

Chapter 19

“Surprise?” Wainwright demanded, still holding the spear to Rei’s neck liked she’d forgotten it was there. “*Surprise??* Kid, where did you *come* from?? One sec I’m playing ring around the rosy with the rest of your squad, the next you’re doing your damndest to shove your shoulder so far up my rear I could have wagged you like a *tai!* What *was* that??”

Rei had opened his mouth to answer, thinking he might as well come clean, when a man’s voice beat him to it.

“It’s some kind of teleporting ability. Instant displacement. Carries his *whole* body, Device included. It’s charged-based, seems to take about 100 to 150 seconds of combat to build up depending on intensity, and *doesn’t* seem to have a max usage limit.”

Kalus Laurent had caught up. The sergeant major came strolling into their midst, Triumverant still called, the three-part staff once more folded into one hand as he swung it casually at his side. Around them, Rei realized the rest of Firesong had stopped fighting, all of them glancing nervously at one another, Devices still glowing through the downpour.

“Tele—?” Jetway started, looking around at the sergeant major in apparent disbelief. “I’m sorry, storm must be louder than I thought. I swear I just heard you use the word ‘*teleportation*’...”

Laurent chuckled, stopping beside her and bring the folded staff up to tap against his should once more.

“Nothing wrong with your ears, ma’am,” he answered, though the green slash across his faceplate was turned down towards Rei. “I did indeed.”

For a second Jetway stared him. Then her four eyes turned to Rei, then back again. Twice more she did this, like she was waiting for someone to let her in on the joke. The whole while her spear never so much as shivered where she still held it to Rei’s throat.

“... You’re shitting me,” the woman finally got out in a strained voice. “*Teleportation?* No way. And *no* usage cap?? What kind of broken Ability is *that*?? Even for a *User-Unique* that’s *insane*.”

“To be fair, it does seem to have some drawbacks.” Kalus Laurent was still looking Rei up and down, like he was taking the opportunity to study him in full now that he’d finally been made to hold still. “Mostly guessing, but his balance, proprioception, and general movement dipped a little every time he activated it, then recovered. Impact got worse after each trigger, and recovery took longer. If I had to, I’d say its draining, either physically or mentally. Maybe both.” He squatted, then brought his staff down to *plink* Rei lightly on the armor Shido’s forehead with the weapon. “Clue us in, Cadet. Which is it?”

“It’s motion sickness.”

There was a light squelching of wet grass, and a familiar pair of green eyes were suddenly taking up Rei’s vision, framed in a broad, upside-down U of red-and-gold steel he was still getting used to. Aria stuck Hippolyta’s spear point first in the mud as she knelt down at his side—practically elbowing her older brother out of the way as she did—loose strands of hair tracing wet lines across her freckled face, neck, and shoulders.

“Ma’am, he’s hurt.” She addressed Wainwright without looking away around at her, studying Rei’s shoulder with brow knit as she placed the hand not still holder her shield on his other arm. “*Actually* hurt.”

“Ya think?” the second lieutenant snort. Still, Aria’s pointing out the injury seemed to shake her into the moment, because she finally snapped her spear away to stake it, too, into the ground beside her. “Broken Ability or not, what C-Rank in their right *mind* thinks it’s a good idea to charge an *S-Ranked* User on the field?” She crossed her plated arms, four eyes glaring down at Rei. “Aren’t you supposed to be *smart*, Ward? Pretty sure anyone could have told him that was going to end up badly, myself included.”

“I get the impression Cadet Ward would have been unlikely to heed your thoughts on the matter even if you *had* had the opportunity to share them, second lieutenant.”

The sound of the rain suddenly dimmed, then quit outright, and a moment later Rei winced as the support of the ground beneath his bad shoulder faded away. He started to drop, Aria still kneeling beside him in midair with her brother at her left, and even as they descended he saw the ceiling of the sub-basement once more as the field depixelated around them, with the white observation disk coming back into view a second later.

At its forward edge, Serena von Bor was peering down at him with interest, still leaning into the cane in the middle of the group formed by her, Dent, Guest, Maddison Kent, and Jasper.

