

WARFORMED

STORMWEAVER
2



FIRE AND SONG

BRYCE O'CONNOR

“Fire and Song”

Book Two of the *Warformed: Stormweaver* series

Bryce O’Connor

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**PIRE
AND
SONG**

BRYCE O'CONNOR

For the Baxter clan.

For all the love and support throughout the years.

... And also because Graig had to fire me that one time xD xD xD

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CHAPTER 1

Late December, 2468
Astra System – Astra-3 – Sector 9
Castalon

“When did I know she was the one? Easy. I knew when she was the only person left who still scared me enough to make me do the laundry and put my dishes in the—OWOWOWOW that’s my ear, my ear, Aria!”

*-Post-match interview with the Stormweaver
Interrupted by his longtime partner, Aria of Flames*

Reidon “Rei” Ward didn’t think he had ever been in greater danger. Not any of the times he’d been put under the knife on the surgical tables that had been the nightmare of his childhood. Not when he’d nearly had his face kicked in by Mateus Selleck and some other jealous Galens Institute classmates a few months back. Not even when he’d faced Christopher “Lasher” Lennon across the 30-yard expanse of an SCT Dueling field, much less the likes of Logan Grant soon after that.

No. Now, as Rei’s slate-grey eyes flicked to every bustling corner of the massive room he stood in—and finding no easily attainable exit—he was sure of it.

He had never been in greater danger.

“Rei. Rei.”

Rei blinked and looked straight again, hoping the terror didn’t show on his face as he took in the tall, green-eyed girl standing before him like nothing was remotely wrong with the situation. A plain black baseball cap, identical to his own, covered her vibrant red hair, and she was looking at him expectantly.

“Yeah?” he asked, his voice forcibly calm.

“Are you going to tell me? Which one do you think would look better?” Aria Laurent, the ace of the Institute’s first-year cadets, held up a pair of pretty button-up blouses that Rei would have bet his Device’s S-Ranked Growth were *perfectly* identical. “The ‘Heaven Blue’? Or the ‘Afternoon Sky’?”

Obviously, there was only one thing to do in a situation like this.

“The Sky,” Rei stated with *distinctly* false confidence, dipping the brim of his cap at the blouse in the girl’s left hand. “It would go better with your eyes.”

Aria blinked at him, a brief look of confusion passing across her face. Then, slowly, she grinned.

“You can’t tell the difference, can you?”

“Not even remotely,” Rei answered promptly, keeping up his air of bravado.

Aria laughed, then, the sound more satisfying than any Rei had ever known in his life, even if it made him scowl in the moment.

“Sorry, *sorry*,” Aria managed to get out finally, still grinning even when she was done. “You could have just said as much, you know?”

“And ruin your fun? Not happening.” Rei chuckled. “You’ve bought more clothes *today* than I think I’ve owned in my *life*, lady. I’m not about to jeopardize that kind of commitment.”

It was Aria’s turn to eye him, and she hefted the three *full* bags of apparel that hung from her elbows proudly, each of them sporting a different brand design in shimmering neon holo-displays that were only visible through their NOEDs. “Are you judging me?”

“Not even a *little*,” Rei assured her with his own laugh, bringing up the *four* bags he himself was carrying for the girl so that she could keep shopping with both hands. “I’m just teasing. We have to wear our regulars at all times at school, so I find it a little baffling is all.”

The pair of them were standing in “Swallowtail”, a massive, single-room clothing boutique that might have fit half a 150-yard Wargames field. The space was a wide-open two stories, and sported so many displays of such a variety of garments that Rei couldn’t imagine there wasn’t a person in the entirety of the ISC who couldn’t have found *something* to wear from among the selection around them alone. They even had an entire section devoted exclusively to wigs, for those in the mood for a more drastic change in look.

And it was only *one* store.

