

CELOVEN
STORMCHASER

◀ BOOK 1 ▶

JASON ABOFSKY

CELOVEN STORMCHASER

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www.jasonabofsky.com

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Please direct mailed inquiries to: Jason Abofsky, PO Box 720, Ellicott City, MD 21041-0720, USA

Cover art by Carolina Lebar

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Map design by Najla Kay

Edited by Allison Erin Wright (developmental editing), Jennifer Sims (copyediting), and Alexandra Ott (proofreading)

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In memory of my father, who offered me this advice:

"You might as well write science fiction. You're already a space cadet."

- Joel Abofsky

TRIGGER WARNINGS

This novel contains graphic violence and sexual harassment. Reader discretion is advised.

PRAISE FOR CELOVEN STORMCHASER

“This is one of the most enjoyable manuscripts that’s come across my editing desk all year. The story becomes more and more compelling as it progresses, building to a climax that’s epic, riveting, and as satisfying as they come. I just kept getting drawn further and further into the suspense, and the result was successfully thrilling.”

— Allison Erin Wright
wrightediting.com

“Readers of Brandon Sanderson will enjoy the richly intricate tale in the first of what looks to be a fascinating Sci-Fi/Fantasy series. The world and its characters are artfully constructed and provide a natural balance of conflict, tension, and mystery.”

— PC via Goodreads.com

“I had a lot of fun reading this book. It gets right to the action fairly quickly, and I was immediately intrigued by the characters and the setting. This is an enjoyable read in my opinion, even if you aren’t someone who reads space operas very often.”

— Annika via Goodreads.com



PART I

Celoven

IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN a sunny day, Celoven Windess mused as she glanced up at the gray clouds hovering over the palace. Her plans to spend the morning out in the gardens with her best friend, Princess Naruné, would have to wait. Unpredicted weather was the least of her concerns at the moment.

She pulled her gaze away from the window and opened her personal Metalink Access Terminal, stretching the ends of the handheld, slender tube into an expanded holographic display. The MAT listed twelve appointments previously scheduled for the king, now rescheduled for the princess in his absence.

Neither Cel nor the princess had spent much time in the throne room as children. Cel felt just as out-of-place now as she had then. A long navy carpet led entrants from two imposing hand-carved wooden doors at the front to the throne at the rear, where intricate stained-glass windows allowed colored light to shimmer across the room. The vaulted ceiling, designed to give the ruling monarch a commanding voice, towered high above them. It also echoed every subtle noise the princess made from the throne. Judging by Naruné's annoyed sighs

and frequent fidgeting, Cel knew she needed to reduce the number of appointments significantly if they were to make it through the day.

She rearranged things as best she could and sent the updated schedule out to the rest of the staff. The princess would meet with Duke Malorne, Grand Archmage Rhonin, and a few other corporate leaders and dignitaries, but the rest could wait for the king to return.

“You ready?” she whispered to the princess.

Naruné shook her head but replied, “I suppose.”

Cel tightened her lips and nodded. The last thing the princess wanted to do was run the monarchy, and this was the third time in as many months that the king had put her in charge while he “rested a bit.” Cel wondered whether the king was genuinely sick or just trying to force his daughter to get acclimated to the responsibilities of ruling.

Naruné had been raised since birth to inherit the crown. She’d been through this before, and she’d get through it again. Cel would make sure of that.

“Duke Malorne of New Didrasyll Colony,” Cel announced.

The guard nearest the entrance used his magestone, a smooth gemstone centered on his forehead. The crystal glowed, which caused the doors to open and admit the duke.

All malens possessed a magestone, gifting them certain abilities. They could levitate and move objects at will as well as port them, disappearing them from one location and reappearing them in another. They could even port themselves short distances.

The duke passed through the doors, keeping his shoulders square and his nose held high. He wore a seven-piece custom-tailored suit, so complicated that Cel doubted the man could dress himself without help. Two small pins adorned one of his lapels. One bore the banner of New Didrasyll Colony: a pale blue flag with two gold circles and a white crescent shadowed in black connecting them, representing the binary stars overlooking the colonized planet. The second depicted a glowing navy magestone to emphasize the man’s purist ideology—that malens were the superior race. A view shared by most in the colony.

