# Skyward Book Guide

Brandon’s Note to Writers reading this. This is the outline and guide I sent to the publisher before starting the project--and many things changed during the actual writing. Hopefully, it helps to be able to compare what I planned and what I actually did. Know, of course, that this contains huge spoilers for the book. Please consider reading it before reading this, to assuage my worry about ruining my own stories for people.

The other thing to know is that I often plot my books by focusing on certain plot themes--like the mystery, or a relationship, or the like--and making bullet points tied directly to that theme. However, you won’t see much of that in this outline, because once I had all of the sub-plots and themes outlined, I joined them together into a cohesive outline in order at the bottom. You can imagine that all of these bullet points were once under separate headings, then merged together in order, and tweaked to read as a narrative. Note that the bullet points aren’t often very explanatory, as they’re mostly to remind me what needs to happen.

This document wasn’t really meant to be a guide to aspiring writers on how to create a story. I suggest watching my lecture series on YouTube (the 2020 lectures go over this outlining process in the third lecture, I believe.)

Anyway, hope this is helpful! Best of luck with your own writing!

--Brandon

# Overview

Skyward is a fast-paced action science fiction book that is part Top Gun, part Eragon. It is about a young pilot who--while training to fight off an unknown alien force--discovers the wreckage of an ancient and technologically superior ship. During her free time (between training sessions where she dogfights with the enemy) she and a friend get the ship up and running--just in time to help in the final climactic fight.

# Setting

## Detritus

The planet Detritus is home to humankind. Most of the surface is a place of rubble and wreckage, the result of hundreds of years of war with the Krell--a mysterious alien force who is trying to exterminate human beings.

Most people live under ground, in enormous bunkers where they eat vat-grown algae and support the war effort. Some brave souls venture onto the surface and either hunt for meat, or scavenge among the rubble and wreckage.

This is a constant danger because the Krell target anyone who tries to live on the surface. Their ships explode when damaged, releasing radiation. (They have never been captured alive.) They tend to carpet-bomb sections of land randomly, just to make sure nobody is hiding there. If they find where a settlement is, they bring in the Lifebuster--an enormous bomb, carried by a bomber ship, which can penetrate the ground and destroy even an underground base.

Detritus has an exceptionally messy upper atmosphere, full of ancient junk. And I mean FULL. There’s like a huge layer of it, which often falls as debris (particularly when the Krell come down to attack, as they blast a hole through it to fly down. You can only rarely glimpse the actual sky, but when you can. It has a small, white sun.

## Alta and Inferna: The City Above and the City Beneath

The largest underground settlement is known as Inferna, and for many years it was hidden and safe. However, twelve years ago, a Krell scouting ship discovered it--and they brought in a Lifebuster to try to destroy it. This assault was fought off in a famous victory. (During which the main character’s father abandoned his flight and was named a coward.)

This left a problem, however. Inferna was known, and further attempts on it would be made. Should it be evacuated, or remain? While some people did leave, others decided they would stake their claim here--and remain. They started building a city above it, on the surface, named Alta.

Though this has been tried many times in the past, Alta has survived where other cities have failed. Though most people (including our main character) have never even been there, Alta is still a symbol of the fact that they’re fighting back. Living in a place with trees, and fresh air, and crops again.

The inhabitants of Inferna, Alta, and a few satellite (underground) communities are collectively known as the Unified Defiant League--or Defiants--but are divided internally as Abovers and Beneathers. The nation is known as the Defiant League, or the League, to most people.

Alta is home to the DDF. (Defiant Defense Flights.) It is the only permanent defense force on the planet; though other strike forces exist, those ships stay constantly moving, and are more like hidden guerrilla fighters than they are a true defense force. They are tied to other communities, other groups of people, who either hide in caverns, other underground bunkers, or survive on the surface in hidden groups.

## The Krell

The mysterious aliens who fight humankind are known only as the Krell.

According to the histories, humankind once spread through the entire galaxy. The Krell, a race of mysterious aliens, appeared out of nowhere and drove men back--eventually destroying their homeworld, and all of their fleets. The last remnants of humankind hid on Detritus, a planet they hoped would let them hide, as it was considered “safe.” Nobody knows why, these days. Destruction to the planet’s records (and extermination of the above ground cities) have left many holes in their history and understanding.

Unfortunately, the Krell did find mankind on Detritus, and began launching attacks. Mankind was driven underground.

These days, Krell attacks come regularly--but randomly. They take the form of flights of ships that try to deliver a bomb to destroy Alta and Inferna. They are resisted by the HAFFS, who scramble ships to resist each time the Krell descend through the Haze--the envelope of debris and smoke that surrounds the planet.

The Krell involve many mysteries. Why do they attack when they do? If they fought humankind into hiding throughout the galaxy, why don’t they have the forces to attack in greater numbers, and completely wipe people off of Detritus? What do they even look like? Ships explode when damaged, and only a few have ever been recovered--and the cockpits of these were empty, as if the Krell are capable of teleporting away before being blown up.

## Human Society

Life on Detritus is difficult. It is sustained by drawing energy from the molten veins that run underground--this heat is used for electricity, and for growing algae. (It is a specialized type that, instead of translating sunlight into growth, grows using heat.) Many people work the vats, stirring the algae and stimulating its growth in enormous underground growing chambers--hot, sweaty, miserable work. Others work the forges, tapping magma veins for iron and other metals, which flow through the crust of Detritus.

Even in Alta, food other than algae is rare. Some other crops can be grown in open air--a few luxury crops. The elites suspect that these crops (which tend to yield very small returns, because of the low light from the small sun) could probably never sustain the entire population--and remain a luxury item for now.

The war has been going on so long, that people tend to be very focused on the war. The ultimate aspiration of most Defiants is to get into the DDF, where they can fight back. The real pilots are chosen through a culling process, where trainees are placed into practice flights and taught--partially while engaging in real combat--so that those with true skill and courage are eventually chosen to become full pilots.

In Defiant society, backing down is considered cowardice. People are taught to fight, hold their ground, and not give in. Though some other humans, from other communities, have a different perspective, Defiants are aggressive--even hyper so. This tends to be encouraged by the leadership of the League, who want fighters who won’t back down.

