

CHAPTER 12

Shido rippled as it changed with arcing bolts of white electricity, first reclaiming the Brawler's claws, the reforming into the Saber's heavier plating and sword just as Rei slammed into the C5 woman. Having been in midair as the Device had shifted, the drop in Speed didn't immediately effect him, and Rei felt a thrill of triumph as the longer blade punched through the projection's lifted defense. The hologram had clearly been "taken by surprise"—or whatever the equivalent was for an AI deliberately calculating that even an opponent of a C5 rank wouldn't have been able to anticipate the triggered Ability as Rei fell—and hardly a heartbeat later the Arena announced the FDA, leaving Rei to whirl on the C5 man.

Just over a minute and later, he was once again facing off with the second B0, body screaming for rest and oxygen, when Bretz's merciful call rose over the shriek of the vysetrium blade.

"Time!"

The grey projection flicked and vanished, leaving Shido to slash harmlessly through air as Rei cursed himself. His goal hadn't necessarily been to reach the B5s—not right then, at least—but he'd seen the possibility even more clearly this time, seen it only to have it snatched away by the test rules.

Then, though, Bretz announced his score, and Rei couldn't have complained even if he'd wanted to.

"Second B0! 4:28.76! Hell, how about that?"

The Second Lieutenant's genuine surprised—and not displeased—tone had Rei smiling again behind his mask, and he had to stop himself from giving a fist pump with his clawed left hand. In the end he wasn't even sure he could have gotten the limb up to do it, because his legs gave out as he tried to turn to face the officer, dropping him to the white floor with a "Woah!" to leave him sprawled on his back. He lay there for a moment, the sub-basement spinning around him, barely noting that Bretz didn't tell him to hurry up and clear the field.

Rei supposed he'd earned the reprieve, so he stayed there like that, waiting for the room to right itself.

Sub-4:30... More than half-a-minute faster than his second attempt, and reaching the same point. He was happy with that—*more* than happy with that—but the victory was two-fold. Aside from the score, Rei also felt like he had made an actual, *tangible* step towards understanding Type Shift and its advantages, noting and applying the Ability almost perfectly to a situation, just as he'd planned.

It was just as good a feeling—no, *better* a feeling—than have demolished his personal record so thoroughly.

“You did good, man, but I give you five seconds before Bretz calls you a drama queen and has you running laps.”

Rei—Shido still called and sword still in one hand—blinked and brought his head up, finding that the training chamber had finally stopped turning around him. Sense had an amused expression as he bent over him, one hand already outstretched and offered.

“Fair,” Rei groaned before muttering a last “Recall” and accepting the Brawler’s help in getting to his feet after the CAD had pulled away from his limbs. Standing, he had to blink several times before he got his bearings, then gave the boy a word of thanks and a good luck pat on the shoulder before taking an uneasy step towards the waiting circles again. Passing Bretz, he gave the officer an appreciative nod—which was return, if with a smirk—then settled down to sit as Sense got the last Offense & Endurance test of the day done.

Rei hadn't been wrong. That *had* sucked.

But it had also been *absolutely* worth it.

He smiled to himself, forcing himself to focus on Sense’s run, to not dwell on his success thus far. The worst had yet to come, after all, and he had beaten his body to a pulp as it was, evidence by the slower progress his recovery was taking, this time. He breathed, watching the boy rip through the lower ranks of the exam, trying to will limbs into good health again. It took the better part of the Brawler’s attempt, but they got there, and Rei had to again shake his head at the effect of Shido’s presence around his wrist.

Even as his lowest spec, C-ranked Endurance was no damn joke...

“Time!” Bretz finally called one last time. “First B0 in 3:59.92! Not on improvement on your second run, Senseon, but we’ll allow it all things considered. Good work.”

Sense, doubled over himself with Scarabus’ pistons resting on his knees, only nodded as he gasped. If he was frustrated with himself for not having managed another PR, he didn’t show it when he finally straightened to draw in a deep breath before, recalling his Device and making for the edge of the field. Rei and Gisham both congratulated his effort quietly, but before either could get anything else out Bretz was talking again.

“Ok! Warm up’s over! You’ve got 5 minutes to recover, then we’re knocking out the Fortitude test.” The man’s eyes lingered on Rei. “Some of you like to play games with this one, I know, but keep in mind that I better see *magnitudes* of improvement from anyone not taking this one by the book. Clear?”