He stepped up to the throne and lowered himself into a bow but kept his eyes trained on the princess. “Your Highness, thank you for

seeing me today in the king's absence. I do hope whatever ails him is not serious."

"You have no need for concern," the princess replied. "I can assure you. What business did you wish to discuss with the king?"

"His Majesty and I were in deliberations over the appropriation of certain funds to my lands. It is not of great concern, but the matter was nearly settled. We have the votes from Parliament and only require the royal court's consent. If Your Highness would be gracious enough to finalize the matter, I will not take up more of your time." He bowed once more, this time all the way down until his nose nearly reached the floor.

Cel knew little about the duke, but she knew King Merrisole was not fond of him. She did a quick search on her MAT for previous discussions between the two. Sure enough, the last time the duke had been here, the king outright refused the request because the "projects" the money was to be allocated toward would only enrich the duke's coffers.

Before Cel could mention it, Naruné said, "Well, if you have Parliament's and my father's prior approvals, I see no reason to hold up or deny the request."

Cel needed to act fast. "Excuse me, Your Highness."

The duke's nose shot up in her direction. He gave her a glance, suggesting something between frustration and a longing for murder. Cel gulped and held out her MAT for the princess. "I've brought up the previous meeting's notes for your review."

Naruné winked at Cel, taking the MAT. She looked over the section Cel had highlighted for her.

"Oh, I see," the princess replied, nodding. "There seem to be a few unresolved issues regarding these funds. I do apologize for the inconvenience, but I feel this is a matter better handled by the king himself. Would you consider tabling your request until tomorrow?"

Duke Malorne's expression hardened. "My ship leaves this evening to return to New Didrasyll. I was hoping to get this matter resolved today."

"According to the notes from your prior discussions, the king has twice refused your request. If you have the votes in Parliament, then

the king cannot prevent the appropriation. However, if you choose to go forward, it will be at the protest of the royal court.”

The duke didn’t respond immediately. He stood in the center of the room, fixed like a statue on display. After a long pause, he replied, “I would prefer the crown’s support.”

Cel wagered the duke only had Parliament’s support if the king approved.

“Then you must wait for the king’s return to obtain it,” Naruné replied.

The duke’s face shriveled into a scowl, but he held his composure. “Of course, Your Highness. I shall wait for another time to make the three-week journey from New Didrasyll to Ankeros to speak with the king.”

Either the princess did not pick up the sarcasm or ignored it. “Rest assured; my father will be eager to see you again then.”

The duke lowered his nose into one last curt bow before making a hasty departure from the room.

As soon as the doors closed behind him, Naruné let out a low groan and slouched in her seat. “You saved my stone just now,” she said. “I can only imagine what Father would have said if I overturned his earlier opinions.”

“It was an honest mistake,” Cel reassured her. “You can’t be expected to memorize every discussion the king had or policy he put in place.”

“That is exactly why I don’t want to take over the crown. I don’t want to stress out over what my father would have done or try to figure out what’s best for the kingdom.”

“And that is exactly why I’m here, to make sure you have all the facts, so you can be a good leader. And to make sure you don’t screw it up.” Cel elbowed the princess gently against her arm. “For instance, reminding a certain princess that it is inappropriate for her to slouch on the throne.”

The princess sighed and sat up straight. “I can’t do this anymore. You know this wasn’t . . .” She leaned over and whispered, “*part of the plan.*”

Cel waved to the guard by the door. “Please apologize to Grand

Archmage Rhonin and inform him he will need to wait a few more minutes.”

The guard bowed and left the room. Only one remained, Archmage Nalya, but she could be trusted. It was the closest to alone Cel could manage.

“That gives us a moment,” Cel said. “And King Merrisole will be back tomorrow. This doesn’t change anything.”

“This was never supposed to happen in the first place. If Father keeps getting sick . . .”

“I will get you through it. It’s my job as your Stone Maiden to keep you sane.”

Naruné smirked. “Are you saying that the Princess of Malenor has a tendency to lose her mind?”

