

Book IV

SOLAR WARS

THE DAWN OF TWO SUNS

A long time ago, in unmeasurable eons of time... not in some distant galaxy, far, far away... but right here, in our own cosmic backyard... in our solar system... there was no earth!

Chapter 18

Predator's Gambit



Kael'Ryn
MERCURY



Princess Lysara
VENUS



General
Vaelor Krynn
MARS



VX-17 (Vex)
Combat-Droid
JUPITER



The
Shallit'Biru



Xal'Zirath
MERCURY

DEE DOWNING

Chapter 18: Predator's Gambit

Commander Typhon's breath came in ragged gasps as she sprinted through the dense, alien forest of Pheldhor's moon. The dim chemiluminescent glow of the twisted flora barely illuminated her path, casting long, shifting shadows that only added to the disorientation. Behind her, a guttural snarl tore through the humid air.

The Rezzak was gaining.

Her squad flanked her on either side, but the chase had already claimed too many. One by one, they had fallen to the relentless predators. Typhon had always dismissed the rumors about the Rezzaks' uncanny coordination, but now she knew the truth... they didn't hunt alone. The creature at the outpost had chased them directly into the waiting claws of another, stationed half a mile away. Was it telepathy? Or something even more insidious?

It didn't matter. They had to survive.

"Stay unpredictable!" Typhon barked over her shoulder. *"Don't do what they expect!"*

Her remaining squad members followed her lead, zigzagging through the undergrowth, altering their pace, making sharp turns without pattern. The tactic worked... at least for now. The Rezzaks hesitated just long enough for them to gain distance.

The com-link crackled in her ear. *"Commander, we have a shuttle inbound for extraction. Stand by."*

Relief threatened to take hold, but she forced it down. *"Negative! Do not approach from above. They know... Somehow, they know. They'll be waiting."*

Too late. A deafening screech split the night, followed by an overhead explosion. The first shuttle rescue never stood a chance. A Rezzak, unseen and waiting, had struck the moment it appeared in range. The fireball's light illuminated the grotesque forms of their hunters prowling the treetops.

Her jaw clenched. *"Send another shuttle. I'll give you coordinates. And listen carefully."*

She transmitted her plan... An insane maneuver, but the only chance they had. The shuttle was to dive straight down at a precise angle, nose-first, toward the cliff they were racing toward. It would look like a suicide run... Right up until it flew parallel down the rock face.

Typhon and her squad approached the precipice. Once they reach it... there is nowhere else to go. The Rezzaks closed in, slinking through the shadows, their glowing eyes locking onto their prey.

"Get ready," she commanded, her voice steady despite the pounding in her chest.

Then she saw it... The belly of the shuttle plunging down the cliffside, as they reached the edge, still running. *"Right on time."*

"JUMP!"

They leaped. The wind howled past them as they fell, arms outstretched trying to reach the back of the shuttle. Typhon barely registered the scream of one of her men as a Rezzak's claws tore into him before he could jump. They landed hard, rolling into the vertical shuttle's open bay.

Before they could celebrate, Typhon scaled up the deck to close the shuttle door. As she reached the lever, her eyes widened; a monstrous shape had hurtled down behind them. A Rezzak had leaped as well, its gaping maw reaching for the shuttle.

"Punch it!" Typhon roared.

The pilot yanked the controls. The shuttle jerked forward, leveling off just before it reached the bottom of the cliff. The Rezzak, unable to change course, plummeted straight into the ground.

Typhon exhaled and sat up, staring down at where the creature landed. Her mission was a success... but at what cost?

Back aboard her ship, **Typhon**, exhaling sharply. *"We got what we came for. The outpost is gone, and now we know why... Prepare for departure. We're heading back to the fleet."*

Silent Infiltration

The Black Talon hovered in place; its exterior running lights dimmed as it awaited the incoming shuttle. Krynn and the others had already positioned themselves around the docking area; in the shadows.

A soft beep from Vex signaled the shuttle's approach. The sleek, gunmetal-gray craft glided in; its engines humming as it aligned with the Black Talon's air lock. The docking clamps engaged with a metallic *clunk*, locking the two ships together.

The airlock hissed, and the door slid open. Two armed Draetheon soldiers stepped through; their weapons slung over their shoulders. Behind them, a uniformed pilot remained in the shuttle's cockpit, oblivious to the ambush awaiting her comrades.