Easthold Mall, it had turned out, was one of the single largest shopping centers in the entirety of the Astra system, thronged daily by the vibrant populace of Castalon and the thriving tourism that was often fed by the Galens Institute and professional Simulated Combat Tournaments the school occasionally hosted. The mall took up no less than *three* of the city’s towering skyscrapers, and comprised of some eleven *thousand*

different outlets, shops, and foodcourts, many of which were represented multiple times throughout the sprawling center. Even if they had spent the entirety of their winter vacation exploring, Rei was fairly convinced he and Aria wouldn't have been able to visit a quarter of the massive complex, for which he was both grateful and disappointed. On the one hand, he'd never been much for shopping, even if he did have a decent pile of credits saved up from the small stipend he'd all-but-forgotten the military provided its cadets.

On the other, while he might miss Viv and Catcher—and even Chancery Cashe, who was quickly growing on all of them—spending the entire vacation stuck inside with Aria didn't seem like the *worst* way to pass the break...

Whether fortunately or unfortunately, though, Aria herself had other plans.

“Rei I have *three weeks*—well, two, now—to *not* have to wear those damn regulars, and I'm going to take advantage of it. Just because *you* can pull off black and gold every day, Mr. White-Hair-and-Grey-Eyes-for-Days, does not mean the *rest* of us can.” She'd moved on from the blue blouses to steadily thumb along a line of colored tank-tops. “If Uncle Ram and the rest of the staff are nice enough to let us wear civies on breaks, you damn well better believe I'm gonna take advantage of it. Besides—” she plucked a simple pink top from where it was suspended, the magnetic latch that held the hanger in place releasing without a sound “—not *all* of this is for me. You think Viv is any more partial to our uniform than I am?”

Rei had to stop himself grinning evilly as Aria scrutinized the shirt for a moment before replacing it with a *click* to pull down another one. “Viv? Not me? I thought this was supposed to be *our* date.”

He got the reaction he'd been going for at once.

Aria froze. Her face flushed, ears going nearly the color of the red hair she had tucked away under the black cap, and it took her a second to look at him, though her gaze flicked away again immediately.

“Tease,” she mumbled at last, replacing the second top too as a group of four or five boys about their age and in matching uniform jackets passed them on the other side of the suspended rack. After a second, though, she found her composure, and turned her green eyes on Rei's own clothes. “Actually... Something for *you*... That's not a bad idea.”

He made a face at her, lifting both arms in display. “What? Why? What's wrong with what I'm wearing?”

In response, he got an arched eyebrow.

Aside from their matching hats—kindly provided for them by Bashir Sattar, the gruff Galens quartermaster—Rei and Aria couldn't have been dressed more differently. They both wore long sleeves, partially to ward off the December chill and partially to hide Shido and Hippolyta's colored bands from the eyes of curious passersby, but while Rei thought he'd looked smart in a white half-zip, a black jacket, and black jeans—the nicest clothes he owned aside from their standard ISCM uniform—Aria had, predictably, put him to shame from the moment they'd met up in the lobby of Kanes, the first-year dormitory, a couple of hours before. Her green bomber jacket was artfully too big for her, loosely buttoned over a low-cut shirt, and her own jeans were fashionably ripped and worn around her thighs and knees. Rei was glad, too, that even with his new 5'7" frame he was used to being towered over by everyone in his life, because Aria—already 5'11"—had kept to her black military-issue boots, adding another inch or so more over him and his simpler sneakers. All-in-all, the girl cut the perfect picture of a voguish teenage model, looking like she might have dropped right out of one of the ads scrolling across the massive smart-glass screens that made up the ceiling of the shop above their heads.

It was a side of her Rei had never seen, and he was enjoying every second of it.

"Rei... We wear black all day, all year." Aria was looking at him almost pityingly, now. "I can't convince you to *try* a splash of color at least? Even blue? To match your C—to match your bracelets?"

Aria had caught herself, obviously about to say the word "CAD" out loud, which had enough of a chance of causing trouble that Galens cadets were discouraged from mentioning their Devices beyond the grounds. When they'd notified the school of their intention to leave, in fact, Rei and Aria had been surprised by the list of "recommendations" the Security Center had sent back along with their approval and the hats. The Institute was famous, they knew—across the system but *especially* on Astra-3—and took the safety of its students seriously. While the list had been non-enforceable, each point had come with reasonings that had had the pair of them following it to a T.

