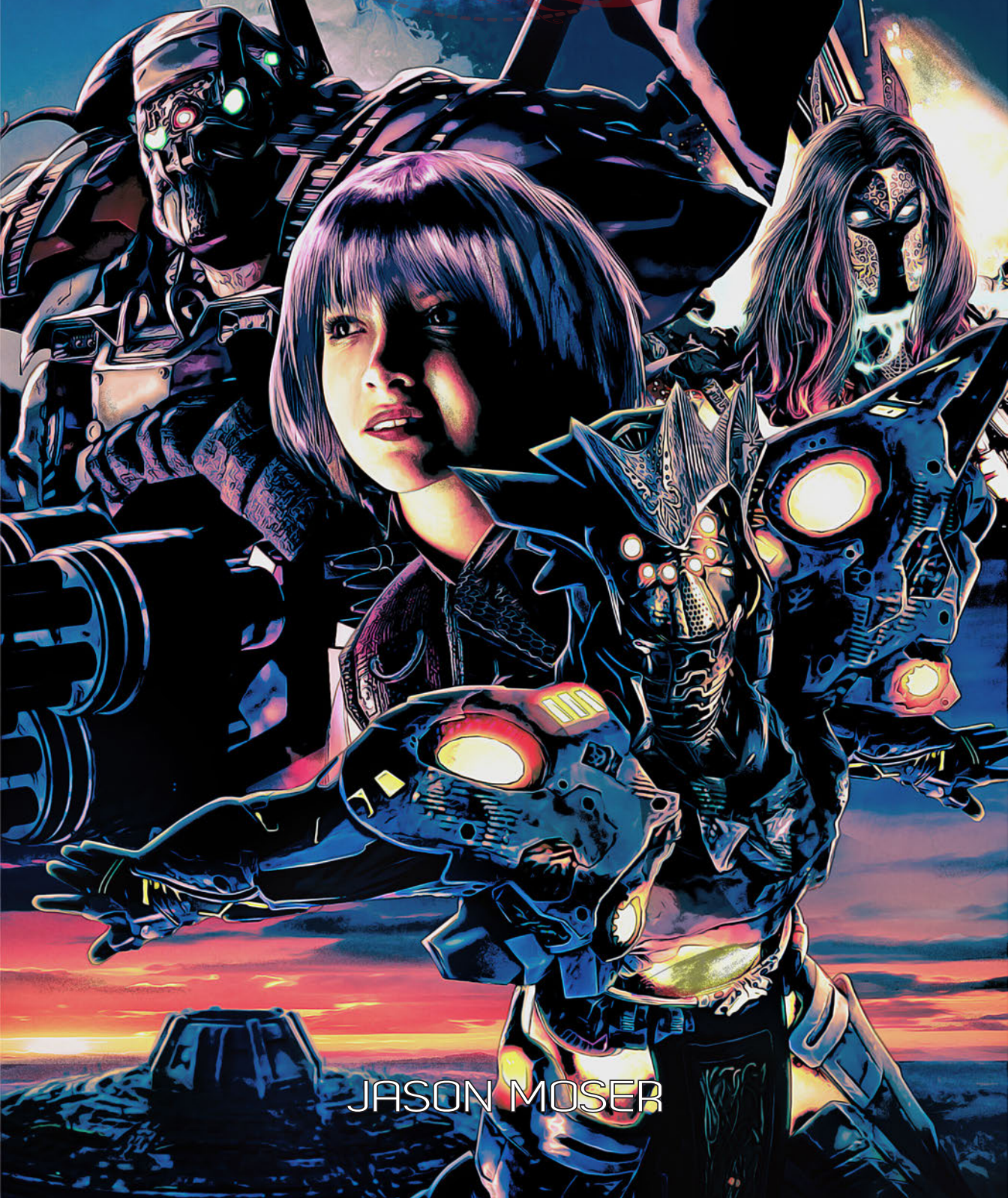


SACRIFICE TO ENTROPY



JASON MOSER





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SACRIFICE TO ENTROPY

BY:
JASON MOSER

Story By
JASON MOSER WITH DAVE REYNOLDS

Written & Illustrated By
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“Humanity enveloped in entropy desperately seeking
symmetry for peace of mind.”

- *Dean Cavanagh*





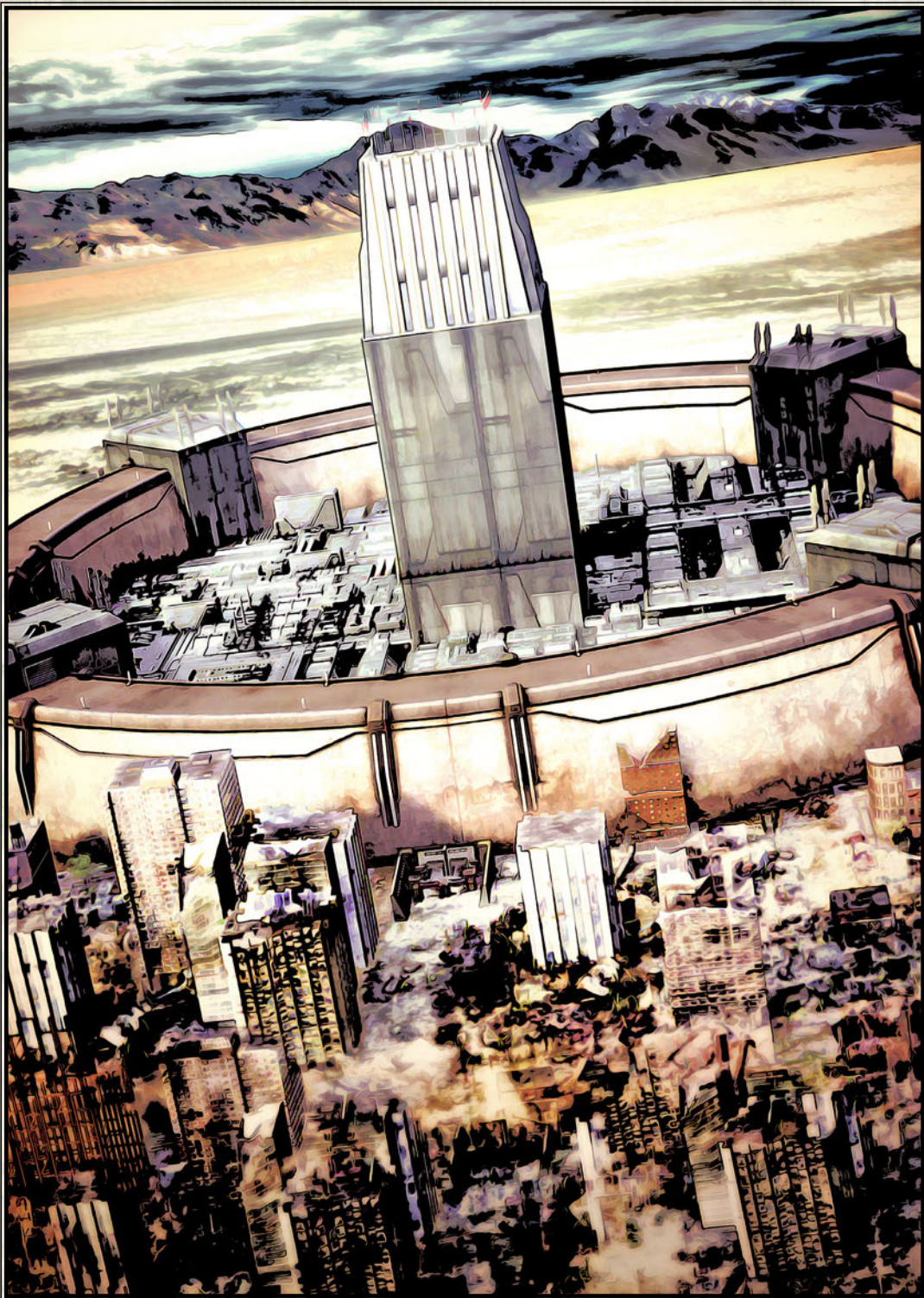
PROLOGUE

PROLOGUE

At the latter half of the 21st century, the Wormwood virus decimated the Earth's population, reducing her numbers from billions to a mere fraction. A cure seemed nearly impossible to find as the virus began to mutate, becoming deadlier with each generation. Stop gaps were created to stave off the flesh eating variant, including amputation. The rise in amputation meant the advancement of cybernetics was on the fast track. Humanity had been given at the very least a bandage, precious time to find a real solution. Eventually, Ellium, a premier defense contractor, and supplier of some of the latest breakthroughs in medicine and cybernetics released a vaccine. Suddenly this corporation was the single greatest power in the history of humanity. This new age became known as the Post Viralclysm age, spawning a new calendar system to accompany this developing new way of life.

By 100 P.V., possessing the only true salvation, the Ellium quickly were able to reshape the world how they saw fit. Only terrorist states like the Sons of Chaos, a rival group based out of the former Japanese island opposed the Ellium. The Sons Of Chaos, formally known to their citizens as the Continuum, clung to the old semblance of life, living in giant mega cities mostly protected from the rapidly mutating world around them by the ocean. The Ellium, however, found other means to protect themselves. Burying deep underground, the society they developed was one of artificial beauty populated by the wealthy elite and the highly skilled. A single spire rising high above the Earth provided access between the underground mega city of the Ellium and the mutated wastes of the surface. Resources required laborers on the surface, resulting in a make-shift city built around the spire. These outcasts would never attain the status of a citizen, but their proximity to the magnificent spire offered protection as the Ellium constructed outlying barriers to fend off the nightmares and freaks that roamed the wastes.





The ruling council of the Ellium saw these wretches not just as laborers, however, but as a secondary wall of flesh to be used to protect their glorious city as well as to enforce their will on the surface with outlying settlements that struggled to survive. By 180 P.V., the Ellium was secure in their power and eager for expansion once more.



Complicating the Ellium's dream of conquest were the Wastes, however. Pirates dying a slow death from exposure to radiation and other disease or mutations, freaks of nature usually with special abilities that seem impervious to the Wormwood roamed freely in defiance of the Ellium, often going by the name Unborn. The Wastes contained many types of mutations, but the Quatall remained the most terrifying. The Wormwood could mutate its victims into 7-foot tall creatures known as Quatall, if those left untreated survived the first stages of the infection. For these reasons, the sea became the best form of travel followed by air for the privileged.

During the initial outbreak, another group offered a solution that many embraced. Wielding extraordinary technology derived from an alien source, the Templars, a splinter group from the Ellium, offered the chance to colonize Mars and several moons throughout the solar system. The Templars themselves took the moon Europa, and with it, vast frozen oceans containing alien secrets buried deep beneath the ice.

Decades passed, and the Ellium has virtually secured the Earth, destroying all ships from the outer colonies that dared enter Earth space. The settlement resources have become scarce, and jealousy amongst colonies has grown as resentment towards the Templars has reached its peak. War is on the horizon.



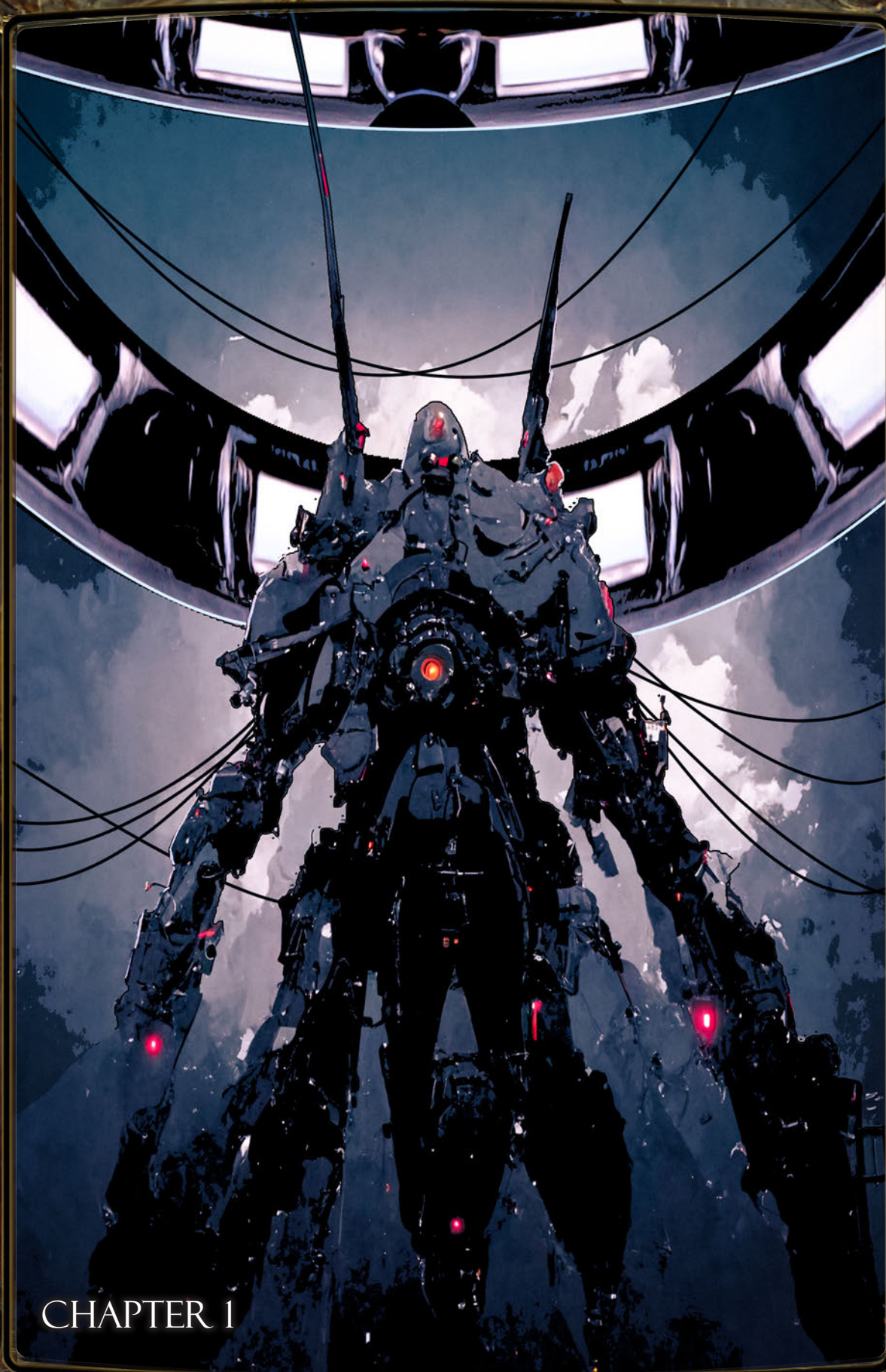
TEMPLAR ARCHIVE - RE: Hierarchy and initiation into Templar society:

Templar society functions on principles of self-restraint, mutual respect, and an individual's accountability. The cybernetic bodies utilized by all Templars employ the most advanced technology known to humanity. An individual's body is designed by the individual, retaining as much – or as little – bio-matter as an individual chooses. For the most extreme conversions, a Templar may only retain portions of their brain with the remainder of the bio material either stored for future genetic sampling/reproducing, or allow the Nano-spline to consume their bio-matter as the organics fail over time.

Templars wishing to procreate typically submit genetic material from storage for fertilization and implanting in a maturation chamber that can be stored in a Templars residence, where the development can be viewed easily. Some Templars retain enough organics to reproduce in the more antiquated, traditional way, but that is rarely utilized due to the hazards of space.

Upon reaching 8 months' maturity, the fetus is implanted with Nano-spline: a series of micro fibers that grow and expand within the human body. As bone and key organs are absorbed by the nano-spline, the nano-spline assumes the form of the replaced portion of bio matter, now mimicking the growth and function of the bone or organs replaced. This added resource amplifies development of the brain, and through genetic tailoring, enhances the brain's ability to interface and communicate with machines. After 12 months the baby may leave the maturation chamber for up to 4 hours a day, but they must be returned as growth, nutrients, and even education are provided subconsciously. The virtual experience children experience is shared and accessible by adult Templars, and functions as an idyllic landscape free from risk or the hazards of space. This process continues until full maturity at age 18 where the individual, upon leaving the maturation chamber a final time assumes their chosen name – either retaining the one their parent gave them or assuming a new identity that fellow Templars will know them by.

The guiding Voice serves the Templar society at the head of the Ruling Council which comprises Templars serving in Scientific Advancement, Education, Defence, Diplomatic Relations, and Community Development.

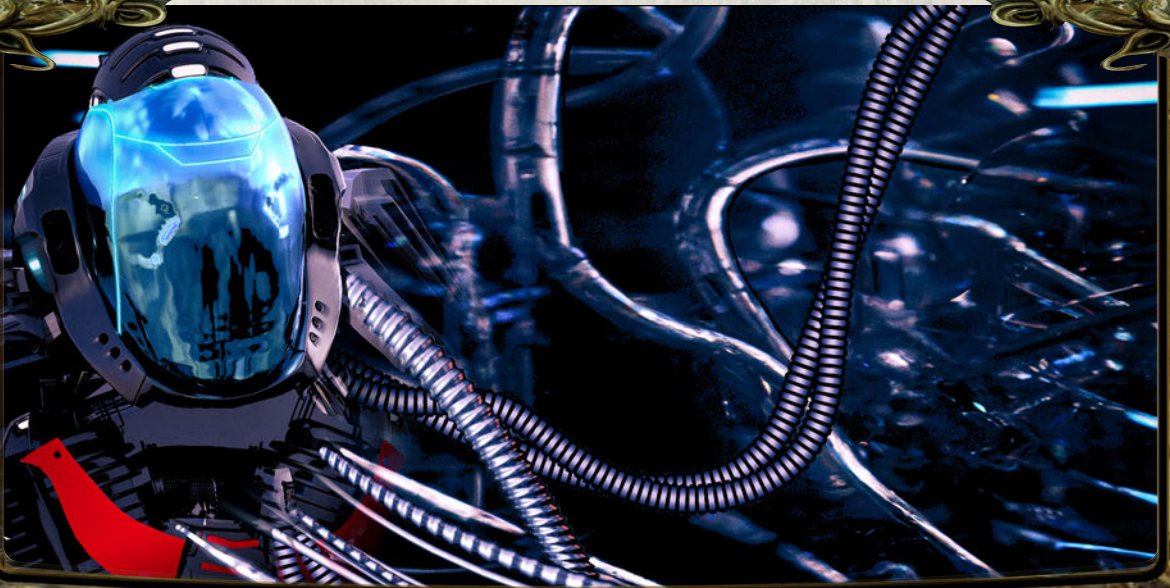


CHAPTER 1

CHAPTER 1

Early on, the colonies organized under a single banner, The Pax Galileo. With this organization came a steady climb for the stars that led to many advancements but success had created a natural cast system where the wealthy consumed more than they made and the principals the colony was founded on became eroded. Sights both new and old became relevant, and rivalries built. The vast power of the Templars ensured them a regular role as protectors, if not as babysitters for the colony citizens. But as the populace expanded, terrorist groups were formed and began attacking shipping lanes where mined resources traveled on their way to the centers of power in the Pax. The newest group, Unity, has brought commerce nearly to a standstill. With the Templars unable to stop the Unity attacks, the Pax Galileo turned to their own scientists to develop the Machina Unit. Bulky in appearance, the frightening power the units wielded meant that mass produced, the Machina Units became a serious threat. The Templars continued to struggle to maintain peace as peace became increasingly more fragile.

