

CHAPTER 11

The red “0” flashed. The starting circle vanished.

Rei took off with a *crack* as the white surface of the simulated flooring beneath Shido’s steel toes crunched under the pressure of 13 weeks of newfound Strength and Speed.

All other sound from around the sub-basement faded to nothing as Rei ripped forward, Cognition setting his neuroline to whirring in his head even before the numbers had started counting down. Bolting northward, his eyes barely moved now as he struck left and right, high and low, every inch of his Brawler-Mode applied to the task at hand. Claws, knees, elbow, shins. Even his head came into play in one flip as he left the ground to run *up* the sheer wall of one of the many octagonal white pillars that formed the Neutral Zone’s only obstacles. He was a whirlwind of destruction, every punch and thrust and hit calculated now in a way he’d never managed to map out before. His movements were deliberate, almost mathematical, from the slightest shift in momentum to the skyward leap from the rising staircase of pillars that loop half of the field. The only thing that Rei didn’t count was the time, pacing himself deliberately, pushing himself here only to apply the breaks there, applying both focus and speed to the task at hand.

It paid off as Bretz’s shout reached him through the thrum of thought and the passing wind just as Rei dropped out of a kick flip off yet another rising wall that had brought him nearly 20 feet into the air.

“Time!”

Rei landed with a light *thump*, both legs and one hand accepting the impact of a drop any regular body would have crumpled under, the other arm extended out to balance himself. Breathing hard, he brought his head up to look up to look skyward, finding the Second Lieutenant obviously struggling to hold back his delight.

“47 discs this time, Ward! Way to finish clean!”

Though his mouth was hidden, Rei was sure the officer would be able to see the grin in his eyes as he forgoed answering aloud in favor of getting to his feet and throwing the man two thumbs up. It wasn't that he didn't have the breath for it, for once. If anything, his new C-Ranked Endurance was already largely bringing his lungs back online.

He just didn't trust himself to keep the glee out of his voice if he'd tried to squeak out a “Yes, sir!” or the like.

47! 47! Setting aside the fact that that his second and third attempts had gained him and additional 3 discs—the black, circular targets that had disappeared from the Speed & Agility testing field the moment his 15 seconds had been up—that was pushing on *twice* his total score of 26 after the previous quarter's testing! What was more, Sense had only achieved 45 discs, officially marking Rei as the fastest User among among 1-A Brawler group according to standardized measurement. Feeling a little apprehensive about this fact, actually, Rei turned at a word of dismissal from the sub-instructor and started for the edge of the field where the others were waiting in their scattered circle, seeking out his friend's eye even as he muttered “Recall” to shed Shido armor and claws in a whirl of metal and blue light. He'd had a rather poor experience the last time he'd hit a major milestone in class. Surpassing Tad Emble had earned him the beatdown of his life—and Rei *knew* beatdowns—even landing him in the campus hospital for most of a day before his Device could do enough to get him back on his feet again. Therefore, as he found Sense—seated between Rei's empty red circle and the one from which Emily Gisham was watching him approach with mouth hanging open—he braced himself for the worst.

In the end, he needn't have worried.

“*Rei.*” Sense hissed under his breath, gaping at Rei as he sat down. “My *man.* That was so freaking *cool!*”

Ordinarily they weren't allowed to speak between testing runs, but Bretz was occupied calling Warren up for her third and final attempt, so Rei granted the boy a sidelong laugh. "Thanks, dude. I think Shido's calculations actually ripped part of your go, so I feel kinda bad..."

"*Don't,*" Sense insisted with a snort, throwing a thumb back at Gisham. "Emily and I were just saying we wish we'd recorded that so we could try copying the last half of it. That wall run and flip... That was awesome!"

"Thanks," Rei said again as Gisham—a short girl with cropped, reddish hair that he'd always been friendly with—leaned forward to listen around the boy. "Shido replotted after seeing your second attempt, I think, but that last part was tricky, yeah. The clawed toes helped a lot."

