



# E.R.E.B.U.S

A Novel By:





## Chapter 6- The ARC

There are two sides to everyone, two voices locked in an internal war against the other. Nobody admits it, nobody wants to be seen fighting their inner demons. But that voice inside, it's like a whole other person whispering... placing doubt, sowing seeds of destruction and self-annihilation.

It's human nature to latch onto the broken, to try and fix something even when it's beyond repair. Both Kai and Hunter walked silently, fighting with that voice of doubt in their heads. The warm summer rays had begun to dull as mid-afternoon rolled in. A cool breeze carried the smell of luscious flowers, creating a serene aquatic aroma around the Leviathan residence.

Despite the nagging feeling at the back of Hunter's mind, he couldn't help but look up at the building towering over the Eastern side of the lake. A large shadow cast across the shimmering crystal waters, moving from one side to the other in tandem with the sun above.

The exterior walls, apart from the apartments themselves, were made completely out of reinforced glass. This gave the sensation of x-ray vision to anyone who walked past the residence, able to see the lobby, outside corridors and the large steel staircase that spiralled up the floors. The other two residence buildings had the same layout and design, exact carbon copies of one another except for the colour scheme and location.

Walking through large automatic glass doors Hunter and Kai entered the Leviathan lobby. The floor was a cold white marble and as soon as the doors closed behind them the glass walls transformed, projecting an oceanic scenery all around them. Crabs and other critters scuttled along the sandy floor whilst schools of fish swam through a rainbow of coral reef. The walls from the inside acted as interactive wallpaper for students to select and give the rooms a more personal feel. Although from the outside you can still look in, it allowed for a certain degree of false privacy.

Large marble pillars stretched to the ceiling giving the presence of an undersea palace. A certain degree of comfort had to be in place in order for students to be able to train at their full potential.

In the centre of the large lobby was a seating area consisting of four black leather sofas and three chairs made of the same material. “Well if it isn’t dumb and dumber,” Aaron greeted sprawled out on the largest sofa, joined by another boy and girl.

Sat in the chair beside Aaron was Jalen; who wore a long white cloak with a pale grey bodysuit underneath. His hair matched the tone of his cloak and his skin was just as light. The bodysuit, if you could call it that, barely covered his skin with his toned stomach on display.

Sharing the sofa with Aaron, who had an arm wrapped around her, was a short girl named Valentina whose long black hair was tied back into a messy bun. She had a similar grey bodysuit to Jalen which didn’t cover her stomach either. “Come to join the fun?” Aaron grinned tapping the free space on his other side.

“My idea of fun is a lot different to yours,” Hunter replied, sitting down on the sofa across from them instead.

“Oh, I bet,” Aaron chuckled, nudging Valentina flirtatiously.

“Why do you always have to be so crude,” Kai said, sitting down next to Hunter. He sighed in relief as his muscles began to relax. This was the first chance either of them had to sit down since their *training* session earlier. They both sunk into the leather enjoying its deep comfort.

“Kai, what happened to your face?” Valentina asked, noticing that it was still beet red. It may have been boiling hot outside but she knew that it took more than heat to cause someone’s cheek to flare up in such a way.

“It’s nothing,” he said quickly, trying to hide the side of his face that was hurt. Valentina gave him a concerned look, one that is usually seen from a close friend. However, Hunter had never seen them share more than a cordial greeting. He watched them closely, it was like she knew something he didn’t.

“So what were you guys talking about?” he asked, noticing Kai slip back into himself again. Stretching his arm around the back of the sofa he comforted Kai, trying to change the subject.



“Just catching up before we beat your asses tonight,” Jalen said with a cheeky smirk.

“Our training session was swapped around with Assassination, something about an injury,” Valentina added when she noticed their confused expressions.

“That’ll be what Cassi and Flare were talking about,” Hunter said, nudging Kai.

“I wouldn’t know; I was too busy distracting myself from the smell,” he replied, making everyone laugh. Wherever Flare went the lingering scent of gasoline followed. It made it hard for anyone to be in close proximity to her for a long period of time.

“Ok, real talk. Can we trust you guys?” Valentina asked suddenly, edging in closer not wanting anyone else to hear.

