

## Chapter 38

PLACEHOLDER TEXT

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50,000 people were on their feet, screaming in terror and confusion into the empty dark. The Arena was a lightless n eruption of chaos as people yelled and frantically looked around with NOEDs flashing, everyone trying to figure out what had happened, what was going on.

Salista Laurent stood, mouth open and staring at the place she had seen Reidon Ward fall, as horrified as any of them.

It was the lights coming back on in the dark of the stadium that brought her momentarily back to her senses, the blinking brightness that returned with staggered *thoom, thoom, thooms* of solar power and machinery coming back online. Even then it was a second before she realized with a start that at some point in the chaos she'd instinctively brought one hand up to her temple in horror, and she snatched it from her face.

Her face, and the mono-molecular remote switch she'd never convinced herself to actually activate.

For almost a minute Salista stood like that, trying in her own fashion to understand what had just happened. A dozen times during the fight she'd been tempted to trigger the switch, but some whisper of emotion had stilled her decision every time. She wasn't sure what it had been even now—she preferred the idea that it was guilt at meddling rather than any sense of awe upon witnessing Reidon Ward's willpower—but it didn't matter either way. *Had* she triggered the backdoor it wouldn't have done anything more than “thicken” the Arena-projection around the target, slowing them down in a way that would have been invisible to any outside viewer or recording. It wasn't designed to

*hurt* anyone, just hamper Aria's opponent enough to give her an advantage. Salista was a meddler—she knew that, and bore no shame for it—but she wasn't a madwoman.

Which is what she would have had to have been to do something resulting in the aftermath she witnessed now.

There was no blood. That was good. In the moment utter chaos of the moment Salista—like many of the other spectators around her, she was sure—had been half-convinced Ward had *actually* been skewered half-a-hundred times before their very eyes. Still, the knowledge that the projected figures had been as holographic as the field didn't change the fact that Salista had distinctly seen the "S1" symbols in black on their backs. On top of that, gravity and physics had been against the Iron Bishop after she'd managed to finally shatter the zone barrier, and as quick as the Knight-Class was she didn't look to have managed to reach Ward before he hit the ground. He lay in a crumpled heap on the black projection plating, his Device recalled from around his body in unconsciousness, while Valera Dent crouched over him still in her own distinct CAD and screamed for "MEDICS! MEDICS!". Her calls were unnecessary, of course, with the floor of the Arena already abuzz with movement. Officers—CAD-assisted and unassigned alike—were rushing towards the pair from every direction. More than one medical drone was already ripping out of the tunnels towards the field, and Salista saw Sara Takeshi bolting from the Galens' seating section for the underwork stairs.

Worst of all, Aria was scrambling forward from where she'd landed, trying to get to the still shape of Ward, mouth still open in a scream of fear that her mother couldn't hear now.

Salista watched the proceedings as though in a dream, a sensation she—a woman very much used to having control of her surroundings at all times—was neither familiar with nor enjoyed. It took a minute for the swarm of medics and drones to assess Ward, but then a lift-stretcher was called for and he was carefully lifted onto it before being guided quickly towards the underworks. Dent went with him, having recalled Kestrel at

some point in the rush, but Takeshi stayed behind to hold Aria back, who seemed to want to follow the boy. Salista was shocked to see her daughter like that—wild-eyed and screaming in turn after Ward and the Captain who was restraining her—but the events of the moment were such that she couldn't process Aria's state enough to be disappointed or alarmed or whatever emotion might have been appropriate for the situation. She could only stand and stare, one of tens of thousands to do so all around her, at a loss as any of them.

“What happened?”

It was just as Ward and his entourage vanished into the tunnels that the first of the distinct questions became to be heard. At first it was just those most curious and most concerned, but as a minute passed with no answer the tone of the crowd changed. Confusion started to shift to concern.

And concern rapidly began to turn to anger.

“WHAT HAPPENED? WHAT'S GOING ON!”

“SOMEONE TELL US WHAT'S GOING ON!”

“Hello?! HELLO?!”

The throng began to get agitated, and Salista found herself finally looking away from the Arena floor to eye the stands a little nervously. All around her people were shouting or discussing worriedly amongst themselves. A few seemed even looked to be tempting to contact the local authorities, a vane action given the ISCM had sole jurisdiction over its sanctioned academies. She could understand the frustration, of course. 50,000 spectators had gone from watching a tremendous match between two intersystem-level first years to witnessing one of those fighters utterly brutalized by some obvious glitch or hack in the SCT-systems. It didn't matter that the figures in grey had been holograms. It didn't matter that they'd been no more “real” than a phantom call. It didn't matter that Reidon Ward hadn't *actually* been skewered half-a-hundred times.

What mattered was terror of the witnessed event and the confusion it bore with it.

Fortunately, though, the tournament organizers seemed to have caught wind of the rising ire of the crowds, because just as the shouting from the stands reached a new level a single figure in military black and golds all-but-ran back out onto the Arena floor. Pulling up her frame to zoom in on them, Salista realized it was the arbiter who'd been overseeing the morning Duels, and that he was making a b-line for the middle of the Dueling area. In one hand he held a strange black device, a sort of metal stick that seemed to have foam on one end, and Salista couldn't identify it even after the officer turned and lifted the thing to his mouth.

