

## CHAPTER 37

PLACEHOLDER TEXT

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“Ladies and gentleman, it is with *distinct* enthusiasm that I welcome you one final time to the Dueling events of this Sector 9 Collegiate Sectional Championships! You’ve waited! You’ve patented! You’ve fidgeted in your seats for long enough! It is now time for the first of our *final* round of one-on-one matchups, and I hope you’re all as excited as I am!”

Inside the steadying darkness of the ramp, Rei paced while he listened to the announcer. He’d tried sitting still, tried settling into his usual spot leaning against the wall, but he just couldn’t manage it. Whenever he tried his mind buzzed and his nerves started to claw at his chest, almost making it hard to breathe. He at once couldn’t bare to wait for the doors at the top of the incline to open and yet dreaded the light they would bring with them.

“Get ahold of yourself,” he mumbled to the emptiness, too low for the staff officer at the bottom of the ramp to hear. “Come *on*.”

The announcer’s continued intro helped distract him.

“We’ve spent the morning showing you everything our young contestants have to offer, but it is time for the absolute best of the best! The young fighters who have already proven to be head and shoulders above the pack! Ladies and gentleman, the two pairs of cadets you’re about to see go head-to-head will one day be among the greatest SCT combatants you’re ever likely to witness on your feeds! I hope you’re watching carefully!”

On second thought, maybe it didn’t help at *all*.

“Without further delay, it is time to bring out our first matchup! They may be young! They may have a long way to go! But these two first years have given us a thrill time and time again this week, and the moment has come to pit them against each other and see who can come out on top! From the east, the spear-wielding wall of grace and death! From the west, the well-known terror of guile and unpredictability! LADIES AND GENTLEMAN, FROM THE GALENS INSTITUTE BOTH, I GIVE YOU... CADETS ARIA LAURENT AND REIDON WAAAAARD!”

Rei jumped at the sound of his own name like he hadn't expected it, and hurried up the ramp as the doors at their top slid open all at once. Yet again the sound that greeted him was a *physical* thing, but it was more powerful a blow now that it had been at any point before. The Arena, too, had changed slightly, all the lights dimmed to bare glints in the stands and ceilings he could see save a single column of illumination shining down directly before him as he briefly stood there. Realizing what was expected of him, Rei hurriedly stepped out into the roar, trying not to blink into the blinding light that fell over him to wreath his every step in shadow. The only reason he knew where to go, in fact, was that—along with the glowing disc upon which the announcer and match arbiter were already standing high above the ground—the Dueling field had been highlighted in pulsing white, the ring's edge warping up and down here and there like a living thing.

And there, across the floor from him and moving in her own column of light, was Aria.

Whereas seeing her had almost always calmed him before, such was not the case now. Rei's stomach clenched, and he could only be glad he couldn't make out more of the packed stands than a bare wash of glimmering light as NOEDS were set to record the fight or take some picture or another.

By the time he reached the edge of the ring, he would have bet anything he owned that he was probably as green as Catcher had ever been.

*Come ON*, he repeated to himself again, privately this time.

Rei stopped just outside the circle almost at the same time as Aria, turning to face her in full. Despite his nerves, despite his sudden rising nausea, he didn't look away from her, and didn't know if he was pleased or only made worse off when she met his gaze leveling. He tried to channel Dent's words of encouragement, tried to get himself to focus, but it was no good.

And then the noise of the stadium started to die, and something like a calm descended. Rei didn't know if he was imagining it, but the a true silence fell across the Arena, and he suddenly found himself able to think again, able to—

“Combatants, take position.”

The match arbiter—the same man who'd been overseeing all the morning fights—spoke into the quiet, jolting Rei out of his momentary improvement, and he ended up half a second behind Aria in stepping through the undulating light that marked the edge of the field. It surely wasn't enough for anyone to notice, but all the same Rei felt a flush rise in his cheeks to add to all his other anxiety. As he moved forward, the pillar of light stayed behind, and by the time he was inside the red ring—this circle rising and falling in only a slightly-lesser fashion to the large white one just behind him—it had faded to nothing, leaving him largely in the dark. Still he didn't look anywhere but across the field from him, never so much as glancing away from the form that was Aria, little more than a silhouette now inside her own crimson ring. He cursed inwardly, struggling to find his center, to get his head in the game. Again he almost managed it, had just started to bring everything he could bear when the arbiter interrupted again.

