

CHAPTER 63

Breakfast the next morning was a buzz of conversation and rumors, even around the second-year section where Firesong had claimed their usual seat by the dome wall. Every cadet in the school had woken up to the surprise notification that a school-wide assembly would be taking place at 1300 that day after lunch—a rare abrupt interruption to planned class and training schedules—and immediately the questions started circulating. Rei wanted to think it had something to do with the fact that spring had arrived in Castalon, and with the warming of the temperatures, everyone was a bit more excitable about *any* kind of news. He wanted to pretend that the glances shot Firesong's way from students of *every* year were nothing but casually curiosity, and had nothing to do with the fact that people suspected *they* were a part of whatever was going on.

Catcher brought Rei back to reality over his french toast.

"If some of these jerks stare any harder, we're all gonna end up looking like swiss cheese..." the Saber muttered as he took an annoyed bite of his own breakfast.

"Don't think we should be expecting anything else," Aria answered with a frown, looking around. Despite their mostly secluded corner, several people peering through the trunks of pines that rose around them abruptly became interested in their own meals again. "It's only going to get worse, too. Probably."

"Definitely, after today," Rei added with a nod. He lowered his voice, letting his full fork drop back down towards his plate. "Once they announce the brackets, it's going to be pretty obvious *why* it's happening."

"And that's assuming they don't just spell it all out," Chancery offered dryly. "Which I wish I could say didn't feel like a *distinct* possibility..."

"Especially given our 'special guest'," Viv half snarled, picking up an entire bread roll and ripping into it with her bare teeth.

Logan reached over from beside her and gingerly extracted the remaining roll from her hand, setting it back on the table. Aria, meanwhile, had taken to glowering at Rei.

“This is *still* all your fault, you know that, right?”

Rei managed most of a grin, presenting one wrist, where Shido’s band glowed. “Don’t blame me. Not my fault I got assigned this monster.”

“*Literally* is,” Catcher beat Chancery to the punch with a snort, and the table as a whole managed a tense laugh. They were in a weird mood as a whole. On the one hand, Rei knew every one of the others was as aware as he was that the assembly—and the long-awaited announcement—was only going to make things that much more troublesome for them around Galens, and possibly beyond. On the other, though, Firesong had been aware it was coming for *months* now, so it wasn’t like they weren’t at least *somewhat* braced for impact. Add that to the display Logan and Chancery had put on for them the previous day, and it was hard for Rei not to be feeling at least a *little* bit excited.

If nothing else because it was looking less and less likely by the day that—even if Central did exactly what he and Aria thought they were going to do come Systems—the two of them were likely to be transferred to Sol for second year.

They wrapped their breakfast up with lighter conversation, chatting about an upcoming exam in Device Evolution and which of their classmates were likely to develop Abilities before the upcoming tournaments they would be finding out about that afternoon. Vademe remained the only first year outside of Firesong to have developed one, but that wasn’t atypical, and would start to change rapidly as the term came to a close and more and more cadets reached the mid and upper C-Ranks. It was an interesting enough topic of discussion that Rei felt like the first half of the day might just go normally as he, Aria, Viv, and Logan split off from Catcher and Chancery.

Walking into Combat Tactics shook him free of the notion once again, as every single Class A head turned in their direction the moment they stepped through the door.

“Catcher might have had a point about that swiss cheese,” Logan grunted while they made their way towards their usual row at the front of the auditorium.

Rei nodded, but didn’t say anything as he followed Aria up the step and down the aisle, doing his best to ignore the stares. The room had gone quiet, and conversation didn’t pick up after they’d taken their seats.

He was almost grateful when a familiar—if irritating—voice came right out and asked.

“Okay. What’s going on, Ward?”

Rei looked up from where he was rummaging through his bag for his pad to find Leron Joy standing before him. It had been a while since he’d had to deal with the Saber, and he decided pretty quickly he hadn’t missed their interactions.

That—combined with the mild annoyance at the feeling of 20-plus pairs of eyes staring at the back of his head—also didn’t endear Rei to the idea of beating around the bush.

