

CHAPTER 9

“You. Did. *WHAT?!?*”

Rei winced, looking around in concern to make sure the back corner of the Kanes lobby he'd picked to have the conversation was still deserted. With most everyone at dinner they'd only caught the curious eyes of a few people coming back and forth from their room, but Rei still worried Aria's voice would soon be loud enough to be heard across *campus*, much less inside the dorm.

“Aria, could you keep your—?”

“Oh no! No no *no!*” Aria was standing in front of him with one finger shoved into his chest, having leapt up—almost as soon as he'd opened his mouth—from the couch to his left where she'd initially sat beside Logan. “You do *not* get to tell me what to do right now! *Definitely* not! Explain! *Explain*, Rei! What the *hell* were you thinking?!”

“I was thinking that I didn't have a *choice*,” Rei said calmly, working not to raise his own voice in answer. “I was thinking that it was this... or you and I would likely be kissing Galens goodbye at the end of the year.”

“But it was *handled!*” Aria dropped her finger from his chest to wave heatedly over his shoulder. “Uncle Ram said he would handle it! Galens was going get us more support! We were probably going to have more time with Imala and all of them, and I *bet* we could have gotten special permission to push curfew a bit! Why would you—?!”

“Aria!” Rei cut across her so sharply that she started in surprise. “Do you *really* think that was going to be enough?? For *Intersystems??* Do you *really* think so??”

Aria's mouth closed with a snap, and she didn't answer for a long moment. Her eyes, though, were still all fury as she stared at him, and Rei refused to look away.

When she spoke again, it was through gritted teeth.

“You didn't have to do this... You didn't... We could have found a better way...”

“*What* better way?” he asked her coolly. “Galens can give us everything it has, and you *know* it probably wouldn't be enough. Not for all of us. Not for all of us *as a squad...*”

He emphasized those last three words, intent on reminding her of the true parameters of the problem. Before the catastrophe of Viv's training accident, Rei had laid in bed for half the night turning over this *exact* problem. He and Aria were one thing. They would be able to rise to the challenge. He'd believed that 24 hours before, but he was endlessly more sure of that fact now that they knew without a doubt that Shido was influencing the CADs closest to it. If he and Aria continued to train together, Rei couldn't believe her Device wouldn't develop a similar 'link' like Gemela's. And while they still didn't entirely know what that meant, Hippolyta's most recent evolution was very likely the result of that

influence already, which could only indicate even greater changes once the link manifested. Yes, if things kept going the way they were, Rei truly believed that he Aria could have overcome, even if that meant carrying the rest of Firesong to victory on their backs. But it wasn't what was being asked of them.

No... that wasn't right.

It wasn't what was being *demand*ed of them.

If Aria had an answer for him, she didn't get it out in time before Catcher raised his voice.

“Okay, hold up! *Hard* pause on the fireworks, please!”

Rei and Aria turned together to find the Saber sitting with his hand raised to interrupt. He was on the couch opposite Logan's, seated beside Chancery, and of the three of them looked like the only one currently capable of speech.

Then again, his eyebrows were almost to his hairline as he pressed on in the pause he'd created for himself.

“Rei, you need to back up,” he said, his tone a forced calm. “Like... *way* up. Forget Kamiya for a second. *Intersystems*? What are you talking about? And you'll be ‘kissing Galens goodbye at the end of the year’? What the hell does *that* mean??”

“‘*Forget* Kamiya?!’” Aria snarled, and not for the first time Rei thought he could just barely feel a subtle pulse of something like heat ripple away from her as she whirled on the blond boy to take an angry step towards him. “How is he supposed to ‘*forget* Kamiya?! Don't make me remind you that *you* were the one who—!”

“*Just for a second!*” the Saber repeated, dropping his hand halfway with palm out to stop her from coming closer. “You bet your *ass* he's going to explain himself—especially given the three of us are the only ones here who even *know* about the offer—” he indicated Rei, Aria, and himself quickly “—but you *need to go back*.” He looked to Rei again. “You're... leaving Galens?”

Rei shook his head firmly.

“*No*,” he said with as much confidence as he could muster. “Or at least I'm *trying not to*.”

“...Sorry, I'm not following.”

“You're not the only one,” Chancery finally managed to mutter, still staring at Rei.

