

Chapter 23

PLACEHOLDER

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Leaning over the edge of the railing, Aria roared along with the crowd around and behind her, screaming herself hoarse into what she suspected was the furor of almost 50,000 people. It *was* probably the vast majority of the crowd for once, truth be told, because whereas usually the attention of the morning spectators might have been divided across the two Dueling fields, it just so happened that the north field—on the other side of the Arena—was currently being taken up by two first years from the 14th and Oyekan’s who hadn’t quite broken into the Cs yet.

Which made the fight on the *south* field—suspended before Aria, Viv, Catcher, Cashe, Grant, and a good portion of the Galens cadets who weren’t fighting anytime soon—only that much more interesting to watch.

“GOOOO!” Aria bellowed along with the others as Rei’s fists flew in a blinding flurry of strikes at his opponent’s body. “GOOOOO!”

From her left, further along the railing and separate from her by several pockets of second and third years, other voices joined the call, with Jack Benaly’s being the loudest.

“TAKE HIM DOWN! TAKE! HIM! DOWN!!”

It only made Aria grin.

On a simple variation of Grasslands—a mostly-flat plain of shin-high greenery divided by a single wide stream—Rei danced with none other than Laquita Martin, and the Red Crown squad leader was *clearly* uninterested in handing the win to him without a *hell* of a fight. They’d been going at it for not even 15 seconds now, but already a swath of the grassy field was ripped up and overturned, either torn to shreds by rapid

footwork and steel boots or actively kicked or slashed up into one face or another to try to gain an advantage. The outcome was all-but-given, maybe—Aria wasn't the only one to have seen Rei taken on Martin *and* another cadet at the same time and come out on top, after all—but that didn't mean it was going to be easy, and the Duelist had obviously brought her A-game.

It only made Aria, and the rest of Firesong to her right, bellow even louder.

“GOOOOO!”

Rei didn't disappoint.

His Speed really *was* a frightening thing. He and Martin's stats were probably about even with the Duelist being C4 or 5 when last Aria had checked, but the fact that he was keeping toe-to-toe with the girl's quick movements and agility was outright breathtaking. Their arms and blades were just a step shy of blurs as they crashed, broke apart, then engaged again, and in between cuts and punches and slashes there came a blistering of kicks and leg sweeps. Despite the two of them being first years, Aria didn't think she'd heard the crowd get this riled since either Lennon or Sidorov had had take to the field for their own—rather quick—Dueling appearances earlier that morning.

In fact, if she strained to listen, Aria was pretty sure she could make out individuals shouting here and there, calling for the “Iron Prince” to show them what he were really made of.

It all made Aria want to laugh into the chaos of the excitement and noise.

Despite all of Dyrk Reese's bluster, if the crowd had disapproved of Firesong's antics during the Team Battle the afternoon before, the condemnation had been fleeting. The Wargames they'd partaken in the afternoon after that first match had—as expected—gone their way, but not before Valera Dent's parting warning about the team's likelihood of being taken seriously proving itself *pointedly* true. Despite the Arena having assigned the bout as a Control match—an objective-based fight that could be won by one team capturing and holding various sections of a zone for a certain amount

of cumulative time—it might as well have been an Elimination fight, with Firesong at the top of the menu. The Arena had kept the six of them together due to the nature of the match-type, but that had turned out to be as much a curse as a blessing when not one but *two* of the three opposing teams—from 9th Sector and Deermont respectively—had descended on them together from the crags of the Cliffside variation within a minute of the fight starting, obviously having already struck some kind of temporary alliance over their common enemy. Firesong had held their own, with only Cashe going down before they'd culled almost half of their twelve opponents, and would have been in good shape before the *third* team—another of Deermont's squads—came slipping and sliding down the loose shale of the hills at their back. Aria had almost lost her cool in that moment, fearing Firesong was about to get cut from the multi-team format brackets early on, but *Grant* had ended up saving the day, growling that he'd do what he could to hold the new arrivals off before charging right for the group of six, the green of their team-assigned color trailing his Device in whips of ion fire as her preemptively triggered his Overclock Ability. It had left Aria with only Rei, Viv, and Catcher to fend off the remaining seven of the original two teams, but it had been the right move. Aria herself and gone down, with Viv a few seconds later, but in the end Rei and Catcher had been left relatively unharmed against only *half* of the second Deermont squad, Grant and his Overclock having cut down *three* opponents all on his own before he'd been FDA'd as well.

