



Armor (Hunted Relics #11)

Author: Sybur Phyre

Category: Fantasy

Description: The Titans BlazeStar is ready for spaceflight and prepped to pick up the human survivors until they discover the lost Brothers buried in mud halfway around the planet. The arrival of another enemy warship threatens their rescue operation and escape.

Esthi

I escape Mothership Marst in a pod, but I don't stay with the other women. I'm caught in a dust devil and thrown far into the desert. No one comes for me, so I set out on my own. I've been hitching rides on Solcrue vessels, looking for my sister. This is nothing new. But now, I'm confident I'm being followed. I fear they know who I am.

Just as the squad of Solcrue approaches my position, a team of Titans confronts them. I'm caught in the crossfire until a shield appears out of nowhere, ratcheting up from the dirt and into a cocoon of metal that protects me. The Titans push the battle away but don't return for us, leaving me alone with the mostly buried CyberTitan named Armor, who has a voice like thunder.

He protected me when he didn't even know me, a gesture uncommon to me in recent years. I dig and scrape to break him free. There are many more like him that we free, though Armor is more than enough Titan for me.

I hope the word Armor receives of a ship leaving Ellipsis is true. And I really hope they don't forget us. I still haven't found my sister. She might be on their ship. Then again, being stranded on a planet with hunky Titan, Armor, doesn't sound so bad.

Armor

For many years, I have hibernated in this dust like my Brothers. I can hear some of them, but I fear for the rest. Esthi's arrival is unexpected. She is small but works diligently to get me up and running again. I have never seen a human fight so hard to save a Titan before. I am indebted to her and dreaming of things I shouldn't. I can't help it. I must be broken. Titans are forbidden from fraternizing with humans.

Together, we free my Brothers only to be forced to run from Solcrue and Cyborg Security Patrol soldiers. So much has happened in the

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:02 am

Sirens warble on enemy Mothership Marst .

Women rush to escape pods as the doors to their servants' quarters open.

Enemy soldiers freak out as sparks fly out of control panels, life support systems grind to a halt.

They try to regain control of their ship.

Evo, the corrupted CyberTitan, finally turns on his captors.

And all it took was a tiny bit of code—an itchy bitch of a virus that the Solcrue's security engineers will have to hunt down, one I've been working on for over a decade.

I monitor Vessna's jailbreak on my tablet. They're in orbit not far from us—close enough for a data transfer. I dare not try to hack the military mothership Corenge . They'd hunt me down for sure with that many highly trained soldiers.

Solcrue took my sister.

One day, I will ruin them.

But that day is not today.

I shut off my tablet and pack it in my bag.

Time to move.

A blast goes off in the hallway, scattering hot yellow flames through the louvers of the vent I've been monitoring the ship through. The heat scorches the right shoulder of my tired Terran armor. I quickly make my way through the ductwork to the room where my sister has been kept chained up.

It has been agonizing to be so close and yet unable to reach her. Her shackles are of a kind I can't hack without more time to study them up close. All of this work was to get me enough time alone with her to free her.

A decade of searching has brought me to this moment.

Through a vent, I peer down and into the round cell Myria is in. There's no one else in there but her. Despite the sirens, she remains in her hibernation chamber like a sleeping vampire in an upright metal casket filled with green light.

The room is a weave of cables, hoses, radiant fuel cells, and a honeycomb of structural webbing like she's some sort of queen of the space spiders. But that's not the strong, sweet, protective older sister I remember. She is not evil. And yet, little about her looks familiar.

"Myria?" I whisper through the vent.

Her eyes don't open. How she's sleeping through the chaos, I don't know. I thought for sure she'd wake up. I have to get to her while the Solcrue are distracted.

The scar between her dark eyebrows brings back a memory of fighting in the mine tunnels over the single piece of hard candy in a dusty rucksack. Forgot all about it when you found the cybertech's journal.

I pat the pocket of my pack to reassure myself that the book is still there. Grabbing my multi-tool, I loosen the vent cover in her room and peek out. It's just her and me and the sirens and beeps of the hibernation chamber's monitor.

The moment I drop out of the vent into the room, the awareness that I can't turn back and rehash my plan ratchets up my heart rate and makes my palms sweat.

I'm not a soldier, not like Myria. Father trained me differently.

I'm supposed to stay a shadow. I have to make every second out in the open count.

The vent cover hangs open. Solcrue will question why. If they don't find me, one of their inspection drones will. I have to free Myria and get to Ellipsis, where the Titans are.

I tighten my gear bags and thigh pouches and finally stand before my sister face-to-face after nearly a decade of tracking her.

Myria's expression is cold, stern even, with more scars than I remember.

They've bound her in a body shackle more intricate than anything I've ever worked on or seen before.

I'm certain Solcrue must be trying to control her every move, like some sort of fucked up marionette.

But why you? What made you different? Why didn't they take me instead?

I think I know why. She was the biggest, strongest female in our mining camp on Earth Minor who moonlighted as a bouncer at our only camp bar.

I fixed machinery with Dad while you swung a Pulaski.

Taking her was the Solcrue's way of saying that even our strongest can't escape their rule.

But they've not met me. Not yet. And as I look up at my sister's sleeping face and the evil carapace they've bound her in, my need for vengeance grows.

"Myria?" I choke out.

Her ribs swell with a breath. They've given her a decorative chest plate, which seems odd to me.

The monitor beside her has a program running, one I don't recognize.

I hate it already because I can't touch her without setting off alarms. It's more complicated than I'm prepared to handle. So I have to fall on my backup plan.

I pry open every access panel on her cage and find a power conduit. The first ten times I tried to access her room through the main computer network, I got blocked out and shot at by an inspection drone. The only way to get her out is the old-fashioned way.

Drawing the gun from my thigh holster, I shield my eyes with an arm, aim at the junction box, and fire.

Power arcs in a bright flash and crackles. The room goes dark for a second before green emergency lights kick on. That will, no doubt, make Solcrue get here faster, cutting down the time I have to talk with her.

I round Myria's cell and look up at her. Finally, her eyes open.

“Myria?”

She looks down at me, and her gaze lingers. I can’t tell if she recognizes me or not.

“I’m Esthi, your sister. I know it’s been a decade, but...”

Small lights blink on in rows inside her cell.

“You’re too late.” She says it with such apathy that I’m not sure what to do or think. This is not what I expected.

Myria crosses her arms over her chest. A shield encases her in green light, giving her an eerie glow. “Ellipsis. Titans. Fight .”

She has Myria’s eyes, her face, and that scar, but she isn’t my sister.

With a droning hum and a rush of air, her cylindrical cage launches through the floor.

“Damn it!” I turn and pace the path circling her cell, trying to figure out what to do. All of my careful planning has gone to shit in seconds.

Fight? Is that where she’s going? Or is that what I’m supposed to do? Has Myria forgotten me, forgotten herself? Was that an evil clone? What the hell is going on?

“They’re ejecting and falling to the surface of Ellipsis,” someone says in the hallway. “Skysprinters loading now.”

A sick feeling twists my stomach. Is that what they made her into? A fighter pilot for the enemy?

That would make perfect sense in their minds. Use the enemy to defeat the enemy.

It's a regular Solcrue tactic.

The door to her cell opens. Panic makes me lurch behind the cage frame and crouch, then watch through a crack between hibernation feeding and circulation systems.

An officer, judging by the gold trim along his black uniform, stops in the doorway. The top of his ears bear the typical military crop, and his skin gleams with oil that makes the hexagonal scales more defined. "Power relay blew in her room. Get it fixed for the next occupant."

It's rare for me to see an officer, but Ahronis clearly likes to get his hands dirty. He killed Marst's captain and took his place. I saw it on the video feeds I'd hacked.

"You're not returning her to this post?" a shorter Solcrue asks.

"No. She's assigned to eliminate the enemy on Ellipsis now. And don't ask stupid questions above your pay grade."

"Yes, Commander."

"Mothership Aidathra will arrive soon. She will be reassigned. Then, I want you to upgrade a hangar for the obelisk. Once we have all the pieces, we will win the war without lifting a finger."

"Yes, Commander."

Plinking sounds, like little metal feet, echo in the vent overhead. I look up, dread filling my bones with lead. An inspection drone peers out. It spots me with a jerking head motion, then crawls like a demented spider to brace itself in the opening as alarms go off.

The door to the cell begins to close. If I don't get out now, I'll be caught, tortured, and killed. It's happened to others I've crawled with through the dust on other ships.

I scramble for the door, dart by the mechanic, and slip through at the last second.

Commander Ahronis and his protection detail aren't far away. They stop in the hall access to the hangars for cruisers and troop transports and then turn around. Security doors flash and begin to lower from the ceiling.

They're trying to isolate the problem—me.

I sprint away from them and down the hallway toward the escape pods, hoping there is one left. It's the only way I'm not getting captured when an Isolate and Terminate order has been placed.

The Solcrue are compartmentalizing the ship and will go through each until they've taken me down. I have to take my chances in a pod. But even as the door to the escape hangar on my level closes and I dive underneath it, I fear I've lost my sister forever.

If she returns to Marst or Aidathra, I have no way to get back. And hitching a ride to Marst almost killed me the first time, just like most transports I've been on.

When I burst into the escape pod wing, I see a woman's hatch on her pod isn't sealing. The others have ejected. She's crying and frantically tapping the release button as an enemy soldier charges toward her.

I draw my handgun and fire at him, knock him back around a support beam with a ball of red fury, then slam to a stop and assess her screen.

It has an error code for a hydraulics malfunction on the door from another blast. I

manually shut it and tap Eject.

The hull seals. Marst closes the airlock.

On the other side, I see her praying as she belts in. The pod launches her into space.

A yellow bullet singes my jacket, making me duck and turn to look.

Another shot whizzes so close to my face that I feel the heat and hear the fizzling of the chemical reaction.

Solcrue bullets are actually quite beautiful when they're not flying at my head.

Their sodium-laced fragmenting crystal projectiles don't penetrate hulls, only flesh. It's a smart design for starships.

The soldier switches to war rounds, green bullets filled with toxic Barium Chloride.

I fire back as I continue along the escape pod accesses to the last one at the far end.

Please work. Don't be broken!

I don't read the screen. It has a green light overhead, so I fire several shots behind me as I throw myself inside and smash the Eject button.

The hatch seals. Marst closes the airlock.

I belt myself into the seat and look back to see the soldier who shot at me now watching from the window.

The pod launches me into space, and he's gone, shrinking with the mothership and

my inside track on the Solcrue, Myria, everything.

All that I have worked toward is gone in one simple tap of a button.

I found my sister, but I didn't find her .

As space brightens and the surface of Ellipsis nears, I realize I have to change my goals if I'm going to keep going.

Aidathra. If I don't find her on the surface, and if I live, that's my next goal.

Titans ... Myria said it. Or whoever she is.

I thought Titans were all lost during the war. No one heard of them after we lost. But after I found my way onto a Solcruean transport, it's all I've heard about for the last two years. The jailbreak, two hundred Titans roaming free on Ellipsis, and General Krader's daughter who is with them now.

Cyborg Submission Patrol failed at their main objective and wants to clean up their mess.

And the daughter of a Creator helped with the jailbreak—a woman who is half Solcrue.

I know so much from the thousands of transmissions I've listened to, and yet I feel unprepared for landing on a planet again, especially one with Titans.

Ahead of me, escape pods flare with heat as they enter Ellipsis' atmosphere.

Minutes pass like seconds, and I trail the others through the burn phase and back to an oxygen-rich environment filled with sunlight, dunes, lakes, and forests.

I descend further north than the others as a jet stream kicks me into an angry desert.

Sand curls around my pod, battering the hull until I fear it will crack the glass.

I tip and tumble through the dust devil.

My harness digs into my shoulders, chest, and crotch as it keeps me locked into my seat.

Navigation beeps frantically as the thrusters sputter, trying to correct my position while choking on dust and sand.

Momentum rises, and my pod arcs out of the storm through waves of sand and dim light before smashing into a dune.

The hit pummels my body. I smack my head on the dash screen as I skip off the dune and tumble to the bottom.

Every muscle tenses as I wait for this disorienting misery to end. And finally, I rock to a stop.

There's no one remotely close by on the navigation screen before it blinks off. The storm rages around me, so I stay put, gather my things and my wits, and prepare for the hike to find shelter and, hopefully, a Titan sighting.

Navigation beeps with an inbound alert that a Skysprinter is coming to rescue me.

They've found me.

I can't stay where I am.

I put on my goggles for stealth ops and switch them to night vision.

Opening the hatch against the wind takes effort, but I push out into the storm.

The climb up the desert's hills toward the forest is slow going and treacherous in the wind.

But I finally make it to the nearest tree I can see.

Wind dies down in the higher-up trees, and I finally get a good look at the other escapees. They rain from Marst and Vessna .

The Skysprinters swarm the pods that have landed miles away. Three enemy fighters headed straight for my position can't be a coincidence. They have to know what I've done, that I'm the reason the doors opened and their servants escaped. Otherwise, they'd never send anyone after me.

If they catch me, I'll never find Myria.

It's a slog, climbing into the forest with all the gear on my body, but I will make it.

I have to. For Myria. For Mom, Dad, and our camp. I can't let the Solcrue take everything from us. They will eat stardust one day for killing and hurting so many. Until then, I'm taking it one step at a time.

One tree.

One shadowy forest.

One tunnel into a mountain.

Clicking on a flashlight, I switch off my night vision goggles, get my bearing, and head deeper into the rock.

I must conserve my strength, supplies, and my wits if I want to succeed.

I refuse to die trying. But I'm secretly afraid of dying alone because then all of my travels, sneaking into transports, crawling through metal ship guts, surviving on stolen food, and leaving everything behind will be for nothing.

I will find you, Myria. We will be a family again. You made me promise you. Don't you remember?

All I hope now is that she saw me there with her and that she knows somewhere deep in her heart that she isn't alone, even if she's too far gone to save.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:02 am

We were too heavy. The thought cycles in my mind with the replay of our final moments of freedom. For years, I have picked it apart, second by second, trying to find a reason why things went wrong and a way to free my Brothers from this deserted tomb.

The mud swallowed us when we landed. I tried to reach my Brothers. The sticky clay was stronger than us. Forty-three of them. One of me. I protected none.

I am Armor. It is my only purpose.

I have failed them.

Every time another Brother falls silent, or his area network ping stops, another part of me cracks.

They fought to make their way to me as we sank. My opened wings caught the surface and kept my arms free. But we landed too spread out on uninhabited Ellipsis.

Years of storms have slowly buried me. And years without food or regular rains have rendered me to my lowest power levels. I have little left. I use it to send a distress signal for as long as I can.

My Brothers closed off their oxygen and sealed themselves in crusty tombs as the sun baked us. They switched to hibernation while we hoped for a rescue. But so many have gone silent over our network that I fear many are permanently lost.

We all knew we were alone in battle out here. The BlazeStar was going down. No

one else was left in orbit to fight.

A couple of my Brothers managed to get their hands to the sunlight so they could charge like me. But only I have enough of me exposed that I can listen and patrol.

Mace and Firebolt still reply on coms.

MaceArmor: Report.

ArmorLocal: I have made contact with our CyberPilot, Clover. She says her human friends named her.

FireboltLocal: Friends?

ArmorLocal: She says they have found General Krader's daughter and Commander Savage.

They have freed Titans and named their pilots Poppy and Clover.

They have found and repaired the ship with help from humans and other Brothers.

They are sending a search party for us. They are leaving in just a few days.

MaceLocal: Days?

My two brothers have only the energy for one-word communication. I fear they are close to their ends. I do not want to be alone. I cannot be the only one who is rescued, or my given name will carry only shame.

ArmorLocal: Three motherships orbit Ellipsis now.

A fourth arrives soon. They have hindered the capabilities of Marst and Vessna.

They do not think they will escape a fourth.

It is heavily armed. Amp, Clover's new copilot, has relayed they want to preserve numbers and that many Brothers have Bonds with human survivors.

FireboltLocal: Insufficient.

I'm not sure what he's referring to. Maybe Firebolt feels he could not serve a human. None of us could in our current condition, so I keep going.

ArmorLocal: Amp says many Titans have found mates among the human females. Titan fell to the Solcrue after the CyberGuards were built. No females were constructed for us.

MaceLocal: Human?

FireboltLocal: How?

They have the same question as me.

ArmorLocal: I do not know. We were once human. Perhaps it is something that we only understand if we are freed from our punishment protocols and given independence.

The rumble of a Skysprinter's engines makes me scan the area. My scanners show a fighter arcing across the desert, heading for distant mountains.

CloverArmor: Long-range scanner shows forty-four Titans in the desert floor. Please confirm.

I click back twice.

CloverArmor: Rescue mission initiated. Skysprinters are aware of your existence. Patrols have increased. Success probability 15%.

ArmorClover: That's better than we've had in years. Even if the team cannot reach us, your communication has made our dishonorable end acceptable.

CloverArmor: You went down fighting. If we cannot retrieve you before we take the BlazeStar to meet up with the Rogues, I will send a team back for you. Please relay to those not yet in hibernation.

ArmorClover: The probability of you escaping is not 100%.

CloverArmor: Correct. But my message to the Rogues has been sent by Amp. They will retrieve you and others.

ArmorClover: That probability is not 100%.

CloverArmor: You don't know Rogues. Neither do I, but Rogue CyberTitan Evo has assured me they only fail when they are betrayed. So they isolate themselves to ensure effectiveness. Only CyberGuards are indestructible and succeed with missions no matter the situation.

ArmorClover: We have missed many years of upgrades to Brothers.

CloverArmor: We will catch you up when you are free. Team approaching your location.

I hear voices of others, Titan and human, but they're muffled by the dirt in my ears.

Only one eye remains above the surface, so I squint, blink to clear the dust, and scour the brown crust between a loose strand of dry grass and an iridescent green beetle toward a flashing light paired with the pops of distant gunfire.

I cannot focus much through the mirage that ripples everything around me.

The team moves closer, but so do the sounds of Skysprinters racing overhead.

I send out a ping, a beacon, in case they need one.

MenaceArmor: I am sorry, Brother. We are pinned down.

My hope crashes like the nearby ship that sends a faint shudder through the desert. Another Skysprinter quickly flies in to replace the last.

FractureArmor: We will return when the threat of Solcrue fighters is resolved.

ArmorFracture: Understood.

It pains me to watch our hope of a chance at freedom and returning to service flee under Solcrue fire, but I can't change what is beyond my control, which is basically everything right now.

MaceArmor: Rescue?

I rework my response because I do not want to break his hope or Firebolt's.

ArmorLocal: Pending. Skysprinters overhead.

MaceLocal: Damn.

But as the firefight moves away from us, something else comes closer. I see the shadow in the sand even though I cannot see what makes it. Something brushes the back of my head. Then again. It is gentle and cautious.

I catch a scent in the breeze. Sweat. Musk. Leather. Soap?

Human.

The shadow moves closer to me and lower to the ground. It crawls over the end of my half-buried left wing.

A small arm appears before my eye. On it is the tattoo of a mining camp from Earth Minor. It pulls into view the face of a female plastered with sweaty strands of ash-brown hair and blue eyes.

“Bet they were looking for you,” she whispers as she digs into the dirt, freeing it from the rest of my face.

I look to where she works, and she jolts in shock. “You’re alive?”

Meeting her gaze, I blink. Yes. It’s the only thing I can do until she frees my mouth.

She lurches forward, digging faster, frantically. The woman swipes the dirt from my other eye, and I can finally look at her with complete focus.

I have never seen such a beautiful sight in all my years of operation.

A human is rescuing me, like the Creators once did.

But this female stirs something deeper, a desire I did not know I could have for a human.

Watching her curves sway and shift as she claws free a clump of dry dirt from my neck gives me daring thoughts of what I want to do to her if I break free.

But our meeting is cut short by a string of green bullets punching a line toward us from a Skysprinter.

I cannot let her die. It is my duty as much as I feel it in my core. She may be our only chance if Menace's team doesn't make it back.

I redirect all of my power to the wing most exposed. It is stiff and slow to respond, but I grit my teeth and pry it up from the desert floor with a loud crack.

She leans back and looks up at it in horror, like I'm going to hurt her. But I want the opposite. There's no time to try to communicate. My arms are still stuck. My wing and my eyes are all I have. So I shield her with the last of my energy and hope she doesn't give up on us.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:02 am

A team of Solcrue that had been following me now advances on a squad of Titans and humans further down the desert plains.

I guess I'm not the priority. But as I cautiously lower myself to the sand to clear the dirt from the Titan I've found in the cracked plains, metal bursts up from the desert in a fan of haggard blades that glint under the sun.

The wing is massive and blocks the daylight.

It arcs high with feathers resembling blades which ratchet into an impermeable shield that falls hard to the dirt and curls up around me.

I scramble back as the sharp feathers scrape up the ground near my body.

Only as the sunlight fades under the Titan's wing do I hear the fighter's engine and the pop-pop-pop of the bullets tearing up the desert floor.

I hunker beside the Titan's head. Bullets slam into his wing with raucous, reverberating force, making me cover my ears.

I've been shot at before, but never when out in the open like this.

I took a chance because I've been tracking the Titan team with a human and a Solcrue since they landed in a Boltburner not far from my campsite.

I didn't anticipate the enemy ground squad.

Solcrue rarely do dirty work. Commander Ahronis is an exception. They prefer clones, drones, and automated systems or servants.

They must be desperate to get control of the Titans , which tells me that the Titans are royally screwing up their plans.

The metal head of the Titan beside me wasn't difficult to spot from the tree line once I tracked the team's trajectory. Now, I'm stuck inside a metal dome with a Titan whose eyes dim like he's running out of power.

"Hey! Don't give up." I pat his cheek. "I need you to stay with me."

His gaze wanders to mine, then languidly lowers as his eyelids droop.

I dig faster, free his mouth and the rest of his face, but it's difficult to see in the pale slivers of light coming in from between his feathers. I put on my goggles and give him an assessment. Stats show his power is down to four percent.

My father always said Titans were more human inside than we were led to believe. All I have is food and water for humans, plus some spare wiring and a few small backup batteries for my tablet, but I'm going to have to make do.

Freeing my water bottle from my bag, I open the nozzle and touch it into his lips. Most humans wouldn't survive a day in a desert without water. "Can you drink?"

He clumsily forms his lips to the straw. When I tip up the bottle, the water runs out of his mouth. I cup a hand under his chin and help him like I used to do with my little brother, who died long ago. It's the most contact I've had with another life form in years.

The heat of his synthflesh is indicative of his compromised state. I don't know if

Titans get fevers, but he's nearly too hot to keep my hand in position.

He drinks down all of the water, and I let him. He needs it more than I do.

I dig through my bag and find the one hydrolyte gel packet I've been hanging onto for an emergency.

It's not easy to part with things that could save my life.

But I'm feeling in over my head on this strange planet and have been risking things I wouldn't normally.

After two weeks of living on my own, I've figured out a basic system for survival.

After confronting the mutant wolves two nights ago and dealing with the moody temperature changes, I am eager to team up with literally anyone who won't try to kill me.

I rip the packet open and set the end to his lips, feeding the gel into his mouth. Electricity needs ions to flow. Water won't help him on its own.

He blinks slowly, and a single tear forms in one eye.

"How long have you been buried out here?" I wonder out loud.

He sways his head as he swallows the gel but doesn't respond, and I know it's been far longer than any human could endure.

Maybe I can't save my sister right now, but it's clear he needs help I can give.

I push my change of clothes aside in my pack, the spare protein bars and gilkyworm

cakes I've stolen from Solcrue lunch rooms, and grab my pry bar. It's the only tool I've got that will dig worth a shit.

"This is going to take me a while, but I'm going to get you out." I focus on breaking up the brittle crust of the desert and freeing his neck and shoulders.

A deep rumble shakes me and makes me freeze.

"Wing," he says. "Solar."

As I catch my breath from the startling depth of his voice, I look around at the metal wing that's curled up in a dome-shaped shield. Must be a pair.

Crawling around his back, I carefully chip away at the dirt, praying I don't pry too deep and hurt him worse than he already is.

I bump the shield with my elbow and wince at the heat.

The desert sun is baking him. I'm grateful for the shade but afraid I'll get cooked if I don't get more airflow soon.

Sweat drips down my forehead into my eyes. I try to wipe it away, but my clothes are soaked. All I've done is add a film of sandy dirt.

I rake free a clump and watch a fissure race out from the Titan's back. The desert cracks open to a horrendous sound like snapping bones.

"Get back," he rasps.

I crawl away and tuck myself under his shield as far as I can get without burning myself on the metal. The Titan closes his eyes. His brows knit. He growls a note so

low it makes my heart shudder. An unfamiliar desire, hot and powerful, stirs in my belly.

The Titan uncurls the wing around me and smashes it into the ground, the metal feathers biting in like anchors. Then, from the torrid desert, another metal wing bursts into the air, flinging dirt into an opaque cloud. Gravel and dust rain down over us.

He groans as it teeters overhead.

It falls heavily in a wide arc beside us. The sigh that leaves his lips is one of immense relief.

“Please.” He looks up at me. I don’t think he has the energy for much more.

The Titan’s eyes close. “Please.”

His wings are spread in a massive, slumped dome around us, making him look like a fallen—broken—angel.

I keep digging. I know what it’s like to feel abandoned, forgotten, and hopeless. He hasn’t given up even after being buried for heaven knows how long. So I’m not giving up either.

I know he’s a machine like Evo, the Titan that the Solcrue corrupted. But I can’t help replaying the desperation I saw in Armor’s eyes when he pleaded with me as I continue digging. It’s something I feel now as I watch the sun sink lower toward the horizon.

Mutant wolves are most active at dusk. If the Titan doesn’t close up his shield, I’ll be out in the open. He will be, too.

My arms burn from scraping and chipping at the dirt by the time I've got his shoulders freed. I stop for a second as the sun touches the distant mountains. After a drink of water from my small emergency bottle, I return to work.

Distant howls of a pack make me pick up my pace until my hands shake from exhaustion and my grip wanes. I get the Titan freed to his elbows as the last beams of sunlight fade out.

"Hey. Can you get out now?"

He opens his vibrant eyes to a pale shade of blue-violet that knocks my breath back into my lungs. When he looks over at me, I slink away from him and adjust my goggles so I can watch.

His nose wrinkles. He looks down at his arms, twists with a violent jerking motion, and breaks them free. Lifting his hands, he studies them as if it is the first time he has seen them.

"Are you okay?" I cautiously ask.

He plants his hands on the desert floor littered with rocks and mounds of dirt I've displaced and slowly hauls himself out of the soil. It rains from his massive, muscled frame. As he rises to his feet and stretches his wings, I inch back from him. He is by far the largest Titan I've ever seen.

Makes sense since he has huge wings to support.

Howls in the distance get me to my feet. I zip up my pack and tighten it against my back, preparing to run for the shelter I made in the forest cave up the hillside.

The Titan brushes a hand over his chest, revealing a glowing digibadge. Armor shines

on his proud left pec. He looks down at me now. My head doesn't even reach the height of his digibadge. He is a monstrosity of a Titan, all hard muscle and hot metal man.

Fuck me.

My core tightens. He is stunning, and the longer I look up at him, the more I want to let go of my other priorities just so I can savor this sense of awe forever.

Armor takes a step and crumples to his knees. "Too long."

His wings slump.

Wolves howl closer.

I can't leave him here. I have to get him to the cave I found up the mountainside. "Come on. I have a place we can safely rest."

"Brothers."

"I know. They're still in the area. But you're not going anywhere, let alone returning to battle until you're powered up again." I move closer and draw my handgun, keeping my eyes trained on the forest.

"No. Can't...leave."

"Armor—"

He tries to stand again and falls. A pained grunt leaves him. "Must help them."

I get down beside him and summon his eyes to mine. "It's an awful feeling, I know.

Trust me. But right now, we have to save you before you can have any hope of getting to anyone else.”

He chokes up and hangs his head, where he lies on his elbows in the dirt. Finally, he gives me a single nod.

“I can’t carry you,” I admit.

Armor folds his wings up behind him and turns them into a sort of sled shape, then rolls onto them. He lifts his arms, crosses his hands, and gives me the same pleading look I saw hours ago.

I’m exhausted, but I take his massive hands in mine and begin the long journey of dragging him up the slope and into the trees.

My legs are shaking and on fire by the time I have Armor in the brush of the low forest. It scrapes over him and makes it much harder to lug him up toward the cave.

I begin leveraging both legs for one pull, slowing our progress.

“Armor,” I wheeze.

He opens his eyes, looks up at me, and rolls onto his stomach. Armor crawls the rest of the way into the cave. He stops in the middle of the floor and stills.

I catch the sounds of rustling brush outside and look out the entrance, but I can’t tell if it’s a squad of Solcrue or mutant wolves. Both have retro-reflectors in their eyes. I scramble for my gun and fire with shaky hands. A yip tells me it’s a pack.

One of Armor’s wings jerks and smashes over the entrance, blocking my escape but also the wolves from coming inside.

“Can you hold that with as tired as you are?”

“Automatic. Power or not,” he mumbles. “My design.”

I scrounge together my gathered berries, a jug of water, and strips of jerky and sit beside Armor. It’s a challenge to get him to eat the way he’s fallen, and I have to hold his arms aside so I can reach his mouth. It gets frustrating enough that I decide that rolling him onto his back is best.

Propping his head up, I straddle his chest and help him drink more water.

His hands find my thighs with curiosity. Armor opens his eyes wider and blinks up at me. “Human.”

“Yeah.” I cup his chin and ready the bottle again.

“Serve you.”

“Sorry, big guy. I think it’s my turn to take care of you.” I trained for it enough back home. I just never had a live cyborg to practice with.

Aarmor’s eyes roll back in his head. His hands grip me harder, then rub up my ass to my waist. “Soft. Smooth. Not metal.”

Beneath me, his chest rumbles faster, like his ultro’s spooling up. Armor wraps his arms around my back and hugs me against him, spilling my handful of berries. “Protect.”

“Why don’t you just focus on resting?” I ask from where I’m squished against him. “I’ll get you cleaned up.”

Armor's eyes lethargically meet mine. He scours my face, strains to lift his head, and sniffs my breath, my face, and my neck. "I am broken."

"Can you tell me where?"

"Everywhere outside. Mostly inside. Damage is significant."

Then he grabs the back of my neck and pulls my mouth to his.