“Yes, sir!” answered five voices in unison, though Rei thought Sense and Gisham’s sounded a little guilty. They—like him—had take a different approach last quarter’s Fortitude testing, and done so not only under Bretz’s scrutiny, but that of Valera Dent’s as well.

Speaking of...

As Bretz summoned them bottles of water and dismissed the five of them to their respite as he prepped the field, Rei half turned where he sat, taking in the rest of 1-A. Unsurprisingly everyone but the Duelists were still wrapping Offense & Endurance—the other Types’ slower Speed always noticeable in those scores—and after a few seconds of searching Rei found the Iron Bishop standing just north of them with the Sabers by Field 3.

Standing by the Saber... but watching him.

Rei almost started as he registered the woman’s brown eyes, and had to force himself not to look away immediately. Politely he nodded to the chief combat instructor, then turned in time to find Sense and Gisham approaching from their spots as a trio of drones zipped through the other Fields in their direction.

He wasn’t all that surprised at Dent’s attention—not with Bretz’s loud announcements that the Brawlers were now prepping for the Fortitude test—but Rei wasn’t sure he would every *really* get used to the piercing nature of the woman’s gaze.

For some reason, it always seemed to say “Show me. Prove to me what you can do...”

“*Second* B0, man... Not gonna pretend I’m not a *little* jealous.”

Sense groaned as he dropped down across from Rei, Gisham doing the same to his left as she nodded.

“For sure,” the girl said, reaching up to pluck three bottles of chilled water from the underside of a bot as it slowed over her head expectantly. “It was definitely cool, but you’re making me wish *I* had a sword, now.”

Rei shook his head with a dry laugh, accepting one of the waters when she offered them to him and Sense in turn. “Careful what you wish for. I’m not gonna complain, but I’m *way* less handy with Saber Mode than I am in Shido’s Brawler form. It’s kind of a pain in the ass trying to master both.”

Sense made a face, waving the attempted placation away with a hand. “*Please* don’t try to make us feel better about it, man. Gripping about a thing like that’s not a great look.” He grinned as Rei grimaced in answer. “I’m kidding. Sure it can’t be easy, but if anyone can do it it’s you. And even if you don’t ever get it down *one hundred percent*, it’s still a nifty trick to have up your sleeve.”

“Which is totally your MO,” Gisham agreed with a snort.

Rei couldn’t deny this, of course. Trickery and deceit had always been his go-to fighting style when he could manage it, at least in the Dueling format. What was more, that jump attack on the first C5 in his third attempt had proven that he could still be clever in direct combat, even if his Saber Mode *was* a lot slower.

Still, he shrugged, not super keen on lingering on Type Shift given how close that conversation often came to details about Shido he’d only ever shared with Aria, Viv, and Catcher. “Maybe, but it’s not like it puts me head and shoulders over everyone. Aria hit the B5s *last* quarter. And I’ll bet Viv, Kay, and Grant all manage it today.”

“Comparing ‘everyone’ to those freaks isn’t exactly a fair assessment.” Gisham gave him a mock scowl, but seemed to sense that he didn’t want to stay the center of the conversation because she continued. “But yeah, speaking of, I think I *did* see Arada down the B0 guy while Emble was fighting, so you’re probably—”

After that the conversation to a turn for the safer, with the three of them exchanging suspicions of how the rest of the first years would do in the Offense & Endurance testing, particularly the sectional qualifiers. By the time their 5 minutes was up, Rei was feeling refreshed—and hydrated—and so Bretz’s shout for them to get on their feet only came with a clench of anticipation.

This time, when the Second Lieutenant faced off with them to announce the last test, his expression was a bit more grim.

“No jokes on this one, ladies and gentleman,” he started evenly. “You know what’s coming, and you know what it takes to succeed. I can tell most of you—” he deliberately didn’t look at Emble or Warren “—put everything you had into your first two exams, so take it as a compliment when I say that if I could give you a few more minutes to recover I would. Unfortunately, that kind of defeats the purpose of a standardized test. So... Everyone ready?” For once, he actually paused to take them all in, waiting for the chorus of “Yes, sir!” that came a little more staggered, all of them not expecting to actually have to reply. When they had, he nodded. “Good. Then get to it, and do what you gotta do.”

This last statement Rei found at once strange and gratifying, because while Bretz hadn’t been looking at him as he’d said the words—his gaze almost deliberately fixed on Gisham at the time, in fact—it felt like a permission.

“Will do,” Rei muttered under his breath, addressing no one in particular and already moving with the others towards one of the five larger, evenly-spaced red circles that encompassed the outside edge of the field, bright against the white contrast of the projected floor. He ended up between Warren and Sense, this time—Gisham on Sense’s other side and Emble two to his left—and so he kept his eyes on Bretz as the officer took his own place in the middle of the space.

