparently no low enough!” Valera only barely kept herself from screaming, hands balled into iron fists by her sides. She could feel the familiar warmth behind her her irises, and she knew her eyes were glowing white hot.

She didn’t care.

“*This* is what I was afraid of!” she seethed aloud. “*This* is why I didn’t want to give her permission! She was desperate, and desperate has *no* place on the field!”

*Captain, it could be argued that ‘desperate’ is all we have left, the red text answered. And I do hope you are not concerned about exposure. I was very careful in applying the necessary permissions, as prove by Lieutenant Colonel Mayd’s search coming up empty. I will likewise take the necessary steps to ensure that Viviana Arada does not make the mistake of naming you when she—*

“I don’t give a *damn*, about my exposure!” Valera snapped, not even bothering to finish reading the MIND’s argument. “You think that’s what I care about?! Arada is in the hospital in *critical condition*! She could wake up with brain damage! And that’s *if* she wakes up *at all*!”

A line of green joined the conversation, now.

*The likelihood of that is extremely small, Valera. From the data I was able to gather while we were at Altmore, I would estimate the chance of Viviana Arada suffering longterm damage that would prevent her from continuing her training as a User to be less than 3%.*

“Stay out of this, Kes,” Valera snarled. “That’s half the problem, anyway. You—*both* of you—you don’t understand. You can’t understand. Maybe one day, when you have enough damn *data*, but until then you just don’t *get* that humans are more than numbers and equations and percentages! We’re more than a mathematical breakdown of what is likely and not! I *told you* I didn’t want to give Arada permission! I *told you* something like this would happen! I don’t *are* what values

and sum you applied to the situation! There is more to people than your damn *algorithms!*”

She finished, and for a moment there came no answer. Some small part of her appreciated that, in a way. The two AIs could communicate as quickly as they could think, after all, so any pause provided at moments like these were typically for her benefit.

That didn't make them human, though.

*Captain.* The MIND answered, and for some reason Valera couldn't help but read the words like they were hard said. *I am merely doing what I have to, with the tools I have, to the very best of my ability.*

The anger drained from Valera all at once, at that. In a heartbeat, however, it was replaced it, and by a myried of feeling she would have traded back for the fire in a second. Grief, furstration, betrayal.

Dissapointment.

“I know,” she answered sadly, turning to start the long walk back towards the staff housing through the frigid winter night. “But until you understand that we *have* to be more than ‘tools’ to you, MIND, then you aren't much better than Shira Abel...”