

PILLARS OF ENTROPY



JASON MOSER





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PILLARS OF ENTROPY

By:
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~ ENTROPY SAGA ~

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LORD OF ENTROPY

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“By our very nature, we are a human paradox. We are a human being. The being is infinite and the human is very finite. We walk around like lightening in a bottle.”

-- Author: Mark Nepo



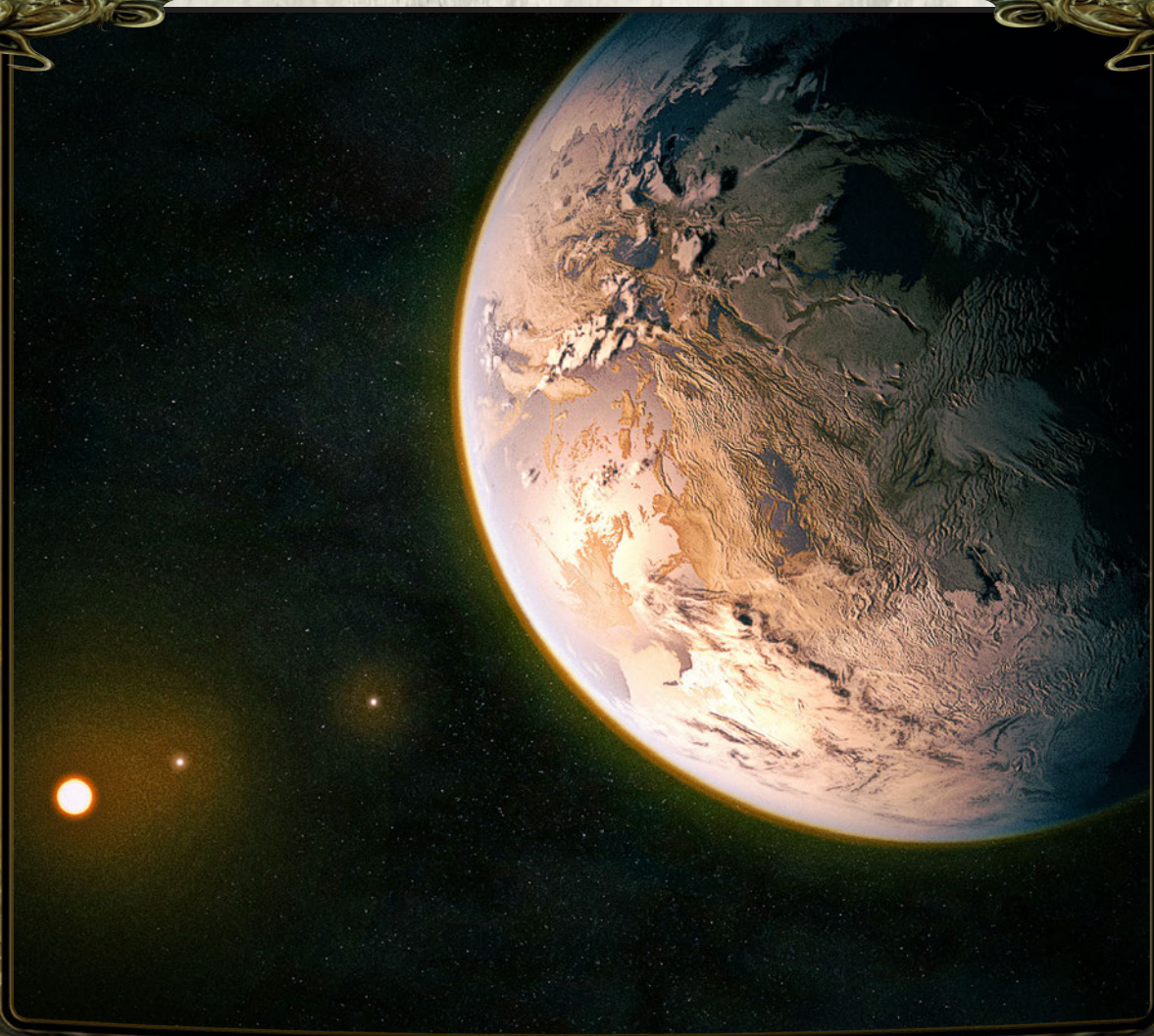


PROLOGUE

PROLOGUE

Barren worlds in a barren universe, stretching on and on without end.

Seldom had anything living found purchase upon any of the illimitable worlds of this dark place, and when it had, its existence did not last long. Existence here was one of thought, as the entities that held dominion over this realm existed as beings of pure thought. Manifestation in the physical realm was merely fanciful thoughts. Often even the idea of physicality was synonymous with prison, forcing limits upon the limitless power of pure thought. In this realm, there was no life but with that came absolute freedom from death. Existence was continuous and without pain or suffering. Most individuals in our universe may even consider it to be an eternal paradise, except that it was no afterlife but a disembodied existence in place of life. Trillions of minds traveling the spaces between stars, moving without restrictions, traveling at the speed of thought. Then the growth arrived.



It began harmlessly enough. Organic mass squeezed into existence seemingly ripped from some other realm and forcefully inserted into this other reality. The malignant trespasser swelled and adapted to Its new environment, drinking in the rich, nourishing energy of the disembodied ones it found all around. As it fed, the growth continued adapting, changing to its new environment. The growth never possessed intelligence as we might view it, yet its movements and decisions seemed to whisper at hints of an insidious instinct at work. The growth knew no fear, only appetite.



The denizens of this realm, existing only as ephemeral thought, did not notice for centuries as the growth continued to spread. Space appeared limitless and so none questioned the few entities that seemingly blinked out of existence overnight. The growth took advantage of their ignorance and overconfidence. The growth kept to the shadows, moving world to world, spreading and growing with every day. Finally, after thousands upon thousands of the bodiless entities had vanished, did the growth get noticed. The growth was their greatest fear-given form, a physical prison of flesh feeding on the entities of this once great universe.





There was one among the disembodied that stood out as different, stronger, and far older than the rest. He was the first in this Universe and someday he would be the last. With his great power, this entity assumed physical form and struck back at the growth. His immense power, however, proved worthless against the growth as it only fed with greater urgency, gorging on his power as if it were a feast. Nothing he tried could stop the growth. From then on, all of creation knew one thing with absolute certainty.

Fear the prison of the flesh. Fear the growth.

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.



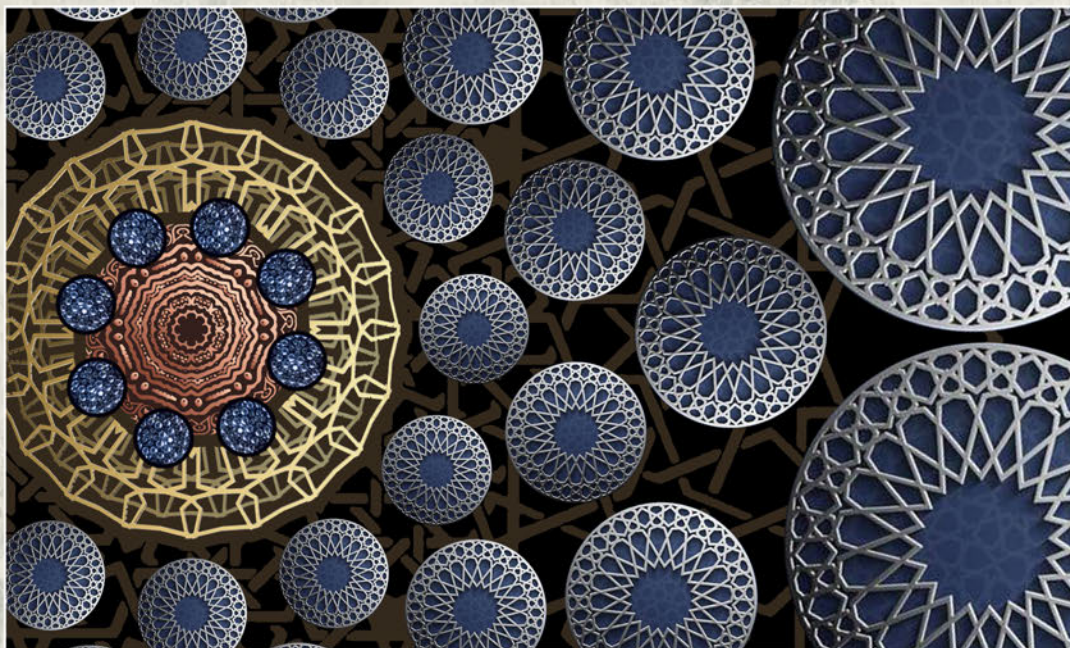
CHAMBER OF GUF: Repository of all information contained in a 2-dimensional realm outside the Multiverse. Functioning as "information repositories," these spheres remain tethered to the multiple physical connections scattered simultaneously throughout the Multiverse, encompassing all living beings in 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.



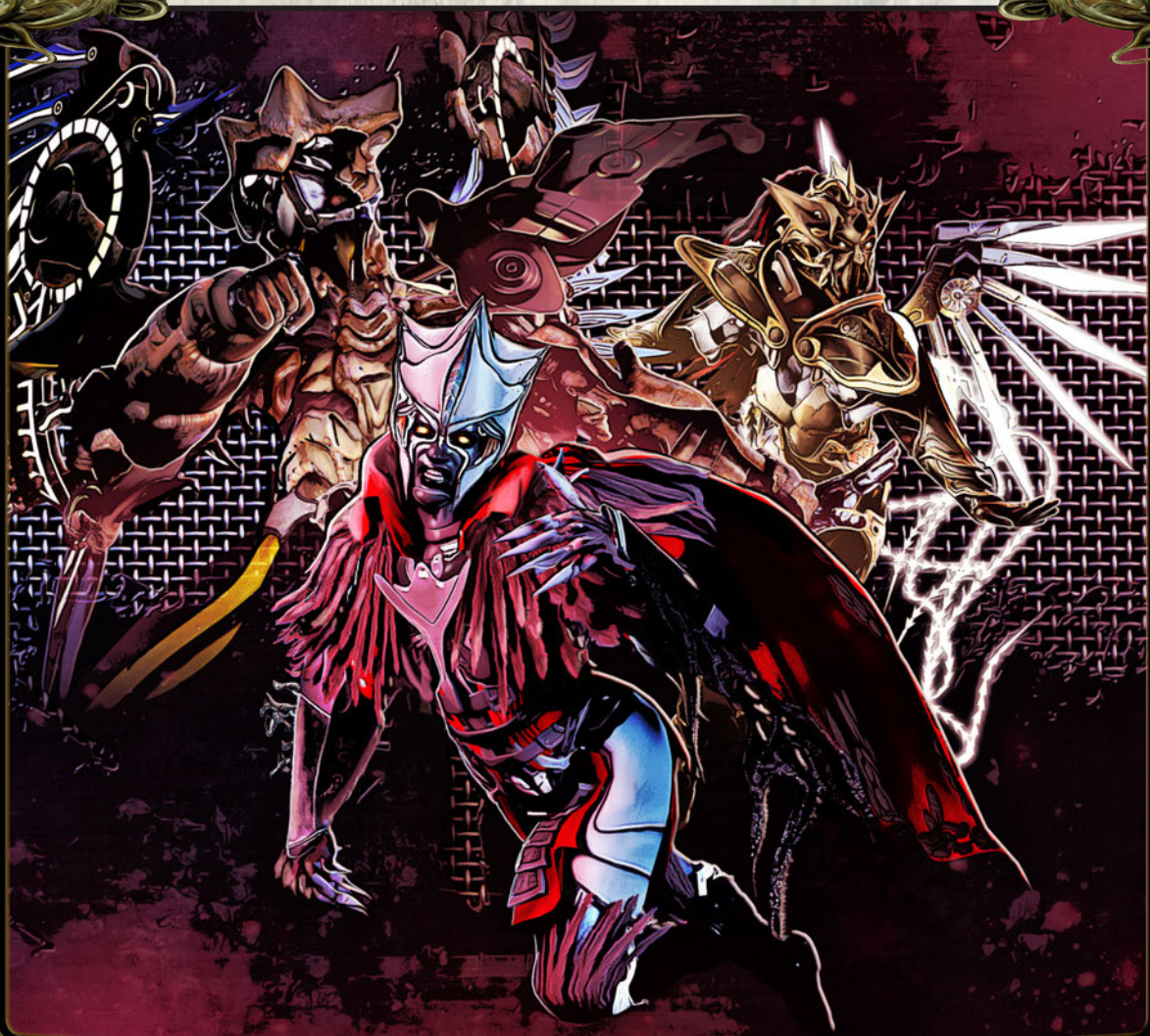


CHAPTER 1

CHAPTER 1

Humanity had come far since the early days of the Viralclysm. Now 344 years into the Post Viralclysm calendar, Humanity's reach no longer would be contained to one solar system, but rather it expanded into the great depths of space, embracing the unknown and challenging the terrors that lurked beyond.

The creature known as Gabriel to some, a former Templar now possessing power enough to rival the Great Old Ones, was beyond reach. His lover, Renee, and daughter, Arissa, spent decades searching for Gabriel during the peaceful time that existed after the great war with Sha'Bolique and the Lords of Instrumentality. Time no longer having any meaning for these beings that bonded with the alien Azathoth shards, a power connecting them to Affine space and beyond, Renee and her daughter followed Gabriel's trail to the ends of the Universe and back as he hunted the Lords of Instrumentality.





Gabriel no longer felt the same through their connection with Affine space. Colder, distant, and refusing to answer their pleas, eventually Renee gave up the pursuit. Earth was her home and she missed it terribly. Arissa, a child of Affine space as much as the Earth refused to give up. At home in the vacuum of space, Arissa thrived out among the stars. The connection mother and daughter shared through Affine space meant never truly being apart unless either one wished it, so no heart-felt goodbyes were exchanged when Renee journeyed home. The only despair they felt was shared and directed toward the missing Gabriel and whatever internal demons he struggled with now.

As Renee journeyed back to the planet of her birth, an odd sensation began to grow. A disruption or maybe just a tremor was felt through her connection to Affine space. Not specifically troubling, the sensation was yet somehow unnerving, as though a dependable road or clearing in a field had undergone unexpected change during a time of absence. Already Renee passed colonies created by the Pax Continuum, the governing agency ruling Earth, and the coalition of non-human species now freed from the Lords of Instrumentality. The Pax Continuum's reach far exceeded the capabilities Renee remembered from so many years prior.

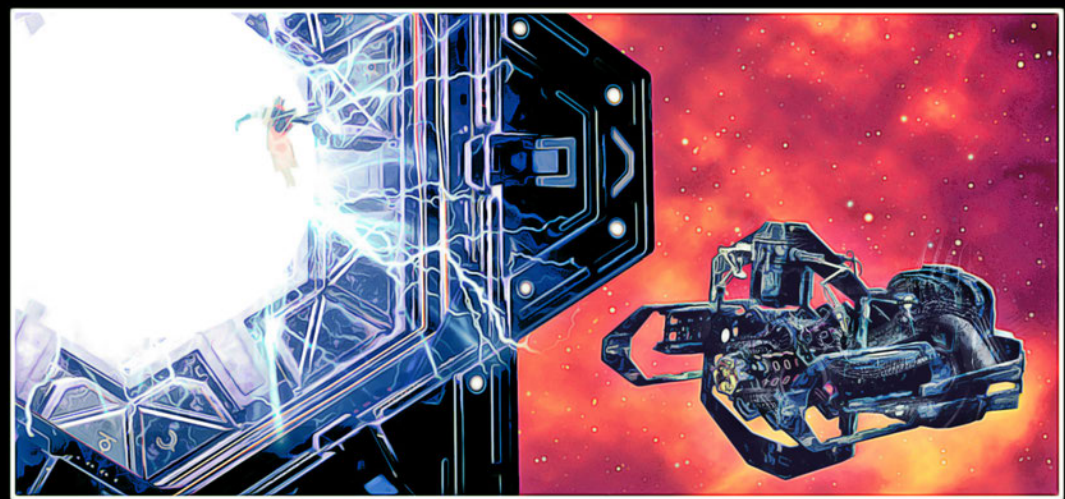
"My God, has it been so long?" Renee thought.

Renee felt overcome with how her perception of time and space had so drastically changed since her transfiguration. The ancient powers of the Azathoth shard mixed with the nanotech passed down through her biology from her mother interwove to create something new and radically powerful. Comfort and acceptance of this great change came unexpectedly and Renee struggled to pinpoint exactly when she became accustomed to her new form. Looking back, though, there was one event that stood out. The birth of her daughter, Arissa, and the realization that she too had become possessed of these same or even greater powers. Renee's mind drifted back as she slowed her approach. What appeared to be the outer-most reaches of the Pax Continuum's influence, an odd ship slowed its approach, coming to a stop just within orbit of a nearby star. The odd-looking vessel began transforming itself in orbit of the local sun. Panels began to detach while arms extended and additional materials were expunged from within its cargo hold. The solar system itself was unremarkable, containing a handful of planets, each surrounded by a variety of moons. The ship however radiated the same energy that caused Renee's connection to Affine space to tremble slightly.

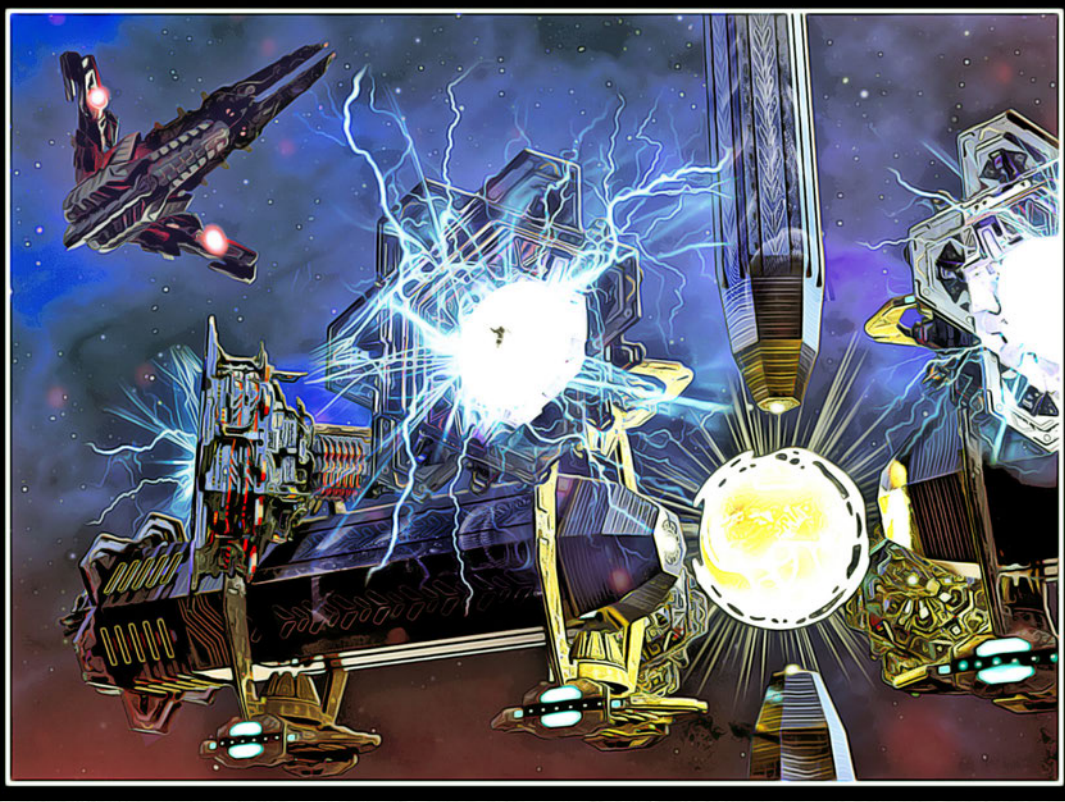




A large ring deployed from the vessel, its diameter expanding as it took up position independent of the ship, all in a very automated procession oblivious to Renee's presence. Thin, yet durable, the ring continued its expansion with the arms of the vessel attaching key components at various times during the process. Eventually reaching the size of a large island, the ring began powering up. Rippling with energy, a tear in space formed, allowing a collection of probes to exit the ring. Renee was fascinated as she realized this was the source and process through which Earth had reached so far into the depths of space. A network of gateways, ever-expanding and self-replicating meant the Galaxy was laid bare before humanity, merely awaiting humanity's presence. Renee could sense the source of the tunnel, recognizing the signature of her home world, and decided upon a shortcut home. As Renee approached the ring, her energies calmed the distorting effects the ring caused within Affine space, making her swift transition to the other side of the gate smooth, and instantaneous.



Exiting the ring, Renee found herself in familiar surroundings. A massive series of gates existed around a transport hub the size of a small city, all floating in the space previously occupied by Jupiter. First having collapsed into a spacial rift, connecting a distant galaxy to our own, the location radiated strange energies and even stranger phenomena. Now, over a century later, the location must have proven ideal for this dimensional gate system. What troubled Renee however, was not the location of the gate, or its existence, but where it appeared to draw power.



Renee's vision allowed sight beyond any technological means available. Able to see the strange, dark energy feeding the gate as easily as a child views a firework, Renee followed the trail back to the black spherical marble of death, formerly known as Mars. Renee shuddered at the revelation, immediately remembering the eldritch horror known as Sha'Bolique that Renee and her daughter Arissa had trapped within the sphere. Renee needed answers and fast before she did something rash. Almost as if on cue a welcoming party of several destroyers and escort craft moved into position, surrounding her. Renee would get those answers now, one way, or another.

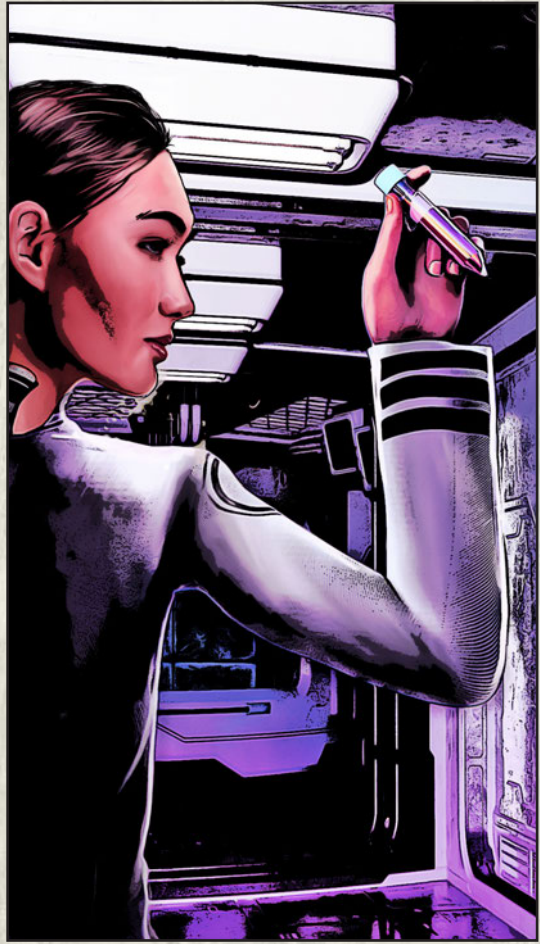


The alarms went off almost immediately as Renee exited the gate. Jupiter Hub remained the central link to all external gates, connecting the Pax Continuum core worlds with the ever-expanding network of colonies. Each system contained its own network hub to help bear the load and provide added processing power in case of emergency, but the Jupiter Hub still functioned as a primary contact, meaning any hostile force co-opting the gate system for their own ends would likely target the core worlds and Jupiter Hub first. To prevent such incursions, multiple safety protocols had been enacted, including a complex coding system that prevented all unauthorized personnel from accessing the corporate and military networks. The fact that Renee not only achieved this but did so with relative ease sent up every alarm in the system. A standing fleet of warships maintained continuous orbit around the Jupiter Hub in case of attack as well as every colony, world, and outpost having a satellite defense system in place. Years of warfare had taught the Pax Continuum many hard lessons that they were loath to repeat. All of these forces attempted to target Renee but were unable to track, much less lock on to the singular figure. As she approached "Purgatory," the new title given to the former red planet, a full panic set in.





