

## Chapter 18

The world warped around Rei. In a blink of time nonexistent he saw again the faces of his hole visions, the myriad cacophony of youthful men and women alike, of all races, sizes, and settings. He focused, focused like he'd be working so, *so* hard on for weeks now, willing himself to stay present, to stay aware of the solid feeling of matter beneath his back foot and promise of knowing it again on his front. In less than an instant he saw everything. He saw the woods and the rain and sodden grass. He saw the path of destruction he and Laurent had ripped through the trees and the distant ring of the horizon the Arena projected all around them. He even caught the briefest flash of the fight still raging between Jetway and the others. Aria was in midair with teeth bared, leaping with shield forward and spear drawn back to strike. Logan had been laid out, Honoris' axe in the middle of spinning away. Catcher and Chancery were still on their feet, closing in from both sides on the S-Rank—whose green-brown armor and white vysetrium Rei glimpsed for the first time in truth—as Wainwright crouched in a ready stance in their midst, her spear a vibrant bolt of colorless lightning held in both hands.

And then it all pulled into that bottomless point in front of Rei, leaving the world empty and nothing for less time than he thought one's mind should register before momentum and light returned to his surroundings with an expanding blast of color.

And not even Kalus Laurent—S-Ranked Pawn-Class that he was—could be totally ready for his simultaneous vanishing and reappearance into the solid nature of reality.

To be fair, the Atypical *bad* whipped around to face where Rei had been. The Ability's vocal command had warned him that *something* was happening, and he'd made himself as prepared as he could, but there was no degree of Speed that could completely prepare one for the instant nature of Temporal Step's jump. His Cognition should have compensated, allowing him to correct, but either Laurent hadn't engaged the spec fully

so as to make the assessment a bit more leveled, or the combination of a lack of information, confusion, and his opponent's sudden disappearance was enough to momentarily overpower even the S-Rank's processing. Likely the former, Rei just had time to decide, having seen more than one of his new trainer's recent professional matches.

Whatever the case, however, the *critical* factor was something that no User, no matter their specs, could have anticipated: the fact that Rei hadn't 'Stepped' into the space before Laurent, into the area the Atypical had whirled around to face the vocal command had been spoken.

Instead, Rei had jumped right passed the man, having focused on the ground he'd pretended he could see between the the sergeant major's feet through the rain, ending up back to back with him and fully ready to take advantage of the trick.

Nausea roiled up through Rei's gut as he whirled, shield swing around. It was hardly the violent degree of illness it had once been, though, and he clamped hold of it with hardly a thought even as he spun. To his great thrill he found Laurent still facing away from him, the man's attention not have strayed from the place Rei had been. In that instant, Rei knew he would land his hit. Long as it was, Triumverant's staff didn't have the room to maneuver to block. He was inside his opponent's guard. Even if the shield bounced harmlessly off the Pawn-Class' impenetrable reactive shield, even if he was sent flying when the retaliatory blow came, he knew he *would* land his hit.

At least until he caught just the barest glimpse whirling green light and shifting metal.

**BOOONG!**

Rei's shield struck narrow, red-and-black steel with the sound of a gong. Intent as he'd been on just *getting* the strike, he hadn't set his feet to brace himself, so the impact sent him staggering back as the heavy steel rebounded. He only found his footing after several stumbling strides, momentarily confused as to what had happened.

For once, his Cognition wasn't ahead of his own knowledge, and Rei cursed even as his pulse started to race again, taking in the sight before him that he realized he absolutely *should* have expected.

Kalus Laurent hadn't moved from where he'd seemed to be trying to find Rei through the storm. He hadn't turned around, nor even lifted from the ready crouch he'd slipped into the moment he'd obviously realized something was off. For the first time now that he had a good look at the sergeant major's back, Rei saw the narrow lines of green staggered along Triumverant's plated spine, gleaming off the wet metal of the shorter, 1-inch spikes that adorned each intricate section. Larger plates moved and flexed in a protective imitation of shoulder blades, and the Styron particles rippled like individual strands of hair in the glowing vysetrium tail of his helmet.

