

Chapter 34

Katro Vademe was good people. Frankly, Rei liked the guy a lot. The Lancer had never given him a hard time early in the year when he'd been lagging behind the rest of the class, and he'd equally been nothing but friendly since Rei had caught up. He was a talented User *and* a skilled leader, and there was a good reason why the Galens higher-ups had picked him to head the squad that became Valormade. Kastro Vademe was good people.

It didn't stop Rei from turning him into mincemeat in their semi-finals match the following morning.

Vademe was a nice guy, but he'd also built up a debt Rei needed to see paid back, especially after Aria had clued him in on what was probably going on with Viv. For that reason the moment the Arena gave them the command to "Fight!" Rei bolted in the direction of Vademe's starting circle—blocked from view by the manifestation of the handful of decrepit, crumbling buildings that was the Deserted Settlement zone—making a beeline as directly across the map as he could. It was a little dumb, sure. In fact it was equally as dumb as Viv's charge against the Lancer had been the day before. Vademe had range on Rei, and was a *very* good User. It was silly not to take advantage of all the cover offered by the crumbling buildings and try to close in without giving away his presence in a hail of pounding footsteps.

But Vademe, nice as he was, had a debt to pay.

It took a bit to locate the Lancer, unfortunately. Either because Vademe saw Rei's approach coming and reacted or just knew a head-on fight wasn't something he could win, the boy was nowhere to be found as Rei found the spot his starting circle had been, made obviously by the footprints in the dry dirt of the zone. Those same footsteps, though, led east, and Rei only had to follow the trail with his eyes to identify one

particular two-story ruin, its cement walls crumbling down to the rusted rebar, into which they vanished.

Rei also didn't miss the subtle flutter of the tattered curtains shifting on the top floor window—strange given the lack of wind—nor the brief flash of orange light beyond them, juuuust poorly hidden enough to see.

Vademe was too smart and too well trained to make such a mistake on purpose, so Rei assumed a trap. He didn't pause, though, his Cognition snapping an idea into place in a fraction of second, and one that *didn't* involve him running recklessly right onto the head of the Lancer's spear.

"Type Shift: Saber," he muttered even as he bolted to the building just on the other side of the road from the one Vademe was hunkered down in. Shido had shifted by the time he reached it, and making his selection fast Rei picked one heavy, loose chunk of fallen rubble from among the crumbling foundation, stuck his sword into it, and wrapped both hands around the most solid-looking of its broken edges.

Then—praying all the while he hadn't miscalculated his Saber Mode's boosted Strength—he heaved the hunk of debris up, twisted, and hurled it with all his might at the failing wall just to the right of the window Vademe had been peeking out of.

Rei was running, jumping, and calling for his Brawler Mode again by the time the rubble struck and blew clean through the crumbling concrete with a deafening *CRUNCH*. He almost didn't hear the shout of alarm from inside the building on the impact, nearly losing it over the crashing and then quieter electric crackled of Shido's Type Shift. It wouldn't have mattered either way, of course.

Rei had already tucked his legs, ducked his head, and crossed his arms over his face to protect it as he hurtled into the mess and billowing dust right through the nice little entrance he'd oh-so-subtly made for himself.

He hit the ruin-strewn floor awkwardly, unable to see anything as he land, but he'd anticipated as much and just stayed tucked, trusting his reactive shielding to handle the

initially impact. He tumbled once, twice, then was on his feet again, squinting through the dust to find what he was looking for in a flash.

Vysetrium—especially something as bright as *orange*—glowed like a beacon through the settling chaos.

Rei lunged, and he heard Vademe curse. It was clear the Lancer had been expecting a little less violent of an entrance—probably for Rei to try to come through the window or floor so he could get the drop on him—but in a confined space with no advantage the fight could only become the head-to-head the boy had been trying to avoid. It was initially a little puzzling, in fact, that Vademe had chose to sacrifice some of his reach by confining himself so tightly, but as he broke through much of the gloom Rei understood a little better. There was a massive hole in the back of the decrepit chamber—*another* massive hole, now, actually—that provided a clear point of egress by which to escape through. Vademe had clearly thought this out, had judged that if things went south, he'd have the opportunity to retreat outside where he could more-easily but some distance between the two of them.

