

## CHAPTER 41

The trek down to the subbasement was agony. At least in large part. For one thing every step sent a jolt of pain through Rei's legs and body, and even with Aria helping to support him on one side with Catcher on the other, Rei only made it by squeezing his eyes shut and willing himself to tolerate every movement. It was fortunate that the underworks and elevators had apparently been cleared when the MIND had done its sweep of the Arena, because he didn't know if he would have had much tolerance for the extra stares and whispers he'd have been bound to get in his current condition. Then again he probably wouldn't have cared. Everything hurt just too damn much. That thought was challenged in turn, however, when *Reese* met them in the north lobby, looking grim and taking Rei in with a nasty sort of frown as they approached. Apparently either Takeshi or the Bishop had summoned him, which might have been some cause for concern under normal circumstance since that left no one to supervise the other students.

But these were anything but normal circumstances.

"Subbasement 3?" was all the Major had asked, looking to Dent for confirmation once they'd were close enough and reaching a hand up to summon them a car when she'd nodded.

In the end, there ended up being only one silver lining to the journey. One *massive* silver lining.

"Oh..." Aria had breathed in surprise from Rei's left after all nine of them had squeezed into a elevator together. He'd managed to open his eyes and look around at her curiously, as did the rest of Firesong, both Captains, and the Major. She was flushed, and at first Rei was worried his added weight was taking a toll on her, but her quickly corrected himself. Firstly, Aria was a Phalanx. She probably could have thrown him over her shoulder and jogged 20 miles before getting winded.

Secondly, her face had been bright, alight with excitement that seemed to momentarily wash away the lingering worry and fear that had still been clinging to her.

“C8...” she’d said quietly, sounding just short of giddy. “And an evolution...”

And just like that the anticipation was back for Rei, twice over now, pulling him away from the pain of his broken body enough to even whisper a thanks to Catcher on his left and tell the Saber he could handle it from there.

Aria helped him alone out of the elevator after that, limping down the hall—had it always been so *long*?—before reaching the wide gap in the arched wall that led them out onto the subbasement practice field. It was a little eerie, stepping as a group into the massive space. Not a one among them had spoken a word other than Aria’s brief announcement on the way down, and the silence only added to the emptiness of the place. Rei realized he’d never seen the a subbasement space like this, devoid of movement and noise. It was always full, in class or during warmups, and the expanse of it made him feel suddenly very small.

Rei didn’t like being made to feel small.

“This is good enough.” He spoke quietly, sidelong to Aria, as they reached the edge of the closes of the six Dueling fields marked within the Wargame border. “I need to do it from here.”

Aria hesitated, but it wasn’t him she was looking at. She’d stopped short even before he’d said anything, bare toes maybe a foot from the silver like of the field, and it was that metal she had her eyes on, that limit. Rei could tell what she was thinking.

The fear was back, and stronger than before.

“Hey,” he told her. “It’s okay. We’ll be okay.”

She started under his arm, then nodded without looking at him. Then she eased his weight off her, pausing only as he groaned involuntarily when his legs and spine protested this shift. By the time he was finally on his own to feet, however, she seemed to have steeled herself, her jaw set and her expression more ready.

Good timing, because Dent came to stand beside them just then.

“Take to the starting rings when you’re ready, Cadets,” she said gently. “Obviously I’m going to ask that you both hold off on your calls until after we get the discretionary walls up.”

Rei and Aria nodded together—he worked not to wince at the motion—and before them the two red circles marking the Dueling starting points flared to life. They were plain things, very unlike the pulsing, decorative waves of light that had marked their finals match earlier.

They were also terrifying.

Rei couldn’t move a muscle, looking at the crimson circles. Beside him, Aria was just as frozen, having even flinched when the rings had appeared. Side by side they stood like that, neither wanting to do anything less in the moment that crossed over the boundary, both knowing there was nothing they had to do more.

Dent helped.

“Reese, join me if you would.”

The Major stepped up on command—apparently the situation was enough that he wasn’t being smart about being told what to do in the moment—and stepped over the silver line as the Captain did the same. Rei could help but blink as the two officers did this, feeling his heart start to race again.

“We have every assurance from both the Kenneth staff *and* the MIND that there is no danger,” Dent told Rei and Aria, turning to face them. “You are safe here. You have my word. The Major is an A8 User. I’m a Knight-Calls. Even if every assurance we get turned out to be wrong, it would take an army to get to either of you.” She didn’t wait for either of them to say anything, lifting her eyes to the group still standing at their backs. “Captain Takeshi will be supervising, and have control of the field systems. If there’s so much as a *flicker* in the hologram that shouldn’t be there, she’ll let us know.”

“Without hesitating,” came the answer from their backs.

Rei couldn't nod this time, though, too tense was he with his gaze still on the silver line. He couldn't, he just couldn't. But he had to. But he couldn't. But he *had* to. Every time this circled in his head—every time he thought he got close to take the step over the boundary—he saw the grey forms of the sparring partners rising from the very red ring he was supposed to be heading for.

No. No way. He couldn't.

But he *had to!*

And then, with a long, shaking breath, Aria's hands balled into fists at her side and she stepped forward, clear over the line, and into the field.

She didn't stop there, and Rei was at last able to lift his eyes to watch her move stifle, one stride after another, to the far circle, where she was about as flexible as steel as she stepped into. From there, she spun on her heels to face the rest, her face pale and her chest rising and falling in an uneven pattern, like she was having trouble breathing.

And despite all that, she managed to give Rei the slightest of smiles.

It was almost enough. Almost.

Viv did the rest.

“Rei. Don't make me punt you over that line.”

