

Chapter 26

It didn't take as long as any of them might have thought for Takeshi to be proven right, though on a scale that Rei thought the woman could have hinted at more broadly.

As it transpired, Sectionals seemed to be a special place for breakthroughs, in particular among the higher ranked first years of every school. By the time Firesong made it through their rest of their Tuesday matches and through Wednesday—cleaning up all the while—the conversation around The Chevaron's breakfast tables Thursday morning focused almost exclusively on the news—and rumors just as often—of one student or another having made a big leap in their CAD development. Among the nearly-200 first years, in fact, Catcher's evolution was only one of at least four or five that Rei had confirmed since the start of the tournament, and there were rumors of that many more he hadn't yet looked into. That did exempt the Galens ranks, either, because Kastro Vademe himself had hit C6 in a Wargames the evening before, earning himself not only the start of the famous "Lupin's Foot" that Jack Benaly's Device already displayed—an addition articulation in the CAD limbs that offered an excellent neutral boost in agility on most terrain—but also the development of Break Step to go right along with it. The Valormade squad leader—usually fairly level-headed and composed—had been positively shaking with excitement as he's shared the news with the other teams at dinner, and was all smiles when he'd received whoops and shouts of congratulations from all in response.

Rei, though, had felt a thrill at the announcement that had had little to do with the fact that Galens' overall power had just notched up another level.

Vademe's Break Step was the *third* Ability he'd heard had been earned so far during the tournament, and that was just among the first years, the only group Rei was really paying attention to. A Brawler from Deermont had been assigned Overclock Wednesday morning after he'd lost a Duel to Zain Kadness, apparently. While Catcher's

Blade Break was still the chief among the whispers—as it had rightfully been since lunch Tuesday—the fact remained that *three* Abilities had been developed in a single tournament, from among a limited number of people.

Three Abilities from no more than *five* evolutions...

On the one hand, Rei had to concede that it made some sense. Christopher Lennon himself had told him once that Users tended to develop their first Ability in the C ranks, if they ever got one. Given the nature of Sectionals, that resulted in a lot of first years in one place who just happened to be in—or near—the Cs.

Still... it seemed like a lot even despite this fact, didn't it?

Rei had a theory, of course. While he knew that Shido tended to be the exception rather than the rule when it came to growth and evolution, he kept falling back on how his CAD had made that very specific jump in Defense and Offense that first Monday afternoon. It reminded him too, of Shido apparently responding to the greatest weakness of his Brawler Mode—his lack of reach—by providing him with an Ability that extended his range of attack significantly. Almost always the CAD seemed to evolve in a reaction to his needs, seemed to intake the information—either in the moment or in the long term—and provide him with an answer to the problem. If he assumed that Shido wasn't different from other Devices in that sense—a big assumption, but one he had evidence with which to disprove it—then it made sense that other CADs responded in the same way, just at a much slower pace. That tracked, too, with the fact that Users could directionally train their specs to a certain degree, could steer their conditioning in one direction or the other, like Lennon had steered Rei's training day the semester before in Speed. Now... well... here they were, the first years in their first *real* tournament, being challenged every day—often several *times* a day—by combatants usually of a level with them, or better.

And people were making jumps, seeing evolutions, and gaining Abilities basically left and right compared to normal trends.

Rei—and the rest of Firesong, when he brought it up with them—just couldn't help but wonder if their Devices weren't just a *tad* bit smarter than the ISCM had ever really let on...

For all the gossip and news, though, the fights still remained the center point of the broader Sectionals attention, which was to be expected. The first years were all abuzz, sure, but for the majority of the civilian spectators—both in person and watching from home—were largely still more invested in the upperclassmen and their matches, as they had a right to be. If the feeds were to be believed, the three Galens rookie squads were generally the only Astra-3 first year groups making any kind of splash in the news, while the likes of Steelbound and King's Law were only at the *top* of a long list of older teams getting all kinds of attention both in-system and beyond. Individually skewing was even more obvious, with only Rei and Aria making any headlines planet-wide, while Lennon and Sidorov were among dozens of exceptional fighters from the older classes being touted as a part of the next generation of SCT pros. Those two in particular, of course, stole the spotlight more often than not, the latter for ripping through more third years than he had any right to—even when they were ranked higher than him—and the former consistently showing off the ripping power of his CAD, Ouroboros, that had earned him his Arena name.

