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THE COVENANT PRELUDE

Prequel to the Obsidian Covenant

An Enemies to Lovers Dragon-Riders
Romantasy

THE COVENANT PRELUDE

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Prologue

I'm the traitor's daughter.

My mission is simple: steal the encryption key that powers their world.

I arrive at the Empyrean Citadel wearing a borrowed name and a scholar's smile. Wingleader Xavian is just law made flesh, forged in dragon-fire and duty.

One wrong heartbeat, my cover shatters and Xavian should end me. Instead, his gaze ignites something far more dangerous than treason.

The Citadel is failing. The wards are cracking. Ancient code is rotting from the inside out—and the truth behind it points to something far worse than rebellion: corruption buried at the heart of the empire.

The bond is only a rumor. A forbidden legend, said to fuse souls, amplify power, and turn two enemies into something unstoppable.

The Covenant Prelude is the prequel of a dragon-riders romantasy saga of hidden identities, slow-burn tension, and a crumbling empire—where the future bond will change everything, and the fire that remakes the world starts long before the Covenant ever binds.

CHAPTER 1

The Cost of Surviving

ANYA

The books lied.

They promised strategy and glory and the satisfying symmetry of battles won by superior logic. They never mentioned how war smells. How it gets inside your nose and refuses to leave—a sticky mix of burnt meat and old blood and something sour that might be fear, or bile, or both.

They definitely never mentioned how loud it is.

Not the kind of loud where steel rings in noble arcs and men shout heroic last words. This is different. This is a constant, messy roar of dragons, people screaming, stone cracking, and the wet slap of bodies hitting mud. It crawls under my skin and wedges itself between my ribs.

I press my forehead into the rough rock of the ravine wall and try not to shake apart.

Breathe in. Metallic cold.

Breathe out. Smoke and panic.

Faelan's mind brushes mine—soft, worried. A low, trilling sound escapes her throat as she huddles beside me, wings clamped tight to her flanks to make herself smaller. She's barely more than a juvenile—sleek, gray-black, with clever amber eyes that have seen far more than they should.

We shouldn't be here, she projects, her emotions a muddled knot of fear and stubborn loyalty.

“I know,” I whisper, even though no one can hear us over the chaos above. “Trust me, I’m filing a formal complaint with the universe.”

She huffs, a weak flare of amusement that tastes like warm rain in my mind.

Another impact shakes the ravine. Dust sifts down from the jagged overhang. Someone screams—a short, ugly sound that ends too quickly.

My stomach flips.

I shouldn’t be here.

I’m not a fighter. Not only that, but I’m a scholar, a cipher rat. My weapons are ink and pattern and the elegant certainty of clean equations, not the brutal improvisation of a battlefield.

But the Exiles don’t have enough fighters anymore. Or enough scholars. Or anything.

So, Father sent me out “just to observe the leyline response at the front,” as if that’s a safe, normal sentence and not a death wish.

I squeeze my eyes shut. The ravine floor is damp and cold under my knees. My hands are shaking. I press my fingers into the grit until my nails hurt, trying to anchor myself in something that isn’t burning, screaming, or exploding.

Above us, dragons roar.

I hear the difference in their voices.

The Citadel beasts are trained for precision kills—short, focused bursts of elemental force. Our dragons, the scattered clutch that chose the Exiles, sound...raw. Angry. Desperate, like they know

they're outnumbered and still launch themselves into the sky anyway.

A shadow slices across the ravine mouth. Faelan flinches, her scales rippling under my palm.

We must move, she insists, anxiety spiking. If they collapse the cliffs, we'll be buried with the others.

The "others."

I don't let my mind attach names to that word.

"On three." A blast of heat rolls over the ravine, followed by the crackle of lightning-laced fire. The hair on my arms stands on end.

"Okay, we're going 'now,'" my voice cracks on the last word.

I scramble upright, legs numb from crouching too long. Pain spikes through my knees, but it's sharp and clean, mine, and somehow that's a relief.

Faelan crouches low, letting me swing up onto her back. I grab the neck strap with fingers that don't feel entirely attached to my hands.

"Straight out, then left along the canyon wall," I murmur. "Stay in the dead angles. No heroics."

I am offended you think I would be heroic, she replies, trying for dry dignity, but it comes out shaky.

She bunches her muscles and leaps.

For a moment, we're just a blur of motion and noise—out of the ravine, up past the jagged lip of rock, into the screaming light of the valley.

The battlefield hits me like a physical blow.

The ground is a churned-up mess of mud, slick with dark patches that I refuse to name. Smoke claws in my eyes. Broken siege engines lie on their sides like dying insects, wheels splintered, runes dead. A fallen dragon convulses in the distance, its great body twisted, wings snapped like torn parchment.

Our banner—black and silver, the mark of the Exile—lies half-trampled near a shattered ridge.

“Higher,” I choke out.

Faelan obeys, beating her wings hard. The air buffets us, hot and unstable, laced with residual magic. Every leyline in the valley feels wrong to me—jagged instead of fluid, currents colliding instead of flowing.

I sense more than seeing the Citadel riders wheeling overhead in precise formations, their armor glinting. Do they move like pieces in a game Father would play on a war board, except isn’t that what he wanted? To prove the Citadel’s “perfect system” could be broken?

Except we’re the ones breaking instead.

Focus, Faelan pushes gently, nudging my thoughts back to the present.

Right.

Escape now, existential crisis later.

I track routes like I’d track symbols on a cipher grid, overlaying lines in my mind. The Citadel riders’ loop in predictable arcs built off the stabilizer beacons, which are calibrated to the Contract’s main harmonics—

There.

A gap. A thin, shifting pocket where their patrol timing leaves three heartbeats of open sky between sweeps. The pattern clicks into place in my head like a solved equation.

“Angle three degrees right, then climb on my mark,” I say, my voice steadier. “We cut through that corridor, and we’re out.”

She adjusts accordingly.

My heart thuds harder as we approach the gap. The roar of dragons coils around us. A shard of light flashes—a Citadel rider banking too close. My lungs lock.

“Now,” I whisper.

Faelan surges.

We slip through the seam in the patrol like a thread pulled through cloth, so close a blast of warm air from a passing dragon scorches my cheek. For a breathless second, I swear the Citadel rider’s visor turns in our direction, sensing something off.

But then we’re past.

Out of the worst of the fire. Out of the main kill zone. Still too close, but farther than most.

The valley shrinks behind us, the smoke softening into a gray smear. My muscles finally unlock. I realize I’ve been clamping my teeth so hard my jaw aches.

Faelan notes with a mix of relief and mild astonishment that we survived.

“See? Your pilot is capable,” I manage.

My pilot is shaking, she counters.

I look down at my hands.

She's not wrong.

It takes nearly an hour of low, careful flying before the screaming in my head quiets enough for me to think clearly. The sky softens from smoke-choked gray to pale winter blue. Mountains give way to ridges, ridges to rough hills, the terrain smoothing gradually under us.

We land in a narrow canyon near the Exile base, shielded from above by jagged stone overhangs. The air here is colder, thinner, sharp with the smell of stone and the faint tang of the wards Father had carved into this place years ago.

As Faelan touches down, her legs wobble. My body, which has been pretending to be fine out of sheer stubbornness, decides now is the perfect time to stop cooperating.

I slide off her side and at once put a hand against the canyon wall to steady myself.

The rock is freezing under my palm; the texture is rough enough to scrape skin. My knees feel like boiled jelly. There's dried blood on my gloves—some is mine, most of it not—which I notice only when I see rust-colored smears on the stone.

The sight makes my stomach lurch.

Faelan nudges my shoulder gently with her snout. Still with me?

“For now,” I say, my voice hoarse. “Ask me again if Father kills me.”

He won't kill you, she answers, radiating simple certainty. He loves you.

I grimace. "You say that like love and terrible decisions are mutually exclusive."

She huffs again, sending a puff of warm air into my hair.

We make our way into the base.

The Exile stronghold isn't pretty. It's not meant to be. The main cavern is carved into the side of the mountain—low ceilings, cold stone, the smell of too many bodies and not enough ventilation.

Lanterns burn low, their light yellow and tired.

Every surface is covered in maps, ward diagrams, weapon racks, and the kind of chaos that happens when idealists try to run a war with broken tools.

No one stops me.

Some glance up as I pass—a medic with blood up to his elbows, a young runner clutching a message crystal in both hands like it might explode—but their eyes slide off me before they can land.

There were more faces before.

I avoid counting the missing ones.

Father is in the war room.

He always is, lately.

The war room used to be a natural hollow—just rock and echo and the steady drip of water. Now it's layered with wards and illuminated by a ring of hanging crystals that flicker with shifting glyphs.

The air hums faintly with magic.

Father stands in the center, hands braced on the edges of the main table. Maps and schematics are

spread out before him, all anchored by a huge, precise rendering of the Contract's leyline lattice. He's drawn so many revisions over it that the page is more ink than paper.

He doesn't look up as I enter.

Likewise, he doesn't have to.

"You weren't meant to be that close to the front line," he says, his voice tight. "The signals from the beacons spiked in your sector."

I hate that the first thing he mentions is data, not the fact that I could have died.

"Good to see you too, Father," I say.

He exhales slowly and straightens.

Up close, he looks older than he did last week. Gray has crept into his dark hair, more at the temples. Fine lines around his eyes have deepened, not from laughing. From squinting at too many patterns no one else wants to see.

For a moment, his gaze softens. Just a flicker. A tiny glitch in the hard mask of the Exile.

Then it's gone.

"Report," he says.

So, I do.

I tell him about the Citadel's formation, the timing of their strike, and the way the stabilizer beacons hummed a half-second before each bombardment, like they were expecting the Contract's response.

I tell him about how the ley currents felt—not in poetic terms but in the concrete language of nodes

and harmonics. The surges aren't random. They follow a pattern. A failing pattern.

As I speak, some tension in his shoulders shifts. It doesn't disappear, but it focuses. This is the part he knows how to manage—information, analysis, a problem he can take apart and rebuild on a table.

“You saw the waveform?” he asks.

“I didn't just see it. I felt it. The Contract isn't just stabilizing the wards anymore.

It's...overcorrecting. Like it's compensating for something deeper breaking underneath.”

He nods slowly, eyes distant. “The Master Contract is degrading at an alarming rate, exceeding the Council's pessimistic predictions. Simultaneously, the Citadel is crumbling, its structure irreparably fractured by systemic corruption and bitter power struggles.”

“They're not predicting,” I say quietly. “They're denying.”

His jaw flexes. His gaze sharpens back on me.

“And you? Do you still think it can be rewritten?”

There it is. The real question. The one he keeps circling every time we talk about the Citadel, the wards, the wars.

“Not rewritten,” I say. “Re-keyed. The foundational clauses are too deeply bound into the mountain and the dragons. But if we had the core encryption, we could create a parallel pathway for the power. A safety net. Something that doesn't require the Citadel to hold all the control.”

“Balance the equation,” he murmurs.

“Yes.”

“When the Citadel falls,” he says.

My throat tightens. “When the Contract fails, the Citadel will fall whether we want it to or not. I’d prefer the world doesn’t collapse with it.”

He stares at me for a long moment. I can’t read his expression. That’s new. I used to be able to see the man beneath the strategist, the father beneath the exile.

Now I mostly see the war.

“I can’t hold the lines much longer,” he admits quietly. “The Citadel’s leverage comes from that Contract. If we don’t have something to counter it when it breaks, the fallout will be...indiscriminate.”

A sick sort of relief stirs in my chest. It’s terrible, but it’s also an affirmation that I’m not imagining things. The patterns are real. The danger is real.

“So, we need the key,” I say. “Not the propaganda. The actual core. The original Vault encryption.”

He looks down at the map.

At the Citadel, drawn in stark, precise lines near the top, like a tumor in the mountains.

“Yes,” he says.

We both know what that means.

There’s only one place in the world where the full Contract core can be accessed—not the diluted versions carved in public squares or etched in council chambers, but the original binding frames. The ones the founders anchored with dragon blood and mountain bone.

The Vault.

Located in the heart of the Citadel.

More precisely, beneath it.

The silence stretches.

My heart thuds too fast for someone who's technically safe inside a warded cave and not on a battlefield anymore.

"This is why you sent me out there," I say finally.