“I’m hurt that you had to ask that,” Aaron said, pretending to be insulted but she ignored him.

“There’s a rumour going around about why our training hours have been increased,” she said, earning everyone’s immediate attention. “Apparently the Academy is gearing up for something big. And they’re thinking of cutting the lower performing squads from the programme.”

“They can’t do that!” Hunter exclaimed loudly, shocking the group of people that were passing by. “Sorry...” he apologised as Valentina and Jalen looked at him with disbelief.

“Well apparently they can,” Jalen said sitting back in his seat. “Our spot is pretty sound, top five means we’re in the clear. I wish I could say the same for you guys though.”

“We’ll be fine, we always are,” Aaron replied with a shrug, not really understanding the gravity of their situation. However, Hunter and Kai looked at one another with worry. This was probably the first time they had actually thought about their rank, and what it meant for their squad.

“I hope you’re right,” Jalen said, pushing back in his chair to rock himself forward dramatically. “Come on Val, we should be heading upstairs,” he said, stretching out his arms so that his stomach pushed forward flexing his toned abs. “We’ll see you later,” he said, winking at Kai, before pulling Valentina up from the sofa and towards the staircase. The lobby fell silent as Hunter and Aaron stared at Kai with mischievous grins.

“Don’t say it,” was all Kai could utter, hiding his face behind a cushion and sinking into the leather sofa. His face had turned bright red out of embarrassment.

“There’s nothing better than a good rebound,” Aaron chuckled as Kai immediately threw the cushion at him.

“I’m not using Jalen as a rebound,” he scoffed, turning his face away in disgust.

“Why not? He’s had a crush on you since way before you got with Blake.”

“Because Kai isn’t the type of guy to just sleep around. He’s not you,” Hunter defended.

“Ouch, that really took a chunk out of me,” Aaron replied, holding a hand over his heart dramatically. “Eh, I’m over it. Missed opportunity there mate,” he said simply, before standing and stretching imitating Jalen. “Shall we head up to the flat? Think I’m gonna raid the cupboards for food whilst Princess isn’t here.”

“That’s the smartest thing you’ve said all day,” Hunter joked, pulling Kai up and following Aaron to the spiralling stairs.

Once at the flat, it didn’t take long for the three boys to devour half the kitchen’s food, including two boxes of cereal, one of which they used to throw at each other. “We’re gonna get in so much shit for this,” Hunter groaned knowing that Jaide was bound to flip.

“I can’t believe they still aren’t back,” Aaron stated, snatching the box of cereal from Kai who was still stuffing his face. They sat at the table overlooking the lake below.



“It’s a miracle,” Kai gleamed at the calm, stress-free environment. Whenever Jaida was in the room she would be constantly on at him for something. Leila on the other hand was just always on top of them about winning and how they aren’t good enough. It was nice for them to have a break from the girls.

“Maybe we should call them?” Hunter said, earning looks of disbelief from both boys.

“And ruin this glorious sass-free environment...” Aaron said, waving his arms around the room.

“We have training in like an hour, we need to know where they’re at. If we’re late to another session, Coach is going to destroy us. And we can’t afford another week of average pay. We’ve just eaten most of our stockpile,” Hunter said as he pulled out his Academy Communication Device. It was a handheld piece of technology that allowed for students and tutors to call each other; it also held information on each student and squad ranging from data on their Enhancements to personal and squad records.

“Fine, call them,” Aaron sighed with a dismissive wave. Hunter unlocked his ACD and a bright light emitted from it bouncing off his face. Scrolling down through the contacts he found Jaida’s name and set it to call.

*“Hey Hunter,”* she answered, her face popping up on the screen. She was laying on a massage bed with a towel around her body and hair.

“Hey, we were just wondering when you’ll be back. We have to get ready for training,” he said, trying to ignore the kissy noises Kai and Aaron made behind him.

*“We have all our gear with us,”* she replied. In the background, Hunter could see another bed with someone lying down on it.

*“Tell him he’s weak,”* Leila’s voice rang through the device.

*“We’ll just meet you guys there,”* Jaida said, trying to speak over Leila.

*“Tell them I need stronger squad mates.”*



Ignoring Leila, Jaida sighed and said in a serious tone, “*Make sure you’re on time,*” she then hung up abruptly. Hunter assumed it was to enjoy the rest of her massage.