“Ward, recall your Device,” the woman ordered as Rei felt the familiar press of the projection plating against Shido’s back. “Captain Dent, if you could call us a medical drone, please? Best to be safe, though I doubt that shoulder is anything more than dislocated. If it were broken, I think we’d hear a lot more screaming.”

“You’d be surprised,” Rei swore he heard Dent, Aria, *and* a nearby Catcher all mutter at the same time, but the Bishop did as she was asked the moment they reached the floor, the observation platform sinking into the steel and vanishing. The familiar whir of propellers was heard, and then Aria—who’d already recalled Hippolyta—was taking him gently by his good arm and around his upper back to help sit him up.

“Recall,” Rei grunted, half to comply, and half as a distraction from the renewed wash of nausea this change of position earned him. Shido vanished in a whirl, and when he had control of his gut again Rei braved a glance at his right shoulder.

“Ew,” he muttered, more in annoyance than anything else. “Yup. Deeeefinitely shouldn’t look like that, should it?”

“You’re awfully nonchalant, kid.”

Looking around, Rei found Wainwright and Kalus Laurent watching him, CADs returned to their wrists to reveal their gold-on-black combat suits once again. While Aira's brother looked nothing more than politely uninvolved as he stood again, the second lieutenant was grimacing at his misshapen shoulder with obvious discomfort, her own arms still crossed.

"That doesn't hurt like hell?" she asked, cocking her head like doing so might let her see the joint as it should be.

"Uh..." Rei struggled to find the right way to explain. After a second he nodded, but simultaneously gestured at his scarred arms and legs. "I guess so? It's kind of... a comparison thing for me?"

"Meaning what?" Kalus Laurent asked, green eyes tracing the markings along Rei's limbs intently now, like their indication had given him permission to further exam them.

Rei didn't get a chance to answer, because Aria karate-chopped him lightly in the side of the head just as the medical drone arrived.

"Meaning he's a great big idiot who doesn't seem interested in *ever learning his own limits*," she growled, pushing herself up and away from him so the bot could do its job. "Seriously, Rei... People are gonna think you *like* pain, at this rate."

"Oh, that's like a hundred-and-ten percent already happening." Catcher appeared, also back in his red-on-grey school combat suit, grinning down at Rei as he came to stand behind Aria. "I found a whole a feed the other day dedicated to chatting about if the Iron Prince was a certified masochist. Weird place. Only like twenty people in it, but kinda funny to—"

"Catcher, do I want to know *how* you found a feed like that?" Chancery asked with a sigh, stepping around to Rei's other side as she shook her head with hands on her hips.

"You know you don't," Grant grunted, smirking a little from just behind her before looking down at Rei. "You good?"

“Right as rain.” Rei tried to offer a thumbs up, but realized he needed his good arm to prop himself up into a sitting position now that Aria wasn’t supporting him.

In front of him, Wainwright was shaking her head, eyebrows halfway to her hairline.

“Cadets the days are made of scary stuff,” she muttered. “I woulda been puking.”

“Modest of you, Second Lieutenant. I seem to recall hearing of a Duel of yours where you broke a wrist and four ribs and *still* came out on top.”

von Bor’s cane made an audible *click* with every step she took as she approached the group, only a little more distinct than Maddison Kent and Jasper’s heels on the steel floor. The old woman stopped to stand before Rei’s right side, looking down on him with that same subdued interest that still felt like more emotion than the old woman usually let on.

If he had to guess, Rei suspected he’d made an impression, and he could only hope it had been a good one.

“Drone says your arm is fine, Ward,” the Ivory Shield, continued, eyeing the bot that was still whirring around scanning him from every angle. “No breaks, just dislocated.”

Rei nodded. “Thank you, ma’am,” he answered, leveraging himself with his good hand to get around onto his knees. Aria immediately moved to help him, guiding him up until he was standing before the officers again. “They can probably fix that at the hospital pretty quick if I could be exc—”

“Oh there’s no need for that,” von Bor cut him off smoothly, black-and-gold eyes moving to Kalus Laurent. “Sergeant Major?”

“Ma’am,” came the simple answer.

Then, before Rei could begin to follow what was happening, Aria’s brother was at his other side, had taken his loose right arm in both hands, and given the limb a single practiced tug and lift.

The *pop* of the ball and socket finding each other again was audible.

