



# UNLEASHED

OMEGA ACADEMY

LILY ARCHER

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UNLEASHED: OMEGA ACADEMY 3

Lily Archer

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Omegaverse (n): A set of story-telling conventions that include the character archetypes of Alpha (powerful, dominant warriors), Beta (regular beings), and Omegas (strong-willed and often bonded to an Alpha ... or perhaps three).

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## WHERE WERE WE?

If you haven't read Omega Academy, you'll want to go back and do that first. [Click Here.](#)

At the start of her story, Lana was taken from Earth and placed at the Gretar Fleet's Omega Academy. Fate seemed to have a hand in her path, because the Alphas Jeren, Kyte, and Ceredes are aboard the transport, and High Commander Bartanz—a member of the Council of Regents that governs the Gretar Fleet—greeted her upon arrival.

At the Academy, Lana learns that she's an Omega, and she develops a peculiar, but strong, bond with the three Alphas who'd been aboard her transport. She also develops friendships with Omegas Tilda and Uaxin and an enemy in Omega Ilwen.

Lana learns that she, Ceredes, Kyte, and Jeren are all part of a circle of power. Her love for the Alphas grows, and they decide to seal their bond after the end-of-year ball on campus. Their plans are disrupted by the overbearing Bartanz and an invasion force of Sentients who try to kidnap Lana.

The circle fights off the Sentients, and Lana realizes she needs to seal the circle in every way. She and her Alphas become one, their bond stronger than any other force in the universe. But the power inside her is daunting, scaring her and pushing her out of control. Her Alphas work to teach her how to control her energy, to focus it in combat and defense.

But her academy enemies and the Sentients are still out for her blood. When Kyte's mother is killed in a Sentient attack,



the circle travels to Latrides to honor her life and regroup on how to address the growing threat.

While on Latrides, Onin tells Lana he needs her help to save lives, and she jumps to assist, traveling off-planet with him. But Onin betrays Lana to the Sentients, and to the one person in the universe who can tell Lana who she really is. The one person who knows her. The one person who can unleash her true power—for better or for worse.

*Welcome back to the Omega Academy, cadet.*

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“*W*ake up, dumbass.”

I lift my head and blink. Sunlight pours in the dirty windows with a few broken panes, and the familiar smell of industrial cleaners and teenage body odor meet my nose. “Where am—”

“No speaking in detention.” Mr. Morgan glares at me from the front of the room.

“Moron.” Van snickers beside me.

My head pounds as I sit up and rub my temples. “Is this real?”

“Ms. Key!” Mr. Morgan slaps his hand on his desk. “There is no talking in detention. Another word from you, and I’ll add another hour to your time.”

All I can do is stare at him. He returns to his book, his bow tie and sweater vest unperturbed.

This isn’t real. This *can’t* be real. I look down at my desk, at the chibi I’d been drawing. Dolly the cowgirl with the confident smile.

“Hey, dipshit, I can draw too,” Van whispers and shows me a crude sketch of a dick.

I can’t seem to process what’s happening. Not the classroom or Mr. Morgan or Van. Where are my Alphas? I need them. It wasn’t a dream. I wanted it to be a dream at first, but now I know my circle is solid, far more solid than

whatever memory I'm trapped in right now. This has to be a mirage. *This* is the dream. My Alphas are what's real.

"Kyte?" I call out.

"That's it, Ms. Key!" Mr. Morgan glances at the clock. "Another hour for you."

Van snorts.

I ignore both of them and stand, walking to the classroom door slowly as Mr. Morgan continues threatening me with more and more hours of detention. "None of this is real. It can't be."

"It's very real, as your permanent record will show." Mr. Morgan makes a show of writing notes on a piece of paper.

"Where's Kyte? Ceredes and Jeren? Where am I?" I reach for the door handle. It vibrates under my touch.

"You are in detention where you will stay until your time is up." Mr. Morgan stands and points at me. "Take your seat, Ms. Key!"

"No." It's so easy now. Telling him no. Standing up for myself and following my own instincts. My Alphas taught me that.

"Stupid bitch." Van cackles. "You'll be in here with me all day. You'll be in here with me when it gets dark. Like it was in the trees, down in the ditch. Remember the fun we were having?" His voice turns into a rasp. "Remember how badly you wanted my dick? I do." He's right behind me now. "If you open that door, we'll be there again. Just the two of us. No one coming to save you this time."

"I'm not afraid of you." I grip the door handle.

"I'll be there too." My mother's voice ricochets around me, and I freeze. "When Van's through with you, I'll be waiting. You'll come home to me looking for some sort of solace. But I don't help sluts, not little bitches who fuck dirty boys behind the playground. Not filthy whores who fuck three different Alphas. I know what you are." Her rusty laugh is edged in whiskey and rage. "You're weak. Pathetic. I'm going

to break your nose this time. Then your worthless fucking neck.”

My heart pounds, and a fine sweat has broken out all over me. I can feel her standing behind me, smell the liquor on her breath. The old fear tries to overtake me, and for a moment I think about making myself small, about curling into a ball and covering all my soft areas to protect from her attacks. But I’m not that girl anymore. I won’t be hiding in my toy box, entombing myself in the hopes of surviving another day. I’m done with that. I’m strong now.

“You aren’t going to touch me.” I turn the door handle. “Not Van. Not you.”

“Open the door and find out.” Her drunken laugh is screeching.

I pull the door open and step into the hall. But the familiar row of lockers isn’t there, no scratched linoleum beneath my feet or half-assed graffiti on the yellow cinderblock walls. Instead, the floors and walls are a smooth black, shiny and almost liquid in their look and feel.

A ship.

And that’s when it all comes crashing down on me—Onin betraying me, my Alphas left behind, Warverian, and the female. The female who touched me and ... I take a breath and have to lean against the wall, the black material cold to the touch.

I’m not at school. I’m not even on earth. I’ve been taken prisoner by Commander Warverian of the Sentients. Not just him, though. He calls her ‘Regent.’ But I know her as Nox. Valnox, the centering Omega of the circle that formed over 300 years ago to defeat the Sentients during the Great Calamity.

But she’s more than that. So much more. When she touched me, I ... Something happened to me. I rub my temples again, my mind aching from too much information. The rest of me hurts, too. Not with the sensation of being overfilled like before when I joined with my Alphas. Now I feel ...

“*Hungry*,” Nox’s voice whispers across my mind.

I still and try to reach out to Kyte, Jeren, and Ceredes. But I can’t feel them. Not even a thin line of connection between us. Where are they? Pillars, what if they’re hurt? I have to get back to them.

A door ahead of me slides open with mechanical precision. I jump back a little and put my hands up, a barrier lighting around me.

“You’re safe with me, child.” Nox’s voice pulses through the ship. “Come.”

I look behind me, but there’s only a long expanse of hallway with closed metal doors on either side.

“*Come*.” Her voice has a pull, the same sort of odd pull I’ve felt down deep in my gut ever since I left earth.

Slowly, I walk through the door and into the room on the other side. It’s the same one where Warverian killed Onin. I stare at the spot on the floor where his blood had been, but it’s gone now.

“Don’t be afraid.” Nox stands at the view window, her back to me. Her dark hair is still styled the same way as her statue at the academy—the sides shaved short and the top like a lion’s mane.

“You killed Onin. Y-you and Warverian ... You’re with the Sentients.” I swallow hard, my mouth dry as I warily walk up behind her.

“I’m sorry about the little scene I had to place you in. You were unstable at first, so I sent your mind to your most recent memory of your life on earth so you could even out a bit. But it also took a turn.” She shakes her head. “Your power is still unstable, unruly even. Dark.” I could swear I hear a smile in her voice on the last word.

“Take me back to Latrides. Now.”

“Latrides is under fleet control. You’re not safe there.”

“My Alphas are there. Let me go.”

She sighs but still doesn't turn. "The fleet has filled you with lies. It's not your fault, of course. That's why the fleet snatches Omegas and Alphas as soon as they come into their power."

"The fleet protects—"

"The fleet is a monster." She finally turns, her face so similar to the statue, except for the right side of her temple and her right eye. Those parts have been replaced with metal and circuitry. "It steals the most valuable assets in the universe and hoards them. It enslaves, kills, and annihilates without mercy."

"But you fought for the fleet. You're the hero of the Great Calamity. You and your circle are—"

"Broken." She strides to me, and I have to look up to hold her gaze. "My circle was a chain, a manacle that held me in place the same as it's doing to you."

"No. My circle is everything. My circle freed me."

Her face—the organic half—softens a bit. "Child. *I've* freed you." She reaches out.

I flinch back, but she still rests her palm on my cheek. Power flows between us. Not the bright blue energy created by the circle, but something deeper, darker. It's so strong, like a current dragging me away with it.

"What is that?" I can barely breathe. Despite the sensation of being pulled down into a deep well of midnight, I also feel ... Strong. Strong enough to grip that power in my hands and shape it. Because it's part of me somehow, a part I never knew existed. If that's true, then how did Nox know about it? How is she able to pull it to the surface?

"It's the deepest power in the universe. Creation. Destruction." Her voice is in my head, in my heart, somehow walking with shadowy steps through my soul. "We contain that power. We are the last of our race, Palatians from a planet beyond the Rift. Our power is not given to us by a circle or the pillars. It is ours to take. Ours to use as we see fit."

So many questions tumble through me, like an avalanche of confusion that threatens to bury me under miles of black ice

and snow.

“Everything will be answered in time.” She pulls her palm away, but the power is still humming inside me, a dark wave right before it crests.

“Why me?” I can only stare at her, at the wonder of her beautiful face and the shiny mech that seems to have encroached on it. “Why all this for me? To break the circle? Is that why?”

“The circle is nothing to me.” She peers down at me, her one brown eye holding my gaze. “But you mean everything.”

I can only repeat the question that bounces around my mind on replay. “Why?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” She moves closer, her arms opening to pull me in. “Because you’re my daughter.”

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“*T*here has to be some way to find her.” Jeren stares out through the dark windshield, as if he can somehow see Lana despite her ship having disappeared through a wormhole.

I access every bit of fleet tracking and information protocols, my fingers and mind flying through a mountain of data.

“Kyte.” Ceredes’s teeth are gritted. “What can you see?”

I keep reading, keep digging. There has to be something here.

“I need you to say something.” Ceredes pilots us to the exact spot where she’d vanished. “I need to know where—”

“I don’t know!” I slap my palm on the controls. “I don’t know.” Pillars, I can’t even feel her anymore. As if there’s something insurmountable between us, a wall of lead deeper than the core of Latrides.

“He took one of your ships. It was Calarian. There has to be some way to trace it.” Jeren works on his own console, trying to find information.

“Where would Onin take her?” Ceredes shakes his head. “This doesn’t make sense.”

Jeren flips to another screen. “What about the tracker the academy put on her?”



“Only works on portals, not wormholes. Probably only on school grounds, too.” I dig and dig, then find the serial number of the ship Onin took. “Their vessel didn’t have flight permission, and they certainly didn’t open a wormhole with fleet authority. Someone else was helping him.”

“Onin’s the traitor.” Ceredes says what we all now know. “He opened the school’s barrier, he told the Sentients about Lana.”

“Nothing. There’s *nothing* here!” I stand straight, my mind a blur of fear and confusion. “And what small connection is left, I can barely feel her. Just a sliver that’s fading.” I close my eyes and reach out to her, trying to stretch my thoughts to her, wherever she is. But I’m met with nothing, just that impenetrable wall. The power it would take to create it—and to maintain it between a bonded set of mates—is unfathomable.

“The circle.” Jeren stands and holds his hand out to me. “We can find her. Together.”

Ceredes stands, too, eagerly taking Jeren’s other forearm as we all link up. Power pulses through us as we join and close our eyes.

“Send everything you have down our bond.” I close my eyes and think only of her, of the Omega who stole my hearts. “*Lana*,” I call silently, my inner voice melding with my brothers’ until we’re chanting her name in a powerful refrain.

“There’s something in the way.” Jeren’s grip tightens. “Something strong.”

“Keep pushing.” I imagine that wall and think of burning a hole through it. Slowly, methodically I take bits of it apart as I move like an arrow toward my Omega.

“Keep chipping away.” Ceredes is there swinging an energy sword, hacking at the unforgiving metal as Jeren phases deeper and deeper through the hole.

“She’s on the other side. I can feel her.” Jeren drifts ahead, his dark shape like smoke finding the cracks Ceredes and I are creating. “We’re getting closer.”

We redouble our efforts, our bodies and minds humming with the effort. I start to warm, the link between Lana and her circle growing stronger.

The last bit of metal is ahead, the wall still solid but giving way bit by bit.

“One more big push. Let’s go.” I silence everything in me except my call to Lana. It works, the wall crumbling until I glimpse her just ahead, her essence glowing a brilliant gold.

“There!” I push through and reach out to take her hand.

But something’s wrong.

Her eyes are open, but she’s staring past me.

“Lana!” Jeren materializes behind her. “Where are you?”

When her mouth opens, darkness spills out. Her eyes go obsidian, and the blast that comes off her is so powerful that all three of us are knocked back, hurtling through the wall and into ourselves. Our consciousnesses hit so hard that our ship groans under the weight of us and darkness explodes from our craft, rippling out into space like waves on black water.

My head aches so badly it’s like I’m being ripped apart, and Ceredes doubles over and dry heaves. Jeren is at my feet, his face pale.

I drop to my knees. “Jeren.” I shake him. “Jeren!”

He’s breathing, but it’s shallow.

Ceredes retches again, then turns to us. “Jeren?”

“He’s out.” I have to sit back, my sight going wavy as I try to manage the pain in my head.

“What was that?” Ceredes drops to his knees and takes Jeren’s other hand. “She’s gone. I can’t ... I can’t feel her at all.” He looks at me, his skin almost as pale as Jeren’s. “What’s happened?”

“I don’t know, but we have to find her. We have to rejoin the circle.”

“Broken.” Jeren coughs. “It’s broken.”

The pain in my head intensifies. Because I know he's right. I know the blast that came from Lana shattered the circle, broke the bonds holding us all in place. What could have done it?

"Lana." Ceredes looks out the window again, his voice forlorn. "Lana where are you?"

Jeren opens his eyes. "It hurts." He thumps his palm weakly on his chest. "She's not here."

"I know." I help him sit up, though that surge of energy isn't there anymore. We're dimmed, like a light that's out of power, the life inside it flickering and nearly fading. "But we can fix this. We have to. Did you get anything, any idea of where she is?"

He shakes his head.

"Ceredes, you?"

"No." He rubs his chest. "No, I couldn't get anything from her. Just the bond and then ... Then darkness."

"We can't track the ship. We can't connect with her through our bond. The circle is ..." I can't say the word out loud. It hurts too much. Losing Lana isn't something I can even process.

Jeren breathes in deep, his color finally returning. "Set a course for the Flotilla."

"The Flotilla?" I wonder if he's hallucinating or suffering a head injury. There's no way Lana is anywhere near there.

"What's at the Flotilla?" Ceredes opens a console and programs our destination without hesitation.

"Help." Jeren grunts and leans against the ship's wall, his mouth drawing down into a glower. "For a price."

I sit on the bed in my room, my mind still reeling. Nox had walked me here after her bombshell. She was talking to me like nothing was wrong, like it wasn't a big deal that suddenly she's my mother.

The woman I thought was my mother—who even was that? Who was the woman who terrorized me for my whole life? And if Nox truly is my mother, why would she have left me with such a person?

I can barely breathe, the questions choking me as surely as a pair of hands around my throat. My ears are ringing, the room around me vibrating as darkness seems to seep off me in tendrils. Not the Larenian shadows from Jeren, but something different. Power. A power that goes deeper than even my circle can. It's been inside me all along. Now, it seems to cocoon the energy I receive from my circle, like a black sarcophagus swallowing the light that burns inside it.

“*Kyte, Ceredes, Jeren?*” I call to them, but there's no answer. Just an uncomfortable numbness where they used to live in my heart.

But for a slight moment, I hear my name. “*Lana.*” Like the whisper of a butterfly's wings. It doesn't feel like my Alphas, yet the voice is still somehow familiar.

“Hello?” I call.

The voice is gone. I'm alone.

I sink to the floor on the side of my bed away from the door and curl into a ball. I imagine my toy box around me, but it doesn't appear. Just black walls. The same as the walls of the ship. I bat the illusion away and just lie on the cold floor and try to reach my Alphas. Nothing. There's no one there.

I'm alone.

*"You aren't alone, Lana. You never will be again."* Nox's voice skitters across me like thousands of tiny spiders.

"I need my Alphas." I blink and realize I'm crying. "Please, let me go to them."

My door opens, and I hear Nox's steps approaching. "You don't need them. They only hold you back."

"No. They make me strong."

*"I make you strong. My blood in your veins."* She sits on the bed above me, her eyes on me.

"You were in a circle. You should know what I'm talking about. Don't you remember?"

"Of course I remember." She looks away. "It was freeing ... at first. At first, I felt like I could bend the entire universe to my will. With my Alphas, anything was possible."

"Yes." I couldn't agree more.

"It's intoxicating. Drugging. Before you know it, you can't tell where you end and they begin."

"So you know why I need to get back to them."

She shakes her head. "It's a lie, Lana. The circle is a lie."

I can't even respond to that, because at my bedrock, I know it isn't true. The circle is the one true thing I've ever had.

"I know it's hard for you to hear this. When I was in your place, I wouldn't have believed me either. But I learned the hard way that the circle isn't absolute. The love you feel from your Alphas? It's not without ... complications." She sounds almost tired. As if this is a topic she's examined many times.

“Like what?”

“There’s so much you need to know. But not right now. You’ve already been through a lot. That power you feel pulsing through you? It’s your core essence. Nothing to do with circles or Alphas. You can wield it, hone it, do more than you’ve ever imagined.”

I close my eyes and try to find that power. It’s inside me, but I can’t look straight at it. Though it’s blacker than the darkest night, it’s like staring into the sun. I relent and open my eyes. “It hurts.”

“True power always does.”

We sit in uncomfortable silence for a while. Adjusting to each other. My mind spinning with overload.

I glance at her. The one mech eye is looking right at me. She’s scary. And not just on the outside. She has to know that, right? She can say she’s my mother, but I still don’t know her. In fact, the only thing I know for certain is what happened to Onin. That memory riles my stomach, and then when I remember the look in Warverian’s eyes, I feel my gag reflex start to tingle.

“Just breathe, Lana. You’ll understand in time.”

“I don’t think so.”

“I can show you I’m telling the truth.”

“About being my mother?”

“I think you already know that’s the truth.” She almost smiles. “You can feel it down deep, can’t you?” She thumps her chest, and I’m not sure if she has organic tissue or alien metal under her tight leather top.

“Organic.” She answers my question then draws a hand to her face where the metal glints from the lights far overhead. “This was a necessity. One that saved my life.”

“I’m sorry.” I don’t know why I say it. I don’t even know if Nox plans on hurting me or using me in some horrible way. I don’t know anything right now.

“Don’t be sorry. It’s made me stronger.” She leans over and peers at me, as if seeing me for the first time—or perhaps she’s trying to read me.

I don’t know. All I know is that I need to see my Alphas. I have to tell them what’s happened.

“I’m going to give you a brief period to rest. The voyage here and the unpleasantness with Onin has left you—”

“*Unpleasantness?*” I sit up. “Warverian murdered him! Right in front of me!”

She barely shrugs a shoulder. “This is war, Lana. We’re fighting for our survival. Onin had served his purpose. Once he’d delivered you, he became a threat.”

“You could’ve kept him here. Locked him up or, or, I don’t know! But you didn’t have to kill him.”

She scowls. “I don’t need any more prisoners.”

“Because you have me?” I shoot back.

Her eyebrow darts up. “You aren’t my prisoner.”

“Then why can’t I leave?”

“Because you’re my daughter, and you’ve been brainwashed by the fleet. I intend to show you what the universe is truly like. Then you can make your choice about whether you want to return to the fleet that fears you and the circle that chains you, or stay with me here, free in the galaxies.” She sighs. “I know it must be a lot. You’re so young. I’ve lived dozens of lives, it feels like.” She touches her metal cheek. “More than any creature ever should.” Then her mouth hardens into a thin line. “But I’m still here, and even though you’re young, I can’t let you go on being lied to and stolen from. Not anymore.”

“Why now?” I pace in front of her, Ceredes coming to the fore in my mannerisms. “Why didn’t you come for me on earth?”

She drops her gaze. “I didn’t know you were there.”

“Why?”

She stays silent for a long while, her body preternaturally still. When she looks up, the rage I see in her eyes is like a laser beam, one that could burn through solid metal. “Because you were stolen from me.”

I sit beside her. It’s like the hits keep coming, and more questions are piling up.

“There’s so much.” She reaches for my hand then pulls back. “More than I could ever tell you in one lifetime. But I need you to know that I’d never hurt you.”

“You sent Warverian for me. He got me killed.”

“And I’ve punished him for it.” She grits her teeth. “He’s only alive at the moment because he was of use in turning Onin.”

“So you’ll kill him, too? Since he’s not useful anymore?” I ask. “Will you do the same to me if I’m not ‘useful’?”

She shakes her head. “No. Of course not. You’re different.”

“So was Kyte’s mother. She was strong. Fierce. A formidable leader. But you killed her.”

“This is war, Lana.” She stands. “I feel like we’re going in circles.”

“We are, because I don’t understand you.” The female in front of me is inscrutable. Her past is a wide ocean of dark currents that I can’t begin to fathom. Three hundred years of mystery, and my entire life—I didn’t even know she existed. “I don’t think I can.”

“You can and you will.” She reaches out so fast that I can’t dodge her touch.

Blackness swarms me, and I’m thrown into a memory. It’s as if I’m Nox, but I can’t control anything. Only watch.

*“Nox!” Eo rushes to my ship as I stagger out of the cockpit. He catches me before I can fall to the hangar floor.*

*“Byran, Krenallus!” He shouts through our shared bond.*



*“You did it. You destroyed the Sentient fleet.” Eo cradles me close, my body cold as I try to keep my eyes open.*

*“I killed more. I killed—” I close my eyes and see Lirian floating through space, her body almost destroyed. “Lirian. So many others.”*

*“You did what you had to do.” Byran calls to me, then appears on the far side of the hangar, running to us at full speed.*

*“So many gone.” I’m crying, tears welling and falling down my cheeks as Eo wipes them away. “Because of me.”*

*“You saved lives.” Byran sinks down next to me, his head bleeding on one side as he holds a hand out to heal me.*

*“Quiet now.” Eo rocks me as the tears and breaks in my body begin to knit back together.*

*“Nox!” Krenallus takes my hand. “I thought I lost you. Pillars, it almost broke me.” He leans over me, looking into my eyes. “You’re going to be all right. Byran?”*

*“She’s okay.” He sits back and gulps in a deep breath, his head wound bleeding more.*

*“Heal yourself. Take what I have left.” I hold my hand out to him, my dark power swirling with the pure blue of the circle.*

*“I can’t.” He shakes his head. Byran’s always been afraid to harness the darkness that dwells deep inside me. It’s a gift from my lineage, though it’s not a power I fully understand. Only I can wield it. And now I’ve—my heart fractures again as I think about what I’ve just done—I’ve wielded it and caused untold destruction. Friend or foe didn’t matter when I pulled from that deep well of resonating energy.*

*“I’ve never seen anything like it.” Eo strokes my hair.*

*More fleet fighters are arriving in the hangar, most of them triumphant, though the undercurrent of fear and loss is here, too. They saw what I did. They know.*

*“She’s gone.” Daviti comes running through the hangar, his face wan, his eyes deadened. “Lirian. I can’t feel her*

*anymore. Gone.” He collapses, but he keeps his gaze on me as he sinks to his knees. “You. Your power. Lirian—” His voice cracks, and then a sob breaks from him.*

*“I’m so sorry. Daviti, I’m so—”*

*“You did nothing wrong.” Byran turns to him. “She’s the savior of the fleet.”*

*“Byran, stop. He’s lost his Omega.”*

*The wail that lofts from Daviti raises the hair on the back of my neck, and I try to get up, to go to him and offer some sort of comfort.*

*“Stay.” Eo gently keeps me in his lap. “You’re still drained.”*

*“Rest, Nox. We’ve got you.” Krenallus squeezes my hand.*

*I can’t fight, not anymore. Eo’s right. I don’t have the strength to move. The weight of what I’ve done crushes me, drowning me in regret and horror. “I’m so sorry,” I whisper.*

*“Lirian.” Daviti makes a strangled sound and topples over. That’s when I see the gaping wound in his side, his flight suit drenched in blood.*

*“We have to save him!” I try again to rise but can’t. “Byran, please!” I hold out my hand, the faint wisp of blue and black twirling there.*

*He stares at my palm, at the power he’s been too wary to touch for so long.*

*“Save him. Please, for me.” I send my desperation through the circle, and Byran finally relents. He takes my hand, closes his eyes, and siphons off just a small dram of my deep power.*

*When he opens his eyes again, they’ve gone black. The circle seems to shift, as if it’s falling out of shape, listing to one side. But then he goes to Daviti and holds his hand over our friend’s wound.*

*Daviti screams Lirian’s name as his wound closes. He passes out from the pain, but Byran makes sure he’s still alive.*

*It's then I hear the thumping beat of several voices and stomping feet. They repeat one note over and over until the entire fleet ship is abuzz.*

*"Nox, Nox, Nox!"*

*Byran looks back at me, the darkness fading from his eyes. But the circle remains bent, like a ring crushed between the jaws of a vise.*

*It's ... Wrong. The circle is wrong, and I'm the reason why.*

I snap out of her memory and almost fall off the bed. Her mechanical arm keeps me steady.

"The circle can be bent, Lana. Bent so far it eventually breaks. It only takes a small push. That day, when I used the power within me and the power of the circle—I did untold destruction. But I also tore my circle apart. Not right at that moment, but I set the events in motion."

"But your circle helped you."

She nods. "It did, until ..." She sighs. "Until it didn't. But that's for another day. Rest now. I'll send for you when the time comes."

"No, wait. I need to know—" But she phases from the room, her footsteps muted until I hear nothing but silence.

I try to go back through her memory, to find some shard of information that would lead to the Nox of now. She's so different, yet the same. But my thoughts don't focus on Nox. They're drawn to Byran. To the look in his eyes after Nox's power had faded. To the feeling of the bent circle. It's like an itch I can't reach, a grating bit of pain lodged deep like a splinter.

Cradling my head in my hands, I realize it's all too big for me. Her memories, my present—all of it is like a puzzle that spans the course of 300 years. It's impossible. Slowly, I turn my senses outward to the things I can see and touch. Something solid.

The ship doesn't even hum. It's like a silent obelisk floating in endless night. My room is large, the floors some

sort of polished black stone. The walls are high and the same matte black of the halls. The bed is simple and large with a midnight blue bedspread, velvety and luxe.

“*Lana, you must escape.*” The ghost of a voice hums through me, and I whirl, looking for its source. It’s not my Alphas, but it’s not Nox, either.

“Who’s there?” I even peek under the bed. Nothing.

“Hello?” But like before, the faint presence is already gone.

Maybe I’m losing my mind. Rubbing my temples, I stand, refusing to rest in this place. Not when my Alphas are out there. I have to get out of here, to find a way back to them. They’ll be able to sort this out with me. They have to.

Hurrying to the wall, I find a console and swipe my hand across it. An array of buttons appear, and I press the first one. The walls begin to move, and I jump back, a barrier flickering to life around me. It fades as I watch the walls slide apart to show me a wide, clear window. A whirl of stardust is right outside my window, pink and orange in the light from the nearest star, it sparkles and twines around on itself. Beautiful.

Pressing a palm to the window, I take in the beauty and try to send what I’m seeing down the bond. Maybe Jeren can find some clue about my location from the planets and stars I can view from here. But even as I try to activate the bond, darkness seeps from me. It blocks my connection, killing my way back to the circle.

“What is this?” I stare at my palms, at the shadowy ripples that seem to emanate from the deepest parts of me. Nox unlocked it, but I still don’t know why I have it. Is it her? Is she controlling me?

Fatigue sets in as I keep doggedly trying to connect to any of my Alphas. I turn from the window and scour the rest of the room. There’s nothing here except a closet filled with clothing similar to what Nox was wearing—leathery armor laced with Sentient technology. The bathroom is large and simple, meeting all my needs but nothing more.

When I try the door to the hall, it doesn't open. I press every button on the console, and nothing happens. Trapped.

I finally return to the bed and rest my head in my hands. "*Help me,*" I call to my mates.

Silence is the only response.

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“*I*t’s bigger than I ever imagined.” Kyte peers out the window as we approach the Flotilla.

“It’s like a city. Look at the buildings. Massive.” Ceredes is likewise struck by the magnitude of Larenian ingenuity.

I’m used to it, to the spires created from floating junk, bits of ships and twisted metal fused together to create forms resembling something akin to order. But that’s not what the Flotilla is. It’s chaos. Begun as a haven for Larenians searching for their homeworld, it’s more than that now. So many races have met here, plenty of outcasts looking to start fresh, and more than its fair share of war criminals, street thugs, and high value targets hunted by the fleet.

“It maintains its own atmosphere and draws its power from the heart of a small star held deep in its core.” Kyte stares, almost rapt, as we approach for landing. “It’s like a civilization built on top of a bomb. Reminds me of Latrides.”

That’s not a phrase I ever thought I’d hear. The Flotilla is so far beneath Kyte’s Calarian homeworld that I’m surprised he knows anything about it. Then again, I’ve learned Kyte goes a lot deeper than his golden surface.

But we have to be wary. His curiosity could get him killed in the Flotilla, especially if someone recognizes him. “Remember, follow my lead. Are you sure you won’t stay with the ship?”

Kyte shakes his head. “Not when Lana is at stake. I know it’s dangerous, but I don’t care. I’m coming with you.”

“I knew you’d say that.” I open a back wall and dig around through ship supplies until I find a dark blanket. I fashion it into a cloak and drape it over Kyte’s head. “If anyone knows a noble is here, things will get dicey. And that goes double for Garusso. He’s dangerous, slippery, and we’d be fools to trust him. But it just so happens he’s the only one with the right mix of physiology and tech to trace Lana’s ship. Watch your back.”

“What about me?” Ceredes asks.

Kyte snorts. “No one’s going to intentionally cause trouble with you, big guy.”

“Good point.” He cracks his knuckles. “Let’s go. The sooner we find this Garusso, the better.”

We leave our ship, and I stop at the landing bay to pay for our berth.

“Only a few hours?” The Larenian behind the counter eyes my brothers and me.

“Yes.”

“Got business?”

“Yes, now mind your own.” I hand him the money.

He lets out a gruff laugh and takes it.

I lead Kyte and Ceredes out into the streets, the grates beneath our feet hissing with steam and the scent of various sorts of filth in the air. This is at the edge of the dark market district. Not the sleaziest part of the Flotilla, but close. The Vents, where I grew up, is the real underbelly of the Flotilla. The place where those with least eek out an existence steeped in violence and often cruelty.

“Good time for you?” A female hangs out of a window overhead. “All three of you. I can take you all at the same time.”

We keep walking as she and others call at our backs.

“This way.” I duck down an alley.

The shadows are moving, several Larenians hoping for unwary travelers, but they take one look at us and keep away. I

don't expect low level trouble. It's the big players like Garusso I'm worried about.

"Are they all Larenan?" Ceredes peers at a shadow hidden behind an overflowing trash bin.

"Most of them, yeah. But there are plenty of others here looking to prey on the weak." I can feel Ceredes thrumming with violence. We're all on edge, and we'll stay that way until we find Lana. The barrier blocking us from her is like a slow blade, cutting through sinew and bone at a steady, vicious pace. I fear what will happen if it comes all the way down. Or perhaps it already has. Maybe the circle truly is broken. But I can't dwell on that. Not when Lana's life is in danger.

"The Sentients will regret even thinking her name." Ceredes bites the words as we take several turns, navigating through the maze of the flotilla.

We're close to my old home, to the place where I grew up and the spot where I held my mother as she died in my arms. Memories and regrets walk alongside me, their footsteps lost in the sounds of the Flotilla.

Kyte's hand comes down on my shoulder as we walk. "She loved you so much. I know she'd be proud of the male you've become."

I want to agree, but I still remember her words. So many times she'd warned me against getting caught in the fleet's clutches, yet here I am.

"*Here we all are.*" Ceredes words are faint, but I hear them through our bond.

Kyte and I exchange a glance. Ceredes has never questioned the fleet. It's not in his nature. But after what happened with Commander Bartanz, perhaps he's becoming a little more wary. That's a good thing as far as I'm concerned.

We turn another corner, careful to avoid a particularly hot exhaust vent where a few scavengers are huddled together roasting a pair of rats. I remember times like that. After my mother died, I did what I had to do just to survive. Those times are steeped in misery, and I don't like to dwell on them.



I cut through another alley. That's when I sense the shadows closing in. At least a dozen of them. Coordinated. Deadly. I slow and stop. "We're here."

Ceredes and Jeren turn, our backs pressed together in a triangle as we look out at the encroaching darkness.

"Steady." I palm my knives slowly. "We're here to see Garusso. Not looking for trouble."

"You found it all the same." One of the shadows circles to my left. "Garusso doesn't deal with fleet lackeys."

I should've known they'd clock us the second we entered the Flotilla. "I have business with him, nothing more."

"Your business is with the incinerators below deck. Your bodies will be meeting them soon enough." He and the other shadows close in.

Ceredes draws his energy sword, and I can feel Kyte vibrating with power. This went sideways faster than even I could've guessed.

A shadow flickers around the edge of my vision as I phase into darkness.

"Jeren?" A familiar voice colored with surprise. He materializes ahead of me, his eyes the same as I remember though his face is covered in quite a few scars.

"Irillon?" I return from the space between the stars.

His face breaks into a grin as he rushes forward and takes my forearm. "Pillars, Jeren! I thought I'd never see you again!"

The other shadows appear, a full crew of them with a few familiar faces.

"Friends of yours?" Ceredes grates, his sword still drawn.

"Some of them." I give nods to the Larenoans I remember from my days running the grated streets of the Flotilla.

"So are we going to do this or what?" The final shadow appears, the one who'd been speaking from the start, and glares at Irillon. "We have orders."

“This is Jeren. The kid who survived jumping the engine boosters. He’s pretty much a legend in the Vents. Outlasted all of us.” He holds up his other hand, one made of metal covered in some sort of synthetic skin. “I would’ve lost a lot more than this hand if it weren’t for him.”

I remember that night, the way we were trying to escape one of the market vendors. We’d stolen fruit and a small wheel of cheese. He’d chased us through the market, down through the ratty alleys, all the way to a set of engine boosters with turning blades and fiery exhaust that could scorch your skin right off. We had to run. If he caught us, we’d be dead or worse, sold off to pay our debt.

I arch a brow. “I would’ve been smart to leave you.”

“Good thing smarts was never your strong suit.” He grins.

It pulls a laugh from me. “Seems like a lifetime ago.”

“It was.” He glances around. “Now we all work for Garusso.”

“Yeah, and it’s time we did what he pays us to do.” The mouthy shadow cracks his knuckles.

Irillon ignores him. “Why are you here? Last I heard you were training to be some big fleet commander or something.” He lowers his voice. “I even heard a rumor you’d become part of a circle of power?” He glances at Kyte and Ceredes.

“It’s a long story.” Pillars, is that an understatement. “But I need to see Garusso. Now.”

“No visitors.” The other shadow glowers.

“Alax, stand down.” Irillon turns to the male.

“I’m not standing down. Garusso said no visitors. These fleet bootlickers included.” He gestures toward us.

“I’m in charge of this crew, and I told you to stand down, Alax. Are we going to have a problem?” Irillon snarls, the fierceness of the Vents still in his blood.

Alax swallows hard.

“We don’t have time for this,” Kyte says.

Alax steps to Kyte who crackles with leashed power. “You going to do something about it or are you too scared hiding behind that hood?”

“Back off.” I growl as tension rises all around me. We aren’t here for this. We’re here for Lana.

“Yes, I’m terrified of you. Especially your smell. Tell me, do you bathe in fresh garbage or do you let it rot for a few weeks first?” Kyte smirks. I can’t see it for the hood, but I can feel it.

Alax reaches for his weapon.

I put a blade to his throat before he can move farther. Ceredes has his blade aimed at Alax’s gut, and I know Kyte is on the verge of lashing out.

Irillon grabs Alax’s shoulder and wrenches him back. “Fall in line. I won’t tell you again.” Irillon presses his own knife to Alax’s neck this time. “I’m in charge of this detail. Not you. One more wrong move and I’ll tie you to one of the supernova grates and watch you burn. Understand?”

Alax gives the slightest nod.

“Good.” Irillon releases him, then strides away. “Let’s go. Garusso doesn’t want visitors, but he might make an exception, depending on what you have to offer him.”

*“What do we have to offer?”* Ceredes asks silently.

*“I’ll think of something.”*

*“That sounds like a plan,”* Kyte chimes in. *“A bad one.”*

We follow Irillon until we get to the tallest building of old ship parts and scavenged stone from passing planets. It’s a fortress, one that dominates a seedy district of the Flotilla. Though, I suppose to outsiders, the entire Flotilla falls into the seedy category.

Irillon gets us past the front guards, then we meet more inside.

“Turn over your weapons,” a large male snarls, his fangs so long they almost touch his chest.

“No.” Ceredes grabs the hilt of his sword.

Irillon turns to me. “There’s no way I can get you to Garusso unless you leave your weapons. It’s the way it is.”

“Ceredes.” I put a hand on his shoulder. “We have to.”

He grunts, hesitates, and then hands the blade over to one of the guards. “Not a scratch.”

The guard doesn’t respond, just places it on a low table along with my blades.

Kyte keeps his hood up as Irillon pats him down.

“*Tell me you still have a knife,*” Ceredes calls down our bond.

“*Maybe one or two. Possibly five. Who’s counting?*”

Kyte snorts and adjusts his cloak. Once we’re cleared, Irillon leads us to a lift. “He’s at the top. Likes to keep a view of the Flotilla.” He steps on with us, his other shadows staying behind to do whatever dirty work Garusso has appointed to them.

“How’d you wind up working for him?” I try to take in every detail of the building layout in case we need to make a quick escape. The problem is, the place is a web of sharp metal and gaping holes that lead to the Flotilla’s lower levels—the Flotilla is dangerous, but the lower levels are practically unsurvivable. Nothing here is safe.

“You might remember that the leader of our merry little band of miscreants flew away to join the fleet.” He elbows me lightly. “After that, plenty of males started fighting for your crown. It ended in bloodshed. The guys who were left—Garusso took us on. Not exactly honest work, but it pays.”

“I can’t fault you for surviving.”

He nods, and we fall into silence as we rise quickly to one of the topmost levels. When the elevator opens, we’re met by more guards.

“What’s this?” A large female steps forward, a metal spike protruding from her forehead and more popping from her

shoulders. “Garusso isn’t expecting anyone. No visitors.”

“He’ll want to meet these three. They’re from the—”

“Irillon, why the fuck would I care where they’re from?” She steps to him, her eyes narrowing. “I said no visitors. Something wrong with your ears, shadow?” She raises her hand to strike Irillon, but I catch her hand before she can swing. With a yank, she tries to pull free, but I don’t let her. She’s strong, but I’m determined.

“We aren’t here for trouble. Garusso will want to see us.”

“If you want to keep that hand, you’ll get it off me,” she snaps.

I release her and step back.

Irillon, for the first time, looks unsure.

“What makes you think I’ll let you see Garusso?” She rolls her shoulders and looks at me with perhaps a sliver of respect this time—or maybe I’m imagining it. But might has made right on the Flotilla for as long as I can remember, so it makes sense.

“I have something he wants.”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “And what’s that?”

I grab Kyte’s arm and shove him forward. Kyte and Ceredes both send shock racing down our bond.

Kyte turns to me. “Jeren, what the—”

With a flourish, I yank his cloak away. “A Calarian noble for ransom.”

