

CHILD OF ENTROPY



JASON MOSER





Presented By

ASYLUM
INK



CHILD OF ENTROPY

BY:
JASON MOSER

Story,
Written & Illustrated By
JASON MOSER

More From Asylum Ink:

HOLLOW

PHOBIC! AN EXPLORATION OF FEAR

CARNIVAL

ANIMAtropolis

LOST REALITY

~ ENTROPY SAGA ~

ENTROPY RISING
SACRIFICE TO ENTROPY
CHILD OF ENTROPY
PILLARS OF ENTROPY
LORD OF ENTROPY

ENTROPY VOL. 3, 2023. PUBLISHED BY ASYLUM INK. OFFICE OF PUBLICATION:
2626 NIXON DR. HUDSONVILLE MI. 49426 ENTIRE CONTENTS ©2017 JASON MOSER. A.R.R. ENTROPY, IT'S LOGO
AND ALL RELATED CHARACTERS TM & ©2015-2017 JASON MOSER. A.R.R. THE EVENTS AND CHARACTERS
IN THIS BOOK ARE ENTIRELY FICTIONAL. ANY SIMILARITIES TO PERSONS LIVING OR DEAD ARE PURELY
COINCIDENTAL. NO PORTION OF THIS BOOK MAY BE USED OR REPRODUCED BY ANY MEANS (DIGITAL OR
PRINT) WITHOUT WRITTEN PERMISSION FROM ASYLUM INK EXCEPT FOR REVIEW PURPOSES.

“Nothing is lost. . Everything is transformed.”

- Michael Ende, *The Neverending Story*





PROLOGUE

PROLOGUE

Reality is a two-dimensional realm known as Affine space. All existence resides in this informational plane though represented in the third dimension, creating the illusion we call reality. For those able to access Affine space consciously, marvelous wonders are achieved. Already humankind has taken its first steps into this limitless horizon building machines to access Affine space for faster than light travel. Affine space has been and always shall be, encompassing vast realities containing a multiverse of possibilities. This is the true reality, but there are those that only exist in Affine space as entities that are more abstract. These Outer Gods are said to have dreamt our reality into existence, and by their waking, our existence would cease to exist. Whether or not this is true, we may never know, for these beings are beyond our limited ability to understand. What is certain however is that their power is seeming without end.

Spawned from the Outer Gods, the Great Old One's were the first to reach out from Affine space. Stretching across the three-dimensional realm, some branching off on their own while others traveled collectively as the Lords of Instrumentality, a title all sentient beings that rose up after the birth of three-dimensional space came to know these beings as. The motives of the Great Old One's, like those that spawned them are not known. Certain truths are thought to have become known amongst the legends, lies, and ancient texts concerning these great beings, but in the end, nothing is certain.

Before the birth of three-dimensional space, The Lords of Instrumentality strove for greater knowledge, endeavoring to procure a notion of understanding based on pure logic. They functioned as pure, formless thought. Timeless until, having exhausted the metaphysical plain of Affine Space, they went on to realize three-dimensional space with the physicality of the universe as we experience it. They searched throughout three-dimensional space, expanding their logic to greater heights. Through this grand act, perhaps purely by accident, life sprung into being. The Lords of Instrumentality continued creating new principals to base their higher equations upon until they came to the realization that the higher forms of mathematical logic that they had conceived were mere copies of the original. All their knowledge was based on the one truth that they had forsaken in their greed for more.

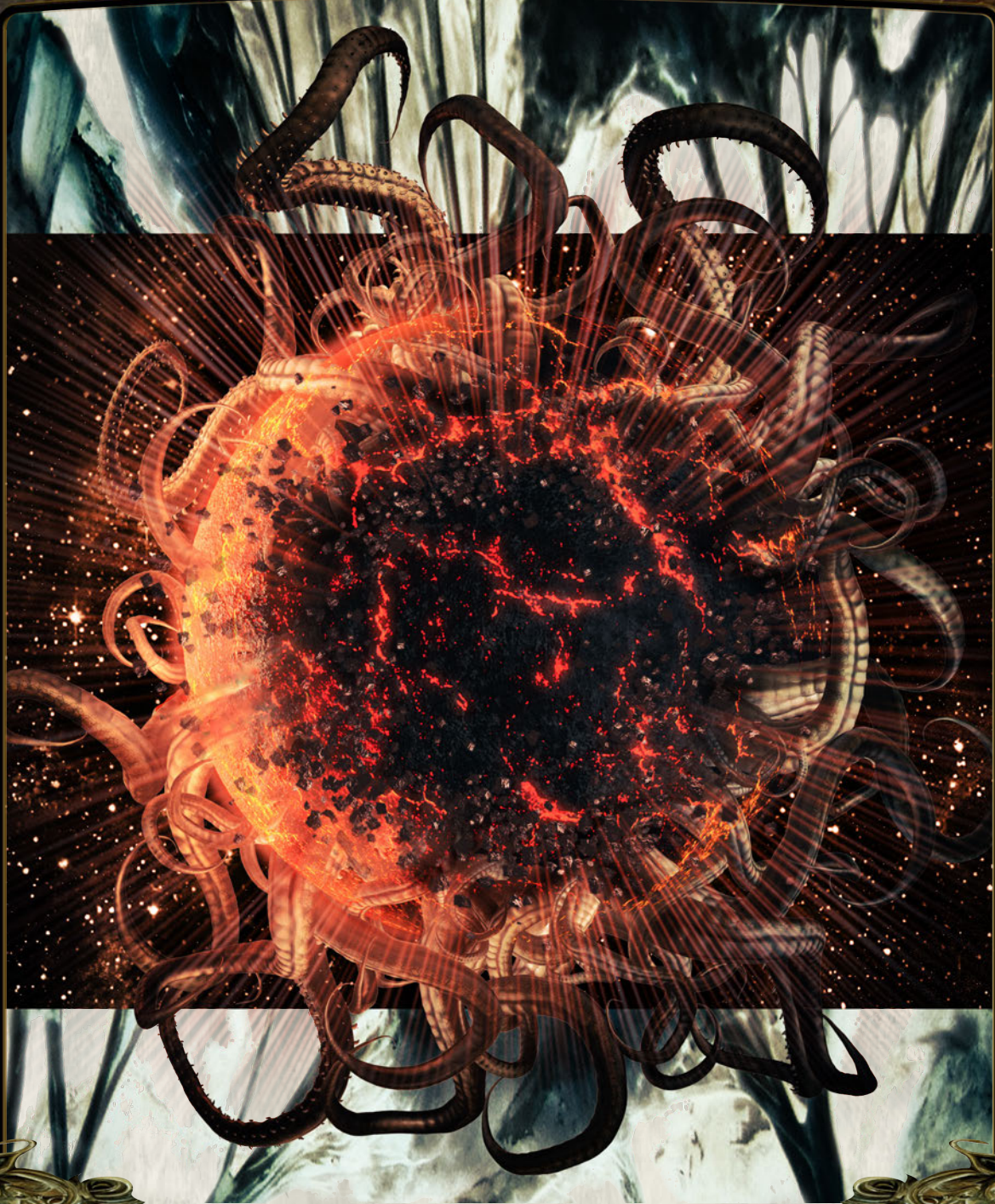
For the Lords to explore the third dimension they took on forms, bodies, and once in the bodies, they had found themselves unable to return to their place of purity and logic, yet not entirely separate either. The Lords of Instrumentality found themselves to be mere avatars of their actual selves with but a fraction of their might. Only a very few of these beings had remained intact, in their true forms. As if in a great slumber, the Outer Gods and the Great Old One's that stayed in Affine Space refused to acknowledge the pleas of their now corporeal siblings. Only the Great Azathoth ever stirred when beseeched by the Lords.

Perhaps by accident or maybe because of some unknowable intelligence or understanding now lost to all corporeal beings, Azathoth sent Shards streaking throughout three-dimensional space. Each of these Azathoth Shards granted great power, enough power to access Affine Space and rewrite the three-dimensional space to the whims of the bearer. The Lords of Instrumentality found this to be their one hope, that if they accessed enough Shards, perhaps Affine Space could be theirs once more.



To hasten their return and the collection of Azathoth Shards, the Lords began mass executions of corporeal life, known as tributes, channeling the enormous energies released into accessing Affine space and summoning more Shards. However, as more and more Shards found their way into our reality, larger numbers of sacrifices were required for a successful tribute.





Though based on the precepts of the purest logic, the universe is a thing of physicality and with this physicality came temptation, pain, and physical death. Longing for a purpose, having lost eons of memories to time and with them their heritage, some with but a glimmer of the reasoning that they had once possessed wallowed in the sins of the flesh. Reveling in bringing about the physical deaths of all they encountered to gain more tribute, The Lords of Instrumentality fractured. Knowing they lost their way, those finding no joy in slaughter went off in search of the truth that once made them the proud race they once were, now known as The Lords of Cerebral Ecology.

The Lords of Instrumentality found the first of the evolved races, the Unborn. Helping to nurture their xenophobia to new heights with their abilities to cloud the minds of beings. Eventually the Lords of Instrumentality enslaved the once powerful Unborn, mutating other races they encountered into murderous Quatall. The Lords of Instrumentality marched across three-dimensional space wiping out all forms of life they encountered. The acquisition of Azathoth Shards only magnified their already considerable might. The Lords of Cerebral Ecology also sought the Shards. The war between Lords ravaged entire galaxies for the acquisition of the Shards. The Lords of Cerebral Ecology, having refused to collect tribute to trigger the release of more Azathoth shards, instead created great machines that both studied the universe as well as watched for Shards to surface. Built with their most terrifying weapons, these great machines would destroy any servitor races attempting to steal the precious shards.

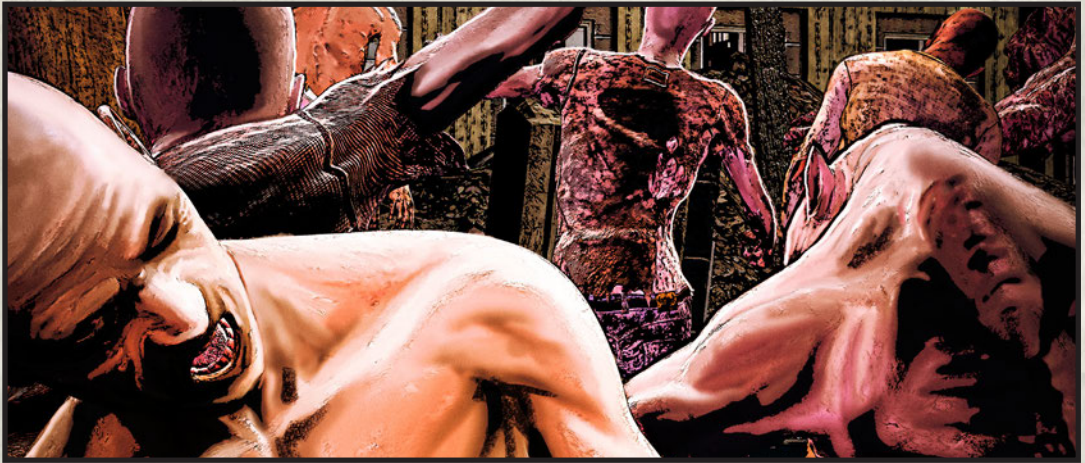


The Lords of Cerebral Ecology chose to bond with the Shards they recovered, allowing the enormous energies to change their forms in a variety of ways. The Lords of Instrumentality, however, wielded the Shards as blunt objects, weapons or tools to be controlled. Eventually, after untold millennia, the Lords of Cerebral Ecology withdrew from the universe, leaving only their technology on many worlds scattered about. Some think they found what they sought after for so long, a return to Affine space. Others believe they gave up their search, content to lay dormant deep beneath the worlds they once populated, waiting for the eventual collapse of all that is. Regardless, known for sure is that the Lords of Instrumentality now stand unopposed in their rampage across all creation. When the Lords of Instrumentality come to a world, that world will be devoid of life by weeks end.



Still, even greater horrors roamed the darkness between worlds. Other Old Ones traversed the dimension with unknown motives. Great swaths of chaos have begun to spread throughout creation, driving all forms of sentience mad by beings too powerful to understand. Consumed by the unknowable machinations directed by He That Shall Not Be Named, a rising force of chaos and violence leaves not even barren worlds in its wake.





Humankind was born into this universe. This is the realm of physicality that we have long considered the provider of “hospitable” worlds. This is the darkness we foolishly have begun stretching out into in a feeble attempt to control and understand our surroundings. The naivety of this youthful race called humanity challenges the unthinkable, the unknowable, and dares to question that which is beyond comprehension. Never once searching their souls for the truth buried deep within - entropy consumes all.

AFFINE SPACE



AFFINE SPACE: The totality of all existence, encompassing everything from the Multiverse to all dimensions beyond. Azathoth is the focal point for all Affine Space with the exact nature and relationship between the two not fully understood by even the Great Old Ones. It is believed however that this iteration of Affine Space exists only while the great Azathoth slumbers and upon his waking, all of existence will cease, prompting a new cycle to begin.



MULTIVERSE: Together, these multiple universes comprise everything that physically exists: the entirety of space, time, matter, energy, and the physical laws and constants that describe them.



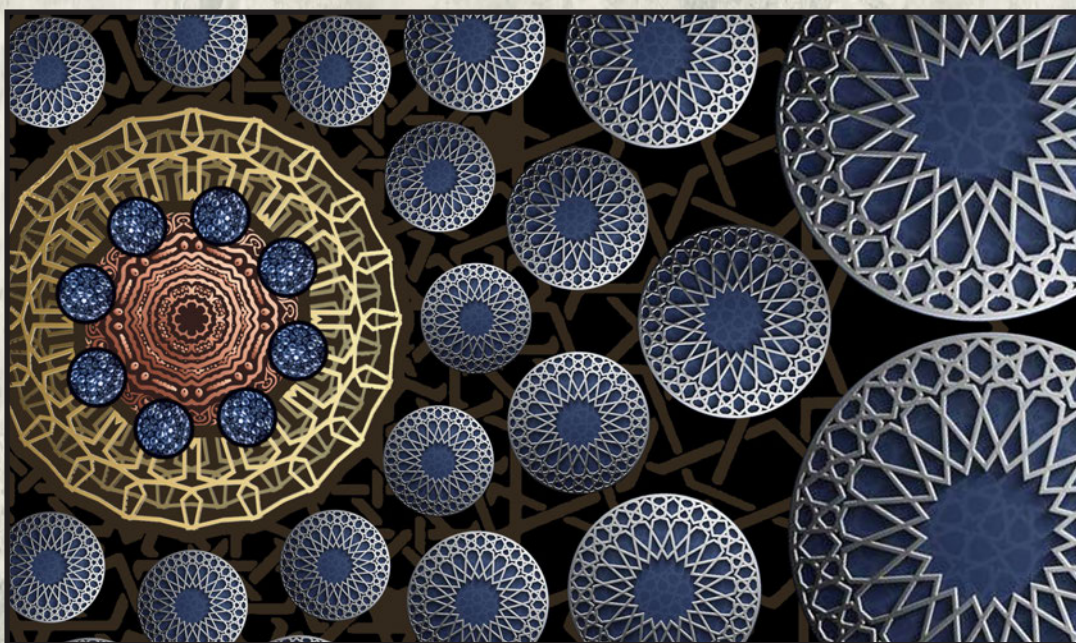
CHAMBER OF GUF: Repository of all information contained in a 2-dimensional realm outside the Multiverse. Functioning as "information repositories," these spheres remain tethered to the multiple physical connections scattered simultaneously throughout the Multiverse, encompassing all living beings in creation. Knowledge and experience is retained and new tethers are created randomly with no limit as life continues to flourish in the Multiverse.



GREAT OLD ONES: Beings of immense power whose connection to Affine Space grants abilities far beyond all other creatures in existence. A product of Azathoth, the Outer God who is believed to be the sum total of Affine Space, the Great Old Ones began as sibling Outer Gods existing outside the realm of the Chamber of Guf. Eventually many of these beings journeyed to 3-dimensional space at the dawn of its creation for their own reasons only to find they had become trapped.



OUTER GODS: The natural state for the first beings in existence. Created by Azathoth before all other beings or realms, their purpose remains a mystery. Many of these creatures journeyed to 3 dimensional space for a variety of reasons, but discovered they were unable to return to pure Affine Space. Existing for eons, these ancient creatures became known as Great Old Ones to the races that evolved in the millennia to come.





CHAPTER 1

CHAPTER 1

Over 60 years ago, a great conflict tore through Earth's solar system. The ramifications of that enormous battle left a permanent tear in the very fabric of space where Jupiter once stood. It has been said that to understand the nature of this large fissure would take lifetimes to study, but humankind was never known for its patience. The once mighty Templars abandoned their home on Europa, leaving only automated sentries to stand guard, making the small moon a quarantined no-fly zone. With their departure, the great tear remained for any that chose to claim it for their own. The now decades old Pax Continuum unified the system under their rule and took it upon themselves to catalog the fissure and to find out where it lead.

That the tear was a portal became apparent 20 years ago when an alien wreck drifted through from somewhere beyond. The vessel suffered massive damage and was soon lost to its reactor going critical. The weapons required to cause the damage however, terrified the Pax Continuum. With A new effort in planetary and system defense enacted, preparations for whatever may next breach the tear continued furiously. When the feared threat failed to show, however, the Continuum formulated a bold new plan. The creation of a new ship began, part built for war, part built for exploration, conceived to journey through the tear to meet any potential threats head on. A bold plan, but many feared what might be awakened by such an aggressive tactic.

The ship named Titan was created to be sturdier than any other vessel in service. Functioning as an impressive engineering feat built to not only survive the massive flux of energies that would tear at any ship as it crossed the Rift, but also survive anything encountered on the other side. The most practical aspect of the large vessel was its ability to record all mission data in multiple areas of the ship. The primary mission would be to locate and determine strengths and weaknesses of any threats. However, should all hands be lost, the mission data and all its myriad backups existed in detachable pods, programmed to find a way home.

Crossing the Rift proved far more traumatic for the crew than their vessel, however. Most fell unconscious while three others experienced grand mal seizures. Eight others however suffered a far different form of torment. The log of the Titan would state that these eight individuals immediately upon recovering consciousness began crying out in terror. Possessed of visions of a vast and ancient city, they described unending hordes of great horrors, almost reptilian in form, moving throughout the ancient streets. All at once, these unnamed beings turned and faced the humans and let out a quiet, undulating sigh. This was all that the eight were able to vocalize before each attempted to end their life, all of whom were in separate isolation rooms, cut off from one another and all other external stimuli.



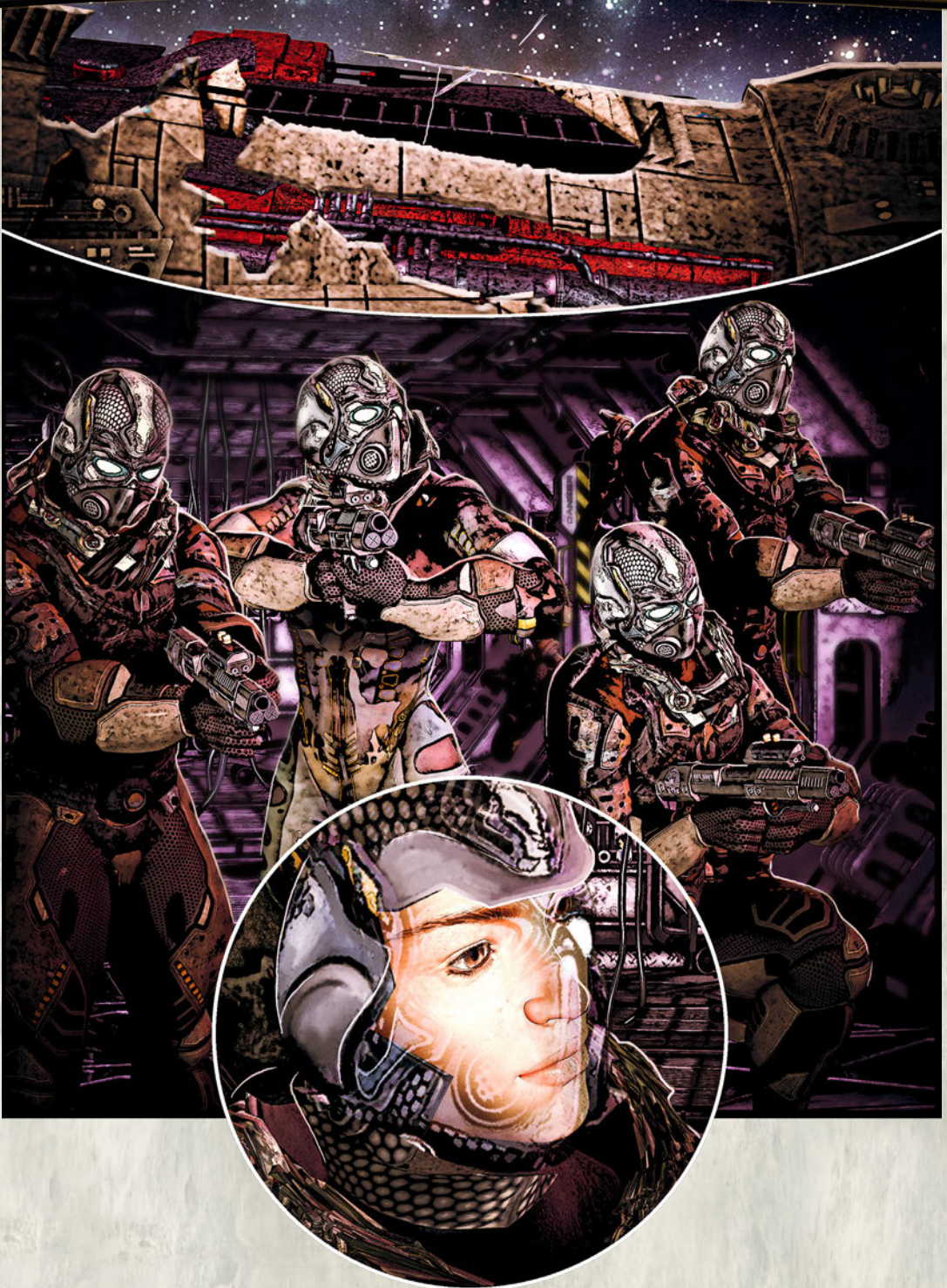
The Titan would continue on her ill-fated expedition, however, as the majority of her crew remained unharmed. Sedated and restrained, the eight suicidal crew members received whatever medical attention was able to be mustered on the lone ship. These mentally ill mumbled independently of the ancient horrors that lay in wait on this side of the Rift, but none would listen. The Rift left them tainted in such a way that they were more sensitive to the space they moved through aboard the mighty vessel. The inky blackness that surrounded them released a strange energy only they could perceive. They tried to warn their fellow crew what it meant, but again, none would listen. A purpose remained, and so the Titan sailed onward, only aware of the thing that approached them when it was far too late to flee.



Two weeks past the return date, finally the Titan's emergency beacon reached human ears. Having returned through the Rift, the massive hulk now orbited the quarantined moon Europa. Lifeless, with no signal acknowledged, the vessel also failed to respond to any remote attempts to retrieve her. The military vessel Achilles neared the derelict ship, staffed with a team of twenty specialists, ranging from engineering and medicine to defense. Ten soldiers and ten science personnel were all the Pax Continuum government were willing to risk at this point. Rescuing the unresponsive ship was perilous enough, but violating the Templar quarantine of Europa held unique dangers as well.

Mission commander Renee Dupelzick briefed her team on what little they knew. Boarding derelict ships, while not common, remained a necessary skill set. Ships malfunction and crew either have time to escape or explosively decompress. The unusual nature of the Titans mission, however, necessitated the detailed review of protocols. In theory, the Achilles would have been able to scan the Titan for life, radiation spikes, and any number of additional threats but since exiting the Rift, the Titan had been saturated in many exotic energies. Most systems became blind to the Achilles as they began their approach. The defenses of Europa the Templars had left behind were unknown, but Renee agreed with her superiors that if the Titan remained in orbit, the risk of triggering the European defenses increased exponentially.





The Titan was a massive ship, many times larger than the Achilles. Built to withstand the unknown, a large number of redundancies occupied an enormous amount of room. Made to maneuver precisely and latch on to targeted ships, the Achilles strained against gravities hold but never malfunctioned. A huge sigh of relief collectively escaped the lips of the Achilles crew as the last connection completed, and the orbit of both the Titan and the Achilles became stabilized around Europa. As a further precaution, however, Renee had the tandem vessels give Europa and the Rift more room, just in case.

Deep within the bowels of the Titan, a lone figure stood at attention. Its head cocked slightly to the side as if listening to some far-off sound. The rescue team moved far faster than expected, already stabilizing the atmosphere and beginning boarding procedures. There was not much time left to find and exterminate the infection. Boarding the Titan, this team was woefully unprepared for what lurked somewhere, lying in wait for the perfect opportunity to strike, or infect. The figure resumed the search of the Titan, now moving at a quickened pace. Time was short for everyone.

Having visually inspected much of the Titans exterior, the recovery team could see the signs of an intense battle. Shredded down to the core, much of the outer armor on the aft section was exposing large portions to space. The damage made Renee think twice about letting any science personnel board before securing the ship.

Renee and her team wore powered armor, supplying them with a variety of tactical advantages, not least of which allowed them to move freely through the exposed sections of the ship while maintaining exceptional maneuverability. As the team entered the vessel, Lt. Martin, a trusted officer, and capable sharpshooter took point. Renee ordered her team into their standard positions, but Martin looked hesitant. Renee switched her mic to a private channel.

“Martin, what’s wrong? I see nothing on the grid, do you have something?” Her voice had a twinge of frustration, as typically the officer was a rock.