Then he spoke, and she realized instantly that the problem was probably much greater than any of them had realized.

"Ladies and gentleman, if I could have your attention." The arbiter's voice was as loud as it had been all morning, but also tinny and uneven. "It is my duty first to assure you that Cadet Reidon Ward is being assessed as we speak, though all early indications from our field medics and drones are that he is in no critical danger. Cadet Laurent is also being assessed, though only as a precaution."

"WHAT HAPPENED?" one particularly loud voice roared out in answer to this, and a thousand other questions followed in a cascade.

"I apologize, but at this time we cannot say as to what has occurred here today, though we *can* assure you all this was neither a prank nor some kind of planned event. At this time our best guess is that some kind of hack was executed on the Kenneth Arena, allowing an outside party access to the SCT programming. I apologize again, but all I can say at this time is that we've requested additional oversight from the MIND to review all our security parameters for a potential breach, as well as all software for potential additional tampering. Members of the ISCM themselves are currently making a security check of the Arena for *direct* tampering as well."

Salista tensed, and had to cross her arms to keep her right hand from twitching up towards her temple.

“That is why you see me with this.” The officer raised the strange black stick in his hand a little as he spoke, and even that movement seemed to change the pitch of his voice until he returned it to the spot in front of his mouth. “The Kenneth Arena is fortunate enough to have some old redundant systems that are self-enclosed, include this microphone and the speakers I’m talking to you now. All other systems have been taken offline until the MIND can complete it’s assessment and a we have done a thorough sweep of the building. For that reason,” he raised his voice a little as though he wanted everyone present to make sure they heard him, “we have unfortunately made the decision to postpone the final upper bracket match till this afternoon, and I must at this time ask you to stay in your seats for the time being outside of emergencies. Should the MIND tell us there is no further concern, the Iron Bishop and several A-Ranked ISCM officers have agreed to thoroughly test all field systems before resuming collegiate matches this afternoon. I thank you for your patience, and we will keep you informed as we ourselves receive further updates.”

And with that the man lowered the microphone—Salista was a little astonished at the size of the thing, having never seen such old tech in her life—and promptly strode from the floor, leaving the stands abuzz again, though mostly nullified. Some people still shouted angrily after him, but most everyone seemed to have understood that the situation was bigger than them and had started taking to their seats again. Those that initially refused only did so until they noticed that a dozen ISCM officers had appeared at the bottom of each section, moving quickly to line the lower walkways and stairs before taking the at-ease position to scan the crowd, eyeing the troublemakers in particular until all of them quieted down to. They were threatening, per se, but they certainly formed enough of a presence to convey it was in everyone’s best interest to stay calm.

Except for Salista, who suddenly very much felt like a trapped fox.

The switch burned at her temple like it was on fire, even if she was only imagining it. She hadn't tried triggered it—she *hadn't*, she was sure—but what difference would that make to the ISCM if they started sweeping the *spectators* for potential bad actors. It was bad enough that she'd already touched the filament instinctively when things had gone south, but she might get away with that even if the MIND did a sweep of the Arena recordings. Now, though, even if she surreptitiously peeled the transparent trigger off her NOED module and discarded it, it would be found and traced right back to her. But if she didn't do anything and they started searched Sectional attendees, it would be found *on* her, which would be twice as bad. Even if she hadn't triggered it and even if she wasn't responsible for the horror show the Arena had made of Reidon Ward, she had no doubt the ISCM would figure out what the trigger was for and charge her with intent.

Salista felt her stomach flip at the thought. Powerful as the family name might be, there would be no recovering from that. Maybe she could tie her own charges up in the legal systems for years with the right council, but she had no ability to stop the military from court-martialing her husband if they even *suspected* he had anything to do with—

MESSAGE FROM “UNKNOWN”.

Salista increasingly panicked thoughts were interrupted as a notification pinged her NOED unexpectedly. She frowned, seeing the alert blink once before fading to nothing but the alert dot in the corner of her frame. She'd told all company and house staff she'd not to bother her while she was “vacationing in Sol for the week”, and she trusted anyone was stupid enough to disregard such an explicit instruction. Combine that with the message coming from an unknown contact... and the timing and...

Suspicious, Salista opened the notification, blinking as the text came up in white across her vision.

*Wait ten minutes. The man behind you will ask if you're alright. Tell him you aren't feeling well.*

Salista swallowed, adrenaline coursing through her. Was this an extraction? Was this planned by the people she'd employed to create the trigger for her? If that was the case what did it mean? Were they just looking out for themselves, or was it something else? The knot in her gut tightened as all kinds of alarm bells began sounding off in Salista's head. What if she *had* activated the switch and this had been the result? What if she hadn't had a choice from the start, and it had been activated remotely for her with all of this planned from the beginning? Had she been played? Had she just been used as a pawn?

*That* sparked something in Salista