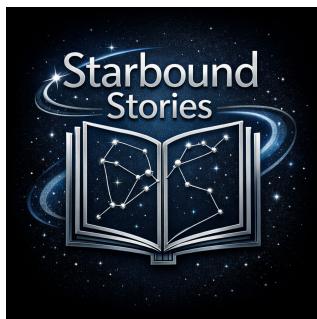


AETHERION

THE FROZEN KING



ADVAIT S
AETHERION
The Frozen King



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Prologue

The Nether War

The sky over Nether was breaking.

Stars froze in the middle of their deaths, their light splintering into jagged shards as the planet screamed beneath the weight of war. Towers of obsidian collapsed without sound, caught in a moment that would never finish. Fire turned to crystal. Time itself shuddered, uncertain whether it was allowed to continue.

Infernal armies stood locked across the burning plains—blades raised, wings torn, mouths open in screams that would never be heard.

At the heart of it all stood **Aetherion**.

His armor was cracked and blackened, carved by battles that had no names. In his hand burned **Dream Hunter**, a blade forged from nightmares older than creation, humming with restrained annihilation. Within his chest, the **Nether Star** raged—alive, unstable, bound to his soul by blood and choice.

Before him stood his brother.

“You still believe Hell exists to judge,” his brother said calmly, even as the heavens fractured behind him. His voice carried no anger. Only certainty. “Hell was meant to rule.”

Aetherion tightened his grip on the sword. Every fallen soul weighed on him. Every choice burned.

“Rule without mercy is extinction,” he said.

His brother smiled faintly. “Then extinction is inevitable.”

The Nether Star screamed.

Ice surged across the world.

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Fire crystallized mid-roar. Cities froze in the act of collapse. Demons were locked mid-scream. Souls were trapped between heartbeats as Nether stopped breathing—preserved, not destroyed.

Aetherion stepped forward as the storm of ice and light swallowed everything.

“Seraphyra!”

Through the white silence, two small hands reached toward him.

“Father!”

The light shattered.

And Aetherion fell.

1

The Nightmare

Adrian woke up screaming.

The sound tore from his throat before he understood he was awake. His body jolted upright, lungs burning, heart hammering as if it were trying to outrun something that had followed him into sleep.

For a breathless moment, the world was still wrong.

Ice clung to his fingers—thin, biting crystals crawling across his skin. The air around him shimmered, sharp and cold, carrying the faint scent of ash and burning metal.

Then it vanished.

The ice dissolved into nothing. The smell faded. The room snapped back into place.

Just a small bedroom.

Just pale morning light leaking through thin curtains.

Just Earth.

Adrian dragged in a shaky breath and pressed a hand to his chest. The ache was there again—deep, dull, and heavy, like something lodged beneath his ribs that refused to move.

“It’s only a dream,” he whispered.

The words felt fragile.

His alarm clock glowed red on the nightstand.

6:12 a.m.

School day.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed, the floor cold beneath his feet. His hands were still trembling. He flexed his fingers, half-expecting frost to return, half-hoping it would.

Nothing.

In the mirror above his desk, an ordinary boy stared back at him.

Eighteen.

Dark hair falling into tired eyes.

No scars. No armor. No crown.

Adrian held his own gaze and searched for something—anything—that explained the violence of his dreams.

All he found was exhaustion.

The nightmare lingered even as he dressed.

It always did.

Fragments clung to the edges of his mind: a sky tearing apart, light shattering like glass, a voice calling his name with unbearable urgency. He could never hold onto the details. The moment he tried, they slipped away, leaving behind only the certainty that whatever he had seen was real.

More real than this room.

More real than this life.

He pulled on his jacket and shouldered his bag, moving through the motions on instinct alone. The ache in his chest pulsed once—slow, deliberate—before settling into a quiet burn.

As he stepped outside, cold morning air brushed his skin.

Not the cold from the dream.

This was gentler. Forgiving.

The street was already awake. Cars passed. Neighbors spoke in low voices. Somewhere, a dog barked. Life moved forward without hesitation, unaware of frozen worlds and broken stars.

Adrian walked toward school with his hands shoved deep into his pockets, trying to match his pace to the world around him.

Trying to feel human.

The school gates rose ahead of him, iron bars catching the early light.

THE NIGHTMARE

Students gathered in small clusters—laughing, arguing, complaining about exams and teachers and everything that felt important when nothing truly was.

As Adrian stepped onto the grounds, the ache in his chest sharpened.

Not pain.

Recognition.

He slowed, breath catching, and glanced around as if expecting to see something impossible standing among the crowd.

There was nothing.

No ice.

No fire.

No war.

Just students.

Just Earth.

And yet the feeling remained, steady and insistent, as though something buried deep within him had stirred—alert, watchful, waiting.

Adrian tightened his grip on his bag and forced himself forward.

He didn't know it yet, but this was the last morning his life would feel even remotely ordinary.

The past had begun to wake.

2

A Normal Morning

The word *normal* followed Adrian like a dare.

It was what he told himself as he moved through the school corridors, letting the current of students carry him forward. Normal morning. Normal day. Normal life. The repetition was meant to anchor him—to convince him that the violence of his dreams had no place here.

It didn't work.

Lockers slammed shut. Laughter burst and faded. Footsteps echoed against the tiled floor. The sounds blended together until they became noise without meaning, a constant hum that pressed in on his skull.

Adrian felt out of step with it all.

Sometimes he walked too slowly, sometimes too fast, as if the world had chosen a rhythm he hadn't learned. He caught himself stopping mid-step more than once, staring at nothing while students flowed around him like water around a stone.

Someone brushed his shoulder.

"Sorry," they muttered, already gone.

Adrian nodded, though the word never reached his lips.

His first class blurred past in fragments.

The teacher's voice rose and fell, a steady drone he struggled to follow. Words reached him but refused to arrange themselves into meaning. Dates and definitions slid away the moment he heard them.

A NORMAL MORNING

He stared at the board, at the clean white surface and neat writing, and saw something else for half a heartbeat—dark stone carved with symbols he almost recognized.

He blinked.

The image vanished.

His pen hovered over his notebook. He realized he hadn't written anything. Not a word. Not a symbol.

A tightness settled behind his eyes.

Focus, he told himself.

Between classes, the hallways grew louder.

Adrian leaned against a wall as students streamed past him, their conversations overlapping into a chaotic chorus. He watched their faces—animated, distracted, alive with small concerns.

They belonged here.

He wasn't sure he did.

The ache in his chest pulsed again, slow and deliberate. He pressed his fingers lightly against his jacket, feeling the steady beat beneath his ribs.

Something was listening.

Something patient.

Lunchtime came and went without memory.