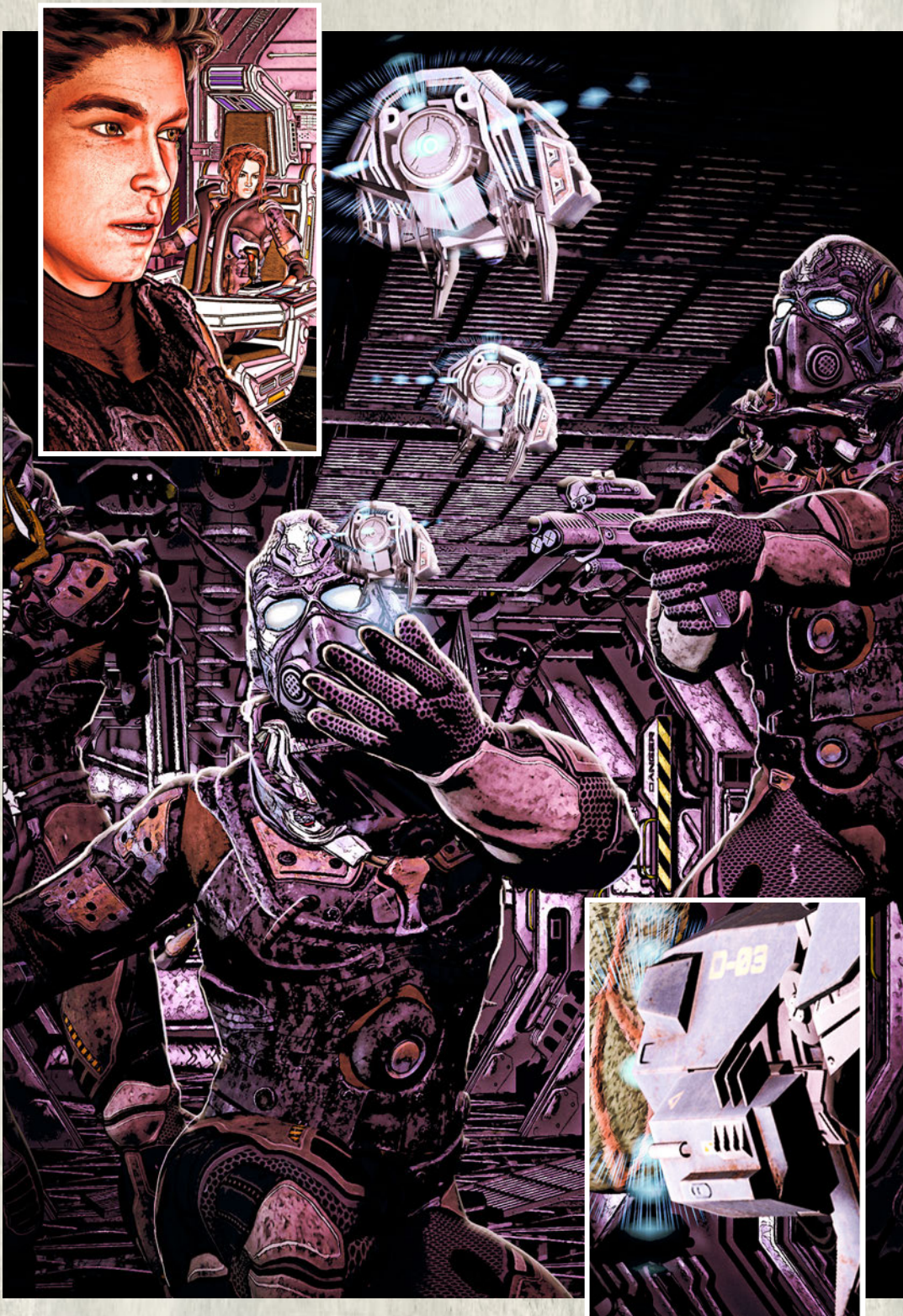
“It’s nothing concrete, just a gut feeling.”

“What type of gut feeling? Now’s not the time to get shy.”

Renee had her team hold position as she conferred with Martin. After entering the main airlock, Sgt. Samuels needed a moment to launch the drone’s anyway. Barely the size of a child’s toy, the drone’s were essential in scoping out the unknown terrain and identifying threats in advance. Martin looked down for a moment, either contemplating his next words or regretted having ever said anything. After a hard swallow, however, he went on.

“It almost feels like the pressure regulators are off on my suit. A heaviness, but it only started when I boarded the ship. My suit checks out meaning its gotta just be me. Maybe I’m just paranoid...”

Renee considered the man for a moment. The situation was tense but nothing like actual combat. Martin was more than experienced enough to know how to deal with stressful situations, but the man’s instincts had proven invaluable in the past.



Renee patted the man on the back and gave him a curt nod. Martin returned the gesture and prepared to advance to the next section now that the drone's were active. "We'll take it slow. It's probably just nerves but I think with the condition of this ship, a little extra caution may well be a good thing."

Renee gave her environment readings a second glance as the hairs on the back of her neck stood up. One footstep aboard and there was an almost palpable sense of foreboding; she had just assumed it was her nerves alone. Renee contacted the Achilles just to be certain.

“Achilles, this is commander Dupelzick, I want to reiterate that there should be continuous environmental scans on the Titan. I need to know any changes, be they temperature, electrical, or life signs.”

The Achilles mic crackled as the signal relayed through the vessel to Renee. “We hear you, Commander, so far all we can actually read is telemetry from the drone’s, interference is degrading most of our scans. If you can tap the main server, we may have better luck accessing the Titans on-board systems remotely.”

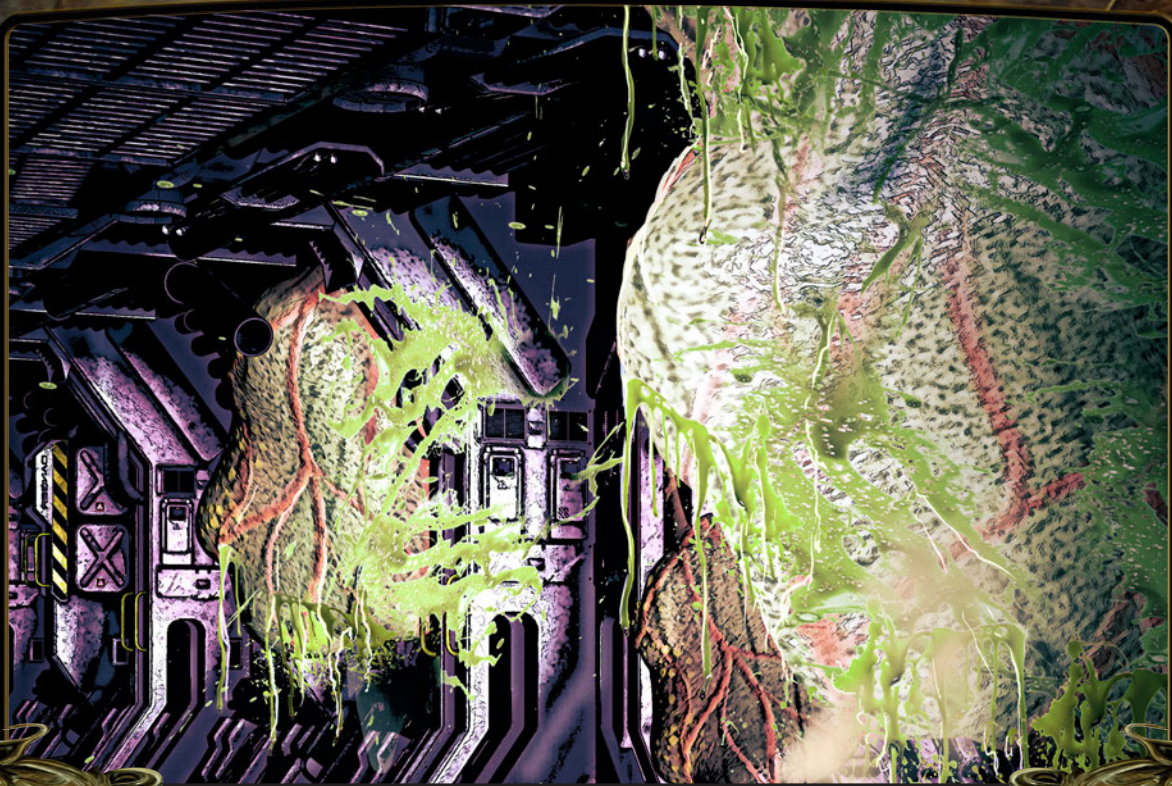
“Understood Achilles, we’re heading there now.” Renee and her team were not used to being this blind, especially within a vessel not considered hostile. Interference on this level without it being deliberate was unheard of, but then again, a ship traveling through the Jupiter Rift was also unheard of. The team entered the main corridor. One direction led to engineering and medical while the other held the bridge and crew quarters. Other hallways branched off to other sectors but what Renee needed would be near the bridge. Servers were scattered throughout the vessel, but the nearest one would be in that direction. Limited power still reached a variety of systems, allowing automated doors to be accessed as the drone’s made their way in multiple directions. Preprogrammed, the drone’s would visit every section of the ship to record and transmit their findings. As the fourth drone reached crew quarters, a strange spike in readings sent notifications to the Achilles bridge just as the drone went dark.

“Achilles to Dupelzick, commander, we just lost drone four in crew quarters. It may be a mechanical error though; the drone experienced a surge just before collapse.”

Renee considered the odds of mechanical failure for a moment before the Achilles cut in again. This time a note of concern in the bridge crew member’s voice. “Commander, we have a situation, two more drone’s just went dark, both two sections in front of you. No visuals or useful data provided before failure.”

“Dupelzick to Achilles, we’re proceeding to that location. Let me know as we approach the drone’s last position.”

“Understood, Commander.” The Achilles crew, in fact, Renee’s entire team were trained and seasoned, experienced in all forms of danger from mechanical to human, yet this mission was different. Renee could sense the tension from both the Achilles bridge crew as well as her team aboard the Titan.



What could cause this dread? Renee wanted to kick herself for feeling like a child, needing to cover one's head under the impenetrable shield of a blanket. Something was wrong, but they must do their duty and meet any threat head on. Renee triple checked her weapon and having noticed the action; her team followed suit. Renee gestured for them to move on to the next section, a rather long passage with additional storage alcoves. As the door slid open, the team immediately saw the difference in air quality. A white mist or dust wafted through the air, further clouding their vision. There was dim lighting along the path, and with their on-board systems, compromised vision should not be a factor, but massive interference caused many of their systems to become unreliable, forcing them to rely on their own eyes. Martin was the first to notice an almost mucus-like substance coating the walls. In several of the alcoves, organic matter of some form seemed pasted to the walls almost in the shape of a pouch. Burst from within, the floor and adjacent wall covered in a grotesque fluid that Renee was especially thankful her suit prevented her from smelling. Near one of the alcoves, drone three lay on the ground. Its battery compartment having exploded outward, the drone had crashed to the floor, now stuck in a puddle of the organic material. Renee left the drone where it lay but ordered samples collected of the material before moving on to the next section. Deep within her gut, Renee held a morbid hope that the Rift reduced the Titans crew to this organic sludge and that maybe the drone suffered mechanical failure after all. She held this hope because the alternative was too unnerving to consider.

As the second corridor hatch opened, the personal motion and life detection units began to light up. The limited range of these units meant they now shared the room with something other than themselves. "Remember to check your targets; this is still a rescue op. and our N.R.H.L.'s can still kill."



The N.R.H.L., pronounced “Nahrl’s” by most in the armed services were the answer to combat within enclosed facilities in space. Non-Reflective Hard Light was capable of cooking internal organs as well as frying bio-mech circuitry without breaching hulls or ricocheting uncontrollably. While the weapon wasn’t the most humane, as the severe burns were for the most part always fatal yet seldom immediately so, accidental hull breaches became virtually unheard of during raids and police actions. The lives saved far outweighed the morality of the weapons used throughout the Pax Continuum.

Scanning the room with beams of light and all forms of sensors, the team felt drawn to a dark corridor leading off the central corridor. A larger storage area was marked on their maps, and they approached cautiously, when, from out of the shadows, a tall humanoid figure stepped forth. Arms raised, the 6’4” male wore unusual clothes that appeared military, and while human in appearance, the individual stood in a near toxic atmosphere with no signs of distress. When he spoke, his voice transmitted through their headsets as if keyed into their frequency, startling the team, as the deafening silence was broken.

“My name is Gabriel, I mean you no harm, but we must leave this section immediately.” He said, with arms still raised in a sign of acquiescence.

Renee viewed the stranger incredulously as she motioned for her team to surround him. “I don’t know who you are or how you’re even alive, but you’re in no position to make demands.”

As Renee spoke, Gabriel's attention drew to the shadows just beyond the group. A large serrated claw swung quickly from the darkness in an arc that would cleanly take off Renee's head. The nearest soldier cried out while two others took aim, all too late. The claw swung, mere inches from Renee's faceplate when it stopped in its place. Gabriel had caught the claw with a single hand, crushing an imprint of his own hand into the large blade. As Gabriel pulled the claw outward, a hideous creature revealed itself as it emerged from the darkness.



Armored with some form of biotech none of Renee's team had ever seen before; the giant creature attempted to hack at the soldiers with its second claw. Two scared soldiers fired their N.R.H.L.'s, one hitting Gabriel square in the back. Steam left his body as Gabriel ripped the creatures' arm from the socket, drenching the deck in black goo. Seemingly unphased by the weapons fire, Gabriel merely turned back to Renee with a sincere expression. "We need to be leaving, now. The entire vessel is infected, and if we do not hurry, your men will be infected next. Here..."

Gabriel handed a small device to Samuels. "This contains a complete recording of the Titans mission logs and all environmental readings recorded from her trip beyond the rift. We must leave and destroy the ship immediately."

Samuels verified the contents of the device for Renee. The whole situation reeked, making the decision to withdraw to the Achilles an easier one. Renee made sure at least three weapons targeted the stranger at all times as they moved through the ship. Suddenly a loud explosion erupted from behind them as another creature crashed through the wall. Larger than the first, the monstrosity leveled its massive arms at the group. Large orifices at the ends of the arms began glowing with strange energy as the soldiers opened fire trying desperately to locate cover.



The creature released a massive blast, vaporizing everything in its path. Only the stranger Gabriel stood in the path of the blast, seemingly absorbing the energy into his person. The others, taken aback in awe of the tremendous power they knew should have meant their deaths, gaped in shock. Renee yelled into comms “move it, people!”



The soldiers made their way to the next corridor, heading for the Achilles access point while Gabriel held off the giant. The creature took up a large beam attempting to crush the humanoid beneath it. Gabriel grabbed the beam however, and with massive strength, shoved the beam backward and through the creatures' midsection, nearly cleaving it in two. Renee opened the doorway to the next corridor only for another of the creatures with serrated claws to stab her stomach, lifting her in the air. Suit punctured and bleeding out, Renee reached for her telescoping blade, a holdover from earlier traditions. The blade sliced through the creature's arm, letting her fall to the floor. As her team drew their blades and began hacking away at the monstrosity, Gabriel came up from the rear. "We don't have time!"

Gabriel lifted her in his arms and carried her the rest of the way to the Achilles. The ship began separation maneuvers almost immediately as Gabriel took Renee to a flat table. He removed the claw and her powered armor to look at the wound. As he was about to reach out to the wound, he stopped. "You're healing, how?"

Renee, still in a good deal of pain still managed a smirk. "It's a gift from my mother."

"It almost appears to be Nanospline, a Templar technology... But different."

Gabriel extended his arm, and tiny fibers reached out from his palm, aiding in the reconstruction. Over the comms, the bridge crew relayed that they were within a safe distance. As the Achilles turned, preparing to release its payload and ending whatever remained aboard the Titan, a strange dark shape detached from the underside. A ship, roughly the same size as the Achilles but giving off no energy readings and invisible to scanning, swung around and raced towards the inner solar system. The Achilles fired at the Titan, engulfing the ship in flame as Gabriel and Renee watched on the monitor.

"You have to warn Earth. That ship is a scout; it'll test your defenses and relay the information back." Gabriel looked almost desperately into Renee's eyes, hoping their recent encounter conveyed the seriousness of the situation.

Renee reached for the comms. "Get me the Chancellor now; we have a class 1 threat inbound."

The alien ship moved quickly into the inner solar system, heading towards the densest populated world. The tools of the trial had been prepared, and the avatar of instrumentality awakened now. "The Lords will be pleased with this tribute," thought the avatar.





CHAPTER 2

CHAPTER 2

As the alien vessel entered Earth orbit, the defensive systems around the world activated. Mechanized troops prepared for battle while orbital platforms scanned for targets. The ship remained undetectable, however, forcing manual targeting. Several destroyers on approach readied their weaponry, but before they could enter range, several projectiles fired toward the earth. Monitoring the situation from the Achilles, Gabriel became agitated at the sight of the projectile launch.

“Those are not explosives. Troop transport pods, though hardly troops in a conventional sense. One heavy assault bio-weapon and three mid-range assault spawn. Quatall, all of them, like what we saw on the Titan. Once in Earth’s atmosphere, they will start to become infectious, able to infect over great distances within three days. They all have to be eliminated.”

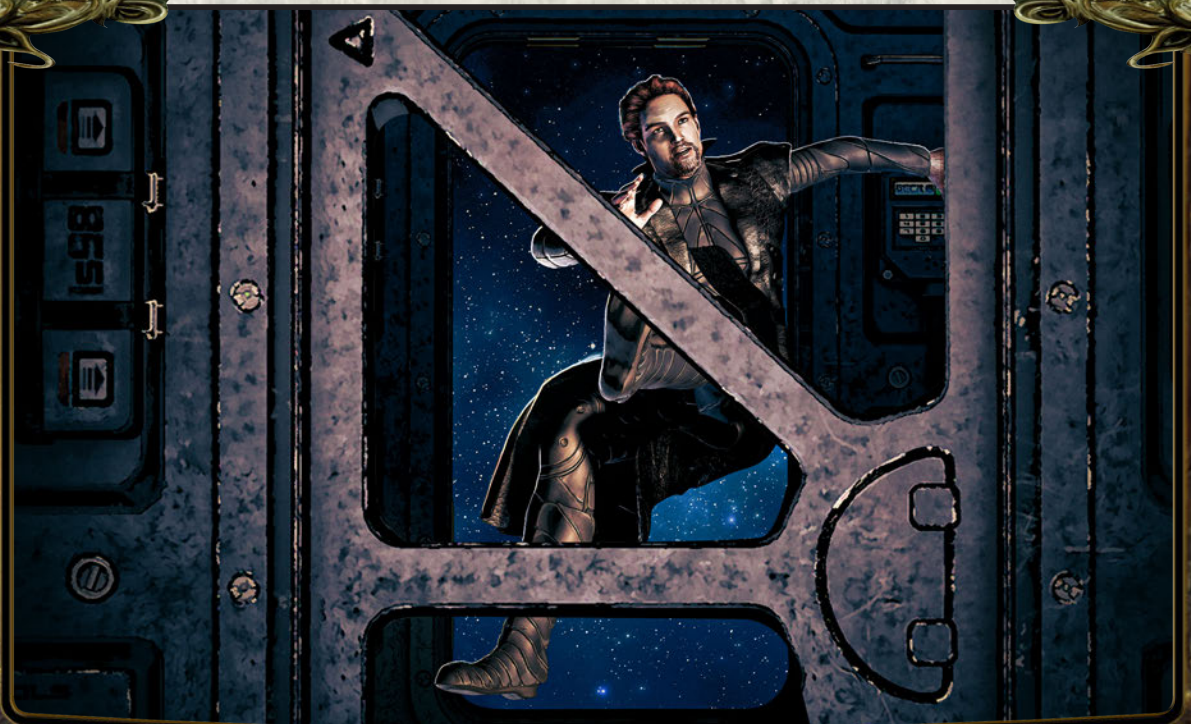
“Our forces are converging on the pods; they’ll stop them.” Renee tried to sound confident, but the situation was quickly spiraling out of control.

“We need to move faster!” As Gabriel spoke, the tall figure began making his way toward the rear airlock.

“We’re at maximum velocity, arriving in 1 hour.”

“Not fast enough, be ready, a gravimetric tunnel will be opening in front of the ship momentarily.”

Renee looked at the strange man incredulously. “Where are you going?”



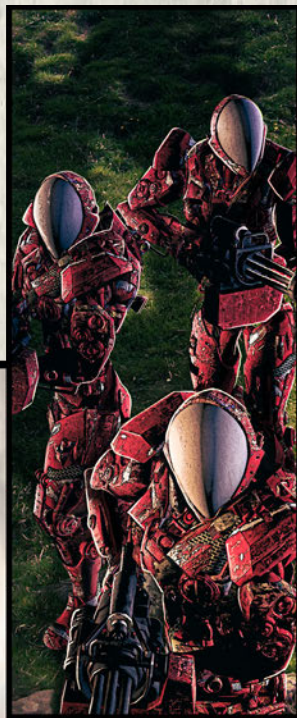
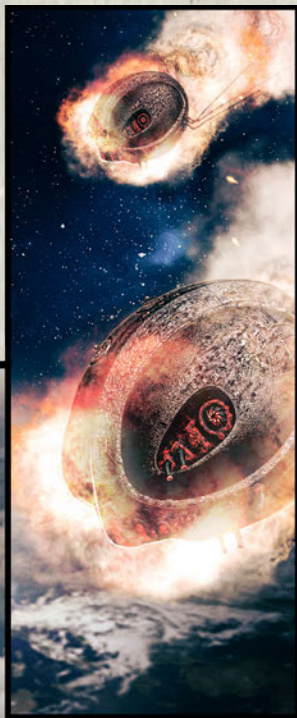
With a smirk, Gabriel replied "outside." With that, he accessed the airlock, stepping into the inner chamber and overrode the Achilles security protocols seemingly with nothing more than a gesture. The crew was in shock at the clearly suicidal behavior as the stranger opened the outer door, blasting him into open space within seconds. Before a word was uttered, strange readings sprang upon every monitor as exotic energy manifested in front of the ship. With a bright flash and lurch, the Achilles appeared just outside Earth orbit and staring down the alien ship.

Mechanized troops began surrounding the pods as they crashed into the Australian coast. Damocles armor provided soldiers with enormous field capabilities including tremendously augmented strength, speed, and precision while the Machina Walkers provided the heavy-duty firepower. H.K. drone's took up the front line, able to absorb a good deal of punishment without sacrificing human lives.

The H.K. drone's were also equipped with a broad array of scanning equipment able to report strengths, weaknesses, and detectable patterns to field commanders wearing Rapier armor, specializing in speed, communication and the sorting and transmitting of vast amounts of battlefield data. With Gabriel's warning received and on order of the Chancellor, the H.K. drone's launched into assault mode at the first sign of movement from the pods.



The release of energy in the initial confrontation was so massive that it could be seen miles away. Quatall assault units danced even faster than the drone's over the battlefield in a deadly show of acrobatics buying time for the heavy units to emerge. Once free of the pod, their massive weapons began charging and firing at the Machina and Damocles units. Kinetic shields sprang up, a secondary function of the large Machina units, shielding most of the earth forces as they began their counter strike.





The heavy Quatall bio-mech's were able to absorb a great deal of punishment while the smaller units did an above average job of just avoiding being hit, but the precision of the earth forces soon proved to be the edge needed as officers could predict Quatall deployment four moves ahead. For the most part, the Quatall forces were contained, at least until their ship began orbital bombardment.

Able to outmaneuver the larger earth vessels, the Quatall ship launched volley after volley in support of the ground forces. Gabriel prepared to blast the ship from the sky when suddenly it lurched. A fuel tank exploded causing the ship to hurtle to earth. Gabriel followed, knowing that the forces still aboard would indeed survive reentry.



The Quatall ship managed to slow its approach enough to prevent a catastrophic crash, though their landing was far from gentle. More Quatall units exited the vessel but in the rear stood a different creature altogether. A Nastrond, Avatar of the Lords of Instrumentality stood taking in the battlefield. At the peak of his power, the creature assessed the strengths and weaknesses of the earth forces first hand and was not impressed.

As the creature moved towards the soldiers, massive volleys of energy fired in his direction either had no effect or were casually deflected. Projectiles managed to tear into the creature but did little to no lasting damage as they immediately healed. The creature began amassing a massive concentration of energy, more than capable of vaporizing the opposing forces. The energy began tearing away at everything in its path as it blasted forth. Suddenly the blast veered off course as if some massive gravitational power directed it harmlessly into the sky. Gabriel approached from off in the distance. An average looking human approaching the might of a Nastrond, the sight would have made the creature laugh if not for the power radiating from Gabriel.

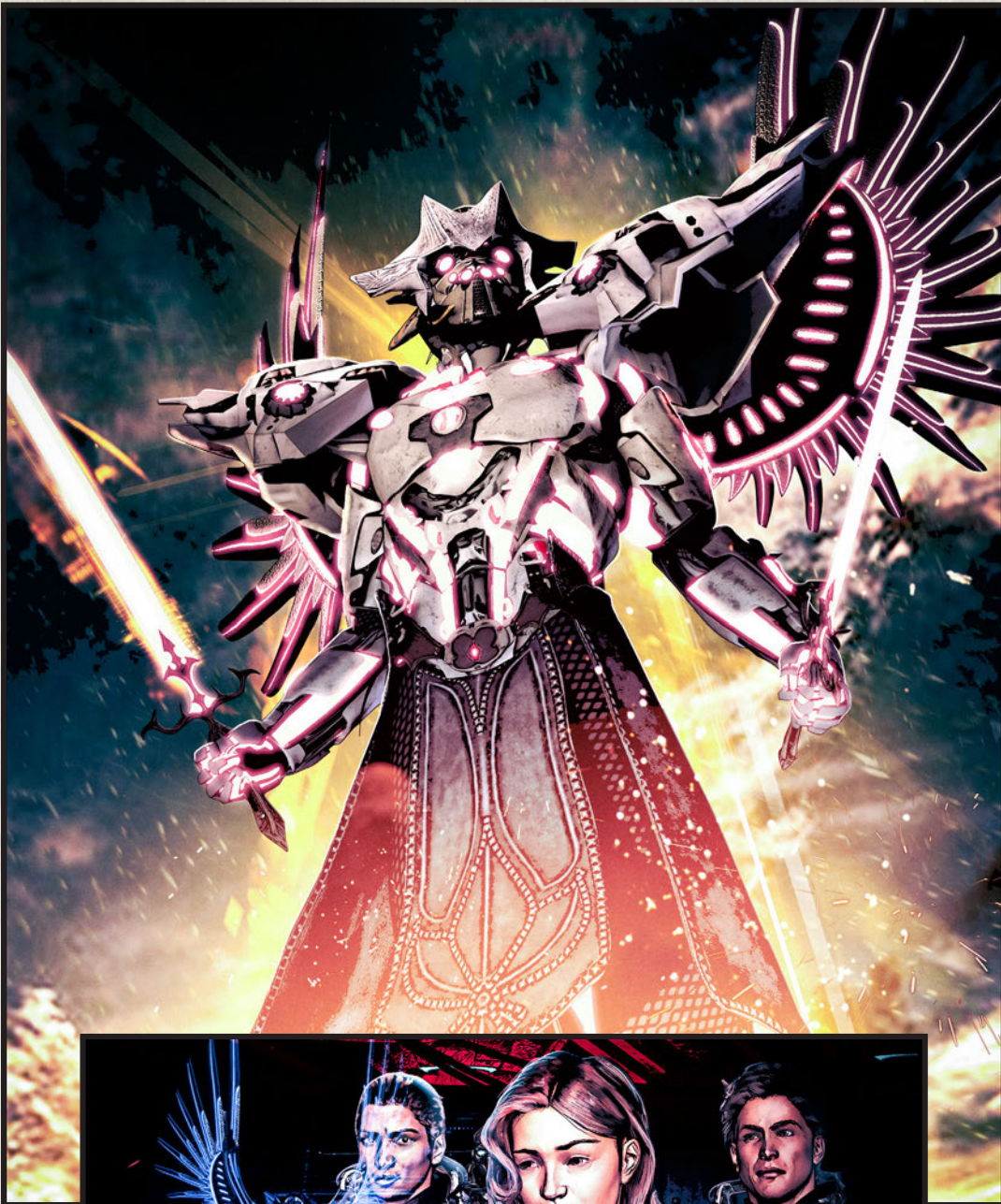


“What is this? I sensed you aboard their vessel. What are you?” The Nastrond took a defensive stance as he asked his questions. Beings of power were rare and often touched by his masters. Was this a test? Certainly, a fellow servant of the Lords would never stand against the collection of a tribute.