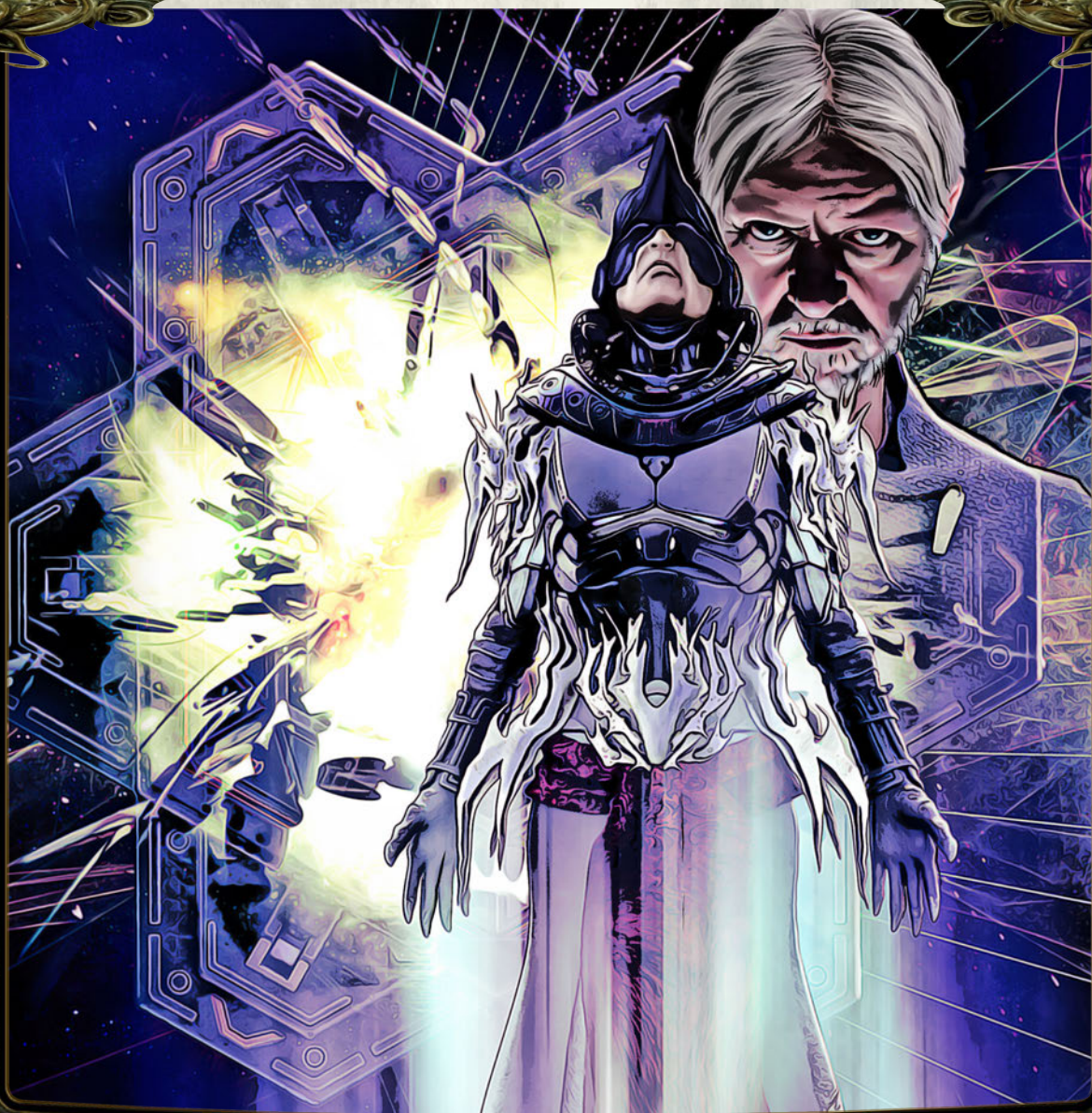
Purgatory had been quarantined for nearly 40 years, as teams of scientists researched the planetoid, hoping to unlock its secrets while also keeping its prisoner, the dread Sha'Bolique trapped beneath its ebony crust. The scientists fought madness and other disorders that plagued any who neared Purgatory. Eventually, the madness plague, similar to the Viralclysm of so long ago, began to spread once more, infecting all who ventured too close. As more resources diverted to the research of the ever-increasing emanations, the long-sought-after answers gradually began to reveal themselves. Not only could these terrible energies be understood, eventually they were able to be harnessed. Focused into an incredible power source, Purgatory began to power the entire solar system, prompting accelerated growth of the Pax Continuum. The siphoning of these energies provided another valuable service, the weakening of Sha'Bolique. While her power never ceased, it was possible to draw enough off preventing her from ever awakening. The madness side effects, however, continued and even spread to other worlds.

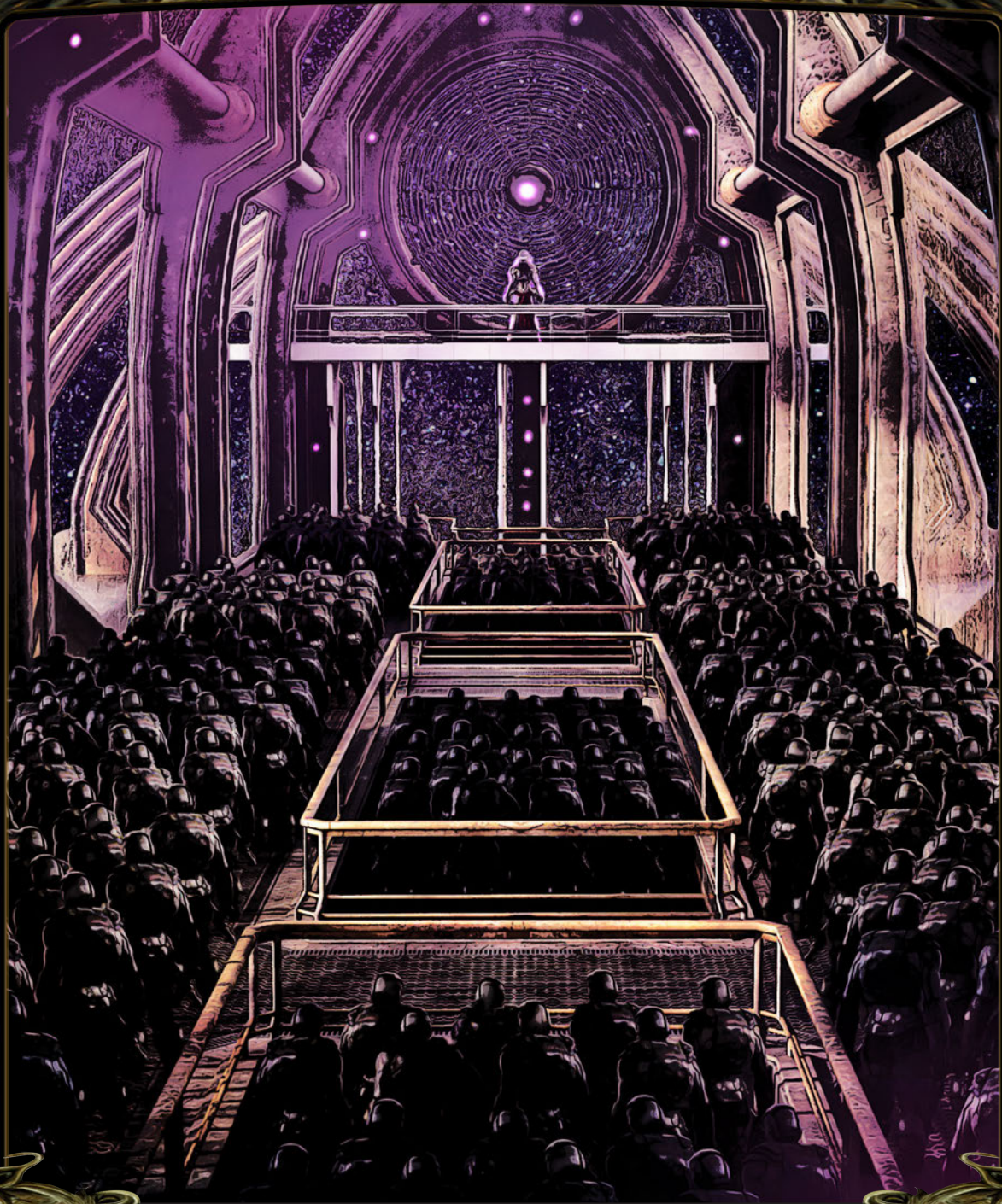


After 5 years of exposure, a select few that utilized machines powered by Purgatory began falling into strange behaviors. Some turned homicidal while most simply seemed “off” as most described these few individuals. Other forgotten problems began to resurface as well. The dreaded Wormwood virus that caused the Viralclysm began to resurface in a new, more virulent form. Adding physical disfiguration to the mental deterioration of so many. This could have signaled the end of the Pax Continuum’s growth, had it not been for one corporation.

Kayer Group performed much of the early research on Purgatory as well as specializing in many other significant areas of science and technology, leading them to the perfect position to analyze pure samples of the Wormwood. Rumors soared of the corporation’s use of alien technology captured during the Lords of Instrumentality war, but none questioned the results. Eventually, the Alessa retro-virus was created. Not only did it eradicate all variations of the Wormwood virus, but a pleasant side effect also provided a form of inoculation to the madness effect of the Purgatory energy. A glorious time of growth and achievement began, as wonder after wonder spread to all corners of the Pax Continuum until the final piece was revealed - the creation of the Gate system.

Former researcher on the Purgatory project and renowned recluse Tomin Lindel discovered a radically different way to harness the exotic energies released from the obsidian sphere. Beyond eccentric, Tomin never revealed the totality of his research, retaining key components that led to his discovery and all research that led to the development of the gate technology to himself. Tomin did however license the plans to mass-produce gate technology as well as the means to scale the technology large enough for ship transport. The technology made Tomin one of the wealthiest individuals in the Pax Continuum but more importantly, limitless, cheap travel to all ends of the universe was now within reach. Tomin retired to a small outpost on the current fringe of the Continuum where he used his fantastic wealth to build a religion around both his work into the Purgatory energy as well as himself, declaring himself Arch Bishop Thram of the Church of the Affine.





Tomin, now called Thram, espoused his views on the true origin of the Purgatory energy, declaring Sha'Bolique as merely a being capable of channeling the energies of Affine space, the source of all creation. If true, this meant to many that the spread of the madness associated with the energy was a religious awakening. The Church of the Affine continues down this treacherous path still, growing from an oddity to a cult, and finally to a religion whose membership numbers remain difficult to know. Fortunately, gate technology no longer remained under the sole whim of an eccentric zealot.

Since the formation of the gate system and the subsequent meteoric expansion of the colonies, reports from fringe worlds reached the Pax Continuum core of anomalies. Strange occurrences best described as distortions in the very fabric of space-time causing little harm but are easily detected by all monitoring systems. Though not frequent and seldom appearing even on the same planet, the anomalies became a topic of some concern. No direct link had been discovered between these events and the technology employed, however. The only link between occurrences consistently detected, related to the type of energy released from these anomalies. Strange gravimetric energies radiated, disrupting local gravity considerably in some locations. This energy while unique did share several properties with one recorded event dating back nearly 100 years. The emergence and subsequent use of power by Renee in her new form. Having detected this energy from Renee upon exiting the gate at Jupiter station, signaled a potential anomaly within the core system, a thought that terrified many in the Pax Continuum.

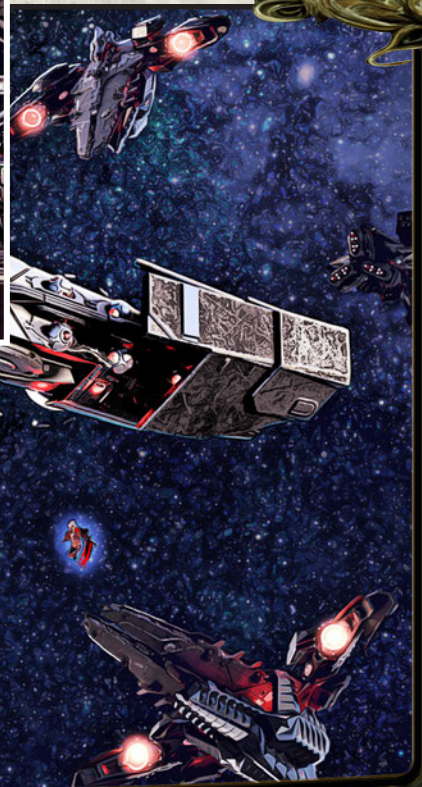


As Renee floated in space, taking in all that had changed since she began her quest to find Gabriel, Renee failed to notice the warships moving to intercept her. Their stealth technology had drastically improved over the decades, but even still, as the vessels drew near, Renee could sense their power core and turned to greet them. A wave of energy rippled outward from her form, cascading over every vessel in her vicinity. No damage was reported, but every vessel lost all cloaking ability rendering the vessels visible to the naked eye. Renee's voice came across all vessels simultaneously, broadcast throughout their communication system.

"I'm not sure if you remember me or even care, I've been gone for a very long time it seems. My mother was chancellor the last time I was here, Alhana was her name. I mean no harm..."

Renee let her statement hang there for a moment. She knew regardless of who was in charge, her sudden appearance would be mistaken as a threat and while she posed no danger, she had little interest in provoking her own people. A smirk crossed her lips as she thought on that simple statement for a moment, her own people. Had she any people, other than her daughter and Gabriel?

The fleet finally signaled a location of a small military outpost orbiting Saturn would play host to Renee. Out of the way, with few innocents to be harmed, the fleet escorted Renee to her meeting with the Pax Continuum.





CHAPTER 2

CHAPTER 2

Archeology took on new meaning in an ever-expanding sphere of human influence. Expanding outward to solar systems untouched by human hand meant chance encounters with alien civilizations, but more often than not, only the remains of once-great civilizations lingered. Many bore the mark of the Great Old Ones, beings like the Lords of Instrumentality or Sha'Bolique; gods who strode the stars with no thought or concern towards the countless dead worlds left in their wake. This was one such world. A potential for mining, classification EX-782 still had tell-tale signs of civilization and potential alien technology that could further expand Humanities understanding and influence of the universe around them.

Agnee Pikeman remained the lead archeologist despite her eccentric nature. A recluse that favored dead worlds and dead civilizations to any live ones, Agnee strove to work in seclusion whenever possible, but being the foremost expert on postindustrial civilizations meant field work and a team, no matter her disdain. EX-782 proved so far to be nothing exceptional. A once lush world quite similar to Earth, EX-782's atmosphere had long ago been ionized. Nothing remained alive to tell their tale but several major cities remained. The level of technology these people had was far lacking when compared to that of the Pax Continuum, at least in its most obvious uses. It would take many more days if not years to fully catalog everything and to translate the language, a necessary step to uncovering potential medical advances that may have been native to this planet or system. Agnee enjoyed the more solitary work of cataloging the findings when an assistant stormed into Agnee's work space aboard the master gate hub established on the planet.



A short, bespectacled young man entered Agnee's office, too excited to remember to knock.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, but we may have found live tech!"

Agnee's attention piqued at the mention of 'live tech'. To date, there had only been several fallen civilizations discovered that possessed tech that could be salvaged at all, and even then only after extraordinary effort. An even more rare event was to find live technology enduring past the decline of the civilization that birthed it.

"You're certain? If this is some stupid prank or a misread diagnostic..."

Dorman interrupted without hesitation or doubt, "This is one hundred percent legit, I swear!"

As the pair journey to the discovery, Dorman filled Agnee in on what to expect.

"We were doing a routine ground sweep on the outer edge of the perimeter when there was a flash. One minute there was nothing there, and the next this pillar, out of thin air!"

Agnee looked quizzically off into the distance, her mind going over possibilities and logging questions for later.

"A pillar? Was it giving off readings? Is it the technology or how it appeared...?" Dorman continued excitedly.

"The pillar itself gives off strange electromagnetic readings. Our systems have a hard time locking on to it. The closer we get; the more interference our systems receive."

When Agnee finally viewed the pillar, her curiosity could hardly be contained. Standing taller than a human, the pillar markings reminded her of ancient hieroglyphs, yet the stone work appeared brand new. The rippling energy was also disorienting, causing hairs to stand on end as static began to build.

"I want to know how old this thing is and I want to know where it's drawing power from. I need all energy readings fed continuously to my handheld, if this thing continues as-is, it may pose a threat."

As Agnee relayed her orders, her team of archaeologists snapped to. A find like this could make all their careers and they knew it. Not one second was wasted as all information was recorded and fed back to Agnee's device.

The readings, what little they had, were astounding. The pillar defied all dating techniques, giving impossible readings that predated existence itself if they were to be believed. The carving was done with highly focused and impossibly precise laser cutting. The material itself corresponded to no local materials, or any known materials either. One mystery after another popped up, only to be confounded with newer reading reporting a dating of only a few centuries, with a composition not too dissimilar to the local materials. The more acutely the team observed the pillar, the more it seemed to shift right before their eyes. Almost as if existing outside the current laws of physics, the strange pillar defied reason.

Agnee reviewed the latest reports when a scream like no other rang out from the far side of the camp. Agnee could barely process the sounds she heard when the single scream became a choir. Someone or something was tearing her people to shreds.



Fortuna colony was a dark, lonely place for the last decade. What once stood as a shining jewel in the outer rim, skyrocketing to full colony status, quickly turned into a dismal, poverty-ridden cesspool, trapping many who were too poor to purchase relocation rights. Dolentite became the driving force in much of the Pax Continuum economy. Exceedingly dense yet malleable under the right circumstances, Dolentite excavation became essential for colony and transportation construction.

Corporations like the Kayer Group would use the Explorigates, miniature, high-power craft capable of assembling gates en route to distant locations utilizing salvaged materials found along the way. As the craft entered a solar system containing marginally habitable planets or systems with obvious resources detected upon initial scanning, the vessel deploys the newly constructed gate which expands, allowing dedicated vessels to come through and establish an outpost. Meanwhile, the Explorigate extracts necessary materials found within the system and continues to its next location. An efficient system for corporations to expand. Fortuna was one such planet. Habitable with minimal atmospheric manipulation for Human kind, early scanning revealed a veritable fortune in Dolentite. No expense was spared in setting up the initial excavation site. From there, support staff and miners looking for excitement, independence, or simply solitude flooded the planet. A large city began to grow, and mining continued at an accelerated pace. Eventually, there was talk of full colony status for Fortuna, a status that meant independent wealth and protection as a colony of the Pax Continuum, opposed to property owned and operated by the Kayer group. In the early days of full colony status, there was much wealth to be gained as commodities rose and opportunities presented themselves with abundance, but sadly that status was never to come.

Some say the original Dolentite scans were forged by the rival Bellent Industries, to make the property more valuable for sale to the Kayer Group to develop. Others simply believe the filed reports, that due to heavy deposits of Dolenphyte, an inferior cousin of Dolentite, the readings were misinterpreted. Either way, the results were the same. Just before full colony status was awarded, the truth came out. Kayer group pulled all but the minimal staff and resources needed to mine Dolenphyte to recoup investment costs, stripping Fortuna of all its potential wealth. Any business capable of leaving fled the small planet within days. Money dried up so fast, buildings were left abandoned, but for those that remained, resentment grew. A prosperous planet of five million quickly transformed into a dying town of several hundred thousand. Poor, and with little hope, they relied on the bare minimum the Kayer group sent to meet basic needs.

This was the world Alec Konis grew up in. Old enough to have killed twice before over scraps of technology destined for sale on the black market, Alec, like many, harbored a burning rage deep within. Only in his earliest of memories could the glory days of the colony be found. Some already spoke of violent action, to “retake the resources that were rightfully theirs” and to punish those who treated the corporate colonies as little more than slave labor. Already several corporate overseers had been assaulted leading to the possibility of martial law if violence escalated. Alec considered his future as he walked along an outlying corridor when a large explosion sounded out from a block away. Screams filled the night as civilians ran away from the flames and militia and emergency units rushed towards. Alec, never known for his ability to contain his curiosity, ventured from back alley to alley, nearing the scene. As he climbed a fire escape for a better vantage point, the sounds of screams began to morph, sounding more like the growls and howls of some creature not native to the planet. When Alec finally saw the source of the cries, his breath caught in his chest as his fear overwhelmed him.





Out there, between corpses and flames, raged ghastly, twisted beasts of a nightmare. Squat and deformed in nature, their speed and strength were unrivaled. Alec attempted to count how many of these strange beings tore through the emergency services, but as he mouthed the numbers the creatures simply began to vanish, as mysteriously as they appeared. Bright flashes consumed the beasts where ever they stood, leaving only the bloody remains of their rampage as proof they were ever there.





Agnee, Dormin, and a handful of assistants pulled themselves out of various holes, destroyed shelters, or from beneath the bodies of their fellow archeologist's. Hundreds lay dead at their feet and many more were mutilated and dying in agony, scattered throughout the site. Reports of the creatures that had done this terrible act of violence were spotty at best with survivors getting only fleeting glimpses of the things. Even electronic surveillance of the site had been cut off briefly, a large, unknown power surge temporarily overloading the grid.

Agnee helped those she could, but with the medical staff counted among the dead, only the most superficial of wounds could be treated by those that remained. Fortunately, her com system remained intact. With remote access established, Agnee had the life raft detach from the main vessel in orbit and within hours the survivors of the massacre were safely aboard. As she filed her report, Agnee couldn't help but wonder if there was a connection between the attack and the strange pillar. Had there been an ancient automated defense system that lay dormant, concealed from all their scans until the Pillar had been awakened? And if so, why stop short of finishing the job? Certainly, her fellow scientists posed no threat or obstacle to whatever strange defenses had been triggered. All Agnee knew for sure was that she remained undeterred, more motivated than ever to crack the mystery of this strange device. Pouring over the data once more, Agnee began making plans for a new team, one more prepared for whatever it had been that attacked her staff. As she readied her request for recourses, the Pax Continuum preempted her, sending new orders of their own. Another Pillar had been discovered and quarantined, with a new team on its way, only lacking a lead researcher with experience.

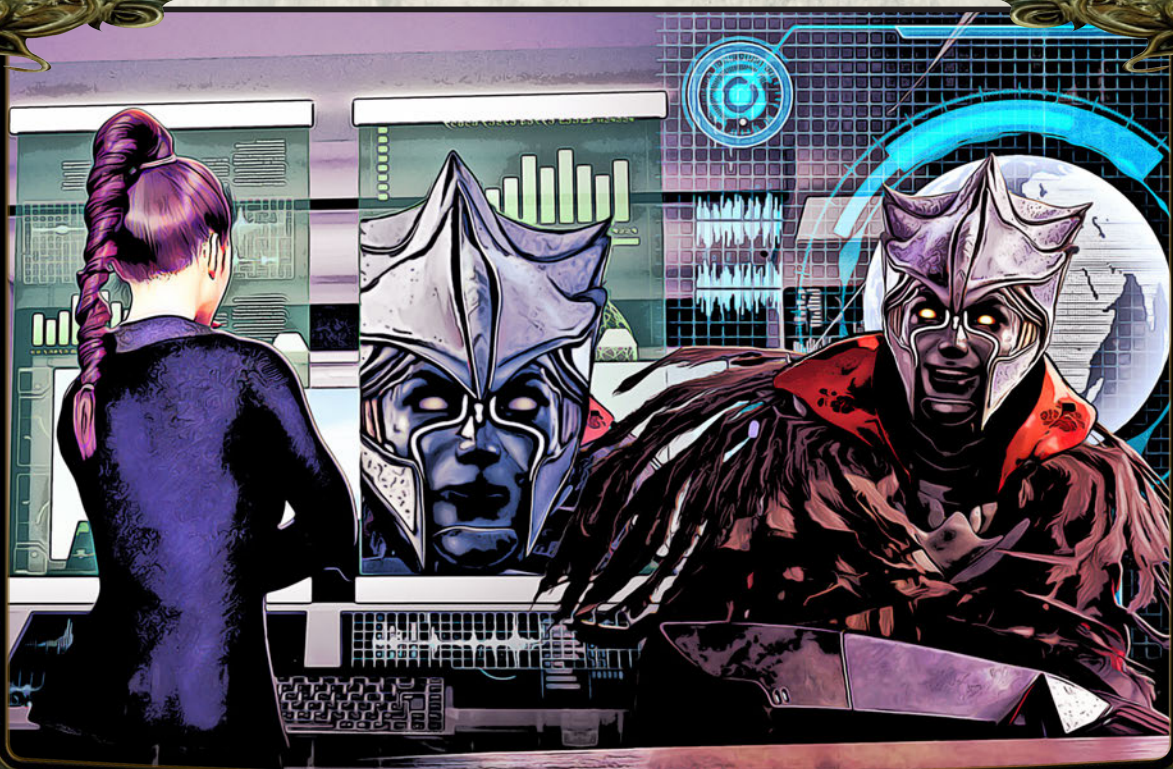


CHAPTER 3

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Renee posed quite the problem for Chancellor Tullman, the current leader of the Pax Continuum. A being of great power and independence yet at least partially human, Renee really couldn't be stopped by modern technology, at least not for certain. There was of course no specific reason Chancellor Tullman didn't trust the new arrival, but those in the senate who already were learning of Renee's arrival would demand answers and assurances driven by fear and a lack of understanding. Patricia Tullman was a career military woman, strong, and with a rich heritage dating far down her family line of military service. She was not prone to fear and despised the weakness so many of her fellow politicians displayed. Many feared the loss of position, some feared the loss of wealth, all, it seemed, feared Renee.