“I didn’t say that . . . but I was certainly thinking it loudly.”

The princess threw a throne cushion at Cel, who caught it with ease and tossed it right back into Naruné’s face.

Archmage Nalya coughed from the far end of the room.

Cel blushed. “We probably shouldn’t be tossing bits of the royal throne around.”

Naruné held the cushion in prime launching position. After a pause, she sighed and lowered her arm. “Just promise me I won’t have to rule for real, Cel.”

Cel frowned. She couldn’t make that promise. “It will be fine,” she said instead. “As soon as Prince Antin comes of age, you can abdicate and let him take the throne just like we planned.”

“Antin is only seven. That is too long. I should abdicate now.”

Cel shook her head. “Royal law won’t let you. You’d need Parliament to approve that, and you know they never will. But it will be okay. This is only temporary.”

Naruné nodded, grabbing Cel’s hand and giving it a gentle squeeze. “Send the Grand Archmage in.”

Sunaan

Sunaan Tethers stood only a few paces away from the president of the Epion Republic, Peli Eruhodd—one of the most powerful people on Ankeros—and all she wanted to do was slap that MAT out of his hands.

“That trade deal has been in the works for nine months,” Eruhodd argued. “Sign it.”

“As I have tried to explain repeatedly,” a hologram of the Confederation of the Luna Republic’s president replied in a calmer tone, “until the Republic is willing to publicly recognize our independence, then there is nothing to negotiate.”

Sunaan remained quiet and patient throughout the link, struggling to keep from scolding her own boss.

“You need this deal as badly as we do,” Eruhodd said.

The hologram seemed unfazed. “Perhaps, but we’re far more patient. We can always wait for a different administration to reach our goals.”

“Is that a threat?” Eruhodd shouted, popping up from his chair. “Listen to me. You people are nothing but backward purists on a bunch of inhospitable rocks. Sign the damn thing already!”

The Confederation’s president closed the link and vanished.

“Piece of drek,” Eruhodd muttered under his breath.

Sunaan let out the sigh she’d been holding. “I should get going, sir. It’s getting late.”

Eruhodd looked at Sun as if just realizing she was still in the room with him. “In a bit,” he replied. “First, I need you to draft an apology letter. Something good enough to set up another link, but don’t make it look like we’re caving to those idiots.”

Sunaan held a clenched fist behind her back. “Of course, Mr. President. Is there anything else?”

“Get started on that. I’m sure I’ll think of something.”

Sunaan groaned internally. “Yes, sir.” She pivoted on her heel toward

the door and sprinted from the president's office before he *did* think of anything else.

She retreated to her own office, which was barely a third the size of Eruhodd's, but at least it was quiet.

Sunaan glanced at the MAT in her hands, trying to think of what possible apology she could write. After exacerbating her headache for an extra minute, she gave up on the idea for the moment and tossed her MAT onto her desk.

Eruhodd wasn't the most diplomatic politician the Epion Republic had ever had, but his political goals and promises for the future made it worthwhile for Sun to join his campaign. As long as she kept his priorities on track—and his untimely remarks to a minimum—she had high hopes for this term. The display on the terminal flickered. *Great*, she thought. *More network problems.*

Sun leaned back in her chair, admiring her tiny office. The election had been over a year ago, yet she still found it surreal to be sitting in Farrondel, the capital city of the Epion Republic, in her own private office, adjacent to the president of the Republic.

Posters of typical government propaganda adorned the surrounding walls: a portrait of the current president, a flag propped up on a pole in the corner of the room. The Republic's banner comprised a green fractal tree, representing the order of nature through mathematics, centered on a dark magenta backdrop—a color not found in nature but discovered through science.

A map of all explored space hung on the far wall, showing their little slice of the spiral galaxy. The home planet of Ankeros was enlarged, with dotted lines reaching out toward systems with colonized worlds. One for each of the three Ankeran nations, plus space stations.

Sometimes it amazed Sun that three races—epions, malens, and pelosye—had all evolved together on the same planet. Countries rose and fell over and over from one war to the next, yet all three races survived long enough to form distinct, independent nations coexisting peacefully together—a peace that had lasted for nearly a century since the Last War. Having seen and learned more in the last five years

following politics than she had in the first twenty of her life, she was all the more amazed that things hadn't descended into chaos ages ago.

