

CHAPTER 14

PLACEHOLDER

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“*Reidon DIPSHIP Ward!* If you so much as roll your eyes with excessive enthusiasm I’m going to call your old Matron, pay for her jump from Astra-1, and provide her with the *best paddle money can buy* to beat your ass with! Don’t. Be. An. IDIOT!”

From his spot hugging the window of the hospital room, Logan watched Viv put a firm hand on Ward’s chest, pinning him down as the dumbass started to try and sit up for the third time in the minute or so since Guest, Dent, and the two medical officers had left. While Logan himself had taken to leaning back against the clear panel of the smart-glass overlooking the school grounds, Viv and Laurent had rushed straight to the bed, leaning over the sides like mother hens making sure Ward was alright.

Well... *Laurent*, at least, was making sure Ward was alright.

Viv, on the other hand...

“If you want us to sit you up, there’s a whole *panel* of controls behind you,” she was snarling through gritted teeth, still pinning the her best friend down without so much as flinching even as he squirmed under her fingers in silent protest. “I bet I could make this damn bed *dance* if I wanted to, so will you *sit still* and *tell me what you want?*”

That mollified Ward, and after a second of the boy typing out his request light flashed across Viv’s NOED. Logan watched with something between amusement and annoyance as she snorted and said “See? Was that so hard?” before reaching out with her other hand to press and hold one of the many buttons set in the wall above Ward’s head. With only the faintest sound of whirring gears the bed started to sit up, and Logan was careful to keep his expression neutral as he took Ward in in full for the first time.

The immediate—but not even the most alarming—thing he noticed was the sturdy-looking device that cupped the right side of the boy’s chest, white steel emitting an intermittent bloom of greenish light every few seconds. It looked uncomfortable, and even as he watched Logan realized Ward looked... off-balance? It took a second more for him to realize the boy seemed to be taking short, shallow breaths, putting together the fact that Ward couldn’t expand his ribs enough to inhale all the way. More concerning, though, was the fact that he appeared almost to have suffered a stroke, the right side of his face flaccid and drooping, the corner of his mouth dipping down even as he looked to try and smile in thanks at Viv as the bed finally brought him to sit up at roughly a 60 degrees angle or so.

What in the MIND...? Logan couldn’t help but think, unable to keep himself from staring even if he did manage to get ahold of his jaw dropping open at the full sight of the boy’s condition.

Fortunately for his curiosity, Laurent was obviously thinking along a similar tract.

“Rei...” she hissed, sounding just short of scared. “What... *happened?*”

Ward let out a huff of sound that might have been a laugh, then looked annoyed at his inability to communicate. Once again he started to type.

Botox. Docs said I had to look good for Sectionals.

“Not *funny*, asshat,” Viv growled. The hand that had finally left his chest as the bed and brought him to sit came up again in a threatening finger hovering above his nose. “Last chance, or I’m calling the Estoran Center and telling them we’re shipping you back.”

Ward grimaced at this, look to Laurent for support, but the girl had no sympathy for him. Even only seeing half her face with her back to him Logan could tell her lips were right and her forehead creased was creased with worry. Ward, after second,

seemed to give in, because he started typing again. When he was done, he paused, and Logan understood why when the boy's grey eyes slid briefly in his direction, taking him in with calculated consideration.

The guy was debating who he should include among his present company in the answer.

Logan said nothing, not even allowing a hint to show that he had read that glance, but he had to admit himself a little surprised—and not unpleasantly so, oddly enough—when Ward seemed to make his decision and looked to change a couple of settings in his frame before sending the message out. A second later the notification pinged Logan's neuro-optic right alongside Laurent's and Viv's.

Someone messed with my Fortitude test. Gifted me with a nice little hole in my lung.

There was a silence, after that, Logan feeling like he couldn't have been the only one of the three of them to be rereading this statement—so simply stated—with growing alarm.

"Excuse me?" Viv finally growled after a moment, breaking the pause. "Explain. Now."

Before Ward could continue, however, Laurent was speaking, her mouth having apparently caught up to her own thoughts.

"A hole?! How?!" She'd gone rigid, posture equal parts furious and bewildered. Indeed, she took the railing on her side of the bed with both hands and leaned over to get closer to Ward, knuckles whitening around the metal as she found the more important question. "Actually, no... *Who?*"

"Was it Dyrk Reese?"