"I'll bet." Sense glanced down at Rei's bare feet with a note of envy as Warren started a run at last, taking off in a blaze of orange light to—he suspected—make a desperate attempt at outdoing him. "I know you've heard it a hundred times before man, but that Device is something else."

"Scary," Gisham added in a hiss before stiffening as Bretz at last turned to frown down at them from atop his observation platform.

Rei raised a hand in a apology, and after another second's worth of warning glare the sub-instructor turned back to watch Warren again.

Yes... Rei *had* heard Shido called "scary", and for good reason. Covering his arms, legs, *and* a good portion of his face, his CAD had demonstrated not only a terrifying potential for statistical improvement, but physical change as well. Even Aria didn't have a partial helm yet, and some digging through the recordings of the Sol System Intra-Schools—widely considered to host the strongest military schools in the ISC—had confirmed she wasn't the only top-level first year lacking in such a way. *No* other cadet his age, not in the entirety of the Instersystem Collective—had a CAD that had

developed as far along physically as Shido, and that was despite a handful of students recruited to Earth's own academies who were now C8 and C9...

His Device Growth spec wasn't just accelerated Rei's specification improvement. It had also *additionally* improved his evolution pacing, with a rough calculation indicating he was likely to achieve between 50 and 100 percent more alternations to Shido's manifestations than the average User in his lifetime. And that didn't even count the transition Type Shift added to the mix...

"Scary" was a very polite way of describing the CAD, if Rei was being honest with himself...

"Time!" Bretz called out, shaking Rei from his musings to drag his attention to the field again. "Total discs: 41. Decent showing, Warren. Off you go."

Warren's dark cheeks looked flushed as she pushed herself up from where she'd fallen to all fours the moment the attempt had wrap. Turning on her heel and not looking at Rei—or anyone, for that matter—she recalled her CAD as she stomped off the already-fading field, leaving him to watch her take a seat as he did his best to suppressed the gloating warmth of victory bubbling in his gut. 41 wasn't bad by any means. It wasn't far shy from Sense's 45 and Gisham's 43, but it was obvious Warren was kicking herself for placing behind them all. It could have been worse, of course, and as the girl brought her knees up to hug to her chest in a dejected sort of way, Rei's eyes slipped by her to Tad Emble, who looked almost grey, as he had from the moment he'd had finished his third attempt. 41 wasn't bad, sure...

But a final score of 36 would have had Rei feeling sickly, too.

"You know the drill, cadets!" Bretz shouted the moment the platform had brought him down the projection plating again, vanishing into the black steel before them. "Five minutes of rest and recuperation, then it's time of Offense & Endurance. Any questions?" As always, the Second Lieutenant didn't wait for anyone to voice any concerns. "No? Good. Break!"

Rei shoved himself up, and was soon deep in a three-way conversation with Sense and Gisham about their runs, trading feedback and recommendations as to what each of them thought the others could have done better from an observer's perspective. Meanwhile, Warren and Emble stayed seated where they were, not even bothering to interact with each other, much less Rei and the others. He might have felt bad, actually, if it weren't for the memory of Mateus Selleck's boot all-but-breaking his nose.

As it was, all he could do was stop himself from smirking, which undoubtedly would have earned him questioning looks from Sense and Gisham both.

Finally at a point where his body recovered nearly as quickly as the Brawlers', it wasn't more than a minute or so before Rei was feeling a hundred percent again, his lungs and limbs prepped and ready for the second test. With this rapid recover came excitement, too, because this next exam was going to offer an opportunity he'd never had before, and Sense turning to him in a lull in the conversation as their break neared an end indicated Rei wasn't the only one thinking about it.

“You gonna shift for Offense & Endurance?”

The question was stated casually, as normally as one could expect, but the tension in Sense's features and the slight—but immediate—stiffening of Gisham's frame beside him told Rei this was a query they both had been waiting eagerly to get an answer to. He couldn't blame them, of course. Shido's Saber Mode was slower than its Brawler form, so calling on it would have put him at a disadvantage during the Speed & Agility test, but such wasn't the case for the second exam.

