
Book V
SOLAR WARS
SHADOW OF DRAETHEON
Kael'Ryn
MERCURY
Princess Lysara
VENUS
General
Vaelor Krynn
MARS
VX-17 (Vex)
Combat-Droid
JUPITER
Commander Typhon
DRAETHEON
Xal'Zirath
MERCURY
The
Shallit'Biru
A long time ago, in unmeasurable eons of time;
not in some distant galaxy, far, far away; but right here,
in our own comismic backyard; in our solar system...
there was no earth!
DEE DOWNING

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Table of Contents

Preamble ..... **a**

Chapter 1: The Tower That Was Not **1**

The Obsidian Womb 3

Begin! 4

Chapter 2: Khepra **6**

Command Nexus 8

The Hall of Echoes 11

Chapter 3: The Flame and the Ash **13**

Outpost Nullveil 15

Tower of Tiraxis - Level Three 17

Chapter 4: The Corpse Garden **20**

Chapter 5: Sanctum **26**

An Estate of Affairs 27

Tower of Tiraxis - Level Five 29

Chapter 6: The Verge **31**

Fortress of Sha'duun - Inner Spire 32

Escape The Verge 35

Chapter 7: Unfair Affair **37**

And So It Begins! 40

The After Glow 41

Chapter 8: Mer'Kuri Prime **42**

The Great Escape 44

Chapter 9: Get Use To Disappointment **47**

Solari Sanctum 48

Rain Drops Keep Falling 51

Chapter 10: Secret Handshake **53**

Bend A Knee 56

Chapter 11: Draetheon **59**

The Mer’Kuri Rim 62
The Capitol 63
Chapter 12: Fractures of Light **65**
Above The Rim 67
Mer’Kuri Streets 71
Chapter 13: A Kingdom of Silence **72**
The Gathering Storm 76
Chapter 14: Crimson Tribunal **78**
Fire and Stone 80
Martian Prejudice 84
Chapter 15: Ashes in Orbit **85**
Inner Sanctum of the Solari Temple 88
The Southern Front 90
Chapter 16: Capitol Flame **93**
Near the Mer'Kuri/Void Rim 96
The Reavers 98
The Upper Ridge 100
Beneath the Ashen Span 103
Chapter 17: Dark Shadows **106**
The Citadel Spire 108
The Creature 111
Chapter 18: The First Eclipse **113**
Family Matters 115
The Darkside Pass 116
Shadow Gate 118
Chapter 19: Crimson Threshold **120**
When Twilight Falls 122
Temple Hollow: Outer Ridge 124
Temple Hollow: Lower Ridge 125

Chapter 20: Revelation 127
The Final Hour I 129
The Final Hour II 131
The Final Hour III 133
The Final Hour IV 134
Far Beyond the Fire Trails and Drifting Wreckage 137

Preamble

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

From the Solari Codex, Verse 91:The Prophecy of the Twin Suns

When the stars are veiled and the void draws breath,
Two shall rise from fire and stone.

The Twin Suns, born of Mer'Kuri's light, shall stand where legions fall. And in their wake, the heavens shall tremble.

Long before the shadow reached Mer'Kuri, there was a whisper; a myth carried in sunlit chants and Solari fire. Kael'Ryn and Xal'Zirath; the Twin Suns of prophecy, forged by the light of Ra, trained from boyhood to command the flame.

At their side stood Princess Lysara of Venus, a sovereign caught between diplomacy and destiny; General Vaelor Krynn of Mars, feared and revered across a dozen warfronts; and VX-17 (Vex); a Jovian combat-droid with the heart of a warrior and the mind of a tactician.

When Kael and Xal were nineteen years of age, this quintet brought ruin to the Draetheon flagship, Abyssal Spire; a vessel forged for a campaign of silence and fire, meant to begin with the conquest of Mer'Kuri, the Sun's closest child, and end with the subjugation of the seven planets of the outer rim.

Their defiance did more than delay the darkness; it lit the void with hope.

But the shadow of Draetheon is not so easily scattered. It coils now in deeper places, where prophecy cannot reach, and fire cannot cleanse.

And as worlds prepare for peace, the true war begins; in the silence between stars.

Chapter 1: The Tower That Was Not

Tiraxis was silent. Eerily so for the Mer'Kuri moon. No winds stirred the black dust plains; no creatures cried in the ancient ravines. Just the crunch of Kael's boots pressing into fractured stone and ash

. A single tower rose in the distance. Far away, yet ever so close. As Kael walked along, keeping just a few feet from the edge of a waist-high walled ravine, he could see the massive structure across the fog-filled gulf. It looked like an enormous shadow. Was it some kind of optical illusion?

From its midsection up, the fog obscured how far the ravine stretched below. Even so, the tower's scale was staggering. From the visible portion alone, it appeared to stretch nearly a mile across. Its silhouette vanished into the dark, churning clouds above.

Those clouds were the only thing shielding him. The sun's rays were still diffused, too weak to burn through the cover. But that wouldn't last. Kael had to reach the tower before the light of Ra broke through. Before it exposed him.

The sky above burned a dull orange, choked with light and shadow. That tower; it didn't belong. It wasn't built here. It arrived here.

The Tower of Rael'thuun, the Solari called it. Sacred. Forbidden. Forgotten.

Once thought lost to myth, it was known only through ancient whispers and half-burned scrolls. But recently, through intercepted transmissions from the Kurai resistance, the Solari uncovered a darker truth: the Eclipse had claimed the tower. Not as a relic. As a stronghold. One of their most, secret.

The path veered away from the ravine's edge, sloping downward into terrain choked with low-hanging foliage and gnarled roots. Kael adjusted the gauntlet on his left wrist, its Solari sigils pulsing faintly in sync with the rhythm of his heartbeat.

The heat of the sun brushed the edge of his awareness; gentle, but growing. He inhaled deeply, drawing its warmth into his core. Focus. No flame. Not yet.

The brush thickened as he descended; the path straying away from the wall, the tangled undergrowth parting only with effort. Thorned vines snagged at his limbs, and low branches swayed as if reacting to his presence. Kael didn't flinch. The tower loomed behind the mist.