Logan hadn't known he was going to ask until the words were already out of his mouth, and he almost cursed himself as Ward, Laurent, and Viv together all turned to

look it him in what miiiiight have been surprise. It was a little irritating—he *had* been making an effort to participate in the squad’s conversations more of late, after all—but he supposed he couldn’t blame them. More to the point, he felt like it was a question worth answering. Reese *had* had an obvious hand in messing with Ward’s schooling during the previous quarter already, so if anyone had the access to fudge around with a *parameter* tes—

Ward made a sound that might have been a snort, and Logan went stiff, the fists already tucked under his crossed arms tightening instinctively.

Then, though, he forced a single breath in through his nose and out his mouth—just like he’d been working on with Viv—before responding, refusing to look away from the boy as he worked hard to keep that ever-present temper of his under control.

“I just thought it was a good—”

Then, though, another message pinged him, and he stopped short.

That was my first guess, too. Funny. But no. Wasn’t him.

Logan blinked, surprised. After he was sure he’d read correctly, he frowned, unsure how to feel about the confusing moment that combined a sort of passing pride at having—rightfully, clearly—not jumped the gun, and the unexpected nature of the answer.

“Ok...” he continued after a moment, coming up short on any other hypothesis. “Not Reese. Then... who?”

Another hesitation from Ward, but this time Logan thought the pause felt more universal, like the boy wasn’t sure he wanted to answer any of them, not just Logan himself.

When he finally did, though, the reasons became clear pretty damn quick.

Central.

The impact of this one word washed across the room in a variety of ways. Viv snarled wordlessly, taking her own railing in such a violet grip that the steel tubing creaked ominously under her fingers. Laurent, on the other side of things, blanched, staring at Ward in disbelief, looking like she were trying to find something, anything, to say.

Logan barely registered any of it.

“Central?” he repeated in a hiss, not understanding. He didn’t feel himself come off the wall, didn’t notice himself uncrossing his arms and approaching the bed in a flash. In a second he was standing over Ward beside Laurent, taking him in with narrowed eyes as he tried—and failed—to understand.

Ward nodded slowly.

It sounds like they tapped some kind of back channel to access the exam protocols. He typed out quickly. Dialup up the gravity and stimulus of the test. Bretz didn’t know, so his level calls were off. Hence the lung damage.

This last statement was accompanied by a tapping of the apparatus—obviously some kind of recovery unit—that cupped the right side of his chest.

Viv made a sound like a wild animal, demanding more information, while Laurent blanched cheeks filled suddenly as she, too, finally started to get angry.

Logan noticed none of it.

Central? Central *Command*? The highest operational level of the ISCM? *That* Central had tampered with the test of a *cadet*? It made no sense. None. Sure, Ward *was* a freak of nature—a term Logan had found himself using with lessening malice and a growing, begrudging respect over the last couple months or so—but what the hell could

be going on that would have *Central* sticking its nose into the business of the Galens Institute, literally *systems* away from earth. Ward was a *first year*. He barely had a full semester's worth of training and combat experience under his belt, and hadn't even qualified for Sectionals undefeated in the Institute's Intra-Schools. Was he really that special that *Central* would want to—?

Then, though, Logan's racing thoughts slammed to a halt, frozen in time as the understanding struck him. No. No... He was thinking about it wrong. He'd caught himself, this time. It was too easy to slip into old assumptions, too easy to lean on expectations that had been disproven time and time again over the last 6 months. Ward *was* a first year, yeah, and he wasn't even the strongest in their class—not yet, at least. But that was only a snapshot of the situation, wasn't it? Only a cross-section of the factors that would have had *Central*'s eyes turning in their direction. It had taken a long time—longer than he would ever likely admit to himself—but Logan had witnessed with his own two eyes what was so special about the situation.

What was special about Ward.

Assuming the boy was telling the truth—and Logan had seen the *commanding officer* of the entire school exit this very room not 5 minutes ago, so there was a *very* good chance Ward was telling the truth—what was important wasn't why *Central* was going around tampering with testing.

It was what had gotten their attention in the first place...

“How is that ok?! How is that *legal?!?*”

Viv's continued protestations finally brought Logan back with a blink, though he didn't look away from Ward even as he returned from his moment of epiphany.

