Genre: science fantasy (space opera/space fantasy)
Age group: New Adult

Dynasties Beyond

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Premise:

A sacred order must defend their city from a cosmic assault, or helpless civilians will be sacrificed in a murderous ritual.

Synopsis:

Five Provinces of the Nuverian Nation.
Four Quadrants of the Nexus Galaxy.
Three Sacred Factions deemed by the Ascended.
Two minutes when contact is made with the Void.
One Tier level breach. Run.

Humanity has fled to the Nexus galaxy, where unlimited resources have helped them conquer the stars. But the Void followed them, thirsting to consume their consciousness.

Rescued from a life of servitude, Aven Artorison has dedicated his life as a sky monk to defending the Nameless civilians from the Void. With no power of their own, the citizens of his nation, Nuveria, rely on the Aprori fighters in the sky, and the Echelon warriors in space.

Aven dreams of one day being strong enough to join the elite Echelon fleets in battle, like the legendary soldiers who saved him.

But when a disastrous attack tears away his sheltered way of life, Aven soon finds that the very elite faction he sought to join are the same forces who mean to sacrifice his people to the Void for Ascension.

Now, another attack looms. To defend the Nameless, Aven must ally with his fellow Aprori fighters across the galaxy, corrupt politicians, and mad warlords in space to defeat the Void, or the Nexus may not survive the next attack.

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Timeline of the Nexus Galaxy

Year: 1ook|--------|50k|----0 (TSD)-------300|-------1k|-------3k|---------6k|---------9k|--------12k|

Age: Prehistory | Giants | Siren Dynasty | Unsung Rebellion| 1st age 2nd age 3rd age 4th age

TSD: Terminal Star Date

Prehistory: It is unknown what transpired before the giants arrived in the Nexus. Perhaps only the Ascended will know these things.

Age: After 0 TSD, humans divided the years every 3 thousand years to mark an age.

Prologue
Beyond the Void

With his hood drawn, Darion Patros pierced through the haze clouding his vision. The strain of laboring voices sprouted from the muddy valley and up the rocks, pulling on him to stop and set them free. But he only had so much time. If he could not find his target, then none could be saved. So he pushed onward.

Darion raced until a sharp noise rang from his arm. The metal device on his wrist peeked through the stubborn fog that engulfed his path. Out of thin air, another figure appeared opposite him.

“Would it have killed you to wait?” a searing voice asked from within her hood. The air shifted and smoldered around the woman. The gray fog dissipated as Jilian Matrisol brandished her bright metallic wrist ornament, a golden light making the pathway clear.

Darion grunted through his hood. “You’re late,” he said. Raising his metal device near hers, their violet and golden He aimed it at the dark fog, and gold cut and burned through the dark as he and his partner quickened their haste.

Peering eyes watched them, no doubt wondering who the strange figures were. But Darion wasted no time explaining to the onlookers.

“Get inside,” Darion said. “Darnkess beckons.” With that simple warning, most of the laborers hurried away. Even on this backwater outpost, the enemy was well known.

“You’d rather I lead them right to us?” Jilian said. “Had to wait for the right moment to—”

“I set the perfect timeframe to avoid detection,” Darion said. “Now we risk losing prime candidates. No candidates, no fleets. They win.” He could feel the heat from his partner’s wrist ornament burning hot as the gold burned away the shadows.

“You think I don’t know the danger?” she said. “It’s not just your bloodline they’re trying to sacrifice.” Keeping his eyes locked ahead, he touched his temple to send a message.

“Commander, come in,” Darion said. A voice answered his call through the metal device.

“I’m not the commander anymore,” the voice answered.

“Fine,” said Darion. “Lehvi, we have a visual of the objective.” As he looked up, he saw a crude formation melded together to resemble a canopy made of stone.

“Commander,” Jilian said. “We need—”

“We need you to maintain watch,” Darion cut in. “Stay in orbit, and we’ll signal for extraction.” He motioned toward the entrance, ignoring Jilian’s frown under her hood.

“Roger that,” Lehvi said. “Three minutes until Void breach.” Darion put away his violet light, but Jilian’s gold intensified beside him, searing as the hooded woman clenched her fist. Brushing past him, a flap of her hood washed across his face as she entered the domain. Wiping rainwater away, he stepped in close behind.

With his boot gripping the glistening floor beneath him, his eyes flickered a purple hue as they scanned the room, looking past the shining chandeliers, the towering buttresses, and fully decorated tables pushed against the wall, until they landed on a lady in the center of the room.

“General, I thought you would never get here!” the lady said. “This way, quickly.” General Darion Patros removed his hood underneath the chandelier. The light revealed scars lining a dark face and purple eyes watching every move the lady made. The general scoffed away a smoldering aroma of roses from the middle-aged woman.
“And your wife,” the lady in the center said. “An honor to meet you both.” Darion saw his spouse, General Jilian Matrisol, remove her hood to reveal burns matching the lantern fire lighting her pale skin and blond hair, her eyes searing like a yellow sun purging the night.
The lady in the center motioned with frantic hands for the two generals to come closer. Her shawl wrapped around her like a wild mane of fiery sand, tamed only by the pearls of glass that lined its fur. She snapped behind her, ushering a servant boy forward with a tray of fruit flanked by two chalices.
“For your travels,” the woman said, stretching the first drink to Jilian. “I would be remiss if I—” Darion reached out his hand, stopping the cup from reaching his wife.

“No need, Overseer,” said General Patros. “The Void will breach in mere minutes, we—” Before the general could finish, Jilian reached out her hand, commanding the chalice toward her

without touching it. Swinging her hair back, she chugged the drink down to its last drop before throwing it away. Her golden wristguard was now burning so hot, Darion feared the whole construction may be incinerated.

“Yes,” the overseer said. “Right this way.” She snapped the servant boy away, motioning for him to move back the draping covering the doorway to another section of the stone canopy. A single-file line of children, all no older than seven, hustled to the center of the room as a presentation to their guests. A howl of hailstorms rustled outside, yearning to break forth.
The generals looked at a row of six candidates, the first three human, the last three with skin like gemstones. The chandelier’s light cascaded over them like a meteor shower, lighting their fine linen, with the humans dressed in purple, gold, and sky-blue. The other three were draped in sapphire and emerald robes, with the last wrapped in cloth that fell like a sea of multicolored stars. Darion coughed away more heavy rose perfume as he touched his temple to scan their brainwave functions as fast as he could. Jilian was checking for any scars, bruises, or ailments. “All prime candidates for your armies.” She was wrapping them all in coats for travel as the wind swirled in eager anticipation.

“There’s one missing,” Darion cut in. The overseer continued preparing her children.

“I’m sorry?” she said.

“Your report named seven transfers with high-level affinity. There are only six here.”

“Oh,” the overseer said. “I must have made a mistake.”

“Two minutes,” Commander Lehvi’s voice said through the wristguards. Darion heard Jilian tapping her metal, her patience ticking away with each raindrop that fell atop the stone.
Darion glared at the overseer.

The overseer wrestled in her stance, but finally relinquished, snapping her fingers. Darion heard shuffling behind him. He looked back to see the servant boy put down the tray and fall in line with the other candidates. The hail halted.

“I only meant to save you the trouble.” The overseer’s demeanor took an annoyed tone. “My job is to find you candidates with potential. The best. That boy is destined for nothing.”
Darion scanned the child. His hair was an unkempt, disheveled mess. It was barely combed over the top, but some curls refused to stay put.

“What the hell is that?” Jilian asked, looking at the metal on his wrist. It was a poor imitation of the same metal guards they had.

The Overseer shook her head. “He insisted on making it himself,” she said. “I provide the manuals for the tests, yet he sneaks away all the time to find archives, finding old useless manuscripts and documents. He reads all night, so then he can’t be productive throughout the day. He refuses to listen..No place for him.”
Jilian kneeled over the boy, grasping the metal scraps closer. She glared as bruises and scrapes hid under his tattered clothing. Her burning eyes turned to the overseer, still tending to her precious, perfumed children. But a shimmer of light drew her attention back. A sky-blue hue shimmered from the metal. She turned to her husband. Darion saw the shimmer and nodded.

“Sky blue,” he said. “We’ll take him.” As he reached for the children, the overseer ceased preparing the candidates.

“Sky?” the overseer said in disgust. Frozen in disbelief, she finally met the general’s eyes. “I was told you needed the best to join your campaign.” Her voice quivered in anger. Darion attempted to wave her away.

“I don’t have time to explain myself to—”

The overseer put up her hand, causing the children to wince. “I was promised payment for these transfers,” she said. Darion glared, glancing at Jilian who bore her own angered expression. The rain picked up momentum.
“We don’t listen to the ravings of madmen who live in the clouds. Who hide behind magic barriers like sky FAIRIES!” she mocked as her rose perfume soured into bile. “Your warriors offer protection. Armies. Soldiers! Not sky monks who take away my children to some fantasy while our work, our way of life is washed away.”

Darion rose up, towering over her. “The Void doesn’t care about your way of life. All the sentient darkness thirsts for are living sacrifices. Were it not for those sky fairies, the Void would have dragged us all into their dimension eons ago.” Thunder crashed, shaking the stone structure as the overseer glared at the generals.

“Children!” she snapped. They all fell back into line, not even looking at the generals once as they scuffled toward their master. “Back to your quarters! The storm is about to hit. We don’t want to be here when it does.” She pulled and grabbed at her students, hurrying them away as the storm applauded in screeching joy and ecstasy.

Darion clenched his fist and Jilian’s chest rose and fell with fury as their metal rang with messages from the commander. The children fell in line behind their master, who promised them safety from the breach.

“You’re out of time,” Lehvi said. “Do you have anyone?”

The general hung his head, not even wanting to respond. Just as he did, he heard a peculiar sound. A strange clicking noise, perhaps an echo. Darion scanned the room, searching for the source, when finally, it was revealed to be coming from the last candidate’s metallic scraps. The boy was already standing by the entrance. Darion looked at the boy’s metal gleaming sky-blue.

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With the shadows warping furiously above them, the generals raced out of the tent, slamming through the mud as they ushered the hopeless workers out of the way.

“Commander, do you copy?” Darion asked frantically with the recruit on his back. The generals sprinted through the pressing fog; the drizzle had grown to a monsoon of gray and black. They listened for an answer but only heard static. “Commander Lehvi, come in!” The sky was cracking apart with Void storms bursting through the stars, threatening to crash-land upon the surface.
“Enemy closing in!” Darion shouted.

He saw the storm descending, shrieking like a fallen star ripped from the heavens. The generals stopped in their tracks to form a defense. Darion guarded the front as he heard Jilian covering the back. The boy’s light shined in between them. Violet lightning clouds shrouded Darion’s view, while gold mist touched down behind him, in Jilian’s scope. There was silence as the darkness converged on their formation.

A singular, slender figure appeared out of the light across from the general, its metal casing of armor spiking through the fog. Darion heard growling as he glanced behind him. Two hound-like, fiendish creatures creeped in front of Jilian. He could hear the candidate’s breathing quicken. Neither general made a movement.

Lightning struck the ground. Before the return strike arced in the sky, the metallic being sped toward Darion as the hounds rushed in after his spouse. Darion’s wrist flashed, shooting one powerful shot, shattering the armored foe in front of him. Jilian’s wristguard sounded off louder than thunder, and with heat like a hot furnace, pulverizing the beasts before her.

Another streak of lightning screeched in the shadows as Darion’s eyes were alerted to more armored specters, taller and faster than before. A horrible sea of snarls and howling came as a horde of hounds clambered out of thin air toward Jilian behind him.