Despite his earlier talk of “standardized” time limits, the man sure took a suspiciously long time in turning to take them all in, only stopping when he was—at last—openly meeting Rei’s eyes now.

One last nod—small, and meant only for him, Rei suspected—and Bretz looked away to shout loud and clear.

“Ok, cadets! Here we go!”

And then the number 5 appeared before Rei's eyes—mirrored in front the faces of each of the 1-A Brawlers, he knew, and the countdown began.

There had been no shout to “Call!” this time, no indication that they should summon their CADs. The nature of the exam required no such application of their Devices, though perhaps that was unfortunate. Rei had to admit to himself—as the 3 appeared, then 2, then 1—that he felt bare without Shido in that moment, like leaving the CAD around his wrists was unnatural as he stood on that field, preparing himself. In fact, there was a brief moment where he thought he should recall to ask Bretz if he was *allowed* to call, just to have Shido's comfortable weight around him to make himself feel better, or if summing the Device was actually banned in the exam.

Then, though, the number hit “0”, and Rei was made to consider that perhaps he should focus on the task at hand as Bretz shouted “F0!” for all of them to hear.

The Fortitude section of parameter testing was—by unanimous consensus of *anyone* who might be asked the question—the most deplored of the exams, entirely because of how damn *uncomfortable* it was. Sure the mental strain of Speed & Agility and the anaerobic toll of Offense & Endurance could be miserable in their own way, but they simply didn't compare to the actually *physical* discomfort of the third and final exam. Using the Arena's projection technology, the Field steadily ratcheted up not only the pull of gravity on their bodies, but also stimulate their Group C nerve fibers, more commonly known by the average civilian by a different name:

Pain receptors.

The crawling, tingling sensation came first, as it always did, noticeable but not uncomfortable. It was almost pleasant, in fact, if Rei really considered it, especially compared to what he knew would follow. Bretz yelled “F1” a moment later—the first notch up in what was supposed to have been about several minutes of torture—and sure enough the buzzing over Rei's skin intensified just the slightest bit. Had he kept going, he would have eventually pushed himself to the point of blacking out, he knew, and he had every intention of fighting that fight.

Just not right in that moment.

“E5!”

Roughly a minute later—and with the biting nip of pain juuust starting to claw at him—Rei took a knee. At once the automatic sensor system the test employed shut down the simulation, and for a few second Rei felt off balance as intensified gravity he'd only barely started to notice alleviated, leaving him to tilt off kilter and catch himself with a hand. To his right, he was unsurprised to see Sense, then Gisham follow his lead in turn, emulating him just as they had during their previous parameter test, and like an echo of 13 weeks past Rei caught Bretz give the the three of them an eye roll as they grinned at each other.

What *was* a surprise, on the other hand, was what came immediately next, hinted at as Sense and Gisham both stiffened in surprise.

“Ok!” came the Second Lietenants unexpected shout. “Since you all want to play this game, I hope you’re ready to fit my boot up your collective asses if *any* of you mess this up. Three minutes, then we go again!”

Rei blinked, taken aback by this announcement, and turned. To his *complete* shock, Emble and Warren too were in the process of falling back off their knees to sit cross-legged in the middle of their circles, as-ever not meeting his eyes, but each of them a little red in the face as they looked everywhere but at Rei or the others. Rei, for his part, could only gape, at once bewildered and something almost like... impressed?

There was a reason he took a knee on the Fortitude parameter tests. At least the first two attempts. The fact of the matter was that the exam was as exhausting as it was uncomfortable, and exhausting in a way that could not be measured up to by either Speed & Agility *or* Offense & Endurance. While the physical demand of withstanding the increasing gravity was definitely a massive contributing factor, withstanding the pain that came with the advance ranks—meant to measure where the average ISCM cadet of said rank usually fell in the exam—was borderline debilitating, at least for Rei. He had a history with pain, one that was well known by now to grant him an edge in this particular test, but that didn’t mean his body and mind *liked* the torture any more than the others. For that reason, he’d come up with the tactic of dropping out and saving himself for the third and final attempt. His score, after all, was not an aggregate, but rather a best-of-three, and

the strategy had worked so well that Sense and Gisham had adopted it the following exam. Emble and Warren, on the other hand...

Well... There was a reason Rei was staring, open mouthed, at the pair of them.

Ping.

