

SAVAGE REBELLION
BOOK I



SAVAGE

LEGION

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WHERE ONLY
STONE STEPS ASCEND

WE ARE NOT FLOWERS. WE DO NOT WILT.

Lexi hears her mother speak those words in her memory as she sits outside the chambers of the Gen Franchise Council. It's here her grandparents and Brio's grandparents came to petition to form Gen Stalbraid. They named their franchise after the steel woven together to push and pull the city's first sky carriage.

The bench beneath Lexi is carved from the translucent white-and-blue stone of the chamber wall itself. The entire Spectrum, including most of its fixtures and even furnishings, are carved from a single mountainous piece of stone, a marvel of engineering whose secrets are lost even to the best masonry Gens in Crache. The Spectrum is the physical, intellectual, and bureaucratic center of the Capitol, making it the center of Crache itself. No structure in all the nation's sterling ten cities rivals the scale or beauty of the Spectrum's massive domes, sky-piecing spires, and corridors so tall and expansive they feel more like mountain halls than the arteries of a city edifice. The sculpture of the national ant in the Spectrum lobby is said to be the largest ever crafted.

Oval lamps are ensconced up and down the towering walls of every one of those corridors; the same lamps that hang from stakes curved like shepherds' staffs along every city street and on every corner. The lamps were one of the first major innovations of the Post-Renewal Age. Each lantern houses two insects, a male and a female. They're nocturnal creatures,

hibernating in the bottom of the lanterns during the day and rising at the edge of dusk, precisely when darkness spreads through the streets. Upon rising, the two insects couple, consummating their nightly union. As they do, their small and bulbous bodies are filled with a bright luminescence that streams through the panes of their glass cage and radiates in every direction.

They make love all night, lighting the entire city with a preternatural passion that is the sole engine of their brief existence, never with the slightest awareness of the gift they're giving to the citizenry. After a month they wither to ash, from which their offspring rise and begin the cycle anew. With very little maintaining, each lamp and its inhabitants can light the night for years.

Lexi often reflects upon how it's all quite beautiful, if one chooses not to focus on the whole "incest" aspect of it.

We are not flowers. We do not wilt.

Those are her mother's words, spoken to her from a room in Lexi's mind where she keeps the memory of the woman as she was.

It's very different from the final room in which Lexi saw her. It's a room in which the air doesn't smell like death. Her mother sits there with her head raised high and proud, not pressed into a pillow, its slip stained brown by the poison expelled from her lungs. In that room in Lexi's mind, her mother's hair shines three different fiery colors in the light of the midday sun, hues for which they made up names when Lexi was a child. The day Lexi's mother died, what remained of that hair was a few wisps gone gray that moved against her scalp like lonely spirits in bone-white graveyard.

On that day, her last words to her only daughter were the same ones she'd spoken to the girl whenever strife crashed in heavy slate waves over their lives.

The great stone doors to the Gen Franchise Council chambers open, somehow without the slightest scraping sound, and an elderly Aegin pokes his graying head through.

"Lexi Xia!" he calls out.

Lexi rises from the building's translucent appendage and smooths the colorful material of the formal wrap she wears. The Aegin steps aside, bowing mechanically and with the disinterest of many years spent opening and closing a door, as Lexi moves past him.

The Council chamber is essentially one long ascending staircase with several spacious plateaus, the first and lowest of which is assigned to petitioners. Brio always told Lexi the chambers were built this way to achieve two effects. The first, giving petitioners the illusion they are rising in status, but only so far. That illusion is central to the second effect; looking up at the next plateau, seeded high above them, they accept that the state officials are their superiors in every way.

Brio also told her the most dangerous people in Crache, according to the Spectrum, are the ones who look to that handmade horizon and see a beginning rather than an ending. Lexi once asked him if he was one of those people. Her husband had only smiled and shrugged and professed that he was a simple pleader, and for the poorest people in the Capitol.

It pains Lexi to think of him then, remembering his words and his easy, reassuring smile. She longs for both every moment of every day. It pains her to force those images and the feelings they cause into the farthest corners of her mind so that she may focus on the business at hand.

The petitioners' plateau levels off a dozen steps from the chamber entrance. Its surface shines like glass reflecting some invisible jade pool, a natural feature of the stone when it is polished deep and rigorously enough. There are no seats or other furnishings for petitioners, only perfect painted blue circles in the center of the space, perfect prompts for petitioners to stand.

