

WARFORMED

STORMWEAVER

1



IRON PRINCE

BRYCE O'CONNOR
LUKE CHMILENKO

“Iron Prince”

Book One of the Warformed: Stormweaver series

Bryce O’Connor & Luke Chmilenko

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IRON
PRINCE

For the developers, designers, artists, staff
and every other mind and talent behind
the incredible games that inspired a
passion for characters like Reidon Ward.

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[Thank You All! Please Read!](#)

PROLOGUE

Early December, 2461

Astra System – Astra-2 – Sector 22

“Progress in CAD technology over the last two centuries has proven itself the single most valuable advancement humanity has made in our war efforts. When firearms and the largest portion of our other ballistic weaponry lost all value against the enemy’s reactive fielding and adaptive armor capabilities, all that remained to mankind was to chase after the same sort of armaments. It took decades, but from the moment Devices and their Users start heading for the front lines, we found a foothold once again in what had long been thought a lost battle.”

- Essentials of Simulated Combat in Military Training

Lieutenant Colonel Hana von Geil, Ph.D.

“And THERE IT IS, ladies and gentlemen!” the match announcer shouted with what could only be described as genuine glee, his voice crackling over the worn speakers of the Matron Kast’s ancient pad. “The Iron Bishop’s Repulsion has sent Alex Rightor flying! Will she—YES! Valera Dent is chasing, following up with a *vicious* barrage of strikes. The Defense spec of Captain Rightor’s Carnus is no joke, but the Bishop is peerless in finding vulnerable attack points with her Kestrel. Two blades are always better than one and—OH! Rightor lands a heavy kick, and it’s the chief warrant officer’s turn be sent sailing! I must say, this is a fight for the ages!”

In the small hands of an 11-year-old boy, the borrowed pad vibrated lightly with every exclamation the announcer provided. It didn’t bother the child. It made the fight that much more enrapturing, and even if he hadn’t been able to see the two S-Rank CAD-Users going at it he thought he might have managed to imagine the details of the bout just from the descriptions.

Fortunately, the Matron kept the clear smart-glass tablet in good condition, and so it was with wide eyes in a dark room that the boy watched Valera Dent and Alex Rightor break against each other like titans made of flashing light and carbonized steel.

As an exhibition match in commemoration of Valera Dent's retiring from the professional SCT circuit, the field had been randomly selected. The two Users fought in 30 yards of open grassland—the standard size of any competitive Dueling ring—their movements completely uninhibited by obstacles or deterrents that were commonplace in other zones. No trees. No buildings. No scattered stockpiles or crates. It allowed for a truly unfettered view of the fight, and the child who had snuck into Kast's office to watch didn't think for a second he was the only one pleased with the choice.

Captain Alex Rightor's Carnus was a breathtaking Device. As an S-Rank, his CAD covered every inch of his body, forming an intricate battle suit whose interlocking plating shimmered and shifted with each movement the man made. The standard tricolor, it was mostly gold and green steel with accents of light blue vysetrium, and it complimented its User's stellar Strength and Defense specs with its bulk. Rightor was a Mauler-Type, the initial form Carnus had manifested as undoubtedly having been some basic design of the massive two-handed hammer the man was now whirling at his smaller, lighter enemy. As the Device and its User had grown in ability, though, so too had Carnus upgraded and evolved. To the boy taking in the captain now, Rightor reminded him of a lion, powerful and graceful despite his massive size.

On the other hand, when it came to grace, Alex Rightor was outmatched twice over by his opponent.

Chief Warrant Officer Valera Dent moved with the speed and elegance of some great raptor of war. Kestrel's externals—suspended over both her shoulders—completed the illusion almost too well, the eight angular modules floating like the broad, red feathers of metallic wings. They served a purpose, of course, allowing Dent to channel her CAD's electromagnetic energy freely, granting her the ability to skate over the twisting grass of the plains without so much as a hint of effort. Her Device was the antithesis of Rightor's. It was spare and dignified, a mirage of minimal red plating over a skin-tight blue under-layer, detailed in glowing white. All of Dent's vitals were armored, but Kestrel sacrificed S-Rank Defense for the Speed and Offense that had made short work of so many of the Iron Bishop's opponents in her years on the circuit. Even the woman's weapons could not have been more different, a pair of

identical, narrow sabers whose handles and blades matched the colors of her armor, ivory vysetrium forming long, florid edges.