Rei made sure he didn't have the time to even consider his plan B.

Horizontal sweep, he thought calmly as he closed the distance in a blink. Firesong's group studies—plus a personal early-morning refresher—of Vademe's tactics paid off at once. If he'd been more level-headed the Lancer might have varied his defenses, but coughing and staggering as he was he fell into drilled instinct, slashing across his body in an attempt to ward off Rei's rush. Rei ducked low, feeling the blade rip overhead with maybe an inch of clearance.

Pivot and upper-cut.

Rei's was already reacting, right arm swinging across his own body and out when Vademe twisted to bring the butt of his spear forward and up in a low vertical arc, not wasting the momentum of his missed strike. Ordinarily it might have come up precisely under Rei's chin—and probably ended the fight there and then—but instead the haft

connected with the solid steel plating along the back of Rei's forearm, knocking the blow aside.

Recovery attempt.

Vademe flailed only briefly in the fraction of a second left to him. His weapon out of position completely and Rei now well inside his guard, he could only try to save himself by bring a leg up and around at Rei's head. It was a good correction, the only one that might have clutched him a win if the kick had connected.

Unfortunately, for Vademe, though, he wasn't anywhere near fast enough to keep up with Rei's Speed.

Dead.

The Shido's claws *thudded* into Vademe body in echoed hits, the left sinking into his open side first, then the right into his belly a fraction of a second later. Rei didn't stop there, thought—and couldn't even if he'd wanted to—the momentum of his rush carrying him forward before he could stop to shoulder Vademe and slam him straight into the cracking wall at his back.

The cracking wall that didn't hold.

CRUNCH!

The concrete gave, and for the second time Rei found himself hurtling through a hole he'd made in the building, though this time inadvertently. As they were only two stories up he cursed as he and Vademe plummeted down towards the hard-packed ground of the dusty road below, wrenching the Lancer's limp body more securely under his. Their combined weight brought them hurtling down, and they slammed into the earth with a sickening *thud* so hard that Rei literally *bounced* off Vademe's chest, his claws dislodging themselves from the boy's torso. Landing again—a little more gently this time—Rei logrolled away to get some distance between the two of them, then shoved himself up with fists leveled just in case. He needn't have worried.

Vademe lay where he'd fallen, his spear lost in the drop and impact, as unmoving as the rest of the scenery around him.

The fight couldn't even have lasted 45 seconds.

"Fatal Damage Accrued," came the announcement, echoing slightly through the empty buildings. "Winner: Reidon Ward, the Galen's Institute."

Rei managed a couple steps towards Vademe's prone form before the ground beneath his feet went translucent and incorporeal, and he started to descend as sky above faded and the roar of the crowd resumed. As they dropped towards the projection plating he looked up and around, taking a second to place himself before he found Firesong along the railing of the north Dueling field, and he lifted a hand in acknowledgement. Before any of them could return the gesture the stands—packed to their limit on the final day of Sectionals as they were—boomed out their approval, thousands on thousand obviously mistaking the motion as one meant for them, and Rei almost wince at the noise as Aria, Cashe, and Grant waved back and offered thumbs up—yes, even the Mauler—while Catcher did a little jig standing just behind the two girls. Viv, meanwhile, didn't seem to be looking at him, her intense focus apparently instead on Vademe, both hands gripping the rail. A twinge of guilt tugged at Rei as he hoped he hadn't actually made things *worse* by taking down the Lancer so quickly, but he dismissed it as he caught Aria's eye and the smile she was giving him.

Viv had to carry her own baggage sometimes.

As Rei touched down he recalled Shido, then stepped quickly over to where Vademe was growning as he started to sit, one armored hand clutching at his stomach, the other helping to get himself up.

"Good fight, man," Rei told him, offering him an arm.

Vademe gave a pained laugh, face scrunched up in discomfort. “You call that a fight, dude? How is it that you just keep getting *faster*?”

Rei chuckled as the Lancer finally took his offered hand, hauling him onto his feet. “What can I say? I’m squirrely.”

“Recall.” Vademe’s CAD whirled out of being back into the bands around his wrist. “I think you’re a bit past that point, Ward. Don’t know how many squirrels can throw *boulders* through walls...”