A fact Rei had spent more than one distracted moment mulling over since he'd realized the edge Type Shift might offer him on this second test...

“Shift'” he repeated Sense's offhand abbreviation of his Ability with a laugh, giving himself a moment to contemplate his answer. “I like that. Might have to adopt it. It's a pain to call it ‘Type Shift’ every time.”

Sense and Gisham offered him only mirrored, tight smiles, obviously not about to let him distract them from the answer they were looking for

Rei sighed internally, giving in. “Honestly... probably? I’ve got a plan, but I want to test it out in the first two attempts if I can.”

Gisham snorted at that, sounding somewhere between genuinely amused and exasperated. “Bretz is gonna *love* that. You know how much he enjoys it when you twist the testing rules in your favor.”

Rei chuckled at the sarcasm. “Given the two of you took a page out of my book during the last parameter tests, I’d say I’m doing something right.”

The girl grinned, the tension leaving her and Sense both now that it was clear Rei wasn’t about to stonewall them despite the subject matter. “That’s different. We’re just following the science. You get to be the guinea pig, and when you don’t get yelled at—”

“Or die,” Sense added in with a furrowed brow.

“—we just apply what we learn,” Gisham finished, nodding sagely. “Mind you the Defense test is a little different. We can copy you easy enough there, but I don’t think anyone else is about to spontaneously learn to pull a whole new CAD Type out of their ass overnight, so I think you get to run this maze all on your own.”

“Am I a guinea pig, or a mouse?” Rei asked, amused.

“Yes,” Sense and Gisham both answered at once, earning themselves a heavy rolling of the eyes.

“I *seriously* need better friends,” he pretended to mutter to himself, just loud enough for the two of them to hear. They laughed, but before either of them could press him any further on his scheme for the exam, Bretz’s voice had them looking towards the field again.

“Alright, cadets! It’s been three months since you’re last Offense & Endurance exam, so we’re going to do a thorough review before he get started.” The A-Ranked

Brawler threw a thumb over his shoulder, indicating the center of the Dueling zone where a red circle was bright against the plain white of the rest of the 30 meter floor. “You stand there. Bad guys pop up to the north and south of you. Bad guys need to be FDAed. Bad guys get strong every two you beat. The more bad guys you beat and the faster you beat them, the better you make me look. Clear? Great! Glad we had this talk!” Bretz looked to Rei, Sense, and Gisham, still standing together several yards from where Warren and Emble had finally gotten to their feet. “Gisham! You’re up!” A light flared briefly in the Second Lieutenants eyes as he pulled something up in his frame. “Your score to beat is 1st B0 in 4:28.83. Ready?”

“Yes, sir!” the girl announced loud and clear, unsurprisingly eager as she stepped forward. Gisham’s score—which had involved ripping through *twelve* training projections to reach the 1st B-ranked opponent—had been the highest in the group last quarter, and one of the highest in the class, only coming in behind Aria, Grant, Viv, Kay, and a handful of others. Though Rei thought he had a good chance or surpassing her this time around, Gisham still approached the middle of the sparring area excitedly, looking like she had something to prove.

“Cadet. Call.”

Bretz command had Gisham’s CAD, Feron, flashing into being not long after she’d taken her position in the middle of the zone. Blue vysetrium—several shades darker than Shido’s—glimmered along red and green steel. The Device covered her lower legs from hips to toes and encased her forearms in narrow plating that was a little lighter than most C-ranked Brawlers might have been expected to sport. Feron made up for it, though, in the matching long, singular blades that extend from just above her wrists over articulated gauntlets, extending some 8 inches beyond the length of her middle finger. As a result, what Gisham lacked in Defense was compensated for in an excellent reach for her Type and what had to be a heavy Offense spec, as well as the added bonus of free use of her hands that some Brawler’s—like Sense—didn’t have.