“What I am is beyond you, beyond your forces, beyond your power.” Gabriel walked towards the Nastrond, never slowing. As he approached, the ground around Gabriel began lifting towards the sky as the local gravity disrupted.



Flares of energy released in bolts as Gabriel glowed white-hot. The Nastrond summoned all of the Quatall to him, but as they prepared to attack, the energy surrounding Gabriel exploded outward vaporizing several of the nearest Quatall and throwing others backward. Only the Nastrond remained standing.



Gabriel emerged from the blast transformed. Radiating vast amounts of energy, the armored form spread its glowing wings stretching out as if waking from a long sleep. The Templar formerly known as Legacy stood revealed.

Miles above, Renee and her crew watched the event unfold. Mouth agape, Renee recognized the Templar immediately from her mother's tales and holo-recordings.



Not all eyes were Earthbound, however, as deep beneath the surface of Mars stood a collection of hooded figures. The exotic energies released signaled the event they had long prepared for. The entrance revealed itself for the first time in countless millennia, welcoming the worshipers of Sha'Bolique to her vast underground city. Entering the city caused her followers to fall to their knees in narcotic bliss as waves of strange energies seeped through the Martian soil calling out to the weak minded within reach. The followers of Sha'Bolique must amass if the Great Old One was to return.

The Avatar of the Lords of Instrumentality experienced blinding pain for the first time in centuries as his body careened through rock and Quatall, exploding everything into a cloud of pulverized Quatall flesh. Shakily the Nastrond stood as he examined his opponent. Not only had Gabriel's blow far outmatched the creature's own power, but most terrifying was how similar the energy Gabriel released was to that of the Nostrand's lord. Had he found one of his lords' rivals, a Lord of Cerebral Ecology? Alternatively, was this something far worse and far older?

As Gabriel approached the humbled creature, he gave the Nastrond one chance for survival. "Surrender and tell us all you know or forever be consigned to the oblivion you fear most. Decide, now!"



"I serve my Lords even in death!" With that, the Nastrond directed his enormous energies inward, building to a catastrophic explosion that threatened all within miles of the battle. Gabriel leaped towards the creature, his hand gripping the monsters head, ripping it from the creatures' shoulders, while Nanospline extended from Gabriel's palm deep into the creature's brain. Gabriel channeled the creature's suicidal release of energy into an enormous funnel of gravimetric energy, directing the blast harmlessly into space. The information Gabriel siphoned from the creature's skull would be invaluable as it was terrifying. Gabriel allowed the rotted skull to drop to the floor as he looked up at the multiple human faces now looking on hesitantly. Gabriel began to glow as the armor pulled back within his human form as he prepared to answer a lot of question.





CHAPTER 3

CHAPTER 3

In the time since the Viralclysm and the colonial civil war, Earth had reformed itself into a beacon of hope and prosperity long sought after but never before fully realized. Humans, Unborn, those that resided in the colonies, all had found new hope as old grudges were buried forever, replaced with the limitless potential that now flared throughout the system. With the return of the Titan, however, humanity once more became aware of the unexplainable and unknowable horrors that yet lurked out among the stars.

The Pax Continuum took Gabriel into custody, being the sole agency within the system that operated without borders and answered exclusively to the Senate and High Chancellor. Gabriel fought hard not to let a smirk escape the stoic disposition he tried to project. The sheer demonstration of his abilities upon landing was enough to tell the officers watching that Gabriel need only comply with his captivity so long as he wished it. There was little any could do should he resist. Still, Gabriel had grown some over the decades and could play along, if only to speed up the process of bringing him before whoever was now in charge. He knew one thing was sure, it would not be long before Nastrond, or even their “Lords” returned, and the Earth must be ready.



Renee Dupelzick underwent standard decontamination procedures, but following this, she found herself ushered into a secure private room. Immediately Renee found herself suffocating under the embrace of her mother. Renee returned the embrace eagerly. As High Chancellor, her mother would have seen all the action as it was taking place. At the age of 75, the Chancellor remained a vibrant and potent force. Decades prior, her father had altered her biology, allowing for a strange but powerful amalgamation of technology and biology that granted her vast power over technology everywhere. This power was instrumental in her ability to bring opposing forces together under the new Senate. The Chancellor had attempted at that point to return to a simpler life, but her overwhelming popularity with the new Senate made it almost impossible for her to turn her back on the government she helped foster. Alhana Etzwiler had achieved a great wonder in unifying so much of humanity, and now her own daughter risked her own life to do the same.



Alhana began to chastise her daughter for unnecessary risks, but the regular expression of rolling eyes told Alhana her breath was wasted. Renee had been gifted unusual abilities from her mother's blood, traits that continued to emerge, but the feature of accelerated healing discovered early on had made Renee an expert in tempting fate with extraordinary risks. Alhana pressed for all the information Renee could provide regarding the attackers as well as their savior. Not since she was little had Alhana encountered Templars from Europa. Certainly she never had imagined one in human form. All recordings of the individual remained distorted. The Chancellor knew that during the entire time the individual was in transport, not a single scan of any type revealed even the slightest information.

In truth, without physical inspection, it would be hard to prove he was there at all. As Alhana compared notes with her daughter, she entered a large briefing room. The circular chamber allowed many high-level Senators to sit in person or contribute through telepresence if necessary. It was here that she intended to meet their mysterious guest.

Brought into the room under guard and heavy restraints as a precaution, Gabriel sat before a vacant room illuminated by holographic projections of the Senate, the representatives secure in various secret locations.



None knew what to expect from this savior and potential threat. Gabriel recognized Renee immediately when he heard the Chancellor's voice ordering the restraints removed. While the officers of the Continuum began to protest the order, Gabriel began to recognize within the Chancellor, the young girl he once knew so long ago. A child whom Gabriel last saw with what he assumed was a mortal wound. Renee was the first to see the man's expression change as Gabriel exclaimed Alhana's name. Lost in a moment of nostalgia, the restraints effortlessly fell from Gabriel as he took several steps toward Alhana. The guards hesitantly motioned for their weapons, but Alhana used her ability to lock them in safety position.

"You know me?" Alhana asked hesitantly. She knew if this person wished them harm, the guards could do little against him.

"My birth name is Gabriel, but when we saw each other last you knew me as Legacy..."

The years of practiced calm and professionalism as a longstanding Chancellor began to melt from Alhana's face, replaced by tears of joy and shock. The two embarrassed as long lost friends, both having assumed the other long since dead. It was quite some time before the pair was able to take a moment to bring the Senate and Renee up to speed.

For most, the attack remained shrouded in mystery, as no civilian recording devices were able to capture the strange alien creature's images. Only rumor spread, but with few casualties, the incident remained for the most part hidden from any public scrutiny. This worked very much in Seymin's favor. A thin, unassuming man with a pale complexion and clothing covering nearly every inch of his body, Seymin was the perfect agent of change. Since his earliest memory, Seymin heard whispers in the back of his mind of the ancient underground city of Sha'Bolique, where upon entering, Seymin would receive great power. Once ready, Seymin would be able to move freely throughout the colonies, the great blessings bestowed upon Seymin would be his to spread unopposed. The great change would happen and with it, the reawakening of Sha'Bolique, but precious time always threatened to run out.

Seymin had always known he was different. Left to an orphanage at birth, he had no knowledge of his parents. Seymin led a quiet life of contemplation and introspection. After careful consideration, Seymin began to look upon humanity as a fungus or worse. He never felt a connection to these alien things that shared only the human form with himself. Instead, a profound contempt grew within his heart as he began to realize whatever extraordinary circumstances had led to his creation and elevation above the ordinary human had left him as superior as he was solitary. These thoughts fueled his ascent into adulthood and shaped his course of study into a dark and dangerous territory. Eventually though, this path through life brought him into contact with others of similar background and way of thought. This collection of strange-minded people began feeling a calling, and as more of them gathered, the calling became stronger, more insistent. Only on the fateful night of the Achilles mission did the group fully begin to understand their purpose.

Seymin and those like him found themselves called to an oft-forgotten tract of Martian land that all but refused to be terraformed. While the manufactured air reached this desolate location, nothing else ever survived for long. Still, what appeared barren to most, stood out quite differently to the chosen.



A great mound stood out from the flat terrain, wide as it was long and smooth to the touch, the mound was the perfect size for one of the chosen to lay. Offering themselves freely, Seymin approached with a short blade.

None had spoken before this meeting nor would any be exchanged now as the blade sank deep into the stomach of the unknown acolyte. A swift cut across the jugular followed, spewing a large amount of blood and gore upon the pedestal. As the group stood back, the earth began to shake. None there knew if the ritual sacrifice released vast energies or if this was the work of an ancient machine finally awoken from millennia of slumber. All that they knew was that the sacrifice was accepted and that they must journey within.



Hidden beneath the great Martian waste, Seymin found a vast stone city of untold age. Apparently formed by non-human hands, the ancient ruin seemed almost alive. Not entirely stone nor technology, the place called to them in a dull hum, guiding them deep within. A select few had found many such sites, but none as special as this. It was in this cavernous ruin that Seymin found his destiny, standing atop a thin stone spire and illuminating the entire cavern with its radiance. The Shard of light barely seemed physical, but as Seymin neared, the certainty of his actions grew. As he reached out to take hold of the Shard, the fellow travelers drew short blades from their clothes, each standing at the ready. Seymin gripped the Shard tightly and felt a purity of energy like nothing before. The moment seemed to stretch for infinity as a growing whisper turned into a dull roar forming the name of Sha'Bolique.



When the moment passed, Seymin looked out into the vast room to find all of his fellow travelers horribly mutilated. A vast orgy of violence had gripped them all causing each to turn to the left and inflict terrible damage to the person standing there, the first in line killed by the last in a circle of gore and madness. As Seymin took this in, he began to feel a change in his body.

An awakening of sorts occurred as Seymin felt such joy in his transformation as if finally removing a shirt worn too tight for comfort. Looking over his body, he discovered an almost reptilian or amphibian metamorphosis had begun. He knew not when the changes would stop or what his final form would be. All Seymin knew for sure was that for the first time in his life, he finally felt right. His body was beginning to feel like it was his own.

Now, sitting alone in the Martian transport Mercury headed to Earth, Seymin knew he must spread the message and welcome others into the fold. The Shard continued to give him purpose and the voice of Sha'Bolique guided his hand, Sha'Bolique's will be done.

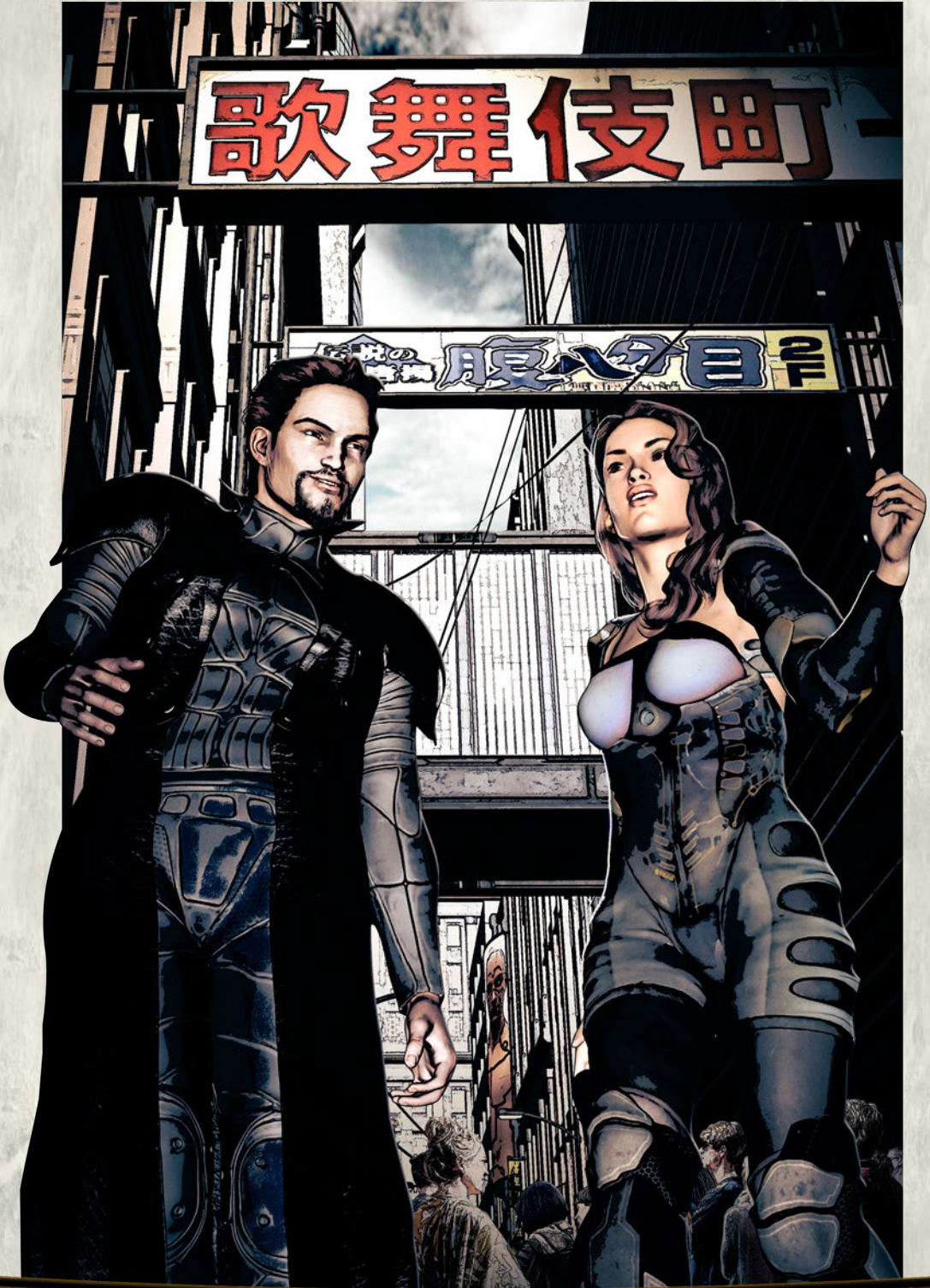


Gabriel sat before the virtual gathering of Senators, illuminated in holographic light. The mounting frustration evident on his face, the Templar had little patience for politicians or their stubborn ways. A threat presented itself, and so defense was needed, but instead of working towards this common goal, the focus was on proof of Gabriel's intentions. His assertions and veracity challenged at every turn. Renee and Alhana both knew without doubt both the levels of power the man before them could wield as well as the nature of his intentions. Alhana did her best to vouch for the strange being, but doubt and mistrust won out. Still, the recent attack was proof enough that some form of threat did, in fact, exist which allowed for movement in the proper direction. Gabriel insisted that the Rift in space near Europa be continuously monitored and guarded, to which Alhana was quick to insist upon as well. After what seemed like an eternity, the meeting eventually was called to recess. Gabriel had been asked to remain in the custody of Renee as a precaution though none believed he could be restrained by any human force should Gabriel have chosen to resist.

Gabriel was eager to see how the Earth had grown and transformed since his departure so long ago. Renee escorted the tall figure through brightly lit market areas teeming with healthy looking people. The signs of the Wormwood virus no longer evident, the people of this new Earth lacked the fear and desperation they once held in their eyes. To know that the sacrifices of so many had resulted in actual change filled Gabriel with joy that he had not felt in some time. Renee asked the Templar of his home and the now abandoned Europa. To her surprise, Gabriel himself lacked many of the details as the change his body underwent radically fluctuated since being exposed to the implosion and transformation of Jupiter, forcing Gabriel into stasis for a great many years. If not for Doctor Armaghash, Gabriel's body certainly would have been consumed by the vast energies that threatened to overwhelm him. Only learning of this after awakening decades later, Gabriel found all data banks wiped on Europa, leaving only Doctor Armaghash's private records. According to Armaghash, the Templars eventually "outgrew" their humanity and saw fit to move permanently out amongst the stars. Their advancement and evolution being so complete that they sought none of the comforts and necessities of life that humans required for existence. Armaghash himself wanted to journey among the stars, having reached the pinnacle of his knowledge with available technology. The Templars embarked upon a pilgrimage, but Europa housed enormous dangers still. With Armaghash's insistence, the care and guardianship of Europa would remain in the hands of Gabriel until the humanity that remained matured enough to handle the awesome responsibilities of the technologies the moon contained.

The implications of this were immense for Renee as she pondered the extent of power both Europa and this man before her could wield. Her own unique biology had left many unanswered questions of both her potential as well as her place within humanity.

While Cyborg and Unborn augmentation were commonplace, her abilities remained uniquely her own, progressing in ways even her mother's own augmentation had not. Both Gabriel and Renee shared many experiences with one another, both never fully understanding their capabilities. Their uniqueness in the universe provided a common bond that they both could sense and perhaps together, for the first time they both could feel like they belonged and not just as outsiders.



The transport approaching Earth gave no response as security forces surrounded the vessel, escorting it to a quarantined zone. Having left Mars days earlier, all signals abruptly stopped 12 hours ago after some strange mental disorder began affecting the occupants. A pathogen of some sort was expected and all security forces were on high alert, expecting the worst. Prepared for any form of known contagion, the Continuum forces opened the vessel cautiously. Preparing a drone, the agents never had the chance to enter the ship as dozens of strange, armored creatures with long serrated claws exploded through the hatch. Blast doors able to contain exploding engine cores barely lasted moments, rent as if paper by the immensely powerful creatures.



As the area became devoid of human life, a single figure silently emerged from the ship. Striding through the carnage of the hanger, Seymin walked calmly, holding the Shard out in front of him. His newly changed travelers would seek release into the general population, murdering and infecting anyone they came across. As word of the assault reached Alhana and the Senate, the words Gabriel had told them, that this was indeed just the beginning, came upon them as if a hurricane. Armed military forces hoping to stem the tide of violence established a larger perimeter, but Alhana knew there was only one being with the experience needed to deal with this new threat.



Renee and Gabriel sat in a transport headed for the perimeter of the quarantine zone. Renee wore the standard Damocles armor while Gabriel remained in his casual attire. A team of specialists that had worked with Renee on previous missions nervously accompanied the pair, unsure of the threat they were about to face. Gabriel turned to Renee, a curious look on his face.

"I sense something very... familiar. Are there any energy readings coming out of the zone that seem unusual?"

Renee relayed the request while satellites continued to examine every inch of the quarantine zone for any abnormalities. However, they found nothing to be out of the norm. As the group made their final approach, a massive explosion shook everything around the northernmost perimeter. Renee directed the pilot to that location as what appeared to be strange mutated things charged headlong into weapons fire, seemingly immune for the most part to the barrage. Gabriel stood, a strange glow enveloping his body as he began the transformation to his true form.

"I'll meet you down there." Gabriel opened the emergency release and allowed himself to be sucked out into the open sky. The transformation completed within seconds as the mighty winged form Gabriel now possessed crushed three of the attackers under foot with his landing. A closer examination told Gabriel all he needed to know about these strange beings. Very similar to Quatall; clearly these things were more servitor races of the evil faced on Europa. The creature's skin held firm against attack, like natural armor. However there were weak points. Gabriel made short work of the creatures nearest him then spread the word to the remaining Continuum forces where to target their weapons.

Renee and her forces never made it to the quarantined zone as one of the creatures launched its self into the air, colliding with the cockpit and killing the pilot immediately. The armor Renee's people wore provided limited flight, but as they bailed out of their doomed vehicle, more of the creatures launched to the sky, killing the soldiers before they ever had a chance. The few that survived followed Renee as she attempted to rendezvous with Gabriel.

Seymin felt what he mistook for the presence of an elder thing; some sibling or decedent of Sha'Bolique. Drawn to the immense power, the Shard he carried radiated energy excitedly and so Seymin rejoiced thinking his work already completed. The howl released by the mutated creature that once was Seymin could be heard for miles. All the dark things he commanded halted their progress to take note of this strange development. Seymin could not understand what he beheld, as all that stood before him were humans and their machines. Somehow, the Shard pulled towards one in particular, even as the thing rent the servitors of Sha'Bolique in two. Consumed with rage and a sense of betrayal, the creature known as Seymin sent all that remained of his creatures to kill these humans as Seymin himself began channeling the power of the Shard into his own being.



As the creatures swarmed the soldiers, Renee did her best to stem the tide, but their numbers were just too great. Gabriel began releasing more enormous blasts of energy as the numbers of human soldiers continued to dwindle. Fighting fiercely, Renee refused to yield as she stood by Gabriel's side, surviving wounds that would have proven catastrophic to any other human. Gabriel crushed another creature in his hands as Seymin launched above the swarm, preparing to blast Gabriel with every ounce of the mighty Shard. With only a split second to act, Renee fired her weapon narrowly over Gabriel's head, vaporizing Seymin's left arm. As Seymin wailed in excruciating pain, the Shard began reacting, releasing energy in waves that began consuming his body and those of his creatures.



Gabriel struggled to shield Renee from the corrosive energies, but as he struggled, his own body began reacting strangely, almost out of his control. The Shard responded to the power within Gabriel, sensing the long ago absorbed sword merged with Gabriel previously. The two Shards purpose was in joining, and so for a second time, Gabriel found himself engulfed in intoxicating power. Struggling to retain his humanity, Gabriel focused on protecting Renee. The more Gabriel focused on her, however, the more the Shard energy attempted to consume her until the foreign technology in her body inherited from her mother began responding.

Renee's body began to change as vast amounts of energy moved through her, changing her. In defending its host, the nano-technology she possessed, now powered by strange alien energies reshaped Renee as it empowered her. The explosion consumed the quarantine zone leaving only satellites in orbit as the only witnesses. The destruction was total, save for where two armored figures stood.



The narcotic-like bliss of the newly absorbed energy balanced against the absolute barren wasteland left in the wake of the explosions. Neither Gabriel nor Renee spoke as they looked upon the destruction and pondered what they perceived as their diminished humanity.

PAX CONTINUUM ONGOING INVESTIGATION INTO THE MARTIAN TRANSPORT MERCURY INCIDENT

RE: RE-ENGINEERED WORMWOOD VIRUS

To the horror of all, the Martian Transport Mercury's arrival heralded the return of the single deadliest virus in mankind's history. The Wormwood variant devastated the world's population and brought with it the very real possibility of the extinction of mankind. Not since Europe's "Black Death" has humanity come so close to being wiped out. The "Mercury" variant, as it's come to be called, remains just as deadly and infectious as it's predecessor only this version is resistant to all established treatments. A higher rate of mutation has been noted with the Mercury variant, which poses a larger secondary problem as the violent tendencies that come with mutation are further enabled by a hardening of the skin, creating an almost perfect armor that renders small arms fire useless.

The Senate has recommended extreme sanctions against any and all found to be infected, up to and including the acceptable loss of uninfected life as needed to successfully eradicate the infection. Samples have been retained for further study but are exclusive to the lunar research facility, limiting any potential casualties to immediate staff alone.

The origin of the Mercury variant is unknown at this time but traces back to Mars. The specific point of original contamination is unknown and with patient zero's death, little clues remain. It is the belief of the Senate that this was in fact a terrorist attack as patient zero's entire history appears to have been sanitized along with any associates he may have had. How this variant was developed or what the intended end result was to be remain unknown at this time.

Office of the Director of Planetary Health
Francis R. Perelson, MD.



CHAPTER 4

CHAPTER 4

The trail of devastation easily led back to Mars. Incidents of civil disturbance continued to rise, while more and more people felt drawn to the ruins, no longer buried under centuries of rubble. No one was quite certain how the madness spread, but a rough pattern began to emerge. Large portions of the colony locked in quarantine or evacuated seemingly stemmed the spread, at least for now. Meanwhile, on Earth, all eyes turned to Alhana, her daughter, and the mysterious Templar whom the inner Security Council looked upon dubiously.

Gabriel and Renee both allowed examination of themselves by a variety of the planet's finest minds. Many had guessed as to the nature of the newly acquired power but no actual answers were provided. The attacks against humanity from within and without threatened massive destabilization. A select few suspected the true nature of what was unfolding. While politicians sought effective defenses against physical threats, the sensitive few perceived the actual threat and feared no defense could be enough. The Security Council eventually released Gabriel and Renee reluctantly. Fear mixed with a greedy desire to control these vast new energies gripped each member but the need for Gabriel and Renee's continued cooperation balanced out the Council's ambitions. Kept separate since their return, Renee could only see her mother through a protective glass as her abilities remained difficult to control. Even her form shifted from human to other moment to moment without reason. Alhana fought back the tears as she struggled to stay strong for her daughter.

"Renee... honey, can you hear me?" Renee stared off into space not responding to her mother's voice, seemingly lost in her thoughts.

"They plan to release you and Gabriel within the hour. Gabriel plans to take you... away... to help you control your power. He thinks he can help. Can you hear me, dear?" Alhana knew her voice cracked at the end, revealing her genuine fear and concern. Slowly, Renee turned to face her mother.

"I can see everything mom. Everything! Gabriel helped me to focus."

Alhana looked confused hearing her daughter's words. "When did you speak with him? They've kept you apart."

"We can speak in each other's minds. It has been a... exciting experience to say the least. Part of the control I have already learned is to block out all the noise. Every machine and living thing around me screams to be noticed. It's like suddenly finding yourself one with everything. Grasping the chair feels almost like touching my own arm. It's overwhelming without focus."

Alhana turned to her side, watching as unnamed scientists or doctors scribbled notes and checked readings. Even now, they attempted to glean even the smallest insight into her daughter's abilities.

“Renee, they say I can’t touch you, your energy readings are still uncontrolled, but I want you to know I love you. Please stay safe and come home soon!”