Darion dashed out at an angle, aiming precision fire at his metal enemies. Jilian whirled in circular movement closer to her enemies. But their shots missed. The enemy was now more agile. More aggressive. A cybernetic figure reached at the candidate behind him. At the same moment, a monstrous beast clambering out of the air opened its jagged jaw, preparing to bite down on the boy.

“No,” Darion whispered. “Not this one. You can’t take this one!”

Darion drew his dark, steel sword. It grew like a terrible shadow, lurching out towards the cybernetic entity, slicing through it with a deafening slash. Just as his enemy fell, Jilian’s saber rose from her hilt. Embers gathered from the base, forming a blazing fire that sliced the beast across its belly.But Darion knew they couldn’t keep this up. Not if the boy was to survive.

With little time left, Darion accelerated so fast that he was just a blur. His shadow saber cut down each foe as he stayed just outside of their reach, shattering the specters into glass. Jilian rushed into the fray, evading claws and jaws, and burning down until they crumbled like sand.

“We have to keep moving!”Darion said. “On me!” The words came out with strength, but his sword trembled at the thought of what came next. Right now, they had the advantage. But every second and every strike gave the Void more strength and less time to escape.

Stepping away from the enemy, Darion reached out with his saber, flinging the shadows from the hilt. Darkness enveloped both machine and beast, knocking them off balance. Before they could recalibrate, Jilian circled in, and engulfed them in a shroud of flames.

She continued her momentum, moving close to a snarling beast so fast that she ended up behind it. She crashed into the feral monster, hurtling herself and her enemy in a wild tackle in mid air. Darion wasted no time seizing the moment. He slashed his sword at the helpless hellhound, decapitating it.

Shadows and embers moved in and out together like twins until there was just one synthetic creature. Darion brandished his sword, about to strike, but before it could land, his enemy expanded in piercing light.

“Eyes up!” the general said. Its whole structure shifted about, phasing in and out of different forms. It finally settled on a system that could oppose the general. It formed its own sword, extending from its arm. This foe had no face, no expression. It only had one eye, scanning like a drone. Before Darion could step, the creature accelerated toward him, drawing blood as he struck for his head. Had he not parried, his head would have been gone.

As the metal knight continued its assault, a loud roar caught the sensor's attention. Jilian was rapidly firing shots at the enemy, only for them to be brushed aside. As Jilian blazed toward them, the enemy prepared to counter, but Darion cut the enemy's sword hand. It staggered as Jilian rushed it down with wild flurries of flame, attempting any combination to keep it off balance. The enemy was just about to strike back, but Darion shot out its sensor.

The generals struck in succession, making it crumple back. Before the final blow could land, the being began to phase again, light shifting around its body—but to no avail. The creature ceased movement. Drawn into midair, the being exploded in a cascade of sky-blue light. Out of the ethereal mist flew a gray ship, moving to hover over them. Seeing their help arrive, Darion shouted at the recruit.

"Come on!" Darion shouted, grabbing up the contender again. In an instant, they were pulled through a vortex of indigo. They reappeared inside the ship to a burly, bark-colored man wrapped in gray clothing. He pressed his wristguard, speeding them to the sky. As they broke into orbit, they could view the great sea of space on the horizon. The battle against the Void, the sentient darkness searching for sapient souls, had commenced.

An armada of gray ships emitting sky-blue light lined the rugged curvature of the asteroid beneath them like a forest surrounded by spiraling rivers. The general could feel the vibrations resonating from the engines humming in unison. As they shouted their symphony on one side, their opposition congregated in storms of violet lightning and fiery clouds of gold, all pouring out from a colossal hole spewing waves of indigo. Countless metallic foes shrieked as swarms of monstrous beasts poured onto the scene like a nightmarish flood, bursting through space while roaring in opposition to the fleet.

"Package is undamaged," Darion said. He scanned the candidate as Jilian fastened him in the middle of the vehicle.

"Aven," said the commander. "The report called him Aven." Darion looked away into the spiraling abyss as they passed.

"This," Darion said. "This is how we defeat him. We rebuild our armies. One civilian at a time if we have to. And then…" His wife chimed in.

"We'll blow his dreadnought to smithereens," Jilian said. "When are you finally planning to come back, Commander?"

"Wasn't," said Lehvi.

“You’re content with feasting on milk and honey as a freelancer? You and your sky-bound monks are the only force he’s afraid of...And you hide like children?”

“I’m good,.” Lehvi said. Jilian grimaced.

“You scared little turtle. You were the commander of an elite battalion. Are you really going to stand by and let him sacrifice the whole galaxy while you finish your picnic?” Darion turned to the old commander.

“She is right,” said Darion. “We cannot fight your brother without you. He betrayed us all when he chose the Void as his ally, but you have the Ascended.” Lehvi sat silent as the general beside ranted on.

“With our combined strength, we can avenge all of the lives he sacrificed to the darkness,” Darion said. “What could be more important than that?” Lehvi looked back at the Nameless candidate.

“Porting to destination,” Lehvi said. The ship sped away from the battle into the far reaches of space. Despite the darkness, Aven’s sky-blue light burned bright, refusing to dim.

Part 1: The Fall of Haven City

Chapter 1

Worthy of Ascension

"*I was there when humanity first heard of the threat. WE guided them to this new galaxy. And I will be there when humanity's time has faded. WE will welcome them into Ascension. But until then, death must transpire. Still, this one seems determined to change that.*" The Ascended Dove

Aven Artorison fought the pain in his wrist. A Void creature, a sentient shadow from another realm, reached toward him, whispering through his scars that he was still a Nameless servant. But Aven clenched his fist in defiance and swung with all his strength to obliterate the shadow.

"Nameless—Nameless—Nameless."

Was this part of his test? He purged the whispers from his mind, forcing his eyes to the mirrors reflecting his brown skin on either side of him. His traditional gray fabrics were drenched with sweat, and his fists were tight in his balanced fighting stance. The navigator was bright with light on his wrist; the mark of a strong sky fighter.

But the memories would not let him see it.

The whispers in his mind made him lose focus, forcing his thoughts beyond the mirrors, and instead on miniature statues of ancient rulers of the galaxy. Rows of figurines progressed. From hulking figurines with diamond-shaped craniums, to tentacled creatures with discs for heads, and to a final set that was composed of voluptuous figurines, who shimmered like a sea of stars.

"Nameless! Nameless!"

Aven looked away as the whispers echoed louder. If even these great civilizations of the past were swallowed by the Void, then what could he possibly do to defend his people? But he gripped his fist tighter. He would not let his people fall to the darkness. With his strength, he would make sure the Nameless could Ascend.

"Tell me Aven, how do we ascend?" a voice boomed. "What can your lone fists do against a sea of infinite darkness?" Aven's posture straightened as a disembodied voice echoed throughout the chamber. He felt the air shift, as if the gravity wanted to pull him into the ground.

"Aven. Patros. Matrisol. Artorison." As the voice beckoned, stating his full name one part at a time, Aven felt the air in the room press down. "When my son first brought you here, you were but a forgotten child, from a backwater asteroid… Nameless. But look at you now…Tell me, what will you do with this name?" His name? As struggled to pull an answer from his mind, the air pressed down, forcing him to look at the images on the floor.

Struggling against the power, Aven saw the meaning behind the question. The illustrations on the training floor beheld three grand circles intertwining with one another.

In the middle, where he stood, the circle was colored with gray. The familiar image representing the physical plain that comprised all the worlds, galaxies, and the known universe.

Protruding out of it was another circle colored with vibrant purple and gold. The parallel dimension that existed unseen beyond the human eye. Where unlimited energy and psionic power flowed. The abyss.

And deep within that vibrant circle, was a circle filled entirely of indigo. An image to represent the energy that had become corrupted. Alive. The Void.

“I will fight the Void,” Aven answered. The air bared down on his shoulders as he struggled to stay upright. “As a soldier.”

“The Void…,” the voice said. “For ten years, we have trained you how to defend against the Void, as a sky fighter. I taught you to defend the Nameless from the Void who wishes to consume them. Now you wish to leave them to be a soldier in space?”

Why would he question his resolve? The Void had been their enemy for eons, back when humans first fled the old galaxy. The Ascended tried with countless civilizations before, with only remnants left. Now humanity was the last defense against eternal darkness.

“My people,” Aven said. His scar seared in pain as the doubt wrestled back. “The Nameless are attacked and slaughtered every day. If I join the fleets, I can take the fight to our enemy. I won’t let my people be sacrificed any longer.”

The abyss, the parallel dimension, gave them access to infinite energy and metaphysical power over the physical realm. But a portion of the abyss had aggregated. Coagulated to become sentient. It hungered for more sentient life to consume. To grow stronger. To Ascend.

“What do you know of sacrifice, little monk? You have gifts from the Ascended. You can use them to defend the Nameless here.”

Refusing to be shaken, Aven forced himself upright. He clenched his fists so hard he thought they almost bled, and purged the whispers away.

“I…” Aven pushed past the pain in his wrist. “…will use my power to defeat the Void in space. So my people can be free. Free to join us in the sky, and Ascend.” As Aven stood upright against the power pressing on him, the voice was silent for a moment.

“Show me.”

The air pressed down harder as a huge tower of a man gazed at him with indigo eyes. The old, copper skinned man had a chin beard shaped like fire, with the sides of his heart breaded into streaks resembling lightning. The steaks led to the top of his wooly head shaped like storm

clouds, yet his face was calm like a blue sky. Perhaps his mind played tricks on him, but it seemed that even the light dimmed in fear of the former Supreme Chieftain, Wovu Grayzar.

Aven's eyes widened as his precognition alerted him to the invisible assault.

He felt Wovu's wave of energy begin to enclose him as his barrier of protection contorted and fluctuated. But Aven accelerated away in a flash of violet.

His senses alerted him to another volley, but he vanished away from the exchange in a puff of golden flames.

Before he could settle, Wovu sent a wave of force by his feet, attempting to trip him. But Aven stomped with a resilient posture.

But he realized he was a step behind. With his barrier now polarized and focused in one area, a crack in his defense appeared. The elder rushed directly in front of Aven and delivered a strike to his chest, sending him hurtling backwards from the force of the blow.

The whispers of doubt rushed to him, shouting his worthless namesake.

Aven slid across the floor, struggling to levitate back to his feet. As he clutched his chest, his powers alerted him to another blitz from the elder.

He saw Wovu gliding straight for him at hypersonic speeds like a giant chasing after the cosmos. Aven threw up his defenses as the elder delivered a mountainous shockwave, depleting his barrier. His navigator beeped in frantic noise as Wovu lunged to end the bout.

With no other option, the sky monk sought the higher plain. Aven raised his hand up, emitting a sky blue wave of energy, an entropy field. In his mind, he reached higher. To the gifts of the Ascended. The domain of energy that bestowed upon his followers. There, he imagined the water flowing again, pouring through his body, reinforcing his barrier.

Aven released his fist, and stretched out his hand.

Space and time folded around the elder like a cocoon, slowing down the attack. The elder's giant fist crept towards him until it came to a full halt. Aven channeled his entropy fields into his own fist, attacking at the same time.

As the attack's collided, Wovu's power rebounded back onto himself, sending him backwards across the room. Twisting in mid air, the old warrior echoed a full body blast to catch himself, hovering back to the ground.

Gasping for breath, Aven saw his teacher's eyes meet his.

“I left the life of a soldier long ago,” said Wovu. “But however you choose to help the Nameless…these will only take you so far.” The elder raised his fists, and then pointed to the center of his chest. “The Ascended gifted you with this. Use it.”

The elder raised his hand, calling his robe of many colors back to him. On his left, a flying robot raced toward him, beeping calculations. The machine grew in size as its steel body flashed violet sparks. On the elder’s right shoulder, a fluffy creature appeared out of thin air. The golden flames swirled in the air as the pet peered at Aven.