## Flight School

Defiants split their time between schooling and work, often in the forges or the algae vats. At seventeen, they can test for Flight School. Everyone takes the tests, but you can just walk out if you don’t want to be in Flight School. A surprising number of people do this, as the pressure is too high, and they know the casualties are also very high.

Nobody is told what is on the test, and you are supposedly unable to prepare for it. But it is always lengthy and somewhat obtuse. The subject tested can be basically anything.

In truth, the test is a little bit of a farce. Students are watched by teachers and trainers on the jobs, and certain people are picked out ahead of time to succeed. The test has almost no influence on it--though there is some little amount it counts. (Mostly, the test givers want to see how persistent people are in forcing their way through a very difficult, lengthy, and obscure test.)

Those who are chosen are given cadet pins. (Many people through the city wear these as a sign of prestige--even if they didn’t make it to full pilot, it’s a symbol of excellence to own one.) The cadet leave for Alta, where they are initiated into a flight of ten other students. They are given intensive training for a series of several months, during which they are used in real combat--though always in a support role. (Supposedly.) At the end, those few who prove themselves are given the Pilot pin to wear instead, and become full pilots.

During the training, cadets are given a ship to fly--a small training fighter called a “Pico-class” ship. These picos are maneuverable, but low on firepower, and are cheaply produced. The exception is if you bring your own ship to fly. Some children of pilots inherit the ships of their parents--and some Abovers or rich Belowers can afford to buy a ship. If you bring your own ship, you are auto-enrolled into flight school, without needing to take the test. You can also fly your own ship in training, which also gives you an advantage.

Most cadets (nine out of ten) either wash out or are killed during the training.

## The XB-1021

In the opening scenes of the book, Spensa (the main character) will discover a cavern near the surface of the planet. Inside is an old, broken ship of ancient--yet incredible--design. She has visions of repairing the ship, and using it to join the DDF. (Though, then, she ends up getting in without it.)

She thinks this must be a crashed human ship from generations ago, back during the initial wars that landed them on Detritus. It is obviously capable of space flight (something their current fighters can’t do.)

Part of the story will be this ship being repaired, and secrets about it being revealed. (See the next section, and plot sections.)

## The Secret

The history that people on Detritus have been told is a lie.

In truth, humankind (led by a tyrant) tried to conquer the galaxy generations ago. At the end of a long interstellar war, this group lost--and was eventually rounded up and deposited on Detritus, which is a prison planet for them. The alien federation who defeated them was very worried about humankind getting off and starting another war. (They think humans are far too aggressive.) However, they also don’t want to engage in genocide by wiping out an entire species.

The solution was to keep humans on this planet, but to keep their aggression channeled toward fighting a war that will drain their resources. The entire idea of the “Krell” was invented to give humans something to fight, something to keep them occupied. But it’s not entirely just a game, as these forces are also designed to destroy human infrastructure and cities if they start growing too much--to keep them from becoming a threat again.

The unified forces who surround the planet have placed automated stations that create robotic ships who imitated being “the krell” and their fleets are replenished when they are destroyed. The groups of aliens who maintain these just basically keep them running, but don’t engage in any fighting themselves. (Indeed, the galaxy is mostly peaceful at this point.) Ships are designed with empty cockpits in order to keep the humans guessing, though they’re all actually remote controlled.

The krell represent a real danger, however, as they’ve been programmed to keep the humans down and prevent them from escaping--and to keep them from contacting the outside. (The Krell aggressively destroy wireless technology that is more powerful than radio.)

However, humankind has managed to establish Alta and build defense forces that are stronger than anticipated. This has led, slowly, to “the Krell” to begin building stations around the galaxy to provide reinforcements. Though this hasn’t happened yet, the mandate of “Defeat the humans” is starting to run rampant, unnoticed and unchecked by those who built them.

### What the Defiants believe

Of course, people ask questions. One of the big ones is, “Why do the Krell only attack periodically. Why not send a huge force and overwhelm us?” What the Defiants believe is that most of the Krell think humankind is exterminated. They’ve conquered the galaxy, and rule everything. They don’t know that humans are hiding out on this one planet, which is protected by a huge, thick debris field.

However, Krell scouting fleets periodically sweep the galaxy, investigating unpopulated planets and looking for life forms to exterminate. Defiants believe that these are the groups they fight, that the larger Krell empire (which is unwieldy and full of creatures that are almost more of a swarm than a true intelligence) doesn’t take notice of the occasional flights going missing.

Defiants believe their job right now is to hunker down and survive, as they are the last of mankind.

## Dogfighting Mechanics

One challenge of this book is going to be making certain that the dogfighting scenes are interesting, fun, and not overly-full of jargon. My instincts say I should stray away from trying to be hyper-realistic in my descriptions of dogfighting, as this isn’t a manual on how to be a fighter pilot.

Therefore, we need some mechanics for the fights that will be easily understood, but will also pull us into our own realm of fighting--away from realism, more into science fiction action. I’m going to do this in several ways.

Fighting against the Krell is difficult. Their shields are impervious to most regular weapons fire, and are too maneuverable for missiles. This means that simply locking on and firing away is useless. So the fighters carry two specialized weapons. The first is an IMP (Inverted Magnetic Pulse, though I don’t ever intend to explain that) a device that releases a blast knocking out all shields in a small area. These are mounted on the ships themselves, so when you fire one, you bring down the shields of yourself, any enemies, and any allies within short range of you.

This means you need teamwork to bring down Krell. One of you has to expose themselves for a few minutes while the other shoots down the exposed enemy.

The second aspect of the fighting will be the Light-Grapple, a weapon that lets the fighters stick themselves to things with a glowing energy grappling hook. They can hook to other ships, or to debris as it falls--or, if they’re a good shot, they can stick one end to an enemy ship then stick the other end to a falling piece of debris. This device allows them to perform faster-than normal turns, tow others out of danger, and otherwise perform some great Ariel maneuvers.

The final aspect of the fighting is the debris field itself. The fact that Detritus used to be a junk planet comes into play quite a bit in the fighting. In order to get through the atmosphere, the Krell usually sweep an opening in the sky--causing tons and tons of rubbish, bits of rock, and chunks of metal to fall to the surface. The fighters, then, have to dodge this (sometimes using it with their light-grappels) and even attack it during the fighting, to blow up the larger pieces and protect anyone down below.

