

CHAPTER 22

“Go on ahead. I’ll catch up to you guys in a bit.”

Rei was still pissed as Firesong finally reached the elevator lobby at the south end of the Kenneth Arena, but Dent’s intervention had settled him enough to at least think straight. He’d known, of course, that he and Grant had been punching a *lot* of buttons in how they’d dealt with Biggs, but he hadn’t expected Dyrk Reese to go full-monty on them in public like that. It had had his—and most of the others’, he bet—blood boiling from the go, and the Captain had arrived about 30 seconds or so before Rei found out if his Strength was high enough to get through an A-ranked officer’s reaction shield.

It hadn’t helped, either, that he’d gotten something of a surprise notification halfway through them getting chewed out by the major.

“Everything ok?” Catcher asked as the rest of the team looked around at him from where they’d been waiting in silence for a car.

Rei nodded, deliberately not looking at anyone as the numbers on the smart-glass wall before them showed one of the elevators about to reach the main floor. “Yeah. Don’t worry about. Just need to check something.”

He tried to be nonchalant about it, but he knew he hadn’t succeeded when Aria, Catcher, and Viv’s expression all fell into a practiced sort of flatness, and Cashe and Grant exchanged a wary look.

Rei knew he wasn’t fooling anyone anymore, but there was a merit to keeping up appearance.

At least for a little while longer...

“We’ll meet you on the fields,” Aria said firmly, as though to make it clear that there would be no arguing from anyone thinking of doing so. “SB2. Don’t take too long.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Rei offered with a forced grin and a mock salute as the car reached them. Aria rolled her eyes, but led the other four onto the elevator, leaving him on his own. He caught Catcher’s eye as the door closed, not missing the questioning lift of one eyebrow, and he allowed the Saber a small nod of confirmation.

When they were gone, Rei didn’t hesitate before selecting the red notification in the corner of his frame. It had been teasing him for 5 minutes now.

It also served as a good distraction for the stares and whispers of the other cadets—and some chaperones—lingering around him as they waited for their own rides down into the subbasements.

Gonna have to get used that that, he thought to himself as the upgrade notification took over his vision.

...

Processing combat information.

...

Calculating.

...

Results:

Strength: Adequate

Endurance: Adequate

Speed: Adequate

Cognition: Adequate

Offense: Lacking

Defense: Lacking

Growth: Not Applicable

...

Checking combat data acquisition.

...

Adequate data acquirement met.

Device initiating adjustments to:

Offense.

Defense.

...

Adjustment complete.

Offense has been upgraded from Rank C3 to C4.

Defense has been upgraded from Rank C3 to C4.

Rei caught himself about to make a face at the notification, ready to give the information a look that would have very much spelled out for any onlookers the “*What the hell?*” reaction he was otherwise having. Defense had gone up? *And* Offense? He couldn’t get his mind around it. The latter he could understand—it had been a minute since his Offense had ranked—but Defense? That had made a *two point bump* literally a week before after the fiasco with his parameter testing and Shido’s evolution...

And now it had upgraded *again*...?

But that wasn’t the only thing that was confusing Rei. Boneyard was a perplexing factor too. They’d been a full team of new fighters to take on, sure, but not only had Rei only had it out with one and barely touched another, but the average rank of the Maston’s team had been 6 or 7 levels under his.

And yet Shido had ranked up not once but... twice?

Rei stood there for a long time, contemplating this new information. He had a theory, but it was a loose one, and he wanted to develop it further with testing before locking into it if he could. It wasn’t the moment anyway, given the timing, but as he closed the notification again Rei felt an old tingle of anticipation down his back, and he

couldn't help but have to work to keep from bouncing on his heels in excitement as he considered it.

Two ranks. Against a weaker team. There was only one factor he could think of that might have triggered that, and if he was right...

But no. No sense in dwelling on the possibility until he knew for sure. For the time being, he would keep it to himself and not get his hopes up. Yeah. He could do that. He could hold it close to his chest, at least for the rest of the week.