As Tullman watched Renee from a remote location, Renee watched the world. Tapping into the global network, she reacquainted herself with the society she left behind. Her mother had eventually passed away in her sleep, after a very long life. Renee wanted to be there with her mother in her final hours but their connection went very deep. In truth, a part of Renee had always remained within her mother since the time she healed her from a near-death state. This connection was more intuitive, passing along sensations and emotions, but nothing specific. Renee still wished she had been present in person when the time came but there was nothing to be done.





Renee continued to brows the history of the Pax Continuum, from the time she left until now. Learning of the development of the gate system and horrifyingly, how the Continuum tapped into the ancient powers of Sha'Bolique. The ingenuity involved was remarkable, but the risk had been tremendous as well. Renee reached out with her senses but could not detect any quantifiable presence of Sha'Bolique which reassured her. Renee was quite glad she wasn't here when the decision was made to tap into the power source, knowing her objection would have been far less than diplomatic. Regardless of the risk, the results could not be argued with.

Several guards interrupted Renee's research as they entered the room. Renee noted their weapons slung across their back, meaning the Pax Continuum must have come to a conclusion regarding Renee as a threat or an ally. That or they realized how futile using the weapons would be. Chancellor Tullman was the last to enter the room. Confident and strong, the 55-year-old woman was not one to be easily intimidated, even in the presence of something as powerful as Renee. Renee stood and greeted the new arrivals, reverting to her human form for the first time since arriving. A sign of courtesy and respect she gave as a display of trust.

Chancellor Tullman had many questions for the young woman (at least in appearance), who sat before her. So many in fact that she scarcely knew where to begin. Renee smirked as she sensed the confusion and perhaps trepidation in proceeding with the interview. The Smirk caught the Chancellor off guard some.

"I can see the humor you must feel at us pretending we're capable of holding you against your will. I've seen the record of what happened on Mars, how you stopped an extradimensional being that fancied itself a god, from consuming everything. Even with our caution, please know the Pax Continuum is grateful beyond measure for your service both before and after your... transformation."

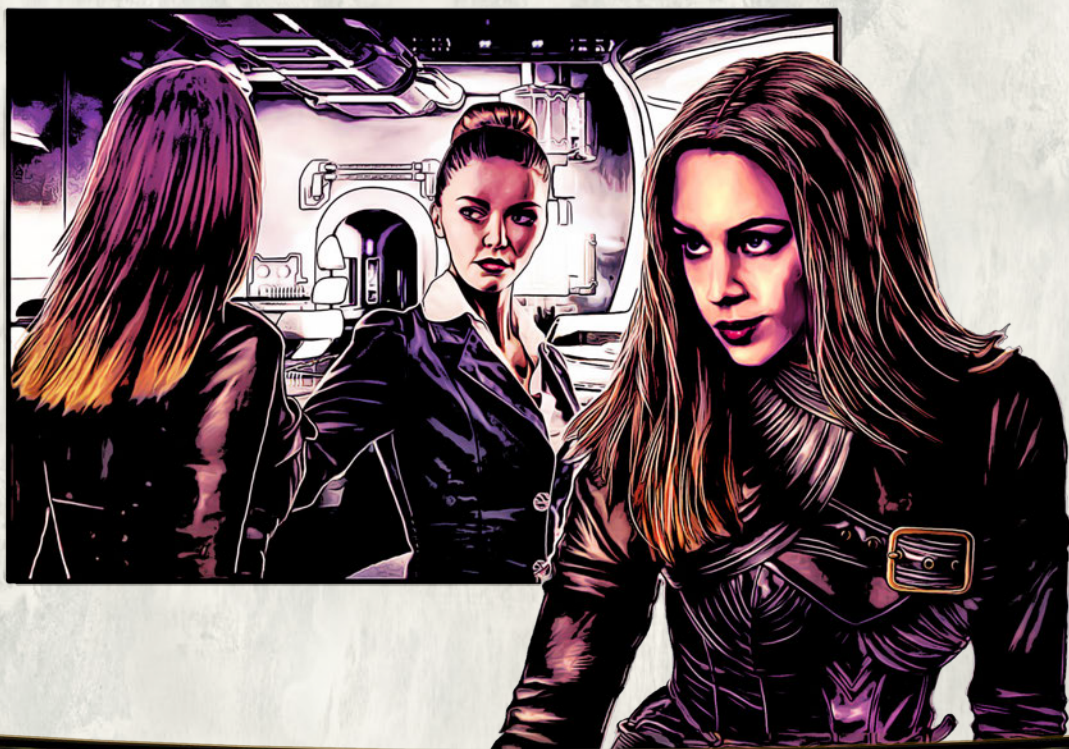
Renee graciously accepted the Chancellor's thanks.

"You have nothing to thank me for, regardless of whatever it is that I have become, Earth is and always will be my home. I was quite concerned when I arrived and saw how the Pax is tapping into Sha'Bolique's power, I must confess. Between that and the new gate technology, I wasn't sure of what I had stumbled upon with my arrival. I apologize for not making a more formal reintroduction."

The Chancellor studied the strange young woman that sat before her. An appearance of a 30-year-old at best, Renee's true age of hundreds of years remained well masked. She was quite difficult to read, be it through the effort of self-control or merely her non entirely human DNA.

"The gate technology isn't entirely new, though our network's reach is, as it is continuously expanding. The gate you entered was on the far reaches of our network, I'm very interested in learning if that's the extent of your travels or if you've been beyond."

"It's hard to say. Traveling the way my family does is a strange thing to explain. I've been further, but exactly how far I'm not sure." Renee answered truthfully as her pursuit of Gabriel had no limitation, leading from one system to another and even to other planes of existence. "I've been beyond this galaxy and I've seen amazing, unexplainable things. There are technologies and races out there that would marvel and terrify you. The only solace I can offer is that the Great Old Ones we've already faced are by far the most powerful and terrifying threat humanity will encounter; at least out of what I experienced."



Chancellor Tullman considered this for a moment. The potential strategic knowledge Renee possessed was beyond valuable, but Tullman knew there were more pressing questions she needed answers to.

"If our information is correct, you left with your daughter all that time ago to find your partner, Gabriel, the former Templar, is this correct?"

Renee looked off in the distance a bit, lost in thought. She hesitantly answered, sadness weighing down her reply.

"Yes, that is correct. We sensed him, out beyond known space. His presence flickered there, making it nearly impossible to find him."

"Were you able to eventually find him?" The Chancellor asked.

Renee's gaze met Chancellor Tullman for the briefest of moments. Tullman felt a slight chill until Renee's gaze once again turned to some far-off place in her memory. "We got very close many times, but no. Arissa wouldn't give up and continues her search, but I needed to return."

Chancellor Tullman was eager to learn the reason for this abrupt departure from the search. Why this being of such power would return and what possible agenda she may have. Tullman was very delicate as she continued the interview.

"I'm a little surprised after searching for so long you would stop. I don't want to pry into personal matters but, was there some reason you chose now to return?"

Chancellor Tullman feared she went too far or overstepped as Renee was impassive at first, then a deep concern came over her face.

"I've sensed something terrible, ancient, coming to earth. At first, when I got closer I thought the energy siphoned from Sha'Bolique was the source, but now I'm not sure. I think something is coming and it's unlike anything any of us have ever seen."

Chancellor Tullman felt fear creep up her spine that she had not felt since she was a small child. The type of irrational fear of the nebulous dark that all children experience, only this fear wouldn't be alleviated with the coming of dawn.

"Do you have any other information you can share about this threat? Do you know how long we have or what can be done to prevent or contain it?"

Renee shrugged, not having the answers the Chancellor desired.

“I’ve tried to see or feel more but there’s nothing there. It’s like nothing I’ve felt before. As if whatever it is, is foreign to not only our galaxy but maybe even our Universe. I’ve had experience with all forms of alien life, and this is... wrong. I wish I had more to tell. And if I do learn more of course I will share.”

“That’s greatly appreciated, I’m not taking any threat lightly, especially one that has you concerned. If you are willing, I would like to learn more of your travels and what other forms of life you have encountered.”

Renee smiled, she knew there would be a great many questions and after centuries of semi-isolation, Renee enjoyed the contact. Renee continued providing answers to the Chancellor’s questions. She had no specific place to go and her connection to Affine space gave her access to any information she desired. Even her daughter, Arissa, remained within reach via their connection. It had made the decision to leave an easier one, knowing that through their shared link they were never truly apart unless they wished it. This is what made Renee’s heart hurt the most, however, the knowledge that Gabriel must be choosing to remain disconnected. But if that were the case, then why become detectable at all? Renee couldn’t shake the feeling that those moments of connection are cries for help as opposed to slips of concentration. But what could drive Gabriel into seclusion? He knew his daughter and lover missed, even needed him. Why would he hide? All Renee knew for sure was that regardless of the answer, regardless of the threat, Renee would see him again.





CHAPTER 4

CHAPTER 4

The universe humanity was birthed into had always been filled with mystery. The immensity of space coupled with the realization that extinction threatened us both from without as well as within created a fearful people eager to find comfort in the arms of a supreme being capable of interceding on our behalf, should we be worthy and devout enough. Over millennia these deities evolved from sun gods and the all-consuming night to organized religions, providing rules and structure. The masses needed the reassurance that there was a point to their existence and purpose behind the everyday horrors experienced by so many. But as mankind began to reach for the stars, the mystery and wonder of the unknown began to give way to explanation, theory, and demonstrable principle. Logic ruled for a time, giving a new purpose to mankind beyond placating unseen deities. Then gods walked amongst us once more.

The Great Old Ones, beings without peer or known limits strode the stars like giants, consuming worlds in their wake and spreading madness and mutation to all corners of creation. The deities of man's creation held no sway over these dark beings, casting further doubt on what few believers remained. Even while terror gripped the whole of humanity, a power born of earth rose to challenge these Old Gods. Gabriel and Renee were as much products of science as they were of mysticism, sparking a new age of wonder as well as renewed fears of the unknown. It was in this field of uncertainty that the Church of the Affine took root.

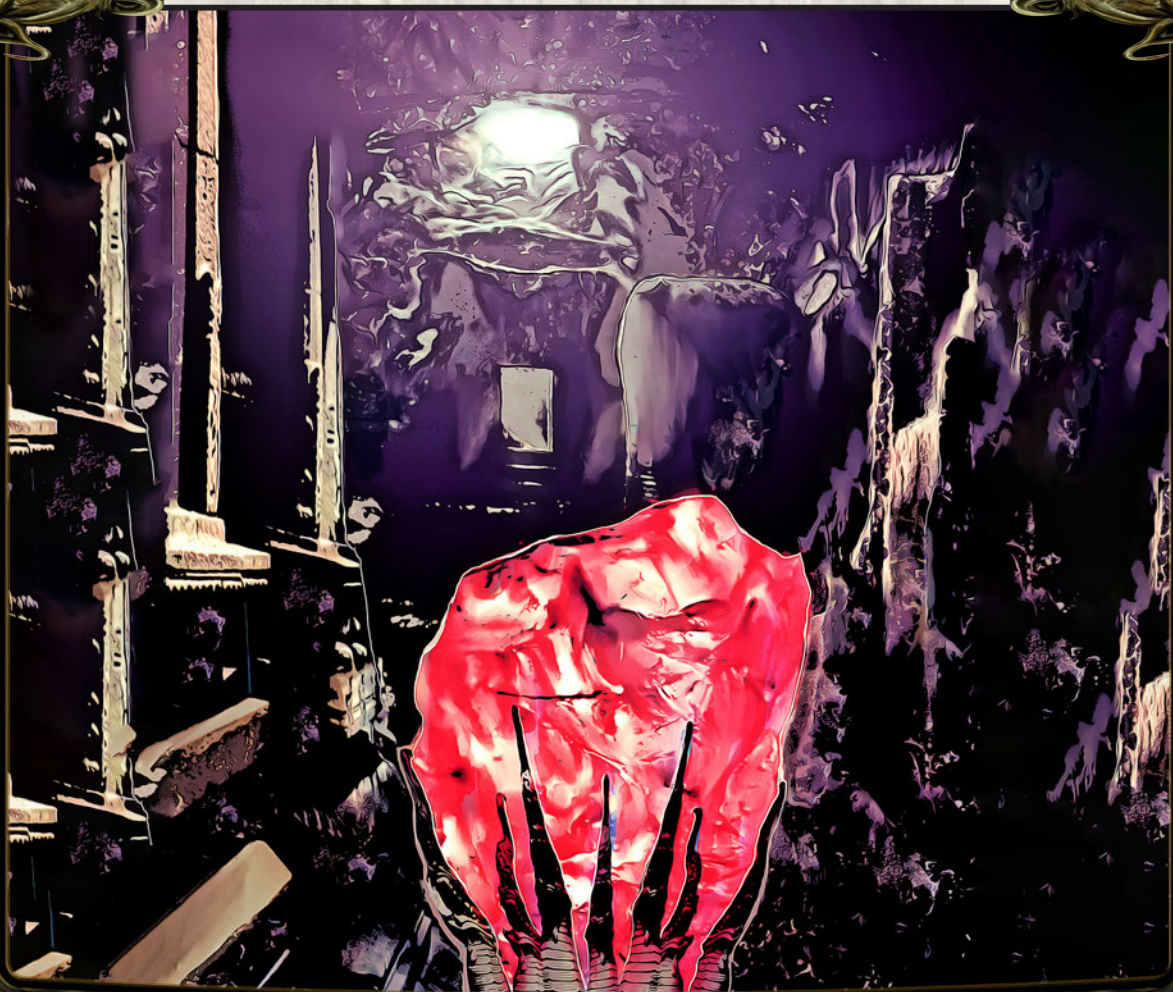


Tomin Lindle had become quite wealthy from his creation of early gate technology. Few understood the principles behind this wondrous technology and none suspected the origins either. Lindle spent the better part of a decade studying the vast reservoir of energy emanating from Sha'Bolique's prison. Professionally, he was regarded as a man of exceptional brilliance and insight which astonished many of Lindel's peers, as up until this time, Tomin Lindle was a scientist of little note. Privately a war raged within Tomin's mind tearing at his soul. The strange energies had a profound effect on Tomin. Unlike most, his physiology remained unchanged, but his psyche had been expanded beyond reason. Tomin saw connections within the universe and beyond that, he had no previous way of knowing or understanding. He found himself connected to Affine space in much the same way as Renee had, but only in fleeting moments. Tomin's connection was tenuous at best but provided the knowledge he sought. Eventually, Affine space even revealed the existence and power of the Azathoth shards.



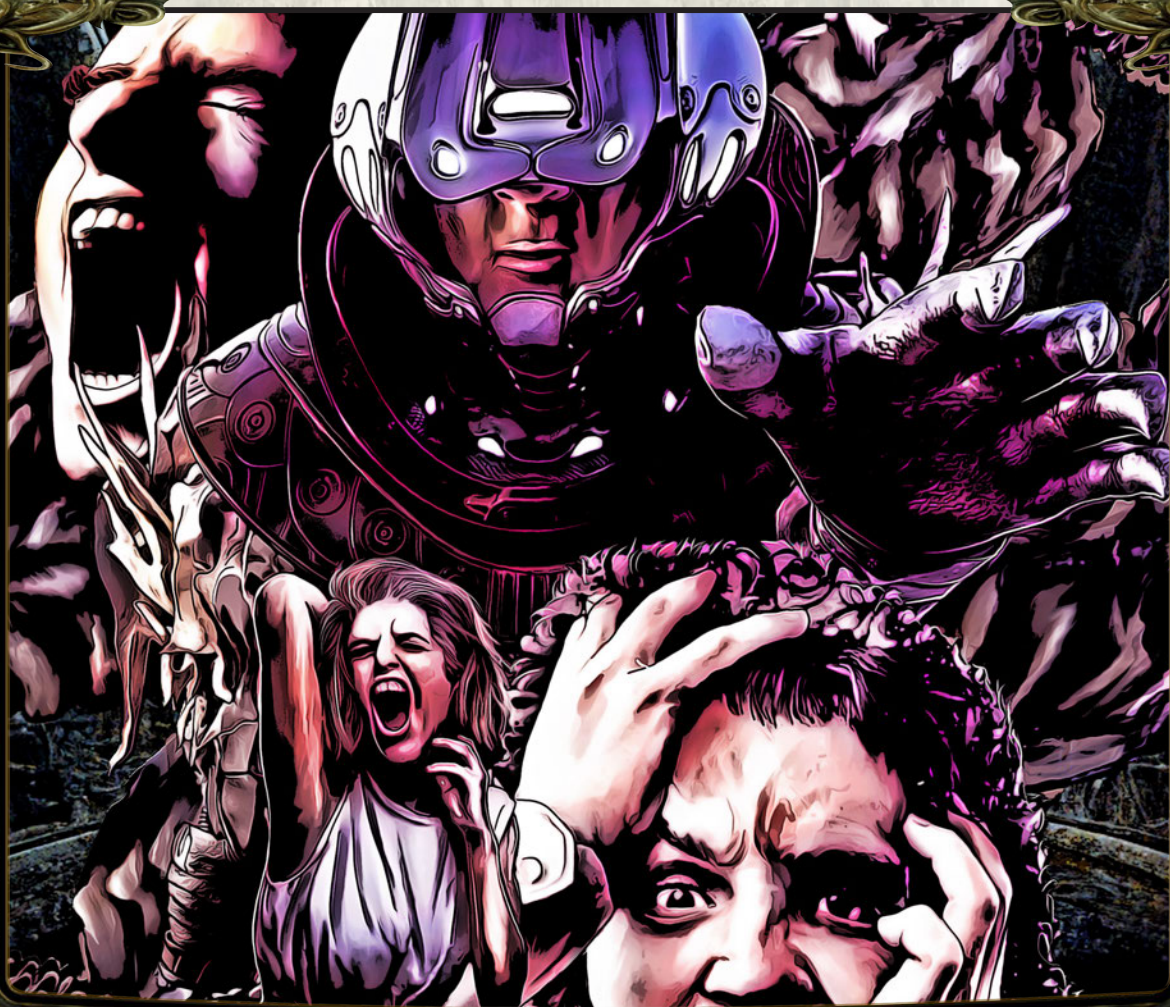
Tomin eventually went on sabbatical, buying a small shuttle with the money he earned from his research into Sha'Bolique's energy. Using the resources and secret knowledge he gained from his glimpses into Affine space, Tomin traveled far beyond the known reaches of space into the void beyond. It was another five years before his journey paid off. Deep within a cavernous alien world, ravaged long ago by some unknown but devastating force, Tomin Lindle completed his long quest and stood before the Azathoth shard from his visions. The power radiated from the shard with vibrancy and purity that far eclipsed anything Tomin had felt from Sha'Bolique, and in this purity, Tomin found himself forever changed.

The shard Tomin discovered was unlike any other shard found before. Glowing a deep crimson, the consciousness that reached out across the limitless gulf between realities found in Tomin a consciousness already ripe for the taking, having been changed subtly by the energies of Sha'Bolique. Tomin found himself a willing recipient of the knowledge bequeathed him from the great beyond. Space/time no longer held mystery for Tomin as his consciousness expanded well beyond human capacity. The links between the myriad points in space were easily linked with the power siphoned from Sha'Bolique.



Tomin's prototype worked flawlessly as he transported himself from a distant outpost to Earth within moments. The Pax Continuum senate was practically giddy with the possibilities that lay before them. All that was asked of them in exchange for complete control of the technology was a sizable sum of money and a distant out-of-the-way moon for which Tomin could continue his research. Needless to say, the council eagerly accepted the deal and almost immediately started gate construction. From this moment on, expansion throughout the galaxy became exponential. The Pax Continuum gave Tomin all he asked for and more and in doing so began humanities march toward a threat of universal proportions.

Tomin established a research facility unlike any other. Demanding absolute secrecy, all supplies were offloaded to a satellite in orbit around the small moon. Automated machines were the only thing ever encountered by those making the deliveries. For years as the gate system expanded, Tomin's research into the startlingly unique shard revealed more than he could have hoped. Secrecy and eventual irrelevancy as Lindle faded from the spotlight led to absolute isolation and only then did the Lord of Tears and master of the Crimson Shard have Tomin Lindle act.





First came the Church of the Affine. A religion welcoming the seemingly insane, different, and even violent. The Church provided absolution, rehabilitation, and status to those perceived as having fallen through the cracks. Tomin was reborn as Arch Bishop Thram, the techno-spiritual leader of the church and inspired by divine light to build his congregation. In truth, the hand that guided Arch Bishop Thram welcomed those with natural immunity to the Alessa inoculation. Be it the anti-vaccination paranoia cult or those legitimately immune, the numbers began to grow and their devotion to the Affine was absolute. The church worked in secret with new members drawn, as if on instinct, to the order. None questioned this strange religion or its motives as they kept to themselves and in fact, continued to contribute scientific advancement for the betterment of humanity. New gates were developed to transfer greater numbers of people and supplies with increased safety and redundancy measures added and continuously improved upon. The Church of the Affine had a vested interest in increased gate use and so did the mysterious master the church served.

As membership grew within the church, so did the church's influence among distant outposts and colonies, eventually reaching even the core worlds and the Pax Continuum itself. While the subtle notoriety increased, the Church of the Affine always maintained a benevolent face. The one move the church made that brought unwanted attention was its purchase of a controlling interest in Bellent Industries. The move was seen as controversial only because of Bellent Industries' checkered past but since the Church of the Affine was formed out of significant scientific advancement, many turned the other way, naturally assuming the acquisition was part of some new research.

