

## Chapter 17

If nothing else Firesong started on the right foot, with only Aria being faster than Rei on the uptake after everyone got out an “Oh!” or “What the—?!” of surprise.

“Woodlands!” she called out the moment what could only be grass and trees began to rise up between the squad and the three trainers, quickly blocking them, Jasper, Dent, Guest, and Maddison Kent from view. “The second we start, form up! I want a *mobile* defense. I’m front, Rei’s left, Chancery’s right. Catcher, Logan, you’ve got our six.”

“Roger that,” all of them said together while the five of them climbed.

“I’m assuming we’re going hunting?” Rei asked as a blink in his frame told him that combat coms had come online online.

“I would vote ‘yay’ on that, if anyone cares about my opinion.”

Communications had popped in right no time, because Catcher’s hopeful offer was abruptly hard to make out when the field started to form a stormy sky over their heads, a mean wind suddenly buffeting them just as they’re ascent slowed, then ceased.

“Seconded,” Logan muttered, stepping up to stand beside Rei and peering up at the clouds. “Especially if—Well, there you go.”

“Ah man... Did you *have* to jinx it?” Chancery this time, moving forward too as the first heavy drops of rain started to fall.

Not 3 seconds later later, they were all standing in an ugly downpour, everyone one of them almost instantly soaked from head to toe.

“Storm’s good for us.” Aria’s voice was clear in their ears even over the rain. “Anything to help close the advantage gap.”

They all agreed, either with a nodded or grunt of affirmation. None of them, Rei noted with measured amusement, decided to voice the fact that nothing short of a tactical nuke would *actually* close said gap, given who they were up against.

“Which way we moving on go?” he asked instead, lifting both scared hands to shield his face as he attempted to squint through the storm.

“South.” Aria’s answer was accompanied by a gleam of Hippolyta’s green vysetrium when she lifted a hand to point to their left. “Kalus was on von Bor’s right, meaning if they split there’s a decent chance he’ll go that way. He’s the least experienced of the three, so we’ve got the best chance of making a match of it against him.”

“Positivity. I like it.” Catchers laughter was a little dry through the coms. “Probably the most ‘technically the truth’ thing I’ve ever heard in my life but...”

“We’ll take it,” Rei grunted.

“We’ll take it!” the Saber echoed enthusiastically.

And then they settled in, waiting for the Arena to announce the match. Waiting.

... And... waiting?

“... Uh...” Chancery was the first to speak again when almost 30 seconds had gone by without the disembodied voice calling for them to take their familiar positions. Even the red rings themselves hadn’t show up anywhere in view. “Did something go wrong?”

Rei’s stomach clenched at the question, and he couldn’t help but glance at Aria. He ended up meeting her gaze as her eyes flicked to him as well, and found his sudden concern echoed there. The last time something odd had happened while they’d been on a field together...

But that fearful thought was interrupted by a woman’s booming shout ringing out of the rain from their left, in the direction Rei *should* have been looking.

“Nothing’s wrong! Your first lesson is just to remember that having expectations on an SCT field is *never* a good idea!”

“CONTACT *LEF*—!” Rei started to yell, feeling his Cognition snap into place, intending to call on Shido as soon as he brought the team’s awareness around.

He didn’t even have time to finish his first thought before his frame flashed red and he registered a pale streak of light coming at him. In the fraction of a second Shido’s neuroline allowed him, he thought glimpsed the vague form of a tall, lithe shape hurtling in a dark blur towards them.

*White*, was the only think he registered in that instant. *White eyes*.

Then something blunt took him in the gut with all the force of a lightning bolt.

*WHAM!*

Rei went flying, whatever had hit him impacting so hard it shattered his reactive shielding like glass and blast him clean off his feet. He rocketed across the group, his body narrowly making it through a space between Chancery and Grant that some small unscrambled part of his brain registered must have been deliberately aimed for. To hit *that* hard *and* direct his mass through such a tight window??

And then, 20 feet away, he struck the ground, skipped once off the wet grass, then made an abrupt—and unkind—stop again the solid wood of one of the stormswept forest’s many trees.

“*OOPH!*”

All the air exploded out of Rei’s lungs at once, and he crumbled across the dirty roots at the base of the tree in a curled heap, clutching at himself as he fought to breath. He could feel his Cognition whirring to clear his thoughts, and worked doubly to assist it, to focus.

