

World Virapet Tournament
Week Three
Sean Francis

The young woman's headset flickered slightly as it turned on and the tiny screen over her right eye showed that the next fight was starting. She faltered in her cooking as she sent the casting from her headset to the television screen in the corner of the living room facing the open kitchen. Audio blared from the screen as the announcer made the introductions for the fight.

"And a beautiful day it is for the fight that everyone is waiting for!" The announcer said with a flair of drama. The woman in the kitchen could see that the headset the man was wearing, similar to hers, was scrolling through the lines, "We have two trainers that have worked tirelessly to get to this stage of the game. On the red corner, we have a previous gold medalist who took the tournament by storm last time with his Virapet, Pincis the electrified scorpion!"

In the background of the screen, the sound of loud cheering from hundreds of thousands of throats came through the TV. The woman smiled, but she did not cheer.

"On the blue corner, we have a trainer who has won the eyes and hearts of the whole world. This trainer has traveled from the Americas to fight in this tournament, and fight he did!"

Behind the announcer, a screen flickered into existence showing previous battles. All of the cuts featured a different stage at different tournaments around the world. The crowds changed, the opponents changed and the time of day changed. But there was always one trainer and one Virapet that appeared.

A young boy of twelve years old who constantly wore that black and blue ball cap, who tended to wear shorts that went below his knees, and around his neck was a tiny pendant given by a close friend. Whose favorite meal was meatloaf with tomato sauce and loved playing with the Virapet next to him.

The pet was a massive lioness with golden fur hidden by a covering of pure snow. The creature's blue eyes were always gentle around the family she lived with and fierce when she leapt into battle. Her mane was made entirely of ice crystals and her teeth glinted with the same material.

Seeing the pair, the woman's heart fluttered with nervous pride and she placed her hands to her chest. She was upset when the screen disappeared, but the camera then cut to the battlefield and the boy standing at the edge marked with blue metal. His faithful companion sat next to him, ready to fight. The boy had a large grin on his face and he nodded in respect across the battlefield to his opponent who was a large stocky man with

the dark skin commonly found in Africa. The man also had a grin and mirrored the boy. The scorpion next to him clamped its pincers down in anticipation and the blue veins covering its exoskeleton sent tiny sparks of electricity out into the world.

"And now the boy from America, who is only twelve years old, has fought through the ranks of the World Virapet Tournament to get to this final battle. A first in the twenty year run of the WVT!"

More cheers roared through the Television screen and the woman in the kitchen started tearing up seeing the boy doing so well. And now he was about to fight one of his toughest battles yet.

The pot behind her started boiling water, but she no longer paid attention as she watched the start of the battle happening thousands of miles away.

"I know you can do it Trace, my son. You can win!"

"Now, ladies and gentlemen!" The announcer yelled through the speakers surrounding the arena, "We get to see if the underdog has what it takes! Cheer! Cheer! Cheer for the boy who has surpassed all odds to make it here!"

Trace had to resist the urge to wince as the whole stadium filled with hundreds of thousands of people let out cheers and friendly jeers. The sound was deafening. He managed to keep his cocky grin on his face as he looked down at the creature next to him. The headset showed him the lion sitting next to him in all of her noble glory.

He reached out to touch her and was slightly disconcerted as his hand actually felt cold snow and fur. It would take him a long while for the idea that he could feel the Virapet even though it was not physically there.

"Are you ready, Icelan? This will be our toughest battle yet."

The lion leaned down to rub her face against his cheek affectionately. He laughed, "Alright. Let's do this!"

She let out a leonine roar and leapt into the battlefield about half a mile below him. While his opponent talked with his own pet, Trace looked over the battlefield. All of the battlefields were created to look like fantastical environments, and this one was no different. The environment was separated out into

quarters. One quarter was covered in a field of water with chunks of snow covered ice floating like icebergs. Another, diagonal from it was a forest full of trees and brush. Next to that, so it touched both the ice field and forest field, was a field of craters and floating rocks which one could stand on. The boy could hear the wind blowing through that section of the field.

A red and orange glow drew Trace's eye toward the last corner. It was a field covered with magma and rocks of obsidian. Just looking at it, he could feel the heat coming off of it, even though it was on the other side of the field from him.

Icelan gracefully landed inside of the ice quarter on top of one of the plateaued iceburgs. Once on the ice, she sat there, waiting for her opponent to place himself on the field of battle. While they waited, Trace looked to his headset's eyepiece and thought about Icelan's health. Two bars showed up at the top right and both were completely full. Nothing else showed up on the screen.

"Good." He muttered to himself, "No abnormalities."

The scorpion landed on the forested area of the battlefield and easily blended into the trees and brush. Through their link, Trace could tell that even Icelan could not tell where the other Virapet went. So the first half of the battle would just be a game of hide and seek.

"Alright." Trace muttered, "If they want to play games, I'm in."

Icelan let out an agreeing growl and charged for the forest. Once again, because of their link, Trace could see where his companion was in the forest.

"Direct Link." He said and his eyepiece removed all of the information it had before and showed a forested area. He was now looking through Icelan's eyes.

He watched as his friend tilted its head this way and that while running into the mass of trees, trying to pinpoint the scorpion.

"Come on." Trace muttered, "Where are you?"

Minutes passed and the stadium was completely silent save for the occasional rustle of disturbed plant life in the forest. Across the battlefield, the African man yelled, "Now!"

A blue light formed to the right of Icelan's position and Trace

could feel power ready to be unleashed.