He sat at a table and ate mechanically, barely tasting the food. A group nearby argued over music. Someone laughed too loudly. A chair scraped harshly against the floor.

For a moment, the sound grated so sharply that Adrian flinched.

It passed.

Everything did.

By the time the bell rang for his next class, the word *normal* felt fragile—thin as glass.

He straightened, slung his bag over his shoulder, and moved toward the classroom, unaware that the quiet balance holding his day together was already cracking.

That was when the door opened.

3

Serena

The classroom door opened a few minutes late.

The interruption should have been forgettable—another student slipping in after the bell, another apology murmured to the teacher—but the moment **she** stepped inside, the room changed.

Adrian felt it before he saw her.

The ache in his chest—constant since morning—stilled. Not faded. Not dulled. It simply... quieted, as if something inside him had been holding its breath and finally exhaled.

He looked up.

She stood just inside the doorway, fingers curled nervously around the strap of her bag, dark hair falling loosely around her shoulders. Her eyes swept the room once before settling on the teacher, who waved her forward without comment.

“Take any empty seat,” the teacher said.

She nodded and moved down the aisle.

Adrian followed her without meaning to.

Every step she took felt strangely familiar, like a memory his body recognized even if his mind did not. When she passed his desk, something warm stirred beneath his ribs—gentle, aching, dangerous in its softness.

She sat two rows ahead of him.

The world settled.

SERENA

Adrian didn't realize how tense he'd been until that moment. His shoulders loosened. His breathing slowed. The sharp edge of awareness that had followed him all morning retreated, leaving behind a fragile calm.

It frightened him.

He tried to look away.

His attention snapped back anyway—drawn by the smallest things. The way she tucked her hair behind her ear when she concentrated. The faint crease between her brows when she read. The quiet way she listened, as if every word mattered.

When she glanced back, their eyes met.

The contact lasted less than a second.

It felt like a lifetime.

Something passed between them—too quick to name, too deep to ignore. Her eyes widened just slightly, as if she had felt it too. Then she looked away, cheeks faintly flushed.

Adrian's pulse thundered.

He didn't know her name. Didn't know where she came from. Didn't know why his hands were shaking.

Only that something inside him whispered:

There you are.

The rest of the class dissolved into background noise.

He caught pieces of her instead—her quiet sighs, the rhythm of her breathing, the subtle tension in her posture, as though she carried a weight she refused to set down.

When the bell rang, the sound startled him.

Students surged to their feet, the room filling with movement and noise. She rose more slowly, gathering her things with deliberate care.

Adrian hesitated.

Then, before he could talk himself out of it, he stood too.

They reached the aisle at the same time.

"Hey," he said, the word rougher than he intended.

She paused and turned toward him.

Up close, the feeling intensified—not overwhelming, not explosive, but

AETHERION

deep and steady, like standing near a fire that had been burning for a very long time.

“Yes?” she asked.

Her voice was soft.

Human.

And unbearably familiar.

“I—” Adrian stopped, suddenly unsure what he’d meant to say. *I know you didn’t make sense. I missed you* made even less.

He swallowed. “You’re new, right?”

She smiled faintly. “Yeah. I transferred this week.”

“I’m Adrian.”

“I know,” she said—and then blinked, surprised by her own words. “I mean—sorry. I heard your name earlier.”

He smiled despite himself. “Right.”

A brief silence stretched between them, not awkward, but full—like something waiting to be acknowledged.

“I’m Serena,” she said at last.

The name settled into him with a quiet, painful rightness.

Serena.

He nodded, afraid that if he spoke again, something important might break.

That night, Adrian dreamed.

But for the first time, there was no ice.

No fire.

No screaming sky.

He dreamed of standing in a place without walls or crowns, sunlight warming his skin. He dreamed of a presence beside him—familiar, steady, alive.

When he woke, his sheets were tangled around him, his heart calm.

And the ache in his chest was gone.

For now.

4

Valerie

The seat beside Adrian was empty when he arrived.

He noticed because he always noticed. Empty spaces had begun to stand out to him—corners of rooms that felt too quiet, moments where the world seemed to hesitate before continuing.

He set his bag down and slid into his chair, letting out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

For the first time in weeks, he felt... steady.

Serena sat two rows ahead of him, sunlight catching in her hair. The calm she brought lingered, soft and fragile, like warmth held in cupped hands.

The bell rang.

Adrian looked down at his notebook.

When he looked up again, someone was sitting beside him.

He startled.

The movement was sharp enough to draw a glance from the teacher, but Adrian barely noticed. His attention was fixed on the girl who hadn't been there a moment ago.

She sat perfectly still, hands folded on the desk, posture straight without stiffness. Dark hair fell neatly down her back. Her expression was composed—not cold, but distant, as if she observed the world from behind glass.

She turned her head slightly.

"You're late," she said.

Adrian frowned. “For what?”

She studied him with unsettling focus, eyes dark and reflective. “For remembering.”

A chill crept up his spine.

“I think you have the wrong person,” he said carefully.

Her lips curved—not into a smile, but something close to acknowledgment.

“Not yet,” she replied.

The teacher began the lesson, voice steady and unremarkable. Adrian tried to follow along, but his attention kept slipping sideways.

The girl didn’t move. Didn’t fidget. Didn’t write.

She listened.

Not to the lesson.

To him.

“You slept better last night,” she said quietly, without looking at him.

Adrian stiffened. “What?”

“The dreams eased,” she continued. “That happens when the right memory steps closer.”

His pulse quickened. “Do I know you?”

She finally turned fully toward him.

“Yes,” she said. “But not in a way that would help you yet.”

“Yet,” Adrian repeated.

She nodded once. “Timing matters.”

He laughed under his breath, the sound hollow. “You’re speaking in riddles.”

She regarded him evenly. “I’m speaking in mercy.”

The word hit harder than it should have.

During a full in the lesson, Adrian leaned closer, lowering his voice. “What’s your name?”

“Valerie,” she said.

It felt chosen. Deliberate.

“Are you new here too?” he asked.

“No.”

The answer was immediate.

Then, after a pause, “Not like she is.”

VALERIE

Adrian's gaze flicked instinctively toward Serena.

Valerie followed it.

"You feel calmer when she's near," Valerie said. It wasn't a question.

Adrian swallowed. "I don't know why."

Valerie's eyes softened—just slightly. "Neither does she."

That unsettled him more than anything else she'd said.

When the bell rang, the class erupted into motion. Chairs scraped. Voices rose. Students flooded the aisles.

Valerie remained seated.

Adrian hesitated, then stood, slinging his bag over his shoulder. "So... will I see you around?"

Valerie looked up at him.

"Oh," she said. "I'll be exactly where I need to be."

He opened his mouth to respond—

And she was gone.

The seat beside him was empty again.