Rei briefly saw stars as the pain flared in momentary bloom of agony, and if Aria hadn't already been half holding him up he was pretty sure he would have staggered. He grit his teeth, and after two sharp breaths the ache faded, then disappeared almost altogether.

Opening his eyes—when had he shut them?—he grimaced around at his shoulder to find it whole and normal again, the awkward drop of the dislocation corrected in a flash.

“Thank you, sir,” he told the sergeant major. “And *owe*.”

Kalus Laurent only grinned back at him, a wicked, knowing glint in those eyes that were *so* like his sister's.

Before him, though, von Bor had already moved on.

“Cadet Laurent, you said something about ‘motion sickness?’” The Rook-Class was looking at Aria intently. “Elaborate, if you would.”

Aria tensed beside him, and Rei glanced around to find her with mouth open, looking uncertainly from him to the von Bor, then to Dent on the old woman's left. She seemed unsure of how to answer, or maybe if to answer at all, actually.

It was Guest who rescued her.

“I'll handle that, Captain,” the colonel cut in, stepping forward. “Ward's situation is... a bit more nuanced than a student is equipped to elaborate on.”

As soon as von Bor, Jetway, Jasper, and Kalus Laurent had all turned towards him, the man started to explain. Rei felt Aria's grip relax around his arm a little, and heard her give a small sigh of relief.

“Woulda been interesting to hear you talk that one out to the *Ivory Shield*,” he told her with a quiet laugh.

“Shut up,” she grumbled, giving his arm a small shake. Still, she smiled slightly. “You good? I probably shouldn't hold onto you longer than I have to.”

Rei considered his stomach, then nodded. Any dizziness was all but gone, and he could feel the last of the nausea fading too. He really *was* getting acclimated to the backlash little by little, wasn't he?

"Fine yeah, thanks."

"And your shoulder?" she asked, letting go of him.

Rei lifted his right arm to test it out, noticing only the mildest of discomfort. "Good as new. Your brother seems to know what he's doing."

"Kinda comes with the territory, I think. Once you start training at *that* level, you're bound mess something up now and then."

"Fair enough," Rei agree with a nod, reaching around to feel at the joint. "Hadn't really considered that."

"You should have."

Rei winced, then glanced back with a sheepish grin to find Aria glaring at him.

"Yeah... I know..." he muttered apologetically. "Can I get off with just a slap on the wrist this time, though? Hitting Wainwright was enough of a lesson. Felt like I'd slammed into the side of a *mountain* at light sp—"

But then Rei stopped, his attention stolen away as his frame flared into being without warning.

...

Processing combat information.

...

Calculating.

...

Results:

Strength: Severely Lacking

Endurance: Severely Lacking

Speed: Severely Lacking

Cognition: Severely Lacking

Offense: Severely Lacking

Defense: Severely Lacking

Growth: Not Applicable

...

Checking combat data acquisition.

...

Adequate data acquirement met.

Device initiating adjustments to:

Strength.

Endurance.

Speed.

Cognition.

Offense.

Defense.

...

Processing.

...

Adjustment complete.

Strength has been upgraded from Rank C6 to C7.

Endurance has been upgraded from Rank C5 to C6.

Speed has been upgraded from Rank B1 to B3.

Cognition has been upgraded from Rank C9 to B1

Offense has been upgraded from Rank C7 to C8.

Defense has been upgraded from Rank C7 to C8.

...

Calculating.

...

CAD "Shido" has been upgraded from Rank C9 to B0.

Rei stared, open mouthed. He wasn't sure why he was surprised. If anything, he supposed another 5 minutes or so of fighting might have twitched him straight through to B1 if he added in the upgrades he'd seen since Sectionals already. Still, he'd be so intent of the fight, so intent on making a good impression in front of their trainers—among other factors—that he hadn't paused to consider the implication.

S-Ranked opponents. A pair of them, and each pushing more than two full tiers higher than he'd been at C9, much less the lower true average of his spec. The last time he'd gone toe-to-toe with a difference like that had been against Christopher Lennon, and Aira at Commencement before that. Both times Shido had made *huge* gains. And when those S-Ranked simulations had surrounded him at Sectionals—

No, Rei told himself firmly, allowing himself not to think of that, even if it was evidence. *No*.