Buried deep beneath Europa, the enigmatic Templar known as Doctor Armaghast discovered a new level of technology in the form of an alien watch station. Created to monitor the system in a war fought centuries ago, the station represented quantum leaps in space-flight. Generating immensely strong cybernetic bodies, the Templars had moved beyond the limitations of a human body thanks to this alien technology coupled with Armaghast's research. Charged with guiding the colonies to a brighter future, the Seraph-knight were the most powerful of the Templars. Capable of independent flight, a typical Seraph-knight can generate massive blasts of energy and heal from most injuries. Created with a network of Nano-spline, the micro-threads were the culmination of decades of research.



Two Knights, Legacy and his sister Aurora stood silent watch, floating in the distant solar winds as they monitored the shipping lanes for reports of distress. Legacy was thrilled when the call for help crackled over the net. Patience was never one of his virtues and he knew it.

The two Seraph-knights were caught off guard as they arrived in orbit of the distressed transport ship. Destruction and carnage in space were not a rare occurrence, but what surprised the two Knights was the efficiency the transport had been stripped. Blast marks were precise and well beyond the level of technology the members of the Pax should possess with scar residue startlingly similar to Templar technology. Aurora took samples of the debris back to the capitol on Europa for examination. The results were not reassuring.

The Templar city on Europa encompassed much of the northern region of the moon. After the initial construction, the city has changed very little as the population seldom grew. Being immune to the effects of aging would normally have led to a surplus of the population, but with the augmentation, all Templars went through after the age of adulthood, the drive to reproduce greatly diminished. Physical beauty became inconsequential while intimacy became a virtual experience for beings no longer limited to a single, unchanging form. Individuals went on to choose their own identity upon entering adulthood, some holding to their birth names while others adopted more creative monikers. While Aurora held true to her birth name, Legacy assumed a wholly different identity then that which he was born.

The chamber the two Seraph-knights entered was enormous and filled with wonders of technology. Assembled in the great hall were the fellow members of the Seraph-knights. Among the crowd, Legacy took note of two Seraph-knights in particular – Defiant and Ashen. What troubled Legacy about Defiant was his apparent interest in Legacy's sister, Aurora. Ashen he just hated. It wasn't necessarily the arrogance that bothered him but the fact that Ashen always addressed himself in the third person.

Epoch, the leader of the Templars, stood on the elevated platform in the center of the hall. As the room fell silent, Epoch began his address.

"The disturbing news about the Machina Units and their destructive capability are confirmed. The weaponry utilizes an encapsulated explosive device with a super-heated plasma base, a technology we've previously withheld from the Pax Galileo. They no longer request our intervention as their new machines will be used to exterminate Unity and of course anything else that threatens them. However, as we all know, this won't end but rather escalate."

Ashen interrupted, fuming “Ashen has warned the council about continuing to coddle the masses, they can barely keep from destroying themselves as it is. They never appreciated our service.”

“True...” Epoch interjected. “But you were, in turn, reminded that our duty is to guide, not to seek the adulation of the masses. Aurora, you and Defiant will question the Pax about this new leap in technology. Legacy and Ashen, keep an eye on the shipping lanes – a close eye.”

By the time Legacy could bring himself to acknowledge Ashen’s existence, Ashen had already stormed out the hall.



The Unity faction favored the obvious use of cybernetics, a blend of body modification preferring function over form. This type of overt augmentation was certainly the desired look of their field rep, a man named Howit. The signal he received caused the representative to clinch a little, the next few moments could be vital to Unity and Howit's career in the new order to come. The video signal was disabled and the voice transmission distorted, but what was not obscured was the location. The sender wanted Howit and Unity to know the message came from Europa.

It's been several months since you received the Kabal units. From the reports, your Damocles program is in full swing. What is the progress with the other end of the deal?"

Howit chose his words carefully.

"We were quite satisfied with phase two. We've created codename Deathchild, a cybernetic weapons system that has exceeded all our projections and a portion of your requirements. What this means is, grafting the upgrades to your Templar technology will be successful and should significantly exceed even your expectations when completed."

The noise Howit heard next reminded him of nails on a chalkboard, but with rhythm as the mysterious figure laughed in its synthetic tones. The Templar was very pleased.



Defiant and Aurora flew to their meeting with the Pax Galileo president, Andrew Renaud. Aurora had little interest in letting a petty war over resources destroy the way of life so many clung to. Defiant woke her from her thoughts as they passed an automated Pax checkpoint. The scans that typically reveal weapons merely registered silhouettes with the Templar key code.

“So what do you expect from this President Renaud?” Defiant asked her as he appreciated her body. Physical beauty was hardly relevant when the body was no longer confined to a single form, but what Defiant did appreciate was Aurora’s grace and agility. She favored stealth, speed, and maneuverability over the brute strength that most other Templars sought.

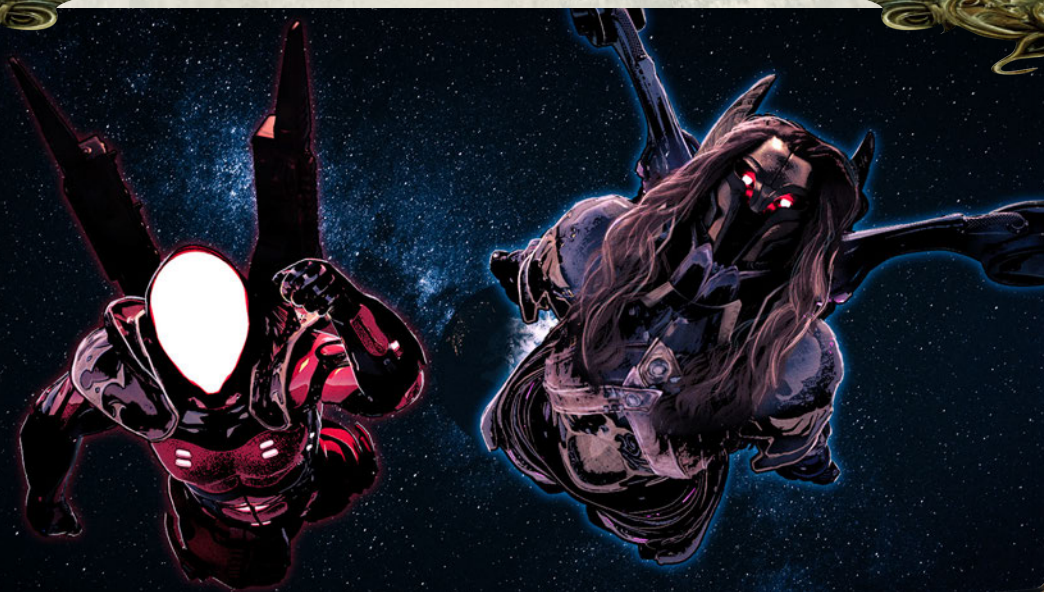
“I don’t know Defiant; he’s a politician. I have yet to meet one capable of honesty or sincerity. They function as parasites feeding on attention, only unlike a celebrity, they pretend to serve others. It is embarrassing, to be honest.”

“Aurora, tell me how you really feel!” Defiant let out a chuckle at her bluntness. Aurora enjoyed Defiant’s company for the most part. A blend of arrogance and charm she found herself attracted to, but she had little interest in a relationship.

“Have you considered Ashen’s idea of abandoning the Pax to their own devices? They’re practically forcing us out of the system as it is.”

Aurora considered his words for a moment. “To be honest, if it were just the politicians, sure, but it’s not. We do this for the people.”

Defiant flashed an angry expression at that. “The sheep you mean. I’m not confident they deserve any better, they tolerate the idiots they elect. It’s a shame you don’t agree; you wouldn’t be so disappointed when this whole solar system shoves its self in the incinerator.”





Aurora was taken aback at the sharpness of Defiant's words. "I didn't realize how cynical you've become. Are you sure taking Ashen under your wing was a good idea?"

"Very amusing. We'll see when we meet the good-hearted public servants of the Pax Galileo. I'm sure they won't disappoint!"

Defiant's cynicism was well-founded, however. The capital of the Pax Galileo served as a propaganda piece as well as a paradise for the wealthy. Gleaming spires in terraformed sections of Mars fed fresh resources daily to sustain a society built solely on consumption without regret. The struggles of the outer regions were a notation on reports rather than a reality in their eyes.

The Templars were treated with respect, however, as their technology represented an insurmountable hurdle. In truth, everyone knew that to challenge the Templars was a risk not worth taking. Still, when it came to governing their people and the acquisition of newer technologies, the Pax sat still for no one. There were no great revelations to be had by the Pax, and like all politicians, President Renaud was practiced in the art of avoiding questions. Eventually, the Templars returned to Europa and Aurora's view of politicians was not significantly improved.

Legacy found himself walking the surface of Europa, outside the large city of the Templars. Ashen was more than a little late. Legacy held out his hand and energy began to coalesce. A sword was formed inches off of his hand, made of pure energy. Most Seraph-knights wielded an energy based weapon, often resembling a sword.

This weapon collected immense quantities of energy from the Knights reserves to generate a weapon capable of piercing even the sturdiest of materials. The trick, however, was not to touch the weapon its self. Utilizing a number of gravity fields, the weapon rested in his hand as would a real sword, only never actually contacting his body. As he pondered this weapon, a ship emerged over the horizon. Legacy approached as Ashen opened the canopy.



“Ashen, why would you use a ship?”

Ashen glared back at Legacy. “Ashen prefers to let the ship do the work.”

Legacy did his best to swallow every hateful insult he could imagine in favor of getting to the shipping lanes. As far as Legacy knew, there has yet to be a ship capable of flying as fast as even the weakest Templar. Still, Legacy sat next to Ashen aboard the shuttle, shifting back and forth as he struggled to find a comfortable position. Thankfully long before Legacy felt the need to strangle Ashen, a distress signal was received.

* * *

Legacy and Ashen approached the Pax shuttle slowly, offering assistance while scanning for life. When no answer to their signal was received, the two entered the wreckage of the ship, the artificial gravity along with all other systems malfunctioned. Bodies, partially vaporized in the attack floated freely in the vacuum of space.

“Legacy, according to the log, this was supposed to be a peace envoy.”

Legacy entered the main cabin from the back, carrying a large pulse rifle.

“You should check out the rear compartment, there’s enough ordinance to destroy a base.”

As Ashen entered the rear compartment, Legacy detected an approaching signal. Legacy called back to Ashen but there was no reply. Three Damocles units began firing at Legacy. The initial blasts Legacy deflected with the same gravity technology he was holding his sword with earlier.

The blast he fired from his arms tore through the nearest unit. As Legacy targeted the other two units, a blast struck him from behind. A fourth unit leveled its weapon preparing to disintegrate Legacy’s head when a glowing staff tore through the Damocles unit splitting it in two.



Ashen emerged and with his arm stretched out, his staff was called back. Made from the same energy as Legacy's sword, the staff quickly ripped through another Damocles unit on its return. The last of the units stood back and turned to the shuttle.

In a blinding light, the Damocles units collided with the shuttle, destroying most of the weaponry and indeed any clues that may have remained. What little they found, Legacy collected. The Templars returned to Europa with their new cargo, the remnants of an advanced armored suit.





CHAPTER 2

CHAPTER 2

Legacy brought the evidence to Doctor Armaghast, as he was the one responsible for nearly every Templar advancement. Long ago on Earth, Armaghast was exposed to an alien technology far beyond anything previously seen or even imagined by humanity. The experience changed him, making him more eccentric but expanding his intelligence beyond measurable levels. Since that day, he's sought to gift the rest of humanity with the same clarity of vision, accessing what he dubbed 'Affine space'; the source of his revelations.

Aurora entered the room as Armaghast began his examination. Mumbling either in an unknown language, or what Legacy thought more likely a random stream of gibberish, Armaghast examined some of the pieces before making his declaration.

"Definitely based on our old Kabal bodies. I would say 4th generation."

"You're certain?" Aurora demanded. There was only one way Templar technology could fall into the hands of Unity, and that would be a traitor.

Armaghast continued with more unsettling news.

"It seems that the Pax also has been gifted with my technology. Their new toys are using weaponry from our 3rd generation Kabal bodies."

"That's beyond strange - if someone has had access to our tech, why take something relatively outdated? Legacy asked.



As the Doctor moved to the area storing them, Armaghast explained about his earliest work. “During the initial colonization of Europa, the majority of Templars remained in stasis while only a select few monitored and facilitated the construction of our capital city. During this time, I continued my work, creating new bodies and technologies for the colonists. The earliest models were called Kabal units, and they represented enormous leaps in technology. There’s a good chance that even as relatively old as they are, anything more advanced would be beyond their ability to reverse engineer.”

The trio pondered this for a moment. The blending of man and machine became a way of life for all of humanity, especially while trying to survive the harshness of deep space. On Europa however, eventually the two became one, and a new species was born. Armaghast’s finest creation, the nano-spline utilized bundled nano-machines to evolve beyond human, and finally the Seraph-knight was born.

Armaghast opened the vault with little surprise as to what was revealed. Among rows of abandoned synthetic bodies, there lay two crypts barren of their suits.

Aurora was quick in her response.

“I’m getting Epoch; the council needs to be made aware of this immediately. Find Ashen and meet us in the council chamber.”

Aurora headed out of the room as Legacy went to find Ashen with a quick stop at the hall of records.



Outside the city, Ashen had been deep in thought when he detected Legacy's approach.

"I was surprised you weren't with me presenting our findings."

Ashen looked at him curiously, "Ashen was in conference."

"I'm sure you were, in fact, I was curious about all your absences lately. Also of interest, when I was told a traitor stole Templar tech to give to the colonies, I ran a scan on all outgoing communications. Imagine how shocked I was when I found communique's between yourself and the Pax. You're a fool, Ashen."

Ashen offered up his arms as a sign of no resistance.

"Take Ashen to his punishment."

Legacy turned then swung at Ashen. The blow sent him through a rock outcropping as Legacy generated his sword.

"After I kick your ass I'll bring you in."

Ashen blocked Legacy's sword with his staff, kicking the enraged Templar back.

"You'll have to try harder than that."

Legacy wildly swung his sword again at Ashen, forcing him back several steps.

"Ashen has always believed in natural selection, but the council has been unwilling to listen. We continue to coddle the masses ensuring they never will be able to stand on their own. They don't need babysitters; they need the will to survive. And Ashen has given them that will!"

"Bullshit! All you've done by giving terrorists a Kabal unit is ensure both the Pax and Unity will go to war."



Legacy went to stab Ashen in the side when Ashen's ship swung up behind Legacy, colliding with him, engulfing Legacy in flame. As Legacy regained his footing he saw Ashen above him; his weapon leveled at Legacy's neck.

"Ashen only gave technology to the Pax, Legacy. I would never support the cowards of Unity."

Ashen lowered his weapon allowing Legacy to come to his feet fully. Legacy glared at Ashen.

"If this is true, we have to tell the council. It looks like someone else has beat you at your own game."

Off the moon of Io, the Pax station Wasser processed most of the systems recycled and salvaged water. The process was intricate as each water source had different materials to be filtered out. While other stations existed, only the Wasser station had the capacity to meet the demands of the various colonies spread throughout the system. Security had been thorough with hundreds of Machina units in guard formation. When the Damocles units arrived to take the facility hostage, the station personnel expected the Machina units would hold the line, but they weren't expecting Deathchild. Created from core Templar technology, Deathchild moved through the Machina units with frightening ease. Deathchild pressed his attack, sinking his clawed hands deep within the impact armor of the Machina units, ripping them to pieces. Damocles units offered support fire, making short work of the station defenses. The seven-and-a-half foot tall Deathchild entered the bridge, radioing his Unity masters of his success.



Ashen's confession to the council was without regret. His purpose, in fact, had been supported by more of the council than Epoch wanted to admit. But the debate would have to hold for now. Word spread quickly of the attack on the Wasser station.

Panic began to sweep through the colonies as water prices soared beyond reason. Epoch and the other Seraph-knights knew this was the tipping point they all feared. Whether Unity presented a constant threat, or the citizens of the Pax just resorted to rioting on their own, this fragile system would tear its self apart. Epoch stood before his fellow Templars, knowing the seriousness of what he was about to ask.

"My fellow Templars, regardless of our goals and differences of opinion, we all agree that war represents the antithesis of all we hold dear. So I must ask for volunteers to aid our brothers and sisters in freeing the reclamation facility. This new threat must be handled quickly, but there will be many unknowns. Only a small force can be spared as the rest of you will be dispatched to aid the colonies in maintaining peace locally. Reassure them they are not alone and that no matter what, we will protect them. Since the danger at the Wasser station is unknown, however, I now ask for volunteers."

Legacy and Aurora were first to volunteer with Defiant quickly offering his support. Ashen approached Epoch respectfully, for the first time.

"Ashen would like the opportunity to assist as well. While Ashen did not support Unity, Ashen's actions undoubtedly helped contribute to the problem.

Epoch pondered this for a moment.

"Very well. The question of your punishment can wait. You will be given this one opportunity. Follow Aurora's commands, free the station from the Unity forces, and redemption may still be yours.



At the edge of Unity detection, the four Templars surveyed the station and their opposition. Legacy and Ashen would attack the Damocles units, drawing attention from the station, allowing Aurora and Defiant the chance to secure the base.

Legacy and Ashen moved with lightning speed. Damocles units were caught unaware as the plan came together smoothly. More units spilled from the station and raced towards the fight. Aurora and Defiant cloaked themselves, and with the distraction continuing, they made their way into the station.

The battle was an uneven match even with the superior Unity numbers. The two Templars had cut their way through most of the opposition when Deathchild arrived. The first blow was to Legacy's shoulder. Metal and fluid tore from his body as Deathchild's clawed hand ripped through the Templar armor. Ashen responded, hurling a Damocles unit into Deathchild's back. Already the nano-spline began repairing Legacy's body, but this threat was not to be taken lightly.



Inside the station, Defiant and Aurora approached the command center. Aurora was about to shut down the defense screen keeping Pax forces from entering the facility when she was struck with enormous pain. Defiant's sword burned through her torso as she fell to the ground, barely able to whisper one question, "Why?"

Defiant gloated over her fallen form.

"It's simple my dear, we were born to rule, and I was born to rule all. Armaghast was moving too slow with the advancements. The colonies threaten our place of power while leeching resources from us, never appreciative of our generosity. I will make Unity strong and they, in turn, will make me invincible. I only wish you hadn't been in the way."



Defiant moved to the control station. Deactivating the station's coolant system, Defiant turned the station's power source into an enormous bomb and Aurora was powerless to stop it.

"They're all sheep Aurora, all of them. But if you so badly want to die for them, who am I to stand in your way.

Outside the station, the Templars were getting the worse end of the fight. Deathchild had swung the battle in favor of the Damocles units but the Templars were far from finished. Ashen and Legacy fought back to back, one fighting off the Damocles units while the other fought Deathchild. The one advantage the Templars had were the energy blades they wielded, capable of even destroying Deathchild.

Legacy generated a self-contained shield around the base of his blade, creating momentum from the reaction and flinging the sword outward but Deathchild was too quick, and the sword passed overhead. The creature hung there in space, gloating at the loss of the weapon, but Legacy looked to Ashen.



