

Chapter 59

The slaughter was immediate.

Rei had clearly deduced his situation as accurately as Chris, because the moment the Arena started the fight he was nothing but a trail of blue. He struck before the poor Mauler that was his first target had taken two steps out of her starting ring towards him, the fists of his Brawler Mode flashing. The girl started to scream, dropping her hammer as Rei ‘severed’ both her hands below the elbows, but the sound ended sharply when a trio of claws slammed through her throat before the weapon had even hit the ground. He whirled, moving even as he faced the other 5 that came charging at him as one.

One went down before they’d all so much as gotten a good bearing on him. A second as they pivoted to face his new position. A third didn’t get their shield up in time as Rei switched to a surprise Saber Mode. The longer reach of his sword extended over the poor Phalanx’s defenses to cleave into the boy’s neck before he could react.

The remaining pair put up a valiant effort, but at a recently hit B9, Rei was officially miles ahead of anything any other first year in his class could hope to catch up to.

Anywhere, Chris corrected himself silently. *Any other first year* anywhere...

“That was... what?” Dice asked with a snort as they watched Rei leave behind the FDAed bodies of his classmates, the first of which hadn’t even slipped all the way through the floor yet. “7 seconds? 8?”

“Less,” Chris answered, carefully tracking the blur of black, white, and glowing blue.

Rei’s Breaker-Type was still a secret Chris and Dice were under gag order not to speak about, and he hadn’t used Temporal Step in a month as far as either of them knew—not that *that* particular Ability had been shown to the public yet. Still, even without access to the entirety of his arsenal, Rei cut through every opponent he came across as easily as fire through a dry field.

And almost never one-at-a-time.

It seemed an unspoken agreement between everyone in the first-year class that when the Iron Prince showed up, all other infighting was put on pause. They'd even seen the other members of Firesong take part in the ganging up—and one time when Aria, Logan, and Catcher had actually managed to *win* by doing so. It was understandable, and Chris doubted there was any bad blood there. It was just the smartest thing to do with a B9 fighting on a field averaging closer to the mid-Cs.

“Wonder when they’ll bounce him up...” Chris wondered out loud, watching Rei encounter a trio of Duelists who all stopped dancing around each other to face him together.

“Think they’re gonna?” One of the group was down before Dice finished the question, another as he answered.

“They’ve gotta, right?” A shield appeared between the third’s sword and Rei’s heart as though by magic, slamming out to instantly FDA the Duelist. The limp body sailed 30 yards over the volcanic earth. “At least for *some* things. Team Combat I get—he needs to stay locked in with Firesong for coordination and stuff. Most Wargames, too. But this?” Chris pointed his stylus down at the Battle Royal as Rei ripped over a ledge to take a battling pair by surprised, neither the Lancer nor Brawler having the chance to so much as pivot as he appeared beside them in the smoke. “What does he get out of this?”

“Confidence?” Dice suggested with a shrug. “Movement and agility practice? Multi-opponent training? At least some degree of it.”

Chris shook his head, unconvinced. Below, Rei moved on as two forms fell to the ground nearly in unison. “Dice... He’s ranked higher than half of the *second*-years. What’s the point...?”

“You say that...” Dice continued to hedge, her eyes on the north side of the field. “But *that’s* certainly an interesting challenge, don’t you think?”

Following her gaze, Chris paused.

“Huh... Okay, yeah. Fair.”

The volcano that provided most of the light and annoying soot for the field was a projection far beyond the walls of the combat area itself, but the north end still angled upward sharply, creating an incline of unsteady shale footing. Thin lines of magma trailed slowly down the base of the mountain, the heat emanating from them casting shimmering waves in the air.

And through that haze, they gathered.

Chris saw it now, coming together further down the field too. A few of the faster remaining first years—a Duelist, a Brawler, and one particularly quick Saber—were moving from battle to battle, shouting something he couldn’t hear over the rumbling and clashing. The message became clear, however, as one by one most of the fighters quit their own exchanges in favor of turning and heading north as quickly as possible. A steady wave of colored lights made for the mountain. Reaching it, they climbed.

When they found the rest of the group, they turned, facing down the incline.