“This is as an official Dueling event. 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?”

“Yes, sir!” Rei and Aria both called out at the same time, and Rei was pleased he’d managed not to bite his own tongue despite himself. Their words rang clear, unanswered for a long moment.

And then the floor began to change.

*Oh...* Rei thought in surprise.

Thanks to the unexpected dark of the stadium, maybe for the first time in his life he truly understood the incredible nature of the solid hologram that made up the SCT fields. No lights came on overhead or around them as the zone took form, and yet everything was suddenly alive. Colors bloomed beneath his feet as Rei felt himself lifted off the ground, and he realized in full that the world being built around him *was* light, bringing with it its own illuminated majesty. The red ring came with him, but everything else was suddenly bright and alive, almost blindingly so. For a few second the blackness beyond the circle of the zone lingered, but then that too was swallowed as the Arena painted the scene around them.

Sand. Ocean spray. The colors of dusk enveloping the heavens all around them.

Sunset Beach, the Arena had decided, was where this culminating fight would take place.

Even as he rose, however, Rei couldn’t help but almost forget that what was surrounded him wasn’t real. Maybe it was the stark difference of the unlit shadows of the stands that were suddenly awash with oranges and reds and greens. Maybe it was the silence that had been replaced by the sound of lapping wave sand the distant cry of gulls. Maybe all of it was in his head, and he’d finally had a breakdown and was deluding himself into forgetting where he was.

Whatever the case, it ended up being exactly what he needed.

By the time the zone had stopped it’s climb, Rei was himself again. He hadn’t found his center, so much—and didn’t think he would—but he’d recalled something more important. Something he hadn’t realized he’d almost forgotten. As his eyes finally

left Aria to take in the rest of the scene, Rei didn't even notice he'd started grinning once more. How could it have slipped his mind? *How?* Why had it taken this moment, this instant of going from a world of black and silent pressure to an open, breathtaking sky and the sound of the ocean?

How could he have forgot, even for a minute, that SCT combat was just so damn *COOL?*!

“Field: Sunset Beach.”

The Arena's voice brought him back down to earth, and Rei snatched his attention forward again. It had been the wakeup call he'd needed, but it had also distracted him. In half-a-second he took in the scene before him, noting the layout of the space. The zone was a total variation on the more common Sunset Beach. Instead of an *actual* beach, Rei was standing on one tapering end of what could only be a sand bar at low tide. Aria was across from him, tensed in her red circle, and between them the sand was rippled and patterned with puddles of salt water. To either side of them, maybe 5 meters in either direction, the terrain slipped beneath a dark blue tide that lapped gently at the bar.

“Cadet Aria Laurent versus Cadet Reidon Ward. Combatants... Call.”

“Call,” Rei breathed, and Shido came to life as Hippolyta responded to Aria's similar summons on the other side of the zone. In a heartbeat the Device was around him, encasing his limbs and closing around the bottom of his face. The smell of brine and sea vanished, but Rei didn't let himself pine for it as he settled down into a ready position.

All of a sudden, he could *think*.

Shido's Cognition functionalities whirred into action the moment the CAD was in place, and Rei found his head clear, his thoughts finally in action as the last of his nerves were swallowed by the tech. He took in the zone again in the still pause after the command to call, registering a great deal more now that he was fully online. The rippling in the sand would make for treacherous footing, but it was dark, like the tide was receding to leave it wet and solid, meaning it would at least be firm. The bar was about 10 meters across like he'd guessed, but the water was clear enough to see that it wasn't more than a foot or so deep within the 5 meters beyond that to either side, a fact that would pose both advantages and disadvantages. Most importantly, however, was the fact that the fading dusk was to his left, the shore a long way beyond the edge of the zone to the right.