Between the posters and flags and other mandatory decor, Sun was afforded little space for personalization. Still, she made sure her desk contained at least one plant and one rotating holo-image gallery of her family. While she now resided in Farrondel, her family lived just across the way in neighboring Eptrad City. The sprawling megacity towered over the capital, expanding every year, closing the gap between where Eptrad City ended and Farrondel began. Despite the shrinking distance between them, Sun's job requirements kept her busy, with little free time to visit her family.

Sun yawned and stretched out her arms. She'd done enough for one day. She rose from her chair and leaned against the nearby windowsill, hoping to catch the last bits of daylight wane over the horizon of Ankeros. Instead, thick black clouds stared back at her.

Epions pride themselves on having superior technology to the other races, she mused, yet we still can't even get the weather report right.

A voiceless command sent through her eye implants opened the window, allowing a strong but soothing breeze to wash over her. The rush of air chipped away at the stress stacked on her shoulders. A few fragments of data floated lazily across her enhanced vision. Humidity, temperature, wind speed, cloud formation types . . . Nothing particularly noteworthy.

Her office was on the third floor of the Presidential Manor, facing east toward the main gate. Despite the overcast sky, Sun found the view relaxing. Off in the distance, she watched the soft glow from Eptrad City, fighting back against the darkness washing over it.

Sometimes, she almost believed she could spot the single light among the thousands coming from her parents' house, no matter how unlikely that was from this distance. Her visual implants read her thoughts and offered a tiny pinpoint icon hovering over the exact location. However, even with her enhanced vision, all the lights from that distance blended together.

Her parents had been so proud of her when she got into politics. And now she was Administrative and Diplomatic Assistant to the

Epion Republic President, working inside the Presidential Manor at only twenty-five years old.

The lights in the room flickered.

What is going on with the system? she thought.

A bright bolt flashed in the distance, followed by a deafening boom of thunder moments later.

A large gust of wind swept into the office, knocking around a few items and tipping over her family holo-image onto the floor. This storm seemed more like a hurricane.

Even the most inept meteorologist should have been able to see a hurricane forming and broken it up by now. Somebody's getting fired for this, she thought.

The lightning cracked again, ripping open the sky with light so bright it overwhelmed Sun's implants. Her vision blacked out. She stumbled backward as a second round of thunder banged against the windows. The force shattered the glass, raining broken shards on top of her. She screamed and covered her face.

Blind and scared, Sun curled herself into a ball on the floor, trying to protect herself. Bits of broken glass cut into her skin, but she didn't want to risk moving. She didn't know how long she lay there, waiting for her implants to reset. When they finally did and restored her vision, she picked the larger glass shards off her body and carefully pulled herself up from the ground. She climbed back to the window to find out what had happened.

The entire horizon over Eptrad City was on fire.

Celoven

Cel crawled back to her room following the end of a very long day. The princess did well for her part. Many of the dignitaries she'd met with would have preferred that the king weighed in, but most of the decisions were trivial and more of a formality than difficult questions on complicated issues. And for those few that required more attention, Cel took their statements or inquiries and saved them off on her MAT

to be dealt with by King Merrisole another time. The only thing she looked forward to now was sleep.

The palace quieted a great deal at night, though a few dozen people still bustled about with their tasks late into the evening. Cel was one of the few who lived in the palace with the princess, albeit on opposite sides of the complex. The palace stretched out into three wings wrapped around the central courtyard. The royal residence filled one side, housing the royal family and close guests, while affairs of state were conducted in the central wing, and the rest of the live-in palace staff resided on the far side of the palace, where Cel stayed.

Unlike a typical building, the hallways of the palace weaved like a maze, with no straight path from one end to the other. The archmages would call it a security feature. Cel called it a nuisance. She rounded one corridor lined with banners and tapestries onto another lined with portraits and statues, to another with flowers and art.

Cel recalled hiding behind various statues and sculptures as a child playing with Naruné. She'd jump out as soon as the princess walked past and startle her.