There had to be 15—no, 20 of them, Chris saw. Even as he watched, the gathered coordinated themselves. Phalanxes moved to the front, forming a curved shield wall. Lancers stood behind them with weapons held in both hands, ready to thrust over the defenses. At their back, some half-dozen Sabers and Maulers created a central pocket, the remaining Duelists and Brawlers took up positions to either side. Studying them all, Chris saw not only Kastro Vademe and Lauita Martin among them, but a few other members of Valormade and Red Crown as well.

Together, they made for a formidable blockade with a powerful central attack force, and quick damage dealers on the outsides ready to loop the edge of the wall and flank their opponent.

Their *singular* opponent.

Neither Chris nor Dice said anything more, taking in the coordinated body of first years that had opted for immediate survival over a slim possibility victory, at least for the time being.

Rei, meanwhile, had found the last of the fighters left on the lower two-thirds of the field. His sword slashed, his Saber's claws raking even as he kicked out with a heavy boot. The blade cut through a Mauler's blocking shaft to take her in the crook of her neck. A Phalanx stumbled back, screaming and clutching at his face where he'd just been blinded. A Brawler went arcing through the air as foot connected with chest. Two flashes of blue, and the latter pair were FDAed too, Rei even catching the Brawler just as he slammed back down to earth, sword ripping down to pin the poor first year through the heart before he could begin to get up.

Wrenching the weapon free of flesh and rock, Rei turned north.

North, and the glowing line of gathered opponents waiting for him on the high ground, visible even through the smoke, the runners who'd been looking for reinforcements now scrambling up the mountain themselves to round the group to a full two-dozen fighters.

Chris could almost see Rei's Cognition firing at all cylinders. 1 second. 2 seconds. A brief pause that felt far longer than that as the entire field seemed to hold its breath.

A shift. Shido's armor came alive, taking the shape of its base Brawler Mode. Chris smirked, thinking he knew what was about to happen.

With a fracturing *CRACK*, Rei blasted northward as shattered stone flew in all directions behind him.

"Oh that's gonna be brutal..." was all he had time to get out.

"Why is he going for the middle of the—?" Dice started to exclaim, but she stopped herself as Rei reached the base on the mountain. "Ah." she said instead, catching on.

With every ounce of Speed he could build up in his fastest form, Rei shifted into Phalanx Mode right before impacting the very center of the gathered lined.

Despite having the high ground, the remaining members of the Battle Royal could only do so much under the impetus of the hit. Acceleration combined with mass, and not only did two of the Phalanxes go flying as Rei hit them shield-first, but so did the two Lancers behind them, as well as half the Maulers and Sabers. Of the 24, Chris counted nine scattered by the attack, half of them sent tumbling along the ground some 10 to 20 yards away, the other half not doing so only because they were still in mid-air.

Then the *real* fighting begin.

The rule of thumb when it came to battles between Users of dispairing ranks was typically 3-to-1. It took 3 F0s to create a challenge for a D0. It took 3 D0s to take on a C0. 3 C0s for one D0. Etc, etc. Given Rei's opponents probably all hovered around a C5 to his B9, rough math said that 5 or 6 of them *should* have been able to put up a good fight if everyone on the field was an average user. But no one at the Galens Institute was an average User.

Least of all Reidon Ward.

That's it, Chris thought as Rei flickered immediately back into Brawler Mode. *Lean into the Speed. Take advantage of the scattering.*

Again Rei seemed to read his mind. He was already moving left. His opening strike had created a momentary ravine through the collected company, splitting them into two groups. He chose the smaller of this new set, flashing in with quick, poignant strikes. 3 seconds, some 20 targeted punches, kicks, and cutting slashes. He never went for the killing blow, never over-extended. Instead, Rei went for damage, for injury, weakening the overall strength of the group without ever putting himself in too much danger from the mob as a whole.

Dent, though, *had* done a hell of a job with the first years.

Not a hint of panic from the rest of the class. No shouts of alarm, only of direction. The healthier right half of the split alliance surged westward, swallowing their brutalized comrades in a protective circle and forcing Rei to disengage. At the same time, the ones who'd been sent flying recovered—at least those that could—and moved quick to rejoin the fight. Only 2—a Phalanx and one of the Lancers who'd taken much of the force of that opening strike—remained where they'd landed.

