

CHAPTER 6

PLACEHOLDER

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The rest of that night and the following day were among the worst Rei had suffered since coming to the Galens Institute. After the Captain dropped the two of them off in front of Kanes, Aria had left him at the lobby stairs with only a tired kiss, mumbling about having to get her head on straight and needing her own bed for what few hours left they had to get any real sleep. Rei, in total agreement, had climbed ploddingly to the third floor and returned to 304 in a stumbling daze, at once having trouble stopping his mind from turning over the evening's events once again and yet all too tired to be able to cling on to any specific thought for more than a few seconds. That, unfortunately, was when he was not only reminded of the regrettable fact that they'd left Catcher and Chancery behind when he and Aria had blitzed off to look for Viv, but that—in the jumble of everything that night—the two of them had also *completely* forgotten to let pair know they'd found out what was going on, or at least some extent of it.

He remembered pretty quickly, though, when Catcher and Chancery all but pounced on him when he walked blearily into the fully-lit living area of suite, the two of them jumping to their feet together from where they'd apparently been waiting—stressed the gills the entire time—for word of what was going on.

It was hard, delivering the news as best he could. The Saber and Lancer were both as horrified as he and Aria had been, for one thing, but for another he had the awkward job of dancing around Colonel Guest's gag order, which got tricky when Catcher asked “But how did *you* know something happened to her??” In the end, though, he managed to escape the trap of their company by begging exhaustion and appeasing them—just as the Colonel had for him—by passing on the promise that they would all be allowed to visit Viv if they wanted to come the Sunday leave day. Catcher and Chancery had both agreed at once, but the suggestion also had the Lancer bringing up a question that had Rei's hands going cold even as he'd been in the process of trying to sidle by to make for the somber blue light of his own room.

“Does Logan know yet?” she'd asked. “Has anyone told him?”

The guilt—and no small amount of dread—brought on by this simple query was only one of many reasons Rei slept fitfully for the few hours they'd had left in the night despite a level of fatigue he didn't think he'd ever known before.

His alarm woke him up early the following morning, only to be greeted by a notification from Aria in the Firesong group chat letting them all know she was making the call to cancel their early morning training. Despite the momentary relief this brought on at first read, it only added to the weight of the coming hours, resulting in Rei laying for longer than he should have at an uncomfortable angle across his bed, one arm resting on his chest, the other hanging across his eyes like he could protect himself from the impending day.

Then Logan had responded, asking if there was a reason for the impromptu break, and after a pause in which no one answered, Aria sent another message—this time to Rei privately—asking if he'd be willing to come with her to the Mauler's room to explain before breakfast.

That was when Rei decided he needed to try and shake himself of the misery of the previous night and, after a quick confirmation, got himself sullenly up and moving.

It was a lot of cursing, a much-needed shower, and *three* cups of coffee later that he met Aria outside the elevators on the second floor of Kanes, and after a tired “good morning” he followed her up the hall until they reached the room numbered 211. Rei couldn't even muster up a spark of curiosity at seeing the inside of a different suite for the first time as Aria knocked quietly on the door, too tense was he while the pair of them waited in their uniforms.

He couldn't help but feel, in the moment, like a notifying officer, the military men and women responsible for delivering the worst kinds of news the families and loved ones of ISCM soldiers could receive.

The door opened within seconds, and Rei for some reason wasn't surprised to find a massive, black-haired boy standing before them, taking the two of them in cautiously. At well-over six-and-half feet tall and with shoulders almost as wide as the doorframe, Logan Grant—Firesong's Mauler, and largely considered the third-strongest first year at Galens after Rei and Aria—was as handsome as he was imposing, somehow managing to pull off both even in sweats and a t-shirt. Clearly their slow response that morning had already put him on edge, however, and the hint of alarm in his black eyes—the irises of which were ringed with a hint of bloody red—only grew more pronounced when Aria asked if they could talk in his room. He agreed with a frown, but demanded to know what was going on even as Aria and Rei stepped into the unlit suite.

They didn't answer him.