As it turned out, three above-average first years didn't hold so much as a candle to the likes of even a fraction of Firesong's total might.

The Galens Institute cadets as a whole celebrated well that evening, with ample cause to do so. Not only had Catcher and Grant qualified for the official Dueling brackets and Firesong had pulled through in both its multi-team format matches, but the vast majority of the other students had kicked proper ass just as thoroughly. Lennon and Sidorov's Steelbound and King's Law had done particularly well, with the former

promptly knocking out a Kenneth Academy squad who had been one of the stronger teams at the tournament, and the latter coming out on top in a Wargame that had had not one but *two* third-year teams mixed in among the four-squad Elimination bout. In fact, only *one* of Galens' squads had been knocked out of the Wargames brackets day one—a second year group whose members Aria wasn't familiar with—and *everyone* had made it through the Team Battles, which had the second years in particular feeling good about themselves, even said team who'd been disqualified from the Wargames. It had made celebrating easy, and Aria and Firesong had been atypically chatty with both Valormade and Red Crown over their food, with not even occasional whispers that Major Reese was giving their raucous tables the stink eye from where the officers were dining doing anything to temper the energy.

Honestly, Aria wasn't sure even the passing night had done much anything to sober anyone up after the Dueling tournament proper had started that morning.

“Yes! YES!” Viv was shouting beside her, and she glanced sidelong to find the others jumping up and down in excitement, with even Grant having cupped both hands around his mouth to shout encouragements. On the field before them the tide of the battle had steadily given way to Rei's superior combat ability, with Martin having been driven back more than a half-dozen steps from the point of their initial clash. As fast as both of them were, neither had bothered trying to disengage from the fight to try a different approaching, knowing the other would be able to keep pace with any retreat and take advantage of any backpedalling or turned back. As a result, the fight—while not as vicious as some of the second- and third-year battles, maybe—was an acute example of the destructive power of the upper levels of even the youngest generation of Users, with weapons and limbs moving faster and faster and faster as Rei or Martin struck, block, countered, punched, kicked, ducked, or dodged more than dozen times in quarter that many seconds. It was an awesome sight—one Aria had to begrudgingly admit to herself she was a little envious of given her and Hippolyta's lagging Speed spec

by comparison—and she could imagine the awe being tenfold among the civilian spectators who were watching zoomed-in feeds from higher in the stands.

And then, as was so often the case, the end came in a blink.

While Martin might meet Rei for Speed—a rare thing even among the Galens cadets—she certainly didn't match him for cunning. As he'd pressed her steadily back, Aria had watched with a familiar eye as Rei had grown more and more confident in the patterns of the Duelist's attacks and defense, so she was only mildly surprised when a wide cross-swipe of Martin's right blade came around low and quick, only to stop dead as Rei outright *caught her by the wrist*. From Viv's other side Catcher gave a whoop of success that was immediately lost to the pitch in the cheering of the crowd as Rei proceeded to catch Martin's *other arm* too when the girl seemed to panic and cleaved at him with a wild slash at his face that was telegraph long before the blow came. For a fraction of a second the two of them were locked like that, Rei fighting to find a proper hold while Martin hauled back and twisted, trying to break loose.

She didn't manage it before he seemed to find the proper footing, crouched, and rocketed upward in a jump that should probably would have shot Rei fifteen feet...

... if his knee hadn't caught her in chin on the way up, of course.

There was a collective "OOOOOOH!" of sympathy from the stands as Martin's head snapped back, Rei letting go of both of Duelist's wrist just as the blow landed. She was lifted several feet off the ground under the impact of the hit, and Aria thought it like the match was already over. Rei, however, clearly wouldn't be holding back against such a dangerous opponent until the moment the Arena called the match, because he was twisting even as he landed again, bring his body around and one leg whipping up.

The kick caught Martin full in the side just as she, too, started to drop back to the ground, the power behind it sending the poor girl blasting sideways to careen over the Grasslands, skip—literally *skip*—over the bubbling surface of the stream, then come to a crashing, tumbling halt up the shallow incline of far bank. It said something to the

girl's fighting spirit that she'd somehow managed to hold onto both her swords despite the hit.