Order and deliberation in all things, that is the Crachian way.

The three members of the Gen Franchise Council, on the other hand, are seated on the next plateau; a good two dozen steps up from those blue circles. The thin, oval backs of their naturally carved and shaped chairs rise high above their heads. They each wear Spectrum tunics, the cuffs of their sleeves draped in crisp triangles. The runic pin representing their

individual kith-kinship is worn in the corner of the right cuff, the pin representing their Gen attached to the left.

Senior Councilman Stru is a hairless, ancient thing. Every inch of his flesh seems to be straining toward the floor. He sags in the center of the trio. To his right is Councilwoman Burr, the youngest of the three by a good two decades, a sharp-eyed, ambitious upstart with close-cropped dark hair and impatient fingers that quietly punish the armrests of her seat. To Stru's left is Councilman Jochi, a short, cherubic man with a thin mustache and a perpetually welcoming expression on his impossibly round face.

The fourth occupant of the Council's plateau is a state scribe, a young scholar standing behind a lectern upon which rests a tome thicker than three battle shields. The scribe attends it dutifully and intently with quill in hand.

Gens are the foundation of Crache. They began with a simple, revolutionary idea: that any group of people, regardless of birth or social standing, could come together to serve a function for the greater good of the nation. It began with humble kith-kins joining together and pooling what resources they had to create something larger than the sum of their parts in order to produce a good or a service that would be useful to the community. In recognition and as reward for this, all of that Gen's needs, be it food or clothing or shelter, were provided for from the coffers and larders of Crache itself, coffers filled by heavily taxing non-Gen merchants and collecting from Gens who produced hard revenue, and by the spoils of war efforts that seemed to press ever forward without end.

Of course, not all Gens received the same allotment of resources or access to them. From the beginning, the amount was supposed to be determined by a Gen's size and particular requirements. However it was well known that priority and special consideration were given to Gens whose work the state deemed the most valuable, or whose leaders were savvy enough to curry favor with the right state officials. Better and big-

ger food allotments, finer clothing, and larger estates were all common rewards for Gens who excelled at playing the political game.

The system grew to become what it is now: the great engine at the heart of the Crachian machine. Once the Franchise Council approved a proposed Gen to attend to one of the state's vital needs, that Gen could then form to oversee that vital need. There is a Gen behind every facet, service, and trade in Crache, from maintaining city sewers and sweeping streets to milling flour and farming rice to forging weapons and capturing stray animals. Their labors guarantee each member of a Gen a place in society and all their needs sponsored by the nation itself.

That was, as Brio used to put it, the gleaming side of the coin, anyway. Like any system composed of and controlled by people, Gens were susceptible to corruption and greed. There were always rumors of graft and favoritism, contracts being taken away or passed to Gens who showed the Council favor, larger Gens absorbing weaker or rival ones to eliminate competition, or any number of other unsavory practices no one spoke of in polite company. The ultimate irony, however, is that the Gen system was created to replace and prevent inherited wealth and power, at least by arbitrary bloodlines. Yet Gens that solidified their control over a city trust are rarely supplanted or replaced, and the formation of new Gens has become equally rare.

In many ways, Brio had often mused ruefully, Gens became the thing they sought so hard to kill.

For all those reasons, Lexi knew enough not to trust wholly to the goodness in these people or the fabled fairness of their process, however well-meaning some of them seemed.

"De-Gens," Lexi greets the male Councilmembers, and then, to Councilwoman Burr, "Te-Gen."

"It's good to see you again, Lexi," Stru says, each word seeming to be dragged over burning sand as it exits his mouth. "I do so wish the circumstances had changed."

Lexi nods, tightly. “As do I.”

Stru sighs. It’s an ugly, sickly wheezing that causes Lexi to feel pity for the decrepit old man even as the irritation she felt in the corridor outside refuses to fade.

“I have nothing well to deliver to you today, Lexi,” he finally pronounces. “Nothing. And for that I am truly sorry.”

He can’t be dead, Lexi immediately and frantically assures her own mind. *They wouldn’t summon you here to tell you that he’s dead. You would have been notified at home. He’s not dead.*

“Well has been in scarce supply for longer than I wish to detail,” she says evenly, maintaining her composure.