*Call!* he thought over and over again, training his intention on Shido while he struggled to choke in even a mouthful of air. *Call! CALL!*

And then, at last...

“*C-CALL!*”

The command was barely rasped out, but his focus was clear, narrowed in on the feeling of the CADs bands around his wrist. In whirl of metal and light the Device came alive, and a second later Rei no longer felt the rain as Shido’s black steel and blue vysetrium constructed itself into it’s dark Brawler armor over the familiar white underlayer. The helm covered his face, leaving on the top of his head and smacked white hair exposed, and almost at once Rei’s breathing got easier, the mask actually lightly forcing air into his semi-paralyzed lungs to compensate for his offended diaphragm.

And then—at record speed—he was shoving himself out of the grass and mud onto his feet.

It took Rei a second to locate the fight, but that was less time than it would have had he not made a minor discovery in that moment. Through the downpour and trees, even the flashing of vysetrium-edged armor and blades was barely visible, and Rei might

have missed it altogether had Shido's HUD not brought up the clean outline of five people, distinct despite the forest. Four of them were highlighted in blue, and Aria, Catcher, Chancery, and Logan's obvious forms and weapons were instantly recognizable.

As was—even if he'd only ever seen her fight on the feeds before—the redlined shape of Jetway and her white-tipped spear, the S-Ranked Lancer's movements a untouchable flitting of slips and ducks and dodges in Firesong's midst .

“Well *that's* handy,” Rei allowed himself to mutter, genuinely amazed.

Then he bolted straight for the fight, the pointed steel toes of his boots tearing into the wet earth as he moved.

He didn't make it two full strides.

The HUD's assistance, as it turned out, was even more useful than he thought. As he blew by a particularly wide spruce, he caught a second red outline through the evergreen's lowest branches, blinking into being at the very edge of his vision from where it had been waiting in hiding behind the tree. Rei had *just* enough time to wrench himself around to the right, getting both clawed hands up to catch the blistering kick he was greeted with on his crossed arms, the newcomer's armored foot slamming into Shido's steel plating with another *WHAM!*

Rei couldn't help but think he'd do well to *actually* learn to fly one day before he hit a *second* tree, slamming to a stop back-first, blasting into it so hard that bark and splinters of shattered wood went flying in all directions.

This time, though, he kept his footing.

An impressed whistle rang out through the rain.

“Damn, kid... I admit I did *not* expect you to block that...”

Another flash of red, from the left now, and Rei ripped around again. He didn't manage to get a block up, but the next hit was kinder, his assailant obviously laying off the gas a bit.

Not that that stopped Rei from being thrown onto his ass under the weight of it, forcing him to tuck into a backwards tumble that had him rolling so many times he lost count. Shido's long knuckle claws had always been versatile, though, and eventually he

managed to get them planted in the soft earth, using the sudden pivot point as his body whipped up to shove of the ground with his fists.

As he arced through the air, he shouted as clearly as he could.

“Type Shift: Phalanx Mode!”

The blue arcs of electricity came and went, and by the time Rei landed, Shido’s heavier plating was in place around his body. His claws were gone, replaced by the thick sword and massive tower shield, and with an ugly splash his feet sank a full inch and change into the wet dirt, the weight working against him in the storm. It didn’t matter. What he needed in the moment was stability. Sure footing.

Defense.

“Well shit!” The shout came from behind him this time. “*That’s* cool as hell!”

And then, before Rei could spin around, something long and thin took him in the back, hitting him like a dozen sledge hammers.

Shido didn’t give.

Forced forward only a single hard step, the grass squelched under Rei’s boots as he managed to haul himself around, shield up and sword swung out to side at the ready. Instantly his HUD worked its magic, and where he should by all means have seen nothing but rain and some hints of glowing vysetrium, Rei tensed as a shape appeared in red, having apparently retreated some a dozen feet back to try and hide in the storm.

Though he wasn’t surprised, he felt a chill as he recognized Kalus Laurent’s tall, strong-shouldered form.

The Atypical’s “Triumverant” was a CAD of growing fame, and even without being able to make out its colors or details Rei could understand why. Heavy armor plating—more than the average Saber’s, but not quite as thick as a Phalanx’s—formed a threatening outline even against the display, with rounded shoulder guards and slender, dangerous barbs along the man’s elbows and knees. His helmet, too, was rounded at the top, but Shido even outlined the narrow point the faceplate tapered to in the front and down at Laurent’s chin. Only a single horizontal slash of wide, green vysetrium decorated it at eye-level, but this was made up for the the long, glowing plume of the same flowing color that tufted out from the top of his head, apparently unaffected by the rain.