Armor kisses me with a passionate surge I don't have any training to handle.

I frantically brace myself on his virile body, trying to grasp how a Titan could rationalize such action toward a human.

But I wager his cyberpsyche is just as likely to crack in a hot desert as any human's.

He sucks on my bottom lip before saying, "Thank you."

I'm still frozen in surprise. He tastes like synthflesh, nanosolution, and berries, an odd combination but one I like.

But even as Armor rests back, he won't let me go. His eyes gloss like he's drunk. I think it's more likely that he's a wreck inside and just grateful to be free again.

It's a struggle to get myself upright enough that I can keep hydrating and feeding him.

Stars, if this is what he's going to be like, it's going to be very difficult to heal him. But I've got to try. I think there are others buried out there. Many squadrons went missing during the war. I haven't picked up a lot of signals, but even leaving one Titan behind feels like a crime.

“Hang in there, Armor. I’m going to get you up and running again. Promise.”

You are the hope humans need.

And I’m starting to think I like this one more than I should. All this time, I had barely a clue what I was digging up. Now that I do, I wish I had dug faster.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:02 am

The female scraped me out with impressive conviction.

I have never seen a human try so hard to save a Titan.

It makes me feel undeserving of her care.

But when I caught her scent as she worked, something in me changed.

Her fight to lug my failing body up the hill to her cave only solidified my growing desire.

A dirty thought enters my mind and zings around in my half-awake state like a feverish dream. I wish she was grunting for a better reason.

I am stuck in the haze of partial operation. Severe dehydration and heat have rendered my nanosolution to a shred of the volume it used to be. I am certain my Brothers are better off being encased deeper in cooler mud.

The curse of being able to communicate and see the world was that the sun would beat down on me with powerful force and zap moisture from me if I opened any orifice on my body for any reason.

Hours pass. I swim in thoughts and dizzy visions of the little female helping me drink, repairing various parts of my body, and feeding me. She is so beautiful and fragrant that I want to drink her in. After five years, I am desperate for stimulation, companionship, and comfort.

She tastes of berries, the same berries she feeds me with soft hands. Soft like her thighs...

The female straddles my chest again. I draw her close every chance I get, wanting only to keep her safe and find some reassurance I'm not dreaming, that I am free, and she is here with me.

The one who protected me from a Black Death in the desert has earned my dedication for the rest of my operation. But it's more than that. There's something special about this female that initiates programs that have never run before.

At some point, she bathes me with a rag, going as far as to remove my busted rocket boots and pants. A gloriously soft sensation glides up my cock out of nowhere, igniting a surge of need so strong, it brings me back to the world.

"What are you doing?" I rasp, fearing I'll offend her if she sees all of me. "That touch is forbidden."

"It used to be. Rules don't matter anymore, not when survival is our focus.

"The female lifts her rag. "Would you rather do it yourself? I was just cleaning up the mud-crusted grease in your joints. Seems you sweat some of it out. No surprise with as hot as you got in the desert. I just don't have the strength to lug you to the creek. "

I reach for the rag, but when she hands it to me, a new program runs in the background. It makes me take her hand and pull her on top of me.

She gasps and jolts. "What are you doing?"

"My sensors tell me its getting too cold for you because you are human."

The female shivers against me, and I need no other information.

“You have cared for me for a long time. Please rest.”

“What about your brothers?”

“They aren’t going anywhere.”

“Hours ago, you didn’t want to leave them. Now, you sound a bit heartless.”

“You were right. And with as good as I feel after your repairs, I’m certain I can free my Brothers, but I’m going to need you to help me get them all going again.”

She snuggles closer to my neck and curls up on my chest. “It is cold at night here.”

Agreed. I wrap my arms around her to keep her as warm as I can.

She laughs softly. “Armor? Are you attracted to humans? Is that even a thing?”

“I am told many Titans have human mates. No Titan females except pilots who do not have legs or other parts . Few human males left after the war. It seems natural even if it’s forbidden.”

“You didn’t answer the question.”

She’s right, I didn’t, because I’m afraid of the consequences.

“I am.”

“You speak your mind to a human?” she asks. “How? I mean, I prefer it, but...”

I look down at her body against mine and struggle to quell the lust heating in my body. “I was sent a recording of our Commander freeing us from regulations involving those matters. My brothers do not yet have it.”

She makes a noise of surprise. “Armor?”

I’m getting so hard it’s becoming painful. If I don’t give in to some of my needs, I’m going to crack.

“Sorry.” But as my rigid length digs into her thigh, I regret nothing. “You bathed me. Can I bathe you? It only seems fair.”

She lifts her head. “No, that’s weird. Isn’t it?”

“Why?”

“You’re the injured one. I’m not.”

I’m not broken anymore. I feel better than I have in years. And I know there isn’t a lot of time if the Titans are getting off of Ellipsis in the next few days.

“What is your name?” I finally ask.

“Esthielle. Esthi is fine.”

I cradle her closer to me, eager for another taste of her. Sweeping my lips over hers evokes a glance from her under hooded eyelids. She’s tired and cold. But she doesn’t shy away when I bond our mouths together to savor that luscious flavor of her again.

But I can’t seem to stop. I want more with every touch of her flesh against mine. Savoring her supple neck, I loosen the top of her armor and trail kisses down her

chest with growing hunger.

“Tell me to stop Esthi,” I rumble. “I will obey.”

She smiles sleepily at me. “Feels nice.”

I cautiously slip my tongue inside her bra and swipe it over her tantalizing nipple. Every lick makes her moan more and me harder until I’m aching for release.

“My savior, I will do anything you ask,” I whisper as I roll us over in search of a better position to taste all of her. “But you feel so good I don’t want to stop.”

Her body warms with gentle heat, nothing like Firebolt’s wild electricity or Catalyst’s power generators. I work her suit down her belly and over her hips, kissing her and nibbling at her curves, intoxicated by her plush flesh and the way it leaves a light flavor on my tongue.

“Armor?” she breathes. “I’m...”

“What?” I glide my nose over her pussy, following the musky fragrance I crave more of, finding it between her petal soft folds.

She squirms and gasps. “Armor...”

“Tell me to stop.” I’m desperate for an excuse to keep going and yet afraid I can’t control myself if I do. Esthi’s scent makes me feel wild and like I could become something more than Titan.

I dip my tongue into her with curiosity. Esthi braces herself on my shoulders as I dive deeper, eager to satisfy my need to explore every corner of her body.

“You can’t possibly want me,” she mutters in disbelief. “This isn’t happening.”

I collect her by her hips, draw her to me, and plunge my tongue into her hot core. My cock flexes with interest as if it’s jealous. I’m lost in my desire for her. I felt it the first moment I caught her scent. I want her.

She looks down at me with bewilderment.

I slip a finger inside and feel her clench around me.

Esthi arches She doesn’t ask me to stop like I expect.

I insert two fingers. She gasps, and her nipples tighten. The urge to bury myself in her grows so powerful that holding back has me shaking.

“Please,” she begs. “I want...”

“What?”

Her lungs pick up their pace. Esthi pushes me back, kisses me with fervor, straddles me, then slides her wet pussy over my shaft and lets out a grunt of relief.

This is what I wanted. I just can’t believe it’s happening to me. The rush she gives me makes me grab her hips and steady her so I can have a moment to anchor my thoughts.

My ultramotor surges in my chest. I did not expect her to be so interested in me. All I wanted was to pleasure and serve her.

Esthi rides me slowly at first, moaning softly. But she quickly picks up the pace, thrusting my euphoria to a new height, something so foreign that I can’t do much but

watch her pleasure herself on my titanhood.

She steadies her body with her hands on my stomach. It takes several bondings before she can accept me completely. The moment she finally does, my balls tighten.

“Shit. Esthi...”

As I look up at her bouncing breasts and all the scars on her flesh in the pale light of my digibadge, I know she wants and needs to feel good as much as I do.

Her core grips me. Esthi cries out in ecstasy, giving me an additional high that makes my programs run erratically as if I’ve suddenly been corrupted. As I pump into her, her body commanding mine, I’m certain there’s nothing in the universe that could ever feel as good as she does right now.

When our bodies calm, and she falls against me, I hold her close, swearing to protect her with every ounce of me. I need her more now than I ever thought I could.

She is mine.

Hours ago, I was still buried in dried mud. Now, I have a human mate, one that can fix Titans. There’s something different about Esthi.

I just hope she doesn’t change her mind about me when she wakes up.

So I force myself to stay up to protect her and linger in this moment for as long as I can.

It’s the first time in my operation that a broken part of me has finally felt whole again.

And I'll do whatever it takes to keep things that way, holding onto Esthi forever.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:02 am

I wake on Armor's chest, still naked from our impromptu lovemaking hours earlier. Stowaways have needs, too, and not just for food and water.

Armor has tucked an arm under his head and now watches me. Data fills his eyes in rapid lines.

I know Titans were once humans, male soldiers that died in battle, made immortal by the symbiotech and cybernetic engineering of Creators. Most don't remember being human from what I know. As strange as it is to think of having sex with a cyborg, I'm not sure he is entirely one.

Maybe memory blockers didn't work on him? He definitely still knows how to do a few things Titans weren't trained in.

"Feeling better?" I ask, embarrassed that I caved to third base and a home run on the first date when it wasn't even a date; it was a rescue mission.

"Yes, thanks to you."

I focus on the data again. "What are you working on?"

"Communicating with other Titans."

"Oh." That's generic and not helpful.

"Position?" he asks.

My heart lurches into a sprint. I'm dehydrated from our sweaty night together, and yet my pussy slicks with fresh urges I struggle to tamp down. "Any."

He cocks his head like he doesn't understand. "What was your job before you ended up here?"

I sit up on him, thinking we're likely going to need to get him moving to the other Titans.

I've been tracking Titan communications on the surface since I arrived and know they're planning an escape.

It's why I broke my cover and finally took a chance to meet up with a Titan squad.

"I can be anyone anywhere. I'm a member of GMARTR, Gray Man Active Recon and Tactical Resistance.

"Solcrue killed the men in our camp who couldn't work the mines. They took many others, including my sister. Only a few of us from each mining camp and colony were trained as Grays. I have a forgettable face and a photographic memory."

"Unforgettable," Armor gently corrects. "I will always remember you. And I swear to dedicate all my days of operation to your protection, GMARTR Esthi."

"That's sweet, but I don't think you can promise that. Not in this era."

He looks up at me with pain and shivers like he's fighting a sudden rush of it. "You reject my offer of servitude?"

It's then that I remember my instructor telling me about the Titan's punishment protocols. "No. I'm honored."

The tremors shut off. He melts with relief. “Thank you.”

I can’t tell if he wants to serve me or if he’s just grateful that I’m not rejecting him because of the pain it causes. “Can I make a request?”

He nods. “Your orders are my command.”

“Scrap those stupid punishment protocols. That is not what you need out here.”

Armor gives me a wild look. “You mean, delete them?”

“Yes, fuck! I have never understood how those help in any situation. Titans are not a threat to humanity. You all used to be human.”

Armor nods. “Done.”

“Now get rid of your servitude protocols. That’s bullshit, too. I want you with me if you want it, like last night. Not because programming demands it. I’m not tolerating a machine waiting for my approval to act. I need you on your toes, especially with the mutant wolves tracking us.”

Code scrolls across his eyes. An appreciative smile touches his smooth gray lips.

“I guess listening to Commander Leah Krader’s freeing request didn’t process completely.

It just knocked down my emotional program barriers.

Now, if I promise to help you find your sister, will you help me find one more Brother?

I'd feel better if we traded help instead of you just assisting with what I need. ”

Sounds like a decent plan. I get to my feet and start climbing back into my clothes. “Teamwork is the only way to increase odds of survival. But I think you have more than one Brother buried, yes? So let's just play it by ear.”

Armor gets to his feet, slowly retracts his wing from the doorway, and scans the palely lit desert below.

“Do you have any more food?” he asks.

I free the protein bar packed in the pocket where my empty water bottle sits and hand it to him. “I have a few more, but not many. Berries and jerky. That's it.”

“How much?”

When I'm clothed again, I sit on a rock and watch him fold his wings up and climb back into his pants.

His boots are mostly toasted, but they'll hold together for now.

I admire his contoured backside for a brief second before his pants cover him again.

“Enough for a few days for me. Doubt it's enough to feed many more. ”

Armor hums in deep thought as he chews the bar.

“Karambit will get us more. Possibly Javelin and Mace. I will free Carver first. He can access the others. Many are still in hibernation. A few may have been rendered the Black Death. But if we can get to Catalyst and fuel him, he can charge the others.”

“How many of you are there?” I ask.

“Forty-four in total.” He glances down at me. “We cannot dig at your pace. That’s why we need Carver. The BlazeStar leaves in two days. That is the only ship large enough to hold all of us and get us off Ellipsis.”

Armor walks out of the cave, stops, and glances back. Insecurity hides in his radiant eyes. “Do you want me of your choice?”

“Right now?”

A light smile touches the corners of his mouth. “In general.”

He’s having doubts after last night. But he’s not the only one. Knowing he still wants me with him makes me more eager to keep going. “Did not expect to dig up a Titan dragon and definitely not one who’s attracted to me.”

“I’m a Titan shield , not a dragon,” he corrects.

I shrug as I join him in descending the hills to the desert.

“Can’t believe you dragged me all the way up here,” he mutters. “You’re so small.”

“I am committed to my duty,” I counter.

“I didn’t mean that as an insult, more as an observation of your impressive resilience. I am one of the largest Titans produced. That could not have been easy.”

“You are my only thread of hope, of a connection to the world. We needed each other. Still do, but for a different reason now.” When he looks over at me, I wink. “You pack quite the rifle under your armor, Armor .”

He laughs in a bashful way that exposes just how human his emotions are. “As long as you liked it.”

My pussy slicks just thinking about bonding with Armor. “Pretty sure I’ve topped out with you. Anyone else would pale in comparison.”

“You choose me? You don’t even know me.” Armor surveys the desert plains and then checks on me.

Titans are all built with the same loyalty, protective nature, and honesty. The only real differences are in their designed skills and a few personality quirks.

“I want you to be mine,” he adds. “But I know that was fast. I don’t know what came over me.”

“I did.”

His face darkens a little. “Esthi.”

Stars, I love the way the depth of his voice rumbles through my core. I grip the straps on my pack to ground myself. “I’d like to be yours. But I won’t claim you as mine.”

“Please do.”

“It feels too out of place because of what you are and what I am. I don’t want to feel in any way like I’m implying that I own you because you were treated like tools, objects, and things for so long. It just doesn’t feel right.”

Armor scans the dirt around the hole I dragged him out of hours ago. “Then I have not yet proven my humanity to you. I will work on that soon. Wait here. I’ll be right back.”

I sway between my boots. “That’s not what I…”

Armor squats down and launches himself high in the sky.

In my night vision goggles, I watch his wings spread and guide him in a downward death dive.

Then he binds his wings tightly around him, forming a point, and slams into the desert so hard he vanishes below its surface and slings waves of crumbling dirt into the air.

The ground shakes beneath my feet. I run to the hole and look down, fearing the worst.

Armor punches at the rock around another Titan, who’s feet-up in the dirt. A wolf howls in the distance. I draw my gun and hope he can get Carver out quickly.

“We must go. The mutant wolves have come through our area before.” Armor hauls a Titan out of the soil, gathers him in his arms, and jumps out of the hole. “We will come back for the others. Carver is offline. We need to replenish and recharge him to have any hope of recovering the rest.”

Armor gets down on a knee. “Climb on my back. We must move fast. You will run too slow.”

“Slower than you, but that’s still kind of a dick thing to say.”

“I am sorry. It is the truth.” Armor jerks his head toward his back. “It’s important to know your limitations so you can compensate for them and give yourself the proper advantages to win. I am the advantage now. But I cannot guard us while I carry both of you. I need you to guard us.”

Hooking my arms over his shoulders, I let my body dangle between his wings, then wrap my legs around his waist and draw my handgun. “Ready.”

Wolves snarl a short distance from our position.

“Hang on.” He gets up and sprints away from the approaching pack, a perpendicular path to the cave’s entrance. Slowly, the wind starts to pick us up. Armor finds a small hill in the desert, sprints up it, and leaps off.

The cooler night air doesn’t provide the lift I imagine he would get during the hot days, but we still glide into the trees. As we near the ground, he folds his wings back and keeps running.

My body bounces as trees whip by us, and it’s difficult to target the wolves trailing our position. I fire and tag one as Armor nears the entrance of the cave. He stops just inside. I get down to guard them, but the wolves take an interest in tearing apart their fallen packmate instead of us.

Armor lays Carver down like he’s made of glass, then stacks boulders in front of the doorway before returning to Carver’s side. When I inspect the Titan, I see why. Carver is covered in blades. “I don’t think we’ll free everyone in time without his help. Can you do anything?”

I’m not sure. But the way Armor looks at me, pleading for a solution, I know I’m going to try everything I can.

Setting my bag on the ground, I pull out my tablet, spare batteries, and wiring kit. “If you can handle his sharp body and open whatever ports he’s got, I’ll do what I’m capable of.”

Armor rolls Carver onto his stomach and opens a port in his side near the kill switch.

“This is closest to his core. Taking a bore unit apart requires a Titan medic’s knowledge. I would charge him myself, but I can only connect to a generation unit like most Titans.”

I survey the plug connection. “I’m going to need a minute.”

Armor nods but looks tense.

“What?”

He shakes his head once. “Clover of the BlazeStar feeds me updates on the situation. It is difficult to be patient when we have so little time left. I was buried for so long that this all feels like it’s happening very fast. But I have been dreaming of this day and all the things I would do if I was ever free again. ”

“Even if we don’t make it off the planet with the others, we will survive. All forty-five of us,” I tell him. “We will find another way to escape.”

“You really believe that?”

I meet Armor’s doubtful gaze. “We will because we choose to make that opportunity. I was trained to mend things in the shadows so others might live in the light. We will find a way to make it happen.”

Time to see if my cybertech skills are up to the task.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:02 am

I want her for myself. Esthi is mine. We have mated even if it was a half-awake, long overdue moment for both of us. But part of me secretly worries my Brothers will find her as intoxicating as I do. I do not want to fight them for her. But deep inside me, I know I will.

It's the first time I've broken the Bond with my Brothers to think of something selfish. It's not in me to take. My design was to sacrifice for others, to take the beating so they don't have to.

But mating isn't in my programming, yet I was not punished for burying myself in Esthi's luscious heat. I don't know what to do except protect her and keep her so close that no one else will try to take her from me.

I haven't encountered a human, soldier, or civilian, who tried so hard to rescue Titans. But Esthi sits on the ground beside a Carver and wires up a long pigtail of cables from pieces she has in her pack. She strips a charging system that I assume is for her tablet and finishes the harness.

We were always tools, machines built to protect soft-bodied humans and fight the war against their descendants—the enemy Solcrue, who were once humans and fled the Sol System when it became toxic.

Humans like Esthi, Narythins of Earth Minor, like to see things through and fight to preserve what's important instead of throwing away what's broken for something new.

The little Gray female that's saved me puts the same focus into healing my Brother. I

just hope she doesn't want to mate with him, too.

"We have to use a transformer," she tells me. "Otherwise, the cables will only directly transfer your power, and you'll be drained much faster. Solcrue might be shitty people, but they're amazing with tech. Stole a lot of pieces from them since they throw away anything not perfect."

I study her gear, the parts she's spread out on the rock, and the tablet that scrolls through readouts from Carver.

"Where are you going to find more power?"

She looks up at me. "You. Just need a little. I'll step it up with the transformer and give him more."

"I am not a power unit."

"Any one of you can be with the right harness." She tosses me another protein bar and a small bottle of water. "We can get more food later."

After consuming what she's given me, a deep sense of guilt grips me. I am taking all of her best items. And based on everything I've heard thus far, I discover I have a question left unanswered.

ArmorClover: We lost the war, didn't we?

CloverArmor: Our Tetrionic era was the most devastating. The Resistance held out for two more years. The Titans on Ellipsis fell here a year ago and spent two to three years sorting the salvaged parts of our Brothers on Hyperion before Poppy and Cara, the half-breed, broke them out.

She gives me the stats of the ships that were destroyed, the human lives lost, the destruction on Earth Minor, and the decommissioning plant on Hyperion where our active Brothers were held as prisoners.

The longer she continues, telling me of the battles on Ellipsis, the Brothers lost during the jailbreak, and the devastating conditions human females endured on Solcrue ships as anaja sex slaves, the sicker I feel.

Esthi pauses and looks up at me. “Something wrong?”

“I need a minute.”

She offers me her handgun as I turn for the door. “Watch out for wolves. And stay close. I’ll need you soon.”

My ultramotor powers up in my chest as I take the gun and feel her soft fingers slip out from under mine. I like the sound of her needing me more than I want to admit.

I climb out to the entrance of the cave and look back at Esthi. She is tough for a human female. Was her sister a Gray or something else? An anaja, maybe? Why is she out here searching for her? The Solcrue must have her.

A sense of failure tenses my insides. I feel unworthy of Esthi’s help and affection. But I am also sluggish from dried-out synthfluids and reeling from the surge of action after being buried alive for so long.

I sit on the rock of the opening and savor the feeling of a gun in my hands again as I scan the trees on the slope below us. Mapping the shapes of the ignition chamber, barrel, and handle, I pull up a schematic. It overlays my view of the forest and distant desert.

Sliceocypher nine-millimeter.

100 manufactured.

Cybertech weapon.

Cybertech? I glance back at Esthi, who's fine-tuning the harness. She definitely acts like one: always focused, doesn't want to take anything for herself, and her job is her life. So much about her suddenly makes sense.

We cannot lose again. I cannot fail to protect my charges, especially now that she's one of them, whether she stays with me or not.

I did not protect them like I was supposed to...like I was built to do. My human name and past are a mystery, but not the sense of duty I have to safeguard my military family. That is as ingrained in me as my digibadge. Both are tied directly to my ultromotor.

A spec of light passes across the sky, far out in the desert, near the silhouette of an enemy mothership in orbit.

Esthi sits beside me. "Beautiful, isn't it, what we can create when we work together? Us, sentient beings, I mean. Humans create starships and new life like you. You safeguard us, give us hope, and preserve the future so we all can have one."

I want to kiss her, hold her, feel her against me again. But Esthi's mind is somewhere else, far away from me and this place.

After a moment, Esthi reaches over and rests a hand on my arm. "I wish we could've protected Titans better. Sometimes, our designs are susceptible to things we don't foresee or aren't strong enough to overcome. But that's why Creators built you the

way we did.”

I look down at her frazzled hair and catch her musk on the breeze. It is so different from the hot plastics and gear grease of Titans and the armored suits and munitions residue of male Omega force soldiers.

Esthi doesn't seem upset that we failed humans in the war. She still looks up at the blue sky with hope.

As I tilt toward her for a deeper breath, she wrinkles her nose. “Sorry, I probably stink.”

“You smell like life. I am grateful to be in its presence again.”

“You set the bar low.” Esthi shrugs. “Well, there's a creek around the backside of the cave where we can hydrate and clean off when Carver's awake. I just need a little of your energy for him. He's ready when you are.”

I look her over, wanting to commit her image to memory so it will be with me if I ever find myself stuck in another cage of mud or otherwise. “Thank you.”

She nods and looks away. “Let's just hope that me breaking my cover doesn't bite us in the ass.”

“I won't let that happen. Anyone who wants to hurt you will have to go through me first.”

She studies me for a long breath, then leans into me and rests her head on my shoulder. Esthi wipes a hand over her eyes and sniffles. “Ready to save your brother?”

A twinge of pain curls through my ultro, though no alerts of damage appear in my vision. I wrap an arm around Esthi and hold her against me. “Things are going to move fast once we start breaking my Brothers free. Just stay close. I will keep you safe.”

“Okay.”

The pain subsides, and I let Esthi lead me back into the cave. It looks like she’s rolled him over with her pry bar and found another port.

“Turns out, his core and his ultromotor have two fuel cells that need charging for him to operate. I’m not sure if that’s the way it is for all of you or just his type. But I need access to your power ports next.”

I find the program and open all of them.

“Just two.”

“Which two?”

“You choose.” She lifts two cords.

It’s impossible to decide where I want her to touch me. I pick two on my neck, thinking it’s safe. But the cords don’t quite reach when Esthi tries to plug me in. But it makes her come closer so I can take in another breath of her.

Her lips part when she stretches and realizes I’m too far away.

I get a glimpse of the scars on her neck.

A memory comes back to me of mines, of the siphon hoses that vacuumed out the

ore.

Ghost pains flare in my neck, remembering the sticky mud and gravel on the wet piping we had to haul in on our shoulders.

“Armor?”

I steal a kiss as I draw her against me. The memory fades amid the plush heat of her lips.

Esthi hums and melts in my arms. “Arm-mer.”

I break the kiss partially because time is slim but mostly because I’m getting hard, wanting to forget the universe of problems to hide inside of her, and because my ultromotor is spooling up, wasting precious energy. “Fine. It’s not easy when you taste so good.”

She giggles nervously and steps back. I open two ports on my sides. Esthi brushes my body as she slips the connectors into place. Her contact is brief but warm and gentle in an addicting way that makes me brace her hands against me.

“Armor...” Esthi sings out. “You have to let me go so I can help.”

I rumble a low note in frustration. It isn’t easy to let her walk away when I want more, but Carver needs to be my focus. Then my Brothers. And then getting off Ellipsis and back with our kind. After that, I can have Esthi to myself.

If we survive this.

Esthi taps her tablet. A draining sensation, like I’m losing nanosolution fast, grips me. I stagger a step. But a moment after the feeling starts, it stops.

Carver's chest moves. He curls up like he's dying and coughs out rocks. A string of muddy drool drips from his mouth.

After disconnecting us, Esthi lowers the half-empty bottle of water to his lips and helps him drink.

ArmorCarver: Status.

CarverArmor: Operational. Power Level – 12%. I am dry and worthless as wolf shit in the desert.

“He needs oil,” I tell Esthi.

She gets up and digs through her pack, producing a small bottle with a needlepoint nose. “This is all I've got.”

“You have oil?” Carver rasps.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:02 am

Esthi hands it to him. “I’ve been on ships for years. I crawl around in ductwork and the like. Rust can be the difference between life and death. Penetrating oil helps break loose stuck hinges, latches, and bolts. I’ve got a tiny amount of gun grease. But it’s just a dab.”

She gapes at Carver when he bites the end off of the oil bottle and downs it like water.

“Ugh, thank you.” Carver rolls onto his back and stares up at the ceiling. “Give me two minutes to spread this around. Maybe three. Systems are still loosening up.”

CarverArmor: Request update since last ping.

I find his last ping relay in my memory banks from three years ago and send him every recording I have so he knows what I know while Esthi carefully folds up her cords.

“I’m guessing we may need this for the others.” Esthi rearranges her pack so the cords are easy to access. “I’ll connect to the downed unit, then to one of you, whoever has the most power left. But with the wolves out there, we’ll likely have to wake them and get back here.

Carver sits up. “If I can get a bit more food and water in me, I can bore us an underground path to the others.”

“The Brothers will need power. We should stay topside,” I counter.

Carver points at me. “You’re right. I’m a bit rusty after years of hibernation.”

Esthi grabs another food bar and the small bottle of water. She chews a lip as she hands it to Carver. “There’s a bowl of berries behind you, along with a few strips of jerky from the garroh I caught. But this is the last of my food and water.

“I can’t take that,” Carver says. “I won’t.”

“You need to free your brothers. This is what we have,” she says.

“No, it’s what you have,” I counter. “You should keep it.”

Esthi sighs. “I can forage more. But you need strength. Take it. Get your Brothers out. I’ll help as long as I’m able, but I can’t do what you do.”

“What about your sister?” I ask.

She rubs a dirty hand over her pretty mouth.

“To the best of my knowledge, she was assigned to pilot a Skysprinter. So many have been taken out in the weeks since I crashed here from Marst that I’m not certain she’s even alive.

I just wanted to try to find her for as long as I could. I think my search is coming to an end.”

CarverArmor: Brothers are shooting down the Skysprinters. Correct?

I click back twice in confirmation.

He gets up. “I am sorry to hear of your sister, Esthi. Thank you for returning me to

operation. I must find this creek so I can break free of this dirt. It is like cement. Then I can free the others, and we can all look together as we make our way to the BlazeStar.”

Carver slows as he stiffly passes me on the way out.

CarverArmor: I know she freed you, but you need to remember your place in protecting her from all threats, Solcruean and otherwise.

I ponder his response as he leaves.

CarverArmor: She needs to know she matters, that she has family like us. Losing a Brother to us is likely a similar feeling to her losing her sister. I know you’re mated and feeling things for her that you shouldn’t. But there’s no time to hesitate if we only have two days left.

He has always been my voice of reason, a straightforward Titan in his cyberpsyche, even if his body is a twisted weapon of destruction.

Esthi picks up her things and resituates her pack on her back. She gathers the berries and jerky and tucks them in a pouch, which she carries in a hand.

I tuck my wings up close together, exit the cave, grab Esthi by the waist, and toss her over my head, spreading her knees so she lands on my shoulders and the crooks of my wings in a sitting position.

Her gasp is a reminder to warn her next time. If there is one.

“Armor?”

“You run slower.” It’s just going to be my go-to excuse for being close to her. “I

want you with me.”

The plush heat of her against my wings and my shoulders makes me want to find a quiet place to explore her body again.

When I dreamt of my future mate, I had hoped she would be warm and soft and gentle, tough but fair, and loyal to our kind.

I did not expect any attraction I felt to be to a human.

And I never considered myself worthy of a Cybertech.

Hearing a splash makes me run faster. Carver’s found water, and I’m suddenly more aware of my own dehydration.

At the edge, I reluctantly set Esthi down.

She drops her gear and refills her bottles first. Then she opens a rubbery bag and fills it, folding over the edge and clipping the top.

I stay with her until she gets in. Then I finally join her and Carver for a quick dunk and to drink in as much as I can.

It feels good to soak off the dirt in the cool water.

CarverArmor: I hear Mother’s beacon. I have missed it.

I hear it, too, and it reminds me we need to get going. But when I turn to exit and switch visual modes for a clearer picture of Esthi, I find a set of glinting eyes watching from the trees across the creek.

“Esthi, don’t move.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:02 am

My grip on Myria feels like it's slipping, but I have plenty of my own problems to deal with before I can worry about where she's gone, if she's even still out there.