Renee’s face resembled mostly her own once more as she smiled. Gabriel spoke to her in Renee’s mind warning her not to say too much as the greedy little men that listened in had more interest in accumulating power than helping. The surreal nature of the situation made Renee nearly laugh aloud, but her smile was enough to ease some of Alhana’s tension. At least some of her daughter remained in this ever-shifting being seated before her.



Deep within Antarctica, a mountaintop stands out from the icy surroundings, barren for centuries. A fluke of nature, the mountain stands tall as a pyramid, shaped not by the hands of man but those of nature. A scar propped out and pointing accusingly to the heavens, this wonder of nature began to crumble early in the morning.

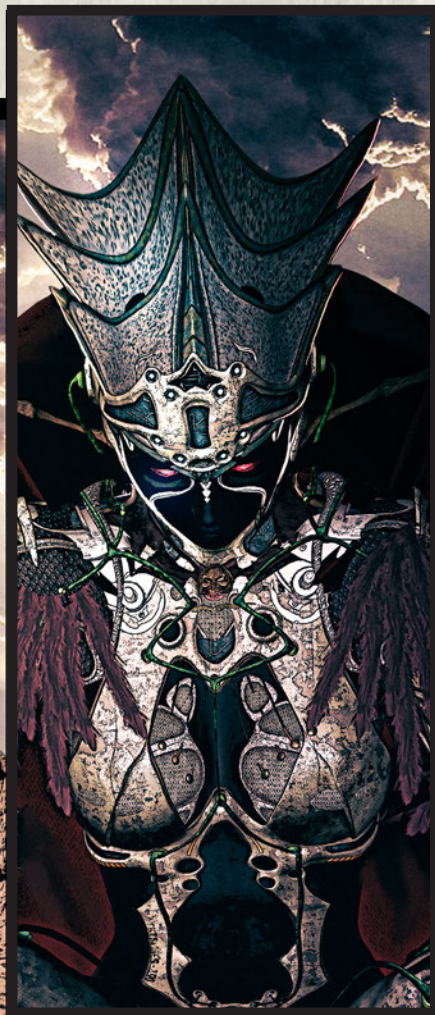
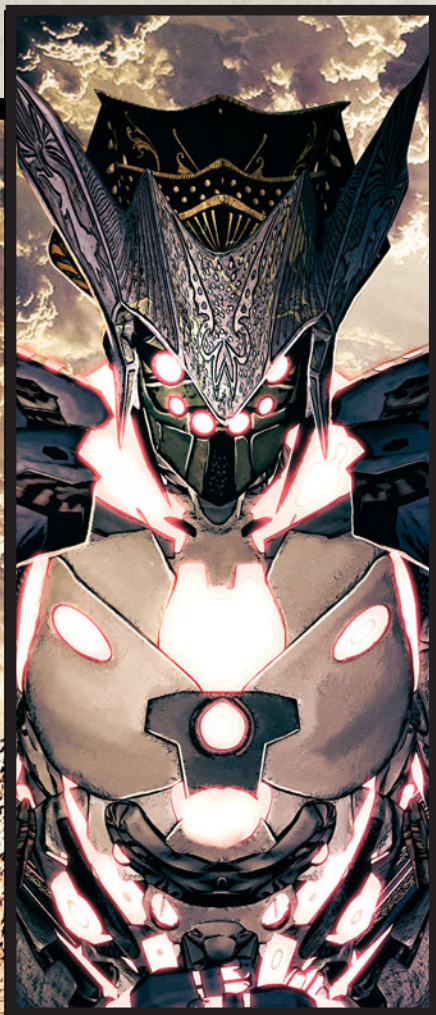


No longer a barren white field of snow, the mountain, along with a mile of surrounding land sunk deep within the earth with violent tremors. Deep within this perfectly circular sinkhole stands a temple of impossible age and unknowable material. As scientists the world over took notice, so did the sensitive few and a vast pilgrimage had begun. No one drawn to the temple could put to words what brought about this desire, this burning need to stand in the presence of this ancient find. The Security Council acted fast to establish barricades as a team was assembled to examine the ancient find. They had time as Antarctica remained a barren and hostile land, but time was running short as pilgrims, motivated beyond reason, continued to gather and make plans for the hard journey.

The Atacama Desert in Chile, known as one of the most lifeless places on the planet Earth with parts of this vast expanse so hostile to life that even bacteria have extreme difficulty existing. Part of the history of Atacama involves the training of early astronauts for early missions to Mars as the hostile region had many similarities. This barren land made the area a perfect place for Renee and Gabriel to gain mastery over their abilities. Gabriel had control, but no understanding of the limits his newly accumulated power might have. Renee still struggled to maintain her form but quickly gained a better understanding as Gabriel helped her practice focus and visualization techniques. Her body had become fluid as thought and needed a firm structure to maintain itself. The body fought between the way it had been born and the new form created from both Renee's inner thoughts and the functions of the technology long dormant within her. As Renee continued to focus on a singular form, Gabriel attempted to expand his consciousness. An eerie feeling had been crawling down his spine ever since Gabriel woke to the world once more and had only increased as he gained power. Gabriel could feel a force or thoughts pulling at him from somewhere out in the dark. The sensations pushed Gabriel to question his sanity except he had learned long ago to trust his instincts. It was the sensations from that far off place that gave him the most concern. Were they kindred beings? The sheer cold Gabriel felt from the impressions warned him that this was a threat and he must be ready, because with each passing day "they" felt closer.

Renee worked to master physical control over her biology. Inner focus and a sense of calm were needed for her to achieve her goal. As Gabriel had explained it, the vast array of energies they possessed was controlled through instinct, imagination, and desire. The world around them became fluid with enough focus. Renee reached out with her senses and discovered she could feel the life energies of everything for miles around. Intoxicated by the sensation, she reached out further. Her thoughts were almost exclusively on the strange Shard and the experience of becoming a part of it and in turn, it becoming her.

She continued to reach further all the while knowing she had already stretched further than she should. Overcome with emotion; she delved headlong into the waiting abyss, darkness threatening to consume her the entire time. In the cold darkness, information was found.



Access to hidden rooms became briefly available to Renee, enticing her to delve further still. It was only then that she began to come to her senses. Pulling away from the darkness, she felt a massive force dragging her further yet. Renee screamed out in terror, fighting with every ounce of her being to no avail. Only when the darkness threatened to become absolute did a blinding light pierce the darkness freeing her.

Gabriel was there, in her mind, telling Renee to focus on him as he pulled them free from the darkness. When Renee finally opened her eyes, a large depression in the earth surrounded Gabriel and Renee.



The Earth had given way under the massively destructive energies Renee had released, leaving the scarred land scorched as if victim to a tremendous battle. Renee was overwhelmed and fell into Gabriel's arms. He held her for a long moment until she regained her composure.

As she stood, Renee coyly thanked Gabriel as she turned from him, embarrassed and frightened that she had caused such destruction. Gabriel hesitantly asked the shaken woman standing before him about the incident.



"I felt you being pulled somewhere... cold and oppressive. It was horrible..."

Renee looked out to the desert, reassured by the solid earth that she stood on. "I saw the other side. I think I saw the source of everything. Something powerful and ancient but..."

Renee trailed off, lost for words and needing time to recover. Gabriel held her shoulder reassuringly as he suggested they return to Europa. Seeing the damage she caused, Renee agreed while Gabriel taught a new lesson, independent flight.





The defeat of a Nastrond servant to the Lords of Instrumentality was an exceptionally rare thing. Able to access the deep well of power the Lords held, Nastrond seemed like gods to most. With the defeat, the Lords knew a grave threat to their mission had arisen, fearing that perhaps their ancient rivals had even returned. The thoughts of these unknowable entities remained their own, but the knowledge of the failure could not help but spread.

Remnants of races brought to the edge of extinction found new hope and gathered what they could, all in the slim hope of finding salvation on some distant world. Many had become aware of the rupture in space-time, its devastating effects having been more explosive on the far side of the universe. Entire systems consumed in a chain reaction fueling the large tear through space and time leaving a vast galactic scar. Nevertheless, an omen signaling the end of all races now began to inspire hope as the rip drew the lost and frightened seeking safety.

It took several attempts for Gabriel and Renee to reach Europa successfully, including one embarrassing collision on the moon that set off seismic detectors around the lunar colony. Renee was quick to ensure that particular incident would remain just between them under penalty of her “undying wrath” as she put it. Automated machines had already repaired most of the damage caused by the Quatall attack and Renee did not want to be the one to explain to her mother any new damage.

The technology Renee witnessed on Europa remained startling even to her eyes. A mix of seemingly ancient design blended flawlessly with nano-technology creating a home as adaptable as her new body. Gabriel showed her much of the city and told her of the long forgotten alien ship deep beneath their feet. Renee found herself swept up in memory rather than shock or awe.

“The Lords of Cerebral Ecology... they made this place.”

Gabriel, at first lost for words, after a moment asked, “Is this from that other place? Where you were nearly drawn into?”

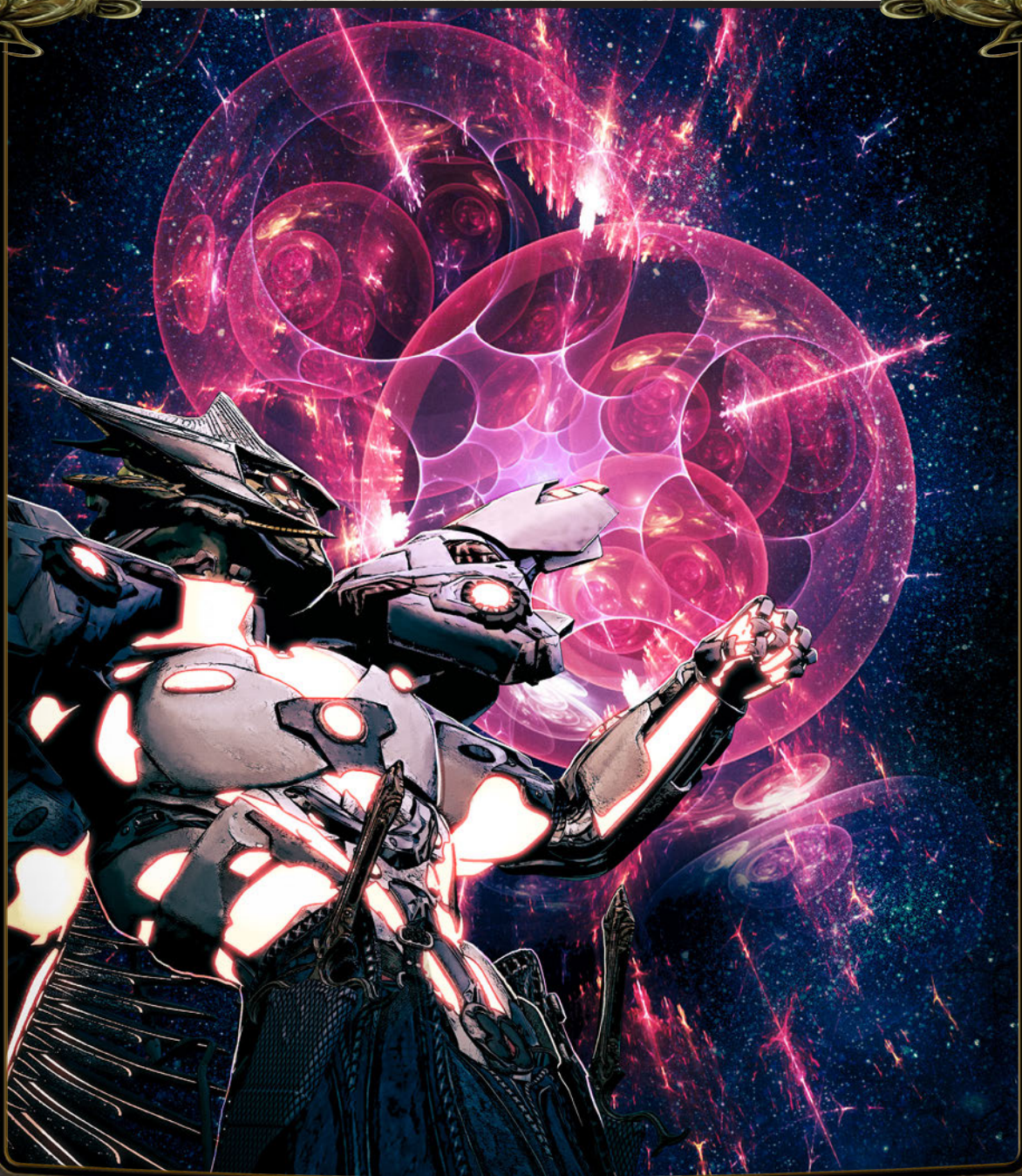
Renee nodded and began collecting her thoughts. “What I saw on the other side was beyond description, it was overwhelming, to say the least.”

Gabriel reached out and took her hand into his own, asking if he could see. By opening her consciousness up to him, he could join his thoughts with those of Renee to experience what she had experienced. She was hesitant at first, not afraid of his presence within her mind, but rather she feared she might expose Gabriel to the sensations she even now struggled to contain. As she began to allow Gabriel inside, Renee could sense his concern for her, and she felt reassured. Gabriel however, immediately began to realize just how traumatic Renee’s experience was.

Having lived entire lifetimes joined to technology, Gabriel had always lived in a world of sensory overload, with all of existence crying out to be noticed. What he experienced vicariously through Renee, however, was horrifying. Absolute emptiness crashed against a shore of unending knowledge with Renee caught between. Even experiencing the effect second hand was enough to give Gabriel pause, yet he ventured on. The bridge between three-dimensional space and Affine space began to expand as his perception widened in new ways.



The Great Old One's existed partially in this realm, and suddenly Gabriel knew why he feared the acquisition of more power. The Shards were pieces of the Outer God Azathoth, a being even these Great Old One's respected and feared. The Shards delivered the power that came from Azathoth and strengthened connections to Affine space. Gabriel saw the 12 Lords of Instrumentality through his connection, as well as what lay beyond. Great Old One's lost in a realm they were never meant to inhabit lay dormant or incorporeal. Unable to fully manifest in this three-dimensional reality. The 12 Lords, through the acquisition of the Shards had weakened the barriers between realms, strengthening their connection to Affine space but in the doing, also threatened all of existence in our reality.





Gabriel tried to take it all in as he struggled towards a greater understanding of Affine space. Gabriel had the realization that Affine space was everything! Not just a realm or dimension, Affine Space was the sum total of all existence in this and every other reality for all time. A realm without end, here existed all realities presented in a limitless existence of pure information, merely given physical form in the three-dimensional realms. It was through access to this realm that all existence could be altered. Where vast energies were drawn from unlimited possibilities unexplored. It was through this exploration that Gabriel began to sense faint; distant reverberations conveyed through Affine space. The vibrations and what they represented carried tremendous ramifications and responsibility with them.



A thing beyond description, a god living both outside and yet within all reality slumbered with great indifference to the beings throughout existence. However, with every overt change or tampering, the great Azathoth stirred. The actions the Lords of Instrumentality were taking did not just cause minor reverberations but instead triggered cascading ripples that continued to amplify through the dimensions. This disturbance threatened to awaken the slumbering Azathoth, an event that very likely would destroy three-dimensional space in every single realm of existence.

Gabriel fell back and slumped to the ground. Instead of merely just viewing Renee's memories he accessed Affine space directly, using her memories as a jumping off point. Shielded from most of the destructive effects, Renee merely crouched near Gabriel, holding his hand to support him as he recovered. Gabriel eventually looked her in the eyes and spoke. "We're the answer. The vibrations our existence has caused work in opposition to the Lords of Instrumentality."

"Which means we're a threat to them, doesn't it?" Renee had the look of a predator in her eyes more than anything else. She surprised herself with the excitement she held for this potential conflict. Something had changed with her latest experience with Affine space and Gabriel felt it as well. Their purpose was clear, and together they would rise to meet the horrors that awaited them.



The fleets of the Pax Continuum stood in disarray as massive refits for the coming war proceeded. Planetary defenses neglected from years of peace were tested and rebuilt as new defenses and ships came off the assembly line. Utilizing the sensitive equipment from Europa, the fragile system kept a watchful eye on both sides of the Spacial Rift when suddenly early warning systems flared to life sending the Pax Continuum into a panic. As Alhana and her fellow council members gathered, the first images began to stream from the far side of the Rift. Within moments, Gabriel and Renee appeared on-screen as all monitored the situation with anxiety.

Three vessels of varying sizes slowly approached the satellite positioned on the other side of the Rift. The third ship stood out as immense in comparison and measured several miles in length. As Alhana was preparing to go to war, Gabriel was quick to interrupt.

“That’s not our Enemy, Chancellor. I don’t know who they are, but those ships are of a different design.”

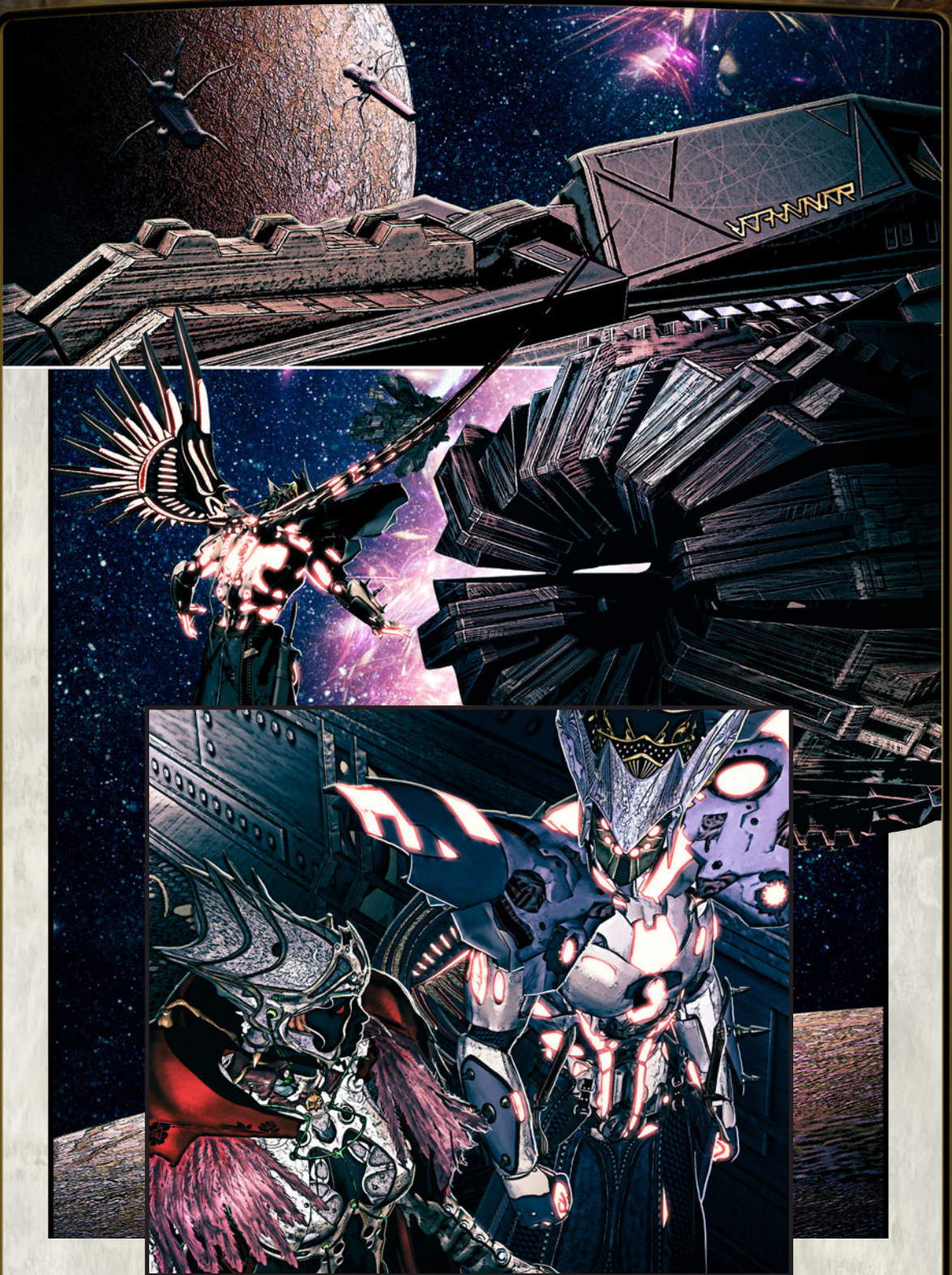
As Gabriel spoke, an officer reported a massive spike in the lead ships energy output. Expecting a weapon, the Pax prepared for the worst, but instead of attack, the smallest ship exploded. Several life pods were recovered by the largest ship, and during the procedure, the equipment on Europa revealed massive amounts of structural damage. The vessels were not here for war but help.

As the smallest vessel entered the Rift, a transmission was sent that Europa translated and rebroadcast it to the Pax Continuum. Gabriel watched the effects of the transition and knew they would need help. Renee stayed on comms to coordinate and reassure the Pax that this was a rescue mission, refugees seeking shelter but also bringing much-needed information. Hesitantly they watched but wanted these vessels quarantined to Europa for now. Gabriel, too busy attempting to help regulate the enormous energies bombarding the ship’s hull merely grunted his approval. As the first ship cleared the Rift, Renee gave instructions via Europa to the ship as it entered orbit. Automated assistance dispatched from the Templar capital city began working immediately to stabilize the strange vessels reactor. It passingly occurred to Renee how odd it was that the Templar systems could so easily accommodate a completely alien species.

The larger vessel suffered far less damage as it emerged from the Rift; with Gabriel’s help, its shielding proved adequate. Gabriel returned to Renee as more automated machines from Europa began to care for the large vessel. Renee walked up to Gabriel, a nervous energy radiating from her.

“So, how do you want to do this?” Her grin was ear to ear as she assumed her armor form.

“Slow and cautious. I can feel something from within the ship - it might be trouble. Let’s play it safe but, well, they’re alien, I have no idea what to expect!”



“Lead on, and let’s find out!”

The pair entered the airlock as the Templar systems distributed a translation earpiece for Renee and updated Gabriel’s system remotely. It was time to meet their new guests.

PAX CONTINUUM SECURITY BRIEFING REPORT

RE: SERVITOR RACES OF THE LORDS OF INSTRUMENTALITY

Source: Historical records from the Templar database as provided by the Templar designated Gabriel (AKA Legacy)

The Lords of Instrumentality are driven by a singular goal, the acquisition of ancient artifacts scattered throughout the galaxy (galaxy's?). It is their belief that by exterminating entire races, these artifacts are either created or their locations are revealed, the exact nature of these artifacts was not revealed by the Templar records.

To aid in the culling of worlds, entire races are enslaved and sent out to locate and exterminate any civilization they come across. The only race named in the records as being a purely servitor race is the Unborn. Their own unique mimicry abilities made them ideal in a variety of ways and in fact were utilized as bio weapons primarily and historically to great effect. Only once their vessel crashed centuries ago on Earth did they finally have the opportunity to free themselves from the Lords and their lieutenant-ants, the Nastrond.

Nastrond function as battlefield generals for the Lords and it is believed that they channel their master's energies, enabling great and terrifying feats of power. Little is documented about the Nastrond but it is believed they are engineered, not born, and that their loyalty is absolute. Past encounters with the Nastrond Sarganthas resulted in a catastrophic explosion upon its death, an event narrowly avoided with the latest attack by the unnamed member of the species. The energy released upon its death was redirected into deep space and has yet to be fully categorized.

Additional servitor races are briefly mentioned but no details were available in the documentation provided. No technologies currently employed by the Pax Continuum are believed capable of killing much less dispersing the energies of a Nastrond at full power.

Department of Planetary Security

Office of Internal Affairs



CHAPTER 5

CHAPTER 5

From Earth to Mars, random, perfectly spherical sinkholes began appearing. From the deepest depths of the ocean to the highest of Martian peaks, the sinkholes varied in size but never shape and always revealed an artifact at its center. The unusual findings lacked explanation but radiated strange energy that affected all forms of life that ventured near. Automated drones carried out much of the investigation, but each site drew random people every day. Vast quarantine areas were set up to contain the nearly catatonic masses that merely awaited the opportunity to approach the relics. Fortunately, for the Pax Continuum, those affected remained quite passive after containment. Those that successfully reached the artifacts became horribly deranged with their bodies mutating to match their broken minds. Some observed a pattern in the sink hole appearance, an aligning of locations that when the orbits of the planets brought Mars and Earth to their nearest, the sink holes would line up, one to another. No purpose could be determined, but many theories were offered, all of which left many terrified that an apocalyptic event neared.

Gabriel and Renee slowly entered the alien ship now orbiting Europa. The hallway proportions were similar to those a human would construct, and while it remained dimly lit to conserve power, there were no threats presented against them. The pair stood for a moment in the hall, arms outstretched, volunteering for scanning by their host's automated systems. The composition of the atmosphere would have been difficult for a human to ingest, but not impossible. Fortunately, Gabriel and Renee required no oxygen.

After a long couple of moments, a massive blast door opened revealing three of the alien passengers. Two female and one male appeared in what resembled governmental or royal attire. Semi-reptilian in nature, the figures stood over six feet tall and wore what appeared to be threatening expressions. It was difficult for Renee to refrain from human assumptions regarding their expressions, as these beings were far from human but the tendency remained. Gabriel however, lived his life in a society where appearance had little meaning other than the projection of whatever your imagination could construct, and so Gabriel chose to speak first.

"Welcome to the Earth solar system; this moon is called Europa. I am Gabriel; this is Renee. You are safe here."

The strange creatures turned to one another, and after a moment, the male and another female seemed to defer to the third, performing a slight bow to Gabriel and Renee as they took a step back. The female spoke in a deep voice but with confidence in her tone.

"On behalf of my people, I thank you. I am called Fe'tang and perform as a leader to my kind. Can you understand my speech as I do yours?"

"Our translators appear to be working. I was able to sample some of your speech as your vessels neared." Gabriel and Renee both knew the truth, their gifts had allowed them access to the minds of these visitors, details likely not best revealed during first contact.

The creatures exchanged looks before speaking again; a silent dilemma seemingly addressed between them.





"You're of the Lords and their kind, are you not? Only the great adversaries could turn back the Servitors of Instrumentality. We seek to pledge ourselves to the Ecological Lords of Mind."

Gabriel took a second to confer with Renee through their shared link of the mind. He questioned how much they should reveal, but Renee argued that the truth now would do more for diplomacy.

“The Lords of Cerebral Ecology long abandoned this realm for others far beyond. Renee and I have connected with their power and become aware of many things. Together we defeated the Nastrond, the servitors as you called them.”

The creatures began discussing this revelation in hushed whispers, the urgency, and fear palpable in the room. Gabriel tried to calm them.