His resolve lasted all of 30 seconds after he'd grabbed a spot in the next car to ride it down to SB2, then stepped out into the lobby to find Aria waiting for him with arms crossed and lips pursed.

"Shouldn't you be with the oth—?" Rei started to ask, hoping to deflect the assault he knew was coming.

He didn't even finish before the girl took his hand and dragged him off down the hall, away from the lobby and the gaggle of first-years from every school coming and going, until they found a relatively quiet spot in the tunnels that—fortunately—weren't nearly as busy as the main floor's upstairs.

There she stopped and turned him, leaning in until their faces were barely 2 inches apart.

"Ok. What happened?"

The question was more stated than asked, so obviously sure was Aria that something had gone down.

"Nothing serious," Rei tried to play it off with an attempt at a shrug. "Just an upgrade. Nothing out of the ordinary."

"Uh huh," Aria answered in a tone that communicated that she very, *very* much did not believe him. "If that was actually the case you would have checked it on the way down and told us afterwards. Don't bullshit me, Reidon Ward. I might not know you as well as Viv yet, but I *do* know you."

Alarmingly well, apparently, Rei couldn't help but think, struggling to weather the intensity of her green eyes.

He cracked within 2 seconds.

“Okay,” he groaned after a second, bring his hands up before him like that might ward away further scrutiny. “*Okay.* I just... I thought it was weird, that's all.”

He expected Aria to ask him “Why?”. After all, Shido's Growth spec was known to her, and she'd been around the CAD long enough to not be surprised by it's accelerated pace of improvement anymore.

She didn't.

“Because Boneyard was weak.” She nodded with a frown. “And you only fought two of them, right? Yeah... That's a little strange, given you don't tend to upgrade fighting me or the others anymore...”

Rei stared at her in open surprise.

“What?” Aria asked, going a little red and bring a hand up to brush a strand of red hair out of her face. “Am I sweaty? I hope not. I barely did more than jog in place in that fight...”

“What? No. Well... a little, but that's not it!” Rei scrambled to save himself as she glared at him. “That's not it! It's just... that's *exactly* what I was thinking. About Boneyard...”

Aria smirked, giving him an amused look. “And that's weird to you? Why? I already said it: *do* know you.”

“Yeah... Better than I thought, clearly...”

Aria waved his continued surprise aside, turning to watch a group of tall Kenneth Academy boys pass in what Rei was pretty sure was an attempt to hide a little more color rising in her cheeks. “*Anyway...* Maybe it's not that big a deal? Even if they were weaker than you, they were still new fighters. That's good for Shido, right? Maybe you

were just on the edge, and Boneyard put you over.” She looked at him sidelong again, still not turning his way. “What upgraded?”

“Offense...” Rei started.

“Oh well that makes sense, right? Didn’t you mention it had been a while since it impr—?”

“... and Defense.” he finished.

Aria stopped talking, at last looking him straight in the face again. For a second she didn’t say anything, taking him in with wide eyes.

“Ookay then...” she got out eventually. “Yeah... That *is* weird.”

“Exactly,” Rei said. Aria, Viv, and Catcher had all been brought up to speed on Shido’s last evolution, so he wasn’t surprised at her reaction this time. “Hence why I’m a little... confused.”

Aria nodded, appearing to mull over this new information.

After a second, she tilted her head to one side, opened her mouth to speak, then closed it, looking unsure of herself.

“What?” Rei pressed. “What are you thinking?”

“Something silly,” she muttered. “Something stupid.”

“Well I happen to be thinking something a little stupid myself so... Let’s have it.”

Aria furrowed her brow at him a moment longer, clearly not about to be bullied into giving up whatever was running through her mind. Rei stared her down, though, and eventually she snorted.

“I’m wondering if it’s because you took them on without Shido called, okay? I know it sounds dumb!” she was quick to clarify. “I do! But it’s the only thing I can think of that—What? What are you grinning at??”

Because Rei *was* grinning. Broadly. He was beaming at her.

“You know, I like it when you make me feel smart.”