And Aria had planted her armored boots in a very specific way, gold and red steel set in the stand, Hippolyta's shield hefted before her at a ready tilt with spear brought up and over to rest on its edge. She looked prepped to meet him, but her legs had already given her away.

Rei knew exactly how this fight would start.

“Combatants... Fight.”

Rei tore out of his starting circle with every ounce of Speed and Strength he could put into his legs, the sand—hard-packed as it was—still giving at once between his clawed toes, but not enough to stop him from getting going. Instantly he was crossing the zone in a blitzing flash of black steel and blue light, ripping across the length of the bar at a slight angle, not bothering to bring up his clawed fists in favor leaning into his run.

He was well over the middle point of the sand bar's length when he saw that he'd be right.

Instead of charging him or letting him come, Aria also moved the moment the Arena had called for a start to the match. Rather than forward, though, she shot laterally, to her right, barreling only slightly away from the wall in favor of making mostly towards the lapping water. It was smart, of course. It was the exact move she'd made against Grant on a very similar field when she'd knocked him out of the Intra-School winners bracket the semester before. Phalanxes didn't care about Speed, didn't care about having their movements restricted, at least not when a similar restriction was placed on their opponents. If she could get to the deepest part of the tide she could safely stand in, she'd have an iron-clad defensive position that would be impossible to circle around, not to mention force Rei to wade in after her. And that wasn't even *mentioning* the fact that the sun would be in his eyes. It *was* smart, and it was *was* the right play.

It just had a couple of flaws.

For one thing, Hippolyta was heavier than Shido, weighing Aria down. Even if she *hadn't* had a *much* lower speed than him, she would have been at a disadvantage in the giving sand.

For another, Rei was a *lot* faster than Grant.

He caught her before she could take her second step into the water, before her ankles were more than 6 inches deep in the tide. She saw him coming and pivoted to face him, but even slight as he was Rei and Shido combined had a *lot* of weight behind them as he leaped from the edge of the bar to drive a flying knee at her head. Aria did get the her shield up in time, but the impact of steel-on-steel along the top of it was so heavy that a sound like a gong rang out across the sea, and she grunted in pain as the highest edge of her own defenses slammed into her forehead, sending her staggering back a pace. It might have been a perfect opportunity to strike, but the hit had also sent Rei flipping over her. That was fine, though. That was planned. He tucked, twisting as he spun, and landed on his feet with a splash at her back. Instead of lunging, though, he leapt sideways, which which turned out to have been the right call even if he hadn't

had a plan. He just barely dodged the hammering fall of Aria's spear coming up and over her head as she turned to meet him. If he'd gone for the opening, he would have been flatted.

Instead, as the spear fell with a great explosion of water that drenched them both, Rei was between Aria and the deeper tide, the sea up to his shins, yes, but the sun at *his* back.

Aria very clearly realized what had happened in a blink, because there was something like a smile in the corner of her mouth as she cursed and ripped the spear up and around to bring it swinging at his side.

Rei slammed it up and away with both clawed fists, taking the opportunity to shift forward half-a-step, and then fight began in earnest.

For the better part of a minute the two of them battled it out right there in the water beyond the lip of the bar, neither taking nor giving an inch. Rei wasn't about to let Aria gain the advantage she was looking for, but Aria was a *Phalanx*, and about as indomitable as the wall the announcer had aptly compared her to at the start of the match. As a result, their weapon tore a brilliant blaze through the air as both refused to move, refused to budge, spear coming in to be ducked and dodged, claws lancing forward to be blocked and knocked aside. A hundred gatling blows were traded back and forth, the shallows around their feet and ankles turning to foam and violent spray.

And then the stalemate gave.

Aria was the first one to take a chance, to try to change things up. Rei almost didn't see it, almost missed the moment as he sucked in his gut to avoid an eviscerating sweep of the spear that left a trail of green light in its wake. The change was subtle, with Aria tucking her shield back just a little too tightly, a little too close. He *did* see it, though, *did* notice the slight shift, the fraction of a pause in the fight.