“It's not by choice,” he assured them. “*Definitely* not by choice.”

And with that he gave Catcher, Chancery, and Logan the rundown of the situation, starting from the very beginning.

He spent the better part of a half hour telling them about his and Aria's meeting with her father the night before, a reveal that initially earned them both equal measures of shock and anger from the others that they hadn't said anything earlier. Rei didn't think trying to tell the three that he'd honestly completely forgotten about it all in the wake of the situation with Viv would help, but they quieted down anyway when he went on to explain *why* the general had claimed to have called the meeting. He told them about the transfer orders whose guillotine he and Aria were now standing beneath, and about the not-so-theoretical involvement of Central Command *in* those orders. He explained how General Laurent had told them first years would, for the first time in the history of the SCTs, be granted a bracket at the System and Intersystem collegiate championships, and told them what the man had laid out as the conditions for their success. They had to win. All of them. The whole thing. Firesong had to come out on top of the first year *Intersystem* tournament, and had to manage it *as a squad*.

In the end, Catcher, Chancery, and Logan were left sitting in mutually-stunned silence—with Aria having dropped down again beside the Mauler to sit with arms crossed in outrage—and only *then* did Rei brave bringing up the offer from the Kamiya Corporation that he had decided to accept.

This brought further sounds of astonishment and disbelief from Chancery and Logan—who indeed hadn't been aware a sponsorship was even on the table for Rei—which redoubled as Catcher joined in too when Rei explained the extra conditions he'd so firmly negotiated for. Kamiya would reveal who it was that was pulling the strings of the offer, who it was who so clearly wanted to bring Rei into the fold no matter the cost. If he was right in assuming, that meeting was now set.

And... Firesong as a *whole* would be part of the deal, not just Rei himself.

"We're... sponsored?" Chancer was the first to speak after this reveal, the question coming like she couldn't believe her ears. "All... all of us?"

"All of us," Rei answered.

There was a moment of dumbfounded silence, all eyes on Rei except for Aria, who was glaring at a nearby pillar with such intensity he was worried the polished cement would soon start to melt.

"I'm sorry..." Logan started up next, seeming to shake himself back into the present as he looked between Rei and Aria uncertainly. "I'm confused. The Central thing I'm not really surprised by, all things considered, but—"

"You're *not*!?" Chancery demanded weakly.

Logan's face darkened. "No, I'm not. Central Command... They aren't all sunshine and rainbows. I know that first hand..."

Chancery went quiet at that, indicating her understanding only with a numb nod, which let the Mauler continue.

"Again: Central, I'm not surprised by. As for the new first year brackets... If anything, that's smart of them, right? Rei's name is starting to make waves. You can see it on the feeds, and not just the local planetary news. The cat stuck a paw out of the bag, and there's no shoving it back in, especially after what happened at Sectionals."

Rei felt that familiar tightness in his stomach, and without looking away from Logan he thought he saw Aria flinch, too.

"Given all that—plus everything with Aria—first year brackets gives the ISCM a way to control the rumors a bit more. Or at least make the public reveals on their own schedule. So all of that I can follow."

"Plus... it's another challenge for Rei and Shido..." Catcher added from the other couch with a thoughtful nod, seemingly forgetting—at least for the time being—that he wasn't speaking to Logan at the moment.

"It is," the Mauler himself agreed, just the faintest trace of eagerness in his voice at Catcher's accession. But then his face stilled, and he scrutinized Rei carefully. "But this *sponsorship*." He seemed to be measuring his words.. "The offer? Okay... Sure. I've *never* heard of a *first year* getting an offer, but you're kinda a 'first' in a lot of ways, given everything. And that gets more obvious by the day. What I *don't* get, on the other hand—" he looked away from Rei to Aria "—is why you guys are making this out to be a *bad* thing...?"

His eyes didn't leave her this time, pressing silently for an answer. It was a fair question, too. By all accounts a offer for *any* student was rare and generally cause of celebration. It meant money, training, fame. If the rumors were true, it even provided an amount of unspoken leverage when it came down to whether or not a User was allowed become one of those 1 in 5 permitted to pursue a career in the SCTs rather than drafted for the front line of the war. If anything, an offer like the one being extended to Rei would have left any other student—at Galens or beyond—skipping.

