

# Chapter 3

## Unwavering

“WHY DIDN’T YOU TELL US?” Jax yelled furiously, slamming Leo against the wall with a handful of his shirt in his fist. Leo shoved him away, breathing heavily.

“He told me not to tell you!” he said breathlessly.

“But you - you- aggggh!” Jax said through gritted teeth, pushing back his hair. “You should’ve told us, Leo.”

Leo forgot his temper momentarily and looked down in defeat.

“Yeah. I’m sorry.”

Jax sighed and sat back in his chair.

“No, it’s alright,” he said heavily looking at the group photo of the whole CSA.

“You listened to Harry’s last request of us, even if he was hiding it from us. I guess he knew we would’ve stopped him if he told us.”

The others in the room, Erik, Fox, Ryder and Zane, looked grim. Zane slowly kneeled down in front of a picture of him and Harry together in their trainee years - they had come from the same squad, and had been the last remaining members of that squad after the others were killed during the First Defilian War. Now he was the only one who remained of Squad 44.

“So, Jax,” Fox said quietly. “Are you going to do it?”

Jax sighed and nodded, before picking up the big group photo of the CSA top brass, framed with gold and silver, and hung it on the wall of the meeting room, before taking out a fat red marker from his pocket and slowly drawing a big red ‘X’ over Harry, where he stood between Fox and Ryder, and the 23

people in the photo were now reduced to 20, with Rupert Drake, Ben Reaper-Taylor and Harry Chapman now crossed out. Jax sighed and slotted the cap back onto the marker and turned back to his four friends.

"We need more helpers in Washington," he said. "Two of you need to go."

"I'll go," Zane volunteered. "Doesn't seem like I'll be needed here anytime soon."

"Same," offered Leo. "I'll redeem myself, don't worry."

"Fine," Jax said. "Head to Shuttle 7, it'll take you right there. And also."

Leo and Zane turned around.

"Naerius's second flagship was seen there. One of his higher ranked subordinates may be on the battlefield – currently only Robert is there along with a small army, but they're under heavy fire and just called for help. It *is* the capital of the US after all."

"Glad you came!" Robert yelled over the din of explosions and guns firing.

"We need help!"

Zane crouched next to Robert inside a trench, enemy fire flying over their heads. Leo dropped down next to them.

"I know that ship," he said, pointing at the massive craft hovering over the battlefield. "That's Zugai's ship. He's Naerius's subordinate."

"Yeah, I remember him," Zane said through gritted teeth. "He got the better of me and Jack last time, I'm not letting that happen again."

"We'll go beat him then," Robert said defiantly, raising his fist. "That'll rout his armies, right?"

"You sure got awfully confident after we showed up..." Leo pointed out.

"Shaddup," Robert snapped. "How are we doing this?"

"We're rushing them head on," Leo said immediately.

"We're doing this stealthily," Zane said at the same time.

The two glared at each other and started arguing about the best attack strategy.

From his vantage point above a tall hill overlooking the battlefield, Zugai examined his armies' advances on the Capitol Building. Everything around it had already been decimated into a barren, flaming landscape, littered with trenches, bunkers, barbed wire and bodies. A group of Intrusinks pushed towards a bunker with two heavy machine guns inside, but were mowed down. However, an Intrusink cannon decimated the bunker to pieces and concrete flew in all directions. Zugai uncrossed his first pair of arms and held up a pair of binoculars to his eyes. His other pair of arms stayed crossed over his bare chest, which was marked with swirling black lines to strike fear into his opponents. He also wore baggy, white trousers that hung down over his ankles from a tight, brown leather belt around his waist, and he wore leather sandals with iron soles – made for kicking enemies... and his soldiers.

"Hmph, we'll have this place overrun in no time," he growled to his cowering subordinates. "Relay to the fools down there that we'll prepare to mount a final charge in exactly three hours. In the meantime.."

He unfolded his second pair of arms and flexed them against the sunlight that was shining from behind the clouds.

"I'll personally go and eradicate them myself. Go!"

His subordinates nodded quickly and scampered away down the hill.

*Ha ha, Robert Callen, you were foolish to guard this city with such a meagre amount of troops – I estimated 40 000, but it seems your numbers were even less. Today I decimate you!*

"Fine, you win then," Leo said, folding his arms across his chest and slumping on his back against the side of the trench. "I guess I still owe you one for Harry."