Together, this should create some cool visuals, an interesting battlefield, and allow me to keep a tighter thumb on the battles--keeping the reader in control of what they’re imagining. However, my instincts say that early drafts will need a little extra attention paid to the combat sequences to keep blocking, character motives, and the like straight.

## Technology

A specific word on the technology level of the Defiant. I want them to be hyper advanced in some ways, but really behind us in others. For example, they have advanced fighters with gravitational dampeners to let the pilots take extreme corners. They can harvest from the debris metal that floats, letting them get ships into the air, and have some cool hovering technology. At the same time, there is almost no computer or wireless technology.

A list below will give an overview of these sorts of things.

**They Have:**

--Hover technology.

--Advanced ship weapons. (The Light-Grapple, the IMP.)

--The ability to grow food using heat instead of sunlight.

**They don’t have:**

--Advanced wireless technology. (The debris interferes with getting it off planet, and the Krell use it to target hidden cities. Even the Defiants don’t use this, by tradition.) No cell phones. No tablets. Crude walkie-talkies in the ships, and radio back to the home base, but those channels are forbidden for regular people to use. Instead, there’s an old-school operator system where you call in on a kind of intercom, and ask a message to be relayed by an operator.

--Handguns. Gunpowder is difficult to make on Detritus, and ordinary people are forbidden to carry their own guns. The munitions all go to the war effort. Besides, everyone is supposed to be focused on the war effort, and they can’t afford casualties. They can’t prevent fighting, however--and people will still get in scuffles. So some people carry a pair of “bruisers,” gloves that deliver an electric shock when you connect, and project a slight defensive field when used correctly. Often, like in our world someone might have carried a sword at their side, the upper class will carry a pair of bruisers on their belt.

--The ability to make their own hover technology. They have to harvest antimatter from fallen debris, or from ships that are shot down, to keep their fighters in the air.

## Worldbuilding Extra tidbits

### Art Design

The art design of Inferna will have a kind of cubist/futurist feel, with lots of repeated images, blocky repetitive feel, with an almost Communist Propaganda undertone. (Don’t worry, this won’t be overt.)

The art design of Alta will be Art nouveau, with flowing designs, almost a 20’s clothing style, and images of things like spring fields and women in flowing clothing representing concepts like justice.

### Society

Defiant tends to be a war-focused society, as one might imagine from the constant invasions. It’s like the United States during WWII near the end, where rationing was strongly in force, and everything was focused on beating the enemy. I want to avoid going too Big Brother, as I feel that’s been done to death, but when people talking they’ll often talk about the war effort. They call each other by the title Defiant.

(Probably will be a few more things here, as I continue.)

# Main Characters

## Spensa (Callsign: Spin)

Spensa is the protagonist of the series. She’s daughter of a former pilot--but one who was branded a coward for fleeing during the First Battle of Alta years ago. Her father was shot down by his own wingmen for his cowardice, and she has suffered as a result. While other children were given jobs, and allowed to earn to help their families, Spensa was declared “unfit” because of being small for her age. (This, though, was simply an excuse--and everyone knows it.)

Now seventeen, she tries to help her mother survive by sneaking up onto the surface and hunting for rats. (Which he mother sells at a little stand down below. It’s kind of gross, even to other Beneathers--but getting meat is unusual enough that other people will buy. She’s often off hunting late enough that she misses schooling, or gets suspended for being late to classes. She’s never been a terribly good student, but she harbors a deep, powerful desire to be a pilot--to clear her father’s name.

Spensa dreams of being a pilot. As a child, she would sneak up to the surface with her father (whose hobby was hunting for salvage.) They’d look up at the sky, and dream of what was beyond the debris field. (We’ll get to see one of these moments, in the prologue, looking up and seeing stars in a very rare opening in the debris.)

Her father’s dream was to discover what was “beyond the iron sky” as he put it--to find out what was out there, where humans came from. He was a dreamer and an optimist, but Spensa has spent her life angry. Angry at the people who call him a coward, angry at those who have punished her and her mother, and even a little angry at him for abandoning her. She has a legendary temper, and brashness beyond measure--which serves her well, at times, as she’s willing to try things nobody else will.

In the book, her stubbornness gets her a spot in the DDF, but will have to choose which dream to live. Anger, retribution at those who punished her, and a profound desire to destroy the Krell--or her father’s dream, the dream of wondering what is beyond the iron sky.

## Rodge (Callsign Rigmarole)

Rodge is Spensa’s best friend, and one of the few people in school she gets along with. Quiet, tall and kind of “lurchy,” he’s always been good with his hands. They’ve dreamed together of joining the DDF since they were children, and he’s like a brother to her. (They’ve been friends since she beat the tar out of someone who was bullying him.)

Rodge is one of the few people who won’t put up with Spensa’s crap, particularly when she starts bragging--or starts getting herself into something stupid. Unlike her, he takes school very seriously, and aces his tests to join the DDF. He wasn’t going to get chosen, but they can’t deny him when he gets a perfect score--so they let him in. However, after the flight’s second encounter with the Krell, he admits to himself that he just can’t handle the pressure and--against Spensa’s wishes--drops out, determined to just go work the manufactory with his brothers.

Spensa, however, ropes him into her scheme of repairing the ship she discovers--and he ends up being the primary mechanic who tries to get the thing up and running again.

## MB-1021 Wanton Destroyer (Callsign: Murderbot)

In the opening chapter, while hunting rats, Spensa makes an incredible discovery. In a hidden cavern, laying where it crashed centuries ago, is an old fighter. She determines to repair it and learn to fly it.

It turns out that the ship has an advanced AI, beyond anything the DDF uses or knows about right now. It seems to be lost technology--it can even communicate with her wirelessly, without using standard radio signals, something forbidden because it usually draws the Krell.

Beyond that, it is sleeker, better armed, and faster than even the best of DDF ships. However, it also has very different controls, and was severely damaged in the crash, and the passage of time since then.

During the course of the novel, 1021 will become a main character. Spensa wants him to be an awesome, destructive machine--but his programming has been corrupted, and basically the only thing he remembers is that he was ordered by his last pilot to deactivate all weapons. His personality is that of an inquisitive robotic hyper-pacifist, which contrasts with the fact that he’s a walking weapon nicknamed “murderbot.”

In the end, 1021 will replace Spensa’s pico class ship after she ejects (during an intense fight) and is kicked out of the DDF for losing her ship. Through most of the book, however, he’s learning, growing, and being re-trained by her and Rodge to be a functional ship again.