“You’ll find out after lunch,” he told Joy flatly, going back to looking for the tablet.

“So you *do* know?” the Saber demanded like he’d just cornered Rei into some big reveal.

“Yes, Joy.” Aria—wonderful, *wonderful* human that she was—jumped in to have his back. “We all do. And like Rei said: You’ll find out after lunch.”

Joy’s attention turned to her, and predictably he seemed suddenly hesitant. Rei almost rolled his eyes, but stopped himself when the boy opened his mouth to say something.

Viv beat him to it.

“But why wait when I can moan about it nooooow?” she crooned in a baby-like tone, but her expression was anything but amused. The old fire—pretty tempered since her hospitalization and Shard assignment—had been coming back bit by bit over the last few weeks.

Joy turned on her, face red. Before he could say anything else, however, Sense and Kay appeared as though by magic behind him.

“Class is about to start,” the bald Brawler told him amicably, putting a hand on the boy’s shoulder and squeezing enough that the Saber winced. “Let’s grab seats.”

“But—!” Joy started, not dissuaded despite his friends’ appearance.

“Let’s. Grab. Seats,” Sense repeated through a rigid smile, staring him down.

Joy hesitated, still clearly frustrated. Then, with a last glare at Rei *and* Viv, he allowed Sense to walk him back towards the steps. Kay followed them, mouthing “Sorry” as she left again.

“It’s gonna be a loooong morning, isn’t it?” Rei muttered, finally pulling his tablet out and starting to set it up on the desk in front of him.

“Yup,” Viv and Logan both answered from his right, while Aria gave him a pitying sort of smile and reached over to squeeze his hand for a second, letting go just in time for Elean Samsus not to spot them as the Captain shouted very everyone to take their seats.

Combat Theory rolled into a double-period of Tactical Studies, not a single hour of which went by without Rei and the others either being approached with open questions about the upcoming assembly—Leda Truant actually came up to them *twice*—or feeling like the the world was staring them down at all times. It got so bad that the guest speaker in Sarah Takeshi’s class—a retired major and SCT pro called Boone—had to stop their lecture at one point to ask if something was distracting them all.

Almost fortunately, that had led to some unpleasant words from Takeshi before dismissing them all for lunch, because no one bothered Rei and the others all the way back to the mess.

That changed yet again the moment they stepped inside, and in the *most* unpleasant of ways.

Rei thought the first-year quarter was—strangely—actually *quieter* than usual as the doors slid open for them. He noticed Chancery and Catcher first, standing together near the food line, she looking a little nervous, he looking *pissed*. It was this latter emotion that clued him, and so Rei was ready when the tall second year stepped in front of him, blocking the path.

Sidorov didn't say a word as he stared at Rei. His face was that usual impassive mask, a creepy, blank slate that was made his handsome features feel dead. His eye, though, were cutting for once, meeting Rei's without moving, without so much as flicking away.

Rei smiled up at him.

"You come alone this time? What a surprise."

Not a flicker of a response from Sidorov himself, but at the words, five figures stood from where they'd been sitting around at the nearest tables. Rei didn't have to look away from Lancer to recognize Gabby Dawson and Benjamin Jobe. The other three, he knew, would be the rest of King's Law.

"Yeah... That's more what a figured," Rei snorted up at Sidorov. "Are you going to stand there like an asshole all day, or are you going to go look pretty somewhere else so we can go eat?"

The second year blinked once, slowly, like it was something he'd had to practice doing and was exactly proficient at yet.

"I'm told you know what this assembly is about," he finally spoke after a second, his tone as empty as his face.

"Shocking," Logan said from behind Rei, sounding as sarcastic as he'd every heard the guy. Rei could imagine him scanning the mess, seaching out Selleck.

"Not worth it," Viv said under her breath.

Rei had to agree, but that didn't mean he felt like letting it slide after the morning they'd already had.

“Your ‘little birdy’ tell you that?” When Sidorov didn’t answer, he shrugged. “And? What about it?”