I freeze when Armor tells me to. My gun is on the bank behind him. It's too far for me to reach. I know it as the wolf growls behind me. It's fast, but Armor is faster.

Claws scrape on rocks. Armor lugs me behind him with a hand.

I spin around at the sound of a crack and a splash. Carver steps aside as the wolf's body passes him, drifting downstream under the early morning light.

"We need to move," Armor says, looking up the mountain. "I hope you two got what you needed."

I scramble out, sling my bag on my shoulders, and grab my filled waterproof bag and charge harness. "Are you going to..."

Aarmor grabs me by my soaked Terran armor and slings me into the air.

Water drains from my body. Carver catches me as Aarmor opens his wings and runs toward us.

As he collects Carver under the shoulders, I glimpse a hundred or more shadows moving through the trees.

The ground falls away from us as Aarmor soars down the creek toward the desert.

“We’re going to have to be fast, Carver,” Armor says overhead.

Carver tightens his grasp on me as his eyes flash with Armor’s color of code. “I won’t!”

“Won’t what?” I ask. “Speed seems like a good idea right about now!”

Carver glances in my direction but won’t look directly at me. “I won’t drop her or cut her, Armor. My power level is plenty sufficient to maintain my position.”

“Plan,” Armor says. “Speak it so she can hear it.”

“I’m going to tunnel down, under each,” Carver says.

“We’ll drop everyone into a tunnel system, then close the tunnel so we’re locked in.

We’ll have to get the Brothers as hydrated and charged as we can.

Then we’ll haul the others out a passageway into a supply den.

Drillbit is sending me navigation maps. It’s not direct, but it’s relatively safe. ”

“Relatively?” Armor grumbles as he sinks us lower into the desert.

“Yes.” Carver’s eyes narrow, worrying me that they’re fighting over their telepathic connection.

“He says many human females have been collected from the area where the pods landed over the last few weeks. Every escape has needed a new route. Tunnels are full of welvirs, the mutant wolves on this planet. And they didn’t find us because we were too low on power. Drillbit won’t stop apologizing.”

“Who is Drillbit?” I ask.

“Another bore unit like me. I responded to Mother’s beacon, and our pilot, Clover, connected me with Drillbit,” Carver says. “Am I hurting you at all? I am trying very hard to be still.”

I shake my head. “Armor is protecting me.”

Carver meets my eyes. “He is trying to.”

I meant my body armor.

Armor glides us into a rather abrupt landing.

Carver immediately sets my feet on the ground. He lifts his hands in innocence. “Still okay?”

“Yeah.”

He steps back and glances at Armor, who glowers at him. “Jump two seconds after me.”

A dark wave thunders down the mountainside.

“Fuck!” I point at it as Armor snatches me up and holds me protectively close.

“I won’t let them hurt you.” Armor’s arms tighten around me, cradling me like I’m something precious.

Carver dives toward the dirt, spooling up into a mass of rotating blades that bite in and cut a vertical shaft into the desert.

I count. One, one thousand. Two...

Armor jumps.

We fall fast. My stomach flits into my heart the way it does when a Solcruean ship makes a portal jump without a warning siren. The surprising sensation strangles my cry from disorientation.

Carver's hum darts off into the distance as a tunnel opens up to our right. Armor lands heavily, sets me down, and encourages me away, then punches the wall and rejoins me.

The thunder of rocks and dirt as Armor gathers me up and carries me away is deafening.

A Titan drops from the soil ceiling not far ahead. Armor shields me with a wing, keeping the falling rocks off of my head and shoulders. Then, another tumbles down to the tunnel floor further forward. A third falls from an adjacent tunnel.

The first opens his eyes. They're bright red. He sits up and rubs his digibadge before freeing the dirt from his hair. "Bitch. Fuck me sideways."

"Watch how you speak around my mate," Armor snorts.

"Indirect statement of relief. My apologies." The CyberTitan promptly gets to his feet, finds me, and takes a knee. "Gray Esthi?"

"That's me."

"I am Mace. Please do not let us get close. I startle easily and Spike Out when I do."

I laugh nervously. “What?”

He gets up and shakes off the dust, exposing his red digibadge. Mace is about two-thirds Armor’s size, stocky, and covered in dots. When Carver drops into the passageway up ahead, Mace jolts. Thousands of spikes punch outward from his synthskin, turning him into an evil-looking porcupine.

He shudders. “Got about twenty stuck with gravel, but that release feels good.”

I give him a handful of berries and a water bottle. “Save some for the others.”

Armor urges us on to the next unit, who is dark and doesn’t move. I brush the dirt from his sides, find his ports, and connect him to Armor.

The transformers I’ve wired in spool up and charge the Titan to ten percent. His eyes open a fiery orange. Whip lights up on his chest beneath a film of fine, sandy dirt, that Whip immediately brushes away. Armor makes me disconnect from him and continue on as Mace helps him up.

The next unit’s digibadge is a dim green. Catalyst doesn’t open his eyes.

“If we can get him online and fuel him, he can help charge others,” Armor says. “Take more for him. He has transformers built in.”

I connect them. “How are you doing, Armor?”

“I am within operational parameters.”

I slump. “You must know what I mean.”

His eyes fall to his Brother. “My duty is to protect them and you. I will not allow

myself to be damaged beyond repair unless it is your life or mine.”

It’s uncommon to encounter another with the same dedication to their job as I have. I’m glad I’ve found Armor. “I hope it never comes down to that.”

Catalyst blinks. His green eyes find me in the dark. “Esthi, GMARTR. Armor’s mate.”

I let out a nervous laugh. “Guess you all get the update the moment you wake.”

“A-firm.” Catalyst sits up with effort. He’s a wide unit, barrel-chested, and covered in ports and groans as he gets himself to his feet. He shares a look with Armor. “Download complete. Thank you, Brother. I understand the situation now. Just wish I had some fuel.”

I hand him the jerky from the bag strapped to my chest. “I don’t have much else but berries.”

“Do not sacrifice this for me.” Catalyst looks at the strips. “I cannot take from a human.”

I slump. “Oh, for fuck’s sake. This programming is shitty to your survival, you know that? Initiate your survival programs or whatever you have to do to accept this.”

Catalyst shakes his head and wipes off his digibadge. “Human preservation overrides all others, Bonded or not.”

I take his hand and place the jerky in it. “Fucking insane. I need to have a chat with a Titan designer.”

“They’re all dead,” Armor says.

“Doubt it,” I offer. “I’m certain there are a few out there still. You think I became a Gray by chance? No. By design. Someone somewhere always has a plan.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Because no one survived outside the last city of Naryth without a very detailed plan and backups for backups. We might’ve served Solcrue, but that doesn’t mean we didn’t have an underground where we trained for the day we would break free.” I march myself to the next Titan.

Catalyst hustles along the tunnel and picks up another unit I don’t catch the name of. I find another red unit named Javelin. He’s a slender Titan with pointed fingertips and sharp angles at every joint. “Armor?”

He quiets as he walks up to us.

“Are you giving them some sort of update when they wake?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“Processing that takes energy. How about you do a group update later? Just get a few with updates to guide the others for now.”

“It is protocol.”

“Survive first, or protocols won’t matter,” I mutter. “I’ve sacrificed a lot to stay alive. But surviving is essential to continuing my work.”

Javelin pries a rock out of an ear. I help him to his feet.

He polishes his digibadge with a hand like every Titan seems to do when they wake.

My first thought is that it helps them see.

But I know they have scanners like I do in my goggles, likely more.

And by the tender way they do it, I think it means something more to them.

They treat it like a symbol, like the torch pendant I keep against my chest.

Perhaps it is their hope. But I think, more than anything, it is a reminder of their purpose.

I motion Armor to the next Titan, half-buried in loose rock. I brush the dirt from the sides of a large, bulky Titan. Armor's wings twitch behind him like he's irritated. "Speak your mind, Armor."

"You touch us with such care when we are machines," Javelin remarks.

I connect Armor to the dark Titan. Brunt lights up in deep violet shades on the Titan's chest. "You are sentient. You were once human. To me, you are more than we will ever become."

Armor helps Brunt to his feet.

Brunt's body looks like it's made of stacked metal boulders. He polishes his digibadge with a hand. "Thank you. I was going crazy recirculating memories to pass the time. Most are not ones I wanted to replay, but there's little else to do in a mud tomb."

I draw in a deep breath and think of my days hiding when I knew I couldn't leave if I wanted to stay free. But I had a choice. They didn't.

Armor's wings launch into an umbrella shape, shielding us as dirt rains down.

"Son of a mother..."

Armor chuckles, draws me under the shield of his body, and folds his wings back. A cyborg sides off his wing to the floor in front of us with a mound of rock and dirt.

"Motherfucker!" The unit stands, holding his hand. He's hunkered with bright blue eyes, pointed teeth, and claws for hands. "Wolf nearly took off my favorite finger. Look at this fucking mess!"

Karambit shakes his hand, his middle finger hanging on by a single cable. "Punk ass mutant."

"Look who's talking, Karen ."

"Oh, ha-ha. Hello to you, too, you hull plate of a Titan. No one ever calls me Claw. It should have been Claw , not this monstrosity or a name. Does anyone even know what a karambit is anymore?"

I motion for his hand. "Let me look while we move to the next, please. I'm low on energy."

He jerks it away from me before he looks and suddenly takes a knee. "Ow."

Armor hangs his head and sighs. "She is my Bonded, Karambit. Let her help you."

Karambit winces as he strains against what I can only assume is his punishment program that's causing him pain. "Oh, stars. It hurts. But feeling anything other than that damned mud is wonderful right now. I'll take it. You can punish me later."

I laugh nervously as I take his hand and inspect the damage. Taking my multitool from a pocket in my bag, I reattach the connectors I can, twist together some frayed wiring, and sleeve his torn synthflesh back into place. “You’ll need a better repair later. But this should hold together for now.”

“Thank you.” Karambit gets up. “Esthi.”

“Before you kneel or do any of that, go help another Brother so we can get out of here.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Armor guides me through the rubble to the next Titan. Catalyst has roused a few more and still has a strip of jerky sticking out of his mouth.

In the distance, Carver drops down with another Titan.

“Firebolt is the last. That’s all forty-four of us.

I did a back-up scan. But forty-four fell when we landed.

So I’m going to cut a path to the supply den Drillbit suggested over the net.

Any who can fight should follow first in case welvirs get in.

Mace and Karambit march ahead of the group, just behind Carver.

Armor turns to the crowd forming in the main tunnel. “Carry those who cannot walk. We can charge them up as we follow Carver’s lead. Drillbit wants us to close channels as we exit them, so make sure no one is left behind.”

A team of Titans brings a dark unit to us as we exit the desert landing site and head for the supply den. I sigh wearily and connect Atox to Armor.

“If you get too tired to walk, let me know,” Armor says. “I will carry you.”

The biggest struggle since my crash landing wasn’t searching for my sister. It was finding the courage to trust a stranger. But Armor protected me then, and it seems like he wants to now. I just wish I didn’t feel like I was sinking too deep into something I can’t back out of.

There’s a pressure to Armor’s hand as it slides around my waist and steadies me, which makes me think something more is going on with him that he has yet to tell me about.

I just hope, whatever it is, that it doesn’t make me regret bonding with him.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:02 am

Carver breaks into the supply den thirty-two minutes later. It took the last of my food and a charge from Catalyst. The rocky cavern lights up when he stumbles to a stop. Carver's body whirs slower until he's still again. He's red hot and paces away from us to cool down.

Mace, Karambit, and Brunt check the area as medic unit Atox leads the crews in with the dark Titans, who need more than a jumpstart. Esthi and I survey the crates for useful parts and start calling out what we've found.

"Rations packs in this alcove. Looks like enough for everyone to get one," I say.

"Titan?" Karambit asks as he peeks around the corner.

"Solcrue."

He sticks out his tongue in disgust. "Dirt tastes better."

"I'm happy to take your pack," Brunt remarks. "I'm starving."

Karambit snatches one up. "Fuck that. These crusty worm cakes are mine."

I grab a crate and hand them out, being sure to save one for myself and Esthi when she calls to me.

"Armor over here."

"One second." I find a large bag of medical supplies and cart it to Atox.

She slaps her forehead. “I mean, there’s Solcrue armor and what looks like CSP battle uniforms here.”

“Oh.”

“But I do want you for a moment.”

Karambit whistles suggestively, catching the attention of the other Brothers. I cannot stop my wings from twitching in embarrassment. They all know Esthi is mine. I made sure to tell them her name, title, and a few other details, even if I did not give them the full download.

I follow Esthi into a private corner of the cavern. Behind me, Brothers dig into their meal packs, help patch each other up, and talk verbally about their time in the mud. Humans wouldn’t talk much. They’d still be processing the trauma. Titans are different.

It is programmed into us to move forward and not let trauma control us if we still have our parts. We assess current problems, like residual dirt in gears, and our remaining assets. We think about the next task.

I long for conversation, but deep-rooted guilt won’t let me join them, so I find Esthi in the back room.

When Esthi turns to me, she is in tears. I open my wings and shield her from the Brothers. Perhaps she is not as strong as I thought. But it is easy for Titans to shut off when we do not want to deal with the truth. Humans do not have this luxury.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

She paces the small area I’ve isolated us in and then slumps on a boulder. “Can I be

honest?”

“Please.”

Esthi hugs herself. “For most of my life, I have been in confined spaces, like the mines or ships. This doesn’t bother me.

I’ve always worked quietly from the shadows.

But I set this plan in motion, and I had no idea what I was really causing.

I released the women weeks ago from both Marst and Vessna .

Corenge was too far away to hack remotely.

And it’s filled with solely military Solcrue.

That’s not something I’m quite ready to tackle.

Pretty sure they’d squish me like a bug. ”

I’m confused. “You released the women, but you’re not happy about that? They are free. Clover says they are on our BlazeStar.”

“A lot of the women didn’t make it.” Esthi covers her mouth. “I did it to help them and give me a chance to free my sister, but she’s been turned into a pilot for Solcruean ships.” She inhales sharply and holds her hands out like she’s laying everything out before her.

“Then I crash here and find you and can’t help all of your Brothers. I dropped my cover, came into the open on Marst , and it’s just been death and destruction since.

“I’m exhausted. I’ve given away most of my most precious supplies, which is suicide without a plan to acquire more. I just feel like I’m at the end of what I can do for you and your Brothers. I’m a shadow worker. This is not in my skill set.”

I think she needs more than a simple solution . Esthi was trained for recon and action but from the sidelines, not while being shot at and pressured to help a squadron of Titans all by herself with the threat of mutant wolves on her tail.

Spreading my anchor feathers, I bite them into the rock, then reach back and disconnect myself from my wings, leaving them as a shield, giving us privacy and making me free to move around inside of it.

Esthi looks up as I walk to her. I want to comfort her, but I am hesitant after letting my Brothers down.

I think I know why she is upset. I gather her in my arms and sit on a rocky slab previous Titans appeared to use as a workbench by the scrapes and metal shavings.

But it doesn’t bother me. Settling Esthi into my lap, I curl myself around her so that she feels safe. At least, that’s my intent.

“It’s a lot of pressure to have others rely on you. I know. I also know what failure feels like.”

“What’s that?”

“Five years of slowly dying in mud.”

Her beautiful brows quirk with confusion.

I motion in the direction of the sky. “Our squadron, Seraph Bravo, ejected from our

BlazeStar to confront Galethian Fleet of the Solcrue's outer rim forces.

We are a quarter of the force we were then.

Most of my Brothers were decommissioned as we attempted to take Gilese Haven, which had Omega Force POWs onboard. ”

“Humans.”

“Correct. Seraph Charlie was the first to fall. Haven set off a mass EMP, causing Brothers to drift out into space like deadweight as they rebooted. Easy pickings for a gunner. Seraph Alpha made it on board with Delta after Scalpel cut into the hull and removed the EMP generator.”

“You’re replaying this as you tell me, aren’t you?” she asks. “I can see it in your eyes.”

I blink the image away and focus on her again.

“Yes. Everything is recorded. The ship turned into a mass battle, and we were called to assist. But CP-549, our pilot, the one a human has renamed Clover, was taking damaging hits. So Commander Fenrir decided we would protect Mother and CP-549. But Haven’s forces did something we didn’t expect. ”

Esthi studies me as I restart the memory.

“They retreated from their own ship. Haven’s fighters and escape pods flooded the sky, firing at us.

I blocked a Gravion weapon from hitting Mother and CP, but it knocked out my shield generator.

” I motion to the dark badge on the right side of my chest. It feels like a cold lead weight instead of the hot life-preserving energy it once was.

“I didn’t know it would do that. I thought I would die. ”

“But you didn’t.”

“I also couldn’t protect the core of the squadron from munitions. My job was to move with the critical assets, either protecting the infiltration crew or the injured. I tried to do it the old-fashioned way before I had the shield. But—”

The memory of struggling to put my body in the way of every missile and bullet and the frantic pace I operated at tenses my back muscles even now.

“What happened?”

“I burned up my rocket boots, and Gilese Haven detonated. They took out Alpha and Delta squadrons and severely damaged the BlazeStar and our Bravo squadron enough that we got caught in Ellipsis’s gravity and couldn’t get free.”

“That’s how you ended up in the mud?”

I sigh deeply and close the replay in my mind. “All I’m saying is that even when we try our best, sometimes defeat is inevitable because it’s beyond our control. But if we live through it, we will try again.”

I hesitantly wipe a tear from her cheek.

“You have done a lot for us already. You are the reason human sisters and Titan Brothers are free. I am sorry about your sister. But you tried. And taking anything from Solcrue is a difficult task. Clover wants us back on the BlazeStar. But if we get

the intel and an opportunity, we will help you save your sister.”

She snuffles and smoothes the flyaway strands of her hair back with her ponytail.

“Why such an old ship? I mean, most BlazeStars haven’t been in battle for a decade or more. Everyone on the coms thought it was a StarStream Heavy.”

“That’s because most were destroyed. Clover is a unique pilot. She is like Poppy, another 500 series pilot. They brought humans here from the Sol system. I’m not surprised they’re both still in operation. I’m certain that’s why our ship has lasted as long as it has.

“Clover knew tricks to stabilize systems when they’re down and maneuvers when it seemed there was no way out.

I think it’s why Fenrir decided to protect her instead of staying on the rescue mission.

It was built for Omega Force, then converted for BloodCyphers and Wrecktanks and eventually Relics while designers moved on to new ships for Rogues and CyberGuards. ”

She runs a finger over the darkened shield generation symbol on my right pec.

Her delicate touch sends a shiver through me.

“Do you ever feel left behind by us? We made new models that we hoped were better . But I know that being pushed aside for someone stronger doesn’t feel great. Myria was the best at everything.”

The remarks stings a little. “Rogues are better for a lot of things, but they were designed with different purposes. They are not as good at Terran battle or even

confrontations inside of ships. They excel in space, but that is not the only place we must fight.”

“What about CyberGuards?”

“Built to protect what’s left of humanity. If we need to take down a ship, we send a small unit like Mace in to Spike Out and shred what Cyberguards can’t reach. They were built to be bodyguards, mostly. Why?”

She rubs her mouth with a hand and shakes her head.

“My sister. They’ve got her stuck in this high-tech armor.

She’s flying ships for the enemy. I always wanted to be like her in the heart of action, but I knew I wasn’t that type of person.

And now that I’ve broken that barrier, I feel like I should’ve done it much sooner.

Maybe she wouldn’t be serving Solcrue and contributing to our demise.

“She didn’t even recognize me. If I can’t save my own sister, if I can’t find her in there somewhere, then I’m not sure of what use I can be to the rebellion or anyone else.”

“You have already helped rescue my squadron.”

When she shakes her head and looks away, I know she’s denying it because she’s stuck in some psychological feedback loop, where she doesn’t want to believe she’s capable of helping because she’s spent so long being unable to.

I lift her chin with a finger until she meets my gaze. I want to be sure she knows I’m

serious. “Take this chance, Esthi. It feels like chaos to us, too. But we’ll get through it together. Just like you said.”

“Or we’ll die together. That seems more likely.”

“But we do it together . We’re all scared.”

“Even Karambit and Mace?”

“Definitely them. Most humans believe we don’t have feelings, but we do. Yours are biochemical patterns in your brain. Ours just manifest with programming and electrochemical processes.”

“What are you feeling right now?”

I brace my hands on her hips and do my best to shrug off the desire to be dirty. I don’t think that’s what Esthi needs right now, even if having her against me drives me crazy with a burning desire to have her shield me from the universe with her tender heat.

“My Brothers are free because of you. You’ve done what I could not.

You protected them from experiencing the Black Death permanently.

There were fifty of us. Every squadron had twelve squads, a commander, and an XO, an executive officer who functioned as the second in command.

But Haven’s detonation took six of us before Ellipsis’ gravity took hold.

If I would have had my shield, we’d all be here.

Without you, none of us would be in this den. ”

“But you saved the BlazeStar that’s protecting hundreds again.”

She has a point, but I still can’t seem to shake the burden of my broken parts and run a finger over my dark shield badge.

Esthi gets up and takes a closer look. Her warm breath falls over my synthflesh in tantalizing feathers. Her fingers scour my chest, my abs, my back, all while she studies me like she’s looking for a port.

Someone bangs on a wing, sending a thumping noise into our corner. “You two done in there? We need to talk.”

Esthi returns to my front. “I can fix this, but I need a chance to open you up.”

I want my shield back more than anything. “Okay. But I need to speak with Atox first.”

“Sure.” Esthi sits back on her boulder.

I hate that she looks so sad. I think working keeps her mind off of other things. She needs something else to think about.

Lifting her chin with a finger, I summon her attention. “You don’t know how much your actions mean to me. I need you with me. Can you hold on for me?”

Esthi draws in a deep breath. “You’re the best thing I’ve had in my life in a long time. I’m just transitioning out of my experience area and into new territory.”

“You and me both.” I kiss her deeply, exploring her velvety tongue and desperately

trying to memorize the taste of her. There's no telling how the escape from Ellipsis will go. But I'm going to do everything I can to hold onto her forever.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:02 am

Armor backs up to his wings and clips into them. “Not a lot of time left, but your scent makes me want things I can’t process right now. I don’t want to go into this battle if it is my last one and not have taken the chance to taste freedom.” He folds his wings up behind him and smiles. “And you.”

Atox joins us, wiping his hands clean of gritty sludge. “Armor, we need a plan.”

Armor turns around to face the medic unit, who continues cleaning himself, starting with the red stripe over his right shoulder.

“Where is Fenrir?” Armor asks.

“Dark like the other six. They need hibernation chambers to be brought back.”

“XO?”

Atox sighs like he doesn’t want to say what’s on his mind. “Yeti, too. Anilius, Panther, Turbine, and Slasher.”

“Then we carry them.”

“To where?” Atox chews a lip. “You’re our commander now. We need some sort of direction. I want a solution for my patients.”

“Might be time to update everyone,” I suggest.

Armor’s eyes flash with light, and the Titans circle up around their dark Brothers.

They eat their rations slowly like they're savoring every bite. I imagine after five years without food, I'd do the same. But humans wouldn't survive that long without re-generation tanks.

I follow Armor as he reluctantly makes his way to the edge of the group.

"It has been five years since I failed to protect all of you," he says.

"For that, I am sorry. But we must move quickly. Other Titans have found and repaired CP-549 and our BlazeStar. We have just over a day to get onboard one of their salvaged ships if we want to rejoin the fight and get off of this planet. We have already lost eleven Brothers to the Black Death. Some, we may be able to recover. This is our best chance to get them to hibernation chambers and renew our purpose and our promise to the last humans."

An inky black unit with red eyes pops his knuckles, sending a wisp of smoke off of them. His red digibadge reads Magma. "It was not your fault, Armor. You protected Mother. She is here because of what you did. We endured. Now we will torch some Solcruean ass."

"Your reports kept me focused," a dark gray Titan named Snare adds. His blue eyes find mine for only a second. "Even as I powered down into hibernation, I still saw them register even though I couldn't respond."

Armor spoke with them and kept them hanging on even when they had no hope. I'm starting to think Armor's purpose is rooted deeper in him than his design.

Several others agree with nods and quiet remarks.

Javelin motions to Armor. "With Fenrir and Yeti out of service, we follow your orders, sir."

Armor shifts his shoulders like he's uncomfortable with the responsibility. I rest a hand to his back, hoping to comfort him.

He looks down at me, nods, and straightens to his full height. "From what Clover has sent, there is an old CSP outpost not far away. They should have a troop transport we can steal. Commander Savage says it landed three days ago. It's an active vessel and should be in flight-ready condition.

"Mother needs all the defensive ships she can get. The Titans that landed here two years ago have fixed the BlazeStar and are preparing some distractions. It's now filled with human female survivors of Solcruean servitude.

We need to get it into space, to the portal that brought the other Relics here.

The faster they can get off-world, the sooner they can access the portal.

"Hacker model Amp is on board. He and Clover will pilot Mother. The rest of us must ensure they make it through. Not many humans are left in the galaxy. We must not fail them again."

Mace pops off the wall that he's leaning against and Spikes in slow waves. "We lost the war, didn't we?"

Armor nods. "Clover has sent us a message from Leah Krader, General Krader's daughter. She is mated to Commander Savage."

A unit from the back of the group steps forward and lifts a modified communicator that projects a video in veins of blue light. The shape of a woman appears above the communicator. She stands with a Titan bearing a blue digibadge Savage .

"I, Leah Nylami Krader of Omega and Titan forces, now joined as one, free you from

all human servitude, effective immediately. Please erase the punishment and decommissioning programs stored in your cores. If you wish to Bond with another Titan or a human, you can do so by choice.

“Now, the only way we’re going to win is if we fight like Solcrue...

dirty. Recent years have taught us this.

Stand by your Brothers and Sisters. Preservation of our united force is crucial.

No self-sacrificing shit. There are no Rules of Engagement.

Do whatever it takes to survive, take out as many Solcrue as possible, and return to fight another day.

Clover and Savage will communicate information to you about our plan. See you all soon. Leah, out.”

Brunt paces a circle and runs a hand through his dark hair. “How did human females end up stuck with us?”

I lift my hand. “That’s my fault. Well, the second batch.

Cara came here with the jailbreak. It was all over the coms on Solcrue ships.

Then, they were after Leah Krader. CSP had her for a while.

Her half-brother Joey is a CSP traitor working with the Solcrue.

Thinks it will save his hide from torture. ”

“He’s naïve like every other CSP traitor,” Firebolt remarks.

“Yes,” I confirm. “Not much else to do but listen when I was crawling through the guts of enemy ships.”

“Why not just blow them up?” Karambit asks.

“Looking for my sister. Solcrue took her a decade ago.” I lift my hands.

“She’s alive. But she’s not the same. I’ve been trying to find a way to get to her.

I did that when I released all the other women from their cells.

I just had to get access to all the different systems lined up in the perfect order.

Can’t release women without a place for them to go that’s safer, plus a way to get there.

And Rogue Evo needed an escape. He was on Vessna .

I was on Marst , but I monitored both because they were in close proximity. ”

Javelin gives Armor a wild look like he doesn’t believe it.

“I’m a Gray. After the Tetrionic era of battle ended five years ago, Solcrue started coming to Earth Minor in waves, taking women as servants of various kinds.

Some worked ships. Some as practice mates for officers.

I’ve been caught a few times. Slipped free.

Freed those I could when I could. But again, destination and transportation .

I couldn't afford tag-a-longs. I barely kept myself alive. ”

Whip gets to his feet from where he's been sitting with Turbine.

He looks like he's wrecked inside. He walks to Slasher's side.

“We all have regrets. If I could go back, I would change many things. I would pull Harpoon and Mischief back and take the missile for both of them. But I can't.

So we carry the fallen with us in our memories and our ultromotors as we get our revenge. ”

A green unit with tracework all over his body steps forward. Radar salutes Armor with a fist over his chest. “I will go with Carver to scout the surface. We will find a route to the CSP outpost.”

“We will be right behind you.” Armor takes a nearby gear bag and straps it over himself backward, then picks up Fenrir and hoists him across his shoulders, using his wings to hold him in place. “Let's move. Not much time left.”

I find a crate of wiring and parts that Atox has picked through. “Care if I steal from what's left?”

He motions to it, and I grab a few items. “A Gray... I haven't heard of those in years. Glad there are still a few of you out there.”

“I may be the last.” I pack the supplies in my bag and fish out my empty bottle of water. Might need a recharge of something else. “I'm going to scout with Radar, see if we can make a stop on the way. I'm sure you'd all like to properly hydrate and

wash off.”

“Don’t stray too far from Armor,” Atox quietly warns. “Once you’re in his squadron, he will always want to know where you are. Since you can’t talk with our coms, you’ll need to tell him.”

“I’m going to be just ahead of the group. How can that be too far? It’s not like there’s anywhere I can go.”

Atox hoists a duffel bag over a shoulder and frees a device from his side as the Titans pick up their sleeping brothers. He passes what looks like a medical diagnostics unit over Anilius, whose striped body dangles from the grip of Javelin and Mace. Anilius is crushed in several places.

“Any chance you know Titan tech?” Atox asks.

“We had a shell to study in the pit. That’s it. Only reason we had it was because it was scrapped during the final retreat from Titan. It never got nanotoner fluid or a cyberpsyche download.”

“That’s decent. We may need your help.”

“Understood. Let me just talk to Radar about the creek network.”

Atox gives me a look like I shouldn’t. But I don’t care. I want water. The Titans need it. I know where it is. But as I skip ahead in the pack, Armor calls after me.

“Esthi?”

“I’m just going to talk with Radar.”

“You need to stay with the squadron.”

All I want is some space to think. It’s been a rush of running and digging and charging Titans. I’m not used to it. I need the silence. So I slip out behind Radar and Carver, who is boring a fresh tunnel.

“Radar is not going to stop and help you if you get stuck.”

“I don’t expect him to. He has a job to do.”

“Esthi!” Armor hustles after me, then stops and looks back at his Brothers like he’s torn between who to protect.

I like the space between Radar and Armor.

It’s dark and quiet except for Armor calling my name.

But we don’t have time to waste. My sister might be on the BlazeStar.

We need water, a ship, and to get moving.

And I do not want to be a drag. I don’t want to be too slow.

Armor’s made it clear that I move slowly.