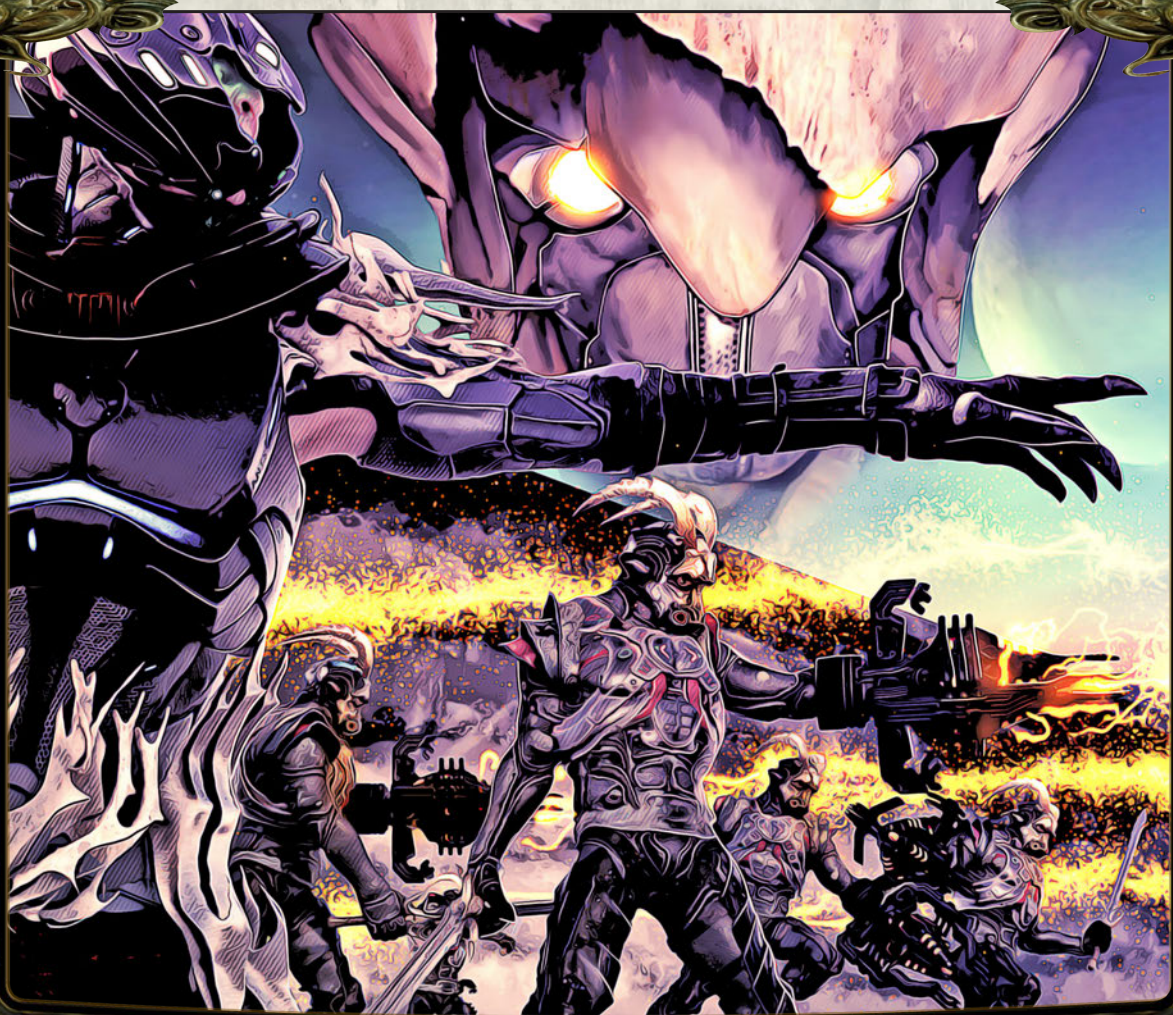
Through Bellent Industries, the church gradually formed its own private defense force, ostensibly to protect assets on un-terraformed worlds. This secretive group came to be known as Hierophants. Divided into three groups, the Hierophant guard was science-based, meant to be professional soldiers capable of experimentation, sample retrieval, field medicine, and more while also being trained killers should the church require it.

The Hierophant Elite were kept segregated from most others, creating an atmosphere of mystery and assumed elitism and entitlement amongst its members. In truth, the Hierophant Elite live in a drug-induced haze of steroids, hormones, and control nanotech, all meant to create an unstoppable killing machine with unquestioned loyalty to the church. Their hostility and lethality in non-combat situations necessitated their segregation from conventional forces, and if this fact helped create a mythology around these specialized forces, all the better.



The Supreme Hierophant served as the elite generals in the new army for the Church of the Affine. Engineered to function at peak levels for days on end, what most distinguished these soldiers from the rest was an emphasis not on strength and brutality, but instead tactics and speed. A Supreme Hierophant could lead an army, command a vessel, or assassinate a dignitary with unheard-of skill and precision.

Arch Bishop Thram oversaw all of these subtle pieces coming together, eventually forming the perfect machine, one that would redefine the Universe, all for the greater glory of his master and those with the strength of will and vision to follow. The rewards for service had already led to knowledge and wealth beyond imagination for Thram and his congregation. The latest task asked of him proved to be both infinitely frustrating as well as employing. Thram was tasked with monitoring a being so powerful that it became detectable only after employing vastly more advanced technologies than even Thram had yet to experience. Only then were they able to monitor the creature known to some as Gabriel. The Church of the Affine watched very closely and waited for the sign. Foretold by the crimson lord Hect'kaaros, they awaited the time of upheaval, the sign that would unleash the next phase of the plan.

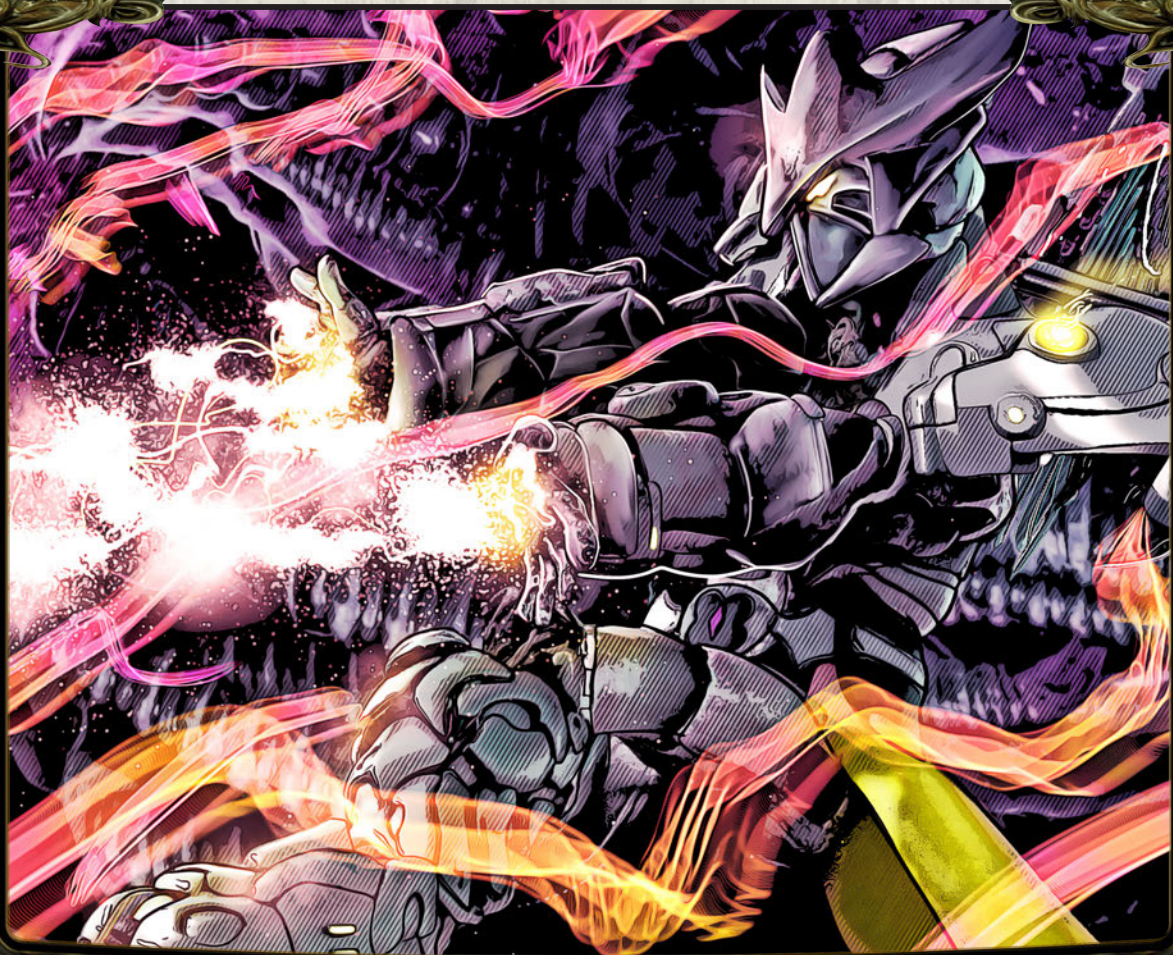




CHAPTER 5

CHAPTER 5

The vastness of space served to help Gabriel focus, while the never-ending cold helped clarify his vision and strengthen his resolve. There lives a great terror buried deep within his consciousness, always threatening to consume his very soul. The pounding in his head was relentless and painful; A constant reminder that he was never alone and if he lost control for even a second, his consciousness would be lost, potentially forever. This is why Gabriel ran and has continued to run for over a century. At first, his long quest centered around the idea that he may one day rid himself of the dread Hastur consciousness, perhaps housing it in some make-shift prison, if utter destruction of the foul thing was unattainable. Sadly, and with a heavy heart, eventually Gabriel gave up all hope of containment in some other vessel leaving only one other option; Gabriel must become powerful enough to destroy Hastur himself, which meant absorbing more Azathoth shards or even the power of other Great Old Ones. As far as Gabriel knew, this was the only way he could return to his family, free of the evil influence of the creature that even now pounded away against Gabriel's weakening willpower. The entity known as Hastur was pleased.



The Lords of Instrumentality had reigned supreme for eons, never knowing fear in any form as all their rivals had either drifted off beyond this realm or long slumbered beneath the layers of centuries, deep within the cores of many hidden worlds. Only when the creature Gabriel ascended had a real threat presented itself. Gabriel's power was felt throughout Affine space, the source of all the Great Old One's wondrous powers and the origins of creation itself. First through the destruction of the Lord's harbingers and then by besting their very avatars, extensions of the Lords of Instrumentality's very beings. The Lords knew fear for the first time and ran. Their only hope lay beyond their reach, resting within creatures of equal yet opposite power. These entities, long separated from the Lords of Instrumentality, once existed as the Gigun. While few, the Gigun were immensely powerful, yet deeply troubled as well. Eventually, after experiencing emotional duality for centuries, the Gigun summoned their collective power and split their very consciousness in two, creating two uniquely different races. The Gigun now existed only as the Lords of Instrumentality, and as beings known as the Lords of Cerebral Ecology. A split in ideology necessitated the severing of selves, portioning out their powers and even their consciousness into sets of individuals, independent of thought from one another. The Lords of Cerebral Ecology journeyed outward, beyond all known space as far as the Lords of Instrumentality knew and so with no hope in sight, all they could do is flee Gabriel's wrath.



Running no longer remained an option, however, as the Lords of Instrumentality's fleet entered a nebula out on the furthest reaches of a spiral galaxy that remained unseen and unnamed by human civilization. As the Lord's vessels materialized, looking for a moment's respite, a gravimetric tunnel opened before them. Swirling energies threatened to destroy the Lord's vessel as it attempted to reach a safe distance. Gabriel emerged from the corridor of light nearly gleeful in finally having run his prey to ground. An inner voice whispered in his ear to savor the moment, that once the task is done, Gabriel would once more be reunited with his family. As the tunnel closed behind, Gabriel's energy began to bubble to the surface, engulfing his form. Already his body had changed, a twisting of what was, with the darkness buried deep within. He would be rid of this darkness once and for all, and with that thought, Gabriel launched himself at the massive ship and its fleet of escorts that lay in his path. The Lords of Instrumentality had little time to react as their mighty ship became engulfed in flame and death. The end came swiftly to the small fleet, having ultimately served its purpose. Gabriel's rage surpassed all quantifiable levels as he realized the ships before him held none of the Lords of Instrumentality, that he had been tricked by yet another decoy fleet. Gabriel raged and the fleet was ground to dust, bringing him no closer to his prey. Time was running out for the Lord's and they knew it.



Dolentite remained the central piece of human civilization. An unmatched ore capable of vastly superior strength and flexibility, Dolentite's use was essential in all things, from gateways between worlds to the mighty vessels of the Pax Continuum. While found on many worlds, the quantities discovered are never vast and can be exhausted within a few short years, that is until the Kayer Group's survey of the now constructed Nova Colony. Unheard of quantities of Dolentite resided in almost every corner of the small world, representing potentially a century's worth of limitless new construction with the prized ore, if not even more. The news excited nearly all branches of the Pax Continuum and as excavation began, a new golden age was imagined by all but the rival corporation Bellent industries and the now devastated Fortuna Colony.

Bellent Industries always maintained its presence at the forefront of innovation and discovery thanks to the gate technology, but their rival corporation, the Kayer Group constantly eroded Bellent's influence by consistently providing the rare materials necessary to realize the creations and innovations of the Kayer Group. With stagnation in current innovative technologies being released by Bellent Industries, the balance of power and influence shifted, potentially forever changing the political landscape for Bellent Industries and Arch Bishop Thram as well. An ambitious plan was launched, attempting a hostile takeover of the Kayer Group in secret, courting, bribing, or threatening the various shareholders of the Group, a dangerous move, but one Bellent and Arch Bishop Thram felt necessary. The ramification, however, would have lasting repercussions for centuries to come, not least of which was felt by Fortuna Colony.

Already stretched thin, when news of Nova Colony spread, the already dying colony was all but abandoned by what little commerce and support that had remained. Kayer personnel was shipped off-world, transferred to the new opportunities Nova represented. Those left behind were penniless, starving, and utterly without hope. Resources were supplied but in limited quantities virtually ensuring the end of Fortuna within decades at most. Anger and resentment reached unheard-of levels as the lost and desperate sought ways to vent their frustration and anger. The seeds of revolution took root.

After the first anomaly and all the deaths that followed, the residents of Fortuna began requesting armaments for defense. No answers were given as to what the creatures were or how they came or left so suddenly with no traces left behind. Video and other readings along with the many bodies of those killed by the beasts provided more than enough proof of the threat these people faced, and as weapons were cheaper than relocation, the requests were granted. Armed and angry, some of the citizens began discussing terrorist actions to draw attention to their plight.

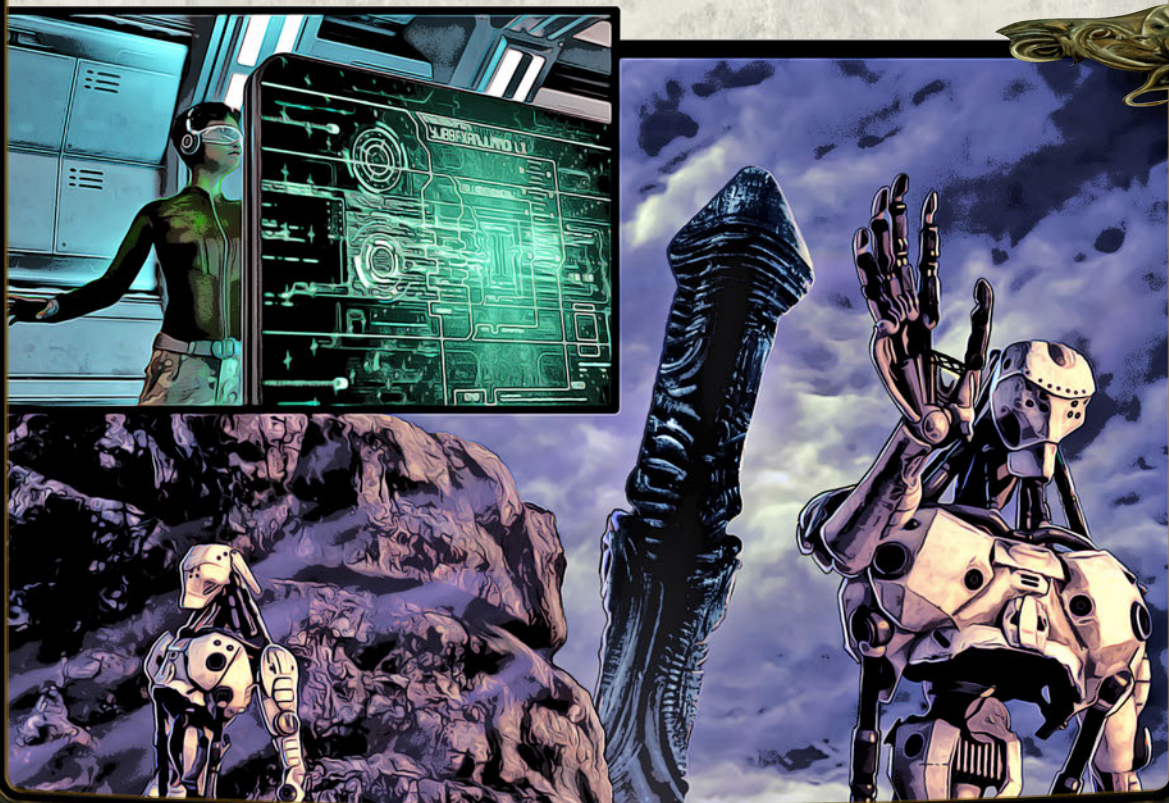
Fortuna was by far the most extreme but there were other colonies in neighboring systems also abandoned, left with meager resources and virtually no support. People starved while the core worlds flourished, often completely unaware of the sacrifices made on their behalf. Others attempted to organize as a political movement, offering to fight within the system to bring positive change for all colony worlds. Change was demanded by the neglected colonies of the Pax Continuum, and it was time for everyone to know it.

Very few humans remained at the Hyborn scientific outpost along the northernmost rim of the Pax Continuum. Mostly the resident scientists observing stellar phenomena were all that remained. Late Saturday evening, a group of the scientists was about their typical schedule, eating their evening meal as they poured over the latest results when, without fanfare or energy readings of any sort, a strange pillar simply stood in the center of the make-shift town. One second it was an empty space and the next, this other-worldly pillar stood as if it had always been there. Some even argued if it had always been there and they simply ignored or failed to take into notice the odd structure, but this was quickly dis-proven.



The pillar had given off no readings or any discernable evidence that it was anything more than stone, but as word of the violence erupting at the last pillar discovery spread, this one had been placed immediately into quarantine. Naturally, when a group of academic minds are told to stay away from a mysterious object that materialized out of nowhere, the first thing that was done was to violate the quarantine and take samples and additional reading. Eventually, soldiers made it in time to prevent any more drastic experimentation from happening but the results, forwarded on to Agnee as her ship approached the colony, proved to be as enlightening as they were frustrating. For starters, no attack had taken place, making the appearance of whatever terrible creatures they were that attacked her people potentially just random occurrence – or so she hoped as she did not want a closer view of whatever those things had been.

Furthermore, word had reached Agnee from the previous site that the strange fluctuations from the first portal had stabilized, meaning a proper comparison could be made between the two pillars. All samples gathered had the same molecular structure as the ones now being sent to her from the first site, millions of miles away. So while the creature sighting may have been unconnected, the pillars quite clearly shared common sources. This pillar however gave off no readings regarding energy output, what so ever; a clear difference between the two. Had this one been damaged or was it waiting for something to trigger whatever cycle the previous pillar had been running remained a mystery. Agnee was both excited and terrified to come in contact once more with this strange alien mystery.



The Templar Gabriel continued his search for the Lords of Instrumentality. Often his quest brought him close to his prey, only for them to slip his grasp. This time, however, Gabriel would not be denied. His hunger and desire for power had been manipulated from within by a deeply malevolent force. The essence of Hastur had spent a century whispering in his ear. What began as a defensive action to prevent the return of the Lords of Instrumentality from returning to earth and wiping out humanity had slowly twisted into Gabriel's current quest for personal power. Haunted by the lord's threats and the subtle erosion of his sanity, Gabriel embraced the isolation of his quest even at the expense of knowing his daughter. The corruption that spread throughout his body would not taint his daughter or Renee, his love. He fought with every ounce of his willpower on a near-continuous basis to hold Hastur's consciousness back as it threatens to subsume Gabriel's ego. Eventually, the only respite Gabriel could hope for would come from the absorption of a Lord of Instrumentality or another of the all-powerful Azathoth shards, the key to Gabriel's immense power. A desire secretly implanted by Hastur knowing the instability generated from the influx of exotic energies would destabilize Gabriel's control, allowing Hastur's consciousness an opportunity to assert its self.



Finally, after a decades-long hunt, Gabriel finally encountered his actual prey. In a distant star system silently being consumed by a nearby black hole, Gabriel found a fleet of warships as well as the collected might of all the Lords of Instrumentality, assembled for the first time to finally confront the singular threat Gabriel represented. Gabriel materialized exactly where the Lord's had hoped, triggering a planetary extinction-level attack. What remained of the fragile, crumbling solar system was quickly obliterated in a pristine, all-encompassing white light of utter destruction. Waves of energy rippled outwards, tearing at the very fabric of reality as weapons designed to kill gods were unleashed fully. The ancient engines of the massive vessels screamed in rage and pain as they pushed up against the limits of even their unholy power. Yet their masters, the Lords of Instrumentality, pushed the engines of destruction even further. Only after a quarter of the immeasurably powerful fleet found itself immolated in an inferno of their own doing, did their dread masters relent.





Far away, Renee heard her lovers' silent cry in Affine space. At first, she thought the sensation was one of pain or fear, but no. This is something far more malevolent, she thought. An almost sickening darkness was conveyed as if someone reveled in the suffering of another. This was not the man she knew.

Renee's debriefing had ended hours earlier and though she didn't need it, Renee had been given a private suite for the duration of her stay. Of course, the many surveillance devices that littered the room became glaringly obvious the moment she stepped within, still, the minor intrusion only made her smirk as the action was expected. Now Renee used the bugs to her advantage. Declaring to no one in particular, Renee announced her need to leave immediately. She asked that her thanks be conveyed to the chancellor as she began to dematerialize.

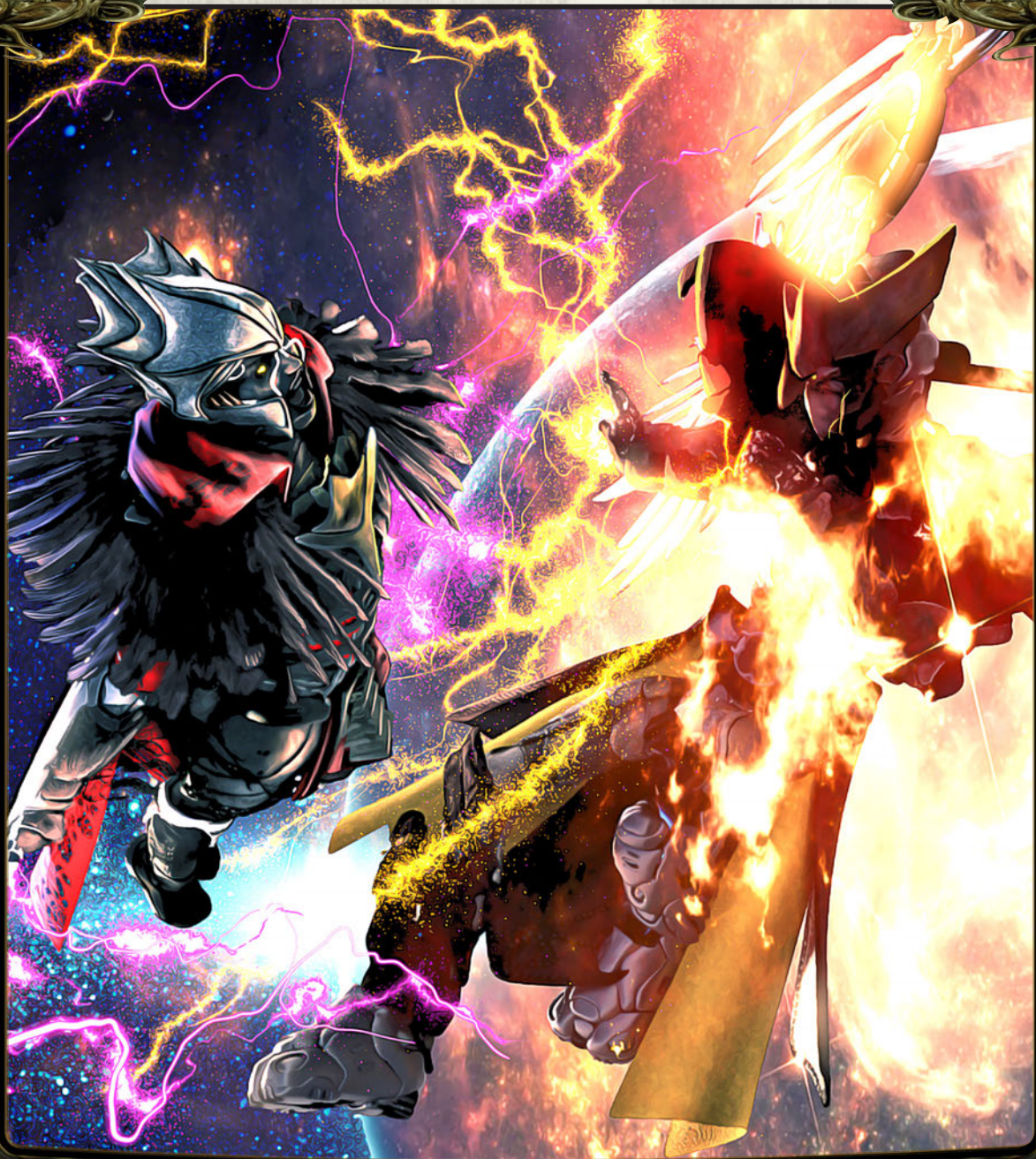
As the blinding light subsided, the Lords of Instrumentality could already sense what awaited them. Gabriel floated out among the debris and radiation, absorbing the fading background energy. The excitement and rage that boiled up within Gabriel folded his mind, clouding his reason and ceding a fraction more of his mental control to the entity known as Hastur.