“Oh!” The announcer’s narration came through again loudly. “Captain Rightor has thrown his hammer in an attempt to bring Dent down! This can only mean one thing—YES! Magnetic Hunt! An Ability both of these fearsome opponents share! As you can see, ladies and gentlemen, Carnus will hound the Bishop across the field until it takes her out or Rightor recalls it! Magnetic Hunt is a high-level Ability, and cannot be maintained long by your average combatant, but then the captain is anything but average!”

“No! Go! Run!”

The boy didn’t even hear himself shout, too mesmerized he was with watching Valera Dent hurtling a foot above the ground around the edge of the simulated grassland, attempting to shake the massive hammer that was now careening after her as though attached by an invisible chain. She was skating backwards, trying to keep an eye on both the weapon and Rightor himself, the glowing white eyes in the red plating of her helm flicking between the pair at an astounding rate. All the same, Rightor saw his moment coming, and when the time was right he bent low—not unlike the crouch of the lion he so embodied—preparing to pounce.

Then, with the *crunch* of shifting ground, the captain lunged.

There was no Ability triggered, no trick to the move. Alex Rightor’s Strength and Speed specs were simply so significant that the man was able to clear 15 yards of distance in a blink, catching Valera Dent in the moment she looked away from him. His heavy gold-and-green form collided with the lighter User, slamming her into the invisible perimeter wall of the Dueling field with a *crunch* that made the simulation shiver and flicker for a moment before stabilizing. From the pad the boy heard the “*Ooooh!*” of the audience lucky enough to be watching the match in person, but the excited shouting of the announcer was lost as Rightor reached out with one armor-clad hand, the other pinning Dent to the wall by her throat. To her credit, the chief warrant officer didn’t so much as struggle, not even when the massive hammer that had been chasing her flew into its User’s waiting grasp with a satisfying *clunk*. Instead, she calmly brought a sword up in a thrust at Rightor’s faceplate. A flick of the captain’s head kept

him from being run through the eye by the glowing blade, Carnus already lifting, ready to come down on the Bishop.

Unfortunately for him, even that brief dodge cost him his focus long enough for his opponent to turn the tides.

The second sword slashed in an upward arc that only someone of Valera Dent's caliber and skill could have achieved from the awkward position of being pinned to an intangible wall. The bright blade caught the arm that held her in place under the elbow, between the gold plates of Rightor's armor, passing clean through. The limb remained intact, of course—CADs in simulated combat matches were always phantom-called—but the wrist went immediately limp, along with the hand and fingers around the chief warrant officer's neck. At once she took advantage, and with a lateral blast of electromagnetic energy skated sideways around the solid boundary just as the hammer impacted where she'd been a moment before with another static jolt in the physical projection.

"And Valera Dent strikes the first true blow of the match, severing her superior officer's neural connection to the better part of his left arm!" The announcer's voice came back to the boy as relief at Dent's escape washed over him. "Fear not, new viewers! The captain will regain full function not long after this Duel is over, but for now he's down a limb! Not a good place to be for a Mauler!"

It was true, of course. Rightor wasn't among the exceedingly rare Users who could manipulate their CAD's weapon configuration using Arsenal Shift. Unfortunately for him, that meant wielding Carnus to the Device's optimal function was going to be difficult, now. With its evolution over the years had undoubtedly come an increase in the two-handed hammer's weight to improve the CAD's Offensive spec, so the captain was likely to have difficulty even lifting his weapon with only one hand, much less swinging it.

Unless...

There was a flash, and the blue accents in Rightor's armor blazed. Ion fire of the same color flickered between the plates of his CAD, and when he whirled the azure eyes in his red-and-gold helm were glowing almost-blindingly.

"OVERCLOCK!" the announcer bellowed across the excited roar of the audience. "A common Ability shared among many Users, but in the hands of someone with the

captain's skill, a truly terrifying turn of events!"

Sure enough, Valera Dent—who'd changed course to come at an angle for her opponent's flank—was suddenly withdrawing with all speed. It was fortunate she had, too, because Rightor spun in a blink, the hammer ripping through the air exactly where the woman had been not a heartbeat before. She continued to retreat, but the captain crouched once more, armor still glowing, his massive weapon held stoutly in one hand.