Rei blinked as a notification popped in his frame. Seeing that it was from Sense, he opened the message even as he turned to frown around at the Brawler, who was watching him expectantly.

Woab. That a LOT of crow to swallow.

Rei snorted, typing out his response—as he had often during Team Battle training—with his eyes rather than his hands. While he doubted Bretz would have given them an earful usually for chatting in between attempts, the unexpected circumstances had clearly put the man in an edgy mood.

Right?? Who would have thought??

Honestly... Me. Mostly. I don't think they're very happy with their performances so far. That 36 disk from Emble in Speed & Agility was yikes, you know?

Rei barely kept himself from snickering, starting to feel a little bit like a bully. Typing back quickly, he worked to keep his face straight.

Maybe they'll be so shocked by how well they do that they'll suddenly turn into decent human beings?

Yeah... And maybe we'll sign a peace treaty with the archons and learn to coexist in a eutopian society full of sunshine and rainbows.

Pessimist much?

Personally I prefer the term "realist", thanks.

Rei grinned, but left the conversation at that, turning to take in Emble and Warren again. It *was* a surprise, but he supposed Sense had a point. There was a price on everyone's pride, in the end.

The call came a couple minutes later.

“Ok! Up you get! Attempt two in thirty seconds.”

Rei, along with the four Brawlers, pushed themselves up at once again to stand at the ready. Bretz had no additional words for them, preferring to look between Rei, Sense, and Gisham with a raised eyebrow, letting them know he was *very much aware* of the corruptive influence they had had on the group as a whole, now. Fortunately Rei—as he suspected the others did—kept his attention anywhere but directly on the man, waiting in silence for the “5” to appear once more. Eventually, it did, and eventually it ticked away to 0 again.

And—predictably, this time—all five first years staggered around Field 1 dropped immediately, Rei kneeling so soon after the last of the red digits vanished from view that the prickly sensation didn't even have time to reach his knees.

He thought he heard Bretz let out something between a hiss of irritation and a sigh of exasperation, and this time Rei thought it smart not to risk so much as *looking* at Sense or Gisham for risk of incurring the sub-instructor's wrath. Instead, he turned where he sat, pretending to study the other Type-groups as they either wrapped their Offense & Endurance test or—in the case of the Duelists, the only one faster than the Brawlers—dug well into their Fortitude exam.

Except for one...

Rei started, noticing first that there seemed to be one Duelist missing from the group, only to realize a second later that Viv wasn't gone, just sitting where everyone else what still standing and taking the brunt of what was probably their second attempt. She didn't look around at him, but Rei *did* accidentally catch the eye of Liam Gross, who glared at him in a measure way that spoke to much the same irritation as Bretz was currently suffering.

Rei had to work hard not to laugh as he looked away from Field 4 and the Duelists, wondering what the next quarter's testing would look like if Viv did well with the stolen strategy.

Phalanxes and Maulers being on Field 5 and 6 respectively, it was harder to find Aria and Grant among the instructors and students between them, and both groups were still finishing up the previous test anyway. Deciding it was time to focus, Rei returned his attention to his out group, braving one glance at the Second Lieutenant before dropping his eyes to the projected white of the floor between his feet. Taking a breath, he closed his eyes.

During their last Fortitude test, Valera Dent had capped him at B0, explain that—despite whatever protests he might have—she had to prioritize a functional environment for *all* her students, not just him. Give that he had apparently been *screaming* by the end of the first quarter's test—and result of his tendency to fall into himself, leaving the conscious world behind whenever pain threaten to take over his body—Rei had understood. This time, however, Dent hadn't yet made an appearance to give him the same warning, probably because she assumed he would know well enough to keep things in control *without* a reminder.

Rei grimaced, eyes still closed. A knot formed in his gut, thinking on it. He *would* keep himself away, *would* keep himself from dropping away again, but it was really, *really* not gonna be fun. Thinking on it, he decided to set a goal for himself, considering what a good target was to claim solid improvement even if he dropped immediately after. Eventually, he settled on B5. His previous test had seen an improvement from C2 to B0, and while Shido *had* made massive improvements in the nearly-3 months since, Rei was aware there was likely to be a *massive* different in the hurdles presented by each increasing B rank compared to the Cs. B5, he decided, was good. Definitely not out of reach, he hoped, but a challenge that would make him feel like he'd accomplished something even if he couldn't go further.

B5, he repeated to himself silent, focusing on that number, trying to sear it into his mind to give him something to fixate on later.

Unfortunate, "later" turned into "soon" pretty damn quick...