Zane breathed out through his nose and pushed back his brow-length brown hair.

"Thanks," he said. "My thoughts is that Zugai shouldn't know that me and Leo are here. So we can ambush him on his hill if Robert holds down the fort alone for the next few minutes."

"That's a rather simple plan," Robert mused. "but it'll probably work. I doubt Zugai knows how to do  $1 + 1$ ."

"He probably doesn't," Zane agreed confidently. "Let's go beat him into the ground."

What he didn't know then was that he'd made a horrible miscalculation.

Zugai bellowed and smashed apart yet another bunker, before charging through a hail of machine gun bullets and hurling Robert's soldiers out of the trench with another yell. He snorted like a bull and stomped towards the Capitol Building where Robert glared at him.

*Goddamn. Zane's plan completely failed.*

Meanwhile, Zane and Leo stared at the empty top of the hill where Zugai had been a few seconds earlier, Leo still holding the decapitated head of an Intrusink in his hand.

"What the heck?" Zane asked. "Where'd that meathead go?"

"What if he attacked Robert just now?" Leo suggested. "I was thinking that he'd probably join the fight himself sooner or later."

"That's probably what happened..." Zane said through gritted teeth. "Agggh! Robert's in danger. We need to head back now!"

But when he turned around he found their path blocked by Zugai's three subordinates.

"Time to feast," said one of them, licking its lips.

Robert stared down Zugai, who was barrelling towards him in a cloud of dust, and raised his curved sabre to meet him. Robert knew that his enhanced speed and strength would help him survive a little longer, but he still doubted he could win the fight – he just had to stall until Zane and Leo arrived back. In a few seconds Zugai was on top of him, raising two of his fists on his right side in a devastating punch downwards. Robert infused his blade with Armament and caught both fists with his weapon, but the force threw him backwards and he smashed into the staircase leading up to the Capitol Building, throwing up a shower of white marble. Zugai bellowed like a troll and charged at Robert again, lowering his head and shoulders for a tackle, but Robert met the attack with his blade and stopped Zugai short in a massive cloud of dust. Robert grunted and slashed downwards on Zugai's shoulder, but he leapt backwards, out of range on Robert's blade.

"Not bad," he grinned. "Now take on this!"

Zugai pounced forwards again, and his lower arms lashed out and gripped Robert's arms, holding him firmly in place.

"Wha-"

Immediately Zugai raised both his upper arms and smashed them down onto Robert's head, crushing him into the ground and causing a massive crater to appear in the centre of the staircase, and throwing up a shower of blood from Robert's head.

"Hmph," Zugai snorted. "Dunno why I didn't do this earlier if it was that easy."

But Robert heaved himself up, blood dripping from his short blonde hair and onto the ground, glaring at Zugai with a murderous look in his eyes.

"That's the spirit!" Zugai chortled. "It would've been far too boring if you'd died that quickly!"

"Shut up!" Robert snarled. "It's my turn!"

He leapt forwards into the air and slashed downwards, but found his attack blocked by two very thick arms.

"Oof, he's sturdy."

Robert put his foot down on Zugai's arms and somersaulted backwards before attacking again, this time aiming lower.

"Have a taste of my techniques," he snarled.

*Heavy spear*

Robert thrust his sabre forwards with such speed and force that Zugai didn't even have time to react as the tip of Robert's weapon thunked into his abdomen, drawing a spurt of blood, but he just barely managed to leap backwards before Robert skewered him through the stomach.

"Ho, ho..." He slurred. "Not bad, not bad."

Robert pressed his advantage and continued slashing, stabbing and hacking at Zugai, but most of his attacks were either blocked or dodged.

"What's wrong?" Zugai taunted. "Having trouble hitting me?"

Robert didn't respond but instead somersaulted forwards and used the momentum to bring down his blade at Zugai, but he side-stepped easily. "Ha, with that heavy blade, you won't be able to stop once you've started swinging, kiddo."

Zugai raised his fist in triumph, but Robert gritted his teeth and clenched the hilt of his weapon with both hands so hard that his veins began to pulse out of his skin – and then he changed the direction of the swing completely and slashed upwards, catching Zugai completely off guard and slashing him across the right eye.

