

Chapter 49

Rei only *barely* managed to avoid Gathers' spear taking him through the back of the knee.

With a curse that he thought had probably been audible even through his mask, he disengaged from Kay barely a second after closing the distance to her, pulling back on a chopping slash straight at her head he was hoping would have opened her torso up for a body shot. He'd gone for her out the gate because he'd *thought* his two opponents would assume he'd try to take down the weak link first, but Kay had seen through the ploy and stood her ground.

More annoyingly, Gathers had picked up on the advantage she'd offered in doing so surprisingly fast.

Rei felt the reaction shielding along the outside of his left leg strain, repelling what would have otherwise been a glancing blow to his lower thigh as he danced rightward, out of the way. He turned as he moved, unsurprised to find Kay and Gathers *both* on his tail, rushing at him from angles that left just enough room for them to maneuver their longer weapons to advantage without offering too easy a standalone target.

Rei met them head-on.

Basic SCT math was well known to most viewers and fighters. On average, it took 3 Users of matching rank to down a single opponent 1 tier higher than them. 3 F0s to take on 1 E0 on even footing, 3 E0s to take on 1 D0, 3 D0s for 1 C0, etc etc. And those were *average*.

Few people, having observed him most of the way through his first year at the Galen's Institute, would have called Rei "average".

The numbers appeared in Rei's HUB, rapidly dialing down from the red-outline tips of both Lancers' spears as he continued to backpedal. Kay matched her speed to her slower impromptu teammate, but even then they chased after him fast. 3 feet. 2

feet. 18 inches inside of a second. As the blades came within a foot from his chest, sRei slammed one set of clawed toes into the projected flooring, feeling the solid light crack under the sudden assault as he cut his retreat short. His Brawler's blades lashed out at the same time, one hand to either side, catching his opponent's weapons both just below the spearheads. Each was slammed away, and the top of Gather's weapon was actually sheared clean off.

Unfortunately for the Lancers, that didn't stop their momentum from continuing to hurtle them forward.

Rei leapt into the air, tucking his knees to his chest even as he twisted slightly to bring himself parallel to the ground. Snapping his arms out, his fingers found handfuls of Gathers' uniform and hair. Kay, less lucky, took both steel boots to the shoulder as Rei dropped-kicked her full in the side just before she would have flown by him. With Gather's body acting as a stabilizing point, more of the impact rocked through the poor girl than if he'd had nothing to hold onto. She was blasted sideways so hard she actually struck the nearby field wall with an audible impact, sending ripples through the invisible barrier.

Rei didn't see, more focused on the Gathers' screaming as the weight of his falling body took the boy to the ground with him largely—maybe a little deliberately on Rei's part, if he was honest with himself—by the hair.

They hit the ground together, but Rei was up faster, again using his grip on Gathers to roll himself back and over the Lancer, getting on top of him in a flash with one knee pinning him down. Gathers, to his credit, didn't give up, swinging at Rei's face from below with what was left of his spear. Again the numbers appeared. Again Rei's Cognition helped him process them faster than ever before. At what he judged to be the exact right moment he swung a blocking arm out, catching the haft hard with the back of his armored fist. He felt the painful impact all the way into this elbow, but

clearly not as much as Gathers, who yelped as the broken weapon was jarred out of his grasp to leave him largely defenseless.

Thinking the hair-pulling had probably already been enough punishment for one round, Rei ended it for the Lancer with two quick punches straight to the head.

“Fatal Damage Accrued: 100%.”

Without pause, Rei leapt away from Gathers as the now-limp body immediately started to slip through the floor. He’d moved right on time, too, because the cleaving sound of the orange blade cutting through the air where he’d just been kneeling was so close it made his hair stand on end. He landed catlike on all fours, and immediately and throw himself back a second time as the spear came again, merciless in its pursuit.

This time he touched down with his feet set, both fists already swing, anticipating the strike he knew would fall.

CLANK-CLUNK!