“It's not. It can't be,” Laurent responded heatedly, obviously starting to let the anger come in full now that she knew Ward hadn't *actually* had a stroke or something. “This *isn't* alright. I'll message Maddison. My father too, if I have to. There's got to be *something* that we can—!”

Ward tried to have them down with both hands, looking a little stricken, but that only earned him the ire of both girls as they turned on him and shouted “Don’t. Move!” in perfect unison. He pushed himself back into the angled bed automatically, as though trying to retreat even those couple inches this could earn him, but just the same typed something out—obviously a placation—that Logan didn’t even notice as the text flashed across his screen.

Central... he was still thinking to himself, still stunned.

He didn’t ask himself anymore what the hell it was about Ward that would have the ISCM keeping tabs on the an first year. Logan, just like the rest of the school—and probably a measurable swatch of SCT enthusiasts throughout the ISC, by now—and long since pulled up Ward’s assignment baseline. The climb from the Es into the Cs had already been impressive enough, but Ward had started even further back—in the damn Fs—before he’d been accepted to the school, meaning he had risen *three full tiers* in half-a-year. That wasn’t just unheard of. It was statistically impossible.

Except that—*technically*—it wasn’t...

The answer was there, of course. Had *been* there, tapping at Logan’s suspicions for months, now. The idea was so ludicrous—so *unfathomable*—though, that he had never *really* seriously entertained the concept.

But now...

Now, as Logan watched Ward trying to calm Laurent and Viv down in what looked like mounting alarm as the pair continued to work themselves up into what was promising to be a fiery frenzy, he doubted there was any other explanation.

Logan steeled himself, watching Ward’s face—still fixed on the girls—a moment more before he began to voice his question.

“Ward.” He hadn’t meant his voice to come out that low, like he didn’t even want Laurent and Viv to overhear. “What’s your Growth spe—?”

Ward had started to look around at him at his name, had started to take in the words, when Logan was interrupted by the sound of the door opening and the blur of two people bolting into the room. Predictably, Catchwick led the way, Cashe right on his heels, both carrying their caps in one hand and their bags in the other. It was obvious they'd sprinted to the hospital at full speed, because their faces and hair looked particularly windswept.

"Rei!" Catchwick was saying even as he entered, yellow eyes snapping to the bed Ward was lying in while Logan, Laurent, and Viv continued to hover over him. "Sorry! Takeshi wouldn't let us out of double period, even after we heard that—Oh, *woah!*"

The Saber stopped short 5 feet from the foot of the bed, forcing Cashe to reflexively side-step him with a yelp. An instant later, however, she too was gaping at the sight Ward cut. The two of them stood like that, frozen for a second, their appearance sudden enough to have even finally cut Laurent's and Viv's spiraling anger short.

"Ward..." Cashe hissed, finding her voice first and stepping slowly up to the bed as her purplish eyes took him in in horror. "What the hell *happened?*"

Ward raised a hand, looking like he was about to type out the explanation again, when Viv pressed his wrist back down to the bed and answered for him.

"He got *attacked*," she growled.

Any other day—any other *minute*, actually—Logan might have bristled as both Catchwick and Cashe glanced instinctively in his direction at these words. The Lancer was quick to look away—the Saber's gaze lingering for a deliberate moment longer—but he didn't care.

He was still too preoccupied with the weight of understanding, the realization hanging over him like lead chains tied to a falling flyer.

"Attacked?" Cashe repeated, voice rising in obvious confusion. "How? When?"

“Parameter testing.” Laurent was the one to answer. “In combat training, after lunch. And it wasn’t... It wasn’t an ‘attack’, per se...”

That was when Catchwick finally found his tongue, and Logan might have been surprised—had he had the mental capacity to do so, in the moment—at the iron edge in the Saber’s voice as he snarled out his demand.

“Someone explain. *Now.*”

Viv was flexible enough to let Ward give his own recounting, and with all of them there, now, he provided more detail. The test had felt off, he said, explaining the early jump in stimulus he’d experienced, and how those spikes had continued throughout the exam. He told them how he’d made it to the Bs and thought something was wrong, and how the pain and gravity and leapt too high for him to handle and B3, resulting in his collapse. He told them about hitting the ground, about caught up blood, and passing out only to wake up in the hospital with a hole in his longs and Guest standing over him with the doctors “overusing his case”.