Stru nods, the gesture jostling every sagging inch of skin protecting his skull. He seems hesitant to speak his next words. The tension between his seat and Councilwoman Burr stretches thinner and thinner with every passing moment of silence.

“We have no choice but to revoke your Gen’s franchise,” she finally says, bluntly, almost impatiently.

There’s no remorse in her voice.

Stru’s face sags impossibly, lower than she’s ever seen it, as he looks to his right.

It’s as if Lexi has lost any ability to discern her native tongue. She looks between the varied faces of the Council. Lexi blinks several times, the motion serving the same effect as toggling a great switch. It allows her to brush away the din of emotion and focus on the practical staked to the road before her.

“My husband has been missing for less than a month,” she begins. “Surely this is . . . to say the very least, premature—”

“New evidence has come to light, I fear,” Stru informs her, sounding genuinely sympathetic.

Councilwoman Burr remains unmoved. “This Council has received a dispatch from the Protectorate Ministry. They have sufficient evidence to support that Brio Alania was neither abducted nor the victim of an ill

fate. This evidence suggests he has fled beyond Crachian borders with the intention of defecting to our enemies. Such is their conclusion.”

“Please. Councilmembers. I should very much like to examine this ‘evidence’ for myself.”

“That’s quite impossible,” Burr informs her, and Lexi is certain now there’s something akin to actual pleasure behind her words. “The Protectorate Ministry will not allow such sensitive material to be examined in an open Council session. To do so would expose the agents who risked their lives in service to the nation to obtain it.”

“I have the utmost respect and admiration for the agents of the Protectorate Ministry and the perilous work they do across our borders. I would never risk our nation’s security for personal benefit. For the very survival of my Gen, however, I must insist I be granted the basic right to defend my husband against such charges.”

Councilwoman Burr begins to respond, but Stru raises a spotted hand to silence her, drawing a look from the younger woman as sharp and ill-intentioned as a dagger striking from the shadows.

“Lexi,” the old man begins, “I must speak frankly with you now, and it is my hope you’ll know what I have to say is unaccompanied by malice of any kind.”

She only nods.

“Lexi, you are now the senior member of Gen Stalbraid, and you are no pleader. Nor is there a suitable replacement within your Gen. Without a pleader, Gen Stalbraid cannot serve its function. Your likelihood of recruiting a competent replacement willing to plead for Division Nine is minimal, to put it mildly. Your Gen chose an inglorious role to fulfill, however necessary, and it has always relegated Stalbraid to the two small kith-kins who founded it. Even if this . . . unfortunate turn had not occurred, within a generation I can reasonably say a review of your franchise would have been mandated.”

“A Gen is not about family, it is about function,” Burr insists to Stru, with the earnestness of one who has been deeply and successfully

indoctrinated. “Gen franchises are approved and folded based solely on the needs of Crache and the value provided by a Gen. We do not stand on sentiment here. Gens are not affectations of ‘legacy’ or a false sense of ‘nobility.’ We have risen above the notion that blood or lineage should determine some aristocratic ruling class. Function is the only determining factor. Your Gen is no longer functional, Lexi. It can no longer serve Crache.”

“Thank you, Councilwoman Burr, for that rousing reaffirmation of Crachian ideology and the Gen Franchise Council’s role within it,” Jochi says, speaking for the first time, and making no effort to mask the sarcasm in his voice.

Stru ignores them as the old often ignore bickering children. His sunken eyes are filled with Lexi, and they hold her with regret.

“You’re a strong woman, Lexi. You’ve shown that strength in Brio’s absence. I believe you will find prosperity in life as a private citizen. To that end, and in recognition of your Gen’s service to Crache, this Council will approve a generous stipend to help you transition into that new life.”

“New life . . .”

Her mind reels, threatening to unspool entirely.

We are not flowers. We do not wilt.

Lexi draws in a breath that might be made of fire, it so twists the features of her face, but when she exhales her expression flattens into a hard mask.

“With respect,” she addresses the entire Council, the words made hard and tight by her clenched jaw, “there is no more extreme measure than folding a Gen, however humble that Gen may be by the standards of most. In the case of Gen Stalbraid, this action would leave the people of the Bottoms with no pleaders, and I sincerely doubt any other Gen will be clamoring for the contract. I’ve had no preparation . . . no time to ingest what you’ve handed down today, or the reasons for it. I accept I cannot examine whatever evidence against Brio you’ve reviewed, but if for nothing else than the basic standard of courtesy, and to prevent the

residents of the Bottoms to be left without basic advocacy, I ask that this session be continued that I might have time to prepare, if not a defense, then a formal response.”