“Well, I guess we have this place to ourselves for an hour,” Hunter sunk back into his seat groaning at his aching muscles. “They had the right idea though, my back is killing me.”

“I could have a look at it for you?” Kai offered but Hunter refused, wanting to just lie down and relax.

For the remaining hour they had to themselves the boys relaxed and chatted about their recent defeat. Even Hunter had to admit it was embarrassing for the girls to see them lose so badly. Not to mention that if the rumour Valentina and Jalen told them was true, they were in serious trouble. None of them wanted to be kicked out of the Academy.

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Walking up the main Academy building took longer than Hunter thought it would have. A mixture of full stomachs and forgetting one of his swords didn’t help. If they were late to one more training session, their rank would pay the price and after what Valentina shared with them, that was the last thing the squad needed.

They walked past the centre training field during what looked like a miniature game of bulldog.

Walking along the catwalk was always a dangerous game because you could easily get lost in the spectacle of watching other students train. Hunter’s pace slowed by half as he watched eagerly as they set up the next round.

At the sound of a whistle, nearly 10 students charged across the field trying to make it to the other side without being caught by the two students in the middle. A girl with auburn hair narrowly dodged being tackled to the ground, shrinking herself to the size of a fly and growing again once out of danger. Another boy, who was wrapped in a black cloak, dove into the shadows cast by another student and only reappeared once the same student had crossed safely to the other side.

“Come on, we’re going to be late,” Kai said, tugging on Hunter’s arm to pull him along.

They finally approached the main Academy building and each time Hunter saw it he was mesmerised with awe and wonder. It was impossibly symmetrical with each detail mirrored to complete perfection. It gave the structure an aesthetic that was extremely pleasing to the eye.

Each wall and glass pane had been placed with exact precision, with the intent of giving the towering building character. Three stories tall with the second level smaller than the others meant that the third level floated seamlessly above the ground floor. This somehow made the large metal and glass structure feel almost majestic and magical.

In front of the building were the Academy Gardens which were decorated with lush greenery. A maze of hedges and bushes of every colour circled the area acting as a natural barrier between the peaceful garden and the hectic training fields. Trees like the deep purple Judas and the Evergreen California Lilac helped to make the area smell fresh and feel beautiful.

In the centre of the garden was a large stone fountain that depicted a towering man standing on a globe which represented Earth. He had water pouring out of his hands dripping down onto the globe. The water held at the bottom of the fountain was home to more greenery and wildlife like lily pads and catfish.

Standing next to the fountain Jaida sighed in relief as Hunter, Kai and Aaron came into view.

“And where have you three been? It’s almost time to go down,” she scalded them with folded arms and furrowed brows.

“Hunter forgot one of his swords,” Aaron chirped quickly to stay clear of the firing line.

“You boys are more trouble than you’re worth,” Leila said, sitting on the edge of the fountain with her two crescent blades balancing on her lap.



“You’re one to talk, you can’t be sat on there,” Jaida said, pulling her up and brushing the spot she was sitting on to clean it. “The founder of the Academy deserves more respect than that.”

“Could you be any more anal?” Leila groaned, folding her arms.

“Well...” Aaron trailed off eagerly rocking back and forth on his heels.

“Don’t you even dare,” a finger was quickly pushed to his face as Jaida gave him a stern glare.

“Are we the only ones here? I thought today was a group session,” Hunter asked, looking around at the empty garden around them.

“They’ve gone down already,” Jaida said through pursed lips. “We waited because I thought you should know... We’re training with Death today,” she added, glancing at Kai who shifted uncomfortably. “I requested for a transfer to a later session, but Coach said it wasn’t possible.”

“That’s all right,” Kai assured, offering a gracious smile. “Thanks for asking though, you didn’t have to do that for me.”

“We’ve got your back,” Hunter said, wrapping an arm around Kai and guiding him towards the fountain. “They might be the top squad, but that used to be our place too. We can’t let them keep walking over us, it’s time to take back what’s ours.”

“For once I agree with you,” Leila grinned, patting Hunter on the shoulder. “We’ll teach them not to mess with us. Don’t worry Kai, Blake will get what’s coming to him,” she said as the ground beneath them began to shake violently.