Rei barely registered any of it, too busy was he glaring at the staff the man still held in both hands.

Or what had *been* a staff, at least...

Triumverant had changed. Quick as thought, the weapon no longer formed the solid, slim shape of the capped shaft Laurent had been using to beat him silly for the past quarter hour. Instead, the twin rings of vysetrium had split and formed two trailing, flexible lines connecting the three equally-sized partitions of cylindrical steel that had originally formed the length of the weapon. The center of this trio was still in front of Kalus, pulled up tight against his chest.

The other two, however, were behind him, one held in each hand over one shoulder and up at an angle from around his lower back, forming the defensive X of crossed metal that Shido had bounced off of so solidly the shield might as well have been made of rubber.

"Dammit," Rei grumbled as Laurent finally started to straighten and turn. With a practiced whip and twist of one wrist, Triumverant whirled, the sansetsukon—the

three-part staff it had become—collapsing over itself to snap into the waiting grasp of the man’s right hand.

Then the sergeant major lifted the folded weapon to point the stacked rods straight at Rei.

“Okay, Ward...” Laurent sounded somewhere between wary and awestruck. “I’ll bite... What in the *MIND* was that??”

Rei had opened his mouth to answer, but a voice interrupted him before he could get the words out.

“Something I would like to know myself.” The call came from above, calm and steady, but thunderous even over the endless thrum of the downpour. It wasn’t Dent this time, either. “Is that a charged Ability, Ward, or repeatable?”

“Uh... Charged, ma’am,” Rei answered the sky, unsure of where to look.

Having Serena von Bor call down upon you from stormy heavens didn’t help his original impression of the woman as some ancient god of myth.

“Single or multi?”

“Single, ma’am.” Rei had to fight not to let his stomach turn at the idea of stacking charges allowing for *chained* Steps, miserable a thought as it was.

At least as he was now...

“Interesting...” the captain’s voice came again. “That’s good enough for me, at the moment. I’m more of a ‘show, don’t tell’ enthusiast. If you would continue, Cadet Ward. Let’s see that Ability triggered as often as you can, please.”

This time, Rei didn’t hesitate.

“Yes, ma’am!”

And then, calling on Brawler Mode again, he shot at Laurent in a shearing splash of rain and mud.

If the sergeant major had been hard to catch by surprise before, it was doubly so now. Fighting with the three-part staff, the man's combat style had *completely* changed, becoming snappier and more fluid. The weapon whirled around him in a constant blur, flashing from one hand to the other, then into both, then flicking up into the air totally free only to be snatched up again a fraction of a second later. Rei did his best to work around the staff, did his best to get in and under Laurent's guard, but even setting aside the S-Rank's superior Speed and Cognition, Triumverant's newfound flexibility was an impassable nightmare. The staff was at once as stable as a Saber's balanced form, as versatile as a Duelist's paired blades, and as dangerous as a Lancer's reach, all depending on what Laurent needed it to be. The latter in particular was a problem for Rei, especially since the twin strands of vysetrium that connected the three sections didn't seem to have a fixed length. Indeed, more than once he was *sure* he saw the glowing green bonds abruptly extend, the space between the steel rods suddenly lengthening from a few inches too as much as 2 feet or so before snapping back again. More than once Rei felt a pang of envy, particularly after this exact trick resulted in him getting caught across the face for the *second* time. Arsenal Shift had been his dream, *especially* since being assigned Shido. It was the ace of so many high-level Atypicals—who were statistically much more likely to develop the Ability than any other Type—and had once been part of the ideal path he'd seen for himself after he'd started to realize the heights he and the Device might climb to.

*Not that I can really complain, can I?* Rei thought, smirking as he ducked under a snapping sweep from Triumverant, calling on his Saber Mode and coming up swinging with both hands before the blade even finished manifesting into his ready grasp.

Laurent, of course, swept the blow away like it was nothing, but that was the moment the now-familiar notification pinged Rei's HUD for the second time that fight.