“Third and final, cadets! Get your asses up and show my what you’ve got, or else!”

Bretz did not seem remotely amused as he announced the last attempt, and Rei opened his eyes. With a steadying breath he got himself up, not looking at the other 4 as they, too, climbed to their feet one last time, not looking at the Second Lieutenant or the number “5” when it appeared. Honestly, Rei didn’t look at anything at all.

He just focused.

0.

“F0!”

The tingling came, and Rei let it wash over him, letting his body relax as it did. To his right, he thought he made out Sense shaking out his arms and legs while he still could, but Rei kept his thoughts inward.

“F1!” the call came, and the buzz intensified just the slightest bit. Rei frowned, wondering if he was imagining that the rank-up felt just infinitesimally stronger than it usually did, but he cast the consideration aside as “F2” was called, then “F3” with no additional concern.

It was only when “D1” got shouted out a minute or 2 later that he Rei started to suspect something was wrong.

“What the hell?” he muttered to himself. The pain had arrived in the Es as expected, and as well as the awareness of the increasing gravity. As the test slipped into the Ds, though, there had felt like a *definite* jump in discomfort, with Red actually wincing as the biting slipped into burning a little more abruptly than he remembered.

Was he wrong? Had he not warmed up enough? Maybe next quarter he would let himself push into the Ds to prepare his body a little more thoroughly.

Then, though, the test progressed, and Rei was forced to focus once more.

By the time he hit D5, Rei had forgotten about the odd shift in the test, requiring every thought to stay on keeping his jaw clenched shut and his lungs working. It was far from the worst paid he’d ever suffered, but it had definitely shifted beyond what he could shoulder with ease. Closing his eyes again, he accepted it.

Pain was easy, he told himself. Pain he could deal with.

“C1!”

Again Rei winced, but the passing thought that the pain had jumped only again vanished as the discomfort forced him to discard all distraction. He was starting to have trouble breathing, and he was long past the point where he would have ordinarily allowed himself conscious to crawl back, to retreat to the far reaches of his mind. The temptation was there, *so* there, and it would have been as easy as giving in, as easy as dropping to his knees had been during the first two attempts, though.

Feeling the weight of the Iron Bishop's trust in his common sense, though, Rei instead forced himself to stand taller, straightening his shoulders and bringing his chin up, trying to align himself as much as possible with the downward force of the now-wrenching gravity.

“C5!”

Camilla Warren's cry as she fell almost broke Rei's concentration, but he held to it, only allowing himself the briefest moment of appreciating that he was pretty sure he recalled the girl's last score being no higher than the low Cs. After that C6 passed, but the call for “C7!” two other people fell more quietly, probably Emble and Sense judging by the directions of the *thud-thuds* that could only be knees and elbows slamming to ground in near-unison. C7 was next, and Gisham went down with a dampened keen of pain.

And then it was Rei, all alone, he knew, standing there.

Standing there, and with his thoughts screaming at him to keep going, *keep going*.

The trouble was... Rei wasn't sure he could...

“C8!”

The pain was... extraordinary. Had he had the mind for it, Rei would have considered what it was that he had done wrong, what mistake it was that he'd made that morning.

“C9!”

If he'd been able to, he would have questioned everything about the day, and maybe even the weekend before. What was different? Why was this so much more difficult that he remembered? He hadn't even reached his last score of—

“B0!”

Rei tried to swallow, but couldn't, the pull of gravity feeling like it was dragging down even the muscles of his throat. Had he tilted his face to the ceiling, he was pretty sure his eyes would have been forced open as the gravity wrench at his eyelids.

B5, the number came when he called on it, his mind seeking a handhold to cling to.
B5. Come on. B5!

But no. Even as he brought the goal to mind, even the subconscious part of Rei that allowed him and free floating though was aware he wasn't going to make it.

“B1!”

B5. Come on! B5 you son of a bitch!

No. No...

“B2!”

B5! Come on! COME ON! B5! You can do it! You can—!

“B3!”

That though, was the moment Rei's body gave in, the moment his willpower shattered. As the test notched up, the burning, screaming pain that encompassed his whole body seemed almost to redouble, like the acid he had been dunked into had suddenly been shocked with 100,000 volts of electricity. Rei entire body spasmed and with a wrenching gasp his eyes flew open.

Just in time to see the world spin away.

WHAM!

Rei hit the ground on his side twisting as one knee gave before the other, the gravity hauling him down like a falling stone. He barely managed to save himself a concussion by getting his left hand between his temple and the floor, and even that Rei was pretty sure he felt his reactive shielding trigger as he slammed to the solid projection of the white field.