So if I start at the front, that gives me a chance to lag in pace without being left behind completely.

I’m not helpless.

In one hand, I carry my gun, in the other, my knife. I expect an attack. It’s just like

being back in the vents of a ship, only fighting vertically instead of horizontally. Or the mines, looking for thorndogs.

And suddenly, Carver's path turns vertical, and I wish I was in a vent.

"Right." I dig through my pack for my pry bar because it's the closest I've got to a pickaxe, and I climb. "Just like the mines. No harness. A ton of gear. One piece of metal between me and death."

Rock still rains from the opening, so I wait until it stops, and Radar's green eyes look down.

"Esthi?"

"I'm good. See you in a sec."

I climb up the loose surface of the shaft slower than I'd like, but every hand and foothold must be brushed clean to the deeper, harder rock before I can trust them.

My goggles pick up an odd reflection in the rock. I pause. "Run element assessment."

I squint as the goggles flash a variety of lights and scanners over the spot. It comes back as hydramidium.

"Score one for Esthielle, shitty miner, nerd, and archaeologist of Titans." I pick free the softball-sized chunk and drop it into a stretch pouch in my bag.

It's a lighter metal but still a metal with a weight that I notice as I climb the rest of the way to Radar and Carver's position.

It's bright out when I crest the surface.

Radar's hanging onto a small dead tree and scanning the area. "Two patrols to the southwest. One scouring the landing zone. Looks like the outpost is on the other side of the forested hills to the north."

"There's a creek northeast of this hill, beyond this dead zone." I pull up the map I drew on my tablet last week and pieced together with images I'd taken.

Radar nods as he looks it over, then glances in the direction of the creek. "Thanks. We'll head through these hills, then make our way to the outpost along this canyon."

Radar's eyes flash green. Carver's flash white, and he jumps down the tunnel.

Radar looks over at me.

"I can drag it." I lift my pry bar.

Radar's eyes flash again. "I am being told no. Not a chance in hell."

He picks me up before I can protest, and jumps. My stomach smashes into my heart and makes my body tense.

Radar lands with jarring force, sets me down, and immediately backs up.

Armor steps out of the shadows, his comrade still across his shoulders. "Please stay with the group."

"I did."

"I cannot protect you if you wander off."

Motioning to Radar, I mean to ask Armor how I'm breaking the group when I catch

the plea in his eyes. He can't watch over me if I run off with another group. And with the guilt he carries over their last mission, I think he's going to be extra protective of all of us.

Armor runs a hand through his hair in exasperation. "Sorry, Esthi. You're not a Titan. And I don't have to follow your orders now that we are free. Do what you want."

"Rarely do I do that," I say. "I do what I need."

"You've sure come a long way over many years for one person," Karambit remarks in passing.

"My sister is not just a miner. She was trained in cybernetics, cyberpsyche transference, merge tech...the good stuff."

This gets their attention. All of the Titans gather up around us as Carver continues ahead.

Atox dissects me with his red eyes. "A Creator?"

"Yeah. The upcoming generation. She only worked on Titan for a few months before the rumor of an attack made them start to move parts off the moon, and she came home to hide with us. So yeah, I need to get her back."

Armor's lips part like he doesn't know what to say.

I pass him and follow Radar. "I was trained to keep her safe. I failed at that. But what I want doesn't matter. Let's just keep going."

"Esthielle—"

“It’s fine.” I tilt my head back as tears blur my eyes. “Please, can we just keep going?”

Atox pats me on the shoulder and gives me a nod. “We will, won’t we, Armor?”

Armor joins me on my other side. “We will find her. Maybe not today or tomorrow, but we will.”

I nod, but I’m not so sure she can be recovered anymore.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:02 am

A Creator? It's the same thought many of my Brothers think over our telepathic network. I can definitely see the resemblance as Esthi helps Atox repair Anilius' crushed insides.

KarambitLocal: Is Esthi a Creator? She appears to have the skills the way she's rewiring our Brother.

ArmorLocal: I don't know.

FireboltLocal: Grays are different than Sentinels. Do you remember them?

ArmorLocal: Hotheaded guards but dedicated.

MaceLocal: How can you not see it, Armor? She is calm during a crisis, resourceful, focused, gentle, and precise when she mends us. She is many things we were designed to be.

I can see it. The problem is that all the other Brothers are, too. I don't like that.

Esthi found me first. I want to keep her for myself. I protected her. She freed me. We freed the others.

I brood over the matter as Carver cuts us a path to the creek. Brunt closes the tunnel behind us every couple of miles to ensure welvirs don't get through.

Finally, Carver cuts upward, and we emerge at the water's edge, lay down our sleeping Brothers, fill our water reserves, and rest our backs from the gear we carry. I

crouch on guard from a rock above the creek.

Karambit, Mace, and Firebolt help form a perimeter around the group. It's a decent-sized creek, deep enough that our Brothers can lay in it and wash away the last five years of grit.

Esthi sets her gear down and strips down to her undergarments in a private bend.

"What are you doing?" I whisper to her, trying to ignore the primal urges stirring in my core at the sight of her light tan flesh in the daylight.

She tips backward and washes her hair. "Never know when I'll get another chance. So I take every opportunity I get."

I hear a noise in the distant brush and signal the others. The Brothers quickly gather our fallen and hurry into the tunnel.

Getting down from my post, I walk to where Esthi bathes. She clearly hasn't heard what I have.

"Esthi?" I say quietly. She doesn't turn around. I slip into the water and make my way to where she wrings out her long hair. Afraid she'll make a noise when she sees me, I cover her mouth and press my mouth to her ear, hushing her.

"Someone's close," I tell her, trying to ignore the feeling of her bare skin against mine. My shaft stiffens more the longer I hold her, but I'm glad I got to her first. If any of the others saw Esthi, I'm certain someone would try to fight me for her. But she is my mate. Mine.

As I reach past her for her bag, my cock brushes her plump ass.

Esthi looks up at me in shock.

I grab her things in one arm and her with the other. I have always enjoyed being bigger than most others because I can carry more. But there are times it limits me severely. It's why Mace is on our squad.

Esthi braces herself on my arm as I haul her out of the water. But before we can turn toward the cave opening tucked back in the trees, the bushes rustle down the creek.

I tuck my wings in close to us and slip into the forest.

"Stay very still," I say in her ear.

She reaches back and gropes my crotch. A hot wave of need floods me. I strain to hold back a grunt and maintain my position.

"Sorry. I was looking for my gun."

"You can have mine." I say it before I think about what exactly I'm implying.

Esthi pauses, then glides her hand up my rigid length again.

What is she doing?

I move to stop her, but Esthi just gives me a wink and puts a finger over her lips.

She finds my cock and strokes it with a warm hand. All I can think about is finding a way to be inside of her.

"Swear it was in this pocket." She gives me a dark look of satisfaction when she massages me again. But I cannot protect her in this compromised state.

“Esthi—” It’s a prayer for more and for her to stop. There won’t be a future if I don’t protect her now.

She quietly gets dressed and picks up her gear as I monitor the Solcrue that hike out to the edge of the creek. “Didn’t think Titans could find humans attractive. We’re so weak compared to you.”

“And yet you freed me when I couldn’t do it myself.”

She frowns and bends over to buckle her boots, leaving me staring at her backside and wishing we could find a sheltered meadow or a private cave where we could be alone and make as much noise as we want.

I wish she didn’t have to put more clothes on. I’d rather take them off.

The soldiers down the creek refill canteens and talk loudly like they forget how far sound travels on a planet.

Esthi straightens like she wants to speak, but I draw her back against me and rest my mouth to her ear. She takes in a breath that earns us the attention of the Solcrue.

We both freeze as they walk in our direction.

“Probably just neoelk, Sathrin. There’s a big herd out here,” the shorter male says. He packs his canteen into his bag and rubs a hand over his face. The edges of his hexagonal scales pulse deep green, something I’ve not seen before. “The Titans are all moving south. We’ll catch them at takeoff.”

Sathrin hisses at him. “You’re so certain they can’t see our ships. And yet, we find they learn to defeat every system we build. Your kind of arrogance is why our race fails to maintain a firm grip on dominance.”

“They won’t survive our weapons or our mutations. You’re right, I’m not worried.”

“Celathious, that mental rigidity will exploit our mortality. We are not infallible. They win battles because they adapt. We need to be more like them. We used to be.”

“More like them?”

“Yes!”

A gunshot tears through the air, punching through the trees just in front of us.

Esthi jolts in my arms.

I hold her tighter against me. Esthi’s skin is soft and warm beneath my lips. I whisper barely audibly in her ear. “I’ve got you.”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:02 am

Her body calms inside mine. The heartbeat I detect in her neck eases, and I know I bring her comfort. She trusts me, and it brings back a shred of the pride I once felt as the guardian of my Brothers.

Sathrin falls to his knees.

“We will win. Your doubt and your desire to be anything like the enemy make you a threat to the empire. Sorry, brother. Lieutenant Groll expects loyalty and perfection. You doubt your people. How you made it this far without execution, I don’t know.

” Celathious holsters his gun and walks back into the trees.

Several minutes pass after he’s gone that I just hold Esthi and drink in her scent while I wait for her to steady herself.

Finally, she twists around and looks up at me.

Esthi rests her cheek to mine in a tender moment I wish could last. It is a foreign stimulation.

Only Mother Besha on Titan ever showed us such compassion.

“We have to go to him,” she says sadly.

“What?” I watch as Esthi walks back into the creek. It takes a second for me to process what she’s doing. But I follow her in case Celathious finds us.

She hikes the bank on the other side and walks down the river to where Sathrin lies, bleeding out. Olive iridescent fluid runs from his body down the rocks and into the water.

He gasps from a hole in his chest as she kneels to him. “Hello, Sathrin.”

Every muscle piston in my body tenses, waiting for a move from him that I don’t like.

The Solcrue squints at her and shakes his head once. “Human...”

“Yes.” Esthi digs through her bag, grabs an injector, and peels it from the plastic. “Don’t you know your species prefers natural selection?”

His breaths rattle.

“He’s bleeding internally,” I tell her. Diagnostics scans fill my vision. “He’s not going to live.”

She looks up at me. “That’s what the Solcrue want, isn’t it? For all of us that they deem less valuable than their elites to suffer until we ultimately die, and they can have their unburdened utopia in the stars?”

Esthi jams the injector with vehemence into the hole in Sathrin’s chest. “Your people took my sister. Where is she?”

Sathrin’s face screws up in agony. “I don’t know where every slave is stationed!”

The muscles in Esthi’s jaw flex. “The special units trained to fly your ships. She’s in cybernetic armor.”

“Commanders Ahronis and Kravith have control of the VoidDiver program.”

“He’s lying, has to be,” I say.

Esthi smirks. “No. It’s built into Solcruean medicines to tell the truth as they’re healed, so reports can be filed with accuracy. Isn’t that right, Sathrin?”

The hexagonal cells of his face darken in waves as he coughs and splutters. He musters a nod.

“What is the plan during takeoff?” she presses.

His gaze darts around like he doesn’t want to say it.

“Sathrin.” Esthi twists the injector.

“Oh! Okay, fuck!” He grunts and curls a lip. “Venom Squadron is set to attack the mountain.”

This is new to me. “What is Venom Squadron?”

“We have acidic weapons that eat into soiridium and most Titan metals. Everything but hydramidium.”

“How do we stop them?” I ask.

“You can’t. Ghost cloaks are like nothing I’ve ever seen.” Sathrin chokes and starts convulsing.

Esthi injects him with a little more medicine, bringing him back to us.

“Why help me?” he asks. “Just for information?”

I have the same question.

Esthi sits back, leaving the injector in his chest. She hasn't depressed the plunger completely. Sathrin reaches for it like he wants to finish the job, but his hands shake violently.

"Your species has caused us a lot of pain," she says.

I scan the area for Celathious and any other heat signatures but find nothing more than a few small rodents in the brush.

"Reversion Syndrome," he wheezes.

"You like humans?"

"I notice when their system is more advanced than ours."

She rests an elbow on a knee and tilts her head. "Alright, answer two questions. How you respond will determine what I do with that injector. What is the purpose of life?"

Sathrin gazes up at the sky. "Don't know. Wish I did."

"Because you don't want to die?"

His breathing grows labored. "No, I don't."

"Why not?"

"That's more than two." He curls up onto his bad side.

"Why not?" Esthi challenges.

“One chance.”

She chews a cheek. “One chance to live? One chance to be anything, and you chose to hate, kill, enslave...”

“Born to it.” His eyes plead with her, then drift away, filling with regret like he’s accepting his fate. “I know nothing else.”

Esthi’s anger fades. “Last question.”

He groans with what little air he has left.

“What is sentience?”

Growing uncomfortable, I hang my head and scan behind us, fearing what she considers life doesn’t include us.

“Awareness. Feeling.” He rolls onto his stomach, and a string of bloody drool drips from his mouth.

Esthi depresses the injector, watching him carefully. “Bonus question. Who is capable of sentience?”

Sathrin looks up at me.

A smile decorates her face. She pulls out another injector, a smaller one, and taps it into his shoulder.

“Now, Sathrin...” Esthi gets to her feet, rolls him onto his back with a boot, and tosses the spent booster injector atop his chest. “You get a second chance. Don’t cock it up.”

She slings her bag over her shoulders again and motions me back across the creek. I pick her up, clutch her against me, and bound over it in one jump.

ArmorClover: Venom Squadron planning to attack during takeoff. Hydramidium is the only effective shield against acid spray.

She doesn't respond.

I repeat the message over the local network, hoping someone in the area can pass it on to her, Amp, or Savage. A Skysprinter roars closer, and I know we can't stay topside for me to resend the warning.

"Do not do that again," I say to Esthi as we dart inside the tunnel system where Brunt stands guard. "Please."

"He broke. Didn't you see it?" Esthi asks as I jump down the ascent shaft. Brunt closes the entrance overhead with a single punch.

He lands beside us and encourages us on as rock rains down, filling the tunnel behind us.

Esthi asks me to put her down, so I do. "We got critical information and hopefully a rebel out of him. That is how we build contacts inside the system. Only time will tell if he sides with us or not."

"He might turn on us, report us."

"Doubt it. His people tried to kill him. He's going Gray."

"You're so certain."

Brunt gives me a mental nudge.

BruntArmor: I heard your message about Venom Squadron. Is that what the Solcrue told you?

ArmorBrunt: A-firm.

BruntArmor: We must move fast then. If they did not get the message, we must find a way to stop the squadron ourselves.

Esthi marches ahead of us. “Yes. It’s one of the few things humans can do that you can’t because you can’t feel it.

There is an energy our subconscious picks up that can only be shared between us.

Just like you talk with your telepathic network, we can feel the energy of another if we know how to quiet ourselves and listen. ”

“If he hadn’t changed?” Brunt asks.

Esthi puts her goggles on. They light up with green readouts. “I would’ve put a bullet in his head to make it clean and as painless as possible. Celathious wanted him to suffer. That is why I say without a doubt Sathrin will turn. There’s nothing worse than being betrayed by your own people.”

“Why do you say that like you have experience?”

Esthi draws a knot of hydramidium from her bag and calls up to Magma.

“Who betrayed you?” I press, worried I’ve handled the situation at the creek incorrectly.

Magma drops back, sees what she's holding, and takes it cautiously in his hands.

"Think you can mold this into something we can use against acid weapons?" she asks him. "Shields?"

Magma looks at me. "Yes."

"Thanks. I have to get working on his shield generator repair." Esthi takes out her tablet as we follow Carver's path and the other Titans toward the outpost.

I don't think Esthi wants to talk about whatever happened, but I'm desperate to know it's not me. I stay beside her, hoping my presence will be enough of a reminder without being too pushy. Brunt guards us from the back while Magma heats and softens the metal in his hands.

While we walk, I forward the update about Venom Squadron and what's happened to my brothers. Mace and Karambit slink back to group up with us, forming a guard squad around Esthi without even thinking about it. I think they feel a similar dedication to her that I do.

"My uncle." Esthi taps her tablet to my chest. As she looks over the readouts, she opens a wiring diagram and begins highlighting breaks.

"He was CSP. When they came for Myria, he was onboard the Solcrue ship. If I ever see him again, I'm going to kill him for letting them take her and all the others from us. "

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:02 am

Armor's shield generator is damaged but not irreparable. I work through my plan for repair so the moment I've got time and opportunity, I can get it done quickly.

"Isn't that hypocritical?" Mace asks. "You want to kill your uncle for betraying you, but you don't think Solcrue killing Solcrue for betraying them makes sense? I mean, I'm all for taking out the enemy, but..."

"It's not the same." I flash Armor a glance, realizing he's shared what happened with his brothers. I should've expected as much with the regular updates. "He is a threat to all humans because he's willing to sell us out to save himself like most CSP soldiers.

"Sathrin was still serving his kind in Venom Squadron. He wanted to protect them; he just thought they should do it differently. But his goal was the betterment of his people, not himself."

"Fucking head games." Karambit curls his repaired finger. "I prefer simplicity. With me or against me. I protect or kill. There's nothing in between."

A shudder runs through the tunnel.

"Report!" Armor calls out.

Radar's green eyes find us. "Skysprinter attack. Distraction operations beginning. Civilians loaded. BlazeStar prepped for launch.

"That's all I can pick up from the transmissions. I relayed your message, sir. But without a way to scan for Venom ships, there's no way to predict where they'll be or

how many we're up against."

We're running out of time to get up there and help.

"I'm sorry, I don't have any data on Venom ships. I can't help with that," I admit.

Armor turns me around, picks me up, and runs. All of the Titans are suddenly moving fast, as if they all felt the same urge at the same time.

The tunnel collapses behind us.

Brunt struggles to catch up. "I'm not doing that!"

Armor's wings take hits from rocks. He clenches his teeth and hunkers around me as we race through the tunnel after Carver.

"Someone's found us." Armor holds me tighter. "I need that shield, Esthi. Can you fix it?"

"While we're running?" I can barely read my tablet with all the bouncing.

He adjusts his grip and tries to smooth out his paces.

Fucking hell. I dig into my bag for my multitool, careful not to drop it.

Prying open his chest, I find the damaged wiring around the shield generator that's been knocked loose, tighten the unit back into place, and begin reconnecting the wires.

"It's going to be a hack job for now. You have a damaged circuit board and need better connectors. .."

“Don’t care! I just need it as fast as you can get it up!”

I work my way through the wires again and find one I missed that’s broken free of a control module. “Magma!”

He drops back with us again, the hydramidium in one hand.

“Heat my multitool? I have to solder.”

He reaches a finger toward me that glows like molten lava. It’s not easy to get lined up as we run with rock raining down on us. But Magma manages to tap the tool long enough for it to glow. I immediately stick it inside Armor’s chest and reattach the loose wire.

The moment he’s back together, I close up his chest panels and watch the shield symbol light up. “Can’t take a plasma hit from a mothership, but she’ll hold for Skysprinter missiles.”

Armor’s eyes brighten. With a single blink, he thrusts out a shield that fills the tunnel. Rock stops falling on us, and Brunt finally catches up.

“Solcrue have our position,” Radar calls out.

“We’re almost to the outpost,” Firebolt adds. “Smash and grab?”

Several Titans confirm interest.

Armor agrees. “Not much else we can do. No time to scout or plan.”

The Titans change their order, sending Radar, Javelin, Mace, Whip, and Karambit up front with a few others. Atox, Brunt, Catalyst, and other heavier units remain behind

to carry their offline brothers.

Light pours in from the end of the tunnel, following a horrid boom. Titans charge into a hangar, taking up squads that skirt open areas from behind pillars and cargo crates.

Solcrue in black armor and CSP soldiers in gray fire at them. But the Titans have only themselves as weapons. Armor's shield spreads around the group, protecting them from gunfire.

Javelin is the first to leave the shelter at a sprint. He launches into the air, spins into a dart shape, and knocks down three Solcrue before tumbling to a stop and swinging his body behind a concrete pillar.

At the same time, Whip zigzags through the soldiers, stealing weapons and knocking several back before a warping pulse from a gun makes him duck and slide under a dune buggy for cover.

Karambit crawls up the walls, chewing up the concrete, and drops down on the roof of a large transport at the end. "No good! Severe hull damage! Still under repair!" He swivels around and dodges a shot from a CSP soldier. "But there's another!"

Karambit launches off of the hull, away from us. "Back here!"

Three more Solcrue squads enter the battle from other rooms and hallways, firing from hangar doorways, one from the damaged ship's dropped ramp.

"Merry-go-boom?" Mace offers a hand to Brunt, who takes it.

Brunt swings him in a loop and flings Mace out across the floor and toward the largest mass of gathered Solcrue. Mace cannonballs through them. When they turn to attack, his spikes flare in erratic patterns that match the incoming assaults as if he can

sense them.

All I can do is stand in the doorway Carver has made, watching the battle.

We built them to do what was necessary to save us and to preserve the minds of our best soldiers, to give them a second chance, a chance to be immortal.

And we have made them into effective killing machines.

But seeing them now, knowing what they put themselves through to protect us, I feel only shame we never gave them more respect and honor.

They deserve so much more. Humanity may be near extinction, but I pray we aren't hopeless and that we can have a second chance, too, to do things right.

Armor encourages me through the facility as his brothers make a mess of the scene, killing Solcrue and raiding storage rooms. Behind the first ship is another, larger vessel.

Karambit tosses a limp human CSP soldier over the side as he lowers the ramp. "Traitor."

Armor's shield gives us a safe zone in the mayhem until a Solcrue dares enter the shield. Light swells in the barrel of his gun as he points it at me.

Armor steps between us as the blast goes off. He spreads his feet as the flames dissipate around his body.

"No!" I scramble to reach him.

"Ow?" Armor looks down at the male, grabs the Solcrue's gun with a hand, jerks it

free, then punches him so hard in the chest that he flies out of the shield and smashes into a wall. The soldier slumps.

What the...

Armor must see the surprise on my face. “It takes a lot more than a standard bullet to damage my synthskin.”

Karambit climbs back up the ramp as Armor encourages me after him. “Still need a sweep.”

My gun shakes a little in my hand. I’ve been in smaller confrontations, never something this big. As we board, other Solcrue and CSP fire into the hallways. I react on instinct, even though Armor’s shield still extends around me. I take down a CSP soldier. He coughs and stills.

I don’t want to kill anyone. But at the same time, I know I have to do what’s necessary to end this war.

Titans load.

“Scan complete. No mines or traps that I can detect,” Radar remarks.

Firebolt stands by the ramp, throwing electric arcs at everyone who dares set foot near the ship as the engines warm.

Rooms smash around the hangar, and Carver comes out, leading Brunt and other Titans who carry crates of food, ammo, and medical supplies.

More soldiers appear at the far end of the outpost.

“Time to go!” Javelin says, righting a sniper rifle on his shoulder. He takes a shot from the ramp as it begins to close.

Armor looks upfront to where two Titans, Lance and Hydra, have taken the pilot’s seats. Four more guard them. The offline Titans are already strapped to beds in the CSP’s medical bay with Atox.

“Shields up, ninety-two percent,” the automated system reports. “Panel SB four-four-alpha down.”

Two Titans break away from helping Atox to address the shield’s downed panel while Armor escorts me to the seats behind the pilots. Outside the windows, the ceiling retracts, and we burst up into the sky.

“Two bogies, approaching from the southwest,” Radar mutters from where he stands behind the pilots.

“Copy, hang on,” Hydra remarks as he adjusts a setting on a screen in front of him, and he and Lance change our trajectory.

Armor braces me and grabs a handle overhead. “Let’s give them a chase and a distraction while we figure out what to do about Venom squadron.

“I think I have an idea.” Karambit steps into the hallway behind us with a highly augmented blond with eyes an inhuman blue. His resemblance to Myria makes my stomach burn with anxiety over what’s become of her.

Behind them, Mace brings forward another man. “I can make them talk.”

“I’d like to help.” Karambit grins.

“Don’t say shit, Lenarro,” the second man growls.

The blonde grimaces and spits blood from his bleeding lip onto the floor. “Shut up, Joey. I know.”

Lenarro gives me a once over like he recognizes me, but I don’t know him. It’s his augmented body that concerns me.

“CSP?” I ask Lenarro.

He watches me closely but doesn’t say anything.

Joey laughs, then groans when Mace punches him in the stomach.

I step up to Lenarro to get a better look at his eyes. Karambit holds his arms behind him while Armor shifts uncomfortably beside me.

“Esthi...”

“It’s okay, Armor.” I glance at him. “Lenarro won’t hurt me.”

“How know you say that?” Karambit growls. “All CSP types want is to destroy us and you.”

Lenarro winces. He’s trying hard not to show his damaged state in front of Joey. It makes me wonder why, but it brings back a memory of childhood and trying to be tough like Myria.

“I can fix you,” I tell him quietly enough that Joey can’t overhear. “But I’m going to need something from you.”

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:02 am

I wish Esthi would stop getting so close to the enemy. It's driving me crazy. The risk assessments run frantically in my mind with every move and twitch of Lenarro's augmented body.

"Sort of like being a high-tech Wrecktank, you know," Esthi tells Lenarro. "Still got a meat processor behind those eyes. Can't replace that."

Lenarro jerks against Karambit's grip, and it makes me put a hand on his shoulder and squeeze.

"Hurt her, and I will pull you apart piece by piece," I growl.

"Won't bother me," Lenarro sneers.

Esthi rests a hand on my side, but it only mediates a pathetically small amount of the hatred I have for him and his CSP brethren.

"You think I don't know how much agony that causes?"

"I add. "We all know very well. Solcrue killed us. Every Titan has been through death, through being assembled and disassembled and tested on, then put through battle after battle, getting blown apart and put back together. We all know agony and how it's inflicted. "

"He looks like Myria," Esthi mutters. "I've studied her. I can fix him."

Lenarro stops fidgeting as if a switch has flipped. "Esthielle."

She slides back a step.

“Privately,” Lenarro says low, darting his eyes at the human behind him.

Karambit disagrees.

Esthi nods. “Alright.”

“What? No.” I slide an arm around her and glare at Lenarro. “I don’t like it.”

“How about I lock them up while you figure out the plan,” Karambit remarks.

ArmorKarambit: Good idea. I don’t trust either of them.

KarambitArmor: Found them hiding in a cargo bay, loading up on weapons.

“Since this is a CSP vessel, put them in Titan cells. She can repair whatever she’s able to while he’s chained up,” I suggest.

“Gladly.” Mace turns Joey around and shoves him down the hallway so that he tumbles to the floor along the hallway lined with Brothers waiting for a task. They take turns knocking him around on the way to the holding cells.

“How many of our Brothers have you tortured and killed?” Catalyst challenges.

Joey spits at him.

Catalyst punches him in the face. “Keep that attitude up and see if you live to see daylight again.”

Joey tumbles backward and falls. Lenarro picks him up and hauls him into the Titan

holding room on his own. It's a strange behavior I can't place. The only thing I can figure is that Lenarro is trying to keep Joey alive.

But why?

Mace and Karambit isolate Joey and Lenarro into individual cells, then lock them away in private rooms where not even Titan telepathic signals can pass through the walls.

When Lenarro is strapped in and laid back on the table for repairs, I permit Esthi inside the room. "I will be watching from right here."

"How much time do I have?"

I wish I knew. "Pretend you have none. We need answers fast."

She looks to where Lenarro lies, puffs out a breath, and walks inside. The door slides shut between us, and I can't stand the separation. It tears at me in a way I can't explain.

ArmorCSP Transport Local: Status, all.

My Brothers report their individual health stats and their positions on the vessel.

In under a second, I know them all and can read them in the translucent text over my view of Esthi as she digs through her bag for tools and parts.

She has a little of everything with her.

But that's often what it takes for humans to survive in space.

She needs a battle uniform of some kind.

“I agree,” Karambit remarks. “Wild, looking at a Creator’s sister, knowing we have a tech with us who’s qualified for Titan repairs. It’s like having another medic, but better.”

“In what way?” I demand.

“Easy, Brother. I mean, I’ve sort of forgotten what the Creators were like. Smart but fragile. Tough emotionally, but vulnerable. And soft.” The way Karambit studies her makes me uncomfortable.

“She is mine . I have Bonded with her and mated with her.”

Mace punches my side, but it barely moves me. “Easy, brute. We know you got a hard-on for the little lady. Maybe just let us tag-team a little hands-on learning?”

“Definitely not.”

Karambit snorts. “I want my own female, Mace. If Esthi is Bonded, then I won’t disrespect that.”

I cross my arms. “She freed me before Leah sent the message.”

“So you’re not really Bonded?” Mace asks.

Sighing, I turn to Mace. “You Spike Out, you’ll kill her. And you...” I glare at Karambit. “One touch and you’ll rip her skin off. I am most suited to her needs in this war.”

“What about after? What if she has a boyfriend?” Mace asks.

“After a decade, I doubt it.” But I am concerned she’ll lose interest if we end the war. She won’t need me then.

Karambit pats me hard on the back. “We’re just teasing, you lugnut. She is a curious female. But every Brother knows she’s your claim. And by the way that she looks at you, she doesn’t want any of us other metalheads.”

As they leave to check on Joey, I watch Esthi with concern. Lenarro speaks to her with unusual ease. I wish I could hear what they’re saying. All I can do is watch for any sign of movement I don’t like and stand ready to rip his head off.

Too many Titans and females have been decommissioned since my last battle. I’m eager to catch up on my body count.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:02 am

Lenarro grunts when I peel open the damaged power cell in his side.

He's been beaten to hell. And as much as I hate that I'm helping the enemy, I'm really trying to get some answers for myself.

Seeing how he's put together, how similar it is to what Myria had on her, makes me think she's not in a shell but part of the cybernetics like him.

A Wrecktank.

Stars, Solcrue made Myria into their version of a Wrecktank!

"How did it start?" I ask him. "Your augments."

Lenarro looks up at the ceiling lights. "Burned my hands saving my friend Joey. At least, he was my friend, once."

His voice is filled with regret.

"Not the same?" I ask.

Lenarro snorts and looks away.

I repair the power cell and the muscle pistons that have been crushed around it.

"Let me guess. Hand augments caused renal failure. Then the synthetic kidneys caused spleen failure, then liver failure, then toxic conditions for your brain, so they

had to add an extra filtration unit near your spine for your cerebrospinal fluid? Then back augments to protect and strengthen your spine and the hardware there.”

“It just keeps going.” Lenarro shakes his head. “For now. Don’t know how long I have.”