“Tough kids,” Dice said with a whistle.

Chris only nodded, watching intently.

Kastro Vademe had been among those scattered, but he appeared to have come out of the impact relatively unscathed. Chris thought he heard the top-ranked Lancer shout something, and was unsurprised when a flash of grey light over blue and white steel appeared by his side as Martin joined him. In a blink they looped their regrouped allies, pinching in on Rei from either side. At the same time, two more first years—Chris only recognized the talented Zain Kadniss of the pair—ripped forward to take the attack straight on. A momentary 4-on-1, including 3 of the other top first years. Theoretically they *should* have stood a chance, even with the disparity in their ranking.

They didn't.

Rei only briefly retreated so all 4 of his opponents were forced to attack from the front rather than from 3 different sides. As he did, his Saber Mode appeared, the sword already sweeping aside the leading blades. The shield materialized at the tail end of that clearing strike, already in place to accept the following shoulders *both* Kadniss and Vademe tried to follow up with. Then it vanished in favor of Brawler's claws slashing out. Vademe *just* managed to duck the attack, but Kadness took three blades straight through the face, FDAing him instantly.

It was only the start of Rei's liquid assault.

Chris found himself shaking his head once again, watching the fully-armored form of the kid he'd only met a few months ago. Back then the only advantage Rei had really

had over any of his classmates had been his tenacity, his sheer force of will combined with a pain tolerance Chris had *always* been in awe of.

Now—in every way but physically—Rei stood head and shoulders above them all.

The practice he'd been putting in to learning how to silently trigger Type Shift over the last months was on full display. He didn't *change* between Modes. He *flowed* through them. Like the three different Types were all one Device he could manipulate at will, Rei moved between Brawler, Saber, Phalanx, and back again with such speed and accuracy it was almost like he was partial-calling them piece by piece as desired. Claws became a sword midway through slashing. A blocking forearm suddenly held a shield. Thinner metal plating thickened where needed. Even Vademe and Martin didn't stand a chance shoulder to shoulder.

Then again, their goal had likely never been to take Rei down on their own.

Once more the first-year class proved themselves a resilient group. At a shout from someone amongst them, those able to blitzed out around Vademe and Martin, surrounding Rei in a blink. They didn't collapse on him, however, just circled, creating a ring of colored blades to limited his maneuverability.

Then the Maulers charged.

Another shout, and Vademe and Martin stepped apart. In perfect unison with the 2 squad leaders, 4 first years wielded axes and hammers thundered through the provided opening, charging Rei as one solid wall of offensive power. He engaged them as cleanly as he had the first group, but against that much force even he had to be careful, particularly since a linear retreat was no longer a simple option. In fact, retreat over the ground in *any* direction had been cut off, since the 3 remaining Phalanxes had taken advantage of the Mauler's assault to join the Duelists and Brawler's circle.

Only then, as Rei was dealing with the heavy attacks of the now 2 Maulers, did the ring finally tighten, spears, swords, and claws alike all lancing inward in a single coordinated wave.

A wave they had practiced a *lot*, Chris had to suspect.

It might have worked. In fact it technically did, if not as intended. A few more bodies, and even Rei probably would have been too hard pressed to jump, too surrounded to have the free instant to make the escaping leap upward. As it was, he dropped to cut the legs out from the last of the Maulers with a sweeping sword, shifting to Brawler Mode even as he cleaved. In that lighter form, he powered upwards just as the blades closed in. In a flash he was clear of them.

It was in that heartbeat, as he started to arc over the wall of the ring, that Martin met him midair.

On the higher end of the Cs, the class' top-ranked Duelsit appeared in a blur at his side, both blades swinging across and down. Rei was able to react fast enough to get a bent arm between himself and the vysetrium edges, and along with his reactive shielding even the thinner Brawler armor was enough to tank the hit. That might have been the end of the fight, then and there.

If Martin's aim had been to do damage.

"Vademe!"

Chris made out the call this time, and only then saw the impressive play. As Vademe Kastro appeared exactly where he needed to be, Chris barked out a laugh, amazed.