Wovu motioned to the wall behind them, causing three gray shadow projections with sky-blue eyes to materialize.

“My fellow Elders,” Wovu said to the projections. “I recuse myself from this ruling as I am partial to this pupil. You have heard his thoughts. Seen his combat. He was rescued from servitude by our prized generals, Darion Patros and Jilian Matrisol. He carries the recommendation of my youngest adopted son, Lehvi Artorison.”

Aven heard the elders whispering to each other as the former chieftain beckoned.

“And most of all, you have seen his entropy power. A gift from the Ascended that all sentient beings wish to achieve. Like the ancient Artorisons of old who united our people, and defended the Nameless. He is a perfect candidate to fight back the Void. How will you rule on this matter?”

The elders rustled like old trees, debating among themselves. Aven’s breath drew quicker, watching the gray shadows. He wrestled away the thoughts of his past as his heart pounded in anticipation of their decision.

Elder Wovu beckoned once more. “From the five Provinces of the Nuverian nation, the four quadrants of the Nexus galaxy, and the three sacred factions, all bear witness to this day. What is the will of the Ascended, and the Dynasties Beyond? My fellow elders, what is your decision?”

Chapter 2

Aven in a Haven

"*I watched their strongest have gather in space. Their smartest have developed entire city worlds of harvest. If only all of them could reach these heights. It is the paradox of ascension. Some will. Some will not*." The Ascended Dove

Inside a secret place within his ship, Darion Patros paced back and forth.

"What if he doesn't make it," Darion said.

The general paced across the sleek metal floors. Stopping to compose himself, he breathed in the cold air. But the hilt of his sword still rattled.

As he breathed cold air in his lungs, the armor encasing his body contorted and contracted like muscle fibers, and then relaxed as he breathed out. His shifting armor felt like an extension of his own organic body, rippling with psionic power, the energy from the abyss. The psionic energy manifested as a glowing ether alive with light, and in turn gave life to all that it touched.

“Wovu must have put him through the paces,” Darion said. “But will the elders find him worthy to move factions?” A ping from his wrist sounded, allowing a voice ring through.

“He’s strong,” Jilian said. “We trained him to be. Now he just needs to remember what we taught him.” Darion pressed a button on his navigator. In an instant, the computer within sparked a series of psionic particles to trigger quantum entanglement, connecting to his wife’s navigator to provide a holographic visual light years away in her vessel.

“I thought you said your forces were prepared,” Darion said. With one glance at her armada, he sighed. Her ships were constantly moving in clusters around her flagship. The wasteful scrambling made him turn away in disbelief.

“You know the pre battle ritual,” Jilian said. “Aven’s acceptance is a spiritual battle. The formations of our ships won’t win this battle, but our connection to the higher plane.” Darion shook his head as she knelt over a line of golden gems set before her. Her armor reflected the bold colors burning from the stones as she prayed to the higher dimensions.

How easy it would be to just throw himself into belief like her. But Darion’s sword still stirred.

“Commander,” Darion said. “there have to be reports on your end, yes?” He pulled up another visual of the calmest person he knew.

“I’m not the commander,” Lehvi said. “And he’ll make it.” Darion peered over to the hologram of Lehvi sitting down in meditation. Draped in gray, his robes were absent of any sigils or symbols of rank. But Darion remembered him when he wore his full battle armor.

How he led armies countless times into battle. And one last time on that fateful night. That terrible night Caius went mad was forever etched in Darion’s mind. When Caius ignited a galactic conflict, forcing the hand of their rival nations into open battle.

The memories unnerved his senses, forcing sweat drop from his brow, until it fell to his trembling steel hilt. Flashes of his father’s forces decimated in cold, dark space. And his own forces, routed, helpless to intervene.

But Lehvi held the line. The commander and his battalion of trained skymonks held back the advance of their enemies, and defeated their leader in single combat.

“You are right,” Darion said. “He’ll make it. And when he does, he’ll join our fleets.” He turned away from the holographic projections of his allies and towards a real time image of the view outside his metal ship.

The image steadied his breath. Just the sight of his brilliant, destroyer class warships, and supporting frigates swelled his chest with confidence. But they all paled in comparison to the old faithful he commandeered.

His supercarrier was a gargantuan metal monstrosity. Its black colored hull reverberated as it arced purple electricity into space, leading the way for the fleet he'd built back over the years.

But his sword shook again, reminding him of their enemy in the far reaches of space. His nerves rattled, but he steeled his resolve. For over twelve thousand years, his family defended the Nameless from the Void, yet their enemy was more powerful than any seen before. Only now were they able to match him.

And they had a new entropy wielder. Ever since they found Aven on that backwater asteroid, Lehvi, Jilian, and himself had poured all they could into the boy. Now they had the perfect sleeper soldier to infiltrate the enemy ranks. Then, they would spring their trap. Aven just needed to pass his final test. As he gripped the end of his blade, he whispered to himself.

"We're waiting on you, Aven." Darion said. The boy didn't know yet. Darion wanted to reveal their enemy the first night they rescued him. But Wovu insisted they keep it secret, for fear it would disrupt his training. "Ascended help us."

As he said the prayer, a dark blot drew his eye as it hovered over the central image of his fleet.

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Aven sat at the edge of a platform sitting in the sky. He smiled with victory for his last day as Haven City's captain. The sunlight danced as if it were vibrating to a cosmic rhythm. The moving energy seemed to bring the open sky to life, all while the light rays produced an aura that bathed the city in solar bliss.

He inhaled and focused his mind, pulling energy from the higher realms within himself. The air shifted around him, and his navigator resonated with his mind, responding with a light. When he let go of his breath, , his navigator sang like a single key on a keyboard, with his light growing brighter.

Hovering in the distance, a bold, colossal stone fortress watched over the city. The knowledge to build the soaring citadel was a gift from the Ascended, and a crown achievement for humanity. Many races had been called to this galaxy. But when humanity arrived, they used all the technology left behind to not only reconstruct the past, but built a society for the future in the skies.

"Aven, you're going to be late!" a woman's voice called over his navigator. He recognized Ren's sharp audio. "We need you here NOW!" Snapping out of his trance, the monk teleported away from the outside.

"Jaks, showtime!" Aven yelled at his roommate.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm up," he said. Jaks roared out his bed, shuffling his mane of hair. "You're extra hyper today."

"Last day in the sky," Aven said. "Tomorrow, space." Aven hit his fellow bridge officer on the shoulder.

"Honor guard, huh?" Jaks said. "Caius is the most powerful human in the galaxy. Why does he need a protection duty?" Aven shrugged.

"Well obviously he doesn't need protection,"Aven said. "But an extra gun to fight Void breaches is what he asked for, and that's what I got."

As he checked security, Aven gazed at the posters of famous fighters he admired. Wovu's greatest student, and adopted son, Lehvi Artorison, stood like a firm tree, with rivers branching off into other posters of fellow fighters and captains.

"I gotcha, man," Jaks said. "Can't believe you're leaving all this for me to manage." He waved his hand roughly through his long, wild mane and yawned again.

Aven shrugged. "My guy, don't worry. You've still got Wovu and Ren to keep everything up to speed."

Jaks shrugged. "Bro… YOU keep the troops in line." Before the captain could respond, their navigator wristguards lit up once more.

"Guys!" Aven recognized Ren's boisterous tone. "We can't wait any longer!" Aven winced, wishing he could just teleport to the top of the station. But the barriers laced throughout the different levels prevented any such insertion. Ren would just have to wait while they made their jumps.

In the blink of an eye, Aven and Jaks were catapulted through space, through the abyss, to an entirely new location.

As they left, Aven did not see a small indigo cloud hiding outside their abode.

Their feet landed on the stone floor at the entrance of the grand fortress. The flying castle stretched high above them as they ran toward the giant doors, passing the gardens attended by caretakers. The grounds and meadows all led to the center, where a magnificent indigo rock birthed the entire ecosystem.

As Aven ran past the rock, the psion core, it glimmered with crystallized energy from the abyss. It spewed forth a geyser of water that seethed and hissed as it shifted through the ground beneath it. The water transfigured into a gleaming, metallic substance.

“Congratulations!” The caretakers waved as Aven hurried past them. He waved back as they grabbed the metallic substance, the arcane ore, and molded it like clay. Aven never understood how the hyper malleable was light enough to make his navigator, yet strong enough to comprise the entire station. His navigator beeped as they teleported up higher into the fortress.

They landed on the solid arcane ore hallway lined with more statues of past dynasties. Aven smirked at the miniature replicas, because the stories he read depicted the species of old as large as mountains.

“Congrats, Captain!” Students turned to cheer for the officers as their teachers ordered them back in their seats. The young cadets were just learning about the abyss, and how it was the lifeblood and fuel of all the technology of this galaxy.

Cube shaped droids buzzed around them, helping with calculations, while fluffy petting animals scurried on their desks. Aven laughed as they teleported away. It was this very history lesson that got him several beatings back when he was just Nameless. Sneaking off to read how humans repurposed ancient machines and feral beasts into helpful mates was always fascinating to him.

Jaks yawned as they landed on a giant pathway in the midst of a grand courtyard beneath them. The walls of the central station welcomed them with a roaring horn sounding into the sky.

“Yeah, yeah,” Jaks said. “We hear ya.”

Hundreds of sky fighters all moved and shouted in unison as commands were issued throughout the courtyard. They all struck in the air, practicing their movements, preparing for the Void attacks that could appear at a moment's notice.

But the fighters were ready. The fighting force of just over ten thousand could deploy at a moment’s notice. Though an attack could happen anywhere, the arcane ore that comprised the entire floating megastructure attracted Void energy like moths to a flame.

Like its very own city, the fortress seemed to stretch on forever. At forty thousand feet in the air, it stood as the primary base to monitor and repel interdimensional attacks.

“Congrats, captain!” The training officers, lieutenants, and upcoming fighters all knew his honored name and achievements.

Another horn blew. Aven looked to the wall just ahead of them sliding open heavy doors. The opening gave view to the clouds outside the fortress, and a bridge extending out into morning mist. Separated into three distinct lanes, it stretched like a highway into the dawn, hovering over the center of the city.

“Guys!” a girl yelled in the distance. “You’re about to miss it, come on!” Ren stood a few feet away, hands on her hips with an annoyed look.

“Ah, we’ll be fine, Ren.” Aven rushed in to kiss his partner, squeezing her side so she would squeal. Her metallic-like black hair almost came loose from its neat ponytail as he pinched her small frame.

“Ow,” she laughed. “Even for your last day, you’re still late!” She ruffled his disheveled hair as Jaks rolled his eyes from the public display.

They rushed past the station’s walls and to the middle of the extended bridge. The midline pathway provided an overhead view of the entire surface level beneath them, where the center market square sat as the epicenter of the city’s commerce and civilization. Each of the officers took positions at modules, pressing nodes and pulling up screens to commence the event.

“I can count it in,” Aven said. They all nodded in agreement as their hands hovered over their respective dashboards. “One, two—”

On three, they all pressed down. A portal to the abyss opened up, with purple lightning colliding with golden flames. It was a beautiful shower of indigo as the interdimensional energy, the psion particles, rushed like a pillar of water toward the magnificent tower.

“Wow,” Ren said. “I love this. Every time.”

The tower blazed with limitless flowing power as the energy roared through the inner workings of the structure. It sounded like a mass choir the size of a planet as the energy raced from the tower to the power plants surrounding it, then to the endless series of buildings next to them, then to the homes beside them, and finally out from the center down to the civilians below, just as the song reached its climax.