“*I*t’s time.” Nox’s voice in my head wakes me from a tortured sleep. I’d finally lain down, curled in a ball, and fallen into a mess of nightmares.

I sit up, the room still spare but not cold. Even so, I don’t belong here, and no matter what Nox claims, I’m a prisoner.

After freshening up in the bathroom, I choose some clothes and shoes from the closet. There aren’t any mirrors, but I feel comfortable enough in the leather top and the close-fitting pants. They have clever little pockets and loops for what I’m guessing are weapons. Not that I think Nox will give me any.

When I whip my hair into a high ponytail, I pause. Grief hits me right in the gut when I remember Ceredes scolding me to keep my hair wrapped tight to avoid an enemy’s grab. *Where are you?* I’ve tried so many times to connect with my Alphas, but the link between us is dark and muffled, as if it’s been suffocated.

I keep wrapping my hair until it’s in a tight bun. Even if Ceredes isn’t here, I know he’ll be coming for me. They all will. I have faith in that. It’s the only thing I have to hold onto. Before I leave, I try to throw up my mental walls. I’ve been far too lax with letting Nox into my mind. I need to defend myself inside and out. That’s what Kyte would tell me.

Once I’m as ready as I can be, I go to the door. It slides open silently, and I enter the wide hallway. Another door at one end slides open, so I follow it, then keep going as doors

open for me, guiding me all the way to the bridge of the ship. Nox is waiting there with Warverian, both of them with their backs to me as they look out the view window at a planet. Its land mass is carved by deep valleys and peaks higher than anything I've ever seen. Water glistens in huge oceans, and the white striations in the water can only be enormous waves, big enough to dwarf anything on earth.

The view is amazing, but I'm distracted by the others on the bridge. It's a cavernous room with three levels of control panels and view decks. Above and below us, Sentients work at the controls, guiding the massive ship and controlling everything within it. Some are fully mech, their robotic movements harsh and precise. Others are a mix of organic and tech, as if someone carved out the parts they didn't like and replaced it with perfectly formed metal. And still others are fully organic—some humanoid, some decidedly not. But they're all working together under Nox, each of them focused on their own tasks.

The more I watch, the more I realize this force is similar to ... the fleet. All different races working together toward one purpose. The fleet's goal is order in the universe. But the Sentients, what is it they truly want? Chaos?

“This is Zujivan 7.”

I turn at Nox's voice and find both she and Warverian peering at me, as if they're listening to my thoughts. But I check my mental barriers, and they still seem intact. Even so, Nox haunts the edges of my mind, as if she's there with one ear on a glass pressed against the door.

“The planet is a supply line for the fleet.” Warverian's horrific, melded voice sends goosebumps along my skin, my aversion to him so strong that my gorge starts to rise.

“You'll get used to him.” Nox strides to me and takes my arm.

“No. Never.” I shy away from him as she leads me forward.

He smirks, the once-handsome side of his ruined face full of malice. “Soon you’ll know me in all ways.”

Nox lifts a hand.

Warverian stills, his eye beginning to bulge. “I hold your heart in my palm, Warverian. Take care you don’t anger me or I just might crush it.” She emphasizes her words by closing her fingers into a loose fist.

He gurgles, one hand clutching his chest.

When she releases him, he gasps in a breath, then sobers quickly. “Apologies, Regent.”

“Apologize to Lana,” she snaps.

“Please forgive me.” He bows his head.

I want to jerk my knee up and cave his nose in, but I just take a step back. At least Nox has this monster on a leash, but I don’t trust him for a second. Or her, for that matter. There’s too much I don’t know, and anyone who’d keep me from my Alphas can’t be on my side. At least, that’s what I have to believe. Kyte, Jeren, and Ceredes are the only ones I can trust.

Nox turns to me, ignoring her cowed commander entirely. “We’re going to take a small force down to the planet. You and I will lead the way in our newest ship.” She turns me around as a wide set of bay doors along the back wall opens to a hangar.

“That’s the ship?” I walk forward, crossing the bridge until I can get a better look at the bird beyond the glass. “It’s so ... sleek.” Black as the space between the stars and sharper than one of Jeren’s blades, the ship seems to pull in all the light around it, swallowing it whole.

“Come, I want to see you fly.” She stands beside me and pulls up a console. The floor starts to move, lowering us into the hangar bay where Sentients are fanning out and boarding other ships.

I realize she’s trying to charm me, to distract me with this beautiful ship. We aren’t here for some pleasure cruise around the stars. The Sentients rushing to cruisers and fighters—



they're an invasion force. I dig in my heels as I stand beneath the black ship. "Why are we going down there?"

Nox waves a hand, and the ship hums to life. It sounds alive, like a real purr, as if some great cat sleeps in the heart of its engine. "We're going to liberate the Gretar Fleet's slaves on this world." She meets my gaze, her eyes so much like mine.

"The fleet doesn't have slaves." I shake my head.

"Come down to the planet with me, and then you can decide for yourself. All right?" She flicks a finger and the cockpit door pops open, the interior of the dark ship practically beckoning me closer.

My suspicion takes a backseat to my curiosity. On top of that, I wonder if there's some way I can manage to steal this ship and figure out a way back to my Alphas. It's worth a shot.

Nox follows me as I approach the vessel and pause to peer inside. When I climb aboard, I find a cockpit with two seats, pilot and co-pilot.

"You can fly her." Nox slips past me and takes the co-pilot spot. "I've heard you're an accomplished pilot. I want to see what you can do."

Surprise and, if I'm being honest, pride ripple through me. My mother—well, scratch that—the woman who raised me on earth, never so much as hinted at complimenting me. When I think of her, questions come flooding back. Why was I left with her in the first place?

"Just fly." Nox's voice is almost soothing. "It always helps me see things more clearly. I suspect it does the same for you."

She's right. Flying is in our blood, though I'm still not sure what it means to be her daughter.

When I sit down, the ship's purr levels out to a steady thrum, and I mold the intuitive controls to my hands the way I like.

Nox watches, her robotic eye follow each minute movement closely. "That's a good setup." She pulls her hands up, her own control set forming in front of her. "This is mine."

She moves her left thumb from one trigger to another. “I’ve found if I keep my forward gun and forward cannon close together like this, I’m much more effective in one-on-one.” She moves her index fingers to the top of her controls. “And here, you can add acceleration and deceleration thrusters. That way your thumbs are free to fire while you maneuver.”

I don’t want to admit her rig is better, but it is. She’s clearly had a lot of experience in a fighter ship, because the intuitive set of controls is spot on. With a simple move of my fingers, mine matches hers more closely.

She gives a small twitch of her lips, the beginning of a smile, but it never materializes. Still a mystery, she only looks perhaps ten years older than I am. But all the years that have passed with her fighting her way through them, I wonder how she keeps so much history wrapped up inside her. It must be dark and stifled, tight and impossible to maneuver.

“Whenever you’re ready.” She settles back in her co-pilot seat and changes her controls to a secondary set.

I look around at all the ships waiting for the signal to leave the hangar bay. “Who gives clearance?”

She glances at me. “You do.”

I snap my gaze to her. “What?”

“We’re in charge. Our—yours and mine—word is law to the Sentient fleet. So, it’s on your command.”

I swallow hard and try to think through this action and the myriad consequences. There are too many for me to even begin to sort. “We’re going to help people. Right?”

Nox nods. “We’re going to free slaves. I promise you. You’ll see for yourself what the fleet is capable of.” Her words turn hard, like obsidian, then mellow again. “And then you’ll *want* to be by my side. There is so much I missed out on with you, Lana. Time I’m desperate to make up. I know it’s hard, especially when the circle is still trying to trap you in its mirage, but I need you to give me a chance. I want you with me. I want my daughter.” She reaches out and touches my cheek so gently, then returns it to her controls.

The air is thick between us, and I'm having so many feelings that I can't describe. Pain and loss, but more than that, something else appears in the darker spaces of my heart—hope. Hope for a real mother, one who loves me. One who *wants* me around.

I make the decision. Nox may be a confusing mix of darkness and hope, but maybe I can trust her this once. And if she makes good on her promise? Then we can go from there.

With a flick of my finger, I power up the ship and lift from the hangar floor. Easing past the other crewed vessels, I watch as they light up and also begin to hover, all of them falling into line behind me like a zipper closing.

As we pierce the hangar barrier and enter the space beyond, my heart seems to find its happy place, and I press forward on the controls, sending us jetting out into the permanent night of the cosmos. The other ships follow, a legion of Sentient warriors at my back. This could go bad. So, so bad.

But when Nox looks over at me, I sense something familiar, something I've only ever experienced with my Alphas. A surge of kinship.

A hint of what it feels like to finally be *home*.

And a spark of hope that could light the entire galaxy.

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**G**arusso's penthouse takes up the entire top floor of the twisted metal building. The whole thing shakes every so often, and I keep wondering if it's going to topple over. I think, eventually, it will. But not today, or so I hope.

"Who's brought me a prince?" A reedy voice wafts to us as we walk past several sets of high shelves filled with various jars and stacks of junk. What's in the jars, I can't tell. It's either preserved creatures or food. Possibly both.

"Move," the guard barks at our back as he and Irillon follow us down the winding stacks of oddities. It's as if Garusso hoards everything he touches. I wonder if the other floors are similarly filled.

The shelves finally stop and the room opens to an area with several shabby couches and a wide table. A male sits with his back to us, his gaze on the steaming, buzzing Flotilla far below. His skin is a fiery red, the hair on his head white and thick. When he turns to glance at us, I see he has one enormous eye that glows like a green laser light. He doesn't sit so much as float, a torrent of power flowing around him like a spiraling river.

"*You brought us to an Unending?*" Kyte almost yells down the bond.

I share his alarm. Unendings are some of the most powerful beings in the universe. The oldest, too. Which

explains his collection. Some of the things in this place are likely thousands of years old, if not more.

“*He’s the only one who can help us.*” Jeren straightens his shoulders.

“Chasing a woman?” Garusso laughs and slowly floats over to meet us, his currents of power lapping at his sides in gentle waves. “Isn’t that the way of the universe? We’re always chasing love, aren’t we?” He smiles, his rows of sharp teeth looking pretty fresh for an ancient being.

“Sit.” He waves a hand at one of the ratty sofas near him.

We’re marched over. The guards seem to make no difference between us and our ‘prisoner’ Kyte. But that’s likely because with a creature like Garusso, everyone here is a prisoner of one sort or another. He could end us all with ease.

“How did you know?” I ask. “About what we’re after?”

“It’s obvious, isn’t it? You’re the circle. The three of you plus the one you’re missing. She’s gone, though. Long gone.” He makes a *pfft* sound. “Gone, gone.” Then he starts humming a tune I’ve never heard.

I share a look with Kyte. Garusso doesn’t seem to be all there, which makes him even more dangerous.

“You want me to find her for you. I can.” He closes his bulbous eye. “I can see her right now. Flying.”

Just knowing she’s alive is like a healing balm on my heart. A sense of relief permeates the bond with my brothers, all of us thanking the Pillars she’s okay.

“Where?” I ask.

The eye focuses on me. “You want information. Information is expensive.” He flicks his gaze to Kyte. “And I know he isn’t on offer despite your little ruse.”

“Then what do you want in exchange?” Jeren presses.

He reaches over and pulls out a small device, then whips his hand out in front of us, snatching something invisible from the air. “Her essence—it still dances all around you. Her scent.

Her markers coded into your atoms.” He draws the tiny device to his lips and whispers something to it. It lights up green and floats in his palm. “Your Omega’s coordinates are right here in this bot equipped with a tiny injection of Unending. It has my ability to track her throughout the universe.”

We’re riveted, all our attention drawn to the little bot that can tell us where Lana is. I want to snatch it from his hand.

“I’m not interested in the Calarian. I have quite a few of them in my collection.” He gestures toward a set of golden horns in a jar high atop one of his endless shelves. An insult, none greater to a Calarian. Putting someone’s horns on display is the same as spitting on their grave.

Kyte goes tense. “Where did you get those?”

“There’s one thing I’ve been after for quite some time.” Garusso continues as if Kyte hadn’t spoken. He looks at me, that one eye taking me in from top to bottom. “I’ve never collected a Bellatian.”

“No.” Kyte and Jeren say in unison.

Garusso closes his fist, the bot trapped inside. *Pillars!* We need that information.

Garusso continues staring at me. “Bellatians, you see, are *impossible* to simply capture. I’ve tried so many times.” He laughs as if remembering good times. “They fight. They’ll tear themselves to pieces against any set of bars you put them in. I have specimens, of course, bits and bobs collected from battlefields, but in all this time, I’ve never gotten my hands on a whole one. Not a *full* specimen. One I can study without great risk. But here you are.” He grins, those sharp teeth once again making an appearance. “In exchange for this bot, I’ll take the Bellatian. But he must agree to allow me to preserve him, of course, with no violence against me or harm to himself.”

“You mean you want him to stay still while you kill him?” Kyte stares at him, aghast.

“It’s the only way to ensure the specimen remains perfectly intact.” Garusso shrugs as if he’s talking about purchasing a

Carilla for his farm.

“No.” Jeren stands. “We’ll find some other way.”

“There is no other way.” I stand, too.

“There has to be.” Kyte glares at Garusso as he rises. “We aren’t doing this.”

“She’s on the move.” Garusso brings the bot to his ear. “It will track her. Yes, my essence inside can track her to the end of the universe and beyond.”

“We’re not leaving you.” Jeren stands his ground.

“Yes you are.” I step back from them.

The pain in Kyte’s eyes, the same agony I can feel trembling down our bond, almost overwhelms me.

“No.” He reaches for me.

I step back again and turn to Garusso. “I accept the deal. Give them the bot and make sure they get back to our ship.”

“Done.” The Unending stands, though his feet don’t touch the ground, and waves for his guards to come over.

Jeren draws his blades.

“*Don’t.*” I shake my head at him as guards grab me by the arms. “*Go with my blessing. Find her and keep her safe.*”

“No.” Kyte brings his hands together, creating some sort of lethal blast.

“Take him,” Garusso barks.

“Ceredes!” Jeren phases to darkness as Garusso erects some sort of red barrier that pushes them both back through the rows of shelves. The last I see of them, they’re fighting to get back to me.

But it’s no use. Garusso is an Unending. The power he wields is almost as great as that of the circle.

When Garusso floats back to me, he can’t stop grinning. “I’ve waited so long for this.” He clasps his hands as his guards lead me away, down two flights of stairs, and into some sort of holding cell. I’m shoved inside and locked in, and when

I grab the bars and lean against them, I see I'm not alone. Creatures of all kinds are imprisoned here.

“Dead.” Someone in the cell beside me croaks. “All of us.”

A scream rips through the air from somewhere far away down the sterile hall as I see something moving quickly toward me. When it passes, I see it's a giant specimen jar, the creature inside dead, it's face contorted in fear. It flies up, and that's when I see the thousands of jars just like it suspended overhead. Rows of creatures, all of them preserved in some sort of liquid that gives off a green glow. Garusso's collections is even more far-reaching than I thought.

In Lana's native language, it seems I'm *fucked*.

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“*Z*ujivan 7 is rich in ploynitium deposits.” Nox points at the nearest peak, the edges sharp and silvery. “The jagged mountains hold the lodes of ore deep inside. The oceans here are treacherous, the waves deadly on impact. The fleet houses its slaves high up on the mountainsides until they need to move to continue mining operations.”

“They have to cross the oceans?” I peer down at the enormous waves and can’t imagine any boat floating out there. They’d be flipped in an instant on the vertical walls of water.

“Yes. The fleet could fly them to the new mine location, but to save costs, they often force the miners to craft vessels from the supplies on-planet to carry them over the waves. Sometimes they make it. Oftentimes not. But the fleet has a never-ending supply of workers to pull from, so they don’t care.”

“But these are, what, like prisoners or something? People that broke laws—not that it makes it okay—but there has to be a reason for—”

“The fleet doesn’t need a reason.” Nox cuts her gaze at me. “They do what they want without consequence.”

The fleet isn’t perfect. I learned that from my experience with High Commander Bartanz, but I can’t take Nox at face value. Not when Kyte’s mother was on the Council of Regents. There’s no way she would’ve allowed outright slavery in the fleet, would she?

Nox sighs. “Heroes are never what others make them out to be. I learned that the hard way. After we’d won the war 300 years ago, we were hailed as the circle of peace. The four of us were lauded throughout the galaxies. But it didn’t take long for the fleet to realize our power and popularity were a threat.” She points. “Land there. It’s a spot outside the primary mining camp. We’re going to be in the thick of it once our force hits the ground, so stick close to me.”

Machines move along the side of the mountain, and a gaping hole goes straight down into darkness. Workers move around, some rappelling into the hole while others are lowered on wobbly platforms. Even from this distance, I can tell they’re ragged. Dirty clothes and tired bodies huddled together and descending into the gloom below.

Unease settles in my gut. There’s a wall built around the camp, the sides high against the gray stone of the mountains. At intervals, I can see plasma cannons set looking outward, and on the slopes below, piles of some sort of bodies.

“They’re called Ramins. Native to this planet and sentient, they attack the mining operations to stop the fleet from robbing their homeworld. They’re trying to defend their lands. As you can see, the fleet slaughters them like animals.” Nox looks at the pile of bodies. Bloody fur and mangled horns, flesh burned by canon fire.

“It’s horrible.” The bridge of my nose starts to sting with tears.

“We’re here to stop it.” Nox opens comms with the other ships. “Ground force leaders with me. Black Squadron, I want bombing runs on the fleet command buildings.”

“Yes, Regent.” A multitude responds as we land, the planet firm beneath us.

“Here we go.” Nox stands and straps her sword to her side. She looks back at me, then pulls another sword from a side bay of the ship. “Take this. You may need to defend yourself.”

“You trust me?” I take the sword.

“With my life.” She nods and turns her back on me, then dashes out the cockpit door.

I could’ve struck her down, cut her in half right then and there the moment she handed me the blade and turned away. Maybe she’s telling the truth about trusting me. Or this could simply be some sort of smoke and mirrors ploy, something to get me to believe her lies.

Torn. That’s the only way to describe what I’m feeling right now. One half of me is being pulled toward the fleet, to the Alphas I love. The other half, it recognizes Nox. We share the same power, the intensity of darkness in our veins. I can’t explain it, but it’s a bond just as real as the one with my circle.

A boom rocks through the air, the ship shuddering as a plume of debris flies into the air a few hundred yards away. Sentients rush past as I step from the ship, and blasters fire as people yell. The wall ahead of me is already busted, Sentients swarming in.

Nox is leading the charge, and when she comes to what can only be the fleet commander of this outpost, she doesn’t hesitate. One strike with her blade, and he’s cut in half, surprise still on his face as he falls to the stony ground.

That unease inside me grows thicker, but I follow Nox, drawn inexorably toward the female my soul seems to recognize without question. She fights with fluid ease, her movements graceful as she cuts down another fleet officer. The Sentients have rushed past her, deeper into the mining operation where screams and blaster fire ricochet off the gray walls of stone.

I scramble over the busted wall and stare at the bodies left behind—some clad in fleet gear, others wearing nothing more than rags. The Sentients don’t discriminate. They kill anyone who stands against them.

I duck before I even know what’s happening. An energy blade swipes overhead, and I jump back as a fleet warrior comes for me. My heart pounds, but I focus on the training my Alphas gave me. I can do this.

“Don’t.” I raise my sword, the energy in my veins rising like one of the waves on this planet.

“I won’t surrender. Not to the Sentients.” He raises his blade. A young male, he can’t be long past the academies. He slashes at me, his blade singing through the air as it flies.

“We’re here to help these people.” I fend off his blows.

He lets out a harsh laugh and tries to run me through.

“Stop! I don’t want to kill you.” My power—the dark and the light—dance with each other, twirling into a whirlwind of destruction.

“I’d prefer death to becoming one of you.” He looks me up and down. “Though I see you haven’t taken the metal yet.”

“I’m not a Sentient.” I parry two more of his thrusts as I back toward the busted wall.

“Sure,” he sneers. “You’re a tourist who happens to travel with a Sentient force, is that it?”

“No. I’m fleet. I trained at the Omega Academy.”

He pauses, his pale green eyes narrowing. “So, you’re a traitor.”

“I don’t know what I am!” I yell, and a shockwave of power slams him in the face and knocks him onto his back.

He rises quickly, his sword at the ready.

“Please, I just need to think. We can ... we can solve this if we—”

“You come here and slaughter my commanders, and now you want to talk?” He lunges for me.

I throw up a barrier, one that crackles with silvery veins. “You don’t have to die. No one does. Please, let’s just put down our—No!” I scream as Nox materializes and slices the warrior’s head from his shoulders.

My barrier disappears, and I drop to my knees. “No, I was going to save him. He was—”

“He was going to kill you the second he got a chance.” Nox looms over me. “You’re too soft, Lana. It’s your youth. I get that. But you have to be smarter.” She kicks his head away, his face rolling in the rough stones and dirt. “Don’t you understand?” She drops to her haunches and meets my gaze. “I will protect you, even if I have to protect you from yourself.” With a sigh, she reaches out to wipe a tear from my cheek.

I lean away from her touch.

“You’ll see.” Her voice hardens, and she rises. “Come.” Striding away, she follows the sounds of fighting until they die off, too.

After that, it’s eerily silent. I stand and tear my gaze away from the dead male at my feet. Something inside me went numb when she slaughtered him. It was so senseless, so *wrong*. Slowly, I pick my way past bodies and busted mining equipment until I find an open area where the workers are huddled together.

Warverian stands on an overturned piece of machinery and looks down at them. “You are now liberated from your service to the fleet. Thanks to your Regent, Valnox, you are free.”

Whispers of “Nox” ripple through the crowd, the miners’ gaunt faces in masks of disbelief or exhaustion. Sentients hem them in on all sides.

Nox joins Warverian. “You will no longer be forced to labor for the fleet. Now, you have a choice.” Darkness pools around her, and her organic eye goes jet black. Her power is fierce, and I can feel my own well of energy reaching out toward hers. Like two old friends meeting again for the first time in ages. We’re kindred, but we aren’t the same. I refuse to believe it.

“Choice is at the heart of the Sentient cause.” She looks over them. “Choice to live outside the fleet, to keep what you kill, to conquer and claim what’s yours.”

Despite her words, the crowd seems to shrink in tighter, as if closing ranks against an onslaught.

“Join us and work for the Sentients.” She opens her arms as if welcoming them in. “The fleet has taken advantage of you for far too long. That’s why we’re here, to give you a true home.”

The crowd seems to hold its breath. Me too.

“Or, if you choose not to join us.” Her voice drops. “You will help us in other ways.”

One of the Sentients, a hulking mass of teeth and claws, advances on the miners. It’s clear what the “other ways” are from the snap of his fangs and the hunger in his eyes. So it’s true—the Sentients feed off those they capture. A chill shivers up my spine, and my stomach turns as I look up at my mother.

The inky blackness recedes, her countenance turning more benign. “I trust you will all choose wisely.” She jumps from the platform and strides through the miners to me.

“Our work here is done. Warverian will handle the rest.” As she speaks to me, his terrible voice seems to come from all angles.

“You will continue to mine ploynitium. We need it to build more ships and create strongholds to stand against the fleet. If you choose not to do so, you will be given a quick death, and your sacrifice will be greatly appreciated by our legions.”

In a daze, I follow Nox back to our ship. She takes the helm this time. We travel back to the mother ship in cloying silence. My mind races, horror and understanding warring with each other. She almost made me believe ... What little hope I had vanished the moment I saw Nox slaughtering without care for the consequences. Just like what she did with Onin. I can’t forget who she is—who she *really* is.

She only speaks once we’re back in the hangar bay. “I know what you’re thinking. I know how this must seem to you \_\_\_”

“I don’t think you do.” I stand and hurry out of the cockpit, my legs going wobbly as I hit the unforgiving ground below. But I force myself to stay upright, to not give in to the overwhelming sense of dread that pools in my gut.

“Lana!” Her voice stops me, and when I look at her, darkness leaks from her ears and eyes. A terrible sight, made worse when I look down and realize the same black energy is seeping from me as well.

“Stop.” I back up a step, but the darkness is like a lightning bolt through me, powering me up until I practically vibrate with it.

“This is who we are.” She reaches for me, and the black tendrils between us braid together. “I wish I could make you see that this is the only way for all of the people of the galaxies to be free.”

“But it’s not. You didn’t give those miners a choice. You gave them an ultimatum. We freed no one! It was cruel. You *lied* to me.”

“No, Lana.” Her grip on me tightens, her power absorbing mine, draining me until my eyes start to close. “The universe is a cruel place. The sooner you realize that, the sooner you’ll understand that what we’re doing is a kindness. *This* is mercy. *This* is freedom.”

“My circle was freedom!” I yell.

“Your circle is the liar.” She practically spits the words. “Not me.” Then she invades my mind, flooding me with another memory. I’m her again, thrown back into the past and unable to claw my way out.

*“Are you all right?” Eo hurries into our chambers.*

*“What?” I sit up, my book falling to the floor. “Why wouldn’t I be?”*

*He sits next to me and pulls me into his lap, holding me tight. “Pillars, I got a message from Byran that you were in danger. And then I couldn’t reach you.” He presses his forehead to mine, our bond springing up bright and clear. “There’s something wrong.”*

*“I know.” I cup his cheek. “It’s been wrong ever since ...”*

*“Ever since we won.” He says it so quietly it feels like a veil falling between us.*

*I'm not a fool. I know Eo can sense all the trepidation inside me. The other Alphas can, too. But whenever I try to talk about it, I can't seem to put it into words. How can you explain pain? How can you tell someone that you're scared of yourself? Even though I can't say it and try to hide it, I'd be a fool to think they don't know. Our souls were forged together; of course they know.*

*I sigh. "Ever since we won—if you can call it that. Yes. I think what I did ... It tainted me somehow. Or maybe—"*

*"No." His golden eyes narrow. "You saved countless lives, more than we can ever know. It came at a great cost. No one can deny that. But you did—"*

*"What I had to do'. I know. You keep telling me that." I let some of my frustration slip into my tone, but really, it's not frustration. It's regret. Shame, too. "But I'm wrong." I tap my chest. "In here. Something's wrong. How else could I have done that? Killed so many?"*

*"You are not wrong." There's so much kindness in his voice that I feel my eyes watering. "You aren't evil."*

*My eyes pop open wider. I thought I'd kept that thought buried. But he knows. Has he seen me staring at myself in the mirror and trying to see the monster that hides inside?*

*"I can hear those thoughts, Nox. Those feelings." He kisses the tip of my nose. "They aren't true. You are good. He puts his hand over my heart and spreads his webbed fingers. "In here, you are so, so good. I'll keep telling you that for as long as I live, because it's the truth."*

*I sigh even more deeply and just let him hold me. He's the true heart of our circle, the one that always gives warmth and light to the rest of us. "I love you." I can't put it any more plainly.*

*"I love you, too." He kisses me slowly, softly.*

*The door bangs open, and Krenallus rushes in. "What's happened?"*

*I snap my head up. "What?"*



*“You got the message from Byran, too?” Eo asks. He eases me onto the bed and stands. “She’s fine.”*

*“I can see that.” He arches a brow at both of us.*

*I shrug. “You can join.”*

*“Oh, I intend to.” He shoots me a cocky smirk that goes right to my core. “Just as soon as I figure out what in the Pillars Byran is doing. I tried to link to you, but something blocked me. It felt like...”*

*“It felt like you.” Eo turns to me. “Like your power.”*

*“Not me. I’ve been reading.”*

*“What is that? Is it printed on—paper?” Krenallus peers at the book.*

*“One of the Granterry elders gave it to me. She said it fell through a wormhole, possibly from the future or the past. They aren’t sure. It’s one of their sacred texts, apparently.” It has certainly been sacred to me so far.*

*“What’s it about?” Eo, ever the scholar, scratches his chin.*

*I smile. “I’m glad you asked. It’s about—” I flip the book around so they can see the cover. “Blue guys with horns and dicks that are gargantuan, like I’m talking the size of a fleet freighter with like a spu—”*

*“So like us, but blue?” Krenallus puffs out his chest as Eo nods his agreement.*

*I burst into laughter.*

*The room shakes, and suddenly, I feel as if I’m being ripped apart. My power is pulled from me, yanked and twisted as it leaves. Byran enters our chambers, darkness oozing from him as his entire body serves as a conduit for my dark energy.*

*“The Omega is mine.” He storms toward me.*

*I try to get up, to stop whatever nightmare is happening. But I can’t move. I’m paralyzed, as if my heart is being mercilessly squeezed. I can’t catch my breath.*

*“Byran!” Eo and Krenallus call out and move to block him. I can feel their bewilderment, their panic.*

*“Brother, what are you—”*

*With a flick of his finger, Byran sends Krenallus flying from our chambers, shattering the thick window, and out into the darkness of space beyond. Emergency shutters clank down, immediately shutting Krenallus off from the rest of us.*

*I scream and try to pull him back, try to throw a barrier up for him. But I have nothing. It’s all gone. Byran has taken all of me.*

*“Brother, don’t do this.” Eo is the only thing standing between Byran and me. “I beg you. The circle must survive.”*

*“Get out of my way.” Byran moves closer.*

*“Please don’t.” I can barely hear my own voice.*

*“She was never yours. She has always been mine. Stand down.” Byran’s voice is cold, and our bond is silent. The circle was bent after the final battle of the Great Calamity, but now ... Now it’s broken.*

*“Krenallus.” I try to call to him down the bond. No response. No, no, no! I scream for him again.*

*“I said stand down.” Byran holds out his hand, my power in his palm.*

*“Eo.” I say his name as he draws his energy sword. And then I scream.*

*“Mine.” Byran incinerates Eo with a touch, my energy eating away everything in a matter of moments. My love, my heart—gone.*

*I scream and scream as Byran lifts me and throws me over his shoulder, carrying me away as I reach out to my two lost Alphas, begging them to somehow be all right. But I know they aren’t. In my heart, I know nothing will ever be all right again.*

*Agony sets in as soon as I’m back in the here and now. My heart is broken, my Alphas gone. I heave in a breath and barely keep my feet under me. No, that’s not real. My Alphas*

are very much alive, very much waiting for me. I just have to find my way back to them. What happened to Nox—it won't happen to me. I have to believe that.

Nox looks at me, no pity in her eyes. “That’s what happens when you join a circle, Lana. Misery. And what I’ve shown you? That’s not the half of it.” With that, she turns on her heel and strides away, her anger bending the ship around her as if she’s too big to fit even in this cavernous space.

I can only stare after her, my heart still fractured from her dark memory. How did she survive it?

“*Lana, find me.*” The voice that’s been haunting me since I stepped foot on this ship whispers around me on a phantom wind.

“Who are you?” I spin and see only Sentients arriving back from their time on the planet below. Some of them emerge from their transports with blood smeared on their uniforms. Their teeth bared and crimson along their chins. Some of the miners must’ve chosen death over becoming slaves for yet another fleet.

I turn and run, darting down the long hallways until I’m completely lost, each door just like the others, each corridor the same as twenty more. I’m alone except for that voice. It pulses now. I must be closer to it.

“What are you doing, little Omega?”

I spin to find Warverian approaching, his leering face one I’m desperate to crush. Power tingles along my spine as he slows his pace.

“We’re on the same side, remember?” He smirks.

“*Find me.*”

He doesn’t move, his preternatural stillness unnerving. But that means he doesn’t hear the voice.

“I just got lost is all.” I force myself to feign calm, to pretend to be the daughter Nox wants.

“I can show you to your room.” He bows his head only a hair, his creepy gaze still on me. “This way.”

I make a mental note of this hallway as best I can and follow Warverian at a distance.

Something's here. Or *someone*. And I'm going to find them.

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**G**arusso's guards follow us back to the port where we left our ship. They hem us in close, the shadows watching us as we walk farther and farther away from our brother. The bot in my palm is the only thing that's keeping me grounded. We're one step closer to finding Lana.

Jeren and I have already decided there's no way in the Pillars we're leaving Ceredes behind, but there's not much we can do about it with a contingent of Garusso's guards up our asses.

"Back so soon?" The Larenolan behind the counter hitches a thumb toward our ship. "Ain't been touched."

We stride toward it, my anxiety ramping up as I try to keep my powers under control. The circle is fracturing even further, tearing all four of us away from each other. I can't let it happen.

"Calm." Jeren soothes as we board our ship.

The shadows are stationed all around, watching us relentlessly.

"We're going to have to take off." He slips into the pilot seat.

"No." I cross my arms over my chest. "We can't just leave him."

"I agree, but there's no way to get back to him from here. We need to find somewhere else to put this bird down." He

fires up the engine. “Just so happens, I know a few places.”

“Can you feel it? His fear?” I ask quietly. The hardened Bellatian must be experiencing something unimaginable for that emotion to break through.

He pilots us up and away from the port. “Yes, his anger too, but Ceredes is still alive. That’s what matters.”

“Where are we going?” I sit forward as wet jet from the Flotilla, then loop around past a much larger frigate and back toward the floating mass of metal.

“The Flotilla relies on several thruster bays to maneuver it.” He points to a spot where purple flames lick along the blackened steel. “They don’t fire continuously.” He points to another bay that’s dark. “Only when the Flotilla’s trajectory needs adjusting, and there’s no way to predict when that will be. They’re connected to tunnels underneath the surface.”

“Service tunnels?” I ask.

“Maybe back when it was first built, but now it’s more for smugglers, thieves, and various creatures that choose to hide from the Flotilla surface.”

I digest that information. “So, monsters? Monsters live in there?”

“Pretty much.” He shrugs and guides us closer to one of the dark bays. “There’s just enough room inside for a ship this size. We can keep a low profile so Garusso’s soldiers don’t see us coming.”

“If we make it past the monsters and the blast from the engines doesn’t kill u—”

The thruster bay ahead of us lights with purple energy, and only Jeren’s fast maneuvering saves us from being incinerated.

“Doesn’t kill us, as I was saying.” He shakes it off and chooses another dark bay. “It’s a risk we have to take.”

I don’t disagree. “We have to move fast.” Opening my palm, I inspect the little robot orb. I want to activate it, to find out where Lana is, but I can’t. It doesn’t feel right without Ceredes here.

“We’re going to get him, and then all of us are going to find Lana.” Jeren’s tone is full of harsh resolve. “And may the Pillars damn anyone who tries to get in our way.” He sets us down inside the dark thruster bay.

Pocketing the bot, I turn and peer at the scorched metal, the black hole where the thruster sits dormant, and a small hatch just to the right of it.

“There.” Jeren points and digs around in the back for helmets.

“I’ve got us.” I spark up barriers around both our heads, keeping in the precious air. Then I create another one that hews close to our bodies. “For warmth.”

“This will work.” He opens the back bay door, and we both step off the ship and into the weightlessness of space.

Gripping the hatch, it takes several hard turns from both of us to loosen it. “I think the heat from the engine sealed the edges some.” Jeren yanks as I grip the handles and brace my feet against the wall. We both pull with one hard heave, and the door finally opens, the hinges screaming in protest. Air rushes out, the vacuum of space pulling everything into the void.

Fighting against the torrent of air and debris, we wrestle our way inside, then brace ourselves against the inner metal walls to pull the hatch shut again. As soon as it seals, we hit the ground, my barriers easing our fall a little.

“Gravity.” Jeren breathes as the barrier falls away. “You don’t miss it until you *really* miss it.”

He glances at the top of the tunnel, which is only a short distance overhead. It’s a tight fit down here. If we run into trouble, there’s no way out.

I breathe deep, until I actually get a whiff of the air. “Pillars! What *is* that?”

“We’re near the garbage chutes. They all empty down here. The garbage is incinerated eventually, but it can build up.”

I wrinkle my nose and consider putting my barrier back around my face, but it's too late. The stink of rot and filth is already in my nose.

Lights line the overhead of the tunnel, though at least half of them are burned out. "It should be a straight shot to Garusso's. Just follow me. Step where I step. Don't touch anything unless you absolutely have to."

"You don't need to worry about me."

He strikes up a quick pace, and I follow close behind. The grates beneath our feet are rusted, bits of garbage stuck in some of them.

We walk for long minutes in silence as the gloom grows, more and more lights overhead busted. Soon enough, I'm having a hard time seeing Jeren in front of me.

When he stops, I almost crash into him.

"What?"

"Shhhh." He hisses.

I go still and listen, but all I hear is the deep thrum of the ship, the whine of distant machinery, and the rumble of one of the thrusters firing. I can only hope our ship is still intact. Closing my eyes, I focus on the bond between Jeren and me, then reach out to touch him. That's when I get a slight taste of what his sense can do.

Somewhere ahead in the deep dark a beast awaits. It sensed us the second we clambered into the tunnel. And now it's hungry for its prey. Sharp teeth. Great big eyes. And legs too numerous to count. It blocks the tunnel with its mass.

"*What is that thing?*" I ask.

"*We don't give them names.*" Jeren's answer is simple, but somehow deep at the same time. There's power in a name, and to deny these beasts that power is tantamount to a physical blow.

Jeren draws his blades and phases into night. I feel him receding, moving ahead of me at a quick clip. I follow despite



the warning he sends back to me. There's no way I'm letting him do battle with that thing without me.

Jeren strikes first, the beast roaring in the dark and sending dust and soot falling from the top of the tunnel. I rush forward and shove a barrier ahead of me. Jeren materializes on my side of it, and I push as hard as I can, shoving the beast back. Its claws dig into the metal tunnel as Jeren phases again, his knives whirring as he slices in deep cuts all along its torso.

I keep the pressure on, forcing it back as Jeren opens it up. Its screams must be heard on the streets above, because my ears are ringing, my heart pounding. A severed claw flies past my head and thunks to the deck behind me, and Jeren lets out a cry so primal it spurs me onward, crushing the beast in the maw of my barrier as Jeren finishes it off.

Once the screams die down, he returns to me, his face splattered with black blood. He cleans his blades on his pants then stows them.

"We're close." I can feel Ceredes somewhere above us. He's angry, growing more so by the second, and the rage is interlaced with pain.

"Faster." Jeren turns, and we both dash past the dismembered creature, our shoes squelching over its muck as we move deeper into the Flotilla's underbelly.

"There's a grate ahead. Above that is Garusso's tower." Jeren stops as we reach a wide, high circular area. Garbage is strewn about down here, some of it rotten organic material. The stench is almost unbearable. "Right there." He points to one of the chutes. "That's our way in."

It's a refuse dump, covered in grime and filth, but if it's the way to Ceredes and then to Lana, then that's the way we're going.

Jeren forms a stirrup with his hands. "Let's go."

I back up, then run at him. Stepping into his hands, I launch myself upward and grab the slimy sides of the chute. I start to slide down, but I wedge myself in, then inch my way

up. Once I'm able to turn, I keep myself locked into the narrow chute and reach down for Jeren.

He takes my hand, and then we both start to climb.

We keep going as Ceredes's anger grows, and when a full wave of his pain hits us, we both gasp for breath. He's hurt bad, dying.

"Faster." I throw myself upwards, clawing at the sides of the chute with Jeren at my back. We climb to save our friend, our brother, our circle.

I can only pray to the Pillars we aren't too late.

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“*Y*ou must eat, Lana.” Nox sits across from me at a small table. A meal is laid out before us. Simple, nourishing food. Nothing fancy, but it looks edible. Still, I can’t seem to bring a fork to my mouth. My stomach turns. Too much has happened.

“I’m trying.” I sip my water.

“Warverian said you were wandering the halls on the lower deck after we returned.” She peers at me more closely, her mechanical eye contracting to a pinpoint.

“I got lost. That creep showed me back to my room.”

“Warverian is solid, Lana. He’s my second in command for a reason. He would never hurt you.”

“That’s not what he says. He keeps trying to say I’m his Omega.” Now I *really* don’t feel like eating.

She waves an unconcerned hand. “He’s getting ahead of himself. We may use him for breeding stock for you, but other than that—”

“What?” My mouth goes even drier than it already was.