“We are not allies of the Lords of Instrumentality, those that attacked us. We can only assume you need assistance. We can offer shelter while we discuss the situation, should you want it. You will not be held here if you wish to go.”

Renee feared the possibility of spy’s attempting to gather information, but through their connection to the Affine, they knew that the Lords did not work that way. Spying was too delicate an act for such as them. The creatures almost reluctantly accepted the aid. Later they explained their situation more thoroughly. As former servitors of the Lords of Instrumentality, they suffered greatly in complete subjugation. Used as an expendable resource, the former servitors were denied everything, lacking even their heritage. Devoid of identity and purpose, they functioned as heralds, to subjugate others in preparation for the Lords arrival. All were consumed in their wake leaving service to the Lords as the only hope for continued existence.

Upon learning of the first successful resistance in over millennia, the refugees saw this as their one chance for salvation. Only the Lords of Cerebral Ecology could have defeated the Lords of Instrumentality in the past. Assuming this was indeed their great return, Fe’tang and the others stole one of the great prizes of the Lords in the hope of offering it up to their new masters. To Gabriel and Renee’s astonishment, Fe’tang’s assistant produced a metal case. Within the case glowed a large Azathoth Shard, what Gabriel had sensed as the ship had first approached. Seeing Gabriel’s recognition of the Shard, Fe’tang began to understand.

“You channel the Shard? Like the Lords, this is your power?”

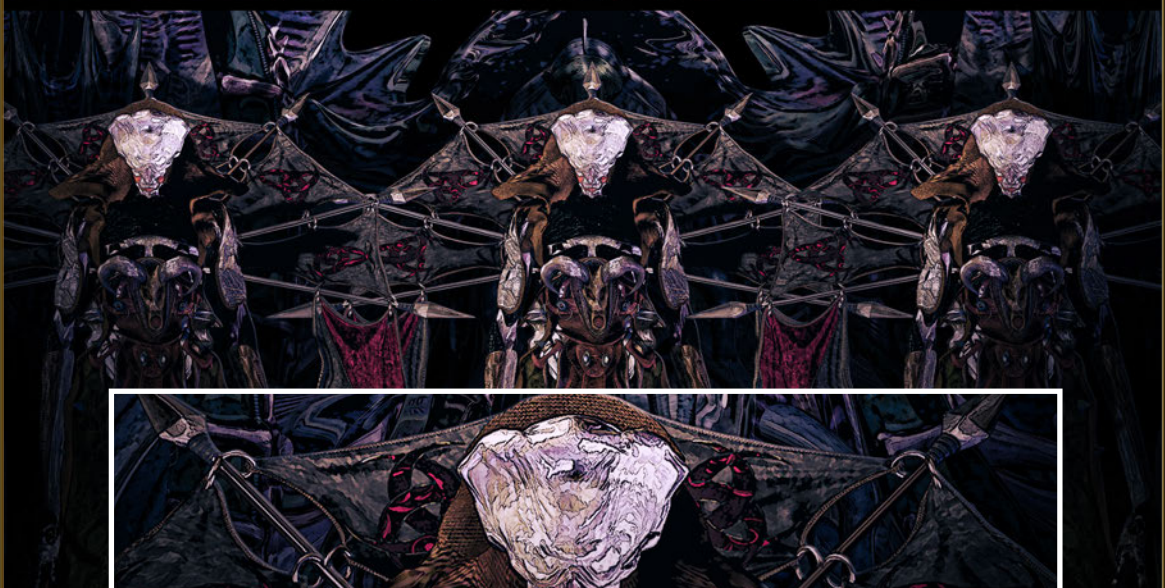
Gabriel was eager to learn any information these people might have about the Shards.

“Yes, we bonded to them, gaining the abilities. Your own people have not been able to?”

Fe’tang replied with shock on her face. “No race ever has tamed the Shards. Only the Lords have wielded their might. All others are consumed or worse. You have become like them. A Lord. If we gift this Shard of Azathoth to you and pledge to your cause, can you save us? Will you fight the Lords of Instrumentality?”

Gabriel already knew, as well as Renee, that they would not turn these people away. Gabriel graciously accepted the Shard, but the look he and Renee exchanged summed up his concern, that to join to yet another Shard would gift even greater power but at what cost? For now, however, it was time to introduce the servitor refugees to the Pax Continuum.





Moving through the vastness of space, an ancient, angular twisting of unknown materials marched onward. Housed within the black monolith, the 12 Lords of Instrumentality stood against the walls, seemingly merged into the rock-like surface of their vessel. Their enormous and monstrous intellects worked through their avatars and the many servitor races under their control.

Their forms rested eternally, preserved until the time of the great alignment. The Lords sensed the competing force rising in the far-off cosmos. An unknown factor in a universe long laid bare before them. Already an avatar had perished at the hands of the new threat. Avatars like the Nastrond wielded portions of the Old One's powers in service of their masters, but that power was with a limit as the wielders form could contain only the smallest fraction.

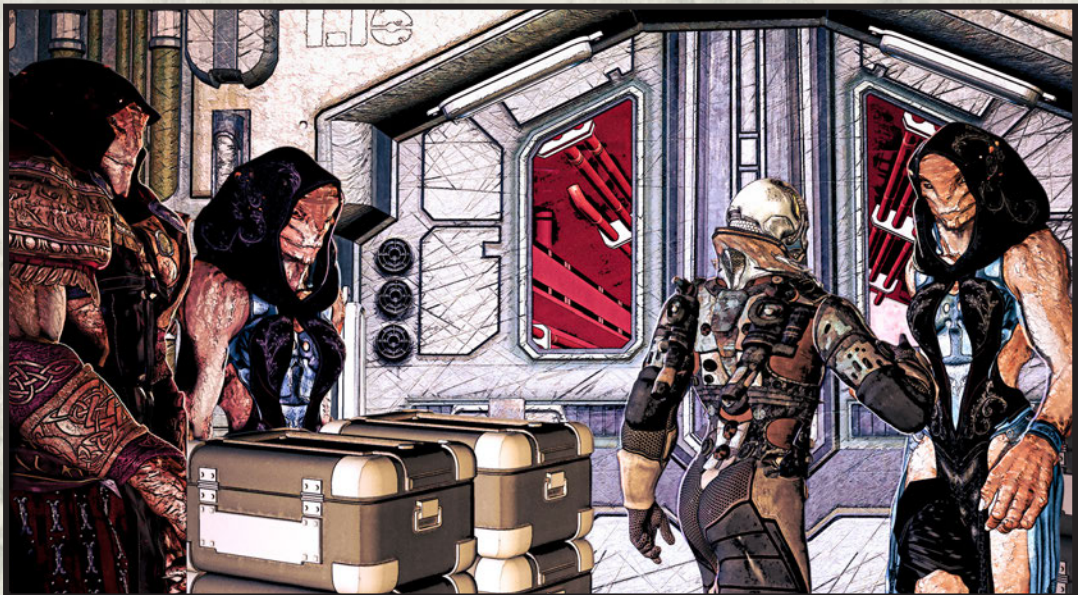




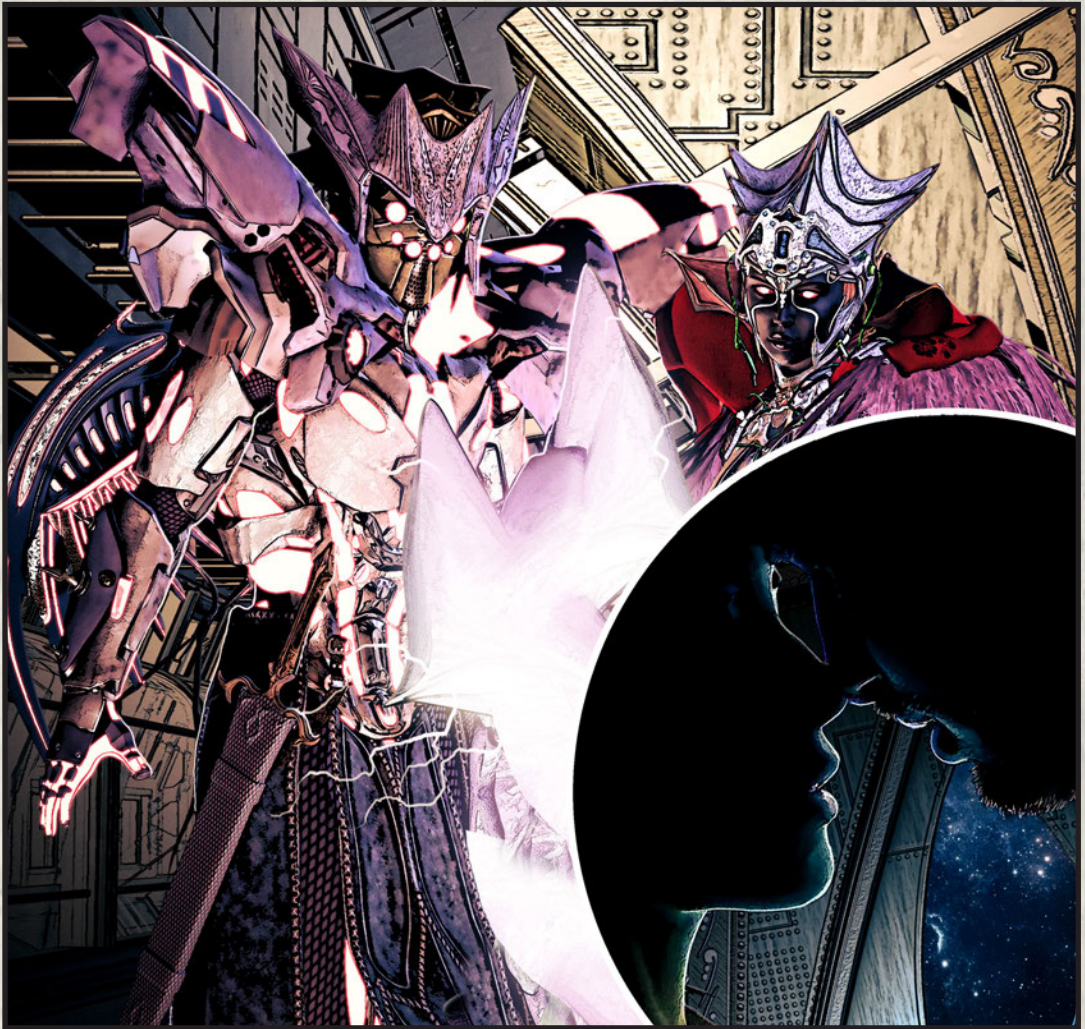
To meet this threat head on, new servitors were required. Alien forms bent and twisted into durable forms able to contain the essence of their chosen Lord. However, there were other hazards the Lords of Instrumentality knew they might have to contend with.

The great devourer slumbered on a distant planet in the same sector as the competing force. Sha'Bolique envied the Lords of Instrumentality and coveted their Shards of power. Her gluttony knew no bounds, and as this new power arose, the Lords knew her prison weakened as her slumber became more disturbed. The Yellow King contained Sha'Bolique long ago at great cost to his corporeal form, reducing his connection to this realm and Affine space as well. The Lords of Instrumentality had little interest in battling a sibling to the detriment of themselves. To minimize the disruption to Sha'Bolique's slumber, only three Lords would assume physicality via their servitors to confront the new threat. Not since before the rise of life in the universe, when the Great Old One's strode across the stars in full, unrivaled glory had such power directly acted upon the universe. Nearly awakened, the three Lords of Instrumentality shook their stone temple ship with each footfall as they prepared their new servitor bodies for their journey to Europa.

Details of the former servitors-turned-refugees were kept to a minimum to avoid panic. The fact that aliens had made contact was less of a shock as most of the population knew of the Unborn and their long history of intermixing with humanity. Contained on Europa, the Pax Continuum feared that the refugees hid plans of conquest or other murderous intent but knew they had no say over Europa or any ability to challenge Gabriel's considerable power. Still, they were quick to volunteer supplies in exchange for operatives having access to the refugees for questioning and of course, any access to advanced technologies. Fe'tang accepted the supplies eagerly and opened their ships to the humans. Long stripped of any identity, the refugees placed their wellbeing in the hands of their new master, Gabriel. Though he fought their dependence and even borderline worship, Fe'tang and her councilors insisted it was best for their people. They needed hope more than ever, and if a war was coming, Fe'tang feared how her people might respond when their former masters arrived, if they remained scared, desperate, and without hope.



As the refugees settled into the Templar city, Gabriel and Renee spent more time with one another. They found a particular understanding and kinship with one another that neither had experienced before. Their shared experience with the Shards alone bonded them in ways no other beings had been before. The pair stood with the latest Azathoth Shard before them. The power that radiated from the Shard seemed more intense than before, or more accurately, they were more sensitive to it. Gabriel and Renee both feared what consequences were in store if they continued merging with the alien artifacts. Would they become like the monsters they stood against, or would their humanity prevail? Could this level of power and awareness be contained in a human brain or would the experience drive them both insane? The fear both Renee and Gabriel shared weighed heavily, but their ever-increasing feelings for one another kept them grounded.



It was not long before Renee and Gabriel became intimate, their bond deeper than physical pleasure or common interest. After their brush with Affine space, their very thoughts shared a psychic link. Instead of insecurity or shame, the pair gained confidence, a level of intimacy beyond anything previously felt by humanity, and with it, a love beyond description blossomed.

PAX CONTINUUM SECURITY BRIEFING REPORT

RE: ANCIENT ARCHITECTURES APPEARING ON EARTH,
MARS, AND OTHER PLANETARY BODIES IN THE SYSTEM.

A series of deep depressions scattered throughout the Earth, Mars, and other planetary bodies scattered throughout the Pax Continuum system have been appearing with increased regularity. On Earth alone, 12 sites have been discovered, measuring in varying size and depth, but always as a perfectly formed circle.

Within the center of each depression an ancient artifact, or in some cases entire cities have been discovered. Perfectly preserved, these artifacts are comprised of an unknown substance which has in effect rendered them immune to erosion.

All attempts to date the artifacts have failed, but the surrounding geology predates humanity by millions of years, making the construction of these artifacts by human hands virtually impossible. In addition, a bizarre side effect seems to be affecting the local populations, drawing them to the sites with increasing regularity. A notable increase in aggressive behavior has been reported by those affected by these ancient sites leading to an immediate quarantine of all detected locations.

At this time, it is recommended that automated defenses be the only Pax representation at the actual site, that the secondary effect is debilitating to human life at close proximity. Only at the outer most point of the quarantine should human officers be present to further contain and redirect any civilians attempting to gain access to the various sites.

Department of Planetary Security
Office of Internal Affairs



CHAPTER 6

CHAPTER 6

Within the vast ocean of darkness that was deep space, the Templar city ship left its twelfth dead world. Formerly home to billions of industrialized sentients, the worlds left behind had been ravaged and left barren, removing even the possibility of life ever returning. Some housed a simple people, incapable of space flight while others like this latest world had been home to an incredibly advanced culture, perhaps even rivaling the technology of the Templars. All crushed by some unknown power, only on this world, the destroyers were not as thorough as previous. Almost as if interrupted half way through by some other priority, remnants of this race survived. Digital recordings of the attack and the time leading up to the attack remained, painting a terrible picture of the threat. Recognizing the technology and horrified by the discovery, the Templars had finally encountered the Nastrond. It took little time for the Templars to come to a unanimous decision to return to the planet of their birth, hopefully with enough time to warn humanity of this impending doom.

Gabriel continued to play host to most of the refugees within the Templar city on Europa. Some refused to leave the relative safety of their ship even while it underwent repairs, but for those settled into the city, the refugees finally felt a sense of relief. Though humans were quite different physically from the refugees, the way the two species thought and expressed themselves were remarkably similar. Working together, the Pax Continuum pieced together a rough history from the refugees' perspective, including tactics and weaponry employed by the Lords of Instrumentality.

The refugees remained a spiritual people though they no longer could recall any form of worship before the Lords of Instrumentality. What they had, they cobbled together from oral traditions and experiences with other races as the Lords continued their destructive march across the cosmos. Other races that had served the Lords, such as the Unborn, attempted resistance from time to time but with even a single instance of rebellion, the last of that servitor race would be completely expunged. As far as the refugees knew, the last of the Unborn were those that remained on Earth.

Renee spent much of her time on the European surface, expanding her abilities and gaining more control. What started out as mental gymnastics to accomplish even the simplest feats now only took but a thought. Through intense meditation, Gabriel and Renee found they could access the invisible realm of Affine space, and through that connection, they could understand much and see even more. They could see beyond the physical into places they did not understand. It was through this connection that Renee sensed the terrible force somewhere in the distant blackness of space. Renee was unable to see it clearly but knew with certainty that something vastly powerful was beginning to stir. In the depths of her soul, she heard the names whispered in barely audible tones.

Names of power, like Sha'Bolique and the Yellow King. Horrible things denied access to our reality for millennia were once more reaching out. Surrounded by hidden powers and threats, she grounded her thoughts by focusing on Gabriel, her mother, and those around her. It was a technique to pull back when either she or Gabriel went too far, and the darkness threatened to consume them. It was during this refocusing that she discovered something terrifying. She could feel the energies of both human and alien refugee, but some of the humans and refugees on Europa gave off a tainted energetic emanation. Most glowed with the pure white light most life gave off, but for some, the tiniest twinges of color shifting to red, signifying the change and corruption within. She did not fully understand the change she saw, but through the blending of color, she saw threads leading off into space. However the change happened, all signs pointed to Mars.

Renee ran through the corridors looking for Gabriel. Everywhere she looked there was at least one being in the group seemingly tainted. Reaching out with her mind Renee touched Gabriel's mind. Renee showed Gabriel the images in her mind, and at once, it was as if a veil lifted. Not only did he now see the tainted energy, Gabriel knew what it meant. Renee instinctively understood his thoughts through their connection and stopped in her tracks. They had to warn the Pax Continuum before it was too late and thousands if not more turned into Quatall.



The defensive systems around Earth, Mars, and several outlying colonies were nearly complete, augmented significantly with technology from the refugees. Many believed that this significant advancement utilizing the enemies own weapons would gain the humans an enormous advantage. Alhana coordinated one of the largest mobilizations of military forces ever in the history of humankind while the best minds reviewed tactics of the Lords of Instrumentality as told by Fe'tang and her council. The mood was best described by all involved as cautiously optimistic which helped to galvanize the two species for war.

Throughout the months since the initial attack on Earth, the Pax Continuum embarked on a massive campaign of information, readying the population for the multitude of revelations to come. In the end, it was said to be quite anticlimatic when the complete truth of the refugees was revealed. For most, this was an affirmation of long held beliefs or a validation of conspiracy theories while others were just caught up in the newness and hype surrounding the alien revelation even to question the slow but deliberate militarization happening all around them. With the news of potential war revealed, much of the excitement was lost to confusion and anger. The revelation of the attacks already perpetrated upon humanity by this unknown foe provided the final piece, motivating an entire species to come together.



Alhana considered for a moment how humanity was always at its best when faced with extinction. Only then did we look past our petty concerns. Gabriel and Renee entered the council chambers where Chancellor Alhana and the Senate waited impatiently. Gabriel warned that they would be presenting news of such import that all members were required to be present for this closed session. Renee and Gabriel entered the room in human form to make the Senate as comfortable as possible.

Personally, even Renee preferred her new form as it greatly increased her senses, plus it began to feel more natural. Chancellor Alhana could hardly stifle an ear-to-ear grin at the sight of her daughter. It seemed like years had passed since last she stood in the same room as her daughter. Renee felt the same; both women consumed with responsibility as the weight of the impending war pressed on them without mercy. The Senate, however, had little interest in family reunions.

"We eagerly await your information, Templar. What news was so grave that you required this meeting to be in person?" Senator Kells snorted. Most of the Senate had grown callous to the personal troubles of a single region. Often these problems were touted as some grand catastrophe waiting to happen when more times than not, the problem was minor at best. Others expressed similar displeasure yet Gabriel merely waited for the collective tantrum to diffuse and Chancellor Alhana to regain control.

"Humanity, as well as the refugees, are already infected." The room blew up in a litany of questions and blame as the Senate turned on one another. Chancellor Alhana banged a gavel for attention, returning focus to Gabriel.

"The Quatall-Wormwood hybrid virus we thought contained to incident sites throughout the system containing ancient artifacts appears to no longer be the sole means of transmission. Renee and I have detected the... Contamination for lack of a better word, in subjects completely insulated from the artifacts. Having discussed this with the refugee representative, they've given us new insight into the illness." Gabriel gave the Senate a moment to digest the information before Renee continued.

"The refugees believe instead of a physical illness or pathogen, this corruption as they call it is a psychic byproduct of being near the Lords themselves."

Even Alhana looked shocked at this news. "Does that mean they are here? Why haven't they attacked?"

Gabriel held up a hand to signal calm. "They are not here, which is not necessarily good news. Other Great Old One's exist, entombed within planetary bodies lying dormant."

“We believe one such being, or perhaps several of these beings are contained in our solar system. We think the strange occurrences and artifacts discovered on Mars and Earth are signals of an Old One stirring or awakening. The increased psychic corruption is yet another sign, slowly corrupting the mind then the body of those it can control.”

“Is there a pattern to the infected? How are victims chosen?” A visibly scared portly Senator wiped sweat from his brow as he spoke.

“As of right now we have no answers,” Gabriel spoke solemnly. “But we do believe it won’t be long before this creature reveals itself.”

The Senate continued their questioning throughout the night, mostly asking and re-asking questions Gabriel and Renee had no answers for. It was a frustrating process for all involved, made extreme when reports from several outlying colonies came in, reporting incidents of madness and uncontrollable, unexplainable violence. Even acts of violence on Europa perpetrated by the refugees were reported. The corruption spread and brought insanity throughout the system.



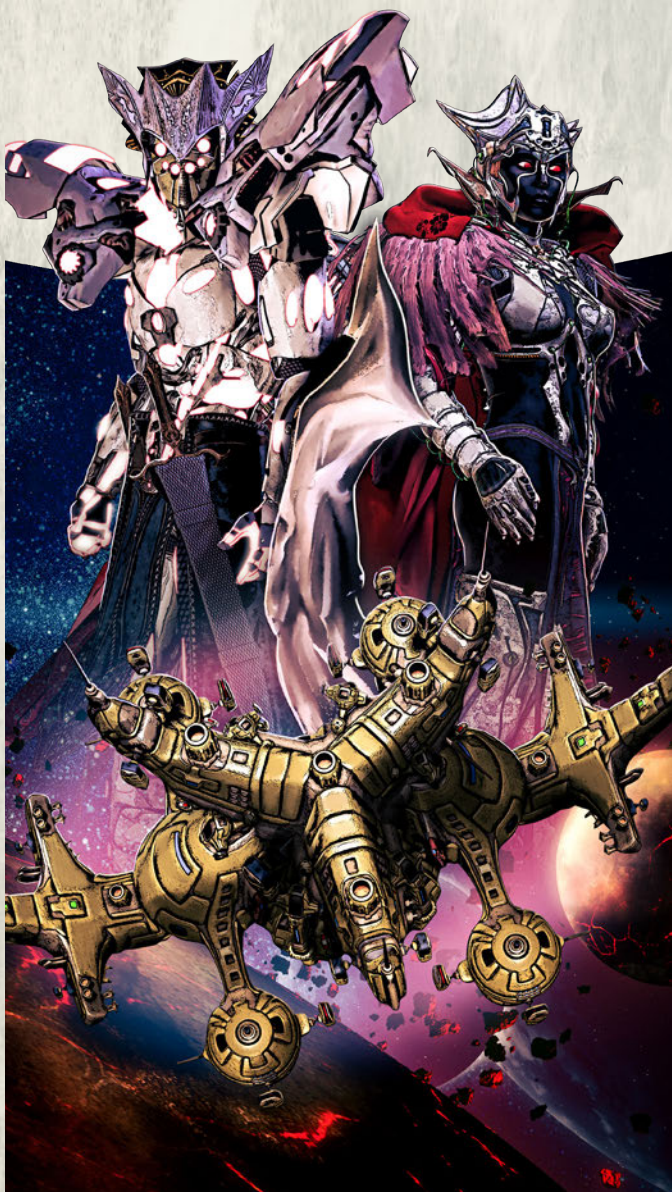


CHAPTER 7

CHAPTER 7

The threat of war on multiple fronts made the argument clear as day for Renee and Gabriel. The time to merge with the third Shard was now or never. The vast power they would gain was worth the risk as deep down, neither believed the Pax Continuum defenses were capable of winning in the end. Traveling far outside the asteroid belt, the pair tried to leave nothing to chance. Chancellor Alhana wanted a team ready to assist should tragedy strike, but Gabriel and Renee both feared the risk was too great. The couple floated in space, armored and holding hands. The Shard floated between them, radiating a strange energy that almost beckoned them to begin the process. In truth, the glow of the Shard did more to make them almost giddy with excitement rather than fill them with dread.

Gabriel and Renee had discussed every conceivable possibility and tried to fortify their minds with intense meditation for days before the merge, yet still, they hesitated. As if to offer one another a chance to back out, or perhaps some miracle to occur, relieving them of the burden they held. While excited by the prospect of the merge, they retained enough humanity to know how grave the risk truly was. After a long moment, Renee and Gabriel looked up, matching each other's gaze. Without a word exchanged, the merge had begun.



The great Templar ship was very close to their home. Moving at incredible speeds, their desire to see their home system spared the devastation they had witnessed spurring them on. The Templars worst fear, however, seemed almost certainty as immense energy readings emanated from their home system. The energy could have been a supernova except for the massive spike never expanded in radius, just intensity. All attempts to magnify the area were disrupted by energies the Templars had yet to categorize. All they could do is watch helplessly as they barreled into the unknown.



The three Avatars of Instrumentality shared their consciousness with their prime bodies still millions of miles away. They were first to sense the tremendous release of power and report it back to their fellow Lords of Instrumentality. Beings as old as existence itself have no name for fear or trepidation, but what this release of power did do was cause the Lords of Instrumentality to pause. Never before had the Old One's bore witness to the birth of rival siblings. All that had existed did so since the beginning. All the Great Old One's that crossed over existed, trapped between Affine space and this reality, had always existed since the time of great Azathoth's first slumber. The Lords did not hesitate for long, but for the moment they stood still, even their servitors took notice.

As the merge continued, Gabriel and Renee found the energies easier to control as their instincts and intuition expanded. A universal consciousness fell upon them, giving them greater clarity and insight into the Affine and through the merge one thing became tremendously clear, the actions they had embarked upon would have lasting repercussions, not the least of which was with their unborn child. The connection Gabriel and Renee felt included a third, still forming consciousness, and how this access would change the child, no one knew. Regret and fear tore at the pair as they considered the unthinkable, but even in its current state, the forming consciousness within Renee seemed to reach out, giving assurance to Gabriel and Renee.