“Gwahhhh!” he got out, feeling his eyes budge as he at once attempted to drag in a breath and had the wind knocked out of him. For a torturous fraction of a second the pressure held, suffocating Rei on dry land, and the very edges of panic—a feeling he hadn't experience in a very, *very* long time—showed themselves on the edges of his thoughts.

Then, though, the Arena released him, and Rei spasmed again as a shocked diaphragm fought his need for air.

“Easy, cadet! Easy!”

A pair of large hands took him by the shoulder and knee respectively, and Bretz’s A-ranked Strength was suddenly holding him down as firmly as an iron cage. Only then, as his body fought this restriction, did Rei realizing his initial jolting had evolved into full blow twitches—boarding on thrashing—his arms arms clenched across his body and his legs kicking.

Then, at last, his chest released, and he got his first full breath in in what had to have been several minutes.

“Guuuuuuh!” Rei gasped fully, taking in one lungful, then another, not seeing Sense or Gisham standing nearby with wide eyes, not seeing Emble and Warren looking on almost equally as shocked. He breathed, drawing in breath after breath, Bretz’s hands never leaving him, helping to stabilize him as his body continued to battle itself.

Then, finally, after nearly a minute, Rei felt the jerking abate, his awareness coming back measure by measure, until he could blink and force himself to be still, inhaling through his nose in sharp, unsteady breath.

“Ward.”

Rei started, though this time it had nothing to do with the Fortitude test or its lingering cruelties. Abruptly, as he regained the ability to focus on anything outside of himself, he realized that another figure had come to stand before him, looking down on where he was still pinned under Bretz’s arms.

“Nod if you can hear me.” Valera Dent said quietly, her voice deathly calm.

Rei, find his neck difficult to control even with his head still rest on one hand on the floor, only managed a twitch of confirmation.

It was enough to bring the Iron Bishop down to one knee beside him.

“Michael, what did get to?”

In any other situation, Rei might have noted the casual address of the Second Lieutenant, the first real crack in the Captain’s stoicism he’d ever born witness to.

As it was, he was still preoccupied maintaining control of his limbs.

“B3,” Bretz hissed back in a hushed tone. “I mean that’s definitely high, don’t get me wrong, but this? After he climbed from C2 to B0 last barely aware that her brown eyes were looking him up and down, taking him in with measured concern.

Concern and... was that *anger*?

No. Rei had to have imagined it. He was aware enough, now, to realize what he must have looked like, crumpled like he was on the floor, and his embarrassment suddenly started to outweigh the slowly-fading shock of his body.

“I-I can sit up,” he got out through teeth that felt strange in his mouth, starting to press himself up with the hand under his head. “I-I can—”

“Absolutely not.”

Dent’s snarl was mirrored in the same moment by Bretz’s hands redoubling their pressure on him, pinning him down with the absolute immovability of a mountain, now.

“You will lie there until we can get a drone to scan you. It’s already on the way. If it comes back clean, then—and *only* then—will you be getting up, and that will be so that Arada and Laurent can take you to see Willem Mayd. Is that understand?”

Despite the question at the end, the Captain words were snapped so fiercely Rei was pretty sure the planet would have started spinning in the other direction had she commanded it to in the same tone. Indeed, all he could do was nod his agreement even as he made out the whirring of medical drone approaching, reaching his ears of the silence of the sub-basement.

Silence?

“Shit...” Rei grumbled, his tongue finally starting to feel somewhat normal. “Everyone’s staring again, aren’t they?”

The question, though not intending to, appeared to ease the Bishop’s tension, because her expression soften minutely. Looking away from him—likely over Bretz’s shoulder—she took in whatever scene was behind Rei for a moment before nodding.

“You *do* have a knack for making yourself the center of attention, Ward,” she answered a bit more gently, this time. “I just wish that it could occasionally be related to you *not* nearly killing yourself while under my supervision.”

Rei laughed at that, the drone finally coming into view, dropping down beside Dent.

Then, though, the laugh turned into a cough, then another, and Rei felt a pain in his chest even as he tasted iron in his mouth.

That was when he noticed the blood, cast in a spray before him, reddening the white of the field floor and flecking the Captains black boots.

“Oh that *can't* be good,” was the last thing he remembered getting out.

And then Rei was falling, dropping into blackness, the world blinking out even as he heard the barest shouts of his name ringing out from somewhere high, high above him.