Even mostly-hidden as he was, Kalus Laurent looked like a medieval knight pulled abruptly into the modern world.

There was, however, one thing that stood out. Whereas Rei thought he recalled that knights of old had been best known to carry swords or spears—or maybe maces or flails—in Laurent’s right hand he held what looked like a standard, most-unadorned staff. It was slender, maybe a thumb-and-a-half thick, to the point that Shido’s red highlight nearly formed a perfect line, almost obscuring the glow of the blunt vysetrium caps that tipped both ends of the steel. More of the element formed two narrow bands to trisected the weapon evenly along its haft, but even with these subtle decorations the staff hardly looked imposing compared to its master.

Rei would have known better even *if* he wasn’t worried about calculating the potential interest his girlfriend’s older brother had in “accidentally” braining him on their first day of training.

*Whoosh!*

Laurent moved, nothing more than a blink of red in Shido’s display as he flashed around in a quarter circle to Rei’s left. From there his outline took a step forward—fortunately at a more considerate speed this time—but paused when Rei jerked southward to meet him. Another *whoosh!* of air, and the red vanished for a second. Rei did a 180, muddy water splashing up in an arc around him as he turned, and sure enough the Atypical’s outline reappeared, having moved to try to get around behind him this time. Laurent paused again, then flicked sideline twice more, once some way to Rei’s left, then back a full half-circle to the right. Each time Rei followed—if slower than he would have liked—keeping his shield as best he could between himself and S-Rank.

After one last attempt to flank him in which Laurent actually ran just shy of a full ring around Rei, the man stopped and simply watched him for a moment, seeming like he was trying to parse something out.

“Your CAD tracking me, Ward?” the man called through the rain.

“Something like that!” Rei shouted back, pulling his shield up a little higher until the top was at the bridge of his nose, just like Imala Cattori had taught him. Then he winced. “Uh... Sir!”

He thought he heard a chuckle over the storm.

“*Very* interesting... Here I *was* going to see what kind of punishment that armor of yours can take, but now I’ve got a better idea.”

And then he vanished yet again.

Rei spun full around once more, but was surprised to find no hint of the man’s shape. For a heartbeat he froze, his reduced Cognition working to process in the fraction of a second he knew he had to figure out this sudden puzzle.

It was the briefest pause in the fall of the rain, and momentary abatement in the drumming of water against his head, back, and shoulders, that clued him in.

Rei dropped to one knee, grunting with the strain of wrenching his shield up over his head. He only barely set in time, bracing the steel with both arms just as what had to have been Laurent’s full weight slammed down into him, both of the man’s steel boots landing in unison like pile driver. Rei’s elbows gave a little, but the brace held, and with a snarl he pushed up, shoving the shield out and away in an attempt to steal the man’s footing from under him.

But Laurent was long gone, Rei’s suddenly-wild swing turning into an uncoordinated twist of his whole body that nearly toppled him sideways. In fact, the Atypical was already watching him from back out in the rain with helmet cocked and his free hand casual resting on his hip, like he couldn’t for the world understand what Rei’s uncoordinated hobble could have been about.

“Graceful!” Laurent called out as Rei found his balance again. “So it looks like you drop in Speed in this form? Veeeeerry interesting...”

And then the Atypical disappeared again, and Rei was forced to spin to look for him once more.

For what had to have been a full 5 minutes Laurent ran him in a *literal* circles, sometimes going left, sometimes right, sometimes from above again. A few times the S-Rank even appeared like magic *inside* Rei’s guard, coming in so low he might have limboed under the shield at light speed. Each time Rei responded, whirling to face him, and each time Laurent vanished again to reappear somewhere else and from a totally different angle a blink later.

And then, almost out of the blue, the first hit came.

*CLANG!*

Rei swore, the blow ringing off the side of his helmet, slipping in around his shield. Given he still had his head Laurent had significantly held off, but the impact still left his temple throbbing as he staggered sideways.