"How did Her Highness handle herself today?"

Cel jumped back, her heart pounding in her chest. It took her a minute to calm her breath and realize the voice belonged to Vorin, the king's Stone Mate.

"You scared me."

"How did the princess do?" he repeated.

"She did well," Cel said. "About the same as the last couple of times. Here." She pulled her MAT out, bringing up the day's notes. "Everything's on here."

Vorin held his own MAT out, unexpanded. Cel waved her hand over the display and transferred the file from one MAT to the other. Vorin pocketed his MAT without so much as glancing at the information. "Did she have to make any difficult decisions?"

Cel glanced longingly toward her room, but Vorin shifted his body to obstruct her view. "Well?"

"There were a few we left for King Merrisole when he's back. The rest were all straightforward."

This answer didn't appear good enough for Vorin. He gripped her

shoulders and locked eyes with her. "If she had to, do you think she could have made those choices herself?"

"I don't know," she answered. "I suppose she could have. What is this about? Is the king okay?"

Vorin blinked and leaned back, releasing her shoulders. "Fine. He's fine. I'm just making sure Her Highness can perform her royal duties as required of her."

A trail of doubt lingered in Cel. But before she could inquire further, Vorin pushed past her. "Get some rest," he said. "I'm sure the day was long for you both. We'll go over your notes tomorrow."

What was that about? Cel wondered. She watched him round a corner, headed in the opposite direction from Cel. She could chase after him and press him for details, or she could get some sleep and deal with it in the morning.

A yawn wide enough to hurt her jaw answered for her. She would ask Vorin about it tomorrow. She hurried back to her room and threw herself inside.

Her room was spacious compared to those of other staffers living at the palace. It housed a bed, desk, bathroom, and an enlarged Wall MAT for entertainment. The palace keepers gave her some personal choice. However, they would not let her keep up a printed poster of an epion band she liked. Instead, they gave her a small, decorative rotating holo-image that could be turned off if needed. She filled it with various photos of the band.

The palace rules had never made much sense to Cel. What foreign ambassador would be visiting her room? But some of the perks of living in the palace and serving as the princess's Stone Maiden were having her room cleaned daily, her clothes laundered, and coming home to fresh flowers each night. Their fragrance filled the room with a relaxing sweetness that helped her unwind at the end of each day.

She tossed her personal MAT across the bed and lay down beside it.

"Wall MAT . . ." she called out to the unit but hesitated.

She needed to keep trying. The button to turn on the display stuck out under the lower edge of the screen. She stared at the button, searching deep inside herself for the source of all malens' power: the Vitae, a life force binding the universe together and worshiped by the

Malen Church. If she could call this power forth and focus its will, something as trivial as pushing a button on a MAT should not be an issue.

The Wall MAT remained off. She stood up and concentrated, furrowing her brow and clenching her teeth. She held her focus for as long as she held her breath until both blew out of her.

The display remained off—same as any of the thousand previous attempts she'd made. Cel felt the crystal within her forehead. Her fingers circled its smooth surface. Her magestone was cold to the touch. Lifeless.

Having a navy magestone was supposed to signify tremendous power for malens. When malens had first evolved, the Children of Vitae, as they were called, had all possessed navy magestones. It defined the royal bloodline.

Yet Cel's stone, despite its color, was useless. She couldn't even push a button with it. Cel knew a magestone's hue didn't matter. In the modern era, malens with navy magestones accounted for over a third of the population, and many powerful archmages in history had green or red ones. And despite being royalty, Naruné's was scarlet.

That didn't make Cel feel any better. She hated being a *dimstone*.

"Wall MAT: on," she said, finishing the voice command.

The display switched on, pulling back the latest streams. She skimmed through a few headlines, local weather, and tidbits of day-to-day information.

An alert flashed across the screen. She read the words and then reread them. After the third reading, she jumped across the bed and snatched up her personal MAT. Within moments, a groggy princess's face appeared on the screen.

"Celoven? Why are you disturbing me?"

"You'd better get out of bed, Your Highness. Something terrible has happened."

