

Chapter 29

Viv's loss in the Saturday morning Duels was the first time Rei finally managed to stop grinding his teeth.

For the better part of the last 24 hours he'd been the quiet one on the team for once, though to be fair all of them had been pretty sober ever since Dyrk Reese had torn the wind from their sails following their Team Battle victory over Greyfang. So profound had been their sour mood, in fact, that not only did Christopher Lennon make a point of stopping Firesong in the hotel halls after dinner to ask what was going on, but he'd been joined by a gorgeous girl looking on with genuine concern who Viv had later had to explain to them all was Candice Rice, the Lasher's girlfriend and a fellow third-year individually qualifier. It hadn't taken much for Lennon to get the truth out of Rei—with Aria, Viv, and Catcher all grumbling alongside him while Grant and Cashe gaped—but unfortunately the A-Ranker could only grimace and say he had faith Firesong would make a hell of a fight of it no matter which way it all went. In the moment it hadn't helped much—though Rei had forced out a muttered thanks to be polite—but looking back he was grateful the Lasher had taken the time and made the point of reminding them it wasn't all about winning.

And yet, despite that, it took Viv losing her quarter-finals match for Rei to finally kick himself out of his black mood.

As they'd entered the weekend, several things had happened. Firstly, not only did the morning fights start an hour later, but the Dueling periods had been elongated to match the increased level of competition. After dropping from 128 combatants in each of the tournament's two brackets to only eight following Friday's Duels, the rapid-fire, two-at-a-time fights that had claimed the mornings on the Arena's main floor had given way to single fights on the north Dueling field. With only the eight quarter-final matches total Saturday morning that would bring each bracket down to the top four, each bout

was provided plenty of time to go as long as it needed, which ended up being for the better.

Some of the matches between the older students—like the Duel between Anatoli Sidorov and the Deermouth third year he ended up barely beating to win a place in the top four—took more than 15 minutes to complete as the best cadets on the planet ripped and tore at each other until one or the other was too exhausted to put up a proper defense anymore.

The other big change was—as expected—that the Kenneth Arena filled to the max, without a single seat Rei could see from wherever he stood left empty. As the work week ended and the civilian SCT fans who hadn't had a chance to partake in the earlier days of the Sectionals freed up, getting in and out of the building became such a congested affair that ISCM officers had started forming special lanes at the entrances specifically for combatants and their chaperones to access the Arena. Overall, it had resulted in a new level of thrumming excitement throughout the venue when Galens arrived, with thousands of new fans shouting in fresh enthusiasm when they caught sight of Lennon or Sidorov or Rei or Aria. Rei suspected, too, that that energy would only be doubled again the following morning, when the last two rounds of Duels would happen back-to-back, deciding first the final two from each bracket, then the Sectionals champion.

And yet Rei hadn't been able to enjoy so much as a moment of it, his mood so foul that Aria—who herself had been quietly seething since the previous afternoon—had openly taken his hand in both of hers as they'd sat in their Institute's Section of the stands, kneading his palm and fingers in an attempt to get him to relax and trying to get to engage him on any subject other than the upcoming afternoon.

Rei hadn't pulled his hand away—what madman would have?—but he'd equally not had the self-control to meet her halfway when it came to conversation, only saying anything more than “Yeah” and “You're probably right” when he got up to head down

for his own fight, when he'd apologized for being an ass and promised he'd make it up to her once they were back at school.

His anger had fed his fight, too, to the point where Rei had almost felt bad when he made mincemeat of his top eight opponent—a C5 Saber name Ashley Wong, one of only two non-Galen's quarter-finalists—inside of a minute. Impatient to get the match over with, the moment they'd met on the Sunset Beach variant he'd feigned an attack at the girl's face only to kick sand into her eyes from below when she raised her sword to defend her head. After that she'd done a truly admirable job of keeping him at bay despite being half-blind, but the fact that she was a two-handed Saber-Type made it hard for her to try and clear her vision, and Rei took the win when he eventually got behind her, kicked her supporting knee out from under her, and drove Shido's claws into the back of the girl's skull.