Suddenly, a thunderous crack split the sky behind him. Kael turned just in time to see the clouds tear open; an unnatural breach spilling forth radiant beams that scorched the horizon.

The sun's destructive rays, long held at bay, now pierced through like celestial blades. Several hundred meters behind, the ground hissed and blackened.

He ran.

The foliage whipped past him as he sprinted through the underbrush; lungs burning, the searing heat nipping at his heels. T

Then… an opening.

As he emerged from the foliage into a clearing, he stopped. The base of the tower loomed ahead at last; closer now, yet no more grounded in reality than it had been across the ravine. Its walls shimmered faintly, as if resisting the logic of space.

From the outside, it looked like one tower. But Kael knew better: each level existed somewhere else entirely. Another world. Another battlefield. He would have to fight his way upward, one realm at a time; each victory unlocking a means to teleport to the next level.

He clenched his fists, feeling the force of Ra surging closer; not yet at full strength, but rising. Yet obliterating everything in its path.

Finally, Kael reached the tower with the destructive force still giving chase. He paused at the threshold. The massive doors loomed before him, split by a vertical seam and flanked by two statues cloaked in ancient warrior armor; unmoving.

Watching.

As the consuming beams of Ra finally reached Kael, a low groan echoed as the doors creaked open. As they exhaled hot air and shadow pushing back the solar force; Kael stepped inside.

The world shifted.

One blink, and the inside environment changed. The smooth, blackened floor beneath his feet was gone. In its place: sand. Endless sand beneath a crimson sky. The ferocious beams of solar energy were no longer raining destruction. Only heat, shimmering in the distance.

Standing between Kael and a glowing pad of Solari glyphs (a teleport gate) was an armored Eclipse warrior. Solar spear in hand. Eyes burning with the light of Ra; well earned.

Kael smirked.

“Level one,” he muttered. *“I’m ready.”*

The Obsidian Womb

(Draetheon High Orbit)

Darkness pulsed within the war chamber like a living thing. The *Obsidian Womb*, forged in secret to replace the fallen *Abyssal Spire*, groaned beneath the weight of unfinished vengeance. Steel ribs arched overhead, etched with glowing red symbols; burning script from a language older than stars.

At the center of the chamber knelt **High Admiral Sarnak Quor**, clad in blackened crimson armor, his mask sculpted to resemble a weeping sun.

Above him hovered the projection; not light, but void. A figure cloaked in deeper darkness unfolded within it.

The Shallit'Biru.

"You stand where Voss once stood," the voice murmured, low and layered, like an echo across the skin of time. *"Do you remember how he begged when the Abyssal Spire fell?*

Quor: *“No. My Shallit.”*

Shallit'Biru: *No? That is because his name is ash, his incompetence buried, and his failure erased."*

Quor remained motionless, his breath shallow.

“You call yourself Vanguard of the Eclipse,” the voice swelled. *“Yet those who destroyed the Abyssal Spire still live. And the Two Suns still*… do not belong to me*.”*

“The Spire was betrayed,” **Quor** offered, his voice like sand underfoot. *“They came in silence. We were not prepared…”*

Shallit'Biru: *"You were warned. Voss said the same, just before the void swallowed his name."*

The silence that followed scorched more deeply than flame.

The Shallit’Biru’s voice dropped to a razor whisper:

"Now you will not beg. You will bleed."

Dark fire licked across the neural mesh, embedded in Quor's armor; cracking the plates with blistering heat. But he made no sound. He had studied Voss's mistake.

The flames withdrew.

"The Solari reach for the crystals. Let Tiraxis remind them what it means to challenge the Shallit'Biru*."*

The projection vanished into black embers.

Admiral Quor rose slowly, smoke trailing from the scorched pauldrons; armor that protected his shoulders. His second-in-command, an **Eclipse priestess**; one not from Mer'Kuri, with skin like pale marble and eyes rimmed in solar ink, stepped from the shadows.

"Shall we proceed to Mer'Kuri, High Admiral?"

Quor straightened; steam curling from his scorched armor.

"Yes," he said. "*Get us under way."*

Begin!

Dressed in sleek black armor traced with glowing green circuitry, the **Eclipse warrior** stood tall, his stance measured. Jagged pauldrons flared like thorns, and etched along his chest plate were faded runes; proof of battles endured. His helmet, though retracted, hung at his side, revealing sharp eyes lit with the earned fire of Ra.

He spoke first, voice even but edged with challenge.
"Are you sure you're ready, Solari? I assume you traveled far to get here."

Kael tilted his head, his tone casual.
"I'm good. You're kind of polite for a psychotic Eclipse assassin."

The **warrior** gave a slight nod. *"There's no need to be rude. First and foremost, we are warriors; here to battle to the death. You wish to ascend to the next level. I'm here to prevent that from happening. Since either I will be the last face that you see… or you will be the last face that I see… we might as well respect each other."*

Kael slowly paced forward, his gaze steady.
"You're right. My name is Kael'Ryn."

The **warrior** offered a slight bow. *“It’s an honor to meet you, Kael’Ryn. My name is **Varik Tal**.”*

Kael returned the bow. *“It’s an honor to meet you too… Are we done talking?”*

Varik reached for his solar spear. The air around it shimmered with barely-contained energy.

“We are done… talking.”

The two warriors approached; muscles coiled like drawn bows. As they bowed to each other, a single word passed between them…

“Ra.”

And then… they began.

The air between them snapped with heat and unspoken resolve.

Kael moved first; fast, a blur of motion fueled by the rising pulse of Ra within him. His blade ignited with solar energy, trailing golden arcs through the crimson haze. Varik countered with his spear, the weapon spinning in his grip like a cyclone of green-lit fury. Sparks flew as their weapons clashed, the impact throwing up sand and light.

Varik twisted low, sweeping Kael’s legs, but Kael vaulted over the strike, flipping backward and landing with grace. He launched a flurry of strikes, forcing Varik onto the defensive. The Eclipse warrior deflected each blow with calm precision, his expression unreadable, his feet gliding across the sand like a ghost.