"Go high!" Trace ordered, and Icelan immediately leapt from tree to tree. She ascended high enough to avoid the lance of lightning that raced across where she was seconds before.

The light showed where the scorpion was for a brief second, and Trace said, "Pounce!"

Icelan aimed herself right at the origin of the lance and went for it claws unsheathed. However, the scorpion was already on the move. Its blue veins, now that the pair knew where to look, showed that the scorpion scooted back and reached out to grab.

"Dodge!" But the call came too late. The large pincer clamped down on Icelan's front leg and it started dragging the lioness out of the forest.

"Come on Icelan!" Trace yelled over the sound of the crowd's cheer, "Break free!"

His headset showed that she started swatting at the Virapet with claws trying to rake. However, the scorpion's hard exoskeleton deflected most of the damage and it got to the edge of the forest.

Right next to the field of magma.

When it got close, the scorpion twisted and flung Icelan into the field. Even sailing through the air, Icelan's snow covered fur started to melt. Drops of water plopped into the cracks of magma as the lioness managed to get to her feet and land on one of the chunks of obsidian. Trace brought back the health status and saw that Icelan took a lot of damage from that move.

He gritted his teeth, "We have to get you out of there."

He thought through all of his options and kept coming up with failures as Icelan fended off the scorpion now trying to push her into the magma. Then he got it. She'll leave the same way she got in.

"Icelan!" He yelled, "Bite its tail!"

She growled and leapt for the tail. The scorpion tried to flick its tail away, but could not do it fast enough and the ice lion's cold fangs sunk in deep. That was met with more cheers as the scorpion swept its tail to and fro trying to get the Virapet off. Icelan let it and put little weight on resisting as possible. When it finally flung its tail away, Icelan let go

and flew through the air. She landed back in the ice field and dived into the water.

"Ice beam!" Trace ordered.

Icelan planted her four paws on the floor of the water and shot up until she fully broke the surface. Out of her mouth came a beam of frost and it slammed home. Because the scorpion was still in the magma area, the attack was not as effective, but it certainly did some damage as the scorpion stepped back and shook itself. Icelan landed back on an iceberg and shook itself. There were patches where no snow covered the lioness's body, but most of it was intact.

"That was just the warm up." Trace said to Icelan.

Because of the way the stadium is linked to the trainers' headsets, the audience heard that too and chuckles rang out throughout the arena.

"Now, let's cool things down a bit. Ice aura!"

The lioness roared and with it came a blast of frost that filled whole battlefield and blinded anyone in there. The man across the battlefield yelled something and the scorpion raised its tail then swung it down toward where Icelan was before. A lightning blast came crashing down onto the iceberg and the heat hitting the cold created steam that would have threatened to sear the trainers if it was real.

When the frost and steam cleared, Icelan was nowhere in sight. A round of confused noises came from the audience. Trace could not hear the announcer, as his voice was not allowed to access Trace's headset, but the boy could imagine the man's dramatic reaction to what just happened. Trace's mouth spread into a grin as he watched his opponent's reaction.

The man's expression turned from confused to furious. Trace studied his opponent's tournament history, and he was the kind of trainer who ended all of his matches as fast as possible. Not many opponents lasted more than five minutes when fighting him. Yet Trace has taken the match to ten minutes and Icelan was still in fighting condition.

"Go to the ice field and find the lion!" The man screamed.

The scorpion skirted over the now completely obsidian fire field and hopped from one ice burg to the other. It finally made it to the platform Icelan was on and started flinging snow everywhere.

Trace's grin widened even more and he said, "Gotcha!"

On the platform behind the scorpion, the snow erupted up and Icelan was in the air letting loose with another ice beam. Surprisingly, the scorpion spun around and sent another lance of lightning into the beam. They connected with sizzling steam and Icelan landed on her four paws before charging forward.

She collided with the scorpion and they both fell into the water. Before Trace could order her out, the man yelled something and the water was engulfed in electricity. Icelan rocketed out of the water and slammed in the wind area on her side. The health status on Trace's headset said that his friend was at half health and paralyzed.

Their gambit was turned against them. And now they were in a tough spot. He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. What could he do now? If Icelan was paralyzed, then she may not be able to act fast enough. The scorpion would end this battle very quickly.

The scorpion leapt over to the wind field and stalked over to the frost lioness, taking its sweet time. Panic started flowing through Trace. Icelan was not moving, so the paralysis was coursing through her body. It would only take seconds for the scorpion to make it worse and end the fight.

A stray breeze flowed against Trace's cheek and he got a sudden idea. He waited for Icelan to have a second of peace from her paralysis and he yelled, "Frost Breath!"

Icelan opened her large mouth and frost crystals sprinkled from it. The wind caught the crystals and sent them around and into the scorpion's eyes. It cried out and started stepping back, trying to use its large pincers to wipe the snow off.

The crowd let out roaring cheers as Icelan shakily rose to her four paws and growled out her defiance. Fierce pride rose in Trace and he said, "Let's show the world what we can do!"

Icelan swung her head up to the sky and let out a roar. The indicator on Trace's headset disappeared, and he could feel that Icelan was spoiling for the fight.

"Frost claw!"

The front paws of the lioness started swirling with frozen wind and her claws iced over. She pounced on the scorpion and started raking at the exoskeleton. The other pet cried out and clamped Icelan at her body. It slammed her down to the ground,

but she flung herself back on her feet and went for the scorpion again. She latched onto the scorpion and Trace yelled, "Direct Hit! Ice Beam!"

Icelan chomped down on the scorpion's face and let loose with the same ice beam they used before. Ice launched out of her mouth and connected hard. Trace watched as the exoskeleton started to ice over and crack. He grinned and said, "Finish it! Frost Claw!"