He'd returned the Galens section to roars of approvals from most of the older students, but only quiet compliments from the first years. The rest of Firesong, rightfully, were all somber, while not a single member from Valormade or Red Crown seemed able to look Rei in the eyes.

It had helped a little that Aria had taken his hand up again without a word after he sat down, apparently unfazed by his mood, and it was minute or so before Rei realized she was holding onto him as much in an effort to keep *herself* calm, too.

Of the first years, Grant was up next, facing off against the only other non-Galens fighter left in the bracket, a Duelist from Kenneth itself called Fred Wynn. That match had been even shorter than Rei's, with Grant taking Wynn completely by surprise about 10 seconds into the fight when he triggered Overclock early, and to devastating effect. The Duelist lost an arm in the first blow once the Mauler's Ability was engaged, and hadn't been able to respond quick enough under the shock of that wound. His left leg had been taken next, then his head, and Grant had been declared one of the top four.

And then, an hour later, it was Viv's turn.

“Here we go,” she muttered under her breath as she pushed herself up from the seat between Catcher and Grant, smiling stiffly around at the rest of the team. “Wish me luck.”

“Good luck,” the five of them echoed in answer, no one in the mood for any jokes or games. She took her leave, and Rei turned back to see Vademe doing the same, the Lancer happening to be glancing around in their direction in the same moment.

They locked eyes for a second, then nodded to each other, both understanding the situation and neither liking it.

For 20 minutes or so Firesong waited in near-uniform silence, with only Catcher occasionally making a half-hearted attempt to engage with any of them. Rei even eventually silently stopped Aria’s frustrated massaging of his hand in favor of just holding hers and running a thumb along the inside of her palm in an effort to keep them both even tempered.

At least until the winner of the match before them came to an end—Rei hadn’t even registered who was fighting—and the announcer started shouting again.

“What a *match!* Congratulations to our victor, and best of luck to the defeated! You still have a long journey ahead of you, we’re sure! But speaking of coming journeys, it’s time for some of our youngest stars to show off what they’re made of once again! Please put your hands together and raise those voices for one of the Galens Institute’s finest first years... FROM THE WEST, IT’S CADET VIVIANA ARADA!”

Rei and the others managed to get a few shouts out at Viv’s appearance from the right side of the floor below them, but on the whole they left the cheering and applause to the roar of the crowds. This late on, even the first year matches were something to look forward to, so enthusiasm was less lacking now than it had been earlier in the week.

“And from the east, also from the Galens Institute... IT’S CADET KASTRO VADEME!”

More noise. More cheering. Rei wondered if he would be returning to the school with his hearing permanently damaged, or if Shido would be able to handle that potential damage as well as it had dealt with his fibro.

“Come on, Viv...” he heard Aria mutter to herself beside him, and he squeezed her hand to let her know he was right there with her.

Vademe. The matchup was unfortunate. Viv needed to get close to her opponents to do any real damage, and Lancers specialized in preventing exactly that. Worse, Vademe was often touted as the best of his CAD-Type at Galens—though Kay and Cashe both might take that as a challenge—which meant he was very possibly the best on the *planet*. And now that he had an Ability in his arsenal to boot...

Come on, Viv, Rei echoed Aria, but only to himself.

The field arbiter—First Lieutenant Neelson again, who’d overseen their first team match—called the pair of them up to their starting points, and soon after Viv and Vademe were rising rapidly into the air. No-one from Firesong made the call this time, satisfied to let the more-enthusiastic Users and spectators above and around them shout their guesses out. The tall walls of a Cliffs variation was quick to manifest, with Viv at the bottom end of a sloped, looping canyon, any sight of her blocked from Vademe’s position higher up in the stone outcroppings. A quick look over told Rei the field had multiple different paths and alleys through the rock—with even a couple low, short channels carved straight through some of the cliffs—and he felt a little better. If Viv could get the drop on Vademe, if she could keep a low profile and stay patient, she might make a clean end of the match before he had a chance to put up a fight. Speed was her forte, and the zone favored a guerrilla assault.