"Ooooh boy..."

It was Aria—who he'd been looking at—who caught site of the script in his NOED first. She was squinting at him with an excited gleam in her eye, peering like she was trying to read the tiny backwards script on his irises, something that seemed to be everyone's first reaction these days when it came to Shido.

"What is it?" she asked eagerly. "Were you and Kalus going at it that whole time? It's gotta be *bonkers* if so..."

Behind her, Catcher looked suddenly intent, and on his other side Rei could practically hear Chancery and Logan going tense.

None of which was missed by their company.

“Colonel, so sorry to butt in, but... It seems like something rather interesting’s going on over there.”

Through the notification, Rei was unsurprised to find Jasper had noticed the shift in Firesong first, holding up a manicured hand to politely interrupted Guest’s ongoing explanation about Temporal Step. Valera Dent’s eyes found him next, snapping around to him instantly, with the other officers’ and Kent’s following immediately.

Among all of them, though, it was the Ivory Shield’s omnipotent gaze that drew his own, their black-and-gold pure fragments of that dragging power the woman seemed to be able to turn on at a whim.

“Ward?” von Bor asked almost curiously. “What happened?”

Rei thought quickly. He was still reeling from the upgrade notification—aside from Sectionals, climbing through the Cs had been a *slog* compared to the previous ranks—but he could jump for joy later. Temporal Step was one thing. He wouldn’t have been able to keep that quite forever even if he’d wanted to, just like Type Shift before it. Shido’s Growth spec was another matter.

Still... The best of misdirections always had a foundation in truth.

“Upgrade notification, ma’am,” he answered. “I’ve never fought outright against S-Ranks before, and my Device’s Growth Spec is above average. I’ve hit B0.”

Silver lining to not having jumped to B1, he considered as he saw collective eyebrows raise along with a broad grin split across Dent’s prosthetic lower face. If he’d skipped right through a rank, he wasn’t sure how he would have explained him—

“B0? Is that is?”

Rei blinked, and to a one every face turned toward von Bor. Whereas most everyone else had looked surprised and pleased, he realized suddenly that the Rook-Class, for her part, seemed almost disappointed.

“Uh... Ma’am?” Wainwright indeed asked. “The kid’s a first year... B0 is kinda *nuts*, don’t... don’t you...?”

Her question trailed away as von Bor raised a hand to silence her.

“My sub-instructors are eager and genuine, Cadet Ward,” she addressed Rei with an impassive expression now. “That’s good. Very good. I, however, am *old*.” She smiled slightly, then. “Meaning you *won’t* be dancing around me as easily as you like. My apologies.”

Rei swallowed, feeling his palms start to sweat suddenly.

“Uh... Yes... Yes, ma’m,” he got out uncertainly, suddenly dreading the next question.

The captain surprised him, though.

“Of course, some things *are* best left in the dark, at least officially.” She shrugged slightly but didn’t look away from him. “Still, I admit a *little* surprise. I expected a bit more.”

Rei decided to keep toeing the line of truth.

“Shido—my Device... It adapts quickly. It’s been harder and harder to challenge it.”

“Meaning it responds to stimulus.”

“It... does. Yes, ma’am.” They were getting dangerously close to specifics Rei wasn’t interested in airing in present company, so he decided it was time to make an attempt change tracks. “Just a little more acutely than most other CADs, maybe. We’ve *all* seen a good amount of growth this year.” He gestured around at the five present members of Firesong.

“Yes... You have, haven’t you?” von Bor indeed took them all in in steady succession, then, but despite that Rei for some reason didn’t remotely get the impression he’d succeeding at diverting the conversation. “An *alarming* amount of growth, one could even say. Two first-year Users with rare Abilities that usually only manifest in A-Ranks or above.” The woman’s eyes swept from Catcher to Chancery. “One with an overdeveloped Device for her age.” She looked next to Aria. “And another, well... I

think there's not much need to elaborate on *you* at the moment, Ward." Her gaze fell on him only briefly before flicking to Logan. "And you, Cadet? Anything of an extraordinary nature to tell us that we aren't already aware of?"

Logan looked suddenly uncomfortable, his red-black eyes apparently having trouble meeting the Ivory Shield's boring attention.