Gabriel launched his counterattack without warning or hesitation. Within moments entire warships, each capable of decimating entire worlds, were themselves reduced to ash. The Lords of Instrumentality focused their incredible might. Exotic energies released against their foe tore at the very fabric of reality, producing a vast rift in space/time. Gabriel experienced simultaneous attacks against his psyche and body as the energy bombarded his form relentlessly. All the while Hastur continued his internal campaign, further eroding Gabriel's hold on the creature.

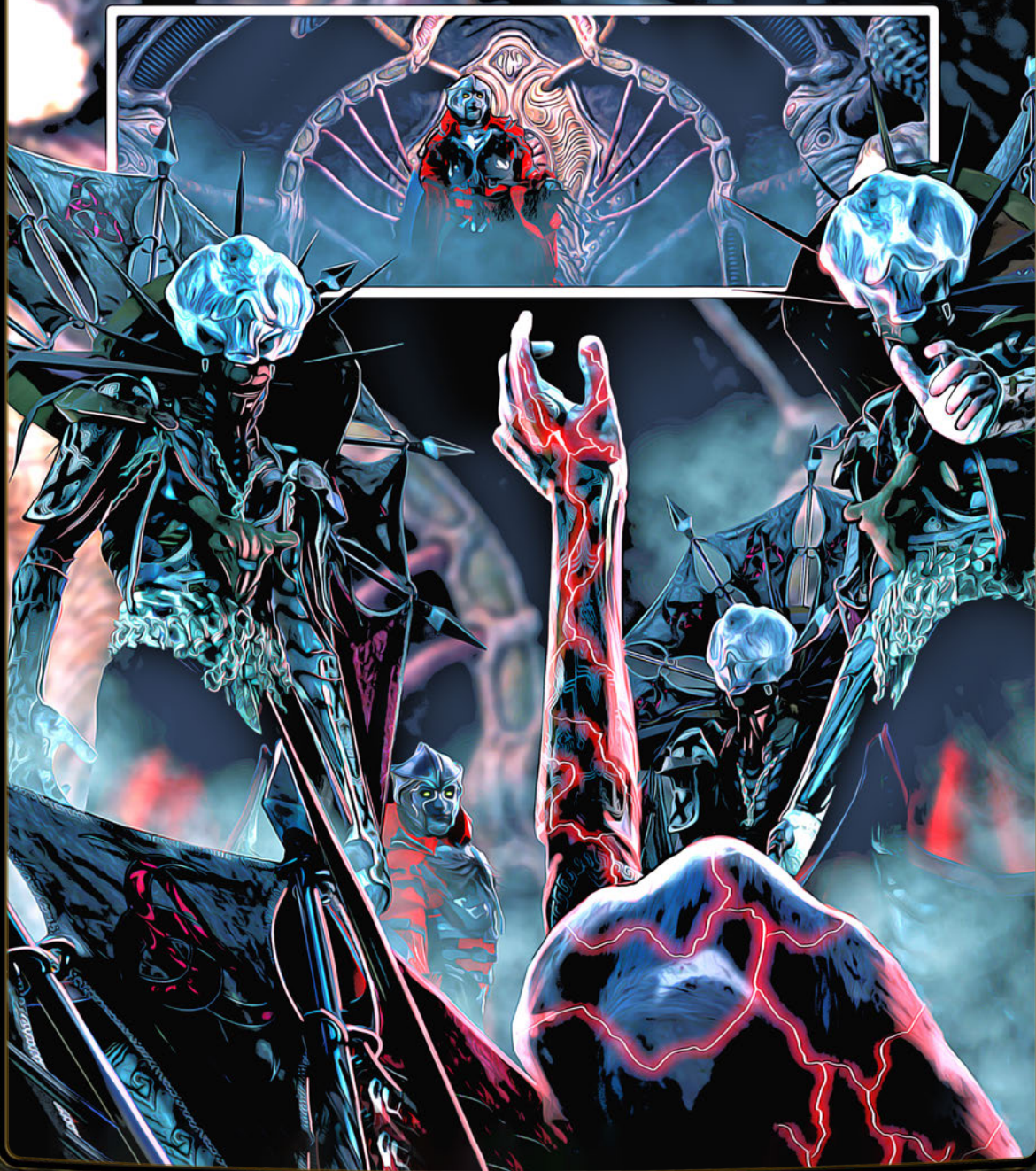
The Lord's pressed their attack, sensing victory within their grasp, even as more of their fleet became consumed in the great battle. Gabriel's willpower began to crumble, if only for an instant. Long enough for the dread Hastur to fully assume control. No longer restrained and with no internal struggle to be found, the full might of this being was brought to bear. The fused Gabriel/Hastur entity unleashed a torrent of rage, hatred, and power against the Lords. So all-consuming was Gabriel's wrath that he failed to notice another entering the field of battle.



Renee Arrived in time to witness Gabriel's consciousness being subsumed by Hastur. Fearing Gabriel may be lost forever should he absorb any more power, Renee chose to align herself with those who spent so long trying to kill her. Renee released an incredible blast of energy upon Gabriel, holding nothing back. The blast easily could consume entire worlds, but only served to knock Gabriel back, close enough to the universal tear ripped open by the Lords of Instrumentality. This served to contain Gabriel long enough for Renee to reach out with her mind to the Lords of Instrumentality, combining her strength with theirs to make a hasty retreat. Mere seconds after Gabriel freed himself from the galactic rift, the remains of the fleet, as well as Renee, vanished without a trace. The fury Gabriel released could be seen light-years away.



Renee felt sickened by the mental touch of the Lords of Instrumentality. Though they expressed no malice, their very presence within her psyche reeked of decay. She closed off her mind as she entered the great hall where the Lord's assembled. In the center of the room lay the unthinkable, a Lord of Instrumentality lay dying. Renee remained silent as the assembled Lord's seemingly prayed over the fallen as its very life force ebbed. Renee could see the energies leak from its body and flow into the gathering, absorbed gradually as its body began to crumble, ultimately reduced to dust.



Galaxy's away, in a region of space devoid of life or even light, something ancient stirred. Deep within a collection of twisted shapes lay a dark and foreboding room. In a circle stood silently and without motion, statue-like shapes caked in eons of dust and rot. But these ancient shapes were not made of any stone and in fact merely slumbered. Slumbered, that is until one began to crumble. As the decay rapidly increased, the strange being began to contort, letting out a barely audible cry as the last of it fell to mere ash.

The room began to subtly shake, causing the ash to plume outwards as a thick fog. The Lord's of Cerebral Ecology began to stir once more.





CHAPTER 6

CHAPTER 6

Standing across from Renee, the Lords of Instrumentality remained silent and motionless, contemplating their next words and actions carefully. Renee was the first to break the silence.

“Clearly we need each other. Your combined power wasn’t enough to stop Gabriel and now one of your order no longer exists. I can’t get through to him on my own, his mind is fractured, suffering in some unspeakable way.”

The Lord’s turned toward one another in silent communion, some appalled at the arrogance of this young new lord, others still in shock from the loss of one of their own. All, however, knew what Renee spoke was the truth. Their response seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at the same time, a mix of telepathy and insect-like chittering.





“We acknowledge your words. The being Hastur and the one known to you as Gabriel, as a merged entity, pose a near-insurmountable threat. In our diminished state the entity will continue its pursuit until all are consumed, and with each victory, Hastur will grow in dominance and power.”

Renee took a moment to consider their words before replying.

“By ‘diminished state’ do you refer to the loss you just suffered?” Renee did not want to seem callous, but even before their comrade fell, the Lords of Instrumentality had proven incapable of stopping Gabriel.

The assembled Lord’s once more turned to one another, debating how much they should or should not tell. Never before had these creatures of Affine space had to deal with another being as an equal, at least none that were not sibling entities. In truth, while separated by millennia, Renee and Gabriel had become as much children of Affine space as these Great Old Ones were. Eventually, it was decided that their secrets no longer mattered, for to keep them meant certain annihilation.

“Our existence in this reality, our physicality, was not always this. Eons ago, born out of frustration or some other long-forgotten sensation, we rent our physical forms in two. Consumed by the loss of Affine space, a consequence we suffered once we embraced this physical existence, the way back was forever barred to us. We sought to remove that which suffered within us. What once was one, now existed as two. If we are to stop Hastur and save ourselves, we must rejoin our other half.”

Renee was astonished to learn so much about these creatures, yet so many new questions pressed her mind.

“Why have you waited until now? If the split left you so diminished, why do it at all?”

“A thing so easily broken is not so easily mended. Two sides, but of the same being. Once apart we no longer thought the same way. Our existence as separate entities led to separate desires. We, as Lords of Instrumentality, became consumed with the desire to return to Affine space. Our actions led us to war with our other selves yet we dared not strike at each other directly, for to do so would mean an end to both halves, as we forever remained intertwined. Eventually, our wars led to further conquest, whereas the Lord’s of Cerebral Ecology merely sought to slumber, passing the time in oblivion until the ending of this universe.”

“After all this time, even reaching through Affine space, how will you find these Lords of Cerebral Ecology? Will they even want this merge?”

The Lords of Instrumentality considered Renee’s words carefully.

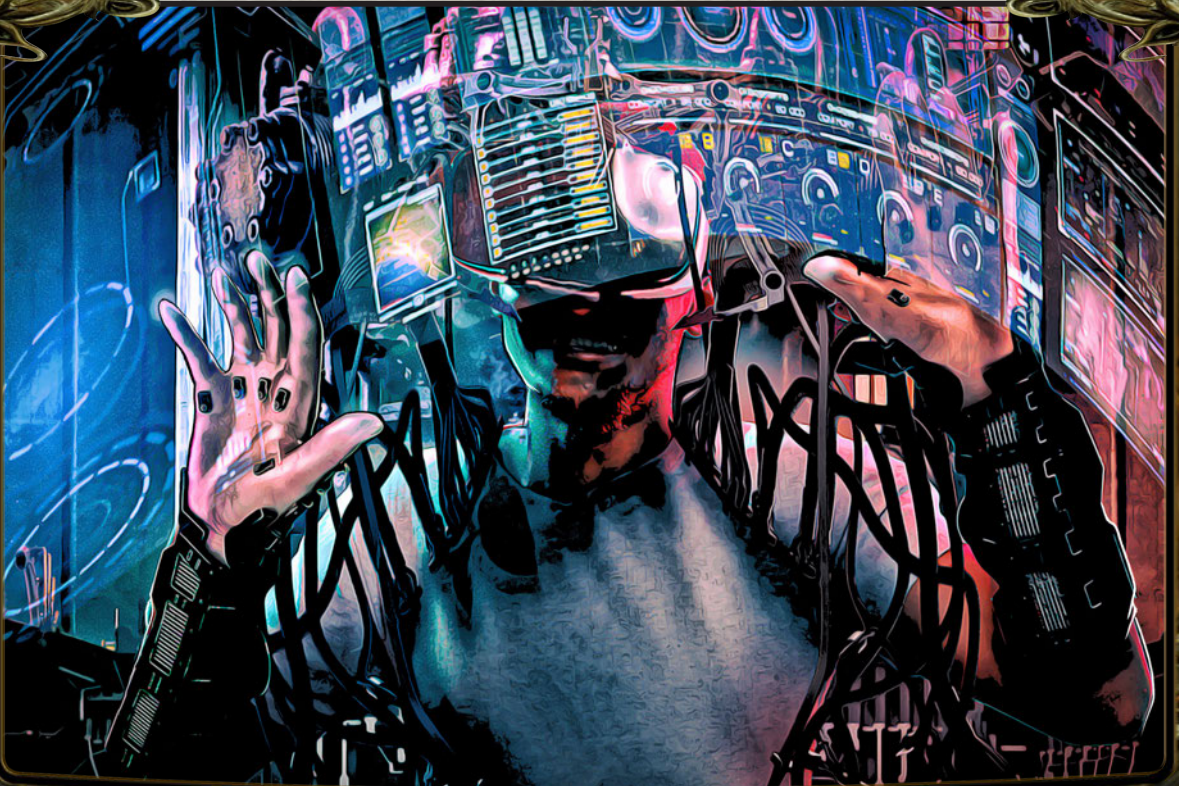
“We already sense their awakening. Naturally, we feel drawn to one another and so they will seek us out, but the neutral ground must be found. A place where violence cannot exist.”

Renee thought carefully for a moment before mentioning her idea. It was a dangerous ploy but deep down she felt it was necessary. Now she only had to convince the Pax Continuum of her insane plan.

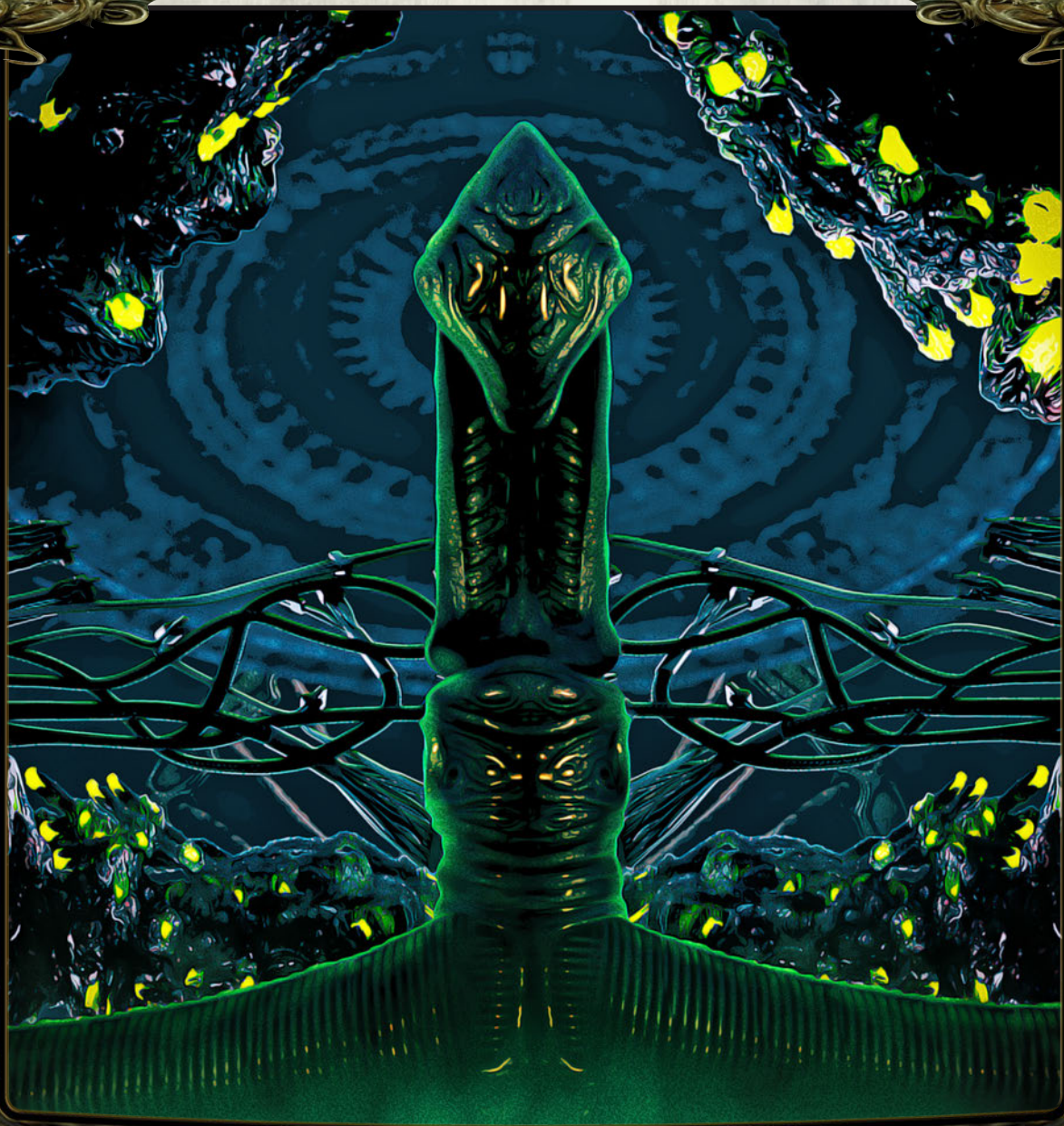


Arch Bishop Thram devoted much of his considerable resources in pursuit of his master's prize. Not much in this universe, save for the Great Old Ones themselves, could track Gabriel throughout his hunt for the Lords of Instrumentality. It was only through the exotic technologies gifted to Thram from his master that he could manage such a feat. Even still, to pour over every ounce of information gleaned from observation required many hours of precise calculation and attention to even the most minute details. Fortunately for Thram, the congregation of his church proved beyond eager to please in all things. It was after years of dedication to this cause that finally the fruits of their labor paid off.

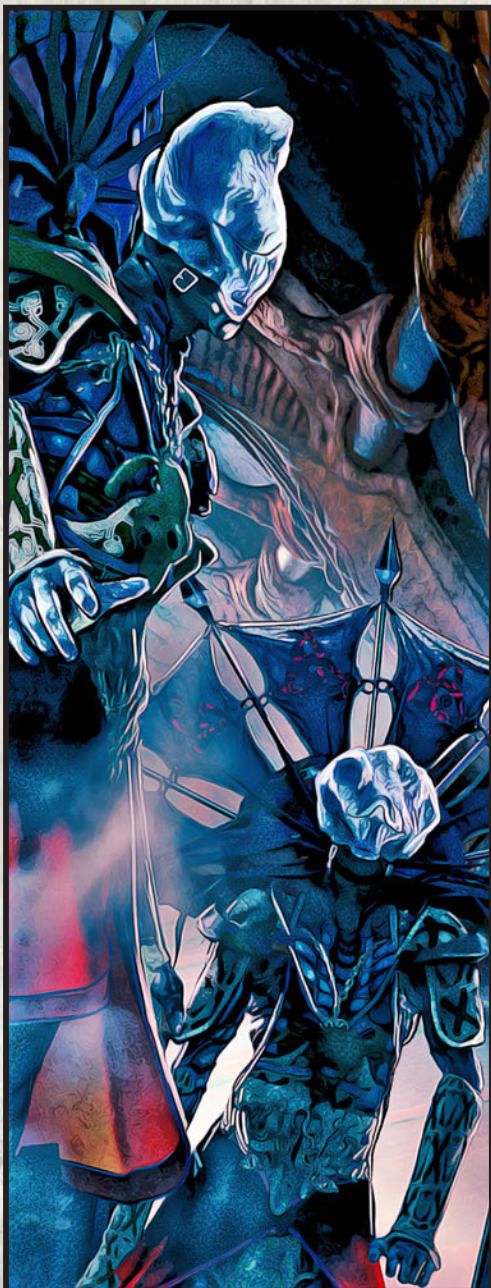
Along the outermost rim of space, in a desolate region devoid of life, Gabriel confronted the Lords of Instrumentality. The battle was fierce, releasing terrifying energies that tore holes in the universe. It was from one of these fissures, hours after the battle had concluded, that a relatively small shard of ebony color slipped between the cracks. The Azathoth shard was humble in appearance, angular and sharp, yet otherwise nondescript. Still, the powerful energies it emanated could be seen galaxies away, at least to those with the right knowledge and skill to detect them. Thram was near giddy with excitement upon hearing the results of the scans. The fastest vessel he possessed was dispatched without haste to retrieve the object of power. There was no telling who else may desire to possess one of these powerful shards, and nothing Thram possessed could stand against a creature as powerful as Gabriel, should he return. As the vessel sped on its way, captained by some of his most loyal Hierophants, Thram began preparations for the next step in his master's great plan.



The first part of the next phase of the plan was already nearing completion. In a cavernous room beneath the main assembly hall of the Church of the Affine, a monolithic piece stood in the center of the room. Engravings of unknown origin decorated the imposing device, leading to the very top where the shard would be placed. Only the last of the engravings remained to be completed, a task only hours from finality. The second part, however, would remain a more delicate process. Through Bellent Industries, Thram's attempted hostile takeover of the Kayer Group failed, as the shareholders rebuffed the offers made, instead embracing new shareholder rights protections rolled out by the Kayer Group. Further attempts at a buyout or takeover were quickly dismissed by Thram as he wanted Bellent to remain more in the shadows for the next phase of the operation. To achieve his ultimate goals, violence would prove to be a far more effective tool.



In the farthest reaches of space, the Lords of Cerebral Ecology gathered in their ancient hall. For the first time in all of existence, a member of their order, a brother from Affine space, lay desiccated. Reduced to a crumbling pile of dust, the Lord's were aghast at the sight. Their connection to their counterparts, the Lords of Instrumentality, did not convey knowledge and rarely transmitted any sensation at all, but this was different. Fear gripped both orders now and for the first time in millennia, the two halves knew they must meet once more. The call, a nagging sensation felt by the Lords of Cerebral Ecology gave them the location where they would meet. The Lord's directed their vessel, a monstrous creation the size of a small moon, to depart.



Agnee sat, perplexed, looking over the data streams sent near-instantaneously to her from every corner of the inhabited galaxy. A freak phenomenon was quickly turning into a frequent and recurring event as pillars continued appearing in random locations, most of which were inhabited colonies or research outposts. Their purpose remained as mysterious as their construction. All pillars were identical in size and material as best Agnee could tell, but the engravings along one panel on each pillar were unique and incredibly difficult to decipher. The markings were a language, or more accurately pieces of many languages. Doctor Finch, one of Agnee's fellow archaeologists specializing in linguistics made the astonishing statement that the language may even be a proto-language, from which many others are derived. Lacking the necessary evidence, most of the others dismissed the notion, turning back to their own specific discipline's and areas of study, but Agnee had urged the young man to continue his research.

Days had gone by with little to show for it, yet Dr. Finch persevered. Driven not only by the confidence in his conclusions but also the desire to prove himself in the face of his colleague's derision. Dr. Finch was considered somewhat of a child prodigy at a young age, able to learn and dissect an incredible range of languages, both human and alien. His skills were sought after in many fields, from translation for trade deals to archeological excavations on alien worlds. This however had proven to be the single most difficult translation he had ever attempted. Hours of cross-referencing and research seemingly lead nowhere when suddenly inspiration struck. Eagerly, the young doctor raced to triple-check his idea, already overflowing with excitement at the possibilities if he was correct.

It was near one in the morning when Dr. Finch stormed into Agnee's makeshift office, a small mountain of papers rolled underneath his arm. "Dr. Finch, what the hell? Do you know how late it is?"

"I did it! I translated our pillar! I know what it says! At first, I treated it as a sentence, maybe a statement but how could I have guessed it wouldn't be any of those things and- "

"Stop Dr. Finch! Take a breath. Now tell me, what does it say?"

Dr. Finch beamed with pride as he met Agnee's gaze, "It's a name! A person's name!"

Agnee returned the doctor's gaze with astonishment, "Well? Whose name is it?"

Dr. Finch let out a slight laugh saying, "I haven't a clue!"



CHAPTER 7

CHAPTER 7

The Pax Continuum nervously patrolled the Earth solar system, awaiting the arrival of legends. No one quite knew what to expect, but the pervasive sensation of terror was palpable throughout the solar system and even beyond. The meeting of two great forces, both more than millennia older than even the oldest of races, brought together to finally put an end to a war that's been fought throughout the ages. Renee stood on the bridge of the command ship Tigris, one of the newest weapons of war developed by the Pax. She could sense the ancient beings approach even light-years away and advised the Tigris' captain. Eventually, the ship's systems were able to detect the fleets as they neared, neither side attempting to cloak or hide their arrival. There was too much at stake to risk everything on needless acts of bravado or false intimidation.