Icelan raised her paw, claws still made from ice, and swung it down to crash against the frozen exoskeleton. Cracks and crunches rang out throughout the room and Trace could see that the lioness's paw was clear through the exoskeleton and into the scorpion.

Everything seemed to freeze for a second, then the scorpion screamed out in pain. It's image faded into a wireframe outline, then the wireframe started dissipating. When it was completely done, Icelan fell down to the floor of the field and sat there with an obvious face of pride mixed with pain. The health indicator said she was only an inch from being finished herself. The paralysis must have constantly damaged her.

The crowd was silent for a couple of seconds. Then erupted into yells, cheers and clapping. Trace just stood there, as if he could not believe what just happened, then he looked up to see his opponent towering over him with a smile.

"Congratulations." He said holding out his hand, "You did it."

Trace traded his look between the man's face, then his outstretched hand, then back. He finally managed to get the shock from his mind and he traded grips with the man.

Trace's mother placed her hands to her mouth as the television showed her son walking up to the three podiums with his Virapet by his side. Tears streamed down her face and flowed along her hands. Her shoulder felt heavier as a tiny red furred squirrel climbed up to rub against her cheek.

She just stared at the TV. He did it. Her son actually did it.

The kettle behind her started squealing and she reached over to shut off the heat without her gaze leaving the screen. Her son shook a man's hand and held up the gold medal. A similar medal materialized around Icelan and the lioness, still sometimes a kitten, immediately started playing with it to the

laughter of the crowd.

"If only your father could see this," she whispered, "He would be so proud of you."

The squirrel bounded from her shoulder and ran over to the TV. It looked left and right, then back at the woman. She smiled and nodded, "Yeah. It's our boy."

She then concentrated on her headset. There was a plane to catch.

Trace woke up in the apartment room he was allowed to stay in for the Tournament. The sun was over the horizon and showing through the window to the balcony. He rose to a sitting position on the couch and swung his legs over the edge. It was quickly apparent what woke him up.

His eyes widened and he walked over to the kitchen area to find himself standing face to face with his mother.

She was wearing a long t-shirt and jeans. Her Virapet, Squeakers, was running in circles on the table in the kitchen chasing after a virtual ball.

His mother smiled at him, "Hello, Trace."

He blinked at her, "What are you doing here?"

Icelan then materialized into the room and Squeakers immediately noticed. He bounded onto Icelan's back and they ran into the living room to play. His mother watched them go and said, "I wanted to come see you."

"What about work?"

Her smile widened, "Being the mother of a new gold medalist has its perks."

He chuckled, "I wonder how you got a ticket though. All of the seats are full up."

"I ordered mine before it started, just in case."

He laughed then, "Why am I not surprised?"

Just then, his stomach finally noticed the food cooking and it rumbled loudly. His mother giggled, "Sit down. I am just

finishing up."

He plopped himself down into a chair and Icelan returned to sit next to him. Squeakers lay down on the table as he usually did, and Trace's mother sat across him. He quickly dug into the food and his mother watched pleased.

"So, what is next for our new star?" She asked.

Through a mouthful of food, he said, "I get to fight the Champion."

"The Champion? Who is that?"

"The toughest trainer in the world." Trace mumbled through food, "He is chosen to be the very final challenge for trainers that win gold."

"Has anyone won against him?"

Trace shook his head as his fork stabbed his food, "No. No one has won in the twenty year run of the tournament."

His mother blinked at him, "Really? Not one person?"

Trace sighed, "They don't call him a Champion for nothing."

Then, his mother asked him the question he had been asking himself since he won gold, "Can you win?"

The food in front of him seemed tasteless and he pushed his plate away, "I want to say yes. But I have been watching him fight, entertain and sports against other gold medalists." The videos of all of those events played through his head.

The problem with going against the Champion was not that he had a strong Virapet, which he did, nor that he had one perfect strategy that no one could fight against, because he did not. What people had to fight against was the Champion's unpredictability. That man had a way to change up his battle plan halfway through the fight. He could change from the extreme of hard pushing to the extreme of turtle defense without batting an eye. On top of that, his Virapet was one of the strongest and most experienced ones in the world, and each event against him just made it better and better. It was rumored that he was one of the few people that was able to stop the Viral War of 2099.

Trace realized that he was actually speaking the words out loud when his mother nodded, "Sounds like a man who knows his

stuff. But, I have to say, you have a knack for unpredictability as well."

He tilted his head in confusion, "What?"

She smiled at her, "I watched your last fight. A few of the moved you and Icelan made during that fight," She pet the lioness as she spoke, "were ones that I would not have believed possible."

He shook his head, "Those are a far cry from what he can do, though."

His mother smirked, "I would not be too sure."

She rose to take care of the plates, "When will you fight him?"

"Tomorrow. I have a day for use to rest before the fight."

"So what are you going to do?"

"I am going to watch the talent events. I have a friend who is competing for gold today."

"Oh? You've made friends here?"

The boy sighed, "Yes mom. I have."

She chuckled, "Well, it's good that you support them."

He stood up and went to the bathroom. When he was done with his bath and dressing, he returned to find his mother packing a lunch for them. When she was done, she grabbed her purse, Squeakers jumped on her shoulder, and the four of them left the room.

The crowd was cheering the contestants on stage as they prepared to start their shows. Five stood on stage, three girls and two guys, along with their Virapets. All of the pets were dressed up and of various colors and animals. Trace sat with his mother next to him so that he could see the front of the stage and everything that was going to start happening.