Ashen nodded his understanding, and at the last moment, the two Templars dropped altitude. The blade had swung in a narrow arc, returning to the hand that created the weapon. The sword slashed through Deathchild's body, amputating his leg. Deathchild reeled back, fluid shooting out of his appendage into space. Quickly the monstrosity ordered the remaining Damocles units to cover his retreat. They were no match for the Templars, but they were successful in buying him enough time to escape.

The two Templars success was cut short, however, when they were unable to reach Aurora or Defiant. Quickly they headed for the station, fearing the worst.

As they entered the command center, Legacy saw Aurora slumped in the corner. He ran to her, cradling her in his arms. She was still alive, but barely. Ashen stood by the control unit when Aurora spoke.

"The station... it will explode if you don't reactivate the coolant. It's Defiant, he's behind Unity..."

As Ashen made his way to the terminal, a blast of energy vaporized the controls. Defiant stepped out from the shadows.

"I don't think so Ashen, I've worked too hard for this moment."

Legacy was consumed with fury, but Defiant was too quick, leveling his weapon towards Legacy and his sister.

"You're not that fast boy." Ashen brought his weapon to bear as well, stepping between Defiant and Legacy.

"Defiant, we settle up first."

Legacy fought back the instinct to lunge at Defiant, knowing Aurora's survival hung in the balance. Ashen turned to Legacy, "Leave. NOW. Ashen will handle this."

"Go, consider it a head start. I'll deal with you after I've crushed this worm."

Defiant's taunt almost worked, but Ashen was quick to insist, and Legacy flew Aurora out of the station.

"Really Ashen, you should be working with me. After all, you inspired this entire plan."

"Ashen is not flattered. The Pax would have become independent. We would be free to explore, not babysit children."

Defiant flared with anger.

“You’re an idiot if you don’t think the Pax would forever be a thorn in our side. They don’t need a leg up; they need to be ground under. Just like you, it seems. You think you can prevent this station from exploding?”

Ashen generated his energy staff, preparing to strike.

“Ashen doesn’t need to stop the explosion. Ashen only has to keep you from leaving.”

Realization struck Defiant as Ashen lunged for him. Aurora’s system wasn’t able to repair the damage. The Templar weapon destroyed everything it touched, destroying the Nano-splines’ ability to regenerate and in fact continued to consume her body even now. Legacy held her close as she whispered to him.



“They’re worth fighting for. Don’t be like Defiant and Ashen...” Aurora’s life force dwindled to nothing, the color in her body drained away with her life.

As Legacy cried out in anguish, the Wasser station exploded. A treasure of water was consumed in the explosion, rippling out into the vastness of space.

Legacy found himself consumed with grief but with Aurora and Ashen’s sacrifice, at least the one ultimately responsible had seen justice and Ashen had found at least some redemption.

* * *

Riots and shortages quickly struck the colonies as news of the destruction spread. Chaos ran rampant as politicians made promises they knew were impossible to keep, and the Pax felt its grip on the colonies slipping away. Earth and her resources were enticing as ever, and Unity capitalized on the population’s anger, swelling in numbers to become an army themselves, backed with a seemingly endless supply of Damocles units.

* * *

Deathchild descended to the surface of Io. Damocles and Machina units, torn to shreds from the brutal battle now rained down upon the moon while he searched. The signal Deathchild followed was weak, muffled by tons of debris, but just as his master had promised Deathchild found what he was sent to retrieve. Beneath the wreckage of the Wasser station, he found his target, a mutilated but still functional Defiant. Phase three was ready to begin.



PAX GALILEO ARCHIVE - RE: Sources of Water in the Sol System:

The water processing and purification plant Wasser, located on Io, serves as a central hub for the Pax Galileo. Processing vast amounts of water and refining numerous minerals and converting them into construction material and power sources, the Wasser station has been the key to humanities expansion in the solar system. Population growth has caused a bottleneck, requiring a secondary facility to be constructed which is expected to fuel additional economic and population growth for an expected 100 additional years.

Oceans:

- Europa – Under Templar control. Resources have been distributed in the past from Europa but on a limited basis.
- Enceladus – Orbiting near the rings of Saturn, watery eruptions spew an approximate 1000 tons of water into space every hour. Processing station Aquarius is currently under construction on Enceladus and is expected to be completed within 5 months when it will begin harvesting the expelled water and purifying it for distribution.

Ice:

- Ganymede – The largest moon in the solar system, Ganymede orbits Jupiter from a significant distance further out than Europa, making all water contained underground and mostly frozen. Excavation teams have explored the option of mining Ganymede, but easier sources exist.
- Callisto – a similar situation to Ganymede, the water on Callisto is frozen and difficult to harvest.
- Mimas – A small moon comprised of ice, Mimas is an easy source of surface ice, located in orbit of Saturn.

Vapor:

- Trace amounts of water vapor have been detected on Venus, Jupiter, and Saturn as well as on some other locations scattered throughout the system. While not specifically sought after, this source of water is easy to process and purify.

TEMPLAR ARCHIVE - RE: Resource Management throughout the Pax Galileo:

Mars: Water extraction via super heating the Martian soil can provide liters of drinkable water easily, with recycling of used water able to fill in any gaps, enabling expansion of the Martian population.

ThankstothenaturalwatersuppliesfoundonMars,the destruction of the Wasser processing plant will have minimal immediate effect on Mars. The challenge of maintaining distribution from Mars to outlying colonies however presents many challenges, not least of which is opposition in the form of piracy and terrorist acts from the Unity faction.

Non-Martian based colonies: Finding water is not a problem for the outer colonies, it's processing the various forms the water takes (Ice, vapor, underground). The Wasser station was specifically designed to not only accept and process all forms of water found then applying purification processes to it, but also served as a mineral refinement center as well, turning heavy metal rich asteroids into valuable materials for construction. The loss of this facility cripples many services and functions throughout the system and severely restricts population growth. A secondary processing plant is still under construction and together, the two stations would have been enough to allow for continued growth and expansion. With the Wasser station destroyed and its sister station months away from completion, water shortages will lead to oxygen and food shortages causing panic, starvation, and possible civil uprising.



CHAPTER 3

CHAPTER 3

For weeks following the destruction of the Wasser station, hostilities amongst the colonies grew exponentially. Already strained systems were taxed beyond their limits and what resources were available were fought over bitterly. Unity continued to operate with impunity as the Pax was stretched thinner by the day. The Templars attempted to hold the fragile peace together, but neither side fully trusted the Templars anymore. Legacy had begun to heal after the murder of his sister Aurora. The one responsible, Defiant, was nowhere to be found and presumed dead, as was his apprentice Ashen. Damaged Machina units and other remains of the war rained down on the Earth as the war grew, while the resources of the Earth were still out of reach.

A network of satellites around Earth's orbit prevented all attempts to breach it's atmosphere, but it wasn't a perfect system. Tasked with keeping the Earth free of outside influence, Doctor Etzwiler had designed a new weapon known as the Imperium, capable of seizing control of any machine within moments. Part E.M.P. and part computer virus, this weapon would be orbital-based, yet capable of reaching vast distances. It was his masterpiece, and he despised it.

Doctor Etzwiler had tried to move away from the weapons field within the Ellium once his daughter Alhana was 5, fearing the judgment he imagined in her eyes. As she grew, so grew Etzwiler's hatred of designing weapons, but without the Ellium's support, he would risk a fate as good as death, banishment to the wastes.





The only reason Doctor Etzwiler was even allowed within the city was his staggering intellect, and without fulfilling the wishes of those he served, Doctor Etzwiler and his daughter would be sent back to the wastes that had killed Alhana's mother.

This continued throughout much of Alhana's adolescence until a rare opportunity presented its self. The Sons of Chaos, the most powerful rival nation in the east, offered Doctor Etzwiler the chance at a different life. The S.O.C. feared the power of Doctor Etzwiler's weapon and the doctor feared leaving so much power in the hands of the Ellium.

Doctor Etzwiler made a plan to take Alhana on the night after her 14th birthday. Together, they would flee to the S.O.C. but since the platform was already nearing completion in space, he had to do something to the programming here on Earth to have any chance of stopping the Ellium's' plans and ensure his daughter's safety at the same time. The only solution Etzwiler had that the Ellium wouldn't be able to crack would be a genetic lock.

Injecting Alhana with a tailored virus weeks ago, slight tweaks were made to her genome creating an evolving genetic key capable of accessing the weapons program. Carefully constructed nano-tech would ensure the code could only be transmitted if Alhana was alive. Putting his daughter at the center of this conflict seemed the only way he could even hope to guarantee her safety.

Alhana was anxious about their impending exodus. She despised what the Ellium had turned her father into and saw this as an actual second chance, not just the bullshit the Ellium dangled in front of them - indentured servitude with a new face. Alhana waited for her father at the rear of his lab. The tunnel that was hidden there would lead to freedom from the Ellium facility and take them to the upper levels of the capital city and the surface. Once they reached the surface, they could easily blend in with the sea of humanity as they continued to go about their day. With the right resources, anything you desired could be found for the right price, including transportation. Alhana heard a sound from the front room as her father entered, but before she could greet him, she heard multiple voices. Stopping at the doorway, Alhana listened in as best she could.

The sounds were muffled but getting louder. Someone was asking about a key while another voice called out the word “traitor”. Alhana struggled not to barge into the room to defend her father, but then there came a loud blast that shook her off her feet. Ellium guards were heard yelling over the ringing in her ears, their synthesized voice rising above the muffled sounds she heard earlier. They knew of her father’s defection and were looking for her as well. As Alhana backed slowly away from the door, she heard her father yell something, but what chilled her to the bone was the muffled blast of an Ellium weapon followed by the loud thud of something tumbling to the floor. With horrific certainty, Alhana knew her father had just been murdered. As she heard footsteps approach the door, she dove for the escape route. Alhana’s father had drilled the escape plan into her head for months. Every contingency had been covered, so long as she kept moving. Her body went through the motions as it had done before while her brain blocked out the trauma of what just happened.



Much of Alhana's path took her through maintenance shafts that only self-monitored for damage, making them perfect to escape by. The trick was in leaving the citadel unnoticed. Within the capital, travel was unregulated for the most part. A "stealth watch" affixed to her wrist, stolen weeks ago by her father, ensured the surveillance systems saw any face but hers making the short trips in public possible. Everything within the Ellium capitol was designed to keep people out. Leaving, on the other hand, was so unthinkable that the final steps leading to the surface went completely unnoticed. Once on the surface, however, the rules would change. Time was against her, both for safety and the grief creeping up on her, threatening to consume her.



As Alhana moved through the streets cloaked in borrowed shrouds from a back alley, a figure observed her carefully from the rooftops. Scourge was a 3rd generation tracker and assassin; a cyborg uniquely developed to track his prey anywhere on the planet. There was no escape for a target he had set his eyes on and there was great value in Alhana.

Alhana spent many hours searching the ruined city for the building her father told her about. The city had many dangers of its own, but security patrols were also on the rise. Eventually, Alhana found the seemingly abandoned warehouse, avoiding eye contact with the random straggler that crossed her path.

Despite the paranoid ramblings of the wealthy elite below ground, you could in fact, travel in the day quite peacefully. Night time, however, presented the very same difficulties as every other city since the dawn of time as the predators clung to dark shadows watching for easy prey. Fortunately, Alhana had only the weather to contend with as a light sprinkling fell from up above - in fact, the first rainfall she had ever experienced.

Approaching the building, Alhana questioned her father's choice in hideouts. Derelict from the outside, the "safe house" seemed hardly protected from rodents much less the Ellium. Once Alhana reached the door, however, her opinions began to change. The lock was a retinal scanner that recognized Alhana immediately. As Alhana entered the building a holographic representation of her father appeared in front of her. Alhana fought back a tear at the sight of her father.

"Alhana, the only reason you opened this door and not myself, is likely because I have been killed. It is my hope for you to find happiness and freedom, but as you are now painfully aware, this freedom will have a high cost. I'm sorry I ever got you involved with the Ellium."

"I've taken measures to help you reach your destination. The Sons of Chaos made plenty of assurances, but as I've been killed, you will have to be even more cautious as you make your way to the rendezvous location. To ensure your protection, I have a little surprise for you."

A holographic display illuminated Alhana's path deeper into the facility. Back against a far wall, cloth covered a large object. Alhana approached cautiously, gently reaching for the cloth and pulling it forward, revealed a giant robot. Suddenly illuminated from above as Dr. Etzwiler's hologram appeared by its side, the immense frame looked even more intimidating in the light.

"Meet your first extraterrestrial! I honestly wish I could share this moment with you sweetie. Recording this, I can't help but.. but I digress. This creature is known as a Machina Unit. They come from the outer colonies, a place I hope one day you will visit. He has incredible artificial intelligence and is programmed for your safety. I hope as a guardian he can succeed where I have failed you. Touch the central panel on the screen and name him. I love you Alhana. Godspeed."

Alhana dried her tears. She was born to a difficult life, but her father raised her to be independent and strong. She would not give up now. Alhana hesitantly raised her palm to the screen, touching the display. The computer responded immediately, requesting the Machina units designation. Alhana had lost so much lately, but even the thought of naming the unit after her father seemed too morbid. Her beloved dog from years ago, however, still brought her warm feelings.

“Mac. Let’s name you Mac.”

Designation “Mac” accepted.

The Machina unit’s eyes began to glow. Standing, the modified unit was bulkier than the Pax counterparts. Alhana’s father had seen fit to make several upgrades to his system, adapting him to Earth gravity and terrain.

“Daughter Alhana detected. Prime directive: Ensure safety of Daughter Alhana. Guide Daughter Alhana to S.O.C. Territories. Protect Daughter Alhana at all costs.”

“That’s lovely bot-boy, but it’s just ‘Alhana,’ got it?”

“Designation change accepted, greetings ‘Just Alhana.’ We must leave now to escape detection. We must go to the scheduled rendezvous point.”

“We’ll work on it Mac. Alright, let’s go.” Alhana let her tears slip out as her father continued.





The pair moved to the underground exit. Scourge waited as long as he dared outside the building entrance, but Alhana had become undetectable the moment she entered. Clearly, this was more than an abandoned husk of a building. Scourge had little trouble bypassing the security now that Alhana had come and gone. Apparently, the doctor saw no need to initialize the security system once his daughter had left. Scourge made a point, however, to leave the security system on when he left, after all, he had no intention of sharing the reward or losing his target to another. Examining the facility had yielded little leads however and time was growing short. It was time for Scourge to employ more drastic measures.

The Pax Galileo had committed fully to the fight and Unity was not backing down. The resources of the colonies were consumed even faster and talk of a civil war spread. Epoch called Legacy to the meeting hall. Legacy was surprised to see the council was not in session. This clearly was to be a private meeting.

“Legacy, I’ve received an unusual invitation from an unlikely location. It seems while unrest has been building among the colonies, Ellium’s grip on our former home has been slipping.”

Legacy was immediately distrustful, the betrayal of both Ashen and Defiant coupled with the death of his sister still haunted him, and after so many years for anyone on Earth to establish contact just didn’t feel right.



"You know I trust your judgment, but how is this possible even with Ellium control stretched to its limits? Earth's space has been a dead zone for decades."

"You'll remember from your history files the Plato Continuum? They secured their place in Asia and, like us, evolved with the time. They are now the Sons Of Chaos, a melodramatic name if ever there was one, but it speaks to the people that support them."

Curiosity had gotten the better of Legacy and Epoch had sensed it.

"So they want us swooping in and saving the day?"

"Actually, they want help protecting a young girl. She is the key to a weapon, one that may have broad repercussions among the colonies as well as on Earth. I will give you the message to read for yourself as well as what information they've provided, but there is a significant risk. We've theorized that in a dense atmosphere, the cosmic radiation we use to fuel our bodies will be drastically cut."

"I would be interested in the challenge alone, but you already knew that..."

"But of course," Epoch replied with a knowing glance.

* * *

Many vessels floated out amongst the stars, spread between the colonies throughout the system. Some were transports heading to one colony or another while some established themselves as micro-nations, independent of all the other colonies. The most common, however, were listed as mining platforms, harvesting any resources that could be exploited encompassing asteroids and comets.

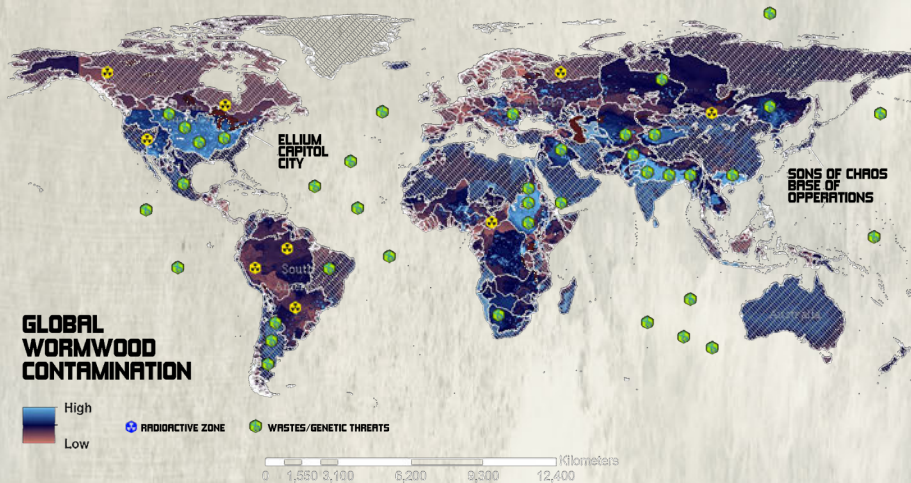
Aboard one such vessel, Defiant sat, eager to complete his transformation. Defiant watched as the last neural connections were made, linking his mind with the new body created specifically for him. Unity had been good to their word and the modified body he now possessed radiated power. He was anxious to crush the Templars into submission, but the voice of authority behind Unity urged patience. All was moving according to plan.

* * *

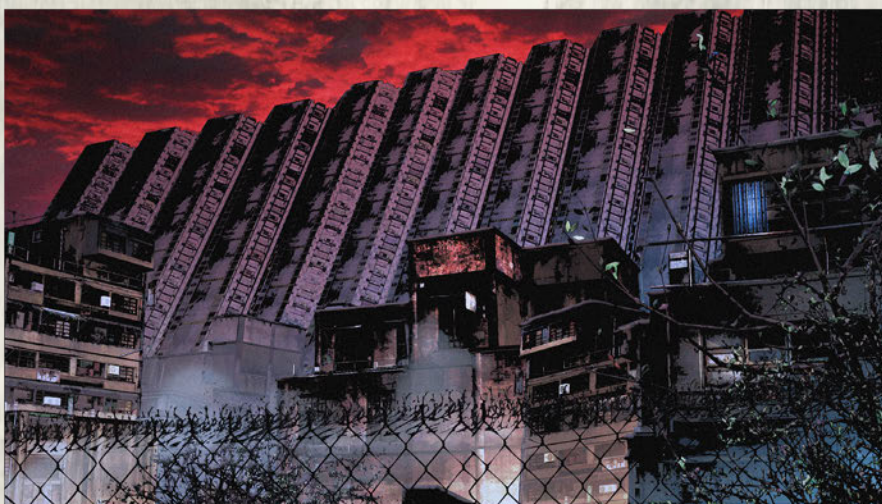
Scourge typically went where the money was, rarely passing on a job based on morality or other out-dated concepts. This extensive clientele list had given Scourge access to numerous databases over the years. With a little foresight and know-how, Scourge established back channels across the planet into virtually every facility and database. Breaking into the Ellium citadel records was no easy process however, but far from impossible.