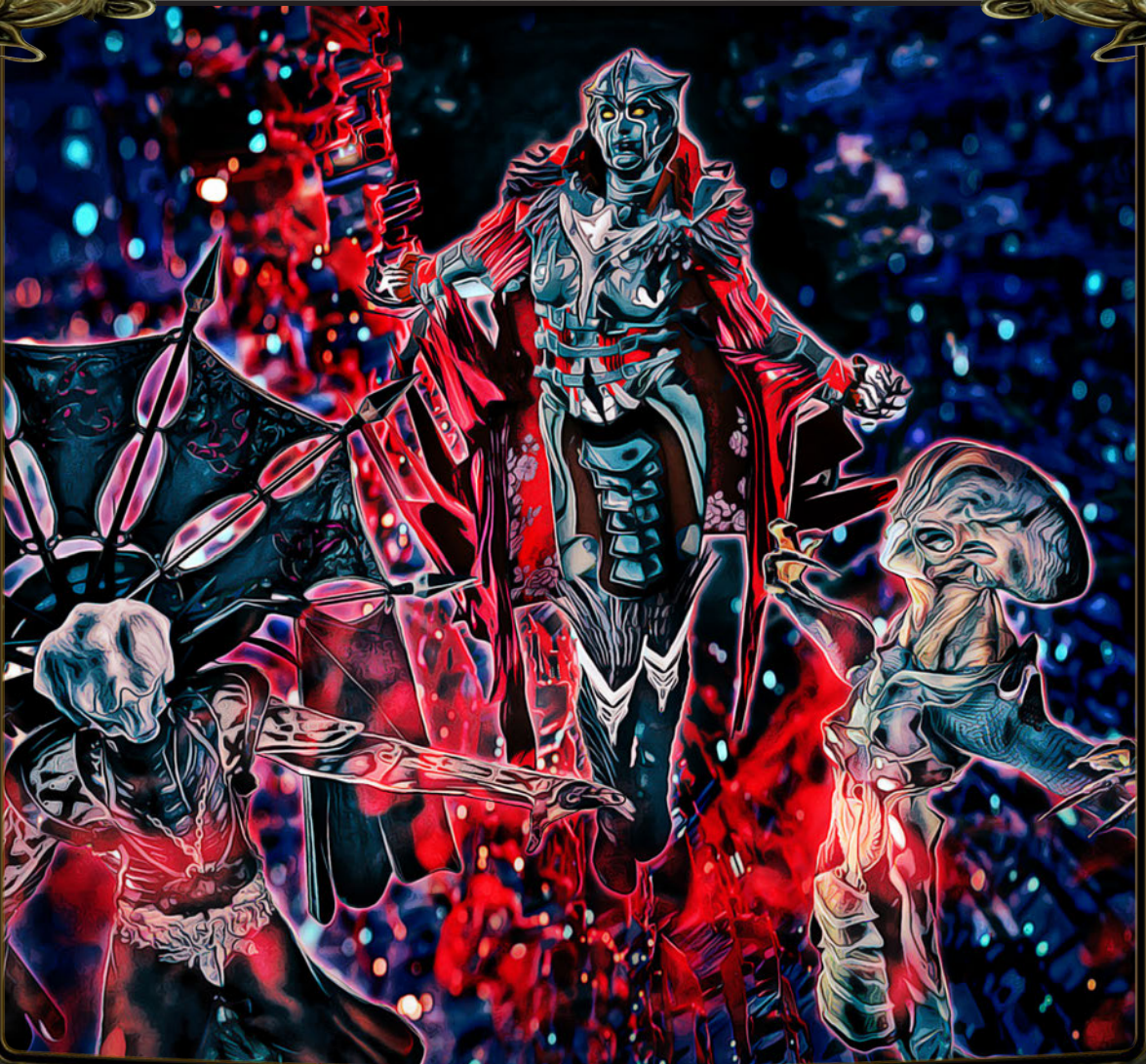
The Lords of Cerebral Ecology was the first to enter the inner solar system. A single vessel the size of a small world carefully maneuvered past warships and outposts alike. A field encompassing the massive vessel negated any effects of its own gravity well, eliminating the fear of widespread damage caused by its mere presence. No signals were sent or acknowledged by the mighty vessel yet Renee remained in constant telepathic communication with the Lord's. The Lord's of Cerebral Ecology parked their ship in orbit of the obsidian planet Purgatory, former planet Mars and current prison of the ancient terror Sha'Bolique. The Lords of Instrumentality, however, were far more cautious. Slithering behind the barriers of detection, a single scout was sent to observe but was almost immediately detected by Renee and the Lords of Cerebral Ecology. Renee sent a transmission to their scout reaffirming that no trickery or deception awaited them. Reluctantly, the Lords of Instrumentality made themselves known. Standing on Purgatory, for the first time in eons, these two great powers met, not in warfare but to discuss the even more unthinkable – reunification.



Renee watched on as the Lords stood motionless and in complete silence. Their discussions took place as a form of telepathy, often completing one another's sentences almost as if they were all shared thoughts- two halves of singular beings both in agreement yet deeply troubled by the actions they were taking. Renee was both fascinated and extremely confused by what she saw and experienced as she listened in on their exchanges. It seemed to her that the process of separation, done so very long ago, was one of impulse and anger. Neither thought out nor truly planned for. Reunification would have to be far more delicate. Finally, the assembled group fell silent as their telepathic congress ended. All turned to face Renee in unison.

With a singular voice, the Lords spoke, "We require your outside assistance for the reunification to succeed. As we merge, it will become increasingly difficult to focus and some may stray. We need you to help maintain focus and to guide us toward one another should we drift. Will you help us?"

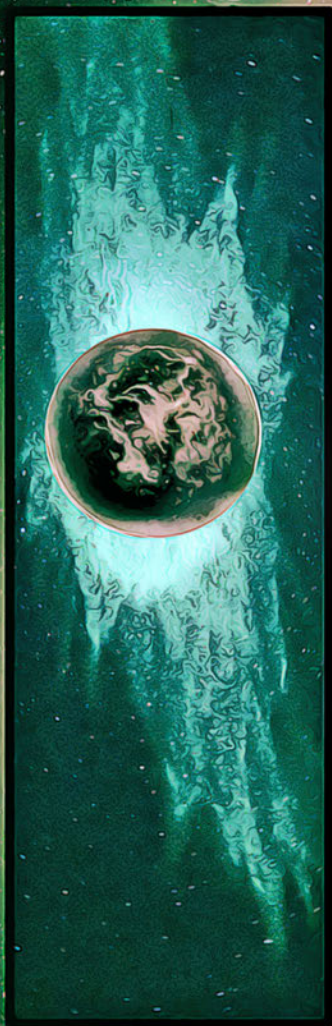
Renee only thought for a moment before answering, "When shall we begin?"



A galaxy away, Gabriel floated motionless in space. His outward appearance projected calmness and a perceived state of meditation, however deep within himself, a constant war raged on, threatening to consume him. The remnants of Hastur swirled and flowed like an eel, winding its way through the memories and emotions of Gabriel's long life. Each event he threatened to twist and manipulate, forcing Gabriel to respond in defense of his own sanity. The war of will's raged on, never-ending and only ever dimming when in combat, for both entities were drawn to conflict, both seeking out the Lords of Instrumentality for their own needs. Gabriel sought revenge, blaming them for the path that lead to his self-imposed exile while Hastur simply sought power and the opportunity to once more be free.



Gabriel and Hastur continued in their standoff when suddenly an immense and familiar wave of power swept over them. Gabriel only knew of the origin of the great wave, sensing that Earth's system was the source through his connection to Affine space. Hastur however recognized the immense power for what it was, for Hastur had been there when the one race had become two. After all, it was through his manipulation and machinations that the Lords were created – halving the power of another Great Old One. Within moments a kind of truce was struck as the Gabriel/Hastur fusion raced back to earth, both eager to end at least one great rivalry forever.



Along the outermost rim of colonized space, the Fortuna colony continued its long, slow descent into poverty and irrelevance. One of the last transports of company equipment and supplies readied for takeoff, completing the abandonment of both the Fortuna colony and its struggling colonists too poor to leave themselves. Fortuna's people raged at the final insult of the Kayar Group, stripping the last shipment of Dolenphyte from the local transport guild, which would have brought much-needed money to Fortuna's economy, and instead of packing it in with their last outgoing transport headed to the new Nova colony. The people had no hope left so it came as little surprise what happened next.

The transport left Fortuna colony on schedule, lumbering way to the local transfer gate. Minutes before reaching the gates event horizon, a distress signal was received by Fortuna. The transports reactors began to overheat. All fail-safes, from emergency shutdown to reactor for ejection failed as a series of explosions were detected. Within moments the massive vessel, all lives aboard, and the local gate were consumed in a massive blast that sent waves of energy back to the colony and pummeled its already fragile atmosphere. The damage caused was incalculable. No one took responsibility for the act and little remained to determine the cause of the disaster. Some blamed the greed of the Kayar Group for sending an archaic transport that most of its type had already decommissioned. Many others assumed it was an act of terrorism, some saying it was the Nova colony in an act of spite or a miscalculation of a Fortuna colony terrorist, exploding the vessel too soon. Regardless of the source, a new group was formed from the rage and sorrow of Fortuna's people. The League of Independence would bring justice to Fortuna and revenge to all those whole had harmed her.

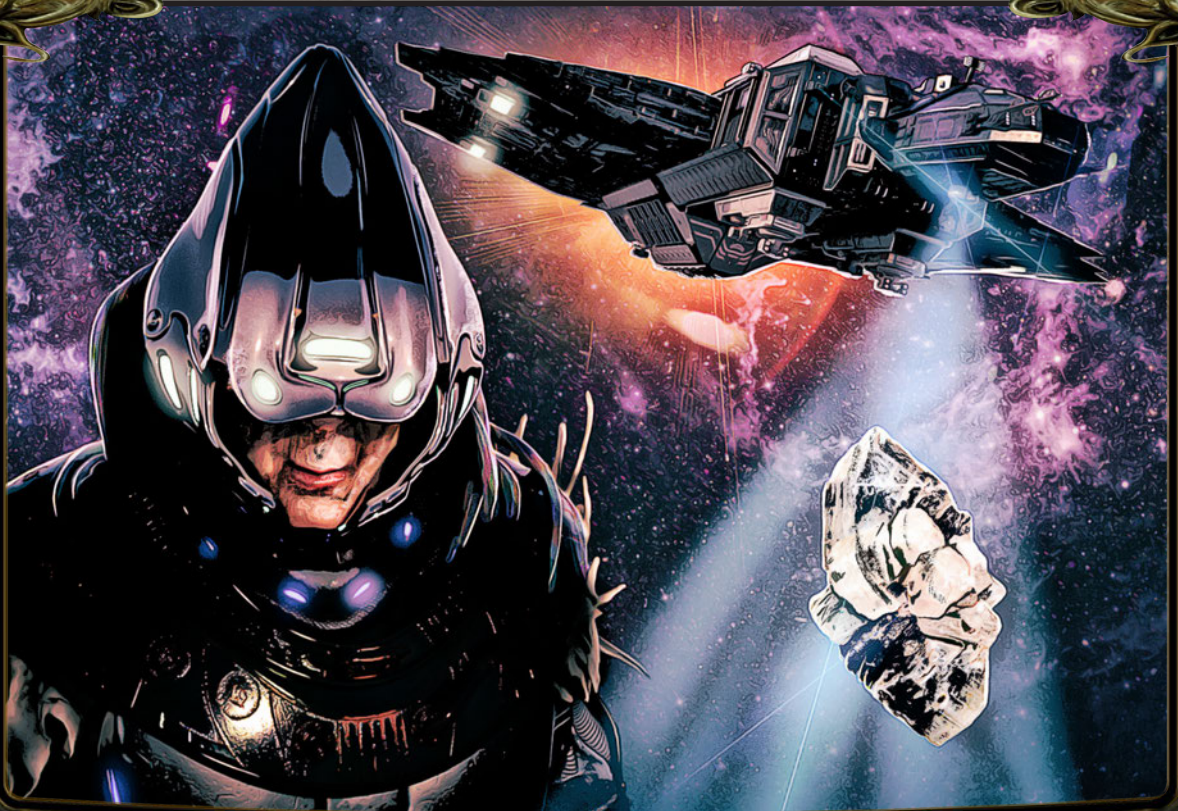


ERROR



At the other end of Pax Continuum space, a lone ship traveled the darkness between worlds. It had ventured out further than what was considered safe to retrieve its prize, a shimmering blue Azathoth shard, destined for the Church of the Affine. Already Arch Bishop Thram prepped the cradle which was designed to hold the powerful artifact. A large sphere had been erected above, built to channel the massive power of the shards. For a simple human to try to tap into the power of the shard directly, the result would be permanent damage and mutation at best, instant death at worse.

Thram had often considered this shard and its capabilities. With the knowledge he possessed, his mind raced with thoughts of power and immortality, of ruling the universe and crushing even the one he served under Thram's heel. In fact, why rule just this universe when he could rule the other side as well, completing the Lord of Tear's plan but instead all of creation falling under the might of Thram! He considered these flights of fancy but Thram was a scientist above all and deep down he knew his limitations. Without direct assistance from his master, there would be no rule, no empire, and no Church of the Affine. The crimson shard had increased Thram's awareness, allowing glimpses and insight from his master, but nothing more. But utilizing the machines he designed, based on the inspiration his master fed him through the crimson shard, Thram would now be able to indirectly tap into the immense power of the newly acquired Azathoth shard. Finally, Arch Bishop Thram would have clear communication with his master, the Lord of Tears, and full access to his wisdom and power.



The two halves, the Lords of Instrumentality and the Lord's of Cerebral Ecology, merged in blinding light. Renee did her best to help guide them back toward unification; a confusing and almost entirely instinctual act on her part, relying more on feeling than knowledge. As the process worked, the sensation turned from trying to contain an ever-expanding ball to one of deflation and eventual ease. As the waves of energy dissipated, Renee could see luminous beings standing before her. Twelve individuals stood where many once had been, taller, prouder than the creatures they once were.

"Thank you for your great service. We stand before you, indebted to you and your kind. Where once we were split in two, now you see the Gigun, made whole once more."

Renee stood silently in astonishment at what had been accomplished. Never before had she conceived of such a thing, individuals split into separate entities yet existing apart, now united once more. The irony was not lost on her that the fast-approaching Gabriel in effect suffered the exact opposite fate, having the poisonous consciousness of Hastur writhing within his own being.

"Will we be able to free Gabriel when he gets here? He's on his way now, I'm sure you can sense it," said Renee.

"Hastur's power and manipulation corrupts and spreads even when deprived of a body. Hastur's ability to corrupt is only outmatched by his desire for more power. For Gabriel to have absorbed Hastur, his abilities must be significant. But together, you, and we Gigun, I believe have the power to save him. So long as Gabriel himself still seeks to be free. If his mind is too far gone..."

The words of the Gigun weighed heavily on Renee. It had been so long since she had been with him since she could hear his thoughts entwined with her own. How much of him remained? Renee had little time to reflect as an intense surge of gravimetric energy opened a gateway. Gabriel stepped out from the light, a terrifying and imposing figure radiating power. He stood silent for a moment, caught off guard by Renee's presence and the transformed Gigun.

"What an odd pairing I find. Former enemies banded together to stop me from bringing peace to the universe?"



Renee shot back out of both anger and love, "You've become twisted and cruel by that thing inside you! The Gigun are not a threat, let them... let us help you!"

Gabriel let out a cold chuckle as he lowered his head, "Oh, I fear I am quite beyond helping at this point. All I see enrages me, drives me to destroy. I might ask that you kill me if I thought you were capable. Instead, all I can do is plead with you. Run."



With that, Gabriel turned on the twelve Gigun, unleashing a torrent of destructive force. The vessel they stood within ruptured, venting gas and flame into the cold, open space above Purgatory. Engulfed in a fiery inferno, the might ship exploded in a blinding light, reduced to mere atoms as Gabriel continued his assault. Renee held nothing back as she joined in the battle. She knew her lover well and countered both his physical and mental attacks, but the sheer power he possessed threatened to eradicate all of them. The Gigun did little more than stand there, choosing to confront Gabriel on the mental plane as Renee pressed her physical attack. Much of the energy directed at the Gigun was deflected or absorbed by a protective barrier they had erected, but even that began to weaken.



"Why do you protect them? Why do you risk everything for them? They hunted you! They threatened our child! Let me destroy them!" Gabriel raged in uncontrolled fury.

"I do it to save you! They're no longer the beings you and I faced! And more than that, they're the only ones that can help me free you! Hastur has twisted your mind, can't you see that?" Renee yelled back passionately.

Raw emotion flooded Renee's thoughts distracting her as Gabriel swung his sword cutting deep into Renee, bleeding out a great deal of her energy from the wound before she was able to heal it. Gabriel took advantage of her injury, now floated above the Gigun, immune to their attacks. As Gabriel leveled his sword against the twelve, his power began to focus, amassing a blast that threatened to destroy even Purgatory, the only prison to hold Sha'Bolique! Suddenly another great rift appeared in front of Gabriel as he unleashed his powerful blast. Arissa appeared from the rift in time to take the full brunt of the force. Gabriel tried to stop as the energy enveloped and consumed his daughter but the Hastur personality raged on, intoxicated by the release of energy.



Arissa reached her arms out and seemingly collected the vast energies. The glowing sphere radiated as she held it firm, unscathed by its power. Arissa then returned the blast, adding her own considerable power to the sphere. The massive blast held enough power to knock even Gabriel to his knees. Sobs could be heard coming from Gabriel as the sight of his daughter almost being destroyed by his hand gave him the strength to fight back against Hastur and his parasitical influences. The Gigun swiftly surrounded Gabriel.

“Now!” They spoke in unison as Renee joined them.

A mental wall was erected around the humbled Hastur. Then another, and another, until the creature was contained, at least for the moment.

“Will it hold?” asked Renee.

“He’ll need to remain here with us. You should as well. We will need to constantly reinforce the barrier and Purgatory will drain away any residual energy that escapes in an attempt to feed Sha’Bolique. From there we can redirect the energy’s as needed.”

Renee embraced her daughter, thanking her as the two helped lift Gabriel. Deep within the planet, the Gigun embedded the remains of their fleet, to serve as an underground city. From there they placed Gabriel into stasis. Renee turned to Arissa and the Gigun.

“Now for the hard part. Convince Earth to hand over Purgatory to the Gigun!”





CHAPTER 8

CHAPTER 8

The Pax Continuum remained preoccupied with the events unfolding around the planet Purgatory, unaware of the growing sightings of newly formed pillars simply appearing out of nowhere. Agnee and her team diligently worked to translate the name carved into the ancient pillar their team was responsible for studying. It was late in the day and the local settlement had already begun turning in for the night as Agnee pushed on. A quiet town, naturally, at night the Settlement took on an eerie, almost ghost town quality to it. Having this almost preternatural calm and near stifling silence stretch on through the night was difficult for many of Agnee's city-born assistants, but for her, it was as if she had returned home, to the quiet little colony she was born to, now light-years away. Agnee thought of the sweet smells from the local orchard and the cool mountain air blowing down into the fields. Agnee's peaceful reminiscing came to a sudden end as a piercing scream broke the silence and rung out throughout the small colony.



Agnee and several of her assistants hesitantly emerged from their makeshift labs as much of the town also began to stir, turning on lights as they searched for the source of the blood-curdling scream. A second scream rang out followed by a chorus as the building furthest from Agnee's encampment burst into flames with a deafening explosion. The townspeople fled in blind panic as nightmarish creatures with unthinkable grotesque anatomies stormed through the town rending and tearing their way through the townsfolk. Agnee looked on in terror as men and women alike were brutalized and tossed about as easily as dolls. Fortunately for Agnee, Dr. Finch emerged from his lab in time to see the horror unfolding. Snapping Agnee out of her shock, the two ran towards a nearby storm shelter with several of her staff and a number of the local colonists accompanying them. Locked within the confines of the shelter, the screams and the horrid sound of tissue being torn and bones being broken were only muffled and not stifled completely. It would be many hours later before the horrible sounds would finally come to an end. Hours more before anyone would attempt to leave the shelter and explore the hellish landscape that awaited them.





Gabriel sat in the center of a circular room, cross-legged and in deep meditation. Nine of the Gigun encircled Gabriel, adding their willpower and energy to his own. Tectonic shifts in the planet had occurred, causing minor earthquakes requiring Renee and the three remaining Gigun to join in on the healing process from time to time, but for the last few hours at least, everything seemed under control. Arissa watched on as her father fought valiantly his inner demon, her own tremendous abilities giving her insight into the inner turmoil as it raged. She could perceive her father as colors more than shapes. The blue light representing her father, yellow for the Hastur parasite, and red for her mother and the Gigun. Each color held sway over a piece of her father's form but none achieved supremacy. For now, her father was in balance.

"Arissa, can you stay here and help with your father should it be needed?" Renee asked as she entered the room.

Renee and Arissa both knew the next thing that needed to be done was to convince the Pax Continuum government to cede control of Purgatory to the newly settled Gigun. Arissa agreed, knowing how fragile Gabriel's sanity currently was. As Renee made to leave for Earth, one of the twelve Gigun approached her.

"I will accompany you on your journey. Not only will they want to question the new caretakers of this desolate world, but there is an even greater threat I sense on the horizon. They must be warned."

Renee thought for a moment, searching her feelings for signs of the threat this Gigun spoke of.

"Now with Gabriel at ease, you are right, I sense something... growing? I can't place it but it's out there. It feels like it's surrounding the entire universe."

The Gigun merely nodded as they both turned toward Earth. They must prepare humanity for whatever this new threat might be.

Fortuna colony had already experienced an entire host of horrors ranging from the stripping of what few resources the colony held to the outright blame for the recent transport explosion. Tempers flared and talk of revolution spread but nothing would prepare these unfortunate souls for what was held in store for them. Kendis Shale was but an average miner and family man. His focus being his loving wife and daughter, Kendis' wants were minimal and his life, while hard, was still a pleasant enough one for the man's needs. Kendis was out enjoying the night sky, awaiting his wife and daughter's return from the local market when the blissful silence of the night was shattered by the cries of terror and pain. A fissure had appeared near the town square, illuminating the buildings as if a tiny sun had appeared out of nowhere. A few people began to gather, transfixed by the light and its radiant beauty. None had a clue as to what the source of this magnificent sight was, yet swiftly the question's importance was rendered moot.





From the rippling sphere of light emerged a long, diseased-looking appendage. Possibly a claw, or an extended stump of an arm, the appendage stretched on until a leg steeped through the fissure. The beast that emerged was not human, nor any other form of a creature known to man. Missing large areas of flesh, the diseased thing stood shambling in front of the sphere, absorbing its new-found surroundings by whatever senses the malformed thing yet possessed. Suddenly the silence was broken as a scream from the crowd shattered the collective awe of the gathered group. The thing jerked its head in the direction of the scream. Its lips, melted together as if to prevent its screams of agony and rage, tore open in thin strands of flesh revealing rows of dagger-like teeth. The beast replied with its nightmarish scream only to follow up by launching its self into the sky, crashing down on top of 5 individuals where the frightened scream originated. A wave of blood and gore spurt into the night sky as another of the diseased creatures emerged from the fissure. Madness and chaos ensued as unknown numbers of the creatures emerged, each immediately engaged in the wholesale slaughter of all within sight.



Kendis Shale clung to the fallen debris that both trapped him and protected him from the horror's ravaging Fortuna colony. He already had watched his wife and child rent limb from limb off in the distance at the onset of this horrible nightmare. Racing towards his fallen loved ones, an explosion collapsed the side of a nearby building, trapping the distraught man but also saving him from a needless and excruciating death. Now all Kendis had left was his sorrow, and so he wept. Kendis was far from alone on this evening of horror. Many families were destroyed, with the corpses of loved ones littering the streets as the fire's raged out of control. Somewhere deep within Kendis, a light began to flicker. Barely perceived at first, this sensation soothed his grief and began to give him a feeling of purpose. An idea was sparked from deep within, and with it, a location.