No movement. No sound. No one reacting.

Just absence.

Adrian stepped into the hallway, heart pounding.

The warmth Serena had given him still lingered—but now it was threaded with something colder, sharper. A sense of being watched, measured, allowed to proceed.

He glanced back once more at the classroom door.

For the first time, he understood something without knowing how.

Serena made him feel safe.

Valerie made him feel **seen**.

And whatever was waking inside him—

Valerie already knew its name.

5

Dreams That Remember

Sleep did not come easily.

Adrian lay awake long after the lights were off, staring at the faint crack in the ceiling above his bed. The room felt smaller at night, as if the darkness pressed inward, listening.

When sleep finally claimed him, it did not arrive like rest.

It arrived like summons.

He stood beneath a sky that was not a sky.

Above him stretched an endless vault of fractured light—stars suspended in the act of dying, their brilliance frozen mid-collapse. Some burned blue. Others bled white. All of them were breaking, slowly, endlessly, as if time itself had been wounded.

The ground beneath his feet was black stone etched with symbols that pulsed faintly, like veins carrying light instead of blood.

He knew this place.

Not by name.

By weight.

Every step echoed with authority he did not remember earning. Every breath tasted of ash and cold iron. The air hummed, alive with restrained violence.

Ahead of him rose a throne.

It was not ornate. Not cruel. Not beautiful.

It was inevitable.

Carved from the heart of the world itself, the throne radiated presence—not command, but expectation. It was waiting.

Adrian took a step forward.

The symbols beneath his feet flared.

Pain lanced through his chest, sharp and sudden, as something inside him surged awake.

A star burned beneath his ribs.

Not a distant thing.

Not a memory.

A living core—cracked, furious, bound to him so completely that separating the two felt impossible.

The Nether Star.

The name surfaced without permission.

He staggered, clutching his chest, and the sky answered.

The stars screamed.

The world shattered and reformed.

Now he stood on a vast plain of ice and fire, the two elements locked together in impossible stillness. Flames were frozen mid-roar, their edges sharp as crystal. Demons and soldiers stood motionless, mouths open in screams that would never finish.

At the center of the battlefield stood a figure facing him.

Tall.

Familiar.

Terrible in its calm.

“You remember the war,” the figure said.

Adrian tried to speak. No sound came.

The figure stepped closer, features still blurred, voice steady.

“You remember the throne,” it continued. “But you do not remember the choice.”

The ice beneath them cracked.

From the fracture rose a blade.

Black metal. White edge. Light bending around it as if afraid to touch it.

The sword hovered between them, trembling—not with fear, but recognition.

Dream Hunter.

Adrian reached for it.

The moment his fingers brushed the hilt, the world screamed.

He fell.

Through layers of memory, through collapsing skies and frozen worlds, through voices calling his name in a language that burned his tongue.

“Adrian!”

“Aetherion!”

Two names collided.

Two lives pressed against each other, neither willing to yield.

He saw hands reaching for him—small hands, desperate hands, slipping from his grasp as ice swallowed the world.

“Father!”

The word tore through him like a blade.

Adrian woke with a cry lodged in his throat.

He sat upright, gasping, heart hammering as if he had been running for centuries. The room was dark, but the air above his bed was wrong—fractured, shimmering, as if reality itself had been stressed too far.

A thin crack ran through the air.

Not a sound.

A wound.

From it slipped a whisper—low, reverent, unmistakably real.

My emperor.

Adrian screamed.

The crack sealed instantly, snapping shut like it had never existed.

Silence rushed back into the room.

He sat shaking, fingers digging into the sheets, chest burning as if a star were trying to claw its way free.

This had not been a dream.

Dreams faded.

This had *waited* for him.

DREAMS THAT REMEMBER

Across the room, his mirror caught the faintest glimmer of light beneath his skin—a pale, icy glow pulsing once beneath his ribs before vanishing.

Adrian pressed his hand to his chest.

“I don’t know who you think I am,” he whispered into the darkness.

Something deep inside him stirred.

Patient.

Certain.

Remembering.

6

Kale

Adrian noticed **Kale** because the air around him never stayed still.

It wasn't dramatic at first. Just small disruptions—papers lifting slightly when Kale passed, the faint shimmer of heat above his desk, the way metal objects nearby always felt warm to the touch. Teachers called him restless. Other students called him trouble.

Adrian felt something older.

Fire.

Kale sat near the back of the classroom, slouched in his chair, leg bouncing relentlessly. His fingers drummed against the desk as if he were trying to release something trapped beneath his skin. His eyes burned with frustration that never seemed to find a target.

When the teacher reprimanded him for talking, Kale snapped back without thinking.

"I wasn't even doing anything."

"You never are," the teacher replied, voice sharp with exhaustion.

The words landed harder than they should have.

Adrian felt it before he saw it—the sudden surge of heat, the sharp spike in the ache beneath his ribs. Kale's jaw clenched. His hand slammed down on the desk.

There was a hiss.

A thin black scorch mark bloomed beneath his palm, curling outward like

a living thing.

The room froze.

No one noticed.

The mark faded almost instantly, vanishing before anyone could question it. Kale stared at his hand, breath shallow, fear flashing across his face before anger buried it again.

Adrian couldn't look away.

His chest burned—not painfully, but insistently, as if something inside him had just recognized its own reflection.

Blood.

That night, Adrian dreamed of fire given shape—wings unfurling in rage, flames roaring not to destroy, but to *be heard*.

He woke with the certainty settling deep in his bones.

Kale is mine.

Nathan

Nathan was harder to notice.

Not because he stood out—but because the world seemed to retreat around him.

He sat alone during lunch, untouched food cooling on the tray in front of him. Conversations nearby softened, then faded entirely, as if sound itself hesitated to cross the invisible boundary surrounding him.

Adrian first noticed the shadows.

They bent.

Not dramatically. Not enough for anyone else to care. Just enough that corners of rooms felt deeper when Nathan was near, as if light were unsure how close it was allowed to get.

When Adrian passed him in the hallway, something strange happened.

The noise vanished.

For half a second, laughter, footsteps, and voices collapsed into nothing. Adrian stumbled, heart lurching as the world went hollow.

Nathan looked up.

Their eyes met.

Nathan frowned slightly, confusion flickering across his face—followed by something like guilt.

“Sorry,” he said quietly.

“For what?” Adrian asked, his voice sounding too loud in the sudden silence.

NATHAN

Nathan hesitated. "I don't know."

The noise rushed back all at once. Lockers slammed. Someone laughed too loudly. Reality resumed as if it had never faltered.

But Adrian stood frozen.

Void.

Not absence.

Control.

That night, Adrian dreamed of a child standing in a field of stars, holding nothing—yet erasing everything around him with effortless calm. Where fire raged, this presence *ended*.