Dice, too, saw it a moment before.

"Ouch," she muttered preemptively.

"*Ooouch*," Chris echoed with emphasis as Martin's slamming blades sent Rei rocketing back towards the ground at an angle.

An angle that Vademe's spear, its back end butted up firmly into a crack in the stone, already set for.

Rei must have seen the blade coming, because he twisted, trying to avoid it. Temporal Step might have saved him, but without it there was only so much he could

do. He kept himself from being FDAed, but whereas the Device should have taken him center mass, it found his right side instead. Chris knew he'd learn a lesson, knew he'd think to Shift in a moment like this in the future. Rei's Phalanx Mode could have taken the hit. Breaker too, probably.

But Brawler was still juuuust fragile enough, apparently, to be overwhelmed by the edge of Vademe's blade and the force of Martin's provided impetus.

"OOOOH!" came a gathered call from the far side of the projected, gasped and shouted out by the unseen other half of the first year class. It stole the sound of Rei's reactive shielding and armor shattering, but did nothing to hide the sight of the spear ripping through him. Rei only slammed to stop as he hit Vademe's gripping hands, and Chris was unsurprised when he immediately lashed out with both fists, sinking claws into the Lancer's stomach and chest. With a jolt Vademe released his weapon, letting it—and Rei—drop unceremoniously to the ground as he ripped himself off the blades in a staggering lurch. It was too late, of course, and he tripped to fall onto his side, convulsing against the stone as the Arena applied what had to have been fatal restrictions.

Rei, meanwhile, was scrambling to his feet again. He swung around, one hand gripping the front part of the spear still stuck halfway through him, the other raised to bring his Brawler's claws up in a threatening point. The dozen first years who had been just about to rush him paused as he faced them, the blue lines of his CAD bright as flames.

Rei's fingers flexed around the steel, and with an audible *CRACK* the halt shattered in his fingers.

"COME ON, THEN!" Chris heard him roar at the survivors, reaching back as he did to wrench the rest of the spear free of his back. The broken weapon joined its other half on the ground before him, and his gathered opponents showed hesitency for the first time. Rei took advantage to Shift again, his Phalanx's shield appearing, the change

in Modes subsequently repairing the visible damage that had been done to his armor as well as any ditch. But only his *CAD* was whole again, Chris knew.

Just as the rest of them did, too.

It was Martin who made the opening move, Martin who lanced forward with Speed only a Duelist approaching the B ranks could manage. Rei saw her, but his turn was sluggish due to what had to be a *long* list of applied restrictions, and he didn't get the shield around in time. The girl's blades struck true, hitting him in his injured side in unison. They didn't seem to do more than chip the steel, but Rei's right leg collapsed just the same, bringing him down to one knee.

This time, the other first years didn't pause, and Rei offered up one last defying roar, sword swinging, as they crashed over him like a wave of falling blades.

Not 5 minutes later, the Arena announced the unsurprising victor.

"All opponents eliminated. Winner: Laquita Martin."

"*Man* some of these kids are gonna be good in a year or two," Dice muttered, sitting back as the Volcanic Slopes began to depixilate. At the base of the mountain, Martin was breathing hard, her left arm missing its armor and limp at her side, right hand only barely clining to her one remaining sword.

"*She's* definitely got a future," Chris grunted in agreement. He'd returned to absently tapping at the pad with his stylus. "Vademe, too. I should ask Annika if she could work with him a little, when she has the chance. Maybe the Sandree girl, too."

"Bet she'd be down." Dice seemed to only be half-listening, looking ponderous. As Martin and the last of her fallen opponents began to drop, she cocked her head towards the Arena floor. "Is it just me, or would Temporal Step have saved Rei's ass there, at the end?"

“Probably would have cinched him the match a couple of times, yeah.” Chris scanned the projection plating as it came into view again. “Breaker-Type too. Can you imagine if he’d hit that center mass with a *full* shoulder charge?”

“There’d probably be a few medical drones on the field right now.”

Chris nodded slowly, returning his attention to Catcher’s data. “Woulda been interesting to see how they’d have responded to that, though. Bet they would have surprised us.”

“They did good,” Dice agreed, looking mildly impressed. “Wonder if *we* were that collected, as first years.”