So we was ready when she charged.



Shield held before her in a solid span of red and gold metal, Aria lunged, obviously aiming to ram him. Rei sidestepped, but not before he shot both hands out to grab either side of the shield, shouting as he did.

“Type-Shift! Saber Mode!”

Shido crackled and changed, blue electricity arcing into the damp air and water as the Device’s plating thickening around his limbs and chest all-but-instantly. The sword didn’t appear—apparently the CAD could read that his hands were already full—and Rei felt everything slow fractionally, like time had dilated backwards for him ever so slightly.

It didn’t matter. Speed wasn’t what he needed in the moment.

Rei twisted into his sidestep, allowing Aria’s momentum to carry her by for a heartbeat before his boosted Strength accepted the weight of her passing rush through his arms. Straining, he let out a roar of effort as he wrenched on the shield with everything he had in the moment.

It paid off when Aria yelled in alarm as she was hauled off her feet, completely clear of the tide, then pulled around by the shield she didn’t even have the time to think of letting go off before being tossed bodily up and through the air.

She flailed as she arced up and away, but she wasn’t as nimble as Rei. Gravity reclaimed her, and she came down on her side with a heavy *thud* in the middle of the sand bar some 20 feet off. Rei hadn’t expected it to be enough to do any damage, and sure enough she was scrambling to her feet in an instant.

But now *he* had the advantage.

Shido’s Saber-Mode blade had materialized the moment his right hand had been freed of the fistful of shield it had been holding, and Rei threw the weapon at Aria just as she came to stand, already rushing her. She made to smack the sword out of the air with her spear, but it dematerialized mid-flight as he shouted for his Brawler-Mode again.

When he hit her, it was with pummeling, clawed fists and the renewed clarity and quickness of boosted Speed and Cognition.

On the sand bar, Rei found his true rhythm at last. Even that foot or so of water had been incredibly limiting to his movement, but now that he was free of it he could slip and slide this way and that under and around Aria's attacks, dodging and ducking with twice the finesse and ease he'd had seconds before. He kept a metaphorical line in the sand, of course, kept his back to the sunset and didn't give Aria a foot in either direction to get around him, but he *could* move again, now.

And he leaned into that with a fervor.

Despite his lack of range, despite his lack of power in Brawler-Mode, Rei took the offensive, pummeling Aria left, right, and center to keep her turtled behind her shield. The spear still snaked out or over, still cut into the fight at every opportunity, but it never managed more than a shallow cut or scrape before Rei was rolling off the green-line blade to strike out again. Another minutes passed like this, then 2, then 3, until Rei realized with an odd mix of thrill and alarm that he and Aria weren't in the center of the bar any more. They were back, not a pace from the other side of the rippled sand and the gentle waves opposite the sunset. At some point, without realizing it, he'd pushed Aria back, pressed her hard enough to force her to give without even realizing it. That should have been good news, *was* good news...

But it also woke him up to another realization.

At Aria's next swing, Rei not only ducked under the spear, but actually tucked and rolled away from it. Both of them were already sopping and sticky with sand, but more of it sloughed and splattered off Shido as he came back up onto his feet several yards back, nearer to the middle of the bar again. From there he watched Aria with narrowed eyes and considered himself carefully, then swore under his breath as he saw her plan, her very simple, obvious plan. Brawler Mode was lacking in reach and power, yes.

But it was more acutely lacking in *Endurance*.

Rei had lost himself too much in the fight, in the advantage of having regained favorable ground. He was breathing heavily, his lungs only just starting to burn, and his arms felt a lot heavier than they had at the start of the fight. His legs were still mostly good, but his whole body was also tingling from a dozen small “cuts” along his thighs and chest and forearm, that particular sensation not helped by the salt water. At the rate he was going, Rei realized he would falter and fail, probably a *long* time before Aria did with her monstrous Endurance and Defense specs, and that was if he didn’t accidentally “bleed out” from the thousand small wounds he would accrue in the meantime.