Then he lunged again, and the Iron Bishop was suddenly dancing between raining blows that came so fast, Carnus's colors became a mirage of gold, green, and blue.

It was breathtaking, and the child sitting in a chair that was too tall for his feet to touch the floor couldn't help but gape. Rightor was a terror, and as long as he could maintain the Overclock he was likely among the most dangerous Users in the Astra System, if not the entirety of the ISC. With one hand he brought the hammer down again and again, and before long the field—pristine at the start of the match not 3 minutes prior—was cratered and pocked from a score of impacts and glancing blows.

But it wasn't the captain and his Carnus that the boy watched with such awe.

Valera Dent moved with such liquid poise, he couldn't help but wonder if the announcer had missed the triggering of her own Overclock. Kestrel's visual energy output hadn't changed, though, and a quick glance and scroll through the live combat log in the top right of the feed showed no Abilities activated since Rightor's last-ditch effort to secure himself a win.

The Iron Bishop was just that fast.

Dent's motions were so clean, so calculated, they could have been choreographed. Her top-tier Speed and Cognition specs showed themselves off in all their glory as her entire form became a red-blue blur streaked with white to match Carnus' constant hammer blows. Here and there the child with the pad barely 2 inches from his face could catch a clear moment of her stepping to the side or deflecting a descending strike with a heavy flick of both blades, but as a whole the two combatants didn't allow their spectators much more than glimpses of clean action in the furious exchange.

And then, abruptly, it was done.

The boy thought he saw the moment, though he caught the opportunity, but Valera Dent moved with such speed he would never figure out if he'd seen the same thing she had, or if he was just trying to convince himself of that in retrospect. To his eyes, Alex

Rightor had overdrawn, had brought the weight of the hammer a fraction too far back in an attempt to build up as much momentum as possible. The difference was a matter of inches, barely pixels in the feed of the glass tablet, but it had been enough. The strike came, horizontally in a thundering sweep meant to cover every foot of space Dent and her Device could possibly escape to. The chief warrant officer, though, dropped under the attack, possibly even onto all-fours—it would be impossible to tell until a frame-by-frame replay was released. The hammer sailed over her head, colliding with several of the floating externals that made up Kestrel’s red wings, crushing and sending them flying with an ear-splitting *crunch* as their phantom-forms processed having been destroyed.

Their sacrifice was well worth it.

The moment the hammer cleared her overhead space, Dent was lunging upwards, both swords leading the way. Rightor jerked back, seeing his fatal mistake, but even his own high Cognition and Overclocked reflexes could do nothing for him. The ivory-edged blades found their mark together, slipping under the captain’s gold faceplate in which his eyes still glowed blue, puncturing with all the power Dent could manage in her upward thrust. There was a *cracking* sound, and the swords broke through the top of Rightor’s helmet, having skewered him jaw-to-skull. There was a moment, almost a full second in which the hammer in the captain’s hands held, the Device kept grasped in an armored hand by the lingering will of its User.

Then the weapon fell to the broken grass with a *thud*, and Captain Alex Rightor went limp on the lengths of the Bishop’s swords.

“Fatal Damage Accrued,” the light, mechanical voice of the Arena announced. “Winner: Valera Dent.”

“YES!”

The exclamation came threefold, once from the crowd, once from the announcer, and once from the boy sitting in the too-tall chair several planets away from the fight. In his excitement he punched a fist into the air with another yell, then cried out as his bandaged shoulder screamed in pain at the motion.

“It. Is. OVER!” the announcer’s voice came from the pad as the boy slid it up onto the Matron’s desk in favor of clutching the offended joint, shutting his eyes tight against the stabbing ache. “Ladies and gentlemen, Chief Warrant Officer Valera Dent

—the Iron Bishop herself!—walks away with her head held high, finishing her circuit in our System SCTs with an *astounding* 54 to 6 record! We will have interviews for you with *both* our combatants once Captain Rightor has recovered, and stay tuned for a return to our regularly scheduled tournament matches starting shortly! For the time being, however, let us all take a moment to applaud the chief warrant officer, and let her know that our thoughts and hopes go with her as she heads for the front line!”

There was another roar of approval from the crowd, which the boy managed to join in with again after his shoulder settled. He was just reaching for the tablet, intent on turning it off and heading back to his room, when he made out the sound of hurried footsteps not seconds before the door along the far left wall burst open.