"You’ve trained well," **Varik** said between clashes. *"But you're still relying too much on instinct."*

Kael narrowed his eyes. *“That’s all I need.”*

He feinted left, then exploded right, catching Varik off-guard with a scorching knee to the ribs. The Eclipse warrior staggered, but spun with the momentum, slicing a shallow cut across Kael’s side with the edge of his spear. Blood hissed as it met the heat in the air.

Both paused.

Breathing heavy. Weapons raised.

Then they charged again.

Their battle raged across the arena, a storm of sand and solar energy. Kael's strikes grew bolder, sharper; driven by discipline and the fire of his training. Varik's counters became slower, wearier. A single mistake opened the final window.

Kael ducked beneath a desperate arc of the spear and drove his blade up through Varik's chest.

The Eclipse warrior froze. The light in his eyes dimmed, flickering like a dying star.

Kael held him for a moment, steadying the warrior as his knees buckled. **Varik** gripped Kael's shoulder; not out of malice, but as a gesture of respect.

"Well... fought," he whispered.

Kael lowered him gently to the sand.

"May the Ra guide you," he murmured.

As Varik's body dissolved into radiant motes, the glyphs on the teleport pad ignited with gold fire, casting a path forward.

Kael turned, blood drying on his side; heart pounding.

"*One down,"* he said under his breath. *"How many more to go?"*

Kael rose slowly, his muscles aching from the duel. He wiped the sweat and blood from his brow, then retrieved his weapon and slung his travel pouch over one shoulder.

The wind kicked up a swirl of hot sand around him, but his eyes were locked on the glowing pad ahead. The portal hummed with power; alive now, awakened by victory.

Without looking back, Kael sprinted forward, each step pounding with resolve. The moment his foot touched the glyph-lit surface, light swallowed him whole; and he was gone.

Chapter 2: Khepra

The shuttle's engines faded into the upper atmosphere, leaving only silence and dust in its wake. Xal crouched low in the shadow of a jagged ridge; eyes narrowed beneath his hood as the black horizon of Khepra stretched before him. The sun was low, casting the land in a faint crimson hue.

Ahead, carved into the darkened cliffs like a scar that refused to heal, was his target: the *Fortress of Sha'duun*. The Solari once believed it was a tomb for forgotten gods.

But now it served as another one of the Eclipse's secret strongholds; half-ruin, half-machine, all death.

His orders were simple: get in unseen; retrieve the crystal of Ra, and get out.

No backup. No noise. No second chances.

He adjusted the cowl around his neck, felt the familiar weight of the twin daggers beneath his cloak, and tapped the activation rune on his stealth harness. A shimmer crawled across his armor as his silhouette blurred against the black terrain.

The descent would be dangerous. The climb worse. But that didn't bother him.

He'd trained his whole life for this.

He moved like a shadow, gliding between basalt outcroppings and broken pillars that jutted like ancient ribs. Every footstep was measured, deliberate.

Khepra's surface offered little cover, but the terrain was riddled with deep fractures and craters; natural defenses that doubled as perfect hiding places.

He paused atop a ledge and surveyed the outer perimeter of the fortress. From this distance, it looked abandoned. No movement. No lights. Only silence; and that was the first sign something was wrong.

The Eclipse never left their secrets unguarded.

Xal knelt, activating the vision emblem on his gauntlet. Veins of red light traced from the rune across his wrist, pulsing once. Instantly, layers of the terrain shifted before his eyes.

A faint energy grid lit up across the fortress walls. Hidden turrets, motion tripwires, and cloaked drones floated silently in their patrol routes, like phantoms in a ritual dance.

He frowned. *"They buried the security into the ruins themselves…"*

Sliding down the ravine wall, he stuck to the shadows, weaving through the blind spots of the patrols. At one point, he pressed himself

into the rocky crevice as a drone passed just inches overhead; its scanners sweeping the ground with a dim blue hum. His breath stilled.

When it vanished into the mist, he moved again; faster now, but no less silent.

At last, he reached the outer wall. The stone was rough and cracked, etched with age-old hieroglyphs, most of them unreadable. But one caught his eye; half-erased by erosion but still faintly glowing.

It was Solari.

A warning.

His fingers traced it. *“Let not the flame stray too far from the light, lest it be swallowed by the void.”*

Xal’s jaw clenched. The Eclipse had defiled this place. Whatever they were hiding inside, it had once belonged to the Solari.

A vibration at his hip broke his focus. The scanner in his pouch pulsed once, then turned green.

The crystal was close… But not close enough.

He turned toward a narrow fissure at the base of the wall; almost invisible unless you knew where to look. He crouched, placed a hand on the edge of the opening, and whispered, *“Let’s see what you're hiding.”*

He then vanished into the fortress.

Command Nexus

The command nexus of the *Obsidian Womb* pulsed with crimson light; its walls etched with flowing runes that shimmered like living flame. At the heart of the chamber, a massive hardened black lava table stretched outward in a circular arc.

Around it, five figures loomed; each clad in variations of segmented armor that glistened with void-black and ultraviolet hues. They were the *High Admiralty of Draetheon*: destroyers of systems, architects of ruin.

At the center stood ***High Admiral Quor***, the eldest and most feared among them. His plated spine curled into an ornate crest above his head, twitching with residual heat from the solar absorption conduits in his armor. With a snap of his clawed hand, a holographic map ignited above the table; a radiant model of the Sol System, projected in haunting scale.

"*Initiate convergence protocol,*" **Quor** growled, his voice like molten gravel grinding through metal.

The system spun slowly. First came Mer'Kuri, illuminated in harsh amber. A red pulse circled it.

"Mer'Kuri falls first," **Quor** said, tapping a talon through the air.

He paused; his glowing eyes narrowing.

"We no longer hold the element of surprise. The destruction of the Abyssal Spire…" his voice coiled into a growl *"…was a setback... but not a defeat. The enemy knows we're coming... Let them!"*

The hologram zoomed in, revealing orbiting defense rings, pulse batteries, and squads of Mer'Kuri defense forces gathering at key choke points on the planet's surface.