Harmon

HARMON DEMAWET PUSHED his laundry cart through the labyrinth of brightly lit, identical corridors. Six months he'd been in space, and dreams of throwing himself out an airlock filled his head. He ventured from room to room, delivering freshly laundered uniforms and picking up sacks of rotting carcasses filled with sweat and musk that were once clothes.

"Damn it, Demawet! I told you to get that stain out of my uniform!"

Harmon took the jacket back from the belligerent senior flier. "I tried, sir."

"Are you talking back to me?"

"I'll rewash it, sir." Harmon walked away, shoulders sinking.

"It better look sharp enough to meet with the first general himself!"

"Yes, sir."

Technically, Harmon carried the rank of second lieutenant. And a senior flier should reply to *him* with, "Yes, sir." But his title did little to stop anyone aboard the ship from bossing him around. He could thank his father, Chief General Demawet, for that. He could also

thank his father for the *glorious* deep-space assignment pushing laundry carts—a far flight from a Pelosian officer’s typical responsibilities.

Harmon tossed the soldier’s uniform into the bin with no regard for its priority amongst the rest and continued along his route. The ship was small by Pelosian standards, with only ten decks and a crew of ten thousand, but ten thousand crew meant ten thousand uniforms to wash, and even if he wasn’t the only one doing laundry, it sure felt like he washed thousands a day.

The one benefit of doing laundry was far greater access around the ship. Some soldiers never saw more than their bunk, a washroom, a chow hall, and their station. Even if he had no uniforms to deliver to the launch deck, he frequently wandered there between shifts for the view. The open-domed top allowed Harmon to explore deep space with his own eyes rather than some readout on a chart. An energy barrier surrounded them, keeping their air supply and people inside the ship.

He hid his cart out of sight and peeked toward the distant stars. They weren’t too far from the Bathmorda Nebula. Its pink hue swirled like clouds on a calm, sunny day, twisting into new shapes in a delicate ballet. No one could suspect such beauty of being the silent destroyer of all ships that dared to disturb its dance by entering.

“Lieutenant Demawet?”

Harmon jumped, wheeling around toward the source of someone referring to him by rank. Broad chested. Stiff. No sense of humor. Even the pelosye’s wings locked at attention. The hardened brim on his forewings stretched down tight with their transparent flaps folded neatly together, covering the smaller hindwings underneath. Harmon wagered the man was an enforcer, and his little excursions hadn’t gone as unnoticed as he’d intended.

“Yes?” Harmon answered.

“Sir, Captain Hauk wants to see you.”

“The captain?” Harmon’s chest thumped in panic. “But I was just taking a little break. Shouldn’t I report to my CO?”

“My orders are to bring you to speak with the captain. You need to come with me.”

Wind and weather! Harmon swore to himself. He reached back to grab his laundry cart.

"You can leave that there; you won't be needing it."

Now Harmon knew he was in trouble. Harmon left his cart, wondering where his fate would lead him. The enforcer stretched his fore- and hindwings and flew off toward the bridge. Harmon spread his own wings and followed close behind.

They landed at the entrance to the bridge at the topmost edge of the vessel. The only way to reach the bridge was to fly—a simple security precaution against any attempts by non-fliers to take over the ship.

When they entered, the captain turned his chair around, nodding expectantly toward them.

"Lieutenant Demawet as requested, Captain," the enforcer announced.

"Thank you, Flier. Return to your duties."

The enforcer snapped his wings in salute before leaving the bridge.

Harmon couldn't help but gawk. In his six months aboard, he'd never once set foot on the bridge nor met directly with the captain. All around the room, a dozen senior officers busied themselves at various terminals. Displays along the walls switched at a dizzying pace between readouts, charts, news streams, and more. There was so much clutter Harmon wondered how they could even see out into space.

Something was wrong. The officers seemed extremely quiet, and Harmon noticed a sense of urgency to all of their movements. One of the news streams along the wall mentioned something about death tolls.

Harmon swallowed his nerves. "You wanted to see me, Captain?"

The captain nodded. "There's been an incident on Ankeros. We've been recalled."

Harmon tried to think of a single reason the captain could have for telling him this piece of information in person. None came to mind.

