

Chapter ??

“Ok! Watch your step on the way out and keep an eye open for civilian coming and going! Second and third years, follow Captain Takeshi! First years, behind Captain Samsus! Move it!”

At Valera’s command the throng of Galens students milling before her in the hotel lobby start to take their leave, the third years leading the way out into the howling nightmare of the storm, soon followed by the second years, then the firsts taking the rear. As this final group left Valera couldn’t help but keep a careful eye on Ward and his friends, the anger returning as she noted the one of the boy’s bags on Catchwick’s shoulders, the other on Grant’s. Laurent and Arada were hovering close to him, too, seeming concerned that he might keel over at any point, which was a fair worry given Ward was still limping as Firesong trailed along behind Valoremade and Red Crown. Even Cashe appeared to be fretting a little, on Laurent’s otherside but looking at Ward every couple of seconds like she wasn’t sure what she should be doing, if there was anything to be done at all.

There wasn’t, of course. Ward’s body would heal, and the boy had an iron tenacity that put Valera’s own Arena name to shame. All he needed was time. Nothing more could be done for him.

Except... Valera corrected herself, her attention finally shifting to the last of the Galen Sectional attendants as Firesong vanished, too, into the storm. Dyrk Reese, who she’d not called to attend to any of the year groups--as he’d undoubtedly been expecting to—had looked around at her in brief irritation before stooping to gather his own bags from the ground and turning to head for the door.

“Not you, Major,” Valera said coolly, working very, *very* hard not to keep the satisfaction out of her voice.

The man froze on the edge of the door, framed in the raging white of the snow, his uniform tossed around his legs by the wind. After a moment he turned to look at her, his taught faced stretched in anger now and—Valera hoped—just a touch of confusion.

“Excuse me, *Captain?*” the Major growled, yet again intoning her rank. The man really never learned.

This time, though, Valera didn’t need to play any games with him.

“Not you, Major,” she repeated, a little louder now, bending to gather her bags in one hand before striding forward, reaching into the inside pocket of her jacket as she did. She could feel the yes of the milling students from the schools who hadn’t departed yet, as well as the common civilians coming and going from the hotel. Good. That was by design.

Let Reese see what a public crucifixion was like.

“Are you telling me not to get on the transport?” the Major half-hissed, half-snarled. “If so, then you are *significantly* overestimating the bounds of your authority on this—”

“That is exactly what I’m tell you, Major, but I’m fortunately not the only one.” Valera stopped in front of the man—maybe a little closer than was necessary—and pressed the letter she had just pulled out of her jacket into his chest—maybe a little more forcefully than was needed. A *paper* letter, plain white, and stamped closed with a red wax seal in the shape of the Galen’s griffin.

Dyrk went stiff, and Valera finally couldn’t help but sneer the tiniest bit.

“Yeeeah... I thought you might know what that is. Should I explain for you, or do you want to read it yourself?”

Dyrk, for once, seemed to have no response, staring down at the letter still pressed atop the gold buttons of his uniform.

“No answer? I’ll take that to mean you need some translation.” Valera let her voice take on the quick, snapping formality of a career officer as she unceremoniously tucked the letter into the overlap of his jacket. “Major Dyrk Reese, you are hereby relieved of your duties as a staff officer at the Galens Institute, effective immediately. As per the orders provided—” she tapped the wax griffin seal with a finger once “—you are being transferred to the authority of the Kenneth Academy, whose commanding officer will oversee the assignment of your new role and duties. You are provided 14 days of paid leave to make arrangements, after which any possessions and personals left in your Galens quarters will be collected and forwarded to the emergency address the ISCM has on record. We thank you for your service, sir, and wish you luck on your new path.”

Finishing her assigned speech, Valera snapped up into the mandatory salute of a lesser officer in the presence of her superior, if only to rub a little salt in the wound.

She’d never even known she could be so petty...

For a long, *long* time Dyrk just stared at the letter, never touching it, his arms lifted slightly to either side of his body despite the bags he carried, like he subconsciously thought keeping his hands away from the thing would stop it from ever being opened. When he finally spoke it was without looking up, and it was with the stuttered, jarring words of a man in utter shock.

“W-what...? What? H-How? W-what is the meaning of...? How?”

Valera let her hand slowly drop, taking in the man, watching him start to spiral.

She answered without an ounce of mercy.

“You really didn’t see this coming? *Really?* After everything you’ve done? After all the bullshit you’ve pulled? Setting aside the stunt you pulled during the Intra-Schools—oh, sorry, ‘allegedly pulled’—” she corrected herself as the Major twitched at the words “—what did you think would come of this week? You not only made a minimum effort to support the students assigned you, but you *publicly berated them* in a clear and obvious attempt to tear team Firesong down. If that wasn’t enough, I also happen to know that you deliberately went out of your way to demoralize them after their Friday victories. Tack all that on to the general truth that your kind of an ass, Reese, and I’m having trouble understanding what you can’t get your head around.”

Again the Major was silent for a bit, but the shock seemed to be dissipating. Instead, the man was stiff, and Valera could see the fury replacing the surprise.

“I won’t stand for this,” he finally hissed out, at last lifting his face to look her in the eyes and speaking through clenched teeth. “Do you hear me, Captain. I will not stand for this. I don’t know what strings you pulled or favors you cashed in, but the Colonel will see this righted, and when he does I will make the formal recommendation that you be rem—”

“I would take a look at who signed those transfer docs before you go invoking Guest’s name, Major,” Valera said smoothly. “You do not have as many allies as you think, in this fight.”

Reese gaped at that, staring at her in disbelief.