His voice, fortunately, was still even as he answered.

"Not yet, ma'am," he answered, clearly choosing his words carefully.

"Yes... 'Yet' being the keyword there, I suspect." von Bor studied him a moment more, then lifted her cane suddenly to bang it lightly on the steel again. "And that's nothing to speak of Cadet *Arada*, of course. Oh yes. I'm aware of the girl's situation." She offered Rei a hint of a crooked smile when he started in surprise at this. That was more than she gave the others, too, since didn't even glance around at Guest, Dent, and Maddison Kent as they all looked sharply inward at her. "I'd love to say I'm still well-connected within the ISCM, but the credit for *that* little tidbit belongs to... someone else."

Rei had just looked passed her to Jasper—whose face hadn't so much as twitched despite his only being one of many eyes to turn towards her then—when Logan spoke again.

"Wait... What situation?"

Rei stiffened. There was a still, unpleasant moment, and he heard Aria murmur a curse at his left.

"Oh shit..."

He had to work hard not to echo the sentiment.

"Captain von Bor," Colonel Guest cut in again, almost hurriedly this time. "That's not something that needs to be—"

"All due respect, Colonel, as far as I'm aware neither I nor either of my sub-instructors is beholden to your gag order" the Ivory Shield rolled over the man so easily

he might as well have been yelling into a vacuum, smiling all the while. “Nor am I fond of secrets amongst squad members, much less those under my direct purview.”

“*Captain* von Bor.” The colonel stressed her rank this time, like he wanted to remind her of who the highest officer of the group was. “That is *not* your decision to—”

“Oh yes it.” Again she cut him off, and again she did so without looking away from Firesong. “Have you forgotten I’m not a member of the ISCM anymore? Haven’t been for a long time.”

“You are still bound by the oath you took to the—!”

The Ivory Shield scoffed. It was the first time all evening the facade of the stern, well-meaning grandmother gave, and for a moment—just a moment—Rei thought he saw someone else under the mask. Someone sharper, harder, and even more dangerous.

Then the woman’s composure was back, and she finally looked around at Guest.

“I’m too old, too famous, and too *rich* to give a so much as hoot about the military oath anymore, Colonel.” Her voice was flat, but not unkind. “I understand your logic. I do. There are some things that need to be protected. However—” she turned back towards the squad “—I also think that this *particular* team already has some experience keeping all-important secrets to their chest. Don’t you all?”

Before any of them could answer this, however, she was addressing Logan again.

“Cadet Arada and her CAD—Gemela, was it?—experienced an evolution after the incident that I understand landed her in the hospital. She has also developed an Ability.”

In the corner of Rei’s eye he saw Logan blink, then the boy swelled with what might have been pride. Beside him, Chancery looked suddenly excited too, and by Aria he was sure Catcher had opened his mouth, probably to get out a “Way to go *Viv!*” or something of the like. Behind the Ivory Shield, on the other hand, a myriad of very different emotions were playing out. Frustration and anger from Guest, apprehension

from Kent, and—oddly—a matching combination of interest and smugness from Dent and Jasper both.

Then von Bor continued before anyone could get a word in.

“A *User-Unique Ability*. The second first-year cadet in the history of the ISCM to ever develop one.” Her eyes fell on Rei again, and once more they seemed to pull at his very soul. “The first, of course, being our own Cadet Ward here.

The shift in the room was instantaneous. Logan’s every movement stilled to the point that he seemed to have stopped breathing. Catcher and Chancery’s jaws dropped in unison, and with this reveal Guest looked abruptly more resigned than angry. Maddison Kent was glancing nervously from him to the back of von Bor’s head, but once more Dent and Jasper held matching expressions.

They were both watching Firesong intently, the Iron Bishop doing a lesser job of masking her eager study of the five than the fixer.

“User... Unique?” Logan finally managed to get out, his voice tight and uncertain, like he wasn’t sure he’d heard properly. “...Viv?”

“Indeed,” von Bor confirmed simply.

“But... How...? When? How could...?” The Mauler seemed to realize he was struggling to form two words, because he took a breath and straightened his shoulders. His next question came more steadily. “Can I ask what sort of *Ability*, ma’am?”