“Overseers can’t stop this,” Aven said with a smile. The monk breathed in the blissful air as ethereal energy trailed off; the tail end of the shower collided with the air and transformed into a shimmering cascade of light rain. As it floated down to the surface, it spiraled and shifted every which way, touching every recipient who was there to watch the distribution of resources.

Aven and his team pressed a series of buttons and nodules to shut off the flow of energy. He scanned the surface to make sure the ether did not mutate and become corrupted in this dimension. He then watched the clouds to ensure there were no signs of corrupted energy from the abyss dimension. The Void was ever persistent.

A proud smile grew on his face as he projected a map of the entire planet. When he was Nameless, he’d only read of this ancient world. But now he could see the green canopies and blue oceans reminiscent of old earth. But with gleaming, metropolitan living spaces that stretched over the majority of the surface.

Before he was rescued, his Overseers were scarce to feed just a few thousand. But in Haven City, the three hundred meter tower could feed the entire population of just over nine billion civilians.

Not even including the ten of thousands who lived in the skies. The floating platforms were each a few hundred meters, able to house and feed a thousand occupants all on their own.

If only all his people had this same protection. Aven gripped his fist as he remembered the asteroid he was saved from. He had ascended so high, but the thoughts of those days as a Nameless never left him. One day, he'd find a way for all of them to ascend to the sky. And one day, they'd be strong enough to defeat the Void, and ascend beyond this physical realm.

"Vanguard-one to Operator-one," Aven said. "What's the forecast for the rest of the day? Any attacks we need to be on the lookout for?" A separate monitor came up displaying the command center full of technicians watching the skies for anomalies.

Predicting a Void breach was like tracking the weather. In the morning, it could be sunny. By the time the night fell, it could be a hurricane. There had to always be someone watching, for at any moment, the corrupted energy from the unseen abyss could break through like a living storm.

"No Void breaches for the day, Cap," the tech officer said. "Clear skies for your last day, my friend." Aven saw Ren's eyes light up with excitement.

"Great," Ren said. "No attacks means more time for training. Mara needs help with her form and—"

Aven shrugged. "Babe, it's fine," he said. "The bridge leaders will get her caught up in no time." He checked his monitor again as Jaks yawned beside them.

"She needs YOU, Aven," Ren said. "You know she responds better when you're there."

"Me?" Aven said. He looked at Jaks, who looked away into the sky before their eyes met. Aven was about to comment before a call on his nav came through.

"The twins just beat your high score, by the way," the tech said.

Aven gasped. "What?!" He touched his navigator to pull up a visual of a room housed in the barracks area. "Jaks, suit up."

Ren frowned. "Aven!" she said.

As Aven and his team teleported away, he missed a crack in the arcane ore.

Aven reveled in the rumblings beneath his boots. He stood in the center of the three ringed insignia etched into the floor. One to represent the physical realm, another to visualize the

parallel dimension of the abyss, and the last to mean their eternal enemy, the Void. He stepped forward, looking out to face the challenge.

The long corridor stretched far to resemble the bridge in the sky they had just stood watch over. It was separated into three distinct lanes of violet on the left, gold on the right, and sky-blue in the middle.

The highway led to the end where there were no lights. Only a pit of darkness. Aven tensed up as he stared at the representation of a breach, a tear in the fabric of space that their techs always kept a look out for. Breathing in, Aven turned to his friend.

“All right, Jaks,” Aven said. “Same plan. I’ll set, you spike. Agreed?” Aven was bouncing on the balls of his feet as he prepped with his co-captain. Their jumpsuits were a dark gray lined in gleaming sky-blue.

“My guy…,” Jaks said. He swung his arms as they stepped forward. “Just use your powers.” Aven heard the applause from his fellow fighters.

“Come on! COME ON!” Aven said. He pumped his fist in the air as his fellow fighters watched overhead through window panes on either side. Cheers ricocheted as the two captains walked toward the middle of the corridor.

With his fist raised, he surged his affinity, his natural ability to use the energy from the abyss. Wielding his navigator, it made it easier to funnel the psion particles from the abyss, directly into his body, and to disperse as he saw fit.

As he breathed in, the light on his navigator quickened with vibrations. It felt like a jolt of electricity, building until it hummed like a song. The song resonated through the air, swelling into a chord that rang like a brass bell, harmonizing with the rest of the room's chants.

“No way you’re beating our time, Cap,” a voice said. Aven looked to the west windowpane, seated over the left lane. His eyes fell on two dreadlocked twins surrounded by their troops and cadets, all hoisting their navigator wristguards in violet electricity.

Rescued from mining worlds, they each had a natural affinity that shined with violet light. In honor of the warrior who saved them, they carried a purple flag bearing the image of their rescuer, General Darion Patros.

“Last day, last record,” Aven said. He lifted his navigator, shining his own violet light to match their affinity.

“Let’s go, Aven!” Aven’s ear perked as he heard the eastern windowpane above the right lane nearly burst from the cheering. Led by a tall crimson-headed woman, he saw a crowd of troops and cadets pounding the window. They clapped in a chaotic beat with their navigator wristguards blazing with golden fire.

Whisked away from runebile harvesting camps, they carried the golden colored flag of their heroine, General Jilian Matrisol.

Aven kept the spirit of the room alive as he beat his chest, pointing his navigator to match their affinity.

One of the recruits waved frantically at Aven, trying desperately to get his attention. Aven threw his thumbs up at Mara. A fresh recruit, she hadn't learned basic telepathy yet. But she had the same affinity as Aven.

Her navigator light matched the banner draped atop the center lane. A giant sky blue portrait of Wovu's son, Lehvi Artorison. Aven smirked at the giant portrait, knowing that Lehvi would not want that much attention. But all the rescued cadets cheering beneath his image adored him all the same.

And Mara jumped higher than all of them.In time, with enough training, she could access the same skillsets as Wovu, Lehvi, and himself. He waved back, shining his sky-blue light with pride toward the fighters over the center lane.

As all the sky fighters cheered for the game to commence, a voice beckoned through their navigators.

"Pay attention," Wovu said. The lights flickered and the shadows cowered as their leader called for them to focus. "Remember, children. This may be a simulation, but it serves as a lesson. Watch and learn how we fight against the Void."

Aven bowed to his teacher. Wovu bowed back, and flickered a proud smile to his pupil. The elder Wovu was the most powerful wielder of psion particles, able to quell whole armies of enemies with this psionic power.

He taught each of his students how their respective affinity could be best used to defeat a specific type of Void creature. And to Aven, he taught everything he knew.

"Simulation is primed and ready to go," the tech said. "Tier two breach in three...two...one." Aven opened his eyes to the dark training room and clenched his fist.

"Two minutes," Wovu said. "Whenever a breach occurs, we have two minutes to wipe out the incursion. Or else, the enemy grows, festers, and phases into a stronger class. Do not let it reach Tier one."

The darkness at the end of the corridor ignited with indigo light. Aven could sense the new cadets wince as the air contorted and bulged. It exploded in an array of chaotic shadows, opening a portal to the abyss. And making a way for the corrupted, dark dominion within it, the Void, to pass through.

The simulation of the Void's sentient energy leaked through the portal like an indigo plague, landing on the corridor. The ether shifted and warped as it gained consciousness, taking the forms of conquered civilizations.

Aven and Jaks configured their navigator wristguards. The arcane ore, the hyper malleable metal of civilizations past, contorted like mud and tar, shaping into barrels as they aimed them at their targets. Aven imagined the wellspring of limitless power gifted to him from the Ascended. As he did, his affinity allowed him to access the energy from the abyss at will, pulling the psion particles around him, making his barrier of protection.

"When the Void energy enters," Wovu said. "it hungers for more energy to consume. To combat this, we match our affinity and weaponry to draw it closer, and counter."

Aven snapped open a short, gleaming staff. The Void energy shuddered and rippled, sensing the weapon as it surged with psionic energy to feed on. The tighter Aven held his channel staff, the brighter the light shone as the energy flowed through it.

He saw the left lane of the corridor light up. The Void took the form of faceless machines. These cybernetic beings from light years away had long since been consumed, allowing the merciless Void to copy their design, and their abilities.

"Watch the left!" Aven said. Focusing his mind, he arranged the psion particles around his staff. The metal sparked with violet light, propelling him forward in a blur to match the speed of the enemy. Accelerating to the left lane, he flashed his staff like a lightning strike, drawing the Void cybernetics in closer.

"Check your 3 o' clock!" Jaks said. The opposite side of the room sprouted clawed, four-legged creatures with no eyes to see, but skeletal, snapping jaws. These beasts from a galaxy far away had long since been devoured by the Void, choosing them as a perfect image to copy and strike fear into humans.

Rearranging the psion particles again, Aven's staff burned with power. He teleported to the right lane of the corridor where the beasts were forming, brandishing a golden firestorm. The beasts salivated at the sight of the power, drawing closer.

"Watch, children," Wovu said. "See how he matches affinity with the invading enemy to draw them in. Now, the trap is set." It was the most fundamental strategy the sky fighters had. It was why they grouped fighters into specific lanes. The bridge, the lanes, and their affinity was all arranged to keep the Void entity focused on one target, before it phased into something too strong.

With the manifestations of the Void drawing even closer, Aven retreated to the middle lane to find his balance. Breathing in, he settled his mind and spirit, adjusting the psion particles in perfect harmony. His precognition alerted him to the Void machines and beasts attacking all at once.

Releasing the tension in his fist, Aven opened his palm, releasing his entropy field. The Void creatures were ensnared in a net of space and time, frozen in place. As Aven maintained the balance of the abyss in his palm, he felt the air shift as Jaks leapt over top him. His co-captain harnessed his own lightning and fire, and released them together, destroying the Void in a hailstorm of psionic energy.

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As it grew late, the sky monks returned to their floating abodes hanging in the atmosphere. The captains lay atop Aven's apartment rooftop as Ren's heartbeat drummed a soft rhythm on his chest. He whispered to her, stretching out his arm to the ocean of stars watching them.

"Think I'll get my own constellation?" Aven said. With his finger, he traced out the constellations. The celestial bodies outlined a portrait in the night sky, depicting the ancient stories of the first humans to receive psionic power from the abyss.

"Well..,"Ren said. "The legends say the heroes gained their constellation when they Ascended to the Dynasties Beyond."

"Oh," Aven said. "Does Heaven have Overseers? If so, I have questions for the Ascended." He felt Ren fight back laughter as she asked a pressing concern.

"How often can you visit?" Ren said. She reached out to grasp Aven's hand. "Don't take too long. Some of us need your gifts here, too."

"If I'm in the Chieftain's battalion?" Aven said. "I maybe can visit once or twice a year. But if anybody beats my score…Caius will understand."

Ren laughed. "I can't even imagine. There's never been a Supreme Chieftain as strong as Caius, not since Wovu. And you get to be directly under him?"

"It was Wovu's recommendation," Aven said. His mind went to the day he was rescued by the generals. The day they saw his potential. "And the generals. They always saw my potential. I just hope I—"

Aven's hand trembled. With his memories still dwelling on the day he was rescued, he remembered the Overseer trying to hold him back. The tremors in his hand made his navigator shake on his wrist.

But Ren grasped his hand tighter. As she leaned in closer to him, Aven felt her light breath soothe his scars that never healed.

"You're going to do great, Aven," Ren said. "You're this city's hero. Your MY hero. Now you get to fight for the Nameless like you've always wanted."

Aven pressed his forehead to hers. “You really want me to visit, huh?” She pulled away in laughter.

“If you don’t, I’ll change your score in the simulator!”

