

-Prologue - The Ladder-

Braelin looked at Oelena, his hand upon the lever. "You ready?"

Oelena stood next to him, looking up apprehensively, feeling small beneath the massive scale of the machine. Braelin searched her face as their eyes locked. He had seen that look in her icy, cobalt eyes before. *Determination.*

Luminous blue energy swirled beneath her skin as she pulled the face covering up over her head, completing the ensemble, connecting it at the nape of her neck with delicate precision. Her hands trembled as she released, *anticipating*. The suit sealed and compressed against her body, shimmering to life like white diamonds glistening against the light of a star.

She had the familiar sensation as the suit's *Mina* was absorbed into her body, overwhelming her senses. She could feel her consciousness expanding, reaching out into the Universe around her; intertwining, like fingers interlocking. She became aware of the frequency of the stars, the orbits of the planets and moons. Her energy calibrated, harmonizing and aligning with the hum of the universe. She dared not think about the power at her fingertips. *All that she could change...*

Oelena struggled to bring herself back to the present. She focused on the small, blue lights as they swirled above her lapel, mirrored in Braelin's suit. They strobed simultaneously in quickening succession, became solid, then faded in unison. A smooth, textured voice spoke, centered in her head. "*Tether confirmed.*" She checked the readings on her wrist one last time to be sure. Oelena looked up and nodded to Braelin as her suit gave a final wink of light.

Braelin's grip tightened. He pulled the lever.

The Ladder ignited. A snap of cold, white light filled the center of the machine and expanded out in a concussive explosion of celestial tessellations, colliding and reverberating against the outer ring. The atmosphere shuddered around them. Oelena couldn't take her eyes away from the patterns, churning and twisting within. Countless constellations battled within the maelstrom of possibilities for this moment in Time.

Braelin looked upon their creation. His suit, a twin of Oelena's, yet dark beyond the blackness of space, rippled like billions of mirrors flashing in an ocean of roiling waves; a cosmic rhythm against the swirling beams of illumination. Oelena couldn't see his expression behind the coverings, yet she sensed his awe as he turned to her.

Explosions formed outside in the distance, closing in. The structure shook around them. Braelin leaned down and touched his forehead to hers. He lightly took Oelena's small, gloved hands in his and held them tightly against his chest.

Oelena gripped his hands. Time slowed around them. "The Universe doesn't get to decide this time," she whispered.

They held each other as debris and dust became suspended, even as the inevitable raced to crush their existence.

She gripped his hands tighter as the ground began to tremble beneath them. The machine did not waiver.

Sound froze. The groan of destruction became a continuous roar as sound ceased to exist beyond the moment, stuck in a hollow roar.

The air vibrated with the impending collapse of the moment, even as they fought to hold onto it.

They turned and faced the cold, sparkling well of light, like two silhouettes standing against the heart of a star.

Together, they stepped into the blinding void of Infinity.

And then the Universe ended...