

## CHAPTER 6

### PLACEHOLDER

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Rei wasn't sure he could remember a time when he'd felt so drowningly miserable. He'd had ample cause of unhappiness in his life, sure. He'd been in pain for as long as he could remember, his fibro diagnosis a constant source of suffering that had only ever rarely been less than general discomfort, and not infrequently as much as absolute agony. Before Galens, there'd been a period of years where he'd also never had many friends, his social circles being of the sort to prefer to exclude and mock him rather than make any effort to bring him into their fold even in the most minimal of ways. He'd been weak and small—*was* small still, by most standards— and his innumerable scars—almost impossible to hide completely—had always made him an outsider and an easy target. In fact, after leaving Astra-1 and the sheltering comforts of the Estoran Children's Center where he'd been raised, Rei was pretty sure his future *should* have been one of general misery and discontent with life and limb.

But then, within his first couple weeks at Grandcrest Preparatory, Viviana Arada shoved her pretty face in between his and the pad he'd been studying a Globals match on, demanded to know what he was watching... and the fates had somehow lost hold of his intended thread.

And now...

“Viv... The hell were you *thinking*...?”

He hadn't meant to say the words out loud, but thinking about it Rei wasn't sure he could have held them back even if he'd wanted to. A of boiling emotions was making a mess of his stomach, and they slipped free like the churn of guilt, fear, and anger had shoved the sentiment out if only to make room for more of their own kind. He certainly didn't feel any *better*, expressing the frustration.

Then again, the slim hand that took him by the elbow, stopping him gently as he'd been automatically heading for the elevators, was a different matter altogether.

He turned to look at Aria, who'd been just as quiet as he had for the duration of their return flight to school. They were standing in the lobby of Kanes again, the dim black and red aesthetic a comforting, homey warmth all around them. It made

meeting his girlfriend's green eyes a little easier to bear, even seeing them tinged with the red of what he suspected were tears forcibly left unshed.

"Don't blame her, Rei...." Aria said quietly. "Please. I... I know it's easy to, but... Please don't blame her..."

Rei stared at her, momentarily at a loss. Then he registered exactly what he'd said, and he let out a laugh. It was a harsh, mirthless thing, but it got out all the same, bubbling up like the frustration had before it.

"What's funny?" Aria asked a little defensively, letting go of his elbow with a frown. Before her hand had dropped completely to her side, though, Rei caught it.

"No. Nothing," he told her quickly, squeezing her fingers in apology. "I'm sorry. Nothing's funny. As much as I wish it was. It's just..." He sighed, giving himself a second to look for the words. "Aria... I *wish* I could blame Viv. It *is* her damn fault. It really *is*..."

Aria didn't pull her hand away from his, but she was still frowning. "Maybe, but that that doesn't—"

"Help anything right now," Rei finished for her with another sigh. "I know. It's half the reason I'm having trouble putting this on her."

"And the other half?"

Rei hesitated.

"Reidon Ward," Aria started to growl, her fingers suddenly stiff in his hand, "don't you *dare*."

Rei blinked at her in surprise.

Then he almost—*almost*—grinned.

"I'm *still* not convinced you can't read my mind," he muttered, trying at another—hopefully a little more genuine—laugh.

Aria clearly wasn't finding anything funny.

"I don't *have* to be psychic when it's written all over your face," she said sternly. "You're looking for a way blame *yourself* for this, aren't you? I can't believe this. Rei, it's not your *fault*."

"I know."

Rei's answer was as calm. It was actually harder to get out than he expected, but he managed it, meeting Aria's eyes evenly as she paused to watch him warily.

"I know," he said again. "I'm not trying to blame myself, I promise. If anything, it's the opposite. I'm looking for a way *not* to, because it's *not* my fault."

"It's not anyone's," Aria pressed gently, like she wanted to build on momentum she'd been surprised to find. "Or maybe it's a little bit of everyone's. But it's not *yours*..."

Rei nodded. "I know, yeah. Still... Not pointing fingers is easier said than done..." He felt his throat tighten up suddenly, and the storm of emotion inside him seemed suddenly to distill into something more poignant.

"We... How did we miss it, Aria...?" he asked after a moment, his voice coming a little hoarse. "I *know* Viv has to carry her own baggage sometimes, but how did we miss it? She was so *tired*... All the time..."

"Because we trusted her," Aria answered quietly, and it was her turn to squeeze his fingers comfortingly. "Because we trusted her, Rei. She told you she would talk if there was something she needed to talk about, right? We trusted her to do that. She just..."