Councilman Stru sighs. “It is within our purview to continue this session. However, barring some truly illuminating new evidence . . . the return of Brio himself and an explanation that would exonerate him . . . I simply do not foresee an adjustment to this Council’s decision, regardless of the formality of your response.”

“But you *will* grant me that continuation,” Lexi says, adding quickly, “As I request.”

The ancient figure turns his head, stretching the flesh of his neck in such a way that makes Lexi want to avert her eyes. Stru looks to Councilman Jochi, who only shrugs. Stru looks to Councilwoman Burr, who shakes her head.

Finally, the senior councilman looks to Lexi. Those eyes hooded by the overgrown hollows of his face are unreadable in that moment, a moment in which Lexi feels an intangible part of herself leave her body. She can almost see it, corporeal and faceless, wearing the halo of some great ethereal guillotine in front of her whose blade is tethered to the next words that will be emitted from those withered lips.

“One week,” Stru declares, and Lexi exhales a small piece of her soul. “We’ll continue this session one week from today, out of respect for what remains of Gen Stalbraid.”

“Thank you, Councilman,” Lexi says, almost automatically.

“This is a final courtesy, Lexi,” the senior councilman insists, his tone harsher than it has yet been. “I advise you attach no more meaning or weight to it than that, and use the time to accept what comes next.”

“Thank you,” Lexi repeats, just as mechanically as before.

She’s already forgotten whatever words he spoke beyond granting her request.

The next few moments are the same detached haze; Stru dismissing her and the Council adjourning, Lexi shuffling from the chamber past the

disinterested Aegin, moving among the sea of bodies filling the cavernous corridors of the Spectrum, and finally arriving at the great receiving hall where she began the day what seems now like a short lifetime ago.

Taru refuses to sit the way a tree refuses to bend, and they loom with the same height and unyielding poise. They await Lexi just beyond the point at which weapons are permitted to be carried inside the Spectrum. Taru refused to be parted from the short sword sheathed in a scabbard made from the same thick leather as the rest of their armor, or the unusually crooked blade hanging from their opposite hip.

It's not only their height or plain armor or the weapons that cause Taru to stand out among the soft colorful tunics and wraps of the Capitol citizenry. It's not strictly the shorn sides of Taru's head or the sun-bleached shock of hair worn in a topknot, the way Undeclared seem to universally prefer, that draws the wary eye of everyone who passes. Taru's features and the color of their skin are just slightly off for a Cra-chian, but more than enough to be noticed in the Capitol of a nation whose borders are closed to foreigners.

"You may rest yourself in my absence, you know," Lexi reminds her Gen's towering retainer.

"That is precisely what I may *not* do, Te-Gen," Taru replies, adding quickly, "With respect."

Lexi has little reason to smile these days, but Taru is her last lingering source of inspiration for the expression.

"Do you find the Spectrum to be such a threatening place?" she asks her retainer, the question meant as no more than a joke.

Taru doesn't answer at first.

"Not the Spectrum itself, Te-Gen. No."

Some subtle force seems to drag Taru's eyes away from their usual singular focus on guarding Lexi's space. It's only for a moment, but Lexi notices, looking for the source of the distraction. Upon the wall at the center of the reception hall fork is a wayfinding tablet, also carved from the Spectrum's own stone. Its purpose is to direct visitors to the various

chambers and authorities and their respective corridors. One word leaps immediately at Lexi from the stone's surface.

It reads, *selection*, with an arrow indicating the corridor branching off to the right.

Lexi's brief, rare smile slowly dies. It never occurred to her that an Undeclared such as Taru might feel uncomfortable in such close proximity to the place where children such as they are often forced to choose a gender assignment.

"I'm sorry, Taru," Lexi says. "I didn't realize—"

"There is no need, Te-Gen. It is a personal discomfort, and one I should have overcome long ago."

"No, I should have thought. It was a careless thing to say to you. You didn't have to accompany me at all."

Taru stares down at her then, the tundra contained in their eyes as fierce and unrelenting as a real ice storm. Taru doesn't respond, but the implication of where the retainer belongs and why is clear.