"Not just to 'observe.' You needed confirmation the degradation had accelerated."

He doesn't deny it.

"You see the system the way it truly is," he says instead, echoing words he's spoken before. "The Citadel sees the law. The dragons feel the power. The Council counts the tithes. But you see the underlying structure. The gaps. The parts that were never meant to carry this much strain."

"That doesn't mean I'm the one who should walk into their fortress and politely ask to borrow their doomsday artifact."

"No," he says. "Which is why you won't ask."

He reaches into his coat.

For a heartbeat, I imagine—ridiculously—that he's going to pull out a cup of tea. Or a blanket. Something soft. Human.

He doesn't.

He places a slim, smooth identity slate on the table between us.

Its surface glows faintly with runes.

My heart drops somewhere near my boots.

The name at the top is not mine.

ANYA VALERIUS

Transfer Scholar, Cryptography Division

Empyrean Citadel, Southern Quadrant Archive

My throat goes dry. “You forged a full transfer profile.”

“You forged it,” he corrects gently. “I just acquired the base records.”

Bits of memory snap into focus—random cipher exercises he’d given me over the last month, “hypothetical” identity matrices to solve, “practice” seal replications. I thought he was trying to distract me from the war. To keep my mind busy.

He was training me.

My fingers hover over the slate. The falsified sigils are perfect. The registry stamps would pass any casual inspection. The patterns are so clean, a part of me wants to appreciate the craftsmanship.

The other part of me would like to drop the slate and run.

“This will get you through the gate,” Father says. “From there, your job is to disappear into the stacks. Observe the vault access. Map the inner lattice of their ward triggers. When you find the core encryption, you copy it. Quietly. No heroics. No sabotage.”

“And then what?” I ask because if I don’t keep asking questions, I’m going to start screaming.

“Then you come home,” he says simply. “With enough leverage to negotiate a future where the world doesn’t end when their precious Contract cracks.”

“You make it sound so straightforward,” I say, my voice thin. “Walk into the lion’s den, steal the math that holds civilization together, and walk out again.”

His gaze flicks up, and for the first time since I walked in, he looks like my father, not the Exile. Not the rebel general. Just a tired man who has lost too much and is terrified of losing more.

“I wouldn’t send you if there was another way,” he says quietly. “I know what I’m asking.”

“Do you?” The words slip out sharper than I intend. “Because from where I’m standing, it sounds like you’re asking your only daughter to walk into the arms of the people who want her dead and smile convincingly while she does it.”

He flinches.

Just a fraction. But I see it.

“I am asking,” he says, each word slow, “the only person who can decode a dying cage to go inside and find the key. Not because I want you to be in danger. Because everyone is already drowning in it, and you are the only one I trust to navigate the undertow.”

It shouldn’t help. But it does.

It doesn’t erase the fear. It just gives it shape. Weight. Direction.

I pick up the slate.

It's warm. That's just the enchantment, but my brain still insists it feels like a living heartbeat under my thumb.

"I'll need the route patterns for the gate sentinels," I say, slipping automatically into the part of my brain that likes puzzles more than it fears death. "Access routes. Patrol timing. Any gaps you've confirmed from the outside."

He exhales. Some ice in his posture melts, replaced by something like grim pride.

"There's a packet with your gear," he says. "You have until dawn to memorize it."

Dawn.

That's... not a lot of time to process the fact that my life just split into "before infiltration" and "after infiltration."

"Anya."

His voice softens.

I look up.

He's closer than I realized—he must have moved while I was staring at the slate. There are lines around his mouth I don't remember from last year. His eyes are the same—rich brown, always seeing one layer deeper than anyone else.

"This is not an order," he says.

I arch a brow. "Feels like one."

"It isn't," he insists. "You can say no. I will find another way."

I'm about to call him a liar.

Except...

He's not. Not right now. I can see it in the tightness of his jaw, the way his hands curl on the edge of the table.

If I say no, he'll still chase the Contract. He'll still throw himself against the Citadel.

He just won't use me to do it.

I should say no.

I should walk out of this war room, take Faelan, find a little cabin somewhere in the mountains nobody wants, and wait for the world to burn without me.

But I've seen the waveforms. I've felt the wards tearing at the edges. If I run, it won't just be the Citadel that falls. The backlash will hit everything. Everyone. Even the people who never chose a side.

And underneath all of that is a quieter, uglier truth:

If I don't go, someone else will.

Someone less prepared. Someone who can't read the patterns like I can.

Furthermore, someone whose death will still be partially my fault.

My chest hurts.

I realize I've been pressing the point of the slate into my palm so hard it's leaving an imprint.

“Fine,” I say, because if I think about it longer, I might take it back. “I'll go.”

Something on his shoulders drops.

Not with relief.

With resignation.

He steps around the table and pulls me into his arms.

It's awkward at first. We haven't done this in a while. I smell smoke and ink and the faint herbal tang of the tonic he drinks instead of sleeping. His chest is solid and cold under my cheek.

His hand trembles once against the back of my head before he stills it.

"You come back to me," he says, voice rough. "Do you understand? We are not throwing you away to prove a point. You go in, you get the key, and you run. No martyrdom. No stunts."

"You say that like we're not related," I mutter into his coat.

A broken laugh escapes him.

He presses his forehead to mine for a heartbeat, eyes closed.

"Anya," he says. "I am trusted with only one thing."

Me.

He doesn't say it.

He doesn't have to.

CHAPTER 2

The Empyrean Citadel

ANYA

Dawn tastes like cold metal and nerves.

The Exile launch platform is hacked into the side of the mountain, a sloping ledge that drops into mist and jagged silhouettes of lower cliffs. The wind cuts straight through my coat, knifing across my cheeks. My fingers are numb even inside my gloves.

Faelan waits at the edge, harness already strapped, eyes bright and eager in a way that makes my chest ache.

We're going somewhere that isn't a battlefield, she says, her emotions buzzing against mine—curiosity, anxiety, a spark of excitement. I approve of this mission.

"It's still a battlefield," I say, tightening the last strap. "The weapons are just...quieter."

She snorts. Humans.

I check my gear for the fourth time. Identity slate. Code packet in a hidden inner pocket. Minimal supplies, so nothing looks suspicious. No visible weapons—scholars aren't supposed to carry blades.

I feel naked without a knife.

I feel even more naked knowing I'm about to walk into a fortress designed to peel people like me apart for fun.

Father stands near the ward pylons, arms folded, cloak pulled tight against the wind. He resembles

the Citadel's war hero statues—sharp, still, with eyes locked on a distant horizon.

We don't say much.

Not much can be said without causing pain.

“You know the entrance protocols,” he says finally.
“You know what their Sentinels look for.”

“Yes.” My voice comes out steadier than I feel.
“Inconsistencies. Hesitations. Emotional spikes.
Anything that doesn't match their predicted
behavioral schema.”

“And you?” His gaze sharpens. “What are you
looking for?”

“The gaps,” I say automatically. “The places where
routine makes people sloppy. The seams.”

He nods once. “Good girl.”

Something hot stings the back of my eyes.

I look away before it overflows.

“Time to go,” I say.

Faelan crouches.

I swing up into the saddle and settle into place. The leather is cold and familiar under my thighs. My hands find the neck strap automatically, and fingers wrap the worn grip where they always do.

Ready? Faelan asks.

“No,” I say honestly. “But go anyway.”

She leaps.

The base falls behind us, a smudge of shadow and stubborn resistance carved into the mountain.

Ahead, the world opens.

The flight to the Citadel is long enough that my body cycles through phases—tension, adrenaline, exhaustion, numbness—while my mind loops the same thoughts over and over.

Don't flinch and overexplain. Don't look too impressed by their wards, and don't look bored, either. And don't stare at their dragons like you've been taught to hate them your whole life.

Remember the patterns, the plan, and that every step forward is one step deeper into a place that wants you dead.

As the sun climbs, the landscape shifts from rugged, Exile-haunted ridges to the structured, overly neat lines of Citadel territory. Roads appear—straight, efficient, slicing through the land like deliberate scars. Fields are terraced into perfect geometry. Even the tree lines look curated, as if anything that grew in the wrong direction was removed on principle.

“It’s like someone turned the world into a grid,” I murmur.

You sound offended, Faelan notes.

“I am offended. This much symmetry should be a crime.”

But beneath the joke is a more pressing truth: grids are easier to read. Predictable. Orderly. A system designed for control can be learned. Exploited.

The Citadel rises on the horizon slowly, almost reluctantly, as if it knows it’s being watched.

At first, it's just a bright spot against the mountain line. Then towers separate from the haze—white stone, gold-capped spires, terraces and bridges, and ward pylons humming faintly even at this distance.

It's beautiful.

And it makes my skin crawl.

The air grows colder as we climb toward it, the temperature dropping in precise increments that line up almost perfectly with the ward tiers Father mapped. Faelan's breath fogs in short puffs. Her wingbeats slow.

They're watching, she says. Not a question.

“They’re always watching,” I answer.

We approach the outer perimeter at an angle that matches the standard transfer flight path. Anything else would be flagged. I force my hands to loosen on the straps, my posture to relax into something that looks like a nervous but legitimate scholar arriving for reassignment, not an infiltrator cataloguing every angle of attack.

The first ring of wards brushes over us like cold fingers. Faelan shivers. I feel the flavor of the magic as it passes—diagnostic, measuring, cataloguing. The second ring tastes sharper, more suspicious.

The third ring—

Hurts.

Just a little. A prickle along the skin. A sting of static in my teeth.

My forged identity slate warms in my inner pocket, reacting to the scan. The runes Father encoded

flared softly, answering the Citadel's query with information dense enough to look real.

They're poking, Faelan complains, twitching her tail.

"Let them," I murmur. "We're precisely what they expect to find."

I hope.

The main landing tier opens ahead—a wide, circular platform carved into the mountain's flank, ringed with spike-like pylons that crackle faintly with blue-white light. Other dragons roost along its edges—sleek, disciplined beasts in Citadel tack, riders moving among them in crisp lines.

Faelan touches down on the outer edge.

My heart tries to escape through my ribs.

I slide off her back on legs that feel like someone else's and instantly must steady myself with a hand on her shoulder. The stone under my boots is too smooth, too perfect, too clean.

The air smells wrong.

Not like blood and smoke.

Like metal and ozone and polish and cold.

A line of Sentinels stands between the landing tier and the massive gate arch. White armor. Helmets hide their faces. Spears etched with faintly glowing runes.

One of them steps forward.

He raises his hand and palm outward. The air around his fingers shimmers with restrained power.

"Identification," he says.

The word is simple enough.

It lands like a verdict.

My fingers are stiff as I reach into my coat and pull out the slate. I hold it out with what I hope passes for controlled anxiety instead of naked terror.

He takes it.

The scanning light that passes over my body is cool and impersonal, crawling from boots to crown. I can't help the way my muscles tense at the feeling of being dissected without a knife.

I don't like this, Faelan says, shifting behind me.

Her tail flicks. A low growl rumbles in her chest.

The Sentinel's helmet tilts, just slightly, at the sound.

Then—

He reaches up and unseals it with a soft hiss.

The helmet comes off.

And I forget how to breathe.

He's...young. Not a boy, but not much older than I am. Late twenties, maybe. Hard lines were carved into his face by responsibility rather than age. Dark hair cut close at the sides, a little longer on top, wind-tossed. A thin scar slices through his left eyebrow, just enough to keep his face from being too perfect.

But it's his eyes that hit me hardest.

Cold gray.

Sharp.

Focused.

For a heartbeat, the entire world narrows to that gaze.

He looks at the slate first, reading. Then he looks at me.

Really looks.

As if the slate is just a formality and I am the data he's interested in.

My mouth goes dry.

I'm used to being watched with suspicion, contempt, and dismissal. That's normal when you're the daughter of the Exile.

This is different.

This is an appraisal.

Like he's measuring angles, cataloging microexpressions, and drafting an internal report only he can read.

Something low in my stomach tightens.

His gaze flicks briefly to Faelan, then back to me. "Transfer from the Southern Quadrant," he says, as if tasting the words. "Cryptography."

"Yes, Sentinel," I manage.

He studies me for a moment longer.

Too long.

The light on the slate blinks once, green.

Clear.

He should hand it back.

Instead, he shifts his grip on it, thumb-tracing a slow, thoughtful arc along the edge while his eyes never leave my face.