“Maybe you,” he told her with a snort, eyeing the Saber’s ‘top 25%’ denominator again. “You were already cool, back then. I probably woulda been shaking and crying.”

Dice didn’t answer, and after a second Chris looked up at her with a frown.

“That’s the part where you’re supposed to go ‘Nooo, Chriiiiis, you were soooooo cool then toooooo.’”

She grinned at him, continuing to say nothing until he finally barked out a laugh.

“Group 1!” Liam Gross called into the stands again. “Back on deck!”

As could be expected, feedback for that second half of the first year class took a bit longer, given the atypical nature of the fight. Bretz and Gross looked to start by giving thoughts to the fighters who’d lost more traditionally—the singles and doubles who’d been FDAed early on—then the collection who’d stood up to Rei together. Chris was pleased to see Rei himself in with the latter crowd, standing next to Vademe, listening intently and nodding along to the sub-instructors. Then they were dismissed, and the officers lifted off once more to float above the Group 1 fighters who’d already found their assigned starting rings again.

“Ten credits says Rei sees a spec jump after that gang up,” Chris muttered, watching the kid disappear into the underworks.

If she heard him, Dice didn't saying anything. She was busy twisting a length of her hair around one finger, looking for Aria and the others.

A minute later, the battle started anew.

The Cliffs variation that manifested was an interesting one. A massive, flat desert plateau that was mostly dust and dried-out grass, it was split lengthwise down the middle by a 15-foot-wide chasm with what appeared to be no bottom. Almost immediately Gillian North got slammed over one edge into the drop, proving that falling in was an instant FDA when she vanished from sight.

The Mauler was only one of about half a dozen that 'died' that way, over the next 10 minutes.

Once again, Firesong was a target, but the odds were a little different across the open plane. Viv's mobility was immediately on full display as she zipped through the battling groups and pairs, and Chris knew she was using her HUD's directional suggestions to cover as much ground as quickly as possible. She found Aria first, already facing off against a trio who'd quickly closed on her. Unfortunately for the 3, they hadn't considered the fact that a murderous Duelist might come flying up at their backs so soon into the match, and they were down within 15 seconds of Viv's arrival. On the other side of the chasm, meanwhile, Catcher had spotted Logan's lumbering form at the start, and back-to-back the two were actually doing so much damage that the group of 6 who'd formed a circle around them seemed less than enthusiastic despite their advantage.

Even less when Chancery arrived to help spear-first, taking out one poor Saber and cutting a leg out from a Brawler before anyone realized what was going on.

From there, both sides of the field became a bloodbath.

It wasn't like the *whole* of the first-year class all came at Firesong, so within a few minutes the 64 had halved, then halved again by the time the clock hit 5. Aria, Viv, Catcher, Logan, and Chancery were all still going when 6-minute mark passed. Only as

things approached 7 did a Lancer Chris didn't recognize score the first really clean hit against any of them, his spear taking Catcher under the armpit while he was busy covering Chancery's back. The Saber let out of cry that was audible from the stands, but took hold of the spear with his clawed left hand before his assailant could retract it. The Lancer let go of his weapon too late, losing a whole arm and his other hand to Arthur's sweeping blade, but then the group saw the weak link and bounced.

They got what they wanted, but at a huge cost.

Catcher—with help from Logan and Chancery—gave them hell. He took down another outright and blinded the Duelist Ashley Renton before going down. His two teammates claimed another each, and by the time the dust settled they were alone except for a very unlucky Jack Benali, who proved himself as fierce as he was skilled by holding out against *both* of them for another 15 seconds before Zion pinned him to the ground by a foot, allowing Honoris to claim his head.

Then it was just Logan and Chancery standing side by side, breathing hard.

For a heartbeat the two looked rapidly around, wary of further attacks. By that point, however, the fighting on their side of the field had largely dwindled to nothing, with only a straggling pair—a Phalanx and Mauler—hacking at each other at the very southern tip of Cliffs. When they realized they were all-but alone, they looked at each other.

Then, without seeming to say a word, both started sprinting for the drop in the middle of the field.

Chris grinned.