Rei grinned but didn’t answer that, instead indicating the closest of the underworks tunnel in question as the announcer gave them the usual congratulations—announcing Rei as “the first finalist for the first year Dueling brackets!”—and requested they clear the field. To his surprise, though, Vademe shook his head.

“No way, dude. Don’t you know who’s up next? I’m gonna grab a wall to watch.”

“Ooooooh *right!*” Rei felt a jolt of excitement at that, moving with the Lancer to clear the floor. Candice Rice had already been eliminated from the upperclassmen brackets that morning to crown the Galens Phalanx Paul William—the only User other than Aria Rei had met who possessed Third Eye—as the first finalist of the older years. Among all the second and third years at the tournament, every one of the four semi-finalists and been from the Institute, just like in the first year bracket. It wasn’t unexpected, but it was still impressive.

Especially given that not all of them were actually *third-year*...

Lennon vs. Siddorov. That was the next match. Rei knew without a shadow of a doubt who would come out on top—by a mile, probably—but the fact that Anatoli Siddorov had made it through every round of Sectionals all the way to the top was mind-blowing, especially given some of the matchups he’d had. As an A0-Ranked User—the only A-Ranked among the second years at the tournament—the Lancer had been paired repeatedly against stronger combatants in the latter half of the week, and each time had come out on top. Every one of those fights would have been worth

recording if the Arena hadn't been doing it for them already, because it was proof again and again and again that raw physical ability wasn't necessarily what made a User. Was it an edge? Definitely. But Siddorov had one every single up-paired fight so far—even one against an A5 Mauler—with cunning, skill, and strategy. And with Sector 9 of Astra-3 being the strongest subsection of student combats in the system, that meant he was well on his way to representing Astra in the Intersystems, just like Lennon had before him.

It would be exciting to see if the second year had a plan to going up against the Lasher, futile as it might be...

“You're staying down here?” Rei asked of Vademe as they reached the wall and the Lancer started towards one of the observing officers.

Vademe looked back around at him. “That's the plan. Gonna see if they'll let me. No better view in the house, right?”

“Fair,” Rei said with a laugh, but he gestured over his shoulder towards the tunnels. “I'm gonna head up, though. See if I can grab a spot with my squad.”

“Roger that,” the Lancer paused to turn towards him, offering his own hand this time. “I should have said it too, sorry. Good fight, man. And good luck against Laur—well, good luck in the finals, *whoever* your opponent may be.” He smirked knowingly, drawing a laugh out of Rei as he accepted the offered shake.

“Hey now, how knows? Grant doesn't have *no* chance.”

“Uh huh. Just like *I* didn't have ‘no chance’, I'm sure.”

They parted ways there, Vademe turning back to head towards the officer again as Rei jogged for the tunnels. It was a little strange stepping out of the light and noise and into the darkness of the ramp. The underworks were quite, almost silent, with no one but a passing patrol bot and a single pair of ISCM officers have a private discussion a little ways up the hall as Rei reached it. He saluted these two automatically when they turned to him, answering with “Thank you, ma'am!” when one of them briefly

congratulated him on his win, then turned and made for the closest stairs. The tunnel was bright with its white plasteel walls and holo displays, but lacked all of the hubbub and life it had hosted all week, even as recently as just the day before. It was dull, almost sad, and Rei realized that—despite all the drama of the weekend—he wasn't looking forward to the tournament coming to an end.

It had been intense and stressful—and yes, made not a little bit *frustrating* by certain parties—but it had also been an enormous amount of fun.

Rei was glad when he reached the stairs up, taking them three at a time quickly to pop out onto the crowded walkway above the main floor. He was pretty sure he was a known figure by most, now, because everyone he passed as he pushed into and through the crowd seemed to recognize him. Most were amicable, giving way so he could get by or even voicing a congratulations to him at various volumes as they crossed paths, but there were more than a few who had the opposite reaction, students, chaperones, and SCT fans alike glowering or muttering something unintelligible his way. It didn't bother him. Not since the night before. Aria had shoved his confidence back into place—if via metaphorical hammer—and he took not a small amount of pleasure in smiling at these people when he passed them, making sure they knew he'd taken notice of their rudeness.