He remarks, “Your dragon isn’t large enough for long-distance tasks.”

The comment is neutral. The tone isn’t.

Faelan bristles. Rude, she projects hotly.

I force my lips not to twitch. “She’s fast,” I say. “And she fits into tight spaces. Not all problems are solved with brute force.”

For the tiniest fraction of a second, the corner of his mouth moves. Not quite a smile. More like the ghost of one he thought better of.

“And you?” he asks quietly. “Do you fit into tight spaces, Scholar?”

My pulse spikes.

“That’s what they tell me,” I say, trying to sound like someone making an awkward joke, not someone who just heard a double meaning in everything this man says.

His eyes sharpen.

He heard it too.

The wind picks up, tugging at my hair, whipping the edge of his cloak.

He finally looks down at the slate again.

“One anomaly in your registry pathing,” he murmurs, almost to himself. “Old records. Minor lag. Southern Quadrant is sloppy.”

I keep my breathing even.

He's right.

That "lag" is the forgery.

He's either buying the explanation or filing it away for later.

He hands the slate back.

Our fingers don't touch, but the air between them feels charged.

"Welcome to the Empyrean Citadel, Scholar Anya Valerius," he says. "Don't wander. The wards are unfriendly to curiosity."

Is that...advice?

A warning?

Both?

"Understood," I reply.

He steps aside, giving me a clear path through the gate.

I should walk.

I should move like a person who belongs here, at least on paper. Steady. Controlled. Appropriately nervous, but not so nervous that anyone will bother to remember my face.

Instead, I hesitate for half a heartbeat.

Something hot prickles between my shoulder blades.

A sensation like a hand pressing there.

Watching.

I step forward.

The massive gates loom over me, carved with scenes of dragons and law and victory. The arch pulses faintly with ward light, ready to swallow me whole.

Faelan nudges my back gently, urging me on.

We can still turn around, she offers softly, even though we both know we can't.

I cross the threshold.

The wards shiver over my skin, tasting, testing, and searching for fractures.

My forged identity holds.

The air on the other side is colder.

Quieter.

More dangerous.

I resist the urge to look back.

I fail.

When I glance over my shoulder, the Sentinel is still standing exactly where I left him.

Helmet tucked under one arm.

His hand rests on the hilt of a long, dark blade marked with unreadable runes.

His eyes are on me.

Not on Faelan.

Not on the other arrivals.

Me.

A slow, knowing awareness curls low in my spine.

He knows something is off.

I'm unsure how much he observes. I don't know whether he's pegged me as a liar or just a problem to be solved later.

But he's letting me in anyway.

I turn away before my face can betray what my pulse is doing.

The Citadel closes around me like a jaw.

And somewhere behind me, in that gray, watchful gaze, I feel the first sharp hook of a fate I didn't consent to take root.

CHAPTER 3

The Scholar's Ascent

ANYA

The Citadel interior assaults my senses differently than the battlefield.

Out there, everything was noisy.

Here, everything is silent.

No shouting.

No explosions.

Not even the distant rumble of dragons.

Just the controlled hum of wards and the soft cadence of boots on stone.

Faelan presses close to my leg as we step deeper past the gate—her tail tucked, wings tight, eyes jumping at every sound. She's small for a Skyling her age, but right now she feels even smaller. And I feel painfully aware of it.

“Stay with me,” I murmur.

She chirps once, a nervous little sound, then bumps her head gently against my calf.

The path leads up toward the Scholar Quarter. White stone buildings rise like carved monoliths, every line exact, every glyph etched with severe precision. Even the air smells different—cleaner, sharper, tinged faintly with whatever incense the Archive uses to preserve parchment.

But something tugs at my stomach.

Eyes.

I feel my eyes.

People glance just a moment too long.

Whisper just faintly enough that I can't catch the words.

Look at my slate in my hand, then at Faelan, then at me again.

I straighten my shoulders.

A forged identity is only as good as the confidence of the person carrying it.

A young clerk approaches at a half-jog, ink staining two fingers of his left hand.

“Apprentice Valerius?” he calls out.

My pulse jolts.

“Yes,” I answer with practiced calm.

“You’re late for your transfer screening. Come with me.”

He turns and starts walking. I follow him into a tall, circular tower—its doors etched with rotating golden glyphs.

The Transfer Tower.

Inside, an arcane platform glows beneath a lattice of sigils. Apprentices stand in line, each stepping into the center to be scanned and assigned quarters.

Faelan presses so close to me she nearly trips me.

“It’s all right,” I whisper.

It’s not. But she doesn’t need to know that.

When it’s my turn, the sentinel overseeing the platform lifts my slate.

“Valerius. Southern Quadrant Academy?”

“Yes,” I say evenly.

He frowns at the screen for half a heartbeat too long.

My lungs freeze.

But then he snorts softly, shaking his head as if at an internal thought. “Too many transfers lately. Can’t keep track of you scholars.”

He gestures to the platform. “Step up.”

I do.

Warm light sweeps up through my boots—a soft vibration crawling up my legs and spine. It tingles. Almost ticklish.

Then the light spikes. Not enough to draw attention. But enough that I feel it.

The sentinel’s eyes narrow. He taps the screen again. “Hmm.”

My heart pounds.

However, a voice from the hall calls, “Officer! Need you a moment!”

The sentinel snaps out of his concentration.

“Your alignment’s... unusual,” he mutters. “But within acceptable variance. Proceed to the dormitories. The Archivist will evaluate you tomorrow.”

I nod, trying not to sag with relief.

“Thank you,” I manage.

Faelan nudges my leg as we step outside. Her movements are jittery—nervous.

“I know,” I whisper. “I know.”

We continue along the walkway leading toward the Scholar Quarter. From up here, the Citadel spreads beneath me like a living machine—training yards, flight decks, classrooms, barracks, all arranged with geometric precision.

And on the far balcony overlooking the Rider field—

Two figures.

One tall and hard-edged white cloak snapping sharply with the breeze.

The other is older, broader, and steady as bedrock.

Xavian Theron.

And by his side—

Lycan. The Wingleader.

My feet are slow.

Xavian stands like the world itself answers to him, posture perfect, gaze cutting across the training grounds with absolute control. Lycan beside him is quieter—power not in sharp lines, but in the gravity of age and certainty.

And behind them—

A massive dragon rests on a high perch, wings folded like dark steel.

Aegis.

Even from this distance, his presence makes my chest tighten.

Ancient. Silent. Watching everything. Watching... me?

No. That's ridiculous. I look away before I can check.

"All right, little one," a voice says suddenly behind me. "This must be Faelan."

I turn.

A stable hand in brown leather approaches, gentle smile softening her freckled face. She carries a set of straps designed for small dragons and moves with the easy confidence of someone who's spent her life around creatures with claws longer than her arms.

Faelan at once backs behind my leg.

"Oh, sweet thing," the woman laughs. "Shy one, isn't she?"

"She's... not used to new places," I say carefully.

The stable hand crouches slowly, offering her hand palm-up.

Faelan huffs.

The stablehand waits.

Faelan leans forward, sniffs, and then nudges her palm.

"There we go." The woman rises, patting her side. "I'll take her to the Skyling tier. She'll be fed, bathed, and settled with the others."

My throat tightens unexpectedly. I crouch, cupping Faelan's head. "I'll be by soon. Behave."

She nuzzles my face once, soft and warm.

Then the stablehand gently clips a small guiding loop to her harness.

Faelan lets out a low, anxious croon as she's led away, wings held close, tail dragging once before she lifts it again with dignity.

I stand there, watching her disappear around a corner, feeling suddenly... too alone.

The yard feels bigger without her.

The Citadel feels colder.

And the weight of what I'm doing presses harder against my ribs.

I force my feet forward.

Up the stairs.

Through the archway.

Toward the Scholar dormitories.

But before the path curves away, I can't stop myself from glancing toward the Rider balcony one more time.

Xavian is still there.

And this time...

He's looking directly at me.

Not long. Not obviously.

Just a flicker.

A passing assessment.

Yet something in his eyes shifts in that split second—sharp interest, then something darker. Not recognition. Not suspicion.

But attention. It feels like being pinned in place by a blade.

Lycan says something beside him. Xavian answers without looking away.

Then he turns and walks deeper onto the balcony.

Gone.

I exhale shakily. Too many eyes. Too many risks.

There are too many ways this can unravel.

And it's only the end of day one.

The Scholar dormitory is quieter than I expected. Quiet halls. Quiet footsteps.

It feels like everyone here is trying not to draw attention—like the air itself punishes noise.

My assigned room is small but neat: a simple cot, a narrow desk, and a glass panel window looking over the lower courtyard. When I drop my satchel on the bed, the faint scent of soap and parchment rises from the sheets.

Faelan isn't here. The emptiness hits harder than I thought it would.

I draw a slow breath and push it down.

There's work to do.

A chime sounds through the hallway—soft, melodic. It vibrates faintly on the floorboards.

A voice echoes: “All new scholars report to the Archive for evaluation.”

I smooth my tunic, straighten my slate against my hip, and step out.

The Archive is impossible to miss.

A towering structure of glass and stone that seems to hum with stored knowledge, every wall etched

with sigils that shift when you look at them from different angles. Inside, long rows of spiraling shelves reach into shadows far above eye level.

Scholars cluster around tables, whispering, scribbling, and arguing quietly over diagrams. My instincts flare—every pattern, every glyph, every thread of logic wants to map itself in my head.

But I keep my expression neutral. Scholars are supposed to be meek.

Unassuming. Careful.

A thin woman in archivist robes approaches me. Her hair is pulled tightly into a braid wound like a crown on her head. She holds a crystal tablet with quick, decisive fingers.

“Apprentice Valerius?”

“Yes.”

“You’ll begin with resonance comprehension. Follow.”

She leads me to a crystalline pedestal where a palm-sized shard rests suspended above a runic plate. Its surface glows faintly with deep blue veins.

Not dangerous. But sensitive.

“Translate the activation glyphs,” she orders.

I nod and lean in.

The shard flickers with a pattern I recognize immediately—but I shouldn’t. Not as “Valerius.” Not as someone from “Southern Quadrant Academy.”

My pulse jumps. Breathe. Two strokes, pause, angled arc, nested curl...

I speak carefully, evenly.

“Sustain ward-line. Stabilize lattice.”

The archivist's eyebrow rises.

“That dialect is not taught in standard scholar academies.”

I freeze. My mouth opens—nothing comes out.
Say something. Anything.

“I... read ahead?”

Idiot. Too eager.

But the archivist's eyes soften unexpectedly.

“Ambitious. Good.” She marks something on her tablet. “We need precision like that. Continue.”

Relief floods my chest.

“Thank you.”

I move to the next pedestal as ordered.

But someone else is watching me.

I feel the shift in the room before I see him—the silent ripple of awareness that rolls between scholars like a cold breeze.

I turn.

A tall figure steps through the Archive doorway, armor glinting silver-white under the glyph light.

Commander Korvax.

I go still.

He moves like a blade—clean, efficient, and deadly—without drawing attention. His gaze sweeps the room in a single, clinical arc.

Taking note of all details.

Judging everything.

Missing nothing.

The archivist straightens sharply as he approaches.

“Commander.”

“Routine review,” he says. His voice is smooth and deep, but flat—emotionless. “Training accidents have increased. I’m assessing internal vulnerabilities.”

His gaze flicks across the scholars again.

Then stops.

On me.

My throat tightens.

A heartbeat passes.

Another.

Then he moves on—but the weight he leaves behind lodges like a splinter under my ribs.

The Archivist waits until he’s out of earshot.

“Do not draw attention,” she murmurs to me, barely audible. “He has a talent for... finding cracks.”

My heart beats too fast.

“I understand,” I whisper.

But before I can process that, another figure steps into view behind Korvax—ducking slightly under the archway as if barely fitting.

Broad shoulders.

Dark hair.

A confident, arrogant smirk is already in place.

Corvan.

Korvax's nephew.

He's younger than Xavian but built like someone who trains twice as much just to prove a point. His gaze sweeps the scholars with amused disdain—until it snags on me.

His smirk widens.

I look away at once.

Perfect. Exactly what I need. More attention.

He says it aloud, loud enough for his voice to echo between shelves.

I become tense.