“What in the MIND’s name is going on in here?!”

Matron Avalyn Kast of the Estoran Center for Children stormed into her office with a fury. A flash of the NOED in her right eye had the line lights of the space flicking on, and at a glance the boy noted that not only had the aging woman clambered out of bed in her nightgown, but several of the Center’s staff—and not a few of the other children who lived there—had followed her, though they were all smart enough to gape into the room for the open doorway.

“Rei!” the Matron exclaimed in what was a half-terrified, half-livid shout when she caught sight of him. “What are you doing out of bed?! You’re supposed to be recovering!”

In answer, the boy the picked up the pad and waved it excitedly in one scarred hand, using the other to push his long, white-streaked black hair out of his grey eyes. “She won, Matron Kast! She won!”

“What are you—?” the Matron started, stuttering to a stop as she looked at the screen of the tablet, on which a reel of the most exciting moments of the exhibition match was playing. “Who—?” Then she realized what she was seeing. “Reidon Ward! Are you watching the combat tournaments *again*?!”

For a reply, the 11-year-old only grinned.

CHAPTER 1

Early May, 2468 - *Seven Years Later*

Astra System – Astra-3 – Sector 6

“The Simulated Combat Tournaments developed by the Intersystem Collective Military are arguably mankind’s greatest form of entertainment. Complex engagement training at the core of their design, since shortly after their application in the early 24th century the SCTs have also become the sole source of military funding, as well as an excellent means of recruitment. The circuits are so essential, in fact, that actual participation in the war efforts was struck as an eventual requirement for high-level combatants first in all professional SCTs, then eventually in the collegiate levels as the academic and institutional events gained their own massive intersystem viewership. If a User achieves any significant merit in either—or both—of these circuits, then deployment becomes voluntary. Strange as it may seem, many prominent civil and social scientists have touted their agreement of this method, often pointing to the research showing that a single successful SCT combatant’s impact on enlistment largely outweighs any direct effect they might have on the situation on the front lines.”

- A Consideration of SCTs and Their Intersystem Influence

Lieutenant Colonel Hana von Geil, Ph.D.

Distributed by Central Command, Earth

When the punch came, Rei was ready for it.

The NOED Grandcrest Prep had supplied him with as part of his tuition wasn’t the best quality, but a little tinkering in the base code had provided a decent boost in processing power. As a result, the highlighted warnings in its optical frame did a good job of giving Rei fractions of a second’s advantage. When Ansley Kosh shifted his footing, twisting away ever so slightly, the readout blared red over the boy’s left arm.

So when the punch came, Rei was ready for it.

He dodged to the side, keeping his right hand up to shield his face as he jabbed with his left. The blue frame lines of the NOED in Kent’s eye were obvious too, though, so Rei wasn’t shocked when the testing blow was smacked away. A leg followed next, and

he ducked, attempting to sweep at his opponent's ankle, but the boy planted and twisted, and Rei earned himself nothing more than a painful slamming of shins. Turning his momentum into something valuable, he shifted and flipped back over his hands in an upward kick. He felt his toes catch Kosh a glancing blow under the chin, and by the time he'd rolled onto his feet again the boy had stumbled back several paces, almost outside the marked lines.

Damn, Rei thought, realizing that might have been his chance to knock his opponent out of the ring.

A few of his teammates were shouting encouragement behind him, and he made out Viv's voice in the drone, but tuned it all out. He had to. His right elbow was killing him after taking the weight of that flip, and Ansley Kosh had murder in his eyes as he shook off his moment of surprise and approached the center of the mat again.

Red highlights.

Rei ducked, then dodged once more, Kent's one-two combo turning half his vision crimson as the NOED only barely registered it. Rei kicked low again, this time straight on, and managed to catch Kosh in the ankle, sending his front foot sliding back. The boy caught himself on his other leg, though, and brought a chopping blow jetting down at Rei's head. Rei got both arms up in time to block, bracing for his elbow to scream in protest.

The strike never came.

WHAM!