“You laugh,” Aven said. “But my scores are how you noticed me, remember?” As he held her hand, he formed a tight nit fist alongside hers and raised their arms in the air like champions.

“It definitely was not!” she said. Ren smirked and lowered their victorious hands down. “I mean…it played a part. But really, it was how you balanced everything. It’s like you saw beyond the simulation to figure it out. I’d never seen anything like it.” Ren opened up Aven’s fist and touched their palms together.

“Yea?” Aven said. “Figured you out, too. Haven’t beat me since.” Ren’s eyes glared like a tigris stalking its prey. She turned to him with a playful, competitive flare and touched her forehead to his.

“You might win in the simulator,” she said. “But I’m the champ around here.”

As they embraced, they shared a kiss beneath Haven City’s night sky.

Aven’s thoughts dwelled on the stars, the battles to come, and one day returning to be with his people. He thought nothing of the strange readings beeping on his navigator wristguard. He did not see one of the stars dying, blackening out the sky surrounding it.

Indigo consumed the entire night sky, pouring out of the abyss over Haven City. With a portal to the abyss shrieking overhead, a shockwave slammed into the bold, colossal structure, obliterating its barrier.

Before he could react, Aven felt the floating platform beneath collapse.

Chapter 3

Shattered Sky

"*If I could save them all from this fate, I would. How I wish to wave my hand and rid their race of these struggles, of their pain, their tears. But WE decided against intervention. WE must allow the physical realm to exist with all its rules of causality intact. And their will must exist alongside it, or we risk undoing even ourselves. So I watch. Wishing. Waiting. Until the day comes when I can finally swoop and deliver them from the darkness*."

-The Ascended Dove

Lehvi Artorison ran his hands over the interface of his navigator. There were too many reports to keep up with. But he knew in his heart what was transpiring.

"Return fire!" a voice crackled.

"We need reinforcements!" another said.

Scattered images formed holographic depictions throughout the worlds. All of which were besieged by torrents of indigo energy bursting from tears in space. The energy rushed out like an ocean crashing on shore, until it hardened, solidifying into monstrous vessels that mirrored the defense fleets they surrounded.

The Void had sensed the enemy forces in front of it and not only matched, but surpassed them, blowing through its opposition.

Lehvi kept trying to reach Darion or Jilian on the comms, but their connections had been severed. And they were too far for telepathic attempts.

Trying to gain a last minute feel for the crisis, he pulled an image of the entire Nexus Galaxy. As the hologram zoomed out, Lehvi's eyes widened. What was once a galaxy secured by massive stations and fleets, was now under fire from a higher dimension.

Darion's main fleet was in a shambled mess of a formation, while Jilian's armada was struggling to even scramble ships. And surrounded by a cosmic storm of chaotic energy, was Haven City.

"Aven," Lehvi whispered.

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Crashing sound waves rushed Aven awake. Eruptions tore through the night as Aven went for his wristguard.

"Aven, wake up!" Ren shouted. "Hurry! I need to do a comm check. I think my nav is malfun—" A piece of rubble just missed them as it fell from the collapsing ceiling and through the ground.

The initial shockwave must've knocked him unconscious. The last thing he remembered was the structure falling through the sky, but as he rose to his feet, he saw they were still hanging in the clouds, but lower in altitude.

"What the hell is happening?" Aven said. His head was ringing. He shook his head to push through the commotion, but the collisions and eruptions high above them made it impossible.

"It's some kind of orbital strike!" Ren. "Comms are down. I'm trying telepathic connections, but it's too chaotic."

"We need to regroup!" Aven said. "We connect with-."

Before he could finish the sentence, the orbital station in the stars above them exploded in countless pieces of arcane ore. Aven felt the shockwave knock him and Ren off the platform.

Spiraling through the clouds, Aven grabbed Ren close, and punched in coordinates to his navigator. The energy wrapped around them, pulling them through the abyss.

When they came out the other end, they were met with fire and broken stone. They were falling through the air, as the platform had been blown away. Aven quickly panned his view for a place to port, searching frantically. It wasn't until he heard a familiar voice that he got his bearings.

"Aven! Port to me!" Jaks said. Aven reached out to the abyss again, porting to a section of the pathway that was still intact. Holding up Ren, she reached for the ledge, but came up short.

"Gotcha!" Jaks shouted. He grabbed her forearm just in time, helping them onto their feet, avoiding shards of the ceiling still falling apart. The giant wall that once stood was now nothing more than bare bones. The courtyard was torn asunder with broken warships hanging on one another, still bursting with flames and rust.

"They took out our central station!" Jaks said, coughing. He looked up at the showers of fire hurling in the sky. "Orbital command is gone! They took out the elder first. He could wipe out this whole sector with a wave of his han—"

"We don't know anything yet," Aven said. "Any word from the battalion? Bridge leaders?"

"Nothing?" Ren said. She kept crunching numbers on her navigator, but there was no response. "It has to be Void energy blocking our signal. If our troops can rally--."

"Rally where?!" Jaks yelled. He looked over the ledge, where falling debris and burning rubble break apart in the open sky.

“Listen to me!” Aven shouted. “We have to find the others, or whoever is doing this is going to reach the surface and run rampant.”

“Aven, if they did this to Wovu.” Jaks said. “Then there’s no telling what happened in the—” Jaks was rambling but paused as they all came to the same conclusion at once.

“Port to the barracks,” Aven said. They all entered the abyss at once and came to the horror that was the other side.

A bloodbath of bodies, beasts, and cybernetics littered the halls. The circular corridor stretched on endlessly with fire and cracked stone, showing the evidence of struggle and slaughter. Red painted the walls as rubble piled over lifeless corpses. Officers, freelancers, and even the young cadets were all taken by death.

“No,” Aven whispered.

The Aprori, the sky fighters he trained with for over a decade, were gone in a night.

“Oh no,” said Ren. Aven looked around and saw his comrades slain by forces of the Void. The twins lay skewered by metal next to dozens of shattered drones. Their lances just out of reach of their grasp. The red haired sisters’ bodies were torn to pieces, surrounded by countless beasts. Their once burning weapons lay dull and smoking as the flame burned out. And the triplets, crushed by some terror he could not identify. All three of them still held onto their channel staffs, yet their grips were absent of strength.

There was only silence as Aven and his vanguard team looked in disbelief at their entire battalion laid to waste in the barracks. In the blink of an eye, the only real family they knew was gone.

“What did this?” Ren said in terror. Tears welled up in her eyes as she attempted to speak.

“We need to look for survivors,” Aven managed to say. He clenched his fist as he scanned the room. “We need to—”

“Aven—look around,” Ren said softly. She shook her head, not even able to gaze upon the death that still haunted the corridor. “We’re too late to save anyone.”

Aven clenched his fist. “No! We can still help them, come on!” He scanned the room for anyone that might still have been moving.

“We need to call for reinforcements,” Jaks said. “We get out of range of the jamming so our signal can reach the Echelon.” Said Jaks. Aven paused, knowing his friend was right. The elite fleets in space were the only ones capable now of helping. He was just on his way to them in the morning, but he needed them to come to them at this very moment.

“I’m not leaving anyone behind,” Aven said. He knew the Echelon was their saving grace, but the thought of abandoning any of his fellow fighters pulled at him. It moved him to push away rubble and rock off of bodies.

“Aven, our comms are jammed,” Ren struggled to say. She touched her temple to send a telepathic signal through the abyss. “But we have to try something before whatever this is goes for the surface. We don’t even know how much time before it phases.”

“I can’t just leave if there’s some—” Aven began to say. But Jaks forcefully grabbed his shoulder.

“We have to move now,” he said. Aven pushed off, yelling back.

“I’m not leaving anyone!” How could he? He already wasn’t there for the initial assault. Already missed the surprise attack. His entire battalion needed him to rally, to guide, to defend them from this monstrous storm. He didn’t realize he was trembling until he felt another hand on his.

“Trust me, I know, Aven,” Ren said. She still couldn’t look at the corridor. “Emotions are everywhere right now. But we have to move rationally. If we don’t, more lives will be lo—” She was attempting to speak sensibly, but the party could hear audible struggles in a distant hallway.

“Help,” someone coughed. Aven immediately ported over to Mara, who was trapped under rubble. He stretched out his hand to telekinetically move all the rocks at once, freeing the young cadet. Picking her up off the ground, Aven embraced her. He gasped for air, not even realizing he was holding his breath as the cadet wept in his arms.

“I’m glad you’re alive,” he said. “I thought everyone was lost.” As the rest of the party reached them, Aven moved his arm to wipe away tears that attempted to form. He nodded in agreement with his co-captain. “You’re right... We need to find a way to get a signal for reinforcements. If anyone can fix this, it’s the Echelon.” His teammates, all grasping his shoulders, thankfully nodded.

Ren ran through possible scenarios. “We can find a working ship frame somewhere. Take it to orbit where—”

A blinding light filled the corridor. It was a foggy, gray-like color, almost like a mist emanating from a doorway. It was so encompassing that the party had to stretch their hands to block the light. They barely managed to see a glorious figure walking through the opening. Long, pale hair. Translucent skin. So tall they mistook him for Wovu at first. But his physique was even bigger. This giant-like figure stepped onto this plane of existence, looking for its prey.

“It’s him,” Mara cried. Aven looked at this monstrous being, seeing the blood drip from its nails, trailing up to its forearms. His oily black armor plates covered one shoulder and his chest, while rugged, brown fabric clung to his waist.

“A revenant,” Ren said. The vanguard team tensed up as Mara whimpered. “The breach has already reached Tier One.”

The Void’s champion manifestation. A horrid amalgamation of all the societies it had conquered throughout the fallen cosmos. In a humanoid body, it had the mind of the colossal machines, and the feral nature of the enormous beasts. With the strength and power of the fallen dynasties, this revenant was the

culmination of all the Void's sacrifice. Still, it hungered for more. More souls to reach the higher planes of the Ascended.

"Wedge pattern," Aven said telepathically. "Jaks and I will set. Ren, you spike from a distance." He put Mara down in the middle as the team took their positions around her. Ren slowly walked to the rear. Jaks drifted toward the right, as Aven fanned slightly to the left, staring the monster in his eye.

The monster welcomed the advance, his eyes glaring at his opponents. His body morphed, forming what looked like contorted faces screeching in horror.

"Somebody—" a howling voice screamed. "Help me!" another groaned. Mara winced in agony as she heard the echoes of her fallen fighters. The Void energy copied the voices of their dying comrades, taunting them to attack. "Help meeeeee!!"

Aven heard the screams as his scars burned with pain. Was the creature that sick? That bold to mock his fallen friends to his face? Aven defied the voices, and formed his shaking hands into the tightest fists he could manage.

"I don't care what you are," Aven said. "I'll kill you with my own hands. For them."

Ren steadied Mara. "Stay here and don't look," Ren said softly to the young cadet. With only their navigators and the source as weapons, they stood at the ready, staring down at this evil entity. Mara tried her best to hold back whimpers and tears. As if in response, the revenant put a finger up to its mouth.

"Shhhhh," it whispered with a chilling grin. Its eyes pulsated as the polluted light then turned to purple electricity, then to gold nebulous, and finally a dark, foggy gray. The Void engulfed its body as the air in the room pushed down on them like gravity. The vanguard resisted the pull of their enemy, standing their ground as they pulled from the source. And in an instant, they clashed in the center of the corridor.

Aven and Jaks dashed toward its midline, striking in unison. The revenant guarded against their attacks as Aven stepped closer. He swung his fist around, feinted, then swung again. The revenant blocked, but its guard shifted, creating an opening. Jaks closed in to deliver a deep strike to finish the bout early. As it landed on the creature's abdomen, it retaliated with its own crushing blows.