## *TEMPORAL STEP: READY*

Rei accepted Triumverant's next blow full on the flat of Shido's blade, accepting the impetus of the hit to let himself be sent flying even as he tucked and somersaulted back. Slamming the clawed fingers of his left hand into the grass, he cut another series of furrows through the earth before coming to a stop in a crouch, sword out to the side and at the ready.

He didn't trigger the Ability until after he started bolting forward again, bringing the blade around and headward like he was going to thrust it at Laurent's chest.

Then...

"Temporal Step," he ordered, focusing hard as he tried to keep his voice low.

The world flashed away and back, and Rei blinked to Laurent's left side, slipping right by him as he instead slashed around and down at the back of Laurent's exposed knees. Unsurprisingly the three-part staff was there in a blink to block him, but Rei was passed the man before the follow-up strike could catch him between the shoulders, getting clear of even the staff's extended range and turning to face the sergeant major again.

"What the *hell...?*" he thought he heard the man grunt through his faceplate, and Rei almost grinned despite his redoubled nausea.

Without pause, he charged in again.

Five more times Rei Stepped, and five more times he managed to catch the sergeant major by surprise—if not managing to land a blow despite this. To his credit, Laurent didn't grow remotely frustrated as the fight wore on into the 5, then 10, the 15 minutes it took to build up use the charges. Instead, then man only sounded like he was talking to himself more every time the Ability was triggered. Rei heard the man mutter "A Speed boost?" once, then "No. Too quick..." like the Atypical was taking note mental

notes. Another time Laurent blocked another hammering shield strike from where Rei had appeared behind him once more, muttering about “Useful for offense *and* escape...?” as he did.

It was this question, after what had to have been a quarter hour, that triggered the idea.

Well... That and the fact that Rei was almost sure he had at *most* one more Step in him before he decorated the rain-washed grass with what was left of his dinner.

For a few more minutes they traded blows, back and forth, back and forth. As anticipated Laurent never tried to outright FDA Rei, who admittedly took advantage of this to fight as viciously as he could, slipping in and out of each of Shido’s forms as often as the situation would allow. He wanted to turn the sergeant major’s own words against him, wanted to set the man’s expectation, to believe he knew what was coming next. At the same time, Rei did his best to be subtle about moving them through the woods, striking and retreating deliberately, pushing and pulling the Atypical in a semi-random pattern. Searching. Searching. Even after Temporal Step charged up again, he kept going. Even after he thought he detected a hint of uncertainty in Laurent’s low muttering and heard the man ask “Limited on uses...?”, he kept going. Searching. Search—

And then, in the corner of his vision, a flash of blue and red, and Rei grinned.

“Type Shift: Phalanx Mode,” he ordered through breaths that had been coming heavier and heavier despite regularly swapping into higher Endurance to recover. Shido’s plating thickened and the shield appeared in one hand. Instead of closing in, though, Rei danced back, dodging a sweep of the three-part staff.

And then, with a grunt and as much power as he could muster, he *threw* the shield straight at Laurent’s face.

“What the—?!” he actually heard the man grunt as the massive piece of metal hurtled towards his head. Rei made out the *CLANG* of Triumverant knocking it harmlessly away, and might have tried to listen for the sound it spinning off into the trees next. But the shield, he knew, had disappeared the moment the sergeant major had struck it aside.

It had whirled back into him, returning to Shido’s thinning plating as Rei had called on his Brawler form even as he spun on his heel and bolted away from Laurent as fast as his boosted Speed could take him.

He heard the man call after him through the storm, sounding half-surprised, half-confused. Rei ignored him, hurtling through the woods in the direction of the flickering blue and hint of red he could make out through the rain-drench trees. Obviously Laurent could have caught him in a blink if he’d wanted to, could snatched him up by the scruff of his armored neck and dragged him kicking and screaming back into the woods, but he didn’t think the Atypical would do that. He was banking on the man’s interest in observing his *choices* as much as his ability as a fighter.

*Let’s see what he makes of this, then,* Rei thought, finally allowing himself that grin.