And, at a passing question from Viv, Ward also told them what his *actual* Fortitude score had been, for once not hesitating even though he did glance briefly at Logan as he responded.

Logan forced himself to pay attention this time, forced himself to read the text that spilled across his NOED. With every *word* he became more convinced that he was right, that his suspicions were correct, and the weight over his shoulders only got heavier and heavier until finally he had to reach out to put a steadying hand on the bed himself for fear of staggering. When the recounting was over, all of them stood in silence, the facts out in full for Logan, Viv, and Laurent, now, and the entire story completely new to Catchwick and Cashe.

Who ended up having two very different reactions to the retelling.

“Central?” Cashe asked weakly.

“A!?!” Catchwick demanded at the same time, looking flabberghasted. “DUDE!”

Fortunately, Laurent had the sense to prioritize the questions.

“It’s not the first time,” she answered Cashe steadily, obviously working to keep her voice even. “Last quarter, during the Intra-Schools. We’re 99% sure Reese got orders to scramble the match that set the two of them against each other.” She waved between Catchwick and Ward.

Cashe’s face grew stony. “Yeah...” she said quietly. “I *thought* that was sketchy... Reese said something about ‘injuries’ requiring the shuffling, but I don’t think anyone ever found out who got hurt... Is *that* what was going on?”

Laurent nodded. “Technically we don’t know for sure but...”

“Let’s just say were as close to certain as we can be,” Viv finished for her with a snarl.

Cashe frowned, eyes flicking between the girls, then settling on Rei.

“A1...” she said, sounding simultaneously awed and in total disbelief. “That’s... That’s something else, Ward...”

“That’s what *I* said!” Catchwick tried to interrupt, throwing his hands up and looking around as though not understanding why his previous exclamation had been ignored. “That’s *insane!* And if *last* quarter’s parameter test wasn’t a record, this *has* to be, right? Ri—??”

“How did you get there?”

Cashe’s question cut the Saber off sharply, the girl’s eyes so intently still set on Ward that Logan was pretty sure she’d hadn’t even noticed he had been speaking. It hung in the silence that followed, Laurent and Viv stiffening on either side of the been, Catchwick freezing with his arms still up.

Nothing could quite freeze over a fire like addressing the elephant in the room.

For a long, long time, Ward met Cashe’s gaze, but said nothing. He wasn’t nervous. Logan could tell that at a glance. He was hesitating or worried or anything that might have been construed as unsure or indecisive.

On the contrary, Ward was staring at Cashe like he were sizing her up, blue eyes so still on her purple-green ones that after a moment the intensity of her own gaze started to collapse.

“Sorry,” she said after a moment, hands tightening around her cap and the strap of her bag. “I get that we’ve been dancing around this for weeks now—*longer* in some ways—but there’s a limit to what I’m cool with not knowing when *Central Command* is suddenly involved, Ward. There’s something going on with you. I know that. *Everyone*, knows that. But we don’t know what. And you waltz onto campus as an E-ranker—Well no. You *don’t* ‘waltz’—” she brought her cap up to cut Viv’s snarl of disbelief short “—I know that, now. But you arrive at school two tiers lower than any student ever accepted to Galen’s, and then spend six months flying by the rest of us. I *know* you put in the effort, I do!” Viv clearly wanted to interrupted, but Cashe bulled on in a rush, now. “But you’ve *got* to know we can tell somethings going on! I’m glad I’m on this squad—*thrilled*, I promise—and I get that Grant and I are still a step outside of the circle you four have going on—” she gestured to Ward, Laurent, Viv, and Catchwick with the hat “—but now it’s different... Central Command...” She let her hand drop again with a disbelieving shake of her head. “I believe you, I do. But I need to know *why*. I need to know why they’re messing with you, why you hit *A1* in a parameter test everyone else has barely scraped the upper *Cs* in.” Her confidence was back as she stared Ward down, returning as the words she’d clearly been keeping close to her chest for some time spilled out at last. “I need to know why you started school in the low Es, and half a year later you’re second-highest ranked first year on campus...”

She trailed off, and Logan found himself fighting back the strangest desire to *applaud*. There had been a time, maybe, where *he* would have been the one to shred through the invisible “Do Not Enter” tape that surrounded the topic of Ward and his CAD, but he wouldn’t have managed it with *half* the diplomacy the Lancer had.