The archivist glares at him. “Corvan, this is a place of discipline.”

“Everything's a place of discipline,” he interrupts lazily. “Doesn't mean we can't enjoy the scenery.”

Heat crawls up my neck.

I focus on the shard in front of me.

Arc. Arc. Hook stroke. Curl—

“You're Valerius,” Corvan says behind me, sounding pleased with himself. “The transfer.”

My jaw tightens. “Yes.”

He circles, stepping into my line of sight with a casual swagger.

“You don't look like a Valerius.”

My stomach drops.

“I wasn't aware names had a look.”

“Oh, they do,” he says, leaning in slightly.

“Especially forged ones.”

My blood turns to ice.

Before I can react—

A clipped, authoritative voice cuts cleanly between us:

“Corvan.”

I inhale sharply.

Commander Xavian stands at the entrance to the Archive, white cloak falling in perfect lines, expression carved from stone.

Corvan straightens, startled.

“Uncle Korvax wanted—”

“I don’t care,” Xavian says coldly. “You are interrupting an evaluation.”

Corvan bristles but steps back.

Xavian’s eyes shift to me. Not hostile, not kind, nor dismissive. Just... assessing.

The same look he gave me from the balcony. The same flicker of attention I felt from across a courtyard.

He holds my gaze for one long, unsettling second—long enough that I feel the edge of it behind my sternum.

“Continue your work,” he orders quietly.

I swallow and nod.

He turns and walks deeper into the Archive, speaking with the Archivist in hushed tones.

Corvan lingers a moment, glaring at me with a mixture of challenges and something uglier.

Then he steps away, following his uncle.

The Archivist releases a breath she'd been holding.

“Commander Theron does not intervene often,” she murmurs. “You should take care.”

I grip the shard harder than necessary.

“I intend to.”

But inside...?

Everything is tightening. Coiling. Shifting shape.

Xavian didn't recognize me. But he noticed me.

Korvax didn't accuse me.

However, he marked me.

Corvan didn't know the truth. Nonetheless, he smelled the lie.

And somewhere outside, perched above the training field...

Aegis waits. Watching. Patient. Too patient.

The Citadel may be carved from perfect stone, humming with wards and order—but the cracks are already there. And I am standing over one.

CHAPTER 4

Fractures in the Citadel

ANYA

The next morning, the Citadel feels different.

Subtle.

Off-balance.

Like a chord slightly out of tune.

The air hums with an agitation I don't fully understand—like the wards themselves are restless, jittering beneath the veneer of order. Scholar apprentices murmur in the halls, speculation rising like steam from a crack.

“Did you hear the runes flickered—?”

“The stabilization array lost power for a second—”

“Commander Korvax shut down an entire corridor—”

Rumors swirl without direction, buzzing at the edges of my thoughts as I descend the steps from the Scholar dormitory. My slate bumps softly against my hip with each step—heavy, too heavy, like the guilt of carrying someone else's name.

Faelan's absence sharpens my senses. The halls feel colder without her warmth nudging against my legs. I'm used to moving with a second heartbeat beside me. Now I feel exposed, raw.

Focus.

The Archive tower gleams ahead, sunlight catching in its glass panels, glyphs flickering across its surface like living script. Beneath it, the wide lower courtyard spreads like a stage—scholars drifting in

small clusters while Riders move with precision across the field beyond.

My steps slow as a ripple moves through the crowd.

Lycan stands at the edge of the training yard, speaking to a group of officers. His presence draws eyes without effort. Calm. Certain. He carries the kind of authority that doesn't need enforcement—it simply exists, and the world adjusts around it.

Beside him, perched on a high basalt roost—Aegis. His silhouette cleaves the sky. Wings folded. Tail coiled loosely over the stone. Eyes glowing faintly like coals in deep wind.

He doesn't move—not even to breathe—but the surrounding air seems to bend, ripple, and resist.

I look away before those ember eyes can turn toward me. Before I can start imagining things that don't exist. Before I can let fear—or fascination—grow into something dangerous.

“Apprentice Valerius.” The voice jolts me.

I turn to see Archivist Seran striding toward me, tablet in hand, brown robes swishing.

“Your pattern assessment is scheduled now.” I swallow and nod.

“Of course.”

She leads me deeper into the Archive, into a restricted wing filled with ancient diagrams suspended in crystalline sheets, runes flickering with arcane complexity.

“Stand there,” Seran instructs, pointing to a dais carved with precise geometric grooves.

I step onto it, the floor cool beneath my boots.

Seran lifts a shard—larger than yesterday’s—etched with an intricate lattice of glyphs. Its faint glow shifts subtly with each pulse, like a heartbeat struggling to stay steady.

“This fragment was recovered from the northern front,” Seran says. “We need an interpretive reading of the sequence. Begin with the external stabilizers.”

I study the shard, breathing slowly as the pattern unfolds in my mind.

Stroke. Stroke. Hook. Pause.

The rhythm clicks; the meaning unwinds itself like thread between my fingers.

“Reinforce containment line. Adjust flow to match winter harmonics,” I translate quietly.

Seran’s eyebrows rise.

“You read that quickly.”

“The dialect resembles pre-Expansion glyphs,” I say. “Pattern recognition more than study.”

“Mm.” She makes a note. “And the internal inscription?”

The inner symbols are harder. They wiggle faintly like ink in water.

I lean closer.

The glyphs shift. Once. Twice.

Then—

They fracture.

Like a crack running through glass.

A flash of bright white light slices across the shard
and the runic plate beneath me.

The air stings.

A bead of cold sweat forms at the back of my
spine.

“What—?” Seran snaps, stepping forward.

The light blinks out.

The shard drops—clattering sharply against the
pedestal.

Seran pales.

“That was not in the calibration.”

The surrounding wards pulse erratically once, then
settle.

Silence falls like a held breath.

Behind us, someone says sharply,

“Check the ward conduits.”

“Already doing it!”

More scholars rush to consoles, scanning
fluctuating runes muttering to each other.

Seran exhales slowly.

“... Valerius, step back from the pedestal.”

I obey, trying to keep my hands from shaking.

“That wasn’t me,” I say, low.

“No,” she agrees. “It wasn’t.”

We both know that’s worse.

When the evaluation concludes, Seran dismisses
me with a tighter expression than she began with.

“You may go. But Valerius—avoid any unsanctioned analyses. If something else destabilizes, Commander Korvax will intervene personally.”

My stomach sinks. I nod and step out into the hall.

The air outside tastes sharp—like the afterscent of lightning.

And just ahead, crossing the courtyard with purposeful strides—

Korvax.

His dark gray enforcement armor gleams under the morning light, the silver hawk sigil flashing across his shoulder. Every step he takes seems to bend the surrounding space, tension pooling in his wake.

He stops suddenly. Turns. Looks directly at me. My heart slams so hard it hurts.

His gaze is like a blade—cutting, precise, unhurried. Assessing me again. Then—

Movement at the top of the stairway catches my eye.

Xavian.

He descends the steps from the training balconies, stride-controlled, his posture unforgiving. Sunlight traces the edge of his jaw, the line of his throat, and the fall of his cloak. His eyes scan the courtyard, his expression giving nothing away—a look familiar to someone used to command.

His gaze brushes mine in passing. Just a flicker. But I feel it beneath my skin.

Not warmth. Not recognition. Pressure. A silent I see you.

He steps past Korvax. They exchange a tight nod—two predators acknowledging shared territory.

Then Xavian's eyes drift once more—

To me. No suspicion and no curiosity.

Just attention sharpened to a point.

He continues walking toward the Archive entrance.

Passes by me swiftly in just a few steps.

His voice, low and crisp, cuts the air:

“Apprentice Valerius.”

My breath stutters.

“Yes, Commander.”

His jaw twitches, barely perceptible.

“Report to the eastern wing this afternoon. Scholar Daniel claims you found a dialect variant he did not recognize.”

A test. A challenge. A summons. All three.

“Yes, Commander,” I repeat.

He nods once—something unreadable flickering behind his eyes—

Then disappears into the Archive. I release a breath I didn't realize I was holding.

From the training platform above, a shadow shifts.

Aegis.

Watching again. Or maybe watching everything.

I tear my gaze away and move toward the Scholar Quarter, feet suddenly unsteady.

Because the truth is—something is fracturing
inside this place.

Inside the wards. Inside the politics and inside me.
And they are all starting to notice.

CHAPTER 5

A Breath Between Us

ANYA

The eastern wing of the Archive feels colder than the rest of the Citadel.

Maybe because it's older.

Perhaps because it's buried two stories deeper.

Perhaps because the walls hum faintly, as if the runes inside them are whispering through the stone.

I'm early.

The chamber is empty except for the rows of crystalline pedestals, each holding shards, fragments, and relics from the battlefield. The room smells of old glyph dust and ozone—like lightning frozen into the air.

I stand at the nearest pedestal, reviewing my slate.

Every detail of the forged identity must be airtight.

Birth registry—clean.

Education records—changed.

Dialect exposure—marginal.

Evaluation scores—high but not perfect.

Except for the transfer resonance yesterday and the shard that flickered this morning.

Except the way Xavian said my name like a verdict. Valerius.

A name that isn't mine. A name that could get me killed.

I inhale deeply, then look up—and startle.

Lycan stands at the archway.

He's alone. No officers. No armor today—just soft gray leather reinforced at the shoulders, the fabric worn from years of use, not privilege.

He is somehow taller up close. And... kinder.

His presence doesn't press into the room like Xavian's does. It fills it. Warms it. It makes it feel... human.

“Apprentice,” he says softly.

My spine snaps straight.

“Wingleader—sir—Commander—”

He lifts a hand, a gentle motion. “Lycan is fine. I'm no archivist. I'm only here because the lower wards are unstable, and Xavian insists on overworking himself.”

I blink.

He said Xavian's name is like a father saying the name of a stubborn, beloved son.

Lycan steps inside, glancing at one of the pedestals.

“When I was your age, this wing was sealed. Too much power flowing through the old conduits.” He touches the wall with two fingers. “The Citadel feels... tense. Like it's bracing for something.”

“Is that normal?” I ask quietly.

Lycan studies me in a way that makes me feel seen but not judged.

“No,” he says simply. “And neither are the patterns you solved yesterday.”

My breath stutters. He knows. He knows I understood them too quickly.

I nod carefully. “I’ve always been good with patterns.”

He smiles faintly. “Good scholars see the rules. Exceptional ones see what breaks them.”

Before I can answer, heavy footsteps echo down the hallway.

Xavian.

The temperature in the room drops half a degree. Lycan’s smile warms but turns wry, like he’s expecting the interruption. “Speak of the devil.”

Xavian strides into the chamber, white cloak trimmed in silver, hair pulled back, eyes sharp. For a moment—just one—he looks younger in Lycan’s presence. Not softer. But more human. Like the weight he carries is a burden they share.

“Apprentice Valerius has arrived,” Lycan notes.

“I can see that,” Xavian answers, voice clipped. He crosses the room with deliberate steps. “Your presence is not required here, Wingleader.”

Lycan’s lips twitch. “My presence is never needed. I just enjoy ruining your attempt to intimidate the scholars.”

Xavian shoots him with an exasperated look. “I do not intimidate anyone.”

Lycan’s brows rise.

Xavian turns away with a tight exhale, muttering something under his breath that sounds suspiciously like a curse. Then his attention lands squarely on me.

“Valerius,” he says. “Follow.”

He doesn’t wait to see if I obey. Of course he doesn’t. Everyone obeys him.

I glance once at Lycan. He gives me a small, reassuring nod.

So, I follow Xavian deeper into the wing.

He stops at a pedestal holding a larger relic—a curved shard of obsidian glass inscribed with fading runes along its edges. The surrounding air feels colder.

“This was recovered after the Red Canyon ambush,” he says.

My stomach flips.

The Red Canyon.

The same battle where the Citadel lost an entire squadron.

The same battle where Exiles allegedly unleashed a forbidden ward-break glyph.

The same battle my father barely survived.

“What do you see?” Xavian asks.

I step closer, fingers hovering above the shard.

The symbols aren’t static.

They shimmer faintly, like reflections on dark water.

But the pattern is wrong.

Too many arcs.

Too few anchors.

A fracture running down the center like a broken spine.

“It’s destabilized,” I whisper.