Aria scowled at him. “I *said* I know it sounds dumb. You don’t have to rub it in.”

Rei laughed. “Oh, no. No no. *Not* what I meant.” He raised an open hand, showing off Shido’s three smoldering blue gems over the Device’s black and white steel. “I mean that I was thinking *the exact same thing*. And if you came to the same conclusion... Then I’m feeling a lot less of a fool about it...”

It was true, crazy as it sounded. Having quickly gone over every detail of the fight on the elevator ride down—every facets and second and traded blows, as few as they’d been—it was the only variable he couldn’t account for. It was the only outlier. Boneyard had all been new fighters, yes, but Rei just hadn’t been able to c???? that fact with Shido’s jump in specs no matter how hard he tried to connect that dots. He’d only fought two of the Maston’s squad members, and neither of them had offered any kind of real challenge for one reason or the other.

No. The longer he thought about it, the more he could only see one answer.

Shido hadn’t cared that it hadn’t been called for most of the fight. All it cared about was the ironclad fact that Rei *himself* had been wholly “Lacking” in armament—weapons and armor alike—compared to his opponents for the greatest duration of the bout, and had reacted accordingly.

And if that was the case...

“Rei...” Aria, completely unsurprisingly, beat him to it. “If that true... If Shido read you as missing in Offense and Defense in that fight because you weren’t wearing a CAD... You know what that mean, right...?”

Rei, no longer looking at her as he stared off at nothing, lost in thought, nodded slowly.

Yeah... Yeah, he did know...

You need to get stronger, Valera Dent’s words echoed—hardly for the first time—in the back of his head.

And if he was right—if *they* were right, since he couldn't discount Aria largely convincing him the fact—Rei may just have discovered an all-new way to snatch at that strength once again.

Then, though, what he was considering struck him in true, and he groaned.

“Oh man... This is gonna suck all over again, isn't it?”

Aria did her best, he thought, not to give him too wicked a smile, but there might have been at least a *touch* of genuine pity in her eyes.

“Yeah... It is...”

Rei snorted, bringing a hand up to rub against his face as he let out a huff of frustration.

Aria, though, reached up and pulled it away gently, watching him more carefully now and not letting go even as he let that hand drop to hang in hers.

“No point in getting depressed about it right now. Not like we'll have a chance to really test it until we get back to school. Besides—” she started pulling him along by the fingers, towards the great opening of the inside wall that led to the warm-up and warm-down field “—you've got other things to worry about right now.”

Rei let himself get dragged along, letting himself enjoy the moment, adjusting to hold Aria's hand a little more firmly. It was only a couple seconds, but the mix of excitement and nerves that Shido's upgrade had caused had calmed by the time they let go as they reached the entrance, where they let go before stepping into the massive, underground space that hosted the subterranean Wargames zone and the Dueling fields it was divided into.

It turned out it was a good thing they had, too...

“If I see it happen again, it will be reported to your school chaperones for discipline! Unbelievable! I don't know what the Galens standards are, but that is *not* acceptable here at Kenneth!”

Aria and Rei stopped short even as they turned the corner, caught by surprised by the raised voice. At once, though, Rei found the officer—a Kenneth Academy second lieutenant—facing off with Viv and Grant, the two of them at rigid attention in front the man as they let themselves get chewed into why Catcher and Cashe stood by watching. At first, Rei thought that the second lieutenant had had the gall to try and ream Firesong—a team from another school—for their actions in the fight, but it was *only* Viv and Grant the officer was yelling at. What was more...

“Why is Catcher smirking?” Aria asked sidelong, taking a step towards the scene, which was being gawked at by some thirty or forty first years from all around the space.

Sure enough, Catcher was looking like he was trying to hide a satisfied grin, while Cashe was *actually* facepalming as she shook her head into her fingers.

“Out in the open for everyone to see! Unacceptable, and undisciplined! You’re fortunate you aren’t students of *my* school, or you’d be running laps until you could loops this room with your eyes shot and your—!”