It all made for a pretty badass sight as the girl took a ready pose designed for her manifestation, left hand up defensively between her and the red number 10 that had just appeared before her face, right drawn back at her side, ready to plunge forward at a moment's notice.

Then the number hit 0, and Gisham had the chance to turn all that coiled readiness into pure, ripping destruction.

North of her starting position, a smaller red circle had appeared as the countdown ticked away, and by the time the Brawler left her ring the form of a woman had pixilated into being, completely monotone grey other than the plain black "F0" Rei knew marked on the projection's back. Despite having her arms up at the ready as Gisham hurtled towards her—the opponents in the Offense & Endurance test only every dodged and defended, rather than taking any offensive action—the "woman" had no more physical ability than an average non-User, and was therefore all-but-helpless as Feron tore through her feeble guard to pierce her chest.

All within probably 3 seconds.

Gisham didn't pause, of course. Ripping her Device free of the falling form, she whirled and bolted across the field again where a second figure—this time that of a man—appeared to the south. Another F0, it took no more time for the girl to bring him down, and she was turning again, this time facing off with the first F5 of the day.

Back and forth like this Gisham sprinted, tearing through to the Es, then Ds. There she slowed down a bit as the projections gains speed and some real defensive aptitude, but it was only when she reached the first C0 woman that any kind of real fight was actually had. The Brawler's opponent was *definitely* quicker now, and it took some chasing and footwork before Gisham finally hooked an ankle to bring the woman down, felling her cleanly with a slash for Feron's blade across her neck. The C0 man was next, then the C5 with even more noticeable difficulty, then at last...

“Time!” Bretz yelled, his NOED flashing again from where he was standing at the edge of the field. The B0 woman that the girl had been hounding glitched and vanished, leaving Gisham staggering and breathing like the bellows. “First B0 reached in 3:57.90! Strong improvement, Gisham! Nice job!”

“R-Really?” Gisham barely managed to get out, so obviously disappointed in herself that she appeared to forget decorum for a second as she spoke through gasps. “But I... didn’t even break my... record...”

Bretz frowned at her. “The hell are you talking about, cadet? You cut more than 30 seconds off your previous time. You might not have taken on a strong opponent, but you got there a whole half-minute faster. That’s more than a little improvement in my book.” Before Gisham could respond, however, he crossed his arms and jerked his head over his shoulder. “Now clear the field. Emble! You’re up!”

Gisham—looking marginally more pleased with her performance after this exchange—remembered to salute this time before trading places with Emble, who Rei made a point to ignore even as the boy took his middle position. Instead, he joined Sense in giving the Gisham a grin and two thumbs up, which he hoped would further tell her she’d done better than she thought. He got the disappointment, of course. The easiest measure of improvement in the Offense & Endurance test was what rank of opponent you manage to get to, but cutting more than 30 seconds off of reaching the B0 fighters was *definitely* an achievement, just like Bretz said.

And solidified Rei’s plan in his head.

Emble wrapped his first attempt with a much better showing than he’d given in Speed & Agility, making it to the second C5—up from the second C0 the previous quarter—in a respectable time, which was almost commendable given he had sandbagged the last parameter testing in an effort to outdo Rei. After that, Warren went, making a similar improvement by reaching the first B0, though much slower than Gisham had.

And then Bretz turned his eyes on Rei.

“Ward! Let’s go!”

Rei was up and jogging towards the center of the field at once, not bothering to look at Camilla Warren as they crossed paths, focusing instead on the task at hand. Like Emble he had eased up on the gas during the October testing, saving everything for his third attempt. Shido, though, had over 3 months of growth since then, include a big leap in its Endurance spec, and if he wanted to properly try out his plan he wasn’t going to have the luxury of taking things slow.

This is gonna suuuuuuck, Rei thought privately, suddenly getting flashbacks of running hills with Viv and the rest of the combat team back and Grandcrest Prep when they’d been in high school.