The first soldier barely had time to process the dimly lit corridor before Xal struck. Moving like a phantom, he grabbed the soldier's weapon and drove an elbow into his throat. He choked, stumbling backward just as a swift and brutal strike to his head, knocking him unconscious.

The second soldier reacted, reaching for his sidearm... but Kael twisted his arm back, forcing him to drop his weapon, and sent him crashing into the wall with a sharp kick. He slumped to the floor, unconscious.

As Vex and Krynn removed the bodies, Kael and Xal continued into the shuttle's cockpit. The pilot still unaware, collapsed on the console face first, as Xal gently placed the palm of his hand on the backside of her head and released a faint pulse.

Kael (surprised): *"I didn't know you figured out how to do that... I'm still working on it."*

Vex rushed on the shuttle and carried the pilot away. Lysara and Krynn quickly boarded. *"Well done,"* **Krynn** praised. *"No alarms. No one the wiser."*

"Now, let's get aboard that flagship and see just how deep this red hopper hole goes. Everyone... buckle in."

Where's My Shuttle!?!

The conference room was dimly lit. The high admiral sat at the head of a long table; his fingers tapping impatiently against the polished surface. He glanced at the clock on the wall. They were well past the scheduled time for the crew of the XK-07 to arrive. His eyes narrowed as he waited; clearly growing frustrated.

"Where are they?" the **admiral** asked, his voice sharp and cutting through the quiet murmurs of the officers gathered around the room.

An officer quickly stepped forward, his face tense with uncertainty. *"Sir, we've tracked the XK-07... There's no sign of them. They're not missing, sir, but your shuttle should've arrived by now to bring them aboard. We're still awaiting confirmation."*

The **admiral's** brow furrowed. *"What do you mean, 'not missing'? Where is my shuttle?"* His gaze flickered to the officer across the room. *"Do we know what's happening?"*

The officer shifted uneasily, pulling up a data display. *"I'm not sure, sir, but I'll check the communications room for any sign of the shuttle. It should've been on a direct path to us. I'll be right back."*

The **admiral** exhaled slowly; as the officer made his exit; down the corridor to the communications room. He turned his attention to the rest of the room, his patience wearing thin. *"What else do we know?"* he demanded, addressing the remaining officers.

Before anyone could answer, the doors to the conference room slid open once more, and Commander Typhon entered. She moved with purpose, her boots clicking against the floor as she approached the table. The **admiral** turned to her immediately, a mix of urgency and expectation in his gaze.

"Commander," he greeted her, his voice stern. *"What's the status of your mission? I trust we've gained some valuable intelligence on the outpost?"*

Typhon offered a slight nod, but before she could speak, the **officer** returned to the room, his face even more tense than before. *"Sir,"* he began, his voice tight with concern, *"We've lost communication*

with the shuttle that was supposed to pick up the crew of the XK-07. It's off the grid. There's no signal, no sign of the shuttle at all."

The **admiral's** expression darkened. He stood; now intense. *"How is this possible?"* he demanded, his voice rising. *"That shuttle was supposed to get them here for the meeting."*

Typhon remained silent, but her gaze sharpened. She was already piecing things together in her mind. *"I'll find out what happened, Sir,"* she said, her voice calm but firm. *"If I can find out what happened at the outpost, I can find out what happened to your shuttle."*

The **admiral's** eyes narrowed. *"You'd better. We've been waiting long enough for this meeting. I expect answers, Commander."*

Typhon didn't flinch; her posture unwavering. *"I'll get to the bottom of this. I'll check in with you as soon as I have something."*

The admiral gave a curt nod. *"Make it fast, Commander. We're running out of time."*

A Shuttle Surprise

Inside the shuttle, the tension was thick with the quintet successfully hiding it from the flagship's sensors.

Xal paced in the tight confines of the shuttle's cabin; his brow furrowed with concern. He glanced out of the small viewport, watching the dark expanse of space, his thoughts racing. *"We've got to think this through. What happens after we disable the flagship? How long before it's back in action? How long before it leads an armada to Mer'Kuri?"*

Lysara looked at him, her expression thoughtful. She had her doubts too. She knew the stakes. *"You're right. I was thinking about that too."* Her voice carried a weight that made the room grow even quieter.

Krynn, standing a few feet away; gaze fixed ahead. *"Well, thanks for sharing,"* he muttered, though his tone betrayed no real annoyance.

Lysara turned toward him, her eyes steady. *"He's right, Krynn. You know it, and I know it."* She let the silence stretch for a moment.