Needs to be programmed to speak.

## Jorgen (Callsign: Jerkface)

Jorgen is both the primary antagonist in the book and an eventual romantic interest for Spensa. .

The son of a pilot and inheritor of his own advanced fighter, Jorgen was raised in Alta--and is an Abover, raised to privilege. Basically, the Defiant version of an aristocrat.

Because of his ship, he has a distinct advantage in the testing of the cadets, something that Spensa resents. Beyond that, he’s arrogant to a fault--something caused by the fact that he feels insecure about being given a free spot in the DDF. He hates that he’s been given a free ride, and even (secretly) tried to take the tests. But of course, the tests don’t really mean much, and they basically ignored his scores because he was already slated to get into flight school.

His parents expect him to do a short tour with the DDF, then retire and enter politics--a common move for someone of his birth. In the school, he’s often trying to take over the flight, and act like the team’s leader--another thing that rubs Spensa wrong. My goal with him is to introduce him as your classic spoiled “Draco Malfoy” type antagonist, then humanize him over the course of the story, to the point that Spensa (and hopefully the reader) come to fall for him.

His story ends as he refuses to eject when his ship is damaged; he keeps fighting, proving to himself that he belongs in the sky even with the shortcuts he was given. He goes down in a blaze of glory.

# Secondary Characters

## Kimmalyn (Callsign: Quirk)

Quirk/Kimmalyn is a member of Spensa and Jorgen’s ten-person cadet flight.

Kimmalyn is a Beneather who is from the cavern city of Bountiful, a (not very bountiful) smaller underground city that is near to Inferna. Her parents moved to Inferna at the urging of one of their local leaders, as their daughter proved very skilled at flight simulations. They hoped that, eventually, they could get her to Alta--which they did, when of her bosses flagged her for flight training. (Her parents and siblings, however, still work the nutrient vats underground.)

Perky and somewhat innocent, she frequently says things that are cringeworthy. She wasn’t raised as a Defiant, however, and offers a kind of “outsider” perspective on their somewhat aggressive and fighting-focused society. She’s a quick friend to Spensa, and though she’s extremely talented as a pilot, and particularly as a gunner, she’s also very timid--and responds poorly to enemy fire. Midway through the book, she breaks and flees under fire, and is kicked out of the DDF for cowardice. (Though she returns in the end climax.)

## Hadiya (Callsign: Hurl)

Hadiya/Hurl is a member of the ten-person cadet flight.

Hurl is a comedic character--athletic, always a top performer in her classes, she also doesn’t take much seriously. She’s a contrast to some of the others (Spensa included) who are hyper-serious. She treats the entire training like a game, and things come easily to her. She has an early rivalry with Spensa, but it quickly turns friendly, as Spensa realizes that Hurl just likes a good challenge. (And in turn likes anyone who gives it to them.) Her “take nothing seriously” attitude can be trying at time, but also gives some nice comedic breaks to otherwise grim scenes.

Hurl meets her end in the same encounter where Spena ejects, but Hurl (being a classic Defiant) refuses to do so, and gets blown up.

## Nedd (Callsign: No Dice)

Nedd “No Dice” is a member of the ten-person cadet flight.

Nedd, like Jorgen and Arturo, is an Abover who gets preferential treatment and a free pass into flight school. (Though he doesn’t bring his own ship.) He has two older brothers who are full pilots, and it’s expected he’ll be one as well.

A good friend to Jorgen, he is initially presented as a “crony” to his friend. Through the course of the book, however, he’s revealed as a nice guy--just lacking in ambition. He’s there because it’s expected, and doesn’t have much drive.

He’s exceptionally good at sticking his foot in his mouth, and is always trying to boast (a classic Defiant activity) but is really bad at it, and usually ends up sticking his foot in his mouth.

He drops out of the flight after one of his brothers is killed in action during fighting, and just can’t force himself to fly the next day. He’s kicked out for cowardiace but, with Quirk, comes back at the end climax.

## Arturo (Callsign: Amphisbaena)

Arturo (whose callsign is really hard to say, but which he thinks is cool) is a member of the ten-person cadet flight. Another Abover and friend of Jorgen, he’s presented as a crony early in the book.

Precise, intelligent, and a little stiff, Arturo is the most consistent pilot in the flight. He tends to consider himself smarter than everyone else, which is only partially true, and has a habit of saying things that imply just how smart he is. He’s offputting at first, but once you get to know him, you realize he’s not being arrogant--or, at least, not maliciously so. He has trouble grasping why people wouldn’t want to hear how smart he is.

## Freyja (Callsign: FM)

Freyja is a member of the ten-person cadet flight.

A staunch member of the “Defiant Counter-Culture Movement,” Freyja likes to talk about the things “You Defiants” do, even though she’s one herself. The daughter of a prominent senator, she has her own ship (like Jorgen) and was put into the military to “straighten her out.” But she’s in the middle of a rebellious period, and likes to spout conspiracy theories and (sometimes) far out ideas. She can be the voice highlighting how strange this society can be, but since she’s a little strange herself, she’ll play a dual role.

She is eventually promoted to full pilot.

## Instructor Cobb (Callsign: Mongrel)

Cobb is their flight instructor, a role that generally brings shivers of fear to those who talk about it. DDF flight instructors are known for being brutal, shouting, angry sergeants who beat their recruits into submission. This is what Spensa is expecting, and is shocked when she’s instead introduced to Cobb--a tall, square-shouldered, quiet man. He never shouts, but is known to use silence as a weapon. He tells stories that will harrow the mind and soul, stories of battle and loss, but he always does it in a quiet voice. And he tends to, stories excepted, be a man of few words.

At one point, the flight of cadets will hear a different flight instructor across the hall yelling at his cadets--the voice echoing through the hall. A symbol of what normally happens. But Cobb will stand, staring at the one in their class who screwed up, and let the silence stretch and stretch uncomfortably, before finally leaning down and just saying--softly--“Do better or you will die.”

Most of the flight thinks he’s creepy, and are disappointed in him. They whisper among themselves about why he’s not up fighting, why he got assigned to look after cadets instead. Though Spensa finds that she is intrigued by the way he’ll stand at the windows looking upward while they practice on the simulations. She finds that he reminds her of her father.

