

RACHEL CAINE

NY TIMES BEST SELLING AUTHOR

HONOR LOST

CHAPTER 1 LOST CAUSE

The world of Greenheld looked so peaceful, spinning beneath us.

Bonded as Men Shen, we were as close to invincible as anything had ever been, and with the combined power and intellect of humans, Leviathan, and Abyin Dommas . . . we understood we weren't strong enough to defeat our enemy, Lifekiller—a damn god, pretty much—in open combat. Not even close.

Yet we would fight. Ours was a resolution that would not bend, much less break. We must be enough because there is no other. The two Leviathan could hear the singing power of the Abyin Dommas from far below, hidden in the oceans, and now there was an electric feeling, a shimmer across the surface of the water, and giant cities rose from the green liquid, towers and spires and curves in shapes that humans never dreamed.

They lifted out of the seas. Thousands of them. And launched into a glittering web around Greenheld.

Is our warshield, our Starcurrent-self said within the bond, a whisper awash in awe. Never has it been so strong.

The Zara-shard asked, How many . . . ?

And Starcurrent-self replied, All my people sing this. All.

Lifekiller's enormous dark presence blotted out distant suns, and millions of Abyin Dommas sang in their floating cities. Sound couldn't travel through space, shouldn't, and the Abyin Dommas warshield was only partly made of sound. It was pure, raw power, and it fluttered through the bodies of both Leviathan, rippled over and past the Bruqvizs mech ships that followed them, and hit the swarming Phage like a storm.

Then it struck Lifekiller, and the ancient god paused, as if pushing against a wall that

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wouldn't yield.

Lifekiller receded, the song of the Abyin Dommas burning bright as stars against the skin of a dread creature from the oldest stories.

Then the god-king attacked and cracked that fiery silver shell with a lash of a black tentacle. For the first time, we felt the full weight of Lifekiller's psychic presence, and it carried the full mass of a universe, starless and heavy with hunger. Worse: it was beautiful. Even as it killed, it was gorgeous as a coiling snake, or so our combined senses insisted. As if it would be an honor to perish at Lifekiller's command.

Screw this, our Zara-self thought, and it stung. We're not going out like this.

Our Leviathan-selves moved, circling in elegant spirals, slaughtering the disordered Phage with massive tail strikes as we fired the physical weapons, many parts moving in harmony. Suncross and his Bruqvizs mercenaries wove complex patterns of light between us and arrowed forward, dragging a net of shimmering light that sliced apart the Phage. The net cut free to drift on to wrap around Lifekiller's pulsing form. It tightened, and there was a burst of cold fury that shouted YOU DARE TO HURT ME?, and the net exploded into a billion sparks that died in darkness.

Our Typhon-shard struck with the full force of an armored, barbed tail. It was enough to shatter a moon, that strike, and we felt the impact of it crack the core of our bond. One of us vanished. Yusuf. Another pulled at the link, fraying it, but the rest of us tugged back strongly. No. We must hold.

The bellow of dark fury from Lifekiller washed over us like a blast wave. Do you think you can hurt me, little ones? Lifekiller's voice came in ripples of calm, and something in us stilled at the sound of it.

Then our Starcurrent-self shrieked, a discordant alarm that jolted us out of the spell. He lies! He is injured!

Thousands of surviving Phage swarmed and drowned both our Leviathan-selves in heaving, stabbing bodies.

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We hit the console and shouted, “Suncross! Kill these assholes!” We slammed our fist onto another control and braced for the pain as thick current blazed through our plating, frying many of the Phage, stunning the rest and sending them spinning. Suncross fired sticky globs that glued the Phage together and blasted them into atoms.

Another thick, glistening wave of song and power from Greenheld. Lifekiller rolled. Our tail hit again, tearing loose flesh and releasing cold liquid into colder space. The god-king was sluggish, and we concentrated our fire as Lifekiller heaved and struggled and reached for Greenheld’s life force.

We drove it back.

Lifekiller rolled away in retreat, its Phage attendants crawling over its body and attending to its injuries. We pursued, firing until the creature moved beyond our best speed and disappeared into the wider chasm of space.