With the merger complete, both Renee and Gabriel felt overcome with emotion as realization set in, neither one had suspected the pregnancy. For a long while, they held one another as they floated in space. Awash in a sea of silence, they contemplated the new life growing within. It was a long time before either of them spoke, and even then, only breaking the silence because of a great disruption within the Jupiter Rift. They could sense as the fleets of the three Lords of Instrumentality crossed the barrier and entered the Earth solar system. All of humanity was brought to high alert as the war was about to start.



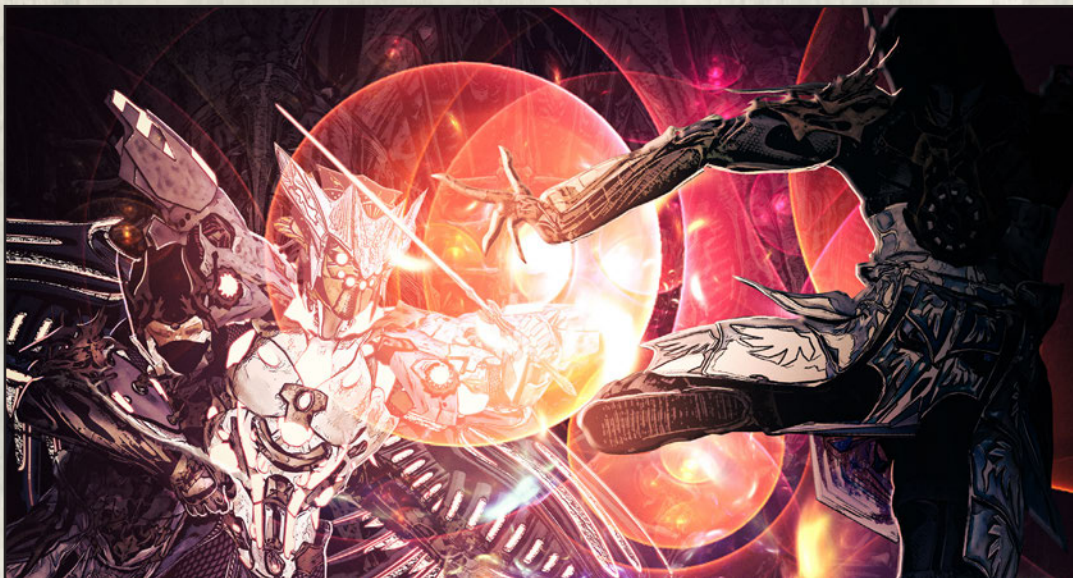
All life had eyes on the Rift, as a black angular ship emerged, heralding the arrival of the Lords. Within moments of beholding the great black shape, millions found themselves overtaken with madness. Not even the alien refugees were immune to the incomprehensible horror that now stood before them. The defenses of humanity collapsed before a single shot fired as brother turned against brother creating wholesale slaughter. Meanwhile, on Mars, a different form of madness was taking hold.

As the forces of the Pax Continuum continued to crumble, the quarantine around the secret temple of Sha'Bolique lay abandoned, allowing her growing number of follower's clear access to their dark goddess once more. The followers had changed beyond recognition, twisted into an amphibious mockery of humankind with no will of their own. The followers knew the time was not yet right for Sha'Bolique to rise, the stars had not aligned, but they sensed the moment fast approached. While the creatures awaited their Great Old One's return, they engaged in all forms of debauchery in celebration of Sha'Bolique.



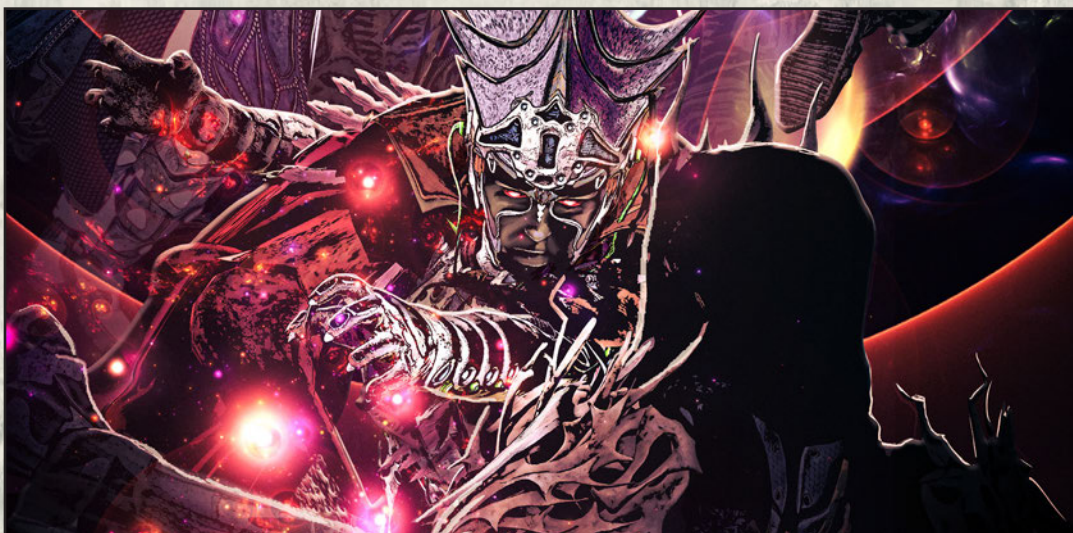
The servitor races of the Lords of Instrumentality swooped into the system taking full advantage of the chaos and madness tormenting the system. Automated defenses held the line on the primary colonies but that left little hope for the minor outposts not yet fortified. Europa offered the most resistance, its Templar technology still decades ahead of any human weaponry. Only when the Lords many-angled vessel turned to face Europa did the Templar defenses fail. Unable to damage the twisted thing, the Lords massive ship positioned itself between its forces and Europa, shielding servitor vessels.





As the tide of battle began to shift once more, Gabriel and Renee appeared out of nowhere, vaporizing an entire swath of enemy ships in moments. The Lords attention immediately focused on the pair, detecting too late the pair's intentions. At full speed, they rammed the massive vessel, rupturing the hull and causing untold damage.

Gabriel wielded two swords of energy as Renee tore through servitor bodies with claws in a near primal rage. The nearer they drew to the Lords, the more they sensed the evil and malice radiating off the Lords hideous forms. As they crashed into the central chamber, Gabriel and Renee came face to face with abominations never beheld by mortals before. These grotesque forms the Lords wore mirrored their real forms, still dormant a galaxy away, channeling the immense power into these servitor bodies. Without hesitation, the Lord nearest Gabriel lashed out with blinding power that could eradicate a star. The action was as much out of hate as it was out of revulsion at the mere presence of a lower being in their grand hall.

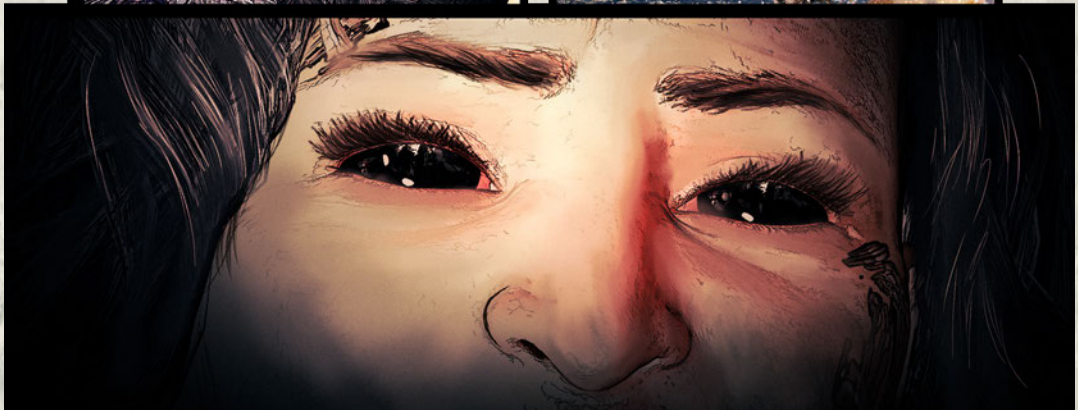
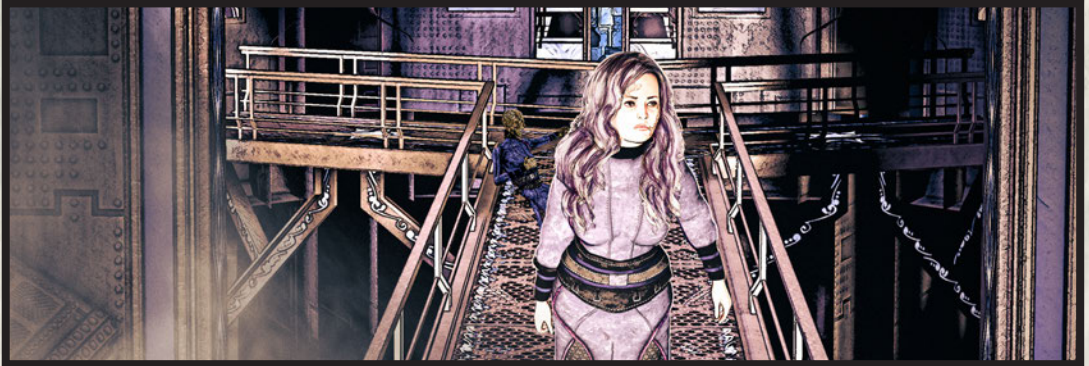




All around, the hall melted or just disintegrated from the release of power, nearly causing the entire vessel to explode. All the power and violence leveled against Gabriel and Renee amounted to nothing as both stood firm. Gabriel's blades glowed brightly from deflecting the blast. Renee felt euphoria now and launched herself headlong into the nearest Lord, reveling in her power. Gabriel stood back; seemingly oblivious to the battle as were the two fellow Lords but their battle was on another front. The battle Gabriel engaged in left vessels, asteroids, and all other nearby objects reduced to dust as enormous mental energies clashed. The Great Old One's and Outer Gods knew nothing of fragility, and in fact seemingly existed beyond death's reach; however, there was a hierarchy. The Old Ones could be imprisoned or forced into a deep slumber by others of the same or greater caliber. Just such a contest was underway as the Lords finally realized these were no mortals driven to madness by their mere presence but rival creatures, a new breed set to supplant the Great Old Ones as the pinnacle of existence.



Reaching out with her gifts, Alhana sought communion with the alien machines. At first, she felt powerful, able to control the enemy fleets, sending them into suicidal dives but the longer she stayed in contact, the more she felt a vast, cold and empty darkness close in on her. Humanity fared far worse than the two champions fighting aboard the angular vessel. While riots, murder and worse consumed many, those that remained found their defenses feeble before the power of the Lords servitors. Alhana refused protection as she stood proudly along the outer promenade of the capitol.

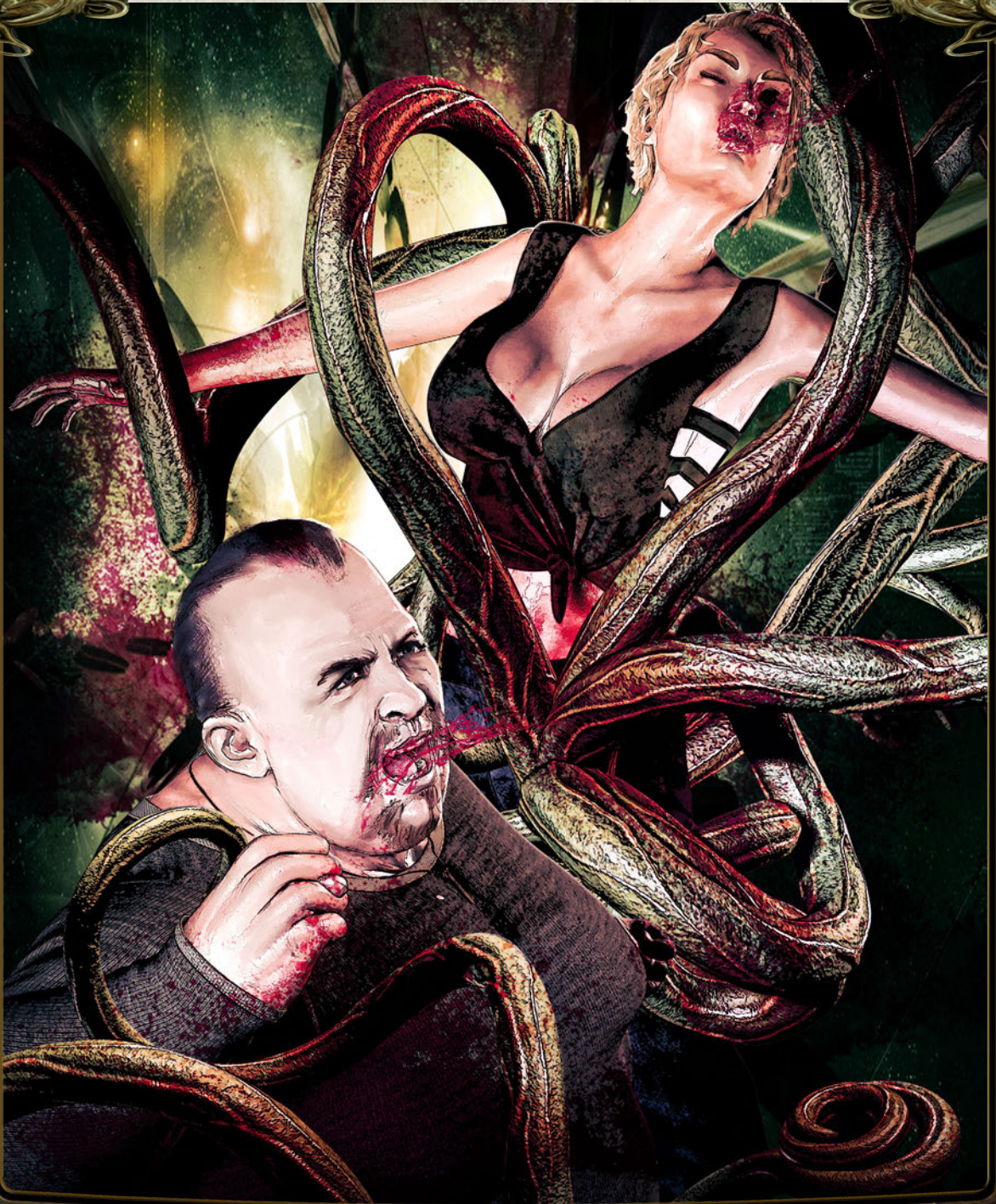


The sensation was one of impending death, and though she struggled to maintain control, her mind betrayed her, cowering within itself, cringing from the darkness that still threatened to consume her. Aids for the Chancellor ran up to her, carrying her unconscious body below. The damage Alhana was able to inflict indeed was great, yet the forces of the Lords continued relentlessly.

On Mars, the alignment was nearing perfection, and the followers of Sha'Bolique rejoiced. Gathered once more before her mighty temple, the latest followers drew out cutting instruments of all variety in the preparation for their grand sacrifice. The vast exchange of energies exploding outward as the Lords fought against the new rivals fed Sha'Bolique in her great resting place.



The many gathered followers of Sha'Bolique began an orgy of violence as cutting implements dove into flesh spilling gore on every inch of the chamber. The thick blood soaked into the parched Martian soil now stained an almost blackish crimson. Sha'Bolique drunk deep and rejoiced, for it was time for her grand reawakening, but she had to move with caution. Weakened in body and mind, Sha'Bolique could not stand against all the forces marshaled against one another should they sense her awakening. Sha'Bolique must remain cautious as her black viscous body rose through the corrupted ground, rotted by the blood of her diseased followers.



Renee was well suited to physical conflict. Her ferocity matched only by her skill coupled with the desire to protect her unborn child. Merely a fetus, already the child exerted an unconscious will of its own, twisting the reality and energies around its mother to aid in its survival. Massive blasts leveled against Renee had no effect due to deflection or absorption of the terrible energies, all happening without thought, summoned by the new life forming within her. Renee pressed her physical advantage, while the Lord she fought struggled to wage a mental war, attempting to erode her sense of self and ultimately reduce her to a mindless shell. But even there, the mighty Lord faced unimaginable resistance.



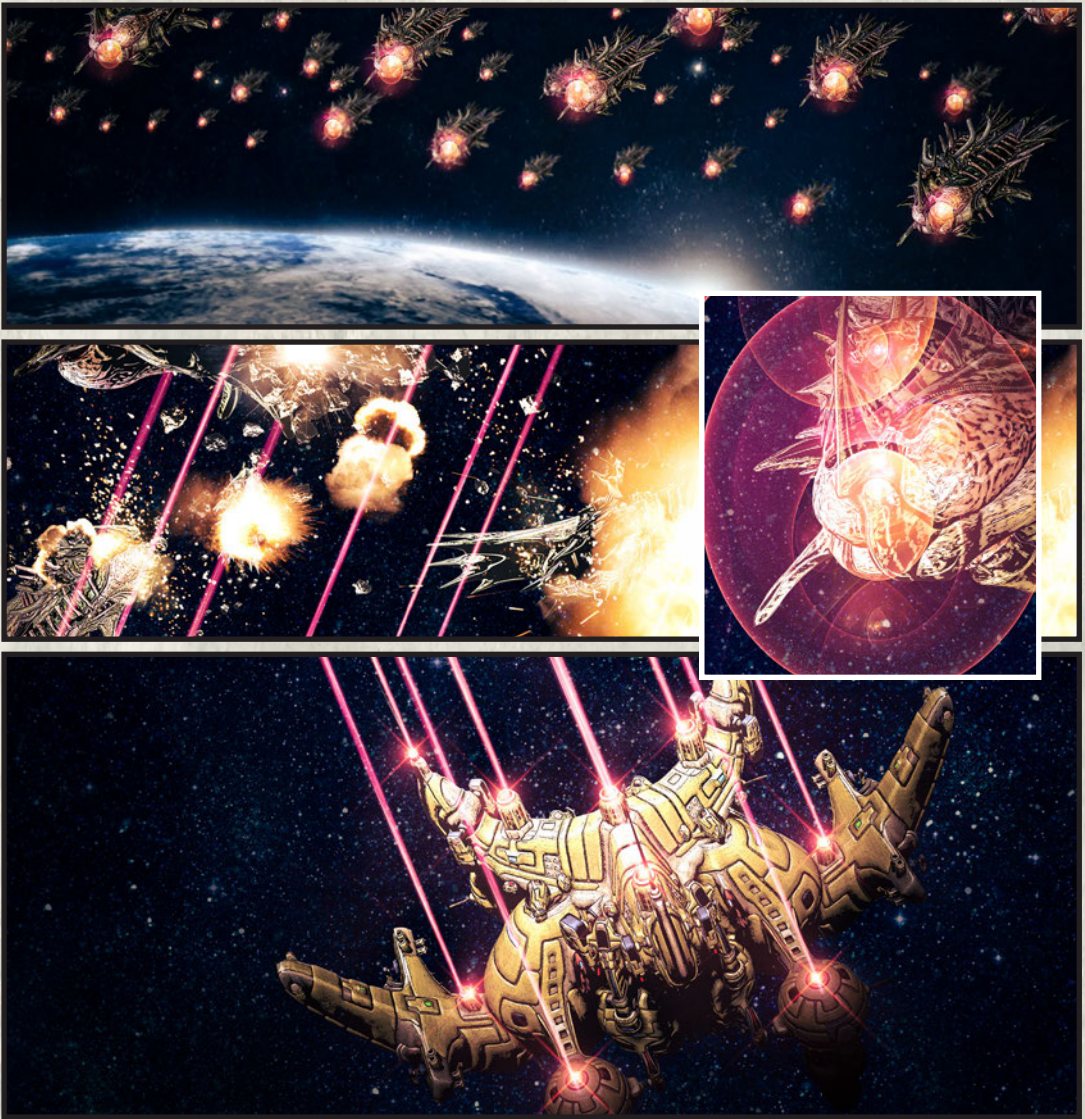
Gabriel tired of the mental battleground he fought the Lords upon. An entire existence lived in the fluid, ever changing physicality created a being at home with the ever-shifting battlefield of the mind. Generating his swords once more, Gabriel engaged the enemy on the physical front as well as the mind. The Lords power proved to be every bit a match, however, only ensuring the destruction of the alien vessel.

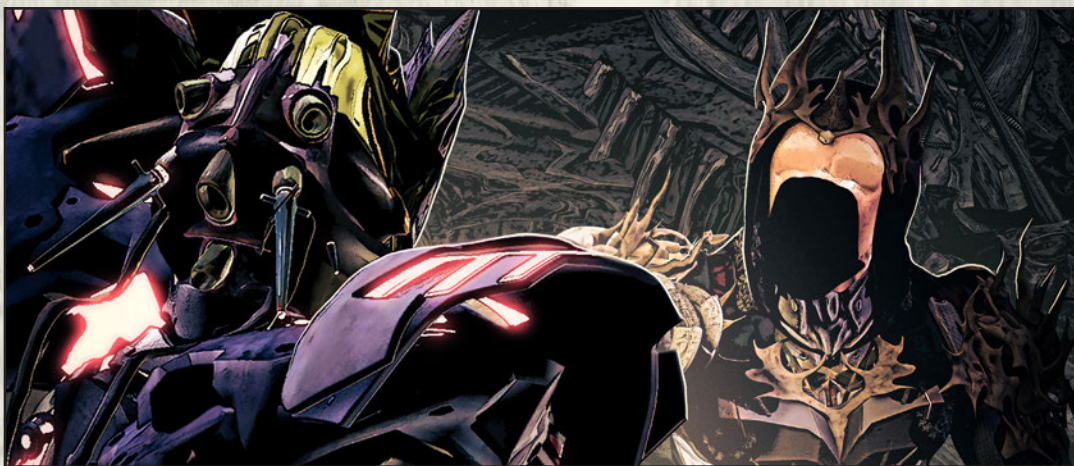
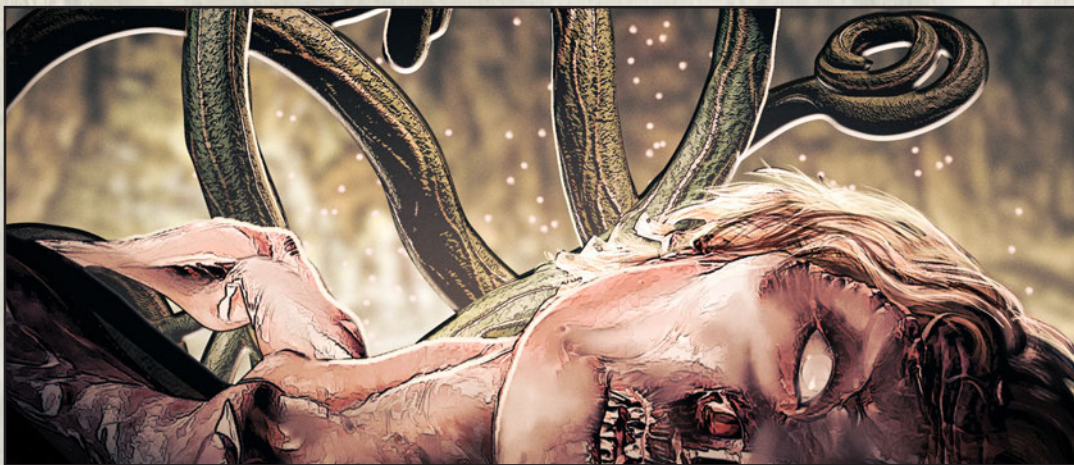
As the forces of the Pax Continuum crumbled before the might of the great servitors, humanity knew only fear and hopelessness as vast resources and weaponry were swept aside within moments signaling the end of humankind.



Great weapons of the Lords targeted the Earth, preparing to eradicate this troublesome race. As the weapon charged and prepared to fire, an enormous burst of energy tore through the servitor forces. The Templar city ship had returned unleashing terrifying destruction on all that threatened humanity. Immune to the effects of the Lords and the madness they brought with them, the Templar weaponry proved exceedingly effective in combat.

The Templar arrival caused enormous distraction amongst the Lords of Instrumentality. Seizing on the moment, Gabriel and Renee pressed their advantage, weakening the Lords hold on their modified servitor bodies. The weakness signaled Sha'Bolique of a new opportunity. Drawing on what energies she yet retained, Sha'Bolique began drawing in the energy of the Lords as it stretched from one end of the cosmos to the other, fueling their bodies no more. Lacking the power for a full resurrection, Sha'Bolique merely smiled, as she knew it would only be a matter of time before all would remember her name.





Gabriel swung his swords, decapitating the two Lords before him, severing the connection to their actual sleeping forms. The backlash was catastrophic causing untold damage all throughout existence as the energies returned to their source. Renee seized on the moment, forcing her clawed hand through the chest of the last Lord, crushing the connection as well. In a spiral of liquid flame, the twisted, angular ship exploded, signaling the end of horror, at least for now.



Most humans and refugees affected by the Lords of Instrumentality never regained sanity, but ceased their violence and fell into a near vegetative state. The Templar city ship moved into the orbit of Earth offering assistance to all in need.

Near the Jupiter Rift, however, two lone figures remained. Torn between the horror at nearly losing themselves to the power they wielded and the joy of victory, Gabriel and Renee merely held one another. Their senses warned them of the rival threats still circling them as predators to prey, but for the moment, they had won and rejoiced.



CHAPTER 8

CHAPTER 8

Alhana lay comatose while the whole of humanity attempted to recover from the near extinction level attack. Over one billion humans and refugees remained catatonic from the Lords of Instrumentality's touch, with potentially a billion more dead and dying. The arrival of the Templars added stability while the Pax Continuum struggled with relief efforts. Gabriel and Renee played intermediary between the various governmental groups, Templars, and refugees. Everyone breathed a massive sigh of relief that the Lords of Instrumentality no longer could be detected on this or the other side of the Jupiter Rift. None was aware of the slow growing darkness beneath the red sands of Mars.

Renee sat with her mother as often as possible during the reconstruction. Many times, she thought about trying to use her power to heal her mother, but the inescapable truth was that she might do catastrophic harm too. She had no experience using her abilities in such a way, and she was not about to start experimenting on innocent victims of the Lords. Still, the temptation was there, and she could not help but wonder what she might be capable of. Renee's mother had another issue, that of her unique biology. In truth, the doctors had no clue what caused the coma, but then again, she was a woman in her late 70's, but with the physicality of 45, everything about her currently defied modern medicine.