"The Solari and Mer'Kuri defense forces stand ready, unified. Stronger than before. They believe that warning has given them hope."

A cruel flicker crossed Quor's face; what passed for a smile among his kind.

"But hope is a flame we know how to smother."

The next target: Venus, glowed in silken white; veined with arterial red.

"Then the Venusians. Their matriarchal caste systems will collapse under the pressure of prolonged siege. Deprive them of solar contact... and they wither."

Mars turned next, rust red and bristling with orbital defenses.

"Mars is divided. Their warriors crave glory, not unity. We will give them the illusion of battle while we bleed their strength dry."

One of the other admirals, **Borrak T'sil**, tilted his head. *"And after the three are claimed?"*

Quor's gaze turned to a pale blue orb on the far end of the map. It shimmered with hues of life; oceans, clouds, storms. **Quor's** voice dropped, almost reverent.

"Then... Tiamara*."*

There was a hushed stillness. Even the ambient hum of the chamber seemed to fade.

"The ancients called it Tiamet," **Quor** continued. *"A water-world with more life than any other in this cursed system. Its oceans hide*

relics older than the sun… And it will be ours… The purification will begin there."

"And Jupiter?" asked **Zharath Kol**, his face a fusion of metal and flesh.

Quor's eyes flicked toward the gas giant, swirling with rage in the projection.

"Last. We need the Jovian cores intact. Their storms will serve us... once the outer worlds join us."

The hologram glitched momentarily... flickers of resistance signatures appearing near Mer'Kuri's moons. **Quor** studied them with a silent snarl.

"They think to delay us with minor victories," he said. *"Let them. We are Draetheon. We are inevitable."*

From across the chamber, **Admiral Borrak** leaned forward, segmented fingers clinking together.

"*But that's only half the Sol,"* he said, his voice rasping. *"What of Saturn... Uranus... Neptune... and the other Outer Rim worlds?"*

Quor didn't miss a beat.

He lifted a hand, and the hologram expanded, pulling back to reveal the distant edges of the solar system. A shadow bloomed beyond Neptune, where the void grew cold and slow.

"The outer rim reptilians will join us in the great war," **Quor** said. *"They will strike from the outside and work their way inward. Their fleets will crash upon the bastions of Jupiter and Tiamara like tidal waves."*

"But they are fractured," **Admiral Kol** interjected, his normally rugged jaw twitching.

"The Rim has not known peace in centuries. They war with each other like beasts in the dark. How can they possibly be of use?"

Quor's eyes flared.

"That is because their Messiah has been absent for millennia."

The chamber grew still.

"In due time," **Quor** continued, voice lowering to a reverent growl, *"Draetheon will arrive. Their world. Our world. Seat of the Reptile Supreme."*

Gasps rippled through the admirals like a silent storm. Even Borrak's jaw clenched at the name.

Quor extended his claws again, manipulating the hologram. A new celestial body appeared; dark, massive, and unlike anything in the system. It did not orbit Ra in a circle like the others. Instead, it followed an elongated, slingshot-like path far beyond the Rim.

"Draetheon does not circle Ra as the rest of your planets do," **Quor** said. *"It travels on a long elliptical path, stretching far into the void. But once every three thousand solar cycles, it returns to this system… cutting through the outer planets like a spear."*

The projection illustrated the orbit in blazing red, slicing a jagged arc back toward the inner planets.

"Depending on your point of view, Draetheon is a myth. A ghost world. But our timetable is precise."

Quor stepped closer to the projection, his voice deepening to a near whisper… more like a ritual than a briefing.

"Draetheon is coming. Soon. And when it does… the Sol must be ready. United. Subjugated. Burned clean. The outer rim will join us once they see on their scans; Draetheon is vastly approaching."

He turned, sweeping his gaze across the admiralty. *"And remember this…"*

The map dimmed, leaving only a glowing outline of the dark planet's orbit as it carved through the solar system.

"The Shallit'Biru and the Reptile Lord work together on Draetheon. It is not just a world... it is a throne."

Silence fell across the chamber. No one spoke.

Quor smiled.

"Let the inner worlds tremble. The tide is already rising."

The Hall of Echoes

Once Xal entered, the heavy stone door sealed behind him with a quiet hiss, and suddenly, the silence wasn't silent at all.

Every footfall Xal made sounded like a hundred. His breath.. controlled, shallow…

… bounced off the high arched walls and came back twisted, warped, like someone was breathing just behind his shoulder.

He paused, one hand gripping the hilt of his dagger. The corridor ahead stretched into darkness, columns lining the walls like sentinels. Faint blue runes glowed along the floor in an uneven pattern, pulsing slowly, as though the fortress itself were breathing.

He took another step.

Step. Step. Step-step-step.

He froze.

The sound kept going.

Xal spun, blades drawn, eyes sweeping the corridor. Nothing. Just shadows and echoes… but the kind that didn't feel natural. He reached out with his training; feeling for movement, heat, a heartbeat.

There was none.

Then, from the ceiling, a shape detached with impossible silence; a black-cloaked Eclipse warden, masked and gliding down like a shadow.

Way too fast.

Xal ducked, rolled, and came up slashing. Metal clashed in the dark, sparks bursting into the cold air. The warden didn't speak. They never do. This one moved like it knew every move that Xal would make before he made it.

And behind every strike… the **echoes** repeated their duel back at them, seconds delayed. A ghostly mockery.

The warden's blades danced like liquid shadow, one arcing low while the other came down from above. Xal barely blocked in time, the impact rattling his forearms. He stepped back… but the corridor offered no space, no cover. Just the endless echo of steel on steel, bouncing off the stone with maddening delay.

The delay.

He pivoted, dodging a strike by inches. The fight was rhythmless, but the **echoes**… they came back late. Always late.

Xal exhaled sharply. That was it.

He let the warden press him, forcing him to retreat. The figure struck low, then feinted high. Xal deliberately delayed his block by a breath… just long enough to make it look clumsy. He let his right arm take the glancing hit, staggered back with a grunt.

The warden surged forward to finish him.

Right then… Xal flung a flash-charge straight behind himself.

The echo.