Gone in the stars.

It will be back, we thought.

Lifekiller had a goal: revenge. The Abyin Dommas had, countless millennia ago, ended the rule of the Elder Gods by singing them to sleep: a slave race that had killed its tormentors. Or at least, most of them. Lifekiller had been sealed away, asleep, as close to death as they’d been able to manage.

A thick, purple thread of regret pulsed through our bond. Human regret—we’d meant well and thought we’d had little choice . . . but look at what it did, that decision. Our Starcurrent-soul’s emotions were more complex, layers of colors that spoke of anguish, certainly. Loathing. Fear. But so much more.

We broke, like a puzzle knocked to pieces—Leviathan, Abyin Dommas, and humans, scattered into smaller selves until we reclaimed all our separate skins, and I was suddenly back to just me.

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Zara Cole.

Alone.

And it hurt so much.

“Bea?” I reached out, slapping the floor that was also Nadim’s skin, and Nadim instantly wrapped around me like a warm blanket—not physically: my body was ice-cold from shock, but my soul was drenched in warmth. Dangerous. I needed to get myself together and take care of my physical needs. For one thing, I felt badly dehydrated. At the same time, I needed to pee so bad it made tears well up in my eyes. “Beatriz!”

“Here,” she whispered.

I turned my head. Beatriz lay on her side, facing me. Her hair was loose, curls tumbling across her face, and she looked paler than she should be. Trembling, like me. Too hard to get up, so I slow-rolled over and put my arms around her. She sank into me with a sigh of relief, and for a few seconds we just held on to each other while Nadim cradled us both.

Group hugs with intelligent spaceships. We might be fighting gods and monsters out here in the black, but at least we had this.

“I need to pee,” Beatriz said, and I tried not to laugh because if I did, I’d lose total control of my bladder.

“Yeah, me too,” I said, and rose onto my knees, then my feet.

I had to lean on Nadim, but I got enough steadiness to pull Beatriz upright. I didn’t let go of her hand; it was starting to warm up a little. She didn’t pull away either. We stumbled back to our quarters and parted there, each to our own bathroom. Intense relief, the kind that left me shaky. After I washed up and threw some cold water on my face, wrapped a blanket around me over my clothes . . . I felt more myself. I looked surprisingly good in the mirror. Healthy. I particularly liked my grow-out

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today. Funny how the little things mattered in the middle of fighting a god.

Nadim said, with a light touch of amusement, You are so strange.

“Damn right.” I laid my fingers against the skin of the wall. Felt a pulse and saw light zip through Nadim’s flesh like cool lightning. He liked that. So did I. “We won.”

More of an impasse, he whispered inside my head.

“Yeah, I know, but let’s celebrate a little anyway. In a couple of minutes, we can be all stressed and terrified again, but right now, just . . . be.”

I am being, Zara. The feeling that Nadim sent rushing through me stole my breath, like cool water and spring wind and sunlight on skin. Intense and personal. I am here, this moment, with you. And that is all I wish.

I couldn’t reply to that because damn, but I let him know without words how much I felt the same. This wasn’t what I guess most people thought of as love, but it was . . . better. Stronger. Fiercer. And I wasn’t afraid of that now, or ashamed, or confused. I just was.

We were.

Then I felt Bea standing next to me, and I turned and said, “I want to kiss you so bad right now.”

“I thought you’d never say it, meu anjo,” she said, and I was blinded by the brilliance of her smile. Nadim’s translation whispered the meaning of her words to me. My angel.

I kissed her, and she kissed me back, and the soft sweetness of her lips was something I’d never known before. It felt like coming home and finding a new land, all at the same time. A flirt of tongues—she tasted like that cinnamon coffee she loved. A gentle shiver crept over me because I could feel Nadim, just beyond Bea’s borders, and he practically glowed with the shared sensations.

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Trembling, I pulled back just a little, enough to make eye contact and register Bea's smile. She leaned forward, bridging the distance, and her brow touched mine, her curls whispering around my face in delicate swirls. They carried a faint hint of honey-and-almond shampoo she favored. Bea hovered close, breathing my breath, and it was beautiful.