“Thanks, guys, you’re the best,” Kai replied calmly as if the unnatural earthquake wasn’t something to worry about. Seconds later the entire fountain structure and paved stone around it began to descend below the garden into a dark pit.

Lights circled the platform before dimming as they passed each set, only to be plunged back into the light as they descended further down. The contrast between light and dark became disorientating to the point that no one knew just how far down the tunnel delved.



They finally came to a stop in a large white room buried beneath the Academy. It was known as the Artificial Reality Chamber, ARC for short, and stretched the entire width of the grounds above. The white panels made it look as though they were in further space where nothing existed. It was used in training sessions to simulate an infinite amount of environments and scenarios.

There was once a rescue mission based on an apocalyptic city overrun by mutant hordes. Another time they had to retrieve treasure from an Aztec temple filled with dangers and traps. Being unfamiliar with any environment outside of the Academy meant they had to rely on the knowledge they'd gained from reading and theory classes.

Stepping off the platform, the fountain raised back up, leaving them standing in the centre of the vast space around them. A tall stocky man stood about 20 feet from them looking down at a device he held between his thick fingers. Gathered around him were two groups, Hunter instantly noticed Blake staring at them.

"Look who's late, again," a tall blonde girl mocked loudly. The tone and pitch of her voice was like velvet, each word more beautiful than the last. She practically sang the words, but behind the façade of a sweet tune, there was a hint of malice. "You'll never move up the scoreboard if you can't arrive on time," she shrugged.

"You know, in Greek Mythology Sirens had the most beautiful voices," Jaida said, approaching the girl who placed her hand to her chest, pretending to be shocked that this was news to her. Her skin-tight, midnight purple dress accentuated her busty chest and cinched waist, which she hugged at the compliment. "But they were actually the ugliest of creatures," Jaida continued, working her eyes over Siren judging her appearance.

"How dare you," Siren hissed, her eyes widening ready to pounce.

"Before you go around giving advice, here's some for you," Jaida said, squaring up to the girl whose eyes burned with venom. "Guys will always go for class over trash," she smirked, gesturing towards the enraged girl before her.



“You think you’re such a little...” Siren huffed, taking in a deep breath and holding the air in her lungs for a moment before a hand on her arm cut her off.

“This isn’t the time,” a deep voice said from behind her. Brokh stood straight-faced, looking down at Siren with an intense stare.

“But Brokh, didn’t you hear what she said?” she exclaimed, throwing a daggered finger at Jaida who simply folded her arms. “It’s about time we finally put her in her place.”

“Siren, stop embarrassing yourself,” Blake said suddenly, with a cold cadence to his words. He didn’t look up, examining instead the large blades that protruded like nails from his suit’s gloves. He slid them across one another, sharpening their edges. Siren huffed, turning her back to Jaida dramatically flicking her hair.

“Should you be provoking them like that?” Hunter asked, worried that the rift between both squads was becoming too wide to repair.

“Well it’s like you said earlier, it’s time to move forward,” she stated, brushing passed him to stand as far away from Siren as possible. Hunter didn’t know how to feel; the conflict between the squads was becoming more intense by the day.

Jaida and Siren had always been at one another’s throats, but the accident with Brokh had escalated things exponentially. Now with Blake on a warpath for vengeance against Kai, it was only a matter of time before both squads imploded.

“We just can’t catch a break today,” Aaron leaned over to whisper. “How have we managed to individually piss off each member of the highest-ranked squad?”

“I’m not sure this is going to end with a song and dance, more like fire and ice,” he said warily, looking over at the Death Squad who looked as if they were plotting their demise.

“Hey Kai,” a soft voice suddenly said from beside the group. Hunter watched Jalen walk over, disrupting the awkward scene.

“Hi Jalen,” Kai replied softly, standing awkwardly glancing towards Hunter for help. The last thing he wanted was another person flirting with him whilst Blake was standing literally 5 feet away. “Good luck, try not to beat us too hard,” Kai chuckled anxiously, trying his best not to be rude when all he wanted was for Jalen to go away.