They were told to call, and two CADs manifested around the pair of them. There was a silence, and Rei didn’t even notice that the stands, too, had gone dead quiet.

The power of the SCTS...

“Combatants... Fight!”

In a cloud of dust and shale, Viv took off.

And Rei went cold.

“Viv!” Aria hissed quietly from beside him, her hands going stiff around his. “No! No!”

The others, too, were cursing, and Grant had even leapt to his feet. In the corner of his eye Rei saw the massive boy half-lunge, half-sprint over to the stairs, then down and to the railing, where he must have growled enough threats that a number of other cadets—including some second and third years—made a space for him.

It didn’t matter. It wasn’t like he could help.

Viv had already committed.

What the hell is going on? Rei could only wonder, dumbstruck, as he watched his best friend bolt right up the middle of the zone, sprinting full-tilt up the hill towards where she knew Vademe’s starting point would be.

Absent seemed any consideration of tactical thought. Missing was any applied combat logic, or even anything that might have been called common sense. Instead of taking the natural upper hand offered by a field that was holy to her benefit, Viv appeared hellbent on throwing aside any edge she might have had in the fight in favor of taking Vademe head on. Rei was so thrown by this, so surprised, that he couldn’t wrap his head around any of it. Viv was hot-headed, yeah, but she only *really* flew off the rails when she had real reason. As *pissed* as they all were at Reese for his gloating, the major’s petty arrogance was nothing compared to when his best friend had gone full brimstone and hellfire after Rei had almost been killed by Central Command in the parameter testing, much less the time after Selleck and the others had done their best to kick his teeth in.

No... This was something else. Something more than the major.

And Rei—*again*, he realized, recalling Viv’s disappointed air after their fight the previous day—had no idea what it could be.

On the field, Viv had gotten her wish. Vademe—who would have lost the advantage of much of his weapons’ range and maneuverability in the field’s tighter side-lanes—had bolted right up what could have been called the “middle” run. He took a corner, and Viv almost won with a surprise attack by accident anyway as she found herself sprinting right at her quarry. In a flash both of Gemela’s blade came up, parrying dagger driving forward, sword cutting diagonally down in an angled crosstrike.

Vademe, though, was one of the best for a reason.

Rather than freeze at the sudden sight of his opponent ripping towards him up the valley, the Lancer dipped into some Strength or Speed reserve to blitz right by the impact point of their trajectories, spinning as he did. His spear came around in an arc, chasing Viv’s back, but when her weapons caught only air she had the sense to drop into a flying roll, dodging the spear to come up on her feet again with minimal momentum lost.

She used it to continue her careening momentum towards the curve in the lane, leapt, planted both feet on the rugged surface of the stone wall, and catapulted up and into the air with a graceful spin to drive both blades down at Vademe again.

Rei only had time to wince at the rashness of such a move against someone of the Valormade leader’s caliber when Vademe swept the falling attack aside with his longer weapon, then turned the angle of the deflection into a whirlwind kick that caught Viv mostly in the side and back before she even hit the ground, rocketing her sideways towards the wall.

Then again, Viv wasn’t in the running for best Duelist at the tournament for nothing.

Her Speed and Cognition had her twisting before she struck rock, managing to hit on her feet again and accept the impact, though Rei thought he saw her wince as she

did so. She lunged off the wall into a roll that brought her up a body length in front of Vademe, and only then did the fight start in earnest.

“Holy *hell*,” Catcher muttered from Aria’s other side. Rei, Aria, and Cashe, for their part, were all too dumbstruck to say anything, while Grant roared encouragements and unheard callouts from the railing below them.