All these thoughts registered inside of a second, but even in that short pause Aria—still standing by the water—had clearly noticed the shift. She stared at him for a moment, like she was wary of a trap.

Then she seemed to realized he’d understood her end goal, because she shot him a brief grin that *very much* said “Oops. Caught me.”, and lunged.

Rei grimaced even as he swept both clawed hands up to slam the lancing spear away from his chest. He was *definitely* slowing down, because he felt the sting of the weapon’s tip rip through his reactive shielding to nick one of his eyebrows before it went wide. He retaliated with a heavy forward kick that did manage to set Aria back a foot despite catching it on her cut and battered shield, but then her spear was retracted and shooting forward again. Abruptly Rei wondered if he’d made a huge mistake giving up his advantage, but thought better of the doubt when something cramped in his side as he ducked the strike yet again. He’d been a fool, been an idiot to lose himself. Aria and Grant had gone forever earlier in the morning, but just like they couldn’t compare to him in Speed, he didn’t hold a candle to their Endurance. Which meant he was probably in trouble.

A *lot* of trouble.

Rei went on the defensive, conserving what energy he had as he deliberately pushed his Cognition to the max, trying desperately to think of something, anything

that would pull him out of the predicament he'd suddenly realized he was in. As Aria took her own turn to pummel at his blocking arms he considered every trick he had, every plot he could come up with, discarding them one after the other. The field was conducive to backing off long enough to catch his breath, and regardless he could only have disengaged for a limited time before the arbiter probably called him for a penalty. He could feign exhaustion or injury, but Aria knew his fighting style better than anyone, better even than *Viv*, and she would see right through him. Maybe he could make a calculated sacrifice, like he had against Grant during their own Intra-School match? No, probably not. Aria knew that play too, and would undoubtedly take the advantage of whatever injury he took on and leave it at that. If he let her spear him she'd just drop the weapon and back off at double pace, maybe even to ditch and let him bleed out. If she couldn't manage that for some reason, she still had Third Eye primed, and could probably outlast whatever last ditch battering he could give her.

No. This would have to be a straight fight. Without a stroke of inspiration, Rei was going to have to win this fight straight on. It was a hard realization to make when he was already in the middle of mildly getting his ass kicked by a still-relatively-fresh Aria, but with it came clarity. Clarity that if Rei was going to come out on top of this match, he was going to have to push himself to his limits.

And if there was anything Rei was known for...

A renewed sort of energy rose up through him, welling into being as this new plan settled and conviction settled into place. Whether it was confidence or frustration or just common adrenaline, Rei's thoughts narrowed to a singular focus. Shido seemed to respond to this, because as Aria's spear lanced forward once again Rei thought he felt his neuroline tingle along his spine, and everything seemed to tighten around him. No longer did he see the pretty redheaded girl in front of him. He saw only his opponent. No longer did he concern himself his the building ache of his arms. He new only what the could and could not do. No longer did the zone pose anything but tactical

advantages and disadvantages, the colors of the sunset almost fading as Rei and Shido trimmed all thought down to one point.

He would win this. No matter the cost. No matter the pain. He would win this.

And so it was almost-reckless abandon that he changed the pace of the fight in a split second.

Aria's spear drove forward, but instead of blocking or dodging, Rei slipped into it's range with a twist. He felt the blade of the weapon cut through his reactive shielding and gash him in the back, but it was a small price to pay for the momentary opening. He lashed out of the end of the spin, bring the back of his leg arm right at Aria's face, and he knew the strike had caught her by surprise when she grimaced as she hauled her child up the block. The massive hit landed hard, forcing a sidestep out of her, and Rei ignored the jarring pain of the impact, turning instead to follow it up with a thunderous punch of his strong arm. He hit the shield again, straight on this time, and Shido's claws slammed through the battered metal. Hauling sideways on them he managed to wrench the shield away from Aria for the briefest moment, and his foot came up to slam in a forward kick at her gut. She managed to get the haft her her spear in the way in time to keep from being double over, but Rei's steel-clad heel still caught her a glancing blow to the hip, sending her twisting away with a grunt of pain, free his claws from her shield as she did.