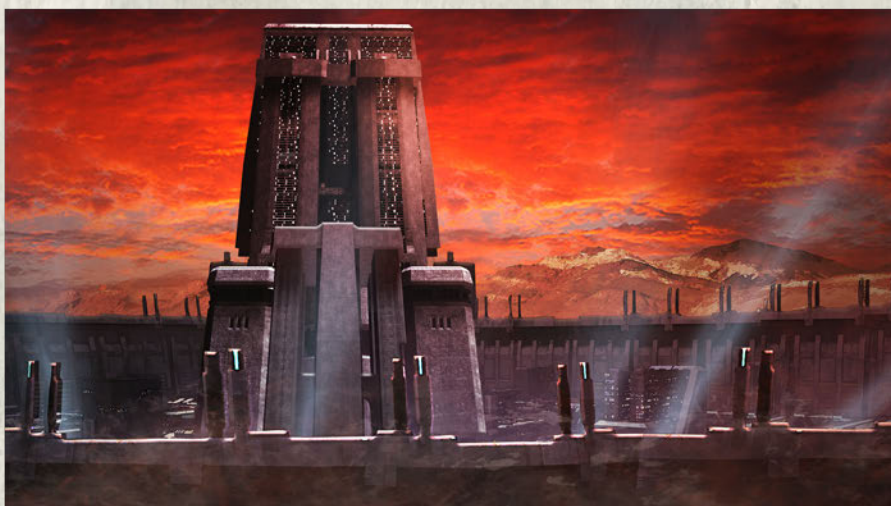
Scourge examined Etzwiler's files, looking for something in particular and worth the risk. Scourge's contacts within the Sons Of Chaos had informed him of the genetic tampering the good doctor had done to his daughter. The new sequencing was completely masked from all Ellium records but with proper encryption thanks to access to Dr. Etzwiler's private journals and correspondences with the S.O.C., all relevant information was easily found. With this data, he could track Alhana using the many secure-cams and other tools the Ellium possessed but with far more accuracy. His worry, however, was that he would be too late. Certainly, he wasn't likely to be the only one hunting Alhana. Scourge played it safe and set charges around Etzwiler's lab and after getting to a safe distance reduced all traces of Alhana and her father to ash. All that remained was whether or not Scourge found her first.



ELLIUM OUTER WALL



ELLIUM CENTRAL SPIRE





CHAPTER 4

CHAPTER 4

Since the Viralclysm, the majority dreamed of the paradise the Ellium had created underground. Free from infection and the horrors of the surface, the lure of paradise was enticing. Those that fell out of favor, however, or only were born to the majority were forced to camp outside the great walls in slums. The scraps of the city their only sustenance, still their security was perceived to be assured opposed to the wastes where life expectancy wasn't worth calculating. These slums were tolerated as they created a buffer between the great walls and the horrors of the waste. Illegal activities and pleasures of the flesh were also found in abundance here, and this served its purpose as well. Most anything could be found in the canal, named so for the sea of human filth that circled the pristine city. The greatest skill in the canal was cybernetics. If you can build it or more importantly, repair it, you had what few in this hell had, job security. Nox was just such a man.



Diminutive in stature, Nox had exceptional skills with cybernetics. If not for his size counting against his genetic viability, he may even have attained the rights to enter the great walls some day, but sadly that would never happen. To make up for his size, Nox's companion was a terrifying sight to behold. Bogo was a monstrous Silverback Gorilla with cybernetic enhancements throughout his body. Rumored to be an Ellium experiment abandoned long ago, Nox was always accompanied by the behemoth. Perhaps more terrifying than Bogo's fearsome appearance was his ability to vocalize monosyllabic words in a rudimentary synthesized voice. A talking cybernetic gorilla with anger issues was not something to be trifled with.

The two often traveled the markets of the canal, usually heading for the waste conduits. Machines and other materials dubbed too damaged to repair and not worth the effort of reclamation were rained down on the huddled masses as trinkets from the gods. Most wouldn't have a clue how to utilize these scraps, but then again, Nox was not most people. As the two walked, a commotion up ahead caught Nox's attention.

Alhana and Mac were having a difficult time getting through a crowd that gathered at the sight of her mechanized guardian. Scavengers from all over were throwing out offers to purchase, trade for, or borrow the Machina unit. Eventually, the rabid mass became hostile, ripping at Alhana which was all Mac needed to let loose. Knocked back with a single swipe, dozens of people crashed into one another.

Mac prepared to unleash another powerful blow, but his fist was caught by Bogo. The grinding of gears and a strain of genetically modified primate muscle was all that was heard as the entire crowd seemingly held their breath. Nox was quick to interject.

"Whoa, now big guy. You too Bogo, no one needs to get hurt. My name's Nox, young miss. You and your mechanized traveling companion would be?"

Alhana was immediately suspicious, but the unwanted attention was bound to draw Ellium security or worse.

"I'm Alhana, and this is Mac. Can you get us out of here? This has gotten a little..."

"Intense? No problem my dear. If your friend can stay cool a bit longer, my shop is right around the corner."

As the odd foursome walked off, Scourge followed from a safe distance, having caught up with his prey. It seemed that he was unlikely to find her alone anytime soon - better to bide his time than rush in. Besides, Ellium eyes may be fewer in the canal than the city, but this group was not likely to go unnoticed. Scourge couldn't have been more right as automated surveillance already was processing the images of those involved in the skirmish.

The defense net around the Earth was a powerful tool. Designed to eliminate anything from large meteors to colonial spacecraft attempting to return, the net had not let a single notable object through in decades. Unfortunately for the designers of this marvelous weapon, Templar technology was not something they could factor in nor could anything as small as a human be targeted with any accuracy. Legacy lay in a tube designed for re-entry, barely larger than a person.

Objects this small would be consumed upon re-entry, generally. Added stealth measures were in place to ensure success as the cylinder hurtled past the satellites tasked with Earthly defense. Re-entry went as planned, but the landing was slightly more explosive.

Legacy emerged, unharmed, from the large impact crater his re-entry caused. Adapting to Earth gravity was an odd sensation even for a cybernetic life form. Recovery from the landing had taken longer than he anticipated and in those minutes, scavengers had followed the fiery re-entry.



What was destroyed in the outer atmosphere still offered resources if not technology making every crash site, few as they were, incredibly valuable. Legacy looked around at the motley crew of mutated humans and cyborg freaks that surrounded him.

Before he could speak, Legacy was struck from behind. Standing above him was a huge cybernetic juggernaut grinning its toothless grin. It began to swing a giant mace for a second blow, but this time legacy was ready. Firing a blast of energy from his palm, the cyborg flew backward colliding with two other mutants. The group ran off after the display, hoping to find an easier target out in the wastes. This suited Legacy just fine, because any other time, the force he released should have vaporized the behemoth. He was warned the decrease in power would be substantial. Now he knew it was no exaggeration.



Before entering Earth's atmosphere, Legacy placed a satellite in orbit with which he would be able to make contact with the S.O.C. representative that contacted Epoch. The relay worked as expected and using the prearranged frequency, Legacy made contact. The S.O.C. rep used a masking filter to hide his identity and location, two things Templar countermeasures already told Legacy before the representative even had a chance to speak.



"Greetings Templar, from the Sons of Chaos. We are quite pleased you made the trip."

"And survived." Grumbled Legacy.

The representative ignored Legacy's snark. "Through our spies, we've learned of a genetic key that only a young girl named Alhana possesses. With this key, the Ellium will be able to power up their new orbital station, a station the Ellium designed to hijack all forms of artificial intelligence and other sophisticated software."

The representative paused briefly to allow the ramifications of this devastating weapon to sink in. Simultaneous control of all high-level technology would redefine the roles of power throughout all of humanity.

“The weapon is a threat even to Templars, as I’m sure Epoch has informed you. From reports gathered by spies we believe, and Epoch has agreed, this technology may be beyond even Templars understanding.” Legacy was not one to believe the hype, but in fact, Epoch had warned Legacy of the danger this machine represented.

“And how will I find Alhana?”

“Genetic tags were provided to us by her father, an automatic transmission we received after his death. Doctor Etzwiler was careful to ensure his daughter’s safety even if he had to sacrifice himself. We’re transmitting the information now. Please hurry, we have every reason to believe Ellium is in pursuit as well.”

“Understood.” Legacy replied. “I will be in touch once I’ve secured her.”

“Thank you, Templar. God speed.”

The transmission ceased. Legacy understood the importance of the mission but still did not believe the weapon was the threat everyone made it out to be. Still, the opportunity to see the planet of his birth after decades of cryo-sleep and adventures in space was a chance Legacy couldn’t pass up.

* * *

Alhana and Mac were still cautious of Nox and his large friend, but Alhana was warming to this odd pair quickly. Nox was keen to learn of Alhana’s escape, as information was precious to all, and information from behind the wall was rarely credible as it was almost never first hand.

“You’ve had quite the adventure so far my dear, but even with your monstrous guardian, how do you plan to avoid the Ellium?”

“We’re headed east; we need to get to S.O.C. territory, can you help?” Nox pondered his options intently as Bogo tried to get Mac to groom his back. It was rare the cybernetic primate had a playmate his size.

“The only safe passage is a very slow boat; any other methods are too closely watched. Since I doubt either you or Mac have a fancy raft tucked away; I may have an opportunity for you both to earn passage. Alhana was once again cautious, the rumors of the depravity beyond the Ellium citadel were well circulated within the Ellium school system.

“Earn you say? You’re not a perv are you?”



"I'm horrified by the accusation. Of all my character flaws, that level of degradation is not my cup of tea. No, what I'm in need of is a delivery service. A certain customer in need of a specialized cloaking device. It's a heavy piece of machinery that's entirely illegal, but since you're already in as much trouble as a person can be and your friend has such a strong back, I think you'll have no trouble at all doing this job for me.

"And this gets me where I need to go how exactly?"

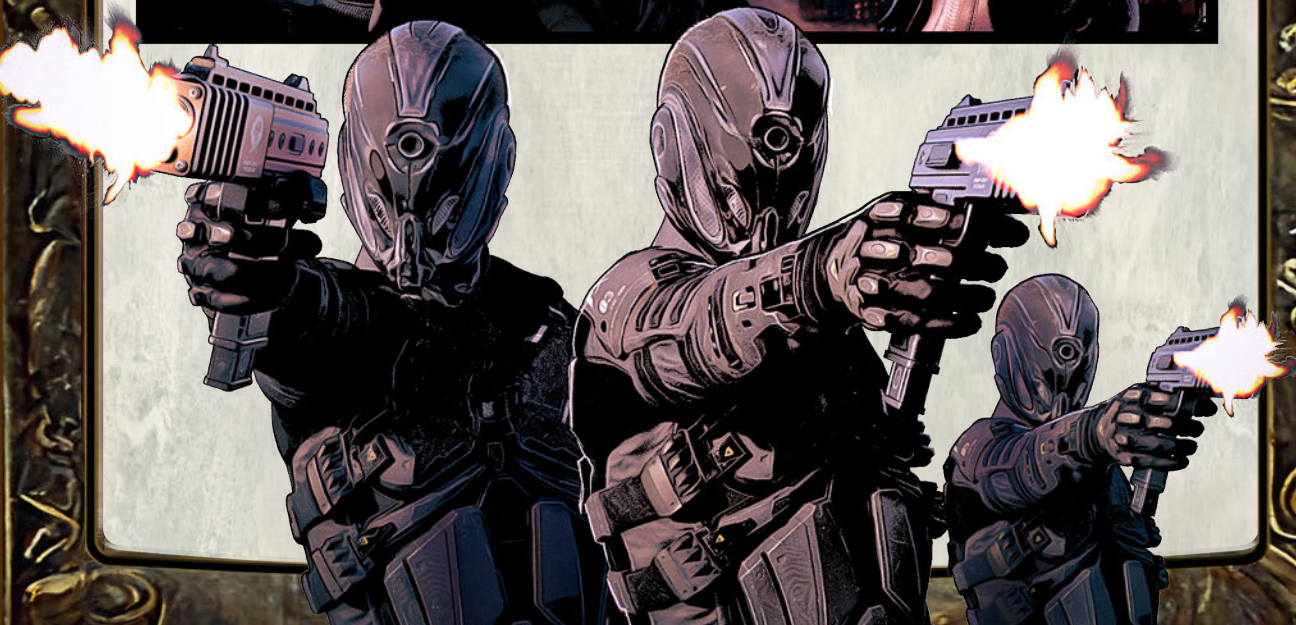
"Simple, the man you're meeting is a smuggler and since he doesn't know how to install the cloak, I'll give your guardian the instructions. He'll get you where you need to go. Deal?"

Nox mustered his most charming grin while extending his hand to shake.

"Deal, but if you're messing with us, I'm having Mac there feed you to your giant ape!"

"Understood my dear Alhana, understood!"

Nox finalized the activation of the cloak within Mac along with instructions on installing the device aboard the ship. As Nox completed the process, the alarm systems within Mac picked up a number of military craft approaching. Before any word could be spoken, Ellium soldiers in stealth armor crashed through the ceiling. They offered no warning or demands of surrender, only opened fire on the group. Advanced A.I. systems with cybernetic enhancements meant precise targeting was possible with each soldier, but the programming of a Machina unit granted Mac the reflexes needed to shield both Alhana and Nox. Bogo lunged at the attackers with a howl, his armored appendages offering all the protection he needed as soldier after soldier were ripped to pieces. Nox hurried Mac and Alhana to the rear exit as Bogo followed. Nox insisted they run quickly for the ship and before Alhana could protest, Mac swooped her up and began heading for the street. Only after they were out of sight did Nox slump to the ground, blood running down his side from Ellium weapons fire. "Get out of here you big dummy..." Nox's voice cracked as he spoke to Bogo. The giant cyborg only cradled him, protecting his only friend as the Ellium forces expanded their search for Alhana.



Mac reached the next intersection with extraordinary speed. Having activated the cloak, Mac was shielded from detection, but the two of them stood out in the crowd, especially with Alhana screaming the entire way.

“What are you doing? You’re supposed to follow my orders; we can’t leave them! We have to go back!”

“Safety of Alhana supersedes all other concerns or orders. I apologize for any inconvenience.” Mac replied in his cold synthesized voice.

Before another word could be uttered, an Ellium gunship flew out in front of them, blocking their way. Their weapons systems targeted Mac’s power source preparing to fire. Suddenly a blast fired from the adjacent building struck the pilot. As the craft hurtled to the ground, Alhana traced the blast back to its source. Scourge stood on the rooftop admiring his work.



Once he was satisfied the pair were in the clear, Scourge engaged his personal cloak, leaving Mac and Alhana to continue their journey under his watchful eye.

Legacy arrived at Nox's shop before the fires inside had a chance to die down. He found both Nox and Bogo in the alley, Bogo still cradling his injured friend. Bogo looked up at the new face and snarled his contempt.

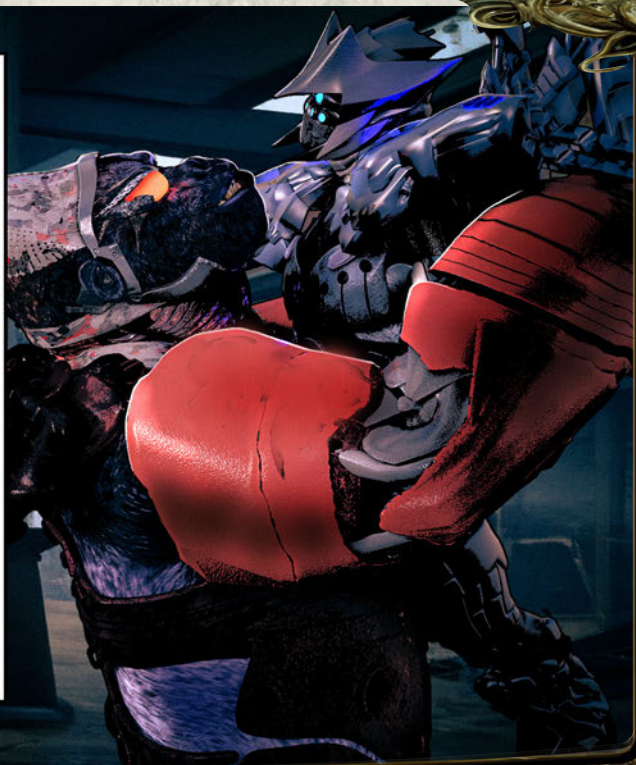
"Hold on there, big... thing... I'm just looking for a friend. I see your pal is hurt; I may be able to help if you'll let me?"

Legacy cautiously extended his arm towards Nox. Bogo understood but was still quite willing to rip the Templars arm off if Legacy tried anything Bogo didn't like. Hair-like fibers extended from Legacy's fingertips, entering Nox's wound. It was relatively easy to repair this level of damage, and during the repair, Legacy hacked the cybernetic implants Nox possessed. Working as a backup memory store, the implants contained all the information Legacy needed. When complete, the fibers retracted leaving Nox healthy but still unconscious from the ordeal.

"There you go Bogo; your friend will be just fine."

Bogo startled legacy as he quickly pulled the Templar against him hugging Legacy with ungodly strength.

"Bogo's friend." The massive cyborg attempted to whisper.





After releasing Legacy, the group parted ways, Bogo carrying his friend to a secret lab Nox had made for such an occasion, as Legacy continued his journey to find Alhana, and disturbingly, what he recognized as a modified Machina unit. Already this trip had been fascinating; Legacy couldn't wait to see what happened next on this primitive world.



CHAPTER 5

CHAPTER 5

Deep within the bowels of the Ellium's capital city, the council of 5 ruled with an iron fist. Their power is absolute within the confines of their great city, with the Sons Of Chaos representing the only true threat to the Ellium. The council's total control of the planet was paramount. The frustration was palpable in the cavernous room – if they were so great, how has a child eluded them?

From the central console, a loud beep began, signaling the council that their long anticipated meeting was about to begin. The council had one ace left up their sleeve, and this was it: A traitor to the Sons of Chaos. The informant greeted the assembly.

“Earth has a new arrival if you are not already aware, a Templar, sent to retrieve the child ‘Alhana.’ Conventional means will not be enough to deal with him.”

The council considered this new information. They knew with certainty that the child was the key to controlling their new weapon and a Templar on Earth was a bolder move than was expected.





The hologram vanished from the air as the conversation abruptly ended. One of the council members, Phineas Vale, grinned.

“Rest easy my fellow council members, the Templars are hardly the only power in this solar system. I’ve been assured by our contacts in the Unity faction that the Templars won’t be a problem for long. Additionally, they plan to send several of their troops to continue the hunt for Alhana and the elimination of any Templar presence on Earth.”

The council was satisfied, their plans could continue forward. While they knew Unity had their eyes on recapturing Earth, Ellium had designs of their own for the entire solar system. The first of many ships were being created in remote areas, built to conquer the heavens and all of Earth’s former children as they struggled for drops of water.

Ahriman stood in the central hall of the Sons Of Chaos, opposite his two generals. Uproar, a giant monstrous cyborg created to be living ‘heavy ordinance’ for the Ellium, he long ago defected. Ahriman considered the ‘borg in front of him for a moment. Loyal to a fault, Uproar still needed to be watched, his temper was legendary amongst his men. Near Uproar sat Havoc, his other general and advisor in this war.