It paid off in dividends whenever most of them—even the chaperones and the older cadets—would glance away quickly, or else flush and try to stare him down until they were swept away from each other by the crowd.

“There he is!”

Catcher was the first to find him as Rei made his way around the walkway to where he'd seen the rest of the team lined up at the railing. Short as he was he hadn't even spotted one of them when a slim arm snaked between the milling bodies to grab him by the elbow, and Cashe offered a polite “Excuse us,” as she pulled him through to join them.

“Nice fight, dude!” Catcher exclaimed at once, bouncing up and down excitedly. “Only you could put all the excitement of a ten minute match into thirty seconds!”

“Forty,” Cashe corrected him, though she was smiling at Rei too. “Give Vademe some credit, Catchwick.”

“I’m not dissing him!” Catcher exclaimed. “If that guy can kick *Viv*’s ass he can sure as hell whoop mine! I’m just saying Rei did a good job of—!”

“It *was* a good fight,” Aria interrupted loudly before the pair could get into it, elbowing Catcher half to get him to quiet down, half to nudge him out of the way so she could get to Rei. Reaching him, she studied him carefully. “How you doing? That was a big hit, dropping off the second floor like that.”

“All good, no worries,” Rei answered, lifting one scarred arm to flex it dramatically. “Ready to kick the butt of whoever I’m matched up with next, at least...” He grinned as Aria raised an eyebrow at him.

“You’re hilarious. Maybe that hit actually completely knocked your brain out of place, if you think it’s gonna be that easy given your options.”

“Or maybe he’s just sleep deprived...?” Catcher offered slyly, giving Aria a meaningful look. “I seem to recall him not getting back to the room until past midnight last night...”

Predictably, she went red, losing all composure as she whirled on the Saber. “Layton Catchwick, *say another word*. I dare you. I’ll bet Dent would be alright with one team casualty. We’d probably still have a chance against Red Crown in the Team Battle even if we’re a down *our mouthy Saber*.”

Catcher laughed at that, lifting both hands to ward off any further threats, while Cashe looked from him to Aria in confusion.

The Lancer had just opened her mouth—likely about to ask what Catcher was talking about, Rei suspected—when Grant swooped in to save the day.

“Don’t think either of us is gonna let you steamroll us, Ward,” he growled, though there was a hint of anticipation in his warning. “You took Vademe by surprise. Laurent and I both know better.”

“I’m sure you do,” Rei answered with a chuckle, looking between. Aria was still glaring at Catcher, but the Mauler was watching him levelly. “Don’t worry, I’m not planning on taking anyone for granted, whoever it might be.”

That seemed to satisfy all parties, because Aria finally looked away from Catcher with a “Hmph!” while Grant nodded.

Of course, that was the moment that Cashe decided to get caught up.

“Someone want to tell me why one of our *aces* was apparently up till *midnight* the night before *our finals matches*??”

“Oh not just *one* of our aces, Cashe,” Catcher jumped on the chance with a grin. “What if I told you that *both* of them them stayed up past their bedt—”

“Catcher, I will *actually* end you!” Aria snarled while Grant gave a resigned sigh from behind her, and Rei took the opportunity to slip by the lot of them to where Viv was still standing by the rail, having not moved from her spot even after he’d joined up with them again.

Coming up beside her, Rei put his back to the rail and leaned his elbows over it, watching her carefully. She didn’t look his way, and may not have even noticed him for all the attention she gave his presence. She was staring, all too intently for Rei to think it was healthy, down at the cleared Arena floor, obviously lost in some heavy thought or another. He looked away and let her linger there for a time, not feeling it was entirely his place to interrupt whatever was going on in her head, but after almost of minute of watching the flow of the crowd—and trying to avoid listening in on Aria half-pleading, half-threatening Catcher into silence about their escapade the night before—Rei nudged an elbow over to bump against where his best friend’s hand was still clutching the metal.

Viv started like he'd given her an electric shock, blinking several times as she seemed to come to herself before looking around at him.

"Oh, hey," she said, sounding genuinely surprised to find Rei standing there. "How long you been up here?"