Gabriel met with top security officers of the Pax Continuum as well as the current leader of the Templars, a female named Rowan. While gaining a vast amount of knowledge in the latest attack, the monumental damage would make a quick recovery nearly impossible. Templars appeared to be the only one's immune to the madness the Lords of Instrumentality spread. Not even cyborgs within the Pax Continuum had the immunity needed, leading many to suspect the source of the Templar tech being the reason they withstood the attack.

All in the room came to the same horrifying conclusion in regards to the Lords; they would return and with more firepower, meaning humanity would not stand a chance, even if the Templars could survive. Gabriel was hesitant to speak up, because of the consequences of his idea. Ultimately, he had no other choice as the lives of billions were at stake. Gabriel and the Templars must seek out the Lords and bring the war to them while Renee remained behind to aid in Earth's defense. The proposal had few fans but even fewer alternatives existed. The Templars set about preparing the great weapon of Europa to go to war.

The Yellow King sat upon his throne surveying his handiwork, the complete subjugation of hundreds of worlds, all performing for his twisted delight. Hastur enjoyed this three-dimensional realm greatly, with all his manipulations and machinations. Never fully invested in a return to Affine space, Hastur was more motivated to play the fallen Lords against one another with only one that ever actually rivaled the Yellow Kings power.



The last time Hastur and Sha'Bolique fought, both their physical forms were destroyed, reducing their might to a mere fraction, as they're essence remained trapped between realms, anchored to two distant worlds until Hastur found freedom. Eventually, with freedom came a new form and with it, Hastur's great power began to return. Now the Great Old One sat in a kingdom of his creation.

Entire worlds ripped from their orbit now cobbled together in a vast web of decay and rot hung in space as a realm of pain. The inhabitants of the decaying worlds remained as undead servants, unable to move on or have free will of their own. The vibrations felt throughout Hastur's kingdom caused tremendous quakes crippling many of the walking undead, adding to their eternal misery. Hastur sensed the awakening of his rival and the rage that filled him erupted across his kingdom. It was time, Hastur now thought, to end Sha'Bolique before her power could grow. It was time to return to his one-time prison. It was time to go back to Earth.

Renee and Gabriel embraced passionately, knowing their time together would be short. Gabriel would leave with the Templars in the morning to find the Lords of Instrumentality, heading off another attack capable of wiping out humanity. Renee did not want to stay behind but knew better than to risk her pregnancy once more. The risk to mankind, leaving them without protection, was another risk they could not take. The love Gabriel and Renee shared grew with every day, making their parting all the more painful.

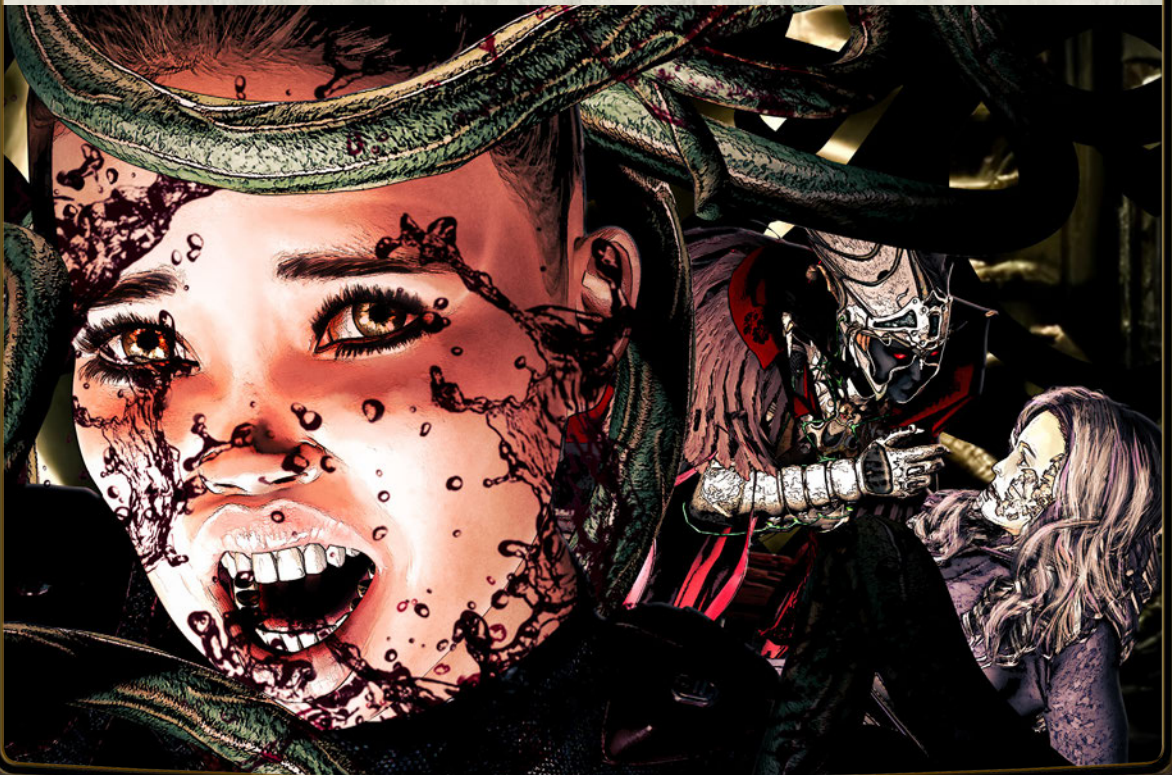
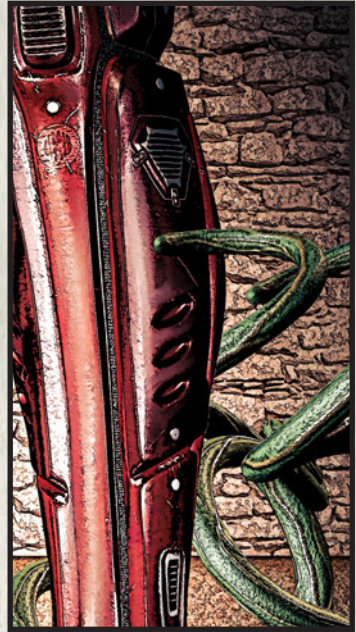
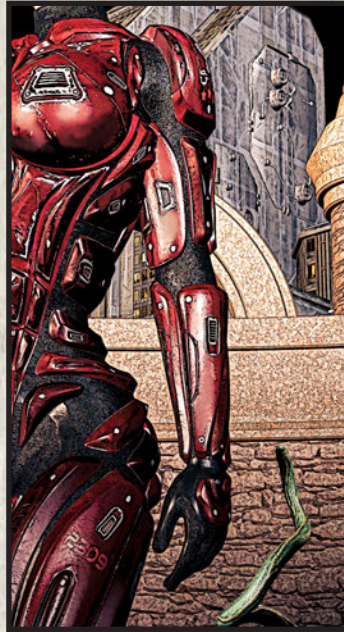
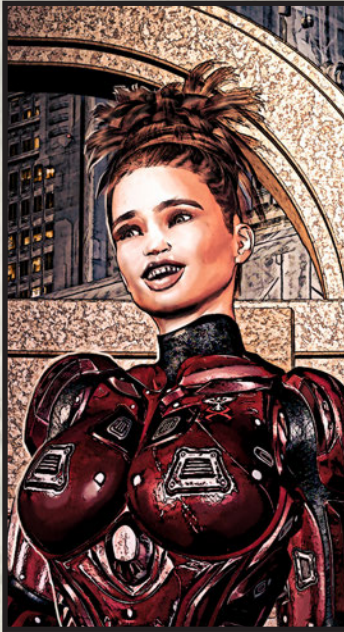
Alhana's health worsened along with many of those affected by the Lords, their deteriorating health showing no sign of abatement. Even Templar technology was unable to find a cure much less a cause for the illness.

As Gabriel, aboard the Templar ship moved into orbit around Europa, Renee determined there was no point in waiting. Gabriel knew through their shared connection what Renee was about to do, but he also stood by the wishes of the woman he loved and did not join her or interfere. If something went wrong as Renee tried to heal her mother, she did not want anyone else to blame. Gabriel decided to focus instead on the monumental change to the entire solar system that he and the Templars were about to make.

Within Europa, beneath her icy shell, lay a vessel of monumental size and power. Created millennia ago by the Lords of Cerebral Ecology as one of many weapons against their enemies, the Lords of Instrumentality, this vessel lay dormant, awaiting summoning by its masters. The source of all the great Templar advancements, the ancient ship now awoke through Gabriel's power. The bond with Affine space told him much, and with his connection, he reached out to Europa. The large sheets of ice and rock cracked producing enormous geysers of water as the moon split into large pieces. The ancient vessel, now dubbed Europa, freed its self from the icy tomb and now floated before the Templar city ship. As the Templar's ship docked with the behemoth, siphons saved much of the free-floating water, reclaiming it for the ship. It was time to learn the secrets of Europa and fast if there was any hope in cutting off any advancement by the Lords of Instrumentality.

As the Templars vessel left the solar system, Renee stood above her mother, focusing on one word, "heal". Expanding her aura to encompass her mother, Renee channeled an increasing amount of energy into Alhana's body. At first, there appeared to be little change other than a quickening of Alhana's pulse, but gradually the color began to return to her skin. Cuts and even old scars began to heal, completely revitalizing her until finally, her eyes opened. Overcome with joy, Renee nearly killed Alhana with an enormous hug as the two women sobbed with joy. Gabriel could sense the happiness, and he smiled, though he knew even greater challenges still lay ahead.

The Pax Continuum focused much of its resources reconstructing the defenses around Earth and the Jupiter Rift, leaving a large number of citizens to care for themselves when essential services remained crippled. The result on Mars was a perfect opportunity for Sha'Bolique to grow. Between the millions dead or dying, millions more continued to vanish. Moving through the core of Mars, Sha'Bolique reached up through the crust pulling new victims down into the soil, consuming them and adding to her power. Some noticed the disappearances and did all they could to draw attention to ongoing vanishings, but the lack of resources and continuous strife meant the warnings went unheard. Sha'Bolique remained very pleased indeed.



EXCERPT FROM THE TOME OF ENTRICHAN, FIRST AMONG
SERVITORS, GIFTED TO GABRIEL BY FE'TANG.

As first among the faithful, it falls to me to record the great works of our masters, the Lords of Instrumentality, all powerful may they remain. These records will aid in the conversion of many new servitors to the will and ways of our Lords.

Many are the Great Old Ones, siblings of our all-powerful Lords. Many rivalries have grown between these ancient beings, often interfering in the great works of our masters. Two such beings, named only in this Tome and never to be uttered aloud, Hastur and Sha'bolique. Hastur, the Yellow King, has caused many of the great ones to war amongst themselves. Goading and beguiling his way through the cosmos, the Yellow King's only desire is to cause chaos among his brethren and the lesser beings scattered about as well. Sha'bolique however is a much simpler creature to understand. Known as the Great Hunger, the All-Devourer, Sha'bolique only seeks to consume. Entire worlds have vanished, consumed by her unending hunger; be they living worlds or not makes no difference to the likes of her. Rumor of others with her hunger exist, but ultimately the Universe can only tolerate one such as her, making her all the more terrifying as her hunger has engulfed her own siblings adding to her tremendous power.

Most of the Great Old Ones sought to avoid contact with the Great Hunger, all save for Hastur. An equally greedy creature, Hastur sought to add Sha'Bolique's great power to his own. The two ancient beings engaged in an all-consuming war for centuries, stalemated by their insatiable desire for more. Eventually it was decided by our great lords that this rivalry could go no further. Both Sha'bolique and Hastur had squandered much of their energies engaged in battle, making the actions of our lords all the easier. Through the great Affine, the Lords of Instrumentality siphoned off much of the energy bled out by the warring duo. Eventually enough power was amassed that Sha'bolique and Hastur could be contained deep within planetary bodies, never to rise again.

We record these great acts as testament to the unending power of those we serve and to remember the secret places of our Lords, where their enemies slumber but may yet still reawaken. It is the duty of the Servitors to ever be vigilant and to pave the way for greater and greater tribute. May the great Azathoth bless our lords with his divine power and may the holy shards ever rain down upon our great lords!



CHAPTER 9

CHAPTER 9

The Templar ship, Europa, traveled at incredible speeds as it retraced the path of destruction originally found by the Templars. Gabriel could sense the massive power that dwelled before them and so focused every ounce of his own considerable might into strengthening his mind and body for the battle to come. The world ship, now fully activated by Gabriel, served the Templars and provided tremendous boosts in technology and weaponry. If they were able to survive the fight, the technological achievements that could be unlocked would boost humanity to undreamt of heights. Unfortunately for the Templars, they all knew just how powerful the Lords of Instrumentality were when only a portion stood against the Templars. How much more terrifying would it be to face them in their seats of power?

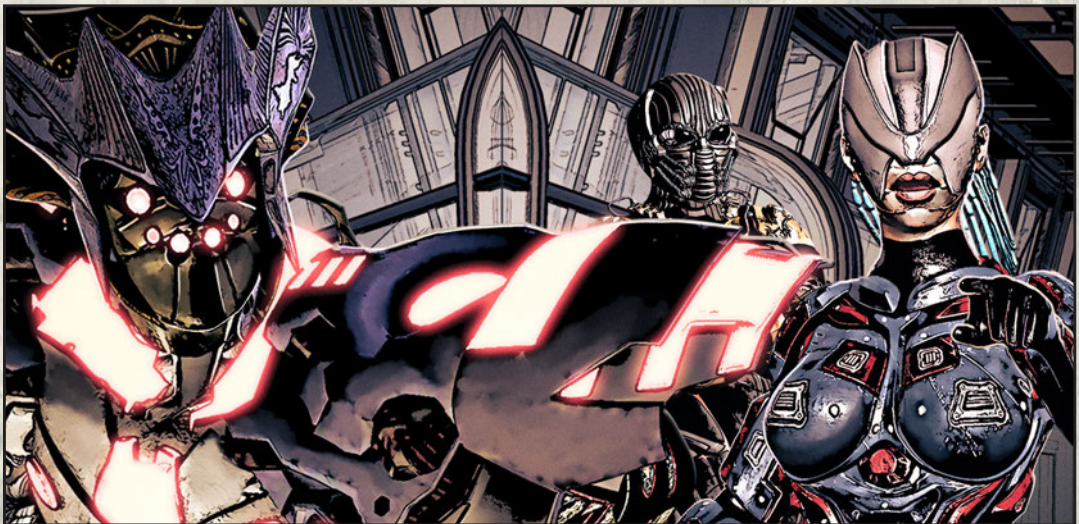


Gabriel meditated, and as he did, he felt his connection to Renee and their unborn child grow faint. With the nature of Affine space as a two-dimensional construct, distance should be meaningless which warned Gabriel of outside influence. The power to disrupt their connection was great indeed, but the source was impossible to detect. All Gabriel could do was reassure Renee that he was ready and not intending to abandon her. Renee could only hope for the best, as her time revolved around healing those damaged by the Lords.

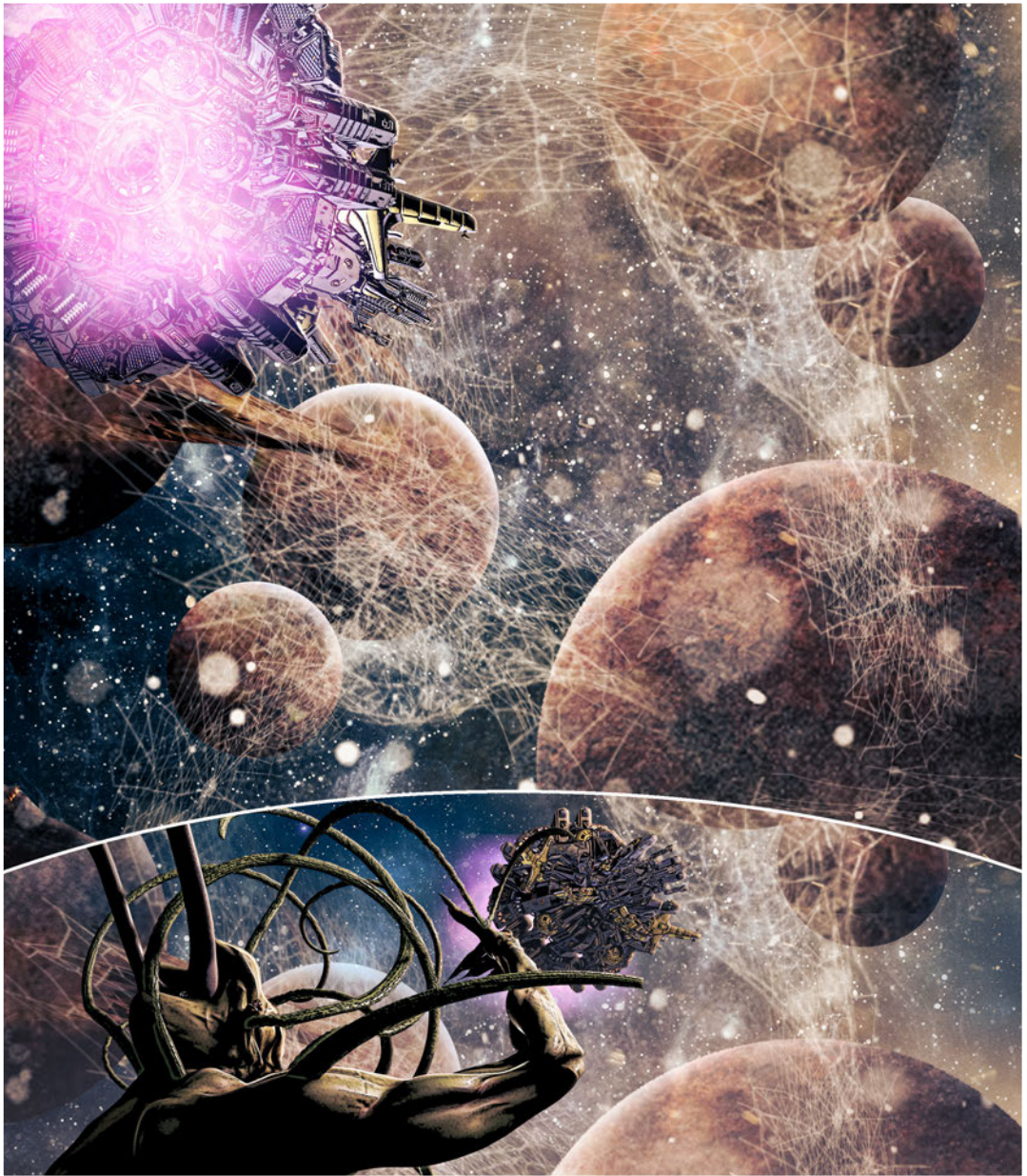
Each victim had a different trauma making the healing much more challenging than healing Renee's mother had been. Alhana's augmented body could aid in the process where the average human had no such advantage. The hours it took to heal each individual was tedious, but with each family reunited, Renee felt tremendous satisfaction, though there was a hidden cost. Renee found herself plagued by nightly horrors the likes of which she could hardly describe. A growing sense of dread as if even her unborn baby tried desperately to warn Renee of an unknown threat, slithering in the dark as it prepared to strike. The unnerving nature of the dreams wore on her, making her lose focus and causing tremendous stress.

World after dead world passed by as the Templar ship continued its search for the Lords of Instrumentality. The extraordinary loss of life spread throughout the Universe with only the decaying remains of their once great civilizations left behind to mark their passing was almost too much to bare. The now barren worlds all showed the same signs of devastation leading in a clear path. No world, no civilization lay untouched on this road of holocaust. Gabriel sensed the growing opposing force as they neared.

What the Templars came upon was difficult for any of them to comprehend as even Gabriel found himself consumed by the horror of it all. Entire planets existed side by side, connected by strands as if they were flies trapped in an enormous spider web. The world's looked gray and drained of life but defying expectations, a semblance of life remained throughout the vast web of decay.

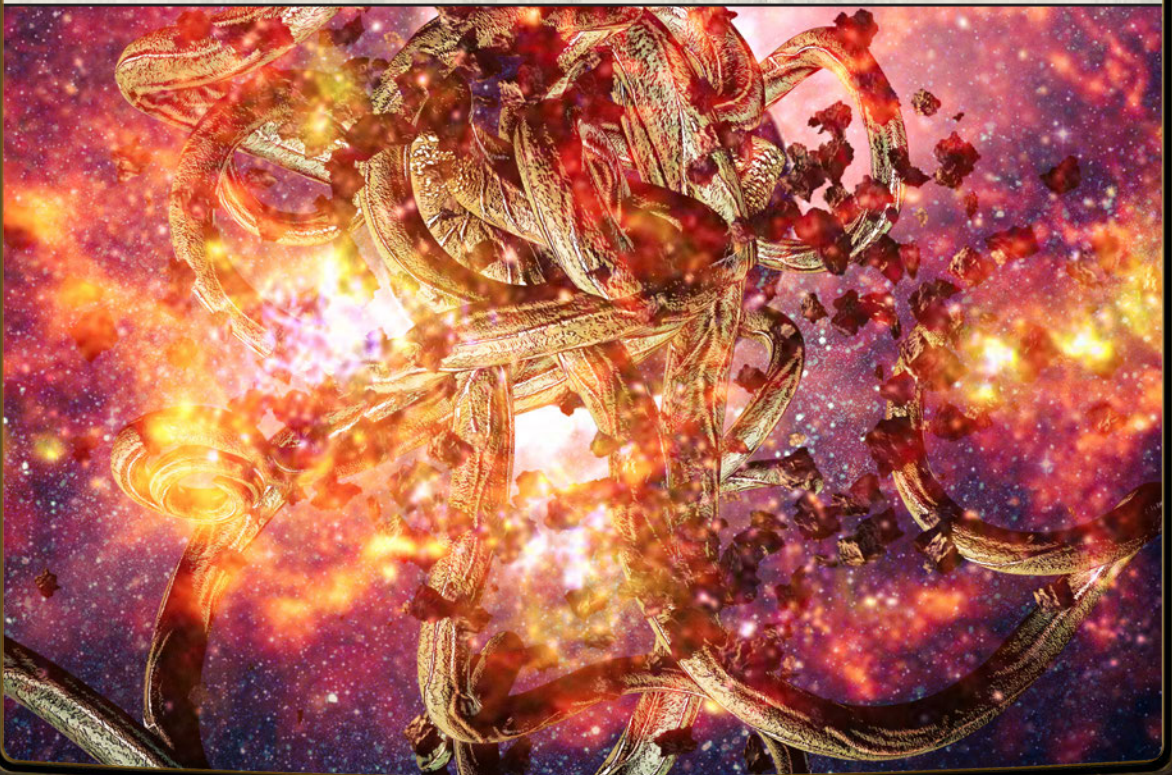
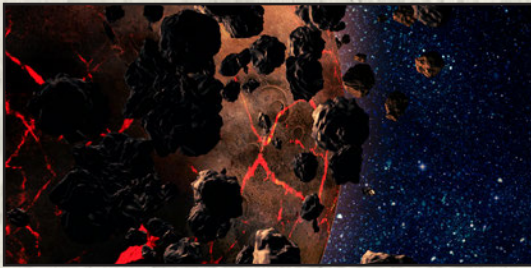


All strands pulled back to a central planetoid, cavernous and toxic to all life. Vast oceans of dust and rock orbited the planets and twisted between the strands adding to the surreal vista, imparting an ever-growing sense of dread. Gabriel chose to go on ahead when he realized what he had felt was not the power of the Lords Of Instrumentality, but rather something else, something possibly far more dangerous. The Templars observed and studied the strange web worlds, monitoring their warped and twisted denizens for signs of attack. Gabriel gave one last warning just before venturing out, that if he gave the signal, they must return to earth immediately and without him if necessary. Out in these vast reaches of space, gods and monsters roamed freely while mere mortals were ground under and discarded as refuse, lost to their insignificance in an ocean of universal indifference.



Renee felt concern over the disruption of her connection with Gabriel. Her mother did her best to console Renee, but Alhana knew there were no words adequate to speak. Alhana had no way of knowing what awaited the Templars. What the Templars had already faced nearly proved too much. Still, Alhana tried to comfort her daughter as much as she could, knowing the process of healing all those affected by the lords continued to take a toll on Renee and her unborn baby. Dealing with the reconstruction and security of the Pax Continuum consumed all other time Alhana had.

As she sat down at her desk against doctors' orders - doctors that still had no clue about her illness or recovery - Alhana skimmed over the many security briefings before her. One in particular caught her eye as a growing number of citizens continued to vanish from the face of Mars. With most interplanetary travel halted, the growing fear was that a suicide cult or some other form of monstrous behavior affecting the populace was taking root once more. As she was about to call a staff meeting, alarms interrupted Alhana while security and numerous officials either burst into her office or bombarded her telecommunications. An extinction level disaster was under way on the planet Mars, and no one knew the cause.



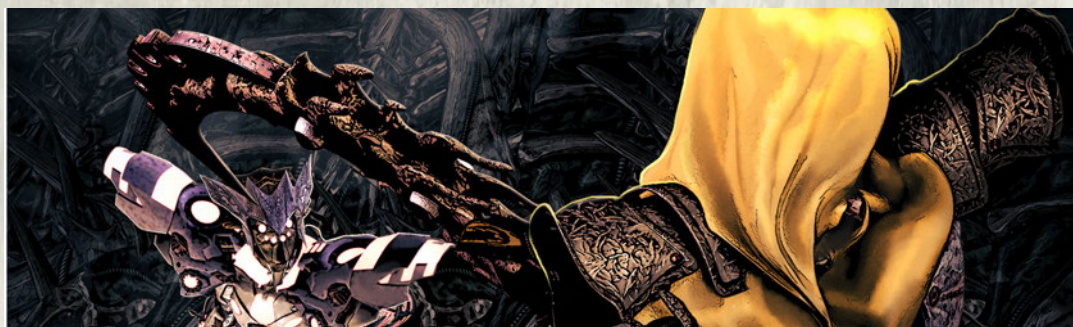
Viewed from the safety of orbit, satellites relayed the horrific images of Mars as the planet began splitting apart as if rent from within by some enormous parasite. What started moments ago as minor quakes had escalated to this global disaster with no warning or time to prepare. Large sections of the planet tore free; some consumed in molten flames while others attempted to drift away as if in some failed attempt to flee. As the destruction continued, several spectators in the Pax Continuum cabinet noticed an odd occurrence, calling attention to black tendril-like shapes emerging through the cracks.