The Ivory Shield shrugged. “You can *ask* all you like. As it’s unique to the cadet and Arada is still indisposed, however, we have nothing more than the name.”

“Which is...?”

“Something for her to share with you, as there is no value in my robbing her of that moment, I think.”

Logan hesitated, then nodded.

Chancery, on the other hand, whirled on Rei and Aria.

“You *knew* this?!” she hissed, livid. “You *knew* this, and you didn’t say anything?!”

“Cadet *Cashe*.” It was Dent who barked out, bringing the Lancer up short. “Ward and Laurent have both been under strict orders *not* to divulge any of this. In case you’ve suddenly forgotten how the chain of command works: that means there were following *orders*, Cadet.”

“Ma’am!” Chancery snapped into a salute at the reprimand. “Yes, ma’am!”

Rei, though, didn’t miss the anger lingering in her furrowed brow. Catcher, too, was eyeing him and Aria both sidelong, though Rei thought the Saber’s expression seemed more hurt than anything else.

Can’t blame him, either, Rei considered bitterly, feeling a embarrassed heat in his cheeks as he avoided his teammates’ eyes.

At least *Logan* still seemed too stunned to feel slighted, if only for the moment.

“Regardless, it’s only more excitement to be explored once Arada is back on her feet.” von Bor waved the subject aside, either not seeing—or more likely not caring about—the sudden tension in the room. “But speaking *of* Arada...” She let her hand drop back to her cane, taking the squad in pensively. “You’re good, Firesong. *Very* good. I put a challenge down, and you rose to meet it. *All* of you.” She nodded approvingly as she cast her eyes across all of them once more. “I’m confident the sergeant major and second lieutenant agree, too?” To her credit, the old woman made it a question, offering Laurent and Jetway and opportunity to voice anything to the contrary.

Neither did, and Wainwright even grinned at them.

“If they were all Bs, they might have actually hit me,” she granted them with a chuckle. “That’s definitely something, given the circumstances.”

“Oh?” Jasper cocked her head at the woman’s back with a titter. “But I seem to recall that Ward *did* hit you, second lieutenant? Or am I mistaken?”

The S-Rank stiffed, then shot the fixer a glare over her shoulder. “That doesn’t count! How the hell was I supposed to see him coming when he can *literally teleport*??”

“How odd.” Jasper smiled teasingly. “The sergeant major managed to avoid getting hit, somehow...”

“Lady, you’re *really* good at pushing people button’s aren’t y—?”

Bang.

The sound of von Bor’s cane hitting the floor again snapped Wainwright’s attention around again, though she continued to look annoyed.

“As I was saying...” the Rook-Class continued like there’d been no interruption, still watching Firesong. “You fight well, all of you. However, you’re only the largest part of a whole.” She let her gaze linger on Logan briefly, looking him up and down. “I’ve reviewed your Sectionals footage. It is clear that Cadet Arada is hot-headed and brash, and I’m sure will be the cause of as many headaches in the future as she has caused already. *However—*” she pressed on as the Mauler, apparently expectantly, opened his mouth to say something “—it is equally clear that the cadet as a fitting addition to this team, particularly when you lack in acute offensive capability. At least for now.” Rei might have imagined her dark eyes flicking to him, if only for an instant. “For that reason, I have no interest in disrupting your training balance more than I have to...”

The old woman contemplated them all for a moment, like she were turning over a decision in her head. After a second or two, she finally turned again to Guest.

“I’ll need a Duelist, Colonel.” It wasn’t a request so much as a statement, but her tone was polite just the same. “Someone either around their level or skilled enough to level their combat ability to around theirs. They’ll fill in for Arada until she can join us.”

Guest—who was looking more and more worn down—sighed in a defeated sort of way.

“We’ll can take care of that,” he grunted in answer, crossing his arm as he half-glared down at the Rook-Class. “Will you *at least* agree that a gag order should be maintained *outside* of your training hours? The ISC isn’t ready for Ward’s Temporal Step,

much less Arada's situation. The squad will *have* to respect that for the time being, especially if you want a stand in."

von Bor seemed to consider this, then nodded.

"Fair enough," she answered. "Though I would encourage you to figure out how to break that news sooner rather than later."