Which is appropriate since, unknown to the kids, Cobb was in her father’s flight of cadets many years ago. They were good friends, and Cobb was the one order to shoot her father down when he (supposedly) fled the battle. He obeyed orders, but now wants to see his friend’s daughter succeed, as a kind of recompense for past sins.

Cobb will be the one who lets her into the DDF at the beginning, despite failing her tests. He doesn’t fly any more himself, which grows increasingly suspicious, and it turns out he has latent issues from the encounter with Spensa’s father. He was too good a pilot to just discard, so he was moved into an instructional role.

## Admiral Ironsides

Commander of the DDF, Admiral Judy “Ironsides” is stern, determined woman with a ruthless air. She is a contrast to Cobb, and--for personal reasons--likes to frequently inspect the cadets to see what she’ll have to work with in the future.

She is the ultimate expression of Defiant culture. Firm, but also angry--and callous toward loss of life. To her, the war is everything. Stopping the Krell is everything. Most importantly, keeping Alta alive is everything. To her, it represents their only way forward, the symbol of humankind refusing to hide in the rock any longer.

Unfortunately, she’s feeling that slip away from her. Alta is in serious danger; they can’t put up enough flights of pilots to keep the Krell back, and the enemy is slowly overwhelming them. She’s putting more and more people into the air, then, with less and less training.

She is unyielding, refuses to think of other options (at least, any that seem like cowardice to her) and represents (in some ways) the choice Spensa has to make. Ironsides will tell her that it’s good for her to be angry, and she needs to take that anger out on the Krell, defending her people. She doesn’t care what’s beyond the debris. That’s not important to her. She wants her fleet in order, and her fighters in their posts.

She was the one who ordered Cobb to kill Spensa’s father. She also knows the truth--that they’re not fighting aliens, but other humans. She doesn’t know exactly why, however, and wishes this to be a secret. She’s not aware of the full business that humans are on a prison planet, quarantined from the rest of the galaxy. But when Spensa’s father found out the truth, she ordered him killed, and branded him as a coward to cover it up.

# Minor Characters

## Bim: (No Callsign)

Bim is a member of the ten-person flight of cadets who dies in one of the early scenes.

Friendly, affable, he’s amazed he got into Flight School--and talks about how this is blowing the minds of everyone he knows. He sits in the front row, and is determined to make good on this, and struggles over his callsign a lot--and never ends up picking one. He acts like he won the lottery with all of this, then gets blown out of the sky early on.

## Magna (Callsign: Morningtide)

Sequoia is a member of the ten-person flight team who dies in one of the early scenes.

Aloof, uninterested, she doesn’t respond when Spensa talks to her. They later find out she comes from another colony, and her accent makes her embarrassed. She is destroyed early in the book, along with Ben, in a harrowing scene.

## Zeen (Callsign: Chaser)

Spensa’s father was a star pilot, one of the best that the DDF ever had. He came from extremely humble birth, the son of scavengers, and was held up as a symbol that even the lowliest of Defiants was still--well, Defiant. He almost did more PR than he did fighting, during the days when Inferna was first expanding and growing, becoming the largest and most permanent human settlement on Detritus. He sometimes had to get away from it all, sneaking out and walking the planet surface, doing as his scavenger parents taught him when young.

He was a flight leader during the early days of Inferna’s growth, and was assigned a key position when the Krell finally targeted the city--and sent a huge force to destroy it. (The largest enemy force they’d ever seen at the time, though now that size force is common.) At the advent of the battle, however, Chaser turned and broke from his flight--disobeying orders. He was commanded to return to post, or be shot down as a coward. When he didn’t come back, he was shot down.

In truth, Chaser was convinced that the attacks they were suffering weren’t random patrol fleets--that more was going on. He claimed to have seen something in the sky, a station beyond the debris, and was determined to find out what it was. He kept telling his flight that if they didn’t stop the enemy at the source, they’d eventually be worn down.

When the enemy fleet came down, they opened a hole in the debris field, and Chaser made for it. Though the official story is that he turned back toward the surface to flee, he was actually caught--and shot down--while flying upward, pushing his ship well beyond its altitude limits, trying to get out and see what was up there.

# Plot

## Structure

The novel will have five sections. A shorter (10k) introduction, including prologue, and a shorter (10) climax at the end. The inner three parts (each 20k words) will balance four types of chapters, hopefully each in an interesting way.

**Relationship**: Spensa and the other cadets will interact in a schooling setting in Alta. Relationships, character drama, and the like.

**Training**: In the classroom, the cadets will fly in simulations, teaching them in a safer environment. These will he half action, half classroom drama.

**Testing**: There will be real-life tests that the students have to pass to prove their competence. Any who pass all three are made full pilots. As part of the testing, they will have to face actual combat situations--during which some of them will be killed in action.

**Repairing**: The “B” plot of the book is Spensa’s interactions with Murderbot, the ship she discovered--repairing it, talking to it, learning to fly it.

## Intro

**Prologue**

The shot prologue of the book will show Spena and her father climbing out of a crack and picking through the rubble for supplies. He’s a famous pilot, and she doesn’t get why sometimes, he would ever want to get away from everyone adoring him. People don’t tend to adore Spensa--they tell her to stop fighting, or stop getting into trouble.

A rare break in the debris comes up above, and her father points it out to her. They share a moment, and she sees stars for the first time. He expresses his desire to get out there and see, and challenges her not to be angry at the kids who tease her. They’re trapped on the ground, but she can set her sights for something higher. Something more grand. Together, they spot a twinkling light, something brighter than the other stars, and Zeen seems to read something into it. Has he seen this before?

He gets a call on the radio, calling him in. They are scrambling all fighters, and an enemy force has been seen. He’s needed, and he tells her to get back down below. In the moment before they part, he pulls off his pilot’s pin and tosses it to her. Then they part. And we cut.

**Early Chapters**

We cut to Spensa, now seventeen, selling rats with her mother. We get a view of Inferna, and our first exposure to it, and meet Rodge. The tests are this evening, and Spensa isn’t to be late--but we get internally from her that she’s worried about the tests. One of her teachers comes to buy some rat, and we get an interaction, where Spensa talks about the test--and how well she’ll do. But the teacher kind of lets the secret out, that there’s no way the daughter of a coward will be let into the DDF. Suggests that Spensa would be better served not embarrassing herself by showing up.