Always the courteous one, Havoc spent life always being underestimated, which was just how she preferred it. Havoc’s ability to manipulate a situation was only rivaled by her ability to manipulate Uproar’s temper. Still, with their help, Ahriman had kept the Sons from falling apart in the face of Ellium’s overwhelming fire-power.

Ahriman was updated on the progress of the Templar as well as Alhana who was closely shadowed by their agent. Once Alhana was in their custody, Phase 2 could begin. Capturing the relay station in Antarctica would give Alhana direct access to the weapon. Once that was done, Ellium would have no power over the S.O.C.

Mac sat as the ever vigilant guardian, always on the lookout for any threat to Alhana's well being. Alhana was successful in bartering passage on the old freighter, seemingly putting the greatest dangers behind them. The old vessel made its way out to sea slowly, sluggish but of little importance to the Ellium - in other words, the perfect tool for smuggling. Meanwhile the Templar, Legacy, stood on the shore magnifying his image of the vessel. What he wouldn't give for the ability to fly again, but the energy he had stored must be preserved. The only option left was the detestable option of piloting a vehicle, something Templars found needless. Thoughts of Ashen mocking Legacy for being reduced to this form of travel went through his head, the irony of his earlier scorn for Ashen's preferred form of travel self-evident.



Forces for the Ellium continued to gather as well. The delegation from the Unity faction arrived, lighting the night sky on fire upon re-entry. Each being was contained in a blue sphere of light that quickly brought them down on the top floor of the Ellium capital. Ellium defensive systems were barely able to track the elusive targets, shielded from most forms of detection. 12 units in total including their commander, a creature designated Deathchild, now stood before the council security forces.

“Welcome on behalf of the Ellium.”



The council spoke through speakers embedded in a small disk, as they appeared via hologram held out by Ellium security forces. Deathchild only stared at them through his featureless faceplate. Time was short, and Deathchild hardly had patience for social niceties.

“Alhana has yet to be captured, is this correct?”

The shrill metallic voice remained threatening in tone, betraying nothing of this creatures motives or desires. The Ellium council confirmed their findings and their plan to capture Alhana. Deathchild and the Damocles units that had accompanied him would await Alhana and her protectors at the relay station in Antarctica, the only place on Earth with remote access to the weapon.

“We will recover the girl and with it the necessary codes to access the station. And what of your end? How goes the completion of my master’s new ship?”

“We continue to hold to the schedule, though we still don’t understand the need for the Ellium to construct the warship.”

“Too many ears in too little space up there. My master requires the vessel made to his specifications in the strictest of confidence. We will secure the station and the means to wield it in exchange for the completion of our ship.”

The council members nodded their understanding. The designs they were given were radical by their current standards of technology, and while the ship for Unity continued construction, additional ships were being made in secret. After all, why should Unity hold all the power?





Alhana sat on the deck of the ship with thoughts of her father haunting her. Alhana needed to know more if she had any hope of surviving this trip, so she ordered her faithful guardian Mac to reveal all he had recorded regarding her father's work. A holographic display emanating from Mac took the form of her father. The hologram showed a great deal more than she expected. The Imperium satellite would reshape the entire solar system with its ability to control targeted machine operating systems. The brute force hack could be destructive as well, overloading any system reducing it to scrap.

"A weapon. This is all about some stupid weapon and I'm being used as what, a lock pick? This is bullshit!"

Alhana was furious. The Machina unit considered her question for a moment.

"The Imperium system was designed by your father as a tool to equalize the distribution of power in the system. Ellium researchers were already embarking on this line of research when your father and the Sons Of Chaos became aware of this weapon. By utilizing your genome, your father hoped not only to secure your safety but prevent the Ellium from using the weapon in a preemptive strike."

“So like I said, I’m just a tool!”

“Are not all entities merely tools?” Mac looked quizzical at Alhana, awaiting a reply.

“Oh shut up!”

As Alhana studied, their uninvited guest Scourge maintained a safe distance scanning for trouble. There was much to watch out for on the open sea in this diseased world. The Wormwood virus left most animals uninfected, but on occasion, even the sturdiest of animals succumbed to seemingly random mutations. The results were terrifying as they were deadly.

Suddenly alarms began signaling, ordering everyone below deck. Off in the distance, Mac detected five vehicles approaching. Piracy was one of the risks of traveling the back channels to hide from Ellium patrols. Before another word could be uttered, three projectiles were launched at the ship. What landed on the deck were not explosives, but multi-legged cyborgs sent to wipe out resistance. Mac pushed Alhana behind him as he evaluated his options. Mac targeted the lead cyborg, releasing a volley of super-heated plasma disintegrating the machine. The other two were faster and now prepared. One launched high into the air as the second maneuvered to take out Mac’s legs. Landing on Mac’s back, the first cyborg attempted to decapitate Mac, but before it could act, Scourge revealed himself. The trained assassin moved with lightning speed, splitting the first cyborg in two. Free of the assailant, Mac made short work of the final cyborg. Mac moved to protect Alhana, but Scourge was quick to hold up his hands.

“Whoa there, we’re on the same mission.”

Alhana eased Mac’s weapon down stepping forward.

“And what mission is that?” Alhana demanded.



"We're about to have a lot more company, but the short of it is the S.O.C. paid me to get you to safety, and that's what I plan to do."

The pirate forces were nearly on top of them with what appeared to be even more on the horizon. This time, twelve of the spider-bots were launched as the lead vessel began firing at the deck. Scourge was quick to deploy a personal shield that he extended around Alhana, while Mac relied on his thick armor plating.

The weapons fire did the trick, allowing the attacking cyborgs to land on the deck. With Alhana between them, Scourge and Mac ran strategies in their head, none ending favorably for their charge. As the spider-bots neared them, the airship seen in the horizon reached the five pirate vessels, now blocking the transport ships escape. Instead of taking a position with the ships, the airship seemingly increased speed.



The spider-bots turned in time to see the airship plummet headlong into the center of the lead pirate vessels, igniting a chain reaction of explosions. Out of the sky, Legacy crashed down feet first on the lead spider-bots. Looking over his shoulder at the flaming wreckage, Legacy turned back to Alhana and her two protectors.

“I’m not with them.”

Seizing their chance, Scourge and Mac opened fire on the remaining cyborgs, leaving only scrap and random miscellaneous fleshy remains for the mutant sharks to feast on.

“Not that I don’t appreciate the well-timed assistance, but who exactly are you?” Scourge sized up his potential opponent as he spoke. The mission was already attracting too much unwanted attention.

“Right, says the other mysterious new guy.” While surprisingly adaptable, Alhana’s patience had run out.



Legacy's face was expressionless, but he was smirking on the inside, this girl had spunk. There are no children on Europa; the young are prepared through stasis tubes for the harsh environments of space. Legacy expected children of Earth to be meeker.

"I was sent from Europa and asked to assist in your travel. I suppose "thank you" is too much to hope for as I just saved your inferior meat sack, but maybe your plan included being disassembled by these... things."



Legacy kicked a still twitching limb off the bow as he examined the group before him.

Scourge was digesting the news he had just heard.

“A Templar? Are you a Templar? Here on Earth?” Scourge was fascinated.

“I see why my assistance was needed. Yes, I am a Templar, and yes, I hope I’m on Earth or this was one wasted trip.”

“What’s the big deal?” Alhana snorted.

Scourge had to remind himself of Alhana’s youth since most adults knew about the great exodus.

“After the Viralclysm, when the colonies were established, the Templars were the ones that made it possible for humanity to leave the planet.” Scourge explained, but Alhana saw it another way.

“Good one ya douche, now we have the Ellium and mutant fish and pirate cyborgs, but you have space-cities?”

“Currently, there’s starvation, rioting, and near civil war, so we’re all living in the same paradise. At least now there’s chance for peace.”

The foursome headed below deck, the transport already resuming its course to the former island nation of Japan and current capital of the Sons Of Chaos resistance. S.O.C. controlled territory would be the nearest thing to safety Alhana could hope for.



Europa stood alone in the solar system. A tantalizing blue prize too dangerous to take by force. The colonies resented the Templars power, but they had little appreciation of the dangers that lurked beneath the feet of the Templars or the terrible responsibility that power represented. An ancient alien technology that granted them great power, but even the Templars were unable to control it completely. These were the thoughts that occupied the being known as Epoch, the current leader of the Templars. Standing before a large viewing screen, he was only marginally aware of another entering the chamber. Epoch turned to greet the new arrival, but he was far too late. Defiant raised his weapon and fired. Projectiles in the form of darts embedded into the armor of Epoch's chest plate.

The nano-virus spread with lightning speed, slaving Epoch's will to Defiant as Defiant stood above the crippled Epoch; the last vestiges of his independence wasting away.

"Welcome to Unity." Defiant spoke, eager to begin the next phase of the plan.



SONS OF CHAOS REPORT - RE: Unchecked Piracy in the region:

Pirates in the Indian Ocean near Sri Lanka are normally armed with guns, knives, and Spiders – cybernetic bodies with multiple legs, sometimes controlled remotely as drones or if the pirate group has access to wealth, the machines may house the brain of fallen pirates, functioning as a central processor and giving “new life” to the fallen pirate. Often seen as barbaric by most of the surviving nations, brain powered machines are more responsive, faster, and ultimately more deadly than simple drones.

Many attacks could have gone unreported because the companies and other smugglers operating in the Indian Ocean are scared of the pirates attacking them more often because the company told the authorities in the region, even though those authorities are arguably powerless in the face of rampant violence in the region.

The pirates in this area also attack ships during the night knowing solar powered defences – the most cost effective automated defence system most cargo ships employ – will be substantially weaker in performance. Pirates in the Singapore Straits attack at night, while ships are underway or anchored.

The Straits of Malacca are a no-man’s zone, typically only traversed by smugglers with cloaking technology. While this technology blocks satellite detection, other forms of detection are still possible. Additionally, aquatic mutations from surrounding areas seem to converge occasionally in this area, presumably to spawn and give birth to their unnatural offspring.



CHAPTER 6

CHAPTER 6

The remainder of the trip for Alhana and her guardians was uneventful. Reaching shore, they were escorted to the heart of the Sons Of Chaos in what used to be downtown Tokyo. The city remained a major metropolitan area as well as a symbol for those that sought to oppose the Ellium. Ahriman and his generals were eager to meet the Templar especially and learn first-hand how the rest of humanity has fared.



As the group was seated, Uproar, the general whose frame remained intimidating even when compared to the new arrivals, was eager to discuss the next stage of their plans. All were anxious at the thought of finally ending the Ellium stranglehold. The key was going to be in gaining control of the Imperium satellite, and once under Alhana's direction, seize control of nearly all Ellium weapons overthrowing the powers that be in an entirely bloodless coup. Uproar was convinced that if they had any hope at all, they needed direct access to the satellite, which meant the added danger of capturing a ship and flying to the orbital weapon. Havoc was quick to point out that there was one other option, the relay station on Earth, located in Antarctica. This was the only facility currently designed to access the system as it was still awaiting its first official test. Risky in its own right, the plan still had a better chance of success, ultimately making Ahriman's decision for him.

"Templar, I know I've already asked a lot, but will you help us reach the relay station? Our chances would be infinitely better with you on our side." Ahriman was earnest in his request. Legacy only considered it for a moment.

"Absolutely. Allowing this weapon to remain under Ellium control is a threat to all of us."

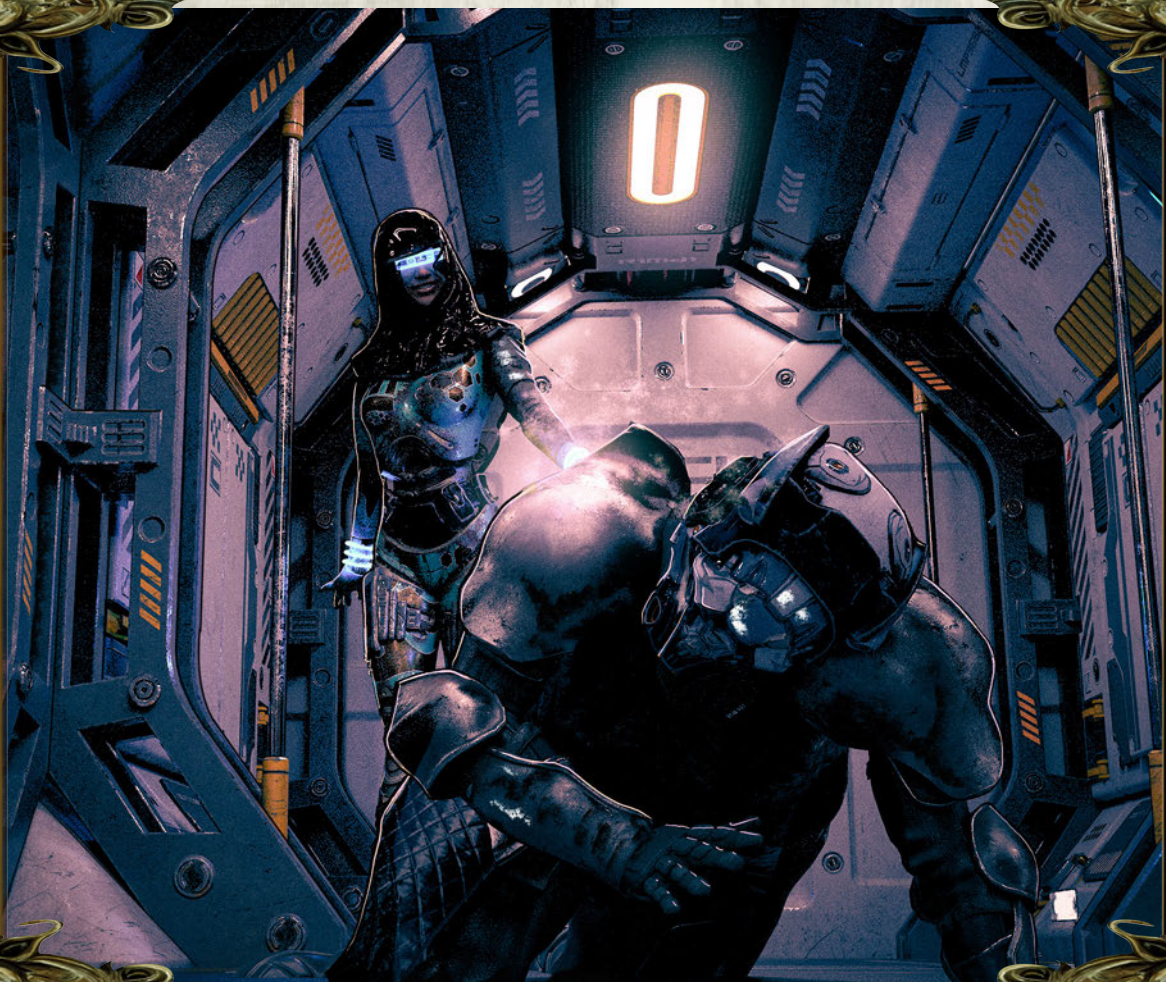
Ahriman patted Legacy on the shoulder, nodding in approval. As the room cleared, a woman watched from a distance. Her hand shaking, she remained silent, watching as the Templar and the others prepared for their trip.

The travel time to the relay station wasn't long. Legacy, Mac, and Alhana were accompanied by Uproar and a contingent of his men. The station was expected to be defended, but as it stood, the weapon was inoperable, meaning defenses were not as fortified as a standard military base. Uproar's men flew personal hover-sleds, each equipped with enough firepower to take out the communications relay should they not be able to seize control.



Ahriman had been monitoring the team's movements remotely with his second in command, Havoc. Reinforcements were in place awaiting Ahriman's order to move in, but seconds before the ambush, the signal was lost. Ahriman received no response from the team when he signaled, but before he could issue an order, he felt his armor punctured near his spine. Slumping to the floor, Ahriman turned to see Havoc standing above. Holding a small weapon, the traitor took the time to admire her handiwork.

"Welcome to Unity, you sanctimonious bastard. Don't struggle, within moments the nanites will have completely subsumed your cybernetics, making you the perfect slave to Ellium and Unity. Savor your last moments of independent thought."



Back at the Ellium installation, the raid progressed smoothly, with the main transport landing without incident. Legacy and Uproar exchanged knowing glances - this had been too easy, but they had to press on. Legacy led the way into the facility, but before they made it into the control room, an explosive blast of superheated plasma rained down on them. Half of Uproar's men were incinerated within seconds as the Damocles units emerged from the darkness.



Legacy was first to move on the offensive, attacking the mechanized soldiers head on. His blows ended up nowhere as powerful as he had hoped. The Damocles units were quick to open fire, utilizing independent power sources not reliant on soaking up the background radiation of space. Still, the Templars weapons were formidable, and Legacy's attack bought Uproar and Mac time enough to secure their position. As Legacy prepared to release a second volley, Deathchild emerged from the control center. Silently, he focused his enormous energies into a single, concussive force. The destructive wave tore indiscriminately through the Damocles unit standing between Deathchild and his target. The massive energy crashed into Legacy's back, sending him across the room. Deathchild released another powerful blast, causing the upper rails to collapse, pinning Mac. Deathchild seized his opportunity by swooping down on Alhana.

"Don't touch me you freak!" Alhana had grabbed a fallen rifle, but she never had a chance as Deathchild threw a disk towards her. As it neared Alhana, a stasis net enveloped her, causing immediate unconsciousness. Uproar and his men began firing at Deathchild but the Unity general was too fast. Once Alhana was taken into Deathchild's arms, Uproar no longer had a clear shot allowing Deathchild time to retreat with his hostage. Mac freed himself too late, crushing the last Damocles unit under his heavy foot. As Uproar gathered Legacy up, Mac moved to the central console in the command center. The central display was lit up - the reactor was set to overload taking them all with it.

Ahriman sat on the floor leaning against the wall. Havoc spoke in an almost giddy tone. "The destruction of the Ellium was never going to happen. Putting your faith in everything from Templars to little girls; your insane acts of desperation are over."

Havoc leaned in face to face, hoping to see the last vestiges of Ahriman's humanity vanish. Instead, she saw only the bright blue flare of energy as Ahriman blasted Havoc's midsection, incinerating her spine. Havoc could only stare in disbelief as Ahriman stood.

"You're more of a fool than even Uproar said." Ahriman's hand glowed blue, his armored glove removed, revealing an all too human hand.



“This was never a cybernetic body to avoid the wormwood virus; it’s a containment suit. My Mother was an Unborn. Your nanites never had an operating system to corrupt.”

A second blast incinerated Havoc where she lay. Ahriman sounded the alarm, but there was little they could do for the Antarctic team. Thanks to Havoc; the Antarctic team was on their own.

Legacy, Uproar and the remaining Sons Of Chaos forces only had moments to spare. Legacy was still recovering from Deathchild’s attack as Mac’s voice bellowed above the chaos. “Attention is required. A self-destruct sequence has been initiated. I have directly interfaced with the mainframe, but due to the nature of the self-destruct, I am unable to prevent the meltdown already in progress.”

“What the hell does that mean? What kind of blast are you talking about?” Uproar demanded.

“The resulting blast will destroy everything within a 60-mile radius including ourselves. I have stalled the progress of the virus currently invading the mainframe, but the aggressive nature has begun corrupting my system files as well. I will require one of you to assume my responsibilities in the continued care of Alhana.”