Logan's room, it turned out, was astonishingly well-manicured, but otherwise very much like any of the other few Rei had had a chance to see. Everything seemed to have its place, from the carefully aligned tablet and stylus on the desk to the few personal belongs the boy had scattered about the space. Even the bed—which, interestingly, looked a good bit bigger than Rei's—had already been made and tidied to a surgical degree despite the early hour. In fact, the only things that stood out took Rei by surprise, because for some reason he hadn't thought to expect *Viv's* presence in the space. There was a green zip-up hoodie he recognized hanging lazily off the back of the desk chair, as well as what he thought was a tube of lipstick on the bedside table. Logan's room was so immaculate, in fact, that Rei even noticed a black hair tie in one corner of the floor, clearly having been lost or discarded by its more-carefree owner.

It hurt, seeing those small, stark indications of his best friend's touch scattered about her boyfriend's room, and didn't make opening his mouth to speak any easier for Rei.

Fortunately, Aria had already steeled herself for that exact purpose, because she started talking the moment the door had closed behind them.

For the five minutes it took to explain the situation, Logan stood listening, arms crossed over his chest. He never said a word, never interrupted, but with every passing second Rei thought the massive boy's face grew paler and paler, and after a while his hands started trembling slightly, until he balled them into bring-like fists under his elbows. It was heartbreaking to witness, and in more than one way. Rei could understand the rush of horror and cold and fear that had to be gripping the Mauler even as he stood though, could empathize with it completely, especially having actually *sceen* Viv suspended in that tank...

But it was somehow more alarming, as Aria finished telling him what she could, to take Logan Grant in and think that in course of those few short minutes he had somehow grown smaller and more fragile than Rei himself could ever remember feeling in his life.

"But she's alive?" Logan asked finally, his voice a dead croak, his eyes not seeing either of them even though they were standing directly in front of him. "She's stable?"

"Yes," Aria answered at once. "We saw her. At the UTU in Altmore."

Grant nodded shakily, but said nothing more for a long moment. His expression was gaunt and withdrawn, and the handsome nature of his features seemed suddenly cast in shadow.

“Idiot...” he breathed at last, but his words had no force to them. “What... What the hell was she thinking...?”

“We’ll ask her that ourselves when she wakes up, man,” Rei finally spoke up, seeking to assure the boy. “You and me both.”

Logan nodded again, but didn’t respond. After a few seconds of silence, he instead uncrossed his arms and stepped by the pair of them to the desk, where he picked up the very hoodie Rei had noticed earlier. From there he crossed the room back to the bed and—paying no heed to the careful folds and creases he’d painstakingly made early—dropped down to sit atop it like his knees had given way.

“I’ll... I’ll see you guys at breakfast...” Logan told them hoarsely then, his gaze still distant as he held the green zip-up to his chest. “Need to... to get ready...”

Taking the hint, Rei and Aria had left him like that, both pretending not to hear the ragged, choked breath that came from beyond the door to his room as they closed it behind them.

But Logan didn’t make breakfast that morning, some 90 minutes later. In fact it was with a somber “See you guys later” that Rei and Aria—who were both in the 1-A classblock—parted ways with Catcher and Chancery outside the mess hall to head for their morning classes, the walk feeling cold and lonely with just the two of them despite a decently warm day and some pleasant winter sun. Viv and Logan were both part of 1-A with them, and it had become a habit since they’d returned from Sectionals the previous weekend for all four of them to head out from breakfast together for the lessons and lectures that always took up their first half of every school day. Viv had been quieter than usual of late—and Rei now knew why—but even then she’d always been the most boisterous one, either chatting animatedly with Logan as they walked or else teasing Rei and Aria for doing things like “standing too close” or “being too obvious”. Logan, on the other hand, was almost always the quietest of them, but his absence was still felt as they walked with barely an exchanged word along the stone path towards the Device Evolution building.

