

Chapter 35

The impact of Lennon and Sidorov's initial exchange might have been mistaken for a bomb going off.

Sidorov triggered an early Break Step out the gate, Lennon very nearly matching him for Speed with natural agility. As a result, both tore out of their starting circles at such break-neck speeds that they left twin hollows of billowing dust to sweep across the plateau in their wake. The Lasher, high-ranked and trained as part of the third-year Duelist groups because of his CAD's form, met his boosted opponent just short of half way across their reduced 20-yard stage. Sidorov, incredibly, looked to have anticipated this, because Rei had seen his spear start to swing even before he'd left the circle. The timing was perfect, the thorough study the second year must have made of his older opponent shining clear, because the weapon curved out and in at *exactly* the right time to strike for Lennon's side. It would have been a hell of an opening hit, possibly doing all the damage Sidorov would have needed early on to even out the match, if not outright end it.

Too bad for him that the Lasher was a master of his own weapons and timing.

Like two separate, living things the A-Type's chain swords move in unison. His left came ripping up in a line along his side, catching and wrenching Sidorov's spear up and away even as the disjointed segments of his right came hurtling down in a straight, swung line at the Lancer's head. Despite the weapon being as limber as—well, as a *chain*—Rei was reminder more of a felled tree crashing down as it dropped, or maybe a tumbling building. Sidorov managed just to get out of the way in time, leaping up and sideways to follow the redirected momentum of his spear just before the chain sword struck earth, causing the erupting *boom* of that first encounter.

And all in less than a second.

Rei didn't even hear Viv and Aria gasp in awe on either side of him as Sidorov landed, rolled, then bolted for the Lasher again, taking him on head-long, spear leading the way. Another fraction of a second, another block by Lennon with one blade and a swing with the other, and another charge.

"Dude's charging like a bull," Catcher's bemusement did, on the other hand, reach Rei. "What's he thinking?"

"That his plan is working," Cashe had to yell over a unified gasp from the crowd as a ripping cut from Lennon's blade just missed taking the second year's arm at the shoulder.

In the corner of his eye Rei saw Catcher give the Lancer a confused look, and Cashe leaned over to explain, loud enough for them all to hear without having to scream this time.

"Lancers have the greatest reach among all the Types, right?"

Catcher nodded.

"Yeah," Cashe echoed. Then, though, she pointed up at the fight. "So what happens when we suddenly *don't*?"

Rei and Aria were both nodding along as Catcher's jaw dropped in understanding, turning back to look up in renewed amazement.

It became more and more clear as the first few seconds of the fight became 20, then 30. Sidorov, master of grace and an elite through-and-through at using the advantage of his spear's reach in every other fight they had seen him in, had adapted in a big, ugly way. It wasn't pretty, but the Lancer had forced himself into the position of the *close*-combat fighter between the two of them, pushing their exchanges to happen as near to the Lasher's body as he could managed. Studying the fight further, Rei was impressed realizing that the second year had even adjusted the grip on his spear, bringing his hands a good foot up the haft of the weapon to keep the distance at a minimal. It would have been pure madness against any other fight.

But against Christopher Lennon, who sported a combat range largely beyond any other User Rei knew of?

“Friggin’ *brilliant*,” Catcher summarized adequately. “No wonder the Lasher’s half on the defensive.”

It was absolutely true. While the back-and-forth of the match was no less of a blur than any other upper-bracket fight, it *was* a good deal more close-knit that Rei would have expected given the two fighters. Sidorov stayed tight and as far inside Lennon’s range as he could manage, moving and prodding and poking at the Lasher more like a Duelist or Saber than his own Type, sometimes going so far as to weird his spear one-handed. The resulting proximity forced Lennon to keep one chain sword constantly engaged in with rippling, spherical defense that was one of his signatures specialties, which further served to hinder his “free” sword from any clean attacks. It *was* brilliant.

And yet...

“I think I’m more impressed that Sidorov has Lennon on edge,” Rei told the group after another couple of exchanges above them, in which the Lasher’s slash blew a crater out of the plateau.

“I was just thinking that,” Aria muttered in agreement beside him, not all that surprisingly.

“Huh?” it was Viv’s turn to ask, and Aria’s in turn to point.

“Lennon’s being careful. *Really* careful. He could try to put some distance between them, or try to find a space to use both swords on the assault, but he’s not. He’s sticking to a solid defense that he knows Sidorov can’t break. He’s waiting.”

“For what?” Cashe this time, face still tilted towards the fight.

“For Sidorov to tire out. Or mess up.”

“Why?”

“Cause he thinks Sidorov is good enough to do real damage if he gives him the opportunity,” Rei answered. “Even as a second year.”

That seemed to register with everyone, because Viv, Catcher, and Cashe's eyes all went wide in realization as Grant nodded from where he still stood with his hands on Viv's shoulders. Above, the battle continued on, with the Lasher indeed playing it very safe, holding the center of the plateau firmly as he turned in place to meet Sidorov's ever-aggressive attacks. With any pair of other fighters at the tournaments, it might have felt monotonous.

With these two, it instead felt like a rising rising tide against a storm wall, every single spectator waiting with bated breath for the moment it would all come crashing down to let in the promised flood.