“Yup. ‘Bout the right Speed I’d say.” The Atypical’s muttering—like he was talking to himself—was so close to Rei’s ear as he found his footing again that Aria’s brother could only have been leaning over directly over him. Rei whirled, swinging his shield, but was unsurprised to catch only air.

Then Laurent spoke again, just behind him. “I’m thinking any faster and you could proooobably block this, right?”

*CLANG!*

Another hit, off his left shoulder this time, and Rei was forced sideways again. He caught himself after two steps this time, and didn’t swipe around with his shield. Instead he held it as tight to himself as he could, reducing the amount of effort required to pivot.

As a result, he managed to catch Laurent *third* hit on the very edge of his defenses as he whirled, causing it to rebound and the S-Rank himself to step back in surprise.

In that moment, Rei got to take in Triumverant in truth for the first time. Crafting the makings of a lithe titan of dark red and black steel edged in pale green, the slick details of the CAD were brought into relief as the vysetrium reflected in shifting ripples off the wet armor. The points at Laurent’s knees and elbows were solid metal 3 inches long, and each looked sharp enough to punch through a steel wall with hardly any effort. The plating overlaid and overlapped itself in an intricate pattered over his chest, torso, and legs, forming the false outline of solid muscle. What was more, heavier build of the Device didn’t seem to impede the S-Rank’s mobility in the least, because the man’s staff snapped into both his hands in a blur as he backed away that one step, coming up in a defensive hold that was clearly all instinct. The long weapon’s three sections were mostly crimson divided by those narrow bands of glowing green, with slices of textured black set into each partion for additional grip. It’s caps, swimming with Stryon particles, left a trail of light across Rei’s vision as they snapped around, much like the long plume that weightlessly followed ever small motion of Laurent’s head. Up close, Triumverant was mesmerizing.

Mesmerizing... and terrifying.



“Well *that* was an unexpected...” Rei heard the Atypical mutter with genuine surprise, and he thought he could tell Laurent was eyeing his shield from behind that slash of green across his face plate. “I heard you *just* got access to this form, Ward. That right?”

“A couple weeks ago, yes, sir.” Rei answered clearly, not lowering his shield. Despite the pace of the fight and the beating, he was breathing easily.

*Man* high Endurance was useful...

Laurent nodded slowly. “I admit it then... I’m a little impressed. A *little*.” Then he stood up straight, pointing his staff at Rei with one hand, who could hear the smile in his words as he continued. “Still... That just means you can handle a liiiittle more, doesn’t it?”

*Woosh-CLANG!*

In a flash that left a hollow in the rain for a moment, Laurent closed the distance between them to slam Triumverant’s leading tip into Rei’s shield like a lance. Rei *barely* had time to lean into the blow, and even then he felt the metal give as he slid 5ft back through the grass and mud, his boot tearing twin furrows into the wet ground.

*CLANG! CLANG! CLANG-CLANG-CLANG-CLANG!*

The rain of hits came fast and thick. Laurent was still holding back what had to have been about 90% of his power, but he struck with such speed that the blows started to feel like a jackhammer against Rei’s defense. 10, 20, 30 strikes in all of maybe 5 seconds. Rei grit his teeth, thinking fast. Any second now the Shido would—

*CRACK!*

With the ugly sound of shattering steel the shield gave, Triumverant punching a fist-sized hole right through it to send metal shrapnel flying everywhere. The Device’s hit carried right through, striking Rei in the right shoulder to send him spinning like a top. His Defense held, though, his reactive shielding absorbing most of the hit.

Which let his Cognition continue to strain.

*Phalanx is too slow, Brawler is too soft,* Rei managed to decide even as he crashed once more to the forest floor. *Easy choice, then.*

“Type Shift: Saber Mode,” he got out as he let go of the shield to tuck and logroll several yards away.

Then he came up slashing, his Speed improving, his mind clearing, and his sword lengthening even as he swung.

The blade missed Laurent by a good foot, though only because of the S-Rank’s reaction time. He sidestepped the blow with ease, but Rei could have sworn he saw a nod of approval as Triumverant came around, under Shido’s upswing. With no time to bring the blade into position, Rei snapped a leg up, catching the staff on the thick plating of his shin instead. The block hurt, but the armor held, and he took advantage of the earned moment to snap the sword down, aiming for the Atypical’s extended wrist. He missed as Laurent flashed away again.

“Very nice!” he heard the man call from the rain behind him. “Good pivot!”