“When you are ready to bear children, he’ll make a more than adequate sire. That’s all.” She shrugs, as if the idea of that brute Warverian mating with me is nothing more than a minor annoyance. “His lineage is strong, and you two will have powerful offspring.”

Revulsion isn't a strong enough word for the utter disgust that roils my stomach anew. "Never. I will *never* let that monster touch me."

"Never is a long time, Lana." She shakes her head. "You're still so young. You'll see in time that the choices I'm making for you are the right ones."

I don't respond, but my face gives away how much I disagree with her statement.

She stands and paces around my room for a while then returns to me. "I thought you'd understand by now. What I'm doing is for the good of the galaxies. You saw how the fleet treats its people."

I force myself to eat one of the grape-like pieces of fruit. "I saw."

"Then why are you still resistant?" She sits again, her hard gaze on me. "Why are you blocking me from your mind?"

"Mental blocks keep me safe. I need to defend myself." I shrug and force myself to swallow.

"Not from me!" She slams her hand on the table, then flexes it and takes a deep breath. "This isn't ... This isn't going the way I planned." She lets the breath out and falls into a heavy silence.

We sit like that for a while, each silently stewing. I'm tired and overwhelmed, and she keeps adding more misery to the pile. Mate with Warverian? Hell to the fucking no! I'm not a brood mare. I'm not some goddamn doll that she can press against that monstrous piece of shit and then say 'now kiss.' I already have my Alphas. And when they find out what she plans for me... I can't even imagine the destruction they'd rain down on her. But she has the nerve to say things aren't going how *she* planned?

"How did you think it would go?" My temper surges forward and outward. "You kidnap me. You kill Onin. And then you show me how bad the fleet is, while also showing me how bad *you* are."

"I'm not the bad guy here."

“Tell that to the miners who had to be your slaves or get eaten by your monsters!” I swipe the food from the table and stand. “This is bullshit! All of it! You can’t swoop in and say you’re my mother and try to play family with me when you left me with a fucking violent alcoholic for all my childhood. It doesn’t work that way. You aren’t some savior of the galaxies. You have an army that crushes people the same as the fleet. You’re no better than them.”

“Lana, you need to sit down.” Her tone is even but lethal.

“No, what I need is a ship so I can get the hell away from here. I don’t belong here. I’m not your daughter. Maybe we share blood, but that’s it.”

“Lana, I said *sit down*.” She rises, and I can feel her like a storm approaching.

I don’t care. I want the storm. I want her to stop pretending to be someone who cares about me or cares about what I think. She’s not. She’s just another monster parading around as my mother.

“Fuck you!” I swipe my hand through the air, my dark energy pulsing toward her and shoving her backward.

She reaches out and pulls her own dark current to match mine. I push harder, both of us leaning into it, battling each other. My heart is on fire, burning with smoldering resentment that has been charring my soul for years.

“Lana!” Nox shoves harder, knocking me back until I’m fighting to stay upright. The room has gone black like the space between the stars, and all I can see is Nox. She’s like a searchlight in a maelstrom, our powers wrapping and warping together. “We are blood. But we are more!” She splays her fingers, and her power scatters through mine, weaving together with it until I feel her everywhere. “We are kindred. You and me. We are infinite.”

“You are a lie.” I realize tears are rolling down my cheeks. “I thought this could be real, that *you* could be real. But you aren’t. You’re just another trick.”

“I’m here.” Her voice is everywhere, eddying in my soul. “I’ll always be here for you.”

“Liar!” I redouble my efforts, pushing my power outward. The ship starts to creak and moan under the weight of my fury. “You left me!”

“You were stolen from me!” she screams back, and in her voice I can hear pain, can feel it in the tendril of power. “I vowed to find you. I tried, Lana. I tried for so long to get to you. But I couldn’t do it. And I’m sorry. I’m sorry for the time we lost. But I’m here now!”

I sob. “You’re here, but you’re wrong. You aren’t ...”

“Maybe I’m not the mother you dreamed of, Lana, but nothing is a dream. This is real. I’m real.” She reaches toward me, her hands clear despite the whirling destruction around us. “I’m not perfect. Maybe I needed you to show me that. But we can work together. We can make things right.”

The little girl inside of me wants to take her hand. But I hesitate. I want so badly to believe her.

“Lana, please. At least let me try.” She reaches even farther, much more than halfway.

The ship groans and cracks, huge fissures appearing in the metal. It’s tearing itself apart just like I am. I’m broken.

“We can fix this. Together.” She surges even closer, our energy melding and flowing as one. “See?”

Our power calms, dancing instead of rampaging, swirling around us and making beauty in the dark.

“Together?” I step closer to her.

“Together.” She doesn’t drop my gaze, but she doesn’t push me. She holds her hand out, and she’s asking this time. Not telling. Not ordering. “Please?”

I nod and take her hand.

She yanks me to her, her power rising like a tidal wave and engulfing mine.

“Nox!” I scream and try to wrench away from her.

“You are my daughter. *Mine*,” she hisses. “And if you can’t see the truth right in front of you, I’ll just have to *make* you understand.” She flings me onto my bed and throws a blanket of black energy on top of me. It cocoons me as I scream and beat on it. Claustrophobia sets in, and I try to will my power to destroy hers. But it’s gone. When I touched her, she took it, siphoned it off and used it against me.

Warverian strides in and tsks at me, then turns to Nox. “No luck?”

“None.” Nox wraps me tighter, almost cutting off my breathing.

I can’t scream anymore.

“I’ll keep her here until she goes into needing. You can breed her then.” Nox strides to the door.

“My pleasure.” Warverian walks over to me and surveys my body. “I hope it’s soon.”

“It will be. Until then, *daughter*, you’ll remain here. Hopefully, once you’ve realized the error of your ways, you’ll be of some use to me. If not—” She shrugs. “If not, I’ll still have your offspring.”

“Are we continuing with the plan?” Warverian asks.

“Yes. No more waiting. Ready the invasion force. I’ll fly at the front. The planet will be ours before they even know what hit them.”

“I have no doubt of it, Regent.” Warverian dips his head as Nox strides out.

He lingers, his gaze on me. I try to shrink inside myself to hide away inside Nox’s casket of darkness. But he can still see me. He runs his fingers along my prison.

I shudder.

“Soon, little Omega. Very soon. I’ll show you what a true mating should be. My knot already aches for you.”

“Never!” I scream, but he only smiles as he retreats from my room, the door shutting behind him.

I try to scream for my Alphas, to surge up with my power.  
But I can't.

I'm a little girl trapped in her toybox, no longer safe, no  
longer warm, and no longer in control.

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*H*eaving myself from the putrid chute, I flop onto my back beside Kyte, both of us trying to get our bearings.

“This is the floor he’s on. I can feel him.” Kyte sits up.

We’re in a garbage depository, piles of refuse all around us. The door opens, and we freeze. Someone tosses an empty food container, then snaps the door shut again. They didn’t see us. But how could they in this mess?

“Let’s go.” Kyte climbs to his feet and offers his hand.

I take it, and we both creep to the door. The grimy handle turns easily in my palm. I phase into darkness and enter the hall, sending out my sense toward Ceredes. He’s hurt, but he’s also filled with white-hot rage.

Kyte follows me quietly, keeping flat to the walls as I edge around the next corner. Two guards are up ahead, their backs to us. One looks like a Cynar—four eyes and two rows of horns. The other, I can’t quite tell. But they seem to be friendly with each other. They’re discussing what they want for their evening meal.

“I’d kill for some real meat.” The Cynar groans.

“I haven’t had that in years. The protein portions aren’t so bad when you can’t remember what meat actually tastes like.”

“Speak for yourself.”

A scream tears through the corridor. They go on speaking as if they hadn't heard a thing.

"Terranseed bread is pretty filling when we can get it," the Cynar suggests.

They're in front of the main door to the area where Ceredes is being held, and it doesn't sound like they'll be moving anytime soon.

"I'll take care of them." I ease toward them, keeping to the shadows.

*"We can't make too much noise. More guards are nearby. If one of them screams ..."* Kyte whispers in my mind. *"Hmm. Can you get close enough to touch one of them without them seeing?"*

I would snort with utter derision at his question, but now's not the time. Instead, I creep down the hall as the guards continue talking about food.

"Ready?" I ask Kyte. I don't know what he intends to do, but I'll play along. If it doesn't go like he wants, I'll break their necks as quickly as I can.

"Yes." His voice seems fuller, louder in my mind, and I could swear I see a bit of a glow coming from around the corner as if he's marshalling his power.

I reach out, neither of the guards paying any attention to the shadow right behind them. When I touch the Cynar, I feel a jolt. And then a whisper. It's Kyte, his voice. Like a current through a wire, his thoughts are passed through me and to the Cynar guard.

The Cynar stops speaking.

"What?" the other one asks.

"Nothing." The Cynar reaches up and rubs his temples. "Just got a headache."

"All this talk about food, probably."

"Yeah."

Kyte's voice grows louder, though it's not a sound. It's more of a feeling.

"Let's go. I'm starving." The Cynar drops his fingers from his temples. "We can take a short break."

"We aren't supposed to—"

"It's my treat. I heard the noodle shop on the next corner stopped using rat meat and has the protein shit you like. Let's get a couple bowls and come right back. No one will know."

The other guard hesitates. Then he shrugs. "Yeah, I could use a bowl. But we have to be quick."

"Easy. Come on." The Cynar takes off, the other guard at his heels.

I feel Kyte's presence fade.

I turn to him when he appears down the hallway. "I thought you couldn't do that."

"I thought I couldn't either." He shakes his head. "I think ... I think joining with Lana has amplified what I can do. I can't just hear thoughts; I can ... influence them." He sways, and I catch him before he falls.

"It just took a lot." He takes a deep breath then stands firm. "I'm all right."

"You sure?"

He nods. "Let's get him." He steps to the door and hits a keypad to the right. The doors slide open silently.

"What in the Pillars?" I'm still faded out, the space between the stars, as I move into the room. Cells line the walkway, many of them occupied by creatures I've never seen before. Overhead, a multitude of bodies are preserved in various states of horror. I was already in a rush to get to Ceredes, but now? Now I shoot like an arrow down the center hall and send my senses toward him.

"*Jeren, wait!*" Kyte speeds behind me, but I'm faster.

An agonized scream ricochets along the cells and bars, and I know in my soul that it's Ceredes. "There!" I slam my palm

on the control pad to open a wide set of bay doors at the back of the prison area.

They slide open, and I find Ceredes strapped to a table, several workers around him.

I don't hesitate. I couldn't care less about their cries. I gut the first one where he stands. Then I'm on to the next, and the next. I'm burning with rage at what they've done to Ceredes, to all the others, at Garusso's behest.

Kyte rushes in behind me and goes right to Ceredes, to the bloody Bellatian who is still alive despite being dissected by these bastards. I slice the next one from stem to stern, and another gets my blade buried in his brain stem. One of them backs away and knocks over a tray of surgical implements, a scream lofting from his lungs as he holds his hands up to try and shield himself.

I slice his throat so deeply his head almost comes off, and then I bury another blade in his eye for good measure.

Turning, I phase back into full form as an alarm starts blaring.

"Can you save him?" I rip the restraints off Ceredes, his blue eyes pale, his skin cold.

Kyte doesn't answer. He's focusing every bit of his power on closing the deep incisions along Ceredes's torso.

"They cut out my organs." Ceredes weakly coughs blood. "Examined them. Put them back. Healed me just enough to keep me alive so they could take another, then another."

I want to kill them all again. Slower this time. The gore I painted onto the sterile white walls with my blade work isn't enough. I want to grind them into a pink mist.

"Don't talk." Kyte holds his hands over Ceredes's chest.

His wounds sew together slowly. I can already hear the sounds of pounding boots. We're being surrounded.

"I'm going." I start to phase.

"No. Wait." Kyte reaches for me. "I need you."

I take his hand instinctively. He squeezes it, and I feel a pull. My darkness is moving outward, the innate power of my people flowing into Kyte.

Ceredes groans as his wounds heal more quickly, the tissue inside him repairing, the bleeding slowing and stopping. His color starts to return as Kyte takes the last bit of power I have.

Kyte falls forward, landing on Ceredes.

“Kyte!” I grab him and pull him upright. His eyes are closed. Drained. He’s completely drained himself to save Ceredes.

“Brother.” Ceredes sits up and slaps Kyte gently on the cheek. “Come back to us.”

Kyte mumbles, his eyes fluttering as he tries to wake.

I send my senses outward again, looking for Garusso’s soldiers. They’re swarming toward us. “We have to go. Now!”

Ceredes hops from the table with a wince, then throws Kyte over his shoulder. “Lead the way. But first give me a knife.”

I hand one over. We don’t have a moment to lose. I try to phase into darkness, but I can’t. Instead, I unsheathe two knives and rush down the main hallway, back the way we came.

“Wait.” Ceredes groans and leans against the wall, Kyte hanging limply over his shoulder. Rearing back, he smashes his fist into a control panel. The lights overhead blink, and the cell doors open. Beings and creatures of every sort emerge from their prisons and head our way.

“Go.” Ceredes coughs and spits out a wad of blood.

I give him a nod, then rush through the doors back into the hallway. The two guards stand there, each one with a bowl of noodles in their hands. I throw two blades, ending them. I show no mercy. Not to anyone who knew what Garusso was doing here.

A contingent of guards rushes us from both left and right, cutting off our escape. I back up, forcing Ceredes to stay put in

the doorway, then I fling myself forward, run up the wall, and drop behind the first set of guards. I angle my blades to slice into their hearts, then whirl and drop low, slicing out and cutting the next set of guards' ankles. They fall and scream as I rise and back up again, guarding Ceredes and Kyte as more soldiers swarm the hallways.

I hear a grunt and something slithers past me, its tentacles reaching out and gripping the nearest guard. He fires his energy pistol at it, but it seems to absorb the blast and, in one horrifying movement, covers the entire guard with its body, taking him to the floor and dissolving him.

“Pillars.” Ceredes stares as the other guards back away.

More creatures rush past us, free and looking for payback. More screams erupt as blood sprays and body parts fall.

“We have to go left. Back to the chute. Follow me.”

Ceredes keeps close to my heels as I slash my way through the guards left standing. One gets a shot off, hitting me in the leg with an energy blast, but I can't fall. Not when my brothers are depending on me. I fight through the pain, dropping that guard and then killing two more.

We're almost to the garbage room when a bright flash lights up the entire hallway. Everything on this side of the corridor—guards and prisoners—has been obliterated.

“What in the Pillars is happening?” Turning, I see Garusso floating toward us, his eye bulging. “You! So many specimens destroyed because of you!”

I want to kill him, but none of us would survive a hand-to-hand fight with an Unending. He's too powerful—I jump as Ceredes moves with lethal quickness, my blade leaving his hand as if it was shot out of an energy cannon. It hits Garusso right in his center eye and propels him backward against the wall, the blade embedding into the metal. The surprise on Garruso's face is almost comical. He didn't even have a chance to counter; Ceredes took him so off guard. Garusso's body slides down, the blade staying put and splitting the rest of his head open as he drops.

“Now that’s a mental image to haunt my nightmares,” Kyte says weakly.

“It’s all in the wrist.” Ceredes smirks.

“You’re awake.” I peer at Kyte, whose pale skin is almost ghostly.

“For now.” He nods.

More feet pound in the far hallway. “We’re almost to the chute.” I scramble to the garbage room door and shove it open.

Ceredes carries Kyte inside.

“Halt!”

I turn and find Irillon with his energy pistol trained on me.

He glances at Garusso’s body, then back at me. “This is bad.”

“Did you know?” I bellow. “Did you know what he was doing down here?”

Irillon shakes his head. “No. Shadows were never allowed on the lower levels.”

I believe him, though maybe I shouldn’t. It makes sense Garusso wouldn’t trust shadows to keep his grisly secrets, not when the Larenian history is full of other races doing similar atrocities to us.

He doesn’t lower his blaster. “But I can’t let you go. This is going to blow up in my face if I do.”

“No, this means there’s a power vacuum at the top.” I can still see the scared little boy in him, the starving child jumping over the tops of engine boosters for his life. But he can be more.

“Jeren!” Ceredes calls. “Come on!”

“It means that some little nobody from the Flotilla, a Larenian who cares for his people, can take over and lead the shadows.”

Irillon stares at me, his thoughts at war, his finger flirting with the trigger.



“Be the space between the stars, Irillon. Lead them.” I turn and rush headlong into the garbage room, then follow Ceredes and Kyte into the filthy chute.

“Where does this end?” Ceredes yells.

“Under the Flotilla!” I yell back. “Brace yourself!”

“When?” he asks right as I see the lower catwalk rushing up to meet us.

“Now!”

He lands hard, Kyte safe on his back as Ceredes face plants.

I land on my feet—I’m a shadow after all—but pain radiates up my body from the impact. That’s going to be sore in the morning.

“You all right?” I pull Kyte off Ceredes.

Kyte manages to stand on his own, and Ceredes gets up slowly with my help.

“What in the Pillars is this?” Ceredes wipes muck from his face.

“We had to kill a ...” Kyte shrugs. “An unnamed foe down here.”

“Great.” Ceredes flings the muck against the tunnel wall. “How far to the ship?”

“Not too far. Let’s go.”

“Wait.” Ceredes grabs my shoulder. “Lana’s location?”

Kyte reaches in his pocket and pulls out the bot. “Right here.”

Ceredes lets out a breath of relief. “Thank the Pillars.” He takes off ahead of us, the knowledge that we’re about to find Lana like a second wind.

Kyte and I follow, hurrying along and hoping we don’t run into any more trouble in the tunnel. Luck seems to be with us, because we manage to make it all the way to the edge of the Flotilla without incident.

“The hatch is just ahead. All we have to do is—”

A metallic clanging noise sounds close by. It’s so loud my eardrums feel like they’re going to burst. We all cover our ears as Kyte and Ceredes give me questioning looks.

When I feel the first hint of heat, dread settles in my gut.

“The booster!” I yell. “Get down!” I yank them to the deck as the engine thruster powers all the way up and the dark tunnel beside us begins to glow purple, heat seeping between the riveted metal.

It blasts for several minutes, our service tunnel getting hotter by the second until I’m certain we’re going to die here, turned to ash in the belly of the Flotilla. Kyte throws up a weak barrier that helps a little, but I know we’re all going to be burned if not dead.

Kyte grabs my forearm, strengthening the link between us. “*When will it stop?*”

“*There’s no way of knowing. It depends on how much it has to course correct. One thing’s for sure—our ship is toast. We have no way out.*”

Kyte lets go, but I can still hear him mentally screaming Calarian swear words.

We hunker together and wait as the purple flames begin to lick between the metal couplings, singeing everything they touch.

“*We can’t die here. Not when Lana needs us.*” Ceredes has force of will, but so does the Flotilla.

The flames grow closer, my skin starting to bubble as I try to shield Kyte.

“*I love you, my brothers.*” I hold onto both of them.

“*We’re going to survive this,*” Ceredes replies. “*But I love you, too.*”

“*I thought you loved me?*” Kyte still has jokes, right up to the end.

*“I did until I had to carry your worthless ass all the way down here.”*

I snort a laugh as a bit of purple flame burns the leather off my back. *“Damn, that hurts.”*

Kyte pulls me closer.

My brothers have me. No matter what happens, no matter where our souls are about to go—we’re going together. That’s all I can ask for.

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The darkness is here whether my eyes are open or closed. I must've passed out, because I regain consciousness with no idea how long I've been trapped.

Suffocating. Nox's power has me wrapped so tightly I'm fighting to breathe. Panic wells inside me, and I scream. The sound goes nowhere.

I'm in pain. Not physical. Physically, I'm numb. But my soul has a jagged wound, one that I should've seen coming. Despite all my cautions to myself to not trust Nox, I gave in and hoped. Hope is what got me here, trapped in a coffin of dark energy that's crushing my soul slowly.

My thoughts travel to my Alphas—the way my thoughts always do. Shame filters through the pain. Shame at believing Nox's lies. My circle saved me, and even though I didn't want to, I turned my back on it because I wanted a mother. A real one. But as I lie here, I realize I don't need a mother. Not when I have my circle. My Alphas help me, guide me, keep me grounded. They're the only true family I've ever found.

*"I'm sorry."* I try to send the words to them, but they—like my screams—go nowhere.

My breaths come faster, my lungs not getting enough air. Hyperventilating, but I'm powerless to stop the panic. I imagine Kyte whispering to me about the lake on Centari, the cool blue water where I float, weightless, with my Alphas all

around me. He would tell me to let go, to let the fear sluice off me as I breathe in deep.

For long moments, I keep my eyes closed and imagine that calm scene, the reassurance of my Alphas, the freedom of being safe in their arms. Safety—that's what they are to me.

Opening my eyes, I find darkness again. But this time I let myself accept it. I have to if I'm going to escape Nox's prison. I'm here, and I have to get out, to get to my Alphas.

I reach deep within myself and find that small blue flame, the flickering soul of the circle. It, too, is ensconced in black power. Mine. The dark and the light are both mine. I have to figure out how to marry the two. It's so clear to me now that accepting and wielding both streams of power is the only way I can save myself, can save the galaxies, from my mother.

Clarity has come too late, but at least I have it.

When I move my hands, they don't budge. The weight is somehow pressing in on me from all sides.

"I'm like a burrito." I even stick my tongue out, but it too meets resistance. Then I second-guess the idea of licking the dark power.

"*Find me.*" The voice is a faint whisper.

"Look. This is a bad time." I huff. "I hear you, you stupid voice, but if you aren't going to help me, I really don't need your cryptic messages right now! Sheesh."

The voice is silent as I try to struggle my way out of Nox's hold. I get nowhere. She's so damn powerful. It makes me wonder if she's even monitoring me or just wrapped me up like a spider snack and went about her business. It doesn't matter. I have to get out of here.

I calm myself again, forcing myself into stillness as I look inside my depths. That dark power is there, the same as Nox's, but there's more. The small blue flame, the power granted to me by my circle—it still lives inside me, too. I focus on it, willing the flame to grow. At first it flickers, and I fear it might go out. Holding my breath, I keep my thoughts on it. But nothing happens. It doesn't react the way the darkness does.

Letting out my breath, I re-focus on it, imagining it growing larger, stronger.

Nothing.

“Damn it!”

“*The circle.*” The voice flits by, nothing more than a distant whisper.

“Cryptic again. Great.” I sigh.

Then I think about a circle. About the unending, infinite beauty of a line curving back to itself. Like a circuit that never needs another power source. It’s self-sufficient. Like my circle. My Alphas and I are all I need.

The blue flame sparks a little.

Instead of the flame, I think about my Alphas. About how Ceredes paces, how Kyte likes to read, how Jeren is always down for getting into trouble. I smile at the memory of them together, how they became brothers as we became lovers. My eyes sting with tears, and I wish with my whole heart to be with them again.

The flame burns brighter, growing exponentially until I feel full of blue light, of power granted to me from the circle. But it’s muffled beneath my own darkness. The power Nox unleashed in me is almost alien, but then again, I *know* it’s mine. She hasn’t taught me to wield it. Maybe that was on purpose? It hits me that *of course* it was on purpose. Why would she teach me how to use the one weapon that could hurt her? She wouldn’t. I suppose I’ll just have to teach myself.

“*I want you to work together.*” I talk to the dark and the light as if they’re arguing toddlers. “*If we all want to survive this and escape, I need you to cooperate. I’m not asking. I’m telling. After all, you’re part of me. I’m in charge here.*”

I get the distinct impression that both are laughing at me, but I’m going to pretend I’m imagining that. Because this has to work. It’s the only way.

Closing my eyes, I return to Kyte’s training. To make a barrier, I have to will it into existence. I have to think about

the reason for it, what I want to do with it. “*Think with purpose,*” he’d always say. So that’s what I’m going to do.

In my mind, I take the dark power in one hand, the blue flame in the other. I hurl both of them in front of me where they collide in a brilliant flash of sparks and static. The flare dies down and I open my eyes. Nox’s barrier is still up, but I feel ... Good. I feel like maybe I can do this.

I reach inside myself again and grab both powers. This time, instead of throwing them out, I bring them in, joining my palms. The powers stay separate at first, like two magnets with the same charge. But I bring my will to bear on them, demanding they join. They stay apart, refusing to become one, refusing to become a circle of their own.

Too bad I’ve never known when to quit. I push until my head starts to pound and my heart hammers against my ribs in a vicious staccato. I don’t give up. I can’t. Not even when my nose begins to bleed and my body feels like it’s tearing itself apart.

The electrical surge that jolts through me should kill me—if I were still the same girl from earth with no clue about my circle, then it would. But I’m not her anymore. I’m something different, and I’m more than I ever dreamed possible.

My palms glow white, the energy between them trying to resist my will, both of them repulsing each other with enough force to make the metal walls around me whine.

“This is going to happen.” I scold the orbs. “You *will* cooperate.”

I take a deep breath despite the pain that radiates through me, and then, with all the strength I have, I shove my palms together. The energies react, pulsing and then disappearing with a *zzzzttt* noise and the scent of ozone.

Gasping in air, I stare at my palms, at the complete lack of anything in them. Despair tries to trickle through my mind. It didn’t work. I couldn’t do it.

My eyes water as I scream my frustration against the black prison.



That's when I see it.

The rope of blue and black energy shooting from my mouth and ripping Nox's box to shreds. I've blasted a hole through her power, and the threads of blue and black are spreading, destroying the walls and lifting the suffocating weight from me.

I laugh. It's insane, but I can't help it. Sitting up, I giggle from the sheer joy of release. The horrible pressure is gone, disintegrating before my eyes.

Freedom.

I rise from the bed and look around. I've no idea how long I've been trapped here. Mere hours? Days? I can't tell. It doesn't matter. I'm getting the fuck out of here no matter what. I have to find my Alphas.

Creeping to the door, I listen, but the metal is solid. There could be an entire contingent of Sentients in the corridor, and I wouldn't know.

Lifting my hand to the control panel, I try to open the door. It doesn't budge. Warverian must've locked it somehow. I don't want to risk making too much noise, but I won't stay in this room one more second. So, I tentatively pull at my power. It flows to the surface with ease, like a river waiting behind a dam, longing to move and dance along the land. Even with my circle, it was never this easy, this comfortable.

"Wow." I stare at my hand, at the intertwined energies. With a flick of my wrist, it darts out and smashes the controls.

The door slides open, then sticks. I'm able to slip into the hallway. It's the same long, black corridor I remember, but once again, the problem is they all look the same.

Taking a guess, I head left, creeping along and pressing myself flat to the wall to peek around corners. A few Sentient soldiers cross my path, but I manage to stay on the side halls so they can't look full on at my face. Thank the Pillars.

That faint hum—the feeling I thought perhaps I was imagining—grows stronger the farther I go, and I double back a few times when I start to feel it fade. It's like a game of hot

and cold. The louder the hum, the closer I am to the voice. I can't leave without finding it, even though I know I should be making a beeline for one of the hangar bays. Whatever the hum is, it's like a wire attached beneath my ribs, pulling me along an invisible path.

When I reach a door that's just like all the others—but where the hum is the strongest, I stop. Pressing my palm to it, I think my teeth might chatter from the vibration.

“*I'm here. Please, hurry.*” The voice is still reedy, but now I can make it out more fully.

I try the control panel. Once again, it refuses to open, and once again, I use my power to force it. Once I squeeze through the narrow opening, I stop.

“What—”

“I knew you'd come.” A male is suspended from the ceiling, black snakes of energy wrapped around his wrists and ankles as he hangs in an X, drawn taut. He's a husk, wiry and thin, his eyes deep in their sockets and his beard almost to his knees. His skin is pale with a blueish hue underneath. Old and sick, he seems almost dead. Like a talking corpse. “Please, come closer. I want to look at you.”

“Who are you?” I step closer, my curiosity getting the better of me. It almost hurts to look at him. And when I step even nearer and get a better view of his face, my stomach drops, the room spinning. “Your nose. I...” I blink, *déjà vu* rushing through me. “I remember it from when I was little.”

He smiles, his teeth gray and some missing. “I suppose it's quite noticeable now. It was mostly blasted off when Byran sent me hurtling into space the day he broke the circle.” He makes a minute shrugging motion. “Pity, really. I used to be quite handsome.”

Nox's memory plays through my mind, the broken circle and the Alphas she'd been bound to. “You're Krenallus. You're the one who left me on earth with my *mother*.”

His gaze softens. “I had to. I had to hide you somewhere Nox would never find you.”

So many things click into place all at once that I drop to my knees and stare up at him. “You’re—”

“I’m your father.”

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Flames lick through the rivets along the metal tunnel separating us from the engine thruster. The heat is unbearable, and it's almost impossible to breathe.

We hunker down lower, trying to escape the inescapable. Even so, I refuse to believe this is the end. I'll take my last breath with Lana's name in my heart. The circle is forever, no matter what happens to the three of us right now.

Just as I realize I can't take another breath, the air too hot for my lungs, the flames die away, the roar of the engine dropping until there's only a slight hum, and then nothing. The metal pops all around us as it cools.

Jeren coughs, and Kyte takes a sooty breath. Everything that had been in the tunnel is now a charred mess floating through the air.

"Pillars. We all got roasted." Kyte groans and peers at the charred skin along his arm, then turns to inspect Jeren and me.

"I'm fine." I shrug him off, despite the nagging aches and bleeds that linger all through me.

"We're a little scorched." Jeren coughs again. "But we'll live."

"But our ship." Kyte swipes a hand down his face.

"We don't have one anymore." I don't even want to open the hatch. There's no way there's anything left out there.

I try to come up with a new plan. “We’ll just have to get back to the surface and find someone willing to—”

“To lend us a ship?” Jeren shakes his head. “Not a chance.”

“I can pay.” Kyte stands but keeps well away from the thruster side of the tunnel.

Jeren scoffs. “Unless you have Flotilla units on you, or maybe some gold, that’s not going to work.”

“Surely I can get credit?” Kyte raises a brow.

Jeren gives him a cynical stare. “I thought you researched the Flotilla. No, there’s no credit. No, *no one* does business here unless you have the cash to back it up.”

Kyte looks up as if recalling something, then nods slowly. “The Flotilla Civil War. Right. I remember now. All the wealth of the Flotilla got concentrated into a super-rich group, and eventually the people rose up and destroyed them. Once the Larenoans won, they jettisoned the loan sharks and creditors into space.”

“That war almost tore the Flotilla apart. Literally. So, no. No credit.”

“Maybe we could—”

A tap sounds at the hatch behind us. We all whirl and stare at it.

“What was that?” Jeren pulls a blade.

The tap comes again.

Jeren shakes his head. “Nothing could’ve survived the thruster blast.”

“So what’s out there?” Kyte takes a shaking breath and tries to conjure up a barrier. A silver orb materializes then fizzles. We have no protection, but I can still fight.

A muffled voice wafts to our ears. Kyte and I turn to Jeren.

“Did you catch it?” I ask.

He stows his blade. “Yeah.” With a stride forward, he grabs the hatch and turns the lock.

“Jeren!” Kyte tries to fling up another barrier to keep us from being sucked out into space.

But when the door opens, all we see is a bright hallway to a docked ship.

“Hi!” Tilda waves, a sparkle in her dark eyes. “You need a rescue?”

“How’d you find us?” I catch Kyte before he falls, his barrier already gone and his head swimming. “No more barriers. You need to rest.”

“I know. I just thought we were going to—”

“Die? Yeah, we seem to keep running into that whole death thing.” I help him onto the ship right behind Jeren.

“How did you find us?” I help Kyte to a seat along the wall and turn to Tilda.

“I’m a Granterry.” She shrugs. “It was easy. You were on a marked royal airship from Latrides. I traced the signature, then caught a few whispers about a Calarian noble in some trouble on the Flotilla.”

Uaxin, the quiet Omega from the academy, kneels beside Kyte and studies his burns. When she looks over at us, her eyes are wide. “Lana?” Her voice is still creaky from disuse, but at least she’s talking now.

“The Sentients have her.” I hate even saying those words.

“I know that.” Tilda rolls her eyes. “But we haven’t been able to track her location. The Granterry network is scrambling for information on her, but we have nothing. I was hoping you could locate her through the circle.” Tilda’s eyebrows lift with hope. Then they fall immediately when I shake my head. “The Sentients must’ve been planning this for a long time.”

Kyte groans as he turns to his side. “They turned Onin.”

Her face falls. “I know.”

“We may not be able to track her through the circle, but I have the next best thing.” Kyte reaches into his charred pocket and pulls out the tracking device from Garusso.

“What’s this?” Tilda takes it and inspects it. “Ooooh, looks like tech mixed with some sort of ...”

“An Unending made it. It should take us right to Lana.” Kyte takes some medical ointment from Uaxin, then motions Jeren over to him. “Come on, I’ll patch you up first.”

“An Unending?” Tilda’s eyes open even wider. “I’ve heard about them. They’re vile, almost as bad as the Sentients. You met one?”

Jeren snorts and glances at me. “We all met him, but Ceredes finished him.”

“I’ll tell you all about it on the way to Lana.” I gently take the bot from Tilda and carry it to the cockpit.

“You need medical, too.” Uaxin stares at my burned and bloody skin.

“Later.” I pull up a makeshift port for the bot, then place it inside. It immediately starts to whir and interface with the ship’s AI.

“Look!” Tilda slides into the pilot’s seat as a map emerges on the view window. “She’s at the edge of the Rift.”

“Let’s go.” I can’t wait another moment. We have to get to Lana and rescue her from those Sentient monsters. If they’ve harmed her ... No, I can’t let myself spiral. I have to believe she’s all right.

“The Rift is far. That’ll take several wormholes.” Tilda swallows hard.

The Granterry fear wormholes, and with their history, I can’t blame them. But I can’t let that stand between us and Lana.

“We have to do this, Tilda. For Lana. The circle is broken —”



“Pillars! Don’t say that!” She shakes her head and crosses her chest in a warding symbol.

“I’m just telling you the truth. We have to get to Lana, repair the circle, and stop the Sentients. That’s the only way we come out of this alive and with the galaxies intact.”

She takes a deep breath. “We already took a wormhole to get here, and I thought I might throw up.”

I cycle through options—leaving her on the Flotilla or dropping her off on the way to Lana, or even trying to knock her out so she won’t actually know we’re travelling through the wormholes.

“It’s fine.” She shakes her head, her black curls bouncing. “For Lana, I can do this. I *have* to do this. *I’m going to do this!*”

“Are you trying to convince me or you?” I ask.

“Me. All me.” She takes a deep breath. “Okay. We need to do it before I lose my nerve.” She reaches for the control panel right when an emergency alert blares through the aircraft.

“What is that?” She smashes a button on her panel, which pulls up a Fleet comms channel.

“All available fighters to Latrides! The Sentients are taking the planet!” A coarse voice barks through the comms.

“High Commander Bartanz.” Jeren scowls. “The bastard wouldn’t believe us when we told him the Sentients were coming for the fleet.”

“I think he believed us, but he didn’t want to admit it and risk losing control.” Kyte sits up as Jeren tends to his wounds.

We have to get to Lana. It’s the only way we’ll stand a chance against the Sentients. But I don’t program the ship to take us to her. Not yet. I turn to Kyte. I can feel the turmoil inside him, the fear for his home planet and the longing for his mate going to war. He’s already lost his mother. Now his home is under attack.

“Kyte?” Jeren grips his shoulder. “Your call, brother.”

His jaw flexes, the dissonance inside him reaching a fever pitch.

“Just breathe.” I put my hand on his other shoulder and stare into his green gaze. His emotions are so strong, each of them leeching into me and making me sick to my stomach with worry for Latrides and Lana.

“We can’t help Latrides until we have our mate and repair the circle.” He drops his chin, the weight of his decision bearing down on him. I won’t let him bear it alone. Neither will Jeren.

“We’re going to end this. Latrides will be safe.” Jeren presses his forehead to Kyte’s crown.

“Let’s go.” I turn back to Tilda.

“Already programmed in. We’ll have to go through seven wormholes.” She swallows hard. “*Seven*. Each time we’re risking instant annihilation. You know that, right? We’ve already received reports of Sentient traps. It’s the Great Calamity all over again.”

“The Pillars ordained the circle. We have to trust in it.”

“We’re going to make it, Tilda.” Kyte finally looks up, tears in his eyes. “For Latrides.”

“We will,” Uaxin whispers.

I reach out and fire the engine, launching us toward the first wormhole, and the first roll of the dice on all our lives.



“*Y*ou’re my father?” I press my palms to my cheeks and stare up at Krenallus. “This is some heavy *Star Wars* shit, isn’t it?”

“Pardon?” His gray forehead wrinkles.

“Nothing.” I get to my feet and hurry to the control panel in the center of the room. “How can I get you out of this?”

“You can’t. It’s not important. We don’t have much time.”

I look at the glistening black ropes binding his thin wrists and ankles. He’s been suspended so long that they’ve dug in, the power cutting off his circulation and leaving deep indentions where he’s bound. “I’m not leaving you like this.”

“You must. I’m never going to be free. I made peace with that long ago.” He sighs. “I’m only here for you now, Lana. I’ve waited. But I’m so, so tired.” His voice bears the weight of years of pain. It’s like I can feel it, too, just whispers of it, aching in my bones.

“I don’t know what’s going on, but I don’t care. I’m not letting you stay here like this.” I pull my energy from deep inside me, marrying the streams, and smash the console.

Krenallus groans as the black ropes flicker, then fall away. He drops, and almost smashes into the floor, but I shoot my energy out to form a landing spot. Slowly, I lower him to the floor.

He doesn’t move, just lies there and looks at me. “I’m afraid my muscles have atrophied. I can’t ... I can’t move.”

I hurry to him and sit, then cradle his head in my lap. “Better?”

“You should’ve left me.” He smiles wanly. “But your heart is kind. I always knew it would be. It’s like Nox’s before ...”

“How can I save you?” I think about everything Kyte taught me, the healing abilities we share because of the circle. Willing it into my dark and light powers, I push some of it into Krenallus. It flutters along his skin and dissipates, but he looks no better.

“You can’t.” He reaches up with a shaking hand and rests it on my wrist. A butterfly resting on a leaf. “Nox has drained me far too much to ever recover.”

“I don’t understand.” My tears seem to come from nowhere. I don’t even realize I’m crying until a drop lands on his face. I wipe it away. “What are you doing here? Why did you leave me?” I can’t have found him only to lose him, but even as I have that thought, I can feel him fading. “You really were waiting for m—?” My voice breaks on a sob.

“I had to see you.” His hand falls away. “Had to know you’re going to be all right.”

“I’m *not* all right.” I shake my head. “My circle is broken, my mother is psychotic, and I don’t know what to do with this power inside me. I’m not ready. I—”

“I want to show you.” He coughs. “Take my hand, Lana. Let me show you.”

I reach for him, and the moment my fingers graze his, I’m thrown back into his memory. The first part is a blur—he’s thrown into space by Byran. A barrier—perhaps from Eo, perhaps Nox—erupts around him, saving him for a short while until it fades. Immense pain wracks him as he quickly succumbs to the cold vacuum of space. Then a fleet transport appears from a nearby wormhole right as he loses consciousness.

He’s saved, but he can’t be healed fully. Never again will he be what he once was—a strong warrior, part of a never-ending circle. His pain isn’t just physical. The ache of losing

Nox and Eo, the agony of betrayal—it's all there, eating away at what's left of him.

I fly through his recovery and then to when he begins his search.

*"I couldn't let her go,"* he whispers.

Krenallus spends the next decades combing the galaxies for Byran and Nox, listening for rumors of their whereabouts, and chasing down every lead. Until finally, at the edge of the Rift, he finds them. I see through his eyes as he raids the building.