Of course, that didn't mean the other members of Firesong were interested in letting themselves get left in the dust.

“Dammit!” Viv cursed over the coms. “Anyone got idea where you are? This damn place is so damn *big!*”

“I think I hear you,” Catcher responded from somewhere. “You're... down from me?”

“I'm with Grant.” Aria this time. “Arena brought us in in the same room. We'll head for center field.”

“Roger.” Viv again, sounding like she were moving. “And yeah, I hear you too, Catcher. Coming to you. Rei? Cashe? Any idea where you are?”

“Zero,” Cashe answered. “Near the outside, given the viewports, but that’s all.”

There was a pause in the coms as everyone obviously waited for Rei to answer.

“Rei...?” Aria finally repeated, sounding a little worried.

It didn’t help.

“Little—*urk*—busy!” Rei finally responded through clenched teeth, already having a hard enough time keeping his bearings as he spun in freefall down gently rotating hall, the strip lighting along what was now the floor, now the ceiling flickering and sparking.

The fact that he was up against not one, not two, but *three* opponents from a *pair* of different squads did nothing to help him center himself.

“Starting to *hate* Zero-Grav,” he growled as he managed to catch the edge of broken plasteel doorframe, stopping his free “drop”. Looking back up the hall at the trio doing their best to give chase, he did a quick calculation, then launched himself at them, ignoring the continued chatter of his teammates in his ear as they demanded to know where he was so they could come help. There was no way they’d make it in time one way or the other.

“Type Shift: Saber Mode!”

Their Thursday afternoon Wargame—the quarter-final match before semi-finals Saturday and finals Sunday—had manifested as an Elimination bout on what was obviously some kind of massive floating wreck. If he was a betting man, Rei thought the ship had the feel of the colossal passenger carriers he took back and forth from Astra-1 to Astra-3 on the rare occasions he’d gone back to visit the Estoran Center, the type of vessel so large its hole drive was power by a hunk of vysetrium the size of a small flyer. If that was the case, he was probably in some kind of staffing area kept off-limits to passengers, but even that was only indicated by the plain paint and narrow nature of the hall.

None of that mattered for the moment, of course.

Shido's sword—lined in team-assigned yellow—led the way up as Rei catapulted along the line of the shaft, working hard to keep some sense of up and down as the hall continued to rotate around him. The three fighters ahead—a Brawler and Lancer from the 105th called Barret and Skylar and a Mauler from Kenneth called Fuentes—had clumped together as they'd chased after him, clearly looking to overpower Rei with numbers. It might have worked, except that in zero-g it was *exceedingly* hard to reposition yourself quickly if you didn't mind your surroundings, much less in coordination with a team.

It helped that the three of them obviously hadn't expected Rei to turn and charge *them*, either.

His trajectory lined up to launch him passed Barret first, aiming to take advantage of the Brawler's lacking reach compared to Rei's Saber Mode. As he streaked by, though, Skylar made a desperate swipe at him from her squadmate's far side, her spear flashing red in the inconsistent lighting. Seizing on a stroke of inspiration, Rei snapped his clawed left hand out to slap the weapon's haft of the weapon away, instantly changing the angle of his momentum. Where Barret had been expecting a slash at his side as Rei would have slipped by the group, he instead took two armored feet full in the chest, the impact serving not only to send him flailing backwards down the hall again but also to mostly stop Rei *just* inside of Skylar's ideal range. The girl squawked in alarm at the sudden adaptation, and she yelled for help even as she fought to bring her spear in for tighter quarters. Fuentes, though, was already fighting to get around from her other side to assist, which gave Rei as much time as he could have wanted to slash at the Lancer. Unfortunately having no ground to plant his feet on had the blade landing with only a fraction of the forcing it might have, but it still cleaved through the arm Skylar threw up to protect her face, stopping just short of blinding her as she jerked head back reflexively.