Angered, her temper almost out of control, Spensa leaves. She climbs the hidden passages her father showed her, digs out her improvised speargun and blast helmet, and goes rat hunting. She sees the place where her father and she looked at the sky, but now all she can see up there is rubble. She watches some ships do formations from a distance, and steps toward them. Then remembers her teacher’s words, and looks for something to take out her aggression.

She goes back to hunting, and gets a rat, then spots another--but in chasing it, slips into a hole and crashes into a hidden cavern. This is bad. She uses a small, improvised version of the Light Grapple (to introduce it to us for later on) and manages to free herself from the rubble. Then, looking for an escape, she stumbles across an interesting scrape trail--something her father trained her usually led to a crash she could salvage. She checks her clock, admits she might be late because of this. But maybe it IS best if she doesn’t show up.

She follows the scrapes, moves some rocks, and is rewarded with some chunks of broken metal. She’s very pleased with this, until she looks up. And finds an entire fighter ship, in remarkable condition, down here. She looks it over, brushes off its call sign, then sits down and thinks about her state. She pulls out her father’s pin, and makes the decision for herself that she wants to fly. She wants to soar, and see what is up there. And she needs to be defiant enough not to let a teacher scare her off--in fact, she starts to wonder with a shock if that’s not part of the test. She blushes, and feels increasingly certain that it IS part of the test. One she’s in the process of failing.

She scrambles out of the rubble. And in the next cut, we see her arriving at the testing, just on time. She sits down and gives a thumbs up to Rodge, then sets out her father’s pin and starts into the test. (On the table are a set of ten cadet pins.)

It’s on a subject she’s never studied before. Mechanics of energy transference, using vat-grown algae for human sustenance. She figures, this is just an introductory question, and flips through the test. But that’s the whole thing.

Lots of jargon, and she’s baffled. What does this have to do with being a pilot? The test is supposed to be tough, but why this? Feeling stupid, she struggles through as many of the questions as she can, but finally just sits there. Rodge turns in his test, covered in writing. She looks around, and some just leave, tests half-finished. Others turn theirs in and move to the waiting room, where results are announced. She just sits there, staring at her test. Her teacher from before tells her, “I warned you,” and Spensa says, “I thought that was part of the test.” But her teacher says she’s a fool, and implies her test is different. And what use is there complaining; this was chosen months ago, and the test is a formality. You’re a rat scavenger, and that’s what you’ll always be.

She stays there for hours, well into the night. Refusing to turn in her test. She hears cheers from the other room as results are announced and pins are given away. Then silence. The test-giver has left, and she’s just sitting there, with papers in her hands and her father’s pin on the table. People try to get her to leave, but she refuses, stubbornly holding the test. She realizes it’s foolish, but she thinks that maybe if she just never gives it up, the dream of being a pilot doesn’t have to end. As she’s sitting there--the lights having been turned off on her--she hears janitors moving outside, cleaning the facility. And she turns over her paper, ignoring the test part, and starts sketching the ship she discovered down below.

She starts to think. If she had her own ship, they’d have to let her in. It’s in the rules. If she could gather enough supplies, if she could repair it... She’s making a plan. She’s not going to let them keep her from becoming a pilot.

As she works, a figure darkens the doorway, and asks why she’s still there. Thinking she’s speaking to a janitor, she keeps drawing, and mutters that she’s going to force them to drag her out by her heels.

They have a short conversation, in which the “janitor” asks why she wants this so badly. Doesn’t she know that pilots almost all die? That it’s much safer to just stay down in the bunker, and she has two immediate thoughts. The first is anger, and bites of a response, saying she needs to prove her father’s innocence. The words that come out are, however, “Down here, you can’t see the sky.” The janitor points out you can’t see it up there, either, not with the debris. When she doesn’t respond, the man steps over and leaves something on her desk. It’s a pin--the pin of a cadet in flight school. She gapes at it, then scrambles to her feet, looking at the shadowed figure in the doorway, a tall older man. She asks how, and she sees a flash of metals on his jacket. His face is shadowed, but he reminisces briefly on the term “Defiant.” “We call ourselves that to defy the krell. We beat it into our brains, until it permeates us. Perhaps, then, we should be so surprised when we are the ones that get defied. Class starts tomorrow, seven hundred sharp. You’ll get to see the sky. It will probably be the last thing you see, but you will get to see it.”

## Part One:

* Introductions are made. Cobb: “One of you might make it. In a good class, two make it. I’m thinking in this class, none of you will.”
* Callsigns are explained, and simulators are introduced. Admiral speaks to them all. (Has it out for Spensa.) First clash with Jorgen.
* Instead of doing initial training that day, they are taken right up into the sky, told to hold. Their first test. The enemy is here. (The students are just supposed to put up a show of force. Just be there, so the enemy thinks there are reinforcements.)
* They pass the time, tense, and are told to pick callsigns to keep themselves from being too nervous. Spensa gets Jorgen named Jerkface. (Retribution for their clash earlier.)
* One Krell gets close, and Cobb calls, tells them to get down low for anti-aircraft guns in the city to shoot the thing down. They manage to. Spensa wonders: Why isn’t Cobb up here himself.
* It’s nerve wracking, though none die. When they land, Cobb says they were sent up to give them a good scare. He says this is to warn them what it will be like. “Who is going to drop out? There’s often one, after the first fight.” Nobody yet.
* Assigned bunks...except for Spensa. She’s not given credits for housing, as Cobb invited her in, but she didn’t actually pass the tests. She’ll need to pay for her own housing, or return to Inferna each night. Cobb doesn’t like this, but Admiral insists. He argues she’ll lose hours that way, and needed camaraderie. Admiral is firm.
* Spensa is turned out for the night, but instead of taking the paths down, she makes a short hike to where M-Bot is. She sleeps in the cockpit, as it’s kind of like a bed. Next morning, wakes early, and starts looking into repairing it. Realizes she needs to steal a power source.
* Next day: Rigmarole drops out. Too scared of that fight. Cobb respects that.
* They are introduced to the simulators, and the Light Grapples. More confrontation between Spensa and Jorgen. In simulations, Spensa pulls off something. They’re told to achieve a goal at all costs, and she treats it like a simulation, not real life, and does something that kind of “breaks” the system. (Maybe crashes into Jorgen head-on, knowing it will knock out the highest point leader except herself, and she’ll still win this round of practice sparring?) Cobb says that wouldn’t have been good in real life, but she reminds him he told her to achieve the goal at all costs. She’s won the sparring, even if she’s “Dead.”
* Jorgen is annoyed by this. He confronts her after, and they clash. He threatens her. She steals one of his power gloves to use for powering her ship.
* She gets it up and running, but is at the extent of her abilities. Decides she needs help, and goes and grabs Rodge. He’s amazed.
* The second test is successfully using light-grapples to spin around poles in real life. They go through an obstacle course, and in the middle of it, there’s an attack. They’re commanded into position, and they actually fight Krell this time.
* Two of the team--Magna and Bim--are killed.