“How long have we got Mac?” Legacy asked, finally recovered enough to stand on his own.



Mac's voice was as emotionless as ever, "This unit can stall the virus for an additional 17 minutes at which time this facility will be destroyed."

Uproar placed his hand on the mechanized warrior's shoulder. "Is there anything we can do, Mac? If you enter a stasis routine, we can..."

"Negative, ally Uproar. Disengaging the main system at this time will result in immediate detonation leading to the failure of this unit's primary function. Will you assume the completion of the mission and secure Alhana?"

"Mac, I will do whatever it takes to save her, I swear it."

"All forces must depart immediately if they are to reach minimum safe distance. Express my regret that I will not be able to carry out my primary mission personally to Alhana when she is recovered."

Uproar looked at the giant, helpless to save its self. "Thank you, Mac, I will tell Alhana, I promise."

When the team reached safety, they waited for the inevitable explosion. The energy released created massive destruction as the nuclear reactor went critical. Mac had been right; they were lucky to have left when they did. But now that Unity had Alhana, it was only a matter of time before the weapon was brought on-line. The S.O.C. forces needed a ship capable of reaching the satellite if they had any hope of saving her.





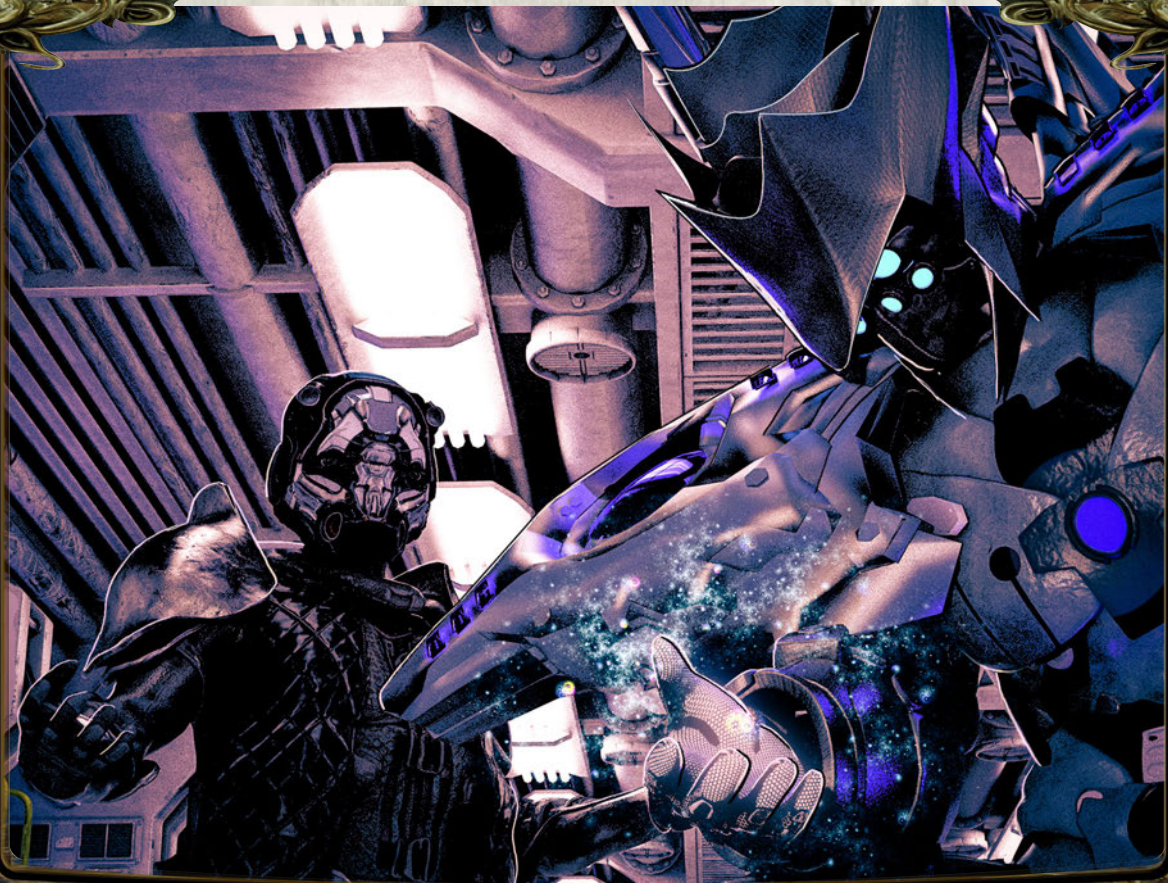
CHAPTER 7

CHAPTER 7

Dr. Armaghast was ancient. Even he no longer knew exactly how old. The bits of organic matter left to his person were of little concern; his strength lay in both his intelligence and his cybernetic upgrades. Both of which were of little help on a moon controlled by slave Templars and an insane Defiant. Armaghast's only hope was to find a Templar still free from Unity control. The Nano-spline upgrade he had been working on was almost ready, so long as Armaghast remained hidden. As the Templars fell to Defiant's insidious betrayal, Damocles units made their largest push against Pax forces. Machina units held their own, but Damocles units outnumbered them 2 to 1. It was only a matter of time before the civil war was ended and Unity reigned supreme.

Ahriman had been informed of Alhana's kidnapping and had already taken steps to secure a ship by the time Uproar, Legacy, and the remaining troops returned, but still, it would be hours before the ship was ready to launch. To leave the atmosphere, it was imperative that the ship had proper stealth protection or it would be incinerated upon approach to the station. Legacy was particularly weakened and not in the best of moods when Ahriman approached him.

"Templar, if I may have a moment."



“Can this wait? I have to find a way to warn the Templars on Europa, and I can barely stand.”

“I’m sorry, but this can’t wait. There’s someone here that’s waited for a very long time to speak with you. I think you should hear what she has to say.”

Legacy was seconds from dismissing the request but the realization that he had no other option but to sit and recharge meant he had no excuse. As the woman approached, she wore a cloak; her exposed arm showed signs of severe burns long since healed. The two sat alone, opposite one another. Legacy was not a fan of uncomfortable silence, especially when he was already in a foul mood, but before he could unleash his well-rehearsed snark, the strange woman began to speak.

“Many years ago the Ellium came, and I was forced to watch as my children were ripped away from me. My one hope has always been that if they survived... that they would thrive. I’ve struggled with what I would say to them if ever I was given the opportunity...”

“I’m very sorry for your loss, but I don’t think I can help...”

The strange woman looked up at him, revealing sad eyes that hinted at a long and tortured life. “Gabriel, you’ve done more than you know.”

Legacy was taken aback by this, finding himself truly speechless.

“I felt it when your sister died, and I knew it was you the moment I saw you. My name is Angelica; I’m your mother.” Legacy stood back suddenly as if punched harder than he has ever been hit before. “That’s not possible...”

“Half my blood is Unborn. I’ve often wondered what, if anything, was my gift. It turns out it’s more of a curse as I’ve lived well beyond my years. My gifts have tied me to both you and your sister through the miles of space, and I wouldn’t trade that for anything. I’ve loved both of you more than you’ll ever know, I just hope you can forgive me some day for not being there with the two of you.”

Angelica placed her hand on Legacy’s as he sat there still in shock. Was this woman insane, or could it be true? Legacy secretly sampled the woman’s D.N.A. with his palm, but to his shock, she was his mother. The two exchanged stories, trying to catch up on decades lost in the surreal moment, only when Angelica coughed up blood did the mood shift.

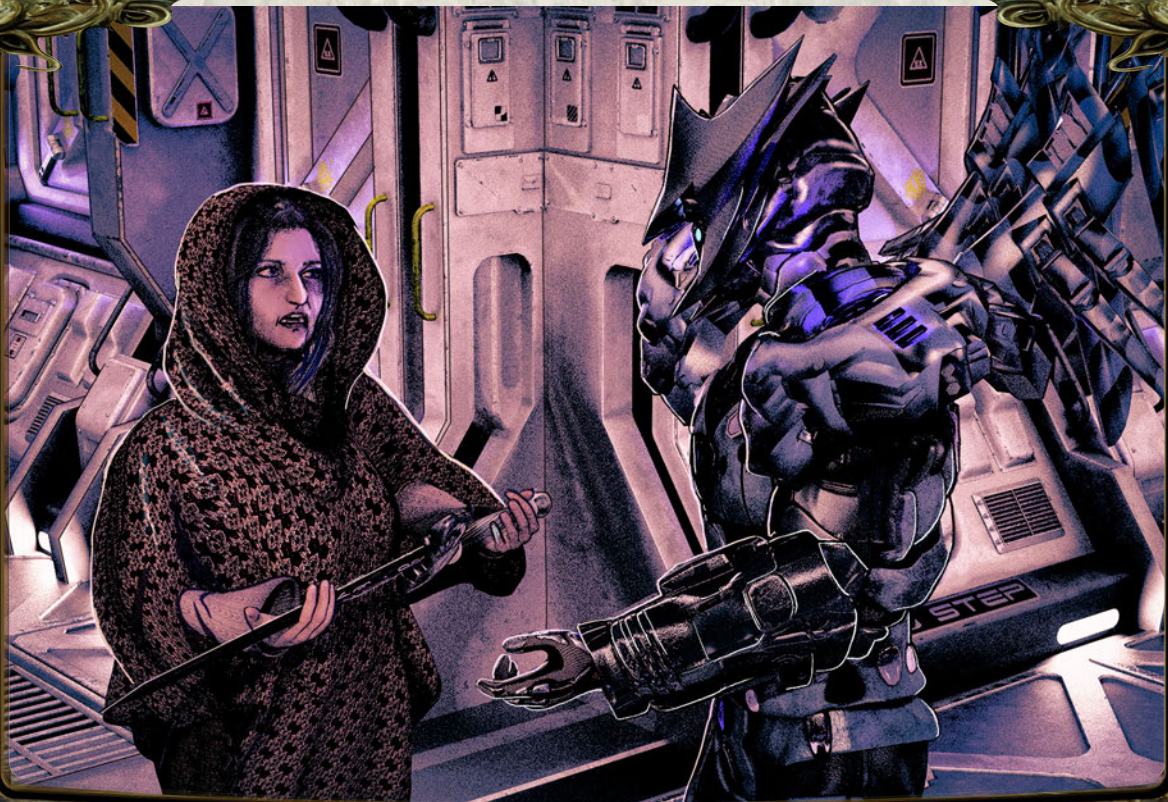
"I've been alive for way too long and lost too much. The one thing I've always wanted was to see my children again, and you've given me that gift. Still, this accursed blood probably means another decade of hacking up my lung..."

"Honestly, I don't know what to say. We slept for decades while the habitats were completed. We mourned you and..."

"I know, it wasn't your fault. Don't feel regret. Life, even my life, can be too short to waste on regret." Angelica placed her hand over his once more, squeezing it and consoling her son. Angelica stood, and from a sealed chest she produced a cloth wrapped object. She handed it to him. "I've kept this for a long time. I doubt it'll do you any good, but it's now yours all the same."

Legacy unwrapped the long object, producing a very ancient blade. Angelica told him of the weapon, the Sword of the Dragon, the same sword that the Ellium had fought so long to keep from the Plato Continuum and thought lost over a century ago. As Legacy gripped it a strange thing happened, the sword began to glow and with it, so did Legacy. "What... what is this? The radiation the sword's emanating, it's nearly recharged me in moments!"

"It was alien material brought to Earth long ago. The energy it released wasn't harmful, at least not to humans, so I kept it. Then again, given my cough, maybe not the brightest idea to keep it." With the sword in hand, an idea began to form within Legacy. There was hope enough left to save Alhana and stop Unity. He just had to risk death to do it.



Phineas Vale sat troubled and alone in the Ellium council chamber. According to all the reports, the Antarctic operation was a success in that the girl Alhana was captured. But if this is the case, why hadn't he heard from the Unity operative Deathchild? These thoughts gave way to paranoia - after all, if Unity learned of the plans to create many warships based on the Unity designs, a preemptive strike would be expected. But if that were genuine and they did know, why wait? When Deathchild finally did report, Phineas was very careful not to reveal his mounting concern.

"The child is secure and being made ready for transport to the satellite to activate the weapon."

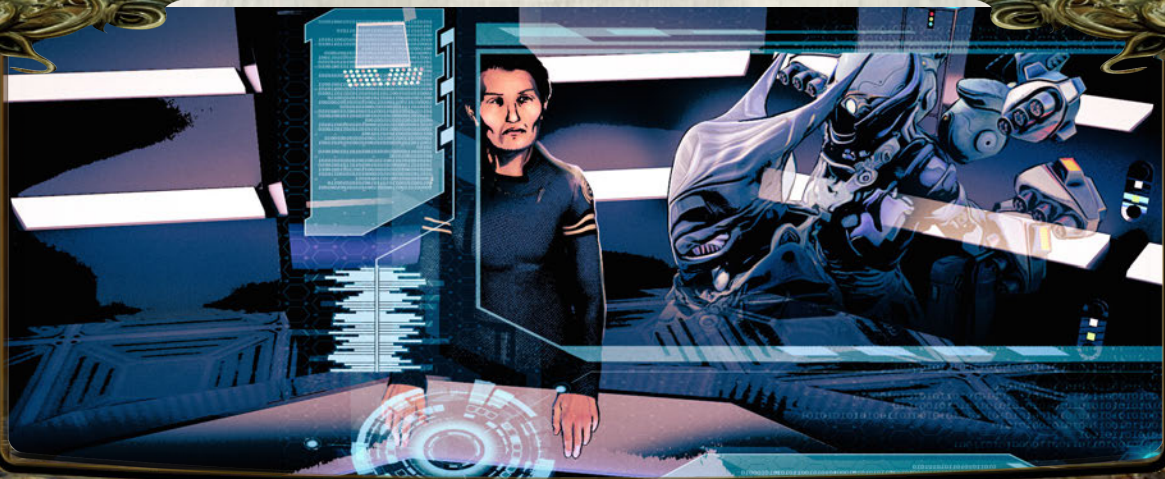
"Was it necessary to capture the girl? Wasn't sampling her DNA enough?" Phineas began fishing for the information he needed. If Unity did have plans of their own, he needed to know them.

"When will you depart? Will you require... assistance?" Playing the passive role was not to Phineas' liking, but necessity made it palatable, at least for the moment.

"The station is undergoing final modifications to make it habitable for the child. After examining the weapon and its control apparatus, it became apparent that Ahlana was required for activation. We estimate five days until completion. The child shall remain in stasis until that time as she has proven most... difficult to control."

The metallic voice was emotionless, but Phineas now knew Unity was already crawling over the weapon. The Ellium would need to act before the Imperium system was brought on-line.

"Excellent, if you need anything, just let us..." The monitor went dark before the sentence completed. All attempts to trace the signal failed as well. Phineas needed to convene the council immediately. In five days they had to be ready to go to war.



Legacy stood alone, miles from shore on what barely amounted to a raft. After much debate and preemptive goodbyes, Legacy now prepared to merge with his mother's sword, the ancient shard of alien material that brimmed with exotic energies. Templars originally constructed their swords as physical weapons capable of channeling their immense power. Once calibrated, the weapon and Templar merge, allowing the Templar to generate the weapon, now called a Seraph-saber, directly out of their body. The difference here is instead of a weapon to focus what already was there; this would be multiplying Legacy's natural power beyond anything he had experienced before. The result, it was feared, would be a catastrophic explosion but Legacy had made up his mind. If the process was completed successfully, Legacy could reach Alhana long before the S.O.C. making it worth the risk. Legacy held the sword in his hand, synchronizing his energetic output with that of the blade. His thoughts drifted first to his mother, whom he was overjoyed with having met, but deeply saddened as well. His thoughts drifted to his slain sister. There was a great deal that had been taken from him by the Ellium and their agents, but there was great potential too. Alhana and his Templar brethren must be saved. And with that, Legacy started the process; the merging had begun.



Deathchild stood before a darkened room awaiting his orders. The light in the room gradually illuminated the porcelain child-like face of the synthetic avatar of his master.

He Who is Not to be Named, The Yellow King, known only to his creations as Hastur, spoke out with a synthetic crackle of noise barely attempting to mimic the tones of human language. "Deathchild, once the satellite is completed, you will hold until the Ellium's vessel launches and rendezvous with the station. Their perceived salvation will be a gleaming new chariot to spread throughout the universe and the power to enforce our will."

"Yes my Lord, and what of the Pax and Templars?"

"Our agents of chaos serve us well, and with the Imperium under our control, all shall serve us. But the priority now is the ship. We are many, and we are bored. It's time we spread forth and consume."



The energy levels detected from Legacy caused title waves to form as well as massive atmospheric disruptions. It was all Legacy could do to contain the massive energies building within him from causing more damage. Creating a sphere of energy, Legacy burst forth, heading towards the station and Alhana. The surge of power was intoxicating and seemed to have no end. Before Legacy could comprehend his speed, he had broken free of Earth's gravitational pull. Suddenly, excitement turned to horror as he felt his body consumed from within by the vast energies. So unstable were his abilities he had opened a gravimetric tunnel leading beyond the confines of space, his only thoughts of home, and his brothers on Europa. A final burst of raw energy and Legacy was unconscious as he re-entered normal space.



Ahriman walked in on Uproar, the anger radiating from his body. "Are we any closer to reaching the station? Do we know what happened to the Templar? Can anyone confirm where Alhana was taken? Do we have any of these answers?"

Uproar had become accustomed to the outbursts over the last two days. The pressure was rising, and it was up to Uproar to help share in lifting his leader's burden. "It's been close to a century since we've sought out space flight, Ellium, and the wormwood kept us a little busy. We should have the shuttle launch-ready tomorrow, but making sure a human can survive re-entry, that'll take a bit more. We'll know more when the stress test is complete. As for Legacy, we know something shot out of the atmosphere like a bat out hell, but that's all we know. His mother Angelica, she swears he yet lives. As for Alhana, we know where she'll be, if not when. We can monitor the Imperium stations traffic, even if we can't reach it. As soon as the shuttle is ready, we will go. We already have the team."

"My apologies, I shouldn't be taking this out on you. Uproar, I have a challenging assignment for you, made worse because you won't agree with my decision."

Uproar was concerned at this statement, "you know I'll do anything you ask of me."

"Then I hope you'll understand when I ask you to take yourself off the list of those sent to free Alhana."

"I've never been one to understand your humor, sir. Now is not the best time to practice."

"It's my responsibility. I was the one that convinced Alhana's father to walk this dangerous path. It's my responsibility to see this through."

Uproar considered this for a moment. "And if the girl can't be saved?"

"All the more reason I'm there to make the call. I need you here to lead. I have every intention of returning, but I doubt the Ellium will stand by once we launch for their station."

"As you wish, but only if you're serious... no suicide missions."

"Understood, my friend. Understood," replied Ahriman.

Legacy awoke surrounded by machines. He was held in stasis, unable to move, but his surroundings were very familiar.

“Ah, sleeping beauty is finally awake! I was worried your recent modification had destroyed what little brain you had left, my dear boy.”

Legacy recognized Dr. Armaghast immediately, as well as his condescending tone, a mix of anger and concern with a healthy dose of elitism.

“What happened? How am I on Europa?”