And yet, despite that and Logan's hanging question, it become clear pretty quick that Aria had no intention of answering, choosing instead to clench her arms tighter to her chest and turn even further away from them all.

"There's... a bit more to the situation," Rei started tentatively, not sure of how exactly to broach the subject.

“Oh. Sure. Of course there is.” Chancery had regained her voice in full, and spoke with a sigh as she sagged in her seat to put her face in her hands, elbows resting on her knees. “Honestly, Rei...” her voice came muffled as she grumbled into her palms, “I think I’m just going to have to quit being overwhelmed by you and that *stupid* CAD. It’s getting bad for my health, at this point.”

“You’re still surprised?” Catcher asked with a snort. “I gave up my sanity months ago.”

Rei decided not to mention that—even as he said this—the Saber was still staring at him like he’d sprouted several additional arms.

Chancery only gave a dry laugh from between her fingers before dropping her hands to look up again.

“So? What is it?” she asked Rei, sounding almost exhausted. “Actually no.” She held up a hand to stop him when he opened his mouth to answer. “Let me guess. You have to let Kamiya study Shido so they can make clones of it somehow.”

“Uh... No...” Rei answered slowly. “I—”

“You have to give them DNA so they can make clones of *you*.”

“No,” Rei said again. “I—”

“It’s a lifetime contract and they’re just locking you in early. Smart.”

“*No*.” Rei tried a third time. “I’m not sure but—”

“You’re the long-lost heir of the Kamiya fortune, destined by fate to rule the family dynasty.”

Chancery actually grinned at that one, snorting to herself.

The humor faded slowly from her face, though, when Rei didn’t say anything to that.

“Wait... *Seriously??*”

Rei offered her a pained shrug. “I... don’t know about ‘heir’, but...”

“*But??*” Chancery and Logan demanded together, both gaping at him again.

It was Aria who answered, though, apparently deciding that was the moment to reenter the conversation.

Even as she still refused to look back around at them.

“We think he’s part of the Kamiya family,” she said, and Rei could tell she hadn’t yet managed to unclench her jaw. “Now that he’s making a name for himself, they’ve decided they want him back.”

The silence that followed this was as heavy as it was cold.

“Rei...” Logan started slowly as he looked back around, eyes narrowing. “That true...?”

“I don’t know.”

It was an honest answer, at the very least, and the best that Rei could offer in the moment. He realized abruptly that he’d crossed his own arms at some point, and he forced himself to relax them, shoving his hands into his pockets instead as he studied the crimson carpet beneath his boots.

“It seems likely,” he continued after a second. “I had a feeling when the Kamiya rep turned up—who is *terrifying*, by the way.”

“They threatened you??” Catcher asked, surprised. “I never heard about—”

“No, no, nothing like that.” Rei shook his head. “You’ll get it, if you ever meet her. But *anyways*...” He lifted his gaze to look between Chancery and Logan. “I had a feeling, after the offer. It was... big. Like *way* big.”

“*Too* big,” Aria muttered furiously.

Rei nodded. “Yeah. *Way* too big. They were offering crazy stuff. Housing, medical care, training. They even offered a *million* credits a year as a base stipend. And expenses on *top* of that.”

“Holy—” Chancery caught herself, shutting up in favor of watching Rei intently.

“Exactly,” he agreed again, pulling up his frame. “It was... almost desperate. Like they were willing to throw everything they could at me to get me to sign then and there. Put me on edge—put *all* of us on edge.” He gestured to Aria and Catcher as he made a quick search of the feeds. “Viv, too. It was so crazy we ended up sending the contract to Aria’s brother and Catcher’s mom for them to look at. Don’t think we ever heard back from him, but *she* got back to us with... uh...” he looked at the Saber sidelong through the display “... enthusiasm?”

Catcher looked like he had to work hard not to facepalm at the memory.

“So it was legit?” Chancery allowed herself a quiet press, this time.

“Apparently.” Rei nodded again, finding what he was looking for and screenshotting it before cropping it down and pulling up the final share commands. “But even if it hadn’t been, everything they were offering plus some other clues—like their name—just... had my hackles up. So....” he sent the file to Chancery and Logan, whose eyes flashed briefly as they received the notification, “I went digging.”

When he'd shown Viv that first time, he remembered sending her the full list of the Kamiya Corporation's executive profiles, knowing she would find the same thing he had. This time, he'd cut to the chase, so neither the Lancer or Mauler were long in studying the single headshot and bio he'd sent.

