

CHAPTER 20

Rei hit a section of unbroken ice some 20 feet downstream of where Biggs stood, crushing through it as expected. He felt the rush of the water through Shido's steel—CADs were incredible like that—but not the cold, and his clawed boots found good purchase on the rocky bed of the stream. Straightening, he turned towards the Marston's boy and started his approach, his Strength spec and the smooth plating along his shins splitting the inch-thick ice before him with every step like it was nothing.

When they were barely a body length away from each other, he stopped, eyeing Biggs up and down.

“So...” he started steadily, raising both hands up from his sides to let the blue glow of Shido's claws ripple off the stream and the stone to either side of him. “Here we are.”

Biggs, in answer, bared his teeth at Rei, eyes flicking nervously from him to the cliffs above—where the others were all undoubtedly gathered now—and back again.

“*And?*” he demanded after a second. “What about it?”

“Well you seemed like you wanted a shot at me yesterday,” Rei offered smoothly, dropping his hands again and cocking his head at the larger boy. Biggs wasn't as tall as Grant, but he was probably a few inches over Catcher, making him most of a *foot* above Rei. “Seems my teammate granted your wish.”

Biggs snarled at this. “You want to *fight*?! Like *this*?! I don't even have a weapon!”

“And who's fault is that?” Rei asked with a snort. “Why haven't you ditched already? You could have had it back in your hands while the three of us were talking on the cliff.”

He'd thought maybe the Boneyard squad leader hadn't thought to do that, but Biggs' sneer corrected him at once.

“Just so you lot can jump me in the time I’m undefended? Fat chance! Not after how you guys fought in the match! That was horseshit! What kind of cadet doesn’t call on their CAD, and waits around hiding for their opponents to—?!”

“*Smart* cadets, jackass,” Rei cut him off sharply, losing patience a little. “If you’re going to whine about losing to better tactics, then I’ve got nothing more to say to you. Ditch. Get your hammer back. Then we’ll do this.”

Biggs’s face lost a little of the color it had, and he took half a step back nervously. “I-I told you,” he stammered. “I’m not about to drop my CAD and let you jump me when you’re five feet from—”

“You know what, dude?” Rei interrupted again, shaking his head in disbelief. “Fine. You want it to be fair? I thought not slicing you open where you stood was enough to cue enough, but clearly you need a bit more buttering up. How’s this?” Rei opened his hands up to either side of his hips, leaving himself wide open. “Recall.”

Shido vanished from his body in a heartbeat, and Rei almost winced in shock as the frigid rush of the water *did* hit him now, instantly digging into his bare feet and shins to the bone, all of which had already been painfully freezing from the earlier ambush.

“How’s this?” he offered, starting to turn in a slow circle. “No CAD. You can ditch, and once you have your hammer back we can—”

There was a *crack* breaking ice, and if he’d had time Rei might have sighed in disappointment.

Instead, he whirled and met Biggs’ lunge head-on, the Mauler having made one last desperate move to try to take advantage of his lack of CAD and turned back.

Rei’s specs, on average, were closer to C3 or C4 than his actual C7 Rank. Add that to the fact that Shido was indeed *not* called around his limbs and his potential in a fight might have been pretty similar to Biggs’ with *his* CAD manifested, at least a paper.

The reality, though, was that even if Rei didn’t suspect he was the much better fighter, he knew, at the very least, that he was the *faster* one.

By lightyears.

With a sweep of his left hand Rei redirected Biggs' leading punch outward, letting the steel gauntlet slip by his left cheek by millimeters. At the same time his right hand snapped up to take a fistful of the Mauler's combat suit, just above where the green mirrored lions of Marston's had been stitched into the ICSM standard first-year grey. Then, twisting into his deflection and using Biggs' lunge to advantage, Rei rolled and hauled as hard as he could on the cloth. It said something about the quality of the fabric that it didn't tear.

It said something else entirely about Rei's improved Strength when Biggs yelped in surprise as all 300-plus pounds of him and his CAD were hauled off his feet and bodily thrown some 15 feet down-stream, landing in an explosion of cracked ice and cold water near where Rei had first dropped from the cliffs above.

"Idiot," Rei muttered under his breath, though he wasn't sure who he was admonishing in the moment. He was annoyed at Biggs for not having taken the opportunity to be decent about things, sure, but he was angrier at himself for having given then boy the opportunity in the first place. It probably would have been better for everyone if he'd just taken the Mauler's head the moment he'd dropped into the gulley, or if Grant had seen it done without these theatrics.

But Rei was getting sick—*so* sick—of being treated like shit just because he didn't "look the part".

Biggs was up inside of 2 seconds, spluttering and coughing up water as he shoved himself free of the stream. Getting to his feet, he staggered and turned, scrambling to wipe the wet from his eyes and blinking rapidly in an attempted clear his vision.

He wasn't quick enough, though, and Rei's flying knee took him in the chest, sending the Mauler rocketing back again.

This time a bend in the stream broke his fall, and he slammed into the rock wall of the valley with a *crunch* of breaking stone and ice and an “*Ooomph!*” of forcefully expelled breath.