*What??*

Zugai grunted and stumbled backwards, raising two of his hands to his wounded face, before slowly opening the eye which Robert had wounded. Unfortunately it had not been blinded. Zugai put his foot down and glared at Robert.

"You little brat... don't get cocky."

"Ho ho," Robert mocked. "Not bad, not bad."

"Shut it!"

Flames suddenly appeared on Zugai's body, enveloping him in a raging inferno so that his whole body looked red hot through the fire.

"It seems you really want to get burned to a crisp!"

Zugai hurled himself forwards and Robert readied his blade, but the heat from Zugai himself was too much and he was forced to raise his arms in defence and momentarily close his eyes. And that was enough for Zugai, who drew back both of his lower fists and hurled them into Robert's stomach.

Immediately, Zugai's fists burned into Robert like a hot knife into butter, and he was sent hurtling back into one of the pillars of the Capitol building, which creaked and groaned in protest. Robert's eyes widened as he collapsed onto all fours, smoke leaking from his sizzling stomach and blood dripping from his mouth and head.

"Ugggh..."

"It's over!" Zugai yelled in triumph, fire still licking around his legs. "I'm sure Lord Naerius will praise me when I bring your head back to him, along with the American -"

He was cut short as a fountain of blood erupted in a diagonal slash across his back, and he turned around to have Zane's foot crush into his face.

"Robert!"

Zane dashed past Zugai's falling bulk and helped Robert up.

"Damn, what the heck happened to your tummy?" Leo asked, standing between them and Zugai, who was climbing to his feet cursing.

"Careful," Robert said. "That guy has some technique that causes him to combust."

"Nothing surprising," Zane muttered, flexing the two sharp blades on his fingers. "Except I'll be the one making him combust after what he did to you."

"Who...?" Zugai muttered. "Oh... you."

Then he threw back his head and bellowed in laughter, the sound booming around the front of the Capitol building, and a shower of pebbles fell from the roof.

"You little loser," Zugai mocked. "Come back to get your backside whipped by me again?"



"I'll make him fall from a high place," Leo muttered. "I'll burn him to a-"

"Shut," Zane snapped.

"Okay, okay, I was just joking."

Zugai once again enveloped him with fire, and grinned at Leo and Zane from behind his wall of flames.

"Hit me if you can."

He lunged forwards, and the duo leapt to either side of him, out of the way of the searing heat. Robert threw himself inside the Capitol building, where two of his men helped him up and went deeper into the building, where some citizens still cowered. Zane weaved his way between the pillars, dodging streaks of fire and burning pieces of debris that Zugai was hurling at him, whilst Leo shimmied up another pillar and launched himself at Zugai's back, with his sword in front of him, ready to impale the general. Zugai swung around and grinned, before letting loose a forcefield of heat which pushed Leo back and slammed him against the roof.

"Oof! Hot! Hot!"

Zane slid across the marble floor on his knees towards the hulking brute of an enemy, before coming lifting himself up about two metres away from Zugai, and swung his blade.

"Ha, you're not gonna be able to -"

He was cut short as the tip of Zane's weapon slid across his cheek, drawing a small line of blood.

"What?"

"You see," Zane smiled, reeling his finger blades back in. "I've always wanted to beat you into the ground, so I've thought of some different methods I can

get close to you. You could say I learned from my mistakes – that's cos I lost last time, no? What did *you* prepare against me? Nothing."

"Hmm," Zugai said, brushing the blood of his cheek and taking a stance from the first time that day. "I see. As for me... as a *King*, we have no need for improvement..."

He spread his arms and looked up to the sky, smiling like a psychopath.

"...no need for learning, no need for betrayal, no need for help, and no need for loss. That is because we are *perfect in every way*."

Zane spat on the ground.

"If you're King, then I'm the God," he said. "Come, 'imperfect' guy."

Zugai roared and kicked off the ground, shooting towards Zane like a fiery comet, and drew back both of his left fists, throwing a flaming double punch at Zane.

### *Heavenly Hand of Defence*

Zugai's fist slammed into Zane's arm, but there was no damage, no burnt flesh and no snapped arm. Instead, Zane's whole body trembled as he absorbed the shock of the attack.

"Have a taste," he grinned. "Of your own perfect power."