Especially when they'd seen the custom note added at the bottom, pointing out that Rei and Aria were—aside from perhaps a handful of second- and third-year cadets like Anatoli Sidorov and the Lasher—the *most* recognizable students the school currently hosted among its body.

And so the pair of them had hidden their most distinguishing features, tucking their white and red hair under the provided caps respectively. The jackets concealed their CADs, and in Rei's case served the double-purpose of covering the now-long-healed scars of over 160 past surgeries, markings that had apparently become a "signature" distinguishing feature of his according to the forums and feeds that followed the Intra-School and collegiate-level SCTs. He and Aria avoided all mention of CADs, Devices, Users, and the like, and did their best to keep their conversation private while they moved about the mall. If he'd been with anyone else, Rei might have found the restrictions oppressive.

Instead, he'd been more than happy for the excuse to stick close to Aria, keeping to themselves all afternoon as they'd bounced from place to place, laughing and talking as easily as any other day, so long as Rei didn't remind the girl they were on an actual *date*.

Eyeing Aria's outfit, Rei grinned as he answered her. "It's not like I'm *opposed* to other looks. I'm down for it, as long as you don't hold on to the hope that there is a shot in hell I'm ever going to look as stylish as you."

Aria managed to keep her composure this time as she looked him up and down. "I don't know about that..." She lifted her gaze over his head then, taking in the projected signs that labeled the different sections of the store. "'Men's... Where's the 'Men's... Ah! There!" She pointed further into the shop and started to hurry around Rei, obviously eager. "Come on!"

"Yeeeah... Not happening," Rei answered with a laugh, catching her by the arm as she passed. "I'm all for shopping for *you* anywhere and any day of the week, but if you think I can afford a place like this, you're insane. I haven't touched my stipend all year and I *still* think I'd have to take a loan out to buy a *sock* from this shop."

"That's no problem!" Aria started brightly. "I can just get it for—"

She stopped, though, as he cocked his head at her with a bit of a grimace.

"Ooor not...?" she said tentatively.

"Or not," Rei confirmed with a snort. "If I'm lucky enough that you still want to buy me boxers sometime in the future, we can talk about it. But no *way* are you dressing me on your dime on our—" he paused for dramatic effect "—First. Date."

Aria flushed again, so brightly Rei could have sworn he felt the girl's *arm* heat up under the sleeve of her jacket still in his grasp.

“You’re the *worst*,” she muttered, looking away at once.

Then, almost immediately, she perked up, whirling back to face him.

“Oh... *Oh...!*”

“‘Oh’ what?” Rei asked, taken aback by her sudden enthusiasm.

“It’s just *me* buying it that’s the problem, right? If I find something you like, and you can get it yourself, you would?”

“I’d... consider it,” Rei answered, choosing his words carefully as he finally let go of her elbow. “Like I said, if you think I can afford anything in a fancy place like this, you’re out of your—”

“Nope!” the girl cut him off, and suddenly Rei found himself being pulled along, Aria having spun on her heel and switched the bags from one arm to the other. The next thing he knew, he’d been taken by the hand to be led—rather enthusiastically—towards Swallowtail’s front exit. “Not like this! Not at all like this!”

Rei was so caught off guard he couldn’t say anything until well after Aria had half-dragged him into the busy, brilliant-white fairway of the mall floor’s packed main hall. He wasn’t sure she’d even noticed that she’d grabbed him *by the hand*, but *he* certainly had, and the warmth of her fingers around his was enough to scramble his usually-clear head.

Eventually, however, he managed it, laughing as his feet finally caught up under him. “Aria! Where are we going??”

In answer, the girl looked back over her shoulder.

“To the mecca of affordable fashion, duh!” She grinned at him. “Have you never been thrift shopping??”

Jay Taylor was feeling pretty good about himself. It had been a while since he’d felt this good, in fact. His loss in his seventh match of the Pennview Military Academy’s Intra-School SCT had knocked him out of qualifying individually for the first-year brackets of the Sector 2 Sectionals tournament, and he hadn’t been picked to compete as one of the non-qualifiers on any of the Academy’s three squad groups even *despite* his parents’ attempted interventions on his behalf. As a result, he’d spent the last week of term sulking and training with his friends, and the days at home since doing much the same.