*The blast door falls inward with a loud clang, the entire structure shuddering as I lead a small battalion of fleet soldiers into the rough outpost on a barren planet. I can feel Nox here, as if she's calling to me. Vibrating with our shattered bond.*

*"Fan out!"* I point down two side corridors and keep barreling forward. No guards, no defenses. The entire planet seems deserted. Whatever life may have been here is long since gone.

*My forces disappear into the low halls as I descend a dark staircase. The metal creaks beneath my feet as I go lower and lower beneath the surface of the dead planet above.*

*"Nothing up here,"* one of my soldiers barks on the comms.

*"She's below. I can feel her."* How long have I been searching for her? Only the Pillars know. The closer I get, the faster I go until I'm hurtling straight down into darkness. *"Nox!"* I cry for her, for my mate. *"Nox, I'm here!"*

*Finally, when I think I'll never reach the bottom, I find another blast door. I throw myself against it, willing it to open, to lead me to Nox. It won't budge. I back up and pull my plasma sword. On its highest setting, I use it to slice through the locking mechanism. With a final kick, the door gives way and I rush forward.*

*"Nox!"* The yell that tears from me is the sound of a wounded animal.

*“Krenallus.” She stands, her familiar gaze on me. But she’s not the same. Now, she’s part machine. Her one good eye waters as she looks at me, but the other one narrows, the red pupil turning into a pinprick.*

*“Are you hurt?” I don’t care what she looks like. I only care that she’s alive. No hesitation, I take her into my arms and crush her against me, the beat of her heart like a soothing lullaby.*

*“Not anymore.” She strokes my back.*

*“Byran?”*

*“Dead.”*

*“When?” I can’t let her go. I may never be able to release her from my embrace.*

*“A long time.” She reaches up and presses her fingertips to my temple, shoving me into her memories of him. I get only glimpses of his cruelty. He tried to breed her for years, kept her locked up and drugged, told her he loved her while he hurt her over and over again. Just the bits and pieces of memory are enough to make my gorge rise.*

*“But I escaped,” she whispers. Her memories skip ahead. She and Byran are in the Rift, surrounded by Sentient vessels. There’s no escape. No more running. “If I can’t have you, no one can.” Byran draws his energy sword. They fight in a blur of violence until only Nox is left. Cut to shreds and dying, that would’ve been her end. But the Sentients came. They saved her life, and in return, she joined their cause.*

*I blink and shake my head. “No.”*

*She pulls away and looks up at me when I hear my soldiers yell as a barrage of blaster fire erupts. It’s not long before the structure is silent again, all except for the sound of the Sentient soldiers surrounding me.*

*“Nox, no.” I take her hands. “Please.”*

*“I’m not just Nox anymore, Krenallus. I’m much, much more.” She squeezes my fingers. “You can be, too. Together,*

*we can bring freedom to the galaxies. No more fleet. No more oppression.”*

*“Come with me.” I try to reach her through our bond, the narrow channel that still connects our hearts. But it’s like a tomb, no longer alive with that spark of energy. Dead. Just as the circle is dead.*

*“I’m dead, too, Krenallus. Nox died when Eo did. When you were lost to me. When Byran took me.” She bares her teeth when she says his name. “But I’ve been reborn. I’m something new. Whatever I was, it’s gone now.”*

*“It’s not.” I reach up and cup her warm cheek. “I can show you.”*

*She leans into my touch and sighs. “I’ve missed you.”*

*My heart dares to hope, to beat faster at the touch of her soft skin. “Please, come back to me.”*

*She kisses my palm then retreats. Her red eye flicks to the Sentients all around me. “Take him to the ship. Bind him.”*

*“Nox?” I don’t try to fight as the Sentients grab me. “Nox, what are you doing?”*

*She turns her back on me as her soldiers drag me away.*

*“Nox!” I can’t stop screaming her name. “Nox, I love you. Please! Nox!”*

*But she doesn’t look back, doesn’t do anything as I’m dragged away from her. My heart breaks again, the last shreds of hope blasted away by my mate. The one I swore to protect. The one who swore to protect me.*

I come back to myself and try to digest everything I just saw.

Krenallus looks up at me, his eyes welling with tears. “She was gone. The Nox from our circle. Byran had twisted and ruined her, turned her into a monster. He really thought it was love.” He glances over to a low bench against the wall. “Sometimes she comes in here and tells me stories from her time with him. About the things he did to hurt her, about the million ways he told her he loved her while he slowly crushed



her body, mind, and soul. I don't know if she's talking to me or herself. Perhaps she's trying to make sense of it. But there isn't any. Byran was my brother, but he turned against us all. I don't know why, except that maybe his love for power was greater than even his love for the circle. That's what led him to kill Eo and crush Nox." He sighs. "So many hours she's simply sat here and gone over it. Clinically. Reliving the pain as if it belonged to someone else. All the while, she was crushing me the same way. So many years, and I've never left this room. Never seen another soul besides her. She's ... so lonely."

I take a deep breath. "You pity her?"

"I have to." He closes his eyes. "I still love her."

That hits me like a physical blow. How could he still love her when he just said she's spent decades hurting him?

"What did she do to you?" I don't know if I'm ready to hear the answer.

"At first, she wanted to fight. So I fought her. She won. Over and over she beat me until I was near death only to revive me. Sometimes in her rages, she even called me Byran."

"I'm sorry." I stroke his cheek, the skin leathery yet thin.

"And then she ..." He groans and shivers, as if it hurts to even speak of it. "She ..." He opens his eyes and looks up at me. "She wanted an heir. Even though I told her I would never agree, never give her another person who she could hurt. But I couldn't stop her. I think maybe I never could." He sighs and closes his eyes again. "We made you," he whispers.

Rape. That's what he's not saying out loud. Nox raped him to conceive me.

Another one of my tears falls onto his shoulder as I try to swallow a sob. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't be. You're the only good thing that's come out of any of this." He lifts a trembling hand to cover mine. "And I'm the one who should apologize. The woman I left you with—Nox told me she was cruel."

“She was.” I don’t bother denying it.

“I thought I was keeping you safe, you see? I didn’t know.”

“You couldn’t have.” I stroke his thin hair. “It’s all right now. I’m fine.”

“When I escaped—the only time I ever managed it—I had you with me. Like a good luck charm. I stole a small ship and jumped through the first wormhole I found. Nox would find me. I knew that. But I had to save you from her. The first planet I saw when I exited the wormhole was earth. I landed, not caring where or the circumstances. All I knew was I had to get you away from Nox before she twisted you into the same sort of monster she became. I hid you with a human who promised to take care of you. Saying goodbye to you was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. But I had to.”

“I understand.” I wipe my tears with my forearm. “It’s okay.”

“I took off and jumped through as many wormholes as I could to disguise your location. Nox found me eventually. Our bond is still alive, even now. She tortured me far worse than ever before, demanded to know what I’d done with you.” He shakes his head weakly. “I won’t go back there, won’t remember it. I can’t...” He takes some deep, shuddering breaths. “But I never broke. Never.”

“It’s all right.” I can’t bear to hear his suffering. It cuts me deeper than anything I’ve ever felt, except perhaps the loss of my circle. “Everything will be all right.”

“I waited ... for you.” His breaths are shallower now. “To see you, my beautiful daughter.” He looks up at me, his eyes swimming with tears. “I love you. I love you so much, and I’m sorry—”

“Shh. Don’t be sorry.” I cradle him closer, holding him tightly.

“I can’t fight anymore. Can’t save you from her. But I want you to know that your circle ...” He coughs, a thin line of blood flowing from the corner of his mouth. “Your circle

can save lives, save the galaxies. Your circle and your own power—those are the key. Together, they are ordained by the Pillars, blessed by the universe. And together, you can use them to defeat the Sentients.”

I shake my head. “Nox is too strong.”

“You’re stronger.” He smiles. “You and your circle are stronger, Lana. My darling child.”

“Don’t go,” I whisper as I feel him slipping away from me. “Please, I need you.”

“You have all you need. And I’ll be with you ... in the space between the stars.” He takes one more breath, his gaze holding mine. “All my hopes live in your heart. You are everything I ever wanted in a daughter.”

I feel all the love he’d been hiding deep inside, keeping it guarded like a dragon on a golden pile of treasure. He hid it all from Nox, saved it for me.

“Please don’t go.” It’s the plea of a little girl, the wish my heart has been making my whole life. I want a parent who loves me, who would never hurt me. “I need you.”

“You ... have me. Always.” He exhales.

He doesn’t draw another breath.

My sob echoes off the cold dark walls and returns to me as I hug his slight, unmoving frame. “Come back.”

I hold him for a long, long time. Until my tears finally cease. Until I can breathe again. And when I gently lay him down and finally get to my feet, the power inside me vibrates to a new height. “I will avenge you.” I’ll never let go of this feeling. Maybe it’ll ebb and flow, sometimes only just a sliver of it dancing along my surface—but I will never allow it to fade. I had a father who loved me enough to withstand years of torment just to keep me safe.

*I am loved.*

With a deep, shaking breath, I forge my power anew into my palms. I send a whispered prayer to the Pillars or God or whoever watches over the galaxies, then create a ball of pure

heat and guide it to my father's chest. He's gone in a matter of seconds. Nothing left of the Alpha whose finally been set free to be at ease in the star-filled night.

I know what I have to do. My heart calls for my Alphas, and a pulse seems to emanate from me, rippling through the air and disappearing. Whatever it is, it slices through the shadow Nox wove around me from the moment I left Latrides, because I *feel* them.

"*Lana?*" All three of them call to me at once. Their voices are still faint, the circle cracked and shattered in spots. Just feeling them sends a rush of power through my veins, and I'm light on my feet as I take off running down the corridor toward the hangar bay. Maybe it's a trick. Maybe Nox is going to spring a trap on me at any second. But I don't care. *I'm loved*. My father loved me, and now I can sense the fullness and beauty of the love that flows from my Alphas.

"*I'm here!*" I call to them. "*I'm here!*"

Right as I get to the hangar doors, a thump begins to play through the ship. My heart leaps when I recognize it. A Granterry beat.

Static crackles over the hard thumps, and then a familiar voice comes through. "Sentient scum, prepare to be boarded." Tilda turns up the volume. "Oh, and you're welcome for the music."

"Did you have to announce it?" Ceredes's voice is in the background.

"Doesn't matter. We'll tear this place apart with or without a soundtrack." Kyte's voice sounds wry.

"Let's go," Jeren says before the comms turn off, but the music still plays.

"Tilda! Ceredes! Kyte! Jeren!" I yell and could cry all over again. My heart has gone from dark to light, broken to healed—all in the space of moments.

I hit the control, the hangar doors opening, and run right into a battalion of Sentients with a commander at the front.

He clicks the enormous pincer at the end of one mechanical arm.

My stomach drops. “Oh, shit. It’s Origami.”

He blinks and the Sentients around him glance at each other.

“Wait.” I hold up a hand. “Hang on. No, I know this. It’s *not* Origami. It’s ...” I sigh and tap my foot. “Seriously, I’ll get it in a second.”

He turns and barks at a Sentient. “Message Nox that her progeny has escaped, but I’ve already recaptured her.”

“You have?” In my peripheral vision, I see a fleet ship entering the hangar and quietly setting down as I keep distracting the soldiers. “Because I don’t seem to be captured at all.”

“Take her.” The commander jerks his chin at a Sentient creature with tentacles sprouting from his head. “I’ll handle the intruders.” He turns on his heel and heads right for the fleet ship. So much for my distraction.

“Wait!” I call as the Sentient grips my arm with one of his slippery appendages. “I’ve got it!”

The commander keeps going, the soldiers at his heels.

“It’s—”

“Oruwani,” Jeren supplies as he phases into view right next to me. “We studied this for ages, Lana. You should’ve had it right off.” He slices the tentacled creep beside me and pulls me in for a hard kiss.

That’s when I know I’m safe. That’s when I know I’m finally *home*.



I can't begin to describe the warmth that suffuses my entire being the moment I'm near Lana. It's like I can finally breathe again, finally think clearly.

Ceredes storms ahead of me, his energy blade whirling and dealing death with every twist and turn. Sentients fall, parting like the sea, as Ceredes never falters.

Though I'm still not up to full power, I throw up a barrier, cutting off Commander Oruwani and his contingent of Sentients. I probably shouldn't bother, because once Ceredes is done with the Sentients closest to us, he sets on the others, his anger and ferocity burning bright.

Tilda and Uaxin use our ships forward guns to wreak havoc on the vessels and Sentients in front of the hangar bay. Metal and bits of tech fly everywhere as they destroy ship after ship, Sentient after Sentient. But more show up from side corridors, all of them charging forward without any thought for their lives.

Ceredes keeps punishing them, taking on Oruwani in a fierce battle of clanging metal and the sizzle of energy weapons.

Blaster fire rains down on us from an upper level, and I adjust my barrier to block the shots. Each impact stings, though, my power not strong enough to absorb this many hits. Even so, I keep it steady.

*“Save some for me.”* Jeren flits between the Sentients, his blades slicing veins and sinew as the fighters go down.

The blaster fire dies down, and when I look up, I see my mate. She’s taken one of Jeren’s blades and wields it with his same fluid motion. She cuts down one Sentient, then launches herself along the upper deck, tackling another Sentient and ending it with a thrust. Rising, she moves quickly, far more quickly than I’ve ever seen. She glows with energy, and I can feel her pulsing through our bond. It’s no longer just the bright blue of the circle, but the darkness that had been locked away deep inside her.

I watch in awe as she summons energy into her palms, the colors wedded as they form a spear that she throws with effortless precision. She skewers two Sentient fighters, their bodies falling to the hangar floor as she retracts her spear and reforms it into a whip. Flinging it forward, she grabs another Sentient, his blaster firing wildly, and flings him hard against one of the larger ships in the bay.

*“Are you seeing this?”* Jeren is making quick work of the remaining Sentients as my barrier fades.

*“I’m seeing it. She’s so—”*

*“Don’t talk about me like I’m not here, silly Alphas.”* Her tone is sassy as she ends three more Sentients with a burst of lethal power from her fingertips.

Feeling Lana’s voice through the bond brings me to my knees. It’s as if my most fervent dream has materialized. She’s real. She’s alive. The circle is coming back together.

*“Silly Alphas?”* Ceredes jumps away from Oruwani’s pincer, then parries with a hard thrust, slicing through the mechanism that attaches it to the commander’s body.

Oruwani’s yell is mechanical and deep, but quickly cut off as Ceredes finishes him with a final blow to his neck, cutting his head clean off and sending it rolling beneath one of the ships.

I let my barrier go entirely, then get to my feet and break into a run. I know right where I’m going, because Ceredes and



Jeren are headed that way, too.

Lana, lithe as a cat, drops to the hangar floor and takes off toward us.

When we embrace, a shockwave blasts out from us, and the circle reignites, the spark bright enough to blind, to wound, to embed so deep that it will never burn out again.

“Nothing can break this bond.” Lana kisses me, her mouth warm as I run my hands along her body, inspecting her for wounds and just enjoying the feel of her warm skin beneath my fingertips.

“May the circle never break.” Ceredes takes a handful of her hair in his hand and kisses her roughly, fiercely, the only way a Bellatian knows how. I feel when her knees go weak, and I lift her up, all three of her Alphas holding her close as the glow from our connection lights up this part of the universe.

Our bodies heal, the burns fading away as fresh power pulses through me. I see everything that’s happened to Lana. The revelation about Nox, the death of her father. Every emotion of hers crashes into me like waves from the deep sea, each one full of memory and secrets.

“I’m sorry, Lana.” Jeren cups her cheek as Ceredes finally relinquishes her lips.

“Me too.” She kisses his palm. “But at least I know who I am. I know where I came from.”

“And you know what you have to do.” I kiss her temple. “What *we* have to do, together.”

“Is Latrides all right?” she asks.

“I don’t know.”

Tilda kills the music and taps on her comms, sending the fleet chatter through the speakers instead.

“—more fighters. Repeat, Latrides will fall unless we get more fighters. The Sentients have taken the capitol city. Half is destroyed. Send more fighters. Send more fighters.” More voices cut in with much of the same information. But there’s

additional information, too. The Sentients are attacking other planets, many rich in materials needed to make virudivan engines—or weapons.

Lana sighs. “Nox is closing her fist, trapping innocent people inside to be crushed.”

“Nox?” Tilda shakes her head. “What does this have to do with Nox?”

Lana’s gaze darkens. “Everything. She’s leading the Sentients and she’s ... she’s my mother.”

Tilda’s mouth drops open, and for the first time I can remember, the chatty Granterry is speechless.

“Kyte.” Lana presses her palms to my chest. “Latrides will be all right. We can fix this.”

I don’t doubt her. With the power of the circle, we can work miracles. “I have to get there. Now.”

“No way.” Tilda closes off the comms. “If we go there, we die there. We need to head to Centari and regroup.”

Ire rises in my throat. “Absolutely not. I won’t abandon my home—”

“Your home is taken,” Uaxin says quietly. “We can’t get it back with you weakened. You need time to heal and make a real plan.” She drops her gaze. “I’m sorry.”

I burn with the need to return to my planet, to defend my people. I can’t let them die. My mother would’ve protected them until her last breath. I will do the same.

“We will.” Lana cups my cheek. “But Tilda and Uaxin are right. I saw what you’ve been through. We have to recover. Nox’s power is too great for us to go at her with anything less than our full force. If we fail, then Latrides and the rest of the galaxies will be—” She gasps, then turns, her eyes on the darkness of space beyond the hangar.

“Lana?” Ceredes turns his head to look, too. “What is it?”

“Nox.” Lana shudders. “She knows you’re here. She’s coming.”

“Then we need to go.” Jeren scoops Lana into his arms. “Now.” He takes off at a run.

I stand for a moment and eye one of the fighters that’s still mostly intact. I could take it and fly home. Maybe I could do some good.

“*Kyte.*” Lana’s voice is in my head, her touch soft and warm on my soul. “*We have to stay together. Please trust that we can make this right.*”

My legs move of their own accord, and I follow her to the ship. I’d follow her into the Rift, no questions asked. Even though it breaks me in two to think of my people suffering, I know she’s right.

We’ll gather the full forces of the fleet and take back my homeworld.

“*And then we’ll rain down vengeance on Nox and the Sentients. It’s time to end this for good.*” Lana stands at the ship entrance with Jeren and Ceredes at her back. I take her in my arms and hold her as the door closes behind me and the ship begins to take off.

I stare into her eyes, into her heart. “I love you, Lana.”

“I love you, too.” She kisses me. “May the circle never break.”

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*M*y Alphas can't keep their hands off me, and I can't stop touching them, either. I feel like we've been apart for a century, and I don't want to spend another second without them.

"So the council knew all along that Nox was your mother?" Tilda asks. She's been talking nonstop each time we move through a wormhole. It's her coping mechanism, so I try to help her by maintaining steady conversation.

"Yes."

"And they brought you to the Omega Academy to like, keep an eye on you or something?" She taps her chin. "How did the Granterry network fail to find out all this information? Seems impossible."

"I think Nox has been the best kept secret in all the universe." Jeren strokes my hair. "They couldn't have their precious savior tarnished. It's just another control mechanism the fleet uses to get people to do what they say."

I glance at him. "You sound like Nox."

"Look, I've seen your memories. Everything that she said to you. Most of it was lies, but some of it was true. The fleet isn't the squeaky clean operation they like to present to the peoples of the galaxies. I told you that the first time we met. If you cross the fleet, they send you out to a supply planet. These are innocent people, just like the miners you saw on Zujivan 7."

“What happened on Zujivan 7?” Tilda winces as Ceredes pushes us through another wormhole on the way to Centari.

“The fleet had ...” I can’t think of a better word for it. “Slaves. Miners forced to exploit their own planet as a fleet resource. When Nox took me there, I thought we were going to free them. That’s what she told me. But it was just another lie. The Sentients killed the ones who resisted, and now the miners are in the same—or worse—situation as before. The fleet is wrong, but so are the Sentients.”

“Everyone’s the bad guys?” Tilda asks.

“I don’t know, but I’m certain of one thing: all of this has to stop. The fleet has to stop using slaves to do their dirty work, and the Sentients can’t go taking planets and killing whoever they want, or forcing them to join their army. There’s no right answer except—”

“Freedom.” Jeren nods. “That’s why my mother told me to never let the fleet get me. My life wouldn’t be my own anymore. She was right.”

“The fleet isn’t all bad.” Uaxin hides behind her hair as she looks out the window at the wormhole passing by. “They saved me, after all. They do a lot of good.”

“But we can’t let them get away with the bad.” Ceredes pilots us through the final wormhole. As space returns to normal—none of the bright streaks of white and bursts of rainbow from the wormhole—Centari comes into view.

The comms blast immediately. “You have entered fleet territory. Identify yourself or you will be shot down.”

Tilda rattles off the ship’s registration and gives our names. “We’re academy students returning to campus.”

“Hold in orbit.” The deep voice on the other end goes silent.

“Sheesh.” I check over Kyte’s wounds, his gold-dusted skin healed up despite the extensive burns he suffered on the Flotilla. Jeren and Ceredes are also like new, though their clothes are still burned through in places. I don’t mind the view of lean muscle.

*“I’m not a piece of meat, Omega.”* Kyte arches a brow at me. Even in these dark times, he’s still a smartass. I suppose that’s a good thing.

Tilda switches the comms over to a Granterry channel, one I didn’t even know existed, then ports the sound into her earpiece. The more I’m around Tilda, the more I realize how fully the spies control the flow of information through the galaxies. She glances at Kyte, and I feel his worry surge.

I sit in his lap as Jeren leans against both of us.

“Is it that bad?” Kyte asks. “Latrides?”

Tilda gives a small nod.

“No.” I cup his cheeks. “I can feel the regret inside you. Don’t let it eat you up. We’re going to take Latrides back, all right? This isn’t the end. Nox won’t win.”

“It’s my job to defend it. My mother defended it her entire life. And now that she’s gone—” He clears his throat. “Now that she’s gone, I’ve failed her and my people.”

Ceredes turns from his spot at the controls and looks Kyte dead in the eyes. “We are going to recover on Centari.” He glances at me. “Re-seal our bond.”

I shouldn’t feel a blast of heat suffuse my entire body at his words, but I do. Even now, when our situation is beyond dire and my heart is still reeling from so many revelations, the thought of being with my Alphas burns through me like a wildfire.

“I can definitely get behind that.” Jeren nuzzles my neck. “When Nox blocked you from us, it was like I lost a limb.”

“We know exactly which limb that was,” Kyte says wryly.

“Do you think she’ll be able to do that again? To break the circle?” Ceredes asks.

I think about what she’s capable of, of the power she wields that, one way or another, destroyed her own circle. “I don’t know if it was ever truly broken. I think she just ... I guess put some cracks in it. It’s hard to describe, but when I was on her ship, it was like she painted this new picture for

me. One where she could be all I needed. Together, we could be so much more than just Nox and Lana. Or just members of a circle. We could be the sort of power that molds the universe to our design.”

“Sounds nice in theory.” Kyte holds me closer, all my Alphas gravitating toward me like planets around the sun.

“In theory, yes. And, the sad thing is, I think the Nox who existed in the Great Calamity, the one who fought the Sentients and saved so many—she would really want to make that happen. She would free people. But the one who came out of Byran’s grip, the one who had to survive for so long in the face of brutality, that Nox isn’t interested in helping anyone. She wants to dominate the worlds, enforce her will so that she will never have to suffer again.”

Why does it hurt so badly to think about a reality that can never exist? Nox can’t undo what Byran did to her, no more than I can undo what Nox did to me. Even so, I think back to the memory she showed me when she was happy. When the circle was intact, and she trusted her Alphas with her life. *That* Nox—she would fight side-by-side with me, and simply knowing that I’ll never meet her, never know her—it’s heartbreaking.

Uaxin sits beside me, forcing Jeren to scoot out of the way.

Tilda stares at me, lots of questions behind those dark eyes. “First, I’m going to need a lot more backstory. Second, we’ve been cleared to land. Ceredes, if you don’t mind ...”

Ceredes handles the ship, piloting us down to the planet.

“I know what it’s like,” Uaxin’s voice is just above a whisper. “That kind of ... obsession.” She shivers. “I don’t talk about what happened.” She looks up, her eyes huge. “And I won’t,” she adds quickly. “I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to. But I know what Nox went through. Some of it.”

I take her hand. “I’m sorry.”

She squeezes my fingers. “What you need to understand is, no matter what, she’ll *never* feel safe again. Nothing can fix it. Not controlling the Sentients or the fleet or you or the entire



universe.” Her voice falters, and she looks down. “It’ll never stop.”

“I think that’s true for Nox.” I reach out and gently tip her chin up. “But not for you.”

“I hope you’re right,” she says, her eyes telling me she doesn’t believe it for a second.

*“When she meets her true Alpha mate, she’ll feel safe.”* Kyte sighs. *“I pray to the Pillars she finds them soon. There’s simply no comfort in all the galaxies like having the one your heart loves.”*

“If you’re trying to make me fall for you, it’s a little late for that.” I kiss his cheek.

“I’m just trying to keep you. We almost lost our minds when we realized you’d been taken.”

“Honestly,” Jeren says. “I think I went nuts there for a minute. I mean, we went up against an Unending. It was worth it, though, to get you back.” He shrugs. “But I can’t lose you like that again. Ever.”

“Maybe we should set up a Lana watch and take turns keeping an eye on her,” Ceredes calls from the ship’s cockpit.

“I’d like to take the first watch.” Jeren licks his lips, sending even more heat through me.

Kyte inhales sharply, then tightens his grip on me. “Your slick is like a drug.”

Uaxin rolls her eyes and joins Tilda, who seems to still be listening to Granterry intelligence channels.

“What is it?” I can tell from the look on Tilda’s face something is off.

“It’s not just Latrides. They’re striking dozens of planets, taking them over and converting their workforces to Sentient slaves or ...” She swallows hard. “Or worse.”

I’m pulled back to grim reality. “Just like Zujivan 7.”

Tilda nods. “Exactly.” She glances at Kyte. “The battle for Latrides is ongoing. I’ll let you know if I hear anything

specific.”

“Thank you.” He gives her a nod as the ship slows and lands.

The familiar buildings of the academy rise outside our view window, but it feels like I haven’t been here in ages.

As we step off the ship, students begin to trickle from the buildings, and then the trickle turns into a steady stream. They’re all speaking, whispering to each other about the circle and what it means that we’ve returned to campus.

The river becomes an ocean, students swarming and growing louder with some of them shouting questions at us, many about their homeworlds.

Ceredes yells to try and quiet them, his roar silencing those closest to him. But many still clamor. Until I raise my hand.

The crowd falls silent.

My Alphas line up at my back, and Ceredes lifts me until I can stand on his shoulders and look down at the students. Some eye me warily, and I catch a glimpse of Ilwen near the back, the pink terror somehow already set free after her failed attempts to rig our duel and kill me.

“The Sentient threat is real. High Commander Bartanz lied to all of us when he pretended otherwise.”

The crowd seems to deflate, some of them whispering to each other. “I have seen their forces and their leaders. They aren’t interested in diplomacy or allowing anyone to live in peace. What they want is total annihilation of the fleet. They will not stop until they meet that goal.”

“She’s lying!” Ilwen yells from the back, her shrill voice making it to me despite the distance. “You can’t trust her!”

“It doesn’t matter if you trust me or not. Latrides is under Sentient attack.”

A collective gasp rips through the crowd.

“Lies!” Ilwen yells.

“It’s not lies.” Tilda steps forward. “Granterries, you’ve heard the chatter. You know the truth.”

Some in the crowd nod.

“Glavarra is under attack,” one of them calls.

“Neonine has been taken, the deposits of liquid ionium there are being loaded onto Sentient transports,” another one yells.

“Seven fleet supply planets have stopped transmitting altogether.” Another Granterry steps forward. “The fleet presumes they’ve been taken and their fleet members killed. The populations are either being forced to labor for the Sentients or are killed.”

More murmurs, more unease. Professors appear from the academy, some of them immediately pulling out their comms, likely telling fleet brass what’s happening.

“I’ve seen this myself,” I yell. “I was on Zujivan 7. I saw what the Sentients did. They took fleet slaves and turned them into Sentient slaves. The ones who resisted were killed, and some of them eaten by the Sentients.”

“How?” Gavros, the rude Alpha pushes through the crowd. “How could you have seen it if you weren’t with the Sentients?”

“I’m not with them.”

Kyte throws up a barrier, blocking Gavros from getting any closer to me.

“Let him come.” I motion for Kyte to relax. “Please. We have to be together on this. All of us. The entire academy.”

Kyte grumbles but lets it fade.

“I’ll kill anyone who joins with the Sentients.” He fists his hands and looks up at me. “They killed my family, probably my sister.”

“I know, and I’m sorry.” I speak to him, keeping my voice loud enough for the students to hear. “I was kidnapped by the Sentients. Onin betrayed me to them, and they killed him.

They've been planning to take the fleet for a long time. Now, they're moving forward. But we can stop them. We can do so much. All of us. The fleet can be better, the galaxies can live in peace without resorting to slave labor. The Sentients can be defeated. But we have to work together. We have to stand as one. One voice. One sword. It's the only way forward. Because I've seen what the Sentients can do, what they *will* do." I take a deep breath and hope I'm making the right move. "They are legion, and their leader is—"

"That's enough!" High Commander Bartanz storms from the administration building, his mouth in a snarl.

Fleet soldiers close in on the crowd, all of them aiming right for us.

"Now?" Kyte smirks at me.

"Now." I nod as Ceredes lowers me to the ground.

A barrier pops to life as the fleet soldiers surround us.

"You are all dismissed. Get back to your classes!" Bartanz barks and storms to us. "Drop this barrier at once!"

"No." Kyte crosses his arms. "What are you doing to help Latrides? What about the other planets under Sentient attack?"

Bartanz's already-red face turns an even deeper shade of crimson. "I will not allow you to spread lies about—"

"No." My voice is carried on a wisp of blue-black power, and it ripples along the air throughout the entirety of academy grounds.

The students who were scattering now stop and turn to look.

"We are telling the truth. If we don't meet the Sentient threat now, we'll have no chance of winning this war. They are powerful, but we can be more so."

Bartanz stares at the darkness and the blue energies mixing together, his gaze lighting with recognition. "It's done then, is it? You've escaped and taken Nox's power with you?"

Another gasp from the onlookers, this one even louder. “Nox?” they all seem to say in whispers.

Bartanz sighs and draws his energy sword, a bright shield sparking to life in his off hand at the same time. “When I take her your head, she’ll give me the fleet as a gift.”

“Yes!” Ilwen shouts from somewhere in the crowd. “Kill her!”

I have to admit I’m gratified when a swarm of students take her down. She screams, but it gets quickly drowned out. Even so, the crowd backs away. Except Gavros. He stands strong as a few other students join him. Then more.

“I should’ve handled this from the start.” Bartanz bares his teeth. “I would’ve bred you and given Nox the heir she wanted. Not you. Weak and dependent on your pathetic Alphas.”

“Careful, you might hurt our feelings.” Kyte smirks and strengthens as Bartanz rushes forward and brandishes his sword. I place my hand on Kyte’s arm, and the barrier glows with dark life, spikes shooting out toward Bartanz.

Jeren phases dark as Ceredes stalks forward, his blade drawn.

“The circle is nothing compared to Nox.” Bartanz slices through the spike nearest to him, then launches himself into the air and dodges Jeren’s stealth strike.

This time when he strikes the barrier, the blow makes my teeth chatter. Ceredes steps to the glowing partition. “Let it go.”

“No.” Kyte pulls more power from me, fortifying the bubble around us.

“Yeah, let’s not do that,” Tilda calls from behind us. She and Uaxin are hunkered down inside the ship.

“I can take him.” Ceredes grips up on his sword.

Bartanz jumps high and comes down hard on the barrier, his blade slicing through it before it seals back up. Kyte winces, and I feel it too.

“You’re testing my patience.” Bartanz backs away, then darts sideways and grabs the nearest student by the throat. It’s Kilden, the hard-hided beta I used to spar with. He struggles in Bartanz’s grip, kicking as Bartanz lifts him into the air by his throat.

“Stop!” I scream and rush forward, but it’s too late. With nothing more than the flick of his wrist, Bartanz snaps Kilden’s neck.

Students panic and begin to scatter as Bartanz reaches for another. “Drop the barrier or watch your classmates die.” He lifts another student.

“Stop!” I swipe through the barrier, shattering it. “Let her go!”

Bartanz stares right at me as he breaks the student’s neck and tosses her body on top of Kilden’s. “Foolish Omega, now you’re mine.”



*R*ushing forward, I aim for Bartanz's back with my blade. A kill shot. But when I hit, the blade glances off.

Bartanz whirls and nails me with his glowing shield, sending me flying back into the fleeing students. The blow snaps something in one of my arms, but I get back to my feet and draw another blade.

*"He's got armor under his uniform,"* I send to Ceredes as he engages with the high commander.

*"Give me one of those."* Gavros motions to my blade.

I hand him the one in my palm and draw another. *"His body is shielded. Go for any exposed skin."*

*"I'll slit his throat."* Gavros circles around as Bartanz and Ceredes duel with all the sound and fury expected from a battle between two Alphas.

Kyte keeps Lana back even though I can sense both of them seething with the need to back Ceredes.

*"Don't,"* Ceredes barks down the bond. *"I won't risk you."*

Even with his command, I can tell Lana is on the verge of lashing out with her power. But I also feel her uncertainty, the fear about collateral damage. Her memories from Nox—all that destruction to win the Great Calamity—is clouding her mind.



Ceredes pulls on the circle, strengthening his strikes as he wages a full-out assault against Bartanz. But the high commander is fighting back with as much ferocity, the battle ranging all over the main square. I move closer, looking for the right time to strike to aid Ceredes. Gavros is creeping closer, too, his thick frame promising a powerful blow if he can get close enough.

Flipping over the circle fountain, Ceredes lands, then launches himself upward with a vicious slash along Bartanz's back. Like mine, his blade glances off. But now the high commander's uniform is tattered, revealing the metal encasing his torso.

"He's a Sentient!" Gavros roars and charges, dropping into a roll as Bartanz arcs out with his blade. Gavros lands a single slash across the high commander's leg before jumping away from what would have been a death stroke from Bartanz's energy blade.

Blood runs onto the stones beneath the high commander's feet.

"He's not all mech. We can take him down." Lana strides forward, closer to the raging duel between Ceredes and Bartanz.

"I don't care what he's made of. He dies now." Gavros stays on my right, his stance steady.

I want to keep her back, to tell Kyte to wrap her in a barrier of protection, but the resolve in Lana's heart keeps me from saying a word. Instead, I focus on Bartanz, on backing up Ceredes whenever possible. He's using all his concentration to bring down the high commander. I have to push down my urge to interfere. Trusting Ceredes is part of being in the circle.

"Never thought I'd see it."

I turn to find Master Rav at my other elbow, her black pike at the ready. Behind us are more teachers and students, rows of them forming, each of them armed.

A yell from Ceredes draws my attention back to the battle, and Ceredes backs away from Bartanz. One of Ceredes's arms

hangs useless at his side, his elbow sliced almost clean through.

Bartanz jumps forward and slams his shield into him, sending him flying into the base of the circle fountain, destroying it with his impact. Lana rushes to him, kneeling at his side as Kyte throws up a barrier around them. I feel when she heals him, her power seemingly limitless, deeper than the shadowy depths of a black hole.

“Now.” I phase dark and run to Bartanz. My knife slices through the skin at the back of his neck, but underneath, I meet metal again. I don’t stop my onslaught, though. Instead of slicing, I flip my blade in the air, catch it and shove it down into the back of his neck. A slight shock rushes through my palm as Bartanz whirls and tries to skewer me with his blade. But I’ve become the space between the stars, fading back as Gavros hurls his blade at him, embedding it in Bartanz’s upper back.

Blaster fire erupts from the students assembled along the edges of the square, most of the shots hitting Bartanz and sending him back step after step. Before long, his skin wears away, revealing a body of metal alloy. The shots have brought him to his knees, where he uses his arms to cover his head as the blitz keeps coming.

I glance at Lana as she finishes healing Ceredes. He gets to his feet and looks like he’s ready to charge Bartanz again, but Lana puts a hand to his chest. He stills and looks in her eyes, then gives a simple nod at the agreement we’ve all silently reached.

“Everyone back!” I yell. “Get into the academies now!” I turn to Master Rav. “Lana is going to use her power. Her *deep* power. She’s Nox’s daughter.”

Master Rav’s mouth opens in surprise, but she recovers quickly. “Everyone into the academies now!” she shouts and starts shooing the students away. The blaster fire dies down as Gavros helps herd them inside.

Bartanz rises to his feet again. He’s more metal than organic at this point. How long has he been a Sentient?

He ignites his sword once more and stalks toward Lana. “Enough playtime.”

“For once we agree.” She opens her palms and pulls darkness and light into a swirl of massive energy.

Bartanz slows his pace, but he keeps his sword at the ready. “You’ll kill everyone here. Is that what you want?” He glances at Ceredes, then me, and finally Kyte. “You’ll turn your circle to ash.”

“Just you.” She forms a thick bolt from the power and heaves it at him.

Bartanz jumps and rolls, and the bolt hits what’s left of the fountain, destroying it completely and leaving a crater where it stood. The high commander takes the opening and rushes forward, his blade moving in a punishing arc toward Lana and Ceredes.

I throw two blades as Kyte puts up another barrier. My knives hit home, but Bartanz doesn’t stop. He hacks at the barrier, each impact sending shattering streaks through it.

Without a word, Master Rav bursts forward and strikes Bartanz with her pole. He turns, and she swings so hard I think she might break her weapon. It connects with a deep thud, and Bartanz staggers back.

“This is for my students!” She thrusts the stick at him, striking him in the chest and causing streaks of energy to burst from his metal parts. Then she hits his shield so hard it explodes in a million red sparks and bits of shrapnel.

He yells and staggers back.

Spinning, she drops low and swipes his legs from beneath him. “And this is for me.” She jumps high and swings to bring the pike down on his head.

With a rough motion, he yanks one of my blades from his torso and throws it.

Master Rav tries to dodge, but it’s too late. The blade hits her in the gut, and the force of his throw sends her sailing back. She lands in a heap and doesn’t move.

“No!” Lana screams, and it’s more than just a sound. It’s like worlds colliding, and I swear I can feel the entire planet of Centari quiver beneath my feet. She rises, floating in the air, her eyes streaked with black and bright blue.

“Back up!” Kyte yells. “Everyone back!”

Gavros and I run to Master Rav and drag her away as Lana rises even farther, a torrent of energy whirling around her as she looks down on Bartanz with harsh judgment and unending vengeance.

“This ends now.” With only a thought, she sends an enormous bolt of pure power shoots toward Bartanz.

The high commander can’t move quickly enough to dodge it, and when it reaches him, he’s impaled on it and lifted off the ground.

Lana blows out a light breath, and Bartanz begins to spin as he claws at the spike embedded through his torso. He lets out a guttural scream, and his fingers fall to pieces as Lana’s darkness and light both hum to the same note. It vibrates down our bond, and I feel her pull. She’s taking our power, melding it with her own, and wielding something the universe has never seen before.

Gavros and I keep pulling Master Rav away as Ceredes and Kyte yank Uaxin and Tilda from the ship and send them sprinting toward the academy.

Bartanz spins faster, the spike wrapping around him now, forming a ring of pain as he finally slows to a stop. He coughs, blood and some sort of yellow fluid leaking from his mouth. “Nox will destroy you. I can’t wait for the moment she—”

Without so much as a twitch, Lana closes the ring, cutting Bartanz in half. His gory pieces fall to the ground with two loud thuds, and the lights fade from his eyes.

She screams, and this time it sends a crack running through the planet’s surface. Narrow and deep, it splits the courtyard and keeps going, the sounds of splintering and booms of rock breaking echoing from leagues away.

“Lana, reel it back in.” Kyte moves toward her, his hands up. “You can bring it back.”

She turns on him, her hair whipping on a phantom wind and her eyes still streaked with black and vivid blue.