The blade came straight on, extended to the limit of its reach just as he’d planned. He caught it in both sets of claws, deftly locking it in place by his left hip with a hard twist, and for a panting second he got to eye Kay with all respect. Her right arm hung loose at the shoulder—undoubtedly marked as shattered by the Arena—and her face was twisted in agony. Despite that, she’d hounded him, and even with her weapon immobilized she was already moving on to her next strike. Her left hand still wrapped around the handle of the spear, she took advantage of Rei’s own Strength to haul herself forward, closing the distance in a flying leap. It was her turn to drive both feet at his exposed face, and even a month ago Rei suspected that might have been the end of the fight.

A month, though, was a long time for Shido.

It all happened in less than a breath. Rei ducked, letting the girl fly over him. Just her hips passed over his head, he powered up again, catching her in the side. He heard another “Oomph!” as she was sent flying in an upwards arc, leaving her trajectory driven by his strike and her own powerful impetus. The spear jerked once as it was ripped from her grip, but Rei held it locked in place.

At least until he twisted a wrist to snap the heft towards him, caught it deftly in the other hand, whirled, judged the line of Kay’s fall displayed in his HUD.

The Lancer’s spear flew straight as an arrow, the orange blade catching her squarely in the chest while she was still 10 feet off the ground.

“Fatal Damage Accrued: 96%. Winner: Reidon Ward.”

It had been a quick fight, lasting under a minute, but just the same Rei was admittedly breathing hard as the field started to disappear under his feet. He hadn’t realized they’d been lifted the full standard 10 feet until he was dropping slowly back down to the plating as it appeared, but it made sense. The match had been a—if surprise multi-User bout—meaning they space beneath the floor would have been necessary. Sure enough, a pale-looking Gathers was in the process of picking himself up off the ground even as Rei landed several paces from him, the boy’s expression something between fascination and terror as he took him in.

Rei let him look. He suspected it would be the last time he wouldn’t feel bad about picking on the spineless Lancer.

“Hell of a fight, Cadets! Faster than I would have liked, but textbook efficiency by all parties given the circumstances!”

Rei looked around to find Allison Lake striding over from the edge of the field, her white outline reminding him to recall Shido. The CAD withdrew with a thought, leaving his bare feet to touch down a second time on the cold steel.

“How about that?” the Lancer sub-instructor asked Rei with a smirk, stopping when she was within arm’s reach to look him over. “Maybe Bretz *does* have a good idea now and then. I get the feeling we should have had you going two-on-one since the start of the semester, Ward?”

Rei offered her a strained smile back as he saluted. “Appreciate the confidence, ma’am, but I think we can thank recent changes for the jump in ability.”

“Riiiiight...” Lake’s tone said she didn’t believe him, as did the slight roll of her eyes as she looked around at Kay and Gathers, who’d come up to stand near Rei.

Near him... but not *beside* him, he couldn’t help but notice.

“Good work, you two,” Lake told them, clearly genuine as she turned to look them up and down in turn. “Like I said, near-perfect execution, especially out the gate. Good job reading this line of attack, Sandree. And *excellent* job jumping on the opportunity that offered, Gathers.”

“He wiped the floor with is...” the boy muttered, sounding more than a little disheartened. “In like... a minute.”

“Less than that.” Kay, at least, still sounded good-natured about it as she snorted.

Lake frowned, eyeing Gathers in particular. “Upset about being shown up by a fellow first year, Cadet?”

The boy lost what little color he’d gained back, eyes darting from the second lieutenant to Rei, then back again. He didn’t answer, but his silence seemed to tell the woman everything she needed to know.