The Lancer continued to stare him down. Rei started to feel his temper gnaw its way upward.

And he wasn’t the only one.

“Sidorov, you can drop the ‘I’m a scary scary guy’ act. We *literally* saw you get your ass kicked by a girl the size of an average elementary schooler. And rumor has, it that it *keeps* getting kicked like that weekly.”

Rei would have loved to keep his composure, but in the end he actually thought the snort that forced it’s why out, did more damage than if he’d been able to keep a straight face. There was that flash, that rare glimpse of anger that snuck through Sidorov’s mask, and he turned towards Aria slowly.

“Wow,” she told him, stepping up to stand beside Rei. “You’re *really* not used to being talked back to, are you? That’s gonna bite you back, once you lose your grip, weirdo.”

“Watch your mouth, Laurent,” the second year told her quietly. “It’s not you I’m talking to at the moment, but it certainly *can* be.”

The threat wasn’t subtle, and the temper-turned-amusement flashed *right* back into fire. It was stupid, but Rei reacted in the only way he *knew* would get under Sidorov’s skin. In a blink his hand was on the Lancers chest and—drawing on all the Strength he could without Shido called—he shoved the older cadet back.

Actually shoved him back.

Sidorov didn’t move much. Only half a step, if that. But he *did* move. And the effect—as Rei suspected—was immediate. There was a moment—only a moment—of surprise in those otherwise-dead eyes, then his still face went red with anger. The change mirrored the gasps from several of the onlooking first-years, and Rei didn’t miss a couple of the King’s Law cronies exchange an alarmed look.

“Huh...” Rei cocked his head as he looked up at Sidorov, all mock surprise. “Isn’t *that* interesting...?”

And then, without another word, he stepped around the second year and walked by without looking back, Aria, Viv, and Logan right behind him.

“You’re officially my hero,” Catcher—who looked *distinctly* less pissed off now—offered him a fistbump as he reached the food line. Chancery, who’d covered her mouth at some point to stifle a laugh, nodded fervently from behind her hand.

“I’m still gonna find Selleck,” Logan growled as the other joined as well. He was still looking around the quarter. “Apparently someone needs to be taught a lesson. Again.”

“It’s not worth it,” Viv repeated, putting a hand on her boyfriend’s arm, though her tone wasn’t any calmer.

“They’re leaving,” Aria interrupted. She *was* looking over her shoulder, and as Rei followed her eyes he saw that Sidorov and his teammates were indeed heading out the mess door.

He might have imagined it, but the thought the Lancer was walking a *lot* more stiffly than usually.

“What a *loser*,” Catcher ground out. He, too, was watching King’s Law leave. “You almost have to feel bad for the guy. Can you imagine being *that* attached to your pedestal?”

“Pedestal’s getting rocked, these days,” Logan told him. Viv’s hand was still on his arm, and he seemed to have decided to heed her advice, since he was looking at Rei. “You should *hear* what the Maulers are saying about your sister, man.”

Rei nodded, but didn’t answer otherwise. It had been a month since he and Aria’s sit-down with Kamiya, and he was *still* having trouble navigating her presence at the school. He knew she and Aria were talking, but he pretended not to, and neither of

them were forcing his hand about it. At least not for the time being. That would have the change eventually, he knew.

Especially since he *had*, actually, been keeping tabs on the rumors circulating about the new second-year that was shaking things up in a *big* way on campus.

“Let’s eat?” he offered instead. “I don’t want to sit through this crap on an empty stomach.”

Everyone nodded, and Catcher turned to lead the way towards the back of the food line. As Rei took a step to follow, though, he wasn’t entirely surprised to find Aria holding him back, on hand taking him lightly by the arm. He turned, expecting to be asked if he was okay? If Sidorov had shaken him up at all.

He *was* surprised, for that reason, to find his girlfriend a little pink in the cheeks as she met his eyes.

“You are never going to repeat that,” she told him firmly. “Got it?”

He frowned at her, confused.

“... What?”

“You are never going to repeat that I said your sister was the size of an elementary schooler. She might *literally* kill me.”