"Long enough to start wondering if that projection plating down there did you a personal harm?"

Viv looked confused.

"You're staring at the Arena floor like it kicked your dog, Viv," Rei clarified for her.

"Oh, that." Viv made a face. "Yeah... Sorry. Just thinking."

"What about?"

She shook her head. "Nothing important."

It took everything Rei had to let it go, channeling Aria's words from the evening before, but he managed it, and the pair of them stood like that in silence for a bit longer. Rei was just trying to figure out something else to say, actually, when Viv spoke again.

"Thanks, by the way..."

Rei glanced sidelong at the girl. She finally taken her hands from the rail to jam them into the pockets of her uniform—she, Cashe, and Catcher wouldn't be allowed change into their combat suits until it was time to warm up—and she was looking back down at the Arena floor.

Rei didn't have to ask what she was talking about.

"I got you," he said, turning and face the floor with her and leaning over the railing. "Felt kinda bad doing it, but the dude knocked my best friend out of the running. He had it coming."

Viv grimaced. "You saying I need defending?"

“Hell no,” Rei answered with another chuckle. “I know better than anyone, Vivian Arada, that you do *not* need defending of any kind. Seen you break the noses of too many guys that outweighed you by fifty pounds to ever think that.”

Viv nodded then, looking satisfied. Rei watched the floor with her a bit longer—a medical drone was doing a sterilizing sweep in the off time below—before saying anything else.

“You’ll get him. Maybe not tomorrow, maybe not in a month. But you’ll get him.”

He didn’t expect a response, much less an immediate one.

“You really think so?”

Once again Rei looked at Viv sidelong, and a small lump formed in his throat as he took the girl in. She hadn’t so much as glanced away from the floor, but her face was scrunched up into something he very, *very* much wasn’t used to seeing.

Viv, for maybe the first time in the years Rei had known her, looked utterly unsure of herself.

Aria, you might have nailed it, he thought even as he answered firmly.

“Damn sure. Didn’t bet on Vademe going into your match, and wouldn’t bet on him now. Or anyone our year that you got pitched up against.”

It took a moment, but Viv seemed to relax a little at that at last.

She even looked around at him, though she didn’t meet his eyes right away.

“Thanks, Rei... Don’t know if I believe you, but it’s good to hear...”

“Don’t doubt it. But once you kick his ass can a remind you of this? Of how I walked up to find you miserable and forlorn at the edge of the Arena, pining for the opportunity to prove yourself once more against the—”

“Okay you and Catcher *really* need to stop spending time around each other.” Viv scowled, her usually self snapping back into place all at once, gaze abruptly having *zero* issue meeting his. “Nobody is ‘miserable’ *or* ‘forlorn’ around here, go it?”

“If you say so.” Rei grinned. “Too bad. I was thinking you needed cheering up, so I was gonna share some news with you.”

Viv didn’t lose her scowl, but Rei thought he saw a sudden shine of interest in her eyes at this.

“News? Spill.”

“Oh no no. I’ll save it for a time of actual need, when you’re legitimately down and I’ve got to—*owowowowowe!*”

Rei was sure, then, that he’d managed to at least temporarily snap Viv out of her funk, because her hand moved in a blur as she reached out to grab him by one earlobe, unfortunately made an easy target since his hair was still up in his combat ponytail. She applied just enough pressure to give him a warning that she *could* make it hurt if she wanted to, and he caved at once.

“I give! I give! I’ll tell you!”

“Damn right you will,” she growled, but she didn’t let go. “And if this doesn’t have something to do with where the hell Aria disappeared to last night, I’m gonna take this ear as payment. I tried grilling her about it when she got back to the room, but she didn’t give me anything.”

Rei—leaning into the threatening tug of her fingers—give her a meaningful look, unable to stop himself from smiling despite his vulnerable position.

“Oh it *does!*” Viv was suddenly all in, finally letting go of him and stepping closer as she lowered her voice so that none of the others still talking nearby were at risk of overhearing. “Tell me *everything.*”

For the next 20 minutes or so Rei did exactly that, happy to have the usual Viv back. He only spared the details he suspected Aria wouldn’t have been too keen on making public—few and far between, given they hadn’t *completely* lost their heads the night before—and the two of them had a good time whispering back and forth just like the used to when they’d make fun of the bullies and other asshats back at Grandcrest.