Then the bags fell at last, and his hands moved with the blurred speed of an A-Ranked User losing control of their specs as he snatched the letter out of his jacket to rip it up with a precise jerk. Wrenching the papers within free, he eyes snapped over the text Valera knew to be written

within, his complexion going more and more white with every back and forth. Then, at last, he stopped at the very bottom of page, where the formal, hand-written signatures required of this kind of formal dismissal—because it *was* a dismissal, they both new—was traditionally written out. Valera knew, too, whose pair of names closed the letter, and she almost felt bad for the man.

“No,” Reese breathed out like he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. “No... You can’t do this...”

“You’re right, *Major*,” Valera agreed at once, taking pleasure on enunciating his rank. “I can’t do anything. I’m merely a Captain. Fortunately for me, though, Colonel Guest and General Abel of Central Command are *very* much capable of doing so, as demonstrated.”

“No... *No*. How? Why?!”

Valera narrowed her eyes as the Major’s voice started to rise. She considered dropping her bags, but thought better of it. With so many eyes on the pair of them, she didn’t want to give anyone—especially the civilians—cause for actual concern.

“Major Reese, I would remind you that we are in public. It maybe be best not to cause a scene.”

Reese’s attention snapped to her again, his irises were clearly outline in glowing XXXXX light, For a second—a very long, tense second—Valera stared him down, not calling on her own CAD, but making sure he was aware of the fact that she was ready for him if he tried to do anything stupid. A? he might be, but Valera was a Knight-Class S-Rank.

It wouldn’t even be a fight.

Either because he knew this or because he just thought better of picking a fight in uniform, the glow dimmed in Reese’s eyes steadily. With it, too, dropped his shoulders, until the man was almost sagging before Valera like the weight of the world had suddenly fallen onto him.

“No... You don’t understand... You *can’t* understand... Over the kid? This, over that damn kid?”

Valera said nothing at that, half because she hadn’t been given liberty to comment on the topic by the powers that be, half because she wanted to see if Reese would go any further in his collapse.

He obliged momentarily.

“You don’t understand,” he hissed, looking up a her with a wild gleam in his eyes Valera didn’t recognize at first. “Why don’t any of you understand?! He’s dangerous! That kid is *dangerous!*”

Then it clicked for her.

Fear, she realized, staring at Reese, taking him in. The major was *afraid*.

And yet...

“It’s *you* who doesn’t understand, Reese,” she told him softly. “You never did, and I don’t think you ever will. You think you have cause for fear here? *Here?* On a planet *systems* away from Sirius? *Systems* away from the war? You don’t know what fear *is* major.”

“Bull,” Reese snapped at her, some of the color coming back to him now. “*Bullshit*, Dent! Can you not see it? Can *none of you* see it? What that boy is? What that boy could become? He has—” Reese actual paused, seeming to remember his souroundings as he glanced around briefly at the small gathering of concerned onlookers the pair of them had gathered there in the lobby. When he continued it was in the barest whisper only Dent could hear. “He has *S-Ranked* Growth, Dent! *S-Ranked!* Do you know what that means??”

“No, and neither do you,” Valera growled.

“Oh I know what it means,” Reese snapped back, definitely regaining his usually color. “It means that *if* Ward has a limit to his ability to get stronger, it’s one that defies any concept we have of Users today. Forget the damn war! If he’s allowed to grow unfettered, *he* might be the end of us all! Why do *none of you see that?!?*”

Valera bristled, a cold running up her arms at the words.

“Your mistake, Reese, is in assuming that we *don’t* see that.” Her voice was ice as she answered. “But unlike you, we can ‘forget the war’. We can’t forget the threat we *know* is there, *know* is coming. Do you know how I know you never set a foot on the front lines, Reese? Because you can spew horseshit like that with a straight face.”

“Reidon Ward is *dangerous*.” Reese was almost pleading through his anger now, like he as desperately wanted her to understand his fear as he wanted her to register his anger. “That’s all I ever saw!”

“Which is explains why you failed as a mentor, and officer of the ISCM, and an adult then, doesn’t it. You never even tried to see him as anything more than a threat, did you? Not even as a weapon? As a potential key to our strategy? Why do you think Abel—*Central Command*—is among the signors of that letter, Reese? You threatened the future of what they are hoping might be one of their greatest assets, and you’re surprised you’re getting kicked to the curb??”

“Central are the ones who authorized the manipulation of the Intra-School brackets last—”

“You were useful to them for a moment, yes, but then you proved unable to lay off the gas. You push and you push and you push without relent, until it’s obvious to anyone watching with any intention that your only aim is to degrade and break Reidon Ward, even at the cost of those around him.” Valera sneered at him. “On the plus side, at least you’ve given up on your bullshit ‘in the name of the school’ excuse. It’s kind of nice to see your true colors. And they’re all yellow.”

Reese’s face went purple at that, but Valera was done.

“No.” She bared her teeth, bring up a hand to stop him as he started to speak, letter her own anger into her eyes a little at last. They grew warm as they started to glow. “You’ll get nothing else out of me, much less sympathy or any kind of friend. You have your orders, Major. I was merely the messenger. You made this bed. Enjoy sleeping in it, *sir*.”

And then, with another swift salute, she turned a headed out the door, leaving Reese standing there red in face and mouth open.

She’d only made it two steps into the snow before she had to stop and turn, yelling back over the wind.

“You know where you *really* screwed your chances, though, Reese? Just so you don’t dig yourself the same hole at Kenneth?”

Reese scowled, but didn’t respond. Nor, though, did he turn away, so Valera answered the question for him anyway.

“You forgot that Ward’s just a kid, Reese. At the end of the day he’s just a kid.”