His eyes were focused mostly on the girl at the far right of where he was looking. She was slightly taller than him with bright red hair and freckles on her cheeks. Her dress reached her knees and was a dark blue and black. The Virapet she was knelt next to was a tiny mouse made mostly of air. It was

running back and forth as if full of energy and the girl was trying to keep it contained.

"She's cute."

Trace's gaze shot to his mother. She was smiling and looking toward the stage. He had the uncomfortable feeling that she was looking toward the same girl.

"What?" He asked.

His mother's eyes turned to him without moving her head, "I said that she was cute."

He felt his face blush slightly, "I don't know what you mean."

She chuckled, "Do you really think I did not notice you staring at that girl?"

He turned his head back to the stage and tried to hide the heat in his head, "I wasn't staring."

"Mhmm." His mother asked, "What's her name?"

It took Trace a couple of seconds to respond, "Sarah."

"That's a beautiful name." She commented, "I assume this is the friend you spoke of earlier."

He just nodded. She laughed, "Don't be so embarrassed. You're getting to that age."

"Mom!" He complained.

She laughed again, but kept quiet. It took about five minutes for the heat to leave his face and when it finally did, the talent show started.

The first girl did alright. Her kitten with an electric tail played tennis with itself using its vast speed to go from one end of the 'field' to the other and hitting the ball with its head. It did this for about a minute, then it started acting as if four players were playing by moving so fast that images of itself remained at various spots. When the pair was done, they received a polite clap with a spattering of excited hoots.

The next participant, a young man, was pretty interesting. His pet, a raccoon with frosted veins crawling on its body, materialized in a frost cloud and the frost shards thunked into the stage. An overhead camera let the audience see that the

shards created an image of the World Virapet Tournament logo which was two Virapets leaping over a trophy. It then landed in the middle of the trophy and let loose with a frost aura similar to the one Icelan made during her battle. The whole stage was covered with a frost cloud, and when it disappeared, the shards of ice glittered. The crowd loved it and let out enthusiastic claps.

Now, it was Sarah's turn. She walked up to the center of the stage. Trace could see that she was trying to calm her breath and the pet next to her was still fidgeting around. Her eyes hardened and she opened her mouth to speak.

The roof of the tournament building exploded.

Ropes dangled down from the newly created hole and men with some kind of body armor and pulse rifles slid the ropes. Guards posted around the ring of the stadium started barking out orders and fired upon the newcomers. Lances of pure energy shot across the arena and while most missed, some collided with the men now landing in the center of the arena.

Other guards within the seats of the stadium stood up and started directing people. Once the initial shock of the entrance exited the audience, they started screaming and running from their seats. Trace's mother pulled her confused son from his chair and directed him toward the stairs up to the exit. He started to follow, suddenly very scared, and climbed two stairs. He did not get any farther before he turned around to see if Icelan was following him.

That's when he saw it.

He could not hear the sudden emptiness of gunfire over the screaming audience, but he saw that no one fired. Because one of the intruders was holding a gun to the head of one of the contestants on stage while his Virapet, a large spiked hound, held down the contestant's pet.

It was Sarah.

She was laying on her side and her hair was in a disheveled mess. Behind her hair, Trace could see tears falling down her cheeks and she held herself in a fetal position as if trying to hide from the man holding the gun to her head. All of the stadium guards aimed their weapons at the intruders, but they looked like they were about to drop them.

Sudden rage started to rise above the massive fear he held in his belly. They dare hold Sarah hostage against the guards?

They dare threaten her life? Later, he would kick himself for what he was going to do next.

"Icelan!" He yelled, "Go!"

The lioness immediately leapt into action. She sailed over the fleeing audience and landed on her paws inside of the arena. As she did, Trace twisted away from his mother's grip and charged through the mass of people to follow his Virapet.

"TRACE!" His mother screamed after him, but while he hesitated, he did not stop.

His actions came on pure instinct as he vaulted over the railing circling the arena and slid down the wall with his hand and feet. When he landed on the arena as well, he was only about five feet behind Icelan. Together, they charged for the stage. Pulse fire whizzed by him from the intruders, but he ignored them as he managed to get to the stage and climb up. Icelan was already there and fighting against the spiked hound.

It's owner growled out in annoyance and tensed his finger as if to fire on the girl still laying on the ground. The trigger pulled.

And Trace tackled the man down to the ground.

The surprise assault sent the man stumbling back and the pulse round ricocheted against what remained of the roof. The man slammed an elbow effortlessly into Trace's face and the boy heard bones snap. He did not care. In fact, the pain did not even register as he returned the favor and crashed his forehead against the man's helm.

It hurt Trace to do so, but the blow stunned the man on the ground, and Trace pulled off the helm. The man was middle aged with greying hair and wrinkling skin. He growled and sent a punch toward Trace. The boy ducked the blow and slammed his head down again. This time, it connected with flesh and he heard bones crack again.

The man screamed in pain and grabbed Trace's shirt. With a roar, he lifted Trace and threw him away. The boy flew through the air and landed with a gasp next to Sarah. The older girl knelt next to him and shook him, "Trace?"

His mind felt foggy and he could barely recognize the girl.

"Hey," he said, "Thought gold would come and I visit."

She chuckled slightly, "Did you steal some drink from the cafeteria again?"

"Again?" He mumbled, "I never did that."

She was about to answer, but the sound of a pulse gun charging up caused both of the children to look up. The man with a broken nose held his gun toward both of them. Next to him was his spiked hound standing above a stunned Icelan. With Trace dazed, the Virapet could not get much commands and their link would make Icelan feel the same thing Trace was. In this case, stunned and as if the world was spinning.