"Oh... Damn..." Chancery was the first to get out, her purple-green iris alive with the glow of the display as she took in Kamiya Hiroto's features.

"His eyes..." Logan growled.

"Yeah..." Aria snarled quietly. "They're *Rei's* eyes."

"But... that *could* be a coincidence, right?" Chancery offered tentatively, closing out of the CEO's profile. "There's got to be *tons* of people with grey eyes... right?"

"Probably," Rei acknowledged. "But the company is based in Tokyo, on Earth. And the Kamiya's seem to be old Japanese blood, which might explain my looks." He gestured absently at the his face, where his eyes were as narrow or angled as Hirito Kamiya's, but moreso than any else's present. "My name—my *first* name—is Japanese, too. Hell, so is *Shido's*."

The words were sour in his mouth, and he remembered briefly the time even Valera Dent had pointed this out, when she'd asked him if he'd known what his CAD's name meant.

'Seed', he'd told her. 'Shido means 'seed'.'

"Combine all that with the offer..." Catcher finished for him, looking himself between Chancery and Logan now. "Well... you get the gist."

"Yeah..." Logan muttered, teeth partially bared. "Yeah... I guess we do..."

Rei blinked at him, but was only confused for a moment before realizing that *Logan*, of all of them, would probably be the *most* sensitive to the antics of a toxic family.

For a long while after that they all sat in silence, no one looking at each other as they processed, some for the first time, some for the hundredth. Rei was just starting to feel like he should try and say something more, actually, when Aria abruptly stood and whirled on him.

"All that..." Her voice was quite now, but her fists were clenched so tight at her sides they were shaking. "You remember *all that*, and you *still* took the offer..."

"Aria, I didn't see another—"

“Did you *try* to?” Even whispered, the question cut him short, and Rei was alarmed to realize her green eyes were glistening. “Did you even *try*? You could have *asked*, Rei... You could have at least *asked* what we thought—what *I* thought—before doing this...”

Rei swallowed, but he held his ground. “You would have tried to talk me out of it...”

She stared at him for a long, tense moment.

“You’re damn right, I would have,” she finally managed with a swallow that looked like it hurt. “You’re damn right. You always... You *always*...”

That was when the tear fell, a single, miserable line that cut through her freckles and down to the slender line of her chin.

Rei felt his heart break.

“Aria, I—” he started, lifting a hand with the intent of wiping her cheek dry.

Catching his wrist, though, she pushed it aside, shaking her head as she stepped by him instead.

“I don’t want to talk to you right now.” Her voice was shaky and pained. “Just leave me alone, Rei.”

“Aria!” he called after her, toeing a desperate now, watching her back as she made for the stairs. “Come on! What else was I supposed to do??”

She didn’t answer him. Instead, she reached the steps and started taking them two at a time.

Her was just about to vanish behind the edge of the ceiling when she stopped with one hand on the bannister.

“East Center in thirty minutes!” she called out, still without looking around at them. “Anyone who is a *second* late can assume they’re sitting out the evening!”

And then she was gone.

Rei stared after her for a long time, feeling half lost, half angry, and *all* totally miserable. No one spoke behind him. No one even moved. Not for a full minute.

Then Catcher let out a breath of frustration.

“Rei...” he began with a huff, and Rei could hear him getting to his feet. “I’ll cop to it. I *was* the one who said you should at least *look* at the offer seriously. Maybe that puts a little bit of this on me.” He came to stand beside him, and Rei could tell he, too, was looking at the stairs Aria had vanished up. “But *that*... *That’s* on you man.”

“...Yeah?”

Rei had meant to sound defiant, to sound angry.

Instead, he was pretty sure the question came out as nothing but sad and resigned.

“Oh, yeah.” Catcher patted him on the shoulder briefly. “If Viv were here, she’d kick your ass.”

“She’d be the world’s biggest hypocrite,” Rei grumbled without enthusiasm, hearing Chancer and Logan get up too.

“Oh one-hundred-and-*ten* percent, my dude.” Catcher nodded sanctimoniously. “But for this? For trying to take everything on yourself? *Again?*” He gave a sad snort, then started to head of the stairs too. “She’d still *definitely* kick your ass.”