Then, after a couple private training sessions with a former Systems Champion Lancer his mother had found to instruct him over break, Jay had managed to not only manage an impressive—in his opinion—D4 CAD-

Rank, but also achieve his first evolution since his assignment back in May, one of only a handful of cadets to manage it in the *whole* of Pennview's first-year class.

His parents had, predictably, wanted to celebrate in extravagance, and what better way to do so than to send Jay—along with his friends Dabeet, Milo, and Colson from school—on an all-expenses paid trip to the hottest city on the planet?

Yeah... Jay Taylor was feeling pretty good about himself.

Especially after crossing paths with the tall, green-eyed girl who'd all but taken his breath away.

"Yo, these guys are *legit*," Colson Meadows had been saying behind his back as they'd explored the Easthold Mall. The black-haired Saber, along with Milo Rett, had apparently caught the tourist bug from Castalon's towering cityscape, because the pair of them had been watching reruns of some of that year's Galens Institute Intra-Schools ever since they'd reached the shopping complex. "This is *insane*. Some of these first-years are already C-Ranked, and well into them!"

"It's nuts right?" Milo, a hulking boy with narrow eyes and orange-blue hair—who could have been a perfect specimen of what someone might think a Brawler-Type User should *exactly* look like—had agreed from behind Jay's left shoulder. "And did you see the upper year matches? That 'Lasher' guy is on another level. Apparently he's a top favorite for ISC Collegiate Champion this year."

"Woah." It was Dabeet Anand this time, his towering, green-haired frame walking tall on Jay's other side, who'd finally entered the conversation. "I forgot Lennon was a student at Galens! Think there's a shot we could meet him while we're here??"

The silence that followed had had Jay looking back at the trio, not-unexpectedly finding them watching him hopefully.

He'd smirked. "How about I call my dad after we're done here? Maybe he can get us a tour of the Institute, if we're lucky."

"Nice!" Dabeet and Milo had said together even as Colson nodded along in eager agreement.

Shoving his hands into his pockets—careful to let the white of Ephrodite's vysetrium gems shine unhindered in its blue-green bands—Jay had looked forward again, feeling like the day was only getting better and better. Truth be told he'd doubted his father—despite being a high-ranking official in Sector 2's local government—would have the kind of pull to get

them anywhere near *Galens*, but ever since assignment his parents had been fawning over him even more so than usual, so it couldn't hurt to ask. He liked, too, feeling like the lynchpin of his little group, like Dabeet, Milo, and Colson would eagerly follow him through any door he could grease open for them.

So when he saw the girl, Jay was feeling sure enough of himself to take a swing even he—confident as he was—might have thought twice about any other day.

After all, she wasn't alone...

It was the flash of green that caught his eye, a brilliant shade of emerald that sparkled even under the brim of the plain black cap she had tucked tight about her head. To call her stunning would have been an understatement, an athletic form—obvious despite the loose jacket she was wearing—complementing a face that stood out even in a modern world of engineered beauty. She wasn't far when she passed by to head into a shop on the right side of the crowded hall they'd been making their way along, so Jay found himself brought up short about as much by the way she moved—graceful and quick as a dancer—as any other part of her.

Then again, maybe she *was* a dancer, for all he knew... It would have made sense given her companion—wearing a matching hat, if nothing else of any real style—moved with a similar poise and confidence. Jay actually would have suspected the pair were Users like him and the other three, except for a simple fact:

The guy looked to be barely more than five-and-a-half feet tall, and somewhat wiry despite his straight shoulders and self-assured air.

“Woah...” Dabeet said again, but this time Jay knew it had nothing to do with the *Galens* tournament recordings. “Who is *that*, and how do I get to know her?”

“Great minds, man...” Jay answered, glancing back as the girl and her short friend vanished into the store—the “Swallowtail”—while chatting animatedly. Dabeet looked to have been the only one to have seen her of the other two, because Colson and Milo were looking between the pair of them, blinking away the playback from the neuro-optics.

“What are you guys talking about?” Milo grunted, frowning around them as he searched for the reason they'd come up short. “Get to know who?”