Especially when she didn't move from where the spot she lay crumbled at the stream's edge, the stillness of her body echoed in the relative quiet of the stands for a full breath before the Arena spoke up.

"Fatal Damaged Accrued," said the Arena on cue. "Victor: Reidon Ward, the Galens Institute."

"YEEEEAAAAAH!"

It was Viv whose scream opened the eruption of noise from the stadium, and Aria didn't have to turn away from the field as to know that a *lot* of people had taken to their feet to cheer. There were stomps of boots and shoes on cement mixed with the flood of clapping and howling, and Aria was right there with the rest of them, smacking the railing before her with both hands to show her enthusiasm. Even Benaly and the rest of Red Crown sounded to be applauding, and she glance sidelong to find the Brawler, Kadness, von Leef, Kwasi, and Clayton only looking politely miffed at the results, with a couple of them even shaking their heads or shrugging as though they'd not really expected the fight to go any other way.

Which, realistically, they probably hadn't.

"Alright!" Aria finally called out once the spectator's enthusiasm had started to die down, turning to Viv and the others. On the Arena floor, Rei was helping Martin get to her feet on the projection plating, both of them having recalled their CADs. "Catcher, you're up next. Ready?"

Catcher turned to her, one of only two of them to still be wearing their combat suits. "Ready as I'll ever be, boss!" he answered with a two finger salute and a wink. It felt like the boy's natural humor, which was a good sign given the circumstances. Rei's

fight had obviously bolstered Catcher's confidence, which had been lagging a little so far that day.

Aria couldn't blame the nerves he'd been showing again that morning, of course.

"Cool," she answered with a grin, knowing better than to push the subject. "North field, right? You should probably get going. We'll wait for Rei, then head your way. We'll be over there long before your match is up."

"Roger that," came the answer, then Catcher turned and starting jogging along the walkway towards one of the underwork entrances, shouting a final loud "Nice fight, Rei!" towards the Arena floor before vanishing into the steady traffic of fighters and civilians that were coming and going along the walkway. After he was gone, Viv let out a groaned and leaned over the railing.

"North field *again*? At this point it feels like we're basically doing conditioning laps for combat training..."

Cashe smirked at that. "Right? I think we've been on opposite ends all morning for your guys' matches, haven't we?"

Like Catcher, Cashe was still in her combat suit, whereas Aria, Viv, and Grant had long changed back into regulars after having wrapped their own morning Duels without much trouble. Since multi-team battles took so much longer and there were only so many squads, they were staggered over the course of the week, so Firesong didn't have any Team Battle or Wargames matches that afternoon. As a result, Rei's, Catcher's, and Cashe's fights were all the six of them had left for the rest of the day, and black-and-golds—with the added holo-patch of their Type-emblem on their shoulder, now—were expected for any cadet not actively prepping for anything.

Aria laughed at the mumbled complaints, glancing down as she did to see where Rei was. He and Martin weren't anywhere to be found on the Arena floor, though, and since the next fighters—a pair of third years whose school emblems she couldn't make

out easily from where she stood—were on their way towards the Dueling field already, it stood to reason he was on their way up to them.

“Rei said he’d shower after you and Catcher are done, since you’re right after him,” Aria told Cashe, Viv and Grant included by proximity. “Let’s grab him at the underwork stairs, then head over.”

The three of them of them nodded, and Aria took the lead, heading east around the walkway as the Arena announced the south field fight as two cadets from Sermont’s and Maston’s respectively. It took them longer than they were used to to reach the underwork entrance given the foot traffic—which only minimally reduced when a bout was actively going on—but Rie was waiting for them as expected at the top of the stairs, waving as they approached before stepping in bending Aria once they reached him.

“*Great* fight, munchkin!” Viv exclaimed as he joined, throwing an arm around Rei’s shoulders, and grinning at him as he winced when she pulled him into a light headlock. “I mean obviously I knew you had it, but *still!*”

“Brave of you, calling me that,” Rei answered with a grin. “Given what I just beat the only other Duelist in this tournament who hold a candle to you, you’d think I’d have earned a *little* bit of respect, at least.”

“Once you’re not living in a different altitude than the rest of us, you can moan about it. Until then... suck it.”