Xavian’s jaw tightens. “Explain.”

“The sequence is collapsing,” I say. “The core glyph is trying to pull in energy it can’t hold. It’s... hungry. Like something stripped the anchors away.”

He watches me closely.

“How long would it take a scholar to identify that?” he asks.

I freeze.

This is a trap.

“A trained scholar? Hours.”

“And you?”

I swallow. “Minutes.”

His eyes harden.

“Your academy records show you’ve never worked with warfront relics.”

Cold sweat prickles down my arms. “I—read extensively.”

“Reading does not replicate field instinct.”

He steps closer.

Too close.

I can see the slight scar that cuts through his right eyebrow, the faint dust of chalk runes on his sleeve, and the controlled power in every line of his body.

His voice drops.

“Who taught you to read collapse sequences?”

I can’t breathe.

Say something.

Say anything.

“I just... understand patterns.”

Xavian holds my gaze for a moment too long.

Then—

A deep groan shatters the silence.

Stone cracking.

Metal straining.

Wards screaming in a frequency that crawls down my spine.

I whip around.

A hairline fracture is racing across the ceiling of the wing—splitting stone, glyphs flickering like panicked fireflies.

Xavian curses under his breath.

“Move.”

The floor trembles.

Dust drifts.

A beam cracks, tilting dangerously above us.

Xavian reaches me in two strides.

One arm hooks around my waist—hard, unyielding—dragging me back as the beam crashes down exactly where I’d stood.

The impact shakes the entire wing.

I gasp, knees buckling.

His grip stays firm.

Too firm.

His breath is warm against my temple, but the rest of him feels carved from stone—held together only by discipline and rage.

I can't think.

My heart slams painfully against my ribs.

He lowers his head slightly—not close, but enough that his voice vibrates through me rather than into the air.

“You almost died,” he says, low. “Do not move until I tell you.”

The dust settles slowly, drifting in lazy spirals through the cramped alcove as the thunder of collapsing stones fades into a muffled roar.

For a long, breathless moment, nothing exists except the press of Xavian's body against mine.

His arm is locked around my waist—steel-hard, unyielding—holding me completely still while the world shakes itself apart inches away. His breath comes fast, controlled but sharp, ghosting against my forehead in warm bursts.

I can feel every heartbeat.

His.

Mine.

My palms are flat against his chest—when did that happen? —and I can feel the tremor beneath the armor; a quiver so faint I wouldn't have believed it if I wasn't touching him.

We're alive.

That realization hits me like a second collapse.

Alive.

His grip tightens for a fraction of a second as the last stones settle behind us, and his chest rises with a long, shuddering breath that warms my cheek.

We should move.

We should separate.

He doesn't.

Neither do I.

Xavian lifts his head, just enough to look down at me. The intensity in his eyes is different this time—no cold command, no clipped disapproval.

Something rawer lurks there, stripped of rank and restraint.

He's not looking at a scholar.

He's looking at me.

His gaze drags down my face slowly, like he's memorizing every line, and when it stops on my mouth, something in my spine melts.

My heart slams so hard I'm afraid he can hear it.

His thumb brushes my rib as he adjusts his grip, and the small, accidental touch sends a bolt of heat through me that has nothing to do with fear.

“Are you hurt?” he asks, voice low and rough—rougher than I’ve ever heard it.

“I—” My voice dies in my throat.

Because he leans closer.

Not much.

Just enough.

His forehead almost touches mine.

His breath mixes with mine.

The air between us disappears like it was never there.

I can smell the smoke clinging to him, the sharp scent of cold metal and sweat. The faint trace of something warm and human that shouldn't make my stomach twist the way it does.

I'm supposed to push him away. I don't.

His eyes flick to my lips again. He doesn't hide it this time.

He exhales softly—one breath, shaky enough to betray something he doesn't want me to see.

“Xavian...” I whisper, and the sound of his name in my voice freezes him.

Something breaks in his expression.

He leans in. Slowly. Deliberately.

Like he's fighting the urge but losing anyway.

The distance between us shrinks to a dangerous inch.

His nose almost grazes mine.

His lips barely part. A persistent heat coils in my stomach.

This is insane. Wrong. Suicidal.

But my hands curl into his armor, pulling him closer instead of pushing him away. My body makes the decision for me.

His breath brushes my mouth.

He's going to kiss me.

And gods help me; I want him to.

A tremor runs through his hand on my waist. A soft sound escapes him—half exhale, half something strangled and helpless.

His lips hover a whisper from mine.

Then—a distant voice shouts from the corridor outside:

“Commander Theron!”

Xavian jerks like someone just plunged a blade into his spine.

He pulls back sharply, releasing me so fast I must catch myself on the wall. The air between us snaps back into cold reality.

His jaw clamps shut, and his eyes ice over.

His posture returns to perfect military rigidity.

The transformation is ruthless.

“Don’t,” he says—voice flat, emotionless. “Don’t ever look at me like that again.”

The words hit harder than Corvan’s blade ever could.

For a moment, I can’t breathe.

It wasn’t survival that almost killed me.

It was he.

Boots thunder down the corridor. Korvax arrives with three enforcement officers, eyes sweeping the debris.

“Theron,” he barks. “Report.”

Xavian turns sharply.

“Structural collapse,” he says. “Triggered by an internal ward fault.”

Korvax’s eyes flick to me.

Lingering.

Measuring.

Accusing.

“A ward fault,” he repeats slowly. “Convenient.”

Ice spills down my spine.

Xavian steps half a pace in front of me.

Subtle.

Barely noticeable.

But unmistakably protective.

“No one touched the conduits,” he says coldly.

“And if you intend to imply sabotage, present evidence.”

Korvax’s jaw shifts.

But he backs down—for now.

“Very well,” he says. “We’ll investigate.”

His gaze drifts toward me once more.

Long.

Piercing.

Uncomfortable.

Then he turns and leaves; Corvan trails behind him with a look that promises trouble.

Silence settles.

My breathing is still uneven.

Xavian looks at the fallen beam, then at me with an expression I can't read. Not concerned. Not anger. Something in between. Something sharper.

"You will relocate your studies to a safer wing," he says.

I nod quickly. "Yes, Commander."

He turns to leave—

Then pauses.

Looks back.

And for the first time, his voice softens a fraction.

"Be cautious, Valerius."

Then he's gone.

Leaving me standing in the wreckage, heart racing, the imprint of his grip burning into my waist.

This place is breaking.

The wards.

The politics.

The secrets.

And I'm standing in the center of every fault line.

CHAPTER 6

Pressure Points

ANYA

By afternoon, the Citadel feels like a living creature having trouble breathing.

The air tastes metallic. Sigils flicker faintly. The hum in the walls is now half a tone higher.

Even the scholars feel it—hushed whispers trailing in the halls like the echo of a distant alarm. Every footstep seems louder, every hallway narrower, and every door heavier.

I can feel the pressure. Everyone does. But no one says it aloud.

Because admitting the Citadel is unstable is like admitting the sky might fall.

As I walk into the main Archive chamber, the tension thickens. Scholars cluster in anxious knots. Their robes rustle like dry leaves, hands gripping slates a little too tight.

I catch bits of their conversations:

“The wards sputtered again—” “—felt a pulse in the east tower—” “—Lycan was seen in the lower conduits, inspecting the runic grid.”

And then:

“Korvax is furious.”

Of course he is.

I head toward my bench. It’s situated near a window overlooking the training fields—a fact that, until today, I considered a luxury. Now it feels like exposure.

As I lay out my notes, a shadow passes across the glass.

Not cloud. Not bird.

A dragon.

Massive. Silent. Dark as obsidian.

Aegis.

He glides above the field with impossible grace for a creature his size, wings slicing through the air without sound. When he tilts his head, sunlight glances off his scales, shimmering in deep steel blues.

He circles once more, and for a moment—I swear his gaze finds me again.

My breath hitches.

Ridiculous. Paranoia.

I force myself to turn away.

“Valerius!”

Jalen’s voice cuts through my thoughts.

The tall Scholar apprentice jogs toward me, hair tied in a messy knot, slate tucked under one arm, expression tight.

“Rough morning?” he asks, offering a sympathetic half-smile.

“You could say that.”

He nods. “The wards flickered twice. Commander Korvax stormed by like someone insulted his lineage.”

Jalen leans closer, lowering his voice. “Rumor is he’s looking for someone to blame.”

A chill slides down my spine.

Jalen notices. “Hey, relax. It’s not you. It’s... well, okay, it could be you—”

I glare at him.

“—I mean because you were close to the collapse earlier!” he says quickly. “Not because you did anything.”

I exhale shakily. “He stared at me. In the debris.”

“That’s what he does,” Jalen says with a shrug. “He stares at everyone like he’s picking the weakest to eat first.”

That does not help.

“But you’re fine,” he adds, patting my shoulder. “Xavian.” “Xavian was there.”

I freeze.

Jalen doesn’t notice. “The Commander practically pulled you out with his bare hands, right? That’s... something.”

“Something?” I echo.

Jalen grins. “You know. Significant.”

“No,” I snap. “It isn’t.”

He lifts his hands in surrender. “Okay! Okay. Just... people noticed. Thought you should know.”

My cheeks burn.

Before I can respond, a loud crack echoes through the hall—like a whip.

Every scholar flinches.

“What was that?” someone whispers.

The air pulses once.

I feel it in my teeth.

Jalen swallows. “Not good.”

Not good at all.

To calm myself, I dive back into my assigned task: reanalyzing the glyph pattern from the fragment that nearly collapsed the wing.

But the moment I touch the raw sequence, something is wrong.

The glyphs warp.

Not because I misread them.

But because the pattern itself is... breaking.

Like the shard wants to rewrite itself.

My stomach twists.

It shouldn’t be possible.

I switch angles. I analyze again. And again.

Each time, the lattice fractures uniquely— sometimes fractalizing outward, sometimes collapsing inward.

It’s as though the pattern is searching for stability and failing.

Repeatedly.

A cold sweat trickles down my spine.

“This isn’t natural,” I whisper.

A voice answers behind me.

“No. It isn’t.”

I jump.

Xavian stands nearby, back straight and arms folded behind him.

His presence hits like a shockwave.

Jalen vanishes so fast I barely see him move.

Xavian's eyes flick to the glyph display, then back to me.

"You see it too," he says quietly.

It isn't a question.

"Yes," I admit. "It's... deteriorating. Mutating."

"Explain."

"The anchors are decaying. It's acting like a live pattern that's lost its stabilizer." My voice shakes.
"Like something disrupted its core glyph during casting. Or after."

Xavian steps closer.

I don't move. I can't.

His shadow falls across the pedestal, and suddenly everything feels smaller, tighter, and hotter.

"This is the third artifact this week with lattice decay," he says. "If you have insight, give it."

"I'm trying," I say, breath shaky.

His gaze sharpens—not angry. Not annoyed.

Focused.

He searches my face for something. I don't know what.

Then—

A deep rumble vibrates the floor.

The window behind us rattles violently. Glyphs flicker. Light stutters.

“What now?” I breathe.

Xavian turns toward the hall instinctively.

“Stay here,” he orders.

“No.” It slips out before I can stop it.

His eyes snap to mine.

Heat flares in my cheeks.

“I mean, what if it’s another collapse?”

He hesitates.

Just a heartbeat.

Enough to reveal he’s considering the possibility.

Then his jaw sets.

“Do not move,” he repeats—and rushes out.

I grip the edge of the pedestal, knuckles white.

The rumble fades. Silence returns. Too quickly.

Something is wrong.

Minutes later, the disturbance is explained:

A convoy of high-ranking officers enters the Archive.

Korvax at the front.

Lycan behind him.

Several enforcement officers flanking.

The scholars go silent instantly.

Korvax strides in like the wing is his belonging. His cape swirls sharply behind him, his jaw clenched, his expression cold enough to crack steel.

Lycan's presence is different. Steady. Measured. Quiet. But his gaze is heavy with concern.

“Clear the chamber!” Korvax orders.

Scholars scatter like frightened birds.

Except me.

Of course.

He stops when he sees me.

“Valerius,” he says, voice deceptively calm. “Still in the Archive?”

“Commander Theron asked me to continue evaluating decay sequences.”

Korvax’s eyes narrow. “Did he.”

Lycan steps between us slightly, his tone smooth. “Korvax, she’s a scholar. Let her work.”