“Come back to us.” Ceredes reaches toward her, his hand outstretched.

“*You can do this.*” I can barely reach her, her own darkness somehow enveloping her and hiding her from us to a degree. “*You control the power. It doesn’t control you. Remember?*”

We’re all three drained, Lana absorbing our power likely without even knowing it. I drop to my knees beside Master Rav, and Gavros helps me turn her over to inspect the wound on her abdomen.

“Shit.” Gavros pulls out his comms, opens a portal, and disappears.

Bastard.

Lana’s cyclone intensifies, and she turns her eyes upward. Opening her palms, she shoots a beam of power up into the sky and well into the universe beyond.

“Mother!” Her cry is heartrending, broken, and full of sorrow, the sort I can understand better than most.

“Your circle is here, Lana. Your *heart* is here.” Kyte yells over the din of her whirlwind, “Remember who you are!”

She takes a deep, heaving breath, then another. Her energy stops spinning so violently, and she slowly lowers to the ground.

Ceredes rushes to her, ignoring the pain inflicted by her destructive power. Each blow leaves a bloody stripe on his skin, but he doesn’t stop. He crosses through it and pulls her into his arms.

At contact, the wind dies down.

“*We love you, Lana.*” It’s all I can think, the only truth I can send down the bond to her.

*“I love you too.”* She’s exhausted, her power still thrumming in her veins, but the vessel—her body—worn out from serving as its conduit. She heals my busted arm without even touching me, sending a soothing touch along the break.

“Here.” Gavros pops through another portal and tosses down some bandages and medical gear. “We can fix this.”

Master Rav groans as Gavros reaches for the blade embedded in her.

“On three.” He pauses, then seems to think better of it and gestures for me to grab the hilt instead.

I grip it, and he snags for one of the medical devices that can seal and cauterize wounds. “On three.”

Master Rav groans and opens her eyes. “Not you two.” But her protest is weak. She’s lost a lot of blood. “I can meet the Pillars without your help.”

“Let me.” Lana drops to her knees beside me, Kyte and Ceredes at her back.

“You’ve done enough.” I kiss her forehead before going back to Master Rav.

“I owe her.” Lana leans down and puts her palm beside the blade. “Pull it out. I’ve got this.”

Kyte rests a hand on her shoulder, his usual golden sheen now a sickly yellow.

“Take a deep breath.” I grip the blade as Master Rav gasps, then breathes in.

With a hard wrench, I yank the blade free.

Lana presses her hands to the wound, her power glowing as Master Rav yells in pain. “I can do this.” Lana’s voice trembles, her body covered in a sheen of sweat. “Come on, Master Rav.”

Kyte’s hand falls away from Lana’s back, and Ceredes grabs him before he hits the ground. Lana’s pulled every last bit of healing power he possessed.

“There.” Lana drops her palms as Master Rav looks down, the fog of death no longer in her eyes.

“You saved—Lana!” Master Rav yells as Lana falls straight back.

I catch her in my arms, her skin cold and clammy, her eyes shut tight.

“She gave too much.” Master Rav sits up and wipes the blood from her mouth.

I try to get to my feet. I can’t. Whatever power I had, Lana used it. Black spots dance in my vision, but I don’t let her go.

Kyte and Ceredes lean on each other, the three of us huddled together around our Omega. Lana is alive. She’s here with her circle where she belongs. It’s all I want. Darkness takes me, and I let myself dream with Lana and my brothers, the four of us eternally bonded.

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“*I*’m all right.” Jeren sits up and swipes a hand down his face. “How’s Lana?”

“Still out.” I keep one of her hands in mine.

“She’s dreaming.” Kyte rests his fingertips at her temple. “Running through memories from her time with Nox.”

“So, nightmares?” I stroke my thumb along her inner wrist.

“No.” Kyte shakes his head slightly. “More like she’s trying to put it all together, to form a clear picture of where she should go from here.”

I can feel the whispers of her dreams, too. There’s confusion and clarity, both chasing each other in an endless loop. In the center, there’s loss. I feel that keenly, and it’s heightened by Kyte’s own emotions. He’s lost his mother and now his homeworld.

He meets my gaze, dark circles beneath his eyes. “We’re taking Latrides back.”

“I have no doubt of that.” I nod, and Jeren echoes my thoughts silently along the bond.

My attention drifts back to Lana, the same way it always has ever since I first saw her on earth. “She’s right to be searching for a way forward. Because right now, the fleet is divided, and no one knows about Nox. They have no idea how very real the danger is.”

“We have to tell them.” Kyte pulls his fingers from her temple. “We have to get the word out about what’s happening—the attacks, Bartanz, all of it.” He lies back and stares at the ceiling in our academy dorm.

It’s like we’re right back where we started, as if the entire universe hasn’t changed in the past few weeks. I can almost pretend that I’m late for class with Master Rav—but the reality is that she’s in medical right now, still recovering from either her wound or the massive jolt of power Lana sent through her body. No one can say for sure.

A portal opens, and I’m on my feet immediately, blade drawn.

Tilda walks in and closes the portal behind her. She raises an eyebrow at my sword then looks at Jeren, who stands behind her with knives out. “You know it has to be me. We’ve been over this. No other portal device will open here.”

“I know, but that doesn’t mean I always trust in tech.” Jeren sheathes his blades and returns to Lana.

“Still asleep?” Tilda’s mouth turns down into a frown as she starts unpacking a box of food and drinks onto my dresser.

“She’s not in danger. Her vitals are all intact. I think she’s just... Recharging, I guess.” Kyte sighs. “She has more power in her than her body can handle.”

“Well, campus is in an uproar. Half the students want to go to war. The other half don’t believe there’s a war. Oh, and they also want Lana to stand trial for killing Bartanz.”

I would laugh, but I prefer undiluted anger instead. “Who? Give me names.”

Tilda shakes her head. “It doesn’t matter. They’ll never get to her.” She gives us a pointed look. “Not through you, and if they *did* get her, they’d regret it.” She shivers and makes a sacred mark across her body, then returns to doling out the food.

“Are you afraid of her?” Kyte asks.

“Me?” Tilda makes a *pfft* noise. “No. But I *am* afraid of all that power you just mentioned. It could tear the fleet apart. Here.” She hands me a protein drink. “You all need to get your strength back for what comes next.”

“And what’s that?” Jeren asks and takes a drink from her as well.

“We have to unite the fleet.” Kyte rubs his forehead. “It’s the only way we can defeat the Sentients.”

“Exactly.” Tilda takes a large, toothy bite of a hunk of meat. “The Granterries are already behind you. We know what’s going on, and we’re ready to fight.”

“How do we convince the others?” I ask.

“We tell them the truth,” Lana says.

I turn to her and stroke her cheek as Kyte lets out a sigh of relief and Jeren grabs bread and cheese—her favorites—for her. “How are you feeling?”

“Good, actually.” She glances at Kyte. “Here.” She reaches out and touches him, a slight glow erupting where her fingertips graze his skin.

His pallor recedes, the golden sheen returning.

“Thank you for staying with me in my dreams. I could tell you were there.” She turns and kisses him softly.

He smiles, then kisses her back. “I’ll always be there.”

I didn’t realize how on edge I was, because the moment I heard Lana’s voice, something in me relaxed. My mate is alive and well. That is all I need. Well, that’s not entirely true. I need far more from her. Our circle is reformed, but I know it won’t sing with the same level of power until we’ve come together as one. Sharing her body with my brothers shouldn’t be at the forefront of my mind, but it is. She’s all I can think about, and claiming her physically will always be part of my obsession with my mate. Lana is everything to me, and I pray to the Pillars she feels the same way about her Alphas.

“*I do.*” She cuts me a warm glance, one that vibrates down my spine and lands between my legs. Pillars, she knows

exactly what she's doing. I adjust myself, and I see Jeren and Kyte doing the same.

Tilda picks a piece of gristle from between her sharp teeth. "Not to bust up your moment, but when you say 'tell them the truth' what do you mean? Because I'm pretty sure you've tried to tell them—and the Granterries have tried to tell them—but the fleet brass refuses to acknowledge what's really going on."

Lana sits up. "I'll just have to show them."

"The brass won't care if you—"

"Not the brass. I need to show the academy. If I can get them to understand what's happening, it will spread. Nobody's better at spreading information than a bunch of young, cocky assholes stuck in an interstellar boarding school."

Tilda cocks her head to the side.

"I mean, except Granterries of course. They're the *best*."

"Better." Tilda smiles. "Now how do you plan to make all these 'assholes' as you say, understand?"

"I'll show them directly. Irrefutable proof that if we don't face this head on, everything good that the fleet has built will be destroyed. *We* will be destroyed."

"Do you mean show them your memories?" Kyte asks.

"Mine and Nox's." She taps her temple. "They're in here. I replayed them over and over to try and find a way forward. If I can do it for me, then I'm certain we can have a movie night here at the academy."

"Movie night?" Jeren asks.

"You mean the big screens with the pictures on them?" I vaguely recall some of Lana's memories from earth. A screening room with people packed in to watch images on a wide view window.

"Exactly. Think of it like a drive-in." She looks at our blank faces, then says, "Just a big viewing screen, okay? One that serves truth instead of entertainment and chili dogs." Lana groans. "God, I'd kill for a chili dog."

My mate hungers, and I'm sitting here doing nothing. The shame alone might kill me. Jeren, Kyte, and I all rush to the dresser at the same time and grab more food, offering her fruits and meats as she eats the bread and cheese first, then the rest.

"I'm good, guys. Calm down," she says around a mouthful of food.

"Our mate should never go hungry." Kyte bows his head. "Please forgive us."

Lana laughs, then wipes the crumbs from her mouth. "It's fine. Alphas are so dramatic."

"Emotional, right?" Tilda asks, waggling her dark brows.

"Very." Lana's smile grows even bigger. "Just big emotional babies, aren't they, Tilda?"

"Careful, Omega." I push a protein drink into her hand, my gaze wandering to her lips as she drinks some of it down.

The temperature rises in the room as Lana licks the extra drink from the edge of the glass. "Mmm, good."

When her mating scent hits my nose, I get the urge to throw her to the bed and show her just what a bad little Omega she's being at the moment.

"*Then do it.*" She taunts me with another lick along her glass.

Kyte groans, and Jeren stares, rapt.

Tilda takes another huge bite of meat. "I'm down for memory viewing. Tell me what you need, and I'll get it set up." Then she sniffs the air. "Oh, um. I'll just be ... I'll figure it out on my own. Be ready to go onstage at sundown." She hurriedly backs away, opens a portal, and disappears through it.

My hunger for Lana is like no other, and she's baited me long enough.

"Come and get it." She smirks, then turns to try and leap from the bed.

I have her pinned before she can even get a foot on the floor. “You asked for this, sassy Omega.” I press my hard cock against the heat between her thighs as Jeren uses one of his blades to expertly slice her top away. “Now it’s yours.”

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I'm ready for them. All of them. It feels like a century has passed since we've last been together. And maybe that's true, given the way Nox showed me what happened 300 years ago. Her life seems to have somehow overlaid my own—like a harsh harmony playing along with my own melody. I've lived more than two lifetimes, far more than I ever thought possible.

“No more thinking.” Ceredes kisses me hungrily, his roughness only outdone by his heat. He expertly masters my tongue as he pins me beneath him.

Jeren and Kyte strip away my clothes, cutting and pulling the threads away until only my skin remains.

“I've missed this.” Jeren kisses my foot, up my calf, and then to my thigh.

Kyte does the same on the other side as Ceredes takes my breath away, kissing me with a vengeance. I don't think I can ever live without this, and shame starts to bloom in my heart when I realize how close I was to believing Nox's lies—including what she said about the circle holding me back.

“None of that.” Kyte nips at my shoulder. “You were a prisoner of war. Nothing you did was wrong.”

“You have to remember that Nox was waiting for you, Lana.” Jeren kisses my ear. “She was prepared, no doubt had a ton of intel from Onin alone. She knew what buttons to push to sway you to her side.”



“But you didn’t fall for it.” Ceredes pulls back and looks down into my eyes. “You were strong. You made your own choice.”

“You’re my choice.” My eyes water when I say it, when I realize how much love I’d almost turned away from. “You’re what I want. Our circle.”

“Then us you shall have.” Kyte laughs low and sultry as he pulls my chin to the side and kisses me. Ceredes bites my throat, then slides his tongue down to my breast. Capturing one nipple in his mouth, he lashes it with his tongue as I moan against Kyte’s lips. He takes the sound, claiming me with his tongue as Jeren repeats his caresses up my other leg.

Ceredes kisses lower until he’s pressing his mouth to my mound. Then he goes lower and runs the broad side of his tongue along my slit.

I shiver with pleasure.

All three of them back away and strip, their gazes on mine as inch after inch of muscled flesh are revealed. They’re so beautiful.

“Not as beautiful as you, my love.” Jeren reaches down and grips his shaft.

I lick my lips and sit up. When I grip him, he groans. And when I take him in my mouth, his hips jerk forward.

Ceredes puts a hand in my hair, guiding me forward as I suck Jeren’s thick cock. “Suck, Lana. Hollow out your cheeks.”

Jeren tenses, his body rigid as his knot pulses. I run my fingers along it, feeling the warm skin. He lets out another low moan and pulls me away. “I spill in you, Lana. Not in your mouth. In your cunt.”

I can’t deny the tingle that suffuses my skin at his filthy words, and I have to confess I want the same. I want all three of my Alphas inside me.

Jeren eases me back and climbs on top of me. “Like this, Lana.” He pushes in with a hard, sure thrust.

I moan at the invasion, at the sweet feeling of being full to almost bursting.

He moves in and out with ease. “Soaked for me.” He bites my lower lip as I cling to him. “Your slick feels so good.”

With a smooth movement, he rolls and puts me on top of him. Ceredes and Kyte set on me, one going for my breasts and the other my mouth.

I can barely breathe as I rock back and forth on Jeren’s cock. He looks up at me, darkness in his eyes, and we become the space between the stars together, pulsing to the same universal rhythm as we move together.

Ceredes runs his hand down my ass and between my cheeks. When he strokes my asshole, I can’t believe the amount of pleasure that lights up inside me.

“She likes it.” Kyte smirks and bites my nipple, then sucks hard as Jeren grips my hips and thrusts inside me.

Ceredes runs two fingers lower and pulls some of my slick up, coating my hole with it as he positions himself behind me. “This might hurt, little Omega.” He ropes my hair in his fist and pulls, arching me for Jeren and Kyte. “But I think you like the pain.”

“Only from you,” I breathe.

He presses his head between my cheeks, and I freeze.

“You won’t fit.” I lean forward and look back at him. “No way.”

Jeren strokes my clit, and I pull my attention back to him. His touch is like a little bolt of electricity lighting up all my pleasure circuits, because my hips begin to move again.

Ceredes increases his pressure as Kyte takes my chin and pulls my mouth to his. His kiss is deep and emotional, the worry for his planet still weighing heavily inside him, but not even that can diminish our bond.

Jeren’s fingers stroke me just right, and he thrusts to a perfect rhythm. I arch, my mind going blank as I come hard,

my body shuddering as waves of delicious pleasure cascade through me. Jeren groans, his fingers digging into my hips.

The pressure at my back increases, and my orgasm flies higher as Ceredes pushes his head inside my tight hole. I can't breathe, can't think, can only vibrate to the frequency of my circle, feeling everything all at once—my pleasure, Jeren's desperation for release, Ceredes's determination, and Kyte's enduring love.

My toes curl as Ceredes pulls back and pushes deeper.

"I can't—" I moan as Jeren thrusts up again, his control on the edge as he leans up and sucks one of my nipples into his mouth.

"You can." Ceredes grips my waist and pushes deeper.

I'm so full, my body adjusting as Ceredes patiently pulls back and moves even deeper. It's like when my power first came into being. There's too much. I'm going to burst at the seams.

"You can take us all, Lana." Kyte whispers against my lips. "It's what we were made for."

Ceredes pulls my hair, arching me back and moving even deeper.

A sting of pain erupts, but Kyte kisses it away as Ceredes embeds himself in me.

"That's it." Jeren grunts as he surges upward.

They both move, my body relaxing as they take over. Soon, I'm moving with them, and I can feel my release rushing through me.

"I'm going to—"

"Come for me, Lana." Ceredes bites my shoulder, holding me in place like an animal. "I want to feel it."

That's all it takes. I cry out, and a shower of black and blue sparks rains down around us as my power fizzles and burns. I'm burning with it, my heart and soul consumed with delight

as I uncoil again and again, letting everything go, letting my Alphas take it from me so I can be weightless in their arms.

When it finally subsides, Ceredes kisses his bite on my shoulder.

I put my palms on Jeren's chest as they both stroke me from the inside.

"I don't know how I've held out this long." Jeren grits his teeth.

"Kyte." I reach for him. "Come here. I want you in my mouth."

Kyte's groan is almost feral as he stands on the bed in front of me, just behind Jeren's head. "Can you take—"

I lick the head of his cock.

He jolts, then grips my hair as I suck him into my mouth. When I criss-cross my tongue along his shaft, his hold tightens, and he starts moving my head to the same rhythm as Ceredes and Jeren.

I keep my eyes on him as I lick and suck, and when I reach for his knot, he pulls my hair to the edge of pain.

"You're going to make me spill on your lips." He rocks his hips, fucking my mouth.

"I want to see that." Ceredes is still thrusting into my ass, his strokes steady as he makes me his.

*"I want all of you to come at the same time. I want to be filled with you."*

All three of them groan, and my power swirls around us in a silky haze of pleasure and desire. The circle is healing, reforming stronger than before. I can feel it.

"All I can feel is you." Kyte strokes my cheek as I grip the base of his shaft with one hand.

When Ceredes reaches around and finds my clit, I know I won't last long. I suck Kyte's cock, pleasuring him as my thighs start to shake. Riding Jeren, I grind down on him as Ceredes fucks me harder, his strokes taking on his

characteristic violence. I want it all. It feels so good, yet needing release verges on pain. It's the highest I've ever been.

*"I need all of you."* I tongue Kyte's head, then take him deeper as my body dances to the tune of my Alphas.

"My love, come. Let us ease you." Jeren surges upward as he flicks my clit just right.

I shatter, letting go completely. My body is nothing more than a conduit for pleasure, and I revel in my release. It's the crescendo of sensation, and each little touch, each movement only sends me to new levels. I come hard, my vision going black as I lock my lips around Kyte's cock. I feel him harden even more, and then I taste him.

All three of them come hard, their grunts the sound of a sexy symphony. Jeren's knot keeps him locked inside me, and then I feel Ceredes. He's locked in as well, both of them pumping their seed into me as my greedy pussy laps it up. I want it all, every last drop. My orgasm demands it, rolling through me in what seems to be endless waves. I moan around Kyte's cock, my body still locked in the throes of pleasure.

*This is the circle.*

*This is perfection.*

*And I never want it to end.*

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She slumbers, her dreams light and airy. I can't stop touching her, my fingers in her hair, trailing down her back, lingering on her soft skin. Ceredes and Jeren are much the same.

"We wore her out," Ceredes says with typical Alpha satisfaction.

"She needed to recharge. The circle needed it, too."

"It's stronger now. The bond." Jeren loops a lock of her hair around his finger. "Like a ring that binds me in all the right ways."

Ceredes, one hand on Lana's thigh, stares at the ceiling. "Here I was thinking I'd never mate, or if I did, it would be well into my career upfleet. I'm a fool." He looks at Lana with so much love in his eyes. "A lucky fool."

I grab a piece of the ruined bodice Lana was wearing. The leather has a feeling to it, a darkness. It's as if Nox left her fingerprints all over it the same way she tried to leave her mark on Lana.

I toss it aside and settle back against the headboard. "We have a fight ahead of us."

Ceredes snorts. "Understatement."

"Nox is a legend for a reason." Jeren shakes his head. "Her power is unmatched."

“It *was*,” I say. “But Lana is more than Nox. She can do so much with us by her side.”

“But can she kill her own mother?” Ceredes voices the question that’s been haunting all of us. “Because that’s what it’s going to come down to. I have no doubt in my mind that Nox will strike down Lana if given even a sliver of a chance. Lana’s the only one who could even attempt to stand against her, so she has to take her out if she wants to ensure her reign over the galaxies.” Ceredes states the grim facts like the military tactician he is.

“Lana isn’t a killer.” Jeren shakes his head. “That’s not in her nature.”

“It wasn’t in Nox’s nature either,” I remind him. “But she changed. She had to. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have survived the Great Calamity or her time with Byran.”

I’ve intentionally stowed away any thoughts on Byran’s actions. Some things are too close to home to examine fully. An Alpha going rogue and kidnapping his mate, the one he has sworn to love and protect—it will never sit right with me. Not to mention the fact that he turned on his brothers. He killed Eo and almost ended Krenallus. It turns my stomach. But maybe that’s because I fear it. After all, wasn’t their circle strong? Wasn’t it called into being by the Pillars to be a force of good? If that’s so—and I believe it is—how did it go so wrong?

“We’ve seen Byran’s mistake.” Jeren reads my thoughts. “It doesn’t mean we’re doomed to repeat it.”

“But what led to it?” I open that forbidden box of Nox’s memory and run through it again.

“Thirst for power.” Ceredes shrugs. “Byran saw Nox’s innate strength, and he wanted to claim it for himself. I understand it.”

Jeren and I both snap our attention to him.

He holds his hands up. “I said I *understand* it. I didn’t say I *agree* with it.”

He’s right. The need for control is one that every being feels in one way or another.



“Look,” Ceredes says. “Every Bellatian is taught from a young age to find a way to win. Thirst for power is pretty much ingrained in our being from the moment we leave our mother’s womb, so I feel like I get why Byran did what he did more than most. I think he broke the circle because he wanted Nox for himself, and more than that, he wanted to be able to use her to gain more power over the galaxies. In his mind, he twisted that around to something like ‘if I do these horrible things, I’ll be powerful enough to protect Nox.’”

“When really he’s the one she needed protection from.” Lana rolls onto her side, her eyes luminous even in the low light.

“Yes.” I kiss her forehead. “But you don’t have to worry about that.”

“That’s because if any of you even so much as think of breaking the circle, I’ll kick your ass.” She nips at my chin.

Ceredes laughs and lies beside her, pulling her against his chest. “You’re no match for me, little Omega.”

She giggles and starts pinching his sides. “I could best you with one hand tied behind my back.”

“Hands tied behind your back? I’m interested.” He runs a hand down to her ass and squeezes.

“Hey!” She wriggles against him, her slick scenting the air.

Her Alphas are immediately at attention.

“No!” She squeals as Jeren cups one of her breasts and kisses her neck. “We have to focus!”

“I’m focused.” I watch as Jeren squeezes her nipple.

“On the Sentients.” She pushes Ceredes, and her power sparks bright, sending him scooting back along the bed. Hopping to her feet, she takes a deep breath.

“You aren’t fooling us, my love.” Jeren licks his lips. “I can taste you on the air.”

“Stop that!” She waves a finger at us. “We have serious shit to do.”

“I take pleasuring you very seriously.” I look squarely at her panties.

“No.” She groans and swipes her hand at me.

“Fine.” I sigh. “I suppose we do have a war to fight.”

“Exactly.” She plops down next to me and leans against me.

“What’s the plan?” I rest my chin on her head.

“First, we let the academy know what’s really going on. Then, we head to Latrides.”

“I like this plan.” I can’t put into words the pain of knowing your homeland had been invaded by the enemy.

“We take the fight to them. We’ll have the fleet, and we can beat back the Sentients.”

“What about Nox?” Ceredes rubs her feet. “Do you think you can—”

“I’m going to try to reach her. The old her. She’s in there, guys. I know she’s still in there. Even after everything that’s happened to her, everything she’s done. She *has* to be there.”

“She’s given no indication of that,” Jeren reminds her gently.

“She has.” Lana takes his hand.

“When?” he asks.

“Krenallus.”

He blinks, and he’s not the only one feeling confusion. Ceredes and I exchange a bewildered look.

“She kept him prisoner for centuries. Tortured him. Forced him to give her a child.” Ceredes shakes his head. “How is any of that indicative of the old Nox?”

“She never killed him.” Lana glances at me. “She couldn’t do it. He told me that she would come and just talk to him sometimes. About the old times before Byran turned on them. He made it seem as if she sounded ... wistful. As if she knew exactly how much she had lost, as if she mourned the old Nox.

She was a hero, you know? She really was. That hero never died.”

“Maybe it didn’t die, but it’s no longer good, Lana,” Jeren says. “Nox is strong, make no mistake. But she doesn’t want to help anyone but herself.”

“If that were 100 percent true, she would’ve killed Krenallus. Keeping him alive was her way of keeping the past alive. Keeping her old self alive. If she was truly beyond hope, she would’ve killed him and never looked back. Hell, she would’ve killed *me*! If I’m truly the only real threat to her power, she should’ve killed me right off. Instead, she tried to convince me to join her.”

“That’s because she created you as a pawn. Someone she could siphon power from and then wield it against the fleet.” I don’t want to speak harshly, but I can’t follow Lana’s logic on this point. Nox is a monster.

She leans harder against me. “But she hasn’t always been a monster. And there’s no reason she can’t come back.”

“I think ...” Jeren begins carefully. “I think you want her to somehow redeem herself when her actions have put her beyond redemption—”

“No.” Lana stands. “No one’s beyond redemption. Not even Nox.”

“I don’t know—”

She whirls on him. “What if it was me?”

“What?” he asks.

“What if it was me? What if I was the one who’d done terrible things? Would you try to save me?”

“You would never—”

“But what if I *did*?” She throws her hands up. “I know for a fact that none of you would give up on me. Not ever.”

Ceredes nods. “That’s true.”

I have to agree, and so does Jeren.

Lana gives a triumphant smile. “See?”

“I see you.” I rise and pull her into my arms. “And I believe in you. I’ll follow your lead. If you want to try to save her, I’ll help you. But ...”

“But?” she asks.

“But if she hurts you, we won’t hold back,” Ceredes finishes the thought.

“I’ll finish her before I’d ever let harm come to you.” Jeren flips a blade into the air and catches it. “I won’t compromise on that.”

“I’d never ask you to. I just want you to give me a chance to end this without more bloodshed. That’s all I’m—”

The portal flickers to life, and I immediately throw up a barrier. It’s stronger now. I’ve recovered fully, and the circle has been imbued with even more energy. Lana is the battery, charging it with her range of power.

Tilda steps through and gives us a bored look as Jeren and Ceredes stow their blades, and I drop the barrier. “We’ve been over this portal thing, guys. It’s always me.”

“Can’t be too careful.” Jeren eases back.

“Are we ready?” Lana asks.

“Everything’s set up in the grand ballroom. And I’ve even managed to add a surprise, thanks to the Granterry network.”

“What’s that?” I raise a brow.

“We’ve hacked the fleet network so that the signal will be boosted across all fleet channels.”

I feel the very second the nerves hit Lana full force.

“Y-you mean the entire fleet will hear me talking?” She swallows hard.

“Yes. And you can project your memories like we talked about. They’ll be able to see everything as long as they’re near a viewing screen. We’ll broadcast throughout the galaxies to

every ship, every planet, every being with access to a fleet channel.”

Lana sits heavily and grips the footboard. “That’s ... that’s great, Tilda.”

“Hey, don’t get stage fright now. We need a leader.” Tilda pats Lana’s hair. “You’re the one.”

“Haven’t you faced down one of the deadliest Sentient commanders and torn him apart? Absolutely zero fear in you, you destroyed Bartanz. Isn’t that you, Lana? But now you’re scared to speak in front of the fleet?”

“Fighting and talking are two very different things.” She wrings her hands together. “And they’ll be able to see me?” She lets out a big breath. “Maybe this was a bad idea.”

“Nope. It’s a good one. You’re on in fifteen. See you in the grand ballroom.” Tilda opens the portal and steps out before Lana can voice a protest.

“The entire fleet?” Lana rubs her eyes. “Crap!” She jumps up and runs to the bathing room. “Oh no!” She looks in the mirror and reaches for a hairbrush. “I look like I just—”

“Had an epic mating with three Alphas?” Jeren appears in the mirror behind her. “Yes, yes you do.”

“Oh my god, it’s like a rat’s nest!” She tries to work the brush through her hair.

“Here, let me.” I take it from her as Jeren flips on the shower. “Just breathe, Lana.” I ease the brush along her strands, careful not to brush too close to her cute little horns. After wrestling with a few tangles, I have it cleared out.

“Just a quick shower. I’ll do the work.” Jeren already soaped up a sponge and is waiting like a spider for Lana to get in with him.

“No funny business.” Lana whips her hair up high on her head and steps in.

“Never.” Jeren massages the soap along her skin and presses his hard cock against her backside in the process.

Ceredes walks in, naked as well, and gets in with them. “Let me.” He kneels behind her and massages the soap along her legs.

“I don’t need all this help just to—”

I strip quickly and get in with them.

“You, too?” She looks up at me, the amusement in her eyes at war with her wry tone.

“I’m a helper. What can I say?” I kneel in front of her. Leaning forward I kiss her sweet cunt.

She doesn’t protest, so I kiss it again.

She groans and reaches down, running her fingers through my hair. “This is not the time.”

“I know,” I say as I grab her calf and put it over my shoulder, opening her up to me. “But you need to relax.”

“Help her, brother.” Ceredes slides his finger down her ass as I take a long lick of her wetness.

I dig in deeper, tonguing her tight hole as Jeren claims her mouth, kissing her as he cups her breasts.

“Bad ... influence,” she says breathlessly.

When Ceredes spreads her cheeks and licks her asshole, she jolts. We don’t stop, all of us giving her pleasure as she moans. Her body is warm and wet, and her mating scent fills my mouth and nose. I want to bathe in it. I lap up her juices, sucking her skin as Ceredes tongues her from behind.

When I press two fingers inside her, she rolls her hips and grinds her clit against me.

“She needs release.” Jeren sucks her nipple into his mouth. “Give it to her.”

“Please.” Her voice is a sexy plea, one I can’t refuse.

I curl my fingers, gripping her slick cunt from the inside as I focus on her clit. Her hips move faster, and she’s practically riding my face as I pleasure her. Ceredes pushes a finger inside her, stroking her where she wants it. When I suck her clit

between my teeth and lightly bite down, she comes on a low cry.

Her body tenses and unfurls over and over as I feel her cunt constrict around my fingers. I don't let up on her clit, giving her more and more sensation as she floats higher. I feel her through the bond—her arousal and her delicious release.

When she finally takes a deep breath again, her body lax, I kiss her cunt once more and then get to my feet.

“Oh my god.” She leans on me, and I hold her up as Jeren and Ceredes finish washing her beautiful body.

“We've never really talked about deities, have we? Does this mean I'm your god now?” I kiss her forehead.

She laughs and looks up at me. “I already told you, you're a bad influence.”

“I can't be both?”

“Hey!” She looks down as Ceredes, with a particularly wicked gleam in his blue eyes, rubs her cunt with his soapy sponge.

“I'm just trying to get you clean. What?” he asks innocently.

“You know what!” She snatches the sponge from him. “Out, all of you!” She steps back and points to the door, her luscious body covered with soapy bubbles and love bites.

Jeren gives it another go: “But we were just trying to help you with—”

“I said *out!*” She stomps her foot, a little cyclone of energy rising from it.

We do as she says, though we grumble on the way out the door about how deeply unfair her decree is.

She doesn't relent. Alone in the shower, she mutters to herself about ‘bossy Alphas’, ‘sexy Alphas’, ‘stupid Alphas’, and ‘fucking hot Alphas’ in turn.

“I want a taste, too. It's only fair, really. You think she'll let us back in?” Jeren stares at the door.

“Stay out of here, you jerks!” she bellows.

We three laugh and get dressed, content with the knowledge that our mate is sated yet still desirous of us. All of us.

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“*I*’ve never been particularly good at public speaking. Actually, I can’t think of a time when I’ve ever really spoken in public.” I wring my hands as my Alphas walk with me to the ballroom. The last time I was there, Bartanz was carrying me around the dance floor like I was nothing more than a doll he wanted to add to his collection.

The building gives me bad vibes, but that’s only because of the memory. I shouldn’t blame the architecture for one asshole’s behavior.

“It’s not like you’re going to be able to see everyone you’re talking to. Most fleet members will be sitting at their stations, minding their business. Then you’ll pop up on their comms. No big deal.” Jeren holds my elbow lightly. “You’ll do fine. It’s just telling the truth.”

My stomach starts to bubble. “In front of thousands, maybe even millions.”

“By last count, several untold billions.” Kyte chimes in.

“I’d rather die,” Uaxin whispers as she and Tilda catch up to us.

“Thanks,” I say wryly.

“Sorry, that’s just me.” She shrugs. “I think you’ll do great.”

“You will,” Tilda agrees, then glances at the ballroom entrance.

I follow her line of sight, then stop.

“Whoa.” Ceredes bumps against my back, then wraps his arm around me, holding me steady.

“Why are there so many people?” I swallow hard and take in the crowd milling around just inside the ballroom doors. There are more students here now than were even at the ball. *Holy shit.*

“They all want to hear it straight from you.” Tilda takes my other elbow and leads me forward despite my reticence. “I guess at this point you and the circle are pretty much the most popular beings in the galaxies. I mean, you defeated Bartanz, who turned out to be a traitorous monster hiding right under our noses. You survived being kidnapped by the Sentients. And, on top of that, you’re the centering Omega for the first circle in 300 years.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I was already quite popular,” Kyte calls over his shoulder. He’s moved up front, pushing the students apart with a barrier so that I can walk through them to the stage.

“You can do this.” Ceredes keeps his hand on my lower back as I climb the steps.

Students are all around us, visible through Kyte’s light barrier. I suddenly feel like an animal in a zoo. Maybe a lion that people want to hear roar but fear to get close to, lest I gnash my teeth and go for their throats.

Tilda leans over, her mouth close to my ear. “Keep in mind the Sentients will be listening in, too. Nox will hear every word. While you’re speaking, I’ll be running interference just in case the fleet or the Sentients try to jam the channels and block you out. So don’t worry, your message is going to be heard one way or another.”

I’m betting on my mother listening in. This little address is for the benefit of the fleet, but it’s also aimed right for her heart. I have to believe she still has one somewhere beneath the Sentient mech.

“You can do this. We’re with you.” Ceredes helps me up to the podium, and when I turn to face the crowd, that’s when my knees get wobbly. He keeps his hand at my lower back. Jeren is right there with him, and Kyte’s on my other side. I’m safe up here despite the multitude of eyes turned my way.

The crowd is buzzing at first but falls silent. It’s a sea of fleet blues and grays, and mixed in are professors here and there. The entire academy. All of them waiting for me.

“*Lead them,*” Kyte whispers across my mind.

I can’t lead anyone, much less the fleet. “*That’s not what this is about.*”

“*That’s what this has always been about,*” he counsels gently.

Tilda steps up and fiddles with some controls on what looks like some sort of a square microphone. A video feed of me pops up on a small screen in front of me, and Tilda taps her ear to let me know the audio is being broadcast as well.

It’s time. I can either step up or I can run away. A small part of me wants to take that latter option. But I know Nox would find me, and before that, she’d hurt everyone I care about. I won’t let that happen.

“Hello.” I hear my voice reverberating throughout campus and wince at the sound.

Uaxin rushes up, hooks something over my ear, then backs away. The echo is gone now, and I feel as if I’m speaking in a small room.

“Sorry about that.” I don’t even have to raise my voice. My Alphas are close beside me, and I draw strength from them.

“My name is Lana, and I’m a student here at the academy. I know many of you from classes. And to the ones who aren’t here but are listening all the same, I want to say hello. You may have heard about the circle already, and let’s be honest, you may have heard plenty of lies. I want you to know that everything I say here today is the truth. It’s one that I’ve lived.

I've seen the power of the circle." I sweep my gaze across the students. "And I've seen the power of the Sentients firsthand."

The crowd shifts uncomfortably, whispers erupting.

"I was kidnapped from Latrides, betrayed by Onin and handed over to the Sentients."

Now there are full-on gasps, and then silence throughout the room.

"But I want to say this now—I don't blame Onin. He did what he thought was right. You see, he has a son, a child somewhere out in the galaxies. Onin gave his life for that child. I didn't understand why he did it at first. After all, the Sentients killed his mate. Why would he help them?"

I can feel curiosity from my Alphas. But I suppose I haven't really had time to go over my tangled mess of thoughts on this topic with them.

I continue, "But he wasn't helping them by turning me over. What he was doing was showing me who I really am."

"Who are you, fliggy?" Ilwen yells from somewhere in the crowd.

I can already see Gavros pushing through the students toward her. "Leave her," I tell him.

He stands down.

I finally pin her with my gaze and say my truth with a steady voice. "I'm Lana, centering Omega of the circle and daughter of Krenallus and the Sentient leader Nox."

Her eyes go wide as shock pulses through the crowd. A cacophony of voices all rise at once, questions shouted and disbelief voiced from every corner.

I wait, then I wait more. Finally, Ceredes gets tired of the din and yells, "Shut it!" with the sort of fury I'd expect from him. The room quiets, though plenty of students are still whispering furtively.

"You heard me correctly. My lineage is no longer in doubt, at least not for me. And Nox is, in fact, the current leader of

the Sentients. They are attacking Latrides and several other planets as we stand here right now. But hearing me say it and seeing it are two different things. So, I've enlisted help from the Granterries and a few others to show you exactly what I mean." I motion for Tilda.

She steps forward, and I feel Kyte right behind me.

"You ready?" he asks.

"Let's do it." I take a shaking breath as he presses his fingers to my temples.

"I've got you," he whispers as he casts back through my memories and pulls on the thread that starts to unravel with Onin on Latrides.

I go silent, letting my mind tell the story while my heart soars with fervent hope that the fleet will listen to me. But there's another hope, too—that Nox will see what I see and that she will turn away from her dark path.

If the Pillars are real, I send that prayer to them.

And then I wait for the crowd to react.

When Kyte finally releases his hold on my memory and I'm able to see the crowd clearly again, they stare up at me. Some of them are crying, others simply gape at me with wonder. Ilwen is fuming, so at least something is perfectly normal.

"This is the truth. Nox and the Sentients will crush the galaxies in their grip. Her power is almost unbreakable." I've reached the part where I have to sell it, to convince them that despite the odds, we can win this war. "But we can fight her. We have to. The Sentients will take everything we know and turn it into something monstrous. I've seen them do it." I take a deep breath. "But we also have to repair the fleet."

No one yells or shouts me down. I pause, expecting at least Ilwen to tell me I'm full of shit. But no one makes a sound. Maybe showing them what happened on Zujivan 7 was just what I needed. Tilda and Kyte are brilliant.

“The fleet is not the overwhelming force for good that we’ve all believed. There *is* good. Together, we can salvage it and make it even better. But we have to deal with the bad. The rot. The aggression. The needless loss of life and liberty. We *cannot* rely on slave labor to make our lives comfortable. The fleet is perfectly capable of supporting itself with the free peoples of the galaxies. If we want to be a positive force, we have to start right here.” I tap my chest. “We have to change. We *have* to do better. If we don’t, we’re no better than the Sentients.”

The crowd prickles at my words, but I stand behind what I’m saying.

“It won’t be easy, but it’s the only way we’re going to come together and win this war. Because, make no mistake, we are at war. Right now, planets throughout the galaxies are being invaded by Sentient warriors. Bartanz placed an embargo on all information and reports from fleet ships and outposts concerning the attacks.” I point to Tilda.

She turns to her console and hits keys faster than I can follow. My face disappears from the broadcast, and in its place are hundreds of distress signals and messages from ships and planets under fleet control.

“The Granterries have now freed the lines of communication. This is the truth Bartanz didn’t want you to see.” I step back and watch as images appear, Sentient ships landing as troops pour from them, bodies on the ground, people fighting back and falling to Sentient weapons. “They began their full-scale assault only hours ago.”