“You know... Why don't we find out?” Jay answered, running a strong hand through his long, grey-black hair before heading for

Swallowtail himself, not surprised when he heard his friends hurrying along behind him.

It didn't take them long to find the girl and her companion. Despite the shop being a sizable one even by the standards of Easthold Mall, the matching black hats moving through the artfully-suspended displays weren't too hard to parse out of the colored hair and flashy clothes of the store's other shoppers. After about a minute of weaving casually throughout the aisles Jay and the others found the two in the "Women's" section looking at shirts, the girl apparently in the process of asking the boy his opinion. When Milo and Cooper got an eyeful of her, their matching expression of "Oh *man*..." had Jay smirking again.

He'd seen her first, and he knew none of the other three were dumb enough to try and claim his dibs on this opportunity, lest he ditch them to find their own—rather expensive—rides home from the city.

Pretending as best they could to be looking for a selection for themselves—which might have been easier if any of their four had been wearing anything but jeans and the casual jackets Pennview provided for its cadets, emblazoned with a proud crest of the school on one side—they listened in on the pair, exchanging sidelong looks of surprise every now and then. As it turned out, the short boy was *definitely* more than a friend, or at least angling to be. It sounded like the two of them were on their first date, in fact, and Jay had to stifle a repeated frown as the guy—"Rei", the still-nameless girl called him—teased her more than once. She was obviously a self-conscious thing, and Jay couldn't help but feel bad for her. If she was so timid that someone as diminutive as *this* punk could convince her to go out with him...

Unfortunately, Jay had just made his choice to interrupt—or maybe try to catch the girl on her own if he got the chance—when the pair of them abruptly high-tailed it out of the store, the girl dragging "Rei" off by the hand like he was some grade school boy.

"Wow," Jay snorted in annoyance at last as the two disappeared out into the hall again, already moving to follow and hearing Dabeet, Milo, and Colson all fall in behind him quickly. "The hell is she doing with a guy like *that*? A hundred credits says I get her away from him inside of a minute."

Had he looked over his shoulder, he might have seen the other three exchange a less sure look.

"Uh... You think so, Jay?" Milo asked uncertainly as they, too,

stepped into the hall and turned left. “They seemed pretty tight to me...”

“*Really* tight...” Dabeet agreed just as carefully.

Jay only laughed. Ahead of them he could still see the paired black hats, and he picked up his pace, engaging his Speed slightly, which forced the others to do the same in turn. He didn’t even bother keeping an eye out for city security, enjoying the widening eyes of the civilians who hurried to get out of the foursome’s way. Sure, it was frowned upon for a User to draw on their specs in public, but it wasn’t *illegal*.

“Girl’s probably just never had someone show proper interest in her,” he said over his shoulder as they moved, lifting a wrist to shake Ephrodite’s CAD band pointedly. “Another hundred says her jaw drops when she realizes I’m a *User*. If anything, she looks in need of rescuing, don’t you think?”

In answer, Jay got only silence, which satisfied him plenty. Again, though, if he’d looked back he might have noticed the other three trade another glance, as well as Colson muttering under his breath. “‘Rei’... ‘Rei’?... Why do I feel like I’ve heard that name before...?”

“Now *that* is what I’m talking about!” Rei couldn’t help but exclaim some 45 minutes later, half-walking, half-skipping out of “Olson’s Second-Hand”. While he still carried Aria’s four bags, his load had now been added to with a pair of his own, and not for the first time he thanked Shido for the Strength spec he could politely call on even out and about. “I might be starting to look like a pack mule, but I’m gonna be a *sexy* pack mule once we get back to school!”

Aria, following a couple steps behind, giggled at that. “Good thing Viv’s not around to overhear you. I don’t think you’d live that particular image down for days.”

Rei grinned, turning and waiting for her to catch up. “Worth it. How did I not know this was a thing?? Seriously!”

Aria laughed again. All her bags were on one arm, now, and with only a brief hesitation she slid her free one into the crook of Rei’s elbow. “I’m glad you had fun. Not gonna lie, I was second-guessing myself all the way down here. I mean *I’m* a fan of thrifting, but it can’t be everyone’s vibe, you know?”