“Thank you, sir,” Rei answered uncertainly, already slashing horizontally as he snapped around. Laurent caught Shido on his staff and forced it up and out of the way, then kicked forward, catching Rei in the gut to send him staggering. His Saber form wasn’t as squishy his Brawler’s, however, so he weathered the blow, leaping right back into the fight with a shout.

For another 5 minutes or so they went at each other like that again, Rei swapping in and out of Shido’s Saber and Brawler as often as needed, a couple times even dipping back into Phalanx Mode if the opportunity presented itself. He was finally confident that Laurent wasn’t out to beat him to a pulp—at least not for the time being—so Rei instead poured everything he had into the exchange, every hour he and Firesong had put into practice late, with and without Bretz and de Soto and Imala alike. As a result he thought he made a good showing of the assessment—because what else could it have been, given he’d been deliberately separated from the squad from the go?—with Laurent pushing a little more every minute or so, like he wanted to find the ceiling of Rei’s and Shido’s ability.

Whether fortunately or unfortunately, by the time Rei started having wincing flashbacks of the day Christopher Lennon had run him ragged the weekend before his final Intraschool match, the man definitely found it.

Or at least the limits of what he could show...

*WHAM-WHAM!*

A combo strike of Triumverant's staff and a booted foot. The first to the side of Rei's right shin, slamming his legs out from under him, the second to his torso again in the fraction of a second he hung half-suspended in the air, arms and Brawler claws flailing. There was no tree at his back to stop him this time, so he cannoned through the woods until he splashed down in a tumbling skip to the earth once more. Yet again he was on his feet in a flash, and yet again he set himself at the ready, blades bared, scanning the rain for a sign of Laurent. He was in the thick of the combat area now, in the heaviest part of the Woodlands field, and all he saw were the shadowy forms of evergreens and underbrush through the storm.

"Not bad, Ward. Seriously. Not bad *at all*."

Rei would have whipped around, but the words were accompanied by a heavy hand on his shoulder, at once a pat of approval and a grip holding him in firmly place. He paused and looked around to find the S-Ranked standing behind him yet again, the man's faceplate—still outlined in red—dipping in approval once more.

"A User-Unique Ability. As a *first* year." The words came out with something like a sigh of envy, and Laurent let his hand drop to his hip, Triumverant's staff over his own shoulder, tapping up and down against the armor there as though by habit. "*And* you seem to have a good head for it. You been putting a *lot* of time in, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." Unsure of what else to say, Rei decided to play it safe. "Our instructors have been a big help. We've been getting extra time with them almost every day."

"Yeah... I can tell." Laurent seemed to take him in from behind the visor for a second. "You've got a few weaknesses, though. You're not nearly as capable in your Phalanx... 'Mode' did you call it?" He waited for Rei to nod in confirmation. "Gotcha. Yeah, you're not nearly as capable in you Phalanx Mode as the other too. Saber's also obviously weaker than Brawler, but it's better."

"Had it a bit longer, sir. Couple of months."

"Heard that. Also heard your CAD was essentially manifesting as Brawler since assignment, so that makes sense." He let out a grunt. "*Three* Types... You've been putting the hours in, kid, but you've got a looooot more ahead of you if you want to make them all useful."

“Yes, sir. Agreed, sir.” Rei decided it wasn’t the time to voice his suspicion that *three* was just the start, if Shido kept growing the way it was.

“That’s long term, though. In the short term, there’s an easier opportunity for improvement. Verbal commands are slowing you down. A *lot*. Jetway says it’s the same thing for the rest of the squad dear baby sis. It’s a little early for your year, but it’s definitely the first thing we’ve got to deal with given all of you already have Abilities. *Especially* in your case.”

Even though he knew the man couldn’t see his face, he still fought to keep from swallowing nervously. For a handful of minutes he’d managed to forget who *exactly* it was he was standing in front of, but Laurent’s reminder that he was Aria’s older brother had brought the anxious horror flooding *right* back *right* quick.

He worked hard to keep his voice even as he answered.

“Uh... Yes, sir. That was the team’s hope, I think.”

“You think?”

“I know, sir.”

Laurent chuckled,

“Good. Always best to *know* on the battlefield, Ward. Whenever you can.” The staff abruptly stopped tapping on his shoulder. “Oh, and speaking of: Your last issue might be the biggest.” He brought an armored hand up to point at where his ear would have been under his helmet. “Anyone ever tell you you’re not good at listening.”

