

Chapter 50

PLACEHOLDER

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Rei should have known the day was turning out a little *too* good.

Not only had classes gone as well as could be expected, it turned out he'd also gotten top marks on a Tactical Studies exam he'd actually been a little uncertain about for once, *and* the paper he'd been working on for John Markus had come together much more strongly than expected. Best of all, he'd been taking advantage of the rare spare hour this all granted to tinker with his NOED's hardcode for the first time in a while—deliberately looking away from the others so that neither Aria nor Viv on the couches to his right would yell at him—when he got pinged by a notification about Shard 2. Catcher had apparently seen an upgrade during his own combat training, bringing the Saber's boosted Growth up to a solid D5. Given the proximity of the alerts, Rei had wondered for a second if Arthus was actually improving faster than Gemela.

Then he considered why Catcher had hit D4 so faster in the first place, and decided it was more likely Sidorov's treating him like a punching bag had just helped give the Shard a hell of a jump start...

Weird thing to be thankful for, Rei had thought right before Aria asked him—sounding dangerously suspicious—why he'd been staring at the wall without speaking for the last 30 minutes.

Dinner was the Saber's to reign over that night, and no one interrupted him as he talked animatedly—if in a low voice so as not to be overheard—about the upgrade, and where he thought things might be going long term. It was a nice to see the excitement. Rei knew Catcher wasn't thrilled at the concept of having part of Shido in his head—and who could really blame him?—and his first Growth jump wasn't something they

had a chance to celebrate. With this second one nearly back-to-back, though, his energy was infectious, to the point that Rei let himself think the looks Chancery and Logan kept exchanging as the Saber spoke at a million words a minute were more glances of anticipation than anything else. Even Aria's eyes were on him more than once, head slightly cocked with a small smirk Rei was pretty sure said something along the lines of "Sooo... Me when?"

Dinner went long, and so it was straight to the Arena that the six of them headed after cleaning up their trays. The day continued to be nothing but good when Viv commented that Logan no longer seemed to need to hover next to her as they managed the icy cobblestone in the dark, to which her boyfriend only rolled his eyes before promptly taking her by the elbow, ignoring her answering protests. It was half the reason the team was still snickering as they changed quickly, headed down the hall, and stepped into the SB7 combat area.

Catcher—still so excited he'd actually been in the lead as he continued to talk—was the first to notice something was off.

"Why does Dent look ready to stab someone...?"

Rei looked around the Saber as they started to move across the projection plating. They had a crowd again, apparently. Mostly the same group they'd ended the night before with, including Forester and Jasper, but with Liam Gross and Ameena Ashton absent as were—oddly—Lennon and Dice. Guest, too, was present again, but Maddison Kent wasn't standing with him for once, which Rei found odd. Doubly so when he caught the stony look on the colonel's face, improved only by comparison with the thunderous expression on the Iron Bishop's standing beside him.

That was when he realized Kent seemed to be attending to a different officer, a woman—shorter than the Users around her—who partially had her back to them. It took him a second to recognize her from behind, her clean wash of black hair spilling down her back from under her cap, cut to a severe line a few inches below shoulders

that were almost too-straight. It was as she turned her head slightly to listen to something a stern-looking Captain von Bor was telling her that he saw the artful purple streak.

Rei and Aria stopped short together, her hand immediately grabbing his wrist so tightly he would have winced if he'd even noticed. At their backs, Logan, Viv, and Chancery were all forced to halt just as abruptly, more than one sound of surprise from them bringing Catcher to a stop in turn. The Saber looked over his shoulder, curious, but in the moment Rei couldn't have answered the silent question if he'd tried.

Ahead of them, Jay Wainwright—who was standing at ease in front of the newcomer between von Bor and Kalus Laurent—caught sight of them first, and a quiet word from the Lancer was all it took to have the straight-backed officer turn in their direction.

Shira Abel's blue eyes were designed to be so vibrant they almost glowed in the bright sub-basement lighting even beneath the rip of her cap. She didn't smile, looking in their direction, but there was something *almost* like happiness alight in her gaze while she took them in without words, *almost* like joy.

Whatever it was, Rei didn't like it one bit.

"Who's... that?"

Viv hadn't missed the immediate tension shared by Rei and Aria, because the question came hesitant from behind them.

"Abel," Aria hissed back just as von Bor lifted one gnarled hand off the head of her cane to wave them closer.