“Five years, maybe.”

He rasps a breath in hopelessness.

“Wrecktank history. It’s why they moved onto BloodCyphers and the first Relics. Put every Wrecktank in hibernation until they could fix the Augment Contagion Effect. Truth is, a simple bloodtoner with the right meds would’ve solved the whole mess.”

I bump his fractured lateral femur support when I sit back to grab a different tool. Lenarro sucks air in through his teeth and grabs my leg.

Armor is in the room in a flash. He grabs Lenarro by the throat. “Let her go.”

Lenarro releases his hand as his face reddens.

“It’s my fault, Armor. I bumped an injury.”

Armor asses me, then lets Lenarro go, huffs, and storms out.

The door swishes shut.

“Fucking hell.” Lenarro gasps for air while I disconnect the control panels and cords in his thigh.

The CSP ship has a lot less stock than I thought I’d find. But after a glance at the

Cyborg Security Patrol sign on the wall with Security scratched out and Submission written in marker underneath, I'm reminded of why they weren't as interested in saving Titan parts for Titans.

I repair his thigh and a bullet wound in his back.

"I know why you're really helping me." Lenarro strains at his cuffs as I pry out a bit of burnt wiring. "I saw your sister. I know you're using me to learn about her. But I accept that."

"You know Myria?"

"Saw her in the lab on Vessna last round. They move her a lot. Heard she has her own ship now."

I replace the panel in his back and pack up my bag. "Do you know what she was before this?"

Lenarro sucks on his split lip. "They always took Creators. I just got lucky, I guess."

"Doubt that." I scour his body, mapping the parts that I can, and scan his body with my tablet so I have notes for if I ever find my sister again.

He struggles like he wants to sit up. "Can you rotate me so we can have a legitimate conversation? I hate talking to the ceiling. I feel like a crazy person."

I turn the table so he can look at me better, then I walk away from him.

I don't owe him shit. Besides, it gives me a good opportunity to see more of his back and the augmented filtration system they added along his spine that gives him a monstrous look.

It's armored and looks like lying back might be uncomfortable.

"We don't have time for a lot of talk. So I'm going to tell you the most important things," he continues. "First, I work for General Erdox, not by choice."

I circle the cell. "The one who led CSP in the revolt against Titan and Omega Forces?"

He closes his eyes and nods once. "When I was younger, I had a crush on Joey's half-sister, Leah.

I saved Joey's life before he was a piece of shit because he was my friend, and Leah still had hope they could be a family.

I wanted that for us, for all three of us.

But General Erdox held her life over my head.

In exchange, I served him by protecting his son. Serve him."

I glance at Joey, slumped in his cuffs in the neighboring cell. "Joey Erdox ?"

"Yeah. General Krader and General Erdox screwed the same chick and hated each other for it. Fought over her. And now look at us all. Fucking mess. But Erdox has a very manipulative way with words. I think Krader was a far better man. So their mother and I share something in common, falling for Erdox's bullshit promises. "

I sit in the guard's seat by the door. "Do you know where he is now?"

"Stays out of conflict orbit. Always remote. But I know of a few places."

“Then you’re useful enough that the Titans won’t kill you.”

He shifts like he’s uncomfortable. “Is Leah still alive?”

“As far as I know.”

He swallows like his throat aches. “I know she hates me. I just wish she knew why I did it.”

“She’s Bonded.”

Lenarro laughs sadly. “You think we don’t know how to line up Titan personalities with humans or to follow the Blood Heir Code? I’m sure it’s Savage. He was General Krader’s Titan in Command.”

The door slides open. Armor looks from me to Lenarro. “Venom Squadron. We need information.”

Joey shouts at us from the other room, but I can’t make out what he says.

“Use Iridithatium smoke to tint the ghostcloaks. All I can say is hydramidium can hold up to the acid. But I haven’t overheard anything else about the ships. Just watch out. The Solcrue on these ships have venom augments, too. Now somebody better hit me in the face to help me keep my cover.”

“Gladly.” Armor walks in and tags Lenarro in the nose, sending his face gushing blood.

“Damn it, Armor!”

“It’s fine,” Lenarro mumbles with a smile as purple liquid stains his face. “Pain now

reminds me I'm not in her lab anymore."

"Erdox's?"

"Shivnel's. Sevrin's twin sister." Lenarro lays his head back, laughing. "Sevrin, the maniacal Solcrue that created the welvirs and tortured hundreds of people trying to get augments right, has a fucking sister who's worse than him. She has a private Poison Arrow docked on Corenge."

I step out of the room with Armor and glance back at Lenarro. He got suckered into the war without even wanting it. His actions were to protect a human, not hurt one. He just drew an unlucky card with Joey. I give him a subtle nod of appreciation, but it's all I can do for now.

"You believe anything he says?" Armor asks me when the door shuts.

My gut wants to. "Guess we'll just have to try iridithatium smoke." Before I can continue, Armor interrupts.

"Loaded. Javelin found some on a lower deck. Makes sense that CSP are in on it."

I give him the rundown of what Lenarro's said as we walk up to where the pilots are.

"Have Karambit check Joey for trackers."

"I already did," Karambit remarks.

I turn to him. "Do you really think General Erdox would let his son disappear on him that easily? Check him again."

"Shit. Is that who he is?" Mace asks.

“Unfortunately.”

They disappear down the hall to check on Joey, giving me time to scan the desert plains ahead as I think about what Lenarro said. In the distant sky, I notice a swarm of smaller ships. “What’s that?”

Armor cants toward me. “Titan Holo is projecting that from another location.”

“Distraction?”

He nods. “Esthi, can I speak to you alone for a moment?”

“Right now?”

“Yes. It’s important.”

Armor leads me into a private office not far from the cockpit. When the door shuts, he turns around and guides me back and against it. “You cannot keep doing these dangerous things. You are too special to risk yourself.”

But when I lift my head to retort and see the way his eyes trace my lips, I think there’s something else going on. “Armor?”

“I don’t like this worry I feel for you.”

“I’m sure it’s just overcompensation because of the fall...” I start.

He takes me by the back of my neck, and directs my mouth close to his until only breath slips between our lips. I want to ask him what he’s doing, but the affection is so unexpected, like when we were by the creek, that I’m frozen in anticipation.

Aarmor's eyebrows pinch as if he's expecting rejection.

Go for it. Come on, big guy.

Aarmor looks away and lets out a breath. "I'm sorry. I'm not used to this freedom of emotion. Our programs always hid it and forced us to feel but not do anything to satisfy the cravings that we have for things. I must be broken."

"Are humans broken?"

He looks at me like I've committed a crime. "No. I didn't mean to imply that."

"We are naturally emotional beings. We feel things, and we give in. Part of being human is learning when to give in and when not to."

"How do you know?"

"If it is something that will make you stronger, go for it. But that's what a Gray would say. I'm aware of that. If you'd asked my little brother, he'd have said the opposite. It's a choice. Live hard and fast and short like him, or cautious and longer like me, and any range in between."

He smirks. "You, cautious?"

"I don't run into a battle without weapons, hoping my body will be enough."

His mouth quirks to one side. "We used what we had."

"It's a lot more than what humans have." I reach between us and stroke his swollen shaft. A surge of lust heats my core.

He growls and nips at my neck.

“Consequence is the burden of freedom,” I continue, trying to stay on task. But all I really want is Armor inside of me again. “What are you willing to deal with to have what you want? That’s what being human is all about. We programmed that weakness out of you for a reason. Look at you.”

Aarmor runs a hand down his bare chest. “We are your creations, not your superiors.”

“You are superior in every way: skill, muscles, and...” I squeeze his cock.

Aarmor pants and grinds into me. “There’s one we’re not.”

“What’s that?”

He braces the back of my head and guides my lips to his for a kiss so deep and sensual that it makes my heart race. “The way you feel is far superior.”

I had no idea Titans could care so much about humans after everything we put them through and what they’ve endured to fight for us.

“Do you think—” Aarmor breaks the kiss to trail his nose down my neck. “You could ever love a Titan?”

He curls around me like he’s desperate to hang onto me. His cock presses into my pussy. Then, he suddenly braces us inside the room with his wings. “Hang on!”

The ship jerks hard and surges faster across the desert. I’m slung around inside Aarmor’s virile arms, pulse pounding in my ears. “What’s going on?”

“We’re entering the battle zone. Skysprinters know we’ve taken over the ship.”

Armor carries me to the back of the office. “I need you protected in case my team needs me.”

“What are you talking about?”

He shoves me backward and into a closet that ratchets around me like thousands of little metal fingers. “It’s CSP armor, so just keep that in mind.”

The metal swallows me in a carapace I can’t wrestle my way out of. I’ve never worn CSP armor, but I’m certain by the weight and the diagnostics that light up in my vision that it’s similar to, if not better than, Starjumpers’ in terms of keeping me alive.

Armor leans inside and kisses me once more before my mouth plates over. “I need you protected if I can’t do it. I can’t stand the thought of you getting hurt on my watch.” Then Armor turns and hurries out of the room.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:02 am

I was about to get a hot piece of Armor when he shoved me in this wretched CSP armor.

Damn it!

After the chamber releases me, I stagger into the room and assess my new dark gray suit. It has a zembi on one hip, a rifle on the back, and a handgun on each thigh. “Complete with weapons?”

“Yes. For fast response,” a voice says in my head.

“Who’s that?”

“Armor. You touched me in that suit, so I am logged first because I am closest. But all Titans should be on your visor. To call all of us, use the Local tag.”

I step into the hallway to find it abuzz with Titans handing things back and forth from various crates.

Missiles go one way. Parts for an engine go the other way.

Inside the medical bay, Atox is down to two Titans still on beds.

Yeti and Fenrir still haven’t awoken. Anilius is coiled up in a narrow compartment, repairing an engine. Turbine is beside him, prepping parts.

The pilots guide us in a barrel roll around an onslaught of Skysprinters slinging

yellow and green rockets in our direction. My boots clunk and hold me to the floor as we spin, and gravity's pull swings over my head and back under my feet again.

"Heading to the drop zone. Radar?" Armor asks.

"Javelin and Firebolt ready on your mark," Radar calls up.

Aarmor stands in the center of the ship, hands on the walls.

Titans sneak past him, beneath his arms. His shield shimmers with light.

I'm not certain the repairs I made will hold.

I climb up Aarmor's body and hook my legs around his waist. "Tell me when you drop the shields. I need to make sure my repairs are sufficient for this level of use."

His eyes flash with communication. "Break coming. Be quick, please."

The moment he nods, I open his chest panel, pull out the circuit board that needs repair, and close him up. His shield reignites. I carry the unit into the medical bay and use the Titan repair tools to replace the burnt bridge rectifier. It takes me all of two minutes with the tools on hand.

Snatching up a flashtack gun, I run back to where Aarmor stands in the middle of the ship, climb up his towering body, and wait for a signal.

"Now."

I open him up and secure the board back into position, then begin soldering the wires back together, the ones I simply twisted together in the tunnel.

“Esthi...” He warns.

“I’m almost done.”

“We need the shield!” a pilot shouts back. “Barrage, twenty-plus, incoming!”

“Esthi!”

I finish the last and close him back up. Armor’s shield lights up bright pale blue-violet. A wave of light shimmers out from his body, spreading through the ship. His brothers brace themselves for impact.

The pilots guide us away from the majority of the attack, but three missiles smash into the shields: Armor’s and the ship’s built-in ones.

Armor curls forward and grunts. A swirl in the light around him makes me wonder if he feels the shield like his skin. Every hit we take makes him cringe, and spots like bruises appear on his synthflesh. But still, he keeps his eyes closed and holds his position.

All this time, I thought they were invincible, even though I knew better.

The Titans around me return to their duties.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” I ask Armor.

When he opens his eyes and blinks, he focuses on me. His eyes are covered in a milky blue pearlescent sheen, similar to his shield.

“I need you to be safe. I have arranged for a transport. We are a target. Titans cannot afford to lose you, Esthi. Not a cybertech. You are too important to my Brothers for

me to be selfish and risk keeping you with me.”

I look behind him to where Joey sits in his cage. I bet I know why we’ve become a target.

“Kelta is coming with Thruster. Please ride with her. This is going to get messy. It’s best if you’re with another human. Exit out the rear airlock.”

I don’t like the idea of leaving. “Can’t I stay? You put me in a suit.”

He winces as another missile hits the port side of the transport.

“Armor.”

“Just go!” he roars at me.

I get down and back up. I don’t know if he’s suddenly changed his mind about us, or if he’s genuinely afraid this might be the beginning of the end.

“She’ll get you safely to space,” he says. “She’s a rebel pilot, according to Thruster.”

I don’t like it. “I’ll leave my bag in case you need my parts.”

Armor studies me for a long, sad moment.

“Come back to me in one piece,” I tell him.

Armor swallows but says nothing. I know he can’t promise that. But I want him to know he’s wanted. I hug him, kiss his chest, and hope it’s enough to keep him from doing anything exceptionally stupid.

As I walk to the back, I notice Joey and Lenarro in their cells. Joey's almost laughing, his finger digging into his wrist in a pattern like Morse code. He's got a built-in com in his wrist. I'd bet my life on it.

"Son of a bitch." I charge into the room and punch him in the face. When he reacts to grab his face, I snatch his wrist up and inspect it.

Embedded communicator.

"Any available Titans to kick two leeches out in a pod? I could use some help."

Mace peeks in. "Problem?"

"He's been communicating with a device in his wrist."

"Fucker." Mace storms inside, grabs Joey by the collar, and readies a hand over his wrist. "You'll probably lose the hand, so you'll get to look like your friend over there."

Joey quiets.

"Which do you want? To be thrown out or lose your hand?" I ask.

"Blood tracker," Joey grins.

Mace nods, frees him from his harness, and drags him to the rear airlock.

Lenarro calls to us. I can't hear him, but I can see it. I round the corner into his room.

"Send me with him."

“Why? You have a chance to be free.”

“No, he doesn’t,” Armor says in my helmet. “He has harmed many to keep his cover. Throw him out.”

I tilt my head, listening to the many Titans who agree with Armor. “Never mind. I got vetoed.”

“Sounds about right,” Lenarro mutters.

I draw my zembi and ignite it. “Try anything...”

He lifts his hands. “You know my story. If Leah’s safe with the Titans, nothing else matters. But maybe I can finally fuck some shit up. Just tell your sister hi for me.”

“I’ll do that.” Probably not. Doubt I’ll ever find her anyway.

I release him and motion him out back with Joey. Our boots clomp over the metal walkway as we meet up with Mace and Joey. The ramp lowers before us, sending warm desert air swirling through the back of the ship.

“She’s in there,” Lenarro tells me. “You have to dig her up. Torture makes us build up armor. Adapt to survive. If anyone can reach her, it’s you.”

“I won’t forget this,” Joey remarks.

“Neither will I,” Lenarro mutters, sliding me a glance.

“I will find you and kill you!” Joey shouts, spittle flying from his mouth.

“Oh, shut up.” Mace picks up a foot and shoves him out the back.

Lenarro runs to the edge and dives after him.

“I do not understand his dedication to the enemy,” Mace says what’s on my mind. “I have relayed the warning that we were being tracked to the Brothers.”

“Thanks.”

He points out back. “Your ride. Use the targeting system on the suit. It will guide you.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Jump.” Mace walks me back a few steps, taps my visor, and illuminates a program. “You really haven’t done combat?”

“Not really. I’m just a cybertech, not a badass! Pulling a trigger from the shadows versus flying over a desert is very different!”

“You’ll be fine!” Mace grins. “Thruster will catch you if you miss, but the window’s closing, girly!”

A yellow rocket-of-a-Titan flies up beside the fighter.

“Need a boost?” Mace lifts a boot.

“No! Fuck!” I eye the ramp, the gap to the trailing ship, and the ship’s hull. The targeting program shows me where to place my feet.

I run down the ramp.

“Faster,” the program says.

I sprint with everything I've got the last few steps and launch out of the CSP transport. Sand passes hundreds of feet below me in a heart-pounding rush.

Air whips around my suit. The ship adjusts its position slightly, and I land on the hull.

"Magnetic boots engaged."

My feet stick firmly to the hull. I straighten and look back at Mace to find Magma standing beside him with a shiny metal object.

"Nice job, Esthi. I'm Thruster. My mate, Kelta, is inside. She can hear your coms, too." The Titan waves. "Now, I must return to battle."

Thruster roars up to the ramp, catches a shield, and darts off again.

"Son of a bitch. I bet he could've picked me up and set me down here!"

"Yeah, totally," a woman laughs over my coms. "But that's no fun. And everything uncomfortable expands what we believe we are capable of. That was just a test of your suit. Seems it's working. And I think you're probably going to need it."

A hatch pops open on the roof. "Come on in!"

I hike to the hatch and clumsily climb inside.

The hatch seals on its own, so I walk myself to the seat beside hers.

Just as I get belted in, a blast goes off in front of us that shuts down every light in the ship.

Gravity grabs us, and we plummet toward the dunes littered with flaming debris from

ships of all kinds.

“Two seconds!” Kelta reaches down, pulls out a lever, and shoves it into the floor, then taps a backup battery symbol on her dash. Something whirs and cracks. Engines come back online, and power returns to the ship. “Shielded hypercapacitors, you fucks! Solcrue can eat a dick!”

She turns to me and holds up a fist. ““Sup? Heard you’re a cybertech.”

I hesitantly bump her fist. “Yeah.”

“Good. So all I have to do is keep you alive until after the end.” She gives me a worried glance, then tracks her mate as he burns across the sky. “Distraction maneuvers haven’t been going well. But the hydramidium shield should help.”

Purple smoke billows out of the back of the CSP transport.

“Iridithatium. Smart,” she remarks.

“I think CSP already had it installed.”

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:02 am

“Which means they were in on the Venom Squadron but didn’t trust them.

” Kelta is quick-witted. “Esthi, I heard you were in isolation for a long time. I was, too. Out here, you have to trust your equipment and your knowledge and always have a backup escape plan ready. Be willing to do the impossible, and we’ll get through this. Copy?”

“Copy.” I think.

“Great. I need you on guns. Flip the red lever, spread your feet, and in this heat, aim a little further ahead of the shot.”

“Where are we headed?”

“Clearing the skies, then following the BlazeStar as protection.”

The com feed crackles. “This is Commander Savage. Scant is down. Poison Arrow in pursuit. Venom ships causing severe damage! Our engines are down. SunFlux pending DOI. Switch to Honeybadger Whiskey Tango Foxtrot.”

“Boltburner on approach. Tap out in ten!” a voice growls.

“Menace, drop some of your pack on these snakes, will you?” Savage’s voice adds. “Let’s see how they do against their own creations.”

“Pleasure, sir.” A dark vessel arcs through the battlefield, banking left and right, dropping mutant wolves out the back onto Skysprinters and other Solcruean fighters.

Kelta leans forward in her seat. “Holy stars, is that your mate?”

I squint against a flare of light until my visor autotints. Armor rides atop the CSP transport, wings spread and covered in shiny new metal.

“Magma must’ve coated his wings.” My heart stalls for a beat as he jumps from the ship and soars across the desert, catching a Titan who’s jumping from a small SunFlux vessel.

“They all talk in their heads a ton. Want to hear the idle chatter?” Kelta switches something in the dash, and a hundred or more voices turn the channel into a mass drone that almost sounds like static.

“Shit. How do they sort that?”

“Visually and programming.”

Armor’s shield takes hits as Venom ships, coated with crystalline sheens, become visible in the air like purple ghosts.

“I can repair a lot of internal components, some programming. But designing and troubleshooting Titans is beyond me, same with cyberpsyches. If my sister was still my sister, she could tell you how to make a Titan do anything with the right coding.”

Kelta looks over at me. “Anything? Like...turn against their own kind?”

Evo comes to mind. That’s why they took Creators. Not to punish them, to use them.

My head is starting to split open from the mess I’ve found myself in. “Why did you say you just had to keep me alive until the battle is over?”

She flips a switch and motions to our starboard side. “Fuck that up, pretty please.”

I shoot up the incoming Skysprinter.

“Because we always need medics after battle. Rebel and Taline can only do so much.”

“We have Atox, too.”

“And you.”

The com feed clicks and switches to a woman’s voice. One I recognize.

“Alright, Ladies. I’m a bit late to this jamboree. Mother— One second. Eat my dust, snake!” Explosions rattle the speakers. I pair them to the other SunFlux vessel arcing high in the sky, taking out three Solcruean fighters in the distant mountains.

“Okay, let’s try that again. Hey, I’m Leah. I know we’ve got a lot of new pilots out there. Here’s the deal. You’ve trained for this life in one way or another. Take your pain and anger and channel it into killing these slimy, gilkyworm-loving, arrogant—”

“Okay, Leah. They get it,” a gentle voice calls out.

“Sorry, Cara. I will try to be precise. Take out the green asses and save the hot gray ones! Nobody has to die if we work together and watch each other’s backs. I’d like to be on mine after this. Give them hell, girls! Leah, out.”

“She’s a kick in the pants,” Kelta chuckles.

They all have a lot more guts than I do, but I feel more confident about our chances.

“Hang on!” Kelta banks us hard, slinging me deep into my seat.

I swear a string under the pressure while Kelta laughs with dark delight. “Now begins the scary part.”

“Are you kidding?”

“We’re the bait. Thruster is reassigned to target another bait-ship’s attacker. And we get someone else.”

“Who?”

She shrugs. “Maybe nobody. We’re switching up the guards and mixing up the maneuvers.”

A green flare sends a jolt through the ship. Kelta slumps. “Torque syncdrive is out on engine two. You wanna fix or fly?”

She’s clearly a better pilot. I get up and dig through the bins for tools, find a belt, and strap it to me.

Climbing out onto the turbulent roof, I catch sight of an incoming missile and duck beneath it. The hot propulsion sends red alerts flashing around the exterior of my visor.

My heart lurches in my chest. I start to panic until I see Armor flying in erratic patterns as he hops from one ship to another, rescuing Titans and humans, placing himself between Venom shots at their targets. And I’m over here worried about one silly little missile.

Mutant wolves continue to drop from the BoltBurner. They tear at Venom ships,

Skysprinters, soldiers, and Titans. They have no discretion.

I feel unsteady as I clomp my way to the engine, but I try to trust my suit, like Kelta suggested.

“How we doing up there, friend?” Kelta calls over the com.

I find the toasted unit. “Trashed. I’ll wire in a straight shot. You’re going to have both engines on one’s commands.”

Bypassing the syncdrive, I hard wire the gears to engine one’s console. “They’ll power up and down together.”

“Esthi, get down! Boogie, nine o’clock!”

A metal mass clips my shoulder and sends me tumbling backward.

“Esthi!”

My magnetic boots fail under the force, and I’m falling, scrambling for a handhold, watching Kelta’s ship clumsily fly into the smoky skies.

Alert: Impact imminent.

Screw! This is not how I thought my life would end. I find Armor and wish I could ask for help, but he’s so far away and so busy with his brothers that I can’t bring myself to call him.

There has to be something I can do. I don’t want to die like this!

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:02 am

An alert flashes in my vision that my corrections officer is in trouble. It takes a second for me to make sense of the signal as I dart through a barrage of Skysprinter fire toward a glowing Venom gun. I have learned that they give a pale visual warning before they go off.

I have to watch them and the Skysprinters and other ships for Brothers in trouble or about to be. But as I steal a glance back in Esthi's direction, my ultramotor stalls for a beat.

She's falling from Kelta's smoking LightBlade. More ships descend upon us from the motherships: Marst , Vessna , and Corenge . We are failing, and the BlazeStar hasn't quite broken free of the rocky mountainside yet.

All I can think about is Esthi.

ArmorCorrections Officer 952: Suit thrusters!

Esthi's suit blazes with light and stops her midair. But in my distraction, I've missed the window to stop the venom missile. It tags the passing Solcrue transport we've acquired and eats a hoverpad into a dripping metal mess, leaving a gaping hole.

But it's what I see dropping into orbit behind them that terrifies me more. A CSP transport, one of the deadliest, cuts like a black blade through the hazy sky.

A spray of acid hits my right wing as I patrol the Venom ships. The blast glances off of my hydramidium lining and rains back onto the Venom ship's hull. To my surprise, it fizzles and eats metal.

Rushed job? Or they didn't find enough to plate the hulls!

ArmorLocal: Update - Venom ships not immune to friendly fire! Crash and burn!
Scythe entering orbit!

FuryLocal: Come again? Did you say Scythe?

A Skysprinter races by with a flaming orange Titan inside one second, then outside the next as he jumps free and smashes his ship into one Venom vessel, which sprays acid onto three others, including a Skysprinter.

All five ships explode and fall to the desert's edge below.

The wreckage trail takes out small trees at the forest's edge and lights it on fire.

Thruster catches Fury and drops him onto another Skysprinter before darting off to punch through a different Skysprinter and out the other side.

When I check on Esthi, I find she's not where I last saw her. A faint trail of light from her suit follows Kelta's ship.

RedlineLocal: Are you sure you're looking at Scythe and not the Poison Arrow that's been hunting us recently?

He sends me a visual of an oily black ship currently tearing up another area of the battlefield further south.

I copy an image of the ship and forward it to the local network. The chatter in response confirms my suspicions. The deadliest CSP vessel, the one with anti-Titan ballistics, is headed into battle.

CO 952Local: Can it target a CSP Corrections Officer's suit?

SavageLocal: With an override. But it is a one-shot deal. It must be approved each time.

CO 952: Understood. Engaging now.

Dread sinks me in the sky.

ArmorCO 952: No, Esthi. Do not engage! That suit is your only protection. If you are captured...

CO 952: Understood.

She's being short with me, and I realize that the way I pushed her off our ship without talking to her may have come across as rude or inconsiderate. But I was desperate to protect her.

ArmorCO 952: Be careful, Esthi. Scythe is not a ship to mess with.

CO 952: Women are Omega Force now. We have seen Solcrue and CSP take many things we love: our friends, our men, our Titans, and our future. Sometimes, our virginity, our sanity, and our restraint. I hope they're ready for me.

My insides are tearing apart as I watch her suit brighten and bank into a collision course with Scythe. I can't protect her over my Brothers or them over her. I have to protect who I can and hope everyone else is able to hold their own. I can't be everywhere all at once.

"Armor!" Thruster crashes into me as a writhing mass of metal arcs by us. The gravity of the cannonball grabs us, slings us in a wide arc around it, and drags us after

it. Thruster's rockets blaze as he winces and fights the pull of the weapon.

I track our trajectory and call out to Brothers in danger. The weapon slams into a Skysprinter as Fury and Redline leap from its hull. The ship implodes, crushing into itself on impact.

Fury, in full Torch mode, falls from the ship like a hot meteor. Redline flails, red hot.

ThrusterArmor: I've got Fury. You take Redline.

I pinpoint our approaching CSP transport as a possible drop-off. Landing in the dunes from such a height is not something I want any Brother to have to endure. I signal Lance and Hydra of our ship for a drop.

ArmorThruster: Patrol on approach.

Thruster guides me toward Redline, then releases me to catch Fury. He can take the heat. But so can I.

I fold my wings back and dive after Redline.

ArmorRedline: On my way, Brother.

RedlineArmor: Skysprinter on our six. Request landing for snipe.

I glance at the Solcruean fighter that was trailing their Skysprinter and dive lower.

Redline preps his rifle even as he falls.

Opening my wings just underneath him, I create a platform.

Redline lands hard and hot on my back, moves into position, and releases a string of bullets up at the passing fighter.

He tags a fuel cell. I know by the rain of flaming green and gold pieces of honeycomb material. The fighter descends with an engine throwing sparks and trailing smoke. It bashes into the ground, slinging up a wave of sand and parts.

Thruster and Fury land on the patrol ship just before us. Redline hops down.

CatalystLocal: Charge available.

He crawls out of the roof hatch and jogs to us.

Thruster, Redline, and I pull charge cables from our chests and clip into Catalyst's body. Hot power fills me, making me more alert and eager to continue.

CatalystArmor: You almost got a Black Death. I've been trying to reach you for fifteen minutes.

ArmorCatalyst: Esthi's going after Scythe.

His green eyes dart out at a ship in the distant battle. "It's here for us, isn't it?"

"Has to be."

"Armor!" Thruster grabs me by the arm and relays what he's seeing over our neural network. Another acquired vessel is getting pummeled by Venom squadron. We simultaneously agree to engage.

It's rare, in battle, to have much time to decide what risks to take. There is a certain element of willingness to figure it out when premade tactics have to be changed up

because the situation, combatants, or resources experience alterations.

ArmorThruster: Defend and Destroy Program Active. Jump in two.

ThrusterArmor: Defend and Destroy Program Active. Roger.

We sprint along the patrol ship's hull to the edge and jump off. Thruster's engines ignite gold all over his body as I open my wings. Together, we race toward the transport housing five members of the jailbreak crew: Commander Savage, Diesel, Rebel, Turbo, and Shifter.

ThrusterArmor: Taking offense.

I don't think he or any of the other jailbreak Titans know how thrilling it is to be among Brothers again. But I am grateful for this chance, even if it is my last day in operation.

Thruster banks toward the Venom ship painted pale purple with iridithatium.

They're wicked-looking, V-shaped, and have tapered ailerons make them easy to distinguish.

The ship's gun swells with green light and launches repeated acid shots.

Thruster hides behind his shield as he dodges shots and sneaks a rifle barrel around the edge. I hope he makes it.

ArmorThruster: Shielding up.

I take a hit as I dart through the lacework of missile fire and venom shots to the gaping hole in the ship. The moment I land, I pull my wingtips together and stretch

my shoulders into a massive plate of metal. Inside, Commander Savage peers out at me.

SavageLocal: Ship cannot be salvaged. On our last run with this one.

Diesel charges up Rebel, Turbo, and Shifter inside the adjoining cargo hangar. Two human females lie dead on the floor, badly burned. Not far from them is a darkened unit.

ArmorLocal: Gunner is down.

RebelLocal: Gunner is salvageable. But I cannot heal the females.

TurboLocal: Why are you all staring at them? We are on autopilot! Venom is shooting at us!

Another blast hits my shield, sending acidic heat radiating through my back. I grunt and clench my teeth to push back the pangs. Commander Savage and the others cannot be allowed to meet Gunner's fate or worse—irreparable damage.

"It's because we have females," I say. "Looking at them makes us worry about ours."

