



# EVOLUTION

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# 1

**M**arden's warships drop from the sky like falling stars. My view of them is partially obstructed by the snow-peaked mountains looming over the valley where I came against my will with Sam and his men to destroy the Alliance compound. Mere minutes ago we were escaping the compound as the tunnels blew apart behind us. We barely made it out in time, only to find the dots of warships up among the stars, descending from the fleet of battle stations settling into orbit just beyond Kiel's atmosphere.

The warships are so small from far away, I can almost trick myself into believing they're nothing more than a swarm of buzzards. Harmless.

If only that were true. The fleet carries passengers aboard, aliens from the planet Marden. Enemies that were thought to be long gone, who've crossed the universe to restart the old war between our races. Judging by the size of their fleet, they've brought a formidable army.

Not long ago, when I was still under the influence of Commander Charlie's serum, trapped in my own body and unable to disobey his orders, part of me prayed the Mardenites would arrive early. That part wanted them to put an end to my fight against Charlie and the other leaders of the planet, because I've been fighting and losing for too long.

At least if Marden's warriors wiped us out, the Developers who rule Kiel would finally be defeated. The suffering I've known since the day I was born in an internment camp would end. All of this would be over.

But as I watch the Mardenites invade the acid sky from their battle stations, I feel no relief. All I feel is terror.

After I was Extracted from an internment camp on the Surface and told I would live a safe life in the Core, I was naïve enough to believe Commander Charlie was my salvation. But the Core wasn't what it appeared to be and Charlie had terrifying ulterior motives. He tried to use me to betray my friends, but I fought back. He became my worst enemy, the reason I was fighting for my life and lost so much.

Just as he was beginning to show weakness the Mardenites reappeared, and they are a much bigger threat. The last time humans fought them, our army attempted to steal their home and enslave their people. Marden's warriors struck back by planting a machine on the moon that bled acid into our atmosphere. We survived by building cities underground and a force field in the sky to deflect the moon's acid, but we only just managed to destroy the machine on the moon.

With the Mardenites' life span lasting hundreds of years, they've had time to wait, plan, and design powerful weapons. And now when Kiel is at its weakest they have come to attack. Not only to

ensure humans can no longer threaten their kind, but also because we took something from them during the last war, something that Charlie has kept secret. The Mardenites believe we murdered their old leader, a being they considered the god of their people, and for that they won't stop until they've destroyed every last citizen.

Even if Commander Charlie finds a way to save himself and his precious citizens in the Core, I don't know how my friends and I will survive a war. The Alliance is weak and scattered throughout the sectors. The old military compound that was the headquarters of our rebellion is in ruins, and those of us who escaped its demolition have nowhere safe to run. The Developers rule the cities belowground and a new enemy descends from the sky. Anywhere we go we'll stumble straight into the path of destruction.

Despite this, every cell in my body rages, screams the same thing: *I can't give up. I need to keep fighting.*

I need to find a way to survive.



Beechy lands our X-wing in a forest clearing close to the river. The trees around the clearing grow dense and gnarled, nearly as tall as buildings, blocking out much of the moonlight. Hopefully they'll also block us from the view of enemy ships passing overhead.

The cover of the X-wing opens and freezing wind rushes inside, making me shiver in my safety suit. I'd give anything to be back in the Alliance compound, tucked into a warm bed in one of the bunkrooms with Logan beside me under the covers. My head would rest against his shoulder and he would hold me close as we slept, guarding me from the people who would harm us. The invasion by Marden's army would seem like just a bad dream.

But I can't go back there. The cots, showers, and training rooms were blasted apart and buried beneath the mountain by Sam and his troops. The one place I felt truly safe in the world is gone.

In the seat behind me, Lieutenant Dean unbuckles his seat belt and gets to his feet. "The Mardenite raiders look like they're headed for these mountains," he says.

I follow his gaze beyond the treetops. Before we landed, the smaller Mardenite warships were splitting up into groups, probably to target different locations on the Surface at once. I'm sure many of them will target the city on the other side of the Surface. The city where thousands of innocent child workers, including my friend Nellie, are trapped as bait with bombs implanted in their bodies. Commander Charlie plans to detonate the bombs in the hope of crippling Marden's army. I thought I still had time to convince him his plan wouldn't work and make him pull the child workers out of the city. But Marden's army arrived two days early, and now there's nothing I can do to save them.

Now, the survival of the Alliance rebels and myself takes priority. Most of the groups of Mardenite raiders have passed out of sight, but one is still visible high above the mountain peaks, tiny warships descending through the clouds. At least twenty, thirty in this swarm. They're still far away, but they already look closer than they did a few minutes ago. They must be moving fast.

As long as we keep our X-wing powered down with the lights off, the forest should conceal us if any raiders fly over the valley. But we can't stay here long. With the Alliance base destroyed, we have hardly any supplies and no fortified hideout. We wouldn't last more than a few days exposed out here in the mountains, and it's likely the raiders would discover us sooner than that. We need to get ourselves off the Surface as quickly as possible.