## Part Two:

* It is a somber group that gather for training the next day. Spensa overhears arguments between Cobb and Admiral--Cobb is angry that the students were used at all. He says they’re too green.
* Admiral: “We’re losing. We’ll be pushed underground again. We need every fighter. And I’ll use every resource I can get.”
* In class: Cobb talks about loss. And tries to frighten them into leaving again.
* In the simulators, they practice dodging rubble. Hurl wants to know when they get to actually shoot things, and Cobb says they need practice on this first. We get an explanation of teamwork, and how to use the IMP. Warning that they’re left completely vulnerable if they use that.
* Spensa returns to her cave that night. Rodge has main power up, the AI boots up for the first time. They’re amazed. A talking calculator? Like, a machine that can voice its own thoughts? Introductions of M-bot. She takes with her a device that lets her lock the ship and engage a stealth device that hides it from salvage seekers. This was up and running for years, but the power finally gave out, which is why she was able to find the ship.
* Their next test is to attack rubble as it’s falling, while a real fight happens overhead. They don’t fight the Krell, not really, but they destroy rubble to keep it from hitting the city. In the fighting overhead, Nedd’s brother (a full pilot) is killed.
* Need doesn’t show up the next day for classes. They kick him out, the Admiral says there’s no room for cowards--every ship is precious. They can’t have anyone in a cockpit who isn’t 100% committed.
* M-bot can talk to her through the locking device, which shocks her. He can hack into her audio in the simulation and things like that. (This way, we can continue to progress their relationship while she’s doing training.) M-Bot is shockingly innocent and a pacifist, to comedic effect at times.
* That night, Spensa finds that the other girls in her flight have made a bed for her on the floor, and they’ve saved portions of their rations for her. She feels welcome for the first time, and stays with them that night, even though she knows she should get back and help. Like, real friendship stuff now. Good bonding with Qurik, Hurl, and FM.
* Admiral next day. “Don’t do that again.” She gets angry, and surprisingly, the Admiral is pleased with this. “I can use anger, Coward. Pity, not so much. I killed your father. Are you all right with that? Prove that you’re not. If you want to succeed as a pilot, you need to prove to me you’re not the coward he was.”
* In the next study session, this all distracts her a lot. Here, they go over advanced using of Light-lances in simulation to bring down the enemy.
* Progress on relationships. Some good things with Jorgen here, where we start to soften to him, in part through Arturo and Nedd. (As we soften to them, we see Jorgen through their eyes.) The group is working like a team; Hurl and Spensa work together really well as wingmates.
* Little more fixing of M-Bot. Rodge warns: We’re going to need some new engine parts that I can’t just build myself. But there’s a warning, and the enemy is attacking. She tries to get M-Bot to help her, but he’s a pacifist. (Plus, he’s still broken.)
* Spensa barely gets back late, and the rest of the team is already up. She jumps into her pico and joins them.
* Big fight with the Krell: Exciting combat. However, Arturo gets hit, and his ship shields are knocked out. Worse, near the end of the fight, Hurl is killed. (She refuses to eject. She will NOT be a coward, even when Spensa begs her to.)

## Part Three:

* Opening, Spensa talking to M-Bot, she’s working underneath with a wrench while Rodge is doing other work. She’s explaining about death to the computer, who doesn’t understand it. Spensa is trying to deal with the loss of Hurl herself.
* Rodge is right. There’s a big problem with his engines--and we’re not going to make any more progress without them.
* Arrives for the day’s training, and techs are deactivating and doing maintenance on the simulators. Cobb explains that they’ve progressed to the point that there are no more simulations for them. They’re given a half-day off, but before they go, Quirk approaches Cobb. She’s dropping out. She just can’t take this. Apologizes to the rest of them, and is kicked out of the DDF.
* In their spare time, Spensa wants to go find Hurl’s body. Nobody will go with her, but Jorgen will. He drives her out in one of his family’s cars, and they talk. About Hurl, about Nedd (who dropped out when his brother died) about life, and things. She’s falling for him, and he for her.
* They find Hurl’s corpse, and they burn her and grab her pin to give to her family. Jorgen marks the location for salvage, and she has M-Bot hack the signal, telling the salvage team to stow the wreckage near the cave for “Security purposes” which ends up working. A salvage team pulls the wreckage (later, off screen) to where Rodge can get at it and grab the parts he needs.
* More practice in the skies, and they’re learning really well. Spensa and Jorgen are now wingmates. FM and Arturo are wingmates.
* They land, and see what’s left of the main combat wing after a bloody battle with the Krell. They’re getting really beaten up out there--so many holes in their teams. As the group is watching this, Arturo’s parents arrive and pull him out, despite him being one of the best pilots, because of how dangerous it’s becoming. They have enough wealth and power they can do that. The flight is now down to only three Spensa, Jorgen, FM. They’re going to be combined with the remnants of the two other student flights, who have taken similar casualties.
* That night, talking to M-Bot, and he mentions things about some of his memories--which are patchy. She flies him for the first time. She takes to it very naturally; it’s a wonderful flight. He’s super maneuverable and fast.
* They bond, but after the flight, he tells her he’s shutting down. He cannot accept where this is going, and has to follow the mandate of his master: Don’t fight any longer. He is never going to be her ship.
* She is heartbroken, but--at the same time--understands. She leaves him, closing the hangar down and locking him in darkness, activating the stealth device and planning to leave him for a few more hundred years. (I need something to do with Rodge here.)
* Spensa then, with nowhere to sleep, returns to visit her mother. She talks about her father, and reconnects. Spensa: “Doesn’t it matter to you, the things they say about him?” Mom: It seems to me the coward is the one who cares more about what people think than what is right. The coward is afraid of not being known as a hero, and the hero isn’t scared of what will be said. (But, of course, this will be said in a more pithy.)
* This is really good for Spensa. The next day, she confronts Cobb, and asks questions about what’s really happening. Why they don’t have answers about what the Krell really are. She demands to know what he knows about her father, and all he’ll say is that she sounds like Chaser used to. (Also, subtle foreshadowing that he has clues of what she’s been doing. Her drawing of M-bot on the back of her test, for example.)
* Almost done with their tests. But the city is in real danger. They fight the krell, and the newly formed cadet flight is used as scouts. In a dynamic sequence, they discover a huge fleet preparing up there. Maximum number of krell ships--a full contingent, the largest they’ve ever faced at once.
* Fun combat. But Spensa’s ship is hit. Rather than die, she makes the choice to eject.
* Admiral is very excited by this. She brands Spensa as a coward, and kicks her out of the DDF for ejecting too early--for not fighting, and for running. Admiral takes her father’s pin away, somehow. (How does she get it? Not sure yet.)