It was the Team Battle all over again, but with *every* eye on Viv, now. Though Vademe never let her get close, she fought with a vicious energy that was as terrorizing as it was mesmerizing. Every movement was sharp and focused, every cut and kick and punch like the calculated assault of machine built to kill. While Rei had seen it the previous afternoon—he cursed, realizing he’d never taken the time to fulfil his promise to himself that he’d watch the match recordings—he had to admit it was on another level now that it was set directly before him. Viv danced like she’d never danced before, all edge and sharp grace, all speed and lethal elegance. It was like there was nothing in the world to her in the moment other than the opponent in front of her, and Rei had doubts he—and maybe even Aria—would have come out of a comparable fight without a couple missing limbs if they didn’t lean into their Abilities.

Unfortunately... Abilities could make all the difference, sometimes.

“Break Step!”

The first time Vademe called out the trigger phrase, Viv was mostly ready. He’d telegraphed the move a little too clearly, leaping away in a moment he managed to slap her back a step with the edge of his spear. Even with her Speed Viv didn’t have a chance to get out of the way, but she was smart enough—no, *skilled* enough, rather—to time a two-bladed sweep of Gemela’s weapons before her, giving most of her body some coverage. The move saved her life, catching the Lancer’s blade with her parrying knife as his Break Step jetted the boy forward with such power that he left a bilateral cloud of dust along the short path of his close. The spear was pulled wide, the killing blow avoided.

But Vademe had apparently accounted for such a possibility, because his shoulder took Viv in the chest with all of the force of his Ability.

Viv didn't manage to save herself this time as she was sent flying for a second time, her back striking the wall full-on with a *crunch* that had many of the spectators groaning or joining into a collective "Ooooh..." of sympathy. The blow very obviously rattled her, because her parrying blade went clinking away and she half-crumpled to the ground as gravity took hold of her. Again, though, her topped-out Speed and Cognition rescued her, because she managed to throw herself sideways before Vademe's follow-up rush could skewer her through the chest.

Even if Rei had noticed Aria's painful grip around his hand, he didn't think he would have cared.

Viv came up on her feet once more—10 yards from her dagger—and lunged. Rei's heart sank as he noticed a sluggishness in the attack, at the lack of acceleration that usually drove her forward, and he could only hope that it was a registered concussion that Gemela would be working to overcome. The larger part of his logic, however, kept reminding him that Viv's weakest spec was Endurance, and that Vademe's shoulder check and the subsequent blast into the valley wall would have done nothing to help what would soon be waning stamina.

To her credit, though, and despite only have one blade to work with, Viv waded back into the fight with just as much fervor and need as she had at the start of the match.

The fight hit 3 minutes, then 4. Viv indeed started to lag, but Vademe did as well, seeming more intent on keeping his opponent at bay long enough to recover a little than he did on trying to close out the bout. At 5 minutes the shouts and cheers of the crowd had peaked, with voices coming from everywhere calling for one cadet or the other, anticipation at what Rei though had to have been a tournament-high for a first year match. Possibly he was making that up, but Viv and Vademe were demonstrating

a powerful example that low Endurance could—to a certain degree—be compensated for with will and skill, because even as the pace of their encounters slowed the methodical approach to attack and defense become only more deliberate, more calculated and sharp.

And then Viv made the mistake that cost her the match.

Whether it was a realization that Vademe was struggling almost as much as her, a desire to get every advantage she could back, or just a lapse in judgement brought on by fatigue, Rei didn't know. Whatever the case was, Viv managed to snake a forward kick through the Lancer's defense while his spear was engaged with her sword, catching him in the gut. He half-doubled, staggering back with an "Ooph!", but instead of pressing the advantage Viv hesitated, freezing for a fraction of a second. Maybe it was fear of a trap, or just indecision. Whatever the case was, it gave Vademe the opportunity to get his spear before him one-handed, warding any opportunity of a direct assault.

So Viv did what she had to think was the next best thing, and bolted for the place where her parrying dagger still lay among the rocks several body lengths away.

"NO!"