Streaks of violet electricity shocked and stunned the Aprori fighters, who barely managed to defend themselves. With Aven and Jaks off balance, the revenant went in for the kill. But before it could claw the monks apart, shots interrupted his assault. Ren accelerated bullets at its eyes.

As the monster reeled back to cover itself, Aven swiftly jabbed at the abdomen to draw its focus. It took the bait and attempted to strike back at him. But Jaks had already ported behind the beast for a suplex, picking up the monster and slamming him into the stony floor.

As if to snuff out their momentum, the revenant expelled a firestorm of power from its surroundings. Aven and Jaks were sent back, but quickly found their footing. They went for another exchange, but their opponent clawed at the air, tearing the fabric of space and pulled a storm of energy from the abyss at will.

In an instant, the corrupted energy materialized into Void creatures. Hounds crowded the corridor, rushing past Aven and towards Mara. But Ren stepped in front of their target, shooting them down with shots from her navigator.

One beast dodged all the shots and opened its snarling jaw toward Mara. Right on target, Ren speared straight through its body with a shining steel lance. She grabbed another from one of the twins' corpses, throwing it at the fiend's heart.

It hit its target, but not before a cybernetic enemy emerged. It flashed violet as it accelerated towards Mara, but Ren deflected it at the last moment with her barrier. Before the enemy could dash away, she shot her navigator point blank into its sensor, dismantling the armored foe completely.

In the center, the revenant rained cracking elbows and thunderous kicks, the last one sending Aven flying. He sent a rushing wall of Void energy to Jaks, who blocked, but didn't catch the bloody forearm that sent him crashing through the ground, depleting his source barrier. The stone floor caved in response to the force of the impact. His immediate opposition out of the way, the revenant broke out toward the crying cadet.

Ren blurred in with an accelerated attack, but the revenant muscled through, flinging her away with a column of indigo energy. As he closed in on his prey, Mara screamed in fear.

Before the monster could reach her, Aven ported in front of the cadet, firing a wave of entropy into the revenant's face. Sky-blue light emitted from his palm, arranging the psion particles to warp and folding space-time. The result forced the monster to crumple back.

As Aven landed on his feet, he reached out to the tall triplet's body and pulled his weapon toward him. He swirled the channel staff flowing with the raw energy of the abyss, pulling the psion particles and rushing them like water. He swung for the kill, but missed and managed to hit the monster's joints and ligaments.

Switching the flow of particles at will, he cut and stabbed its extremities. Switching again, he bashed its bones. As the beast swung for the captain's head, Aven ducked and countered with a tidal wave of power into its center organs.

The revenant muscled through, shattering the staff with a screeching battle cry. It grasped Aven with its nails. Ignoring the pain, Aven pushed back with all his strength, halting the monster's advance.

"Shoot the heart! The *heart*!" Aven yelled, struggling to hold the darkness back. Ren, still bleeding on the broken floor, shot her navigator. The revenant roared as it clutched its chest, the flesh rending from the source bullets. Aven jumped and kicked its jaw to send it reeling back. Rolling off the floor, Jaks stepped in deep for a powerful, crushing fist as he roared with might.

Aven held his navigator tight and pulled as much power as he could from the ascended plains of space. He dashed out to the enemy at hypersonic speed and jumped over its cranium to end the nightmare. Before he fired the cannon, the revenant looked up and grinned.

The Void shadows ensnared the revenant's body in a cocoon of darkness, phasing him into some new terror. His energy exploded throughout the corridor, emerging through the structures to reveal a scattered sky raining destruction on the station. Before the captains could counter or make any defense, the enemy struck with the force of all-encompassing night.

Chapter 4

Facing the Darkness

"*I mourn this day. Just like the day my people fell so many cycles ago. When the Void overtook my race, I was granted Ascension. Gifted visions to see the ends of the universe, and secrets I must never speak of until that end. When that day arrives, when all entropy has ceased, and the Void overtakes the cosmos, WE will ride out and deliver a new dawn upon the darkness. Until that final victory, I do what I can to help those who call."*

-The Ascended Dove

Lehvi Artorison raced his personal vessel through the debris. The cosmic storm raging all around him blocked the outside view and immediate communications, but he cared not. He forced his way through the wreckage of broken spacecraft and whirling darkness until he located the heart of Haven City's orbital station.

As the primary hub for Aprori communications, it was supposed to monitor Void activity throughout the known galaxy. There was meant to be an array of defense platforms, each a kilometer and a half long that wrapped around the entire city planet. But this attack was too sudden, for all that remained were scraps.

He tried to remember his training. To calm his nerves, like he'd done so many times in the face of overwhelming odds. But the years had chipped away at his resolve. For the darkness had taken many he cared for. He wasn't sure if he could bear yet another loss.

"Wovu!" Lehvi shouted. "Wovu!" He called over the comms through his navigator. But there was no answer.

Was this that fateful battle all over again. The day he was forced to wage war with their rival nations due to his brother's madness? It was what made him turn away from his post all those years ago.

Holding the line against a sea of enemy ships, while his own battalion perished. All so Caius could release his terrible wrath on all within range, sacrificing friend and foe alike. The death of his comrades had never left him. And here he was again.

“Father!” Lehvi said. He scanned over the wreckage, hoping to the Ascended that any sign of Wovu would surface. That his voice would boom through the comms like so many heroic times in his youth. But a different voice answered.

“It’s the commander!” the voice said. Lehvi checked his navigator, pinpointing the signal that managed to break through the jamming. It was an ally freighter.

“Sir,” the voice said. “We’ve lost contact with the rest of our fleet. What do we do?”

“I’m not the—” Lehvi began to say. His eyes moved from the destroyed orbital station and peered through the cosmic storm raging in the distance. He could just make out the freighter that called to him, with about a dozen small frigates in broken formation.

He wanted to keep searching. To focus on his own worries. His own life. But deep down he knew, if he didn’t fill the seat of command, even more lives would be lost. He pressed his navigator.

“Transmitting pattern now,” Lehvi said. He sent a formation for the vessels to arrange into and moved towards the center, facing the storm head on. “Prepare for a counterattack. The night’s not over yet.”

***

It rained chaos and death as the sky cracked open. The revenant screeched through the gate, tearing back the very fabric of space and time. More Void energy poured through, threatening to rip the world asunder. In the midst of the nightmare, something stirred Aven back to consciousness.

He looked frantically around him, searching for his friends. All he could see was the darkness closing in. Suddenly, static came from what looked like Ren’s nav. But nobody.

Anyone? His eyes raced, desperate to find any trace of his comrades. But there was only destruction and the violent torrent of energy pouring forth from above.

“Gidi!” yelled Aven. “The Void breach has phased to Tier one!” His navigator crackled to say something.

“S—s-sir,” it said.

“Call for reinforcements! We need the Echelon to port in another battalion, right now!”

“Sir, I—” Gidi attempted to say.

“Send a separate message to left division general Patros and right division general Matrisol. Tell them a revenant is phasing and breaking through to the surface. Pincer strike is recommended!” Aven was yelling into the navigator as he crawled through the wreckage, coughing up blood as he struggled to breathe. “Send messages to central captains Bryella and Jacen. They can stack to bolster the assault.” Aven grew weary as he gasped through the debris and smog. “Send one more to Lehvi Artorison. Tell him—”

“I cannot, sir,” Gidi said. “My functions have been restricted by codes originating from the Echelon command center.”

Aven stopped moving, not able to process what was said. “….what?”

“I have been prohibited from communicating, or sending any signals based on a mandate from the Echelon command. The Tier one revenant was predicted three days ago. The war takes priority, but the threat must be contained. Therefore, once the threat reaches the surface, codes for the gate to self-destruct will be implemented.” Aven’s heart dropped.

“But…the surface, the core sector. All those people….”

“They are deemed a necessary loss, sir.” Aven closed his eyes and shook his head in disbelief.

The revenant towered over what was left of the station. It was only shambles.

The enormous creature’s energy arched down. With the planetary barrier dissipated, the darkness reached the surface, enveloping the surface dwellers into the indigo depths. Aven heard screams as the dark power plowed through the buildings, homes, and the roads down into the burrows of the planet. The revenant pulled the core sector inhabitants into the depths, ending the lives of the countless Nameless.

Aven turned away from the perishing civilians. He watched in fear as the jaws of this creature attempted to envelope him. He tried crawling away, tears falling from his face. Just as the Void creature nearly took him, the monstrosity stopped in its tracks.

"Aven!" The young captain looked above to see Elder Wovu standing over him. The old warrior stood with his body torn to pieces, one arm missing, the other hand outstretched, extending his entropy fields to hold the dark creature at bay. "Remember where your name comes from. Your gifts!" he yelled, struggling to keep the darkness at bay. "Not from the Echelon. Not from our own strength. But from beyond." The old chieftain's arm began to fade.

If Wovu survived, then maybe his team did as well. Maybe Mara. The surface could still be saved. But the hope left as soon as it came. The longer he looked at his mentor’s broken body, the more he realized his death was imminent.

He saw Wovu muster a last bit of strength.

"Ready your barrier!"

Aven opened his hands to reach out to higher plains. While Wovu held their enemy in place, Aven expanded his navigator, readying his cannons to fire. Reaching deep into the reservoir, he let the power of the Ascended flow as entropy fields sprang forth like a geyser from the heavens.

Wovu smiled. "Embrace your gifts. For the Nameless!" Wovu's strength finally failed as the Void monster clawed at him, just as Aven roared a final battle cry. He fired a colossal shot into the jaws of death.

Chapter 5

Heart of Nuveria

"*To protect mortals from the Void, the Ascended helped humanity develop sacred orders, factions, to protect their worlds. To keep those without power, the Nameless, safe. The Echelon faction to guard space. The Aprori faction to protect the skies. And the Overseers faction to distribute resources. For a time, it worked. But the Void found a new way to corrupt the physical realm. By corrupting their strongest, the rest fell."*

- The Three Sacred Factions: Codex of The Gray Guidelines

Darion gripped his sword with all his might. Blood trailed from his hands as energy from the steel shouted at him. The sword clawed at his mind, forcing him to admit his failure. He should have seen an attack of this magnitude coming.

He blinked away blood seeping into his eye. When he opened his lid again, he could see the last of his fleet whisping away in a flash of violet. Good, all was not lost. At least the majority of his force managed to retreat to the rallying point. There Lehvi could take command.

"Failure!" said the sword.

He relinquished his grip on the sword, falling to his knees. He tried to focus on the hopes of counterattack. Perhaps Wovu was still alive. And Aven.

"Failure!" Failure!" the sword screamed. "You are not worthy of Ascencion!"

Darion closed his eyes as his head throbbed with fear and shame. The sword was right. How could they have routed so easily? No warning, no signs. Only destruction. He should have known.

His sword flashed, forcing the regret of his failure through his mind. Back to the night Caius attacked their rivals, and when they responded by raiding Darion's ancestral homeworld. He remembered his father hailing the supercarrier, and being overtaken, losing their family's sword.

As his mind sunk into regret, he felt vibrations bouncing from the hull of his ship to his palms placed on the steel floor. When he opened again, he saw golden flames opening a portal to the abyss, with his wife stepping through to kneel over him.

"Darion!" Jilian said. "We have to rally now. Lehvi is leading the counterstrike!"

"Leave me!" Darion said. "I've failed the Echelon faction. I've failed the Nameless."

"We failed tonight," she said. "But tomorrow brings victory." She grabbed him up, throwing one arm over her shoulder.

"I cannot leave my ship. I cannot leave my post." Darion reached out his bloody hand to the snarling sword. The dreadnaught groaned like a colossal sea creature deep in the ocean.

