

CHAPTER 14

PLACEHOLDER

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Aria was shivering, but she didn't have the capacity to regret having forgone fetching her jacket and pants from the East Center's small locker room before rushing out into the cold. It was late—pushing curfew, actually—and she hadn't heard from Rei all evening. Not after dinner, not after she, Catcher, Chancery, and Logan had headed back to Kanes to drop off their school bags, and not even as their first hour of evening training slipped into two.

And then, just as she'd been thinking of calling it a night, resolving to bite the bullet and call him when the four of them headed back towards the dorm, he'd messaged her.

Aria had bolted from the training chamber without so much as a word to Catcher or either of the others where she was gone.

She was down the hall and in the East Center lobby in a heartbeat. She'd barely managed not to break her nose on the glass of the double doors as they slid open slower than she would have liked to let her out, and cursed out of habit as the January night—cooled to frigid now that the sun had long since left the sky—bit at the bare skin of her arms and lower legs. Her feet were numb in seconds, but she barely noticed them aching as she hugged herself for warmth, looking desperately around. The winter wind was meaner now than it had been all day, and she was forced more than once to pull loose strands of her red hair out of her face while she searched.

Where are you? She thought over and over again, true worry mounting with every moment passing moment. *Where are you??*

It didn't help that Rei's message played itself on repeat in her head.

Can I see you?

She'd told him where she was, and bolted.

Where are you?? Aria had to keep herself from shouting aloud, squinting into the dark and wind, squeezing herself tighter as the light of the East Center lobby cut a clean, long shadow of herself up the nearest campus path. She wasn't sure why, but Rei's simple question had been heartbreaking. She'd known the meeting was going to be hard, of course she'd known that. No matter how things played out, in any of the hundred likely and unlikely directions they could have, she'd know the meeting was going to be hard.

But hours later, for him to be unwilling—or maybe unable—to give her more than that simple question...

Yeah, Aria was worried.

That was the moment, mercifully, that she saw him.

“Rei,” she breathed, already sprinting up the south path.

He loomed out of the night as he stepped into the dim glow of one of the overhead lights that illuminated the path in patches of light. He looked... odd. Small almost. His head was bowed and his shoulders hunched, and he was holding onto the loop of his school bag with both hands. As she approached, she saw that his knuckles were white around that strap, like it was some kind of tether holding him wherever it was that he was struggling to be.

He only lifted his face from the path when he heard her running towards him, and without waiting for a greeting Aria barely kept from knocking him clean over as she threw her arms around his neck, squeezing him to her.

“Aria, it's *freezing*,” Rei hissed in surprise, his whole body going tense against here. “What are you *doing*? Where's your—??”

“Doesn't matter,” she told him quickly. “Doesn't matter.”

Instead, she pulled him in tighter, not saying another word, waiting for him to speak.

It took some time, but he was warm against here, and her feet were already too numb to cry about. Eventually he returned her hug, too, and she managed to stop shivering after a little bit.

“... That was hard...”

His voice was quiet, hoarse and harsh in her ear. She didn't answer them, though, choosing instead to nod into his shoulder, encouraging him silently to keep going.

"It's... It's what we thought," he continued after a second, sounding like every word was painful to get out. "At least... sort of."

"Who did you meet?" she finally asked, bring one hand up to the back of his head, squeezing comfortingly.

"... The CEO," he answered eventually. "Kamiya. Kamiya Hiroto..." Rei paused, and Aria could tell he was working himself up to say more.

It took a full ten seconds for him to form the words.

"... My grandfather."

Aria let in a breath, then, a slow, careful gasp that she had to work hard to keep even. She could feel the pain in her own throat now, but she didn't let it climb.

She could cry later. Right now, it wasn't what he needed.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she whispered instead.

She didn't ask if he was okay. Of course he wasn't. Of *course* he wasn't. It was as they'd feared—and maybe hoped, if only a little bit?

Of course he wasn't okay.

Another nod, and this time his hesitation was shorter.

"Aria... I've got a sister..."

CHAPTER 15

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Kamiya Hiroto watched Castalon's night life flash by them without seeing it, his thoughts far away. He didn't see the neon colors, nor hearing the staggered pounding of music from the clubs and dance halls they passed by. He didn't even notice Abigail's attentive gaze, trained on him expectantly from her seat across from him, one leg crossed over the other with finger's wound around her knee.

He was too angry to see the world.

He and Reidon and spoken for hours, neither caring about the falling night more than what it took to have them finding one of the path lights to stand under. Hiroto had told the boy a little of his family and the company—of Sarah, of Ueno Jasper's uses, of the work they did—but for most of the conversation he had merely listened. Listened as Reidon told him of his life. Some of it he'd already known, but much of it was still new. He'd been aware of the broad strokes, of the Estoran Center, of Grandcrest Preparatory, of the fact that the boy had spent much of his life in and out of hospitals. He'd even know how Reidon had struggled to make it onto the combat team at Grandcrest, how he'd scored exceptionally well on the written portion of the Assignment Exam, and had been able to guess how hard he'd pushed himself to rise once he'd made it to Galens.

There had been much though, that Hiroto *hadn't* known. Could never have known. Things like the impact of Reidon's first friend. Things like the harassment by his peers, and his constant fight to rise above in whatever way he could, because there had always been so many ways he never would.

Things like the pain...

Hiroto didn't feel his hands ball into fists in his lap as the city continued to whirl by in trailing lines of color.

It only took a minute or so more for him to make his decision.

"Abigail."

"Sir," the steward answered expectantly, and in the corner of his vision Hiroto saw the woman pull up her frame, ready to take notes.

"How much am I currently sending Keiji and Samantha?"

"About three million credits, sir."

"A year?"

“A month, sir.”

Hiroto grimaced out the window, cursing himself for the thousandth time that evening. *How* he had ever let himself become so *blind*, he would never understand.

Nor forgive himself for.

“Set up a trust in names,” he growled. “*Only* their names. Place ten—No... Place *five* million credits into it.”

If this was an odd request, his steward made no mention of it. “I’m assuming I should draw the funds from you personal accounts, sir?”

“You should.”

“Paying out at a rate of...?”

“One million a year.”

Abigail nodded, making a note. “And after that?”

“Cut them off.”

“From everything, sir?”

“From everything.”