"Didn't," Rei finished with a nod as Aria let the statement linger, feeling the tightness move up and become a strange pain in his cheeks. "She didn't." There was a weird itching in his eyes, now, and he blinked a few times to try to get rid them of the feeling. "But why *not*...?"

"Cause she can be as stubborn as you, and twice as much of a pain in the ass, apparently."

Rei finally did laugh at that. A real, *actual* laugh. It was strange, though. It didn't *sound* like a laugh, to his ears. It sounded... wet? Why did his laugh sound wet?

And then Rei realized that he was crying.

"Ah, damn" he muttered, not letting go of Aria's hand but burying his face into his other elbow as the tears started to pour unbidden.

She was there, then, drawing him into her before wrapping him in her arms and squeezing him tight. It didn't matter that she was still a good 4 inches taller than him. It didn't matter that her cheek rested against the side of his head, itself wet and sticky. It didn't matter that his body was suddenly shaking in a way that had nothing to do with the cold they'd left outside.

All that mattered was that she was there, with Rei, to cry right alongside him.

He let it all out, then. All the fear and anger, the sadness and the shock. He didn't scream or cry or sob, but his breaths came ragged and his hands gripped at the back of her uniform like he'd fall away into nothingness if he let go. He'd bent his face down into her neck, and it was there that he let the tears loose, let them all out in a wash of grief unlike anything he'd known before. He hated this, *hated* it. Not crying in front of Aria. He was surprised at how little he found he cared about that, in fact. No. What he hated was this feeling, this distressing, heavy sense of uselessness, of fear and worry. He hated the feeling, but he hated just as much that he *felt* it at all. It wasn't like Viv was gone. She wasn't here, sure, but she wasn't gone. Not yet. Probably not ever.

And yet Rei couldn't help but think there was only one other time in his life—all too recently—that he had ever felt so *scared*.

For a long time they stood like that, holding each other as they cried together. Rei didn't have any idea how long it was before both of them started breathing normally again, and but even after the tears ran out they stayed there for a while longer, taking comfort in each other's presence.

It was the only feeling Rei could call pleasant he'd experienced in the last... what? Twelve hours or so.

He was just about to break away from Aria, just starting to debate whether to thank her or apologize for leaving the shoulder of her uniform damp, when his NOED lit up, briefly. It had already done so repeatedly in the last half hour or so, and each time Rei had pushed the notifications aside without a second thought, too far gone to care about whatever or whoever was trying to reach him. He was just about to do the same, but this time he caught a name in the thumbnail of the message, and his stomach gave an unpleasant flip as he pulled away from Aria faster than he'd meant to.

“Oh no,” he half-hissed, half-choked. “Aria, we forgot. We forgot to tell the others! We have to—!”

“It's okay.” Aria shook her head, letting her arms drop from around him but taking his hands up again comfortingly. “I didn't. I updated Catcher on the way back. Told him as much as I could. Sorry... I was going to tell you, but you were... preoccupied. He'll have told Chancery by now, too, I bet.”

*That explains the rush of pings,* Rei thought, but even as he did he shook his head.

“Catcher. Good. That’s great. But that doesn’t *matter*.”

Aria looked surprised at that, then frowned. As she opened her mouth to say something to that, though, Rei corrected at light speed.

“I mean it *does* matter, obviously, yes! Sorry. I just... I meant...” Rei stopped himself, taking a breath. His mind was all over the place, sent tumbling by the nights events. He had to pull himself together, at least for a little while longer.

As it turned out, there was yet one more challenged they needed face, that night.

“Logan, Aria,” he said quietly, already stepping back, pulling her along with him, in the direction of the elevators. “Catcher and Chancery... They told *Logan*.”

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The living area of suite 304 was a dismal sight as Rei and Aria all but sprinted in, leaving the door to the hall to bang shut behind them. Someone had turned on all the lights, and even made the smart-glass of the outside wall transparent, revealing the sight of Galens’ north wall and the blooming neon colors of Castalon in the distance. The space was bright, even welcoming now, and one could almost forget it was well past midnight of the most unpleasant evening anyone present had probably experienced since arriving at Galens.

Or maybe it would have been, had the three people hunched over on the matching pair of red couches angled at a V in the center of the room not all looked like they were waiting for news of their own impending execution.

Catcher was the first on his feet as Rei and Aria entered, almost scrambling to stand even before the sound of the door faded. He’d put a shirt and sweats on, but there were bags under his yellow eyes that said he most certainly hadn’t gone back to sleep. Chancery, who’d been seated next to him, looked like she hadn’t bothered changing, but looked no less tired.

“Guys!” Catcher croaked, moving around the couch so fast to meet them he must have accidently triggered his specs. “What’s going on? Aria said Viv’s in the *hospital*?”