“Work?” Korvax snaps. “Or tamper?”

The room goes still.

My lungs freeze.

“I didn’t touch anything,” I say. “The decay has been present in multiple samples—”

“Enough,” Korvax cuts sharply.

But Lycan doesn’t flinch.

“The decay is real,” Lycan says quietly. “And Valerius saw it. She has a talent we need.”

There is nothing aggressive in his voice. No challenge. But the authority behind it is undeniable.

Yet Korvax bristles.

“We do not rely on untested scholars with questionable records.”

My heart stops.

Lycan’s gaze flicks toward me for the briefest moment.

He heard that.

Everyone did.

Before Korvax can lean in further, another presence enters the chamber—

Xavian.

His expression is thunder.

He strides between them without hesitation.

“What is happening?” he demands.

Korvax turns sharply. “Your scholar is interfering with sensitive artifacts.”

“She identified a collapse pattern none of your officers saw,” Xavian says coldly. “Unless you prefer ignorance.”

The room holds its breath.

Korvax’s nostrils flare. “Watch your tone, boy.”

The word lands like a slap.

Xavian stiffens.

Lycan moves like a shadow, stepping subtly beside him—not blocking him, not shielding him, but supporting him. Quietly. Powerfully.

“Enough,” Lycan says softly.

Korvax looks between them.

Then look at me.

His stare is colder than ice.

“This scholar,” he says, “will be reassigned for evaluation. Immediately.”

My blood chills.

Reassigned. In Citadel terms? That means isolation. Interrogation. Scrutiny. Potential expulsion. Or worse.

Xavian’s jaw flexes.

“On what grounds?” he demands.

Korvax smiles. A thin, cruel curve.

“Because I find her... interesting.”

A low growl ripples from the training yard outside.

Dragons.

They even feel the tension.

Xavian steps forward, voice like a blade.

“She is under my purview.”

Korvax’s eyes glitter.

“Yes. That’s the problem.”

Lycan’s voice slices into the moment. “Korvax—”

“If she has nothing to hide,” Korvax says loudly, drowning him out, “she will submit to a full verification.”

My heart slams.

My cover can’t survive a full verification.

I will be exposed, destroyed, and dead.

The room spins.

Xavian opens his mouth—

Then stops.

Because the Citadel suddenly groans like a wounded beast.

A shockwave pulses through the walls.

Lights flicker.

Runes dim.

A sound like a breaking spine echoes from the west wing.

Scholars scream. Officers shout. Dragons roar in the distance—Aegis's call unmistakable above all others.

The entire Citadel holds its breath.

And in that second of chaos—

Korvax's attention shifts.

Not much. Not enough to be obvious.

But enough.

Enough for Xavian to step closer to me. Enough for Lycan to scan the ceiling and for the wards to pulse again.

And enough for me to realize—

Everything is about to collapse.

Not just the Citadel.

My cover. My mission. And my life.

And Korvax is not going to wait.

He is going to force it.

Sooner than planned. Sooner than I'm ready for.

The fault lines deepen.

And the duel that will define everything is about to
be set in motion.

CHAPTER 7

The Walls Listen

ANYA

The Citadel breathes differently at dusk.

In the mornings, it hums with discipline—orderly footsteps, clipped commands, the sharp metallic scent of training fields. But at dusk... At dusk, it feels like the world holds its breath.

The wards glow faintly beneath the evening sky, soft amber ribbons weaving along the ramparts, but the light flickers in and out like a candle pressed too close to the wind.

The Scholars gather on the upper walkways in small clusters, crossing between towers with hurried steps. No one lingers tonight. No one trusts stillness. The collapse earlier rattled everyone.

Including me.

Especially me.

My hands still tremble faintly whenever I stop moving long enough to notice.

I should be in my dorm, documenting glyph decay, preparing for the next evaluation, and pretending to be Valerius. But I cannot ignore what I overheard earlier.

Korvax wants a “verification.” A formal one.

Which means—

He suspects me. And he intends to expose me.

My breath stutters as I reach the eastern balcony that overlooks the training grounds. The air tastes

like cold stone and distant smoke. Drills are over, but some Riders stay for extra practice.

And there—standing with the rigid posture of someone who refuses exhaustion—is Xavian Theron.

He oversees a small group of late cadets, arms crossed, jaw tense. His silhouette is cuttingly defined against the dying light, cloak catching the faint breeze.

My stomach twists.

I need to avoid him.

I start to turn away—

“Apprentice Valerius?”

I freeze.

The voice is not Xavian’s.

It is Corvan’s.

Of course it is.

He leans against the stone railing at the far end of the balcony, arms draped lazily over the edge like he owns the view. His expression sharpens when he sees that his voice startles me.

He smirks.

“Jumpier than yesterday,” he says. “Wonder why?”

I straighten my spine. “Do you need something, Cadet?”

He clicks his tongue. “So formal. Relax. I just wanted to check on you. That wing collapse looked... close.”

“Thank you,” I answer curtly, already stepping sideways.

But he pushes off the railing, blocking my path with casual arrogance.

“Avoiding me?” he asks. “That’s unwise.”

“Is there a reason you’re here?” I manage through clenched teeth.

He laughs—a sharp sound that echoes too loudly across the balcony.

“Reasons are overrated. People are more interesting. Especially the mysterious ones.”

He steps closer. I refuse to step back.

But he notices my hesitation. And he likes it.

“Scholar Valerius,” he murmurs, leaning slightly forward, “tell me something.”

“No.”

He laughs again.

“Not even one detail? Not even where you were trained, or how you solved that dialect that even Seran struggled with?”

I glare at him. “I’m good at what I do.”

“Too good,” he says softly. “And incredibly lucky. Most people who stand in Theron’s way get crushed.”

My breath catches.

“What—”

His smile widens. “You haven’t noticed how... interested he is?”

Heat rises along my spine, sharp and humiliating.

“He is not—”

“Oh, but he is.” Corvan tilts his head. “He looks at you.”

“He looks at everyone,” I counter.

“Not like that.”

My pulse pounds angrily.

I force my calm tone. “If you’re finished—”

“Not quite.” His voice drops. “I think you’re hiding something, Valerius.”

Ice shoots through my veins.

“And I’m going to find out what.”

A low rumble echoes from the yard—the sound of a dragon adjusting its wings. Corvan glances over the railing briefly, satisfied with the tension he’s sown.

He steps back finally, offering a mock bow.

“See you soon, Scholar.”

Then he walks away, whistling.

I grip the railing until my palms ache.

This is spiraling fast.

Too fast.

By the time I reach the lower gallery, the corridors are nearly empty. Torches flicker on the walls. The shadows seem deeper tonight, stretched by the failing wards.

My steps echo as I turn into the long hallway leading to the Scholar stairwell—

Voices stop me.

Low. Arguing. Sharp.

I slip into an alcove beside a pillar, my heartbeat thundering.

“Not stable,” Lycan says.

His voice is low but firm. “The conduits are fraying. Every collapse pulls more strain into the lattice.”

“I am aware,” Xavian snaps back.

The sound of boots pacing.

“But Korvax refuses to suspend discipline or close the east wing,” Lycan continues. “He’s using this instability as leverage. Against you.”

“I don’t mind what he uses.” Xavian’s voice is clipped, tight. “The Scholars are in danger.”

A pause.

Then Lycan says quietly, “You’re worried about one Scholar.”

My breath lodges in my throat.

Xavian doesn’t respond.

Lycan’s tone softens. “She’s clever.”

“Too clever,” Xavian mutters. “And her record is—”

“A record can be forged.”

My blood turns cold.

Forged. He said forged.

Xavian growls under his breath. “Precisely.”

Lycan sighs. “If she were a threat, she’d have made her move already.”

“That is not how spies work.”

Spy.

There it is. The word I dreaded.

Lycan’s voice deepens. “Xavian, listen to me. I’ve seen enough war to know when someone is hiding something because they intend harm—and when they hide something because they are afraid.”

Xavian says nothing.

Lycan presses gently. “And I saw fear in her eyes. Not malice.”

My chest tightens painfully.

He saw me.

All of me.

Silence stretches.

Then Xavian exhales sharply.

“Korvax wants her isolated,” he says. “And you know what that means.”

Lycan’s footsteps stop.

“You’re not going to let him,” the Wingleader says. Not a question.

“I won’t allow him to interrogate a scholar without grounds. It’s a breach of protocol.”

“Everything is a breach of protocol these days,” Lycan murmurs.

Another long silence.

Then Lycan speaks again, voice softer. “Xavian.”

“Hm?”

“You’re becoming invested.”

My heart jolts.

Xavian’s tone sharpens like a blade. “I am not.”

“Don’t lie to an old man,” Lycan chuckles. “You watch her too closely.”

“That’s because she’s suspicious.”

“No,” Lycan says simply. “It’s because she feels familiar.”

I nearly choke on air.

Familiar?

Xavian inhales audibly, the action noted with a trace of discomfort. “Enough.”

“You should rest,” Lycan says gently.

“I will when this place stops falling apart.”

Lycan laughs softly. “Then you’ll never rest.”

Footsteps approach—toward my alcove.

I press myself against the cold stone, breath held.

Xavian passes first.

His profile is sharp against the torchlight—jaw clenched, brows furrowed, eyes storm-dark. For a moment, he stops, as if sensing something behind him.

He turns his head slightly—

I hold my breath until my lungs burn.

But then Lycan calls him, and he moves on.

When they disappear around the corner, I exhale shakily.

They suspect me. Both.

Several reasons. Different instincts. Same danger.

And yet—

Xavian defended me. And Lycan understands me.

Two sides of a trap I cannot escape.

I force myself toward the Scholar stairwell, mind spinning.

But at the bottom of the stairs—

I collide into someone turning the corner.

Books scatter. Slates clatter on the floor.

“I’m so sorry,” I start.

Then freeze.

Because the person I bumped into is not a scholar.

It’s Commander Korvax.

His armor gleams like wet steel even in dim torchlight. His dark hair is slicked back, the silver hawk on his shoulder gleaming ominously.

He looks down at me slowly. Deliberately. Like a predator noticing a rabbit that ran into its paws.

“Valerius,” he says.

My throat tightens.

“Commander,” I manage.

He crouches, picking up one of the shards that spilled from my satchel. His fingers brush their surface. The glyph pulses faintly.

He examines it.

“Analyzing collapse patterns without authorization?” he asks.

My stomach drops. “I was assigned—”

“By Theron.” His voice hardens. “Of course.”

He stands, towering over me.

“What do you think of the Citadel’s condition?” he asks casually.

I freeze.

This is a trap.

“I—have no opinion, Commander.”

He smiles.

A thin, cold, terrifying smile.

“Oh, but you do. You wouldn’t be looking at broken glyphs otherwise.”

He hands me the shard.

His fingers brush mine.

Cold shoots through my arm.

“I think,” he says softly, leaning in, “that you know more than you should.”

My pulse thunders.

“And I think,” Korvax continues, “that you’ve been careful to avoid leaving any evidence.”

My body goes numb.

Then he whispers:

“But everyone makes mistakes.”

My breathing shatters.

He steps back, eyes gleaming.

“We will speak again soon, Apprentice.”

Then he turns and leaves, boots echoing ominously against the stone.

The hallway seems to close in on me as he disappears.

I kneel to pick up my things, hands shaking violently.

He knows. Not everything. Not enough to confront me.

But enough to tighten the noose.

And enough to set the pieces in motion.

When I finally return to my dorm, the room feels too small. Too dark. Too quiet.

Faelan isn’t here to press against me. No warmth. No comfort.

Just silence.

I collapse onto the bed, chest tight.

I cannot hide much longer. Xavian suspects. Lycan sees through me. Corvan circles like a vulture. Korvax is hunting.

The Collapsing wards. The political tension. The fracture patterns.

It all feels connected.

And in the center of it—

Me.

I bury my face in my hands.

The Citadel is cracking.

And I am standing on the thin edge.

One wrong step—

And I fall.

CHAPTER 8

The Unraveling

ANYA

By morning, the Citadel feels... hungover.

Every corridor vibrates with the ghost of last night's shockwave—like the walls remember the blow and haven't stopped trembling since. Even the air tastes bitter with unsettled magic.