A hundred times Sidorov attacked, and a hundred times he was rebuffed and forced to counter or dodge an incoming response from Lennon's free sword. The exchanges were so quick, so flawlessly connected, that the *WHAM* and *CRUNCH* of the A-Type's weapon blasting through earth and stone came in a deafening wash of rapid fire explosions. Dust rose, and furrows were carved into the field. Rocks and stone shook loose of the underside of the cliff with every hit, dropping down to splash into the rip of the flow below. The madness of the fight took on a monstrous feel, like Sidorov was battling some tentacled titan whose many arms were lashing out in a chaos of drumming attacks. The fact that Lennon only had *one* blade to extend beyond his defenses was lost to all in the speed of the fights, as was the fact Sidorov wasn't fighting in his elements. The cheering started to get louder from the stands again, shouts for one side or the other to overcome the daunting talents of their opponent, until the booming strikes of the chain sword were only part of the deafening roar of the Arena as a whole. The announcer—whose voice had been largely lost to Rei from the start—becoming nothing but a droning noise in the background of the rest, and then everything was a constant, deafening note of solid enthusiasm.

And Rei and the others were along for every second of the ride.

Aria hadn't let go of his forearms, and he winced more than once as her grip tightened instinctively whenever Sidorov dodged a particularly close call. Viv was actually about as animated as he'd seen her all week, jumping up and down while she held onto the hugging arm Grant had ended up looping around her from behind, the Mauler himself hollering along to as he pumped his free hand in the air. Catcher and Cashe, meanwhile, were mirror images of the other, subtly ducking and weaving imaginary blows without realizing it and alternatively yelling out encouragements and shouts of alarms. Rei grinned to himself as Aria's fingers dug into his bare skin yet again when Sidorov leapt clean over a low sweep of the Lasher's free sword, thinking he wouldn't have minded if they'd all stayed like that forever. Sadly, he only got about a minute and a half.

Because at the 90-second mark, Lennon walked away from the fight.

"Wha—?!" Rei and pretty much every spectator all around him, his friends included, started to shout out in amazement before understanding dawned on them. The Lasher, just as Sidorov leapt clear of yet another crossing swing, retreated in a blitz away from the center of the field, leaving another trail of dust in his wake. The thing was, though, that his *blades* didn't come with him. Instead they hung suspended in the air exactly where he'd been standing a moment before, and with no actual *User* to have to protect now, both swords began whipping and churning at Sidorov.

"Invisible Hand!" Catcher and a thousand others called out the Ability trigger with enthusiasm.

"Sidorov's done!" Grant yelled in answer, sound have ecstatic, half disappointed.

The Lancer, to his credit, hadn't let out so much as let out a grunt of surprise at the sudden change in pace, instead resetting his grip on his spear to a comfortable length before bringing it to bear in a blurring defense. His footwork became a dancing pattern across the dirt, his whole form slipping and snaking through the whirling maelstrom of hits as the weapon snapped and struck out to flick away any hits he didn't manage to

deflect. For a few seconds he held like that, keeping at bay the black and red destruction, and then the chain swords were coiling, slithering around him in a unified, quickly closing tunnel of death. With nowhere to go but up, Sidorov set himself, then rocketed upward and a slight angle, arcing free and clear of the spinning blades. Even as he ascended, Rei could make out his armored head flicking this way in that, looking for Lennon, looking for where his opponent had disappeared to. The Lancer knew, obviously, that he was exposed, and was trying desperately to at least get a bearing on how the fight would renew when he landed.

He never touched the ground.

The match first true hit was also its last. With a sound somewhere between a gunshot and a rocket engine starting up, a small section of the the cliffs cracked and collapses, starting to fall completely free of the rest of the field. The stone, it turned out, couldn't handle the enormous force of Lennon triggering his own Break Step, placing the momentum of the Ability into a carefully timed, lancing leap of his own. Rei saw it, saw the strategy even as it was triggered. The Lasher had let his swords read open havoc on Sidorov just long enough for the Lancer to get his bearing. Then they'd formed the tunnel, and Sidorov had—as any logical fighter would have in that situation, launched himself clear of the blades at a angle that would bring him further into the field and secure footing. Who in their right mind, after all, would have jumped in any other direction by *into* to plateau, risking landing on unstable ground or near enough an edge to be easily knocked off the cliffs and into the water below by a timed swing of a chain sword. Sidorov had reacted exactly has he should have.

And Lennon and planned for it.

Ten thousands screams and cheers rang out as the streak of red and black of that was the Lasher impacted with Sidorov's leaping form right at the peak of his jump. The Lancer didn't even have time to react, the speed of an A8's Break Step barely slower than lighting. The sound of it even swallowed the hit, and Rei couldn't tell if Lennon

had struck in any particular way, or if he'd just put a shoulder or knee or whatever part of his body had been leading the launching into the first piece of Sidorov he could reach. The result was the same either way, as Sidorov was blasted away, flung up and sidelong like he'd been hit by a rail gun, spear flying from his grasp and body spinning like a top.

In his wake, a trail of silver-grey fell like a metal rain, the shattered armor of his Device announcing the end of the match more clearly than anything else.

All sound vanished for Rei as he watched the Lancer's "demise" as though in slow motion. First Sidorov struck the invisible wall of the field limits, hitting it on his back with such force that the transparent barrier warped and rippled once in a pulse of bright light. He hung there for a second—or maybe a 100, Rei wasn't sure—then started to slip, tumbling down, down down. Above him Lennon had similarly found the top of the field, but he'd flipped to land feet first, momentum sticking him there long enough to gaze down on his defeated opponent like some ravenous, massive bat.

And then Sidorov hit the raging water with a massive, heavy splash, and the Arena didn't wait to make the call.

"Fatal Damaged Accrued. Winner: Christopher 'Lasher' Lennon, the Galens Institute."