It felt good—felt *normal*, even—and they were both taken by surprise when the announcer came back over the speakers to start the next match.

“Ladies and gentleman, thank you for your patience and your attendance! Our initial first-year semi-final round was kept short and sweet, but it is now nearly time for the second upper bracket fight of the morning! If you would please return to your seats, our combatants will be called on shortly, and I promise you it will be a fight you don’t want to miss!”

“Ooooh man, here we go!”

Catcher appeared, coming over from the group to stand beside Rei, deliberately leaving a little room between them. It was a good thing, too, because Aria squeezed in—openly pressing her arm up against Rei’s as she did—while Cashe grabbed a spot on the Saber’s other side and Grant contented himself with stand just behind Viv.

“Lennon’s gonna steamroll him,” Viv announced, and Rei was pleased she hadn’t immediately closed off again the moment they were joined.

“Don’t be so sure,” Aria disagreed. “I mean the Lasher’s got this in the bag, yeah, but Siddorov is good for his year.”

“Insanely good,” Grant echoed with a nod.

For a minute or so they all chatted like that, everyone taking one side or there other as to if the second year had a prayer or making any kind of decent showing of himself. The crowd around them had dispersed into the stands or tightened along the rail where they could, and the whole of the Arena was on the edge of their seats long before the announcer came back on. Rei could practically taste the energy of the place, the rumble of 50,000 spectators like the constant, churning roar of an ocean threatening a storm.

And than a single figure came briskly out from the tunnels, reached the top of the north Dueling field across from where Rei and the others stood, and turned to face the crowd. A middle aged, fit officer lacking any CAD bans, the announcer had been the

acting arbitrator for all of the morning's matches thus—Rei and Vademe's included—and was more than competent at his job.

Both in commenting on the fights, and in riling up the spectators in equal measure.

“Ladies and gentleman, as promised it is now time for our last upper-bracket semi-finals match of this 2468 Sector 9 Sectionals tournament! We've seen some true up-and-coming titans so far this morning, and you can look forward to seeing cadets Williams and Ward have it out with their respective opponents in the upcoming finals—” Aria and Viv both nudged Rei from either side at the mention of his name “—but you don't have to wait any longer for another clash worth every credit you spent on your seats! Two monsters, one a legend who competed in the Intrasytems as a second year, another looking to follow in those very footsteps! NOW PLEASE BUT YOUR HANDS TOGETHER TO WELCOME, FROM THE EAST, AND A YOUNG MAN DESTINED FOR AN INCREDIBLE FUTURE IN THE SCTS SHOULD HE CHOOSE IT... CADET CHRISTOPHER 'LASHER' LENNON OF THE GALENS INSTITUTE!”

Rei and the rest of the squad roared together with the whole of the stadium, the Arena one undulating, resonant voice of enthusiasm as Lennon's familiar form appeared from the tunnels along the right side of the floor. He didn't lift a hand as he closed the distance to the Dueling field, but he did look up and flash a smile into the stadium from behind his grey dreads, which was answered with redoubled noise.

“I'll never get used to it,” Grant muttered as Lennon reached the east edge of the fighting ring, his third-year combat suit a splash of red-on-blue against the black of the floor. “I mean the guy is still fit, but if you told me *that* was the most dangerous cadet in the system and I didn't already know you were right, I'd laugh.”

No one disagreed. It was a common, unspoken fact that Lennon just didn't have the typical bearing of your average User, much less you *well-above-average* User.

Honestly, it always made Rei feel a little better, taking in the third year.

“AND FROM THE WEST, LOOKING FOR YET ANOTHER IN A LINE OF UPSETS AT THIS TOURNAMENT... CADET ANATOLI SIDOROV, ALSO OF THE GALENS INSTITUTE!”