## Climax:

* The only two remaining cadets--Jorgen and FM--graduate. Spensa watches from a distance, and won’t meet Cobb’s eyes when he looks for her. Somewhere in here, she realizes she still has the locking mechanism for M-Bot’s cave. Frustrated, she throws it away, and walks through the city of Alta.
* She finds a café with Nedd and Quirk, reminiscing together. Nedd has a radio that can hear military broadcasts, and they listen as the huge Krell fleet is deployed against Alta. Every available fighter ship is sent to confront them.
* Jorgen is in danger. He warns, something’s wrong. He’s doing scouting, which he’s proven effective at. He says that the carrier ship--the one with the lifebuster bomb--isn’t among the fleet they’re fighting.
* Spensa looks up and sees stars, and a glowing star at the front, and a small flight coming down. The big fleet was a distraction. The others say there’s nothing they can do, but she points out, there is one ship remaining. Arturo’s broken one.
* Cut to command center. Admiral’s POV. They’ve identified a lifebuster, and a small flight coming right for the city. The admiral is livid; there has to be something they can do. Someone they can send. They’ve committed everything to the other fight. (As they thought there couldn’t be any more enemy, as this was the maximum number of ships ever sent.) What about the other defense forces? Too far away. Private ships maybe? Calls Arturo’s family, demands their ships, but they’re pulling out. It would be suicide.
* The people around the Admiral say they need to evacuate, and she calls that cowardice. Tech: So you’d throw away the entire command center? Admiral: What about this? What about everything we’ve worked for? We leave, and this is no more. Both cities are no more. Tech: And what do we gain by staying?
* One of the other techs: Admiral. Admiral! On the screen, a single ship streaking up--a single point of light. What is that ship? Who is piloting it? Tech: they just radioed in a callsign. Who? Who is it? Tech... Callsign: Chaser.
* Cut to Spensa, flying toward the enemy fleet, alone. Admiral calls. “Coward? What are you doing. Engineer report says that ship has no shield.” Spensa: If I can bring down the ship carrying the bomb, it buys us a lot of time, right? Cut to Admiral, speechless, as one ship engages dozens.
* Spin fights, but there are too many. She ends up taking a hit to the engines, and in the end is immobilized, floating there. The sky explodes with debris, coming down toward her, and one enemy ship circles around to deal with her. She looks up, at the sky, as she waits for it to happen. But Cobb saves her, as M-Bot has called him. (Using the device she threw away, which Cobb recovered.)
* Cobb grabs her with a light grapple and lands her broken ship. He spills the beans: “Listen, they didn’t kill your father for fleeing. They killed him because of what he saw. A secret, though I don’t know what it is. He disobeyed, he flew up, and he saw something.” Cobb hasn’t been able to fly since. He tells her some sage advice, and she remembers what her mother said.
* She gets into M-Bot, and asks what happened to shutting down. The ship admits, “I said something that was untrue.” (This will echo the first time he talked to her about lies, which he couldn’t believe that she’d say.) His big arc is this: He went to shut down, but couldn’t do it. Because he wanted to live. And he finally understands why she’d fight.
* They fly back, double speed, and engage the Krell. But her weapons still are locked. (M-Bot has decided to help, but the lock is beyond his programming to remove.) Arturo, Quirk, and Nedd arrive in Arturo’s family ships, which they’ve stolen. Spensa draws fire and dodges. She’s really, really good at it--best at dodging. Together, they bring down the ship with the bomb, and the rest of the Krell disengage.
* Spensa is congratulated, and the Admiral offers her and her father a full pardon. Just come back. But she looks up.
* And flies skyward.
* Admiral threatens her, but she has M-Bot patch it into all signals. Talks. Because my father saw something? Yes, Admiral admits. Don’t do this. You don’t know what you’re ruining. Our enemy isn’t what you think. It’s important. Please...don’t do this.
* She flies high, and sees that their enemy is humans. (Stencil says “Quarantine forces” or something.) I’m thinking we cut here, with the rest as a mystery, but we’ll see. I also haven’t 100% decided if this is fully automated, as I talk about earlier in the outline, or if it’s a better reveal if a smaller subset of humans was put in charge of maintaining the stations and keeping their own kind down. (The reason to do this is it can be a quick twist at the end--there are no fearsome aliens, just other humans, which raises a big question. The reason not to do it is because it’s a better “pitch” if humankind is all being quarantined. But I don’t quite know how I can drop that bomb at the ending in a way that doesn’t require a huge infodump.)

# Cover suggestion

I think whatever you were planning for the cover with Apocalypse Guard can be adapted to this book, as great lettering + space planets works here too. If I might make a suggestion, though, I think whatever we do it should include a little graphic of a line shooting upward, perhaps toward (or through) the title lettering. The idea is to do something that looks like a reverse shooting star, simulating the idea of a ship launching into the sky--and going skyward. (A replication of the scene at the end where Spensa turns her ship and flies upward, out into space.)

If you google “Shooting star” and imagine the image rotated in your head so it is shooting straight upward (instead of the general sideways downward) you might be able to imagine what I’m seeing. Other than that, cool title lettering works for me. We don’t even need planets, if we don’t want them.

Series title could work as Defiant: Book One. (Unless you think it’s too similar to Divergent.)