“We aren’t going to take it easy on you guys,” Valentina cut in, standing beside Hunter cutting off Blake’s view, who was watching the scene intently. She nudged Jalen, motioning to Kai with her eyes.

“I was wondering... do you want to, maybe... if you aren’t busy later tonight...” Jalen began, but couldn’t seem to finish the sentence. His face went beet red, and sweat began to drip down his forehead as if he’d been struck with a nasty fever.

“Are you ok?” Kai asked, but all Jalen could do was stumble back as if he was about to faint. Then suddenly, as quickly as it came the fever seemed to vanish and Jalen hunched over breathing heavily. Hunter noticed Blake smirking behind him, who then rolled his eyes and turned back to his squad.

“Oh, you’re all here,” the stocky man said suddenly, finally looking up from the device glued to his hands. He was just as disinterested in the students as Miss Blanc, looking over them as if they weren’t really there. “Well due to one of the squads here having a less than satisfactory score,” he paused longer than necessary and glanced towards Hunter’s squad as if to prove a point.

“I have a strange feeling he’s talking about us,” Aaron whispered, earning a quick kick to his shin from Leila to silence him.

“Today we’ll have a simple relay race,” the coach continued, trying to fake some enthusiasm but giving up halfway through. “You’ll race in pairs with the last member running on their own. Decide amongst yourselves what points you want to race and head there immediately. The first stage will be through a forest, the second across a lake and the final a straight dash across an open field.”

It was clear this was the last place he wanted to be and was over the entire situation. Hunter noticed how all the teachers had become incredibly inefficient and disinterested the past few months. It was like they didn’t even care if they were fired. Jaida had complained about it multiple times, but only in the privacy of their own flat.



“I think after this morning’s display; we should pair up boy-girl,” Jaida stated, hoping she and Leila could pull the boys out of whatever lethargy they’d been lazing in lately.

“That’s not needed,” Aaron said, batting her away as she inched sheepishly towards Hunter. “We’ve seen the error of our ways and we’re ready to prove you wrong,” he said, leaving Jaida dumbfounded. “Isn’t that right Kai?” he asked, placing both hands on Kai’s shoulders.

“Hmm? Yeah,” Kai replied, not really paying attention.

“I’d ask what’s made you finally see the light, but I don’t want to ruin anything so go before I change my mind,” she said, hooking arms with Leila, who looked back at her with discomfort. Grabbing hold of Jaida’s arm she unlocked it from her own and turned to Hunter pointing at him.

“You, get to the end,” she said, flicking her finger in that direction when he didn’t move. “You two, the lake,” Aaron and Kai looked at each other with glee, knowing they’d have a serious advantage there. “You’re with me,” she told Jaida, stomping away and muttering to herself about incompetent teammates.

“She scares me sometimes,” Aaron said to Kai, as they skipped off towards the lake.

Jalen started to walk in the same direction, but Valentina tugged him back and motioned for two other members of the squad to the lake instead. One had a gas mask attached to his face with vials of iridescent liquid strapped to a belt around his waist. The other was just over 6ft tall and resembled a Satyr-like creature with goat legs covered in thick brown fur. He held a large tiki torch that had a small flame burning inside its tip.

Jaida joined Leila by the coach as he began to prepare for the ARC’s transformation on his handheld device. He lined the girls up with the other two competing squads, placing them in the middle. To their left were Jalen and Valentina and to their right, a pumped-up and angry-faced Lilth with the final member of the Death Squad, Efah.

She had a sharp angular face, with thick black hair cut short but pushed out creating wave-like curls. Her suit was a more feminine version of Blake’s but had cuffs on her ankles and wrists that had large curved blades attached to them.

“You ready?” Jaida breathed in a hushed voice.

“Oh yeah,” Leila grinned, tightening her grip on her crescent blades. Suddenly, the white panels around them began to transform. They broke apart like shards and in their place was a white webbed structure. The lines raced out forming opaque webbed trees, grass and other forest shrubbery. As the web travelled forming a new environment, colour bled through seconds behind it adding life to the fabricated world around them. Grass formed at their feet and the smell of conifers and fir trees began to drift on a cool breeze that appeared from thin air.

A deafening gunshot broke through the chirps of artificial birds, signalling the start of the race.