Rei wanted to answer his friend. Desperately, even. He would have, too, would have told him everything he could the moment he walked in the door.

But it wasn’t Catcher he was looking at as he moved closer to the couches. It wasn’t even Chancery. They would hear what he and Aria had to say, and that was good enough.

It wasn't *their* questions that need to be answered just then, though.

From the couch opposite the Saber and Lancer, the massive, black-haired boy who'd been sitting with them had been slower to get to his feet. At well-over six-and-half feet tall and with shoulders almost half that wide, 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 shorts and a loose grey tank top that might have made a decent bedsheet. Unlike Catcher and Chancery, Logan looked wide away, his black eyes–the irises of which were ringed with a hint of bloody red–sharp and alert despite the late hour.

And yet, of the three of them, Logan's dark expression made him look like he expected to be the first to be walked to the gallows.

“Rei...” The Mauler's voice was a low, hoarse rumble. “Aria... What's going on...?”

Rei cursed internally, wanting to kick himself. He couldn't blame Catcher and Chancery for having woken the boy up. If he'd had the presence of mind to do so when they'd left, he probably would have done the same.

But that was before they knew–before he and Aria had seen Viv suspended in that anit-grav tank–and now Rei wasn't sure he had enough left in him to find the right words, that night.

Lucky for him, while he might be the *strongest* on the team, there was a reason *Aria* was Firesong's leader.

“Logan... Sit down,” she said quietly, slipping passed Catcher and around the couch and the coffee table–on which three full mugs of what looked like long-cold brew waited untouched–to take a seat herself at the end of his own couch.

Logan hesitated, looking from Rei to Aria and back again. Then, probably seeing something in the grimness of their expressions–not the mention the irritated tinge that Rei new wasn't just around his girlfriend's eyes, now–he eased himself back down slowly, seating himself with a light creak of metal next to a divot in the cushion Rei couldn't help but notice for the first time in a while, now.

Viv had made that dent, he couldn't stop himself from remembering, just like he couldn't stop a hint of that previous pain from reaching his cheeks again at the thought...

“First off, Viv's alive, and Lietenant Colonel Mayde says she has a really good chance of making a full recovery.”

Aria's voice—despite the fact that she'd been crying right alongside Rei downstairs not 3 minutes prior—was strong and gentle as she started to talk.

“She's in the city, at a special treatment unit at Altmore Hospital. It's specialized for treating Users.”

“Catcher said that,” Logan nodded unsteadily. “But... *Why? What happened?*”

Aria did pause, this time, but only for as long as Rei suspected it took to steel herself to get the words out.

“Viv... pushed herself too far. In training. Tonight. She overtaxed her neuroline and sensory input in... a big way.”

“Meaning... what?” it was Chancery who asked, the question quiet as she, too, took a seat again. Behind the couch, Catcher started to let out a groan, but stopped himself. Like Rei, the Saber was a rather extreme enthusiast of all-things-SCT, and—maybe predictably—even Aria's brief description was apparently enough to clue him in to what was going on.

For the benefit of all others, though, Aria explained anyway.

“Meaning that she fried her system, and is currently unconscious with brain swelling, and in bad enough shape that the Galens facilities weren't up to the task of treating her.”

And then, before anyone could ask anything else, she dove into the full explanation.

Rei was—not for the first time—in awe of his girlfriend by the end of the 10 minutes or so it took her to finish telling the others about what they'd learned and figured out that night, about Viv's extra training hours, how and why she'd been so tired, and why they thought she'd been pushing herself so hard without telling anyone. Not only did Aria get everything out quickly and concisely, but she managed to keep her composure the entire time, not so much as glancing once at Rei for support. She danced deftly, too, around the subject of Shido, Viv's upgrade, and the User-Unique Ability. She even dodged any mention of the encounter with General Abel. Her uncle's gag order held firm, after all, and a part of Rei could help but wonder if Aria didn't believe he could keep *those* bits of the story to himself, even for the time being.

A much larger part of himself, on the other hand—the part who whispered with all the trust he had in her, developed right alongside a range of more complicated

emotions for months now—was just grateful she wasn't even giving him the *chance* to think about putting this part of the night on his shoulders, too.

"I'm sorry I didn't explain more when we were on the way back," Aria wrapped up, apologizing to Catcher in one of the few instances her gaze had left Logan as she'd talked. "I... I was having a hard time..."

"Can't imagine why," the Saber mumbled from where he'd long left Rei to stand on his own behind the couch, opting to sit back down where he'd promptly put his face in his hands. "Can't *remotely* imagine why. Not even a little."

Aria managed the smallest of smiles at that, but lost it immediately as she turned back to Logan.