Then she was screaming in pain.

Content with the damage he'd managed to inflict, Rei slammed an open hand on the ceiling above his head—or was that a wall?—to shoot himself down and under the ripping cross swing of Fuentes' green-lined hammer as the Mauler finally managed to get himself lined up for an attack. The weapon might have ruffled Rei's hair had the field been projecting air currents for them, but a miss was a miss and Rei found the far side of the hall just as Fuentes's blow had the boy starting to spin like a top through the air. The Mauler yelled in alarm, but Rei was already launching himself back upward, Shido driving home point-first. The vysetrium-lined steel took the boy in the side and pierced clean through, nailing him to the first wall and causing him to spasm once, then go limp with a wheeze of his lungs being registered as bilaterally punctured. Had it been a choice Rei would have ripped the sword back out again, but Skylar wasn't done despite her "missing" arm, and he cursed as he instead had to use the blade and the plasteel it was wedged into on the other side of Fuentes' body as a leverage point to shove himself away from the Lancer.

Still, that was hardly the end of the world.

Only taking the time to glance up the hall to make sure Barret, the Brawler, was still scrambling to find something to grab onto to halt his backwards tumbling, Rei commanded Shido again.

"Type Shift: Brawler Mode!"

For a second time his CAD shifted with roiling arcs of blue lightning, and it was with some satisfaction that Rei saw Skylar's pained glare turn to alarm when the sword he was no longer in contact with dematerialized as effectively as if he'd pulled a ditch. It was one of the earliest tricks he'd learned Type Shift allowed, though he'd only rarely had cause to make use of it. A fraction of a second later he was streaking at her directly, armored arms to either side, ready either to defend or drive the blades of his clawed knuckles forward. From what he could recall Skylar was a lower C-Ranked, and she

showed her aptitude by flicking her spear forward in a defense posture despite only having the one functioning hand.

It didn't save her.

With a slash Rei knocked the spearhead aside. The move had him turning at once, but it just meant he struck the Lancer's face with a knee instead of a fist. As close to the nearest wall as she was, Skylar ended up as good as sandwiched, the back of her head hitting the side of the hall with a *thunk* and another brief yowl of pain. Not giving her a moment to recover this time, though, Rei drove the blades of his left hand down, catching her clean in the chest, the blue claws vanishing 6-plus inches into the three black swords of the 105th stitched into her grey combat suit. Like Fuentes she jerked as she was FDAed, the spear slipping from loose fingers the moment Shido ripped through to her back and severed her aorta and spinal cord alike.

Two down, Rei thought, looking up to find Barret finally barreling at him from up the hall again, snarling Skylar's name as his fists led the way. *One to go*.

With another spoken command Shido shifted once again, and not 15 seconds later Rei was standing—well, floating, actually—on his own in the hall, the bodies of the three Users all in various states of being drawn through the nearest floor or wall or ceiling as the Arena removed them from the fight.

“Ooph,” Rei grunted in his coms, realizing as he did that he was breathing hard. “Zero-g is *tough!*”

There was a moment before anyone answered, and he took the time to look up and down the hall, making sure he had his bearings straight post-fight.

“All good on your end, Ward?” Cashe asked. “I think the others found trouble, too. You got any kind of lock on your position? I haven't run into anyone and I can't figure out where the hell I am.”

Rei frowned, hoping the rest of the team wasn't in too much of a pinch. “All good here. And I'm in a... narrow hall? Probably a staff access space?” He squinted at the

nearest wall. It was tough to make out the exact shade of the paint in the flickering light. “Painted... white? Or light grey, maybe?”

“Really? Shit, I just passed a door that looked like it might lead down that way. Hold on, I’m doubling back.”

“Roger. Makes my decision, too.”

Rei struck out with the flat of Shido’s sword, hitting the nearest panel of plasteel he could reach to send his body drifting toward the opposite wall. Reaching it, he promptly pushed off in the opposite direction he’d sent Barret during the fight, where they’d all come from initially. The Arena had placed him at what he’d thought was some kind of air lock, which meant that if there was a into the ship itself it was probably the other way.