She has the softest skin. That was my thought, but Nadim shared it as I ran a fingertip down the curve of her cheek. Her lashes fluttered, and I could see the path that led to both of us in bed, sliding together, hands joined, bodies arching—

Not the time.

I knew it, even if I wished I could drag Bea off for some privacy. Adrenaline and sex were definitely a thing, and I didn't want to push too hard, too fast and wreck everything before we got started. I'd made mistakes before. Not again. Not with Bea. I'd never liked anybody so much while also thinking they were just fucking beautiful, head to toe. That meant I had to be careful and think everything through, get it right the first time.

With a pang, I recalled just how wrong it had all gone before. Bea would never ask me to steal for her, but I had—for Derry. And look where that had gotten me. I'd pissed off a major crim; Torian Deluca thought I'd screwed with his supply chain, and that asshole was probably still plotting how to get at me. But I couldn't worry about Deluca when I had Lifekiller on the line and a bunch of Abyin Dommas relying on me.

"We should see if they need our help on Greenheld," Bea said, her voice soft and breathy. Impossible not to take that as a compliment. I put everything else out of my head for the time being.

"On it." I headed to Ops, where I got Chao-Xing on the comm. Like me, she looked shaky, red around the eyes. Humans might be able to do these mental gymnastics, but they came at a physical cost. I could feel my blood sugar dropping.

"You okay?" I asked.

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“We don’t have the leisure for a chat. Why did you ring?”

“Right to it, then. How’s Yusuf?” He had dropped out of the bond first, and I was worried his parasite might be giving him trouble.

“He’s getting treatment in the medbay. Bonding agitates his condition.”

“Will he be all right? We still have plenty of meds in stock.”

“I think so. I’ve instructed the bot to tell me if the situation becomes critical. Greenheld’s Planetary Defense Coalition has asked to meet with us, but I don’t think it’s wise to linger long. We should hunt Lifekiller down at once.”

“Easier said than done,” I muttered.

Destroying Lifekiller was the most impossible job I could imagine, and for a second I thought about walking away. We pulled it out of cryo, but Bacia let it escape. Still, we were guilty of that first thing. With that much skin in the game, I couldn’t say good luck to the rest of the galaxy. Not that Nadim would let me.

True, Zara.

God, I loved how he said my name.

“What does the PDC want?” I asked, realizing C-X was waiting to hear back.

“I’m not sure. We shouldn’t leave our Leviathan vulnerable, though. A delegation can go planetside, but not everyone in both crews.”

“Understood. Starcurrent should be there for sure. Who else?”

“I’ll pilot,” Chao-Xing said. “And I’d like you along for backup.”

I couldn’t help it. My grin started small, brightened up until she rolled her eyes. “You

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like me. You really, really like me.”

“I’ve come to respect your abilities,” she said stiffly.

Whatever. I understood damn well that wasn’t a denial. “Fine, I’m on board for the away team. We’ll leave Bea here and Marko with Yusuf?”

“Sounds good. I’ll collect you in our Hopper in a quarter hour.”

I took that time to cram down some food and put on lipstick. If I was about to meet important aliens, I should look good, right? I also changed my uniform and rigged up the remote-Nadim communications device so he could ride along.

Then I contacted Starcurrent. “Did Chao-Xing already ping you?”

“Good,” said Starcurrent. “On the way to the docking bay now.”

“Excellent.”

I got there a few seconds before the Abyin Dommas and we waited in the antechamber as Nadim opened for Chao-Xing’s Hopper. Once the atmo stabilized, I hurried for the shuttle, Starcurrent close behind. This was the same team that had survived the temple of doom where Lifekiller had been buried, so we’d be fine for a simple meet and greet, no problem.

I could almost hear my mother saying, *Pride goeth before a fall*. And I shivered it off.

As I buckled into the passenger seat—Starcurrent preferred the back because there was more room—I realized that this was an honest-to-God First-Contact situation for Earth. The Sliver was kind of . . . Zone-dirty, unofficial, not something you’d put on an Honors program resume where you were bragging about what the recruits had accomplished. But a visit to Greenheld? This was something to write home about. I imagined myself telling Mom and Kiz about it as Chao-Xing fired up the engines and ran the usual system checks to make sure we wouldn’t explode on atmospheric entry.