The Mauler was pale. Paler than Rei had ever seen him, actually, and he'd been in fights with the guy where the Arena had been temporarily convincing Logan he'd lost an arm or a leg, or both. His black eyes seemed sunken and dark, and his gaze was on his calloused hands, open and loose in his lap before him, Honori's red vysetrium glimmering against the white steel of its bands around his wrist. He'd barely moved—much less said so much as a word—the entire time Aria had spoken.

If he couldn't see the boy's wide shoulders lift and fall with every breath, Rei might have confused him for a corpse.

"Logan... she's going to be alright," Aria told the Mauler quietly, going so far as to reach out and place a slim hand on his bare knee. "Mayd says he really thinks she's going to be alright..."

"And if she's not?"

It was the first question he'd posed since Aria had sat down beside him. The boy hadn't even flinched when she touch him, and his eyes still seemed unable to leave his open palms.

Aria paused, like she were unsure of how to answer this. Then, at last, she finally looked around at Rei, her expression pained.

Silently asking for help.

Rei gave her the tiniest of nods before taking over.

"That's not worth thinking about, man," he said quietly, stepping up to stand behind Catcher and Chancery, putting his hands on the back of their couch to lean over it. "The Lieutenant Colonel said the chances of anything but a full recovery are



slim.” This was a bit of a stretch, but Rei wasn’t prioritizing technicalities, at the moment. “She just needs time.”

“And we’ll get to see her?” Chancery got out the question in a mumble from below him. She had her head bowed over clenched hands, and at some point she’d pulled her braids loose from the round bun they’d been in atop her head. Instead, her hair now hung like a silver-black curtain, hiding her face from all.

But Rei didn’t miss the trembling of her fingers as one thumb rubbed hard along the top of the other, balled atop her knees.

“Yeah, we will.” Rei nodded, looking up to try and meet Logan’s eyes again as he did, even though he knew it would be useless. “During our free time. I’m going Sunday, first thing. Just need to get a staff to escort us.”

“I’m coming to,” Catcher echoed this at once.

“Me too.” Chancery this time, and she finally let go of herself so that one hand could raise up into her vieling of braid, seemingly to wipe at her eyes.

“We can all go,” Aria agreed with a nod, and while she’d pulled her hand from his knees, she’d never once done more than glance away from Logan. “I’ll find us a chaperone. I’ll hold Hippolyta to my uncle’s throat if I have to.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t take *that*,” Catcher chuckled dryly. “Your new shield is cool and all, Aria, but I’m preeetty sure the Colonel could still plaster you to the wall with a sneeze...”

Almost everyone managed a small laugh at that. Even Chancery, though she still didn’t lift her face.

Everyone except Logan, who still hadn’t done more than blink at his hands.

The humor drained away quickly, and no one said anything else for a while, maybe all waiting—like Rei was—in the half-hearted hope the Mauler could shake himself from the dark place he’d clearly been dropped down into.

After nearly a minute of painful silence, though, Aria gave in and tried again.

“Logan—” she started.

But then, before she could finish, the boy cut her off.

“I... should have known,” he said quietly, and his fingers finally twitched.

“Logan...” It was Rei’s turn to try to interject, but Catcher beat him to it.

“Don’t be stupid, man,” the Saber said with a sigh, leaning back to rest against the couch, crossing his arms over his chest as he did. “Why? Cause you spend a lot of time with her? Come one. We *all* could have—”

“*No.*”

The word rang in a growl, and the fingers that hand only flinched before suddenly curled into two, brick-sized fists in Logan lap.

“You don’t get it,” the boy continued. “I *knew* she was having a hard time. I *knew* she was worried about being left behind. She told me as much, at the tournament.”

Rei exchanged a glance with Aria at this.

“Logan...” Aria tried again. “Rei and I both did. Well... maybe we didn’t *know*, exactly, but we were pretty sure that Viv was—”

“But I *did*,” Logan snarled, and for the first time in a while Rei heard an old fire in the Mauler’s voice. An old, ugly fire.

“I did...” Logan repeated, only a little less forcefully now, and in his laps his knuckles were white around his fists. “I just... I thought she had a handle on it. I told her it was stupid, and I thought she figured that out too. This whole week, she’s been telling me she’s just been staying up late catching up on the schoolwork we missed over the tournament.” His jaw tightened, his words coming through clenched teeth now. “I’m such an *idiot*.”

“No, you aren’t,” Aria said firmly, her voice still gently, but unforgiving. “Logan, I already did this dance with Rei tonight, and I’m *not* doing it with you. It’s no one’s fault. Viv could have talked to any of us. We could have seen what was going on. The *staff* could have seen what was going on. We *all* messed up, and none of us did. It’s not your—”

“SHUT UP!”