From there, he didn't let up.

Blow after blow he rained down on Aria, empty of all thought and feeling other than the fight. He all-but ignored every counterstrike she gave in return, dodging or blocking only when he suspected the blow would incapacitate him in a way no amount of will could overcome. He ignored, too, the fire that had started building in his arms and chest the moment he'd started hammering at her, ignore the weight of his fists and the raging, angry ache in his shoulders and back.

No matter the cost. No matter the pain.

Steadily, one step at a time, Rei drove Aria back. She couldn't keep up, couldn't keep pace with his endless torrent of attacks. More than once he broke through, managing to get in a slashing cut to her chest or a kick to her knees or even several inches of blue-lined steel in one thigh. Every time she would be forced to try to retreat away, to try to regain her range and her defenses, but Rei wouldn't let her. He followed in step, hurtling blow after blow, utterly uncaring of it all. Even when his chest began to tighten. Even when his arms screamed that they would fail, screamed that they were at their limit and beyond. He didn't care, couldn't care. This was nothing, *nothing*. He knew pain. Intimately. This was nothing.

And in the end, it was Aria would gave first.

Only in retrospect would Rei realize that she had long since triggered Third Eye, just like only in retrospect would he take note of the alarm on her face as his own expression had gone hard and focused. It was almost 2 minutes of fluid battering and bashing that he managed, eventually forcing her to call on her Ability, then completely overtaxing it. It was this failure that but Aria on the ground, in fact, this shattering of her ace-in-the-hole that became too much on her body and mind before Rei gave into his own agony. One moment his strikes where ringing off her shield again and again and again, and then her defenses crumpled, and his next blow ripped through. He was so surprised at the feeling of his blade sinking fully into flesh, in fact, that he was partially jolted out of his revery, half-kicked from that odd realm Shido seemed to have taken him too that was similar to the dark, empty place in the back of his mind he'd sunk into as a child when the pain of his disease and all the surgeries it brought with it became too much to handle. He blinked as his fist slammed into Aria's side, blinked and found himself looking at her, at her face twisted in pain and fatigue. She was a mess, sand in her hair and caking her cheeks, and even as he watched she opened her mouth to let out a strangled cry that sounded like she was as much out of breath as she was in agony. He blinked again and saw his Shido in her side, up to the knuckles through ribs

and muscle and lung, and he realized with a jolt that the match was his to take. Before he could managed it, though, Aria showed she still had more than a little fight left in her, because even as she screamed she brought her head back, then forward again in a vicious hit, catching him full in the nose. The pain of it was staggering, and Rei went reeling back, tripping as a heel caught a ripple in the sand, to land sprawled on sand. He was himself, now, completely, and his scramble to find his feet—eyes watering the entire time—brought with it an acknowledgement of the fire ripping through his own body. His arms gave completely when he tried to shove himself up, and he was forced to awkwardly get his legs under him before he could stand. His breaths came in ragged gasps, the taste of the salty breeze coming through even his mask as he heaved in lungfuls of air, and he staggered sideways. It took everything he had not to collapse then and there, and it was hard to find Aria through the pain and watering vision.

When he did, though, he realized he wasn't the worse off of the two of them.

Aria was done. If the fact that she'd crumpled to kneel in the sand wasn't enough to tell him that, the fact that Hippolyta's shield and spear lay fallen to either side of her certainly did. She was taking in every breath sharply, but looked to want more than she could get, one hand clutched to the side his claws and ripped into. Her other was limp at her side, like she had nothing more to give to the fight.

And yet, despite all that, when he found her eyes she was smiling at him.

"Thanks... for the fight" she managed to get out between pained inhales. "I had... fun..."

It hurt his face—and his smarting nose—but Rei grinned back at her as widely as he could manage, trying to tell her with his eyes how much those words meant to him.