“How far is Sam’s hovercraft?” I ask.

“Just through those trees.” Beechy’s voice sounds muffled through his helmet. It doesn’t help that my left ear is still plugged up after my eardrum ruptured during explosions in the Crust camp; it could take months to heal, months for me to hear clearly again. Beechy points to the east, in the opposite direction of the river. “Maybe fifty yards.”

That’s where Sam and his troops were headed after they fled Alliance headquarters. The hovercraft is their passage back to the Core, though the invasion of Marden’s army will slow down their departure.

The Core is the farthest sector from the Surface. It’s where we’ll all be safest from the fleet and where we can organize ourselves against Marden’s army. It’s where I need to go in order to convince Commander Charlie to let Logan and the rest of the Alliance prisoners go.

Sam is the last person I want to rely on for help. He targeted me and tried to take advantage of me because I outperformed him in soldier training exercises in the Core. His hatred for me has only grown stronger since then, and now I’ve gone and shot him. But his hovercraft has a medical facility to treat our wounded, and more supplies than we have aboard the X-wing. If we end up trapped out here for more than a night, or if bombs start raining down, we’ll have the best chance of surviving aboard Sam’s hovercraft.

We must survive, even if it means allying with the person I’d very much like to kill.

“Then let’s get moving,” I say.

I swing my legs over the side of the X-wing and hop down into the grass. The jolt of landing worsens the throbbing in my arm

where I was struck with a laser by one of Sam's soldiers. Wincing, I press my hand against the wetness of blood on my sleeve. I feel a bit faint, and my heartbeat seems irregular. Signs my body is experiencing mild shock from the injury. But I can't let it slow me down. I can't rest until we reach the hovercraft.

"You all right?" Dean asks, his boots squelching in the mud as he joins me on the ground.

He touches my shoulder to steady me, and I stiffen. He might've assisted Beechy and me in our escape from the Alliance compound, but that doesn't mean I trust him. I haven't forgotten how he knocked me unconscious when I was undercover in the Crust camp a few days ago. How he stood by and watched while Commander Charlie injected me with a serum that took away my free will and turned me into a mindless, obedient soldier, and did nothing.

"I'm fine," I say, pulling away from him. Immediately I regret it, as the movement worsens the pain in my arm.

Dean's gaze becomes stony, but he doesn't argue. He tramps a few feet away from me, toward the back end of the X-wing, pulling a small device out of his pocket. It looks like a computer chip.

"What are you doing?" I ask, still clutching my arm.

"Putting a disabling device on the X-wing's transmitter, so it can't release any signal that could give away our location." He disappears around the backside of the ship.

I turn to Beechy, who's climbing out of the pilot seat. "Could the Mardenites have picked up our signal before we landed?"

"It's not likely, since they're still far away," he says. "But we'll know soon enough."

Beechy pauses to catch his bearings on the ground. His eyes

slide to mine and stay there, emotions flickering through them. Words we haven't had time to say. We haven't had a real conversation for days, not since before the Alliance infiltrated the lower sectors and he and I were separated. He was captured before I was, and I spent two days in the Crust camp wondering if he was dead or alive. After I was caught and taken to the Core, I found out he was alive but no longer himself. We were both injected with Commander Charlie's serum and sent on this mission against our will.

We have a lot to catch up on, but not until we're somewhere safer than out here.

Beechy turns back to the transport. Uma, the nurse who was stationed in the Alliance compound, is sitting up in the copilot seat. Her shaky arms prop up the limp body of Sandy—Beechy's wife, one of the Alliance leaders.

It's too dark for me to see Sandy well, but I can hear the weakness of her breath as she tries to suck in air. The last time I got a good look at her, the blood seeping from her pregnant belly had already soaked through the cloth Uma was using to keep pressure on her wound.

Sandy took a bad hit back at the compound. I saw her moving into the path of the fire, and I tried to stop her. I wasn't fast enough.

"How's she doing?" Beechy's voice is uneven. I'm amazed how well he's keeping it together, given how badly his wife was hurt.

"She's hanging in there," Uma says, sounding anxious too, "but she's lost a lot of blood. There's not much I can do for her without any supplies."

There wasn't time for any of us to grab anything from the compound, not even a medi-kit. I was lucky I still had my gun in my hand, or Dean would've been the only one of us with a weapon.



One of Dean's boots snaps a stick in the grass as he returns from the backside of the X-wing. "There's an infirmary aboard Sam's hovercraft. His medic should be able to stabilize Sandy until we get her to a surgeon in the Core."

Beechy's body is rigid with worry, and I can tell he's struggling to keep it together. I bet he's thinking the same thing I am: Who knows how long it will be until we reach the Core? If the Mardenites bomb the valley, we might not make it back at all.

But there's nothing we can do except take things one step at a time. First we get to the hovercraft. Then we'll worry about getting off the Surface.

Clenching his fists, Beechy moves closer to the side of the X-wing. "Here, hand her down to me."