*CRASH.*

Logan was on his feet, standing so abruptly he hit the coffee table with a hand on the way up, jolting it with enough force to send the still-full—but thankfully long-cooled—mugs tumbling across its surface. One fell right off the side and shattered

on the floor, resulting in Chancery pulling her knees up to her chest with a yelp and Catcher leaping up and out of the way of the spill as he cursed.

“Shut up, Laurent!” Logan snarled, but he wasn’t looking at Aria. He wasn’t looking at anyone, in fact. His eyes were wide, but unfocused, like the wall across from him was some window to a distant place only he could see. Rei could have been wrong, be he thought he saw a glimmer of red flash across them, too, a brief, violent glow of crimson that might have been more than then the odd catch of the light above their heads. “You don’t get it! None of you get it! I didn’t *see it!* I didn’t! How could I not see it?!”

No one answered, all of them too surprised by the outburst. Aria hadn’t even gotten to her feet, one hand halfway to her open mouth as she stared at Logan.

Their silence seemed only to fuel the Mauler.

“Viv...” he started unsteadily, his voice a thunderous growl. “Viv is the only one... The *only* one who ever...” His breaths came rapidly, short, furious burst of air in and out, in and out. “She was the *only* one who ever... And when it was *my turn*, I didn’t. I *didn’t*... Even though she *told me*...”

“To steal a quote from Aria...” Rei interjected quietly. “Viv has to carry her own baggage sometimes, man. She told me she’d talk to me if she ever need to. I bet she said the same to you. This isn’t on us...”

“Oh, so it *is* her fault?” Logan’s eyes finally found their focus, and they snapped on Rei as the Mauler’s handsome face twisted into a snarl.

“Did I say that?” Rei shot back through clenched teeth, feeling an old anger of his own start to rise at the sight of that expression. “No. I’m just saying it’s *not on us*.” He forced himself to be stay calm, forced his voice to stay even. “But even if you’re going to insist on taking the blame... you *don’t get to take it out on your teammates*.”

Logan glowered. “I’m not—!”

“Dude, look around!” Rei cut him off sharply. “Look around, and tell me that’s not *exactly* what you’re doing! Wake up!”

Those words, at last, seemed to reach the boy, because Logan blinked and did, in fact, look around. First at Chancery, who was staring at him with wide eyes, then Catcher, who was glaring at him with old ease. Then he seemed to notice the coffee mugs, three of them tipped over to spill their contents over the surface of the now-

askew table, the last in a doze sharp pieces atop a damp patch in the carpet at the Sabers feet.

His face had already started to fall, dropping into a sort of horrified realization, when his gaze fell on Aria, who still had that hand halfway to her mouth, expression half-shock, half-concern.

That was when something seemed to dawn on the massive boy, and his horror twisted further, changing into something else entirely.

Fear, Rei thought.

“I—” Logan started, his face suddenly grey again. “I—I’m so—I didn’t mean to...”

“To what, *Grant*.” Catcher’s choice of words was as deliberate as his tone was unforgiving. “To throw and tantrum while jumping down all our throats?”

Logan’s cheeks only paled further, and Rei saw something then, too. Despite the rigidity of his shoulders, despite the fists still clenched at his side... Logan Grant looked suddenly as small and weak as Rei thought he’d ever felt in his life.

“I—I’m sorry...” the Mauler managed to get out, his horrified gaze dropping to the shattered mug again as he started step unsteadily out from around the table. “I’m so sorry. I—I have to make a call... I have to—I’m sorry.”

“Hold on, where are you—?” Catcher started to shout.

But Logan was already gone, bolting from the room suite so fast the door to the hall banged open yet again.

“He has to make a call?” the Saber repeated as though in disbelief. “What? Who the hell is he going to call at two in the morning??”

No one answered, though. For a time no one said anything, in fact, all of them looking anywhere but at each other. Then, at last, Chancery moved, sliding gingerly down from the couch to crouch by the coffee table to start picking up the broken fragments of the mug.

Without a word, the rest of them all moved to help her, each of them keen to have something—anything really—to do, to distract them from the misery that had been that evening.

They'd just finished picking up the pieces when there came a click from behind the couch Aria had been sitting on, and all of them looked up to see Jack Benaly peering at them blearily from his open door.

“Guys... seriously...” he almost begged. “If you're trying to sabotage Red Crown catching up to you, this will definitely work. If you're not... can you *please* keep it down?”