The pair of them laughed together at that, with Grant watching them a little warily from the back of their little line and Cashe only rolling her eyes before telling Viv to let go of Rei so they weren’t forcing other people on the walkway to move around them. Aria hid a smile and didn’t reprimand them further, pleased to leave the two at their antics. She and Rei had talked pretty long into the night the evening before about the conversation he and Viv had had—a little later than was probably prudent, given where they were, truth be told—and she was pleased to see them jabbing and poking at each other in common fashion. They’d never really *stopped* their back and forth, of course,

but—like Rei had said he felt after the talk—Aria though their interactions felt a little... easier? There was probably still a little tension there, and probably would be until Viv—or possible Grant himself, it sounded like—clued them in as to what was going on with the big Mauler, but the fact that they'd had it out looked to have healed a stressor neither of them had been aware was there. It was nice to see, and only added to overall excitement of how Sectionals had gone for Firesong and its individual members so far.

Then again... They were coming up on the first real potential challenge to that bliss, weren't they...?

“Group's leaving up there,” Cashe said a minute later, pointing along the bend ahead of them just as they reached the north end of the Arena. Sure enough, what looked the better portion of a couple of squads from the 104th were stepping away from stepping away from the railing just in time for Firesong's arrival, and Aria started making mumbled excuses as she started to hurry. It was a silent rule that walkway viewing was to be kept for the schools, but space was usually still tight for everything but fights between the lowest level first years at the tournament. As expected, even hurrying half the space had been taken by the time they reached the railing, and Aria was about to regrettably ask Grant to stand behind them—given he could see over all of them with half-a-foot to spare—when Rei's hand pressed her forward, then slipped around her as he took hold of the barrier as he pressed his body up against hers.

She felt a tingly along the back of her neck that had *nothing* to do with neuroline, and she around at him—as close as the two had *ever* been—to find him grinning, but avoiding her eye.

“Sorry,” he said with an exaggerated shrug that said very much that he wasn't sorry *at all*. “Space is tight. Hope you don't mind.”

She blinked, then looked at the others. Viv, for once, hadn't noticed as she chatted with Grant—who had amusingly pulled a similar move, though much more subtly given how much longer his arms were—but Cashe was eyeing her and Rei sidelong with a

raised eyebrow. It *was* tight, but they'd managed to all wedge themselves into the space to get a clear view of the north field, so Aria looked turned away to pretend to look for... whatever. Anything.

"Just don't sweat on me too much," she mumbled, trying—and failing—to sound stern.

Rei's quiet snicker told her she hadn't been successful, and the light squeeze he gave her midriff with the encircling arm didn't help at all to keep Aria's from getting hot.

They arrived between fights, and it was two more matches before Catcher's turn came up. The Duels were good, and all five of them ended up picking one cadet or another to cheer for—though not always the same one, amusingly—so they were already feeling the thrill again by the time a second year from Kenneth put up a valiant-but-fruitless effort against a third year from the 104th. After that, though, it was Catcher's fight, and only Viv shouted encouragements—ones that were probably only borderline acceptable per ISCM terms—as he and his opponent made their way out of the underworks towards the Dueling field after the second lieutenant acting as arbiter called for them.

Aria felt a twinge of anxiety, watching the boy move stiffly towards the west end of the 30-meter circle.

"He looks nervous again," she muttered quietly so that only Rei could hear, and he nodded beside her.

"Can you blame him?"

She couldn't, of course, and her attention shifted to the other fighter as both of them reached the edge of the field.

Andre Boone hadn't exactly come out of nowhere. He had been one of the strongest fighters coming into Sectionals, and only a little digging had revealed that he was widely considered the ace of 9th Sector Division. A Phalanx like Aria, he was of the

sword-wielding variety, which meant he would have a familiarity with Catcher's fighting ability that could only have been bested by another one-handed Saber. That wouldn't have been too problematic, and even that fact that Boone was a C5, a full tier higher than Catcher, wasn't anything worth stressing too much about.

The issue was that Boone had demonstrated—in both a Team Battle and Wargame the evening before, both which is squad had come out firmly on top—that he'd been one of the earlier first years to develop an initial Ability.

“Catcher knows what he has to do,” Rei told her, giving her another squeeze that was more comforting than teasing this time. “We spent all night and morning reviewing. He's got this.”