“That’s my homeworld!” someone yells and takes off running through the crowd.

“This will be all of our homeworlds if we don’t fight to stop it.” I raise my voice, thundering through the comms. “We have to fight. The circle is ready to fight with all of you to stop this needless loss of life. We can end the Sentient threat and reform the fleet. Our future can be bright if we claim it right now. I promise you, my Alphas and I will be at the front lines, and the circle *will not break*.”

“May the circle never break!” someone yells.

Others join in.

And then, like a war cry, everyone in the ballroom is repeating it, some beating on their chests as they yell and whoop. The comms echo it back, the fleet set alight with the simple words that mean everything to me.

I step back into the strong hands of Ceredes and Jeren as Kyte reaches to turn off the flood of images.

The screen blinks, then goes black.

But then a voice cuts through all the cheers.

“Daughter.”

I freeze as Nox’s visage appears on the screen.

Tilda is frantically working at her console, but she can’t do anything to stop the transmission.

“I listened to your speech with interest, and I very much enjoyed the trip back through your memories.” The image zooms out, and legions of Sentients appear behind her. “It had passion. It really did. But I—” She sweeps her hand in front of her, black sparks flying from her fingertips. “I have the numbers.”

I feel the blood drain from my face. My mouth goes dry, my ears hot, my hands cold. It’s as if Nox is creeping around my soul, her darkness dancing with mine in a lethal embrace.

“For the rest of you, you may think this is the time for heroes.” She tsks. “But the fleet will surrender, or I will kill every last one of you. The circle will die by my hand. By the way, I’d like to share my own recording, one that is quite recent.” Her vicious tone cuts through skin and sinew.

The screen switches to an area of space, an enormous fleet cruiser stationed near a dark moon above a yellow planet.

Tilda gasps.

“Nox found it.” Kyte grits his teeth.



“Found what?” I stare at the ship, disbelief setting in at how immense it is. It rivals the moon, the entire craft big enough to house a city. A big one.

“The Scion. This can’t be real.” Ceredes stares at the image. “No one can find that ship.”

“It’s fleet command. That cruiser is untraceable, practically invisible to tech. The Scion hides in deep space, far from the fleet territories. It’s the hub of fleet power. All the top commanders are—” Tilda cries out when several Sentient vessels appear from the nothingness of space and begin firing at the same time. But the fleet ship seems to absorb the energy blasts. It’s impervious to attack, not even a ripple along its surface. Untouched, it opens fire, hitting the Sentient ships and destroying them with ease.

Tilda lets out a sigh of relief, but my heart tightens, foreboding deep in my gut.

That’s when I see the sleek silver gunship rise from the back of the pock-marked moon. Nox.

I can see it play out before it even happens. The Sentient forces were a distraction. The real danger is closing fast, and when a vicious bolt of black energy streaks from Nox’s ship, it cuts through the fleet cruiser as if it’s made of nothing more than fluff. The ship fractures, blasting apart as explosions rip through the hull and destroy the gigantic cruiser’s integrity. More Sentient ships appear and fire in an endless barrage, finishing it off until nothing is left but twisted metal and bits of junk that float aimlessly in the dark.

The entire ballroom is filled with screams and disbelief. Some students burst into tears, as if they knew of loved ones on that ship. I feel it all like a gut punch.

Nox was already two steps ahead. She has been this whole time.

“This is only the beginning of the new order we’ll make together.” Nox reappears, her gaze boring into me. “Surrender now to prevent further bloodshed.”

“We will *not* surrender!” I yell back, my own energy spinning around me, the dark and the light surging to my surface.

Nox smirks. “Oh, my foolish little Lana. I’ve missed you since you’ve been gone, and I can’t tell you how much I’m looking forward to seeing you again.” Her mechanical eye glints as she raises her energy blade. “Soon.”

The screen cuts out, and it’s as if all the air has gone from the room. Jeren keeps me steady as Kyte takes my hand and tries to lead me from the podium.

I follow him.

Until I stop.

Until I dig in my heels and back up until the entire ballroom is once again focused on me. My Alphas instinctively form a circle around me.

“We can beat them.” I don’t need anything to amplify my voice. It booms through the ballroom, into the academy grounds, and even farther out into Centari. Lifting my hand skyward, I keep my gaze leveled on the students, on the ones who will have to fight this battle alongside me.

I pull power from within myself as my Alphas each place their hands on me. “*May the circle never break!*” I yell as a beam of pure energy shoots upward, shattering the ballroom overhead and blasting through the atmosphere and into space beyond. I feel it as it coalesces out there in the dark, folding in on itself and spiraling until a shining mass begins to spin.

But still my power flows, ringing the mass with blue light and creating a new star.

“*We are the end and the beginning.*” Jeren holds onto me. “*The space between the stars.*”

“Forever,” Kyte says reverently.

When I close my fist, the power stops, and I lower my shaking hand. Ceredes keeps his grip on my waist as I look again at the crowd.

In one voice, even stronger than before, through tears and fear and sorrow, they cry, "*May the circle never break!*"

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“*W*hat are you going to name it?” Uaxin asks as Lana lies back in our bed.

“Huh?” She’s tired. Not drained, though. She still pulses with power, but her body is on overload.

“The star. You made a star.” Tilda shakes her head. “I can’t believe it.”

“We should call it Lana.” I stroke my hand down her side as she closes her eyes.

“And the Scion ...” Tilda goes quiet, then flips open her comms and fires off some messages.

A sharp knock at the door has everyone in the room on alert.

“Master Rav.” Her voice comes through.

I keep stroking Lana as Ceredes opens the door.

“We’ve cleared the main study hall for a command center.” She doesn’t seem as if she was gravely injured only hours ago. “We haven’t heard anything from fleet command since ...”

“We’re on our own,” Ceredes fills in. “Are you sure you should be up?”

“Stop gawking. I’m fine.” She waves a hand through the air. “We need to get a plan going, and we need it now. Fighters from all over the galaxies are converging here. Soon, we’ll be bursting at the seams.”

“I have plenty of ideas on where and how to strike.” Ceredes grabs his jacket.

“The Granterry network is lit up right now. We have tons of intel pouring in. I can sift it and figure out some strategic advantages.” Tilda goes to Master Rav’s side. “If you’ll have me.”

“We’ll take any expertise we can get.” Master Rav leans on the doorframe. “The council is in disarray after what happened with Bartanz and now fleet command, and the only thing holding them together is Master Harlan—not his forte, of course. He’s more of a bruiser.”

Kyte gives a wry grin. “I’m glad I picked him.”

“So am I,” Master Rav agrees. “Hopefully, he’ll get them all in line and help us rally the fleet, what’s left of it.”

“We’ll need them. We have to take back Latrides.” Kyte grabs his jacket, too, then glances at Lana.

“I’ve got her.” I lie next to her. “You two go with Master Rav. I’ll watch over her.”

“You sure?” Kyte rests his hand on her hip.

“I’m so tired.” Lana blinks slowly. “And having to listen to Ceredes give a lesson on battle plans would knock me right out.”

“*That’s my Omega.*” I nuzzle against her ear.

“Smart mouth.” Ceredes leans down and gives her a hard kiss. “We’ll be back soon.”

“Give me a little break, and then I’ll be ready to ‘have fun storming the castle’.” Lana nods almost drunkenly.

“As you say.” Kyte kisses the back of her hand, then Master Rav and the rest leave via portal.

“Is there a castle?” I ask and pull her against me.

“Hmm?”

“You said ‘have fun storming the castle.’”

She snorts a little laugh. “It’s from a movie. *The Princess Bride*.”

“What’s it about?”

“Revenge. True love. Betrayal. Battle.”

“Sounds like something I’d enjoy.”

“I definitely think we’re going to have a real movie night once this whole war thing is over.” She snuggles closer, and I can feel her eyelashes tickle against my throat.

Her thoughts are unsettled, the image of her mother at the forefront of her mind.

“She’s coming for me.” She says it with such sadness that I instinctively hold her more tightly.

“I know.” I can’t deny the truth. Nox won’t rest until Lana is either under her thumb or dead, neither of which I’ll allow to happen.

“I can’t stop her from killing. I wasn’t able to save those miners, or fleet command, or Latrides, and now I won’t be able to save all the people she’ll kill just to get to me.” She takes a deep, shuddering breath. “It’s like I can feel her bloodlust, her need for control. She didn’t have a say in her life for so long that she started to crave it until it twisted her into what she is now. That’s how Krenallus put it. But the scariest part is—I understand it.”

I kiss her forehead. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. When I was a kid and my mom would ...” She sighs. “Hit me. I had zero control. I *hated* it. But that’s what it all boiled down to—control. Same for Nox. Now, she hangs onto it with a death grip, because when she didn’t have it, really bad things happened.”

“I get it.”

“I know you do,” she says softly and tilts her head back, meeting my gaze. “I know your childhood just like you know mine.”

“I wasn’t able to stop what happened to me after my mother died, but I can’t let that turn me into a monster. I will never let that rule me.” I spent years pushing those memories down, down, down. But Lana knows them. She’s seen me, all of me.

“That hurt little boy became one of the strongest males I’ve ever known.” She rests her palm on my cheek.

“And that hurt little girl is a badass who can create stars from her fingertips.” I turn and kiss her palm.

“Will it be enough?” Her voice is barely a whisper, her eyes turning haunted. “Will I be enough to stop her?”

“*We* will be enough.” I move closer and brush my lips against hers. “The circle will save us all.” I kiss her, feeling her worry and replacing it with desire.

She runs her fingers through my short hair and returns my embrace, her tongue dancing with mine. Ceredes and Kyte are here, too, their presence with us despite their absence.

She pulls back. “I shouldn’t want this. Not right now. Not when—”

I kiss her again, silencing her as I reach for the hem of her top. I strip it off with ease, then remove her bra. Cupping her breasts, I hold her on top of me as she reaches between us and unfastens my pants.

When she frees my cock and I feel the heat of her palm, I groan. “More.”

“I need more, too.” She bites my lower lip.

I quickly strip her the rest of the way and place her back on top of me.

With a slide of her hips, she positions herself over me and slides down. The feeling of her slick along my shaft makes my knot ache, and I grip her hips tightly as she begins to move. Sucking one of her nipples into my mouth, I bite down lightly.

She moans, her body crackling with energy. I feel the pull from her, the way she’s recharging herself from me. It’s erotic, our bodies so in sync that we work together effortlessly.



“I need you.” I pull her down to me, claiming her mouth again as I thrust up, feeling every clench of her muscles around me as she grinds against me.

Her smooth skin is like silk beneath my palms, and I run my hands all over her. Down her back, to her ass, and back up again. Gripping a handful of her hair, I pull her away and watch as her breasts bounce with our steady rhythm. She’s irresistible. Every part of her calls to me.

Placing both of her hands on my chest, she leverages her body to get me even deeper inside her. I stroke the outside of her thighs as she works me, setting me on fire with each movement of her hips.

My knot tightens, my release on the edge. But I won’t spill my seed inside her yet. Not until she’s writhing with pleasure, so much she can barely stand it.

“What do you need from me, Lana?” I reach farther and grip her ass, slamming her down on me as I thrust upward. The resounding smack of our skin only heightens my arousal. The sounds and smells of our mating are their own aphrodisiac.

“Just you.” She arches and comes down hard on me, squeezing my cock inside her, then grinding down on me.

I lick my thumb and place it on her clit.

She jolts.

I flick along the little nub.

She jolts again.

When I press down and slide side to side along it, she gasps. Her hips lock, and she throws her head back on a keen cry. Her muscles tighten, squeezing me deeply inside her, and when she starts to come, I feel it through the bond like a shot of some illicit drug.

My knot tightens even more, and then I fall into the pool of pleasure with her. I harden and shoot, my come spilling inside her, coating her with me as my hypersensitive knot expands and locks me in.

She gasps again, her orgasm expanding, the room around us sparkling with dark and light, our power becoming one again and again as she gives and takes, her body so responsive to mine.

I feel every little sizzle of pleasure, every shot of delicious heat that wraps itself around her, and I know she can feel mine. Together, bound in ecstasy, we float and fly in the sureness of our love, the strength of our bond.

When the peak is behind us, our bodies still joined and swimming in warmth, she lies on my chest.

“So. Good.” She gets out between quick breaths.

“I couldn’t agree more.” I thrust up lightly, sending a pulse of pleasure through both of us.

She moans and digs her nails into my biceps.

We come down slowly, both of us just breathing each other in.

“So I can’t get pregnant?”

The question hits me hard, like an energy blast, and I can feel Kyte and Ceredes stop whatever they’re doing over in fleet command.

“Why so shocked?” She lifts and looks at me.

“It’s just ... I just ...” I sputter.

“*You want children?*” Kyte asks.

“Of course.” She smiles. “Don’t you?”

“I ...” I can’t even form words to show her how unbelievably ecstatic the thought makes me.

“*I’d be honored,*” Ceredes intones down the bond.

“Just think. We could have little shadows running around, or maybe some golden-skinned cuties, or some fighters with hearts of gold.” She rests her cheek on my chest. “When this war is over and done and we’ve figured out our lives in this big universe, we could have a little family. Children who will

always be loved, always cared for, always protected.” She sighs softly. “It sounds like a dream, doesn’t it?”

I never dared to hope for children. Not me, a Larenian nobody from the Flotilla. Not me, the boy who’d been sold to the highest bidder after my mother died. Not me, the boy who’d been used over and over again by vicious males until I managed to escape. But here I am with a beautiful Omega in my arms talking to me about starting a family.

“Don’t do that.” She reaches up and softly wipes a tear away from the corner of my eye. “You aren’t what happened to you any more than I am. You’re strong and brave, and I’m so proud of you.” She kisses me. “I love all of you, Jeren, and I want to have children with you one day.”

I kiss her back, fighting away the tears and simply reveling in the joy she’s brought me. I don’t deserve her, but I will never let her go. I can’t. She’s part of me now, the most cherished part of all.

“*Our children would be the best fighters in the universe.*” I can hear Ceredes’s smirk.

“*And the prettiest,*” Kyte adds.

I’m definitely loving the idea of having a child within the circle. “Just think—a shadow, Bellatian, Calarian noble, and a Palatian—”

“I don’t know anything about Palatians. Just that I’m one.” Lana frowns.

“*They’re a myth. Well, we thought they were a myth,*” Kyte corrects himself. “*The fleet studied plenty of races from the Rift areas, and there were texts written hundreds of years ago about a planet with a highly evolved species capable of taking dark matter and bending it to their will to create great cities and even rework the surface of their world. The texts would say that they eventually became drunk on their power, which led to their own destruction. The academy always took it as a cautionary tale about the nature of power more than an actual study, but perhaps the academy was looking at it all wrong.*”

“I think it was.” Lana forms a dark orb in one palm. “I think the Palatians were real. Is it possible that Nox and I are the last ones?”

“Possible.” I kiss her forehead. “Plenty of races flourish and die all over the galaxies for reasons only the Pillars can know.”

“That’s so sad.” She lets the dark matter dissipate.

“I’m sorry.” I stroke her hair as she settles on top of me again.

*“I think the Bellatian traits would win out over the Calarian or Larenoan. I mean, I’m the strongest, after all.”* Ceredes is already lost in a daydream of a champion child, winning battles and hearts with an easy smile and muscles for days.

Lana scrunches her nose. “What do you mean, ‘win out’? Are you saying we could have a child that has DNA from all of us?”

“DNA?” Ceredes asks.

*“It’s one of the smallest life elements the humans have discovered to explain their makeup. There are others, of course, but humans focus on DNA,”* Kyte explains. *“But yes, Lana, once you’re off your suppressants, the circle means that our children will have traits from all of us, as long as the mating is ... shared.”*

Lana smiles against me. “You mean all three of you have to finish inside me?”

Ceredes groans. *“I’m trying to plan a series of counter-attacks against the Sentients over here, and now all my blood has rushed far away from my brain.”*

*“Strengthening the circle is war planning, brother. Wouldn’t you agree?”* Kyte points out.

*“We shouldn’t keep you. Lana needs rest.”* I kiss her crown and thrust up again, my cock thickening as my knot begins to ache, needing another release inside her.

“Yes, rest.” She laughs and licks one of my nipples, sending a current of tension through me.

“*This is torture,*” Kyte complains.

“*That’s it,*” Ceredes growls, his discipline at odds with his desire. “*We’re coming back to the room for a half hour, and a half hour only. The war will just have to wait.*”

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*\*Three hours later\**

“We built off what Ceredes already set out for us.” Gavros points to a glowing map of the nearest galaxies.

Planets currently under attack are in red, with the epicenter clearly marked as Latrides. The bulk of Sentient forces are raining down hell on Kyte’s home. I take his hand.

“My people are strong.” He stares at the multitude of ships massed in the Ghost Planet’s orbit. “We will survive this.”

“What are we—”

“Move aside.” A familiar voice barrels through the room.

“Master Harlan.” Ceredes turns and greets his former professor.

“It’s Councilor Harlan now.” Kyte grips the large male’s forearm in greeting.

“Don’t rub it in.” Harlan smirks, his eyes roving over the battle map glowing brightly in the center of the room. “Looks like you’ve already got a head start. Fleet brass is on its way here.” His eyes turn somber. “What’s left of it, anyway. Should arrive any moment.” He turns to me. “After your speech, fleet traffic is headed in only one direction.”

“Here.” Kyte flips through map after map of fleet routes, each of them lit up with cruisers and gunships making their way to Centari.

“At least we don’t have to worry about anyone betraying our location.” Tilda listens to fleet chatter, moving through the channels at a frantic pace. “Everyone knows right where we are. We can only hope the shield over the academy will hold.”

“It won’t,” Harlan says grimly. “Not if the Sentients come at it with everything they’ve got.”

“Then we better be ready.” I turn to Tilda and gently pull the comms from her ear. “Hey, have you heard from your sister?”

“No.” She doesn’t meet my gaze. “But that doesn’t mean anything. Just because she was upfleet doesn’t mean she was on the Scion.”

I pull her in for a hug.

She’s stiff at first, then relaxes against me. “Look, she’s a Granterry. She’s probably gone silent to get some excellent intel on Sentient movements. I’m not worried ...” She squeezes me harder. “Not too much, anyway.”

“Good.” I pull back. “If anyone can slip out of the Sentient’s grasp, it’s definitely a Granterry.”

She smiles at that. “See? You’ve already learned the most important lesson the academy can teach you—Granterries are badass.”

“You taught me that.”

She shrugs. “Okay, back to work. This recon isn’t going to do itself.” She clicks her earpiece back in and listens.

Master Harlan and Ceredes are already deep in conversation about battle strategies while Kyte tries to work up an estimate on when the bulk of our forces will be in place.

“We’ll need more.” Ceredes leans back and pulls up another galaxy, this time giving us a view of Sentient forces. “We’re badly outnumbered. Maybe five to one. They’ve been massing in the Rift, far beyond any spot where the fleet could keep track. More and more are pouring out into the galaxies as we speak.” He zooms in to light signatures firing from a



particular spot along the roiling darkness of what I've started thinking of as the "Grand Canyon of Space."

"Grand Canyon of Space?" Jeren is behind me, like always. "That's a good one."

"The Rift is more concise, but I like the descriptive name better."

"Me too." He phases into darkness, still haunting my steps. It used to irk me, but now I don't think I feel at ease unless my loving shadow is at my back.

"We have the circle." Ceredes turns to me. "It'll have to be enough."

"We can muster others." Jeren comes back into view. "We have to try."

"Who?" Kyte looks up.

"I'll contact my mother. She's moved up quite a bit on the Bellatian homeworld ever since the circle first formed. She may be able to send more fighters."

"That would help. I'll contact my homeworld as well." Master Harlan flips open his comms. "Still won't be enough."

"What about the Flotilla?" Jeren asks.

Master Harlan looks up sharply. "The Flotilla?"

"It's the largest ship in the galaxies, and it has plenty of guns. No one has ever attacked the Flotilla and survived." Kyte makes a *hmmm* sound. "If they could find a wormhole big enough, the Flotilla could be here in a matter of hours. I'd need to do some calculations on that, though." He pulls up a console and works on mathematics that I could never hope to understand.

"But the Flotilla is run by outlaws. Only out for themselves. They'd never fight for the fleet." Master Harlan turns to Jeren. "Would they?"

"They're more than just outlaws." Ceredes steps forward. "They're a people looking for their homeworld, and they'll fight for their future if it's threatened."

The surge of pride I feel in Jeren's heart is enough to make me melt. I remember a time, not so long ago, that Ceredes would have never stepped up to defend Jeren. But now, because of the circle, their brotherhood is solid. It's beautiful. My eyes water a little, though I try to blink it away.

Master Harlan's eyebrows are at his hairline. "I, uh—"

"I'll open a direct channel with one of my contacts." Jeren reaches for his comms, accidentally pulls a knife instead, then stows it and manages to snag the comms on the second try.

"Never change." I kiss his cheek.

He gives me a wicked half smile as he fires off a message. "The Flotilla may not be just outlaws, but it doesn't suffer fools. If you want them to fight for the fleet, you're going to have to offer something in return. Something big."

"Isn't being free of a Sentient takeover enough incentive?" Master Harlan asks.

"Absolutely not." Jeren shakes his head.

"Did you hear the part where I said no one's ever been able to take the Flotilla?" Kyte is still doing calculations that make my head spin. "They're a nation unto themselves. We have to deal with them like one." Kyte stops his work and looks at Harlan. "I chose you for the council because you solve problems. You're honest and straightforward—almost to a fault. Now that the Scion is gone, you're the closest thing we have to High Commander. You have to start thinking more diplomatically when the situation calls for it. Like now." He returns to his console.

Silence drops around us as everyone in earshot stares at Kyte with something verging on disbelief.

"I think that was the most regal, intelligent thing you've ever said." I run my finger along Kyte's horn, sending a pleasant shiver through him.

"Keep it up, Omega, and I'll show you just how regal I can look while on top of you." He adjusts himself.

There's the cocky noble I'm used to.

Master Harlan clears his throat. “So, ah, I think we’ll have to offer them credits.”

“No.” Jeren crosses his arms over his chest. “We have plenty of those.”

“Then what does the Flotilla want?”

“A home of their own.” I say what’s perfectly obvious.

Master Harlan turns that particular shade of reddish-purple that I remember well. “An entire planet?”

Jeren shoots me a wry smile. “That’s a good start.”

“A start?” Master Harlan bellows.

“Commander Regalus and Lieutenant Lir just landed.” Master Rav hurries in, her moves almost frantic.

“What? Are they bad?” I turn and plant my feet, ready for a fight if that’s what’s coming.

“No, not at all. Stand down.” She stands beside me. “Commander Regalus taught me combat at the academy a long, long time ago. I haven’t seen her in years.”

“Oh, so you’re nervous.”

“What?” She shifts nervously from foot to foot. “Not at all.”

Master Harlan straightens his spine even more than usual, the bones crackling.

Jeren and I exchange a look, then he receives a message on his comms and walks away to speak into it.

“—in preparation for a direct attack as soon as possible. Where is the circle? We should attach a security detail to them at all times.” An imposing woman with white hair so bright it almost glows strides in, her black clothing formfitting and showing off a multitude of blades along with a wicked-looking curved sword at her side.

“Master—I mean, Commander Regalus.” Master Rav walks forward to greet her.

Master Regalus appraises her. “And you are?”

Master Rav gives nothing away, but I can tell that simple question hurts.

“Rav—Master Rav now. I teach combat at the academy. You taught me.”

Commander Regalus appraises Master Rav with a critical eye, then leans forward. “Did I do a good job?”

In a flash of movement, Master Rav has pulled her black pole from her back and is swinging it at Commander Regalus.

Ceredes captures me in his arms and pulls me back as the two begin to duel. They dance away from each other’s blows, keeping their movements controlled and focused on each other.

“Is this normal?” I whisper.

“For two combat instructors? Definitely,” Ceredes says with open admiration. “It’s like a special hello, I suppose.”

“Look at them go.” Kyte spares a glance before returning to his console.

Even Master Harlan cracks a smile as the women strike, parry, fall back and move with amazing grace and speed. I follow their movements, completely in awe of the way they move. I can fight now, but what they’re doing is nothing short of art. It’s like the way Jeren and Ceredes fight. So much style and deadly substance all at once.

“Enough!” Commander Regalus yells and stows her silver sword.

Master Rav immediately stands straight and sheathes her pole.

“I think I’ve taught you rather well, Master Rav.” Commander Regalus, a twinkle in her light eyes, gives a small bow.

Master Rav returns it with one of her own, and then the two start talking as if they weren’t locked in a death match only seconds ago.

“I still have so much to learn.” I sigh.

Commander Regalus turns to me, her shrewd eyes missing nothing. “Now’s not the time for that. Lana, I presume?” She graces me with another short bow. “We need to talk.”

Suddenly, the thought of being one on one with this killing machine makes me feel a bit uneasy. “Ceredes is in charge of the battle plans, so—”

Commander Regalus holds up a hand. “Not battle plans. We need to talk about killing your mother.”

“Oh.” I swallow hard. “That.”

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Lana follows Commander Regalus from the study hall and into a side chamber.

The three of us make to follow her, but she sends down the bond, *“Let me hear her out. I’m safe.”*

I keep walking. *“Are you, though? We thought Bartanz was —”*

*“A total asshole who you’d never leave me alone with even if your life depended on it?”* she chimes in.

*“Well, yes.”* I can’t argue that.

*“She’s okay. Master Rav trusts her. So does Master Harlan. Neither of them ever turned their back on Bartanz. But with Regalus, I feel their confidence in her.”*

I stop, then put my hand out to keep Jeren from strolling right past me. *“We’ll stay out, but if I get so much as a hint that you’re in trouble—”*

*“I know, jeez. Stow the big bad Alpha stuff until we’re alone together, okay?”*

*“Sassy Omega.”*

I can’t see her do the finger thing that humans do as an insult, but I can certainly feel it. She’ll pay for it later. The thought warms me.

*“Come on. She knows what she’s doing. We should probably also keep in mind that she could turn even*

Commander Regalus to dust if she got pissed off enough.”  
Jeren stares at the door.

He’s right. I need to focus on strategy. So many lives depend on it. We’re already at such a huge disadvantage. Bartanz sold us all out. He even told Nox the location of the Scion, or at least how to find it. That information is only at the very highest level. Lower ranking members of the council don’t even know the Scion’s movements. If he gave that up, what else does Nox know about fleet defenses?

“Everything.” Kyte sits back and wedges his fingers together over his stomach. “We have to go on the assumption that everything we know, Nox knows. Pillars, she probably knows more. It’s not as if any of us were ever in the inner circle. You and Jeren have never even seen what upfleet is like.”

Kyte’s the closest thing we have to a council and fleet insider. His mother’s position made him privy to plenty of things I never knew. Even so, the map has completely changed now. The fleet is, as it stands, leaderless. Nox cut the head off the snake.

“She cut the entire front half away. The Scion held some of the greatest minds and military strategists the fleet has ever known.”

Tilda snuffles.

“I’m sorry, Tilda.” Kyte sends out a tendril toward her, just a brush of golden comfort, then pulls it back. “I’m sending prayers to the Pillars your sister is all right.”

“It’s okay.” She swipes at her eyes. “She’ll be fine. We’ll figure all that out later. Right now, we have to fight. That’s what I’m focused on.” She pulls up some star maps on her console with yellow indicators of wormhole travel. “They’re all converging here. The Sentients are sending the big guns right to our door.” Tilda swipes through information on her screen. “There’s a steady stream of fleet and Sentient ships hitting markers throughout the galaxies, all funneling right to Centari.”



“It’s Nox. She’s coming for Lana. We have to be ready.” I didn’t expect to fight an all-out war when I was still in the academy, literally, but this is it. We are at ground zero for the biggest battle the galaxies have seen since the Great Calamity.

“Two councilors just landed.” Master Harlan pockets his comms. “The rest are unaccounted for. I’ll go greet them, see what I can learn.” He strides out past several students who make a path for him. He may not be a professor here anymore, but he still strikes fear all the same.

“Any word from your Flotilla contact?” I ask Jeren.

“Only acknowledgement that the message has been received and is being discussed. Your mother?”

I check my comms. It’s silent. Which is odd. My mother should’ve answered by now. I stow that worry away right along with all the others. If anyone can handle herself in battle, it’s Wreytha. She’s a Bellatian of great worth. She’ll get back to me when she can.

I spin back toward the command center to find Gavros staring at us, right along with a contingent of academy Alphas. All of them are looking to the circle. To me.

“We need orders.” Gavros stands firm, the others at his back. There are more behind them, Alphas, Omegas, and Betas ready to fight.

Even the fleet brass, Lieutenant Lir, looks at me. He’s young, possibly only a few years out of the academy. If he and Regalus are all that’s left of fleet leadership, then the rest of us have to step up.

“You’ve got this.” Kyte rises and stands at my elbow.

Jeren’s at my other side, his piercing gaze searching for weakness or perhaps anything to indicate a traitor in our midst. It’s certainly possible. “*Lead.*” It’s the only word he thinks to me.

Ever since we left the Flotilla, we’ve been hovering on the edge of this war. Now, we jump in.

“Gavros, you’re our best flyer after Lana.”

He doesn't even dispute it. Just gives a quick nod. He's out for blood, and that's a quality I can respect.

"You're in charge of defensive squadron—"

"Kila. I want to call it Kila, after my sister." The emotion in his voice feels like a wound.

"*Pillars.*" Kyte swears silently at the weight of grief rippling off the rough Alpha. "*Do we know if she's alive?*" he asks.

"*He still doesn't know, but the Sentients killed his parents and took her,*" Jeren answers.

I point at Gavros. "Kila it is. I want you to choose 100 squads to fly in formations of five ships each. The space above the academy and Centari City are your territory. Anything comes through a wormhole without prior clearance, burn it out of the sky."

"Got it." He gives a salute, then taps one of the Betas behind him and barrels from the study hall barking out names.

"I pity anyone who enters that bit of space," Kyte says.

"I'm ready." Uaxin steps forward, her hair pulled all the way back in a tight ponytail. "I can fly."

I want to check with Lana, but I send a feeler to her down the bond. She's dealing with something heavy right now. It feels like she's laboring under the weight of the universe. But she's safe, and she's dealing with it. I leave her alone for the time being.

"Uaxin, I want you to assemble the same setup. Take the bigger ships in the back docking bays. They're slower, but their weapons can reach farther. You'll patrol the rest of the planet's orbit. Make sweeps. Anything shows up unannounced —"

"I'll burn it out of the sky." She salutes and turns on her heel, marching through the crowd with the spirit of a fighter.

Kyte stands. "All of you skilled in healing, we need you in the infirmary. I also need squads to set up triage locations in the city as well as at fortified locations around the planet."

The crowd shifts, several students lining up in front of Kyte. More students and fleet members pour through the doors, all their eyes turned to us. The entire academy is stepping up.

Jeren materializes in the crowd. “Dirty fighters, hand to hand specialists, with me. You know who you are. If they make it to the academy, we’re going to have to fight street to street, room to room. That’s where we come in.”

Students move, several of them massing near Jeren.

When I see Ilwen in the group, I immediately send Jeren a warning.

He stalks through the recruits and stops in front of her. “I know you fight dirty, Omega, but I don’t want you on my squad.”

“I can help.” She puts her hands on her hips.

“No. I don’t have time for whatever drama you’re trying to bring. We’re at war. This isn’t some game.” Jeren glares at her. “You’ll never get to Lana. Ceredes will never love you.”

She glances at me. Tears glisten in her eyes, and her chin wobbles. “I know.”

“Then you also know why I don’t want you on my team.” Jeren turns away from her. “I want squads for academy patrols. Fleet security forces will be here soon, and there are already some on campus. That’s not what we are. We’re the fighters the enemy won’t see coming. We—”

“I can fight!” Ilwen yells.

“Ilwen, step back.” Jeren bristles.

“Wait.” Kyte peers at the Omega.

Jeren lifts a brow in his direction.

“*She’s suffering.*”

She wipes her tears on her sleeve. “My dad was on the Scion.”

The room goes quiet.

“He never told me where he was stationed, but I got a message from him when he ... when he—” She chokes on a sob.

Her friend Justa shuffles forward and wraps an arm around her shoulders. “It’s true. Her father pre-recorded a message that would trigger if he were ...”

Ilwen cries harder.

*Pillars.* Despite wanting to kill her, I still feel pity for Ilwen. Oddly, I know that’s what Lana would want.

Justa’s face is drawn. “He confirmed what you and Lana have been saying.”

“It’s real. All of it. I didn’t realize. I thought Lana was just being a bratty Omega, you know? Trying to steal my Alpha. I couldn’t see past it. I’m so sorry.” She looks around, her eyes searching through us. “Tell Lana I’m sorry I didn’t believe her. I didn’t want to believe her, b-but now my dad—” Ilwen wails and turns her face into Justa’s shoulder and cries.

Even though it pains me, I tell Jeren, “*We have to let her fight. It’s a matter of honor for her now.*”

“*Sure, but she’s mental,*” he deadpans.

“Lana would forgive her.” Kyte walks to her. “But that doesn’t mean we will forget.”

She keeps blubbering, but Jeren relents and allows her to stand with the other fighters. “Let’s go to the sparring room. I need to assess strengths.” He opens a portal, and the group hurriedly files out, Ilwen the last to go.

“You two owe me for this.” Jeren gives us a pointed glare before walking out and snapping the portal shut.

“She isn’t messing around this time,” Kyte says almost sadly. “That time of her life is done.”

The remaining students replenish the ranks ahead of me and fill the space anew.

“Can you teach basic battle formations?” I ask Lieutenant Lir.

“Certainly.” He steps forward.

“Good. You’re in charge of regimental combat. Any new fleet soldiers that arrive, direct them to take position around the academy.” I call out various specialties—reconnaissance, strategy, snipers, energy wielders—anything and everything that can help us. Once I’ve divvied up everyone who’s come to fight, I have a strong contingent in the command center with me and many more out in the courtyard and forests practicing battle formations.

“How much time do we have?” I ask Tilda.

“The first Sentient ships are massing at a wormhole only a solar system away. Granterry network believes they’re awaiting orders from Nox.”

“No time at all.” I grab my comms device and contact Councilor Harlan. “We need access to every weapon the academy has. The armory beneath the courtyard—how do we access it?”

I hear him talking to someone in the background. “That armory can only be used if the council votes unanimously that it’s required for academy defense.” He grumbles the last part. “Apparently.”

“I think the councilors who are here can agree we need them.”

More background talking.

“We don’t have time for a vote, Harlan. This is life or death.”

“I am aware!” he roars back, sounding more like his old self. “If you two councilors don’t get your heads on straight, we’re all going to die here! So let’s put it to a vote. Everyone who wants to die here, raise your hand.”

I only wish I could see the looks on the other councilors’ faces.

“All right, so no one wants to die here. Good. Now, raise your hand if you want to live to see another day.”

I can imagine two hands shooting up in a hurry.

“Glad we’re on the same page. Now give me the code so we can unlock the armory!”

I close the comms. Harlan has that handled, and I trust he’ll have every fighter armed to the teeth within the hour.

“Sir.” Xeril, one of the Alphas I would’ve considered something of a friend before the circle, points to the map. “The ship that destroyed the Scion just arrived at the mass of Sentient ships one system over.”

“They’re trying to take Centari before we can muster any sort of response.” Strategically, it’s a solid plan. But Nox didn’t count on having the entire academy armed and ready for the assault. “How many fleet ships have entered the space around Centari?”

“Thousands. They’re leaving the corridor over the academy clear—Gavros is making sure of it—and Uaxin is directing them to spread out to form an umbrella over the city and across the planet.” He reaches over and marks some darker areas farther out in space. “These are the open spaces where a wormhole could appear. No chokepoints, no way to stop an influx of ships all at once.”

“We’ll have to rely on our pilots at that—”

The doors behind me finally open and Lana walks out, Commander Regalus at her back. My mate looks strained but still hopeful.

Regalus gives Lana a much deeper bow than I expected before turning and striding out. “Where’s this armory? I want to see the toys we have to work with.”

“What happened in there?” I pull her into my arms, her body alight with warmth and power.

“We just talked. She sort of laid it out for me. Then I laid it out for her.” Lana wraps her arms around my waist. “I gave her my list of demands.”

“Demands?” I kiss her hair, my wily Omega always surprising me. “Do tell.”

“Nothing crazy. I just told her that we would fight this war and win it, but things are going to change. I meant everything I said in my address to the fleet. We will no longer take advantage of those weaker than us. That’s done.”

“How did she take it?”

She shrugs. “Not so great at first.”

“But she agreed?”

“She had to.”

“How so?” I can’t stop my smirk, given that I already have an idea of how my beloved enforced her will on the current ranking member of the fleet.

“I just told her that if the fleet wouldn’t treat the peoples of the galaxy with kindness and compassion, that there would be no more fleet.”

Xeril and a few of the others in the command center give Lana long sideways glances.

“I don’t mean I’d kill anyone. I just mean that the circle and I have the power to make it very, very difficult for the fleet to continue operating when its existence is based on exploitation. Though going around the galaxies and liberating people wasn’t high on my list of career choices, it’s something I’d be willing to dedicate my life to if the fleet decided against doing the right thing.”

“But she accepted?” My smirk turns into a full-on smile. Lana managed to strongarm her way into changing the fleet at every level. Powerful, so powerful—my Omega is incomparable.

“*Sounds like she had no other choice,*” Kyte chimes in. “*I love it. And you.*”

“*Badass,*” Jeren calls down the bond. “*Turns me on.*”

“*Don’t start.*” Lana groans. “*After we win this war, I think we should spend a week straight in bed.*”

“*A month,*” I counter.

“*A lifetime,*” Kyte whispers.

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*I* don't tell my Alphas everything. I can't. Commander Regalus heard my terms, but I also had to hear hers. There's no future for any of us if we don't defeat Nox. If *I* don't defeat Nox.

Bypassing the multitude of students and fleet soldiers that seem to cover every square inch of campus, I open a portal to our room, close it, then collapse on the bed.

*"You sure you don't want company?"* Kyte asks.

*"I'm fine. I just need to think. Nox will be here soon, and I have to face her. I'm just not sure what that entails."* That's not entirely true. I know what Nox wants. Me, dead or alive. Part of me wonders if I shouldn't just take a ship and go to her. But that would never work. She'd do the same thing she did before—imprison me, likely somewhere I'd never be able to escape—and kill everyone who opposed her. She'd put my Alphas to the sword. My friends. I'll *never* let that happen.

The portal hums and opens, then Tilda steps through. Her eyes are tired and red-rimmed as she plops down beside me.

*"No more intel?"* I ask.

*"There's plenty, but the Granterry network has it on lock. It's inevitable at this point—the Sentients are coming. We'll get barely any warning before the battle for the academy begins."* She rubs her eyes.

*"Your sister?"* I take her hand, and we both stare up at the ceiling.

“No word. My parents are frantic and demand that I come home.”

“Should you go?” I squeeze her fingers.

“No. I can help here. I know they want me safe, but this is too important. If I don’t stand and fight now, no one will ever be safe again.”

I hate to say she’s right, but she is. This is our last stand.

“Do you think you can kill her?” She asks the question that everyone is already thinking. The question Regalus wanted me to answer with no reservations.

I tell Tilda honestly, the same way I told Regalus. “I don’t know, but I promised Regalus that when it came down to it, I would make the right decision, no matter how hard it might be.”

“How will you know it’s the right choice?”

“I don’t think I will until I’m there, until I’m looking into her eyes.”

She sighs. “Complicated.”

“Very.” I turn over to face her, and she does the same. It’s like we’re two girls at a sleepover instead of two Omegas about to go into battle. “She may be the only link I have to who I really am. Everyone thought Palatians were a myth.”

“You don’t need her to tell you who you are, though.” She blinks, her dark eyes studying my face. “You know who you are.”