Assuming there weren’t multiple halls like this one, of course, or—MIND forbid—the entire *ship* was hardly more than halls like this.

In the end, however, they got lucky. Rei found a bend in the way—shoving aside several pieces of furniture that were only the largest of the free-floating debris tumbling gently around the space—and sure enough a sterile-looking steel door with a narrow glass viewing window appeared just ahead of him. Catching himself on the corner wall and pushing off again at a 90 degree angle, he’d just started reaching for the metal handle when a yellow light shined through the glass and the door swung inward to reveal Cashe as she peered in warily.

“Heads up!” Rei called, and she caught sight of him just in time to pull herself down and out of the way, avoiding a head-on collision. Rei slipped through the opening to find himself in another, more-spacious hall with a cleaner design and the plasteel panels colored black, doing a good job of accenting the carpeted green floor that was currently above his head.

“Sorry about that,” he said even as he reached the far wall, staking Shido’s blade in to get purchase before turning around to face Cashe. “You good?”

“Fine,” the Lancer confirmed, using her spear to likewise guide herself around to face him. “Still haven’t run into anyone, friend or foe. Others don’t sound so lucky.”

“I wasn’t either. Three of them in that hall. Two 105th and one from Kenneth.”

Cashe groaned. “They’re ganging up *again?*”

“Sure are,” was all Rei could answer with, offering her a sympathetic laugh as he looked around, trying to decide which way to go.

Three Wargames, now, and three matches in which the other squads seemed to have unanimously decided that Firesong needed to be dispatched before any other combat could take place. The previous afternoon had been much the same—with Firesong only *barely* coming out on top once more—so Rei supposed none of them should have expected otherwise. It was a bit frustrating, sure, but hadn’t this been exactly what the six of them had been asking for when they’d so brutally put down Boneyard that first Team Battle match?

Careful what you wish for, I guess, Rei thought, almost sighing as he recalled Dent’s warning about being taken seriously.

Then the coms cracked, erasing all other thoughts.

“If you two are done chatting—*gab!*—we could use some help here!”

“Viv!” Rei exclaimed, joining Cashe in looking up and down the hall now. “Where are you? Any indication? Any landmarks?”

Another pause, but shorter this time.

“Dining area! All four of us! Would recommend—*WOAH!*—Would recommend *getting your ass over here double-time!*”

“Seconded!” came Catcher’s shout this time, followed by an echoed agreement from Aria and Grant.

Cashe and Rei didn’t hesitate.

“This way,” the Lancer said, pulling herself down to the... ceiling?—man, Zero-Grave really *did* suck—before wrenching her spear loose and shoving off up the hall. “I came from the other direction. Outside hull. All viewports. Nowhere they could be”

“And the dining hall on these things would be in the front or middle of the ship,” Rei followed, nodding as he, too, pulled Shido’s blade free before launching after the girl. “Good call.”

Despite the lack of gravity, the absence of further encounters and decent Speed specs made movement quick for both of them. More debris—everything from mattresses to luggage to withered potted plants.—slowed them down a little here and there, but they mostly just cut or shoved their way passed these as needed. They hit two bends and had to double back once, assuring the others they were coming the whole time, but within about a minute Rei finally made out the sounds of fighting as they passed one especially large hall that led towards the front of the ship.

“Ahead!” he hissed, and he didn’t wait for Cashe to agree or not before throwing himself in the direction of the noise, slamming the claws of his left hand into the first panel of the wide tunnel’s polished wall he could reach to launch himself forward at all speed

Not a couple of heartbeats later, Rei was jetting out of the hall again into the main dining area, and even despite the urgency of the situation he was forced to take an instant to marvel at the site.

Everything—*everything*—was a dying, glorious red.

The ship had likely been some kind of the luxury liner, he suspected now. All around him the furniture and related accouterments of a splending eating hall floated free, the table cloths forming a hundred crimson swimming ghosts, the tables and a single piano drifting like larger animals through a crimson ocean, the silverware a shining, glimmering snow in the light. Instead of walls or a ceiling, a thousand triangular glass plates formed a half-dome over the space, almost exactly like the Galens mess

hall's. Beyond it, bits of wreckage and larger debris floated carefully by, cutting swaths of shadow through the glow of the red star that hung like a dim sun in the distance. It was a view worth being distracted by for a fraction of a moment even despite the circumstances, and Rei didn't think even a veteran spacefarer would have been able to *not* be taken in by it.