Logan didn’t show up for that first class, in the end—a talk on the varied impact deliberate training can have on guiding a CAD’s development, presented by the head of the department, John Markus—nor, alarmingly, did he make the following double-period in Combat Theory. What was more, Rei and Aria weren’t the only ones to

notice the lack of attendance. While their instructors didn't say a word about it—undoubtedly making their own private deductions based off information Guest and Mayd had spread among the staff—the same couldn't be said for their classmates. Bahnt Senson—a bald, good-natured Brawler who trained in the same group as Rei and preferred to go by “Sense”—caught up to Rei and Aria after their Device Evolution lecture to ask if “Viv and Grant got each other sick or something?”. Kay Sandree—one of the school's top Lancers, and Sense's suitemate—had been looking concerned right alongside him. Adam Jax had asked much the same as they'd sat down for Combat Theory, and even Leda Truant—a Phalanx known to be the class gossip, and one of Rei's *least* favorite fellow first-years—had braved trying to ask Aria where Viv and Logan were before class started.

She'd scurried off with a squeaked “Sorry! Nevermind!” when Aria had only answered her with a glare so firey it should have set fire to her hair, which served the girl's gall right in Rei's opinion.

After Combat Theory, the two of them *had* hoped they might at least see Logan at lunch, but were again disappointed when only Catcher and Chancery turned up at their regular table in the south end of the mess, along the edge of the glass dome that made up the building's outer wall among the sheltering evergreens of the southern quarter of the arboretum-like hall. The four of them ate with only some subdued small talk, with even Catcher—almost *always* the one to try and lighten the mood with a few laughs—seemingly unable to muster up more than a dim spark of his usual cheer. In the end, it was with only another muted “Later...” that Rei and Aria set off alone again for the mess, heading this time for the center of campus.

Then again, as they approached the middle of the grounds Rei had to admit that he couldn't help but feel at least a *little* better while they walked. He and Aria didn't say much more than they had on the way to class that morning, it was true, but they were headed to combat training now, and Rei suspected suddenly that if *anything* was going to make him feel better that day, it would be hitting something. True, given it was his last day of restrictions according to Ameena Ashton—the young, likeable doctor in charge of his specific case at Galens—he wouldn't be swinging at anything more than projection partners, but it was still something, and a *hell* of a lot better than stewing in in his own feelings with his ass stuck to a classroom chair, which had made for a morning of hell. What was more, as they neared the middle of the grounds Rei allowed himself to be taken away by a more immediate distraction, and one he had privately sworn a hundred times before he would never allow himself to get used to.

The Arena was the dark gem of the Galens Institute, the black diamond nestled firmly in its midst. Boasting a seating capability of over 150,000 spectators, the building was visible from almost anywhere on campus, but exponentially imposing as one approached it. Oblong and with its length running perfectly north to south, the outside of the stadium comprised of a thousand flat, harshly cut metal sheets that reflected black in the winter sun. While it was closed now to the cold, during the warmer months the ceiling of the Arena was kept open to the sky, a large circle in the top lifting upwards and away in a number of massive, triangular wedges to form a sort of jagged crown high, high above the ground. Even without that distinctive feature, though, the place was impressive, and as Rei, Aria, and the scattering of other students from 1-A arriving from lunch started to climb the dark steps leading up into the building, he couldn't help but feel—not for the first time—like he was willfully walking into the belly of a dragon.