Man he’d hated those days...

“Cadet! Call!”

Bretz expected shout came, and Rei settled into his standard pose, bringing both hand up, loose and open, in front of his face as his knees bent slightly in preparation. “Call,” he muttered, focusing on the subtle pressure of Shido’s steel around his wrists, not even blinking as the CAD whirled into place. After the familiar embrace of the metal and vysetrium over the Device’s white underlayer pressed across his arms, legs, and face, Rei watched the red number 10 blink into being, ticking to 9 even as he readied himself.

When it hit 0, he was gone, one singular goal in mind.

The F0s fell in a flash, as did the C5s and both of the Es. The D0s were next, and Rei was thrilled to find himself not even winded as he ripped through the pair of them, only suffering one blocked hit from the woman and a deflected kick from the man before the Arena announced “Fatal Damaged Accrued” for each of them respectively. From there, the D5s took a bit more work, and C0s started to put up an actual fight, requiring Rei to push himself in order to take them down in a reasonable time limit.

So focused was he on the intent of this run, in fact, that he barely registered when the C5s fell and the B0 woman appeared, marking the first time he'd ever achieved that particular achievement.

His distraction, unfortunately, might also have had something to do with the wicked burn in his arms and legs that had finally manifested when the Cs started putting up a decent resistance.

"Time!" Bretz shouted 30 seconds later, and the B0 flickered out of being even as Rei threw an exhausted haymaker at her temple, leaving him staggering. "First B0 reached in 3:47.76, Ward! *Excellent* jump from last quarter! Glad to see you putting in the effort off the bat!"

Rei, catching his balance unsteadily, bent over himself to suck in air through his mask—the CAD helping to prioritize his oxygen intake—as he put one hand on a knee and threw a weak salute at the sub-instructor with the other. He allowed himself a couple of seconds like that, only barely hearing Bretz call for Sense, before he forced himself to stand straight and recall Shido to make an unsteady line towards his ring beyond the edge of the circle.

"Nice," Sense whispered sidelong as they passed, giving Rei a subtle fist bump.

Rei grinned.

Yeah. It *was* nice. And it was exactly what he'd been going for. He'd known if he went all out he would be able to shatter his personal best just on the bases of his vastly improved specs. He was pleased that he'd broken through to the B0s like Gisham and Warren, but the massive chopping down of his time—nearly a full *3 minutes* faster than the roughly 6 minutes 45 seconds it had taken him to get to the C5s last quarter—was what he'd *really* been going for. He'd sandbagged that attempt *hard*, of course, so the jump was as impressive as it might have been on paper, but he had a sense of it, now.

He had a sense of the limits his Brawler Mode could take him.

"*Dude*. Could you try *not* to make us look bad in at least *one* test?"

Rei looked around at Gisham as he half knelt, half fell to his circle, chuckling when he found her smirking at him in a dejected sort of way.

“I *barely* beat you,” he answered back, pleased once again to discover his chest no longer ached as it might once have so soon after such an arduous attempt.

Gisham snorted as though to say “Uh huh,” then turned to watch Sense’s first attempt get started. Rei imitated her, not sure if he was more pleased with the success of his first run, or at the realization the afternoon had brought that he should have put more faith in the character of his friends.

It was nice not to be looked down on, anymore, but equally as pleasant was the understanding that his steady rise over the heads of the majority of the other first years over the last 6 months hadn’t left him a complete pariah...

Sense ripped through his run in short order, reaching the first B0 in just over 4 minutes, managing the opposite success from Gisham of pulling a slower time than last quarter but reaching a higher ranked opponent. After him, it started over again, with Bretz calling Gisham up for her second attempt, where she *just* managed to set a second PR by another couple of seconds, returning to her circle again sweaty but genuinely pleased now. Emble went, then Warren again—neither of them making any significant improvements to their scores—then Rei found himself once more taking a position in the center of the field.