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Rei slept fitfully for what remained of that night. He was exhausted, but the stress of everything kept him awake for at least an hour after walking Aria back to her room on the second floor. What was more, he discovered—in the darkness of his room after turning of the light—that he was as *angry* as he was anything else. At Viv, for being an idiot. At Central and General Abel, for being manipulative *bastards*. At himself, too, because as much as he told Aria that he didn't blame himself... the truth was that Rei understood how Logan felt better than he wanted to admit.

Maybe that was why, when he woke up late that morning—having mercifully slept through the early morning training period Aria had told them all the night before she was canceling—the first thing Rei had in mind was finding the Mauler and forcing him to bury the hatchet.

Or maybe punch his face in. He wasn't completely sure the two things were mutually exclusive concepts.

But Logan didn't meet up with the four of them to head to breakfast that morning, as had become Firesong's fashion. Nor did he show up late for it. In fact, it was in somewhat-dismal silence that they ate—feeling all too out of place with two of the squad absent from the table—and with only 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, too, felt cold and lonely with just the two of them, even given the decently warm day and a pleasant winter sun. Viv and Logan were both part of 1-A with them, and—like with breakfast—it had become a habit since they'd returned from Sectionals the previous weekend for all four of them to head out 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 now they all knew why—but even then she'd always been the most boisterous one, either chatting with Logan as they walked or else teasing

Rei and Aria for doing things like “standing too close” or “being too obvious”. The Mauler, on the other hand, was almost always the quietest of them, but his absence was still felt as they walked with barely an exchanged words along the stone path towards the Device Evolution building.

Rei started to get worried when Logan didn’t show up for that first class—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—and the concerned glances Aria kept shooting the boy’s empty seat told him he wasn’t the only one. More alarmingly, he didn’t he make the following double-period in Combat Theory either, and at last Rei and Aria weren’t the only ones to notice the lack of attendance. Their instructors didn’t say a word about it—which Rei found odd, even if *Viv*’s reason for absence had already been disseminated by Mayd and the Colonel—but 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 while the Saber Leron Joy—another suitemate of theirs who Rei could tolerate on the good days—glowered disapprovingly from behind the pair. 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. Again 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 here and there—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 had been thinking since falling asleep angry the night before 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 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 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 more imposing as one approached it. Oblong, 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 SB2—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.

On the other hand, what awaited them in their claimed aisle of the locker room, where all the first years always changed out of their uniforms into the red-on-grey of their skiing-tight combat suits, did a better job of that.

“Logan!”

It was Aria who made the quite exclamation, having turned the corner of the aisle first. Taking it right after her, Rei’s gut tightened a little as he, too, saw the Mauler. Then it relaxed, though it took him a second to figure out why.



Logan was alone in the row, and seemed to have been waiting for them. He was seated on the long bench that split the aisle between the rows of anti-grav lockers on either side of the way, and had his jacket in one hand, though the rest of his regulars were still on. He seemed to have been staring at nothing again, but this when Aria called his name, he looked around and stood up at once, his face tense and...

Guilty, Rei realized as he followed behind Aria a little more slowly, his girlfriend having hurried ahead to reach the massive boy.

He suspected he knew what was coming.

“Logan where have you *been*??” Aria demanded even before she’d reached the Mauler. “You missed class! Both of them! Are you okay??”

The question, apparently, wasn’t remotely what Logan Grant had been expecting, because for a second he tensed up, looking stricken.

Then he relaxed.

“I know,” he grunted as Rei caught up to stand behind Aria, watching him carefully. Logan seemed to be having trouble meeting their eyes. “I... I took the morning off. I think I needed to...”

“But you’re okay??” Aria demanded again, sounding concerned. “You’re alright. After last night...”

She let the statement hang, but the guilt returned to Grant’s face again.

“Aria...” he started uncertainly, his jacket hanging limp at his side. “Listen... I’m really... I’m *really* sorry. Last night, I...”

But he seemed unable to finish, his mouth opening, but no words coming out.

Aria gave him a little, but when several attempts to speak failed, she decided to step in.

“Logan, it’s okay,” she told him kindly, waving a hand before her like it was all water under the bridge. “It’s *okay*. We were all on edge, so I get why you—”

But then, suprisingly, Logan cut her off.

“No.” His words were grateful, but firm. “No. Please. I need to get this out.”

Aria stopped talking at once, and Rei watched the boy carefully as he continued to struggle for a while more. It was lucky the rest of 1-A tended not to change in the

same aisle as the Firesong members, or they would have stumbled onto a rather awkward scene as the three of them stood there in silence.