"You are mated?" Shifter asks.

"Yes. Esthi of Earth Minor. She's a cybertech."

Commander Savage moves toward me. "A cybertech? And you're not guarding her?"

Another blast slams into me. I spread my feet and adjust my grip on the haggard hole in the ship. "My duty is to my Brothers. Hers it to her sisters."

Commander Savage braces himself on a support pillar as the ship tilts.

SavageLocal: Menace and crew, time for Cerebus Drop.

MenaceLocal: Understood. Will confirm completion.

SavageLocalTransport: New plan. Give this vessel one last use and rescue Esthi. Do you comply?

DieselLocal: I comply.

RebelLocal: I comply.

TurboLocal: I comply.

ShifterLocal: I comply.

ArmorLocal: I comply. Thank you.

Commander Savage growls at me. “You are becoming rusty, Brother. Perhaps I should find some anti-rust for your gears. A cybertech?” He’s furious.

“Leah is out there by herself,” I challenge, taking another hit that rattles my core. We’ve been updated on who all the mated females are so we can protect them and keep our distance.

He glowers at me with brightening blue eyes and bares his pointed teeth in a snarl.

“She is the female’s commander, not a Titan medic!

Esthi must be protected! She’s the closest we have to a Creator!

We must get her back! And you need to get your head screwed on straight!

Trying to claim a Creator for a mate? Have you gone haywire, Brother? ”

ArmorCommander Savage: I didn't know. It happened when I was broken after she dug me out of the mud after five years.

Commander SavageArmor: No excuses. Freedom doesn't mean you can afford to be irresponsible. You made this mess. Fucking fix it!

I hang on to the ship as Shifter takes the controls with Turbo and guides the damaged ship away from battle and toward Scythe.

It's a suicide mission. Commander Savage is pissed at me for choosing us over my mate. And Esthi's vulnerable without guardians.

But part of me wonders if Savage is so upset because Leah fought him on the matter and won.

I have no doubt he wishes she was safe. It's just something in the way his gaze falls away from our conversation, a feeling like Esthi said, she gets.

Ultimately, I'm left with only one thought that brings me relief.

We're going to rescue Esthi.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:02 am

My use of suit thrusters is clumsy and sends me into a tumble that takes me a second to map and correct as I race toward Scythe.

I know they're freaked out about the vessel because I'm learning to sort their communications faster and read them in a split second as they load on my helmet.

I've always been a fast learner, and right now, that's a critical asset when I'm seriously inexperienced.

I glance back at Kelta's ship to see her on the hull, kicking free the toasted engine. I think she'll be okay. She seems familiar enough with ships that she doesn't need help.

I'm the one who needs it.

Mental help for this idiotic decision!

This is not where I excel. But I know Scythe is the Reaper of Titans, and there's no way in hell I'm letting them get anywhere close to the BlazeStar or the main battlefield if I can do anything about it.

Air thunders over my suit. It feels like trying to stand up under a waterfall. I can't quite look up, and my feet are unsteady. But I have a special hatred for Scythe.

I had hoped it was taken out in the war. I know it has special shielding and anti-Titan weapons. It is CSP's flagship. And the only ones who can get on board without being blown to pieces are CSP officers. I just don't know if they can tell who's still loyal by which ships we come from.

Otherwise, I am the perfect weapon.

If they don't shoot me out of the sky.

Maintaining radio silence, I rocket myself toward the incoming vessel.

ScytheCO 952: Report.

I say nothing even as they repeat it. They'll know something is wrong because my vocal patterns likely won't match whoever is on file for this suit.

ScytheCO 952: If your radio is down, click back twice.

Yeah, no.

It's a test. If I click back, it's not down. It's switched off for a reason. It's a manipulation tactic CSP are known for. Redirection. Deflection. Distraction.

"Ping, switch off." It's a guess at the suit's capabilities.

An alert flashes in the upper right corner with a signal beacon in a circle with a line through it in red.

No one can track me now. Not my source patrol ship, not the Titans.

Not Scythe. I know a few things. Not everything.

But enough. If there was a way CSP could play dirty and keep control, they did.

We were so afraid of what our AI and cybernetic creations would do to us if they learned they were stronger that we lived in fear of something we didn't need to. Then,

our elite human guards turned on our finest creations, tortured them, and killed them because of that fear.

Now look at where we are.

I am so ashamed of the weakest of our kind, and yet I know it is because they did not understand our creations. I do. They were not ready to confront their fears. I am.

I'm trying.

Titans are human inside. Armor has shown me that. Everything from lust and tenderness to anger and desperation. They still care about their Brothers, want to know love, to feel alive, and to have purpose. Solcrue threaten all of it. And CSP. Especially Scythe.

Scythe banks away from me, likely because I have not responded.

If I don't redline my suit, I will miss catching a ride and my chance to stop them. But I'm already behind.

Scythe launches familiar warping pulses that make Titans fall like dead weight on their ships, toppling to the dunes like husks of gray men. Stolen Skysprinters plummet to the dunes from the EMP blasts.

It is heart-wrenching to watch. I swallow against the ache forming in my throat, hating that any of them have to know such misery and deep down praying Armor isn't hit.

Knowing what I do about how his Brother squadrons from the BlazeStar met their fate makes me all the more determined to take Scythe out of the game.

A shield flickers to life around Thruster as he rockets through the air, rescuing falling brothers. I don't know if he'll be fast enough, and he's on limited power. He can't do it forever. None of them can.

Another shielded Titan fires rockets manually from another vessel. He hops off of it and falls to another, where he fires again like he's challenging them to try to hit him. But the number of Titans they're taking down is devastating.

"Increase thrusters to 100 percent," I command my suit.

My suit surges so hard that I strain to keep my body upright as I soar across the dunes and catch up to the stern engines of Scythe. Blood drains from my head. I breathe faster to help my heart compensate.

Overheat warnings flash in my shaky vision. Power lever drops a bar every two seconds.

Come on... Please make it.

A Skysprinter explodes midair to my right in a plume of fire, smoke, and shrapnel. Instinct makes me want to duck inside my suit, but I can't break course, or I won't reach my target.

Metal fragments plink as they rain over my husk. And then I see what nearly turns me inside out.

A ship with a gaping hole in the side banks along the distant mountains.

"Zoom in, visual."

My visor focuses the image of a winged Titan crawling along the ship, black spots

darkening his body.

Armor?

Anger I haven't felt in a long time roars to life inside me. I grit my teeth and bring Scythe back into view.

Alert: Overheat and shut down in five...four...

Almost there...

Three...two...

I try to make myself as aerodynamic as I can, folding my arms and legs tightly together. It helps me close in on Scythe until I've got a handhold within reach. Flying under the main engines, I slip between them, reach an arm up, and snag the aileron as my visor flashes and my suit cuts out.

The weight of my body and the dead suit threaten to break my grip. My visor switches off as my body steams in the wind.

I'm on my own now.

I lug myself up and study the radiant swirling light inside a nearby cylinder. Portal generator?

Suddenly, it makes sense how Scythe has been able to be everywhere all at once, how they showed up and took Myria and the others out of the fog, made it to battles all over the galaxy to capture Titans, swaying the war in the Solcrue's favor, and dropped in here without any word circulating among the Titans or Clover and all the scanners available to her on the BlazeStar.

Portals were never something I could find a lot of study material on. But I read everything I could when I was stuck in the mines.

I want to tell Armor, Commander Savage, anyone. But my suit is offline. Its mechanical assists are all I have to help me now.

There has to be a maintenance hatch close by if they have portal generators.

I climb around the unit to the hull of the ship, duck under an engine turbine shaft, and find an airlock.

It's engaged from the inside, but there is always an emergency backup on CSP ships.

As much as they kept tools for themselves that they didn't let anyone else have, just like Solcrue, they also had backups to get them out of situations, even though they presented vulnerabilities like the one I'm going to exploit now.

Bashing an elbow into the control panel, I find the solenoid that the power runs through to the door and rip it out. The hatch's shielding shuts down.

I'm going to have to be fast if I don't want to be an easy target for whatever patrol is in this area of the ship.

I get up and brace myself on the hull. They're going to hear me for sure.

Grabbing my rifle from my back, I steady it in front of me, watch it light up, and switch off the safety.

Then, I stomp a heel at the mechanical latch.

All those months of compiling bits of data and salvaged pages from textbooks on

CSP and Solcruean ships under a headlamp with the constant threat of a mine collapse is suddenly worth it.

Prying open the hatch, I peek inside with my rifle. I find no one in the immediate area, climb inside, and close the hatch.

What to wreck first...

I'm on a lower deck, below the cockpit. Guns will be up another level, but the munitions core that powers the rows of guns will be up two floors.

I've got to find a way out of the area I'm in so any soldiers coming for the infiltrator won't find me.

I have no doubt they've received the signal of hatch shielding offline.

I find an ascent shaft ladder behind an engine power turbine and fold my helmet back so I can switch to my goggles and hear worth a damn in the local area.

I could power down the ship, but then I'd die when it crashed.

With my suit offline, I don't like that plan.

And the portal generator is still on my mind. I'm certain there's a use for it.

Exiting into the maintenance room, I hear two men talking. "BlazeStar's lifting off. Erdox wants it buried."

"Cypherjets then?"

"That's what Lieth wants."

Uncle Lieth. My stomach turns, hearing his name again. Only people who know him personally can call him by his first name. To everyone else, he was Major Oethiaus. Growing rage steadies my hands and my shaking legs as I sneak out from the shelter of the ascent shaft.

I don't like shooting anyone in the back. But I'm desperate to save humanity . And right now, Titans are looking like the last source of it.

I fire at a familiar man and tag him in the back of the head. The second turns to me, surprise on his face.

"E-Esthi?"

My heart wrenches, but I squeeze the trigger again. I take him down with a shot to the leg, then walk up to him as he crumples. "You're a traitor."

"Trying to feed my family," he rasps.

"Your family died in the war twelve years ago, Arius. I'd love to go back in time and change a lot, but believing a lie is never something I'd want."

His face reddens. "I miss them so much. I'm just trying to survive."

"So am I. So are the Titans and the hundreds of women on their ship."

"Women?"

"Yes," I hiss. "You piece of shit."

His eyes scan the room as he braces his bleeding leg. "They said the Titans were corrupt, coming to kill us for vengeance after the war."

“Never thought you were that stupid,” I harshly whisper.

“ CSP took Myria, Kelion, Havlis, and Sima, among how many others? They took family from us and handed us over to the Solcrue! Not the Titans. Those Titans are still protecting humans, even after all the shit we put them through, all the pain...”

I can see the connection form in his mind the wider his eyes get. “I just did what they said to stay alive.”

I find a nearby rag and throw it at him. “Patch yourself up. You’re going to help me make up for this mess you’ve made.”

“What about Talryn?”

I look at the man I’ve killed. “He raped your sister as a kid. Fucking leave him. He’s no better than Solcrue, who’ve turned most of the women into anajas.”

“Practice mates?”

“Yes,” I snap, directing my rifle at the main door. “Get up. Shut down the munitions core. All of the rails. I want guns down. Not broken. Offline.”

“What if I can’t?”

I glare down at him. “I’ll drop you like Talryn just for being a moron.”

He grabs a nearby pipe system and lugs himself onto his good foot, keeping the other off of the ground. “I don’t really care to live now.”

“Then help for the future of those of us who want to.”

He nods once, hops over Talryn's body, and works on the control panel at the end of the room. I tuck myself in the shadows, waiting for whoever will come to inspect the system to find out why it shuts down.

Motors whir slower. Ammo belts grind to a halt. Seconds later, a man charges into the back in a CSP uniform. As the door slides shut behind him, I slip out.

The door shuts behind me. A gun goes off. I don't know who's died, but I hope Arius has found some courage for a change. If not, I'll need a backup plan for the other soldier.

"It truly is amazing, isn't it?" a familiar voice says in the distant doorway to the cockpit. "How loyal Titans are. It's one of their most predictable features."

The door opens to the munitions core. Arius steps out with a handgun and blood spray across his chest and face. A murderous gleam shines in his brown eyes.

My uncle looks back.

"Problem solved, sir," Arius remarks with a bitter tone. "Core should be back online in a matter of minutes. Spooling up now."

"Good." My uncle turns around as if nothing is wrong.

Arius scans the shadows, finds me hiding behind a pillar, walks by me, and drops into the portside gunners' bay, a hand behind his back filled with injectors. He glances up at me and jerks his nose toward the cockpit.

I close up my helmet, expecting a confrontation. But when I turn to walk up to the front, Uncle Lieth is standing in the fuselage, looking right at me.

“Thought I saw something in the shadows,” he says. “Welcome to Scythe, Gray .
This will be your final memory. Let’s make it a good one.”

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:02 am

A flaming mass slams into my chest with force, throwing me against the shut door of the munitions core.

I pick up my rifle, fire loosely at him, miss, and take out the copilot.

He glances back, sees the man down, turns, and charges at me. I push off the wall, knowing I have a chance at comparable force with the weight of the suit.

He rears back a fist with a blade, so I duck and crash into his middle. We tumble back to the floor. His knife skitters away as a soldier comes in from the starboard gunners' bay and fires at me, sending sparking flares of heat up my side toward my head.

Shit! Rolling onto my back, I frantically fire back at him.

Arius enters from the first bay and takes the soldier out with a headshot, then gets in a scuffle with another gunner from the starboard rail. They tumble off the deck and into the gunners' row.

Uncle Lieth punches me in the face, sending a pounding wave through my skull as it bangs around inside my helmet. I take a kick to the suit that launches me away from him.

Get up! I have to get up.

Myria would get up.

I blink hard and force my eyes open. I'm on limited oxygen with my suit down and

open my helmet to get my breath back.

My uncle's already on his feet, another foot swinging at my head. Crap! I throw myself to the floor and tumble away from him as the ship cants to its starboard side. I get my feet under me. Blood drips from my split lip.

"Turned on your people?" He says it with such malice that I think he genuinely believes he and all other traitorous CSP soldiers are superior to Titans, and I am the scourge on humanity for staying true. But he has it all backward.

I draw my handgun and fire three times at him. It hits a shield. I'm not surprised.

"Solcruean shielding," I snarl. "You are worst of all enemies."

He laughs, pauses, then laughs harder. "They are superior in space. They thrive while we suffer. I've merely worked out a deal so the best of us can have a future."

"We suffer because of them and because they take and trash and move on. Humans are expendable to them. Including you." I know because I've been on Solcruean vessels for a decade and seen the way they treat our kind. "Torture and rape is not a future I want for humanity."

"And you — You helped Solcrue pick the people they took. You sold your soul, selling us to them."

"How can you choose Titans over your own descendants?" he asks. "They're machines. Solcrue are flesh."

"How can you? I choose to stand with those who stand by me. You betrayed our people, our camp, our family."

This gets his attention.

“I have a bone to pick with you, and I’m planning to cut it out of your body myself, just so I can stab you with it again and again,” I confess in a weak moment. My plans are falling apart mostly because I didn’t really have anything but a goal, and I’m at the height of figuring it out as I go.

Uncle Lieth still doesn’t recognize me. It’s been over a decade since I saw him last. I’ve grown. He looks the same.

“Seems that you like machines more than you want to admit,” I say, drawing the zembi from my belt.

It’s the only weapon I have that can penetrate his shield.

I can’t go into a hand-to-hand battle with him and win, not even with all the training and the fueling anger I carry inside. The dead-weight suit is too heavy.

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t you know what they turned some of our kind into?”

“Wrecktanks.”

So he does know what Myria became. Arius mentioned Erdox when he spoke with Talrux. “Ran into Lenarro.”

My uncle stands frozen like the name doesn’t register.

“And Myria, what’s left of her.”

A cheek twitches.

I fling open the zembi blade and ignite it with a button on the handle. Then I pull my goggles onto my forehead and look my uncle in the eye. He's several paces out of reach but close enough that I can see his lips part in shock.

"What?" I taunt. "Didn't think I'd survive long enough to get vengeance for our camp, for your brother and my father, for Myria, and all the others whose lives you filled with the worst agony imaginable?"

"You're a Gray?"

"You were . Father was. Yrais would've been if you hadn't sold him out. Myria was a Creator. You had to know I'd follow in their steps as the last of our family, the one you betrayed for your hide that I'm going to puncture and let bleed out all over this mutated planet."

He shakes his head. "But you were so innocent, so quiet."

I smirk. "You should always worry more about those of us who don't often speak but just listen. We hear everything . We feel so much more because we have to bottle it inside. We see the play pieces on the board. And we are a force no one expects. That is the life of a true Gray."

He takes a step toward me. "You shouldn't be..."

"Here?" I yell, losing my temper. I have thought about this moment for over a decade and all the millions of ways I could end him. "I am here because of you! They turned my hero into a monster! She doesn't even recognize me anymore!"

Veins swell in my face with the fury behind my words. "You gave thousands of

families the same pain! You are the virus!” I spin the zempi into a ready position as I charge at him.

And I am the only remedy.

My uncle punches a button behind him, opening hatches in the sides of the vessel and creating a turbulent storm of air that pushes me around and makes reaching him nearly impossible. The magnets in my boots switch on, locking me in place through a backup battery.

I grab a support pillar and hold my ground as red alert lights glaze over the ship. My uncle watches me fight my way to him like he fully expects me to fail.

But he has no idea how strong the grip of vengeance can be. I strain for another step and another.

Metal clunks behind me. I look back.

A Titan boards. Storm gleams in dark blue on his chest. His eyes find mine. His body morphs into an array of spinning blades that calm the air.

Another Titan lands inside, dressed in a Starjumper’s suit. Karambit drops in with Menace, Mace, Diesel, Redline, Fury, and finally, the one I want to see more than anything.

Armor lands and folds his wings back. He moves to the front of the pack, finds me, and starts in my direction. “Esthielle—”

A CSP soldier swings a pulseblade in his direction.

For a moment, my heart catches in my throat.

But Armor is faster, disarming him and crushing him to the floor.

Aarmor gets up, adjusts his wings back into position, and keeps moving toward us.

Behind him, Titans pour into the gunners' rails.

Sounds of heavy hits and grunts fill the ship.

I look back at my uncle, whose eyes bear the wide realization that this is his end. His superiority was only an illusion created by the shields and barriers he kept around him.

Today, I have my own shield.

"It makes me sad," I tell my uncle.

"What?"

"That I have to kill you to save you."

He chuckles once, nervously.

I shrug. "If I don't, they will. Either way, this time, we win."

My uncle squints at me like he's got an idea of a way out.

I can't wait. Whatever is on his mind is a threat to the ones I protect now.

My heart races as I sprint toward him with all the energy I can muster. I push my legs hard to get to him before he grabs whatever he's reaching for. But it isn't him who holds the gun.

His pilot, a soldier with green hexagonal scales, lifts a large rifle that he aims over my uncle's shoulder. I dive like I remember Javelin doing, making myself as narrow as possible.

I will end you if it's the last thing I do.

The gun kicks, punching out a horrid blast as I drive the zempi into my uncle. The light makes me close my eyes. My ears and my skull ring from the percussion wave as I tumble onto my dying uncle in the cockpit.

"No!" I scream, looking back as the massive ball of green fire races toward Armor, who's pulling his wings in front of himself and his brothers.

The blast crashes into him and throws Armor into his brothers.

A vehemence I've never known boils up in me.

I scramble up from my uncle, yank the blade out of him, and slash at the Solcrue, who throws himself back and whips his gun toward me.

I clamber over the copilot's body and thrust my hot blade into him.

It slips into his shoulder with surprising ease.

The soldier cries out and drops the gun.

Anger makes me twist the handle.

He winces, convulses, and blacks out.

When I turn around, I see Menace look up from a body on the main deck. Olive blood

drips from his mouth. Another Solcrue in a CSP uniform lies at his feet. Karambit isn't far away. He lowers the body of a human CSP soldier. It slides off of his knife-shaped fingers to the floor.

“Armor?”

Diesel's connected to Armor's coal-dusted chest. “Hang on.”

Fury lugs the bodies out of the cockpit and takes the pilot's seat. “Redline, take out the trash?”

“Yes, Mom .” A red-hot unit collects the bodies of my uncle and the two pilots and throws them out of the open doors in a flash.

Once my uncle and the other bodies have fallen to the dunes, Fury slaps a button and closes the side hatches. Storm whirs to a stop and returns to a humanoid shape.

Armor gasps in the arms of Redline and Diesel and gets to his feet. “Esthi?”

As I approach him, he snatches me up.

“I thought we'd lost you forever,” he says.

“You got balls, Esthi,” Menace remarks. “Sefina is going to like having you around. She is a Sentinel. I hear you are a Gray.”

I nod and savor the feeling of Armor's arms around me. Armor and his Titans are my family now. Myria isn't herself. My uncle is dead like the rest of my family. They are all I have left.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

Armor kisses my forehead. "I'm sorry I yelled at you. I was not thinking straight."

"You were emotional."

"Yes. We came to get you. Commander Savage's orders." Metal hits the roof. Then again and again.

"I joined for the fun of it." Redline punches sideways and knocks out a Solcrue as they exit a nearby door. "Menace sent his payload to Marst and Vessna on returning Skysprinters. So a few of us were in the area."

Savage drops to the deck from an overhead ladder. Behind him, Turbo, Shifter, and Rebel drop inside.

"Esthi, Scythe is an impressive claim. We are honored to have you with us," Commander Savage says.

"BlazeStar is about to break free," Shifter reports. "Rock falling now."

Fury banks us toward the mountain. "Arius?"

"Ready," my old friend shouts from the munitions bay.

Guns come online, lighting up in the port and starboard rails, which Titans eagerly rush to.

Fury whoops. "Let's take out Venom squadron and see how they like EMPs!"

Rebel turns to me. "Arius needs medical attention. Are we helping him or leaving him?"

I motion for him to help Arius. “He’s from my camp. Here under false pretenses.”

Arius enters the main cabin, tears the badge from his chest, throws it down, and crushes it under the heel of his good foot.

“Status of the Cerebus drop?” Savage asks.

Menace points out the window at a falling ship, and we all look. “ Marst is going to eat shit in ten...nine...”

As Marst plummets to Ellipsis, Fury reports, “ Vessna is powering down in the Iridithatium belt!”

Menace grins, wipes blood from his face, and says, “Two out of three ain’t bad.

I didn’t send my pack to Corenge because I didn’t think they’d win.

But Vessna should succumb to Ellipsis’ gravity soon and give any survivors a chance on Ellipsis the way we had.

Then we’ll just have Corenge’s ship to deal with during lift-off. ”

“We better get Mother free soon,” Fury calls back with urgency. “Another Solcruean mothership just dropped into orbit. It’s circling toward us now.”

Savage swears and paces. “They’re early. Okay, I want everyone on guard for the BlazeStar. Nothing gets through our shield. Pull in the females on pilot duty. We need to tighten the perimeter and protect our most important asses.”

“ Asses , sir?” Mace asks.

Savage waves a dismissive hand. “Assets! Assets . Sorry. Leah...”

The mated Titans all look similarly stressed, a level above Shifter, Turbo, Mace, and Karambit.

I close up my zembi and attach it to my belt. “I think I have an idea of how to get the BlazeStar out of here in one piece. I need whoever is best with portal tech to come with me.”

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:02 am

My mate stuns me more every hour with some new invention or way to work with what we have, transforming it into something new. I am thankful to her for accepting me and my faults and the fact that she still lets me protect her even though I couldn't stop her uncle from hurting her.

"I'm alright, Armor, really. Please stop apologizing," she says as she swipes through schematics on her tablet.

I keep her in the shield of my wings as we hike over the BlazeStar's hull, with my Brothers assigned to stay with the ship. They are eager for some action and ready to get off-world.

"I still don't like dropping the shields," I tell her.

"It's necessary to integrate them. Power has to be off, or we risk throwing ourselves into an unpredictable wormhole from hell to be lost forever."

Is that all? "Sounds risky."

She shrugs as she studies a diagram. "Life is a risk. It is not permanent. We do not have the luxury of hiding behind layers of safety nets. Only the very rich and powerful can afford to hide like cowards, usually behind a lot of people who will be sacrificed first. But no one escapes death. Not even them. It will come for all of us, eventually. I'd just rather die fighting than hiding. "

Most of the Terran units like Cobra, Chaos, and Banshee, along with ship maintenance units like Turbo, Bomber, and Turbine, help mount the heavy portal

units we've stolen from Scythe onto the BlazeStar.

"You're sure this will work?" Chaos asks as he peels apart into three naked Titans.

Esthi covers her eyes with a hand and extends a transformer to him. "Make sure you position it to step up the voltage. BlazeStar is about four times Scythe's size."

Chaos One takes a unit, along with each of his brothers, and they leave to set up the portal generators that other Brothers have just bolted to the hull.

A Skysprinter races by, shooting at us. I adjust my wings as Esthi huddles inside my shield. The bullets melt against my shield, but a few tag the hull and ricochet off.

Esthi winces as she monitors the progress on a tablet. Her modified designs come online. She walks along the roof toward the nose to check the bow's generator. Then, she hustles toward the stern.

I pick her up, run a few steps, and glide us to the back. "Just tell me when you need a lift."

She smiles when I set her down. "Still can't get used to that."

"We're low on time."

"I know." She flips something open and taps on a screen in the stern generator.

"We're synced. Can you confirm with the teams, please?"

The last unit hums to life and swells with storming blue light.

ArmorLocal: BlazeStar hull crew, please report parameters of portal generators.

Chaos 1Armor: Alpha, operational. Steady at 11,500 watts. Portal storm at 198wh units.

Chaos Two and Three, Cobra, Banshee, Turbo, Turbine, Bomber, and the other Titans on our crews report back with similar numbers. I relay them to Esthi.

She confirms what she's seeing on her screen. "Looks good. Call everyone in."

AmpArmor, Clover: Portal generators ready.

AmpArmor: Recalling ships for docking now.

CloverArmor: Portal warm-up sequence initiated.

"We don't want to be on the hull when this thing ignites," Esthi says. "Anyone above it will get sliced in two."

I forward her message to the local Titans so everyone knows.

As we hustle back to the doors, CSP, Titan, and Solcruean ships, including our acquired Scythe, turn and head for Mother, our BlazeStar. Several Titan ships hover out of the hangars on guard, waiting for a Skysprinter or other enemy ship to try to enter.

They will. It's just a matter of time.

I pick up Esthi and jump down an open hatch, dropping us inside the ship.

Chaos Three closes the hatch behind us, finds Chaos Two, and merges with him. "I'm going to find One. Nice to meet you, Esthi."

She only half-glances at him and returns his wave as I put her feet down. “He’s nice.”

“Counter to his name, isn’t he?”

“Just wish he could wear some pants.” She waggles her brows. “But...whatever. With the Trio of Terror, I can see why they named him Chaos.”

“Technically, it’s the Squad of Terror.” A passing Titan pats his digibadge, which reads Terror . He chuckles as he jogs after Chaos Two and Three.

Knurl slows as he runs in the opposite direction.

His textured body glints under the hallway lights.

“Have you seen Scant? He’s the best at climbing in the maintenance shafts to fix things.

I can’t because my husk gets me all bound up.

We tried to get Rhee to do it, Diesel’s mate, but even working on engines all day, she’s not strong enough to free some of the rusted parts and get the hyperdrive’s final engine online. ”

“Not sure. Has no one done a recovery mission?” Esthi asks. “Many fell from EMPs.”

“It isn’t exactly easy with everyone shooting at us,” I offer, checking the logs of recent missions. “But we do need to run a recovery mission. I’m not seeing one on file.”

ZipZap joins us, motioning to a hangar where ships are hovering in to dock.

“Incoming!”

“Shields lifting in five,” Clover calls over the ship-wide coms. She speaks verbally more now than she used to with just us Titans on board. I wager it’s because of all the women who are with us now.

A few loose shots pelt the hull near the hangar.

Esthi and I run toward the sound with Knurl and ZipZap.

Titan ships and those we’ve acquired land in the hangars.

Floor locks fold up and engage. I know Mother, the BlazeStar’s AI, won’t let anyone inside she doesn’t approve of.

But that doesn’t mean some won’t set themselves on a crash course or target us.

And by the buzz of ships outside the open hangar doors, we need all the defensive firepower we can get.

“We pulled out who we could,” ZipZap adds. “But Scant was piloting alone. After the EMPs went off, we didn’t send in others because of the threat of losing Recovery Mission Brothers, too.”

Green light flashes pair with warping pulses just inside an open hangar door in the hull.

The gunner, a woman in a StarJumper’s suit, has her helmet open.

Her long dark hair is pulled back in a tight braid, exposing her pale green skin, and her eyes trained along a modified rifle.

“Eat shit! Since you love coilguns so much, I built this one just for you, fuckers! For my mother! For my father! For all the Titans! Today, you meet your maker!”

She’s a terrifying sight to behold. When Amp requests confirmation Cara is secure behind the shield, several of us Brothers quickly confirm. I make a mental note not to piss her off.

In the next bay, Leah sets up another gun. Then, another female in the hangar beyond hers. Redline kisses the third female, hugs her quickly, and sprints deeper into the ship.

She must be Aniah.

“Keanna!” Fury tosses a rack of ammo to a woman in furs with beads in her hair, who catches it and loads it into another woman’s gun. “Rip them a new one, Babe!”

“Start a wildfire, my sexy Torch!” Keanna throws him a kiss, which Fury bites out of the air.

Every bay fills until the entire hangar is armed to the teeth with pissed-off mates of Brothers here and in the rows of hangars on levels overhead.

“Light ‘em up, ladies!” Leah shouts, a headset com trapped to the side of her head. She grabs her gun with two hands and launches a blue flare.

“What’s that?” Esthi asks, gripping my wrist.

A small drone with one wheel, a camera, and a single grabber arm zips up beside Leah, lugging a can of ammo up beside her, which he locks to the floor.

“Thanks, CB!” Leah calls out.

He beeps and whizzes off to haul another can of ammo to Cara. “Big family. Protect! Big family! Titan. Human. Family! One family!”

The women fire through the shimmering shield at Skysprinters who are throwing a barrage of rockets at Mother .

Esthi drags the hand down her face, messing up a few loose strands of hair. “Seems like they’re good here, so let’s focus on retrieving your Brothers.”

“Agreed.”

Esthi looks tired but doesn’t complain. “ I need to. If I’d been faster to catch up with Scythe, I might’ve prevented...”