"Then I'll bring it, too," Jilian said. She raised her hand opening a massive portal. The flames erupted, engulfing the dreadnaught in an array of cosmic light. Darion held the sword, and his wife.

When they landed, Darion's eyes were clouded with smog. The scorched dirt beneath him crumbled in dust particles, blowing away in the wind, carrying to be lost among a wasteland of debris and destruction.

But Darion felt his wife squeeze his hand, forcing him to look up into the sky. To his left, the black ships of his fleet streaked with violet energy. To his right, flames of gold emanated from Jilian armada.

This city planet was lost, with billions of lives gone. But they still had a fighting force. They could avenge the Nameless sacrifices. With his fear at bay, his mind raced to their protégé.

"Where is Aven?" Darion said.

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As he lay dreaming, the captain saw arcs of bright lights and streaks of scarlet. What looked like a giant cat creature leapt about as it phased into a giant bird, blazing fire to keep the fiends at bay.

A magnificent snow-white dove streaked across the sky. As it homed in closer to the bridge, it transformed into a cat-like creature, tearing through and dismantling drones.

With the threat reaching Tier one, the Ascended had intervened.

“Aven, Aven! Can you hear me?” Lehvi said. He could see through blurred vision his body being carried by the freelancer. A tall, brown-skinned, braided woman covered his left side. She fired pure ivory beams from her navigator to assist the retreat.

Sprinting beside her was a wild-haired, copper-skinned warrior, rushing with twin burning sabers.

Soaring above them was Nezrah, Lehvi’s wife. The Siren glowed as she shot streams of photons toward the Void.

“Hang on!” Lehvi shouted. “We’re going to make it!” The vision blurred completely out as Aven lost consciousness.

In the med bay, he would come to and drift off again, waking up to hear the generals pacing and panicking. The freelancer, Lehvi, had them all in an entropy field to prevent anything they said from escaping to untrusting ears.

“This had to be Caius!” Aven heard Jilian say. “Who else can give restriction orders at that level besides your brother?”

“All of my contacts confirm. And he had help from the Overseers,” Lehvi said, shaking his head.

“How?” Darion waved his hands in frantic anger. “No one can control Void breaches at will!”

“It’s happened before,” Lehvi said. “At Terminus Cathedral.” The generals both looked at him, putting it together. “I knew something wasn’t right. Caius has never been involved with the politics of Overseers. All of a sudden he backs a candidate… I should’ve made the connection sooner.”

Darion paced in rage. “So Caius conspired with Overseers to create a breach, all to intimidate the Cabinet and sway the vote. That’s all we need for the other quadrants to back us! We have to invoke the Ascended! Have them swoop in with an army and obliterate the lot of them!”

“Not without proof,” Lehvi said. “Caius knows this, so he’s disappeared, with the bulk of the royal fleet is still at Terminus guarding anything that might connect him to the attack.” Darion shook his head.

“Were there any survivors?” said Jilian. The golden heat from her navigator was fuming. “Did anyone else on the station make it?” The freelancer shook his head.

“None,” Lehvi said.

No survivors?Aven wasn’t sure if he was hallucinating or not. But the pain surged either way. He hoped it was just some horrid nightmare, but it seemed every time he came to, the realization hit him all over again. It was worse than any physical damage the revenant could have inflicted.

It was a grief he could not grasp or quantify. It made his waking hours feel like a surreal dream of doubt, and his sleep felt like a darkened prison of regret.

He could only register snippets of the news. But every time they showed the smoking rubble of his beloved city with no survivors, an Overseer would flash across the screen, sending thoughts and prayers. As if following some script, every Overseer would smile and wave to the screen, while the Nameless in the background were eagerly reaching after them for supplies. But the Echelon beat them back to a bloody pulp.

Aven was too dazed to be angry. Even with the healing chambers mending his wounds, he felt drained. Twisted by doubt and unbelief.

The screen panned over tears in the entire Nexus galaxy. Divided into four quadrants, each nation controlled a collection of colonies in their respective quadrant, and they were all on fire.

“Nuveria’s five provinces still stand,” the news said. It was technically true. But they never reported the total number of lives lost. The ships that Darion lost in his Western Province, or Jilian in the Eastern provinces. Or the billions gone in the North where Haven city resided.

“No word from our allies,” the news said. “Or our enemies.” Nuveria had suffered, but this was a galactic scale assault. Their rivals in the other quadrants were no doubt reeling from Caius’s attack.

The news channel showed Nuveria’s quadrant seated at the top region, with over two hundred colony worlds. The Kingdom of Elagos, their once allies, now bitter enemy, took the western quadrant, and the Empire of Orsai in the east.In the south was the Siren Authority. They were oldest as descendants from the previous dynastic cycle, but it didn’t help them avoid the attack.

And over the center of the galaxy, at Terminus Cathedral, the old capitol of the Unsung Colonies, indigo eyes stared too long into the abyss. Aven felt the shadow of Caius Grayzar, the chieftain of his nation, and betrayer of the sacred factions, bearing down on him as his schemes threw the entire Nexus galaxy into turmoil.

Aven wished it were all a dream, but whenever he returned to consciousness, the Echelon fleets across space were still fighting in the manufactured wars. Lehvi’s voice startled him back awake a few days later.

***

In his ship, Lehvi stood within an entropy field. His navigator projected figures shrouded in gray, the elders of his order.

“It was a Damocles strike,” Lehvi said. The elders on the monitor screen shuffled. They didn’t even show their faces during their court rulings, let alone come out from their secret locations across the galaxy. “The antithesis to our entropy fields. A psionic attack so powerful it created a Tier One breach over the city.”

“The true power of the Echelon,” an elder said. “The Supreme Chieftains have always had this power in their bloodline. Ever since the Last Champion. But he can use it on a galactic scale?”

Lehvi waved his hand to construct a holographic construction of Terminus Cathedral, where his brother hid in a monstrous vessel beside a fleet of flanking warships.

“That’s what he’s been doing in Terminus,” Lehvi said. “All these years, he’s been obsessed with ancient rituals. Like the ancient humans who first discovered the Nexus, he’s been feeding bodies to the obelisk tower, gathering the essence to create one giant attack.”

“He was meant to protect the Nameless?” an elder said. “Now he does the Void’s bidding? To what end?”

“For Ascension,” Lehvi replied. “I don't know exactly when it began..but by the time Wovu and I saw it, it was too late. Caius, and the Overseers who follow him, have been possessed by the Void into sacrificing the Nameless.”

Lehvi zoomed out wide from the image, giving view to the entire fleet of Echelon vessels at the heart of the Nexus galaxy. Surrounded by ruinous space stations and broken debris, the giant tower in the middle floated like a dying tree in a decaying forest.

It was only a mock imitation, since live footage had ceased since the strike, but even the pixels were almost too gruesome to watch. Echelon soldiers from each vessel tossed bodies from their cargo bays, some dead, some still living. The droves of Nameless floated towards the bottom of the tower, churning in a horrendous display of blood and blinding light.

An explosion of light shot upwards, tearing the very fabric of time and space. What had just been theories and assumptions previously, was now proven true. Caius and his royal battalion had sacrificed enough corpses to the great obelisk tower to summon a galactic strike from another dimension, allowing the Void forces to seep through and attack at will.

“Why would the Ascended allow this to happen?” an elder said. “How could they sit back and just let Caius use the Void for a dimension strike on this level? Why allow it to reach Tier one?!”

The elders groaned with earnest questions. Lehvi knew their frustration. It was the same anger he’d felt for years knowing his brother in arms had fallen so far.

“Because of the possession,” Lehvi said. The elders fell silent. But their fear was louder than any voiced concern. “From all the wars we fought, the blood on his hands, it has tainted his mind, and allowed the Void to latch on. The Ascended promised to never harm us directly, so the Void is using Caius as a vessell”

The gravity of the situation fell on the room. Their greatest defender was now their worst enemy. An avatar for the Void to usher an interdimensional invasion. Their hero, born to fight to protect the Nameless, now willingly sacrificed them to achieve an insane crusade to a higher existence.

“If he is truly this mad,” another elder said, “then there is no stopping him! We must retreat! Only the Ascended can defeat him.”

As if to answer, an ivory dove flew towards Lehvi’s shoulder. A crimson fowl then flew on his opposite shoulder. Lehvi leaned down to hear what the manifestations embarked from the higher planes.

Lehvi raised his head. “We can’t sit back and wait,” Lehvi said. “He’s going to strike again. And now he has the Overseer’s full political resources to feed him victims. The Nameless are more vulnerable than they’ve ever been.”

“We cannot fight them head on,” one of the elders said. “Our strength doesn’t come from fighting in open space with the Echelon. We must stay in the shadows and fight him on our terms.”

“Listen to me,” Lehvi said. The gray figures bickered among each other as Lehvi’s fist clenched tight. “*LOOK* at me!” The Elders fell silent as the freelancer spoke. “He just killed our father!”

“If you do nothing, Caius will continue using his Overseers and funnel the *ENTIRE* civilian sector to the obelisk, all for his psychotic crusade to Ascend to the Dynasties Beyond!” The elders stood silent as Wovu’s adopted son took command of the situation.

“This Damocles strike has opened tears all over the Nexus,” Lehvi continued. “Caius has put all five provinces, all four quadrants, and the three factions on defense. We CANNOT let this go. We assemble a battlegroup, rally our troops in the Central Province of Nuveria, and hold the line.” The old gray trees rustled as they debated what to do.

***

Aven’s heart tossed and turned as he lay stuck in slumber. He had nightmares of the darkness. Voices from his memory called to him, screaming for him to save them. All to no avail.

His commencement, the day he officially became a captain, snapped into the focus of his mind. Elder Wovu stood in the courtyard of the station, speaking to the fresh recruits.

“The heart is the seat of decision making for the human being. The balance between mind and spirit, where you can exercise both when the moment arises. The very essence of commitment. Choice. So I ask you now. What will you choose? How will you live your life? Will you do everything in your power to help those who cannot help themselves?” he shouted.

“I will!” Aven and the rest of the young cadets recited their oaths. Committing themselves to the Ascended.

“And will you follow the Gray Guidelines? Will you fight back the sentient energy that is the Void? Will you defend the Nameless, so that all may one day Ascend into the Dynasties Beyond?”

“I will!”

“Then rise! From the five provinces of the Nuverian nation, the four quadrants of the Nexus galaxy, and the three sacred factions, all bear witness to this day. What is the will of the one ruler of the Ascended, and the Dynasties Beyond?!” Aven stood up with cadets and looked to his team. He saw the faces of young Jaks and Ren.

Then he heard the navigator echoing through his mind.

“They are considered a necessary loss….” Gidi said.

The image of the Echelon soldiers clad in blood soaked arcane ore filled Aven with terror. Overseers laughed as they watched the Nameless civilians be taken by the Void.

Aven saw a shadow. The betrayer, Caius Grayzar watched from his dreadnought as his father, Wovu, fell. Now only his brother Lehvi stood in his way.

Finally, Aven rose from his slumber.

“How long have you known?” Aven said. Darion and Jilian both turned to him in shock.

Aven?” Jilian said. She spoke softly. “Don’t get up, you have to fully recover.”

“How long have you known?” Aven said again. “Since you found me? Was this always your plan?”

The generals looked at each other. Jilian attempted to speak softly again, but Darion returned a stern look.

“The plan,” Darion said. “Has been the same ever since Caius went mad. Defeat him, and all his conspirators.”

“So you're rescuing us,” Aven said. “Helping me train…it was never about helping the Nameless. It was all just this feud with Caius?”

“This is how we help the Nameless, Aven,” Jilian said. “We need all of you to help us save the Nexus.”