Finally Logan took in a breath—a single long breath—seemed to hold it in, then let it out

“I’m sorry,” he got out at last, more assuredly, and while meeting Aria’s eye this time. “I shouldn’t have snapped at you, and I definitely shouldn’t have told you to... to shut up.” He stumbled a little at this admission, but kept going. “I... I didn’t mean it, and I’m *really* sorry.”

Aria waiting a beat to see if he had more to say, then nodded in understanding. Logan relaxed a little, but clearly wasn’t done as his eyes lifted to Rei.

“You too, Rei,” he said. “I’m sorry. And you were right. What... what’s happening with Viv... It’s not my fault.”

“Uh huh,” Rei managed, folding his arms over his chest and chewing on his words for a second, debating. He’d woken up wanting to smoothing things over, yeah, but now that he was face to face with the Mauler... Well, he’d never been as gentle a soul as Aria was, had he?

Still...

Rei sighed.

“Viv’s got us all scared shitless, man,” he grumbled placatingly, dropping his bag on the bench before turning to the closest locker and tugging it open. “And I appreciate the apology. We’re good. For now.”

From the corner of his eye, he saw Logan relax in truth, then, and he couldn’t stop himself from continuing.

“Chancery will probably be cool with things too, but Catcher’s a different matter, just so you know.”

Surprisingly, this only elicited a nod from the Mauler, who’d started to sit back down on the bench.

“Yeah... I hear that. He’s got good reason to. I’m... I’m still working on things. And last night was... a bad night.”

“For all of us, yeah,” Aria agreed with grunt of a laugh from between them, in the process of kicking off her boots. Putting them away, she exchanged a sidelong look with Rei before continuing. “You seem to be doing better now, though...?”

Again Logan nodded, but didn't answer this subtle probe. After a couple seconds Rei was pretty sure the boy wouldn't be saying anything more, and he was just about to try to change the subject to anything that would have them thinking of something else when Logan spoke.

"I've... I've been seeing someone."

Rei froze. Something like lightning rolled up his body from the boots he was in the process of untying to the top of his head. Around them, the sounds and chatter from the rest of 1-A changing in the other aisle seemed suddenly to fade away. At his left, Aria too had tensed, and slowly she closed the door to the locker she had just opened.

"Oh?" she asked, cool and cold.

Logan didn't seem to hear the ice in her tone as he nodded and continued.

"Yeah... I've... I've been wanting to tell you guys. For a while now. I just... I wasn't really sure how, you know?"

"That so?" Rei growled as he turned haltingly to face the boy, fury burning in his chest.

*If this bastard is going to sit here and admit to—*

"Viv wanted me to tell you months ago. I just... It didn't feel like the right time, you know? I didn't really feel like I'd... done the work yet, I guess?"

All at once the fire winked out, and the fury that Rei was pretty sure had been etched all over his face was abruptly replaced by what he could only assume was total confusion. For her part, though, Aria's expression cleared as well, but it was only a second before something like realization seemed to dawn.

"Logan... when you say you've 'been seeing someone'... What do you mean?"

Logan, who'd just finished unbuttoning his shirt, looked up at them with a bemused frown as he pulled it off one arm at a time.

"What do you mean 'what do I mean'? A therapist. Well, a psychiatrist, actually. Galens has a couple on staff at the hospital."

There was a moment of silence at that, both Rei and Aria gaping at Logan, jaws on the floor.

And then, at the same time, they both started to laugh.

“*Dude,*” Rei barely got out, covering his face and leaning against the edge of his locker as Aria half-dropped, half-collapsed onto the bench. “Don’t *do* that!”

“Do what??” Logan asked, very clearly totally bewildered now, looking from one to the other in total confusion. “What did I do?”

“Just... phrasing, Logan,” Aria choked out, shaking her head into where her face was pressed into both hands, elbows on her knees. “*Phrasing*, next time, okay? I’m pretty sure you were about three seconds from getting the crap kicked out of you by Rei, and *I* definitely wasn’t about to stop it.”

“*What?*” Logan apparently still totally lost, looked to Rei in confusion. “What are you talking ab—?”

And then it was his turn to realize, and after second’s stunned silence his face flushed red.

“THAT’S NOT WHAT I MEANT!” he almost shrieked, sending Rei and Aria into renewed fits.

It felt good to laugh, to *actually* laugh. So good. It hurt, in it’s own way, and maybe Rei would feel bad about it later when he thought about Viv alone and suspended in that anti-grav tank at Altmore. For the time being, though, it felt *really* good to laugh, and Rei couldn’t help to feel like maybe the day was looking up just the slightest bit as he pulled off his jacket, still chuckling to himself.