Also, he didn't feel like getting castrated the next time he snuck Viv into his room...

Cashe's words seemed to ring, now. Instead of silence, the room felt like it was holding its breath, the stillness before the storm. Viv was still vibrating with indignation, but she seemed to understand that this *wasn't* her fight to take on for once, while across from her Laurent had turned away from the Lancer to look at Ward.

Ward, who still hadn't moved except to cross one hand over the other in his lap, left hand covering the CAD band of his right wrist almost protectively, thumb running over the three vyzetrium gems that glowed a deep, heavy blue against the white steel they were set in.

For a long time—for an *eternity*, it felt like—nothing happened. No one moved or spoke. Only eyes shifted from person to person, mostly Catchwick's and Viv's nervous energy manifesting as they looked from Ward to Cashe to Ward and back again. Outside, a small group of people passed the room in conversation, voices muffled beyond recognition by the opaque glass.

And then, just as Cashe's face started to fall, like she was starting to think she wasn't going to get even the hint of an answer, Ward lifted a hand and began to type.

I'm not, the first message came.

Everyone—even Laurent, Viv, and Catchwick—frowned in confusion at this.

“You not?” Cashe echoed, her own expression having brightened only momentarily before dipping with a lack of understanding at this. “Not what.”

I'm not the second strongest anymore. Shido ranked up. And evolved.

Laurent, funny enough, was the first one to register this information, her excitement coming first in a gasp, then tempered squeal of excitement.

“What?! Rei, you didn’t say that! That’s amazing!” Her congratulations came out in a rush. “You’re C7, now?? What did Shido do?? Oh, you probably don’t know yet, do you! It’ll have to wait till—”

But Ward, for once, wasn’t looking at the girl.

He was still watching Cashe even as his fingers continued to move over the invisible keyboard at his side.

Shido is special, Cashe. Really special. There’s a reason for everything, like you said, and there’s a part of me that wants to tell you that reason, but I can’t. Not now.

“Why not?” Cashe asked after she’d read the message. She was careful with the question, though, not snappish or heated like Logan thought he would have been in her shoes. Now that she was getting *some* kind of answer, it was obviously she wanted to keep the conversation going. “Let’s be really: I have a pretty good idea of what’s going on, but why can’t you just tell me? Confirm my theory for me.”

Because it’s information that I can’t put back in the bottle. Not once it’s out there.

Cashe’s frown deeper, eyebrows coming together. “But *they* know.” She waved at the others again. “If it’s that bad, why can they know, but not us?” She pointed between herself and Logan.

It was a fair question, and apparently Ward thought so to, because he finally paused. After a second he looked around, meeting Laurent’s, Viv’s, and Catchwick’s gazes one after the other.

Because I trust them, the answer finally came.

Cashe's face darkened at this, and her mouth opened to respond. Before she could, though, Laurent stopped her with a word.

“Wait.”

Sure enough, Ward was still typing.

I trust you, too. I do. Both of you. But this is different. If you think you have a good idea of what's going on, I want you to take that idea, dial to 10, and then double it.

Cashe's eyes went wide at this, any offense very suddenly forgotten. “Wha—?” she started, clearly taken aback by extreme nature of this promise. “H-How—?”

Another message, though, interrupted her.

And if that doesn't help, ask Grant. I know for a fact he's on the right track...

Logan snapped his head around from watching Cashe to look at Ward. The boy's eyes were lifted to him, now, narrowed and deadly serious.

After a second, Logan let out a low snort.

“So you did hear me?” he grunted.

Ward nodded.

“Hear what?” Cashe asked quickly, looking between them with wide eyes. “Hear what? What's ‘the right track?’”

Before he answered, Logan watched Ward a moment longer, waiting.

The nod was almost imperceptible.

He looked back to Cashe. The others were all staring at him, studying him with something like warning in every gaze, including Viv's.

“I asked him how high his Growth rank was,” Logan told the Lancer quietly.

Cashe hissed, and Laurent and Viv’s grips tightened on the bedrails while Catchwick’s face grew tense.

“And?” the Lancer asked, obviously working to keep her voice steady. “What did he say?”

“He didn’t...” Logan said with a frown, looking back to look Ward in the eye again. “But I think that’s kind of the point...”