He promptly redirected all of the force of Zugai's attack back into his upper arm, forcing his elbow backwards and slamming into his chest with the equal force to his own punch.

Zugai was sent flying out of the Capitol Building's massive front porch, where he went bouncing down the front steps and came to a crashing halt at the base, lying in a heap.

*What the hell...? Did he really just absorb the force of my punch and fling it right back at me?*

Zugai stared up at Zane, who was standing at the top of the stairs looking down at him.

*This guy... he's like a completely different person to before, when I fought him in the last war!*

Zane and Leo leapt down the stairs and came to even ground with Zugai, who raised both of his upper arms into the air.

"Come forth. Scolder."

A bright yellow light suddenly glowed between Zugai's raised arms, and slowly a long, solid object began to form.

"I guess he's summoning his weapon," Leo muttered to Zane, who nodded. Eventually, the object elongated out and formed a polearm – a bident.

"What kinda weapon is that!?" Leo exclaimed. "It looks like a trident... but... more inferior, I guess?"

Zugai smiled wickedly as he lowered his weapon – the handle was thin and silver, and about one and a half times as long as he was tall, with two sharp prongs at the end of it, one longer than the other.

"A bident," he said, whirling it between his fingers. "Time to die."

"If you're going to draw your weapon then I might as well draw mine," Zane said, looking at his two small finger blades.

*Sixfold Star Martial Arts: Halberd.*

"You see," Zane said, as his halberd slowly formed into his hands, "in ancient China, there were 6 main weapons, with six different fighting styles... the

halberd, the sword, the spear, the crossbow, the three-section-staff, and last of all, the armour. I guess my technique is all six of those... put together."

Zane whirled his own polearm and charged Zugai with it, and the two of them clashed, metal throwing up sparks against metal. Leo dashed past Zane and leapt up, throwing a volley of punches, some of which connected with Zugai's shoulder and face, but the rest were blocked. The general bellowed with rage and grunted as he swung his bident in a wide arc, latching onto Zane's halberd and throwing him into the air. At the same time, the two spare hands he had free raised up and punched Zane in the back, causing him to cough up blood and sail through the air before crashing into the ground in a cloud of dust and debris. Leo ducked under a straight punch and jumped over another, trying to get close to Zugai until his flames scorched him once again, forcing him to jump back. Zane grunted and heaved himself off the ground, before switching techniques.

"I'll put your flames out once and for all."

*Sixfold Star Martial Arts: Crossbow.*

Zane aimed the crossbow carefully between Zugai's upper arms, and began to charge his shot.

"Leo," he called.

Leo leapt back and dropped down next to him.

"Yeah?"

"Keep him busy for 1 minute. If I charged this up and hit him with it, he's as good as dead."

"Alright!"

*The crossbow's Piercing Shot requires alot of my energy. I can't believe I was forced to use it so early – I doubt I'll be able to do much after I've used it in this fight.*

Leo charged Zugai straight and pulled back both his hands, as though he was about to double punch Zugai in the chest.

"Ha! Get burned!"

But when Leo threw his hands forwards, two thick, long vines shot of his palms and smashed into Zuagi's abdomen, sinking into his flesh momentarily before burning off and collapsing into pieces of burnt plant matter.

"Wha – wha?" Zugai asked, blood spitting from between his lips.

"NEVER TOLD YOU MY POWER, HUH!?" Leo yelled, laughing.

Thick pieces of bark began to cover his arms, then spread to his chest, until he was wearing what resembled a full on suit of tree bark armor.

"Don't you know what ironbark is?" Leo tutted. "You gotta do your biology.

This bark is pretty much the hardest in the world! Couple with... this!"

Massive cactus spikes and thorns began to grow out of his fists, until his knuckles and fingers were completely covered in all sorts of sharp thorns and spikes. Brandishing his terrifying knuckles, he rushed forwards once again, dodged Zugai's swing with his bident, and punched straight into the inferno, the tree bark armour providing protection from the heat, and his spiky fist slammed full on into Zugai's chest.

"A-Aaaaaaaaagggh!"

The four armed general stumbled backwards, clutching his chest, blood seeping from between his fingers ad dripping onto the ground.

"D-damn..."

But he wasn't done yet. Suddenly, catching Leo off guard, he raised his bident and slammed it down onto Leo's shoulder, a hundred tons of force falling on him in an instant, breaking through the tree armour and sinking into his shoulder.