“So... What’s going on?” Rei asked after he and Aria had slipped behind the second lieutenant to join Catcher and Cashe.

“Idiots,” Cashe answered, not even looking up from her palm, before Catcher could get a word in. “Idiots. That’s what happened.”

“Only *one* idiot, to be fair,” the Saber followed this up with, as though this would clarify things. “Poor Grant just got caught in the crossfire.”

“Oh no...” Aria moaned under the breath. “What did Viv do?”

“Ask her yourself,” Catcher answered with a snicker.

About a minute later the second lieutenant had finally had enough of screaming—all while offering no help whatsoever in guessing what the hell had happened—because he dismissed Viv and Grant both with a jerking wave and a final warning. They half shouted their expected “Yes, sir!”, then hurried over to where Rei and the others stood.

“Viiiivvv...” Aria growled quietly the moment the officer, too, had walked away. “What did you do?”

Viv, though, seemed surprisingly hesitant to answer. She was red in the face, but there was something more than anger in her expression something...

Embarrassed...?

Suddenly suspicious, Rei turned his attention to Grant, and his theory was immediately confirmed. Whereas the Mauler was usually somber of face, he had seemed as irritated as any of them after Reese had tried to make a parade of chewing them out after the fight.

Now, though, the boy only looked dazed, and his hair—sweaty from an *actual* fight where he’d taken on two Users at once not 10 minutes before—was sticking up and weird places.

Understanding dawned, and Rei let out a something between a snort and a guffaw of laughter.

“What?” Aria hissed, turning on him as she realized he’d figured it out. “What did they do?”

“Not *they*,” Rei confirmed for Catcher, eyeing Viv pointedly. “If I had to guess... Cadet Arada here had the bright idea to grab Cadet Grant and... what?... kiss him in the middle of room for of first years and staff?”

Aria let out a choke, then whirled on Viv.

“You *didn’t*...”

Viv, though, looked to be reclaiming a bit of her spark, because she only squirmed a little under her squad leader’s glare as she answered. “... Maybe...?”

“*Viv!*” Aria squeaked. “Are you kidding?? You could have gotten in *so much trouble*.”

Viv, in answer, mumbled something in return, all while Grant was still staring off into the clouds beside her like someone had hit him over the head with a brick.

“What was that?” Aria demanded shakily, clearly unsure of how she was supposed to act in the moment.

Rei saved everyone the trouble. “She said ‘Worth it,’” he answered for Viv, knowing his best friend all too well. “And come on. They’ve already been yelled at and people are staring. No reason to make this a bigger deal than it needs to be...”

Aria looked at a loss for a second or two longer, then threw her hands up and turned away to start for one of the fields on the west side of the room that had just opened up. Catcher and Cashe—still smirking and looking mortified respectively—followed close behind, while Grant started ambling along at their heels in a staggering, lost sort of fashion.

Viv, though, waited, and had gathered the courage to finally look at Rei.

He watched her steadily, waiting, knowing what was coming.

“Rei... I’m really sorry...”

Rei frowned, then crossed his arms. “For what?”

“For... Well... For you know what...”

Rei let the discomfort hang a moment longer, fighting with himself a little.

It was easier now, though, to let go of the confused feelings he was having than he thought it would have been before the fight with Boneyard.

“Don’t be,” he answered with a shrug, starting to turn and indicating that they should follow the others. “It’s not a big deal.”

Viv, though, didn’t budge.

Nor did she seem willing to take the opportunity he was giving her to walk away from the conversation.

“It *is* a big deal,” she insisted, hands coming down to clench into fists at her side. She kept her voice low so that they couldn’t be overheard, but she looked to be having a hard time doing so. “It is *so* a big deal. I’m really sorry. I’m really *really* sorry. I didn’t mean for it to happen, I really didn’t.”

“The kiss, or....?”

If she wanted to have it out here, even a little bit, Rei decided he would give it to her. He’d been trying for weeks—*months* actually, at this point—to get Viv to open up on the subject, after all.