"I have had enough of you children," he growled, though the threat was lessened slightly by his broken nosed voice.

Sarah looked up at the gun, then to Trace, and seemed to reach a conclusion. She rose to her feet and Trace grunted as her Virapet, Gust, jumped on his side.

"Get away," she said. Her threat was lessened by the fear in her shaking voice, but her eyes were hard.

The man laughed, "You think you can stop me girly?"

"No," she said, "But I won't let you hurt him."

He laughed again, "Fine then, girly. Show me what you can do."

Before he finished 'show,' Gust was already on the move. He started spinning in place, and a small tornado formed on top of Trace. It was not large or strong enough to pull him along, even if it was real, but it caused the tiny mouse to swirl around and around inside of it. When the creature got to the top of the tornado, it locked its gaze on the spiked hound and flung itself at the Virapet by releasing the tornado from existence at the right time.

The tiny mouse was not impressive by himself. His size did not give him much power, and he could be swatted down easily with his low health. But the creature was one of the fastest pets engineered so far. And his speed assisted in his power as he collided with the spiked hound. He missed the spikes, and both pets flew away.

The perceived winds caused the man to cover his eyes and he was distracted long enough for Trace to recover his wits. The boy rose to his knees and hands, then slowly pushed himself to

his feet. His legs still felt as if they would buckle at any time, but they supported him enough. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Icelan do the same. As his brain kicked into gear again, he could hear pulse rifle fire from behind him. Icelan let out a roar of defiance and charged for the spiked hound. While she attacked and harried the hound, Gust kept up the massive winds, using multiple tornadoes to keep the wind up. Trace knew that while the wind could not hurt the man, his brain would be registering the visuals and the wind through his headset and it would keep him pinned down. It was very hard for people to think past the digital signals.

Gust and Sarah were concentrated fully on the distraction, so it was up to him and Icelan to keep the hound in check. Good thing he was skilled at that kind of battle.

Instead of shouting out his orders he kept everything mental. The shouting and commands during the arena battle were just for show after all. The Virapet's connection with their owners was all through brain signals and programming.

Icelan landed on the hound's back, ignored the spikes entering her paws, and clamped her jaws hard on the hound's neck. It cried out in pain and twisted. The force of the move caused Icelan to lose her grip and fly over the pet. The hound turned its attention to Sarah, but Trace put himself in front of the girl and gave the pet a fierce look. It was about to charge at Trace, but Icelan tackled it and they both slid away on the stage.

Trace called the Direct Link command on his headset and saw the screen flicker. He then turned to watch the battle happening off stage.

The remaining contestants were helping the guards fight off the invaders. The ice raccoon let loose with its shards and they all connected with a monkey made completely from plant-life. Back to back with the raccoon's owner was the first girl commanding her electric kitten to use its tennis move to keep slamming its ball against a blazing falcon. While this went on, the guards put their bodies in front of the children and fired on the invaders. Body armor and shielding protected them, but Trace could tell that the shields would not last much longer.

He turned back to the stage and saw that the man was inching closer and closer to Sarah through the perceived tornado. At this point, he was only a couple of feet away from being able to grab the girl. If he grabbed her, she would lose focus on Gust and the man would overpower them both. Yet, Trace was unable to get to her as the winds would be just as effective

against him as they were against the man.

Panic rose in his chest. He did not want to watch Sarah get hurt, but at this point, there was not much else he could do. His focus was keeping Icelan on the battle against the spiked hound, and if he pulled Icelan away to try and save her, they would both not be able to get there because of the winds. Then the same thing would happen. But the man was just seconds away from reaching her. He did not know what he could do. He felt the tears of frustration start forming and a scream was about to sound from him.

A pulse rifle round fired from somewhere in the seats and slammed into the man's shoulder.

The man cried out and fell to the floor. Another round shot out and entered the man's head. He lay there, limp on the ground and obviously dead.

Trace turned to where the shot fired from and found a man of about fifty vault over the railing and land on the arena floor. His brown hair was half grey and wrinkles were visible on his otherwise handsome face. In his right hand was a pulse rifle and his left was pressed against his headset as he spoke. He rushed over to the stage and climbed up onto it.

"Are you two alright?" He asked.

Both of the children just stared at him.

He waved a hand in front of their faces, "Hey! Are you two alright?"

They recovered from their shock and Trace nodded, "Yes. Hurt, but fine."

The man knelt down to look at Trace's nose, "Broken. We'll need to get someone to take a look at that." He switched his gaze between the two, "That was bravely done. I'll take you to your parents."

Red light flashed behind them and Trace looked around the man. A large fox made from sparks of fire took to the fight in the arena and started effortlessly taking out the invader's Virapets. The boy turned his attention to the man's headset and saw that it was currently directly linked to the fox.

His mouth dropped open, "You?"

The man nodded, "The Champion. Nice spot there, kid."

Trace pulled his mouth up and said, "I want to help you."

The Champion blinked at him, "What?" "I want to help." Trace repeated, "I don't know why these guys came, but whatever they are trying to grab can't be good. Plus," he hesitated as he thought of his mother, "my mom is here."

The Champion's gaze bore into Trace, "You do know the consequences of fighting, right?" His head tilted to the invader still laying on the floor, "This is not a VR game."

Trace swallowed in nervousness, but nodded.

The Champion kept his gaze on the boy for a minute, but then nodded and smiled, "You really are brave. Either that or stupid. I think I will like you."