“Nah! That was *way* cool! You had me a little worried there with how badly you wanted me to put on that purple top hat, but aside from that I

was *here* for it.”

Aria nodded approvingly. “Good, I’m glad. Now though...” She looked to check the time in the corner of her NOED. “It’s a getting a little late. If we want to be back in time to have dinner with the others, we might need to catch a flyer in the next hour or so.”

Rei only barely kept himself from sighing out loud in disappointment, pulling up the frame of his own neuro-optics as he led them along aimlessly up the nearest hall. He quickly had a map of Easthold up to scan it briefly, pleased when he made note of their location.

“There’s actually a port just two floors up, it looks like. Won’t even take us five minutes to grab an elevator and call a ride.” He blinked the frame away to look at Aria again. “Seems like this floor has a bunch of other second-hand places, though. Wanna check out a couple more before we head out?”

“Oh, I’m so in,” she agreed at once, giving a little skip of excitement on his arm. “I came here with my sister a few years ago, before she volunteered for the front lines. There’s a *bunch* of good spots! First, though—” she pointed to a glowing holo-sign up the hall a little ways, displaying the minimalist shape of a human form that morphed every second or two from a roughly masculine outline into a more-feminine one accented by the shape of a dress “—nature calls, if that’s okay?”

“Nah. Gonna make you hold it all the way back to school,” Rei joked absently even as he shifted them to head for the bathrooms, earning himself a poke in the ribs. He might have chuckled at her blushing again, except for the fact that he was a little distracted. As they’d started crossing the hall, he thought he’d seen a familiar set of school uniforms drifting along in the throng nearby...

Keeping an eye out, Rei turned them down into the narrower, empty alley off the main way, plain aside from the advertisements that played across the walls between the half-dozen open bathroom entrances and a trio of mostly-free double-sided benches thoughtfully provided for partners and families left to guard purchases. Agreeing to keep an eye on their things, Rei didn’t watch Aria hurry around the privacy corner into the nearest of the unisex restrooms, choosing instead to toss his stuff on the plasteel seat beside where she’d dropped hers before easing himself down by the bags. As he did, he studied the end of the fortunately-one-way hall, wondering if he’d been imagining things.

He didn’t have to wait more than 10 seconds to be disappointed.

The four boys took the corner as a group, rounding it with a purpose that told Rei immediately their appearance was no coincidence. Indeed, they to-a-one locked eyes with him even as they approached, and Rei forced himself to ease back and rest one arm across the top of the bench behind him, hoping to cut a casual air.

He'd learned a long, long time ago that it didn't always take much to throw most troublemakers off their game.

Sure enough, he saw the division at once. The shared, uncomfortable look between the three trailing boys—sporting black, green, and orange-blue hair respectively—told him there was a mastermind behind whatever was about to go down. Indeed, as they approached, it was on the leader of the group that his eyes fell, a tall, handsome youth probably his age, with a strong, square chin that framed his face well along with his own black-and-grey locks. The boy was smirking as he neared, but that was hardly the first thing Rei took note of.

Much more alarming, after all, was the CAD...

Well... shit, Rei thought, eyeing the matching bands of blue-green steel accented with white vysetrium. Unsurprisingly the other three, too, sported Devices, but Rei only watched the leader as the four of them finally came to a stop before him, spreading out to pin him in with a practiced efficiency that said this was not the first time this game had been played by the group.

Rei's certainty in this fact redoubled when the leader smiled at him and spoke with the absolute confidence of someone very, very used to getting their way.

"Get lost, munchkin."

There might have been time, in a past life, where Rei would have risen to that bait, where he'd had something to prove by standing up to this *exemplary* example of a pompous prick. As it was, though, he instead blinked at the boy, then looked around over his shoulder as though making sure there wasn't anyone behind him who might have been addressed instead. There was no one, of course, and—taking the opportunity to double-check that Shido's bands were still hidden under the sleeves of his own jacket—Rei looked around again in feigned confusion.

"Sorry... Are you talking to me?"

The tall boy's smirk redoubled. "Stupid to boot." He looked around at his friends. "See? Told you I was right." There came only shared nods from the others who—Rei made sure to note—never looked away from

him.