The impact of Kent's knee catching him square in the face would have broken Rei's nose if it weren't for the thin layer of reactive energy shielding his head from potential trauma, transmitted by the mandatory combat collar around his neck. Just the same, the barrier was only designed to *reduce* the force of a blow, so Rei wasn't surprised to smell blood as he was thrown onto his back. He lay there for a bit, stunned, and was unsurprised when he heard the shout of "Match win! Carter's School for the Gifted!" from the referee.

Dazed, Rei only barely managed to sit up. The ref was beside him a second later, the man's plain whites almost painful to his swimming vision.

"Easy, kid. That was a hell of a hit. Can you stand?"

It *was* a hell of a hit. Rei grunted and closed his eyes, pretending to consider the question. In reality, with a series of quick eye commands he had his NOED pull the footage from the mat-side cameras, then watched the last few seconds of the fight from the spectator's angle. He had to admit that Kosh played him well. Instead of bringing the blow down on his head, the move had been a feint to get him to defend up and open himself for a knee-strike.

Block with one hand next time, idiot, Rei berated himself, already hearing Coach Kat's criticism ringing through his ears.

"I can stand," he told the referee, opening his eyes again and pushing himself up. As he did, he tasted metal, prompting him to bring a hand up to his nose. His fingers came away bloody, soaking the wraps that looped over most of his exposed limbs to cover up as much of the scarring as possible, or at least what wasn't hidden under his black combat suit already. He looked up, offering Ansley Kosh a grin. "Good match. Hope you don't mind if we don't shake hands." He held up the reddened hand in explanation.

Kosh, for his part, grimaced. It made his designed, handsome features take on an ugly quality that even reached his orangish eyes. He addressed the ref. "Can I go?" He asked, looking like he distinctly preferred to be anywhere but sharing a mat with Rei.

The ref frowned, but nodded, having no reason to keep the victor from his cheering teammates. The Carter's fighters, in their red robes, were all smiles and shouts as Kosh turned on his bare heels and stepped out of the ring. There were laughs as well, but Rei chose to assume those were hoots of excitement rather than anything else.

He didn't have the energy to believe anything else, in that moment.

"I'm okay," he told the ref with a nod of thanks. "I can walk off on my own."

The man patted him on the shoulder, offering a look of forced encouragement. "Good fight."

It made Rei feel sick.

He turned and approached his own bench. Coach Kat was standing at the edge of the mat, arms crossed and looking bored. She offered Rei a cursory once-over, lacking anything more than apathy, eyes lingering on his bloody face.

"Block with one hand next time, idiot," she muttered by way of feedback, then waved him by with an unenthusiastic wave. "Go get cleaned up."

Having expected nothing less, Rei moved on without another word.

There were no more shouts of encouragement from the combat team, now, much less cheers or smiles. On the contrary, the majority of the boys and girls of the squad didn't meet his eyes as he stepped off the mat, or even move out of his way to make it easier to reach the bench. He still got there, though, and had already sat down to start looking for a clean towel before discovering his punishment wasn't half over.

"What the hell, Ward? Do you have *any* useful function, other than acting like a living training dummy?"

With an internal sigh, Rei looked up in time to find a broad-shouldered boy standing over him, his black hair striped with artfully designed slashes of red, his clear blue eyes burning in his perfect features.

"I just got kneed in the head, Lee. Hard." A few strands of Rei's own bone-white hair had fallen out of the tail he'd gather it in behind his head, and he blew them out of his face before waving at his bloody nose for emphasis. "Are you going to cut me some slack, or just keep up the trend of being a monumental dick?"

Lee Jackson's expression hardened, and he put his hands on his knees so he could bend down to be closer to eye-level with Rei. "You'd think three losses in a *row* would have taught you to shut your damn mouth, freak. If you cost us the lead in this tournament, I'm—"

"Lee, it's the 25th century. If you've got a thing for Rei, you can just *tell* him. No one's gonna judge."

Rei wasn't proud of the breath of relief he involuntarily took at the sound of Viv's voice, but it was worth Lee snapping up and away from him, cheeks flushed. From his left, a tall girl with brown hair—twisted into artful curls that had *no* business lasting the length of a day-long school combat tournament—slid into view from out of the rest of the gathered team.

"What?" Lee seethed. "I'm not—"

"Oh, you're *not* into him? Weird." Viv cocked her head in feigned confusion as she approached the two of them, people moving aside for her without hesitating. "You have a tendency to get in his face so much, I figured a burning desire for some make-out action was the only plausible explanation."