As flat as the variation was, he wasn't surprised they'd clearly already seen the only major fight of the match still ongoing. As they reached the chasm, they leaped, easily clearing the 15 feet side by side. Logan's bulk forced him to roll as they landed, but he came up only a yard or two behind Chancery as they shifted their run slightly.

They reached Aria and Viv before Dice finished saying "Niiiiice," from Chris' left.

While Catcher, Logan, and Chancery had been holding their own, the two girls had more been fighting for their lives, and it showed. Aria's spear had lost its head at some point, and she'd flipped it in favor of stabbing with the smaller point at its base she'd gained in her last evolution. Her shield, too, had been hacked largely to bits, what was left of it barely clinging to her left arm. Viv, unfortunately, hadn't fared any better. She still had both weapons, but someone seemed to have put a blade through her left leg given how stiffly she was moving, and her skull-like mask had been partially smashed off her face, revealing an arched eyebrow and one angry blue eye. They faced off against a foursome of attackers, including both Hannah Tether and Lena Jaing, two of the strongest Sabers in the class. They were putting up a valiant defense, but even as Logan and Chancery arrived, Jiang—who'd always been fast for her Type—managed to get around Viv's blades, sword slashing deep into her exposed left side. Viv's legs collapsed immediately, and Jiang pulled her weapon loose, raising it to strike again.

Logan got their first, not even bothering with his axe as he lead the way with a dropped shoulder, slamming into the Saber's back with more power than a small earthquake. The girl rocketed away so forcefully, she hadn't started to slow down when she struck the field wall face-first, crumpling into a pile there at the edge, where she promptly started to drop through the floor.

Chancery, meanwhile, had by passed the girl's fight to support Aria, who'd abruptly been fighting 3 against 1. Third Eye had been activated, because her shield arm was moving largely of its own accord, but between her battered defense and the overwhelming number of opponents, she'd already taken another half-dozen small injuries. Tether's in particular was a problem, weaving with significant skill all around the thrusts of the broken spear, staying away from the auto-blocking shield. She probably would have gotten the kill given another 10 seconds or so.

Instead, she had to pivot, just managing at the very last moment to get her blade around to redirect Zion's glowing black blade away from her side, only barely keeping herself from being skewered width-wise.

The fight ended quickly, after that. Viv was out for the count despite three attempts to stand again, collapsing entirely after the third as the Arena succumbed her to her injuries. Aria and Logan were still on their feet, however, and the two poor Brawlers who'd been support Tethers and Jiang, didn't last long, even injured as Aria was. Once they were down, Logan turned quickly to Chancery's fight, but only just in time to see Tethers get speared through her sword shoulder.

Her scream was cut short as Chancery ripped her blade free in a spinning arc, bringing the butt of it around and straight into the Saber's temple.

There were only 5 total fighters remaining in the Wargame, after that, but even as Chris and Dice watched, the Phalanx and Mauler going at it at the north end failed to keep an eye on their surroundings as they lumbered around each other. The Mauler reached the edge of the center chasm first, one foot slipping off the ledge, and in a panic he snapped a hand out to grab the first thing he could. If his opponent had been just a little faster, she might have dropped her shield in time to win the bout, then ditched and recovered it after.

Instead, they both tumbled down with mirrored shouts of surprise, vanishing together out of the field.

That left Aria, Chancery, and Logan standing all together near the center of the east half, breathing hard, and looking around.

If only for a second.

Even from the stands, Chris saw Aria grin at her teammates. She raised her broken spear, mouth moving in what might have been the words "Have fun."

Then she dropped to her knees, staying there unsteadily for a second or two before falling face-first to the field floor in a puff of dust.

“Oh *this* is gonna be fun...” Dice whispered excitedly, suddenly at the edge of her seat again.

Chris nodded without look around, but held a hand out to his girlfriend just the same.

“Winner gets to pick the place for next date night. I’ll take Chancery.”

“Bet.” Dice accepted his hand, shaking it once. “Big man’s got this.”

Privately, Chris agreed.

But it was still gonna be a hell of a fight.

Given that—not long after the end of the match—both of them were sprinting for the underworks as Michael Bretz shouted for Rei, it turned out even more so than either could have expected.