Possibly only one real idiot here, then... he made a mental note of even as he considered his options. He'd been worried he—or Aria, more likely—had been recognized by cadets from a rival school looking to pick a fight, but obviously that wasn't the case.

Which unfortunately only meant they were about something much more devious...

"Oh, was this your bench?" Rei asked, playing for time and putting on a genuine air of concern as he motioned to the plasteel beside him. "Sorry. I can move our stuff if you need to take a load off?"

The smirk faded a little at that, like the boy wasn't used to this level of difficulty getting his *very* obvious point across.

"No, it isn't our *bench*, you moron. Are you *actually* this slow? Let me make it clear for you, then." He bent low to cock his head in Rei's face. "We're—" he motioned between himself and the trio "—of the opinion that your friend is in need of better company than yours. In case it wasn't obvious, that would be us." He lifted a hand to show off the CAD band. "I'm assuming you know what this is?"

"I know what that is, yeah," Rei said calmly, eyeing the Device.

"Good, then you should also know it means that *you need to get lost*, shouldn't you?"

As the white vysetrium in the bracelet gleamed under the hallway lights, Rei saw the opportunity and took it at once. It had been drilled into him for more than 5 months now, after all, that information was often more valuable than strength in a fight.

So, instead of answering, he peered at the boy's jacket.

"'Pennview Military Academy'," he read off out loud, the emblem stitched into the cloth over the left breast clear now that it was so close. "Is that one of those 'SCT' schools? That's cool. You guys look pretty badass, too. I'm guessing you're like..." he looked between them, snagging quick snaps of the group's faces with his frame as he pretended to ponder "... fourth-years, maybe?"

"First," the tallest of the other three, green-haired and olive-skinned, grunted in answer. "There's no fourth year for ISCM cadets." He looked at the ring leader. "Okay, Jay, I'm convinced. This guy's definitely an idiot."

Rei, though, had stopped listening, pulling up his frame again the moment the second boy had spoken. He'd intended to do an image scan using his surreptitious camera work, but the name was *way* more useful.

Pennview Military Academy. A school he'd never heard of, which—despite the fact that there were a *lot* of schools he'd never heard of, even on Astra-3 alone—was a good sign. It took barely a second for the name “Jay”—coupled with the confirmed first-year status—to draw “Jay Taylor” up on the feeds, and Rei was pleased to find that Pennview actually displayed its cadets' publicly-accessible information on their students' profiles, saving him the precious seconds it would have taken to do a search of the ISCM User database.

Jay Taylor. First-year. Lancer.

D4.

Rei couldn't help himself from smiling, letting the tension go with a breath as he sat back more comfortably in the bench.

“The hell are you grinning at?” The leader—“Taylor”, Rei knew now—half-snarled as he caught Rei relaxing. He was standing straight again, hands balled into fists at his sides. “I said to *get lost*, didn't I? Walk away, or—”

“Or *what*, dumbass?” Rei cut him off sharply, letting his voice harden and staring the boy down even as Taylor towered over him. “You'll call your Device on me? Try to kick my ass in a *public mall*? Pretty sure the only moron here is *you*, and that's being kind to your friends.”

Taylor blinked at him, then, obviously completely taken aback by this sudden shift in tone. Of course he was, though. Bullies never handled being shoved back into line well, and it had been months since Rei's bravado in situations like this had been all sham.

D4. What a joke. After his final duel against Logan Grant in the Galens Intra-Schools had won Rei an individual qualifying spot at Sectionals nearly 4 weeks ago, Shido had made numerous individual spec jumps, including Endurance and Strength. It hadn't been enough to upgrade his CAD-Rank after his training with Christopher Lennon the Sunday before had *just* gotten him to C4, but the fight combined with nearly a month of training since—including a full week of squad-format sparring under the watchful eyes of Valera Dent—*had* done the trick and then some. Assuming Jay Taylor was the strongest of this foursome—which tended to be the case with groups like this, in Rei's experience—Rei's shiny C6 CAD-Rank, tied for the highest first-year rank with Aria, was a full *tier* higher than any of them.

Even if his combat specs were skewed closer to C2 or 3 due to his S-Ranked Growth, he was pretty sure he could have taken any two of these