He woke shaking, breath shallow.

Two truths settled into him with terrifying clarity.

He had sons.

One burned.

One erased.

And both of them had been living their lives without knowing what they truly were.

Or who they belonged to.

8

Awakening

The breaking point came quietly.

No thunder split the sky. No alarms screamed. The world did not announce what it was about to take back.

Adrian was alone in his room when it happened.

He sat on the edge of his bed, elbows on his knees, staring at nothing while the ache beneath his ribs pulsed—slow, deliberate, insistent. The air felt thick, as if the room were holding its breath.

He hadn't slept since the dreams.

Fire.

Void.

A throne waiting.

And two boys who carried his blood without knowing his name.

His hands curled into fists.

"I'm not losing my mind," he whispered. "I know that much."

The ache answered.

Not with pain.

With **memory**.

The room fractured.

Not shattered—*peeled open*.

The walls fell away like mist, revealing a vast black expanse threaded with frozen light. Adrian gasped as gravity loosened its grip, the floor dissolving

AWAKENING

beneath him.

He was standing on obsidian stone.

Symbols flared to life beneath his feet—ancient, precise, unforgiving. Power surged upward through his legs, his spine, his chest, igniting something that had been restrained for far too long.

The **Nether Star** awakened.

It burned beneath his ribs, no longer distant or muffled, but fully present—alive, furious, complete. Its light spilled through his veins, rewriting him from the inside out.

Adrian cried out as memories slammed into him without mercy.

He remembered fighting.

Not wildly. Not blindly.

With purpose.

He remembered standing before the Hell King—not as a conqueror, but as a challenger who had earned the right to be there. He remembered the weight of the duel, the silence that followed, the moment the crown shattered willingly at his feet.

He remembered taking the throne.

Not in triumph.

In responsibility.

He remembered Seraphyra—her voice, her strength, the way she stood beside him when the realm bowed. He remembered the first time he held his sons, fire and void wrapped in small, trembling hands.

And he remembered his brother.

Not as a monster.

But as certainty sharpened into cruelty.

The battlefield returned.

Nether burned and froze at the same time, armies locked in eternal conflict as ice swallowed the world. He stood at the center of it all again, Dream Hunter heavy in his hand, the Nether Star screaming as reality tore itself apart.

“I will not kill you,” he heard himself say.

Mercy.

The choice that broke the world.

Ice surged outward, faster than thought, sealing cities, souls, and time itself. The last thing he felt before being torn away was Seraphyra's scream—and the desperate reach of small hands slipping from his grasp.

"Father!"

Adrian collapsed to his knees.

The vision shattered, slamming him back into his room as the force of memory finished what it had started. The walls reassembled around him, but the air still trembled, fractured and unstable.

He pressed his hands to the floor, breath ragged, heart pounding with impossible weight.

"I remember," he whispered.

The words felt final.

The room answered.

Valerie stepped forward from the shadows.

She hadn't entered. She had always been there.

"You're late," she said gently.

Adrian looked up at her.

No—Aetherion did.

"I didn't choose to forget," he said.

"I know," she replied, kneeling before him. Her head bowed—not in fear, but in acknowledgment. "You paid the price anyway."

He stared at his hands.

They were shaking—not with weakness, but with restraint.

"My family," he said hoarsely. "Where are they?"

Valerie lifted her gaze. Her eyes reflected frozen stars.

"They survived," she said. "Your wife remembers everything. Your sons carry your blood."

Aetherion's breath caught.

"But you vanished," Valerie continued. "You were torn from Nether when you froze it. No one knew where you went. Not even her."

Silence settled between them.

"I ruled Hell," Aetherion said slowly. "And I failed it."

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Valerie shook her head. "You saved it."

He closed his eyes.

Then opened them again.

The hesitation was gone.

The confusion burned away.

In its place stood something calm, vast, and awake.

"I am not a king here," he said.

"Not yet," Valerie agreed.

The air rippled.

Far beyond the room, beyond Earth, beyond frozen Nether, something stirred.

A presence.

Patient.

Watching.

Aetherion felt it and lifted his head.

His brother had noticed.

The Frozen King had remembered.

And the war—paused but never ended—had just resumed its breath.

9

Serena Knows

Serena had remembered long before the world gave her permission to.

The memories did not arrive like a storm. They came quietly, patiently, as if they had always been there—waiting for the moment she was strong enough to hold them without breaking.

Fire.

Ice.

A throne carved from the heart of a world that burned and judged and endured.

And him.

She woke one night with tears already on her face, the name trembling on her lips like a prayer she had spoken a thousand times before.

“Aetherion...”

Her chest ached with a grief too old and too vast for a human body. She remembered the Nether War with painful clarity—the betrayal, the freezing of the realm, the moment the light swallowed her husband whole.

She remembered reaching for him.

She remembered him *vanishing*.

What she did not remember—what the universe had cruelly withheld—was where he had gone.

Serena did not tell anyone.

Not the teachers who thought she was quiet.

SERENA KNOWS

Not the neighbors who thought she was young.

Not the world that believed she was just another girl trying to survive.

Instead, she locked the doors.

She drew the curtains.

And she brought her children home.

Kale paced the living room like a caged storm.

"Mom," he snapped, running a hand through his hair, frustration bleeding into every word. "You can't just keep us locked in here."

Serena watched the air shimmer faintly around him, heat curling at the edges of his temper like a living thing. Fire had always answered his emotions before his reason could.

"I'm not locking you in," she said calmly. "I'm keeping you safe."

"From what?" Kale demanded.

She didn't answer.

Because the truth would only frighten him—and fear made his fire burn hotter.

Across the room, Nathan sat cross-legged on the floor, back against the couch, eyes unfocused. Shadows pooled quietly around his feet, obedient and still.

"They're close," he said softly.

Serena's breath caught.

She crossed the room and knelt between her sons, placing a hand over each of their hearts.

"You are not weapons," she said firmly. "You are not soldiers. You are not what they made us."

Kale's anger faltered. Nathan leaned into her touch, silent and trusting.

"You are my children," she continued. "And I will not let the war take you."

That night, after they slept, Serena stood alone by the window.

The city stretched below—bright, fragile, unaware. Somewhere beyond it lay worlds frozen in time and enemies patient enough to wait forever.

She pressed her forehead to the glass.

"He's alive," she whispered.

She felt it.

Not hope.

Certainty.

Aetherion had not abandoned them. He had not chosen power over family.
Whatever had taken him had done so without mercy or explanation.

She just didn't know where he had been.

Or where he was now.

"Find us," she murmured into the dark. "Please."

The stars did not answer.

But far away—closer than she realized—something ancient stirred, its
memory fully awake for the first time in centuries.