“Don’t be.” In a rare display, Lake reached out and actually took Gathers firmly by the shoulder, giving him a little shake. “You can’t view a situation like this by age. You can’t view it by time, by hours put in, by height. Whatever. You’re a C4-Ranked User who just went up against a B6, and held your own. Maybe not for a long time, but you held your own.” She looked at Kay. “Splendidly, the both of you. Your first years. You’re used to being surrounded by peers of similar ability and power. Well... Most of

you.” Her gaze flashed to Rei, but only briefly. “Eventually... that’s going to change. Whether you go pro or head to the front line, you are eventually going to encounter people *much* stronger than you. *Much* faster. Some of them will be your age, some of them will be younger. It’s the nature of Devices, Cadets, and it’s important to get used to it now.”

Rei kept his pace impassive as he stood by, but he had to admit to being both impressed and grateful.

Lake was at once consoling Kay and Gathers, and also helping carve out just a *touch* of normalcy in his very *abnormal* situation. She was working to protect *him* as much as the two Lancers.

“Two Cs against a B, especially one in the latter half of his tier, is an impossible fight. And yet you two nearly managed to maim Ward out the gate, and you, Cadet—” she looked right at Sandree “—found several other openings that might have ended the match if your opponent had been just *slightly* slower. You both did good, and you shouldn’t look at this as a loss. You should look at it as an opportunity. How many C-Ranks get to fight against a B on the regular? The other class blocks will be jealous, I promise.”

She ended her encouragement with a smile, dropping her arm from Gathers’ shoulder at last. The boy seemed to be feeling marginally better—at least his cheeks had some color now—and Kay was standing a little straighter than she had a minute before.

Unfortunately, what Lake had in store for *him* wasn’t nearly as pleasant.

“Good fight, Ward,” she said, looking around at him. “Take a break. I’m thinking I might have to put you against *three* next round...”

Allison Lake didn't *actually* pit him against three opponents that evening, but that didn't mean Rei had an easy time of it. He understood, in the end, what Dent had meant about "acclimation" early, because not only did Kay and the other Lancers stop looking at Shido's new call with raised eyebrows after the first few matches, they also got better at dealing with him on the field. They started meeting his Speed by sprinting towards *each other* out of the ring as the call to fight came, forming a two-man unit faster than even he could get to them. They started dealing with his Strength by doing a better job of keeping him at bay, working as a pair to ensure one spear was always moving into place as the other retracted. This also served to minimize his offensive ability—at least stuck in Brawler Mode like he was—and the matches started to go longer, lasting well over a minute by the time combat training ended.

Not that Rei had any trouble dismantling every defense and counter-attack the moment he was able to flick inside their guard.

By the time Dent told everyone to call it a night, Rei had fought no less than 20 matches against paired opponents, and to his eventual delight he found a challenge present in a way he realized he hadn't really felt in afternoon training for some time. He was all smiles as Lake dismissed them to the showers, and turned around to look for the others in high spirits.

He had to work not to let the pleasant feeling deflate as he was made to recall—*very* abruptly—the situation he was in.

While the students of 1-A *were* taking their leave, there wasn't a single person making for the hall without glancing back over their shoulder at him. Some were even moving in groups away from their fields, heads bent together and whispering in a way that made it all too obviously who and what they were talking about. A couple—like Sense as joined up with Leron Joy and Kay when she walked by—offered quiet congratulations or at least double thumbs up, but most of the rest looked no less in shock at his presence among them than they had at the start of training.

“Well... *That* seems to have gone about as expected.”

Rei turned to find Viv approaching, wiping sweat off her forehead and looking around. She was still on light duty—he’d seen her running laps and doing some half-speed sparing over the course of the session—but she’d mentioned Gross and the others were steadily increasing the training load, and today seemed to have been the most intense yet.

Sadly, even back on the field Gemela seemed to be old news, because no eyes shifted to her anymore as she came to stand beside him.

“No surprises there,” Rei agreed with a grunted, squinting through the crowd to find Aria being giving last minute instruction by Catoria Imala on some sort of spear form. “Pretty sure I could have given Jeffrey Gathers a heart attack if I’d pulled out Breaker Mode or Temporal Step, though.”

“Perfectly missed opportunity,” Viv answered, turning to him with a sigh brimming with disappointment Rei was only *pretty* sure was fake. “Was Kay chill about it all, at least?”