The delayed **clack** of his boot hitting the stone a moment earlier replayed just as the charge hit the ground. The warden, tracking the sound and assuming Xal had moved again, spun toward the echo.

Too late.

Xal drove his blade through the gap in the armor beneath the warden's ribs.

The figure twitched, spasmed, and collapsed in a heap. Silence followed… but even that seemed like an illusion in this cursed hall.

Xal breathed, slow and steady. The wound on his arm burned, but he grinned through the pain.

"Nice trick," he muttered to the dead.

Xal stepped over the body, deeper into the shadows, where the whispers still waited.

Chapter 3: The Flame and the Ash

The Council Hall of Ra's Vigil was silent at this hour, save for the steady hum of the solar map suspended in the air above the podium. Warm light from Mer'Kuri's rising sun filtered through the golden lattice dome, casting long, fractured shadows across the chamber floor.

Councilor Alaric stood with his hands behind his back, watching the map shift; five red trails spiraling toward a now-destroyed coordinate point in the void.

Seraphina entered without announcement, her presence as fluid and firm as ever. *"Still staring at the wreckage?"*

Alaric didn't turn. *"The Abyssal Spire was their flagship. Its destruction should've broken their momentum."*

"Should've," **Seraphina** echoed. She stopped beside him. *"And yet the intel the Quintet recovered suggests otherwise."*

Alaric: *"The Quintet?"*

Seraphina: *"A nickname… so I don't have to keep saying, "Princess Lysara… General Flynn… Vex… Kael… and… Xal."*

Alaric: (Looking annoyed but isn't) *"Noted."*

He nodded slowly. *"The Draetheon didn't plan just a single strike. The Spire was the tip of something... colder. Deeper."*

Seraphina glanced at the newest flickering symbol on the map… Draetheon script, partially decoded, hovering over the region near Mer'Kuri's second moon.

"They called it Operation Cinderwake," she murmured.

Alaric exhaled through his nose. *"An assault on Mer'Kuri itself. Scorch the atmosphere. Blind the satellites. Collapse the shield array. They meant to cripple us before we even knew they were here."*

"But now we do know," **Seraphina** said, sharp. *"They've lost the element of surprise."*

"Or," **Alaric** said grimly, *"they wanted us to think we had it. Let us believe we thwarted them, so we'd lower our guard."*

She stiffened slightly. *"You think they allowed the Spire to fall?"*

"I think the Draetheon don't panic. They adjust." **He** finally turned to face her. *"And we still don't know when… or if… they'll strike. Not exactly."*

A long silence stretched between them.

Seraphina broke it. *"And the quintet? Are they recovered?"*

Alaric: *"You do know they're not really a thing… Don't you?... That one time, their separate and unrelated missions just happened to collide… and they started working together… It's not like we can just… start sending those five on secret missions together."*

Seraphina: *"A concerned mom can be hopeful… Can't she?... I feel so much better when Kael and Xal have company… and help… on their missions."*

Alaric: *"I don't know about the general and Vex… but the princess was supposed to return to Venus."*

Seraphina gave him a look. *"And yet she hasn't."*

Alaric said nothing.

Seraphina stepped closer. *"Al… Do you know where she is?"*

Alaric: *"I know she's not where she's expected to be."* His tone was neutral. *"And I know General Krynn has gone silent."*

Seraphina: She studied him carefully. *“So we’ve lost our best soldiers to silence and shadows.”*

Alaric: “We haven’t lost them yet,” he replied. *“But the Draetheon are watching. Waiting. And if they believe our unity is fractured…”*

“They will strike.”

He nodded once. *“And this time, they won’t stop with the loss of just **one** flagship.”*

Outpost Nullveil

(Somewhere in the Void: Eclipse Outpost Under Siege)

The alarms were deafening now; shrill pulses of red-light strobing down the long corridors of Nullveil like blood through veins. Smoke coiled from shattered conduits. Bulkheads trembled under the force of internal blasts.

Princess Lysara ducked behind a fallen girder, plasma bolts shrieking overhead. Her breath was sharp in her throat, her braid damp with sweat. She clutched the scorched grip of her Venusian plasma lance, its edge glowing hot.

“They weren’t supposed to respond this fast,” she muttered.

“We weren’t supposed to get caught,” **General Krynn** shouted from behind cover. His Martian gauntlets flashed as he threw a shock-round grenade down the corridor. A flash. A scream. Silence.

From the far end of the hall, a door slammed open; and more Eclipse fighters poured in.

“Krynn!” **she** called. *“Tell me Vex is done!”*

“Vex!” **Krynn** bellowed, thumbing his wrist-com. *“You better be on the way or we’re going to die poetic and furious!”*

“Detonators planted. Final charge active,” came the calm metallic reply through static. *“I am three levels above you. Headed to rendezvous point Alpha.”*

“Alpha’s compromised,” **Lysara** snapped. *“Secondary route… hangar bay.”*

Vex: *“I will adjust.”*

Lysara rose and fired, her lance's beam cutting through a bulkhead. The resulting fire sent two Eclipse troopers crashing backwards. Krynn surged forward with her, slamming a soldier into the wall with a gauntlet-powered punch that cracked armor like glass.

"Where's the damn evac?" **Lysara** shouted, ducking beneath a swinging blade. She jammed the butt of her lance into the attacker's ribs, then drove the burning tip through his side.

"The ship's docked just past the east junction," **Krynn** growled. *"Assuming Vex didn't already blow it up."*

"Statistically unlikely," **Vex** said, now at their side; arriving without sound, as though the chaos obeyed *him.*

His plating was scorched, one shoulder sparking slightly. He handed Lysara a satchel. *"Primary core detonator. Set to sixty seconds. Once you reach orbit, I will trigger the failsafe remotely."*

"I thought you said you already planted all the charges," **Krynn** said.

"I lied," **Vex** replied.

A fresh wave of Eclipse shock troopers swarmed the hall behind them.

"GO!" **Lysara** shouted.

They ran… fire blossoming behind them. Plasma bolts chased their steps. The corridor ahead trembled, another blast tearing through the ceiling. They skidded into the hangar as the cloaked Black Talon roared to life, engine whine spooling up like a scream.