It wasn't even Firesong that shouted at that, but a thousand voices from all around the stadium. Rei had seen this exact mistake before—a hundred times, in fact—and he could only marvel at how tired Viv had to be, how far she had pushed her limited Endurance, for her to stumble so badly. To his left he saw the five other members of Valormade leap to their feet, yelling for Vademe to take this golden opportunity.

The Lancer had needed no such encouragement, having already planted his feet and gripping his spear tight in one hand even as the other clutched at his gut.

"Break Step!"

CRACK!

Maybe it was the rank of his Cognition, or maybe it was just his mind playing tricks on him, but Rei watched as though in slow motion as Vademe's vysetrium blazed,

and he screamed forward in a streak of light. Ahead of him, Viv had just snatched up her parrying blade and was turning to face the boy, both weapons coming up at the ready.

Too slow, Rei knew, himself on his feet with Aria and the others beside him, though he didn't know when he'd jumped up to stand.

Sure enough, Viv wasn't fast enough, and Vademe's spear caught her full in the chest, wrenching her backwards to smash her against the wall of the valley and pin her there against the stone. Incredibly she managed to hold onto her blades this time—even the smaller weapon she'd just recovered—and Rei felt a an irrational grief tug at his gut as he saw his friend's body spasm where it had been impaled to the rock. For a long moment Viv and Vademe were both still, the dipping sound of the crowd matching their unmoving form as all waited, but the Arena was long in its announcement. Apparently the Lancer must have just missed her heart, because after a second, then 2, then 3, Viv brought her face up to look at Vademe, staring at him with wide eyes. Then, incredibly, she lifting a lifted a shaking arm. Her sword came up, rising above her head. Rei saw Vademe's face register shock, saw the Lancer's gaze lift with the weapon, watching it fearfully as it rose in a display sheer will Rei wasn't sure he had ever seen.

Then, though, the blade slipped from Viv's fingers to clatter to the stone, her head drooped forward, and the Arena finally spoke.

“Fatal Damaged Accrued. Winner: Kastro Vademe, the Galens Institute.”

From a distant, dark place, Viv heard the words, and a part of her was relieved as the pain that had ripping through her chest, stealing away her breath and focus, faded

and blinked away. Despite that, though, she knew she was passing out, knew that she was slipping. It didn't matter. None of it mattered.

She'd lost.

An unpleasant wash of emotions claimed her last thoughts as she registered this fact. Disappointment. Sadness. Regret. Fear. Logan had done a wonderful job of bolstering her spirits the last couple of days, but the fight against Vademe—the very target of much of her apprehensions, if even indirectly—had presented Viv with a golden opportunity to shed much of the worries plaguing her when the Mauler wasn't around to poke a smile out of her. If she could beat Vademe, if she could just prove to *herself* that she was the strongest, she would have felt safe. Would have felt serene. She could have brushed off the fears and accepted Logan's words—echoed by that confident voice in her head that had been getting quieter for days now—that it was only a matter of time, that her turn would come.

In retrospect, Viv realized she'd put way too many fragile eggs in that very precarious basket.

Shit, was her last conscious thought as everything went black, and she hoped she was only imagining the feeling of a tear forming in the corner of one eye, then trailing down her cheek as her head fell to her chest.

Then she was gone, slipping away, her utter exhaustion and the agonizing shock of that final blow taking such a toll that she didn't hear Vademe recall his CAD, nor feel the boy catch her as she fell forward while the field started to dematerialize around them. She didn't hear the sounds of the Arena return, and was still out cold by the time they touched down and the projection plating and Vademe handed her carefully off to a couple of ISCM medical offers who'd rushed over as they dropped. Even Logan's beloved shouts of her name were lost to her when a gurney was called for and she was hauled atop it and hurried off the Arena floor while the announcer assured the stands

that she would be fine, that she'd just pushed herself a little too hard, and that everyone should give a resounding round of applause for both the victor *and* the gallant defeated.

In fact, the first thing Viv registered after passing out was some time later, as she came too slowly in the bright bustle of the underworks, having been roused in large part by familiar text scripting itself out across her vision, demanding her attention no matter what state of consciousness she might have been in...