And for the first time since the Nether War, Serena felt the weight of waiting
begin to lift.

10

Reunion Without Answers

They met without ceremony.

No fate-marked convergence.

No dramatic sign.

Just a street caught between afternoon and evening, the sky was pale with approaching dusk.

Adrian felt her before he saw her.

The ache beneath his ribs—once chaotic, once burning—settled into something steady and deliberate, like a heartbeat syncing with another. He slowed without knowing why, his steps faltering as the world narrowed around him.

She stood across the street, one hand gripping the strap of her bag, gaze unfocused as if she were listening to something no one else could hear.

Serena.

She looked up.

For a moment, neither of them moved.

The noise of the city continued around them—cars passing, voices rising and fading—but it all felt distant, like sound carried through water. What stood between them was older than this world, heavier than language.

Serena crossed the street first.

She stopped a step away from him, close enough that he could see the fine tremor in her hands, the careful control in her breathing.

“You’re here,” she said.

Not a question.

Adrian swallowed. “I think I always was.”

Her lips curved faintly, but her eyes shone with unshed tears. “I knew you were alive.”

The words struck deeper than any accusation could have.

“I didn’t leave,” he said immediately. “I swear—I didn’t choose to go.”

“I know.” Her voice was steady, certain. “If you had, I would have felt it.”

Silence settled between them, dense and fragile.

She studied his face—not searching for the boy he was, but for the man she remembered. Her gaze lingered as if mapping familiar ground that had shifted just enough to feel strange.

“You don’t remember everything,” she said softly.

“No,” Adrian admitted. “I remember... pieces. Enough to know I don’t have the answers you deserve.”

Serena nodded once. Acceptance, not forgiveness.

“Where were you?” she asked.

The question was quiet.

It was everything.

Adrian closed his eyes.

Images flickered—ice swallowing the world, light tearing him apart, endless falling through silence. No direction. No time. No anchor.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I was somewhere that didn’t feel like anywhere. I couldn’t reach you. I didn’t even know who I was.”

Her breath hitched once, quickly controlled.

“I waited,” she said. “Not because I was sure. Because I had to.”

He looked at her then—really looked—and saw the weight she carried with such careful grace. Waiting had shaped her, sharpened her, but it had not broken her.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“For vanishing,” she said.

“For leaving me alone, she did not say.

She stepped closer.

REUNION WITHOUT ANSWERS

“Don’t apologies for surviving,” she said gently. “Just... don’t disappear again.”

“I won’t,” he said, and for the first time, the promise felt possible.

They walked together without deciding to.

The city shifted around them as if accommodating something it didn’t understand. Serena spoke of ordinary things—school, the neighborhood, the strange comfort of routines that kept the world from unraveling.

Adrian listened, grounding himself in the sound of her voice.

At the corner of her street, she stopped.

“Our children are with me,” she said.

The words landed carefully.

Adrian’s heart stuttered.

“I know,” he said.

Her eyes widened just slightly.

“You feel them,” she realized.

“Yes.”

“Then you know why I didn’t tell them about you,” she continued. “Not until I was sure.”

He nodded. “I wouldn’t have come back as myself if you had.”

Another silence passed—this one softer.

“They remember who they are,” she said. “But they don’t know where you were. They don’t know why you didn’t come back.”

“I wish I could tell them,” Adrian said. “I wish I understood it myself.”

Serena reached out and took his hand.

The contact was simple.

Human.

Devastating.

“Then we tell them the truth we have,” she said. “And we live with the rest.”

As they parted, Serena hesitated.

“There’s something else,” she said.

Adrian waited.

“The war didn’t end,” she said quietly. “I can feel it. Something is... watching.”

He felt it too now—an awareness brushing the edge of his senses, distant but unmistakably present.

“I know,” he said.

Serena searched his face. “Do you?”

“Yes.”

He looked up at the darkening sky, stars beginning to emerge—too still, too patient.

“He’s alive,” Adrian said.

Her grip tightened on his hand.

“Your brother?”

“Yes.”

The name did not need to be spoken.

Serena exhaled slowly, resolve settling into her expression.

“Then we stop waiting,” she said.

Adrian nodded.

The reunion was incomplete.

But it was real.

And for the first time since the Nether War, Aetherion stood not alone—but beside the one who had never stopped knowing his name.

The Breach

The first sign was the silence.

It spread through the city in thin, uneven waves—traffic sounds thinning, voices faltering, the hum of electricity dipping into something uncertain. People noticed it only as discomfort, an instinctive tightening in the chest they couldn't explain.

Aetherion felt it as pressure.

He stood at the edge of the street outside Serena's building, the evening air cool against his skin, and listened as the world shifted. The ache beneath his ribs sharpened—not painfully, but urgently, like something knocking from the inside.

"It's starting," he said.

Serena followed his gaze upward. The sky looked normal at first glance—clouds catching the last traces of sunset, the first stars appearing—but there was a wrongness to it, subtle and precise. The air rippled faintly, as if stretched too thin.

"They've felt you," Serena said.

"Yes," Aetherion replied. "And they're not waiting anymore."

It opened three blocks away.

No flash. No explosion. Just a sound like tearing fabric, deep and resonant, vibrating through bone rather than air.

People stopped mid-step.

A seam appeared in the space between two buildings—thin, vertical, impossibly dark. It widened slowly, revealing nothing at first, then *absence*. Light bent around it. Sound died as it approached.

From the tear, something moved.

Aetherion inhaled sharply.

“Inside,” he told Serena. “Now.”

She didn’t argue.

Kale felt it before he saw it.

The heat in his chest flared, sudden and violent, forcing him to grip the edge of the table to stay upright. The lights flickered overhead, casting jagged shadows across the room.

“Mom,” he said, panic threading his voice. “Something’s wrong.”

Nathan was already standing.

The shadows at his feet stretched toward the door, restless, alert.

“It’s here,” Nathan said quietly.

Before Serena could respond, the windows rattled.

Then shattered.

The creature stepped through the breach like a thought given form.

It was tall—too tall—its shape flickering between solidity and smoke. Its body burned with embers trapped beneath blackened skin, eyes glowing with recognition rather than hunger.

It bowed.

“My king,” it rasped.

Aetherion stepped forward before it could cross another inch of ground.

The streetlights above burst one by one, plunging the block into dim, fractured light.

“I am not your king,” Aetherion said, his voice steady. “Not here.”

The creature’s head tilted. “You remember.”

“Yes.”

“Then Hell remembers you.”

The pressure surged.

More shapes pressed against the tear, testing it, listening.

Inside the apartment, Kale screamed as fire tore free from his hands.

THE BREACH

The flames did not spread.

They coiled.

Obedient.

Nathan stepped in front of him without hesitation. The shadows surged upward, swallowing the flames before they could touch the walls, containing them in perfect silence.