He got to his feet and looked to Sarah, "What about you?"

She did not say anything, but moved behind Trace and gave both the Champion and Trace the impression that she did not want to leave the boy's side. The Champion nodded again, "Very well. Let's get you to a doctor then we will start by making sure the safe room has not been breached."

The Champion jumped off of the stage and the two children followed him with their Virapets in tow.

Trace, with a newly healed nose, ran next to the Champion as they made their way toward the safe room. They met the occasional invader, but with Icelan distracting the Virapet and Gust distracting the owner, the three of them made short work of each invader.

And while they did, Trace kept his mind as closed off from emotion as possible. He knew that if he even thought for a second about what they were doing, he would break down into a fetal position of sobs and puke. Next to him, he could see that Sarah was doing the same. There would be time to console each other about this later. Right now they had to focus, and it seemed like they both agreed on that one fact.

The safe room's entrance looked like a normal wall. If the Champion had not stopped in front of it, Trace probably would not have noticed it at all. The large man ran a hand over the wall and studied text flying up his headset.

"Looks like the safe room is locked down and ninety-five percent of the spectators made it in."

Trace did not even attempt to think about what happened to the last five percent, "What's next?"

"Try to figure out why they are attacking." The Champion said, "And make sure the tournament's board is safe."

"Where are they?" Trace asked.

"They should be in the safe room, but I have reports that not all of them made it in. We have to find the last two members."

As soon as he said that, a sound came from Trace's headset. The Champion and Sarah both gave reactions that told the boy that they also heard the sound. It reminded of someone testing a microphone to make sure that it was active.

"Hello," a voice said from the headset, "this is the leader of the Blood Arrows. I currently have two of your board members held hostage." At that point, Trace's headset's lens flickered and showed a video feed of some kind of conference room. Right in front of the supposed camera was a man dressed similar to all of the invaders. Behind him was a man and woman tied up and with bruises on their faces. The invader continued, "Now, I am willing to give them up, but I need something in return. Dragon.exe. If the Champion comes to the board room with Dragon.exe in hand and alone, then I will let them go."

"Raist!" The woman yelled, "Don't do it! Do not give him that program!"

The invader turned to the woman and slapped her across the face, "Did I say you can speak, bitch?"

The camera feed went out. Trace and Sarah both looked at the Champion who was sweating and thinking furiously.

"What is Dragon.exe?" Trace asked, "Is it a Virapet?"

"Yes," the Champion said, "a strong one. If they are able to get that Virapet, they could cause a whole lot of damage."

"How?" Sarah asked, "I thought Virapets were not allowed to do any harm to humans. That was the reason they were created in the first place, to stop the viruses that could."

"Yes," he said and started walking down the hall, "but the Blood Arrows have somehow found a way around that."

Both Trace and Sarah blinked at him, "What?"

"I have been getting calls from guards all around the stadium that have been saying the Blood Arrow's Virapets can cause a guard to go unconscious. The mercenaries have been knocking guards out then executing them. If they got their hands on Dragon.exe and could do the same thing..." He trailed off, and Trace felt as if he was going to be sick from the unavoidable thought that came next.

If they got their hands on a strong Virapet and could kill men and women even more ably than the viruses in the Viral War. Then many lives would be lost. A new war would start. And the defenders would not have the means to fight back as effectively.

"What do we do?" Sarah asked, "Can we do something?"

The Champion nodded, "I am going to the board room. See if I can save the board members. While I do, you two head down to where Dragon.exe is stored. Defend it at all costs. We cannot let it fall into their hands."

Trace gulped, "But, are we strong enough?"

The Champion smiled gravely and knelt down to put a hand on each of the children's shoulders, "I have seen you fight Trace. And I have seen each of your bravery. You can do it. Besides, you just need to hold them off until I can get down to help you out."

Trace was silent. The fear was starting to break through his mental walls. There was every chance that he would die in the next few minutes. Maybe in the next few hours. But, if he did nothing, then the whole world would collapse under a war that it could not win.

Sarah looked at him, "I am going."

He turned his gaze to her. Sarah had been a good friend since he arrived at the tournament a couple weeks ago. She was kind and not without a sense of humor. He liked her, and he could not let her go in alone.

The boy gulped again and nodded, "Alright. Where do we go?"

The Champion nodded and Trace could see him activating commands in his headset. In seconds, Trace could see a map of the tournament building appear in his own headset and a line that led deep below.

"That will guide you." He rose to his feet and gripped his rifle, "Good luck." With that, he materialized his fire fox and raced down the hall. The two children looked at each other and nodded. Then they too raced down the hall.

Following the map on Trace's headset, the pair found themselves inside of a dimly lit chamber about the size of a house. The room was empty save for one column with a small object on top. Trace walked over to look at it while Sarah followed close behind.

It was a small disk. Its diameter was no longer than the boy's middle finger, yet it glinted the little light in the room strongly. He could even see his own reflection in it. Bruised nose, some cuts and scrapes and disheveled hair. But none of that was really unexpected.

What was unexpected, though, was his eyes. They looked down at the reflection and it showed orbs that were completely dead. Narrowed eyelids and no light dancing on their surfaces made Trace look like a robot. A golem. Something not alive, yet able to move, talk, and mimic emotion.

It should not have been a surprise, though. Throughout their trip down to this room, they had to fight and kill no less than five men. Two were guarding this room, waiting for some sort of commander to get there, and three were patrolling through the halls of the tournament grounds. As they did not have guns, they had to be 'creative' when taking them out.

Trace shook his head. It would not do anyone any good for him to break down now.