"You've been reassigned. Your orders are to report directly to First General Hirkain upon our arrival."

They're tossing me off the ship for stargazing? he wondered. *But what does that have to do with an incident on . . .* "Did you say the first general?"

Sunaan

THEY'RE OKAY. They're okay.

Sunaan repeated the words over and over. She didn't dare think of the alternative.

Devports into the city were offline, so she raced her lev toward Eptrad at unsafe speeds. No enforcers stopped her. They were too busy dealing with the crisis.

She landed the vehicle near a checkpoint set up just outside the city line. Emergency service members would not allow her to get any closer. As soon as she got out of her lev, some rookie enforcer tried to stop her.

"No civilians," he said. "You need to leave the area immediately."

"Ident: Sunaan Tethers, Administrative and Diplomatic Assistant to President Eruhodd."

The rookie paled. His eye implants shifted, studying hers until the information read back to him, confirming her identity.

"Sorry, sir. What are the president's orders? I'll relay them to the chief."

Sun needed to get around this kid. "The orders remain the same:

save lives first, find out what in Science happened second. However, I need to enter the scene personally.”

“I’m afraid I can’t allow that—emergency personnel only right now.”

Sun was about to grab this epion by the throat and throw him into a wall, but she couldn’t do that. Her expression must have said as much because the kid gave a large gulp and stepped aside.

“The chief is currently in OPS Tent 3,” he explained. “The big one, straight ahead on the right.”

Sun barreled past him. She passed the large tent and proceeded up to the outermost edge of the city—or what once was a city.

Sun gaped at the nothingness in front of her. The largest city in the world, with the tallest skyscrapers ever created, vanished behind a vast jungle of flattened rubble, charred black beyond all recognition.

No one could have survived this.

Her arms went cold and numb. Her heart weighed down into her stomach.

“We got one!” a med-evac shouted from somewhere amongst the debris. Sun spotted the white of his uniform before it flashed and disappeared. Then he reappeared outside the nearest medical tent with the patient. A crew nearby rushed out to treat the wounded epion.

For the briefest moment, Sun thought it might be a family member, but as soon as she saw the man’s face, she knew better.

It doesn’t matter, she told herself. There are survivors, which means they could still be alive. I have to get to them.

Unlike the malens, epions didn’t have magestones to port them around wherever they wanted. They used science and technology to unlock those powers—meaning Sun would need to secure such a device.

She snuck past the medics into one of the med tents. After a few moments of searching, she spotted her quarry on a nearby table, unguarded. She snatched it before anyone could spot her and wrapped it around her waist.

Back outside, she needed to find the house. Her implants overlaid the map of the city as it had been before the destruction in front of her.

A small pin flashed over the location. She knew the risks; she had to do it.

Activating the device, she vanished from her position, reappearing over the broken remnants of her childhood home. A stillness settled over what little remained buried under a blanket of black char. Nothing moved in the dark nor voiced a sound of life within. The silence screamed louder than the distant sirens of a rescue far too late to help. Only her footsteps resounded around her, splintered wood, cracking glass, and broken shards of her childhood shifting under her weight.

There has to be something left. Someone.

She sifted through the debris, pushed smaller piles onto larger ones. She would spend days here if it meant finding her family. Under a bit of floorboard sticking up from the ground, she spotted a small, fuzzy ear. The ear belonged to a stuffed animal—*her* stuffed animal. A malemare she'd given to her sister. The little girl never let it out of her sight.

Sun ripped the board away and clawed at the rubble beneath. Bits of broken glass and splintered wood cut into her hands and arms, but she didn't care.

Three med-evacs appeared in a flash around her.

One grabbed her arm. "You can't be here."

"I'm staying," Sun said. She yanked her arm free and dove back into the rubble.

"It's not safe," another said. Each grabbed an arm and forced her back.

"No!" Sun cried, yanking against their grips. "Let me go! I have to find them. I have to—"

Another flash, and she reappeared outside the city. She screamed. "No! I have to go back. They're still alive; they have to be. I need to get to them. Let me go back. Please!"

She felt the tranquilizer pinch into her neck and watched the world go black.