And then, with a final heave of effort and a half-stagger, half-lurch forward, he brought one agony-riddled arm up to drive Shido's claws forward at her heart.

The blow never fell.

Instead, the world stood still. Not in any psychological way, this time. Not like when Shido's growing specs tweak his thoughts to narrow his focus or assist his perception. No. The world went *literally* still, and Rei gave a small, surprised "Urk!" as his momentum was cut totally short practically in mid air. He was frozen, at an angle with his arm still lifted to end the fight, and he wasn't the only one. Everything around him had stopped moving, from the slow waves that hung in the tide on either side of the sand bar to the distant shape of gulls that had been circling high overhead and in the distance. Even the sunset felt suddenly more like a picture than a hologram, now, and the sounds of the zone had gone silent, too.

And before him, eyes wide in surprise, Aria was almost as still.

Almost.

"What... the hell?!" she gasped, looking around in shock. She could move her head, and Rei realized then that he could as well.

Which also answered her question.

"A... penalty pause?" he wheezed right back. He'd seen it before, on the feeds and in person. If a match arbiter deemed it necessary to deliver a penalty mid-match—or, much more rarely, actually *end* the match—they had the ability to "pause" the zone, freezing everything by the combatants ability to move their heads and communicate. Rei had never experienced before, and didn't like the sensation one bit, but that wasn't the real issue here. Nor was it even that he couldn't imagine what he—or either of them, he supposed—had done to earn a penalty.

The real issue was that the arbiter hadn't appeared yet to explain himself.

For a long moment, Rei and Aria just held like that, largely frozen, unable to do so much as twitch anything but their heads. After several seconds without so much as a sound from anywhere, though, it became clear that something was going on, and Aria was the first say so.



“Somethings wrong,” she said, her expression suddenly something very much like scared despite her Endurance having already helped her to catch her breath. “Rei, something definitely wr—!”

Before she could finish, though, the world regained motion in all the wrong ways.

With a painful crack of movement Rei was wrenched backward and away from Aria, so quickly he might have been shot from a cannon. Just a quickly, though, the movement was cut short, and he yelled in pain and confusion as his aching body protested, his insides sloshed around nauseatingly, and his brain was rattled in his skull. His vision had cleared, though, and Shido was still called around him, so it didn’t take long to register that he seemed to be in the exact middle of the field. Odder still, his body had been wrenched to stand perfectly straight, legs slightly spread, arms at a low angle with palms forward, like some living anatomy model. Before him, 10 yards away now, Aria was much the same, held in place by the field, shield and spear back in her hands as though by magic. Around her feet, the red ring of the starting circle had reappeared, making Rei realize that he, too, had one circle below him.

He started to get a very, *very* bad feeling...

“REI!” Aria screamed, terrified.

“It’s ok!” he called back, doing his best to comfort her even as he forced himself to once again ignore his still-aching lungs. “It’s fine! I’m sure everything is going to be fine!”

As though in disagreement with this assurance, though, there was an add *thud* from over their heads, and before either of them could so much as look up it was followed up.

*BOOM!*

Rei felt his teeth shake as the entire field—still frozen in place—rippled outward from a place above their head. Instantly there was another *BOOM*, and he realized that

something with more power than he could imagine was *hitting* the top of the zone wall 30 yards above their heads, striking it like they were trying to break in.

But why the hell would someone outside be trying to break in when they could just as easily deactivate the—

“REI!”

Aria’s second scream was different from the first, truly terrified this time, and Rei snapped his attention back earthward. Instantly he saw what was wrong, and a chill unlike anything he’d every experienced shaved up his spine. Both of them stood in red rings, but while he hadn’t thought twice about the fact that he was in the middle of the zone while Aria was at the edge, he abruptly understood exactly why. Aria’s zone was a starting point for Duels. Rei’s was a starting point too, but not the type programmed for any kind of sanctioned match.

The two red rings that had manifested to the north and south respectively, glowing over the frozen tide beyond either edge of the sand bar, clued him in.