On the other hand, it also made figuring out who the hell was *who* a hell of a lot harder.

The fight was chaos, pure and simple. It was only Viv and Catcher now—just barely distinguishable by the glowing yellow of their vysetrium—with Aria and Grant nowhere to be found. If the latter two had been FDAed, however, they'd probably done good work before going down, because Viv and Catcher were only up against five—no, *six*—opponents, though Rei was quick to correct himself that there was no guarantee the entirety of the other three teams had found them, yet. The pair were doing an excellent job of holding their own, too, using the zero-g mechanic to advantage by bouncing around the hall unpredictably, avoiding the constantly moving web of their opponents. They might be outnumbered, but the space was massive, allowing for plenty of openings to slip through, and even to slash out a passing strike now and then when the opportunity provided itself.

Still, Viv only had her sword—the empty left arm cradled to her chest obviously having been marked either broken or severed—and Catcher's Speed was lagging compared to the two Brawlers who seemed to be making a point of chasing him down.

“Cavalry's here,” Rei growled into the coms.

Then he caught himself on a passing table, rolled over with it to leverage his momentum down to the floor just below him, and leaned into all his boosted Strength to rocket up again at an intercept trajectory with Catcher's pursuers just as the boy zipped by 10 yards or so above head.

As focused as the pair had been, they didn't even see Rei come flying up under them, left hand reaching for the first Brawler even as Shido's sword slashed upwards at the second. He was using the Saber Mode a *lot* more than he might have ordinarily, he knew, but the advantage of the reach in Zero-Grav was just too good to give up unless he was body-to-body with his opponent. Sure enough, he felt the blade catch in the further opponent's side even as his clawed hand slammed around the closer's throat. The Brawler—a girl from Kenneth named Vovk—didn't even have time to react before Rei squeezed, his clawed fingers shattering the reactive shielding around her neck with a visual sparkling of light, her body immediately ragdolling as the Arena must have registered the snapping of her cervical spine. The perpendicular angle of their impacts had sent them spiraling widely, though, and he barely managed to untangle himself from the FDAed girl before slamming shoulder-first into the top of the viewing dome. Fortunately his own shielding was able to weather the hit, but it was still jarring, and Rei had to scramble to dig his claws into the glass before he bounced off, giving himself a moment for his neuroline to address the minor brain jostling.

Once his vision was clear, he looked down into the spilling red light of the fight.

Cashe had joined the battle now, engaged with two separated opponents who'd gotten around to face her, spear moving with such blinding speed that the afterglow was forming the faint outlines of a sphere around her. Unfortunately the second Brawler Rei had landed a hit on was still going, but he was clutching his side with one hand and moving at a *much* reduced pace, allowing Catcher to gain some distance. The one in trouble now, unfortunately, was Viv, who'd finally gotten cornered by a Saber and Phalanx—both from Oyekan's along the far edge of where the dome met the dining area floor. The fact that she looked punch-drunk—even moreso than should have been normal in zero-g—told Rei it wasn't a coincidence.

Her arm had been severed, he knew now, and blood-loss would be the end of her even if the two fighters closing in didn't do the job first.

Not that that meant he wasn't about to help.

Getting his feet under him, Rei once again launched himself off the glass, aiming as best he could. The three of them were far away and the ship was still rotating, so he'd calculated his trajectory for the shrinking space between Viv and the Oyekan's cadets. He was a little off, over-judging the angle and hitting the dome again some 4 or 5 feet above his best friend instead of just in front of her, requiring that he plant and spin once more to face their two opponents.

Then again, it was worth it to see the pair immediately start to scramble to end their lunging assault at Viv, eyes going wide as their attention raised to him, likely looking like some kind of crouched, hungry man-spider as he glared down from the glass above her.

