

## CHAPTER 33

PLACEHOLDER TEXT

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Despite the disappointment of the Wargames loss, a part of Rei knew that the Saturday matches ended on a better note than his mood was allowing him to admit. For one thing, Shido saw yet *another* double-jump in stats after processing the disadvantages of that all-out-battle—Speed and Cognition in both modes this time, amazingly enough—his NOED flaring to life as Firesong had been making their dejected, plodding way towards the elevators to warm down. For another, the Team Battle they had later that afternoon brought with it a *decisive* win over Red Crown, numbing the sting of the earlier victory Jack Benaly had clutched for Martin and their squad. It had been something of a cold affair—with not one of the Firesong members speaking throughout the Flood Zone fight other than to relay tactical information or acknowledge one of Arias orders—but the clean execution and subsequent qualification for the format’s finals match seemed to make almost everyone feel a little better. Even Viv, who’d barely spoken a word since the Wargame, managed something like smile while accepting a high five as Aria congratulated all of them on the well-earned W.

Rei, though, just couldn’t bring himself to let his mood improve.

While the others spoke a bit more as they packed up their stuff and left the Arena that evening, he stayed out of almost all conversation, fuming quietly. The entire flight back to the hotel he was mostly silent, too, even when Aria and Catcher took turns trying to draw him into discussion, and he didn’t say much even after they’d reached the Chevaron and dropped their stuff off in their rooms to shower and change in civies before heading for dinner. The meal was an odd balance of excitement and somberness for the first years, with Red Crown obviously wanting to celebrate their finals

qualification all while not a one among them—or Valormade, for that matter—seeming able to meet any of Firesong’s eyes. That was fine, though. Rei wasn’t angry at Martin or the others, or at least not measurably so. Was it frustrating that Firesong had been eliminated from the Wargames brackets because they’d been ganged up on? Yes. Very. But that was also part of the reality of the SCTs and—more poignantly—the reality of *war*. Had the three other squads in the semi-finals *not* mounted a collected effort against Aria’s team, everyone in that Arena knew what would have happened. Red Crown and the others had merely identified a critical threat, and done what they had to to eliminate it first a foremost.

What Rei just *couldn’t* get out of his head, though, was the smug, all-to-pleased look on Dyrk Reese’s face as the man had pleasantly informed them of the details of the match.

That, and the immediate downturn in moral the Major’s words had effected of Firesong.

It stuck with Rei all through dinner and after, when Aria had all six of them gather in her room to review the day. It was nice to to have affirmation that the Team Battle victory had indeed boosted the other five’s spirits as they discussed the Saturday fights—Duels and multi-squad formats both—and Rei even managed to force himself to participate a little to fill in the details of his early participation in the Wargames and what his decision-making process had been like before he’d joined with with Aria, Catcher, and Cashe. After that they only briefly touched on the following morning’s matches—Aria vs. Grant first, then Rei vs. Vademe, then finally whatever pairing came out of those two fights for the finals—before diving into the Team Battle finals against Valormade, but Aria seemed distracted, glancing Rei’s way every minute or so from her place on the bed to where he sat in the room’s sole desk chair. He pretended not to notice, wanting to convince himself he was doing a good job of hiding his frustration,

but after another 10 minutes or so it was Catcher who made the suggestion that they should head to bed since “Everyone seems a little out of it after the day.”

This was met with a general consensus of nodding heads and muttered agreements, and everyone said goodnight and made to take their leave, all but Aria and Viv heading for the door room.

At least until Aria told Viv quietly that she’d be back in a bit, followed Rei out into the hall, and took him firmly by the elbow just as he and Catcher started making for their room. Her grip might as well have been a hundred steel bolts anchoring him to the floor, and he let out an involuntary grunt of surprise as he was brought up short.

“Rei’s gonna catch up with you, Catcher,” Aria told the Saber sweetly when he turned around in concern. “I’m just gonna steal him for a bit.”

Catcher didn’t so much as hesitate. With a grin and a double thumbs up in Rei’s direction he spun on his heels again and hurried to catch up to Cashe and Grant, who hadn’t noticed Aria’s intervention. In silence the pair of them waited, not saying anything until the other three had turned a corner in the hall.

Then Aria slid her fingers down from Rei’s elbow to his hand and promptly started pulling him along in the opposite direction.

“Woah, hey,” Rei grunted in surprised as it took him a second to get his shorter legs moving on pace with hers. “Where we going?”

“You’ll see,” was the only answer he got in answer, which didn’t help his mood.

“Aria, it’s getting late, and if I want to be ready for Vademe tomorrow I should really get to b—”

“You and I both know you could probably take on Vademe without Shido called and come out on top, Rei, so shut up and just come with me.”

Her tone, firm but concerned, was enough to indeed shut Rei up, and he didn’t say another word as she continued to pull him along. They passed a number of other students as they moved, some from Galens and some from the other schools, and Rei

had to work for once to ignore the stares and the whispers that started up as they passed. He really *was* in a pretty shitty mindset, if the eyes and mutterings of a bunch of other cadets was getting to him. Even the not-so-bad knowing smirks and nods he got from some of the others boys pricked at him for some reason, though the wink he got from Candice Rice—the Lasher’s girlfriend—as they crossed her coming out of a room wasn’t so bad, he supposed.

Soon they were at the elevators, and Aria didn’t let go of his hand as she called them a car, Rei noting as she did that she seemed to want to go up. One came in short order, and they climbed in along with a scattered few other hotel guests, tucking themselves into a back corner to wait. Oddly, Aria didn’t actually make a floor selection, and when someone asked her politely where they were headed she smiled and gave them the highest number already displayed as having been selected by the other passengers.

Rei’s curiosity finally got the better of him, and he brought up a new message to her in his frame, typing it out quickly with his free hand before sending it off.

*Where are we going?*

Aria didn’t even blink when he saw the notification hit her, though she did read it and respond in short order.

*You’ll see.*

The answer came with an accompanied squeeze of his hand, and Rei resigned himself to waiting it out.

They lingered in that car for several minutes, stopping every dozen floors or so as they climbed. The Chevron, like every modern metropolis building, had dozens of

elevator, but the sheer scale of the building meant that even ascending as quickly as was safe for humans meant they were still in there for a while. At some point, Rei realized abruptly that he and Aria had been holding hands for probably 5 minutes without him even really noticing, and that thought alone lifted more of his annoyance at the day than any Team Battle victory ever could have.

Whatever other bullshit might have happened, the tournament had brought them closer together without him really even realizing it.

Eventually the car reached the highest floor it that had been selected by any of the passengers going in and out and they'd climbed, and only then did Aria finally reach out with her other hand to touch the nearest wall, bring up the elevator controls. As Rei watched, she selected the highest button on the display—a bold, carefully-designed “R” in the middle of a red circle—and then they were the last of the passengers and the doors were closing again. They climbed one last time, moving faster and faster as the car skipped nearly a hundred floors without stopping now, and then started to slow, eventually coming to a steady stop. Finally the doors opened, and Rei blinked in surprise.

“Uh... Are we allowed to be up here?” he asked hesitantly.

Aria gave a dry laugh, but started stepping out of the elevator, pulling him along with her as she answered.

“Definitely not.”