The enthusiasm for Sidorov’s entrance wasn’t lacking in comparison to Lennon’s, like half because of his own merit, half because it was a Lasher fight. Ironically, Lennon’s smaller, softer stature was made only more diminutive with the Lancer’s appearance from the tunnels, all tall and regal in his green suit, all poise and grace as he strode for the other edge of the field. Sidorov made neither gesture nor acknowledgement of the crowd as he moved, and Rei might have thought he heard a few of the cheers turn to boos and catcalls from the roar just before the second year came to a stop himself.

He thought that a little unfair. He didn’t particularly like Sidorov—and had been growing more and more convinced the Lancer *didn’t* like him over the course of the week, for some reason—but he would have liked to see any of the haters among the stands face off against an opponent like the Lasher and show half the focus the second year was now.

The two faced off across the 30-yard ring, and the sounds quickly faded from the Arena. It was almost frightening, in fact, to go so quickly from the cacophony of enthusiasm and cheers to the near-utter silence that followed, in which even a few singular nervous coughs could be heard from high among the stands.

“Combatants, take position,” the announcer said into the quiet, voice echoing through the Arena.

Lennon and Sidorov were both over the silver boundary lines and inside the red starting rings that had appeared for them in a few short strides.

“This is as an official Duel. Do you condone and agree to the rules of this fight?”

The briefer confirmation required of the upper bracket was quickly followed by two nods, one calm and steady, one tense and quick. For a second there was silence

again, the stillness below disrupted only by the faint flash of light in the announcer's eyes.

Then the two cadets began to rise, and the stadium came alive again as Firesong became only a handful of voices in tens of thousands to start to shout out their field guesses.

"Not Neutral," Catcher called out unhelpfully over the roar.

"No shit!" Cashe answered. "I see green? Woodlands?"

"Nope, no trees!" Rei yelled. "Red! Dirt!"

"Canyons!" Viv guessed.

But it was Grant who beat them all too it this time.

"Cliffs! And... woah... A weird one, too!"

Sure enough, a second later Rei could see it too, and had to agree. Lennon and Siddorov were both climbing much faster than usual, something like a pillar of earth rising up between and under them as they ascended. Just as they started to slow he saw blue, too, and Aria and Catcher both whistled from his right as the final form of the field took shape.

"It's like a moat!" someone from the stands behind them shouted, which Rei supposed was a fair summation.

A moat would probably technically have required a castle of some kind, but the the comparison stood. In the center of the field, standing 30 feet high or so, a tower of earth and stone jutted skyward, capping at a flat, roughly circular top. The edge of this apex was probably 5 yards from the limit of the actual field wall, and plunged down at a concave angle to vanish into a rushing, clear roar of water that was obviously the fierce current of a heavy river. All in all it looked like a rough-hewn cone of rock cut at by nature and the passing flow, and Rei had little doubt that if either of the fighters fell from the top of the field there would be very little chance of recover.

“Field: Cliffs”

The Arena’s cool voice replaced the arbiters, raised automatically to be heard over the emulated sound of water rushing over stone. Rei realized he was holding his breath, but didn’t care as he stared upward, taking in Lennon and Sidorove through the rock, made automatically translucent for him and the others by the stadium systems. Aria had reached over at some bout to grip his forearm in excitement, while on his other side Viv was bouncing with nervous excitement, to the point where Grant finally reached up to take her by the shoulders to hold her still, not once looking down himself from the two cadets.

“Cadet Christopher ‘Lasher’ Lennon versus Cadet Annatoli Sidorov.
Combatants... Call.”

Neither opened their mouths, and yet in a blink their form were clad in the clashing armor of their Devices. The Lasher red vysetrium glowed against the black full-body suit that his Ouroboros had encased him in completely, the place where his eyes should have been made obvious only by a trio of crimson, glowing lines. In each hand he held the handle once of his signature chain swords, their loose blades laying and an expected curl around his feet, and over his shoulders his externals hover, unmoving but ready. Opposite him, Sidorov had seen at least an evolution since the Intraschools, because he, too, now had full-body armor, his CAD cover him from head to toe in silver-grey steel, his tower helm not unlike Lennon’s. Instead of red, though, the Lancer’s vysetrium glowed yellow, the single horizontal line across his face echoing the glowing edges of his long spear.

“Ooooh here we go...” Cashe half whispered, half squealed just as the Arena spoke one last time.

“Combatants... Fight.”