“Breathe,” Serena said, gripping Kale’s shoulders. “You control it. It does not control you.”

Outside, Aetherion raised his hand.

The air shuddered.

The Nether Star pulsed once—enough.

The creature froze mid-step, its form unraveling as if the world itself rejected its presence. With a sound like collapsing breath, it folded inward and vanished, leaving behind scorched pavement and a seam in reality that began to stitch itself closed.

The pressure eased.

The city exhaled.

Sirens wailed in the distance.

Aetherion slowly lowered his hand, the glow beneath his skin fading to a dull ember.

“That was a scout,” he said.

Serena stared at the scorched street, the broken windows, the trembling shadows. “Then this was a test.”

“Yes,” he said. “To see if I would answer.”

She turned to him, fear and resolve braided tightly together. “And you did.”

“I had to,” Aetherion replied. “If I hadn’t, the next one wouldn’t have bowed.”

Silence settled again—different now. Heavier. Informed.

Far beyond Earth, beyond frozen Nether, something observed the failed breach and adjusted its patience.

Aetherion felt it like a distant smile.

The war had not arrived.

But the door was open.

12

Sons of Fire and Void

The second breach did not bow.

It tore open behind the apartment building just after midnight, ripping through the narrow alley like a wound that refused to close. The air burned and froze at once, heat crawling along the brick walls while frost bloomed across shattered glass.

Aetherion felt it immediately.

This one was not a scout.

This one was sent.

“Stay inside,” he told Serena, his voice calm but edged with urgency. “No matter what you hear.”

Serena shook her head. “Not this time.”

Their eyes met.

Aetherion saw fear there—but not hesitation.

“Then stay with them,” he said. “Whatever happens, don’t let them face this alone.”

“I never have,” she replied.

The alley darkened as the breach widened.

Two figures emerged—twisted reflections of infernal nobility, their forms armored in scorched bone and frozen steel. Their presence crushed the air, heavy with authority borrowed rather than earned.

They did not kneel.

They did not speak.

They *advanced*.

Aetherion stepped forward, placing himself between them and the building.

“You are far from Nether,” he said. “And you enter without sanction.”

One of the creatures tilted its head, voice echoing as if spoken through stone.

“The king remembers,” it said. “The blood remembers. That is enough.”

Behind him, a window shattered.

Fire spilled into the alley like a living thing.

Aetherion turned.

Kale stood framed by broken glass, flames curling around his hands in furious arcs. His face was pale, eyes wide—not with rage this time, but with clarity.

“I’m not hiding,” Kale said. “I’m done being afraid of it.”

Nathan stepped beside him silently, shadows flowing upward like wings unfolding. The alley lights flickered, dimming as sound itself seemed to pull back from him.

Serena stood behind them both.

“You don’t get to take my children,” she said. “Not again.”

The creatures paused.

Recognition flickered in their burning eyes.

“Blood of the throne,” one rasped. “Come willingly.”

Kale laughed—a sharp, unsteady sound. “Yeah. No.”

He raised his hands.

The fire answered.

It did not explode.

It *focused*.

Aetherion felt it then—not raw power, but *choice*. Kale wasn’t lashing out. He was shaping the flames, drawing them inward, forging control from instinct.

Nathan stepped forward.

The shadows surged.

Where Kale burned, Nathan erased.

One of the infernal figures lunged.

Nathan lifted a hand.

The creature vanished mid-stride—no scream, no collapse. Just absence, as if it had never existed at all.

The second creature recoiled, suddenly uncertain.

Aetherion felt something tighten in his chest.

Pride.

Fear.

Responsibility.

“Enough,” Aetherion said.

His voice carried weight now—not command, but **truth**.

The remaining creature faltered, its borrowed authority unraveling under the pressure of the Nether Star’s presence.

“You will return,” Aetherion continued. “And you will tell him this.”

The creature froze.

“My sons are not his weapons,” Aetherion said. “They are not his inheritance. If he wants them, he will come himself.”

The creature bowed—not to the king.

To the father.

Then it dissolved, pulled backwards into the closing breach as reality stitched itself whole once more.

Silence fell heavily over the alley.

Kale’s flames flickered, then died down, leaving his hands trembling. Nathan’s shadows retreated, folding back into the corners where they belonged.

Serena reached them first, pulling both boys into her arms.

“You did well,” she whispered. “You did exactly what you needed to.”

Kale’s voice shook. “I didn’t lose control.”

Aetherion stepped forward slowly.

“No,” he said. “You didn’t.”

Nathan looked up at him, eyes unreadable. “Was that... normal?”

Aetherion knelt so they were eye level.

“No,” he said gently. “But neither are you. And that doesn’t make you

wrong.”

The boys studied him—really looked at him—for the first time.

“You’re him,” Kale said quietly. “Aren’t you?”

Aetherion nodded.

“I’m your father.”

The words landed like truth finally spoken aloud.

Neither boy pulled away.

Far away, beyond frozen Nether and fractured stars, something observed the failure with growing interest.

The sons had answered.

The king had claimed them.

And the waiting brother smiled.

The war had just learned its next shape.

13

Dream Hunter Returns

The sword did not arrive in fire.

It arrived in silence.

Aetherion felt it first—not as a presence, but as a *recognition*. The ache beneath his ribs shifted, aligning with something vast and familiar, like a long-lost limb remembering its place.

He stiffened.

Serena noticed immediately. “What is it?”

“Something old,” he said. “Something that has never stopped listening.”

The night air thickened. The streetlights dimmed—not flickering, but bowing, their glow bending inward as if reluctant to illuminate what was about to emerge.

The shadows deepened.

Nathan took a slow step back, eyes fixed on the space at the center of the alley. “It’s... not like the others.”

Kale swallowed. “Is it bad?”

Aetherion shook his head once. “No.”

He stepped forward, heart steady now.

“It’s mine.”

The air folded.

Not tore. Not cracked.

Folded—like a page turned by an unseen hand.

From the crease in reality emerged a shape that refused to obey distance or perspective. The longer one looked at it, the less certain its size became—sometimes the length of a blade, sometimes the span of a doorway.

Black metal caught no light.

The edge glowed faintly white, sharp enough to make the air recoil.

The hilt hovered at chest height, perfectly still.

Dream Hunter.

Kale's breath left him in a whisper. "It's just... waiting."

"Yes," Aetherion said quietly. "That's what it does."

The sword drifted closer, slow and deliberate.

Images bled into the air around it—fragmented reflections not of the present, but of *what had been*. Battlefields frozen in time. Crowns shattered willingly. A king kneeling—not in defeat, but in acceptance.

Serena felt it too.

Not fear.

Recognition.

"It remembers you," she said.