A second more and he was close enough. He allowed himself another heartbeat, another breath and a maxed straining of everything he could get out of his Cognition to time the moment. Here Aria was retreating from a sweeping white blur. There Catcher was a hammering kick on one armored arm. It was Logan and Chancer who were moving together now, the Lancer using the boy’s body as shielding cover to hide her thrusts from around his bulk.

And there, in the middle of them, Rei watched the red out line of his target twist and turn in the rain, moving almost lazily despite her blazing speed, deflecting and dodging and striking out among the blitzing flurry of blows.



Then he saw his chance. Catcher slashed out, forcing the woman to unknowingly turn her back to Rei to parry the sword aside with easy grace.

And Rei took it.

“Temporal Step.”

He didn’t bother calling for a more aggressive form, didn’t bother planning for the optimized attack. The entirety of the squad could have struck out all at the same time and not gotten a *spark* out of Jayden Wainwright’s shields. He wasn’t trying for damage.

He just. Wanted. The hit.

And *this* time... Rei got it.

The world flickered out and back in, and he put every ounce of focus he could into his momentum, into not stopping even as his front foot found new, strange ground. He’d already brought his arms to his chest and tucked his chin, and so it was with his armored shoulder set that he blinked into being as close to Jetway as he could have hoped. Maybe if she’d seen him coming the woman could have dodged, could have twisted out of the way in the fraction of a moment she would have had to register his appearance.

But she didn’t, and Rei’s shoulder took her in the back at full speed, steel meeting shielding with a solid *THUD!*

It was like he’d run full speed into a boulder.

Rei bounced half-off, half-around the woman as the awkward angle of his shoulder twisted his body under the impetus. He felt a *pop* in the joint, and pain erupt up his neck and down his arm as he felt the whole limb go mostly limp. With something between a yell and a grunt he staggered by Wainwright, tripping over his own clawed toes to tumble down into the mud, rolling twice before coming to a halt on his back, where he allowed himself to stay. He’d managed it. He’d gotten the hit.

And now he was paying the price.

Nausea turned to an uncomfortable clenching of his stomach, but Rei didn't recall Shido. He'd gotten used to the steadily-waning discomfort of Stepping, and he knew the Device wasn't about to let him hurl just yet. Instead, he clutched at his right shoulder with his left hand, feeling the odd shape of the joint that his armor had shifted to accommodate, groaning in pain as he made out the text he'd never seen before on the field scroll itself out across the corner of his HUD, in bolder red than even the usual "injury" registration usually gave.

*[TRUE] Skeletal muscle damage registered.*

*[TRUE] Right glenohumeral joint dislocation registered. [TRUE] Right glenohumeral joint capsule strain registered.*

*Emergency field protocols enacted....*

*...*

*Does User WARD wish to continue combat?*

*YES/NO*

"Well *that's* new..." Rei muttered through clenched teeth, squeezing his shoulder tighter even as he pushed "NO" with a quick visual selection. He'd taken *actual* damage on the field before, but on reflection it had always been enough to knock him clean out of the fight, like during the Sectionals hack.

He was in the middle of making a mental note *not* to run headfirst at an S-Ranked User again, when a blaze of light engulfed his frame.

Rei froze, blinking up the shaft of a truly beautiful weapon. The spear was almost *entirely* made of white vysetrium, with little more than a single foot-long core of green and brown steel forming the center of its length. The glowing ivory blade was cruelly curved and hooked at the end, like the tip of a harpoon, and was had to have been a

hand-and-a-half wide and three times as long. It was practically a sword attached to the end of a long shaft, Rei thought.

And its edge was currently at his throat, so close he could see the hint of his own blue vysetrium against the white.

“Ward...” Jayden Wainright growled from behind an solid faceplate of opaque, curved green. “What. The *hell*. Was that??”

For a second, Rei was too busy blinking nervously up the length of the major’s spear to answer.

Then he carefully drew his left hand away from his shoulder—careful to avoid the woman’s blade as he pulled it around and under the weapon—to offer her an awkward salute from where he lay prone on the ground.

“Uh... Surpriiiiise, ma’am?” he offered with a uncertain laugh.