Lexi says no more about it, but she can't shake loose the feeling of guilt.

Thankfully, Taru asks, "What did the Council have for you, Te-Gen? News, or more platitudes?"

Lexi's sympathetic demeanor turns hard. "They're using Brio's disappearance against the entire Gen. They want to fold our franchise. They want to end us."

"On what basis?" Taru all but demands.

"They say the Protectorate Ministry has evidence Brio defected to Siccluna. They want to name him a traitor."

"It's a lie!"

"Of course it's a lie," Lexi says without hesitation, a sweeping dismissal in her tone. "It's a very pointed lie, aimed at wiping away anything and everything Brio leaves behind in his absence. He spent his life upholding the ideals of Gen Stalbraid and speaking for the citizens of the Capitol Crache refuses to claim. For decades we've been the only

thing stopping the Protectorate Ministry from razing the Bottoms altogether. Discrediting him and dismantling our Gen is to their ultimate advantage.”

“But why would the Council do this? Are they the Ministry’s puppets, as well?”

“It’s not the whole Council, at least I do not believe so. This was spearheaded by that fanatical Burr woman. She’s either in league with the Protectorate Ministry or so eager to curry favor and advance her position she’ll do anything they say.”

“Does she know what Brio was investigating before we lost . . . before his disappearance?”

Lexi feels a swarm of sharp hooks take root in her chest and pull in what feels like a dozen different directions. She sees the same denial being plated over in Taru’s expression, the same suppression of loss and longing and fear in the face of meeting the challenges facing them now. Lexi knows no one in the world can possibly miss Brio and burn for the knowledge of his fate more than her. However, Taru comes the closest to matching her feelings. They may not love Brio in the same way as Lexi, but Taru is no less loyal to him, no less attached.

“Whether Burr knows or not, the Protectorate Ministry surely does,” Lexi answers stiffly. “He disappeared less than a week after he told us of his suspicions. I do not believe in coincidence, not of that import.”

“Nor I,” Taru affirms.

“I will not allow them to tear us apart,” Lexi insists. “I will not allow them to use whatever they’ve done to Brio as their excuse. I’ve done all I can to find him. If it comes to nothing, the least I can do is hold us together until he—”

Lexi breaks off in midsentence as the sudden, stony change of expression on Taru’s face halts her next words. They’re staring past Lexi, down the length of the berth.

Lexi follows her retainer’s gaze. Two Aegins are approaching them, one of them almost as tall as Taru and the other short and squat. Both

are young, male, and the faded threadbare state of their green and black tunics speaks of years wearing them. Like all Aegins they don't carry swords; the city was designed to negate the efficacy of long blades in its purposefully narrow streets. The daggers sheathed in scabbards resting against their chests on draped baldrics are long with curved handles.

"Te-Gen," the taller one greets Lexi with mock respect, although it's clear neither of them is interested in her.

"Aegins," she responds in her best hostess manner.

"Fine day."

It's further clear he's not interested in the weather.

Lexi only nods.

"Who is this here?" the Aegin asks, his eyes locking on Taru's.

"And what?" his partner adds, sucking a stunted breath through his nostrils.

Lexi answers in the same dutiful tone, ignoring the second question.

"This is my personal retainer, Taru."

"You don't look Crachian," the taller of them observes. "You've got a bit of the Isle of Rok in you. Never seen one in the city proper before."

"That's because they're not allowed beyond the docks," his stubby fellow reminds the Aegin.

"Taru was born in the Capitol, I assure you," Lexi says stiffly.

The tall one grunts. "You're one of them Undeclared, too, aren't you?"

"I don't see as that is any of your business, Aegin," Lexi answers for her retainer.

Taru simply glowers down at the men with thinly veiled contempt.

"Never will understand your kind," he persists. "State offers you a simple choice, man or woman. Even offers to fix you free of charge. Doesn't matter to me which one you choose, I just wish you would. Yet here you stand, confusing the two just to set yourself apart from the rest of us."

Despite already standing as if they are bound by barbed cords, Taru tenses even further at the Aegin's use of the word "fix."

“Perhaps Taru is content with the way they were born,” Lexi suggests through an abnormally clenched jaw.

“Two blades, is it?” the squat Aegins accuses more than asks Taru.