They finished changing quickly after that, Rei and Aria grinning the whole time as only two people who’d were rediscovering what it was like to smile could manage. Logan’s pleading of his case—assuring them again and again that he most certainly did NOT mean it that way—got quieter and quieter until they turned to nothing more than grumbles, and so it was in the lightest mood he’d felt since the night before that Rei led the way out of the locker room and back out into the massive, arching hall that made up the outer loop of the subbasement. Halfway down the way, the left wall of the corridor vanished, and turning the corner Rei stepped onto the combat field with a sense of eagerness he didn’t think he could have managed even 10 minutes before.

He’d barely taken two steps across the black plating, Aria and Logan right on his heels, when a voice called out just to their left.

“Ward! Grant! Both of you, on me!”

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 griffin on the chest of his white combat suit, Second Lieutenant Michael Bretz was watching their group expectantly.

“You, too, Laurent,” the man added as they all caught sight of him. “Come on. You might as well hear this too.”

Rei glanced over his shoulder to exchange a curious look with the other two, 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 call them out before class started.

“Sir...?” Rei asked tentatively as all three of them came to a sharp salute in front of the officer.

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

Rei swallowed, and behind him he thought he felt the others tense slightly.

Bretz must have noticed, because 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 more 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 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’d found that—even if just a moment of it—by accident in the locker room with Aria and Logan.

And hadn’t he been thinking early about how punching something would make him feel better.

He was going to be allowed to *fight*.

And then, abruptly, his excitement tempered itself.

“But... sir...” he started uncertainty. “What about Shido? What about... you know... all *that*?”

Bretz grinned. It was a grim sort of smile, but it made Rei’s heart leap all the same.

“We can’t hide you forever, Ward.” His voice was lower, now, clearly intent on keeping the words from the line of still-chatting classmates that were trickling in from the hall 10 feet behind them. “You’re to keep Temporal Step under wraps, at least for now. Captains orders.”

Rei blinked. “But... that’s it?”

“That’s it, Cadet,” Bretz offered him a pleased little nod, his voice raising to it’s normal pitch again. “We’re doing cross training today. You’ll be in Imala’s group, so take advantage of it. If you know what I mean.”

Rei’s eyes went wide, but he, too, nodded, understanding perfectly. Imala, as the Phalanx sub-instructor, was the perfect teacher to help him with his newest Type Shift mode. In fact, she’d recently joined Bretz and Claire de Soto—the Saber sub-instructor, and a former SCT professional fighter—during Firesong’s extra training hours in the evenings for exactly that purpose.

Rei was being told it was time to bare all—minus Temporal Step, of course.

Yeah... Maybe that was one secret best left under lock and key juuuuust a little longer...

“I didn’t just call you over, though did?”

Rei blinked, coming back to himself and Bretz looked passed him, over his shoulder to Logan.

“Grant, the Captain got a call this morning. My understanding is you were given leave to take the morning off. How you feeling?”

“Uh... Fine, sir,” Logan answered, sounding a little surprised.

Bretz raised an eyebrow at him, and Rei swore he felt the Mauler *fidget* at his back.

“... Better, sir,” Logan amended after a second. “A bit, at least...”

“Glad to hear it.” Bretz nodded again, but was watching Logan more carefully, now. “During that call, though, the Captain mentioned was apparently given some suggestions for... I think the term was ‘healthy outlets’. Some ways that she and the sub-instructors might be able to ‘help things along’.” His eyes narrowed. “I’m not much for punching pillows and the like, but there were some good thoughts, too.” He dipped his head in the direction of Field 5, where the Phalanxes usually trained. “Cross-training today is going to be pair-offs. No rotations. Your jobs will be to learn everything you can about your matches, and to figure out how to beat them—or *keep* beating them—at any cost.”

“Um... Yes, sir...?” Logan said, sounding about as lost as Rei was. “Is there... a reason you’re telling us that, sir...?”

“Sure is!” Bretz barked, a fire lit in his gaze, which had settled once more on Rei. “The Captain had the thought that while Ward here has to pop out of his shell eventually, it was probably best to make sure we matched him with someone who isn’t going to be mouthing at the air like a goldfish when he pulls out that new shiny shield of his.” The grin returned. “You two catch my meaning?”

The heat was burning in Rei’s chest like an actual flame by then, and it *was* excitement now.

He wasn't just going to be allowed to fight! Rei *was* the strongest first year at Galens now, it was true. Probably among the strongest first years in the ISC, thanks to Shido.

But if he was going to be sticking to Phalanx mode all afternoon...

“Couldn't get any of you pillows, sorry Cadets,” Bretz said, one eyebrow raising in anticipation. “But we figured you two using *each other* as punching bags might make for a good ‘healthy outlet’, wouldn't you say?”