Rei frowned behind his mask. No, he *hadn’t* ever been told as much that he could recall. At least not by an instructor.

“Er... Not really, sir...?” he answered tentatively, hoping for clarification. The S-Ranked was nodding once more, and Rei again heard the grin in the man’s voice.

“The Second Lieutenant already told you, didn’t she? *Never* have expectations on an SCT field. Remember?”

There was a second, a frozen moment, in which Rei stared at the Atypical, not understanding.

And then the implication registered, but not before he could do anything about the staff that came swinging at his head again, a sharp blur of red, black, and gold.

... *Wait... Gold?*

*WHAP!*

Rei staggered back a step, but not because of any hit. Instead, a hand, slim but so, *so* strong, had shoved him out of the way as a tall, familiar figure in officer's regulars appeared seemingly out of thin air between him and Laurent.

"That was sly of you, Sergeant Major. Maybe we ease into psych tactics a *little* slower, what do you say?"

Firm and regal in her black and golds, the Iron Bishop stood separating Rei and the Atypical in the rain, a sudden, impenetrable wall outlined in white that had saved him from what would probably have been nasty headache. She hadn't even called on Kestrel to stop the hit, having caught the staff with one bare hand, her other loose and relaxed at her hip.

In front of her, it seemed to take the Sergeant Major a moment to catch up to the woman's sudden appearance.

Then he laughed.

"Yes, ma'am," he told her genially. "I promise I was just gonna ring his bell. It's good to stay on your toes in a fight."

Again Rei couldn't help a flashback of doubling over and wondering why he'd bothered packing lunch.

"Preaching to the choir, officer," Dent answered with a grin. She hadn't let go of Triumverant, though, and after a second Laurent took notice.

"Uh... Mind giving me back my weapon, ma'am?" he asked politely, giving the steel a small tug.

"Not just yet. I've seen your fights, Laurent. You're *very* good at hiding cards up your sleeve. *But*—" her smile widened slightly "—you're not the only one. Actually, I'm thinking you two have *ample* reason to get along, if just cause of that."

And then, still smiling, Dent looked around at Rei.

“Ward. Had a chat with the Colonel and Captain von Bor. How would you feel about surprising the Sergeant Major, here?”

Rei blinked at her, not following for a second.

Then it clicked, and his mouth dropped up behind his visor.

“Uh... Ma’am?” he asked. “You sure about that...?”

“Pretty sure,” Dent answered pleasantly, still holding onto Laurent’s staff. For his part, the man was looking between the two of them, the movement something between confused and curious.

Rei barely noticed, excitement building suddenly. It definitely hadn’t been his intention, but it wasn’t like they were going to be able to keep it hidden from the Kamiya trainers forever, right?

So if the Colonel and Dent were in approval, and *if* Firesong *actually* wanted to get everything they could out of this sponsorship... wasn’t now as good a time as ever?

Starting to grin himself, Rei took two quick leaps back from Dent and Laurent, figuring he might as well get the point across *very* clearly. One he was a dozen yards away and the pair were nothing but white and red outlines through the downpour, he fell into an offensive crouch, calling on Shido to shift as he did. He knew there wasn’t a world in which any weapon he brought to bear could have broken through the Sergeant Major’s reactive shielding, much less his armor, but if Rei could get *physics* on his side...

Once Phalanx Mode’s heavy shield was set on his arm again, he yelled out into the storm.

“Permission to surprise the Sergeant Major, ma’am?”

In his HUD, he saw Dent white outline finally let go of the man’s weapon, then vanish from sight in a blink. She must have leapt back up to the viewing disk she’d probably dropped from in the first place, because her clear, loud answer came from above.

“Permission granted, Cadet! Show him what you’ve got!”

For his part, Laurent was left standing confused, peering first in Rei's direction—undoubtedly following Shido's blue glow—then half turning to look himself up in the direction of the stormy sky.

“Sorry, but I'm a little lost!” he called out, raising a hand as though wanting to ask a question. “Could someone fill me in, or am I just supposed to guess what—?”

Rei didn't wait for the man to finish. Taking advantage of the S-Ranked's turned back, he focused on the on his target, on the space just behind the man.

Then, with a breath, he took a single, deliberate step forward.

“Temporal Step.”