“Then why have me join him?”

“You weren’t there to join him,” Darion said. “You were meant to KILL him. Your affinity gives you mastery over entropy fields, the only counter to his Damocles.

“I’m not joining,” Aven said. He stood up, looking out the window of the med bay. The bridge was in ruin, and no one was there to repair it. The tower, the building, and roads on the surface were torn asunder.

“What?” Darion said. The general stood in dismay.

Jilian tried to move closer. "I know this is all sudden, but you have to join. This is what you’ve wanted since we saved you.”

“No,” Aven replied, continuing to stare. “It’s what YOU all have wanted. You just made me think it was my idea. But you don’t care about us or the city. You just want what I can produce for you. Like the Overseers.”

“You can’t just cower away,” Darion said. “We need your strength more than ever. Look at what’s happened!”

“I was there!” Aven shouted. “Where were you?! How could you not tell me? My battalion was in danger this whole time, but you were about to let me walk into the lion’s den. For what? Was I always just a political play to you? A pawn in your game?”

“That was never what—” Jilian began. She reached for the scars by his navigator, but Aven pulled away. “Once you were accepted… Once you reached the capitol, we planned to tell you everything. Ever since we took you from that colony, we knew this was all you ever wanted. We just wanted to…protect you from the truth until then.”

“Protect me?” He hung his head and clenched his fists. Tears streamed down his face. “I just wanted to help. I never wanted to be involved in this.”

“The moment you were born,” said Darion, “you were in it. As were we all.”

“This isn’t the same,” Aven said. “You’ve been building your armies to plan a coup and overthrow the Chieftain!”

“You think we had a choice?!” Darion said. “When Caius went mad? When he executed our loved ones and kin in cold blood? And all to reach this Ascended plain he so craves.” Darion sucked his teeth. “He’s been hunting down anyone he believes to be an enemy ever since Wovu stepped aside. We taught you everything we know. To protect you. And in the hopes that one day, you could join the fight.”

“I’m not your pawn,” Aven said. “Not your…thing to use in this match with a psychopath.” The generals began to object,

“Look,” Darion said. Aven heard the generals rustling toward him, but he ported out of the med bay.

Outside, Aven stood as he saw the new Prime Aprori commander sending out the call. Two figures draped in silver and gold stood beside, as Lehvi deciphered coded messages from his glowing spouse, Nezrah.

“You knew,” Aven said. “You and Wovu. You ALL knew.” Lehvi turned, at first in surprise. But then, in quiet observation. The two soldiers reached for their weapons at first.“This whole time. That the Echelon, the Overseers…they’re all corrupt. That’s why Wovu stepped down. Why you became a freelancer.” Lehvi’s deep breath was a mix of anxiety, yet assured relief.

Aven fists trembled. “It was my fault. If I had just been stronger than maybe—I can’t do this. I can’t play this game you all want me to play.”

Aven felt dizzy. The smog from the burning world around him made his visuals swirl as his mind screamed at him with regret and sorrow. He saw the two figures beside Lehvi move towards him.

“Hey, hey, breath,” Jacen said. “Take a knee.” Aven recognized the Echelon soldier draped in golden arcane armor.

As Aven took deep breaths, he recognized Jacen's sister, Bryella, step closer to them. Her silver armor was unmistakable. Had he accepted his honor guard position, he would have met them for his training regiment. Instead, they helped rescue him from the revenant attack.

"Our father," Jacen said. "Caius…he's a monster. But we can defeat him." Aven felt his breathing return to normal. He felt Bryella brush grab his other shoulder, keeping him from falling over.

"Aven," Lehvi said. The commander spoke with a solemn voice, but looked at Aven in his eyes. Nezrah's image showed her holding a hand to her heart. "We must speak."

Fighting back tears, Aven mustered more words. "Everything I've known is a lie," Aven said. "I just wanted to be strong enough to protect my people. I just wanted a name."

Lehvi walked toward him. "You HAVE a name," Lehvi said. "In time, you will see that." Aven felt the commander's hand on his shoulder as the entropy field surged through it, lifting his spirits. "In time, you will believe it."

Aven sat across from Lehvi in the heart of his ship. waiting for the commander to explain the situation. To offer some solace, or even solution for this tragedy. But Lehvi, for the first time Aven had witnessed at least, seemed unsure.

Lehvi reached out his hand. Aven recognized the psion particles balancing around his palm to produce a light.

"Entropy," Lehvi said. "The ultimate protection. When humans fled captivity from the Sirens, this was the power the Gray Chieftain used to protect the Nameless. But when he passed, his descendants waged war on the Nexus. Until one remained."

He then closed hand again, swirling the light in a violent torrent of dark shadows. Aven saw Lehvi's eyes flicker with indigo.

"This Last champion slew the Siren queen in combat, along with droves of Nameless. The sacrifices corrupted the entropy field, producing a Damocles strike.A collection of psion particles that can overcome any matter it touches. It is an unlimited power incarnate. A Tier one threat that can breach the fabric of space and time. Attracting the Void."

Aven's eyes widened at the corrupted particles ensnaring Lehi's hand. This is how a revenant manifested. The strike made the path.

"The Ascended had to intervene, choosing The First Greyzar to finally defeat the Last Champion. He established Nuveria, and ordained the Three Sacred factions to protect humanity. Because he knew the Void would come. It took thousands of years, so Nuveria splintered into separate provinces, and eventually into rival nations throughout the four quadrants. But he was right."

Aven winced as the memory of the revenant creature invaded his mind. He blocked out the images of his teammates being torn to pieces.

“Generations later, the Void invaded, laying waste to the Nexus galaxy. As they had done to ancient dynasties all throughout the fallen cosmos. It took Wovu calling on the sacred factions, the five provinces, and the four quadrants to band together. Wielding the entropy AND Damocles, Wovu pushed the invasion back.

“Wovu found us after he defeated the revenants.” Lehvi continued. “He sensed our potential, and decided to train us as his successors. From the very beginning, Caius was a prodigy. The best of us. The strongest. We saved the Nexus countless times. We fought the Void, rival nations, rogue colonies…we protected the Nameless from every threat. I don’t know exactly when, but he changed.”

Lehvi’s eyes turned up as if he was in a trance, caught up in the events of wars past.

“The Damocles has corrupted Caius and his followers. It has warped his mind into believing they are direct heirs of the Unsung. Chosen successors of the Last Champion. And their mission is to sacrifice the Nameless, all so they can Ascend.

Lehvi turned away, as if he were caught up in a terrible memory. Aven had never seen Lehvi this taken aback. If the past made even Lehvi uneasy, what could the rest of them do?

“Ten years ago,” Lehvi said. “Before we found you, Caius killed--.” He couldn’t finish his thought. Instead, he shook his head, and moved to the next idea.

“It ignited a war,” Lehvi continued. “We’ve been rebuilding ever since. Preparing for the inevitable day he attacks again.”

“But you fought side by side,” Aven said. “How could he do this to his own nation? His own father?”

“The Damocles is too powerful. The Void has convinced him and his cult to forsake the oaths as protectors.”

“For Ascension?” Aven imagined echoes of Overseers gloating at the height of power over Nuveria. And Caius watching from the center of the galaxy. “That’s insane.”

Lehvi calmed the raging particles in his hand, and reached out to Aven.

“Aven, I know this world is unfair. It’s dangerous. But if we don’t fight, the Nameless will be lost.” Aven looked away.

“How?” Aven said. “I’m not strong enough. I thought my powers were enough, but I’m not some chosen hero. I’m just--.” His hand trembled with anguish over the souls lost under his command.

“I’m not asking you to be the chosen one,” Lehvi said. “Or the next Chieftain. I’m asking you to do what only YOU can decide to do. Help me defend the city.”

Aven sat still in thought. Lehvi's words wrestled with him harder than any physical force could. Lehvi's hand beckoned him with the choice, but Aven's mind screamed for to stay put. To crawl away from the danger. To remain Nameless.

Still, Aven thought hard on the offer. He looked at Lehvi once more, as if to ask with his eyes if this was the right idea. Lehvi nodded in confirmation, beckoning him again.

Aven inhaled with a deep breath, mustering resolve, and grabbed Lehvi's hand.

As their ship raced through the clouds away from the broken Haven City, Aven turned his eye away from the smog and destruction.

They passed by the western fleets of Patros shrieking in violet electricity, and the eastern armada of Matrisol burning their golden embers. As the generals, Darion and Jilian, stood atop their supercarriers, the news portrayed a unified front. But in truth, their armies shouted in rebellion against the royal Nuverian armada who had orchestrated this death and destruction.

"Darion and Jilian will lead the search for Tylin," Lehvi said. "The ring leader for Caius's Unsung cult. We nab him, he'll testify before the Ascended."

"Tylin?" Aven said. "The head of state?" Of course the leader of the Overseer faction was the ringleader of a cult. Aven was angry at how much he didn't know. At how much he was oblivious to this whole time.

"You must forgive us, Aven," Lehvi said. "We've been at this secret war for more than a decade now. We should have told you, but we can never be too careful."

"Why not just sail to Terminus?" Aven said. "You have the forces. Troops all over the Nexus."

"It took us this long to rebuild our fleets. By sending precious vessels, the enemy might swoop in and attack the exposed gap. So for now, Jacen and Bryella will feed us info from the inside."

Aven looked above the Patros and Matrisol line of ships to a company of crafts hovering above. Jacen Greyzar sat adorned in his golden armor, preparing his troops for travel. Across from him, Bryella stood tall in her silver plated ore, ready to depart.

"Nezrah will keep our sleeper cells organized while we man the main front." There was no trace of the commander's Siren wife in their vicinity, but Aven could picture her lightyears away organizing countless spies across the stars. "And she'll keep tabs on our rivals, just in case."

The Five Provinces were divided enough. But the nations in the remaining quadrants were old enemies Lehvi and Caius had fought off for years.

"How do we stop them?" Aven said.

“He will fire the Damocles again,” Lehvi said. “It may take months, years, but the more Nameless the Overseers secretly funnel him for sacrifice, the more energy he gathers for the ritual. We must be ready.”

“We repel the strike,” Lehvi said. “I’ll gather our fighting force on the bridge in the capitol. Darion and Jilian will close the breaches and capture High Governor Tylin. With his testimony, we can convince our rivals to join us.”

“And me?” Aven said.

“You gather as many Nameless to safety as you can. They might not know it, or understand it, but our faction is the only protection they have against another strike.”

“Caius is out there,” Aven said. “He has to pay for this.” Lehvi breathed in deep.

“It seems fate desires we handle him personally. So be it. When the safety of Gadavon’s Nameless is secure, and with Tylin forced to testify, then we launch a counterattack and finish Caius in combat.”

Aven gripped his fist in anticipation.

“I’ll be ready,” Aven said. “Next time, I’ll be strong enough.”

Aven turned away from the smoldering bridge and looked at his wounded hands. His carelessness and doubt cost the lives of his team. He refused to join the corrupted Echelon. And as an Aprori captain, he failed. But maybe he could do more as something else. As a freelancer. It was Lehvi who found him and countless other fighters during his tenure as a freelancer. was when he saved him from the Unsung Colonies.

Aven settled his heart, refusing to doubt the strength in his fists again. No more chasing rank. Or scores. Only the choice to fight for what mattered. “I’ll save them. Any Nameless I can find, I’ll bring them to the sky sector. And if Caius brings the Void…this time, I’ll defend them all.”

“Setting course for Gadavon,” Lehvi said. “Central Province.” Aven’s scar flared at him as whispers of doubt tried to cloud his heart. As flew through the abyss of space, Aven gripped his fist, ready to use every ounce of his strength to fight for the Nameless.