I nod against the duvet. “Yes. I do now. Thanks to my Alphas, and you, and everyone I’ve met on this crazy journey I never even knew was out there waiting for me. I’ve never been surer of my path, except when it comes to Nox. Maybe I’m being naïve, but do you think there’s some little sliver of the hero still in there? I feel like there has to be.”

She drops her gaze for a moment. “I understand why you’d want to believe it. She’s your mother. She told you all these things to play on your emotions. You bought it for a little while at least. But all those tricks, maybe they weren’t tricks.

That's what you're thinking. You think that maybe you can still reach her? Right?"

As always, Tilda sees what's hidden away. A perfect spy. "Yes."

"What does your heart say?"

"Mixed signals."

"I don't know why you're having such a hard time. It's not as if the fate of the galaxies rest on your shoulders." She smiles, her sharp teeth somehow comforting now that I've gotten used to her. She's my best friend outside the circle.

"You're right. It's just another Thursday."

She snorts. "It's Saturday." Reaching out, she rests her palm on my arm. "Look, I know this isn't a decision I can make for you, or even one you can make lightly. But I support you whatever you choose. I'm going to fight, to try to save lives, and I'd follow you right into the maw of the Rift if you asked me to."

My eyes sting with tears. "You went so hard right then. You know that?"

"I don't know what that means, but I can guess. I mean every word. You're the legend. The centering Omega who has the power of the stars all wrapped up inside you. But you also don't remember what day it is and have no clue how a virudivan engine works." She rolls her eyes. "Stay humble, okay?"

"Not a problem with true friends around." I grab her and pull her into a hug, her curly hair tickling my nose.

"I won't let you get a big head." She pats me on the back. "All right. Enough mushy stuff. I'm going to head to the sparring grounds, make sure I've still got it where it counts, then get back to listening in. I'll be the first one on your comms when the Sentients enter Centari space."

We stand. I feel lighter somehow, Tilda shouldering some of my invisible burden just by being here for me.

She leaves, and I walk to the window and stare up at the falling night. The sky is clear, giving a perfect view of sparkling stars and wisps of galactic dust. It's a beautiful world. Below, warriors are running drills, sparring, and turning the campus into an advantageous battleground. Creating corridors and arranging barbed wire to funnel Sentients into traps and chokepoints where they can be dealt with. So much blood and death are on the horizon. I wish I could stop it.

"You can't." Kyte wraps his arms around me from behind. Ceredes and Jeren enter through a portal and stand at my sides as we watch the night fall, fleet ships landing all around campus and bringing more soldiers. Weapons fire lights up the forest at intervals. Jeren takes my hand in his, his calm in the face of the storm like a smooth suit of armor.

"I suppose the weapons cache under the school had plenty of supplies?" I ask.

"Blasters and energy blades for days. We'll run out of bodies before we run out of weapons." I can feel Ceredes regretting his words as soon as he voices them.

I take his hand. "It's all right. War isn't pretty. Not like in the history lessons where Nox the great hero saves the fleet. It was never a fairy tale like that, at least not one with a happy ending."

"We'll survive this night." Ceredes kisses my palm. "The circle will see it through."

"*Lana.*" My mother's voice hits me like a torrent of ice.

My Alphas are instantly on alert.

"*Come to me. We are the same, you and I. I'm waiting for you.*" She fades out, but her words linger, giving me a sense of foreboding that settles deep in my heart.

"She's delusional." Jeren tightens his hold on my hand. "You'll never be like her."

I want to agree with him, but the darkness that seems to run in my veins matches hers. Does that mean I'll share her same fate?

“No,” Kyte says without hesitation. “Jeren’s right. You may share her lineage, but you aren’t her.”

“Never doubt yourself.” Ceredes kisses the top of my head. “We know who you are, and so do you.”

My tension eases, if only a bit, and I let them comfort me as we watch the twilight turn to night.

We’re still holding each other when the first bursts of virudivan cannons explode in the space above the academy, burning our retinas with the intensity of the fire and beginning the battle for the academy, the battle for the future of the galaxies.

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A massive blast hits the planet in a matter of moments. The glow is bright enough to light up campus as if it's the middle of the day. It's almost beautiful in all its horror.

"That's Centari City." Jeren shades his eyes with his forearm.

"Down!" Ceredes grabs Lana and throws her to the floor as we all cover her with our bodies.

"Was that the city?" She gasps. "The entire city?"

"Breathe out." I press my palm to her back. "Breathe out before the shockwave hits."

"The shockwave?" She does as I tell her, all of us bracing as I throw up a barrier around us. Lana adds her power to it.

The blast hits faster than I'd calculated, rushing across the surface of Centari like a destructive tidal wave. It feels as if the entire planet shakes down to its core. The dorms shudder, the walls creaking and bits of wood and metal rattling and falling around us. Every bit of glass disintegrates, shattering inward as the devastation passes by, carrying debris with it.

Once it's gone, I keep the barrier up but get to my feet. "Pillars!"

The others join me. The barrier over the school is shattered in several places, the entire wall facing Centari City nothing more than a few streaks of virudivan power in a broken grid. The forest is nearly leveled, all the trees snapped, and the tops



of the buildings are piles of rubble in courtyards and crumbled in on themselves.

The screams from around us are instant.

*“Come to me, Lana. Alone. Just mother and daughter. If you don’t, more will suffer. I can destroy the entire academy if that’s what it takes.”* Nox is in Lana’s head again, ripping down walls and cutting through barriers to get to her.

“Fight her. Block her out.” I turn to Lana and kiss her hard. “I have to go. Stay with Ceredes and Jeren.”

“I can help.” She shakes her head. “Let me help.”

“No. Save your power for Nox. I’ve got this.” I stroke her cheek. “I love you.” With that, I spin and bound over the windowsill, landing on my feet in the courtyard below. So many people are hurt, lying in their own blood, crying for help. Others are looking around, completely dazed.

“Anyone who’s able, come to me!” I close my eyes and pull as much power as I can to the surface. Students and members of my medical team gather at my back. Sending out my energy, I let it sift through rock and dirt and metal, leaching under crumbled mortar and stealing around chunks of stone. When I’ve stretched it as far as I can, I surge forward, pushing my power out into a barrier that lifts the debris away.

“Get them out!” I yell, holding on to the incalculable weight as the students rush forward and start pulling their classmates to safety.

The strain is already wearing on me, the power of the circle immense but with limits. Even so, I stand my ground.

Then I feel hands at my back. “I told you to save your strength.”

“It’s more important to save lives.” Lana sends a jolt of power through me, Ceredes and Jeren also touching me and forming the perfect circuit of power.

The load becomes lighter, and I’m able to expand my energy to the forest, lifting shattered trees from soldiers and students.

“Pull them to the infirmary in the Omega courtyard!” Harlan runs into the forest and dashes back carrying one person over each shoulder.

Master Rav is there, too, bleeding but helping others from the rubble.

“Looks like most people knew to get down.” Lana sighs. “That’s good. But what about the city?”

“Gone.” Ceredes’s anger powers me even more, the debris lifting higher into the air. “They destroyed an entire city. Millions of lives. Children.”

That’s when Lana’s rage stirs, rising like a distant moon. “All of it?”

“Nothing could’ve survived that,” Jeren says quietly.

When Lana’s anger and sorrow hit, the debris soars into the air high above, every bit of destruction lifting and beginning to spin.

“Lana.” Jeren leans into her. “Don’t lose control. We need you.”

“Nox did this.” The debris spins faster, coalescing into a ball of stone, wood, and glass. “She murdered an entire city to get to *me*. I could feel her in that blast—her power. *Our* power.” She pushes more of her inner energy, that darkness that seems to have no end, through me, compressing the debris tighter and tighter.

“Lana, you have to back off.” Ceredes tries to counsel her, but his own anger is still simmering.

She steps beside me, her eyes on the dark sky. “I can feel her out there. Her ships. Her hunger for control.” When she looks at me, her eyes have gone completely black. “She can have the destruction she’s caused.” With a jut of her chin, she takes control of the mass of debris and flings it into the sky. The sonic boom shakes the already destroyed campus as the ball hurtles away.

Far above the planet, something explodes with impact, and shortly after, the sky lights with falling bits of debris.

“One down.” She stares at the golden streaks.

“Lana.” Jeren puts his hand on her shoulder. “Come back.”

I let out a hard breath, my head swimming with the way she channeled her own power through me and turned mine off like a spigot. I sway on my feet, but Ceredes steadies me.

She blinks, the black fading. “Kyte!” As if coming back to herself, she hugs me. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” I stroke her hair. “You?”

“I just... I don’t know what happened.”

“You let your emotions take over,” Ceredes grates. “You can’t do that, Lana. Those sorts of mistakes are what Nox is counting on. She’ll exploit them and use them against you.”

“I know.” She strokes my back, sending her own energy through me, replenishing my stores. “You’re right.”

More explosions blast overhead, the battle for the space above the planet on full display.

Ceredes looks up. “They’ll be landing soon. They may already have ships on the ground nearby.”

“I have to get in the air.” Lana steps back and shakes her head as if to clear it. “That’s where I’m best. That’s where I can fight for us.”

“I’ll be your gunner.” I volunteer.

“No. You have to help the people here.” She gestures toward the makeshift infirmary where Master Rav is trying to set a bone with ear-piercing results. “I’m going to take a fighter more like Daviti’s. No room for hulking Alphas.”

I can’t let her go, not without me. “You aren’t going to Nox. I won’t let you.”

“You have to.” She strokes my cheek. “All of you have to.” She takes another step back. “You’re needed here. I’m needed up there.” She points to the sky. “It’s the only chance I’ll have of taking down Nox.”

“Not without us.” Ceredes advances on her. “Don’t play her game, Lana.”

She backs away but bumps into Jeren. “Guys, I *have* to do this. I have to face my mother, and I have to do it alone. If I show up with my circle, she’ll kill more. I can already sense her threat, the great mass of her power pointed right at the academy. If she fires on this place, no one will survive. I won’t let you die. If I don’t go, there won’t even be a chance to try to make this right.”

“Nox can’t be saved.” Ceredes scoffs. “This is a bad idea, Lana.”

“It’s the only way,” she replies with just as much arrogance as him. “You’d know that if you listened to me.”

“Sassy Omega.” He grips the front of her shirt and yanks her to him, kissing her.

She returns it, then wriggles from his grasp. “Look, Kyte, you have to save lives. Jeren, you have to stab people. Ceredes, you’re in command. We’re a circle, but we have to work together.”

“By being apart?” I shake my head. “No. We already tried that. None of us are a fan.”

“We don’t have time to argue.” She winces when Tilda yells at someone to “quit squirming, it’s not that bad. I just can’t see for all the blood!”

Lieutenant Lir runs up to Ceredes, one of his arms dangling limp and broken at his side. “Sir? Should we form ranks around the campus or ...”

Lana throws up her hands at him as if to say ‘see!’

Ceredes points. “Take as many fighters as you can to the biggest breach in the barrier on the eastern side. They’ll pour in from there first.”

Lieutenant Lir turns and runs, yelling for his troops to assemble.

I get on my tiptoes and kiss each of them in turn. “Kyte, heal people. Jeren, do the murder. Ceredes, lead and fight. And

all of you, *trust me*. Okay?"

I don't like it. None of us do. But the battle over the academy is growing louder and closer by the second, and I don't know how long Tilda's patient is going to survive at this rate.

"You know I'm right. I can do this. Please." Her plea goes against everything in me—the need to protect her and keep her close. But I can't put my instincts over her own choices, no matter how badly I want to throw her over my shoulder and hide her away somewhere.

"You're a warrior. I respect what you're trying to do. But I don't *like* it." Ceredes glowers. That's as close to acquiescence as Lana's going to get from him.

"Don't do anything stupid." Jeren pulls one of his blades and hands it to her.

"No promises."

"Omega, no matter where you go, we won't be far behind. Know this." Ceredes crosses his arms over his chest, Alpha displeasure written all over him.

"I know." She strokes a hand down his bicep, and I can feel the tingle that lights up between them.

"Be safe, my love." I cup her cheek. "I trust you."

She nods, love in her heart and written in our stars. Then she turns and runs, disappearing through the academy ruins on the way to the hangar.

"I can't believe we let her go." Jeren stares after her.

"We're still with her." I put a hand on his shoulder. "And she can do more good in a ship than anywhere else. She was born to soar, and she's taken our power with her. The circle is strong."

"She has to face Nox." Ceredes flexes his jaw and his fists. "I understand it. It's part of the Bellatian laws of combat which we respect above all others. The duel. The challenge for supremacy. That doesn't mean I have to agree with it when my mate chooses it."

“Commander Ceredes!” Regalus strides through the mess with a contingent of fleet soldiers behind her. “My warriors are awaiting orders. We’ve already received reports of Sentient scouts on academy grounds. There’s no time to wast—”

“Kyte! Is this important?” Tilda holds up what looks like part of a liver as the patient on the cot in front of her moans. “Should I put it back in?”

“Sheesh.” Jeren fades into darkness as Ceredes begins barking orders for academy defense.

I send my heart with Lana but turn my attention to the wounded and roll up my sleeves. It’s what my mate wants, and I will never disappoint her, not when she’s counting on me. Not when she needs me to be strong for her.

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The Sentients didn't wait to strike. I suppose I thought in the back of my mind that they'd group in the neighboring solar system and spend time coming up with a plan, some great masterstroke of strategy that would leave us reeling but still able to fight back. Instead, they chose the worst possible way forward—annihilation.

I dodge jagged edges of buildings and splintered trees, passing the back of the Omega dorms that were nearly leveled. It makes my stomach churn to think of the lives lost here, and when I try to imagine what Centari City looks like right now? I think I might be sick.

Cutting through a back courtyard, I find an opening in the side of the hangar bay. I use it to get inside, some of the ships in pieces or missing wings along the side where the blast emanated. The damage is incalculable, but there are some ships here and there that remain intact. Ceredes was smart to send most of our fleet into the space around the planet. If they'd been here, we'd have lost control of the skies immediately.

*"I need your word that you won't blow the academy to bits."* I fire off the thought to Nox. What I couldn't tell my Alphas—but what they know all the same—is that I have to face her. Alone.

*"I can't give you that promise."*

I stop. *"Then I'm not coming."*



Her displeasure roils like distant thunder. *“I’ll give you my word that I won’t destroy the academy until after we have our face to face. If your little allies still foolishly refuse to surrender, then I’ll have no choice.”*

I want to get more from her, but I know I won’t. She’s bent on killing anyone who gets in her way, even if it means taking out an entire planet. *“Fine.”*

I hurry to the back right, the area where the smaller, nimbler ships are parked. A noise behind me has me wheeling.

A scream catches in my throat as a Sentient rushes me, its mechanical arms like shiny tentacles. I yank out Jeren’s blade, black and blue energy wrapping around it as I brace to defend myself.

The Sentient slows, its red eyes blinking, and then it falls to its knees only a few paces from me. Behind it, Ilwen drives the rest of her energy blade into its back and twists. The tentacles stop moving, the Sentient dead.

“What the fuck?” I put a hand to my chest, my heart pounding, but then I step back and bend my knees, on my guard.

“I just saved your life.” She rolls her eyes and wrenches her blade from the Sentient’s back, the blue blade sizzling with blood and some sort of black grease.

“I can save myself just fine, thanks.” I watch her move, trying to time her attack.

She powers down the sword and stows it behind her back.

Now I’m even more confused. “What’s going on?” Then I remember what I’d seen through my Alphas’ eyes. Her father is missing, presumed dead. If he was on the Scion ... There was no way he could’ve survived it. I ease up on my stance, but I don’t put my knife away. “I’m sorry about your dad.”

She takes a deep, shuddering breath. “I can’t think about that right now. Maybe when this is all over, but not right now.” Reaching up, she tightens her already painfully-tight ponytail. “I know this doesn’t make us even—and I still think Ceredes

is better off with me—but I was wrong about you teaming up with the Sentients.”

“Ceredes is part of the circle. He’s *my* mate.” I bare my teeth. “And if you ever try to take him from me, I’ll show no mercy. And it should go without even saying that the Sentients are our enemies. Yours *and* mine.”

Her eyes open a little wider, a ghost of a smile playing across her glossy lips. “I like you better this way, though I still don’t particularly like you at all, of course.”

“What?”

“You’re just better like this. Fierce. Kind of bitchy. Suits you.” She shrugs, then pulls her sword again.

I tense.

“Pick your ship. I’ll keep a look out until you’re in the air.” She turns, giving me her back.

Holy shit. My emotions were already in a fucked up tangle, and now Ilwen is saying she likes me bitchy and then gives me an opening to end her? Is this what it feels like to be drunk, because if so, I don’t know why my earth mother ever touched the stuff.

She doesn’t spin, doesn’t attack, doesn’t do anything except watch the darkened hangar.

I back away until I’m sure I’m out of striking distance. Still, she’s scanning the hangar, sort of bouncing on the balls of her feet like she’s looking forward to a fight.

“*So, are you and Ilwen best friends now?*” Kyte teases.

“*Oh my god, shut up.*” I wrinkle my nose.

He laughs and fades, though I get the distinct scent of antiseptic before he’s completely gone. Shaking my head, I turn and jog toward the ship I have in mind. It’s similar to Master Daviti’s. The thought of him sends a pang of sadness through me, but I keep moving, adding his ghost to the ones who already float along with me—Onin, Kyte’s mother, my father, and so many others.

I climb into the cockpit and fire up the engine. It purrs to life. Louder than the newer ships, but more powerful in different ways, this fighter seems made for me. It already has a name painted across the side window. “Stinger.” I like it.

The controls mold to my hands, and I maneuver toward the hangar door. It’s blasted off the hinges, and I fire up the thrusters so I can fly over it and smoothly out into the night.

Bright blasts of flame and energy are all around the planet, combat progressing at a devastating clip. And beyond that, I see ships lowering to the ground. Some fleet. Most Sentient. Soon, the entire academy will be nothing but open warfare. I have to stop this. I have to stop *her*.

A beat starts thumping through the craft, and I can’t help but smile.

“All right. Let’s get this ship into the shit.” Tilda’s voice in my ear is a welcome addition. “Heavy fighting directly over the academy. Gavros and his teams are tearing the Sentients a new refuse hole as we speak.”

“She’s at the heart of their fleet. I can feel her.”

“In the mass of ships grouped near the second moon?”

“Yes. Her ship is there.”

“I can get you there, but it won’t be easy.” She sighs, and coordinates of a route begin blinking on my display. “This is the clearest path right now, but that might change any second. So, get going.”

“On it.”

“I’ll be here with you for as long as I can,” she adds. “I’m in command, though I feel like I was doing a pretty good job in the infirmary. Kyte made me leave because—on your left!”

I pull up hard on the controls and go vertical as an energy blast shoots past me. “Crap, I’m not used to this system.” I flip on the proximity and weapons fire alarms, then level out and circle to the right.

“You better get used to it. Fast!”

A Sentient ship is on my tail, weaving back and forth to avoid any rear ordnance I could fire. It's bigger though, nowhere near as quick as mine. I think back to my lessons, all that flight time with Master Daviti. I can do this.

I take a deep breath, centering myself, and dodge left, another barrage of blasts exploding close enough to my ship to make it shake. With a hard yank on the controls, I do two sideways flips, then fade back toward the planet. The Sentient ship is far too bulky to follow me quickly enough.

Only moments later, I shoot up behind it and fire. It explodes in a mass of metal and blue virudivan flames, then begins its fall to the surface. I can only pray everyone below is somewhere safe. Firing up my engines, I jet faster, hurtling away from the pull of the atmosphere and out into space. The gravity adjusts, though I can barely feel it. Out here, I move easier, as if space parts a little bit ahead of me, unzipping as I ease across its surface.

I can't believe what I'm seeing. Hundreds of skirmishes. Ships tearing each other apart and blaster fire everywhere. It's like an active minefield, and it's hard for me to tell friend from foe.

"It's a mess up there." Tilda reminds me she's here, like an invisible copilot. "I've adjusted your route somewhat. Just keep an eye on it."

"Got it." I maneuver around a floating mass of debris, Sentient bodies mixed in with the metal. I can't focus on that. Instead, I keep my eyes ahead, scanning for anything incoming. I don't have to wait long.

Two ships come screaming toward me, both of their guns hot. I jet upward, avoiding the explosions, and head back to the debris. I ease off on the engine power and float along with it as the larger ships catch up. They see my ruse and start shooting into the twisted metal.

"Damn." I fire back up and drop, then fire on the underbelly of one. It lists to the left and several smaller explosions tell me it's finished.

The other gets a shot off at me, but I fire a flare to attract its movement. It works, and I'm able to get off a glancing shot that blows out the starboard engine. The ship starts to spin, one engine overcompensating. I fly away, and a fleet craft zooms past me and finishes it off.

"Nice work, Stinger." An unfamiliar voice over the comms.

"Thanks."

"Heavy traffic the way you're headed." She circles to my left and speeds back into the nearest firefight as I navigate along Tilda's route.

More Sentient ships approach, several of them grouping on me, likely because I'm not part of the pack closer to Centari.

"You need to reroute." Tilda enters new coordinates.

"Too late." At least a dozen ships head right for me, surrounding my craft. I can take them. I have to. I grip up on my controls, ready to start firing.

*"Bring her to me."* My mother's voice cuts through my mind like a spike of ice. The Sentient ships stop approaching. Instead, they form around me, hemming me in on all sides.

*"Lana."* All three of my Alphas are attuned to me. They shouldn't be. There are too many lives on the line.

*"I'm fine. If nothing else, I'm buying time for the academy to bolster its defenses. I need you three to fight, to help. All right? Save lives. That's what I want."*

I can feel their need to keep me safe at odds with their sense of duty to those around them. *"Please, I need you to trust me."*

*"You always have our trust."* Ceredes speaks for the other two. *"That doesn't mean we won't fight you on this."*

"Lana, I don't have much time. The Sentients are breaching the walls en masse. We're all going to have to fight." Tilda speaks quickly and lights up some points on my map. "This is where you're headed. Near the moon. If things

go wrong, head to this spot. It's the only outpost the fleet has on the moon near the—" Her voice cuts out.

"Tilda?" I tap the comms. "Tilda?"

*"They've cut through the power and the comms. They're coming."* Kyte's voice in my head is tight.

The tide of worry shifts, and now I'm the one questioning the plan. My Alphas are strong, but what if they—

*"We'll take care of the academy. You take care of you,"* Jeren whispers. I look down at my hands, because for a split second, I feel as if they're covered in hot, viscous blood. *Sentient* blood. Jeren's already engaging the enemy. Time is running out.

*"Go. I'm going to try to end this now. I love you all. Never forget that."* I shut down my mind, raising walls to block them out as much for their own good as mine. It hurts all the same, because at my core, I know we should always be open to one another, sharing our lives and feelings and dreams. But this is the way it has to be.

*"I await your arrival, daughter. It's time to put an end to our disagreement."* My mother pierces my consciousness, her glowing red eye aimed right at me.

*"I agree."* I stare right back, unafraid, undaunted. No matter what happens, we're ending this. Now.

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*S* motion for a small contingent of fighters to station themselves near the crater where the circle fountain used to be. Sentients are already infiltrating the outer lines of fighters and trying to make their way into the heart of the academy.

Fading into the space between the stars, I wait around a corner as three Sentients, mostly organic, come creeping past. They're dead before they hit the ground, and I wipe my blades on their gray uniforms.

My fighters take out two more, then disperse into the shadows to pick off any others that make it past the rows of soldiers engaged in heavy fighting at the edges of the grounds.

Pausing for a second, I check my comms for any message from Irillon on the Flotilla. I realize help from that quadrant is a longshot, especially given Irillon is a part of the Vents, not the upper crust that rules the Flotilla. But now that he's taken over Garusso's operation, he might have an avenue to approach the more legitimate power players. Even so, that might take time. We don't have it.

I dart out and bury my knives into some sort of gelatinous creature similar to Master Lintaru. It spurts green blood and gurgles, a mechanical limb whipping out to clip my ankle. I stomp it onto the pavers and crush the metal as the organic part of it bleeds out.

More shadows are moving, Sentients breaking our lines and creeping closer and closer. They want to take the heart of



the academy, gut the fleet from the inside out. They've already destroyed the Scion. The academy will be the death blow.

My thoughts return to Lana, like they always do. She's thrown up a barrier to keep us out of her thoughts. I know why she did it, but I don't like it. We're stronger when we're linked in every way. Her reasoning is sound, and though she didn't say it, I know she wanted us to stay back out of fear for us. Her mother is powerful and vicious, and Lana would never be able to forgive her or find a way forward if Nox harmed us. Even so, I'm pulled to my Omega, and resisting that pull is slowly tearing me apart.

*"Need you at command!"* Ceredes yells down the bond.

I'm moving before he even finishes his call. Some of my fighters follow behind me as I hew close to the edges of buildings and stick to the shadows. By the time I get to command, I see why Ceredes called. Sentients are swarming, likely having burst through the academy barrier somewhere unexpected. The battle is fierce, and I have to step over several bodies to get to the main fight.

I come out swinging, cutting down two Sentients and throwing knives into a winged one that hovers overhead raining down arrows. It falls, dropping onto its comrades below as Ceredes throws his sword out in a wide arc, halving five Sentients at once.

We fight as more Sentients pour into command, the battle destroying everything and then spilling outside as more fleet warriors rush into the fray.

It's a free-for-all melee, the sounds of battle echoing off the ruined buildings as we fight for our survival. Ceredes leads the battle, charging forward and slicing through Sentients as more waves break through our outer defenses.

I stab and slice my way through dozens of enemies, striking from behind and saving students from otherwise deadly attacks. It's dirty fighting, and I was born for it. So I keep spinning and slashing, destroying every bit of organic and mech material, dropping bodies in my wake and fading

into shadow. Blaster fire is everywhere, and I dodge and roll to avoid it, then take out the Sentients wielding the firepower.

Master Rav runs past me, her pole spinning like a propeller and sending Sentients flying off in all directions. Students set upon them with swords, and some even use the fallen bricks to smash the invaders.

I turn and slash out, hitting a Sentient in the back. It stumbles forward, and Ilwen jumps on it and sinks her fangs into its neck, then rips its throat out. If I didn't loathe her, I'd be impressed. Once that Sentient is down, she moves onto another, getting lost in the mass of bodies and blades.

A red laser blast nearly skewers me, and I look up to find another one of the winged Sentients flying overhead. Two more blades and it's down, black blood soaking through the ruined stone beneath it. Ceredes is pushing the Sentients back with each mighty swing of his sword. More and more of the enemy turn to run, and students and fleet soldiers give chase, not taking prisoners and granting no mercy.

We're routing them, sending them running into the fleet fighters that form the perimeter. Some may escape, but most will be dispatched before they can reach the edge of the academy grounds.

"Don't let up!" Ceredes keeps advancing, but the Sentients ahead of him have already turned tail. Lifting his sword, he roars, and the students around him echo his battle cry as they fend off the remaining invaders.

*"We've pushed them back,"* I tell Kyte. *"They're retreating. We need healers over here as soon as you can get them to us."*

I run forward to catch up to Ceredes when a huge blast knocks me off my feet. Everyone in the vicinity is thrown backwards as something slams into the courtyard. Only Ceredes remains standing, his energy sword glowing blue. I climb back to my feet and help a student beside me.

She's bloodied but still has an energy blaster in hand. "What was—"

A roar sounds through the academy as High Commander Warverian rises from the crater where he landed, one of his arms a long, thin blade with a red energy signature. The other has a thicker, serrated blade, and when he stands, it also lights up red.

“Back up. Everyone back!” Kyte yells as he comes running, his hands bloody from working in the infirmary. He forms a barrier and pushes the remaining fleet forces back and away from the high commander.

“You whelps are still here? I assumed my soldiers would already be feasting on your corpses.” He slashes the air with his thin blade and raises the serrated one over his head. “At least they saved some fun for me.” He smiles, the metal in his face giving the impression of a skeleton.

Kyte throws up a barrier around the three of us.

Ceredes shakes his head. “Offense only, brother. We’re going to gut Nox’s lapdog here and now.” He lifts his sword.

Warverian bares his teeth. “I’ll be sure to tell Lana how you cried for mercy. It’ll make excellent pillow talk after I’ve mated her.”

Fire rushes through our veins, and a primal need to destroy this hunk of cruelty and metal overrides any other concern. Ceredes and Kyte feel it, too, their thoughts turning from strategic to straight-up lethal.

“After we’ve killed you and left you to rot on the ground, your name will be forgotten. You don’t even deserve an honorable death, but I suppose any death will do.” Ceredes assumes his attack position, his blade forward and his knees bent.

Warverian’s eyes narrow as he takes in all three of us.

Then Kyte drops the barrier as I phase into the space between the stars and Ceredes raises his sword.

“I’ll feast on your bones!” Warverian charges forward to either welcome death or grant it to the three of us. There’s no other way out, not when he’s threatened our mate.

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I land on a large freighter in a static position at the back of the Centari moon. The moment I climb from my ship, I feel Nox. Her presence is oppressive, like a weight bearing down on my lungs.

The Sentients form a contingent around me, leading me through the hangar where I spot her ship deeper into the structure.

We enter the bridge, and Nox stands in front of a screen and watches the battle on the planet below, the academy grounds crawling with Sentient forces.

“Leave us.” She doesn’t turn around as her soldiers shuffle out and the door shuts behind them.

“You have to stop this.” I stride to her. “You’re killing innocent people.”

“No one’s innocent, Lana.” Her voice seems even more mechanical than before.

“The children you killed in Centari City were. Millions of lives gone, and why? Because you want to take over the fleet? You can’t control the galaxies, Nox.”

She turns and assesses me, her red eye narrowing on my face. “You’d rather the fleet be in control, then?”

“No. I’d rather people be free to decide for themselves. That’s what you want, isn’t it? Freedom to choose your own path?”

She smirks. “I suppose I haven’t been clear with you. Maybe the emotional mind games I was playing with you earlier have clouded your idea of who I am.” She steps closer, her voice lowering. “What I want is *everything*.”

“That’s ... not a thing.” I stand firm. “No one can have everything. And even if you could, what does that mean? You want to own the universe? Sounds dumb, if you ask me.”

She sighs. “I can’t tell if you’re being deliberately obtuse or if you inherited your father’s lack of intellect.”

That one gets to me, lighting up the anger I know I need to keep tamped down. “The father you killed?”

“He’d served his purpose.” She shrugs. “I didn’t need him anymore.”

“Then why was he still alive? You’d already conceived me, right? That’s why you were keeping him—so you could create an offspring from circle stock.”

“Maybe I wanted another child.” Her glare intensifies. “In case the first one disappointed me.”

“You think *I’m* the disappointment?” I laugh, and it sounds hysterical, but I can’t help myself. “I thought you were going to be a mother. A real one. I’d already been abused by one person claiming to be my mother. I didn’t realize that was just the start of a *pattern*.”

“Abuse?” She crosses her arms. “I offered you the galaxies, anything you wanted, a life of your own—and you call that abuse?”

“I already have a life of my own. A circle that loves—”

“Stop,” she barks and holds up a hand. “I told you the circle is just a manacle. You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You’re full of shit.”

Her eyes pop open wide.

“You heard me. You are absolutely full of shit. I *saw* your memories. You’re lying about your circle the same way you’re

lying about why you kept Krenallus alive. You *loved* your circle. They loved you. You were happy. Don't you remember that feeling, of being happy with the Alphas you loved?"

"That happiness was a lie. The same as yours."

"It's *not* a lie." I try to send that same feeling to her, the bond between my Alphas and me. I want her to feel it again, to know that it's real. "This is what you used to have." I reach up and press two fingers to her temple. "This is love. The kind that can bring you to your knees, to your senses, to the edge of madness. It's real. Yours was real, too."

She swipes my hand away, but not before I feel her reaction. *Familiar*. That's the word in her mind. That sensation of loving others and being loved back—she remembers it.

"It doesn't matter what *was*, Lana. Byran made sure of that," she snaps. "The circle was broken, and I'm glad of it. It made me realize who I really am. I don't need Alphas. I don't need anyone except myself."

"If that's true then why do you keep trying to convince me to stay with you?"

She turns on her heel and examines the battle screen. "Not for sentimental reasons, I promise you. You are a Palatian with the same dark power as me. I created you so that my bloodline would live on. If Krenallus hadn't betrayed me, we wouldn't be having this foolish discussion in the first place. You'd know your place by my side. You'd know that we are the only ones in the galaxies fit to rule."

"How can you rule when you're killing everyone? No one will be left for you to control!"

She turns again to face me. "I'll remake the worlds as I see fit." The organic side of her mouth lifts in a half smile. "And you needn't worry about having enough subjects to rule." She flicks her finger and the screen changes.

I step forward and watch as thousands of ships, some of them almost as large as the Scion, appear at the edge of the Rift in what looks like a never-ending stream, all headed here.



“The Sentients are more than happy to repopulate worlds for me.”

There’s too many. My heart sinks, my mind reeling at the sheer numbers I’m seeing. We thought the attack force at the academy was heavy, but it’s nothing compared to what Nox has kept in reserve.

“So you see, daughter, I’m ready to remake the galaxies with or without you. Getting rid of the fleet is just the first step, one that’s already on the verge of completion.” She switches back to the battle view as Sentient cruisers overtake gunships in Centari’s orbit.

The tide is turning. More Sentient ships are arriving with fresh crews and booming cannons. How long can we hold out against this sort of an onslaught?

“You can’t.” She sounds almost giddy. “Your academy and your circle are done.”

The resolve I had coming here is beginning to crack, to fray around the edges as Nox grows surer of herself. But I can’t give up. Not on my circle, and not on her. “My circle will survive, and you can come back from this. I came here to show you a better way forward. You don’t have to do this. I’ve already received assurances from Commander Regalus that the fleet will no longer use slave labor or prison planets to produce raw materials. There’s going to be a complete shift in fleet culture and makeup. No more elitism. No more crushing the less fortunate under a fleet boot. That’s what you wanted. My circle and I are making that happen without violence.”

“Oh, no violence? How wonderful.” She switches the screen again. This time, it’s a view of the academy courtyard.

I gasp and step to the screen. Ceredes and Kyte are fighting Warverian. Ceredes is injured, a deep slice down the back of his right leg, but he’s dueling hard as Kyte tries to shield him from Warverian’s strongest blows. I don’t see Jeren. Closing my eyes, I send a feeler down the bond to him, but it’s quiet. Where is he?

“You see, Lana. I think violence is key. I can thank Byran for teaching me that. He ruined my body, tore out parts of me that he wanted to feast on because he loved me so much. Because he was *serious* about our love, Lana. Really, violence is the only way to show others you’re serious. Case in point, High Commander Warverian. He’s been looking forward to this from the moment he heard about your pathetic circle.” Nox grins. “He’s going to enjoy gutting your Alphas, though I think he’s already downed one. Shadows are hard to catch, but Sentients can see in the dark.” She taps her cheek beneath her red eye.

Anger, the emotion I’m fully aware I need to keep under wraps, is starting to rise to the surface. Like magma under pressure, it rolls upward with superheated speed.

“Of course,” she continues, “You’ll be devastated to lose three young Alphas, but Warverian has already promised me he wants to take good care of you and your offspring. He’s going to breed you on a rigorous schedule, one that I’m sure you won’t enjoy, but that’s not the point, is it? Once you’ve given me the heirs I want, he may even keep you alive. But I suppose we’ll have to wait and see.”

“You’re trying to rile me. Why?” I back away as dark power begins to swirl in my palms.

She snaps her finger and her own energy pools around her. “Rile you? How? By telling you your Alphas are dying horribly bloody deaths one by one under Warverian’s blade? That’s simply the tru—”

I lash out before she can finish speaking. My power strikes her across the cheek, splitting her skin and charring a line along the metal.

She wipes the blood with the back of her hand and smiles. “That’s more like it.” She summons a sword of black flame.

I do the same, though mine is also ringed with blue. “I came here to save you, not kill you.”

“Then you came here on a fool’s errand.” She sneers.

Backing away, I lift my blade and bend my knees, lowering my center of gravity like Ceredes taught me. A barrier springs up around me, glowing golden like Kyte, and I phase dark, becoming the Larenian shadow.

“So many tricks. But they can’t replace true power.” She comes at me so fast I can barely see her before her blade whispers against my skin, singeing my arm as I roll away.

She’s on me again quickly, slicing at me with her blade as I jump back and parry. When our swords meet, black energy slithers down my arm.

I drop and kick my leg out to knock her off balance, but she jumps and swings downward, trying to cut me in half. Throwing up my sword I block her strike then roll backwards and get to my feet.

We circle each other.

“Are you ready to surrender?” She spins her sword in an easy fashion, as if she’s out for a stroll with a deadly weapon.

“Are you?” I whip out a spiked barrier and follow behind it with an upward slash.

The barrier knocks her back, but she’s on her feet quickly and swings to deflect my sword. Dancing back, I charge again, jumping and spinning to land a blow with my heel then stabbing downward.

She yells and sends a pulse of power like a giant fist, throwing me back against the metal wall of the bridge. My head makes contact, hitting hard as I slide to my knees.

“*Up, Lana. You can do this, my love!*” Ceredes yells down the bond, and I can sense his own pain, the cuts and bruises he’s taken from battling Warverian. He’s not safe. He’s still fighting. “*We’re coming for you.*” I feel the moment Warverian stabs him through the thigh, pain ripping through me until Ceredes cuts off the bond.

“No!” I scream.

Nox slashes her sword through the air ahead of me, then dances forward to deal a death blow. I roll sideways and jump

to my feet. Putting one foot on the wall, I launch myself into the air, flying over her head with my power wrapped around me like a shield. I swipe downward, catching her shoulder with my blade.

When I land, she's already on top of me, hacking at me with her sword with ruthless insistence. I block and parry, holding my ground as we battle back and forth. Our swords ring out again and again as we cover the entire bridge, one pressing the advantage until the tables turn.

We both spill blood, droplets coating the floor in what's become our combat arena. She's relentless, coming for me again and again as I pull from my deep well of dark power and what I can take from the circle. The longer the battle rages, the more I realize it isn't enough. Her rage, her absolute iron will to dominate is something borne of centuries of cruelty—done to her, and hers done to others. I can fight it, but I see her striking more blows. She's slowly bleeding me, a million cuts draining my life away. And what's worse, I can't feel my Alphas.

“Because they're dead!” Nox crows and feints forward, then back again. “The circle is done, Lana. You have nothing. No one. Only me.”

I refuse to believe it. I'd know if they were dead.

“Look for yourself.” She backs away, lowering her blade as the screen lights up. The space around Centari is full of ships. All Sentients. The fleet fighters are gone, maybe all dead. We've lost the battle for the skies.

“No.” I keep my sword up, my arm shaking. “You won't win.”

“I already have.” She stows her blade. “The fleet is finished. I don't have to make any more moves. It's done. The galaxies are mine.”

“I won't let you.”

She gives me a mock pitying look. “You can't stop me. Your friends at the academy are already dead, Lana. You've lost.”

“No.” My eyes burn with tears, and I brandish my sword. “I don’t believe you.”

“It’s over,” she snaps. “Don’t make me kill you.”

My arm stops shaking. I pull myself up and stare her down.

Her smirk returns as she puts her hands out and opens her palms. “Still a fighter? At least you inherited something from me.” She pools her power, then presses it together in a tight ball of darkness. Rearing back, she aims it at me. A massive beam of pure black shoots from her palms.

I answer, pulling my own energy to the surface and meeting her beam with one of my own. The power flows through me, dark wed with light. The ship begins to groan, the walls shaking as I push and push, shoving my power toward her as she shoves right back.

My feet begin to slide across the floor, her beam growing wider as I do everything I can to hold on. “You won’t win.” I grit my teeth and think of my Alphas, of their trust in me. The blue in my column sparks brighter, and I gain on her.