Rei started, and managed to look around, the ache in his body momentarily forgotten. She'd come to stand on his other side, and was looking at him with one eyebrow raised expectantly. He could see right through the expression, of course. Right through it to the worry and uncertainty in his best friend's eyes.

And yet...

“I'm serious. I'll do it. And if you think you're sore now, just wait till you've got my boot planted on your—”

“Cadet Arada, now is *not the time*,” Reese interrupted with a snarl, staring daggers at Viv. “This is a *serious* matter, and if you can’t comport yourself long enough to even handle—”

But then it was the Major’s turn to be cut short, this time by a lifted hand from Dent.

Because Rei had laughed.

It wasn’t a *happy* laugh, per se. Not even close. But it wasn’t miserable either. It was more a laugh of relief, of recognition of the moment of levity—however forced it might be—in the circumstances he found himself in.

And it was a laugh that got him over the line.

Ice washed through his veins as he stepped away from Viv and onto the field, tingling from his fingers and toes upward. Fear. Adrenaline. Anticipation. It all hit him in a rush to mix with the absolute agony that was that first movement, then every stride that followed. He was half grinning, half grimacing as he walked, forcing himself to think only of the image of Viv booting him into the far wall and looking nowhere but at Aria. In doing so, he managed it. It was long. It was painful. But he managed it.

He stood in the red circle, heart beating a million miles an hour, every inch of him screaming in protest at the mere fact that he was upright, but ready.

“Alright.” Dent called out, speaking more loudly than she had since Rei had woken up, a note of what might have been relief in her voice. “The rest of you know the drill. Find a spot. Captain, whenever you’re ready.”

True to Takeshi’s word, there wasn’t a pause. Rei actually thought he heard Cashe go “Woah!” in surprise as the circular discretion wall rose up in a solid white ring all around them, the Lancer probably still having been walking along the edge as it had been called up. It came finished manifesting, and on either side Rei thought he saw figures easing themselves down to sit long the inside edge in observation. He didn’t turn to look at them. He had made, had survived the hard part. The fear abated with

every moment he stood in that red ring without incident, and across from him Aria too, seemed to be relaxing little by little. They were safe. Just like Dent had said. They were safe.

Which meant the gravity of what was about to happen finally started to settle on them both.

Rei's breath started to quicken, but not for any clinging terror or anxiety. Rather, the excitement started to take over everything, the real, solid understanding weighing down that something big—really *stupid* big—was about to happen. The cold fled Rei's chest a limbs, replaced by a restlessness that surpassed the aches and pains.

*Oh man*, he thought to himself. *Oh man oh man oh man oh man oh—*

“Cadets,” came Takeshi's voice. “Call.”

Rei started, somehow surprised despite having expected it. As a result, Aria beat him to it, speaking clearly into the quite so that all of them could hear.

“Call!”

And then there were shouts of excitement and a *whoop* of delight that could only have come from Catcher, and Rei was so distracted by the sight before him that he forgot himself completely.

Hippolyta had evolved. He'd know that. That's what Aria had said.

But what he saw before him now seemed like more than that.

It wasn't an evolution. It was *overhaul*. Where the CAD had originally only covered Aria's legs and forearms, it now encased her hips and both arms *and* shoulders. What was more, her *face* was now partially framed, red steel lining part of her jaw on either side before rising matching straight plates along just in front of her ears, which in turn connected with a two-finger-thick band of gold metal and green vysetrium that bent around her forehead. It looked like the very beginning of one of those open-faced helmets Rei knew the Greek warrior of ancient Earth used to sport into battle.

“Head manifestation?” Rei heard Reese hiss in surprise, which was completely understandable. Rei had been the only User he’d ever heard of to develop any kind of CAD armor around his head and face as a C-Ranker. Typically that started to form in the Bs, and sometimes as late as the As if a Device’s evolution took an atypical path. So far *Aria* now, too, to have developed it...

Thing was, though... Hippolyta’s *armor*, wasn’t the true shock.

Aria’s shield had been about the size of her torso, maybe a little wider. It had been a bit irregular in shape, but otherwise had been larger at the top before narrowing to a point at the bottom.

Now, though, Aria was hefting nothing short of a full-body kite shield.

The absolute wall of red, gold, and green stood resting a sharp point that provide only a vague resemblance of the Device’s old shield. It wasn’t much wider, but it was nearly twice as long, with a semi-flat top that had shallow divot cut out of the inside half to form open viewing channel that would help Aria see even as she defended with the massive thing.

And her *spear*! Where’s Hippolyta’s manifested weapon had before been nothing of any particular note for it’s kind, what she held in her hand now even had Rei taking pause. The haft has shortened, if only a little, but it had to have to maintain balance with the blade that was now twice as thick and half-again as long as it had been. On top of that, the spear now had a cross-guard at the base of it’s head, formed by two shorter, 3 or 4 inch prongs of green vysetrium extending perpendicular from the base of the main blade with a *third* of such spike gracing its bottom end. The weapon had always been a terror in Aria’s hands, but even on its own now it inspired caution at nothing more than a glance, assuring anyone who took it in that they were about to have a *hell* of a fight on their hands.

Rei couldn’t help it. He stared, taking Aria in with open astonishment as she herself gaped down at her arms and legs and armaments in shock and glee. He might

have even eventually worked up the ability to whoop right along with catcher had Takeshi not called him out.

“Yes, Ward, we’re all aware it’s impressive, but we’d also rather you didn’t keep us waiting all day, Cadet!”

Rei jumped, remembering himself and where he stood. Mouthing at the air for only a moment as he fought to think around the amazement at Hippolyta’s changes, he finally found the word he was looking for.”

“Call!”

Shido responded with a fervor.