"It remembers *us*," Aetherion replied.

The sword paused before him.

For a long moment, nothing happened.

Then—slowly, deliberately—Dream Hunter lowered itself.

It did not fall.

It knelt.

The alley trembled.

Not with destruction, but with acknowledgement.

Kale's knees buckled. Nathan steadied him without looking away.

"Dad..." Kale whispered. "That thing just bowed to you."

Aetherion reached out.

The moment his fingers closed around the hilt, the world exhaled.

Power surged—not explosively, but *precisely*. The Nether Star flared once beneath his ribs, its light threading through his veins, answering the blade's return.

Memories locked into place.

Not new ones.

Final ones.

Dream Hunter was not a weapon of conquest.

It was a blade of *decision*.

It did not strike unless the choice was made. It did not kill unless the cost was accepted. Every swing carried a consequence that could not be undone.

Aetherion tightened his grip.

“I won’t let it shape them,” he said quietly.

Serena stepped closer, her hand brushing his arm. “It never did,” she said.
“You did.”

The air rippled again—far above them, beyond sight.

Nether stirred.

The ice cracked.

Not breaking.

Listening.

Somewhere beyond frozen time, something ancient felt the sword awaken and finally allowed itself a smile.

Aetherion lifted his gaze to the stars—too still, too patient.

“He knows,” he said.

Serena nodded. “Then let him.”

Kale squared his shoulders. Nathan stood taller, shadows calm and obedient at his feet.

The family stood together beneath the night sky.

The sword had returned.

The king remembered.

And the war—no longer frozen, no longer distant—had finally begun to move again.

14

The Brother Stirs

He felt it the moment the sword bowed.

Not as pain.

Not as an alarm.

As confirmation.

Across distances that no longer obeyed time, across a realm locked in ice and silence, something shifted. The pressure eased. A tension was released that had been held for far too long.

The waiting was over.

The place he stood had no sky.

Above him stretched an endless dark, smooth and unbroken, like a thought held too carefully to be spoken aloud. Beneath his feet lay stone colder than ice, etched with fractures that never widened—cracks preserved at the moment before destruction.

Frozen Nether.

Not dead.

Paused.

He moved through it without disturbing anything. The ice did not resist him. The silence did not question him. This place had learned him too well to pretend otherwise.

At the heart of the frozen realm stood the throne.

It was empty.

Not broken.

Not claimed.

Waiting.

The brother stopped before it and rested a hand against the armrest, fingers tracing the thin line where the crown had shattered centuries ago. He smiled—not with satisfaction, but with fond familiarity.

“You always did leave things unfinished,” he murmured.

His voice carried easily through the stillness, unhindered by the absence of sound.

He closed his eyes.

And felt it.

The blade.

Awake.

Dream Hunter had returned to its master.

The brother inhaled slowly, savoring the moment like a long-anticipated note finally played correctly.

“So,” he said softly. “You remember.”

Memory rippled outward—not his own, but the echo of another’s awakening. Aetherion’s presence brushed against him across impossible distance, bright and unmistakable.

Alive.

Aware.

Whole.

The brother laughed quietly.

Not cruelly.

Almost warmly.

“You chose them again,” he said, turning away from the throne. “Even now.”

He walked through the frozen hallways of Nether’s capital, passing statues locked mid-bow, demons frozen mid-step, banners trapped in the act of falling. An entire civilization held between heartbeats—preserved by mercy rather than destroyed by war.

“You could have ruled,” he continued, speaking as though Aetherion stood beside him. “You still could. Hell would kneel. The world would follow.”

THE BROTHER STIRS

He stopped before a frozen mirror.

His reflection stared back—unchanged by time, untouched by ice. Where Aetherion had aged, broken, forgotten, the brother had remained.

Patient.

“Instead,” he said calmly, “you chose to remember.”

The mirror cracked—not breaking, just enough to distort the image.

Far away, on a fragile blue world, Aetherion lifted his head.

The sensation was unmistakable.

Someone was thinking of him.

Not hunting.

Not attacking.

Waiting.

Aetherion’s grip tightened around Dream Hunter.

“He’s awake,” he said.

Serena didn’t ask how he knew.

“I felt it too,” she said quietly.

Back in frozen Nether, the brother raised his hand.

The ice did not melt.

It *moved*.

A single fracture extended outward from his palm, racing across the frozen stone like a living thing—then stopping, perfectly controlled.

“Not yet,” he whispered.

There was no hurry.

Wars rushed.

He did not.

The children had revealed themselves.

The sword had returned.

The king had chosen love over dominion—again.

Everything was exactly where it needed to be.

The brother turned toward the vast, silent horizon of frozen stars.

“Come to me,” he said softly. “Or make me come to you.”

Either would do.

Far above Earth, the stars remained still.

AETHERION

But somewhere deep beneath the ice of Nether, something ancient smiled.
The game—paused, not ended—had finally resumed.

15

The Choice Before the Storm

The night did not end with fire.

That, more than anything, unsettled Aetherion.

He stood on the rooftop of Serena's building as dawn bled slowly into the horizon, the city below wrapped in fragile calm. Sirens had faded. Windows were boarded. People slept, unaware of how close their world had come to remembering things it was never meant to know.

Dream Hunter rested against his shoulder—not heavy, not light. Present. Waiting.

Behind him, the door creaked softly.

Serena stepped out onto the roof, pulling her jacket tighter against the chill. She did not look at the sword. She never did—not because she feared it, but because she understood it too well.

"You didn't sleep," she said.

"Neither did you," Aetherion replied.

They stood together in silence for a long moment, watching the sun climb. Somewhere below, a car started. A door slammed. Life continued its careful pretending.

"He felt it," Serena said at last.

"Yes."

"And he's not moving yet."

"No," Aetherion agreed. "That's what frightens me."

AETHERION

Serena studied him, her gaze steady, unflinching. “You always feared what came after mercy more than war.”

He smiled faintly. “War announces itself.”

Inside the apartment, Kale sat cross-legged on the floor, staring at his hands.

He turned them over slowly, flexing his fingers as if seeing them for the first time. The fire was quiet now—coiled deep, controlled, listening.

Nathan sat nearby, knees drawn up, shadows resting calmly at his feet like loyal sentinels. He watched the window—not the street, but the sky beyond it.

“He’s thinking,” Nathan said quietly.

Kale glanced at him. “Who?”

“Our uncle.”

The word landed with uncomfortable weight.

Kale exhaled. “Figures.”

Aetherion entered the room without sound.

Both boys looked up.

He didn’t speak immediately.

This wasn’t a moment for declarations or authority. This was the space between things—the pause where truth mattered more than power.

“I need to ask you something,” he said finally.

Kale straightened. Nathan met his gaze.