The representative of the Gigun was met with trepidation by the Pax Continuum Senate. Had this strange new arrival been unaccompanied, there would be no saying how this meeting would progress. But with Renee acting as an ambassador, much of the fear and hesitancy of the Pax Continuum was eased. The advisory council to the chancellor received a complete breakdown of the events that transpired on Purgatory as well as many unknown events that led up to the confrontation. In addition to this information, the Gigun presented vast star charts and a treasure trove of scientific data decades, if not centuries, beyond what was currently possessed by the Pax Continuum. The Gigun made its case for the need to take custody of Purgatory. At first, the Pax representatives scoffed at the notion, but deep down Renee knew that the planetoid Purgatory had always been more of a burden, a cursed obsidian sphere best avoided by all who valued their sanity. Eventually, in exchange for the gifts and the continued, improved siphoning of energy from the planet, the Gigun were granted possession of Purgatory.

The science alone gained by the Pax would require decades of the most learned minds in the galaxy to unlock all the secrets and potential. Meanwhile, the Gigun were true to their word and within weeks, the energetic output from Purgatory increased, expanding the Pax Continuum's influence to even greater reaches. Renee however found herself increasingly deep within the bowels of Purgatory, sitting opposite Gabriel in the innermost chamber. Her power and concentration were used to bolster Gabriel's defenses as the war within raged ever on. Hastur never gained an inch, but the cost was constant vigilance. Renee helped Gabriel to carry this burden and she did it gladly.

It took weeks for the Fortuna colony to reconstruct its power grid and establish a new transit system and spaceport. Several of the other outlying colonies, older than Fortuna but equally weak and abused by the corporations that spawned them, slowly began sending what meager supplies they had to help the beleaguered colony heal. When the gateways became active once more, volunteers were sought to test the integrity of the gate system, a job not without risk yet unlikely to result in catastrophic injury or death, given the testing carried out before this final shakedown. Kendis was the first to volunteer, opting to travel to a distant colony, small even by Fortuna standards. Most assumed it was out of grief, a potentially final act of depression or rage, but Kendis knew better. As he stepped through the portal, that inner light flared and he felt renewed with purpose.

Kendis stepped out onto a dust-covered plaza where smoldering rubble and the stains of recent blood spatters remained. The sight was both terrifying and extremely familiar to the man that just survived an attack by the misshapen creatures. Kendis immediately felt drawn to the edge of town. Pulled as if by some alien magnetic force, Kendis simply put one foot in front of the other as he proceeded to the nearby pillar.



Agnee and Dr. Finch stood outside the research tent comparing notes when the strange man approached. Kendis walked in a straight line, giving no attention to anyone around when one of the security team for the site approached.

“This is a secure site; I’m going to have to ask you to leave. If you need help, we can look at you over at the medical tent if you were injured in the attack.”

As the guard extended his hand toward Kendis, a brief fleeting glance was given and with a bright flash of light, the hapless guard was flung 10 feet back, knocked unconscious. Agnee looked on in terror but something as strange as this triggered a thought in Dr. Finch.

“Your name? Are you Kendis? Is that your name?” The doctor called out, pieces of a puzzle finally coming into place for the young man.

“It calls to me. My purpose, I must fulfill my purpose.”

“What is your purpose Kendis? What are you here to do?”

As Dr. Finch spoke another bright flash of light appeared in the distance as yet another fissure tore through the fabric of space and time. Those that bore witness turned in horror, the memories of the recent attack still freshly seared in their minds. Kendis merely began walking toward the pillar once more as he spoke one word, “heal”.



As he reached the pillar, Kendis extended his arms, his palms resting on the patterns etched into the pillar. The material was cool to the touch and immediately Kendis felt his body flush with endorphins. The pillar and the man began to glow as a fissure appeared nearby. The fissure violently reacted as tendrils of light whipped about the fissure. The tear in space began to collapse on its self, ending a potentially dangerous situation before it had a chance to escalate. No creatures from the other side made it through this time. A loud sound, almost like a scream of agony, tore out from the fissure as it finally collapsed. A sense-shattering boom was heard for miles around, but the threat was gone. Agnee and the doctor turned back to the pillar only to find Kendis was gone. The pillar stood out in brilliant color with an etching nearest the top glowing brightly. Agnee could only mutter “what the hell” as she looked on.

“It’s his name, at the top. This pillar was for him. And when he touched it, the rip that was forming closed, saving us all. My guess is they won’t be happening in the colony again. Maybe not even on this planet.”

Agnee stood there in amazement as the ramifications of this information soaked into her brain.

“If you’re right, we need to tell the Continuum immediately. We need all the pillars translated if we want to stop these attacks.”

Both agreed and Agnee made for the communications tent. Deep within she wondered what it all meant. Where did the strange man go? What drew him to the pillar? Why was this connected to the creatures and how did it stop them? Important questions to be sure, but nothing was as important at this moment as getting this new information to the Pax and hopefully stopping these incursions once and for all.



News spread of the sudden stabilization of a fissure, as hope within the outermost colonies slowly began to return. Few had any solid, reliable information as to what truly happened, but the persistent fear caused by the increasing number of fissures and their randomness meant that any hope, no matter how remote, was clung to all the more fiercely. Word continued to spread and eventually reached the ears of Arch Bishop Thram and his Church of the Affine.

Thram sat upon his throne, alone in a cavernous room, dimly lit save for the gentle glow of machines and monitors off in the distance. Thram had built numerous contingencies into his great plan, yet he had not foreseen the closure of the fissures even being a possibility. As he sat, lost in these thoughts, a great sphere lowered from the all-consuming blackness above. The sphere began to crack as paneling slid ever so slightly apart, releasing a deep blueish glow and a mist that began engulfing the sphere and the throne alike. Thram stood before a projection of his true master, fear gripping his very soul as he awaited the words of his god.





“The closing of the portals was not unexpected,” spoke the multi-faceted voice, as if a choir spoke out with the same words only slightly staggered in delay.

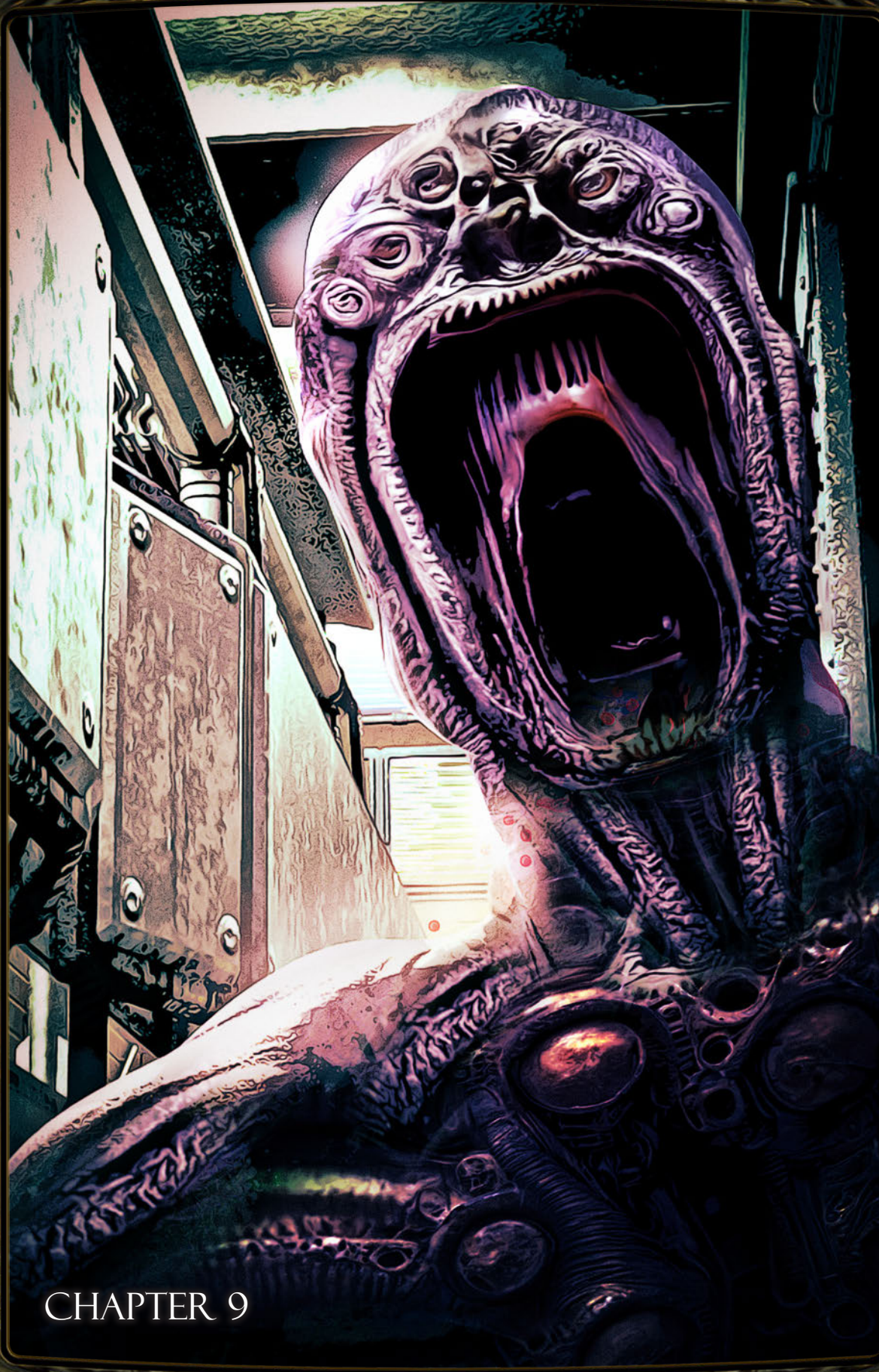
“I shall impart knowledge upon you my loyal one. The grand design requires more sacrifice as powers align in opposition to the great work. Learn and act accordingly, my herald.”

With that, a bright beam shot out from the sphere, slamming into Thram's head with what felt like the force of a bullet. Thram lurched as if caught within a spasm, the pain coursing through his body rippled outward nearly driving the man insane. Just as Thram was about to cry out, a moment of pure bliss washed over him. He saw the future as presented by his dark god. He saw the plan and with it, he saw his future secured. Thram collapsed to the ground. The sound he made could easily be mistaken for weeping, but the tears that fell from his face were not ones of sorrow and pain. Thram knew exactly what needed to be done and with a voice choked by ecstasy and purpose, Thram called for his Hierophant Elite. Meanwhile, Thram turned his attention to the outer colonies, and the seeds of dissent he had sown there.

Only a couple of days had passed since the attack on the Fortuna colony. With the sudden closure of the fissures and no knew attacks happening, curiosity began to spread throughout the outer rim. Had Fortuna learned to harness whatever frightening power threatened all the outer colonies? Was this always a weapon under their control? Rumors grew with every retelling leading many to question Fortuna's "luck". Eventually, a decision was reached by the leadership of the Nova colony. Representing both the Kayer Group as well as the corporate-sponsored colonies aligned with the Kayer Group, a diplomatic envoy would be sent from the Nova colony. The stated purpose of this meeting was to strengthen Fortuna and help the lesser colonies find better ground for continued trade and harmony with the surrounding colonies. The real purposed, thinly veiled behind this charade of humanitarian effort, was to gauge the military capabilities of Fortuna and learn whether or not the power of the anomalies and the terrors they released were truly under the control of such an insignificant colony.

Diplomats and their entourage concealed the true investigators and the heavy ordinance they secreted away among the supplies meant to help those still suffering on Fortuna. While many of the citizens saw through the shallow act of marginal kindness, most still eagerly anticipated whatever aid and supplies they might receive as Fortuna's beleaguered economy still reeled from the recent devastation. Those hopes were crushed however as the transport ship met the same fate as the cargo ship that sought to flee Fortuna, bursting into flames and killing all aboard in an all-consuming inferno. This time, however, responsibility for the attack was claimed and done so with great pride. The "League of Independence" released video evidence, taken leading up to the destruction of the envoy. Members of the group had snuck aboard the vessel to scan the cargo and anything else they could get away with, looking for weapons or other signs of deceit. They uncovered just that, when having been discovered by a soldier working undercover as a diplomatic attaché, a fire-fight broke out. Instead of exploding due to a terrorist bomb, the diplomatic vessel, however, suffered a catastrophic failure due to the exchange of weapons fire, started by the Kayer Group operative.

Both the Nova colony and Fortuna colony erupted in furious accusation, recrimination, blame, and threats as the video was verified by third-party sources. From this act of hostility, the League of Independence achieved the validation and recognition a true political movement required, and because of this, other overlooked and impoverished colonies grew closer to Fortuna and the League. The power shift was palpable and the seeds of revolution and war well nourished. Everything was proceeding as Arch Bishop Thram had planned.



CHAPTER 9

CHAPTER 9

Arisa was enjoying her time on earth. Appearing fully human, the woman resembled a typical 20 something out for a stroll, instead of the several hundred-year-old creature of raw power that she actually was. While having lived many years and having had access to universes worth of knowledge, Arisa was still very much the inexperienced and emotionally immature woman she currently appeared, having spent nearly zero time interacting socially with other living beings. The idea of stores, food, and more, confused and excited her as she had no personal need for such things, yet still found herself fascinated by them. Arisa was accompanied from a distance by two Pax Continuum undercover agents, mostly to act as a guide should she require it and also keep tabs on the woman's exploration. Arisa had decided to make her presence known to the Chancellor and the senate, deciding that the best way to build trust would be through an overabundance of openness.



Arissa was free to travel within the Pax Continuum at will, but Chancellor Tullman appreciated being included in Arissa, and by extension, the Gigun's plans. While there seemed to be little choice in the dealings with the Gigun and their custody of Purgatory, the Pax Continuum still had a responsibility to at least attempt to maintain the security of the inner system. Many in the senate held reservations and fear towards these alien entities and from that fear conflict may arise. Chancellor Tullman knew with absolute certainty that in open conflict with the Gigun, the best they could hope for would be mutual annihilation, not a prospect she was eager to explore. The Gigun had lived up to every promise made so far, increasing the energetic output from Purgatory, even purifying the energy, refining it to more tolerable levels that no longer risked the mental stability of those caught unaware. So, with a potential unifying purpose, Chancellor Tullman welcomed all attempts at mutual understanding and expanded communication, two things Arissa was eager to embrace.

At the moment, Arissa was lost in thought as she stared out over a small pond. Watching something as simple as birds flying through the air marveled her. She had seen many strange and marvelous things in her travels, things that might shatter the minds of those who casually strolled past her. But birds flying under a bright blue sky held a simplistic wonder for her she could not explain. Maybe it was because this was the planet of her mother and father's birth? A distant connection she felt now for the first time. Either way, it was a memory she was determined to carry with her all her days.

The two escorts approached Arissa from behind, one clearing his throat to get her attention.

"Ma'am, Chancellor Tullman has requested a few moments of your time. An event has occurred on one of our outer colonies that she's hoping you can lend your expertise on."

Arissa agreed and the trio walked off to the nearest gateway for her meeting with the Chancellor.

Arissa entered a large room, tastefully decorated and managing to blend a comfortable, welcoming atmosphere while maintaining the necessary impressiveness one would expect when entering the Pax Continuum's seat of power. Behind a large desk, Chancellor Tullman rose, greeting Arissa in a friendly manner.

"Thank you for meeting with me on such short notice. We've had some interesting developments on a number of our outermost colonies and I'm hoping you might be able to provide some insight into what's happening."

Arissa was intrigued as the chancellor flicked on a nearby screen. Images of the known pillars began appearing, all mostly identical with similar reading and observations listed alongside the images. Arissa studied the pillars as the chancellor went on to catch Arissa up from the first appearance of the pillars to the spatial ruptures, concluding with Kendis Shale and the events as recorded by Agnee Pikeman and her xeno-archaeology team. Arissa looked at the information quizzically, not recognizing the pillars or the creatures emerging from the special tears. "I honestly don't know what to make of this," she said.

Arissa and Chancellor Tullman discussed the various attacks at length, providing even more detailed reports from the various sites to Arissa to examine. In the end, Arissa planned to meet with the Gigun on Purgatory. Both women figured these ancient creatures would know something and the opportunity for them to further prove their good intentions toward the people of the Pax Continuum could only help solidify their alliance with humanity. Arissa left the meeting confused and excited at the same time. A mystery was a wonderful experience she had never felt before. Her mind whirled with possibilities and theories, but in the end, she knew time was not on her side if she wanted to save lives. Arissa pictured the planet Purgatory in her mind and began focusing her energies. A glowing sphere began to manifest in front of her, lasting only as long as it took her to step through, then vanishing as suddenly as it appeared.





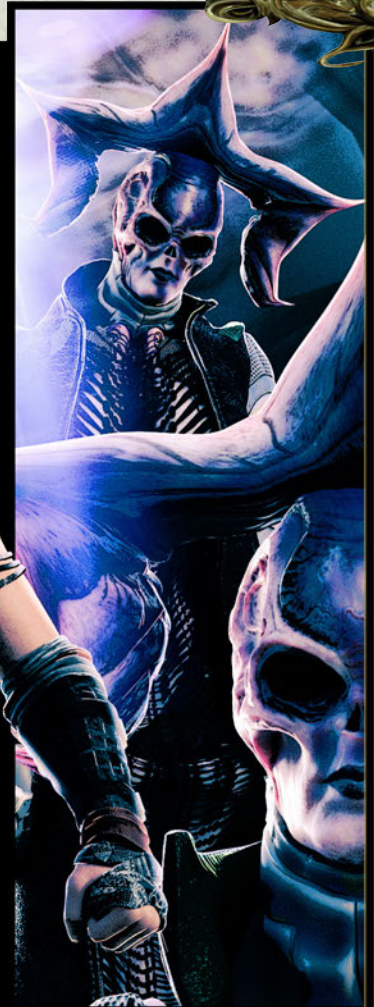
Arisa stepped out onto the red soil of Purgatory. Much of the planet had been compressed into an ebony sphere but some soil and other particulates were recaptured as Sha'Bolique compressed into her prison, giving the ebony sphere a thin layer of dust and dirt. The Pax Continuum had established several research stations on the planet, the largest of which stood before Arissa now. The facility originally was a modest creation, meant to house the scientists and engineers working to siphon the immense energies Purgatory generated, but since the Gigun's arrival, the facility and the land around it had undergone a strange metamorphosis. The very ground had grown up around the facility, creating ebony walls of protection around the facility. The material of the planet merged with the facility, creating a strange hybrid structure, almost cathedral-like in appearance. The Gigun reshaped the land into their new home, a terrifying yet strangely beautiful site. Arissa appreciated the design of the architecture but felt none of the apprehension or dread the humans monitoring from orbit felt. These beings of power were never meant to walk alongside mankind and in so doing, they triggered a natural aversion, a deep-seated fear that no human could explain. Other races including the Unborn had described such feelings as well when discussing their times as servitors to the Lords of Instrumentality. Many warned of madness, should one come into close contact for an extended time. Arissa however was a thing born of the same power. To her, the sensation was no different than being in the presence of her parents. To Arissa, it was all-natural and even comforting. Often she asked herself if that in and of its self was a sign of madness, but she laughed the notion off.

Arissa was greeted by the Gigun, their gaze as impassive as ever. Arissa communicated to the Gigun in their way, a form of telepathy or group thought-speak that existed beyond the physical realm's reach. Knowledge and information were imparted most efficiently in this way, as ideas, experiences, and thoughts blended and were conveyed near instantaneously. Within moments, the Gigun made a signal and a new figure entered the room. For the sake of this entirely human appearing individual, the Gigun returned to the all too mundane speech of the physical realm.

The Gigun introduced the young man as Jemin Allwithier, a descendent of the Martian holocaust brought about by Sha'Bolique so many years ago.

"Greeting, Arissa, I've heard many wonderful things about you from my gracious hosts."

"Your hosts? I had no idea humans were still on Purgatory, much less being hosted here," Arissa said, genuinely surprised by the information.



“The Gigun recently took me in to serve as a bridge between humanity and themselves. I was – drawn, I guess you would say. I felt a genuine purpose calling to me and when I arrived I was greeted as if they expected me all along. It’s been a fascinating experience so far.”

The Gigun explained that while these pillars were not of their creation, they did know of their purpose and possibly their origin.

“Eons ago, the great Azathoth fell into a deep slumber, and from this dreaming, and the entire multiverse was given form. We of the Affine space, are its direct descendants. Born of Azathoth’s first wondrous dreams, the great old ones as we’ve come to be called ventured forth, and in piercing the veil that separated the dream space of the Outer Gods, we Great Old Ones birthed the physical realm and all it contains, through the power of Azathoth’s dreams.”

Arissa knew much of this from her connection to Affine space, as she too was as much a child of that realm as any other, but she couldn’t help but wonder how much Jemin had grasped.

“Oh, don’t worry about me, I’ve heard much of this before, even if I still barely comprehend it all. What can I say, I’ve learned it best to just go with the flow and trust in instinct. The pieces come together as they will,” Jemin smirked with a shrug as he answered Arissa.

Jemin possessed a deeper understanding than he let on as if a spark of hidden knowledge from Affine space seemed to float behind his eyes making Arissa wonder about this strange man.



“The pillars serve to mend these fissures in Affine space. Some mortals are born with a strong connection to the realm beyond, it serves them and their instincts but also provides a stabilizing force throughout the Affine. Our actions and our very presence send ripples throughout Affine space as if a gentle breeze were to blow against the slumbering Azathoth. Our wars, our vast power used in the physical plane creates hurricanes, vast swells in Affine space that could threaten to awaken great Azathoth and in so doing end all existence as we know it,” the Gigun said, with great reverence.

“The Azathoth shards are a symptom of these powerful displays. Pieces of godhood that emerge from Affine space carrying portions of Azathoth’s great dreams within. When used, these powerful shards further cause disruption that should have long ago led to the end of everything, if not for these very unique individuals. These special mortals act as a calming effect, absorbing and soothing these vast winds by merely existing, and in so doing, maintain existence as we know it. The fissures and the beasts that emerge from them are not of our reality. We don’t know their source, nor do we understand their purpose but what is clear is that they represent a vast and ever-growing storm, one that will consume everything if left untreated.”

“The pillar touched by one such mortal amplified the calming effect. The mortal had merged with Affine space and through activating the pillar, the damage done by the fissures healed and the storm grew quieter. Other such pillars require the same activation if Azathoth is to be kept in the dream state, and thus why we have called Jemin to stand among us. He is a seeker, a mortal touched by Affine space and in so being, he is sensitive instinctually to the activators. Jemin can lead you to others with a burning purpose deep within to join Affine space and heal the many fissures. Some may find their way, but there are still dangers and not knowing the source of these fissures, we ask that you help in this quest, Arissa.”



"Of course, How dare I refuse with so much in the balance. Jemin, how precise is your instinct? Can you lead me to these people even if they're worlds away?" Arissa asked.

"Let me show you," Jemin said as he approached Arissa.

Reaching out, he took her hand in his and closed his eyes. Within Arissa's own mind's eye, she could see a tether reaching out from them, searching through all of space. The tether reached out through vast distances then broke into many paths, each homing in on the ones they sought.

"Fascinating, I can see them, feel their locations or at least the regions of space they are in. When do we leave?"

"Time is of the essence. Find the mortals and guide them to the pillars. We feel the approach of a great many disruptions in Affine space. These few fissures we've experienced so far are but prologue."

Arissa sensed an odd thing in the Gigun as they spoke. She sensed a great fear deep within, hidden behind their unflinching gaze, twisting in the backs of their minds.

"Alright, I'm ready when you are, Jemin," Arissa said, extending her hands toward the man.

His hands joined hers and she began to see in her mind's eye the paths that would lead to the activators. Sensing the location of the nearest one, Arissa began generating a portal of gravimetric energy that would thrust the two light-years within mere seconds. As she worked she generated a shield around the duo to protect Jemin. It was her first time transporting another but she felt reasonably sure he would survive the trip, and in a flash, they were gone.