As he lanced down at them, he could have sworn he heard one of the pair yelling "The Prince!" into her coms before Shido's sword arched at her partner's head.

The rest of the fight was brutal, but short. Catcher caught on that he was down to one injured pursuer and turned the tables on the poor Brawler in a flash before flying to Cashe's aid against the pair of cadets she was still engaged with. Viv's rapidly worsening bloodless made her less than useless, unfortunately, but she'd been enough of a distraction for Rei to have no serious issue handling the two who'd been going after her, though the Phalanx proved a bit of a pain. In the end, however, he floated victorious between another set of bodies, working to swing himself around with the intention of getting to Viv and helping if he could.

He only managed to turn in time to catch the girl giving him an agonized grin and lifting her one still-functioning hand to point to a corner of the dining area.

"Aria and Grant," she managed woozily, looking like she were having a hard time keeping her eyes open. "That way. Trouble." She turned the pointing hand into an unsteady thumbs up. "Go get 'em, half-pint."

And then her face went slack, and Rei knew the light flashing briefly over her unfocused irises would be needlessly notifying her that the Arena had made her “succumbed” to her injury.

He didn’t hesitate.

“Catcher!” he called out loud, spinning himself around with another table as it drifted into reach to look up at the Saber above him. “Aria and Grant are still in? Where?”

“That way!” Catcher shouted back, pointing in the same direction Viv had, towards a corner of the big room that was now to Rei’s right. “We got swamped and separated, so they split in that direction. Took at least half of the rest of the other squads with them.”

“Oh that’s not good,” Cashe said, already making to push herself towards the corner where a smaller open tunnel led out of the dining area again.

Nope, Rei agreed silently, managing to get himself moving to follow the Lancer as Catcher struggled to do the same in the open air above them. *Definitely not good*.

It took a couple seconds to gather up, but once they had a rough triangle formation the trio took off after Aria and Grant, asking all the while that the two of them to confirm their position over and over again into the coms. Neither responded, however, but when Catcher groaned that they were probably FDAed, Rei disagreed. If that many gathered opponents had gone after the two of them and taken them down, they would probably have run into the survivors backtracking to the dining area.

It wasn’t *too* far a reach, he hoped...

Lucky for them, Aria and Grant seemed to have done some fighting even as they’d retreated, because dents and scars in the walls, ceiling, and green carpet that couldn’t have been part of the field aesthetic offered a rough trail to follow. As a result, it took less than half-a-minute or so to find the battle, though it came as a surprise when the did.

They'd found themselves in the bunking quarters, with the halls narrowing down until only four people or so might have been able to walk comfortably across. Turning a corner down one of these first, Cashe had started, then grabbed the wall and scrambled to pull herself back again, pushing the haft of her spear flat behind her as she did. Rei, who'd been paying attention, took the hint and grabbed the weapon to stop himself from floating forward. Catcher, on the other hand, had been busy checking their six and so nearly sliced himself in half on the head of the spear hit him in the chest.

“*Owe*,” he grunted. “Cashe what the h—?”

He stopped when he noticed the Lancer giving him bug yes with a finger pressed to her lips. When she was sure they would be quite, she pointed around the corner, motioning for them to have a look. They did so, slipping along the wall quietly to peer around the turn, and Rei had to stop himself from cursing.

There—he counted twice—*nine* opponents were still up, all of them a mix of the red, blue, and green of the 105th, Kenneth, and Oyekan's respectively. The the only reason Aria and Grant hadn't gone down already was because they seemed to have managed to wedge themselves into a single tiny room at the very end of the hall, likely what had been the trash or laundry shoot area. The door to the small facilities chamber wasn't big enough for more than one person to get through comfortably, and so had resulted in a stalemate that was also the reason Rei, Cashe, and Catcher hadn't heard the fight coming up. There were ten opponents, sure, but none of them seemed keen on rushing the narrow access point behind which two of the strongest first-years at the tournament were waiting for them.

Problem was...

“How long until they just get a Mauler to take an axe to the walls?” Catcher muttered, clearly thinking on the same track as Rei.