“The parameter test...?” he wondered aloud, utterly at a loss, and growing more frightened by the second.

That fear manifested into terror, in fact, when shapes materialized out of the rings, rising up from the space above the water, cold and familiar in their grey, monotonous coloring.

Programmed sparring partners. The kind Rei used to fight in the summer before he and Viv had headed to Galens.

The kind that manifested for their quarterly Offense & Endurance tests...

Aria was screamed again, but Rei didn’t hear her as the figures appeared, then and stood tall. To his left, the male partner model was expressionless, but it’s gaze was fixed on him in the same way the female’s was to his right. Instinctively Rei tried to move, tried to get out of the way of that stare, but the Arena head him firm. His heart started

to hammer in his chest, and something very much like panic began to well up inside him. He had to move. He *had to move*.

And yet he couldn't.

And then the two figures stepped out of the red rings at the same time, dropping down to their waists into the still tide, and Rei didn't think he'd every been so scared in his life.

"No no," he started to say, wrenching at his limbs as best he could, looking desperately side-to-side as another *BOOM* echoed over head. "No no no no."

He had to move. He *had to move*. The figures were walking towards him now, the water glitching and pixilating around them like it didn't know how to react to the contact while frozen, and as they climbed the shallow incline of the floor towards the sand bar another grey form materialized behind them. Worse, as the figures rose out of the water with every step, their hands came clear of the tide gripping weapons that hadn't been there when they'd fallen in. A sword in the woman's, and axe in the mans. The second pair fell into the tide, and yet another two materialized.

Rei still didn't hear Aria screaming, didn't hear the the titanous strikes of something massive striking the wall high above them. He could only see the grey figures continue their steady approached, heedless of his own yelling of "No! NO!" as they neared. He didn't knew what rank they were, but something about they way they moved a voice in his head—and maybe Shido itself—screaming at him to run, *RUN!*

But he couldn't. He couldn't move. He couldn't get free of the grip of the Arena, no matter what he did.

And then the first two figures were there, standing before him, their grey faces utterly expressionless as he continued in vane to struggle to get away, *away!* They waited, ignoring Aria's shrieks at their back and the impacts from above, until the next two were at Rei's sides, and the last stood at his back.

“NO!” Rei was shrieking at this point, utterly at a loss for anything else he could do, desperate for a way out. “NO!”

There was a pause, a moment of stillness for the six forms surround him, their varied weapons held at their sides like they were waiting for some kind of order.

Then it came, and six blade flashed grey as the came up and drove into Rei’s body from every angle.

The pain was unlike anything he had ever experienced in his life. Ever. It was beyond the agony of his fibro or the surgeries, beyond the the misery of the compromised parameter test. It erupted inside of Rei from every point the swords and spears and axes tore into him, blooming along every nerve like like a hundred thousand scalpels were shearing into each one individually. He couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think. He could only feel the agony of it, so great that it didn’t even give him the chance to fall away, to faint into shock. There was nothing in him left in that moment, nothing but the horror of the blades sinking in, then pulling out, then driving in again. He was blind even to the motion of the grey figures before him, blind to their callouses, empty strikes other than the *pain* each one brought. Something cold started to climb up through Rei again, but it was different this time, empty and hollow.

He was dying, he realized.

He was dying.

*BOOM! CRACK!*

The was a flash of light, so brilliant it ever registered briefly with Rei despite the hell he’d fallen into. It roared in a fracturing spiral like the world itself had shattered apart. His face had been upturned, he realized, his mouth open in a silent scream of torment, and for a fraction of an instant he thought he saw a shape through the blaze a slender silhouette descending from the heavens themselves, the faint shape of wings outstretched to either side.

And then the white faded, and everything went black. The figures froze, lingered for a moment mid-swing, ready to strike yet again, then vanished to leave nothing but the darkness.

And then Rei was gone, not feeling the Arena release its grip on him, not hearing Aria's final scream through the lightless world, not seeing the steel plating of the stadium floor come rushing up at as he fell into nothingness.