"Shira Abel," Rei clarified as they started approaching again, if reluctantly. It wasn't like they could ignore the captain's silent order, as much as he would have liked to.

"Oh *that's* not good," Logan grunted under his breath, the only other sound being a low agreeing groat from Chancery before they were too close to say anything more.

“Cadets, as you see, we have a visitor tonight.” The lines of von Bor’s face were a bit tighter than Rei was used to, but her voice gave away nothing. “I’d like you to meet General Shira Abel. She’s come all the way from Sol to put eyes on you.”

As expected of them, all six members of Firesong snapped immediately into salutes, attentions lifted to the far wall, elbows high hands forming perfect lines to their heads. Whatever else the situation might be, they were in the presence of one of the highest ranking officers in the ISCM, after all.

“At ease, Cadets.”

Rei felt a chill crawl down his spine at the sounds of Abel’s voice. It was unchanged from the last time he’d heard it, as he and Aria had watched the woman take Viv in like a particularly appealing piece of meat through the walls of the Altmore UTU. Her words were still as mirthless, still as apathetic.

And all despite that hungry look he could tell—even with his own attention above the woman’s head—lingered in her eyes.

“I’m not here to create any sort of interruption,” the general continued as all six of them dropped their hands to clasp them behind their backs. “Simply to observe. As you can imagine, Central has been keeping a close study of the developments we’ve been seeing from the six of you, and I felt a few of the most recent changes required eyes on, as the captain said.” She paused briefly, and Rei could feel her gaze linger on him.

Then, surprisingly, she looked away.

“Cadet Arada. I’m glad to see you back on your feet. I don’t know if you’re aware, but I was planet-side when you were hospitalized, and managed to drop by. How goes your recovery?”

Viv, fortunately, had clearly anticipated she would come up, because her answer was prompt and clear.

“Good, ma’am. Looking forward to getting off light duty and back to real training soon.”

“And you’re getting used to Endwalker?”

Rei had to work not to visibly clench his jaw. Abel hadn’t even paused, coming out swinging the hammer full-bore without so much as a hint that it was a big question. It was *exactly* what he would have done if he’d wanted to put someone off their game.

And it worked.

“Uh... Good, ma’am, yes.” Viv had been expecting to be addressed, but obviously hadn’t thought her User-Unique Ability would be the immediate topic of conversation. “I-I’ve only been able to practice during our extra training hours given the gag order, but I’m getting the hang of it.”

“Catchwick, how about you?” Again a pivot, and this time Rei saw Catcher actually start as the general’s eyes were suddenly on him. “Congratulations on your recent evolution. How’s the adjustment coming along? Any major changes?”

“Oh. Uh...” The Saber stumbled getting his answer out. “The-the HUD’s taking some getting used to ma’am, but otherwise its par of the course. Still haven’t quiet adjusted to the extra blade weight, but I’ll get there.”

“Excellent.” The toneless word made no indication of if Abel was *actually* pleased with Viv and Catcher, but Rei was pretty sure that was only deliberate. “If possible, I’d like to see both your evolutions and Abilities applied to their extent, today. I know Ruinous isn’t User-Unique, but developing it as a first year is unheard of, as I’m sure you’re aware. I look forward to seeing what you can do with it.”

There was a polite cough from the left, which Abel didn’t so much as acknowledge.

Just the same, Forester spoke up.

“Ma’am, I apologize, but Cadet Arada *is* still on light duty.” Of every adult standing around them, the doctor was the only one who seemed to manage to appear completely

unfazed by Abel's presence—well, other than Jasper, but that didn't surprise Rei in the least. "If you'd like to see Endwalker in action, I would request that we ask Candice Meyer to join us after all. She's been a great help working with Arada as a Duelist a bit closer to her level."

"No. Only the members of Firesong will be necessary today."

The general hadn't even bothered looking around at Forester, her words blunt razor that were both a command and a warning. Forester, to their credit, didn't look the slightest bit surprised, nor bothered.

"Ma'am," they address Abel again, pleasant tone not so much as shifting an octave. "I have to insist. Arada's recovery plan was crafted by the Altmere staff, Lieutenant Colonel Mayde, and Doctor Ashton together. I signed off on it as well. It would do no one any good to—"

"Thank you, Doctor. You're dismissed."

The words were as flat as any other, and all said still without looking around at Forester. Rei braved a glance down, and for once was unsurprised to find Abel's eyes on him.