“Yeah, it’s a problem,” Rei said as Cashe, too, nodded from his right, having take a spot to peer around the corner two. Had any of the other squad members turned around, they would have been treated to the comical sight of the tops of three heads sticking out around a turn in the hall. “I’ll bet they tried once already. See the damage on the side of the door.” He nodded in the direction of the room, where several missing chunks of the doorframe were visibly missing even above the heads of the squad members, highlighted by the yellow glow of Aria and Grant’s crouched, ready forms. “Hundred credits says Aria’s been keeping them at bay with her spear. Still, it means we’re on a timer.” He looked sidelong at Catcher. “Is Blade Break up?”

“Has been for a while. Haven’t used it.”

“That’s good. Does it built up multiple charges if you let it sit? I don’t actually know...”

The Saber shrugged as a nightstand floated lazily by behind them. “Your guess is as good as mine. Haven’t had the chance to test it, and didn’t think to look that up.”

Apparently we’re gonna have a lot of things to test, once we get home, Rei thought even as he turned his attention back to the hall, contemplating the situation. With Aria indisposed—he wasn’t surprised she and Grant hadn’t answered now, since they probably wouldn’t have wanted to put their opponents on alert for reinforcements—he was next in command, which made the decision as to what to do his.

“Ok, here’s the plan,” he said after a second. “We move quick and we move quiet. Hit them fast. Take down at least one each *on contact*, then move *immediately* to the next. Even if we manage just that it becomes six to five and we’ve got them pinned from two directions.”

“Oh you just *know* Grant’s gonna have a field day plowing into them from behind if we’re a good enough distraction.”

“Phrasing,” Cashe muttered even as Rei supported a snort. “If that’s what we’re doing then we better move fast. They’re gonna check their asses eventually.”

“No time like the present, I guess?” Rei whispered.

Then, with a silent pull of his claws on the wall, he drifted out into the hall behind the gathered squads, Catcher and Cashe following carefully at an angle to each claim a side of their own. Moving as quickly as they dared without making a sound, they gathered speed, accelerating with every quiet grab and shove.

As a result, they weren't moving fast enough to blast into the group when they reached them, but they sure as hell got the drop on each of the three cadets they'd individually aimed for.

SHLUNK!

Cashe's spear hit first, stabbing through the 105^m's back before the girl knew what hit her. Rei and Catcher were only a fraction of a second behind with their blade, FDAing both in one hit, but Rei's aim was a little off with the sword he still wasn't completely used too, and the Kenneth Lancer had enough time to scream before the Arena shut him up.

“AUURG!”

At that point, of course, all hell broke lose.

With momentum on their side, Rei, Catcher, and Cashe tore into the back the remaining seven fighter, striking out as the closes of the opponents whirled at the cry. Weapons came around in instinctive swings or up to block, vysetrium edges slamming against each other where they didn't meet armored steel. Yells started up, at first surprised, then alarmed, and as Rei cut down of an Oyekan's Duelist he heard a roar and saw a blaze of yellow.

On cue, Grant erupted from the room, swinging Honoris one-handed as only an Overclocked Mauler could do.

It probably took only 20 seconds for the advantage to slip out of the hands of the three enemy squads after than, and another 30 or so before the fight came to an end. It felt like a lot longer, though, as Rei shoved and twisted his way through the

melee, quick transitioning into Shido's Brawler Mode with a shout as the reach of a sword became less important in the tight quarters. Red and blue and green and yellow arched in all directions, weapons screaming through the air and *cracking* loudly against steel. The shouts to coordinate turned to screams quickly, and Rei found himself at one point fighting side by side first with Catcher, then Cashe, then even Grant as the chaos had them flying passed one another a hundred times in the minute the battle lasted.

Then Aria found him in the roiling mess, Hippolyta ablaze her her left arm and shield moving with uncanny precision as Third Eye made itself useful, and Firesong ripped the win for the other schools as they both turn in the air to put their backs together to hold position in the middle of the hall while their weapons punched and slashed and tore the way to victory.

Catcher go the final kill—having *still* not had to trigger Blade Break—locking up with another Saber from Kenneth briefly before dealing the boy a ringing headbutt to the nose that had him going rigid and unable to recover as Catcher pushed off and slammed Arthus forward in his place, taking his opponent through the chest and nailing him to the floor.