"It'll get out eventually," Kalus Laurent said by way of agreement as Wainwright nodded along on Ivory Shield's other side. "Whether you want it to or not."

"If only it were my decision to make alone." Guest's words came out as more than a growl than he probably intended, because he coughed into a fist as though to clear his throat before continuing. "But alright. Firesong has already been completing their Team Training days with another first year. Martin. She's good, and a Du—"

"No!"

Rei, Logan, and Catcher all spoke at once. Even Aria and Chancery—who hadn't said anything—looked suddenly concerned, and among the group of adults Dent was frowning at the Colonel.

"Excuse me, *Cadets?*" Guest asked in a low, hard voice, frowning at them all.

For once, though, Rei found himself unable to quail under the man's heavy gaze, snapping instead into a quick salute as his eyes found the familiar spot over the Colonel's shoulder. Maybe it was the fact that—by comparison—Guest's bearing as a Pawn-Class User didn't seem to hold a candle to even von Bor's repressed presence.

More likely, though, was that *this* was a place Rei thought he wouldn't have let himself yield even if he'd been standing in front of the Gateknocker himself.

"Sir, we appreciate Martin's help in class," he answered quickly, standing rigidly at attention. "If we could request someone else outside of that, though...?"

"She's a talented Duelist, ranks in the average of your squad, and has demonstrated responsibility as the leader of Red Crown," Guest answered firmly. "She fits the combat

criteria, and can be trusted with what she would learn in these extra training courses. She's an ideal fit."

"She's not Viv..." Rei heard Logan mutter at his right.

Most unfortunately, the colonel heard him, sharp eyes turning on the Mauler in a flash.

"She is not, no, Cadet Grant." His glare did not soften even when Logan, too, snapped to attention. "But given Arada's current state is *the entire point of this conversation*, that is hardly a factor."

"Colonel, maybe they have someone else in mind?" Dent eased into the conversation placatingly, looking between Rei and her superior officer quickly. "If they have concerns about Martin..."

She let the point hang, and Guest frowned around at her.

"Who else would be a better fit?" he asked sharply. "As I said, she's been working with Firesong for over a week already, and meets the criteria."

"She does sound like an ideal match." Wainwright had one eyebrow raised as she took in Rei and the others. "What's the catch, Firesong?"

Rei hesitated, thinking fast. He didn't want to say exactly what he was thinking. That he wasn't a fan of the overeagerness he'd been sensing from Laquita Martin in class wasn't a good enough reason, at least not to Guest. The colonel *was* correct, after all. The girl *was* ideal, and even came with experience working with them—and therefore the complexity of Shido's unique characteristics—already. If anything, there wasn't anyone who *was* a better fit, even if they all didn't want to give her the opportunity to—

"Oh..."

Unlike Logan's muttering, Aria's quite exclamation so close to Rei's left hadn't been overheard. Nor was the flash in her frame noticed when it came a second later.

There was a ping, and a message popped up in Rei's own NOED.

Wondering what in the MIND *that* could possibly be about, Rei dropped his gaze to the ground in an attempt to hide his momentary distraction. Opening the message, a single word popped up in his vision.

A single name.

Rei stared. At first he couldn't believe Aria would even make such a suggestion. In the next, he actually considered it.

By the time anyone noticed he wasn't paying attention anymore, he was kicking himself that he hadn't thought of it first.

"Ward," Guest barked, making him jump. "Would you care to share what's more interesting than your current situation?"

Rei blinked the frame closed and looked up again to meet the man's glower. He considered the idea for a second more, then decided to bit the bullet.

"Sir..." he started slowly. "Does... Would a stand-in have to be a Duelist... strictly?"

The colonel continued to glare at him, but von Bor cut in before the man could answer.

"If we want to minimize interruption of squad tactics and training, yes, Ward." She was watching him carefully, though. "We want someone who could fill Arada's roll."

Rei—happy for any reason *not* to look Guest in the eye—turned to old woman quickly.

"Meaning... Theoretically..." He had to work to get the words out. "Any duelist with the skills to fill Cadet Arada's position could do the trick...? And especially if they've already worked with Firesong before...?"

There was a second of silence, most of the adults watching him intently, clearly not following.

And then Dent started to laugh.