This time, though, he struck a different pose, right arm back—just like Claire de Soto, with Catcher acting as an assistant, had taught him—left hand outstretched with fingers splayed as though ready to accept the rush of an oncoming attacker.

Even over the sound and flurry of activity that was the other Type-groups taking part in their own testing all around them, he didn’t miss Bretz’s brow furrow slightly, nor Sense and Gisham taking in matching breaths of anticipation.

“Cadet. Call.”

“Call,” Rei echoed, but even as Shido’s CAD band dissolved from around his wrists, he kept going. “Type Shift. Saber Mode.”

It was lucky that, unlike some other Abilities like Repulsion, Type Shift wasn’t dependent on a buildup of electromagnetic energy that naturally accumulated over the course of a fight. It was more like Break Step or Third Eye in this way, drawing instead on the vysetrium that lined the CAD as it settled over Rei, allowing him to trigger the Ability as soon as combat was initiated, or even before, as was the case now. As Shido came into being, the whirl of metal and light settled a little differently over Rei’s body, the Device feeling a bit heavier, denser around his limbs. His standard Brawler Mode blades didn’t even have a chance to manifest as the CAD’s form was commanded to adjust mid-call, the still-unfamiliar weight of vysetrium-lined sword settling into the palm of Rei’s right hand, the fingers of his left tipped with glowing blue claws as the Device finished its summoning.

In the end, as the “10” appeared once more, Rei was left standing at the ready, looking the part of a Saber in true, Shido’s armor thicker around him and his reach and offensive capabilities suddenly magnitudes improved.

Of course, that all came at a cost.

0.

Although he knew he was still moving a blistering pace to any onlooker, Rei felt sluggish as he surged out of the starting circle, the drop in his Speed and Cognition specs always the first thing he noticed when he switched out of Brawler Mode. Initially this had been a source of alarm for him when he’d first developed Type Shift, but he’d quickly learned the advantages of the Ability heavily outweighed the cost, at least in the right circumstances.

Circumstances such as a test designed to test one’s offensive capabilities and overall endurance, both of which were now markedly improved.

Despite his drop in agility, the Fs fell in shorter order, as did both of the Es and D0s. The D5s proved no real challenge either, but Rei—who hadn't had nearly enough hours using the sword and claws to really be used to them—had to work a little harder to apply his new weapon correctly to compensate for his most prized Brawler specs. Pretty soon, though, he'd figured out he still had the Speed needed to grab hold of the D5s with his left hand to hold them in place as his blade did its work, and so he moved into the Cs feeling even better than he had in the first round.

The C0 woman took a little, as did the man, but they fell eventually. The C5s were even more difficult, their Speed actually surpassing Rei's now, but he still cut them both down within 20 seconds or so of his allotted 30. He was feeling the fatigue now, but the ache wasn't in his limbs like it had been, his improved Strength assisting his added Endurance to bolster him. The B0 appeared, and Rei put everything he had into challenging the woman, focusing with every fiber of his being on the lessons de Soto and Catcher had imparted. Step. Strike. Grab. Miss. Thrust. Twist. Strike. Strike. The projection, of course—bearing B0-level specs across the board—was stunningly quick, and despite the immense pressure Rei applied on her it was all almost to no avail.

Almost.

There.

Rei saw the opportunity, the chance in the pattern, an echo of his previous test. As the cutting sweeps of his blade drove the woman back there was always a moment where one leg was left extended just ahead of her body while she backpedaled, and as the seconds ticked threateningly by Rei forced himself to wait, forced himself to be patient.

Then he struck.

Had he been in his Brawler mode, his reach would have failed him by a foot or more, but even with his reduced Speed there was no such weakness for a Saber. The top 4 inches of his long, single-edged sword trailed blue light to catch the woman clean

in the side of the knee as she continued to retreat away from his onslaught, bringing her to the ground in a crumbled heap. To the credit of the combat program the B0 *still* managed to put up a hell of a fight from there, applying the projection's Strength and Cognition to the max by redirecting the rain of blows Rei brought down on her head, but he managed to get a surprise kick through her blocking at last, the crook of his ankle catching her a tremendous blow under the chin in what had to have been the last few seconds he had.