“Call,” Rei muttered, watching the Mauler tumbled off the stone to crash into the frozen stream again. As Biggs struggled a bit more to get up this time, Rei looked up. As he’d suspected, all five of the other members of Firesong were there now, but he deliberately ignored all gazes but one.

“Grant!” he called up over the wind he knew was still howling above, hold out a hand in indication.

Grant didn’t hesitate.

Red vysetrium flashed as he tossed down Bigg’s hammer.

Rei didn’t bother trying to catch the thing. He knew better. There was a reason Maulers in particular were at a disadvantage when they lost an arm or a hand in a fight. Sure enough, the hammer fell head-first, and demonstrated its incredible weight by landing in the stream with a small explosion of ice and water. Rei got a hand up and turned his face away in time to avoid the worst of it, but he was still drenched, and when he looked back only the haft of the hammer was visible, sticking out of the flow like a crimson beacon.

Moving towards it, Rei spoke again.

“Type Shift: Saber Mode.”

Shido sparked as it responded, short bursts of blue static arching over and off his arms and legs as the CAD changed. By the time he stood by the hammer, Rei’s armor was thicker and less sleek, and the single-edged sword in his right hand was mirrored by the claws tipping the fingers of his left.

He was glad he’d made the change, too, because he ended up having to stick the sword into the rocky bed of the stream to take the Mauler weapon in both hands before he could heave it up with no small amount of strain.

Then, with a twist and every ounce of the *substantial* improvement in Strength the Type Shift had granted him, he just managed to toss the hammer towards the spot where Biggs had finally regained his footing once more.

Again it struck the stream, but the wash of water and shattered ice was much less this time, barely reaching the Maston's boy's chest. It took him by surprise just the same, however, because he leapt back as the weapon was returned to him, then stood gawking at it for a several seconds, not understanding.

"Pick it up," Rei clarified for him at last as he himself reached out and jerked Shido's sword free from the steam bed. "You wanted a 'fair' shot. Now you've got it."

Biggs' found his voice even as he took two sudden, jerking steps forward to take hold of the hammer. To his credit, he hauled it up much more easily than Rei had, which spoke to a considerable strength spec.

"A shot? At what?"

"At proving I'm a 'stand in'. What else?"

And then Rei surged forward, ripping through what little ice was left intact between the two of them, clawed hand leading the way and blade trailing behind at the ready.

In any other circumstances Rei didn't think he would have chanced opening an engagement in Saber Mode. He hadn't trained with the form enough to make it useful as anything other than a surprise attack or confusing shift in pace in the middle of an exchange. In that moment, however, things had lined up in such a way as to make the risk not only possible, but preferable. For one thing, Aria and the rest of the team were standing at the ready above them, so even in the event that he went down it would have a negligible impact on the impending nature of Firesong's victory.

For another, he needed to make an example of Daniel Biggs.

In the blink it took him to close the distance, Rei's drew on his neuroline to its fullest extent. The reduced Cognition of Saber Mode made his thoughts feel lagging

compared to the mental abilities of his Brawler form, but it did most of its job admirably, with thousands of hours of training and study doing the rest. Biggs was too close to the left wall, and was right-hand-dominant. He wouldn't be able to swing the heavy hammer horizontally. He was near the back as well, yes, but stepping forward would be a lot easier than stepping sideways when wielding such an ungainly weapon. With Rei charging him head on, there was only one thing the Maston's cadet could do.

And so, as expected, he bellowed as he charged to meet Rei, the hammer coming up and falling in a thundering, vertical arc.

It was over in a blink.

With deliberate, measured movements Rei stepped sideways at the last second, just out of the swing of the weapon. He twisted as it fell, rolling the impetus of his rush and turn into a dropping strike of his own. The Shido's vysetrium-line blade fell just behind the upper haft of the hammer, and as the Mauler weapon crashed into the stream and stopped dead as it struck the rocks beneath the water, the sword's edge cleaved through that thinnest part of the Bigg's Device, severing handle from head. Rei was hardly done, though, retracting the blade even as his opponent started to recoil in shock, stepping around the Mauler as he continued to twist.

Two turns. Four clean, severing cuts. Less than a single second.

And done with a deliberate grace Rei wanted every single person watching to have carved in their memory of the moment, to recall whenever they thought of scorning his size or stature or scars ever again.

In the end, Rei was left standing behind Biggs, his back to the boy, Shido's sword swept out the side where it had finished the arc of his last blow by carving a clean sheet of water out of the stream. The Mauler didn't make a sound as he fell, as he collapsed down to splash into the stream. How could he have? The first cut had broken his hammer. The second and third had relieved him of an arm and leg each.

And the fourth had cleanly parted his neck, severing brain from body.

“All Boneyard combatants eliminated.” The Arena announced. “Winner: Firesong”

Almost at once the sounds of the stadium returned with a deafening roar as the zone began to fade and Rei started to drop. Behind him he knew Biggs and the rest of Firesong would be descending as well, falling slowly through the vanishing snow and frozen earth. He didn't look back at any of them, though.

Instead, he just raised a hand, smiled, and allowed himself a moment to wave into the bellowing crowd he knew he had just given a show worthy of their praise.