“Stop,” I interrupt her as I escort her out of the hangar. “Think forward, not backward. What’s next?”

“I swear I heard you were all brought here on a LightBlade with grav beams.”

Fury interjects as he slings a rifle on his back. “In hibernation cells. We’ve never tried Solcrue grav beams on bare Titans. But Poppy’s the one to talk to.”

Esthi looks at me. “Where is she?”

ArmorPoppy: Request location.

PoppyArmor: Two decks below you, private hangar Five Charlie.

I encourage Esthi into an adjacent hallway.

But as we head for Poppy’s location, my fear of losing Esthi in all of this grows

again.

Redline gave Aniah affection in front of other Brothers, and it makes me want to do the same with my mate.

Finding a quiet corner on our way to Poppy, I grab Esthi, pick her up by the hips, and crush her against the wall, bonding my mouth to hers.

She moans with lust. “Right now?”

Commander Savage interrupts my thoughts and my view of Esthi with a request for a private meeting.

I sigh and nip at her neck. “We don’t have time, but stars, I want you. Just promise me you’ll be safe. I’ve got to help Commander Savage.”

She takes my jaw in her hands, kisses me deeper, and digs her heels into my ass, crushing my rigid length against her hot core. “Watch your back. I want you inside me the moment this is over.”

“You’re not the only one.” I kiss her once more, reluctantly set her feet down, and lead her inside the correct hangar.

Poppy hikes out of a repaired LightBlade on rudimentary legs.

I’m in such shock that she has become mobile instead of being mounted to her pilot’s seat like all female Titans that I lose my grip on Esthi before I’m ready.

“Poppy!” Esthi hurries to her. “No one’s picked up the Titans after the EMP. I have an idea, but we need your ship.”

Poppy's red eyes find me from across the hangar. She seems to sort whatever was running through her head and motions Esthi inside.

AstorPoppy: Please keep my mate safe.

Poppy salutes me with a fist over her ultramotor.

PoppyAstor: With my life.

I hustle out of the hangar, stealing one last glance at Esthi and Poppy in her ship before exiting to meet up with Savage and other gathered Titans in a command center.

Schematics of Corenge are lit up on the screens around us and glow above the holo table in the center of the room.

Karambit punches me in the shoulder as he enters. "Got a little hot in the hallway. I'm a bit jealous."

"Just focus, please. Or I'll be the one having to save your ass."

He casually salutes me as he inspects the schematic.

"I've brought you all here for a private mission," Commander Savage says. "Please lock your network."

I switch on my com lock so no one else can hear what's said or what I think.

"Mothership Corenge has been supplying a lot of military support to Vessna and Marst. Amp just relayed that the captain is Jorden Opfner, the Solcrue officer that Cara once served."

“Amp’s mate, Cara, the half-breed?” Firebolt asks.

“The one throwing bullets in the hangars?” Mace adds.

Commander Savage nods. “This is Opfner’s vessel. His soldiers fill this machine of death and destruction. He hurt Creator Besha’s daughter. He’s killed many of our Brothers, Titan and human.”

“I remember,” Redline remarks. “Please tell me we’re taking him out.”

“Not just him,” Sefina says as she and Menace step forward. She taps a spot in the center of the ship. “This is the fuel depot, where all the engines get their power from. I’ve been on Corenge before.”

Menace bares his teeth like he’s remembering something he doesn’t like. “Might be a suicide mission. We’re not going to have more than a couple of minutes. But we’re going dark, taking the most shielded and the deadliest of us to end Opfner and his soldiers for good.”

Commander Savage motions through a doorway. “Any who will comply, please form up in Kelta’s hangar.”

Every one of us files out the door. It’s not easy to leave Esthi behind, to know that I’m leaving the ship to go far away. But my Brothers jumped in to help save her. I’m going to do the same for them.

Esthi’s alive, and I carry the taste of her on my lips. That’s all that matters. If I have to greet the Black Death, I am ready.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:02 am

I'm officially lost, trying to find the boundary between what feels risky and deadly. I can't tell what's a good idea and what's a deadly idea.

Poppy powers up the ship as everyone else docks inside the BlazeStar for the portal jump. We're going to rescue Titans just like she did during the jailbreak. I don't want to leave them behind, including my sister, if she's out there.

I climb out onto the hull as she races toward the stretch of downed Titans from EMPs. Opening the gravity beam array for docking to ships, I repair the charred regulator and replace the burnt wiring to the power cell. When I'm done, I close up the housing and hike back into the ship.

"You sure you can pick them all up with this tiny ship?" I ask.

"I brought a couple hundred Titans here," Poppy says. "We crash-landed, but that's beside the point. I can pick up a fraction of that with ease, no doubt. Your repairs going to hold?"

"Hope so."

"Hope?"

"Yeah."

"You're such a human," she mutters.

"Last I checked."

“Armor, huh?” Poppy flies out across the dunes toward the crash sites and the EMP zone.

I shrug. “He’s the one thing I’ve always wanted in my life but never felt like I had.”

“A Titan?”

“Someone who wants to keep me safe instead of use and abuse me.” I clutch my harness as Poppy guides us through the low hills for the first pick-up. “I dug him out of the sand, and he shielded me from CSP and Solcruean ground forces.”

“Every Titan should do that for you.”

I chuckle. “Doubt every one of them wants to mate with me afterwards. But it took time to get him upright on his own.”

She switches on the gravity beam, tunes it to metals, and skirts the desert floor, kicking up dust. “Probably true. We believe in one mate. When we find them, we know.”

I monitor the progress on her screen. “Do you have one?”

“Had someone of interest, once.” She’s pulled up a list of all the missing Titans and, as they’re collected, they blink twice then slide to a Recovered list.

“What happened?”

The Titans dangle limply from the vessel’s belly, held on by only threads of light. Poppy lifts us up and scans again. “Stayed behind to guard a critical vault on Earth.”

“Looks like it’s holding,” I say.

Earth, huh? Not Earth Minor?

“For now.”

“What’s in the vault?”

She shrugs. “No idea. But I respect him more for taking on such a solitary responsibility.”

Her radiant fingers fly over her screens as she adjusts our payload, tightens them against the belly, and taps the Charge button. Titans arch and begin to wake beneath us.

CyberPilots are unique in a lot of ways I have yet to fully discover, but I definitely respect her skills.

PoppyLocal: One more pickup to do, boys. Stay still but ready.

Her communication with them logs on a dash screen even though I can’t hear anything over my suit. She scans ahead of us, adjusts our flight path, and descends toward the EMP field where seventeen Titans have fallen.

Before we can pick up the first, a pitch-black, vicious-looking ship darts in front of us.

“Poison Arrow!” Poppy swears. “She has been a thorn in our side for weeks! I knew they were sending in extra ships! I just didn’t expect a Poison Arrow, a fourth mothership, Scythe, and Venom all at once!”

“She?”

Poppy pulls up an image on the dash. “Thruster relayed this. She collected him with her ship’s magnetic belly and took him to a mothership in the sky for interrogation. She also, oddly, let them get away.”

My stomach knots as I study the picture. “What’s her name?”

“They call her KillStar.”

The Poison Arrow dips low along the ground and picks up the remaining Titans, the last few we were going to collect. She flies up from the sandy dirt, Titans lying flat under her ship.

Poppy’s furious. “I can’t fucking shoot her down because my Brothers are there!”

Poppy banks hard after Killstar as I strain to figure out what to do about my new situation.

“What?” Poppy practically screams at me.

I get on coms. There has to be a way to get through to my sister.

“Maybe you don’t remember, but I do. Soiridium is ferrous.

We had to use special tools to chip it out of the mountain.

The drills were diamond tipped but had to be made of hydramidium, because it was hard enough to punch through the rock, strong enough to take the heat, but also not ferrous.

“Dad ran the drill and trained me at eight. Mom worked in the dreg piles because of her eye for Creshnius, the fuel cell material Solcrue prefer.”

Come on, Myria. You have to remember. Please remember.

“We were born to work the mines, not to save the universe from itself. We just knew that loyalty was the only way to survive, and we did something about it.”

Poppy cocks her head. “What the fuck are you doing?”

The Poison Arrow straightens out and hums in front of us like it’s on autopilot.

I ignore Poppy’s complaints. “I was nine when they put me in training. Cybernetics. Ship design. Engines. Weapons. Shadow soldier tactics for staying hidden, infiltration, recon, and manipulation.”

Poppy shuts off the coms. “Esthi! You’re broadcasting that!”

I look over at her. “I know. There’s no one left from my camp. If the Solcrue hear, it won’t matter. There’s little left they can take from me.”

Her brows knit for a barely visible moment. She slowly sits back.

I switch the coms back on. “No matter who I pretend to be, who I have to kill, I remember why I was made into who I am . Because without that anchor, I am lost to the stars. I have always been with you, with our family, our camp, our species, and our Creations. ”

Poison Arrow hits the brakes and slides back alongside us.

“Shit,” Poppy mutters.

I look over at my sister . Her eyes are a radiant blue now—inhuman, like most of her body.

“I have always loved you,” I add. “I never forgot you. I never will, no matter what you do today or tomorrow. I know this life hasn’t been easy. But it can still be just, right, and filled with purpose even if it is short and painful.”

Poppy gasps quietly beside me.

“Lenarro told me,” I say to my sister. “He’s still here, somewhere. I’m sorry I didn’t get to you sooner. I tried.” Tears form in my eyes. “Stars, I tried.”

“Is Joey still with him?”

I choke up, hearing Myria’s voice even if it is flat and apathetic. “Yes.”

“Then humanity is still in trouble.” She leans forward and engages something. Myria climbs out of her ship, all glinting metal and radiant synthetics and dark armor.

Even Poppy gasps at the sight of her. “Like an obsidian BloodCypher. Fuck me. Solcrue are building those?”

Myria stalks down the ship, pries free a unit that looks like a tracker and throws it overboard. “This isn’t over. I will see you soon.”

She drops back into her ship and closes the hatch, then gives me a hand signal.

“Devil’s horns!” Poppy growls.

I smile. “That’s my big sister. She’s on our side.”

“No, she’s not!” Poppy warms her guns. “She captures and tortures Titans!”

I give Myria the hang-loose gesture like I always did as a kid. She slides closer,

almost smiles at me, then moves her ship overhead so we can see the Titans she's collected.

“Last load. But I will scan for more.” Myria switches off the magnet, and the Titans fall to our roof. “I will find you, Esthielle. Count on it.”

Her engines roar and blast with green light. Myria darts off at twice our speed.

Poppy frantically ignites grav beams to hold the dark Titans in place on our hull, then banks us back toward the BlazeStar. “I do not know what the fuck that was. You will have to explain your strange behavior sometime.”

“All you need to know is that KillStar is not out to destroy us.”

“She was.”

“So was Evo. But you have accepted him back into your ranks.”

Her jaw cocks to one side. “Fair enough. For now.”

Poppy gets on coms as she guides us inside the BlazeStar's opening hangar. “Incoming injured Titans in need of immediate medical care.”

Titans and women rush over the moment we land, directing hovering gurneys to us.

Clamps secure the ship for transport as Poppy, and I climb out. When I get down, I look for Armor but can't find him anywhere.

I stop a Titan who is helping unload his dark Brothers. “Where is Armor?”

The Titan's eyes flash. “Left the ship. They went dark.” The kind-faced Titan rests a

hand on my shoulder. His digibadge reads Coil. “The units that went dark all at once likely did so because they’re on a stealth mission. You cannot reach them. I’m sorry.”

“Damn it.” If Armor’s gone, I’m going to need my own back online. “Where can I charge my suit?”

Coil directs me to a wall with cells, some filled with suits, others empty. “Step in backward. You can request to be released or stay for the charge.”

“Thanks.” I rush across the hangar floor and climb into the cell. Hoses and cables clip into the suit, bringing it back online and raising the power level.

Amp comes over my helmet com, not just in sound, but in a visual. He crosses his arms, which are decked in radiant green tracework. “Hello, Esthi. So your sister is KillStar? Poppy just reported in.”

I sigh. “I didn’t know until we encountered her. She’s gone now. Returned the last of our Brothers. I think she went after Joey and Lenarro.”

He makes a noise I can’t decipher. “Ours?”

I realize my slip. “I don’t claim ownership, just that you all feel like Brothers to me. I miss my blood brother. But I can’t bring him back. I can only protect the family I have left. Right now, that’s all of you.”

Amp looks away. “Joey and Lenarro, huh?”

“A-firm. Joey has blood trackers. General Erdox is apparently his father. I don’t think Leah knows that. Erdox held Leah’s life over Lenarro’s head. It’s why he’s stuck guarding Joey. But I think he’s on our side. Sounded like he was leaving to fuck some shit up.”

Amp nods and looks behind him. “Your mate, Armor, is with Commander Savage. I am aware of the mission. I will let you know the end result.”

“Good or bad?” I ask.

“Whatever the outcome, yes. You are welcome to stay with us if this is their final mission. Let’s hope not. Please ensure you’re locked in. Amp, out.” The com feed closes.

Alerts fill my vision and the monitor inside the regeneration pod.

Portal Jump in 0:30. Short Range - Operational. Long Range – Disabled. Please secure yourselves and loose items.

I grab the handles inside the chamber and close my eyes. Please, let this work. Please don’t tear apart the ship.

Leaving Armor behind doesn’t give me good vibes. We need them with us, but there’s nothing I can do. I have to focus on what I am capable of.

A flash of blue glazes the back of my eyelids as the ship jolts. A ripple of cold air passes through me.

After a second to catch my breath, I look up and see the navigation in my suit.

Navigation... Location ID - Orbit: Ellipsis.

We made it?

My suit is quickly back to 100 percent, so I step out and make my way toward the cockpit. I want to be in on the action, find out where we’re at and what I can help

with, when I encounter a squad of Titans in StarJumper suits heading into a nearby hangar.

“What’s going on?” I ask over helmet coms.

“Portal’s not responding to pings for startup,” Chaos says. “Not this one, the main one. They’ve disabled it or something. Sounds like it has taken fire.”

I throw my hands in the air. “Oh, come on, universe! This is bullshit!”

After a calming growl, I turn and sprint to catch up with the squad as another team merges with them.

“Esthi, you’re joining us?” Chaos asks.

“Sounds like I better.”

The Titan behind him nods, and I realize the Trio of Terror has separated and put on individual Starjumper suits. “Would be helpful.”

“Trio of Terror coming out to play?” I tease.

The third Chaos grins. “So good to stretch my legs again. All six of them.”

“Be careful!” Celeste calls after them . She waves at me. “All of you!”

Leah walks up to her. “Where are they going?”

“To fix the portal. Clover says it isn’t responding.”

“We fly, fight, and survive together,” the Titans say simultaneously.

Or die. I draw in a deep breath and take the tether one of them hands me. “I’m going to want some tools, too.”

Turbo motions me to a nearby storage cabinet. “I think we’ve got what you need over here.”

When he opens it, exposing racks and bins filled with parts and tools, I punch the air in joy. I definitely want to make it back to the BlazeStar. This ship is amazing. But I’ve got to get it somewhere safe first.

I grab what I need and point to additional items. “Bring those, if you can. We need to make this happen in one go, not multiple trips.”

Bomber reaches over Turbo’s head and collects a bag with wiring and circuitry. “I like your thinking.”

When the Titans are loaded up and we’re at the edge of the hangar’s platform, Chaos forms up on either side of me. The BlazeStar rotates until we’re a short jump from the portal’s framing.

I stare out at empty space, my stomach flipping. They can’t be serious.

“Together.” Chaos on my right offers me a hand. I take it as the Chaos on my left offers me one too. We form a chain. “On three.”

Fuck, fuck. Fuck! I’m not ready.

Deep breath, Esthielle. You can do this. Myria’s voice echoes in my memories.

Please find me again, Myria. Please stay alive, and I’ll do the same for you.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:02 am

I don't like leaving Esthi behind, but she will be safe on the BlazeStar. Kelta gets word of Poppy's arrival, reassuring me that Esthi's made it back. Savage pilots with Kelta. She and Sefina managed to modify a ghostcloak for Menace's BoltBurner.

We are the shielded Titans and the most animalistic of the Brothers. We cannot win in an outright battle, but we can take a stealth ship, sneak onto Corenge, and rip out its heart.

Sefina, Menace's mate, is dressed in a StarJumper's suit and moves around in it like she's done it a thousand times. "Through the ion trails under the belly. If they're going to catch us, that's the last place they'll be watching."

"That's dangerous," Kelta counters. "But I like it." She shuts down thrusters as we approach Corenge's black hull. Green lights gleam along the perimeter of each rounded layer of the vessel. Even as we approach, a few more Skysprinters and other fighters depart the far hangars.

We drift in silence until we're through the gap in the shield by the engines. It's the only way to avoid setting off an alert. The heat of the thrusters sends red alerts flashing over the screens.

I shift nervously between my feet.

"It's okay, guys. We'll chill in just a second." Kelta kicks the engines on as we cruise under the ship's belly. Then she switches them off again. "Bump thrust will get us what we want without getting caught."

Beside me, Thruster's engines light up for a second, and I know exactly what he's thinking about.

"Kelta, don't talk like that. I'll lose my head."

"You better, later ." She winks back at him. "Just make sure I get it back in one piece."

Thruster leans around her seat and kisses her as she sets us down, making me wish I'd had a chance to see Esthi one more time before we left.

I replay a memory of her skin against mine and let it burn in my ultramotor until I can't stand the idea of being away from her. I have to get back to her in one piece, too.

Fury readies his rifle in the back. We're all dressed in Starjumper suits and form our squads behind Sefina.

Commander Savage joins us, leaving Kelta alone on the ship. She's the only one in a simple armored spacesuit without thrusters or weapons.

"You leave if I tell you to." Thruster points at her.

Kelta doesn't respond, just watches us leave through the airlock Firebolt's fired. I'm the biggest Titan here, so it's up to me to open the door.

I kick in the mechanical release, grab the door handles and pull. It slides open, letting out the scent of gilkyworm cakes and hot oil. I hold it open while our three squads enter. Fury is first with Redline, Javelin, and Whip. They're fastest and scan the area, rifles radiant and ready.

“Clear,” Redline whispers.

Savage leads his team in next. Menace stays close to Sefina, his mate, while Shifter and Thruster bring up the rear. My squad is last with Mace, Karambit, and Firebolt. When they’re inside, I close the door, and Kelta closes her airlock.

We enter the ship in a lower maintenance area.

Commander Savage glances back at us. “Two minutes and counting. Mark.”

I start a timer in the corner of my vision. On average, it takes Solcrue about three minutes to detect a breach, track it down, and get crews to the location. We’re narrowing that window to be extra cautious.

Sefina leads us through the dark hallways of Corenge .

Mace reaches out into the shadows and swipes a blade through someone’s neck without a sound. He gets back on track, a line of blood across the chest of his armor and a smile gleaming inside his suit.

Redline dashes down a hall and is back with us before we’ve passed the opening. The blade in his right hand drips.

We continue toward the engine room, the speed units taking out every Solcrue who might see us but are out of reach for the stealth units like Mace, Karambit, Savage, and Menace.

Sefina leads us around a jog in the hallways, rifle up and ready. Menace mentioned she used to work for a bounty hunter. Watching her now, I believe it.

Holding her rifle in one hand, she signals us with the other that there are two

combatants on an upper level, three on a lower, and six in the middle.

I move to the front with Whip, Redline, Javelin, and Firebolt.

“Unlock coms,” Commander Savage says.

I unlock my communications channel.

Commander SavageLocal: Claim your targets. Armor, guard Shifter and Sefina. The rest of us will clean up.

Time: 1:26 remaining.

Whip takes the top floor. Redline takes the bottom floor. Firebolt and Javeline claim three combatants ahead of us. As they charge out of the doorway, I curl a wing around Sefina and another around Shifter, who’s carrying Bomber’s most reaction creation.

We hurry out across the room as Savage, Menace, Mace, and Karambit confront the Solcrue entering from the soldiers’ quarters across the room. The moment we’re out in the open and seen, I light up my radiant shield.

Whip is a blur above us as he takes one Solcrue down with a blade and chases the other. Redline is similarly difficult to track; he’s so fast.

Electric arcs lash out from Firebolt, making enemy soldiers arch and topple. Javelin launches his body through the air from one landing to another, where he crashes into two enemy soldiers.

I take a hit to my left wing.

ArmorLocal: Attack, my eight o'clock!

Savage snarls somewhere behind us and to the left. Something tears.

SavageLocal: Resolved.

I glance back to see him spit something out of his mouth. Blood drains from his lips. His shoulders heave with his heavy panting. There's a feral look in his eyes, and yet he looks more satisfied than I've ever seen.

We all want this. We've all lost Brothers and Sisters to Corenge battles.

Sefina motions to a system of pipes. "Fuels. Set it here."

Shifter walks to the maze, fractures into millions of little bars that fold in on themselves in rippling waves, then slips through the pipes with the bomb until I can't see him any longer.

I take another hit, this time over a wing mount. Pain flares in my shoulder so strongly I curl forward.

ArmorShifter: We need to go!

ShifterLocal: Explosive Timer – 1:01 remaining.

Shifter emerges like a fragmented liquid that rebuilds one foot, then another, and slowly reforms into an upright Titan again. He's matched the timers.

Timer 2: 1:00 remaining.

Timer 2: 0:59 remaining.

Commander SavageLocal: Escape route blocked.

Thruster rockets overhead, smashing through incoming squads as bullets rain down on us. I hunker around Sefina and Shifter while I scan the ship for nearby exits. “Hangars?”

She motions to a narrow passageway. “On other ships, we’d take the servants’ passageways to escape.

Thruster knocks down the Solcrue that fire down on us as we cross the catwalks to the passageway.

“Sefi!” Menace rejoins us and picks her up, clutching her to his chest. “Hang on. We have to run!”

Savage bounds on four limbs beside us like Menace. Whip and Redline are first through. Javelin is next.

I check behind us as we run. It’s my job to be between my charges and the incoming fire.

I am the bullet sponge. Fury swings Mace one more time, sending him tumbling down a filled catwalk.

Mace’s body produces spikes and shatters his Starjumper’s suit, save for his rocket boots. But he clears two full squads.

“Come on!” I shout.

Mace gets up and hurries after us. Fury’s augmented shield takes hits between his Torching bursts that wipe out bullets and bodies. Thruster roars in and sets down, his

shield flickering out.

“I’m low on power.” Thruster rushes ahead of me with Fury so that I’m at the back, Shifter just ahead.

When we enter the hangar, I find Karambit clawing his way up the wall to a security system in the ceiling that’s preventing the hangar from opening.

ThrusterLocal: Kelta on approach. We’re going to have to run for it.

A squad of Solcrue bursts into the hangar, sees Karambit and fires.

I leave Shifter vulnerable to leap up and sling my wings up in a shield.

I take three hits, but Karambit takes one too.

He arches and falls, scraping his claws erratically as the hangar door opens and a sealscreen shimmer becomes visible.

Commander SavageLocal: Everyone out now!

Fury fires back at the Solcrue as Javelin picks up Karambit and darts out of the hangar into space.

Redline smashes into Shifter, Whip into Firebolt, and Fury into Mace.

Menace and Savage guard Sefina as they make the jump.

Thruster rockets out. I am last. I don’t get up as much speed as them, but I don’t need it.

I have mass, and I need to be the shield behind them.

The moment my feet leave the deck and air pressure behind, I open my wings.

Savage's squad lands on Kelta's ship first. Fury's crew is second. Mine only half makes it. Mace lands with Firebolt, but Javelin struggles to hang onto Karambit's failing body. I land, grab Karambit's dangling leg, find a handhold, and lay my wings over my Titan Brothers and Sefina.

ArmorKelta: Locked in. Go!

Timer 2: 0:12 remaining.

Kelta's engines kick hard, straining my grip as we race away from Corenge .

Please work.

Timer 2: 0:10 remaining.

My Brothers watch behind us as Kelta races us with redlined thrusters.

KeltaLocal: We're not going to make it out of the blast range. I need more power!

Thruster slides back on the ship and opens ports on his body.

ThrusterLocal: Firebolt, hit me. Don't ask, just do it, now!

Firebolt glances at me. He'll destroy Thruster. We all know it.

ThrusterLocal: Kelta, I love you.

Firebolt releases a surge that Thruster's body takes in like he's practiced some sort of insane new form of torture. Thruster seizes. His engines brighten so much I fear he'll explode.

Firebolt strains to pull back, but he's always had trouble with restraint. There's a baseline discharge that he has to send out before his system will shut off.

I cannot stop him or help either of them. All we can do is watch Thruster sacrifice himself for us.

Corenge pops with light behind us. It fractures in two as the fuel systems detonate. The bright green blast ring surges out, heading for us.

ArmorThruster: We're going to make it. Shut down, Brother. I will catch you.

Thruster's engines dim and wink out. His grip slips, and he begins to drift behind us. I catch his wrist and draw his body under the shield of mine.

KeltaLocal: Why is Thruster not responding?

Commander Savage looks down at the hull we're hunkered against as she flies us out of range.

KeltaLocal: Someone respond!

FuryLocal: Get us to the BlazeStar as fast as you can.

KeltaLocal:...

She opens the channel, then doesn't speak.

ArmorKelta: I have Thruster. He has overheated. Still registering a ping. I don't know how long he'll hold.

Kelta snuffles.

KeltaLocal: Understood. Hang on. We're entering space with the last mothership, and she's a beast of her own kind.

Commander SavageLocal: Seen it before?

KeltaLocal: Unfortunately.

The silhouette of the vessel that I glimpse behind the BlazeStar, which thankfully sits near the portal, makes my core stutter.

Fighters spew from the sides in the hundreds.

MaceLocal: Fucking hell.

KeltaLocal: Someone, kick the damned regulator off this ship! I'm overtorquing this bitch, or we're not going to make it to the BlazeStar before they do!

Fury hikes across the hull to the torque regulator on the engines and rips it free.

Kelta flies faster, but the ride soon becomes bumpy and rattling.

MaceLocal: Why isn't the portal opening? Why aren't they through?

Commander SavageLocal: Clover says the portal won't open.

My ultromotor stalls for a beat. A terrible sinking feeling grips me.

I know where my beautiful mate is, and it's the most vulnerable place to be in this battle.

There's no one to save us now. We're at the mercy of the Boltburner's engines.

Commander SavageLocal: I want all of you on fighters the moment we're back on board. Protect the portal and Mother. Do not let the enemy through.

All of my Brothers click back except Thruster and Karambit.

My insides twist with fresh guilt and anger.

Commander SavageArmor: Do you comply?

I look down at my darkened Brothers and swear to them that they will be the last I permit to sacrifice themselves on my watch.

ArmorCommander Savage: I comply.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:02 am

The portal that brought the Titans to Ellipsis from Hyperion is a massive ring of metal and engines that automatically maintains its position. The only system wired in to be accessed remotely is navigation. No one can hack it or move it without disassembling it or towing it.

Sometimes, old ways are the best for securing things. Unfortunately, my navigation tech skills on portals are non-existent. All I know is theory and history taught to me by my instructors.

I've tethered myself to the edge of the portal's frame, where the circuitry access is for the damaged navigation bar. All twelve have to work, or the portal won't ignite.

Chaos's Trio of Terror and the other Titans have repaired the burnt wiring around the ring. It's almost as if something exploded in it while it was open.

I crawl through the dimly lit guts of the ancient portal and feel a sudden rush of awe that humans could build such beautiful things.

Solcrue might've known how, but they made our people do the work, teaching us new secrets and giving us the power to learn, excel, and ultimately refine our own creations.

The panels that are damaged look scorched but mostly intact.

"Did you find that spacetack gun?" Rhee asks over my coms. She's stuck in the engine room of the BlazeStar, waiting for Scant to finish his repair of the last hyperdrive engine. Diesel won't let her leave the ship, but she seems content to stay

where she is.

“Yeah, thanks.” I work through the circuitry, trying to memorize the pieces as I go when I get to a small drive motor.

“Hey, Rhee. I’ve found the navigation motor for bar twelve.

I just need clarification, so I replace this last wiring harness correctly on the torque converter.

The flex plate that engages the actual navigation gearing is larger in diameter than the impeller, right? ”

“A-firm.” She makes a strangled noise. “Hurry, Esthi!”

I place the wires and tack them as fast as I can. The gun flashes and smokes. But, in space, it dissipates fast. “What are you hearing?”

“It’s not what I’m hearing. There’s a visual in here on a screen. Finish, and get out of there!”

I tack the last wire, close the casing, and pack my tools away.

Crawling out of the access, I flip on the power to bar twelve and watch it light up like the other eleven.

Then I see what I wager Rhee was speaking about.

A mother of motherships in black and decked in evil green lights lurks into Ellipsis’ orbit from the outer rim.

The portal ignites a bright blue.

The mothership's sides open, and hundreds of fighters gush out in deadly waves.

AmpLocal: Launch!

BlazeStar's hangars open, and a hundred or more vessels dart out of the sides. They spread into a ring that rotates, rises, and falls, depositing small items out into space.

CelesteLocal: Minefield set.

Lights blink on in a grid surrounding the BlazeStar.

KeannaLocal: Mines online.

A massive missile arcs toward the ship.

The BlazeStar's reverse engines brighten, trying to move her out of the way, but the missile is fast.

CloverLocal: Clear hull rooms, now!

I watch in horror as the missile lights up two mines, but still makes it through the field, Mother's shield, and bashes into the side of the BlazeStar. The hole puffs a gray cloud of parts and life support, Titans and humans. And the bleeding doesn't stop.

CloverLocal: Bulkheads not closing, level Sixteen, Charlie through Indigo. Emergency Rescue Program – BleedStop. Starboard Collector Five is down! I can't catch our Brothers! Many females lost to space!

Clover's panicked voice makes me forget where I am. My tether snaps tight,

reminding me I'm still harnessed to the portal, and I'm letting myself drift away from it.

Chaos 2CO 952: Esthi!

CO 952Chaos 2: I know! I know! I got distracted!

I pull myself back to the portal as the Titans gather up and begin jumping off of the portal toward the mothership.

Chaos 2CO 952: You have to use your engines. Mother is in trouble. We're on our own.

I look out at empty space. I'm screwed if I miss and my boots cut out.

After a deep breath, I disconnect myself and push off of the portal like the other Titans, sending my body out across open space. I kick on my boots, launching me with the terrifying rush of a hot blade through flesh.