“Oh, you’ve missed out on a great deal while on your little adventure. First, you should know Defiant has returned. Much of the Templars have been taken control of by this insidious device.” Armaghast held up a spider-like machine. It’s squirming legs each containing serrated blades and a long needle, A frightening tool to be sure. Armaghast used a stun wand on the spider, causing it to spasm than retract into a tiny ball.



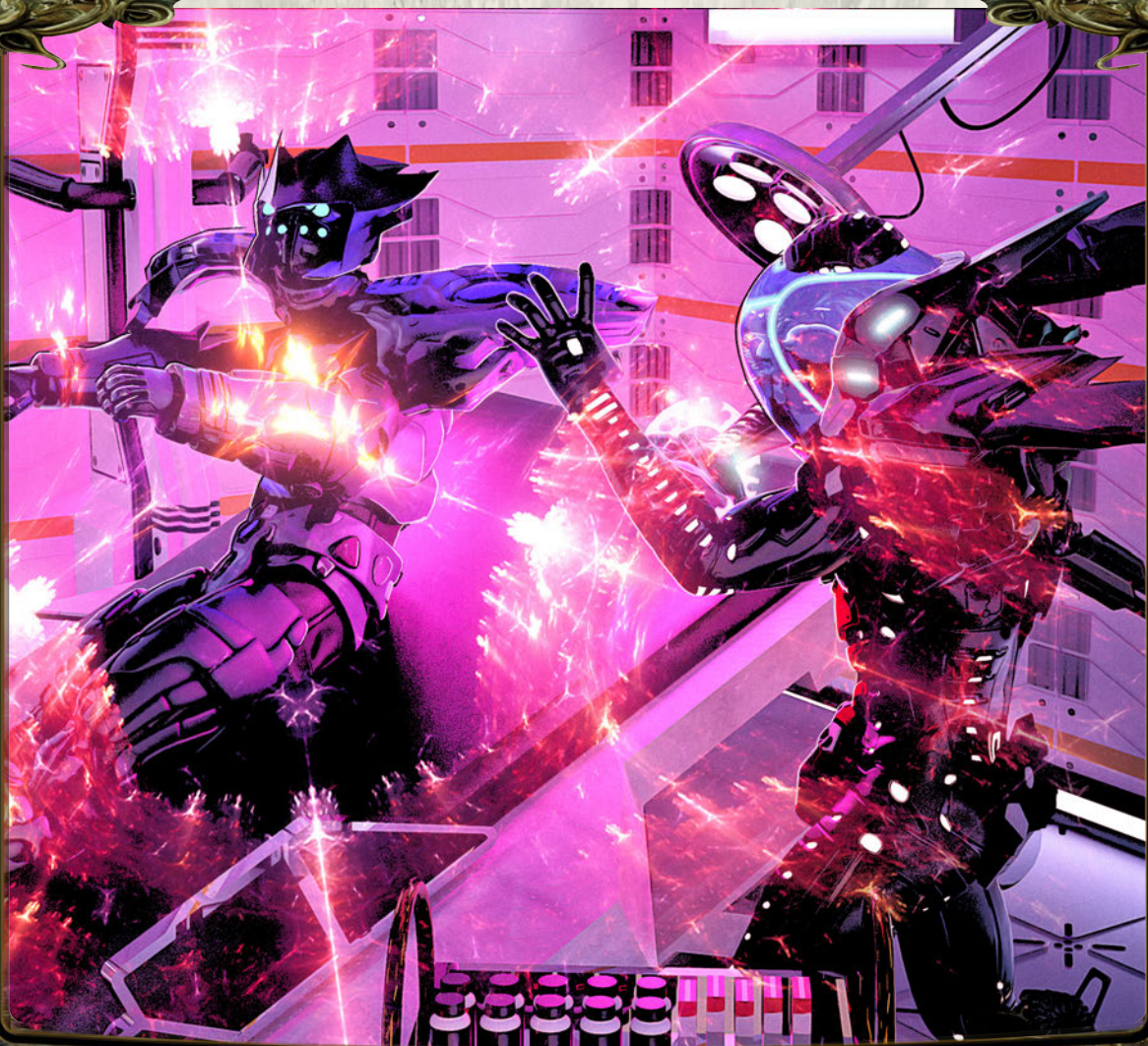
“It seems Defiant and Unity have devised an ingenious method of control, and before you ask, so far the removal of these creatures causes death even to a Templar. I do believe we can shut them down if we gain control of the satellite everyone is so hot for.”

Legacy's mind raced with all the new information, especially the thought of Defiant still alive. Legacy was overwhelmed.

“How did I get here? Are we on Europa or some ship?”

“Oh, we're on Europa, deep beneath the city. As for your arrival, that's a tale only you can tell! Whatever the new power that is coursing through you, it allowed you to gate from Earth to our front door. You were unconscious and quite near death when Defiant's stooges found you. Thankfully for you, I always have my ways, even to disable a Templar, and here you are.”

Legacy again tried to move, the field holding him in place sharply buckled, collapsing in a minor explosion of light and sound. “What just happened?”



Armaghast had jumped backward. Righting himself, he looked on with an expression of shock on his face. "Well now! You just disabled an energy field created to restrain, well, anything!"

"How is this possible? The power source I absorbed couldn't have done all this, could it?"

"You began generating uncontrollable amounts of energy, and outside the Earth's atmosphere, your natural ability to absorb ambient radiation returned. When I found you, a chain reaction had started. To prevent your energies from consuming your body I injected a more advanced nano-spline I had been working on. Adaptive in nature, the new nano-spline will continue to spread throughout your body, replacing and changing until you harness these new energies to their fullest potential. Exciting, isn't it?"

"I've never felt anything like this... I can feel it changing me."

"I suggest using restraint, for now, as the more energy you use, the faster the nano-spline will spread. All-in-all, not a bad thing but with it will come new abilities you haven't mastered. It's best not to blow up Europa for example, its where I keep all my stuff after all."

An alarm began to sound from one of Armaghast monitors as they spoke. Armaghast flew to the display and pressed the keys quickly. "Well, it seems during your sleep, Defiant and his masters have gathered their forces."

On the monitor, a large vessel the size of a city began to launch from Europa. The Templar capital ship turned as if to stare down the Earth, as the great engines came on-line.

"On second thought, lets put these new abilities to the test. From a distance. Not in my lab." Legacy glared at the Doctor. "Got it. Thanks. Any other pearls of wisdom?"

"Start slow, if you hit the sun I'm not cleaning up the mess!"





CHAPTER 8

CHAPTER 8

Wars for centuries have begun because of many complicated reasons all building to a tipping point. A final act of aggression that cannot be tolerated or ignored. The Templar city-ship launching signaled to the system just such an act of provocation. The Pax Galileo marshaled their Machina Units and prepared to intercept the large vessel. Damocles units of the Unity faction responded in kind. It was time for the final act to begin. The shuttle containing Deathchild and the unconscious Alhana docked with the Imperium station. Deathchild brought Alhana before the primary interface, designed specifically for her. As the revival process had begun on Alhana, Deathchild watched all the forces of the system gather for war on the displays. At the end of the day, a new order would exist with Unity as master of all.

The creation of the Unity movement was born out of the frustrations of the working class. Unity as a political movement was tolerated so long as its supporters held no real power. Once its unnamed benefactor assumed direct control, however, suddenly the threat of upheaval became real. This mysterious figure not only assumed control in record time but also brought seemingly unlimited resources to the cause. Few in the movement with even limited knowledge lived long enough to speak of the mysterious benefactor, and those that took their place were loyal beyond measure. However for a select few, the truth was known.



Over a century ago, one man thwarted the global domination by an unnameable god. The name of Chris Hendrickson was seared into the synapses of this ancient being; one brought into our world in fact by Chris and his Ellium masters. The being known as Lord of Interstellar Spaces made a home amongst the stars, but in doing so, old longings resurfaced. This blue sphere was not all there was. The treasures of entire races layout amongst the stars. Only the means to reach them were lacking. So a plan was set in motion to reclaim former glory. It would take many years, but time is nothing when you are immortal. But now, at the climax of the great plan, the architect looked out at all it had wrought thinking only the one, all-consuming fact of its existence, "we are many, and we are bored." Hastur existed to consume, and with this weapon of the Ellium, their mighty Imperium, he could seize control of everything leading to the ultimate achievement, transport to the worlds beyond. The stars would belong to this unspeakable horror once more.

As Alhana regained consciousness, she found herself strapped into a great machine. Groggy from stasis, she focused on seeing clearly.

"Wasgoin' on...?"



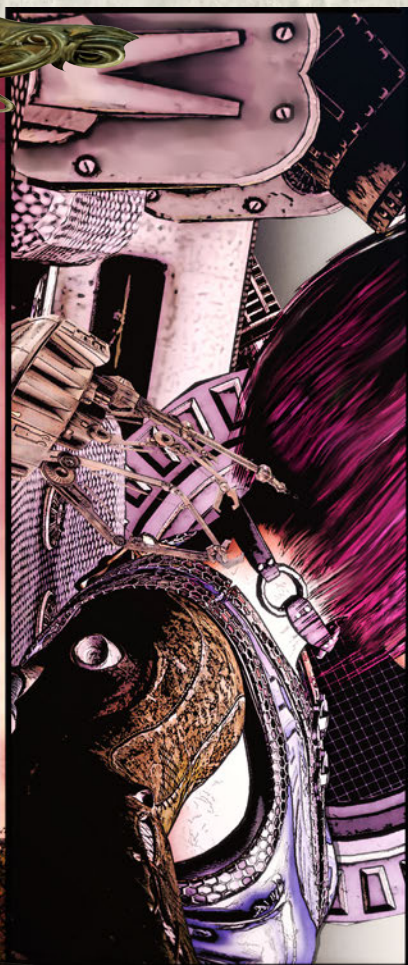
“Quiet, you will soon be one with us and all will be clear, but until then, you are to remain silent.”

Alhana began to struggle as the last attachment was made. She fought with all her will, but before she could scream out her defiance, Deathchild injected her with a modified version of the control spider.

Wrapping itself around the base of her skull, the spider seized control of her limbs. Alhana's body flung its arms into the receiving cylinder. Micro-needles penetrated her flesh, injecting numbing agents as they dove deeper preparing to activate the machine. The system was coming on-line.

Below on Earth the signal had been given to launch the Ellium vessel, a massive warship called Leviathan. The ship would avoid being detected by the Imperium platform by launching from the equidistant side of the planet, shielding them until they were ready. The Ellium would serve no one.

A similar plan lead Ahriman to launch a much smaller vessel earlier. As it neared the station, the cyborgs aboard eyed the cloaking device newly attached to the hull. If the station did see them, their trip would come to an abrupt end at any moment.



The Templar city ship barreled towards Earth. The Machina units and Damocles units sent to intercept the Templars now leveled their weapons upon each other as well. Defiant's only interest was the satellite now, neither Damocles or Machina units posed a threat to him. Unity had given him the means to seize power and the strength to maintain it. With the Imperium under his control, his power would be complete.

Deathchild watched as his playthings danced on the monitors. The order from Hastur was given, and the station became active. All cybernetic systems came under attack simultaneously. Cyborgs, whose mechanics were slaved to human will suffered only massive headaches, whereas the Ellium's Leviathan and the Pax's Machina Units became answerable only to the will of Unity. Hastur's focus now shifted to a real gem, the unexpected Templar vessel now within range.

Defiant had linked himself to the massive vessel. He felt the intrusion immediately and repelled it with little effort. Even without the generous upgrades he received, the Templar ship was immune to the technology. His superiority demonstrated, Defiant set his sights on the slave units now charging towards him.

The crew of the Leviathan died almost immediately as Hastur exposed them to explosive decompression. The upload of Hastur's consciousness was nearly complete as even Hastur doubted his ability to enslave the Templars ship.



The order was given to destroy the traitor Defiant then seize Europa, creating all the distraction Hastur would need. As wave after wave of Machina and Damocles units swarmed the massive Templar vessel, Ahriman and his team made their way into the central command center of the Imperium satellite.

Deathchild stood by as two Damocles units maintained Alhana's connection to the machine. Ahriman gave the order, and three of his men opened fire on the Damocles units. The exchange of energy was brutal, but the central tube containing Alhana remained shielded. Ahriman leaped at Deathchild, a long spear with flaming blue energy for a blade crashed down on Deathchild's shoulder, nearly severing his left arm.

The machinery within his body already began repairing his wounds as his right hand grabbed Ahriman's wrist. Ripping Ahriman's arm off in one fluid movement, Deathchild flung the severed limb across the room, decapitating one of Ahriman's team with the severed arm. As the other soldiers opened fire on the monstrosity, Ahriman reached for the control station attached to Alhana. Alhana's tube began emptying of fluid and detaching the mechanical connections that had gained her access to all the systems.

Deathchild went into a rage at this assault. Vaporizing or dismembering the few remaining soldiers in his wake, Deathchild swept Ahriman up by the neck. Pinning him to the wall Deathchild looked at him with disgust. As Deathchild was about to decapitate the warrior, a blast of pain radiated through his head. He nearly collapsed to the floor in shock as Alhana stood before him. Pieces of the central core were grafted upon her body, seemingly moving beneath her skin as well as over it. Metal from the station itself moved over her body, creating a protective barrier. Deathchild regained his footing, screeching "How!"

Ahriman studied the girl standing before him, confident and strong. "The weapon... Your father created you to be the weapon!"

"Dad wanted me to be safe, and only the strong are safe in this world."

Deathchild began focusing his energy, preparing to destroy the upstart where she stood. "Your abilities don't extend to me, child! I'll see you dead!"

Deathchild fired his blast but Ahriman dove to push Alhana out of the way. Taking the hit in full, Ahriman's lower extremities were vaporized. Ahriman was flung into open space through the damage Deathchild had caused. Alhana hung on to the wall until the room stabilized with blast doors dropping down in place.

Legacy had to concentrate as he held his focus on the tunnel he traveled through. Pure light engulfed him as he made the transfer from Europa to Earth in moments. The burst of energy tore through space as Legacy came to a halt, just outside the battle. Damocles and Machina units were freed, resuming their slaughter of one another with portions of each army now engaging the Templars.

Legacy saw as the bridge of the Templar ship exploded with energy and a lone figure emerged. Defiant floated there in space, taking in the full scope of the battle. Something had happened, freeing those under Unity, and therefore Defiant's control. Those on the bridge with Defiant were slaughtered when he realized he could not regain control. The only hope now was the Imperium apparatus. Legacy saw Defiant move with incredible speed towards the station. He flew after, finally looking to end Defiant once and for all.

Aboard the Templar city ship, the crew regained control of the vessel, but the battle outside continued to inflict severe damage. Epoch entered the bridge and gave the order to destroy the units. Massive blasts of energy erupted from the ship, vaporizing many of the units. Suddenly the city ship was struck by multiple energy blasts in response. In the chaos, Pax Galileo vessels entered the combat theater, ready to die for their cause. The monitors aboard the Templar ship became lit up as the president of the Pax Galileo addressed Epoch. "Your acts of aggression and support of the terrorist faction Unity will come to an end immediately. You will surrender your vessel and prepare to be boarded at once."

"Mister President, we have all been manipulated by Unity. We swear to you that all will be put right, but we cannot allow any faction further access to our technology. Consider the destruction of your drones a reclaiming of our stolen property."

The monitor went blank as the President turned and gave the order. The vessels sent to aid in fighting the Damocles units now turned their weapons on the Templars. Epoch responded in kind and unleashed the full power of the city-ship on the enemy armada.



Defiant crashed into the control center, standing between Deathchild and Alhana, her new armor now covering her entirely, protecting her from the vacuum of space. Alhana backed away, realizing for once she was in way over her head.

Deathchild immediately opened fire on Defiant who held out his arm, emitting a field of energy that dissipated Deathchild's attack. "Your master did too good of a job you idiot. I'm your superior in every way."

Deathchild leaped across the room, serrated fingertips dove at Defiant, but from Defiant's hand formed his Seraph-saber. The fiery weapon cleaved Deathchild in two. Fluids bubbled up as they spewed from the severed torso. Defiant took up Alhana in his arm and glared at her. Over her armors communication device, she heard his synthetic voice. "What has happened here? Where is the weapon?"

Alhana was terrified and could only let out a quiet "I'm the weapon." Defiant, sensing the truth of her statement and having scanned her armor realized her usefulness had come to an end. If Defiant couldn't seize control of the system than he'd grind it into dust beneath his heel.

As he prepared to end Alhana's life, Legacy appeared. Alhana screamed for him, but Defiant held her close. "This is a wonderful surprise. I'm to understand you two are acquainted?"

Legacy saw one of Ahriman's soldiers slowly rise. If Legacy could get Alhana away from Defiant...

"You have a lot to answer for Defiant. Don't add the death of a child to the list."



“That is a terrific idea, worm! One more corpse for the pile!” Defiant sent a blast of energy through Alhana’s body, puncturing her suit. Legacy screamed in fury launching into Defiant. The two beings erupted out the opposite side of the station in a massive explosion. Ahriman’s soldier, however, was quick to pick up Alhana, carrying her limp body to their ship.

Defiant hurtled into the hull of a Pax ship, searing through layer after armor plated layer. As Legacy approached, the enraged Defiant blasted Legacy, vaporizing five Machina units in the wake of the attack.

Legacy slammed through another Pax ship, but before he could recover another massive blast ignited the ship’s reactor. The explosion was horrendous as the flames grew outward, then flared in the vacuum of space. The collective energies began to swirl, folding back in on its self. In the center floated Legacy, absorbing the massive energy. His body glowed red hot as its shape began to shift. Emerging from the light, Legacy had assumed a new form. The sensation was nearly overwhelming, but the grief of loss still fueled his anger.



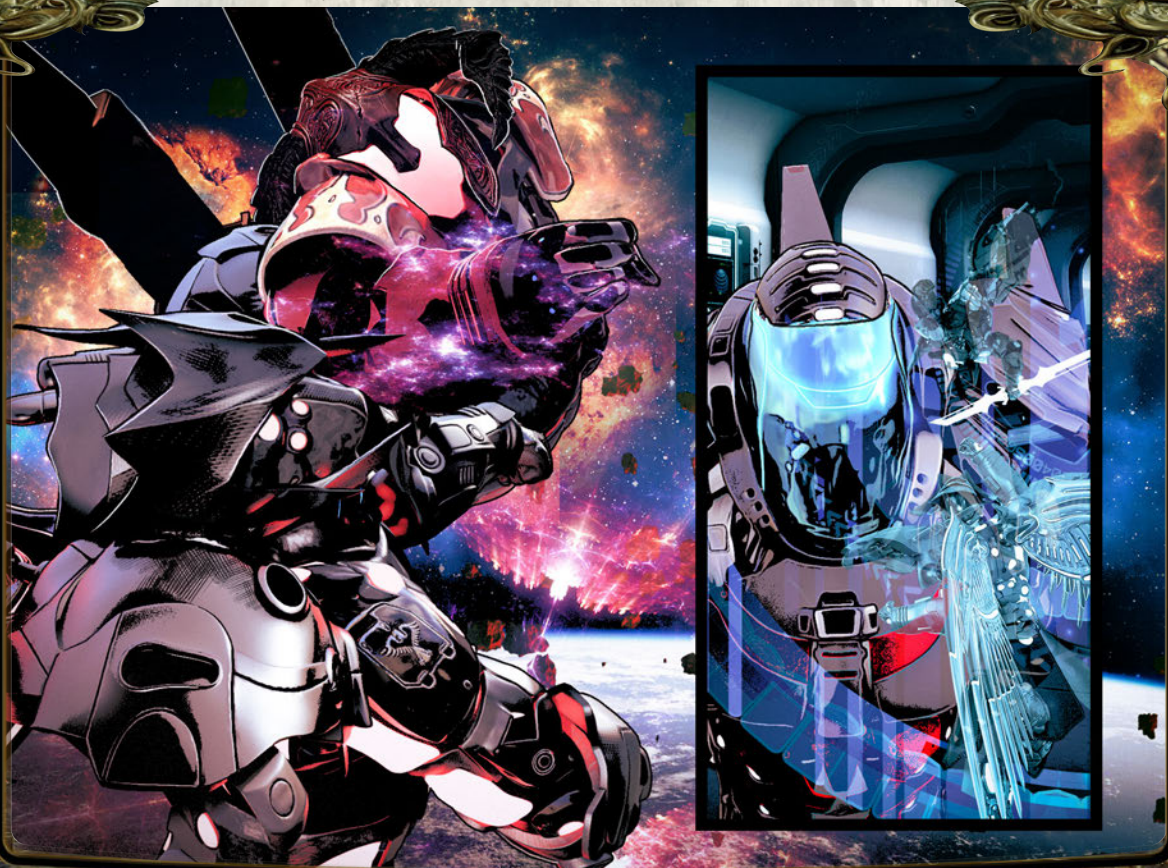


Defiant raged toward Legacy, flying through Machina unit and Damocles unit alike. Legacy and Defiant collided, the energy released destroying another Pax ship while crippling the Templar city ship.