“Yeah...” Aria managed with a slow nod as she looked to Catcher on the west side of the circle again. “Yeah... He's got this...”

She hoped she sounded more confident than she felt.

“Combatants, take position.”

The arbiter called Catcher and Boone to move, and the pair of them stepped over the silver dividing line that separated the Dueling circle from the larger Team Battle and Wargames section. They were in their red starting rings in moments, and the officer continued as expected.

“This is as an official Team Battle event,” he said. “It is therefore subject to regulation ruling. Once the field is formed, you will be ordered to call, then engage. Premature Device manifestation will result in a penalty. Premature approach, attack, or the like will result in a match loss. Is that understood?”

Two glances in either direction. Two nods. One flash of a NOED in the man's eyes.

Then Catcher and Boone started to rise.

For once it was Viv who called the field first.

“Depot,” she got out before any of the others could even begin to guess, and it wasn’t a second or so more before she was proven right. Dirty concert flooring manifested beneath Catcher and Boone, soon followed by rusting steel walls and chains hanging from a rotting ceiling of dilapidated sheet metal. It appeared to be raining outside the depot, because water was streaming down to splash into filthy puddles everywhere throughout the space. It reminded Aria a little of the zone she and Rei had *first* had it out on, the day they’d met at Commencement, except that instead of stacked storage crates there were several long lines of unmoving, raised conveyers whose rubber belts had long-since peeled away into ugly strands and piles.

Aria only took it all in at a glance, to intent on watching Catcher.

“Field: Abandoned Depot,” came the Arena’s first announcement.

Aria and the rest of Firesong held their breath, not hearing the cheers and calls from the stands and elsewhere along the railing that rang out despite the fact neither fighter would be able to hear anything anyone yelled now.

“Cadet Andre Boone of the 9th Sector Division versus Cadet Layton Catchwick of the Galens Institute. Combatants... Call.”

In the buzz of noise that was the closest the Arena every got to quite, it wasn’t possible to hear either fighter make the summon. Aria saw Catcher’s lips move, though, and a second later Arthus was around his arms and legs, purple vysetrium tipping this left hand in curved claws and lining the edge of the Device’s longsword. She looked away from him, then, to take in his opponent.

Boon might only have been a single rank higher than Catcher, but his C5 evolution had apparently brought with it more advantages than just his Ability. His

armor—silver and white steel accented with glowing orange—covered both legs and girdled his hips, and planted both hands and forearms. His sword—a straight blade like Catcher’s—didn’t look to match Arthus for reach, but the boy’s shield was a beast of a thing, a round, flat plate of solid white edged with vysetrium that was half-again the size of Hippolyta’s defenses.

Catcher was going to have to play this very, *very* carefully.

Then again, they’d known that, and had been preparing him for it accordingly.

“Combatants,” came the Arena’s voice one more time. “... Fight.”

And with that, Catcher charged.

It wasn’t ideal, but it was the only option. On the one hand was the fact that, as a Phalanx, there was very little advantage to Boone moving more than minimally necessary from his starting point. Top-level Defense came at the cost of agility with almost every User of his and Aria’s shared Type, so it would have been silly for the 9th Sector cadet to budge unless absolutely necessary. Ordinarily that *might* have allowed for a more patient approach by Catcher, *might* have allowed for a bit more study of the zone to see if there were any environmental factors at play he could take advantage of.

Unfortunately, time was not on the Saber’s side in this particular fight.

Reaching the first of the conveyer belts in a flash, Catcher planted a foot on a solid-looking part of the steel and leapt, flying upward in a massive arc that took him a third of the way to the ceiling high above. He didn’t make a sound as he dropped, but there was a *crash* of noise when he impacted Boone’s waiting shield with both feet. The Phalanx accepted the hit, but tilted his defense away at the last second so that Catcher half-slid off the metal. Its force still drove Boone back two paces, however, which had been the point. The boy swung at Catcher, trying to catch him in the side, but with his footing shifted the blow did carry half the speed or force in might have

from a solid base, so it sailed harmlessly over the Sabers head as he ducked. Rocketing upward from that crouch again, Catcher first drove this blade at Boone's eyes over the edge of the Phalanx's shield, then twisted to sweep a clawed hand at his sword arm, hoping to sneak in enough damage to disarm the cadet.