"Ugh!"

Leo jumped backwards out of range of Zugai's weapon, clutching his bleeding shoulder, whilst Zugai just realised that Zane wasn't joining in. And in that split moment, a streak of gold flashed in the corner of his eye before it pierced his chest.

"Ugh..."

Zugai raised his shivering hand to the hole in his chest, which was still pulsing with golden light.

"It's over, huh?"

"Yeah," Leo nodded. "Nice fight."

Zane lowered his smoking crossbow, sweat dripping down his face, and breathing heavily.

"How was that?" He asked.

Zugai grinned and spread his arms.

"Splendid!"

Then the crossbow bolt exploded, tearing his body apart from the inside, two of his arms flying in different directions while the other two remained half torn, but hanging on by a mere thread of muscle. The top half of his chest and his head were ripped away from the rest, and they crumpled to the ground in a burnt, smoking heap.

"Phew," Zane muttered, wiping the sweat of his brow and sitting back onto the ground. "That was... way harder than expected."

Leo looked at Zane and then back at Zugai's crumbling remains.

"It was?"

The duo dashed back towards the Capitol building, slaughtering any of Zugai's troops they saw. Robert was lying on his back a few soldiers treating the wound in his stomach, which was a smoking, bloody mess. His face was pale and clammy, and every breath was laboured, with blood bubbling deep in his throat.

"Robert," Zane said. "I'm sorry."

"Oi," Robert said, looking at him through fading eyes. "Did you beat him?"

"Yeah."

"Good!" Robert said cheerfully despite his predicament. "I would've killed you myself if you died."

"Hmph," Zane scoffed. "No way we couldn't some weak guy like tha-"

Then the whole horizon exploded.

"That."

"I know."

"That technique... it's..."

A bead of sweat rolled down Leo's neck.

"Why is Naerius here?"

Zane tried to summon a weapon, but the air around his hands only fizzed and sparked.

"I don't even have the power to summon a stupid sword," Zane muttered, frustrated.

"It's alright," Leo said, but he didn't sound completely confident. "Wait in here, I'll try to hold him off while you try and contact the others."

Sweat rolled down Zane's face and forehead as he nodded reluctantly. As people who had fought Naerius head on, Robert, Zane and Leo all knew that it would be next to impossible to win the battle, let alone kill him. However, Leo still sprouted four sharp vines from his back, swallowed hard, grabbed up his sword and walked out of the Capitol Building, to confront the hulking shadow through the heavy rain that had just begun to pour down.

"A fitting sky, isn't it?" Naerius growled over the smashing of raindrops. "For two funerals."

"The second will be yours," Leo replied, pointing his blade at Naerius, who's glowing red eye pierced through the gloom like a bright flashlight.

Naerius's first attack slammed into the flat of Leo's blade, and the force sent his elbow crushing into his stomach and sending him flying into the air, smashing into the Capitol Building's stairs, throwing up a shower of rocks and dust.

"Urk..."

Leo scrambled to his feet, but Naerius streaked through the air so fast that he was nothing more than blur, and smashed his knee into Leo, who managed to block it with two arms, but was still pounded back into the ground, onto his back on the stairs.

"Agh!"



*Even though I blocked that, the force still makes my chest throb, not to mention my arms feel limp...!*

Naerius stood with his legs wide apart, towering over Leo, and brought his massive fist down so hard that the whole staircase exploded into a million fragments and collapsed, causing them to fall down to the ground again, but Naerius refused to stop. He continued pounding Leo into the ground, who folded his arms over his head and drew in his legs, but the sheer force of the hits would break all the bones in his body soon.

“Guh!”

Naerius suddenly paused to draw back his fist for one final hit, and Leo took the opportunity to leap up and punch Naerius between the eyes with the force of a train, but the massive, hulking general only took a single step back. Naerius wasn't even dressed for battle - he only wore a waist-length leather tunic with the arms cut out, and his dull grey skin glinted in the weak sunlight. He was probably over twice as tall as Leo was, and a helm with three prongs grew out of his head, his glowing, evil red eyes gleaming from beneath. Leo wasted no time to press his advantage, gripping two of Naerius's forehead prongs until his knuckles turned white, and pulled himself up, slamming his own knee into Naerius's face, and a spurt of blood spurted from the connection. Leo's eyes widened, and he dropped down to wipe the blood off his grazed knee, while Naerius, smiling grotesquely, loomed over him, without a scratch, and reached towards him.