They burned, those eyes. Behind a mask of apathy, they burned. He'd seen something a little like it before, in Valera Dent's own gaze. Something like triumph, like victory. In the Iron Bishop, however, what that look was had flashed like fire, warm and hopeful.

Abel's eyes, on the other hand, lingered more like the sting of ice pressed to flesh.

"Ma'am." Forester was brave, trying one more time. "Again, I have to insist. Cadet Arada should not be pushed to—"

"Colonel." Finally, Abel turned, the slightest hint of a frown forming the first emotion Rei had seen the woman express since they'd walked into the room. She didn't look to the Doctor, however, but at Guest, still standing to the side by Dent. "Do your civilian contractors make it a habit of ignoring commands from higher officers? If so,

we may need to revisit the permissions you've been granted to hire outside the rank and file."

Rama Guest had the look of a man who hadn't been sleeping much as he met the general's distastefully. For a moment Rei thought the colonel would actually defy the woman, but after a second, he instead lifted a hand to gesture towards Forester.

"Doctor. You're dismissed."

"Sir—" Forester's voice at last gave away the slightest hint of anger, but Guest didn't let them finished.

"I will keep an eye on things here," the colonel assured them firmly even as he dipped his head towards the door. "I promise Arada won't be pushed beyond her ability."

Still Forester hesitated, their ??? eyes going from Guest to Viv to Shira slowly.

Finally, they smiled.

"Of course. I apologize if I've been out of line."

And then, as ordered, the doctor took their leave, careful to meet Rei's eye as they passed, then—he was pretty sure—Viv's behind him.

They were even brave enough to outright mouth the words "Be. Careful." slowly and clearly before were by and headed for the hall.

Shira Abel, for her part, acted like nothing whatsoever had happened.

"Captain von Bor, if you would," she simply said instead, stepping back as though ceding the floor. "Let's see what Kamiya Corporations funds have bought the ISCM."

Rei suspected she'd been testing the water with that, trying to get a rise out of Jasper with that. In any other situation he would have found it almost amusing as von Bor moved to take the general's place dutifully. Sure enough, when he glanced the fixer's way, nothing had changed about the woman's serene, confident smile.

Then again... Jasper's eyes were lingering on the back of the general's head in an odd, too-calm sort of way. Like a cat trying to decide if it's food was more entertaining alive than dead.

As von Bor started giving orders, getting them to pair off with her, Wainright, and Kalus Laurent supervising each match in turn, Rei found himself wishing Abel would toe that line juuuust a little more...

It was stupid, but Rei decided he was going to give it a try anyway.

As Logan stepped in front of Chancery—who was quickly rolling to her feet from the floor Rei had just kicked her too—he grunted out the command. His lighter Saber armor rippled, and was at once replaced by the bulky frame of his Breaker Mode. He felt the world speed up as his Cognition dipped, but as fast for a Mauler as he was Logan, he wasn't *that* quick.

The axe fell. The HUD readings dropped rapidly. Rei prayed.

Then, at the last moment, he slammed both hands together to catch the flat of Honoris' falling blade, slamming the weapon to a halt.

... Almost.

Despite the Breaker-Type's incredible Strength spec, physics *weren't* on his side. Honoris slip between his palms, the grip anything by imperfect. It was only 3 or 4 inches, but it was enough that Rei had to jerk his head to the side to avoid having his skull split in two.

Leaving Logan the best opening he'd had all fight.

WHAM!

The Logan's armored shin took him high, just below Rei's expose armpit. His Defense swallowed most of the hit, his reactive shield tanking it almost entirely, but just

the same Rei felt the shock through his chest, making hard to breath for a second. Logan was most of a tier below him rank-wise, but their average numbers were a bit closer discounting Shido's growth, and Strength was easily the Maulers highest spec. As result, Rei's lost his grip almost entirely, and he didn't have time to curse as the blade slipped towards his shoulder with a shriek of metal.

"Type Shift... Brawler Mode!"

He was lucky Shido registered the command, wheezed out as it was. His specs shifted along with the armor, but as the world slowed down again he twisted out and leftward, shoving the axe to the right. The weapon dropped, but Logan had it ripping up again before it touched the ground.

But Rei was already gone with two more hissed words.

The lightning and smell of ozone accompanied the Temporal Step as he appeared in front of Chancery already swinging. The nausea was so minimal now he only barely registered it, just like he barely registered the hole visions that he'd seen now for the thousandth time. His focus was pure, the old distractions gone.

Which was exactly why Chancery only had time to give him a shocked look before her buried all three blades of his right fist into the side of her head.