He turned away from the disk to find that Sarah was staring at him. It was slightly disconcerting that she had the same kind of expression on her face that he did.

"Are you ready?" She asked.

He was going to answer. His mouth was open and the breath was coming out. But then something broke. Those emotionless eyes of his teared up, and he leaned against her. The sobs came next,

the sounds of a child crying out in agony. They did not sound loud, and he did not hear them bounce off against the walls, but they seemed loud enough. His body shook with every heavy inhale and with every gradual exhale. His legs buckled next, taking him to the floor and he knelt there, head bent down, and watched the drops pitter pat against the metal floor. The dam of emotions had broken. And he could not stop himself. It had just been too much. It was all too much. He had to get out. Had to get away. He could not do this! He was not trained in combat, in killing. He just celebrated his twelfth birthday two months ago! Why had he been put to this?

Because he chose it himself. He volunteered to go through this. Why? Why was he so arrogant to think that he would have been able to handle this task?

Something closed around him and pulled him in close. Hair tickled his cheek and he felt someone's neck against his in a hug.

"I understand." Sarah said quietly.

Trace instinctively pushed himself closer to her, "I can't do this. I can't."

"I know the feeling." She responded with a small smirk, "But, remember at the stage. You went in to save me. At risk to your own life, you came to rescue me."

The boy shook against her, "Yeah... but..."

She nodded, "I know. But, you have to pull out that courage again. Or else none of us may make it out of here."

Her blunt words hit him hard and he shook harder. She was right of course, but that just made what he had to do harder to do. Yet, the images of his mother flashed through his thoughts. Of her smile and her tolerance of his dreams. And he saw her lying dead on the floor of the safe room.

The steely resolve rushed in and he immediately stopped shaking in fear. His eyes hardened again and he stood up. Sarah followed him up and looked down at him.

"You're right." He said, "We have to do this."

Just then, they heard the door to the room boom as it resisted a heavy blow. The pair had locked the door, but under such a heavy blow, it was not going to last long. It boomed again and the sound resonated throughout the large room. Trace nodded to

himself and called Icelan to materialize. The lioness came out in front of him and bent down into a curve, ready to pounce. Sarah did the same with Gust, and he started dancing around the lioness, ready to support as he had for the past hour or so.

The door boomed again, and this time it fell down with a crash. Five men appeared in the door all holding pulse rifles. They all wore body armor, but the man in front also held a pulse pistol at his hip and a blade at his other hip. He took one look around the room, spotted the children and their pets, and smiled.

"Ah, the children who defended themselves on the stage. I am impressed." His smile widened, "But this is over. Just step aside. There is no need for you to be hurt."

Instead of stepping away from the column, they each stepped in front of it. While they did not exactly block the disk from view or would really protect it, thanks to their height, it was a clear message to the men.

The lead man sighed, "Fine then." He turned to his men, "Open fi--"

He was interrupted as Icelan and Gust both let loose with winds, one frozen, the other fast, and they both combined to slam into the men. They stumbled back and cried out in surprise. The commander growled out something and a massive beast of a Virapet appeared behind the children. It was a dinosaur, a t-Rex, and it's larger than life mouth gapped open to snap on the children.

Trace noticed it first and pulled Sarah to the side. Icelan then twisted around and sent a lance of ice at the dinosaur. The large creature stumbled back slightly, but Trace thought it was more from the shock of attack than anything else. Against the massive being, the melting lance was a toothpick. Yet, Trace took advantage of that hesitation and called Icelan forward to start clawing and biting at the dinosaur's legs.

Trace turned back to the mercenaries and found that they had gotten their minds far enough past the perceived winds to be able to walk toward them. He growled out and started looking around, trying to find something they could use against the men.

Behind the men on the floor was a pistol. The commander must have knocked it out of its holster and forgotten or not noticed it. Now, Trace just had to figure out how to get to the gun without the men shooting him down. At least the other men did

not have their Virapets out, for whatever reason. If they did, then this fight would have been over already.

Then he saw that all of the men were pushing their way toward Sarah and apparently did not see him. This was his chance. He just hoped that Sarah could hold them long enough. He rushed for the gun and got halfway before he heard a shout from one of the mercenaries. The boy looked back to see that one of the men was aiming his weapon and about to pull the trigger. However, he did not get a shot off before a roar sounded and the t-Rex stumbled back to stomp on the man. Normally, the man would have been fine, but slightly stunned at the mixed signals the headset and the brain were sending each other. With the mercenaries' special tweaks, though, the man was slammed to the ground and blacked out.

That gave Trace the time he needed to grab the pistol. As he was raising it to aim, he saw that the other men were now coming after him while the commander still pushed his way to Sarah. Trace pointed the pistol at the closest man and fired. The gun barely shook from the shot, and the pulse round grazed his target's shoulder. He tried again, and this time he hit the man's chest. The mercenary was flung back and landed on the ground hard. The body armor he wore protected himself, but the round must have still taken the wind out of him.

That was not really important now, though, as the others started pulling their guns up to fire. Trace started running to the side and taking pot shots at the men. Most of the shots did not hit, and those that did hit were grazing shots, but they let Trace get out of the shooting range he was in before.

He aimed the pistol again and fired. The next person from him received two shots to the chest and he felt to his knee. Which let Trace hit the person behind that one. No thought entered his mind as he kept forcing the men back. As he did, he stepped closer and closer to Sarah, who was in turn stepping closer and closer to him.