“Fatal Damage Accrued.”

As the Arena announced Rei's victory—and he thought he heard a whoop of excitement from Sense on the sidelines—Rei whirled and bolted across the field. He was *definitely* winded now, and didn't want to know how much more time it had taken him to get to the end of the first B0, but it didn't matter. He'd done it. He'd cracked through, just like he'd hoped. Even if the growing exhaustion that had his arms shaking as he clashed with the B0 man let him down, he'd confirmed his theory.

Now—as Gisham had put it—he just had to “follow the science”.

“Time!” came Bretz shout 30 seconds later, announcing the end of the attempt. “*Second* B0 reached in 5:03.23! *That's* how we get it done, Ward, even if it *was* with an inferior Type.”

Rei, despite his utter exhaustion, let out a bark of a laugh even as he nearly stumbled to his knees. Again he granted himself a few seconds like that, sucking in air through the half-mask, and as expected his recovery was even more speedy given his higher Endurance. Recalling Shido, he looked up to find Sense already most of the way to the middle of the field, and he hurried off as best he could after yet another quick salute to Bretz.

By the time he crossed the silver perimeter, he was already doing the math in his head.

2nd B0. That was great. That was what he'd been hoping for, given how thoroughly the first B0 had shrugged off his assault in Brawler Mode. Had he had a hundred more hours of practice with his Saber form, actually, Rei was pretty sure he would have been able to get through to the B5s, but experience had failed him. On the whole, though, the entire experiment was a success.

After all, his weaknesses had shown themselves exactly as expected...

Accepting a excited “Nice job!” from Gisham with a tired grin, Rei dropped to sit with arms extended behind him, looking up at the sub-basement ceiling high above as he continued on working to catch his breath, still running the numbers. Just over 5 minutes. Assuming he'd taken almost all 30 seconds he had to down the B0 woman, he'd reached the point he'd wrapped his first attempt in roughly 4 and a half minutes, about 45 seconds slower in Saber Mode. That was actually better than he'd expected—given his Speed and Cognition went from his top specs to his *bottom* when he switched from Brawler—but it was still an impressive drop in agility. Aside from the reach of his blade, his Endurance had clearly been the deciding factor in the success of that second run, because there was no way in hell he would have been able to push himself that much longer if he hadn't “shifted”, to steal Sense's abbreviation.

Now, though... Could he do better?

Rei—his breathing finally settling and his arms starting to ache less—grinned as he plotted.

Sense made a truly impressive showing of his second attempt, cutting almost 10 seconds from his first run to join Rei and Gisham in the sub-4 minute mark for the 1st B0. After that, there was no fanfare as Bretz initiated the third and final round of the Offense & Endurance exam, and Gisham started them off by shaving *another* 2 seconds from her already-impressive score to top out at 3:53 exactly. After her Emble failed to

improve on his second run while Warren barely scraped under her score, and then Rei was once more on his feet, his heart rate half again what it should have been as he made for the starting point, going over the simple plan in his head one last time.

This time, when Bretz told him to call, he let Shido take the standard Brawler it always started as.

Then the count hit 0 again, and Rei was off with all the Speed he could muster one last time.

Fs, Es, Ds. All of them fell with a precision he would have been proud of had he not been wholly focused on the test. One after another Shido cleaved through them, Brawler claws working perfectly well to tear through the meager defenses of those lesser ranks. The Cs came next, and Rei held to the path, bulling into them one after the other until they fell to punches and cutting slashes. At last, when the C0 man toppled to an axe kick between the eyes, Rei spun and bolted with everything he had at the first C5.

When he was 5 yards from the woman, Rei leapt, launching himself in an arching blur some 10 feet into the air.

As he flew, though, he ground out the words through clenched teeth.

“Type Shift! Saber Mode!”