“You don’t have to answer now,” Aetherion continued. “And whatever you choose... I will respect it.”

Serena watched from the doorway, heart steady, hands clenched.

Aetherion knelt so he was eye level with his sons.

“There is a war waiting for me,” he said simply. “For us. One that never truly ended.”

Kale swallowed. “Because of him.”

“Yes.”

“And because of you?” Kale asked, not accusing. Just honest.

Aetherion nodded. “Because of my choices.”

Silence stretched.

“If I take the throne again,” Aetherion said, “I become something else.

THE CHOICE BEFORE THE STORM

Something colder. More distant. I will protect the world—but I may lose the part of me that learned how to be your father.”

Nathan’s voice was calm. “And if you don’t?”

“Then the war comes to us,” Aetherion said. “On this world. On your terms.”

Kale laughed weakly. “So either way, it’s bad.”

“Yes,” Aetherion said. “But one way lets me stand with you.”

Nathan looked at his mother.

Serena nodded once.

That was all he needed.

“I don’t want a king,” Nathan said quietly. “I want you.”

Kale blinked, then nodded sharply. “Same.”

The words hit harder than any blade.

Aetherion bowed his head, breath catching—not in weakness, but in relief.

“Then this is my choice,” he said.

He stood.

Dream Hunter hummed—not in protest, but in acceptance.

“I will not reclaim the throne,” Aetherion said. “Not yet. Not for power. Not for fear.”

He looked out the window, toward a sky that no longer felt empty.

“If my brother wants me,” he continued, voice steady, final, “he will face me as I am now.”

A father.

Far beyond Earth, beneath frozen stars and unmoving ice, the brother paused.

The fracture spreading through Nether slowed.

Not stopped.

Adjusted.

“So,” the brother murmured, smiling to himself. “You choose the harder path.”

He approved.

Back on Earth, the sun fully crested the horizon.

Morning arrived.

Aetherion set Dream Hunter aside and reached for his sons.

AETHERION

Outside, the city breathed.

Inside, a family stood together—not unaware of the storm, but unafraid of it.

Because the choice had been made.

And storms, once named, could be faced.

16

The Sister's Hand

Valerie did not arrive.

She revealed herself.

Aetherion felt her presence before she spoke—an adjustment in the world's balance, subtle but unmistakable. The air shifted, not with pressure or power, but with *clarity*, like a veil being gently drawn aside.

She stood at the edge of the room, where light met shadow, exactly where she always had.

"You've chosen," she said.

Aetherion turned.

Valerie—**Vaelthara**—met his gaze without hesitation. There was no judgment in her eyes. No surprise. Only the calm of someone who had been waiting for this moment longer than anyone else.

"Yes," he replied. "And he knows."

She inclined her head slightly. "Of course he does."

Serena watched the exchange closely. "You knew this would happen," she said.

"I knew it *could*," Vaelthara answered. "And I knew he would choose love again."

Kale folded his arms. "That doesn't sound like a compliment."

"It isn't," Vaelthara said gently. "It's a warning."

She stepped forward, and the room seemed to expand around her—not

physically, but *conceptually*, as if reality itself made room for what she carried.

"The choice you made has consequences," Vaelthara continued. "Not because it was wrong—but because it was visible."

Aetherion nodded. "Then tell me what I've already guessed."

Vaelthara's gaze moved to the boys.

"Your brother will not strike at you first," she said. "He will strike at *meaning*."

Nathan's shadows stirred faintly.

"He will fracture alliances, expose truths too early, and force you to act before you are ready," Vaelthara said. "He is patient—but he is not idle."

Serena drew a slow breath. "Then what do we do?"

Vaelthara looked at her.

"You disappear," she said simply.

Kale straightened. "Again?"

"No," Vaelthara replied. "This time, *together*."

She raised her hand.

The air shimmered—not tearing, not cracking, but folding inward like a curtain being pulled aside. Beyond it lay no landscape, no throne, no battlefield.

Only *space*.

A pocket between places. Between moments.

"A sanctuary," Vaelthara said. "Hidden from thrones and stars alike. I have been building it since Nether froze."

Aetherion stared at her.

"You've been preparing for my failure," he said quietly.

Vaelthara met his gaze. "I've been preparing for your mercy."

Silence fell.

Dream Hunter hummed softly—not in warning, but in agreement.

Vaelthara lowered her hand.

"This will not stop the war," she said. "Nothing can. But it will delay it. Shape it. Give you time to become what you need to be *now*, not what you were."

She turned to Kale and Nathan.

"You will learn control without cruelty," she said. "Strength without

obedience."

The boys nodded—Kale with fierce determination, Nathan with quiet understanding.

Then Vaelthara looked at Serena.

"And you," she said softly, "will remain the one thing your brother cannot predict."

Serena met her gaze, unflinching. "Because I don't want his world."

"Exactly."

At last, Vaelthara faced her brother.

Aetherion saw it then—not distance, not formality, but something older and heavier than either.

Love sharpened by time.

"I will walk the edges," Vaelthara said. "I will listen where you cannot. Lie where you will not. And when the moment comes..."

She paused.

"...I will call you."

Aetherion stepped forward and embraced her.

It was brief.

Unspoken.

Enough.

As the sanctuary sealed around them, Earth slipped quietly out of reach—not lost, not abandoned, but *set aside*.

Far away, beneath frozen stars, the brother felt the shift.

Not anger.

Interest.

"So," he murmured, sensing the absence. "The sister moves."

He smiled.

The board was changing.

In the quiet between worlds, Aetherion stood with his family, Dream Hunter at rest, the Nether Star steady within him.

He was no longer frozen.

No longer lost.

And no longer alone.

AETHERION

The war waited.
But so did he.



About the Author

Advait S is a novelist drawn to stories where myth and memory intertwine, and where the past refuses to stay buried. His writing blends epic fantasy with emotional depth, exploring themes of identity, loss, love, and the quiet endurance of the human spirit.

Raised in India and inspired by ancient legends, cosmic mysteries, and the subtle poetry of everyday life, Advait crafts worlds shaped as much by feeling as by fate. His narratives often balance vast, otherworldly stakes with intimate human moments—families separated by destiny, truths hidden beneath ordinary lives, and power that demands a personal cost.

His debut novel, **Beyond The Horizon of Space: A Journey into the Unknown Universe**, **Beyond The Horizon of Space: Echoes Beyond Eternity**, *Aetherion: The Frozen King*, marks the beginning of a larger mythic saga, one that unfolds across time, memory, and forgotten realms. Through this series, Advait seeks to tell stories that linger long after the final page—stories that feel both timeless and deeply personal.

When not writing, he is often immersed in world-building, exploring speculative ideas, or refining new stories that bridge fantasy, science, and myth.

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