The main level of the Arena was as it always was, the 150- by-70-yard expanse of the combat floor all black projection plating, the colored steel interrupted by silver lines that marked the edges of the Wargames field that took up the entirety of the space, as well as the two smaller Team Battle and Dueling fields held within it. The railed walkway that formed the bottom of the expansive, rising stands was some ten feet above the floor, and it was along this path that Rei and Aria joined the others to head towards the nearest of a some score or so of smaller entrances scattered throughout the seating, each of which led down into the stark white tunnels that made up Arena underworks. There, Rei again made an effort to let himself be distracted by the flashing recordings of the forms and figures projected onto the smart-glass panes layered atop the plasteel of the walls. They featured—as they always had—the legends of the Galens Institute, the Users of the past who had climbed to the very top of the professional SCTs and risen victorious. There were a multitude of Global winners amongst the recorded, and even a good number of Systems-level champions. The Duelist James Wicky and the Lancer Clementine 'Edgewarden' Ward had each topped the Astra System SCTs in the distant past, while 'The Ivory Shield', the Phalanx Serana von Bor, had won her home tournament in the Sol System some decades prior. Every dozen yards, too, the telltale flashes of orange, red, and white marked yet *another* display featuring the King-Class Brawler Dalek O'Rourke, the Gatesmasher—or was it Gatecracker?—the only Galens graduate as of yet to have who taken on the Intersystems—the absolute peak of the SCTs—and won. Rei watched in awe as he passed one of O'Rourke's displays he'd never noticed before, upon which was a looping image of the legendary Brawler uppercutting his armor-clad opponent so hard with one piston-like fist that the poor Saber was blasted 50-something feet into the air as a shockwave rippled out from the point of impact.

From his side there came a muffled snicker. Rei blinked and realized he'd craned his neck about with his mouth hanging open to watch the loop for a probably the fifth time as he'd passed. Closing his jaw with a *click*, he turned to find Aria staring firmly at the opposite wall, one hand dropping from her face like she'd just been covering her mouth.

"What?" Rei muttered, a little embarrassed to have been caught staring. "He's cool..."

Aria, still not looking around at him, only gave a little nod, almost as though to say "Uh huh."

The moment of levity, unfortunately, didn't last. As the two of them piled into an elevator alongside several of their 1-A classmates to head down to SB3—the Arena sub-basement the first-years always trained in—more than one person turned to glance at them curiously, or else shoot them sidelong looks before trading puzzled expressions with whatever nearby friend was standing nearby. Rei supposed it spoke highly of the bond Firesong had formed—or was in the process of forming, in certain cases—that so many people found it odd that he and Aria would be arriving to class alone, but it didn't make him feel better about the situation. Nor did the relative quiet of the locker room aisle where the two of them changed with their backs to each other, the chatter and laughter echoing from all throughout the rest of the chamber like a constricting rope around Rei's chest. A few minutes later they were out of their regulars and into their red-on-grey combat suits, walking around the corner into the cavernous expanse of the sub-basements training area.

That was when Rei finally, at long last, got even the smallest amount of good news.

"Ward! On me."

Rei and Aria stopped together and looked around. The training area, like the main floor above them, consisted of a full 150-by-70-yard Wargames field—with some 30 or 40 yards of overhead clearance to allow for proper field verticality and leveled combat training—but instead of the standard subdivisions within it, the projection plating had been split into six 30-yard Dueling fields in three rows of two fields each.

And standing just outside the edge of the closes of these, his trunk-like arms crossed over the red griffing on the chest of his white combat suit, Chief Warrant Officer Michael Bretz was watching Rei expectantly.

“You, too, Laurent,” the man added as Rei and Aria both caught sight of him. “On me, if you please. You might as well hear this too.”

Rei and Aria exchanged a look, then jogged over as summoned. Bretz was the Brawler-Type sub-instructor, and a rare A9 User, which not only tied him as the highest ranked among their teachers alongside the Phalanx Catori Imala, but technically classified him among the strongest fighters on the Galens campus, behind only the Iron Bishop and Colonel Dent himself. He’d also been rather more fond of Rei than most of their other instructors since the very start of the year, but it was still odd for the man—or any of the other combat training staff—to ask for a word before class started.

“Sir...?” Rei asked tentatively as he and Aria came to a sharp salute in front of the chief warrant officer.

“At ease, Cadets,” Bretz told them at once, his voice low and steady, he eyes trailing over Rei’s face, then Aria’s. “I just wanted a word. According to Captain Dent, you two had a... rough evening, last night.”

Rei swallowed, and beside him he thought he felt Aria tense slightly.

Bretz must have noticed as he lifted two fingers from one arm as he shook his head. “Not looking to talk about it if you don’t want to. Actually, kinda the opposite.” He looked to Rei. “Ward. Dent pulled some strings for you. We’re lifting your combat restrictions a little early. You’re back in with the regular group as of today.”