Then, to my relief, the BoltBurner uncloaks, and a gorgeous glint of wings launches off of it toward the BlazeStar. My visor focuses the view so I can watch Armor gather up ejected Titans and carry them to the ship's hull.

The Chaoses and others I've been working with follow suit and collect who they can. I snag the hand of a small Titan named Tumble.

CO 952Tumble: Status?

TumbleCO 952: Cold as shit, but I'll survive. Thanks for the lift. The females are not so lucky.

I fly us through the sealscreen of an opening hanger and land inside with the other Titans, who carry their Brothers and frozen women. “I’m going to go see if I can help with the puncture.”

Tumble takes my tether. “Follow me.”

We run out into the hallway and hike a set of large spiral stairs to an open compartment.

“Mother won’t let us near the injury without another airlock in place.” Tumble closes us in a room beside the damaged section. When the life support has been reclaimed, the door to the torn compartment opens.

Armor cries out in pain as he struggles where his wing is suctioned against a bulkhead door. Several Titans in Starjumper suits try to free him.

“Disconnect it!” he growls as crates of supplies drift around the semi-weightless environment. “It’s the only way we can stop the bleeding right now!”

I run to him, climb up onto his shoulder, and find the mechanical switches for his wings. I disconnect the stuck wing, and Armor stumbles to his other side under the weight of his last.

“Take it,” he rasps to his Brothers in the low oxygen. Ice crystals have formed on his broken Starjumper’s suit.

I hesitantly disconnect it, and the other Titans, Tumble included, brace it in front of the second cracked bulkhead door and let it go. It seals the room and brings the depressurization to a standstill.

I try to help Armor up, but it takes two other Titans to assist.

“I need a new suit.”

“Armor,” Chaos says. “You’re in no condition to fight.”

Armor stands and snarls at him. “I will not sit and watch my Brothers and Sisters die like this!”

He motions to the bodies of frozen women drifting by us.

I look away and swallow down my urge to cry. I’m so sorry.

“I can fight,” Armor defends. “Just because I don’t have my designed purpose anymore doesn’t mean I can’t be useful another way.”

“Your shield doesn’t work?” I ask him.

“Very limited.” Armor draws me close. “I can only protect myself and one or two other people without my wings. Until we get this mess sorted and cleaned up, my wings need to stay here and help Mother keep her insides inside.”

Chaos helps him into another room. I follow behind them, staying as close to Armor as I can, relieved he is back in one piece.

Out in the hallway, we stop to let Rebel pass us with a stretcher holding Thruster. Another one trails behind with Karambit.

I can’t help but reach out a hand and brush Karambit’s shoulder, remembering fixing his middle finger. “It’s not fair.”

Armor corrals me against him with an arm. “It’s just the nature of war. If anyone can save them, it’s Rebel.”

AmpLocal: Incoming message from Commander of Aidrithin, Mothership.

AmpLocal: You can surrender or die.

Commander SavageAidrithin, Local: You will kill us either way. Titans do not surrender.

Through a nearby hangar door, I see Savage staring out at the mothership through a sealscreen as the hundreds of enemy ships close in on us. I watch the ships as Chaos helps Armor climb into a fresh Starjumper's suit.

A woman in a CSP suit of armor joins Savage, takes his hand in hers, and squeezes it.

Commander LeahAidathra, Local: Omega Force chooses freedom. If that means death, then we accept it.

Commander SavageAidathra, Local: We will not grovel at your feet when you hurt and kill us either way. If all we have is pride and each other, then that is what we die with.

I walk up to Leah's side.

"Change Identifier from CO 952 to Esthielle."

My helmet's ID code switches out. I take Leah's other hand.

EsthielleAidathra, Local: Grays and Creators stand with the freedom fighters.

Leah smiles at me from inside her helmet and gives my hand an encouraging squeeze. "Now, let's kick some scrawny green dicks into the stars and get Mother through the portal."

Armor hugs me from behind, dressed in his new suit. “Please, don’t make me let you go again.”

Savage motions us to a ship. “Stay together.”

Commander SavageLocal: pair up for the assault wave. Mates stay together whenever possible! Launch fighters asap! Clover, prep hyperdrive for portal jump!

Armor and I rush through the bays to an available Skysprinter and climb inside. He takes pilot controls while I slide into the seat beside him. He gets us headed out of the hangar with the other ships.

But as we emerge into space and slip past the minefield meant to protect the BlazeStar, I’m not sure there’s any way we’ll survive. They have more ships, bigger and better vessels, many I’ve not seen before.

Ellipsis’ orbit quickly turns into a weave of blue Titan fire and Solcruean green and gold. Ships take hits on both sides.

TumbleLocal: Last fighter out of the hanger. Clover, clear for launch.

CloverLocal: Understood. Hyperdrive operational. Vacate now.

Hundreds of clicks overlay one another before the com channel goes silent. Her engines brighten as another missile launches.

Commander SavageLocal: Incoming!

The BlazeStar grows so bright that I have to look away even as my visor tints.

Just as the massive missile races to the BlazeStar’s position, Mother disappears in a

blur of chrome through the portal.

But we can't follow her. All we're trying to do is give her enough time to get to the other side and clear the exit zone.

Commander SavageLocal: Does anyone have contact from Amp?

The Titans that respond have only fragments.

Commander SavageLocal: Anyone who can get through, go! Protect Mother. Do not let the enemy catch up to her.

A handful of ships make it through before the minefield blooms with missiles tagging mines, and the enemy vessels start making it too close to the portal for comfort.

I target everyone I can as fast as I can with the Skysprinter's guns while Armor flies.

"Banking port. Aim ahead!"

I swing the gun to the left and fire ahead of passing ships. Two take hits as we pass and move into a starboard turn that arcs upward, then dives back into the battle.

"How are we going to get out of this?" I ask, tension knotting up my body.

A pair of guns light up from a deep space Ravenger vessel, tearing through a squadron of Solcruean fighters.

Aidathra comes over coms. "What are you doing? You're shooting at your own people!"

"No, I'm not," a deep Titan voice roars triumphantly. " You are not people! And let's

just say that Sevrin had a tiny little accident back on Hyperion. We've been chasing you a while, you big green asshole! Time to eat some Iridithatium!"

New guns raze rapid fire on the vessel, spitting thousands upon thousands of glowing purple bullets.

"You can thank my mate, Navi, for that little gem ."

Commander SavageLocal: Your ID is broken, Brother. Please repair.

Cr4Lve1Local:...

CrazeLocal: Please confirm receipt.

ChaosLocal: Craze! You survived! So glad to have another wild SOB on the force again!

MenaceLocal: Craze, when did we lose you? There was a husk like yours on Ellipsis.

CrazeLocal: Fell during the jailbreak.

Their ship continues its devastating onslaught.

CrazeLocal: Have a few other units with us. Ranger...

A missile tags us in the side. Red alerts fill the cabin.

My body jolts. My helmet cracks under some sort of debris. We're hit again.

"Armor!"

He grabs me, frees me from my seat, and jumps out into space.

Air vents from my helmet and my knee as we slowly rotate and drift away from the Skysprinter. Another Titan ship explodes not far from ours. It only takes one more hit for ours to go.

Armor breaks off a unit from my thigh and snaps it over the hole in my knee that's letting in an agonizing cold. He breaks one off of my other thigh and places it over my helmet. It seals but blocks most of my vision on my right side.

ArmorEsthielle: Hang on beautiful. We're on our own.

Armor clutches me tightly, ignites his boots, and races us through the battle. I can't quite tell where we're going, but I think he has a plan.

It can't get any worse, can it?

But all I can see for sure is the Solcrue berserker that drops out of the mothership.

"Shit."

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:02 am

I have missed a rocket suit. I wore one before the Creators gave me my wing upgrade. The drone of engines that echoes inside my pressurized carapace is comforting. I hold Esthi close and aim for Craze's ship.

He's a long way off but serves as a decent shield against the Solcruean weapons fire the way their shields barely shimmer as they take hits.

Esthi clings to me in a desperate way that makes me all the more committed to getting her to safety. Even without my shields, she still trusts me and feels safe with me. And that means everything when I feel like my skills are limited in this condition.

A Solcruean fighter sends vibrant green bullets, cutting up the space around us.

ArmorEsthielle: Tighter!

She hugs me like her life depends on it. And it does. Her suit is badly damaged. Her visor's flickering, so I know she's losing control of the rockets at her feet. I am our only chance at making it to another ship.

Esthi screeches as a missile blazes by her thigh.

I draw the rifle from my back, adjust our position with the thrusters in the suit, rotating so I can get a clear shot, and account for the change in trajectory when I fire.

I target the ship and don't wait to pull the trigger.

The bullets race across space, pelting their shield and throwing them off course.

As they bank away from us, I tag the side of the ship until I have a shot at the engines.

But they dive away from us before I can rotate far enough to take them out.

Another ship targets us. Then another. There's little space between bullets, but I sling my rifle onto my back, clutch Esthi, and try to fly us out of it.

All around us, Titan ships take hits. Craze's Ravenger is hard at work combating the Solcruean fighters while enduring a barrage of weapons fire from the approaching berserker.

Esthi jolts in my arms.

ArmorEsthielle: Are you damaged?

Her com clicks on, and she sobs out, "We're not going to make it are we?"

Rocket tails reflect in her eyes when I look down to inspect her face. "I'm scared, too. But we're not out of service yet. Until then, we need to focus on what we have, not what we don't. Can you do that for me?"

She licks her lips and nods. "I love you."

"I love you too, Esthielle. You are strong and smart. We will get through this together."

Her gaze darts across her intermittent visor diagrams. Manual mode blinks.

Esthi reaches down, finds a button on the side of her suit, depresses it, and opens a panel.

What is she doing?

She clicks something into place. Her boots kick on. She spreads her legs to either side of mine.

“Omega and Titan Force...” a voice calls over coms. “This is Asgier Toriszi of the Astral Rebels Alliance. We are here to assist.”

Out of the darkness of space, hundreds more ships join the battle in a mass wave that merges with ours and engages Solcrue.

“Does anyone have eyes on Leah Krader?” someone asks.

Leah’s voice comes over the coms as her and Savage’s fighter banks back for another attack pass. “Halim, is that you?”

“Josarin is on guns, Miss Krader. It took us two years, but we never gave up hope you were out here,” Halim replies as a ship banks in and parallels Leah’s.

“Takes a lot more than my half-brother to take me out. Glad you’re with us! “

Hundreds of rebel ships, from single-person fighters up to larger transports and bombers, flood the stars.

Many open portals below their vessels and swallow Titan ships, scooping us out of the sky like nets.

They ignite with the dark ink of rebel portals, swallow Brothers, switch off, and fire

at passing enemy ships.

The vessels are a mismatched bunch, but it shows human resourcefulness, something I'm grateful for.

All this time, we worried there was no one left but the human servants and a few forsaken souls in Naryth on Earth Minor.

A ship rises beneath us, the torch symbol of rebels painted on the roof. The person inside closes his helmet and waves at us. He fires Gatling guns at Skysprinters and fighters as we change direction and fly to his ship.

Landing on his hull, I help Esthi inside before climbing in myself. I close the hatch. A blue shield ripples over his hull.

“Welcome to the Pissy Sissy. I'm Reidar. No portal for us, but she's pep in a can. Strap in!”

Esthi and I take seats and belt in.

“Got any extra guns?” I ask.

“It's a one-pilot ship. I have all the controls. But some information would be helpful,” he says as we dive through the battle, taking out Solcrue fighters. “Any idea where my sister is, Kelta Toriszi? Have you seen her?”

“She's a firecracker, for sure. She was on the BlazeStar, last I heard,” Esthi says.

“Her mate was hurt.”

“She found someone?”

I'm surprised by his ease of conversation while he fires at the enemy. But knowing Kelta lived in her ship, I wager he does with his. It's just second nature to fly and talk, maybe even fire at the enemy.

"Sort of," I clarify. "She's bonded to my Brother Thruster."

"A Titan?" he mutters in shock. Then laughs. "I'm not surprised. Thruster, huh?"

"He is severely damaged. She was not in a good headspace when we returned. You may want to reach out when there's time."

Commander SavageLocal: Retreat. I want everyone through now! Solcrue are targeting the portal!

Titans and Rebels without portals flee through the main portal. Portal carriers pull back.

I scan for any Brothers who might be adrift in space as our pilot races for a nearby portal.

The only free-floating Titans that register in the void are Fracture and Evo.

They've found their way to Craze's ship and are rigging up a special weapon I've never seen before.

It's just the two of them. I can't explain the need to be with them, but it batters my core with demands.

"Can you drop me off there?" I ask.

Esthi looks at me like all she wants to do is get out of here.

“I can .” The hesitancy in Reidar’s voice makes me think he doesn’t want to.

“Please. It’s just... I need to be out there with them.”

“Why?” Esthi challenges.

“Rogues might be more advanced than Relics, but we’re always stronger together. And we need them to help us navigate the nebula. Whatever they’ve built is special. But we need to make sure they get to the other side.”

ArmorLocal: I’m landing near Fracture and Evo.

“If you’re going, I’m going,” Esthi says, unbuckling.

I don’t like the idea. I’d much rather her be safe, but she looks determined.

“Alright.” I turn to our pilot. “Go find your sister.”

“Will do.”

He opens the hatch. I grab Esthi around the waist and leap out, igniting my rocket boots.

We blaze a short distance to the hull and land with heavy clunks as our magnetic spacewalk heels kick on.

Esthi draws her rifle as I free mine from my back.

We march up the roof toward Fracture and Evo, scanning the hull for infiltrators.

ArmorLocal: How can we help?

FractureLocal: Connect to the power port at the junction.

He sends me a visual schematic. I grab the cable, lug the large wire rope to the port, and get it hooked up. Esthi fires her rifle over my head at an incoming Solcruean transport dripping soldiers onto Craze's roof.

The weapon that Fracture and Evo have sits on a tripod that looks like a cannon or a launcher for a massive shell. The central cylinder bursts with storming blue light the moment I connect it to power.

Esthi fires at the charging soldiers as I get to my feet and turn to confront them. She takes one out as gunfire races in a mad dash for Fracture and Evo.

I'm too slow in my suit, heavy but without the maneuverability of my wings. I used to outstretch them and protect my brothers. Now I have only myself.

Fracture splits into a million pieces. Evo touches one of his crystal fragments and shatters with him. Bullets race through their parts, missing them completely.

Esthi leans away from them in horror. But the moment the bullets pass through, my Rogue Brothers pull themselves back together again.

Craze hikes up the side of his ship in a Solcrue officer's suit of armor, blasting enemy soldiers off of the hull with a three-round burst rifle. Ranger joins us from another batch. Then RamBash, until I'm left wondering who is flying the ship.

CrazeNavi: Ready for deployment.

The ship banks hard toward the portal, shielding it as the last Titan and rebel vessels flee in the Ravenger's shadow. Soon, we are the only ship remaining of the resistance on this side of the portal.

Craze's squad picks off the landing soldiers but can't seem to stop them from dropping in greater numbers from the ship.

RamBashLocal: I knew this would happen! We're surrounded!

I put myself between the gunfire and my friends and mate, trying to hide them all with my body. I'm large, but not enough without my wings to protect them all.

Bullet after flaming bullet hits me.

Evo touches my shoulder as he finishes helping Fracture set up the radiant canister. Bullets start bouncing off of Evo like he's suddenly built of my kind of metal. He and Fracture adjust a few settings on the weapon, lock in a ring, and hunker down.

"What now?" Esthi asks as she returns fire from behind my shield.

EvoLocal: Pray you aren't any part Solcrue.

Esthi gives me a wide-eyed look.

Evo releases me, grabs the handles on the sides, twists them, and shoves them together. His palms drip with red blood, which makes no sense. Evo's digibadge is not red, nor is his nanosolution. But nothing about Evo makes sense to me at the moment.

One last rocket releases from the berserker. I don't see it until the Solcrue boarding party begins vanishing in a puff of mist under the power of the blue wave.

"Armor!" Esthi screams and reaches for me. The projectile punches through my middle.

Evo steadies the weapon as it blooms with light, billowing out like a luminous, spherical blast wave, while cold emptiness invades me and my nanosolution, along with bits of wiring, drift out into space.

Esthi's face appears before me, terror in her beautiful eyes as she catches me.

“Armor!” her voice is a muffled whisper.

I'm okay. I want to say it because I feel it even though my suit depressurizes and shuts down.

I don't need air. But the pain is immense. I just don't want her to see it on my face. I don't want to scare her more.

Solcruean ships nearby empty of their pilots and crew. But the wave only eats into the closest third of the ships.

The Ravenger makes one last turn toward the portal as the mothership and her berserker launch a fresh missile assault from the back of the pack.

NaviLocal: I'm at full throttle, but she's not going to make it. Brace for impact!

As the portal nears and our fate closes in, another vessel punches through the portal—a rebel ship.

KeltaLocal: Hi, Aidathra. Miss me? This is for my mate, you...

She lets out a string of swears that would make Menace blush as she sprays cluster bombs out of the ship. They carve through space, separating into smaller and smaller bombs until they're nearly a wall of explosives, racing to blanket the enemy in deadly blows.

EsthielleLocal: Kelta! Hurry! We're heading back now!

KeltaLocal: get inside! It's a rough ride through! Portal's destabilizing.

A hatch opens in the Ravenger, and Craze helps Esthi inside. Evo picks me up and jumps in.

The moment we're through, Craze closes the hatch. "Now, Navi!"

The ship surges forward. My vision warps, but I swear I see a woman standing at the front of the ship, lights blinking around her head, the ship tilting with her movement. Blue light of the old humans' portal gates flashes over the nearby window. The ship slows.

"Welcome to the other side, Omega and Titan forces," a feminine voice says. "One more jump. We're just waiting on our last member."

Come on, Kelta.

A port in the side of the BlazeStar opens, and a gold rocket arcs out of it, back through the portal.

Thruster...

I ping my brother. He pings back.

Rebel has worked magic again. I think he may have once been a Creator, himself.

Seconds later, Thruster returns atop Kelta's ship, powering it through the portal. He fires at the portal as they pass, and it shuts down.

Commander SavageLocal: Prepare for final jump. Portal engaging. Be quick. We want to be sure no one gets separated again. We will regroup on the other side.

Esthi braces me. When I look down at her, I see my interstitial fluid has spilled onto the floor in pale blues and violets.

“We need a medical bay,” Esthi tells Craze.

He sees me, and his eyes fill with magenta light. All the other Titans reach down and pick me up, carting me down the hallway and through a series of smaller passages to a medical wing.

Lights blur overhead.

Esthi says something, but I can’t decipher it. I look at the scanner’s reports but can’t read anything on the screen.

“Craze?”

A Brother takes my hand. Magenta light moves overhead. “Armor, you came to our rescue right when we needed you. Thank you.”

I want to thank him but can’t get my voice to work.

“I know, Brother. Hang on. You’re in the best possible ship for repairs, trust me.”

Bright, lightless blue eyes hover close. Warm hands brace my body near my wound. I see a smile and remember the taste of her lips. “Es...”

“I’ve got you, Armor.”

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:02 am

It takes two days to repair Armor. We keep him on recirculators and nutrient feeds while I clean out broken parts and slowly begin wiring him back together.

I don't stop. I can't bring myself to. All I can think about is hearing his deep voice again and feeling his strong arms around me once more.

Rebel and Atox have both stopped by to help with various procedures. The most devastating being a backup core drive replacement.

Once he's repaired, I clean him and work on a few upgrades. The BlazeStar and Rebel fleet are with us now as we search for the nebula with the help of Evo and Fracture. Evo says we should arrive within the day. We simply cannot see the nebula because it is hidden in a field of dark rock.

Fracture has been helping the ships prepare for the ride in with bumper panels and seals over intakes. Cara, Jeris, and Sythius, our Solcrue members, stay in the heart of the BlazeStar because of a noise we humans and Titans can't hear. I guess that's just the nature of Iridithatium.

Craze has set Armor and me up with private quarters. RamBash and Craze carry him there. I finally get to cover Armor with proper blankets on a real bed.

I hope he wakes soon. He has slipped into the Black Sleep, and I miss him.

I take my first civilized shower in many long months. Navi and her friends from Sevrin's test groups have fixed up the rooms. As I get out and dry off, I notice a placard of Solcruean standards of appearance above the sink. Someone has scratched

out Solcrue and written scum in marker over it.

The sight makes me smile. I return to the room, pass the wall of windows that look out at space, and slip into bed with Armor. He hasn't moved, but he's still breathing on his own.

I check the readouts on my tablet to be sure he's still stable, and he is.

So I curl up against his arm and close my eyes.

I've only let myself nap long enough to satisfy my brain before getting back to work again.

I am exhausted and sink heavily into chaotic dreams of battle and dying women and Fracture splintering into a million tiny pieces.

Hours later, I wake on my other side, blink, and notice something at the foot of the bed.

Aarmor sits with his muscled back to me, staring out at the passing stars. The merge brackets on his back glow softly with their upgrades.

I hope he likes them.

He glances over his shoulder at me as I get up, crawl to him, and hug him from behind. Aarmor braces my hands against his body like he can't get enough of the sensation.

I'm so grateful he's back with me that relief finally hits me, and I crack, letting a tear slip free.

Armor twists and nudges my forehead with his in a sweet gesture.

I'm here. We made it. We're okay. I love you. He says it all without words.

Armor doesn't ask where his wings are or his clothes. He simply turns around, collects me in his arms, and lies me back on the bed. His kisses are slow and tender, like he's savoring every single one.

His rough hands roam my body with increasing hunger until I am alive beneath his touch, slicked with the need for him and scorched by his every incendiary exploration of my skin.

His hard gray body is heavy yet smooth as it glides over mine.

Armor laces his arms under my waist and gives my breasts long, appreciative licks, swirling his hot, velvety tongue around each globe and over my tightening buds.

He gently rakes his teeth over each until I can't help but arch in anticipation.

Armor kisses my throat, then trails his tongue down my chest to my stomach and lower.

Lower. Gliding over my nub. Slipping into my folds.

Pushing deep inside of me. Deeper. Deeper .

Then, he licks slow and hard all the way out.

Up my folds. Plunging back inside. Suckling my clit.

Swirling his heated affection in my pussy until I am a wreck with soaring desire to be

filled with him.

But he doesn't give me what I want. Instead, he binds my hips to him, rolls us over so that I'm sitting on his face, and grins. I only know because I can see it in his eyes.

He lifts me just far enough to say one thing. "I want you to ride my tongue like you rode my cock that first night we were together."

Mischief sparkles in his bright blue-violet eyes. He steadies my hips in his hands and draws me down over his tongue.

I gasp for breath under the scintillating high spreading through my core as his long, thick tongue fills me— stretches me.

A slight fear he'll suffocate with the way he's bonded us rises in the back of my mind until I remember Titans don't need oxygen.

He growls underneath me, squeezes my thighs, and tugs me sharply against his mouth.

Fuck! Okay! I close my eyes and focus on the sensation of him inside of me.

His wet tongue gives me a new kind of pleasure as I brace myself on the wall above his head and slowly ride his tongue, bobbing up and down, feeling him lick me nearly all the way out, then fill me again with as much force as I can muster.

My heart beats faster as I take him to my deepest. Sweat beads in my skin. A euphoric tingle spreads through me.

I grip his tongue, sit hard on his face, and buck, straining for more as my body shivers under the strength of my orgasm.

A armor's moan is muffled beneath me, but he massages my thighs in circles like he's thoroughly enjoying himself.

When I calm, he guides me back, wipes his face with a hand, and slides me down over his erect shaft.

A fresh wave of erotic pleasure floods my hips.

He sits up and scoots us to the edge of the bed as I strain to collect my scattered thoughts.

A armor gathers me against him and pumps slowly and deeply, letting me feel every curve of his tip down to his stout base. Even now, with space at my back and all the terrifying things we've endured out there in recent days, I feel protected and safe.

His lips find my ear as he drives into me. "I claim you, Esthielle, to protect and serve as my mate for all of my remaining days in operation. I don't ever want to be separated from you again."

I want to return his words, but I'm too breathless from just how hard and massive he is. He pushes deeper, stretching me to the point that it's a touch painful.

I gasp under the strain of accepting his full, healthy form. Ecstasy surges when he flexes inside of me. My core clenches hard.

A armor's fingers dig into me. "Oh, Esthi..."

He rests his head against the side of mine as he thrusts into me, filling me. His heat spreads through my hips, melting me in his lap.

A armor pants as we both quiver from the rush of release. "I love you, Esthi. I want

only you, forever.”

I lean back and summon his eyes to mine. “You’ve got me. For as long as I live.”

He lets out a gentle, humble laugh and hugs me with relief.

My sweet Titan. “No more taking missiles to the gut. Promise me.”

He kisses my temple. “I’ll do my best.”

Page 27

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:02 am

Esthi and I wash up in the shower after mating, but I'm already eager to feel her again. As she bends over to wash her legs, I steal the opportunity to pick her up and slip inside of her once more.

She gasps and giggles, then sings my name with her lovely human voice, "Armor."

I can't help myself. I'm crazy for her. "You put it out there. I lose control when I see your gorgeous body or even pick up a whiff of your scent."

She braces herself on the stall door and moans, then pushes backward, sheathing me further inside of her.

Esthi's core grips me. "Ooh. This position, yes."

"Already?"

Her tight pussy clenches again. "Yes!"

I get the signal and penetrate her in rapid pumps, quickly finding my release.

When I set her down again, Esthi's legs nearly give out. She chuckles and frantically steadies herself.

"Too much?" I ask.

"Never." She turns around, kisses my chest, and finishes washing herself.

When we are dried off and dressed in fresh Solcruean armor that someone has marked with a gold torch symbol on the chest plate, we exit the room.

“Nice,” Esthi mutters as she looks down at the symbol.

CrazeArmor: Hope you’re awake. Approaching the nebula now.

“Come on,” I tell Esthi. “Let’s head up to the cockpit to check our progress.”

She’s first out of the door and into the hallway. “So, feel any different?”

I shrug and notice the ease of movement in my back. “Why?”

“I upgraded your wing mounts so you can release them with a mental command, not just mechanical latches. I also upgraded your shield generator and infused your synthflesh with hydramidium. That one took some help from the medics and Evo.”

“Armor,” a female greets me as we join the group in the deck. Her eyes and head gleam with tracework. “Welcome. I am Navi, Craze’s mate.”

“Thanks for getting us through the portal and for coming to assist,” I say.

She dips her head cautiously as if it is heavy. “I have a cybernetic implant that allows me to communicate with your kind and control many things, from ships to portals and more. Sevrin was a real sweetheart, cutting my skull open.”

Esthi takes my hand in hers. “She’s like a human version of a CyberPilot.”

Navi smiles and returns to look through the windows. “Approaching nebula now.”

Craze joins us, giving me a pat on the back. “Glad you’re on your feet. Got a little something for you.”

I glance back in the direction he points to see Karambit smirking as he and Mace each carry one of my wings to the cockpit.

“Got a few upgrades, Boss,” Karambit remarks.

I walk up to him and inspect his repaired husk. “You’re still with us. I am happy, Brother.”

“Rebel is better than Atox. Don’t tell them I said that,” Karambit chuckles.

“I’m right fucking here, Karen .” Atox rounds Mace’s side with an eye roll.

Karambit flips him off, grins, and adds, “You would’ve let me die.”

Atox sighs. “Rebel has infected my programming. I am learning to break the rules and try risky repairs.”

I grip Atox’s shoulder. “I am grateful you are with us, however you wish to operate.”

Mace clicks his tongue. “Easy to say when you had a cybertech working on you.”

“Pretty sure she gave me the workout.” I wink up at Esthi like she once did to me. When her cheeks flush, I know it was the right move.

Karambit whistles suggestively while Mace whoops.

“Alright, you horny hotskins,” Atox grumbles. “Let’s get our Brother out back together.”

They motion for me to turn around, so I do. My back jerks as they merge my heavy wings with my brackets. Alerts fill my vision.

Left Wing: Online. Shield extender - operational.

Right Wing: Online. Shield extender - operational.

Squadron Shield: Ready.

I curl forward and stretch my wings as best as I can in the cockpit and feel their weight has evened out since I wore them last. I pull the tips forward and admire the smoothed-out blades.

“Magma and a few others spent some extra time reshaping and bolstering your wings with hydramidium,” Esthi states.

“Thank you, everyone.” I glance around at them all as I run a hand over my repaired side.

“Breaching perimeter now,” Fracture reports. He and Evo are in the pilot’s seats in front of Navi, guiding us after the radiant chrome BlazeStar and hundreds of other vessels into a vibrant nebula filled with indigo, violet, and fuchsia clouds. White orbs dot the space, drenching it in light.

Esthi hugs me from the side.

“Did Mother get repaired?” I ask.

“Yes.” Esthi beams up at me. “Titans are impressive with how they work together to get shit done so fast.”

“How many Brothers did we lose?” I ask.

Atox shifts closer to the windows. “We gained two. Yeti and Fenrir are back in operation. No Titans down that Rebel, or I , couldn’t save.

But we lost nine females during the Venom hit and the perforation of the BlazeStar.

Brothers are working on hydramidium reinforcements on the BlazeStar as we speak. We won't let that happen again."

Ranger and the rest of Craze's crew join us as our ship emerges from a vibrant cloud of stardust into a cavity.

"There she is," Craze says with a smile.

Fracture high-fives Evo. "We're home, Brother."

"Feels good," Evo remarks. "Contacting Rogue Mothership now."

The coms crackle, and a voice pops through. "Ravenger Three, Aegis 189 confirming ping. BlazeStar, Aegis 189 confirming ping." The woman pauses. "Wow, that's a lot of Rebel ships. I am Lotus, CP-577. Chasm has the bridge."

"We are glad to see you," another voice booms. "Please form up your fleets around us. We have a lot of work to do."

Clover cuts in. "A new war is just beginning. Solcrue will regroup after our escape, pull in fresh forces, and hunt us down."

I tighten my grip around Esthi. "I won't let anything happen to you."

She looks up at me with her gorgeous blue eyes and kisses me. "And I'll be sure you're capable of keeping that promise and coming back to me every night."

I nibble her ear. "Inside of you is what I prefer."

Esthi blushes and rests her head on my chest. "I love you."

“We will be ready,” Chasm says. “And this time—Brothers, Sisters, and Rebels—we will win because we are finally united once again.”