There was a second a ringing silence, all of them waiting with baited breath. Logically Rei could account for all eighteen enemy cadets that would have been on the other team, but in the chaos of it all logic had lost most of its meeting. Despite the fact, despite the knowledge that the five of them had all somehow made it through the battle unscathed, not a one of them had put their weapons down other than Grant, who was sagging in midair as his Overclock ran its course to leave him drained.

And then, finally...

“All Red, Blue, and Greem Team combatants eliminated. Winner: Yellow Team, Firesong, the Galens Institute.”

As always, sound returned first, exploding from the stands long before the field—which had only just started to fade around them—revealed them.

“Oh thank the *MIND*,” Rei heard Aria groaned from behind him, breathing hard and tilting her head back to rest against his for a second as gravity started to return to the scene. “I thought we were goners for *sure*, that time.”

“Nope,” Rei said with a grin reaching back to give her thigh a reassuring pat before the Arena pulled them apart and corrected their orientation. Apparently all of them but Cashe had been basically upside down compared to the projection plating. “Made it. And practically whole.”

“Yeah, somehow” Aria conceded, able at last to look around at him. She was sweaty, and her hair was a mess, but her smile shown through like a sunrise as always. “Nice timing, by the way. Thanks for the rescue.”

“Your servant, malady,” Rei answered, sweeping Shido’s claws in a blue arc before him—their CADs had all shifted back to their original color—in an exaggerated bow in the girl’s direction as they floated down.

“Nerd.” It was Catcher who cut in, grinning as they all dropped. He’d already recalled Arthus, and had his arms crossed in mock judgement. “Not how you impress the girls, man. You know this.”

“If I counted right, Rei FDAed *eight* opponents this round, Catcher.” Cashe was smirking at the Saber. “I’m pretty sure he could strip naked and start singing bad 21st century pop music at the top of his lungs and there would *still* be in this crowd willing to jump him at this point.”

Rei guffawed at that—as he did at the slack-jawed look Catcher gave Cashe and Aria’s prompt facepalm—just in time for them to touch down. Viv was waiting for them down on the floor, bouncing up and down in excitement, having moved carefully towards so as not to step on any stirring bodies of the other squad’s cadets.

“Guys that was *awesome!*” she practically shrieked, throwing herself on Rei and Aria first, one arm around each of their necks. “Talk about a comeback! I thought we were done for!”

“I said the same thing,” Aria mumbled, still a little red in the face but looking pleased. “Especially when Grant and I kited the group out of the dining area. Initially it was only six of them, but we ran into another three and were fighting our way back the whole way.” She paused, then, before adding—in a whisper to Viv only Rei thought he’d overheard: “You’re man did good. I would have been down inside of 15 seconds without him.”

Viv looked a little pained as she disengaged from the pair of them, still smiling but seeming bummed. “I saw, yeah. After I went down. You *all* killed it. And there I was twiddling my thumbs under the field.” She grimaced, looking around at Catcher, Cashe, and Grant as the rest of their opponent squads pulled themselves to their feet and started walking away in uniformly dejected slump. “Sorry, guys...”

“Don’t sweat it,” Catcher said genially, stepping forward to give her a pat on the back as he nodded sagely. “We’ve all been there. You’ll catch up.”

“Oh you sonofa—!”

Rei and Aria laughed again, with Cashe and Grant grinning nearby. The match arbiter, dismissed them with a brief congratulations, and they left the field to under the rush of final applause from the stands.

They were down the ramp, out of the tunnels, and headed for the elevators when it happened.

“*Oh...*”

Rei and Aria, who’d been walking elbow to elbow and talking at the front the group, were the last to pause and turn. Catcher and Viv, who’d been bickering good naturally behind them, were already looking around, while Grant had an eyebrow raised passed them.

Beside him, Cashe was standing rigid, eyes ablaze with light.

Rei stiffened, and he felt Aria do the same beside him.

No, he thought in disbelief as she watched Cashe's face go from surprised to excited to outright shocked in quick order. *No way...*