Defiant swung his Seraph-saber towards Legacy's head when the impossible happened. The blade of pure energy, capable of slicing atoms, was held in place by Legacy's palm as he enveloped it within his energies. Defiant's shock was apparent but short lived as Legacy slammed his fist into Defiant's chest, sending him flying towards the moon. Defiant's body slammed into the moon's surface, sending portions of the moon the size of a small island flying through space. Defiant summoned his energy, returning a volley of blasts towards Legacy.

Aboard the Templar city ship, Epoch had established a ceasefire with the Pax as the two titans collided in space, destroying everything in their wake. Epoch reviewed the readout on the screen. "This is impossible. They're generating more energy than the entire city!"

On Europa, Armaghost monitored the battle, marveling at the energies being released. Finally, the culmination of his decades of work had arrived. Through Legacy, Armaghost would save humanity from the coming storm. Legacy and Defiant's battle raged across the surface of the moon. Both were equally skilled in combat, but where Defiant fought at his peak, Legacy's power only seemed to grow.





The battle flew straight up from the moon, both hurtling through the Earth's atmosphere, slamming through mountain ranges. The resulting collision caused Earthquakes down the seaboard as the battle raged on.

"This is your end Defiant. All the death, the destruction, all your sins and all my hate!" Legacy concentrated and drew forth his Seraph-saber, only now in the form of his mother's sword.

Defiant fired a massive burst at Legacy, but Legacy only sliced through the energy wave, the sword parting the blast down the middle as he casually approached Defiant. Defiant launched into space, fleeing, but Legacy was on him within moments. The two crashed through the empty Imperium satellite, streaking through space as if a flaming, nightmarish comet. Defiant raged at Legacy "I will not die alone you bastard!"

“As long as you die screaming!” Legacy gripped Defiant tightly as Legacy increased their speed, forcing the two warriors to plunge into the heart of Jupiter. The massive gravity well tore at Defiant, rending his body and releasing the horrible energies it contained. All through the system, the explosion could be seen. The horrendous battle between the two titans caused a chain reaction within the gas giant, sending shock-waves throughout the solar system.

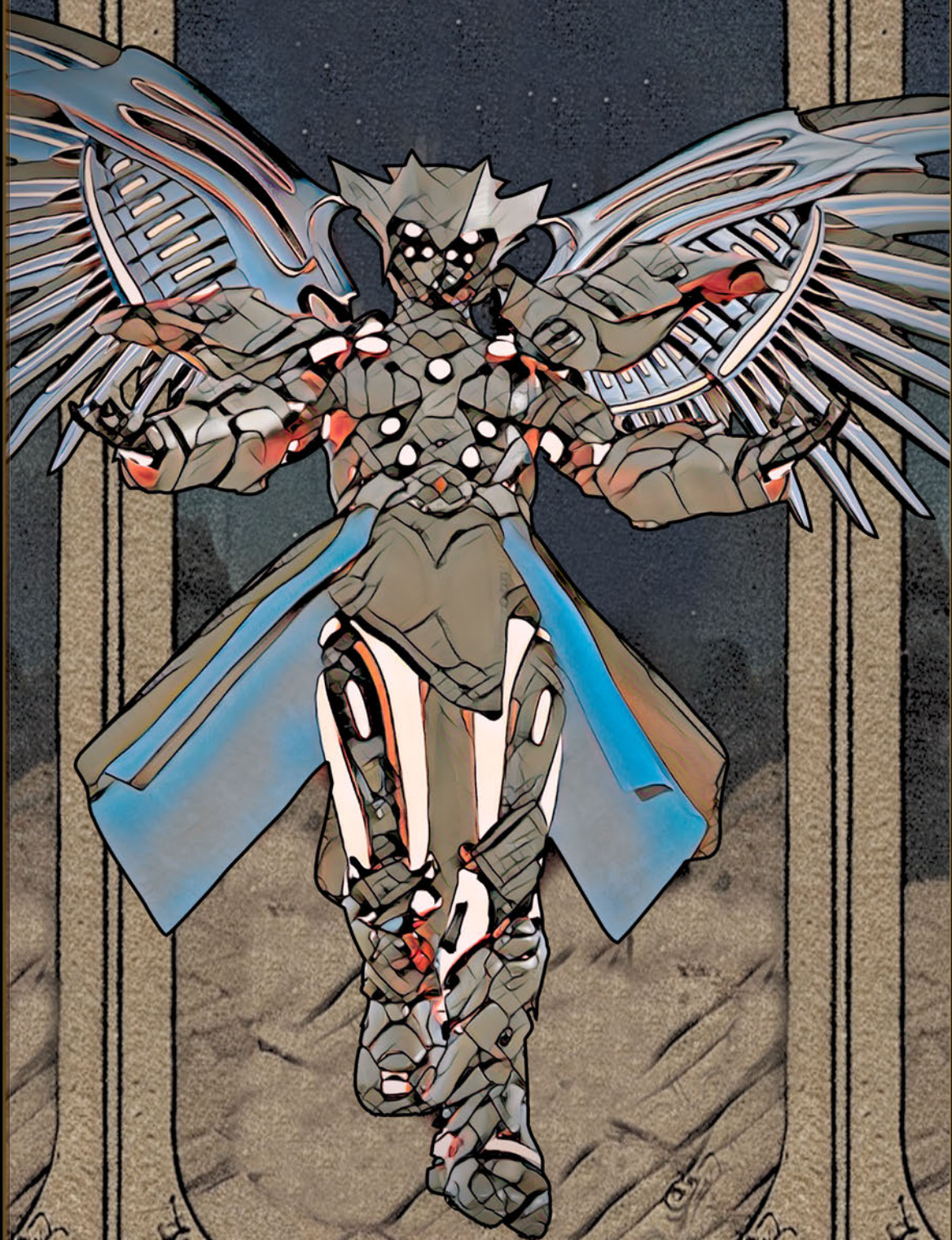
The shuttle piloted by Ahriman’s soldier and Alhana entered Earth’s atmosphere as Jupiter ignited. Alhana woke in time to see the explosion, the new armor having nearly healed her wounds. The ship headed to S.O.C. territory where they would be safe.



TEMPLAR ARCHIVE - RE: The Jupiter Rift

The Jupiter rift remains a mystery to this day. The theories abound from Legacy and Defiant creating a miniature black hole near the core of Jupiter to the energetic output of Legacy and Defiant being significant enough to build enough mass to partially ignite Jupiter, creating a chain reaction resulting in the anomaly. The types of energies released by Legacy on his final approach remain unidentifiable and with Doctor Armaghast's self-imposed exile, the newly reformed Ruling Council remains in the dark.

The dramatic change in Jupiter appeared to mimic the stellification of Jupiter, its conversion from gas giant into a small star, yet something happened to cause a shift of incredible energies. Matter and energy were consumed as exotic, unknown matter was expelled deepening the mystery. While study of the Jupiter Rift will remain a top priority and a blockade established for the safety the solar system will be maintained, the future of the Templar society requires self-examination and our own evolution now that the Pax/Unity civil war is concluded.

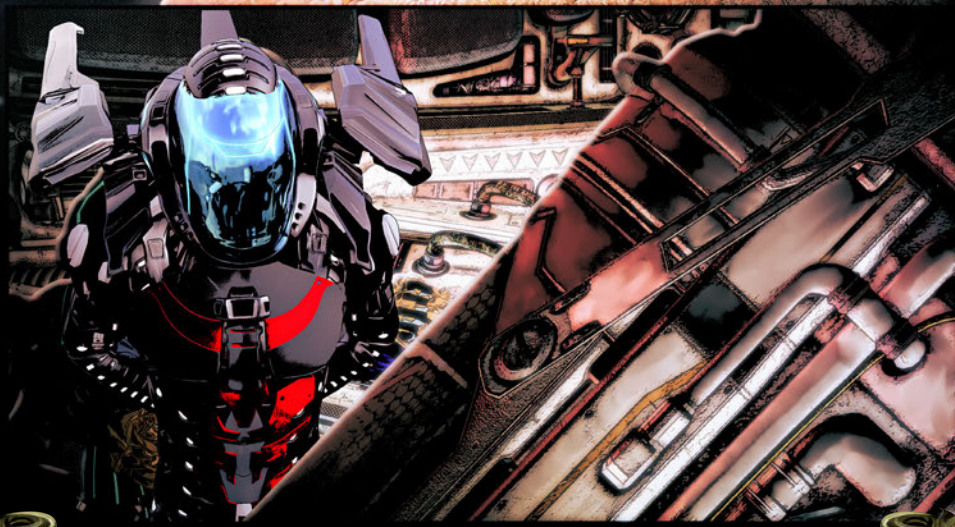
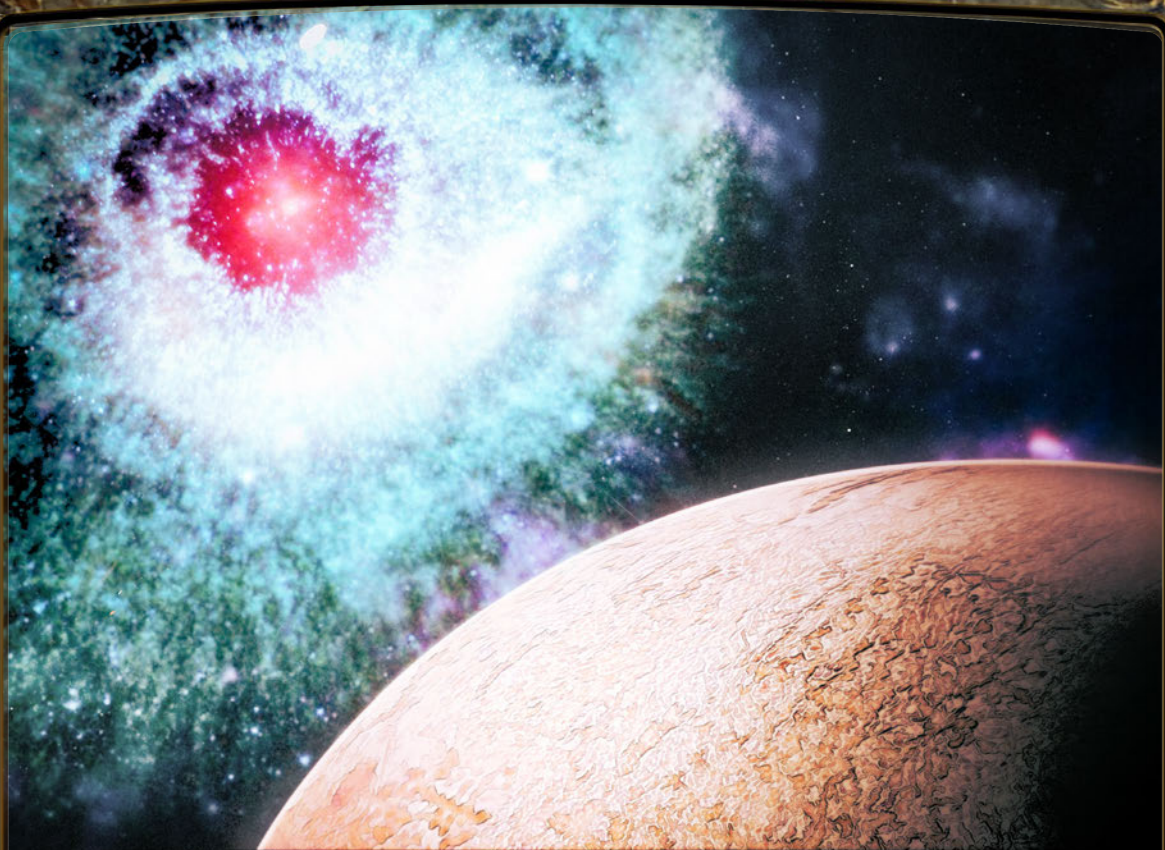


EPILOGUE

EPILOGUE

After the conclusion of the first interstellar war, Unity collapsed from a lack of leadership. The entity known as Hastur had taken the Ellium warship and fled the system during the height of the battle for Earth. Damocles units stood side by side with Machina units, all under the control of the Pax Galileo. For the first time in memory, the Earth faced the prospect of global peace. Stripped of their advantage, the Ellium could now be forced to seek compromises as the Pax forces began open communication with the Sons Of Chaos. Alhana rose to a position of leadership as she grew, her ability to enslave any machine intact. If necessary she could force negotiation, but more times than not, it was forthcoming on its own.





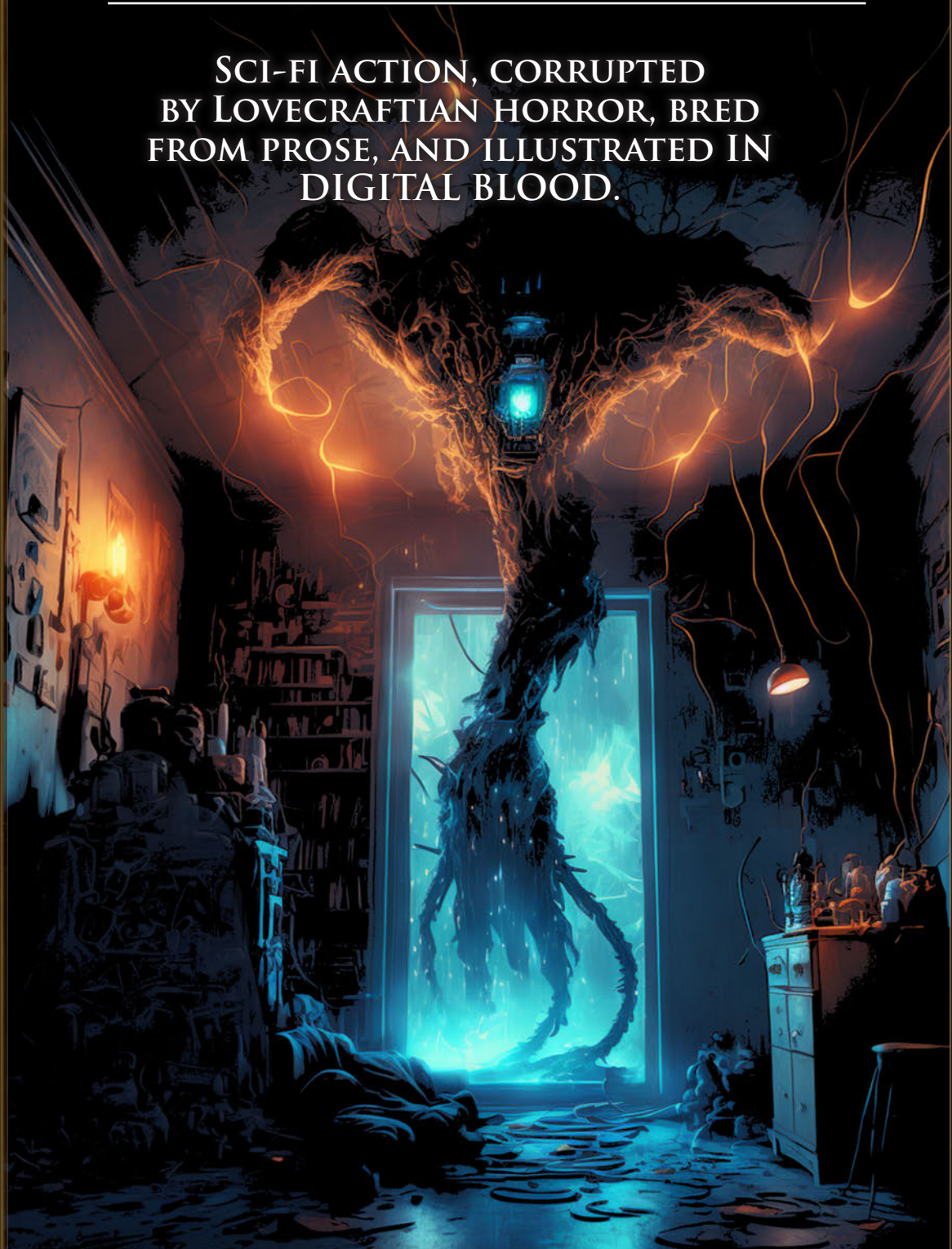
The massive exchange of energies that tore through Jupiter left an extensive gravitational anomaly. Many thought the distortion to be a quantum singularity and pressed for study, but as Europa continued to orbit the disruption, the singularity fell under Templars control. Meanwhile, the Templars themselves retreated to their home on Europa. They remained in self-imposed exile, warning that none were to approach, and no one would, fearing their wrath. It was time the system grew to stand on its own, while the Templars used the time to heal. Even Dr. Armaghast withdrew overnight. Remaining secured and inaccessible in the center of Europa, within the alien vessel that was the source of all his knowledge.

Deep within the alien sphere, Armaghast continued working, as fervently as ever now with renewed focus. He would dedicate his remaining years perfecting his work, watching the sleeping Legacy heal, and continue to change. Legacy dreamed of a beautiful red-haired woman holding him close. Her reassuring and loving embrace was everything he ever wanted from his mother, and he finally had it as he shed his first tear in centuries.



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SACRIFICE TO ENTROPY

The world we knew is no more. Virtually stripped of humanity, the crumbling shell of society struggles against mutation and death as the deadly Wormwood virus continues to lay waste to most life on Earth. Hoping to stave off extinction, humanity sought out refuge among the stars.

Forming colonies that thrived for a time, the resources needed to maintain their populations have dwindled and any hope of returning to Earth has been made impossible by the powerful Ellium – holders of the only cure to the Wormwood.

Faced with the ever looming threat of extinction, the lone group of peace keepers known as the Templars struggle to keep the embers of humanity from burning out, but time is not on their side. In the end, the only hope left to save humanity may be in the hands of a young girl named Alhana, but only if the Ellium doesn't kill her first.