Not dice, unfortunately, and the fight only got more hellish from there.

Catcher, fortunately, had done a good job of training up his Endurance, so keeping up a steady flow of hits and slashes and strikes wasn't any major issue. Even as the fight slipped out of its first 30 seconds and passed into a minute in length, there was no obvious slowing down. It was good evidence, Aria thought absently as she looked on, of the steady improvement they'd all made over last months, and she was particularly glad for it in the moment. Again, ordinarily it would have been asinine to chop at a Phalanx's shield like a lumberjack might challenge a tree, but Catcher didn't have the time for that. He *had* to get through. He *had* to. If he didn't manage that soon, he was at risk of—

SHING!

“OH!” Cashe exclaimed excitedly, and Aria felt a thrill that was accented by Rei's arm stiffening across her back. Catcher's ceaseless pounding and abruptly born fruit. After what seemed like a thousand vicious hits, Arthus' edge had apparently caught at just the right angle in Boone's chipping shield, because had cleanly sheered off maybe a quarter of the left side of the steel. Aria's grip tightened around the railing, seeing this, because all her experience as a Phalanx told her this was a *huge* blow. Aside from the obvious reduction in coverage, a round shield that size would suddenly be off-balance. If Catcher was ready for it...

WHLAM!

“YES!” Aria and Rei exclaimed together her as the hit blasted forward and landed cleanly.

Before the hung of metal had even completely hit the floor, the abrupt change in the weight of the shield had bent Boone's arm awkwardly for a moment as the boy fought to rebalance his defense. It was only an instant, a fraction of a second, but the Phalanx was wide open. Unfortunately the stroke that had cleaved the steel off had brought Arthus' blade out of position, but that hadn't stopped Catcher. On the contrary, he bent into the impetus the downstroke and driven a shoulder forward, catching Boone full in the chest as he did.

The Phalanx, still with his feet planted, didn't go flying like most other Types might have in the moment, but he was still thrown back, arms and legs flailing to find his balance. Catcher followed, bringing Arthus up again and lancing forward, angling to drive the sword straight through Boone's chest and ending the fight then and there. The 9th Sector cadet, however, provide atypically nimble, because he found at least a decent balance just before the blade hit, and he pivoted, sweeping his shield around to catch Arthus and redirected the plunge by and passed him. Boone's own sword cleaved horizontally in a clean followup, but Catcher was ready for it, diving forward into a roll that had him coming up dirty and socking in one of the zone's filthy puddles, but not absent any significant part of his being, like his head.

Still... Aria felt a rock starting to sink in her gut. That had been a *perfect* opportunity to end the fight in a reasonable time, and Boone had just managed to slip the noose. Now the match was going to push the 90 second mark...

"Not goooood..." Cashe muttered in a worried sort of singsong, her own dark knuckles glancing as she gripped the railing to Aria's left with equal vigor.

"*Really* not good," Rei confirmed as Viv and Grant nodded along in agreement on Cashe's other side.

"Come on, Catcher," Aria muttered under her breath, not even realizing she'd leaned over the edge of the walkway. "Come oooon..."

Sadly, if you tell the universe your plans, it tends to laugh...

Catcher reengaged in short order, ignoring the muddy state of his suit and CAD. He charged Boone again, Arthus leading the way once more, and the Phalanx was again promptly put on the defensive. He'd adapted to the weight of the imbalanced shield now, though, and was clearly skilled enough to make do even with the reduce coverage of his all-important defense.

Which was why he had enough time to weather not just that assault, but the following two, winning himself another 15 seconds of breath or so.

Or—much more concerningly—15 seconds of charge.

Aria saw the moment, saw the instant the change happened. Her own Third Eye—like Rei's Type Shift—wasn't an Ability that required any electromagnetic buildup, but a lot of them were. From what she understood, one was informed of the availability of such a option the moment it was brought online, having built up though movement, friction, and impact absorption.

So it wasn't hard to tell—if one was looking for it—when Boone's face subtly lit up, giving away what was about to happen.

And Aria hadn't been the only one looking for it, apparently.

“Ah shit,” Rei cursed.

She didn't have time to echo the sentiment before Boone shifted his footing and launched himself at Catcher for the first time all match, shouting the voice command as he did.

“REPULSION!”