The destruction of the Nova colony's diplomatic envoy enraged the citizenry of the outer rim. Kayer Group propagandists carefully massaged the information released from the investigation, ensuring all colonies under their direct economic control sided with Nova. Calls for economic sanctions against the Fortuna colony only escalated matters, which was precisely what Arch Bishop Thram wanted. Leveling his influence within Bellent industries, Thram secured an underground network joining several of the orphaned colonies around Fortuna, allowing for resources and personnel to move in secret, solidifying the League of Independence. When economic sanctions finally were levied against Fortuna, the leadership of the League swiftly denounced the action and while many believed the act of defiance would lead to the end of Fortuna, thanks to the underground network, Fortuna began to grow. Where one outer colony lacked in one area, another made up for it with a surplus. All they had

lacked was the means of exchange and the coordination to execute, both Bellent Industries supplied with ease covertly.

Eventually, the Kayer Group recognized the true threat Fortuna and the League of Independence represented. As more colonies joined, talk spread of Kayer Group colonies ceding from their control, looking to join this new league as it offered equality and a sharing of resources opposed to the outright exploitation Kayer had benefitted from for so many years. Further painting Nova colony as the victim in this scenario, Kayer Group announced they would explore all options, including launching a blockade of the Fortuna colony. All they needed was an excuse.

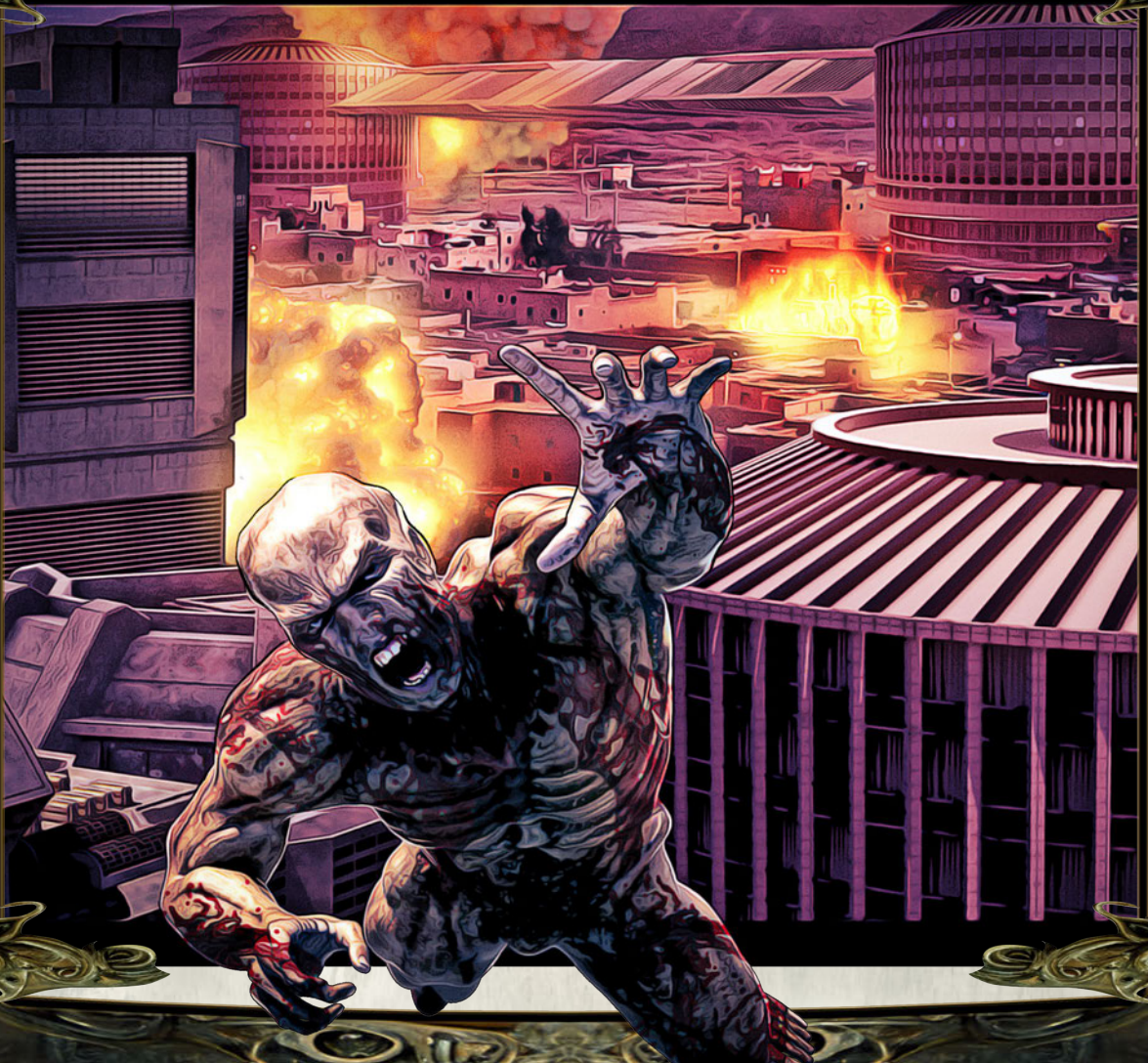
Gallet Drum spent much of his early life living in the shadow of his family. A long lineage of soldiers, generals, heroes lay behind him with 2 older brothers fulfilling their familial purpose in life as members of the Pax Continuum security forces even now. Yet Gallet never seemed to find his calling. Gallet managed to avoid washing out of the Pax Evelpidon, the elite military academy, but only just barely and largely owed to his familial name more than any efforts on Gallet's part.

Eventually, Gallet became convinced his path lay in the creative arts. Living off his family's wealth, Gallet pursued fame and fortune in sculpture, photography, installation art, practically every art form he could conceive of. Of course, nothing amounted to anything save for scathing reviews from critics. That is at least until Gallet Shale began his latest series. Titled 'The Icon', Gallet became obsessed with drawing and sculpting a strange pillar with immensely detailed carvings into the sides. He had no idea what the meaning was or what the strange pillar meant except that he must explore it from every angle. He was obsessed with the object's form, texture, and meaning, and the quality of his work while expressed through this strange subject resonated with the viewing audience. Finally, Gallet had a purpose or at the very least a path leading to one.

Against all odds, Gallet had been invited to display his 'Icon' series in a prestigious art gallery located on Nova colony. Even with the recent troubles of the outer colonies, Nova had gained much respect and influence due to its immense mineral wealth. With even a single gallery opening on this small world, Gallet might finally prove to his family once and for all that he was worth something and not the screw-up they accused him of being for years. The excitement was palpable in the young man as he walked down the long street leading to the downtown gallery awaiting his work. He would take measurements and make plans for the display, or at least that had been his plan for the day.

Crying out across the city destroying the tranquility and peace all around, a loud siren erupted, signaling like an incoming bomb raid from some war that citizens everywhere needed to seek out shelter.

In terrible light and deafening sound, fissures began rending space and time in multiple locations across the Nova colony. The creatures screamed out in agony and malice as they entered our universe from somewhere far beyond. Their flesh rent and leaking blood from a myriad of cuts laid bare the terrible cost of crossing from whatever realm these things had called home. Yet no matter the damage, nothing slowed these walking nightmares down. Unrelenting in their wrath, the creatures lashed out at everything from inanimate objects to fleeing people; nothing was spared their terrible rage. Gallet looked on from a distance, sweat pouring down his forehead as he shook with terror. The young man crumpled to the ground, willing himself to appear as small as he could, insignificant and ideally not a target of these merciless creatures. His lips quivered as a soft whimpering sound left his mouth as Gallet looked on to the horror.





A child half-consumed from the creature's gaping maw, an orifice grew from the top of its head in impossible ways continued to rip at the flesh of the innocent, spilling crimson gore upon the cement. Another creature turned and spotted Gallet. Its terrible face, if one could call it that, exploded with rage as the creature began sprinting toward the man. Gallet knew this was his end yet he simply lacked the will to even move. Terror gripped Gallet down to his soul. Just as the monster was about to reach its prey, an impossible coincidence saved Gallet's life. Signage from the building above, poorly installed and further weakened by the explosions currently rocking the city, ripped from its moorings. Crashing down, the massive sign cleaved the creature in two, driving its self-several feet into the ground below. Gallet looked on as the creature now ripped nearly down the middle squirmed impossibly on the ground. Unable to heal or reform, the creature still refused to die. No mere nervous system drove on some lasting twitching, there was still awareness and great rage behind the creature's eyes. Gallet let out a final scream as darkness claimed him. The young man would wake hours later, safe inside a hospital, yet the damage and loss of life had been immense.

All said and done, over five thousand dead had already been counted with no end in sight as to how many the final tally might include. Rumors, fear, and blame consumed the colony's web leading to panic among many of the citizenry. Finally, the need for someone to blame overcame all logic, and the leadership of the Nova colony, with the full support of the Kayer group announced a new alliance of worlds with the sole purpose of mutual defense. The Aegis Union was formed and included the wealthiest and most prosperous of the outer colonies. Notably, the Fortuna colony and others that had long ago fallen out of favor with the larger colonies were not included. No one put the thoughts in words, but it was generally understood that if the wealthiest of worlds presented a unifying front, whatever scourge they faced would instead turn its gaze solely toward Fortuna and her allies.



Arch Bishop Thram of the Church of the Affine stood before his congregation of Hierophants – his soldiers, and Priests – the scientists, technologists, and anyone of importance that was not a warrior or servant class. Menial labor and the provision of sustenance and entertainment fell to the servitors, a collection of the poor and downtrodden and even the mentally ill, that found themselves called to the Church of the Affine. While their purpose was necessary for the Church's daily functioning, little else in the way of courtesy or kindness was shown to this slave class. Thoughts of freedom and independence died long before these individuals were drawn to the church, as the corrupting powers of Sha'Bolique's energy that powered the interstellar gate system had already infected the minds of these select few. Longing for their one true God, these weakened fools fell into Arch Bishop Thram's clutches with ease.



The Priests and Hierophants were much like the others that were drawn to the Church, but these elite possessed skills or abilities separating them from the rest. Specialists, former soldiers, all forms of useful skill sets could be found and molded into something more. The Priests were given their mission first, a mission to create a terrible device capable of widespread destruction throughout the interstellar gate system. Such a device would cause immense disruptions throughout Affine space, rupturing the membrane between universes and setting the dread lord free to consume our wretched existence, and in so doing, instill the Church of the Affine at the right hand of the Lord of Tears.

Thram's Hierophants, however, were the weapons of war he needed to bring about his dark master's dream, to usher into this universe the Lord of Tears. So it was specifically to the Hierophants that Thram spoke now, knowing they would be the ones to utilize the destructive forces Thram's Priests looked to harness into a weapon. A great sacrifice awaited the select few that would journey to the heart of the Pax Continuum and breach the cursed planet of Purgatory. The heart of the gate system lay there, now under the protection of the Gigun, yet still minimally maintained by a small force of humans and former servitors to the Gigun from before their merge. A suicide mission with no doubt, yet one that would ensure eternal salvation under the Lord of Tears' gaze. Thram always chuckled internally at the little lies he told his followers, knowing full well a creature as powerful as his lord cared little for the devotion of insects like these. But with these powerful words, Thram could reshape a universe with the mindless devotion of his flock.



The main purpose of his grand gathering, however, was to address a potentially catastrophic thorn in his master's side.

"The sweet rewards of our great lord are but inches from our grasp," spoke Thram. "Only one thing has even stood against the great Lord of Tears and it is an affront to all our Lord stands for!"

The gasps and anger of his flock were palpable as Thram continue to stoke the flames of religious fervor.

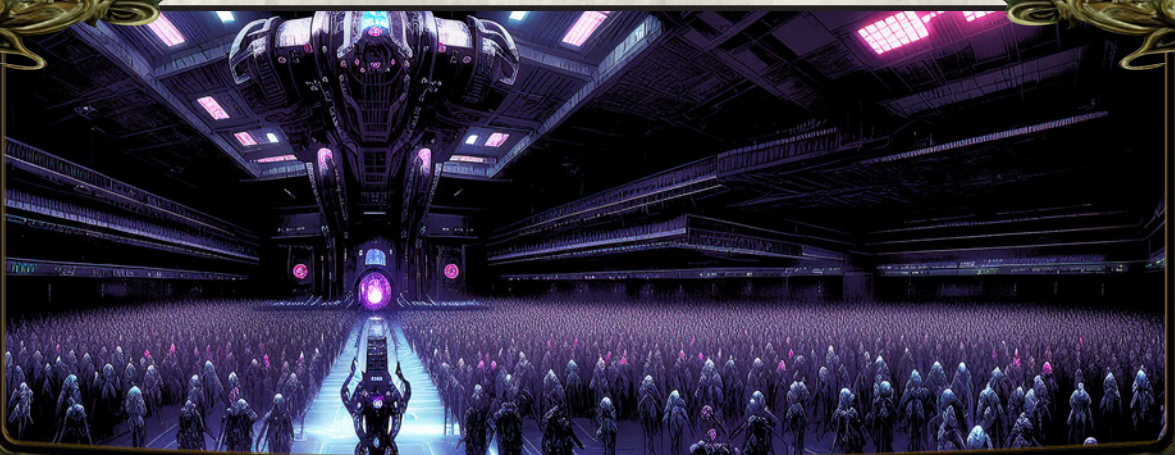
"So I ask of you, will we let stand this affront to our Lord?"

"NO!" the people cried out, fists in the air.

"Pillars of alien construction have spread throughout our universe, undoing the great works of our master. They stand strong against all attempts to be destroyed but they do not act alone. The fallen, those who worship the old ways and spit upon our grand church, these heathens who worship false gods must activate these pillars and this must not be allowed! We must find these bastard children and end their lives before they can wreak more havoc upon our humble church! Will you help weed this corruption from our garden? Will you join me in honoring our lord with the blood of these heathens? Will you?"

The crowd let out a deafening roar as Thram looked on with pleasure. Thram knew the locations of the pillars thanks to his connection to the Lord of Tears, but only the barest of notion as to whom he must target. A Supreme Hierophant was needed for the work of hunting down the scum he sought. Of his favorite and most skilled, one such Hierophant possessed the sensitivity of mind needed to be elevated. Locked in Thram's innermost chamber, the arcane energies of Affine space and the Lord of Tears permeate and manipulate the mind and body of the Hierophant. What emerged from the room was a terrifying sight. A creature of machine and flesh. Animal and man. An abomination to all that would behold, save for his master. It was time for the hunt to begin.

To be continued.





LEVIATHAN CLASS DESTROYER

Size and Shape:

The destroyer spaceship is a large, sleek, and angular vessel designed for combat. It measures approximately 2000 meters in length.

Propulsion:

The destroyer spaceship is powered by a compact fusion reactor further supplemented by the powerful Purgatory drive, a reactor channelling the vast energies of the planetoid Purgatory, which provides ample energy for its engines and weapons. It has four main engines, two located at the rear of the vessel and two mounted on the wings, which can accelerate it to speeds of up to $0.9c$ (90% the speed of light). It also has a smaller, more agile set of maneuvering thrusters located around the ship's hull, which enable it to make tight turns and dodge enemy fire.

Offensive Capabilities:

The Leviathan Class Destroyer is armed with a variety of weapons systems, including:

- Six torpedo launcher bays, which fire powerful, high-explosive projectiles that can be used to disable or destroy enemy ships from a distance.
- Two railgun turrets, which fire high-velocity kinetic projectiles that can penetrate armor and shields.
- A pair of phased plasma cannons mounted on each wing, which fires a concentrated beam of energy that can at maximum output, theoretically punch through a planets mantle.
- Eight missile battery's, which fire swarms of smaller missiles that can track and destroy multiple targets simultaneously.

Defensive Capabilities:

The Leviathan Class Destroyer is heavily armored and shielded, with advanced materials that can withstand high-energy weapons fire. It also has a sophisticated sensor suite, which can detect incoming threats and provide early warning to the crew. In addition, it has an array of defensive systems, including:

- A set of point-defense laser turrets, which can shoot down incoming torpedoes and missiles.
- An energy shield, which can absorb and dissipate incoming energy weapons fire.



Crew and Facilities:

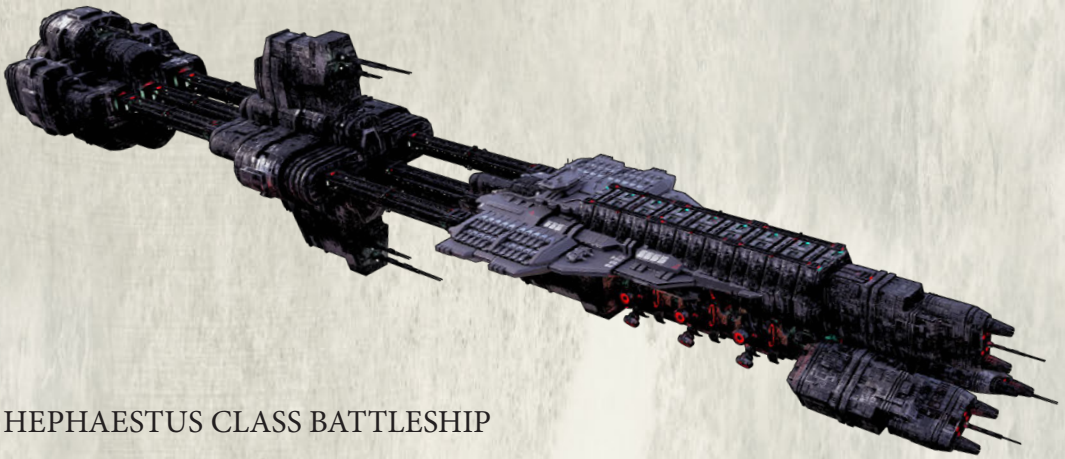
The destroyer spaceship has a crew complement of around 1,200 (60 Officers and 1,140 Enlisted). It has a bridge, located at the front of the vessel, which serves as the command center for the ship. It also has a variety of facilities, including:

- Living quarters, which provide comfortable accommodations for the crew during long missions.
- A mess hall, which serves meals and provides a social space for the crew.
- A medical bay, which is equipped with advanced medical equipment and staffed by a doctor and nurses.
- Engineering decks, where the ship's systems are maintained and repaired.
- Cargo bays, which can store supplies, equipment, and vehicles.

Miscellaneous Features:

The Leviathan Class Destroyer is equipped with a variety of other features that enhance its combat effectiveness and versatility. These include:

- A tractor beam, which can be used to capture and tow smaller ships.
- An advanced communications array, which allows the ship to communicate with other vessels and ground stations over long distances.
- A cloaking device, which can render the ship invisible to most forms of detection.
- 3 shuttle bays, which can launch and recover smaller craft, such as fighters and shuttles.
- Escape pods, which can be used in the event of an emergency evacuation.



HEPHAESTUS CLASS BATTLESHIP

Size and Shape:

The Hephaestus class battleship is a massive, imposing vessel designed for heavy combat and long-range missions. It measures approximately 2500 meters in length, with a large bridge and multiple decks of weapons and equipment. Its shape is blocky and long, with armored plating and heavy turrets dotting its surface.

Propulsion:

The Hephaestus class battleship is powered by a complex fusion reactor, further supplemented by the powerful Purgatory drive, a reactor channelling the vast energies of the planetoid Purgatory, which provides enough energy to sustain its massive engines and weapons systems. It has six primary engines, arranged in pairs on either side of the ship, which can propel it to speeds of up to 0.78c (75% the speed of light). It also has a set of maneuvering thrusters located around the ship's hull, which allow it to change direction and evade enemy fire.

Offensive Capabilities:

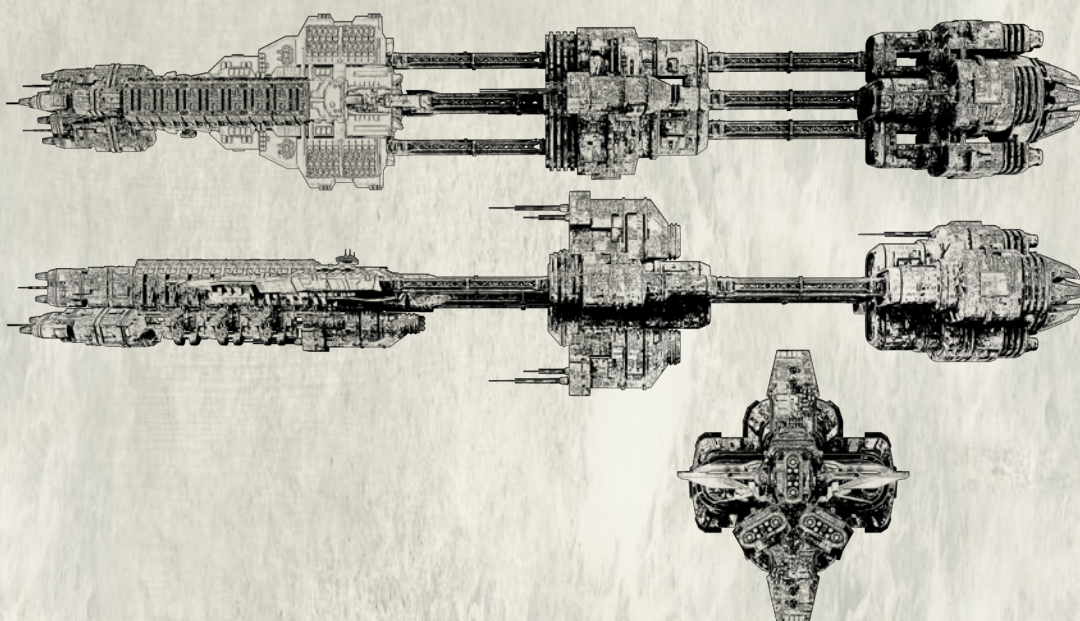
The Hephaestus class battleship is armed with an array of weapons systems, including:

- Ten torpedo launchers, which can fire high-explosive or nuclear-tipped torpedoes at long range to devastate enemy vessels or installations.
- Eight railgun turrets, which can fire high-velocity kinetic rounds that can pierce even the toughest armor and shields.
- A six phased plasma cannons, which fire powerful blasts of superheated plasma that can melt through armor and vaporize enemy ships.
- Twelve missile batteries, which can launch a barrage of guided missiles at multiple targets simultaneously.

Defensive Capabilities:

The Hephaestus class battleship is heavily armored and shielded, with multiple layers of defences to protect it from incoming fire. It also has advanced sensor and targeting systems, which allow it to track and engage enemy ships from great distances. Its defensive systems include:

- A set of point-defense laser turrets, which can shoot down incoming torpedoes and missiles.
- A variety of countermeasures, including decoys, which can confuse enemy targeting systems.
- A powerful energy shield, which can absorb and dissipate incoming energy weapons fire.



Crew and Facilities:

The Hephaestus class battleship has a crew complement of several thousand, including officers, engineers, technicians, and support staff. It has multiple decks of facilities and equipment, including:

- A bridge, located at the front of the ship, which serves as the command center and nerve center of the vessel.
- Crew quarters, which provide comfortable living accommodations for the crew during long missions.
- A mess hall, which serves meals and provides a social space for the crew.
- Medical facilities, including a sickbay, surgery suite, and laboratory, which are staffed by trained medical personnel.
- Engineering decks, where the ship's systems are monitored, maintained, and repaired.
- Cargo bays, which can store supplies, equipment, and vehicles.
- A hangar bay, which can launch and recover smaller craft, such as fighters, shuttles, and landing craft.

Miscellaneous Features:

The battleship has a variety of other features that enhance its combat effectiveness and versatility. These include:

- A tractor beam, which can be used to capture and tow smaller ships or debris.
- Advanced communications and sensor arrays, which allow the ship to communicate and gather data from great distances.
- Stealth and cloaking capabilities, which can allow the ship to avoid detection or evade pursuit.
- Long-range scanners and telescopes, which can scan nearby systems and planets for potential threats or resources.
- Specialized weapon systems, such as mines, drones, or probes, which can be deployed for specific missions or objectives.

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PILLARS OF ENTROPY

Humanities fate hangs in the balance, between the potential brilliance of a new golden age and the ever-present danger of obliteration. As destabilizing element from within scheme in the darkness, the ever-spreading human civilization echoes throughout the universe, threatening to awaken from millennia of slumber untold horrors from before recorded time.

Amidst the suffering and devastation, a small group of survivors lead by the mysterious woman Arissa -- child of the lost Templar Gabriel -- must bravely try to wield the power of ancient relics from a vanished civilization in an effort to thwart an approaching universal threat. As reality starts to warp and fissures in time and space give way to blood thirsty abominations, will humanity stand together or fall and be lost to the ashes of history?



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