Scholars walk faster than usual. Eyes down. Voices low. As though speaking too loudly might draw the attention of whatever is cracking the Citadel from the inside.

I carry my slate with both hands just to give them something to do. They've been shaking since dawn.

A faint rumble rolls through the stone beneath my boots.

Another. And another.

Like a heartbeat buried beneath granite.

The Citadel is alive. And it's afraid.

The Archivist drones on during the morning briefing, but no one is listening.

“...glyph consistency remains an area of priority...”

The room is packed—much more than normal. Scholars from multiple tiers stand shoulder-to-shoulder, whispering nervously. Everyone wants answers. No one has them. Not even Seran, whose eyes stay fixed on her tablet, tapping too quickly.

“...we will temporarily reroute all evaluations to the west chamber...”

I'm seated near the back, next to Jalen, who keeps bouncing his leg restlessly.

He leans in and whispers, "What are the odds the entire building collapses?"

"Jalen—"

"I'm serious! Last night I swear I saw a fissure glowing through the library wall."

I don't answer.

Because part of me wonders if it was a fissure...or a warning.

Seran clears her throat.

"I understand tensions are high," she says. "But all scholars must remain focused on their duties. We are dealing with isolated malfunctions—"

A deep groan interrupts her.

It rolls through the chamber like thunder underwater. Lights flicker overhead. Glyph lines pulse erratically, dimming... then flaring bright... then going dark again.

Scholars gasp. Someone yelps. Seran's face drains of color.

"Remain calm!" she calls over the rising panic.

But she doesn't sound calm herself.

The runes on my bench shudder violently. My slate jumps an inch.

Then silence.

The wards stabilize again.

Barely.

Seran swallows and forces a strained smile. “As I said—isolated.”

The entire room looks at her like she’s lost her mind.

But she continues the briefing anyway, knuckles white against her tablet.

I barely hear her.

Because across the room, near the entrance—

Korvax stands in the shadows. Watching.

Not taking part. Not inspecting.

Just seeing.

Me.

A chill crawls up my spine.

Jalen notices my stiff posture and follows my line of sight.

“Oh no,” he whispers. “He’s here?”

I nod once.

Jalen gulps. “That man’s soul is made of cold iron and disappointment.”

“That’s not helpful.”

“Nothing is helpful when Korvax is staring at you like he’s already planned your funeral.”

My hands clench around my slate.

Korvax stays silent throughout the entire briefing. When the Scholars begin to disperse, he steps out of the shadow and glides toward me like a hawk sighting prey.

Jalen vanishes the moment he appears. Not subtle. But smart.

Korvax stops merely inches from me. His eyes gleam with quiet malice, but his expression is smooth. Controlled.

“Apprentice,” he says.

“Commander.”

He studies me for a long, unbearable moment.

Then—

“Walk with me.”

It’s not a request.

I fall into steps behind him, heart hammering.

We move into a quiet side corridor lit only by small rune lamps. Each pulse of light reflects against Korvax’s armor like a heartbeat made of steel.

He doesn’t speak until we reach a narrow alcove overlooking the inner courtyard.

Then he turns sharply.

“You are becoming a distraction,” he says.

My breath stutters. “I—I don’t understand.”

“You do.”

He steps closer.

I don’t retreat, but every nerve in my body screams to run.

“The wing collapse was an anomaly,” he continues. “Your presence there? Furthermore, an anomaly.”

My throat tightens.

“And anomalies,” he says softly, “interest me.”

I force my voice to be steady. “I was following Commander Theron’s orders.”

“Yes,” Korvax murmurs. “Theron. He is... curious about you.”

I don’t respond.

Because what can I possibly say to that?

Korvax tilts his head.

“I wonder why,” he muses. “A Scholar with little documented field training. A transfer student with a nearly spotless academic record. A girl who reads dialects even our archivists struggle with.”

A bead of sweat rolls down my neck.

Korvax leans in just slightly.

“You stand out, Valerius,” he says in a deep voice.
“And that makes you dangerous.”

I open my mouth to protest—

A sudden roar shakes the courtyard below.

A dragon. Fierce. Loud. Agitated.

Korvax barely flinches.

“Report to the west chamber,” he orders. “You will undergo a supervised analysis this afternoon.”

My pulse spikes.

“Supervised by whom?” I ask before I can stop myself.

His smile is thin and cruel.

“By me.”

He leaves before I can breathe again.

I reach the Scholar dormitory hallway on shaky legs.

My room is quiet and cold. The air tastes like stone dust and fading incense.

I close the door behind me and sink slowly to the edge of my bed.

Korvax wants a supervised analysis.

Which means—

He intends to break me.

Not physically. Not yet. But mentally. Politically. Strategically.

Until I crack.

I bury my face in my hands.

It's too soon. I'm not ready. My cover is too thin. My control is too fragile.

The walls feel like they're closing in.

A soft sound breaks the silence.

A chirp.

My heart leaps into my throat.

“Faelan?”

I turn—and there she is.

Her small gray form pushes through the half-open door, harness still on, eyes wide and worried. She chirps again, flapping her wings weakly before leaping onto the bed beside me.

Relief hits me so fast it nearly knocks me over.

“Faelan,” I whisper, pulling her into my arms.

She's warm. Real. Home.

I just now realized I needed this.

She nuzzles into my chin, rumbling softly, then pulls back to examine my face, like she understands everything going wrong even if she can't name it.

I stroked her head gently.

"I'm okay," I murmur. A lie. She doesn't believe it. Her little claws tighten on my sleeve.

And for the first time in days, tears sting behind my eyes.

Not fear. Not grief. And not pain.

Just... relief.

Brief. Dangerous. Necessary.

I wipe my face, inhale shakily, and kiss her snout.

"You need to go back," I whisper. "They'll notice you're gone."

She huffs stubbornly.

I force a smile. "I'll visit soon. I promise."

A soft knock jolts me upright.

Faelan freezes.

I swallow. "Hide."

She slips to the bathroom instantly—quiet and quick.

The knock repeats.

I brace myself and open the door.

Xavian stands there.

In full armor.

His expression is unreadable.

My lungs forget how to work.

“Commander,” I manage.

His eyes sweep over me—quick but thorough. Checking. Measuring. Making sure I’m not physically harmed.

He steps inside without waiting for permission. I shut the door with trembling fingers.

He turns to face me fully.

“Korvax spoke to you,” he says—not a question.

“He assigned a supervised analysis.”

His jaw clenches, a muscle twitching at the hinge.

“He wants to interrogate you,” Xavian says. “Do you understand that?”

My mouth goes dry. “Yes.”

He exhales sharply, pacing once across the room. Sharp. Controlled. Barely leashed anger radiating off him.

“Korvax is exploiting the instability,” Xavian says.

“He wants scapegoats. He wants leverage. And you—” he stops pacing, facing me again, “—you are the perfect target.”

“I know,” I whisper.

“No,” he says sharply. “You don’t.”

His tone hits me like a physical blow.

He steps closer, lowering his voice.

“You are alone. You have no allies. No one to vouch for you. And Korvax...” His eyes darken. “He does not stop until he gets what he wants.”

“I’ll be careful,” I say.

Xavian laughs once—short, humorless.

“Careful? Valerius, Korvax isn’t concerned about being careful. He cares about control.” Another step closer. “You cannot win against him.”

My breath trembles.

“Then what should I do?”

Xavian falls silent.

He studies me with an intensity that makes my pulse trip—eyes sharp, unreadable, borderline devastating. His breath is steady. Mine isn’t.

When he finally speaks, his voice is low.

“I don’t know,” he admits. “But I am not letting him tear you apart.”

I blink.

What?

Confusion and something far more dangerous flutter in my chest.

“Why?” I whisper.

Xavian doesn’t move. Doesn’t blink. But something in him shifts.

“Because,” he says slowly, “I can’t shake the feeling that you’re the key to whatever is happening here.”

A shiver rolls through me.

“I’m not a key,” I insist.

He steps closer—too close. Heat radiates from his armor.

“You see patterns no one else sees. You read fractures like language. And every time the Citadel shudders, you’re inches from the source.”

“That’s a coincidence.”

“No,” Xavian murmurs. “It isn’t.”

We stand there—breaths mingling in the narrow space between us.

I should step back. I don’t.

He holds my gaze, something unspoken passing between us. Sharp. Tense. Frightening.

Then—

The floor trembles.

Light sputters. A beam somewhere above groans loudly.

Xavian looks up sharply.

“That’s the west wing,” he mutters. “We’re out of time.”

He turns back to me, voice clipped, urgent.

“Whatever happens next—stay away from Korvax. Avoid Corvan. Do not go anywhere alone. And if anyone questions your placement—”

He stops.

Then he meets my eyes again.

“Find me.”

The words hit like a blow to the chest.

Before I can breathe, let alone respond, he turns and strides toward the door.

He hesitates once—barely a fraction of a second.

Then he leaves.

The door closes behind him.

And I collapse back onto the bed, heart pounding,
Faelan scrambling into my lap.

“I know,” I whisper into her scales. “I know.”

Everything is unraveling.

The Citadel. The politics. The wards. My cover.
Me.

And I can feel it in my bones.

CHAPTER 9

The Commander's Trap

ANYA

The west wing smells like scorched runes and metal fatigue.

By the time I reach the site of the collapse, the air is thick with dust and tension. Scholars and Riders swarm around the fractured corridor like ants around a wounded predator—keeping a careful distance, terrified it might lash out again.

Chunks of stone hang suspended midair by flickering stabilizer glyphs. Every few seconds, the magic sputters, letting one pebble drop before flaring awake again.

The Citadel is breaking.

Not metaphorically. Not politically. Literally fracturing under the strain of something no one understands.

And somehow, Korvax has decided *I* am the thread to pull.

Xavian isn't here yet.

That's good. Or bad. I'm not sure anymore.

His presence helps. His presence complicates everything.

A group of Scholar Apprentices huddle near the far wall, whispering nervously. Instructor Seran stands beside them, pale, hands trembling slightly as she evaluates a dangling rune plate with a portable scanner.

“Back,” she warns a jittery student. “If the anchor rune fails—”

“It won’t,” a voice snaps.

Korvax.

He strides into the fractured hallway, presence cold enough to silence everyone instantly.

Riders in black-and-gray armor flank him—
Enforcement officers, their expressions blank and their hands resting lightly on their weapons. Not drawn. Not threatening.

Just ready.

Korvax surveys the wreckage with clinical detachment.

“Clear the corridor,” he orders.

Scholars scatter.

I stay where I am.

His eyes land on me like a blade being placed gently against my throat.

“Valerius,” he calls. “Step forward.” My stomach twists, but my feet obey.

When I reach him, he lifts his chin in approval—like a general acknowledging a soldier brought to heel.

“Good,” he murmurs. “You’re prompt.”

Prompt. Not terrified. Not cornered. Prompt.

He gestures toward the collapsed archway where runes still sputter erratically.

“You identified the first fracture better than any of Seran’s trained specialists,” Korvax says. “So, you will do it again.”

“I’m not certified for structural rune diagnostics.”

“You’re competent.” A pause. “And expendable.”

My breath catches.

Before I can respond, one of the stabilizers sparks violently, sending a flash of white-blue light racing across the corridor like a whip.

Everyone flinches. Except Korvax.

“Begin,” he orders.

Seran tries, meekly, “Commander, she is only an apprentice—”

“One with curious instincts,” Korvax cuts sharply. “And uncanny timing. Don’t you agree?”

Seran goes very still.

I swallow. “What do you want me to look for?”

He gestures toward a rune column with a hairline crack running down its center.

“Origins. Pattern irregularities. Anything that might show sabotage.”

The word hangs in the air like smoke.

My pulse spikes.

Last night’s collapse wasn’t sabotage—not by Exiles, anyway. I saw the glyphs destabilizing long before the blast. They were decaying from within.

I move toward the column, carefully stepping past piles of stone and flickering glyphs. The air hums

faintly—a warning vibration, like a creature growling low in its chest.

I crouch beside the crack, running my fingers slowly over the edges.

Warm. Almost feverish.

The fracture pulses erratically like a dying heartbeat.

And there—in the faintest shimmer—

A pattern. Not carved. Not etched. And not written.

Just... *left behind*. A signature of some kind.

Familiar. Sickeningly familiar.

Like the resonance I felt while translating the shard in Seran's lab.