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A pang went through me. I'd most likely never get the chance to tell my mom and sister anything. It surprised me faintly that I wanted to. I could even picture myself visiting them in the dome, if I didn't have to stay. If I knew Nadim was waiting for me, just beyond the pull of the angry red planet they called home.

Always, he promised silently, and I just about melted.

"You're clear." Bea's voice came through the comms as Chao-Xing swooped us out of the hold and into the high-orbit vantage above Greenheld.

"Are you with me?" I whispered to Nadim.

"I am."

"Has been long since I came to Greenheld," Starcurrent said, and I didn't think I was imbuing that wistful edge to his translated voice through my imagination.

"When your people join the Honors, do you have to say good-bye to everyone?" I asked.

"No. Why would this be?"

So there were differences in the program. It made sense if the Leviathan wanted humans for their warlike qualities. They took us on the "Journey" and told us there was no coming back, so our people wouldn't ask questions on Earth. That way, when we died in their secret war, there were no reports to make. And nobody on Earth any wiser. It made me seethe, that manipulation. But who could I get mad at over it? Nadim? Nope. Never.

The Hopper dropped suddenly, sending my stomach upward, and I held on as Chao-Xing expertly guided us through the burn and then the rocky push into the misty exosphere. From here, the view was breathtaking, like Earth, but not, because the land masses were much smaller and there were pockets of deep purple amid the blue and green, streaks of white that must be snow or ice. Those flying cities were fucking incredible, and from what I could tell of our trajectory, we were headed straight for

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one.

Oh my God. I'm visiting an urban orbital station populated with tentacle aliens. This is the best day of my life.

Not least because I got to kiss Bea. I tried not to blush and was glad Chao-Xing was paying too much attention to the controls to notice and Starcurrent was behind me. Plus, ze might not pick up on such human cues anyway.

Ahead, the floating city grew before my eyes, though that was a trick of perspective. The smooth lines made the structures look like liquid metal or ice or I didn't even know what. Behind me, Starcurrent was singing, a subharmonic ululation that sounded happy, like when you rub a cat's head and it purrs.

"Your home is magnificent," Nadim said through the tech on my shoulder.

"Many thanks. Sad to be here in such dire times; happy to be here," Starcurrent replied.

The comm popped as the translation matrix activated. "Unknown Leviathan Shuttle, please respond."

"This is Hopper-1X of the Leviathan Typhon," Chao-Xing said. "Piloted by Zhang Chao-Xing, carrying two passengers, Zara Cole and Starcurrent."

I noticed she didn't use a bond-name, though Typhon and his crew had one. Starcurrent spoke in zis native tongue, and those sounds still didn't register as anything I could learn, let alone emulate. If I could get a chip implanted in my head to make me magical at new languages, I would have that hardware put in so fast. That was one ability I wished I had, and I admired the hell out of Bea for speaking five languages with her own skills. Only so much the regular translators could do with the language the Abyin Dommas spoke.

"Be welcome to Greenheld," the voice on the radio said. "Transmitting vectors for approach. You are clear for docking."

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It must not have meant exactly what I thought, though, because once we got close, the shuttle stopped responding to Chao-Xing's commands. Somebody on the other side must have been piloting us remotely, and let me just say, I did not love being hijacked like that. C-X turned to level a sharp look on Starcurrent.

"Is this routine? It feels hostile," she snapped.

"Hospitality and safety?" Ze seemed confused. "This is best to make sure we arrive intact. There are slipstreams close to the sky cities."

"There's safety, then there's commandeering our ship," she muttered, slapping a palm against the now-useless control panel.

Yeah, knowing we had to go wherever they took us? Didn't feel great. Still, Starcurrent didn't seem worried, but they were zis people. Obviously, ze wouldn't be the first one thrown in a cell if shit went sideways. Maybe these Abyin Dommas didn't know we were the ones who woke up Lifekiller?

I could hope.

Continued in Honor Lost

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