He would take what he could get.

“All of it,” she answered, swallowing hard and looking at the floor. “It’s not... He’s not... I really didn’t mean for it to happen...”

“Yeah... I gathered that,” Rei answered slowly, glancing around to see Aria and the others had reached the field, and had turned back to look at him and Viv. I lifted a finger to indicate they needed a minute, and got a nod of confirmation from Aria and Catcher both. “Wish you would have been down to talk about it with me a little earlier, not gonna lie...”

Viv stiffened, looking stricken, but then nodded.

“Yeah... Yeah, I’m sorry...” the word was sound heavier and heavier every time she repeated it, and Rei felt like the girl, too, was growing smaller and smaller before him. “There’s... a lot about him you don’t know. He’s not all bad, Rei. I *swear* he’s not all b—”

“Viv... I get that.”

As he spoke the words, Rei had to admit to himself that they were—in fact—true. He wasn’t sure if he’d believed that as he’d started to say them—having wanted only to comfort his best friend, standing like this before him—but as they came out, he registered that they were indeed true.

He *did* get that.

And it helped that Viv’s mouth opened as he said them, looking up again to take him in with surprise and—maybe—something a little like... hope?

“I don’t... like Grant, Viv,” he decided to press on. “Don’t really know if I’ll really ever be able to, honestly. Too much bad blood.”

“You don’t have to!” Viv said quickly, taking a step forward as she seemed to see a light in the conversation she wasn’t expecting. “I would *never* ask you to, after everything—”

“*But—*” Rei cut her off, unwilling to let her stifle his momentum, now “—I am *starting* to see why you might. *Starting,*” he repeated, so as to be *crystal* clear. “If I’m being honestly I’ve known he wasn’t an absolute shithead from he start—we all did—but he made it pretty damn hard to convince myself of that last semester. Still...” he thought briefly of Grant’s discomfort as they’d stood briefly overlooking Biggs during the Team Battle match, and of the genuine appreciation he’d felt as he slapped the Mauler on the back in thanks for the provided opportunity “... I am *starting*, to see it.”

Viv took a slow, shaky breath as he finished, nodding in the same way. It took a little, but she managed to smile, blinking a few more times than she might have otherwise and swallowing again before speaking.

“So... You’re not mad?”

“Oh I’m *pissed,*” Rei answered with a snort. “But at you for dating that idiot, and at you for not *talking to me about it.* But—” he added quickly as Viv started to look crestfallen again “—I’ll get over it. Probably. Maybe.”

That got a laugh out of her at last—if a cracking one—and she nodded. “Sure... Yeah. Fair enough.” She paused, then, though. “Rei... There’s more to him, too... I promise you there is. If you give him the chance...”

“I’ll think about it,” Rei answered, suddenly finding his energy for the topic running out as he recalled, now, the brief conversation he and Grant himself had had the day before. “That’s the best you’re gonna get, though.”

“Ok,” was all Viv said, seeing that the conversation was done.

Together they turned, then, and walked in silence through the busy room, not meeting any of the dozens eyes that had been poorly trying to hide that they’d been flicking to the two of them continuously for the last minute or so. It was a little

awkward, but it was better, too, and Rei realized that despite the brevity of the conversation, just a little of a weight he hadn't realized was having between the two of them had lifted.

They were halfway to the zone Aria and the others had claimed when he decided to try and pluck a way just a bit more of it.

“Still... Did you *have* to kiss him in full view of every school at the tournament, officers included?”

He knew it had worked when Viv sniggered at his side.

“He did good. He's working hard. Mama bear is proud of her growing boy.”

At that, Rei stopped dead. A step or two later, Viv did the same, realizing he wasn't with her and turning to look back at him in concern.

“What?” she asked a little nervously, clearly worried she'd undone what progress they'd just achieved.

Rei, though, could only stare at her queasily.

“Viv... remember that rule we made up last year? About neither of us every using the words ‘man meat’ ever again?”

“Yeah...?”

“We're expanding it. Immediately.”