Krynn threw himself into the pilot's seat, fingers dancing across the controls. Lysara vaulted into the gunner's chair. Vex remained outside for a split second longer… turning to face the enemy.

He raised a hand.

Triggered the failsafe.

Behind them, Nullveil erupted in an expanding halo of flame and molten steel, breaking apart in jagged fractures. The Talon rocketed away as the asteroid fractured like a dead star, swallowed by fire.

Inside, Lysara was still catching her breath. **Krynn's** eyes flicked to her in the mirror.

"Next time," he said, panting, *"we start with the explosion."*

Lysara gave him a crooked smile. *“And miss all the fun?”*

Behind them, **Vex** sat wordlessly; head tilted toward the collapsing outpost.

“Target eliminated,” he said softly.

Tower of Tiraxis - Level Three

Kael stepped onto the third platform with a hiss of air and shifting light. The strange teleportation pad beneath him dissolved like mist. For a moment, there was nothing but silence; dim torches casting long shadows across the chamber’s circular walls. The ceiling stretched impossibly high, lost in a dull amber haze.

The silence didn’t last.

“You made it,” a smooth, taunting voice echoed.

“Still intact,” added another; sharper, colder.

From opposite ends of the chamber, two figures emerged, each dressed in flashy Eclipse battle armor. The brother bore a jagged halberd; an axe below the tip of a spear, across his back. The sister wielded twin eclipse-blades curved like serpent fangs.

They moved in perfect sync, like one thought split across two bodies.

“You must be Kael,” the sister said, circling to his right.

“He looks smaller than I imagined,” the brother mocked, circling to the left. *“No offense.”*

Kael didn’t move. His stance was loose, but alert. *“And you are?”*

The brother gave a dramatic bow. *“I am **Mairon**.”*

The sister followed suit, her smile tight and cruel. *“And I am **Shael**… We are the other twins.”*

Kael blinked. *“Other…?”*

“Ah,” **Mairon** grinned. *“So they never told you. Not surprising. You wouldn’t want the Two Suns looking less special.”*

“You were born the same year as us,” **Shael** continued. *“Also on Mer’Kuri. Also marked at birth by Ra’s flame.”*

“But we weren’t born to the Solari,” **Mairon** said bitterly. *“We were born… elsewhere.”*

“Cast aside. Forgotten,” **Shael** finished.

Kael’s expression hardened. *“That’s not my fault.”*

Mairon’s halberd scraped the floor. *“No. But we’ve always known we’d face you someday.”*

“And if you truly are one of the prophesied Suns…” **Shael** stepped forward, blades gleaming, *“then defeating you will eclipse your legacy into shadow.”*

“You’re not leaving this level,” **Mairon** said.

“We made sure of that.”

Kael slowly drew his Solari blade, its radiant edge illuminating the room in golden firelight.

“I didn’t come here looking for a legacy,” he said. *“But if you stand between me and the Crystal of Ra… then you’d better be ready to burn.”*

Without a word, they attacked.

Mairon’s halberd swept low, forcing Kael to leap. Shael was already in motion, her twin blades spinning… a blur of steel and venom. Kael barely blocked her first strike, the force driving him back.

They were fast.

Kael was faster.

They fought as one, reading each other’s movements, timing their attacks like twin pulses of a single heartbeat. Kael’s instincts screamed under the pressure.

He twisted, deflected, countered… but for every strike he landed, two more came.

“You’ve trained well,” **Shael** admitted, breathless, *“but we were trained to kill you.”*

Fortunately for Kael… they knew nothing about the special training he received from Vex.

Kael ducked under Mairon’s halberd sweep, rolling sideways. *“Then **you** should’ve trained harder.”*

He stabbed at the floor, channeling a burst of solar energy… blinding light exploded outward, staggering them for a second. He lunged at Shael, but Mairon caught his leg mid-swing and slammed him into a column.

His body cracked the stone. Pain shot through his ribs.

I can't win this head-on, **Kael** thought. *Not like this…*

Then he saw it… just a flicker.

When Mairon rushed to follow up, Kael faked right, then kicked a loose tile into his path. Mairon stumbled, just for a breath.

It was enough.

Kael ducked into a slide, letting Mairon's own momentum carry him forward… then used the halberd's length against him, pinning it underfoot and spinning to drive the butt of his blade into Mairon's exposed side.

Mairon grunted, toppling.

Shael screamed and charged…

… blades flashing in a storm of rage.

Kael met her halfway. At the last second, he dropped his blade and caught her wrists mid-swing.

She blinked… confused… and he twisted, locking her arms and flipping her over his shoulder in a brutal throw that cracked the floor.

Then he yanked his blade back into his hand, the metal responding to his solar grip.

Both twins lay groaning, winded, stunned.

Kael stood over them, chest heaving.

"You fight with fury," he said. *"But I fight for more than myself."*

Mairon tried to rise. Shael pulled him back. Their glares burned with hatred… but she knew they were done… They didn't follow.

Kael, knowing they were done, as well… turned to the teleport pad at the chamber's end.

The path to level four shimmered before him.

Chapter 4: The Corpse Garden

The descent was longer this time.

Xal moved in silence, his boots echoing down the narrow stone spiral that bored deep into the moon's core. Each step took him further from heat, from light, from anything that felt alive. The Solari blade at his back pulsed faintly; as if uncertain it even wanted to be here.

At last, the passage opened… and Xal stopped cold.

The chamber before him was… unfamiliar.

A massive cavern stretched out beneath a dome of natural Obsius stone; wet with dew and glistening like a starless sky. The floor was a twisted garden of the dead; corpses arranged in grotesque poses, half-wrapped in thorned vines that pulsed with crimson bio-light.

Flowers grew from open mouths, eyeless sockets, shattered ribs. Petals of bone. Leaves like black glass.

Xal stepped forward slowly. Every movement felt… watched.

The garden breathed.

And at its center, rising like a skeletal hand from the soil, stood a black tree. Its bark was charred and cracked, branches twisting in impossible angles, some fused with broken weapons and fragments of armor. From the hollow at its base, a soft golden glow pulsed… like a heartbeat.