Uma carefully lowers Sandy's half-unconscious form into his arms. She stirs a little, a soft moan escaping her lips, her eyes fluttering open. She looks like she's trying to say Beechy's name, but her lips are having difficulty forming the word.

"You're gonna be okay," Beechy says, his voice so soft, so fragile, I feel like I'm intruding on a private moment between the two of them. "I've got you."

Sandy's eyes slowly close again, and her head flops against his chest.

I remember the first time I saw them together, before I knew Sandy was Commander Charlie's daughter, or that she and Beechy were secretly plotting an insurrection. We were in a hallway in the Core maternity ward, and they'd just found out Sandy was pregnant. I'd never seen two people so happy before. They couldn't stop smiling and hugging each other.

Nothing in the Core had turned out the way I'd expected before I was picked for Extraction. The freedom I thought I'd won

had turned out to be another series of tests to prove I was strong, intelligent, and obedient enough to be kept alive. I was terrified I wasn't going to pass. But Beechy and Sandy gave me hope things could get better. They've given me hope time and time again, and saved me more times than I can count. I owe it to them to return the favor.

"Clementine, take this," Uma says from her seat in the X-wing. She's holding out the bloody rag.

Swallowing hard, I hurry forward and take it from her. "What do I do?"

"Put pressure on her wound until I get down."

I quickly press the rag against Sandy's stomach. But there's so much blood seeping through Sandy's uniform, my slippery hands can barely hold the rag steady. The baby growing inside her . . . how can it still be alive after an injury like this?

For Beechy's sake, I hope we'll make it to the medic in time to save both of them.

Once Uma climbs down from the X-wing, she grabs the rag from me and takes over. I'm grateful; the stench of blood is making my stomach uneasy. I step back a few feet and inhale fresher air through my nose. But the nausea doesn't go away. My light-headedness is also getting worse.

"Everyone ready?" Dean asks behind me.

"As ready as we'll ever be," Beechy says. "Let's get this over with."

Dean draws his weapon, so I pull my copper out of its holster. It's not like a laser gun will do any significant damage in the face of a raider attack, but holding the weapon makes me feel stronger. It reminds me I'm in control of my hands again, no longer a slave to Commander Charlie's orders. Capable of fighting to save the people I care about.

“This way,” Dean says, turning and tramping toward the eastern side of the forest.

Before the rest of us can follow him, there’s a *whirring* sound overhead, somewhere in the sky behind us. Panic rushes through my veins like a stream of icy fire.

*Raiders.*

I whip around, raising my gun. It can’t be them. They can’t be here already.

A flight pod hovers into view above the trees. Floodlights beam down on us, blinding me.

“It’s the others!” Uma says. “The Alliance survivors.”

It takes me a minute to realize who she means: Darren and Fiona. The other rebels who escaped from the Alliance compound. We lost contact with them after the transmitters aboard the Mardenite ships interfered with our comm system. But they shouldn’t have been far behind us. They could’ve seen us land.

Still, I hold my gun steady as the flight pod lowers onto the grass. We need to be sure it’s them.

The engine sputters and dies. A few moments later, the side door opens and two figures stagger out: Fiona, one of my old roommates when I stayed in the compound, and Darren, an Alliance pilot. The two of them slowly make their way toward us, Darren leaning on Fiona for support. His pant leg is bloodied and he struggles to keep his composure with every step.

“Don’t shoot,” Darren says. “It’s us.”

I lower my gun. “Are you okay?”

“We’re alive,” Fiona says. Through her helmet visor, her tan cheeks are flushed and strands of her black hair stick to her sweaty forehead. “So I guess we’re lucky.”

Their flight pod was nearly out of fuel. We weren't sure they were going to make it out of the compound at all.

Beechy looks past them to the pod. A third rebel was supposed to be with them. "Where's James?"

"We lost him back at headquarters," says Fiona. "We hoped he was with you."

Heavy silence fills the air. He's not with us. Unless he somehow made it onto one of the other ships, he went down with the facility.

I hardly knew James, but I was aware of him because he was one of the rebels Beechy and Sandy sprung from Karum prison when they rescued me. I was only locked away there for a few weeks, but James had been there for too many years to count. He'd lost sight in one of his eyes due to the experiments the prison doctors had performed on him. He joined the Alliance to fight the people who'd sent him to Karum—Commander Charlie and the other Developers.

"I'm sorry about your friend," Dean says. "But the raiders are coming in fast. We need to move."

The heaviness lingers for another moment. But Dean's right. There will be time to mourn the people we lost, but not until we've escaped Marden's army.

As Dean leads the way into the forest, thunder rolls in the distance. I lift my eyes to the sky. The clouds are moving in steadily over the mountains in thick clusters that can only mean a storm. The dots of Mardenite raiders are growing bigger by the second, still on a course that could bring them close to the valley. The question is whether they'll notice we're here, or whether they'll pass by overhead.

We're dealing with a new enemy, an alien no human has dealt with in combat for hundreds of years. We can't predict their moves, or know exactly what they want from us.

All we can do is try to be ready.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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