*"We've got to do more than just disable this ship. We've got to... How did Xal put it?... **blow something up!**"*

The words hung in the air, their weight sinking in. The tension that had been building in the shuttle seemed to crystallize. **Xal's** eyes met Lysara's, *"Yeah, Right!"*. The stakes were too high for anything less than total destruction.

Krynn: *"And what exactly are we going to blow up, Princess?"*

Lysara's lips curled into a half-smile, a dangerous glint in her eyes. *"Anything that will keep them from coming after Mer'Kuri... Beginning with that!"*

Pointing at the flagship.

Kael, who had been quiet up until now, stood in the threshold of the cockpit; fingers clinched on the handhold of the door frame above his head. *"How are we going to blow **that** up?"*

Xal: *"She blew up the outpost on Pheldhor... Now turn her loose on that flagship!"*

Lysara turned her attention to Vex, her expression serious as she spoke, her voice steady despite the weight of their mission. *"Vex, do you think it's possible **for us** to blow up the flagship?"*

Vex's glowing eyes flickered as he processed the question, his mechanical voice soft but unwavering. *"As a matter of fact, **Yes**... But it would require two simultaneous attacks... One from the front and one from the rear of the flagship. Coordinating both strikes will be the most difficult part."*

The group glanced at the vast, looming form of the flagship, visible through the shuttle's viewports. Its sheer size was intimidating; an imposing structure that seemed almost invulnerable.

Xal raised an eyebrow, his skepticism evident. *"Two attacks? You think we can pull that off?"*

Although Xal's question was directed to everyone aboard the shuttle, it was **Vex** who answered, his voice steady and matter-of-fact.

"Yes... And here's how," Vex began; his metallic form shifting slightly as he navigated through the data in his internal system. "Although the size alone of the flagship is intimidating, it has a very vulnerable weakness." His eyes flickered as he projected an image of the ship on the shuttle's screen.

"The flagship's power is generated by two systems," Vex continued. "One at the front; the reactor core. Its purpose is to power the entire ship's weapons and shields. The other, at the rear, is the engine room, where the propulsion system resides. These two systems, although essential, have their limitations."

Kael leaned forward slightly, listening intently. "What's the limitation?"

Vex's tone became even more precise. "They are linked, but they aren't entirely in sync. If one is disabled and the other is not, the flagship would still be operational, though slower and more vulnerable. However, if we hit both at the same time, we create a chain reaction. The explosion in the reactor core would trigger a critical overload in the engine room, and vice versa. The damage would ripple throughout the ship, bringing its systems down before they can even react."

Lysara's eyes sharpened. "That would destroy the flagship."

"Precisely," Vex replied, his voice calm as if discussing a simple tactical maneuver. "It would take down the weapons, shields, and propulsion all at once. The flagship would be crippled. The crew would be too busy dealing with the fallout to stop you."

Xal: "Well... When you say it like that..."

*Vex interjected with a crisp finality. "And once your objectives are met... you will have exactly **ten minutes** to get off the flagship before it explodes."*

The shuttle went silent for a beat as they all processed. Their eyes flicked to one another, mouths hanging open for a moment. The weight of the mission just increased tenfold.

Lysara broke the silence, her gaze hardening with determination. "OK, We split up into two teams. Kael and I will take the front and hit the reactor. Krynn... You and Xal take the rear and handle the engine room."

Krynn raised an eyebrow, clearly surprised. *"We're not going together?"*

Lysara shook her head firmly. *"We don't need any distractions, and both of us will benefit from having a Solari warrior at our side."* Her eyes met Kael's and Xal's with a sense of trust that was unmistakable.

Krynn, ever the strategist, gave a small, knowing smile. *"A Solari warrior at my side... Interesting concept."*

Xal: *"Let's hope we don't end up turning the flagship into space debris before we can get off it."*

Lysara turned to Vex, her tone sharp and commanding. *"Vex, give us the exact coordinates for each target... and keep us hidden."*

Vex's face remained impassive as he brought up a new schematic on the shuttle's console, showing the exact locations of both the reactor and engine room. *"Coordinates are set. Once you're in, I'll continue to guide you remotely."*

With that, the shuttle's controls whirled as the ship began its approach to the flagship. The looming hulk of the vessel grew ever larger in the viewport. The air was thick with anticipation, but the team knew what they had to do.

There was no turning back now.