At that second, Robert's sabre clanged against Naerius's head, and Zane yelled for Leo to run. He didn't need to be told twice - scrambling to his feet, Leo bolted towards Zane and Robert, and Zane drew a powerful Enhanced

Shotgun, and emptied it towards Naerius, doing no damage but forcing him backwards with the force.

“Let’s get out of here, sir!”

Robert charged Naerius and rammed his elbow into his stomach, forcing him back again, and retrieved his sabre.

“Guys let’s go!”

Zane grabbed Leo by the shirt and yanked him towards the last helicopter, making him wince because of the welts and bruises he had on his body after being pounded by Naerius. Robert was still fighting with Naerius, one hand on his wounded stomach.

“ROBERT!” Leo screamed.

“GO!” I’LL BE RIGHT BEH-“

His words were cut short as Naerius’s giant hand clamped down onto his head, and as the helicopter took off, the last glimpse of Robert that Leo saw was Naerius lifting Robert up off his feet with his head in his fist.

Naerius trudged into his ship.

“Why the heck are you here?”

“Why, can I not visit an old friend?” slurred the voice from the shadows.

“Don’t mess with me!”

Naerius slammed his fist down onto the arm of his throne.

“Fine,” the voice sighed. “Of course I wouldn’t visit useless things like you, but His Lordship has come with new orders.”

Naerius raised an eyebrow.

“Oh?”

“We are to hunt down and destroy all CSA and humans in America before moving on to the rest of this wretched planet.”

“Hmph,” Naerius scoffed. “You even go to such lengths to memorise the stupid names of their non-existent borders they have drawn on paper.”

“It’s necessary for our strategies,” said the voice, irritated. “Only a big, battle-crazy oaf like you would think you could just crush anyone everyone everywhere, oh no. The people on this planet have their forces divided in these ‘countries’, that is why it’s necessary to remember their names.”

“Nonsense!” Naerius shouted. “You come into my flagship uninvited and spout nonsense. How much farther will you go... Witherblood?”

Witherblood stepped out of the shadows, but one side of his face was streaked with grotesque, glowing purple lines covering his eye, and the rest of his body (most of which was covered by his black armour) was also horribly mutilated with purple lumps and streaks that pulsed with a strange energy. “Herobane’s on his way,” Witherblood said. “He should be arriving any moment now.”

“This *was* only supposed to be between me and him,” Naerius said, sniffing in disdain.

Witherblood rolled his eyes, and Herobane strode into the room.

“Preparations are ready on my side,” he announced. “Just waiting on you meatheads.”

“Meathead singular,” Witherblood muttered.

“Fine,” Naerius replied, ignoring him. “I’m rallying my soldiers, they’ll be ready to launch the main attack, anytime.”

"We need to talk," Jax said.

"Make it quick," Robin said over the receiver. "What do you want?"

"You should've already sensed it."

"Ya, of course I did, duh," Robin said. "Are you telling me all o' you guys together can't handle two of those guys?"

"We're not that pathetic," replied Jax. "Don't be ridiculous. I just have a request."

"Let's hear it."

"If anyone else comes, can you help out?"

"Wahahahaha! Who's 'anyone else'? Who else is going to come, Mazog?"

"I don't know," Jax said. "But I don't have a good feeling about this. Just promise me. If somebody else from their side comes, come to our help."

"Oh, alright, alright!" Robin sighed. "You guys can't do nothing without me there to hard carry you. Fine. I promise."

Jax put down his phone and turned to Erik and Fox.

"He agreed this time," Jax said. "Step one worked."

"*Last time* we were caught off guard by *his* return," Erik nodded.

"The reason we lost then was because Robin failed to arrive on time."

"It definitely cost us," Jax agreed. "I'm just wondering when would be the best time to release my power. I have leftover soldiers from the last simulation we went through, but not enough."

"Just wait," Fox said. "That's more like end-game sorta thing, right?"

"Fair," Jax replied. "But right now, we should focus on cleaning up our mistakes – we won't let what happened the previous times happen again. This time, we will succeed."