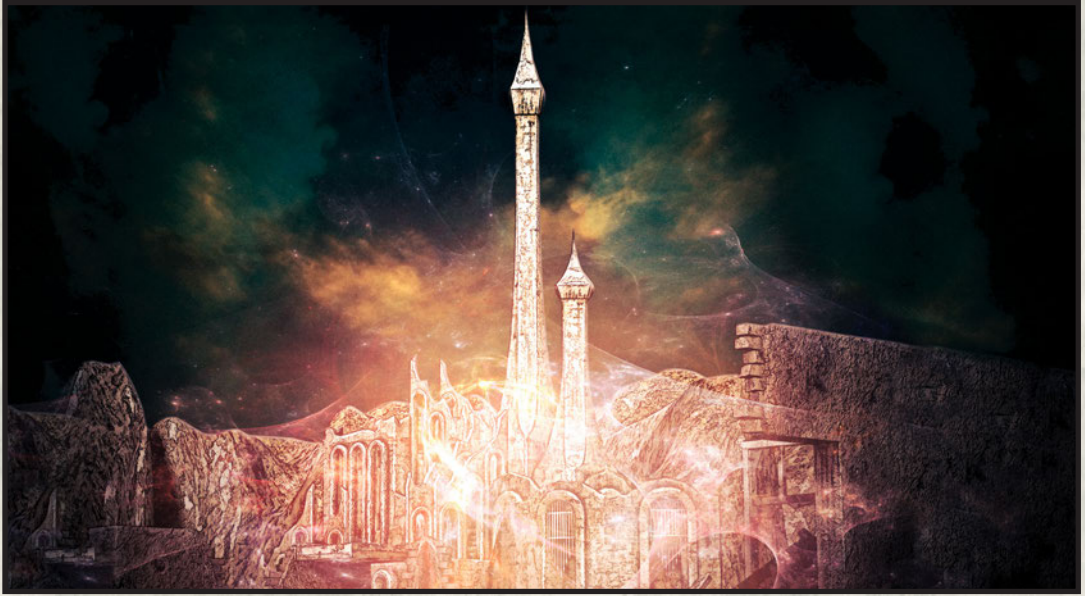


Local gravity began to suffer massive disruptions, as the fractured planet now seemed drawn within; collapsing in on its self as if it were a star in its final death throws. With the implosion nearing its completion, only a vomitus mass of ink-like forms remained, barely visible except for where it blocked out the stars themselves. Renee felt the whole transformation and reeled in pain from the overwhelming sensation of energies and information now forcing its way into her. The black death that awaited Renee probed the system with strange energies as she sought out the only challenge to her power within reach. Once Sha'Bolique finished this new threat, only Hastur would stand in her way.



Gabriel walked through a long cavernous passage, gray and covered in a strange web-like structure, hanging from the walls and ceiling. In fact, the entirety of Gabriel's surroundings seemed to signify decay, leaving Gabriel with a strange sense of rage at the pure waste of it all. Entire worlds suspended in a web of death to honor a thing with no compassion or purpose other than destruction. Gabriel sensed what awaited him and through his connection with Affine space, he saw the truth of their connection.





Reborn to this reality through Gabriel's grandfather and his colleagues, given a new form and transportation by the greedy, selfish decedents of that initial group, now, Gabriel stood in the hall of the Yellow King, and on its throne, Hastur awaited Gabriel with keen interest.

"It has been a long time, New Lord. Not since our mutual rebirth so many years ago, have our paths crossed. We never met properly, both caught up in the moment as it were. I am the Yellow King, Hastur, and this is my empire". Hastur spoke with a chilling voice, all the while psychic tendrils probed at Gabriel's defenses looking for weaknesses, gently testing his perception.

"I remember it well, much has changed since then. Why are you returning to earth? We sought the Lords of Instrumentality who have threatened humanities existence. Instead we find you, headed in the same direction, back to Earth." Gabriel's defenses held, and he returned the favor. Their collective power enough to shatter entire galaxies if fully realized.



“The Lords of Instrumentality flee as the lesser creatures that they are. You need not worry about them, at least for the time being. As for Earth, I have no interest in your puny humanity. In fact, I rather enjoyed playing with them, it’s a shame they will all be consumed.”

Gabriel felt the malevolent glee radiating off the monster that sat before him. Again, he reached out through Affine space to Renee but found no reply.

“If you have no cares for humanity and the Lords are in retreat, then what threatens to consume Earth now?”

“You dare make demands of me? Paltry Lord of insignificance, can you not sense what has awakened? My great rival, the darkness that consumes all, Sha’Bolique. She has awakened and will feast on all she finds, at least until she faces me once more.”

Gabriel thought for a second then presented an opportunity. “If you oppose this Sha’Bolique, why not fight with us? We can help you...”

The laughter heard throughout the Yellow Kings kingdom came from no form ever mistaken as human, sounding like the crackling sound of evil and putrescence encapsulating pure madness and indifference. “That, my naive Lord, is not how a rivalry as old as ours will be settled. No, in fact I am unable to allow you to return, as you shall help me in my fight, only not as you suspect.”

Hastur extended his power out towards Gabriel attempting to absorb the Lord as Gabriel had absorbed the Shards. Gabriel resisted, his defenses holding as the entire kingdom shook with the reverberations of their battle and yet neither one had moved a muscle.



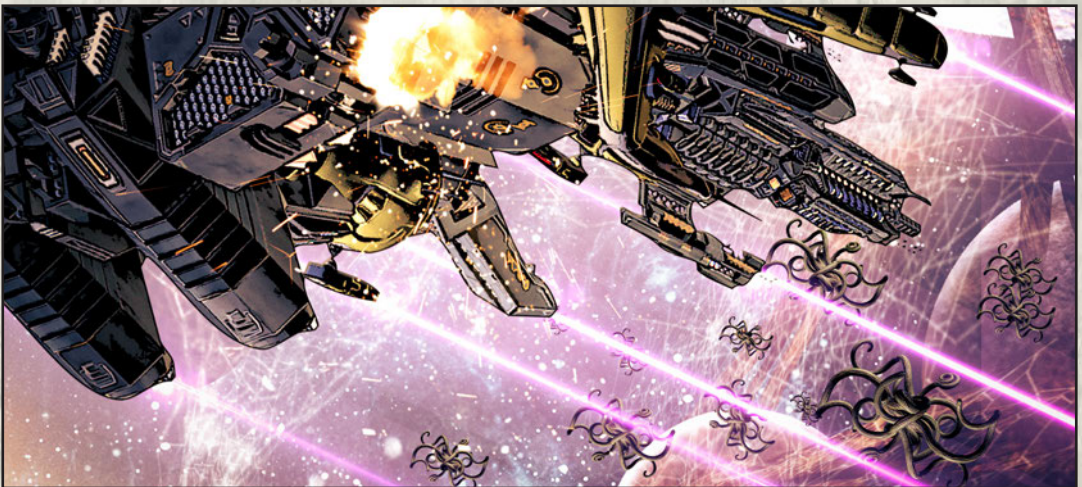
The Yellow King let out a boisterous bellow and stood, shaking the dust of a century off his tattered robes. As he approached Gabriel, Hastur signaled the hordes of followers to descend on the Templar ship. Gabriel, unaware of the fight starting outside, prepared for the battle within the chamber, drawing his two swords, a manifestation of his power given form. Hastur drew a blade as well, intent on destroying the upstart Lord and crushing him under his heel.



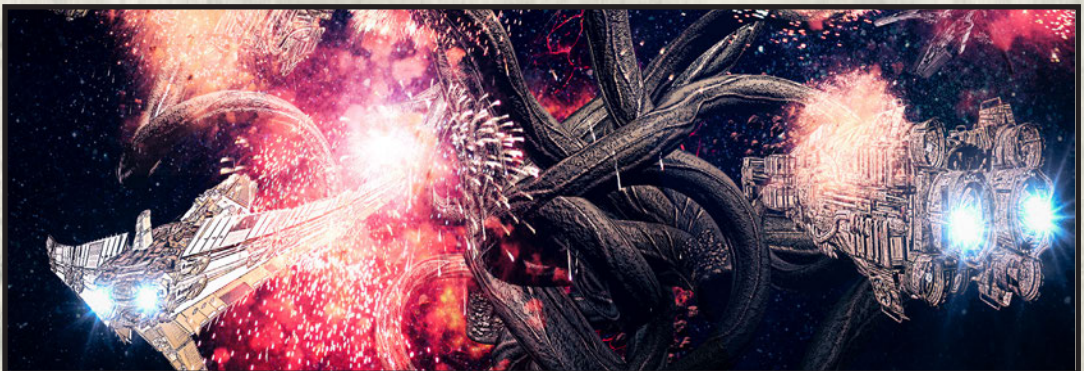
The Templar ship had already begun to withdraw when the vibrations began causing structural collapse throughout the web. As the world-ship retreated, hordes of augmented creatures swarmed the vessel, blasting away with unheard of power, channeled from Hastur himself. The Templar defenses stood strong bolstered with the technology of the Lords of Cerebral Ecology, the former masters of their grand vessel.



The battle would easily have been the Templars to win had the web world not contained so many millions of slaves. The sheer numbers were enough to sway the battle, threatening to consume the vessel and all aboard.



Sha'Bolique writhed in space, dwarfing moons and satellites, monstrous in size and power. An ebony Goddess of pure malevolence, wrapped in inky tendrils reaching out to the stars. The defenses still standing were brought on-line but failed even to target the monstrosity while manual control and targeting only illuminated the hopelessness of the situation as no power that could be brought to bear even seemed to register with the behemoth.



Renee had already taken flight, ready to confront the darkness that floated before her. Renee's considerable power, reinforced by a desire to protect the lives around her and the one life growing within her spurred her on in her attack. Words lacked all meaning, as Sha'Bolique knew nothing of care, compassion, or want. A creature of pure consumption, the only instinct the terrible force possessed was a cry for more. Renee utilized every ounce of her energy to repel the beast. Attacks came in the form of psychic assault as well as a draining of energy and life force itself. Renee felt drawn into the blackness and panic rose, as she feared her impotence before this Great Old One.



Gabriel's blades met Hastur's own in midair, resulting in an explosion of energy destroying the entire castle the Yellow King had constructed. Their blows leveled entire worlds in the web-like structure, reducing the ruined worlds to dust. The battle tore through planes of existence, destroying entire swaths of reality, the only fault being the location within the multiverse. The Templar ship made its break as Hastur drained his slaves of what little power he had given them. The Templar ship raced back to earth as fast as possible, traveling towards the Jupiter Rift, a galaxy from Earth, yet only moments away traveling through the Rift.





Hastur braced for every blow as did Gabriel, each one proving to be nearly as powerful as the other. Gabriel exceeded any skill Hastur possessed in physical combat yet the psychic realm remained one of Hastur's domain. With every advantage gained a new disadvantage appeared, prolonging the battle until the entire structure of the web-worlds collapsed into plasma, obliterated forever. Whole solar systems consumed in the horrific battle channeled as fuel for their war. The Lords of Instrumentality fled the galaxy they had spent so much time warping for their own purposes, fleeing to neighboring clusters as all the Great Old One's felt the terrible tremors of the battle. These tremors gave Renee her one chance to win.



Sha'Bolique became distracted as the battle taking place a galaxy away sent shock waves through even Affine space. Renee felt Sha'Bolique's grip loosen, sparking an enormous will to survive. Channeling her massive power reserves, Renee unleashed a torrent of energy upon Sha'Bolique, forcing her to withdraw.

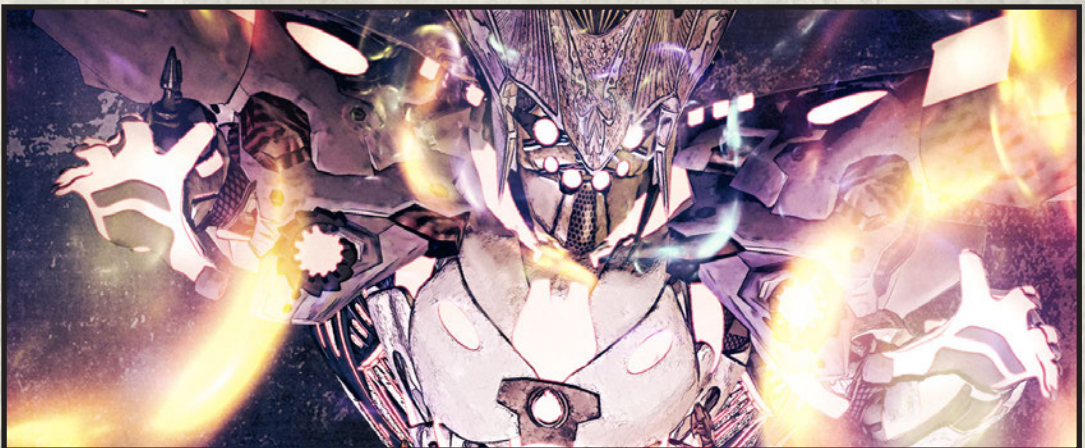


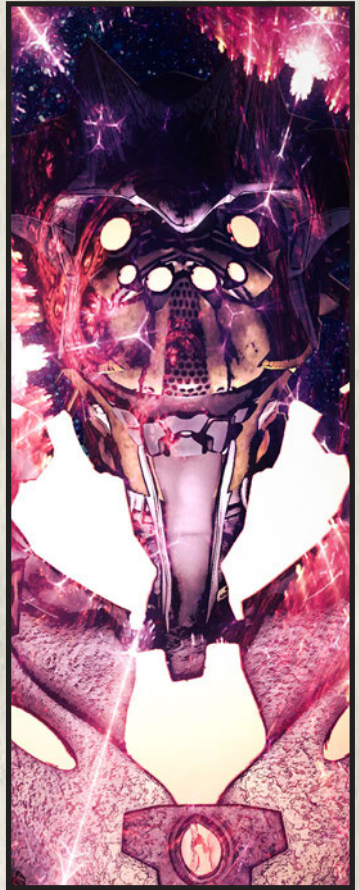
Even the life inside Renee, the unborn baby connected to unlimited knowledge and power through Affine space helped guide its mother's hand, empowering the impossible to happen. Sha'Bolique knew pain for the first time in eons. Drained of energy and exhausted by pain, the Great Old One had only one option, the return to its deep slumber. Drawing in all the remnants of Mars and other debris, Sha'Bolique collapsed into a planetoid half the size of Mars but with nearly twice its density. The black diamond planetoid resumed its orbit as Sha'Bolique found herself driven once more from our reality and into the deep slumber of the Old Ones.

Renee flew with incredible speed back to Earth, to her home, as the exercise of power fed the child inside her, bringing the baby fully to term. It was time to deliver, and there was no stopping the birth of this new Lord.

Gabriel's fight with Hastur became a game of chess, as each opponent struggled to counter the others moves. Every ounce of their considerable being applied to this battle leaving nothing behind. In the end, a victor did emerge as a single, unthinkable move proved too much to counter. As Hastur unleashed his most terrifying blast of destruction that he could muster, Gabriel withdrew all of his power. Standing firm in the storm, Gabriel focused every ounce of the energy released into his being, extending even to Hastur himself, trapping Hastur in his attempt to overpower Gabriel, unable to halt the explosion of energy. Gabriel channeled the force into the depths of his being and found reserves he never knew possible.

Hastur fought to pull back, screaming his rage and disbelief. Never capable of actual death this ancient being had forgotten how easily energy could be absorbed. Merging his power into Gabriel, the being Hastur ceased to exist as a blinding light of creation and destruction warped out in all directions consuming nearly the entire galaxy in an incredible inferno.





The silence in Affine space was almost deafening when compared to the cacophony released moments prior. All was silent, and while something of the two warring powers must survive, none connected to Affine space could find the victor. Some new being existed in the depths of space, but was it Hastur or Gabriel given new form? Only time would tell.

PAX CONTINUUM SECURITY BRIEFING REPORT

RE: GALACTIC COLLAPSE IN THE VIRGO SUPER CLUSTER

The Virgo Cluster is a cluster of galaxies in the constellation Virgo. Comprising approximately 1300 member galaxies, the cluster forms the heart of the larger Virgo Super-cluster, of which the Local Group (containing our Milky Way galaxy) is a member.

Within moments of the Templar ship Europa returning to near-earth orbit, a vast segment of the Virgo cluster lost illumination, plunging into darkness and signaling the eradication of countless stars. The energy needed to extinguish entire swaths of galaxies is incalculable at this time but given the telemetry of the returned Templar ship, the location of the exit point for the Jupiter Rift was in the vicinity of this galactic cluster. With the rift collapsed at this end, it's impossible to probe what remains of the sub-cluster, the entities known as "Hastur" or those that were enslaved by it.

The Templar known as Gabriel possessed incalculable power but for anything to survive the collapse of entire galaxies is beyond impossible, still Gabriel's counterpart, Renee, insists that his death would have been detected. As it stands, Gabriel is considered MIA and not expected to be recovered alive or in any other state.

Department of Planetary Security
Office of Internal Affairs



EPILOGUE

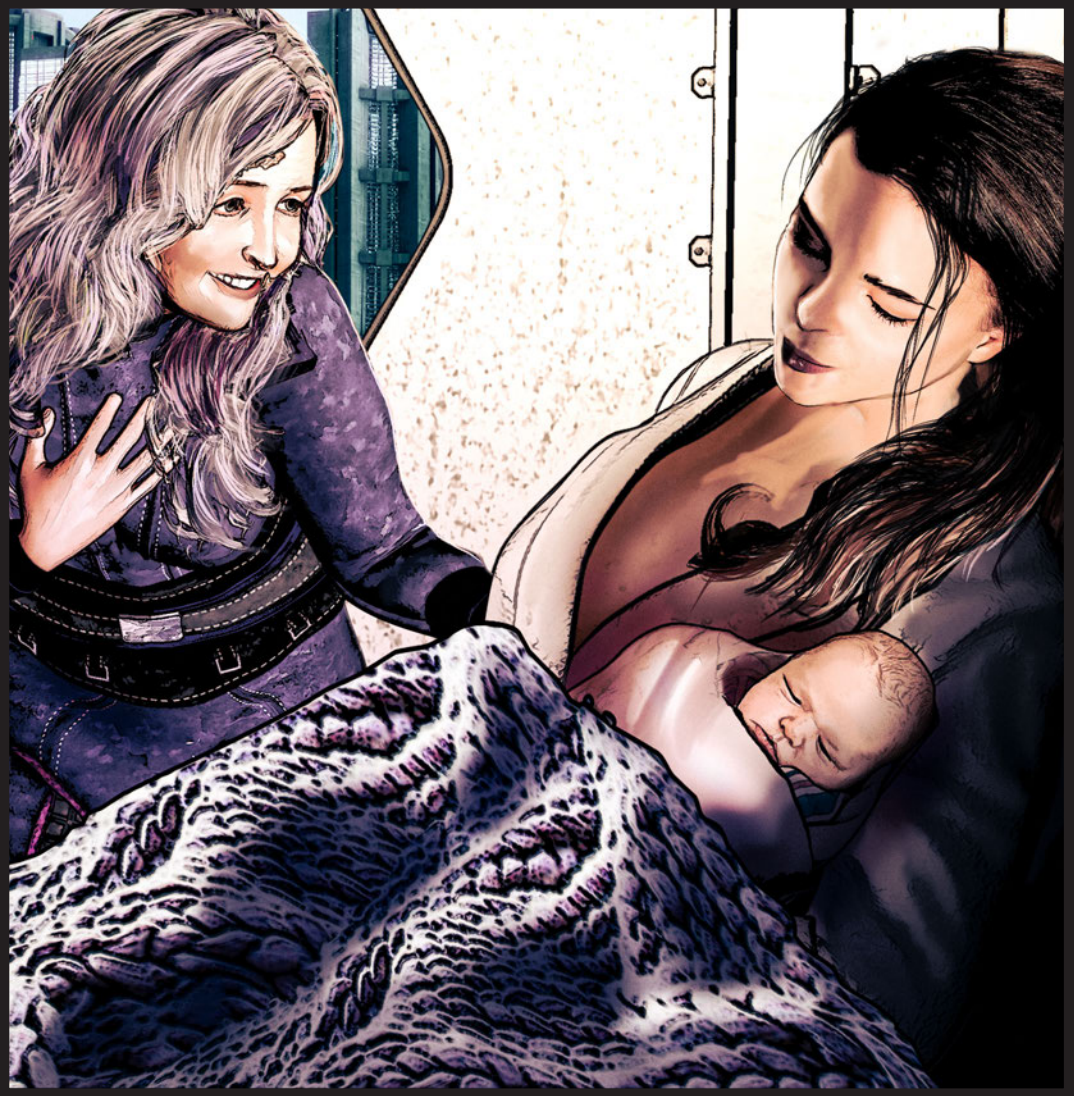
EPILOGUE



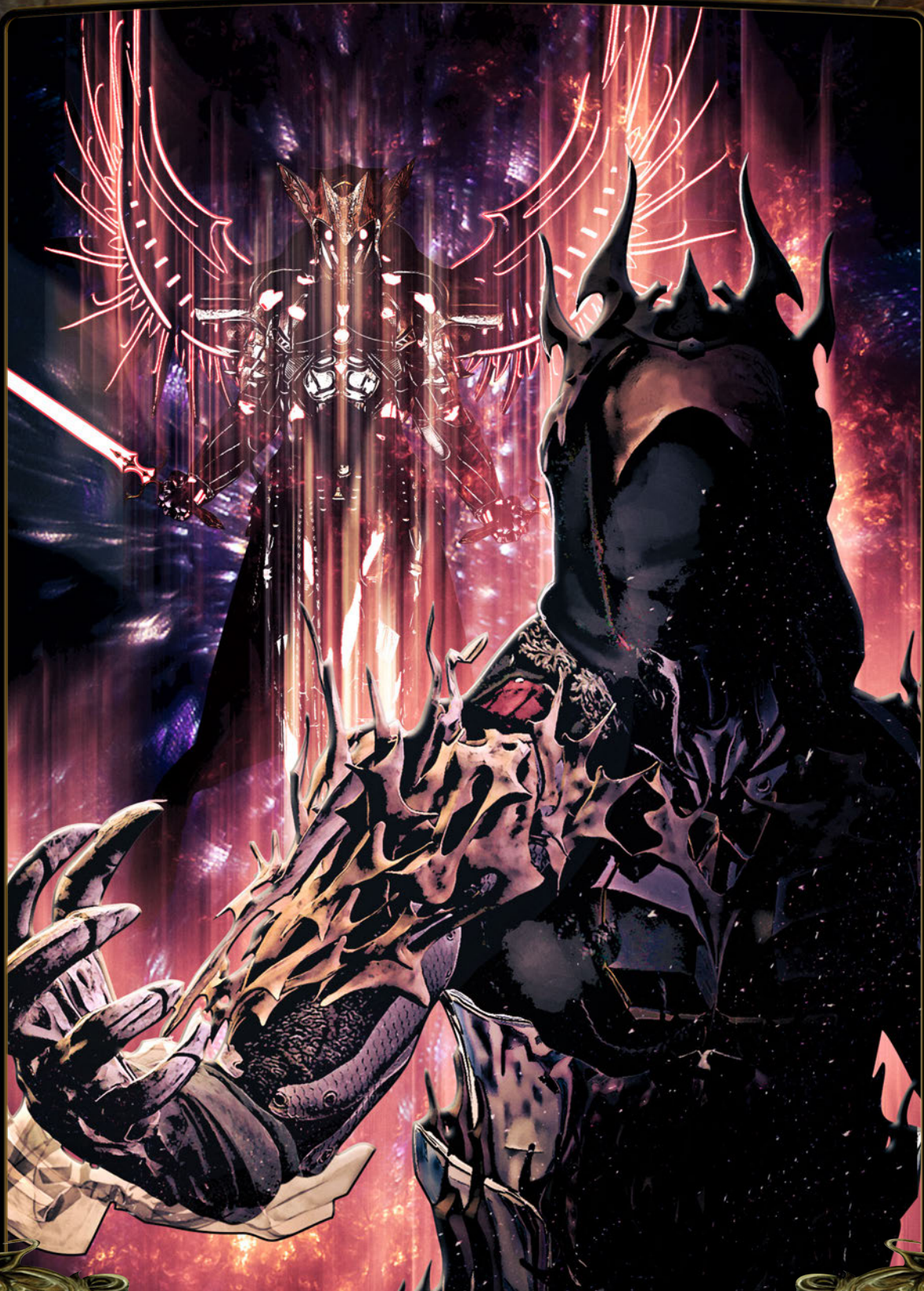
Humanity created a quarantine zone around the planetoid now dubbed Purgatory. Devoid of life, if any had the power to drop the cursed rock into the Sun surely, they would have, but even if Renee was able, she knew better than to tamper with the resting places of gods. The Jupiter Rift seemed to have closed after the release of energy in Gabriel's massive battle. Still, strange, exotic energies surrounded the area making it unstable. The returned Templars parked their world ship in orbit of the area to study and guard against any future intrusions.



Back on Earth, Alhana could only smile as her daughter lay in bed holding Alhana's granddaughter in her arms. Renee had not expected so early a birth, but to all concerned, the baby girl was beyond the picture of health and developing rapidly. Renee felt torn between happiness and grief, not knowing the fate of Gabriel. She knew she should have felt his death or life, but the absence of both could only mean something transformative had taken place. Her frustration at not knowing did find solace in acknowledging that transformation was not death, and therefore, she had hope.



Not all felt happiness at the uncertainty, however. Two great powers vanished from detection, an act that should be impossible to perform, something that deeply disturbed the Lords of Instrumentality. With their opposition removed, a great potential existed but if the power merely lay dormant, exposing themselves too soon could prove disastrous. Worse yet, was the possibility of what other ancient horrors may have been awakened by the massive battle, for more than just Sha'Bolique and Hastur yet slumbered.



The Lords were used to waiting centuries, eons even if necessary. They would wait, and build, and rise again. Moreover, when the time was right, the Universe would know their wrath.

www.ASYLUMINK.net

SCI-FI ACTION, CORRUPTED
BY LOVECRAFTIAN HORROR, BRED
FROM PROSE, AND ILLUSTRATED IN
DIGITAL BLOOD.



WELCOME TO THE FUTURE
OF DIGITAL ENTERTAINMENT.





CHILD OF ENTROPY

Humanity's future has never looked so full of hope and promise, as a new age of enlightenment and cooperation unites the human race in peace and exploration. The Jupiter Rift, a tear in space and time, has gifted humanity with a glimpse of what lies far beyond our traditional reach. Spurred on by insatiable curiosity, humanity has tempted fate, peering beyond known space and in doing so, awakened a tremendously destructive force.

A new generation is thrust into warfare beyond human understanding as beings as old as time begin to awaken from millennia of sleep. Great Old One's walk among us once more, destroying everything in their path. Madness infects all from one end of the cosmos to the other as more of the Elder Things begin their march across reality. With all forms of life facing extinction, can even a mysterious power from the distant past be enough to stem the tide of destruction?