"Fatal Damage Accrued: 100%."

The Lancer dropped like a stone, as he wrenched his hand loose of her temple, already turning even as he gave the command again, clearer now.

"Type Shift: Phalanx Mode."

Honoris' blade came again, swung at his gut this time, Logan having closed the distance over the Neutral Zone shockingly fast for his Type. Rei felt a thrill as he started to lift his empty left arm, fearing he wouldn't be quick enough. The shield manifested, flowing into being directly in the path of the axe. Metal struck metal with the sound of

a gong. Logan grunted, his weapon rebounding against the block he hadn't anticipated, but even as he was forced back a step he leaned into, bringing a boot up again in forward kick.

The strike might have been limited by his poor body position, but Rei still couldn't believe it when he barely felt it land against the shield.

He took the hit, then charged, his Phalanx's heavier sword trailing at his side, ready to slice in around his defenses just like Imala and Aria had taught him. He didn't drop his guard, though, trusting the wall of steel between him and his opponent, and his caution paid off when Logan dropped back into a recovery roll, coming up with haft ready in both hands. He accepted the rushing shield metal on metal with another crash, and for a second the two struggled there, Rei trying to find a clean line to get his sword in for a clean stab, Logan obviously looking for an angle to get the edge of the axe around his defense.

In the end, they had to break apart, and from there the fight resumed in earnest.

Slow as he was in Phalanx Mode, it made for a decent one-on-one match against Logan's Strength and atypical Speed for his Type. They exchanged a flurry of quick blows, sword being swept aside here, axe being blocked there. Sparks flew between heavy breaths. Steel shrieked against steel. Streaks of red light interchanged with blue. All the time Rei kept half an eye on his HUD.

2 inches of overreach, recognizable only because of his Cognition, gave him his line.

Logan swung back, drawing Honoris around his back for a massive cut at Rei's side that probably would have done real damage if it had landed. He extended too, though, the timing of it *just* off enough.

Rei didn't hesitate, swinging his shield around and back as well, using the twisting momentum of the massive metal wall as a counterbalance to drive his sword forward

and up, aiming for center mass. Tip found flesh, and Logan didn't have the opportunity to make that ready swing as 2 feet of the blade slipped through ribs, lungs, and heart.

Or at least he *shouldn't* have had the opportunity, but Rei saw the fire a moment too late.

WHAM!

Sure enough, the blow *did* do damage. Left wide open as he'd been, Honoris—it's vysetrium accents ablaze with ion flames—took him full in the side. His reactive shield, already strained, gave, and the weapon caught him barely a finger off from where *he'd* just speared *Logan*.

B9 Defense, though, was a *hell* of a thing.

Rei felt Shido's armor crunch and crack as the impact sent him flying, losing his grip on the sword. Heavy as he was, he didn't go far, but just the same the slam and tumble across the ground didn't help his momentary inability to breath. He came to a stop on his back, facing an endless sky, stars dancing across his vision.

That, mercifully, was when the Arena spoke.

"Fatal Damage Accrued: 100%. Winner: Cadet Reidon Ward."

Rei managed to turn his head to the side just in time to see the blaze of Logan's Overclock flicker out. Honoris fell to the floor, and the Mauler followed face first, Shido's sword was still buried in his side.

Reccall, Rei gave the silent command as the field faded, and the Device—including the weapon—vanished. While it was true the blade wouldn't have done any real *harm* to Logan if it had been left in after the match end, it would have been—at minimum—extremely uncomfortable.

Hopefully she's happy with that... Rei thought to himself, the throbbing in his side ebbing away as he started to drop, allowing him to sit up on the fading floor. As much

as he didn't want to, he scanned the walls in the direction of the floor as they vanished, waiting.

Shira Abel came into view a few seconds later, and Rei immediately knew he was going to want to throw something shortly.

She didn't even wait for him and a recovering Logan to touch down before giving the order.

“Again.”

“Ma'am.” von Bor's voice was calm as ever, but there was an edge to it now that Rei had never heard before as the old woman spoke from the general's side. “They can resume combat after a reprieve. That is the *10th* match without a break. Same for the others.”

“They can get a reprieve when I'm satisfied with my observations,” the general answered just as evenly, not looking away from Rei while he finally touched down next to a waiting Chancery.

“And when will that be, ma'am?”

“We'll have to see, won't we?” came the curt answer, blue eyes like burning chips of frozen glass. “Now... Again.”