He moved toward it, eyes scanning.

Names were etched into the petals of the flowers. He recognized some… old Solari, warriors long thought lost during the Eclipse incursion. A chill crept into his bones. This was no grave.

It was a monument.

Or a warning.

He drew his blade.

That's when the whisper came… low, like breath against his ear.

"Would you bury yourself, too, child of Ra?"

Xal spun, blade up.

A figure sat beside the tree, cloaked in living vines. Its face was obscured by a lattice of thorny growths, lips barely visible behind curling

leaves. They sat among the roots as if born there, pruning a flower that grew from a skull like it was nothing more than a rose.

The **figure** looked up, thorns shifting like tendrils.

“They all came seeking glory. All of them… heroes.”

It gestured to the corpses with a slow, graceful hand.

“None left with their soul.”

Xal didn’t answer. The tension in his stance said enough.

“Tell me,” the **figure** said, voice melodic, *“What makes **you** different?”*

“Not here for glory,” **Xal** replied, stepping forward. *“Just the crystal.”*

The figure’s head tilted.

“And will you plant yourself for it?”

The vines at the tree’s roots began to move… subtly. Curling toward him. Testing the air like curious snakes.

“You want to stop me?” **Xal** raised his blade. *“Try.”*

The **figure** rose… slowly, creaking like old bark bending. The vines recoiled, coiling back into the soil as the roots shivered.

Something rumbled deep below.

“Then you may face the Garden’s judgment.”

The ground behind Xal erupted.

From the corpse-laden soil, limbs twisted upward… dead warriors dragging themselves free, hollow-eyed and draped in flowers. Their movements were slow… but deliberate. Dozens. Maybe more.

“Let us see if your flame can survive the dark.”

Xal exhaled and tightened his grip.

“Good,” he muttered. *“I can use the exercise.”*

He struck first… his blade arcing into a wave of solar fire.

Xal’s blade sliced clean through the first wave, solar heat searing through bone and blossom alike. The corpses shrieked… not from pain, but from release… ashen smoke curling from their mouths as they collapsed into petals.

But for every one that fell, *two more* took its place.

Some moved with staggering clumsiness, others with unsettling grace. They were warriors in life, and the Garden had not let them forget.

One came at him in a lurching sprint… missing half its face, ribs exposed like cracked porcelain. Xal ducked under its swing and drove his blade through its chest. It spasmed… but instead of falling, vines burst from the wound, wrapping around his arm.

He snarled and blasted heat through his gauntlet. The vines shriveled with a hiss, and the corpse crumbled, a spore of black ash bursting where its heart should've been.

The cloaked **figure** by the tree never moved… just watched.

"The Garden doesn't want to kill you, Solari," it said. *"It wants you to join us."*

A vine lashed toward Xal's leg… he flipped over it, then landed with a heavy slam that cracked the stone beneath him. The tree groaned in response, and several corpses began to *melt*… their bones stretching, fusing, forming something… else.

Two of them slammed together… bones cracking, vines knitting them into a single monstrous hulk. Its arms were twisted halberds, its jaw split open vertically with thorn-teeth inside. It *roared*… a sound like a hundred voices screaming at once… and charged.

Xal narrowed his eyes. *"Now **that's** more like it."*

The creature came down in a brutal swing… Xal dodged to the side, sparks erupting as its bladed limb gouged the stone. He rolled and came up behind it, slicing through the vines holding it together.

The creature staggered… but didn't fall.

Instead, the vines tried to pull Xal in.

He shouted, then jammed a thermal grenade from his belt into the hollow where its spine should've been.

The explosion sent him flying, slamming into a pillar of roots. Bark cracked… his shoulder throbbed… but the monster went down in a burst of fire and screaming petals.

Xal groaned, pulled himself up, and looked toward the tree.

The cloaked figure was gone.

The glow at the tree's base now pulsed more rapidly… like a heart under duress.

"You're close," a **voice** whispered… This time from *within* his own mind.

Xal staggered forward.

Then stopped.

One of the bodies ahead was… different.

Kneeling in the dirt. Pristine. Unspoiled.

No vines curled from its limbs. No rot blackened its skin. The Solari crest glinted faintly on the chest plate. Its head was bowed slightly, dark hair falling over its face.

Xal slowed.

He recognized him.

"Lioran…"

They'd trained together in the early Solari trials; same cohort, same sleepless hells of discipline and failure.

Lioran had been sharp, competitive. Always looking for an edge. The kind of warrior who didn't care if he walked through his friends to get what he wanted.

Then he disappeared during a mission to the outer rim. Presumed dead. No ceremony. No closure.

Now. Here he was.

Eyes snapped open… clear and cold, just like Xal remembered.

"Still slower than me, I see."

Xal didn't answer. His jaw tightened. His grip on the blade firmed.

"What is this?" he asked.

Lioran rose, smooth and deliberate. His armor bore cracks, but no blood. As if the Garden had taken him at the edge of victory.

"You always were the favorite," **Lioran** said. *"You and your golden twin. The 'Two Suns.' Chosen. Prophesied. While the rest of us bled just trying to survive."*

His voice didn't carry hatred… it carried wound. Old and deep.

“You think you were the only ones worthy? I trained harder than anyone. I passed every trial. But you two? You had destiny on your side.”

A bitter smile.

“Where did destiny go when the Eclipse surrounded me and left me for dead?”

Xal’s heart thumped… but he didn’t look away.

“I didn’t know you were alive.”

“I wasn’t,” **Lioran** said softly. *“Not until the Garden woke me.”*

His body tensed, and the glow from the heart of the black tree surged brighter behind him.

“So now I get one more chance. Not to be chosen… just to win.”

He lunged.

Xal raised his blade just in time to catch the strike… flesh and steel clashing in a flurry of speed only the Solari could match.

This wasn’t just a fight. It was the past, resurrected with a score to settle.

They circled one another, Solari-trained instincts clashing in brutal elegance. Sparks danced with each strike… sun-steel against sun-steel; honor against spite.