Something hot rose up inside of Rei, at these words. It wasn’t excitement, per se, or eagerness, or any such positive feeling. If anything, it was more like something that had been held down inside of him, held down and struggling to get loose for a week now, had abruptly broken free of its chains and was scrabbling up his gut and chest towards freedom.

“Are you serious, sir?” he all but hissed.

“A hundred percent, Cadet,” Ward answered with a nod. “We talked to Dr. Ashton. It took a little pressure, but she eventually gave in. Said your recovery has been even better than expected, or something like that. So she’s okay with letting us toss you back into hell a day early.”

The heat was only growing, a sharp, burning anticipation. Rei recognized it, then. Realized what it was.

Anticipation. Anticipation for a release he hadn’t even thought to hope for. His restrictions had been lifted. He was going to be allowed to fight, *really* fight. The

thought brought him something akin to joy, and yet lacking any of the pleasant edge of it. That was fine, though. He wasn't looking for joy. He wasn't looking to feel happy.

Now that the prospect was before him, all he wanted was to kick someone's teeth in.

That, though, was when a question from Aria nearly brought him crashing right back down to earth.

"Sir..." she started quietly, like she didn't want any of the other students trailing in from the hall 15 feet behind them to overhear. "Is that... is that okay? What about Shido...?"

The heat in Rei's chest turned suddenly cool. Yes, what about Shido? Aria's reveal of Hippolyta's C8 evolution—complete with the start of the facial armor that usually only manifested in the late B-ranks—had caused waves among the Galens students. Though he hadn't been in class when she'd made her first call since returning from Sectionals—recovering as he'd been—Rei had seen the lasting effects over the last week in the form of lingering eyes on his girlfriend when she passed, and even a few poignant questions for people he was pretty sure neither Aria had never even spoken to. It wasn't just the first years, either. The second- and third-years had had occasion to stare during meals and the few other times the classes had opportunity to mix, and while some of the gazes were curious, others... no so much...

Anatoli Sidorov's eyes, for example, had never look colder...

It wasn't *just* Aria, though. Rei had left for Sectional's a C7 User, tied as the strongest rank among the first-year cadets, and come back a C9. A two-rank jump in a week, which was by now well-known to have happened almost all at once, in the disastrous final Dual of the tournament that had nearly killed him. Between that and the attention Aria was already getting for her Device's changes, what would the reaction be when the class caught sight, at long last, of *Shido*...?

Then again...

"There's no hiding it forever."

Rei blink, and looked back to Michael Bretz. The Brawler sub-instructor was watching him carefully, something like a knowing glint in his eye.

"You're probably thinking something along those lines, if I had to guess. Ain't that right, Ward?"

Rei, surprised that he'd been so obvious, nodded slowly.

“Thought so,” Bretz answered with his own nod before turning back to Aria. “Your concern is noted Laurent, and frankly not unwarranted. But the truth is—short of throwing Ward here in a hole on Pluto or something—that it’s not like we can hide this forever. I was privy to everything—I’m not paid enough for that kind of responsibility, thank the MIND—but my understanding is that Captain Dent and Colonel Guest had a conversation this morning, once he got back from the city.” The chief warrant officer’s eyes settled one last time on Rei. “The way I hear it, they decided if we’re going to have to spill the beans soon anyway, might as well happen now.”

Rei raised an eyebrow at that, thinking he'd caught something more in the chief warrant officer's tone.

“Because of what’s going on with Cadet Arada, sir?”

Dent offered him a smirk, at that.

“Because of that... and because I’m pretty sure the higher ups are all keen to ensure you have... er... as ‘healthy an outlet for potential frustration as Galens can provide’.”

Rei stared for a second, not sure he'd heard right.

Then he grinned. It was a hard, cold thing, but it was a grin nonetheless.

“Sounds like you’re giving me permission to kick some teeth in, sir.”

Bretz’s own harsh smile mirrored his own.

“You’re damn right I am, kid.”