She redoubles her efforts, the blackness growing all around her as she glows with dark power. I can’t give up, can’t stop even if it means I kill her. And that’s when I know how this is going to end. One of us has to die. My Alphas tried to tell me, but I wouldn’t listen. I thought ... I thought I could save her. She was right when she said that was a foolish idea. My despair only adds to the strength behind my attack, and I push her beam even farther toward her. Now her feet are sliding, and she’s trying to hold on.

The red eye glows brighter, and I can feel her fury rising like the winds of a cyclone.

“The galaxies are *mine!*” she bellows, her beam of dark energy surging like the explosion of a star. I try to hold it back, but it’s too much.

Her beam overtakes mine, and I’m thrown backward, my body hurtling through metal walls and hallways until I land in

a heap of pain at the edge of the hangar bay, my blood  
puddling beneath me as everything inside me ruptures.

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*W*arverian charges me again with his serrated blade. Half of his thin sword lies broken beneath my feet as I stumble back and block his killing blow.

“Is he all right?” I yell at Kyte as I dodge right, Warverian’s blade whistling past my ear.

“I’ve healed him. He lost a lot of blood though.” Kyte sounds exhausted as he appears behind me and shields me as best he can.

“Save your power.” I rush forward and slam my foot into Warverian’s knee, using it as a launching point as I shoot up and come down hard, hacking through the metal shoulder attached to his serrated blade.

He screams in a mechanical roar as the body part falls to the ground in a flurry of red sparks and splashing blood.

I land hard and struggle back to my feet as he whirls to face me.

Backing away, he flourishes the short blade from his broken sword. “I don’t need any more than this to kill you.” He spits, blood roping from his lips. “I could use my bare hands.”

“You seem fresh out of those,” Jeren cracks as he fades to black behind Warverian.

“*Stay back,*” I caution Jeren.



*“What’s that term that Lana taught us? I think I’m using it correctly when I say fuck you.”* He dashes forward in that liquid way of his and buries a dagger in Warverian’s right calf. “Payback, asshole!”

Warverian strikes out toward him but misses, his blade too short to touch the shadow. But even I know that wounded animals are the most dangerous.

“It doesn’t matter what happens here.” Warverian spits blood again. “Nox will take this planet and all the rest.”

“It’s a real shame you won’t be around to see it,” Jeren taunts.

“Filthy Larenoan!” Warverian roars and stabs at a shadow. Jeren’s on his other side, digging a blade between his ribs.

Warverian screams and slashes wildly again.

Jeren backs away.

Warverian turns his glare on me. Whatever organic bits of him still remain, none of them have any semblance of pity or remorse. He’s hard, unflinching in the face of his demise. “Come for me, Bellatian. Meet your death like a champion, not some shadow rat from the Flotilla.”

“Harsh.” Jeren snickers.

I could toy with Warverian, make him suffer over a long, long time. But I don’t have that luxury. Not when Lana’s locked in a battle for her life. We have to get to her. Now.

Easing into my attack stance, I dash forward, then jump back as Warverian swings his sword out in a wide arc, overleveraging himself in an effort to gut me. I take the opening to parry him, slashing down his metal side with my sword then spinning and landing a hard kick to his sternum.

He falls back, sputtering as he lands hard.

I don’t hesitate. With one hard shove, I embed my blade straight through his chest, piercing his heart whether mechanical or organic. He jolts, a surge of red energy skittering along his frame. Then he looks at me as blood pours from the sides of his mouth.

“You will never touch my mate. And what I said to you before—your name being forgotten as your body lies decaying?” I twist my blade. “That starts now.”

He groans, his body shuddering like a dying spider as his systems shut down.

Wrenching my sword from him, I bring it down again and separate his head from his body for good measure.

“We might put it on a pike. We might not. Depends on how we’re feeling later.” Kyte grips my shoulder.

“I vote pike.” Jeren stands at my other shoulder. “But maybe we should let Lana decide on décor. She’s the artist, after all.”

Kyte looks around at the battles still happening all around us. “We need a ship.”

Something flickers in my peripheral vision, and Jeren shoots his arm out, catching someone by the throat.

Tilda smacks at his arm. “It’s me!”

“Sorry.” He drops his hold.

“I’ve been looking for you. Our air defense is done.” My sister finally messaged, but only to say thousands, maybe millions more Sentients are en route. They’ve formed a complete blockade. We had to land our squadrons.” She flinches as something explodes nearby. “More Sentients are landing. We have to fall back, outside the academy. I already have students moving the infirmary to the wide plain to the west.”

“Where are the ships?” I ask.

“Everywhere. Down past the Alpha dorms and—Hey!”

I take off at a run, Kyte and Jeren at my heels.

“Wait!” Tilda struggles to keep up. “You can’t fly! I just said the skies are done.”

“We have to get to Lana. She needs us.”

“Keep evacuating,” Kyte instructs. “Save as many as you can. We’re going to Lana, and then we’re going to finish this one way or another.”

“Finish it the winning way, if you don’t mind.” Tilda slows. “And bring her back to me.”

“We will,” I call and change course when I see a ship on top of some rubble to our right. “There.”

A Sentient comes stumbling out of it, but one of Jeren’s blades in its neck gets it out of our way. We board the ship and take off.

“How are we going to get past the—”

We all stop. I freeze. My heart seems to seize completely. Lana—she’s hurt. Bad. The bond is severing, burning away as she fades away a fiery pit of agony.

We never should’ve let her go.

“*Lana!*” We all cry out for her, our souls demanding answers. We get nothing but pain.

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“*P*athetic.” My mother hovers over me where I’m hiding in my toy box. “Weak.”

I siphon Kyte’s healing abilities as my mind fades, my thoughts becoming a jumble of pain and confusion. The power is inside me. I just have to use it. But I’m broken. Not just physically. I came here thinking I could make a difference, that I could show Nox a way to move forward. But there’s nothing inside her anymore, only a gnawing emptiness that’s been filled with an endless need for control.

Something screeches in my ears. Is it my voice? Wait. Is it Nox who works at the tire factory? She’s a vicious drunk. I’m used to being hit, though. I’ve been hit so many times I can take it. But something about this is wrong. Unfamiliar. I just need to get away. I need to get away and think and move to some other city.

“I thought you might be a worthy opponent, someone who would be up to the challenge. You aren’t. You’re just a silly little girl. So weak you may as well be human.” She sits beside me, totally at ease as I writhe in pain and will my body to heal itself. “For the longest time, I didn’t understand why Krenallus left you on that primitive planet. I even asked him. He didn’t have an answer. But Krenallus was always the cleverest of us. Eo the kindest.”

“*What were you?*” I ask without thinking, the question part of my muddled subconscious. For a moment, I forget who I’m

talking to, but then I remember and forget who I am. Where am I?

“Hmm. Eo would say I was the most trusting. Naïve, even. But he saw that as a plus, not something to stomp out. His mistake.” She sighs. “He was trusting too, until Byran ... But you know all about that. No need to retread that path.”

“*And now?*” I scream in my mind as my ribs knit back together.

“Now what?”

“*What are you now?*”

“Powerful.” She shrugs. “No one will ever hurt me again.”

“*What about the people you hurt?*”

“Does the spider care what the fly thinks of her?”

“*Spoken like a true villain.*” I almost black out from the pain of my neck snapping back into place.

“Look who’s naïve now.” She shakes her head. “Nothing’s so easily labeled like that, Lana. Not me. Not you.”

An alarm goes off somewhere nearby.

She rises. “Right on time. Your Alphas should be here shortly. That is, of course, if they can get past my legions of ships.”

“What?” My mouth moves, the word a mush coming from my broken jaw. What ships? Is this a dream?

Nox pats my hand, sending stabbing sensations rocketing up my arm. “You should heal your head next. You aren’t making a lot of sense.”

“*Alphas?*” I ask.

“They’re coming to save you, of course. It’ll be cathartic to wipe them out. For you and for me. Once they’re gone, I’ll keep you with me until you decide to see reason. Might take a few hours or a few centuries, but I’m not letting you go. You’re my family.”

I try to access the bond, to warn them away, to tell them to run far, far away from my mother. But my thoughts are jumbled, my mind still scattered on the floor behind me as the grey matter slowly stitches itself back together. Flashes of memory are like bursts of sun. Am I here? Am I still in a classroom with Van leering at me? Is my mother threatening to kill me while I hide in my toy box? Is that where I am?

“*Hello?*” I ask, uncertainty in my tone.

“Just rest, daughter. Heal. I’ll handle the messy business.” A voice, one that should be warm and comforting. It’s not. It’s hard and cold, made of sharp spikes and ice. “Once your Alphas are gone, you’ll see this is the only way forward.”

“*No!*” I scream, my head bursting with agony before it goes dark.

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“*R*ight!” I call out. “No, your other right!” I slam my palm down on an alarm, then another, as Ceredes pilots us through a maze of Sentient ships.

“Three hot on our tail,” Kyte calls from his gunner position.

“Hang on.” I flip up another console and hit a button to release a batch of mines behind us.

“Perfect!” Kyte calls, the boom of his gun matched by the explosions from the mines.

Too many alarms are going off—proximity, weapons fire, actual fire. Wait, actual fire?

“Shit!” I rush past Kyte, then drop down the narrow port to below deck. A bright blue flame is shooting across the ceiling just ahead, toasting the grates beneath Kyte’s gunner chair.

“We need you up here. What are you doing?” Kyte yells.

“I’m saving your knot!” I spray some fire suppressant on the electrical blaze, and it dies back to a flurry of sparks. One of the wires to the engine is frayed from a blast, but there’s not much I can do about it. I spray it down with more fire suppressant and hope that holds for a little while.

“Jeren!” Kyte and Ceredes yell for me, so I climb back up and cancel all the alarms.

“Navigation, brother.” Ceredes pushes the ship to its limits to avoid an approaching battalion of Sentients, their blasters already firing before they’re within range.

“I’ve got this.” Kyte focuses on his screen, his fingers running across the controls. “I’ve loaded up the cannon. It’s almost ready.”

“We need the engine power.” Ceredes warns and shoots us forward past a field of floating debris.

“We’re going to have to sacrifice some.” Kyte spins the guns toward the ships that are gaining on us.

Ceredes grumbles and does a series of avoidance maneuvers, trying to keep the debris damage on the hull in a manageable range.

The ship rocks when a hit lands square on our starboard side.

“Pillars!” Ceredes sends us shooting downward, the debris slamming into the ship and making the engine sputter as we try to escape. “Where’s the cannon?”

“Wait for it.” Kyte’s fingers are still moving super fast.

“We can’t wait!” Ceredes yells as another blast rocks the ship. “We just lost our port thruster, Kyte!”

I hit the command for more mines. Nothing happens. “We’ve lost mines.”

“Shit.” Ceredes pulls hard starboard, barely avoiding a piece of debris twice the size of our ship. It’s blasted to pieces right as we pass it. “Kyte!”

“You’re going to get mad, but I have to power down the ship for this to work.”

“What? No!” Ceredes yells.

Kyte flips a switch on his console. The ship goes dark and still right as another blast hits us from beneath, knocking me off my feet.

“Now!” Kyte smashes his fist into the console, and the ship groans, the area around us turning blue. When the cannon

blast erupts, the power from it shoves us forward, and behind us, the blue explosion clears the debris field and destroys at least a dozen Sentient ships.

“Yes!” Ceredes shouts.

“Told you.” Kyte shrugs.

“Okay, now power it back on.” Ceredes tries to restart the engine.

I go through the startup procedures, but nothing is happening. I do it all again, more frantically this time.

“It’ll come back.” Kyte jumps up and heads to the port below deck. “It’ll come back.”

“Kyte!” Ceredes shouts.

“It’ll come back,” he calls.

“Hey, there’s a bare wire I covered with fire suppressant. Don’t touch—”

A flash of blue lights up the entire inside of the craft and the engine restarts. Ceredes howls with triumph and maneuvers toward the back of Centari’s moon.

I silence the alarms again and don’t start to worry until I smell burning hair. “Shit. Kyte!”



“*T*hey’ve made it. Perhaps they’re stronger than I thought.” Footsteps near my head, my mother’s voice laced with irritation. “Not that it matters. I suppose I should welcome my guests.”

I blink, my body still hovering on the edge of an abyss of pain.

The footsteps recede as I sit up. I’m in the hallway where I landed, the hangar bay to my left. Nox disappears between some Sentient ships, a contingent of soldiers at her back. She’s going to kill my Alphas. I’ll never let that happen.

“You can’t stop me, Lana. Just recover. It’ll all be over soon.” A sharp crackle of pain down my spine accompanies her words. “Stay down.”

If she knew me at all, she’d know that wasn’t possible. My mind has cleared, and whatever neurons had been destroyed are firing double time now. Ceredes, Jeren, and Kyte are here. They somehow navigated the minefield of Sentients to make it to me. The circle is glowing brighter with every passing second.

Getting to my feet, I have to double over and put my hands on my knees until a wave of nausea passes. I’m healed, but I still bear the aftermath of what Nox did to me. I ache, and my blood has soaked through my clothing in spots. She almost killed me.

Almost.

Standing up fully, I stride into the hangar, but I don't make it. A dark barrier erupts in front of me, blocking me out.

*"Mother."* I bang on it, ignoring the sting in my hand. *"Let me in."*

*"I told you to stay down."* She sends a stronger blast of fire rushing along my nerve endings, wracking my body with sizzling torment.

I gasp and clutch my stomach, trying to stay upright despite my knees wobbling.

*"Block her out,"* Kyte calls to me softly. *"You have to block her out."*

*"She's too strong."*

*"You're stronger,"* Jeren whispers.

*"We're landing now. We've got you."* Ceredes's tone is laced with death; he hasn't come for reconciliation.

*"She'll kill you. Please stay back."* Tears rise in my vision. *"Please."*

*"Not this time. We aren't leaving without you."* Jeren's fingers play along my cheek with ghostly softness.

A black wall slams down, cutting off my link to them.

*"No cheating."* Nox tsks.

I step back and try to center myself, breathing the way Kyte taught me. I focus inward, on my mind, on being aware of everything inside me that ticks and swirls and pulses. Mindfulness. I see the wall she's put up. It shines like black obsidian, but even Nox can't cut the bond between my mates and me. It flickers beneath the blackness, a blue thread tinged with gold from me to them.

Pulling on that thread, I unfurl some of its power and build my own wall. Higher than Nox's and ten times as thick, it severs the dark link that runs between us. When I call for her, she doesn't answer. She's not in my head. Or if she is, she's locked away somewhere behind my wall. The challenge will

be to keep the wall strong until I can subdue her, because if she gets to me again ... I can't think of what will happen.

Another alarm begins blaring, signaling the arrival of an enemy ship. I can feel them when they land. Pressing my palm to the black barrier, I grip the center of it, balling it in my fist like a piece of cloth. My own power rushes through my hand, snaking out along the darkness and digging in. When I yank, the barrier pulls away like a cloak, and I toss it aside and stride into the hangar.

“Let them land. I want to get a look at them before they're gone.” Nox stands unafraid in front of the ship.

The rear bay door opens slowly. I can't see Jeren, but I feel him slip out and meld into the shadows cast by a large Sentient ship.

“Come out, Alphas. Lana has been waiting for you.” Nox snaps her fingers, and a fresh set of soldiers appear behind her. There have to be at least 50 of them, all waiting to descend on my Alphas.

Stealing around behind them, I stay low. I check my barrier, testing the wall every so often. But Nox hasn't sensed me. Not yet. It's working.

Kyte walks from the ship, his hands up, a rakish smile on his face. “I see where your daughter gets her good looks.”

Nox lets out a small laugh. “You're the charmer of the bunch, are you?”

He shrugs. “I've charmed a few in my time, sure.”

“A Calarian noble. I haven't seen one of those since ...” She taps her finger on her chin. “Since I destroyed your mother's ship. That was a good time.”

Kyte's smile falters, steely determination taking its place. “She was a hero. Something you know nothing about. I'd suggest you stick to other topics like genocide or traitors. On those points, you're practically a scholar.”

“Ever the golden-tongued diplomat.” Nox grins.

Ceredes strides out behind Kyte, his sword already drawn. “I didn’t come for a chat.” He doesn’t stop until he stands in front of her, his stern glare enough to melt the face off anyone else. “I came to kill you.”

“Spoken like a true Bellatian.” She glances to the side. “Where’s that sneaky Larenian? He must be here somewhere.”

“I’m in your nightmares.” Jeren circles around behind me.

Nox snorts. “My dance card is full in that arena. But thank you for the offer.” She raises a brow at Ceredes. “I was going to destroy you myself, but now that I’ve had a look at all of you, I think I’ll let my warriors handle it.”

“Warverian should’ve done the same.” Ceredes reaches behind him and pulls out a shard of a broken serrated blade and throws it at her feet.

Despite the block, I feel when the shock hits her. “You ...” She backs up a step.

“Me.” Ceredes gives a sarcastic bow. “Though I shouldn’t take all the credit. Kyte and Jeren were right there with me.”

Nox stares at the broken blade, her rage rising as darkness sparkles around her. “Kill them!” she yells.

The Sentients attack, blasters and knives flying as Ceredes ducks and rolls while Kyte throws up a barrier to absorb some of the barrage.

I shove my foot into the back of a Sentient just in front of me and grab its blaster, then shoot it. Turning, I start firing. My aim is more stormtrooper than anything else, but I shoot down the Sentients close to me. Snatching an energy blade from the floor, I spin and cut a leg out from under a particularly giant Sentient. It crashes to the ground with a howl, crushing two others under its bulk.

“Nice.” Jeren ghosts past me and stabs a Sentient in the neck, then slams it to the ground.

Ceredes is fighting several Sentients at once as Kyte sends blasts of energy out like jabs. He distracts the enemy enough



for Ceredes to deal several death blows in a row.

I fight my way through, but I'm not focused on mopping up Sentients. I have to find my mother. She's retreated to the back of the hangar, her arms crossed as she watches her warriors battle.

I can't tell if she's amused or curious. Perhaps both.

Sneaking up on her isn't an option, not when I can already tell she senses me. I slice down a Sentient who runs at me, then step over its body as I keep making my way to her.

"*Lana, don't,*" Kyte calls.

I ignore him. I have to.

"I'm beginning to get bored of this, Lana." She puts her hands on her hips. "Do you want me to destroy you again?"

"You can't destroy me."

"I can, and I will." She sends a blast of power at me, binding my arms around me with a ring of energy.

I struggle against it, but it only tightens until I can't get a full breath. That's when I start to panic.

"*Calm. Stay calm. Fight back.*" Jeren's voice is in the back of my mind.

Breathing out, I summon my power and let it crawl up my arms and wrap around Nox's circle. It tears it apart, sending roots into it and breaking it to pieces. It shatters and fades away like dust, and still I keep advancing.

"Are you sure this is what you want?" Nox summons her dark energy into her palms.

"This is what I have to do." I call forth my own energy, sending the blue and black surging through me. That's when I feel the wall Nox put in my mind begin to crack.

Her eyes narrow. "The circle won't save you. It's on its last breath."

I don't argue with her. I've done enough of that. The only way I can do what I must is if I accept that I can't save her,

that I never could. It hurts more than anything I've ever felt, but the truth isn't there for comfort. Nox the hero is gone. And in her place is the monster standing in front of me. The one who slaughters innocents and razes entire cities to the ground. I can't let her live. That realization hurts, too, but it's the deepest truth I have to face, and I have to face it *now*.

The battle with my Alphas still rages behind me, but I can feel each of them. When I reach out to touch them through the bond, Nox's wall cracks even more, blue light shining through. "*I love you. All of you.*"

"*Lana.*" They all say my name, the circle completing itself and ringing true. Nox's wall falls, and the circle energy inside me grows, twining with the dark until I'm floating on a current of pure energy.

"This is the end. I'm sorry." I mean what I say, every word.

Her eyes widen for only a moment, then she pulls more darkness from inside herself, preparing another devastating beam. "You think you and your pitiful Alphas can kill me?" Nox's mouth twists into a smirk. "You think you can do what Byran never could? What so many have tried and failed?" The frigate begins to vibrate, the metal under Nox's feet wrinkling as her darkness begins to shimmer around her like an aura.

"I wanted to love you. Maybe I will one day." I form my power around myself like armor, the energy massing and evolving, sparking and colliding. "Maybe I can only love you once you're gone."

Nox lets out a shriek of rage.

I take off at a run for her.

"Lana, don't!" Kyte yells right as Nox fires her beam.

I take the impact to the chest, fight forward, and then close her in my arms, burying her in my power as it unfurls all around us.

"Let go!" She screams and tries to fight me off, but I only hold tighter.

It hurts. It hurts so much, like my body is being eaten away by acid, but I can't let go.

"Stop!" Her scream ends on a gargle as my energy pours into her, down her throat and into her eyes. I send every bit of my strength from the circle and from myself into her, suffocating her with power. She beats at my back, her fists powerful at first, then getting weaker.

"Don't," she whispers. "Please, don't do this. Don't take it away from me."

"I'm sorry." I blink away my tears, crying for what she used to be and what she's become. "I have to."

"No!" She pushes back, her power trying to overcome mine.

Our energies tangle, our souls at war as we hold onto each other. The energy builds, moving frenetically between us as the entire ship around us starts to bend around our deepening gravity well.

"*Get down!*" I send a blast of power to Kyte. It's the last thing I can do before I'm swallowed by the energy. My mother and I are a nuclear reactor, the heart of a neutron bomb. Our energies melding and splitting will be the end of us.

Right before I give it one last push and sink us to the bottom of our own black hole, Nox wraps her arms around me. She doesn't fight. Doesn't do anything except hold me. Gently. Sweetly. Like a mother to her child.

"*Forgive me.*" Her voice. Not mech. Not even audible. But *her*.

Then we implode, sinking ourselves and our power into oblivion.

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“*N*o!” I throw up a barrier encapsulating Ceredes, Jeren, and me right before the entire frigate disintegrates.

The blast knocks us back, our orb spinning as we search for Lana through the bond.

“Where is she?” Jeren cries.

“Wait. Wait.” I close my eyes and grab the tether, the narrow rope of energy Lana sent me before the implosion. She did it to charge me up so I could protect us, but it also made a stronger link between the two of us.

Ceredes grips my shoulder, his voice breaking. “Kyte, where is L—”

“Wait!” I snap.

She’s gone. She’s *gone*.

No. No. No! I grip the line between us and pull it in like a fisherman with a net on the banks of Latrides. Pulling and pulling, the line still intact but yielding nothing.

“Is she alive?” Jeren sinks to his knees beside me. “I still feel her, but she’s gone. It’s like an echo. Like she’s ...”

“She isn’t here anymore.” Ceredes falls beside Jeren.

I focus on her, on her warmth, on her soul. “Come back to us, my love.” I keep pulling the thread of energy, searching for her past planets and galaxies, through wormholes, and far, far away. All the way to the edges of the Rift.

Once I get there, I pull the thread until it frays, the end lying limp and empty in my palm. I open my eyes.

“She’s gone somewhere far beyond where I can see.”

“She’s alive?”

“I don’t know.” That honest answer pains me in ways I’ve never imagined. “I can’t find her.”

“Oh, no.” Jeren’s tone makes the hackles on the back of my neck rise.

I look toward his line of sight. Several legions of Sentient ships are headed straight for us, their forward guns already lit with virudivan power. My barrier is strong, but nothing could withstand a barrage of that magnitude.

Joining them on my knees, I send a prayer to the Pillars for Lana and embrace my brothers. “I’ll keep the barrier for as long as I can.”

“I hope we go to Lana.” Ceredes watches the fighters approach. “I hope we all wake up together in bed with Lana in our arms.”

His wish is my fondest dream, too.

“Wherever we go, we go together.” Jeren thumps his chest. “May the circle never break.”

“May the circle never break,” Ceredes and I repeat back to him.

The ships move closer, one of them opening fire, somewhat tentative, as if unsure of what to make of the Alphas floating in a bubble. Then the others join, and I feel each blow, each strike against my barrier as it weakens. Still, we hold onto each other and send our love to Lana.

A cannon opens fire, the blast putting hairline cracks into the barrier. One more blow, and it’s over. We can be at peace. We can be with Lana.

Something crackles. At first I think it’s the barrier.

Then something enormous floats by us, the wake of it knocking us away from the mass of Sentient ships.

“Is that ...” I look up as the familiar thruster bays begin to fire with red power. Not for maneuvering. These are the weapons ports.

“The Flotilla.” Jeren’s on his feet. “It’s my people!” He whoops as the Flotilla begins firing, cutting through the Sentient ships as if they were nothing more than bits of flimsy metal. “Yes!” he yells and bangs on the barrier with pure joy.

“Might not want to do that.” I catch his fist before he hits it again.

“Sorry.” He wipes beneath his eyes. “I just never thought I’d see the day.”

“No one did.” I clap him on the back. “But you made it happen.”

He nods and looks out as the Flotilla continues its course of pure destruction. “I only wish Lana could see this.”

“She will. You can show her when we find her.” I hold onto that hope, even if it’s foolish. I will never give up on my mate.

Another crackle, the sound of a wormhole opening, and more ships pour through, these bearing the insignia of Ceredes’s homeworld. Their guns begin firing, ripping apart Sentient ships as they chase them away from Centari.

Ceredes’s comms erupt in static, though a woman’s voice comes through. “Son?”

“Mother!” Now he’s the one whooping, though he’s careful not to beat on the barrier.

Bellatian fighters roar past us, taking out Sentient ships and chasing more away from Centari.

“Unarmed and floating in space.” She sighs. “At least you’re still alive. I’m sending a ship.” His mother says curtly and cuts off the comms.

Ceredes gives a half smile. “That’s the same as her saying she loves me. It’s just the Bellatian way.”

“So, we’re going to steal said ship, right?” Jeren asks.  
“Just like old times.”

“Definitely.” Ceredes turns, his sense of direction never failing as he looks toward the direction of the Rift. “We’re going to get our Omega. She’s promised us plenty of time in bed. Now it’s time to pay up.”

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Floating. This is nice. Like when I used to go to the city pool during hot summers. I could just float in the deep end and no one would bother me. Mostly because my ears were underwater so I couldn't hear anything. The thought of a pool reminds me of the lake on Centari, the one on Academy grounds. How peaceful and beautiful. Not to mention how smoking hot when my Alphas were naked in the water with me.

I smile. Still floating. At peace. Though I do wonder when my Alphas will get here. They like to swim just as much as I do—mostly. Jeren still has to get used to it.

“Lana.” Someone calls my name. Probably a lifeguard.

Nope. Sorry. I'm busy. Floating.

“Lana.” The voice is louder.

“Busy,” I sing-song. “So busy.”

“Wake.”

I open my eyes.

What. The. Hell?

I'm floating. Naked. In some sort of void place with at least a dozen people—wearing clothes, no less—staring right at me.

I cross my legs and cover myself with my hands as best I can. “What is this?” I yell.

“Calm yourself.” A gray-haired woman at the center of the group already seems exasperated with me. I realize they’re situated around me like a council, similar to the one in charge of the fleet.

“Who are you?”

She flicks her finger, and I lower to the ground. My knees feel wobbly, and someone unseen drapes a white cloak over my shoulders. I pull it closed.

“That’s our question for you. You arrived here in the Moon Pool days ago. You’ve been floating—and snoring, I might add—ever since. We tried to fish you out, but you proved ... powerful and stubborn. Even in your sleep.”

Some of the others exchange amused looks. They’re all older, and they don’t seem hostile. More curious than anything else.

“You’re on the Palatian homeworld, Haranimun. Do you know how you got here?”

“You’re Palatians?”

“Yes.”

“Me too!”

“We know.” She blinks several times. “How did you end up in our most sacred pool?”

“Wait, I thought the Palatians destroyed their world.” I look around. Nothing seems particularly destroyed.

“We don’t appreciate visitors from beyond the Rift, especially forces bent on conquest or war. So, yes, we allow that myth to proliferate through the universe.”

“Wow, that’s ... that’s actually really smart.”

“Thank you,” she deadpans. “Now, please answer my question. How did you get into the Moon Pool of the palace?”

“I don’t know.” How *did* I get here? That’s when the memories hit me. I killed my mother. I destroyed the ship with my Alphas on it. It takes my breath away, the amount of loss I’ve caused. I killed them. Tears swim in my vision, and I sink

to my knees as a sob rockets from my lungs. “No, no, no!” I cover my face with my hands. “This can’t be happening.”

“Lana,” the lady says gently.

I want to sink through the floor and die. I can’t live without my Alphas, without my circle. I destroyed them. I destroyed Nox. She became a monster, but how am I any better? I killed the only people in my life who knew me down to my soul, who loved me despite all my flaws. I can’t breathe. I can’t take in the enormity of what I’ve done.

I cry louder and curl into a ball.

“Lana.” The woman is closer now, kneeling beside me.

“How do you know my name?” I don’t know why I ask. I think I’m grasping at anything to keep from drowning in despair and regret. I keep seeing their faces—Jeren, Ceredes, Kyte—all on an endless loop. It’s like stabbing myself over and over again.

“Some Alphas arrived only minutes ago looking for a Lana. We can only assume—”

I sit up. “What?”

She stares at me. “I said some Alphas came looking for you.”

“Where are they?” I get to my feet and almost drop the cloak. “Where?”

She rises. “We have them in an antechamber under guard. They aren’t particularly well behaved.”

That’s when I know. “They’re mine!”

“*Kyte, Jeren, Ceredes!*” I call to them.

Our bond reignites, the blue solid and firm, and it leads me right to them. I sprint past the woman, down a marble hallway and then dash to the right.

I use my power to gently move aside the two guards on the doors, then throw them open. I’m set upon immediately.

Ceredes sweeps me into his arms as Jeren kisses me and Kyte kneels, his forehead pressed to the back of my hand.

“Thank the Pillars.” Kyte whispers a prayer.

“You’re alive.” I look at each one of them in turn, as if I haven’t seen them in years.

Ceredes hugs me so hard it hurts, and I only want him to do it harder.

Then I gasp. “But the academy. All those Sentient ships. Even with Nox gone—”

“It’s handled. The Flotilla ate them for breakfast, then the Bellatians came back for seconds.” Jeren smirks, his palm on my cheek. “The Sentients are done. Latrides has been retaken. Once word spread that Warverian and Nox were dead, the Sentients fell apart. Many ran back to the Rift.”

“But we’re in the Rift.” I look around. It’s a completely normal-seeming place. “Shouldn’t there be giant monsters trying to eat us?”

“In some parts of the Rift—yes. In others, not so much. Turns out the Rift as we think of it is a myth. It’s more of a mirror universe than anything else,” Kyte says.

“A what?”

“More on that later.” He kisses the tip of my nose. “First we need to get out of here and back to Latrides. People need us.”

The guards are standing outside the door, some pretty intense-looking halberds in their hands, when the woman from before walks up.

“So, she’s yours?” She raises a brow at Ceredes.

“She’s ours,” he responds.

“Then you’re welcome to take her. But I’d like you to have this.” She hands me a silver comms device.

“So we can talk?” I take it. “I’d love that. I have a million questions.”

She nods. “We have some questions, too, particularly about the woman who arrived with you.”

My stomach drops. “There was a woman?”

“Old. Broken. She was barely held together. Missing an eye and part of her face, likely more. We tried to give her aid, but she kept us back with her energy. She bore the Palatian royal ability. The dark power.” She eyes me, already knowing I have it, too. “She arrived at the same time as you. When you wouldn’t wake, she knelt and said a prayer over you, then left. Stole a ship and disappeared.”

“Nox.” I can’t believe it.

“Before she left, she asked us to tell you something.”

Ceredes tightens his grip on me as Jeren and Kyte gather closer, as if to protect me from whatever words my mother bequeathed.

“Okay.” I steel myself. “Hit me, lady.”

The woman raises an amused brow, but continues, “She said ‘may the circle never break.’”

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## EPILOGUE

Lana

“She hit me!” Stellan runs in, his face in a pout.

“Why’d she do that?” Ceredes scoops him up and tickles him.

Stellan’s toddler giggles are infectious, and I find myself smiling. “You have to remember Ravda is older than you, so if she gets mad, she can hurt you. And trust me, she gets mad a lot. She’s just like her Uncle Gavros.” I lie back and page through my book.

“Can I hit her back?”

“If you can do it with honor, yes. If not, no.” Ceredes puts him on his feet.

“I don’t know what that means.” Stellan frowns and scratches his head, mussing the black hair near one of his golden horns.

“You already healed yourself.” Kyte leans down and kisses his forehead. “I don’t know why you’re complaining.”

“Aunt Tilda saw the whole thing, and she and Aunt Uaxin told Ravda to apologize. But she didn’t. She doesn’t have honor.” He crosses his arms and lifts his chin. “Oh, and Onin Junior sided with Ravda!”

I roll my eyes. “Honor has nothing to do with this. Sounds to me like she whipped your butt. Just do better next time.”

Ceredes grins. “Spoken like a Bellatian.”

“Sneak up behind her.” Jeren kisses his son on the top of his head. “She’ll never see you coming.”

“Maybe I can just scare her. She hates when I do that.” Stellan gets a devious twinkle in his blue eye, matched by another in his green one. He romps out of our bedroom to torment Gavros’s niece a bit more.

Ceredes locks the door.

I look up from my book. “What was that for?” I know damn well what that was for. My needing is teasing the edges of my being, my body already throbbing for release. It’s about to hit, and this time, we’ve decided we want another child.

Kyte strips off his shirt, his body highlighted in the glow of Latrides, the ocean behind him crashing and reflecting shards of light.

“I can smell you, little Omega.” Jeren, already shirtless, drops his pants.

“I’m quite preoccupied with my book. I simply don’t have time for—ah!”

Ceredes takes my ankle and yanks me down in the bed. “Sassy Omega. I’ve missed you.”

“You’ve been with me all day.”

“Not inside you.” He yanks up my shirt and fastens his mouth to one of my nipples. It sends a jolt of desire through me, this one so strong I moan.

“Her needing. It’s here.” Kyte pulls down my pants and panties, then spreads my legs. “You smell so good.” With a long lick, he makes me arch as Jeren kneels beside me, his dark eyes hooded with lust.

“You need this.” Jeren leans down and kisses my mouth as Ceredes sucks my breasts.

That’s when it hits me full force, and my body sings with desperation. Jeren’s absolutely right. I need them. All of them.

“Please,” I whine.



“My mate never has to beg.” Ceredes knees my legs farther apart and presses his thick cock inside me.

“Yes.” I dig my nails into his shoulders, my body still aching, needing release so badly I can barely breathe. “Give it to me.”

“All yours.” Ceredes thrusts deep and hard just the way I like. Hitting all my pleasure spots and then some. He doesn’t stop, his powerful body contracting as I hold onto him. Each stroke soothes the ache until I finally reach the point where I feel pleasure.

“Don’t stop.” I bite his shoulder as he makes me his, his body mastering mine as he pistons inside me.

He grinds his hips against mine just right and sends me into my release. I moan loud and long as I come, my body constricting around him, squeezing his cock, demanding his seed. He can’t hold back. He thrusts deep, his body perfectly aligned with mine, and he roars as he comes. His knot expands, locking us together and heightening my pleasure. It erases the ache, soothes my body, and bathes me in the most delicious bliss.

We stay together, kissing and touching as we come back down from the high. When he finally pulls out, my ache begins anew.

“Kyte.” I reach for him, pulling him on top of me as he claims my mouth.

He thrusts inside me, his cock sliding with ease. With a push, I roll over, riding him as he stares up at me with pure love in his gaze.

“A goddess.” He cups my breasts. “A saint of Latrides.”

I move on him, rubbing my clit against him as I rock back and forth. Jeren pulls my face to the side and kisses me as Ceredes grips my hips, feeling my rhythm and holding me steady.

Kyte squeezes my nipples, twisting them until the ache rises even higher. I need more. Quickening my pace, I moan as Kyte thrusts up, meeting me and giving me contact where I

want it. Jeren's tongue swipes against mine, his hands on my face as I ride Kyte faster and faster, the ache finally fading.

As Kyte reaches down and swipes his thumb across my clit, I shatter again, my body rolling up and unfurling again and again. Jeren swallows my moans of pleasure as Kyte presses upward, filling me with him as he releases with a primal grunt.

I feel him spill inside me, his come mixing with Ceredes's as we continue thrusting against each other, feeling every bit of sensation as his knot locks into place. My mind blanks out, my body on fire with desire and satisfaction all rolled into one. I've had too much; I need more. I can't stop wanting my Alphas. We languish in our pleasure, our bodies slowly relaxing. But my ache only begins to build anew.

"Mine." Jeren takes my hips and pulls me back, his cock easing into me as I kiss Kyte's chest.

Ceredes stands beside the bed, his hand on his cock as he slowly works it, his eyes locked on mine. It's filthy and erotic, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

"My mouth." I open for Ceredes.

He steps up and swipes his cock head across my lips as Jeren pushes deep inside me, then begins to move faster, our skin slapping together as I suck on Ceredes's head, tasting both of us there. I suck more, sliding down his shaft as Kyte reaches up from below me and strokes my clit.

Jeren grips my shoulder, leveraging my body against him as he pushes inside me again and again, stroking my ache and giving me what I so desperately want. Even so, I demand more. From all of them. They give it. They always do.

"That's it." Kyte sucks my nipple into his mouth, his fingers still at my clit, and Jeren thrusts harder, lighting me up from the inside.

Ceredes grips my hair, pulling the strands as I use my tongue to swipe along his shaft.

"Omega," he grates. "I'm going to come."

I take him to the back of my throat.

He groans, and his second release spills into my mouth, coating my tongue as I drink him down.

“Pillars.” Jeren swears as I contract around him, my climax coming at me fast as I taste Ceredes.

Kyte presses on my clit just right, and that’s all it takes. I shatter again, my body thrown into a pit of pleasure from which I never want to escape. Moaning around Ceredes’s cock, I feel my eyes roll back in my head as Jeren surges forward and releases, his seed filling me and joining with my other Alphas. His knot expands, and I reach new heights, my soul shooting into the stars and fluttering back down in slow, brilliant sparks.

I’m gone, my pleasure complete, my body sated... for now.

I collapse onto Kyte as Ceredes pulls his cock from my mouth and places a sweet kiss there instead.

Jeren leans over me, his knot still engaged, still sending jolts of delight through me. He kisses my back, dropping love along my spine as he comes down from our high.

When we’re snuggled in bed together, a mess of arms and legs and love, I send a prayer to the Pillars or whatever is out there, thanking them for this. For love. For my Alphas. For my family.

For my circle.

May it never break.



*Thank you for taking this fun, star-filled journey with me. I loved every moment of it, and I hope you did too. ~ Lily*

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## ALSO BY LILY ARCHER

### Fae's Captive



My college roommate is the worst. Cecile steals my food, brings guys over at all hours, and parties instead of studying. But those quirks pale in comparison to what she does next. She drugs me, and I wake up imprisoned in an alternate universe full of terrifying creatures. Now, the biggest and scariest creature of all—a *fae king*—believes I'm his mate. He's freed me from the dungeon but keeps me close. So close, in fact, that I'm beginning to like his wintery gaze and ice-chiseled body. But secrets and villains lurk throughout this new world, and I don't know if I'll survive long enough to figure out how to get back home.

### Fae's Consort



They call me the village spinster. I rather enjoy it. Single and free to dance with the witches under the moonlight whenever I please—what could be better than that? When the day king shows up to take ten changelings as his consorts, I'm happy those selection days are behind me. At least I thought they were. But instead of ten young females, King Solano chooses only one. Me. Emma Druzy, sock darter and 28-year-old spinster of Moonhollow. He takes me to the day realm, a world of sun and beauty the likes of which I've never imagined. Solano is far more than he seems, his wit and his warmth breaking down my walls. But there's danger here,

too, the sort that creeps up on you despite the bright light of day. And if I'm not careful, I'll lose my heart to the day king or my life to his enemies.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lily Archer believes in fairies, mermaids, and fierce fae warriors. Armed with nothing more than her imagination and a well-worn MacBook, she intends to slay the darkest beasts of the fantasy worlds and create true love where none seemed possible.

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