They bumped back to back in front of the disk. At this point, the only people remaining in fighting condition was the commander and two of the mercenaries. Yet they all held rifles to the children. Trace kept his weapon pointed on the commander, but his hands were shaking too much. The Commander chuckled and smacked the pistol out of the boy's hand. Trace stepped back and spread his arms out to protect Sarah.

The Commander raised his weapon.

And was hit in the back.

Trace looked toward the door to see the Champion with a charging rifle. Behind him was the two captive board members, and the fire fox ran into the room. They took care of the last two mercenaries and started walking up to the children. It was over. They had won.

Trace suddenly felt weak. His knees buckled under him and he fell to the floor. Blackness took over and he reveled in it. The last he remembered before blacking out was Sarah holding on to him.

The first thing Trace noticed when he returned to consciousness was that there was something soft and warm under him. And there was something equally as comfortable on top. It reminded him of waking up after a long day of school at home. The fact that he was comfortable after a situation that was hopeless to him.

"Why has he not woken up yet?" A worried female voice asked.

Trace almost jumped up in surprise.

"He pushed himself too hard during the fighting." A male voice answered with emotionless confidence, "The fact that he is resting instead of going into a coma is a good sign. It means that his body is doing its job and getting everything back in order."

"But it has been three days!" The female half yelled.

"I understand your worry, ma'am," the man said, "but there is nothing else we can do. We have made sure that the worst injuries are taken care of, and his body is doing the rest."

"But-"

Trace opened his eyes. He found white ceilings, white walls and multiple complex machines. A window in the right wall brought in afternoon light and one of the machines made a constant beep. To his left was a curtain and standing by the entrance of the curtain was his mother and a tall man wearing a doctor's uniform. He felt an arm on him, and he looked down to his right to see that Sarah was fast asleep, using the space on the bed Trace did not lay on as a pillow.

"Huh." He breathed.

Both his mother and the doctor turned to look at him. As soon as she saw him awake, his mother ran over to the bed.

"Hey son." She said with a smile, "How are you feeling?" Hearing that question, his body started reporting its condition. The boy's throat was dry and felt as if he could barely breath through it. Every single muscle in his body was stiff, and his face felt sore. But all he said was, "Thirsty."

His mother reached over to the bedside table and grabbed the handle of a glass pitcher and a plastic cup. She poured the water into the cup and helped Trace drink. Apparently doing that took all of the boy's energy, because as soon as he finished drinking he flopped right back down. Sarah stirred and pulled her head up with the sluggishness of exhaustion. But when she locked eyes with Trace, she rose straight up and wrapped him in a tight hug.

Trace groaned slightly as his muscles became uncomfortable, but he had a smile on his face, "Hey."

The girl's hair tickled his cheek as she moved her head, "I was so worried. Are you alright? How is your head? Do you feel dizzy?"

Trace had to brace himself mentally against the onslaught of questions and it took about five minutes before he was finally able to say, "I'm fine."

The girl sighed and said, "Good. Good."

Her head pulled away from his neck and her eyes locked on his. The pounding of his heart quickened slightly, and the machine next to him beeped a bit faster as well. Her hand came up to cup his face. The machine beeped even faster.

"What you did was really brave." She said in a whisper, "I never got a chance to say thank you."

Trace did not know what to say. His mouth hung open for a couple of seconds before he finally got his mouth to work enough to say, "Um. I just assumed that..."

Sarah smirked and leaned down. Her mouth pressed against his. And Trace's mind froze. He did not know what to do, what to say, what to think. The emotions that rushed through him did not allow anything to enter his thoughts.

It seemed like an eternity when she pulled away from the kiss.

"Thank you." She whispered.

Trace stared up at her for a couple of seconds before he managed to whisper, "You're welcome." She smiled and rose to her feet, "I should let you rest."

The girl did not even make it a step before Trace grabbed her wrist. He was surprised at the instinctive need for her to stay by his side. When she turned to look at him, he said, "No. Stay."

She looked at him blankly for a second, but then nodded, "Alright."

Outside of the room, looking through the window, a man and woman watched as the children talked.

"What do you think?" The Champion asked.

The woman stared at the boy laying in the hospital bed for a couple of seconds, "Is your report correct? This is really him?"

The Champion nodded, "Yes."

"Extraordinary." The woman said, "That this boy has so much capability."

"He was the gold medalist of the tournament this year." The Champion said, "He has battle experience, even if it is just the battlefield of the Virapets."

She sighed, "And you think it translates to real potential, yes." Her head turned to him, "But you know that this is something that we cannot do thoughtlessly."

He nodded, "Of course. But the time for it is coming close. We cannot wait much longer. The Blood Arrows were stopped now, but they will eventually figure out how to remove the Virapets' restrictions."

"I know." The woman almost snarled, "But... a child?"

"A child who has proven that he has bravery and skill. And the willingness to fight."

The woman shook her head, "I just don't know."

"Well, we will have to see on the final battlefield." The Champion said, "You know the rule. Just my choice is not enough. He HAS to win Platinum. Something no one has done since the WVT's start."

"And if he does not?" She asked with true curiosity. He shrugged, "Then there is nothing I can do about it." His eyes hardened, "But he will win."

The woman's eyes widened, "You are not thinking--"

The Champion laughed, "Of course not. The matter is too serious to throw the match just so he can get it. I just have confidence in his ability."

She stared at him skeptically, "If you say so."

"We'll see once the tournament building has been repaired."

She nodded and started walking. Before she got too far, though, she turned back, "What if you are wrong?"

"Then I am." The Champion said frankly, "It would be too late at that point."

He did not watch as she continued down the hall. The door to the waiting room closed with finality.