My breath stutters. I lean closer—

A boot plants itself on the ground beside me. I jolt, nearly losing balance.

Corvan stands over me.

The first time I saw him—two days ago—I thought he was just another well-made Rider with a harsh jaw and a temper behind the eyes. But today, up close, I see the truth:

He's a weapon. Polished. Proud. Already pointed. At me.

“Careful, Scholar,” he drawls. “Wouldn’t want the little rabbit getting crushed.”

“I’m fine,” I say quietly.

His smile twists. Not nice. Not warm. Predatory.

Korvax motions him closer. “Stay with her. Record everything.”

Corvan grins. “My pleasure.”

He steps behind me so close that my shoulders tense instinctively. I focus on the rune instead—on the faint hum, the dying rhythm, the thread of meaning slipping between the cracks.

But Corvan speaks again, voice deliberately low so only I can hear.

“You have interesting luck,” he murmurs.

“Collapsed wings. Exploding wards. Sudden transfers.”

I keep my eyes on the rune. “Coincidence.”

“That’s not what the Commander thinks.”

That makes my pulse jump.

Corvan leans closer, hot breath brushing my neck.

“I think you’re hiding something.”

I straighten slowly.

“Am I under investigation?”

He smirks. “Everyone is, little rabbit. But some more than others.”

My jaw tightens. “I’m not your prey.”

His smile widens.

“No,” he says softly. “Prey doesn’t get this close to the Commander’s interest.”

My heart skips.

Before I can respond—

A voice slices through the hallway like steel:

“Corvan. Stand down.”

Xavian.

His arrival is a shockwave.

He strides into the corridor, ignoring the crumbling arch, the danger, and the scattered runes. His presence burns through the tension like wildfire cutting through frost.

He sees me. And I feel it like a hand closing around my lungs.

Corvan tenses but doesn’t move from behind me.

“Commander Theron,” he says evenly. “We were asked to observe the scholar.”

“Observing,” Xavian says coldly, “does not require proximity.”

Corvan’s eyes flash with challenge. “We’re dealing with a potential security risk.”

“That is not your determination to make,” Xavian snaps.

Korvax’s voice cuts in, smooth as poisoned silk:

“Theron.”

Xavian’s jaw flexes. He turns toward Korvax with a rigid military salute.

“Sir.”

Their locked gazes are a battlefield I am not equipped to understand. Authority versus authority. Fire versus ice. An unspoken hierarchy shifting and straining.

Korvax folds his hands behind his back.

“Your presence is noted,” he says blandly. “But unnecessary.”

Xavian’s eyes narrow.

“With respect,” he replies, “if the Scholar is being placed near an unstable rune core, her safety becomes a Rider concern.”

“Since when?” Corvan mutters.

Xavian doesn’t even look at him. “Since I said so.”

The corridor becomes airless.

Korvax steps forward with a smile that doesn’t reach his eyes.

“This Scholar,” he says lightly, “is under my supervision. Not yours.”

Xavian takes one step toward me.

The room shifts.

Not magically. But physically.

Every Rider straightens. Every scholar holds their breath. Even Korvax pauses.

Because of the way Xavian positions himself—one step angled between me and the two men—it’s unmistakable.

He is taking my side.

Not politically. Not strategically. Instinctively.

Korvax sees it too.

And his smile sharpens like a blade.

“Very well,” Korvax says quietly. “Let us settle this properly.”

Corvan stiffens, glancing between us.

“What do you propose?” Xavian asks, voice low.

Korvax’s gaze drifts to me. Then to Corvan. Then back to Xavian.

“I propose a simple remedy for... confusion,” he says. “A demonstration.”

My blood runs cold.

Corvan straightens, excitement flickering in his eyes.

“A duel,” Korvax continues. “Standard rules. Scholar’s competence versus Rider’s discipline.”

Xavian’s expression becomes stone.

“Denied,” he says instantly.

“Overruled,” Korvax replies.

“You cannot force—”

“I can,” Korvax interrupts softly. “And I am.”

The stabilizer glyph above us flickers, as if reacting to the tension.

Corvan’s smirk spreads slowly and viciously.

“When?” he asks.

Korvax’s eyes never leave mine.

“Tonight.”

Xavian steps forward. “She is a scholar. Not a combatant.”

“She claims battlefield experience,” Korvax counters smoothly. “And her reflexes at the collapse confirm it.”

I feel Xavian’s gaze on me—sharp, questioning, furious.

My hands shake.

“Commander,” I whisper, “I didn’t claim—”

Korvax lifts a hand. “Enough.”

Then, to Corvan:

“You will meet Apprentice Valerius in the southern atrium at twilight.”

Corvan bows slightly, eyes gleaming. “As you command.”

He looks at me once—slowly. Measuring. Hungry.

Xavian looks like he wants to break his jaw.

Korvax steps back, folding his arms.

“It’s settled.”

Xavian’s voice drops to a cold whisper. “You will answer for this.”

Korvax smiles.

“Oh, I intend to.” He leaves.

Corvan follows. Riders disperse.

The wards continue to flicker overhead—pulsing like a heart on the verge of stopping.

And I stand frozen as Xavian turns fully toward me.

His eyes aren’t cold. They’re burning.

“What did you do?” he demands.

My breath catches. “Nothing.”

“You must have provoked—”

“I didn’t!” It bursts out too loudly.

His anger hardens. “Korvax doesn’t choose targets randomly.”

“I didn’t provoke anything,” I whisper. “He decided. That’s all.”

Xavian’s breath shudders—barely perceptible. But I catch it.

He runs a hand through his hair, pacing. “I can’t stop the duel without raising suspicion.”

I swallow hard. “I know.”

He freezes. Turns. “What?”

“I know there’s nothing you can do.”

His expression fractures.

Just slightly. Just enough that I see the truth beneath it.

He wants to help me. He shouldn’t. Likewise, he’s furious at himself for it.

He steps closer.

“Valerius,” he murmurs, voice low and rough, “he’s sending you out there to break you.”

“I know.”

“You’ll be unarmed.”

“I know.”

“And Corvan—” His jaw tightens. “He won’t hold back. Not for a scholar. Not for you.”

The way he says *you* makes my pulse stumble. I lift my chin carefully.

“Then tell me what to expect,” I whisper.

Xavian swears under his breath—a sound like frustration made flesh.

Then he reaches out—slowly—and grips my forearm.

His thumb presses against my pulse. Hard. Steady. Claiming.

“You survive,” he says. “Do you hear me?”

“I’ll try.”

“Not try,” he snaps quietly. “Do.”

The air between us heats. My skin burns beneath his fingers. He steps closer, his voice dropping to a whisper that chills me to the bone.

“Because if Corvan harms you—”

He stops. Swallows. Corrects himself.

“—He will answer to me.”

My heart slams. Before I can speak, he releases me abruptly, steps back, and straightens his shoulders.

“Prepare yourself,” he says. “I’ll find you before twilight.”

He turns and walks away, cloak snapping sharply behind him.

But halfway down the corridor—he stops.

Doesn’t turn. Doesn’t look back.

Just speaks one quiet order that shakes me more than the impending duel:

“Valerius.”

“... Yes?”

“Don’t die.”

Then he leaves me alone among the flickering
runes and the crumbling stone.

Twilight looms. Korvax is waiting. Corvan is
preparing.

Xavian is fighting a battle he doesn't understand.

CHAPTER 10

The Last Light

ANYA

The Citadel feels different at sunset.

During the day, the white stone glows with confidence, unshakable and orderly, too perfect to question. But as the sun sinks behind the western mountains, everything softens into gold-washed uncertainty. The towers cast long, jagged shadows across the training yards. The air cools. The wards pulse faintly, like the fortress is breathing slower with the coming night.

The duel is at sundown.

And sundown is swallowing the sky.

I walk quickly through the Scholar Quarter, clutching Faelan's harness close to my chest. She follows at my heels—small, dark, wary—her wings tucked tight the way she does when she senses danger I haven't yet named.

The stable tier is quiet at this hour. Only a few dragon tenders remain, sweeping straw or checking feed bins. Their voices drift softly between the archways, careful not to disturb the great beasts resting inside.

A stablehand spots me and smiles.

“There you are,” she says warmly. “Come to settle your little one for the night?”

I nod, though the movement feels brittle.

Faelan presses against my leg, uncertain. She remembers this place, but tonight there's something different in her. A tension. A refusal.

She knows.

Of course she knows.

I kneel and turn her toward me. Her amber eyes glisten in the dim light, reflecting mine back at me—fear, confusion, trust.

Too much trust.

My chest tightens painfully.

“Faelan,” I whisper, stroking her jaw. “I need you to stay here tonight.”

She emits a soft, distressed trill. *No. With you.*

“I wish you could,” I breathe. “More than you know.”

But she can't come with me. Not to the arena. Not to whatever waits for me there. And not to Corvan's blade.

A tremor runs through her scales. She rubs her head against my shoulder with a desperate urgency that makes my throat burn. I wrap my arms around her slender neck, pulling her close. Her wings cocoon partially around me—an instinctive gesture of protection.

A gesture I don't deserve.

The stablehand approaches quietly but keeps her distance, sensing something she shouldn't interrupt.

I swallow hard.

“I’m going to be fine,” I lie, my voice trembling.
“This is just... something I have to do.”

Faelan nudges my cheek with her muzzle, her breath warm against my skin. I kiss the top of her head, lingering in the softness of her scales.

“I’ll come back for you,” I promise. “I will.”

She hesitates.

Then—slowly, reluctantly—she releases me and walks toward the stablehand.

Every step she takes away from me feels like a thread snapping.

When they disappear into the dim interior, the emptiness hits so hard I lose my breath.

The yard outside feels colder. Quieter. Too still.

It is the first moment I have truly been alone since arriving at the Citadel.

And the night feels hungry.

I step out into the open courtyard.

The sky is painted blood-orange and deep violet. Clouds stretch thin across the horizon like cracks spreading through glass.

A fitting sky for a duel.

A fitting sky for a reckoning.

I draw in a slow breath and let it out, trying to steady my racing heart. The air tastes metallic—expectation and fear and the faint tang of ward-light warming for the night shift.

My boots echo softly on the stone as I take the long path toward the arena. With each step, the world seems to narrow around me, the corridors dimming, the shadows lengthening.

This is my last hour alive if anything goes wrong.

My last hour as Valerius if Korvax has already unraveled the lie.

My last hour before my father's plan either begins or ends in blood.

I touch the forged identity slate at my hip—warm from constant scans. Too warm. Father's runes resist detection harder each day. Or maybe my fear is amplifying their pulse.

Everything feels fragile.

Especially me.

I pass a tall window overlooking the lower courtyard, where I first saw Xavian and Lycan standing together. The memory hits harder than I expect—the way Xavian had looked at me from across the yard, sharp and assessing. The way he'd stepped between me and that collapse. The way he'd—gods—almost kissed me.

Heat curls low in my stomach. Fear coils beside it.

If I survive the arena, he will be there. Waiting.
Watching. Judging.

And somehow that terrifies me more than facing
Corvan's blade.

Halfway to the arena, the Citadel bells begin to toll.

Three slow, heavy chimes. Each one reverberates
through stone, through air, and through bone.

The summons. Not at the stables. Not during
goodbyes. Now.

As I walk into my fate. The sound makes my steps
falter for a heartbeat. Then I keep going.

Past the training balconies where the Riders gather.
Past the ward pylons flickering with pre-night
strain. And past the well where older scholars
whisper bets on who will bleed tonight.

No one stops me. No one speaks to me.

I pull my cloak tighter around myself.

The sun sinks lower.

By the time I reach the colonnade leading to the
arena, the last sliver of daylight is gone.

Only torchlight remains—flickering, uncertain.

I force one final breath into my lungs. It feels thin
and fragile.

Then I step into the arena passage, the roar of
distant voices gathering above.

The gate swings open.

And I walk into the night that will decide
everything.

THE END

Afterword

Visit my webpage to discover the complete saga description and enjoy the first chapter of Book 1.

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If this story ignited your heart and if you were moved by the characters' choices to fight for truth in a world governed by lies, your voice is the most powerful magic we have.

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Dedication

For those who have loved through the fire,
who chose truth when obedience was easier,
and who understand that freedom, without love,
is just another cage.