“Pretty much. Took her a second.”

“Who could blame here.”

“Actually, they kinda all were, at least by the end. Lake worked on them while were fighting.” He reiterated what the second lieutenant had said to Kay and Gathers, words she’d repeated in some form or another to Adam Jax and Emily Hinks not long after.

Viv nodded with a “not bad” expression, looking impressed.

“You know, Dyrk Reese left a *bad* taste in my mouth, but *most* of the staff really *do* know what they’re doing, don’t they.”

“We’re talking about Dyrk Reese? Why?”

Both of them looked around to find Logan was joining them from Field 5. Rei couldn’t but chuckle under his breath when a few faces that had been turned in their

direction looked away abruptly, and stayed suspiciously forward until they were out in the hall.

“You’re pretty useful, man,” he told Logan with a grin, reaching up to pat the guy on the shoulder. “I ever tell you that.”

Logan scowled at him, but didn’t have a chance to ask what Rei meant as Aria, too, finally jogged over to meet them.

“How’d it go?” she asked immediately, studying Rei’s face with only a touch of concern.

“He could have killed Jeffrey Gathers,” Viv answered with a snigger before he could. “Chose not to, for some reason.”

Aria’s face went flat. “And you *missed* the chance?” she asked, sounding almost dissatisfied.

“That’s what *I* said!” Viv cackled.

“Yeah yeah, laugh it up,” Rei told them, but he was grinning again as he started moving for the hall. “If it makes you feel better I *did* possibly help him go bald.”

“From the stress?” Viv asked, still laugh as she, Aria, and Logan all joined.

Rei chuckled. “Something like that.”

From her seat among the highest rows of the Arena stands, Shira Abel watched the four first years go in silence, her head unmoving, her eyes following their path across the display she’d pulled up in her frame until they vanished into the hall outside the combat area. Even after they were gone, she kept looking at the corner they’d disappeared around, staring at it as she processed.

F8. The boy had been assigned F8 in May of the previous year. And now—barely 9 months later—he’d achieved... this.

At last, Shira pulled her eyes away from the hall entrance. It didn't take her long to find Valera Dent, having to switch the camera angle only once before her black-and-golds—a sharp contrast to the greys and whites and reds of everyone else on the sub-basement floor—came into view. She had to admit it to herself. She owed the captain a *hell* of a debt. She hadn't even been *aware* of Reidon Ward until the closing days of the previous semester, and she *dreaded* to think what might have happened to his care and training if Dent hadn't fought to have him attend Galens. Even with his S-Ranked Growth, if the brass had failed to notice him—if he'd been allowed to languish at some pilot or trade school, even for a year or two—Shira wasn't sure she'd have ever been able to forgive herself.

Instead, though... Here he was. A sword being molded into perfect being before her very eyes.

And he's not even the only one...

Again Shira's eyes flicked to the hall. She'd been pleased—very pleased—to find Viviana Arada in good spirits and gaining weight again. She'd been pleased, too, to put live eyes on Aria Laurent's CAD, famously well-developed even before Arada and Layton Catchwick's incredible improvements. She'd seen nothing extraordinary about the Mauler, Logan Grant, but that in-and-of-itself was exciting to Shira.

She was watching now. She was paying attention.

She was going to see where things were going with her own two eyes...

With that pleasant thought, Shira close out of the feed and pushed herself onto her feet. Turning, she started for the nearest set of stairs, where her escort stood waiting. Guests' chief assistant, the woman—Kent, she recalled—had been watching her for an hour now with silent, placid professionalism. Her face was *so* impassive, in fact, that Shira got the feeling the woman was working extra hard to stop herself from bashing over the head with the smart-glass tablet she always seemed to be holding the crook of her right elbow.

“All set, ma’am?” Kent asked pleasantly enough as soon as Shira reached the stairs.

“See what you came to?”

Shira offered here the smallest, rarest of smiles.

“It was a start.”