“Taru is fully bonded through my Gen,” Lexi informs them evenly. “Bonded retainers are permitted to openly carry arms in the Capitol, as I’m sure you’re aware, Aegin.”

The tall one nods, smiling pleasantly. “Hai. And we’re permitted to inspect those weapons for the proper proofs, especially here in the Spectrum.”

“Let’s have ’em, ya great tree,” the squat one orders, gesturing with his pudgy fingers.

“I only relinquish my weapons at Te-Gen’s request,” Taru answers them stonily.

“Present your arms for inspection,” the taller Aegin demands, his tone no longer light or playful. “Or we’ll be detaining the retainer.”

Taru’s forearms cross in front of their abdomen, each hand closing around the hilt of a blade. They draw the weapons so fast and with such force that both Aegins involuntarily back away a step.

Lexi couldn’t swear to it, but she thinks she sees Taru grin in that moment.

Taru lets the point of each weapon linger just a second longer, then sweeps the blades of each weapon back and extends their hilts to the Aegins.

Before watching Taru unsheathe them, the tall one might’ve taken the weapons from Taru’s hand. He seems hesitant now, resigned to leaning over them to inspect the steel of each.

“The Capitol proofs look genuine enough,” the taller one admits, squinting at the small impression of the Spectrum hammered into the thickest quarter of each blade.

“I don’t know about that,” the squat one says. “Off-side smiths are doing marvelous things with counterfeit proofs these days. And that’s an interesting blade.”

He extends a chubby digit at the crooked blade Taru carries in addition to their short sword.

“This looks like a fancied rendering of a hook-end. Spent some time in the Bottoms, have we?”

“My Gen has long served as pleaders for the Division you call the ‘Bottoms,’” Lexi interjects quickly.

“I was born there,” Taru says, their lips tight.

“I knew it! You may be the biggest port rat I’ve ever seen, but your kind can never get rid of the smell. How many Aegins did you bloody with your first hook-end before your mistress had her Gen’s smith forge you a prettier one?”

Lexi steps between them before Taru can even begin to formulate a response.

“Taru is a bonded retainer of Gen Stalbraid,” she says, addressing the two Aegins with an edge in her voice that causes them both to really look at her for the first time. “*My* retainer. You’ve exercised your authority to inspect my retainer’s weapons, which, as you’ve seen, bear the required proofs. By my reckoning you’ve now exhausted your authority, and I bid you both good day.”

The squat one seems ready to press the issue, but the tall one’s gaze trails down to Lexi’s broach, tracing the lines of the official insignia there.

“Good day to you, Te-Gen,” he says, his eyes returning to hers. “And to you . . . retainer.”

Taru bows their head formally.

The two of them turn and retreat through the reception hall crowd.

“I’m sorry you’re forced to endure that,” Lexi says when they’re beyond earshot. “Perhaps if you served a more prominent Gen—”

“They’re small men,” Taru says with more iron than any single forge could temper in their voice. “They’re so small I can’t even see them.”

Lexi smiles quietly to herself.

“You’d see them well enough if you had to cut them down, I imagine,” she says a moment later.

Taru snorts their reply, immediately stiffening at the slip in formality. “Forgive me, Te-Gen.”

Lexi dismisses that with a wave of her hand. “You really must stop apologizing for acting as a person. I’m the one who should apologize. I’ve never truly tried to understand how difficult it must be for you, existing in so many worlds.”

“I only exist in one. I cannot account for how others see me.”

“Of course not. I didn’t mean to . . .” Lexi’s brow wrinkles in frustration with her inability to articulate her thoughts in a way that doesn’t seem to diminish the retainer. “I only meant ours is a difficult land in which to be different.”

“As you said, I was born here. I cannot speak to my ancestry. I never knew my family. As for being *Undeclared*, I make no apologies. I may have to give up my blades for the sake of other’s petty comfort, but that is all I am willing to give up. I made that decision before I came into Te-Gen’s service.”

Lexi finds herself at a loss. Her only clear thought is that she wishes she’d had Taru’s kind of unyielding strength in the chambers of the Gen Franchise Council.

“Well said” is all she’s able to offer.

“Where do we go now, Te-Gen?” Taru asks.

Lexi is silent for a moment before answering.

“Home,” she says. “We *will* find a way to prevent what they are trying to do to us. I promise you. We will do that.”