“You don’t belong to them,” **Xal** said, deflecting another vicious sweep. *“You’re Solari. You trained with me.”*

Lioran’s mouth twisted into something like a grin… something broken.

“I was Solari. Until I realized the Solari only serve the light as long as it serves them.”

His skin began to change… veins darkening, eyes glowing with the pulsing red of solar inversion.

The Eclipse brand flared to life beneath his armor, spidering up his neck like a virus. He flung off his outer layer, revealing Eclipse regalia warped by the Garden… thorns and solar glyphs intertwined like twisted runes.

“The Eclipse showed me the truth. The sun doesn’t care who it burns. But the shadow chooses. The shadow remembers.”

He thrust out his hand, and vines surged from the blackened ground, snaring Xal's leg and yanking him down.

Lioran leapt.

Xal activated a solar pulse… *FWOOM*… the vines exploded in a flash of light, but Lioran was already upon him.

They clashed again… closer, bloodier, each strike laced with history. **Lioran** drove Xal back, grunting with every swing.

"You should've died back on Solari Prime. You and your brother. The Two Suns… always casting everyone else in shadow!"

Xal caught Lioran's arm mid-strike, twisted it, and slammed a knee into his gut. Lioran staggered. Xal went low, slicing at the vines trying to re-form around his feet.

Lioran snarled and summoned a burst of corrupted solar flame… dark light that seared the edges of reality. Xal ducked under the blast, rolled, and spotted something:

Lioran's Eclipse brand was glowing like a target.

Xal surged forward… not with brute force, but with precision. He feinted high, then slipped beneath Lioran's guard and slammed his palm against the brand. His gauntlet lit up with pure solar energy.

"Let's see if the shadow can survive the sun."

A blinding flash erupted… **Lioran** screamed, staggered back, smoke pouring from the seared mark.

"NO…"

Xal didn't hesitate. He spun and drove his blade clean through Lioran's chest.

For a moment, **Lioran** just stood there… expression blank.

The glow in his eyes fading.

"You always had the final move…" he whispered.

Lioran's body hit the ground with a final, heavy thud. The warped glow faded from his skin. The twisted Eclipse brand smoldered black before vanishing altogether.

Xal stood over him, chest heaving, blade humming faintly with residual heat.

"Goodbye, brother," he murmured.

No triumph. Just silence.

The vines withdrew. The darkness eased.

The Corpse Garden quieted.

Xal turned without another word and began walking… toward the faint waiting light into the unknown.

He didn't look back.

Chapter 5: Sanctum

The air aboard the Obsidian Womb thrummed with a low, resonant hum; like the ship itself was holding its breath. Vast, dark plated paneled walls enclosed the command sanctum, lit only by a circular floor glyph that pulsed crimson with each passing second.

The assembled admirals stood rigid in its glow, their expressions unreadable beneath burnished helms and armor etched in Draetheon runes. Then the portal opened.

It did not shimmer… it tore. Space split like stretched skin, folding in on itself to reveal a vertical, skeletal maw of radiant darkness.

And from that fracture stepped the Shallit'Biru.

He was tall… inhumanly so… his limbs draped in metallic robes that hissed with movement. His face remained obscured by a ritual mask: expressionless, silver-black, carved with concentric circles where eyes should have been.

He didn't speak immediately.

He glared.

Silence fell heavier than gravity.

At last, his voice rang out… Not loud, but unavoidable.

"Nullveil is gone."

He paced once along the edge of the glowing glyph. None of the admirals moved. One flinched. Another blinked too fast.

"Another outpost lost. Another fortress penetrated. Before the war even starts… the enemy advances again… And yet…"

"None of you can tell me how."

The light in the sanctum surged white-hot. One of the younger tacticians winced, sweat beading beneath his collar.

“Our data links are secure. The relay patterns are rotated on Draetheon cycles… encrypted by living thought,” Admiral **Shurak** offered. *“They should be untraceable.”*

“Should be,” the **Shallit’Biru** echoed, voice colder than vacuum. *“And yet our positions fall. One by one. As if... they know.”*

He stopped. Turned. The mask faced them all.

“So tell me. Which of you still believes there is no traitor within our ranks?”

The question hung in the air like a blade.

An Estate of Affairs

A storm of heat-lightning flickered across the distant sky beyond the arched windows, casting brief shadows through the towering chamber. Inside, the flicker of firelight met with the quiet tension of an unsanctioned meeting.

Princess Lysara stood just beyond the crackling hearth, flanked by General Krynn and the ever-silent Vex. None of the three bore the signs of a formal delegation; this was not a political visit. It was a warning.

Across from them, Councilor Alaric studied them with a guarded expression. Seraphina leaned beside the tall window; the orange dusk reflected in her eyes as she watched the trio.

“Outpost Nullveil is gone,” **Lysara** said plainly. *“But what we found there wasn’t just an abandoned forward base. It was a staging point.”*

Krynn stepped forward, removing a compact projector from his belt. A faint blue hologram blinked to life between them; schematics, troop movement logs, partial star maps. Coordinates. A name.

“Outpost Verge.”

“These weren’t meant to be found,” **Krynn** said. *“They confirm our suspicions… The Draetheon invasion of Mer’Kuri is still planned. Sooner than we thought.”*

Alaric’s face darkened. *“You’re sure?”*

“Too many converging signals. Supply routes. Drafted Eclipse units re-deployed. Whatever’s coming... they didn’t stop with the Spire.”

Seraphina tilted her head. *“That will be your second strike after the Abyssal Spire. First Nullveil, now you’re heading for Verge.”*

She gave Lysara a curious look.

“So tell me… Who’s feeding you this intel?”

The room went quiet.

Lysara glanced at Krynn, then at Vex, before answering.

“We don’t know.”

That caught both Seraphina and Alaric off guard.

“You don’t know,” **Seraphina** repeated slowly, eyebrow raised.

“The first data came from fragments aboard the Spire,” **Krynn** explained. *“Since then, each new location’s been sent to our secure drop network. Untraceable. Encryption so advanced… even Vex can’t pin it down.”*

“So someone’s helping you,” **Alaric** said, voice low. *“But you have no idea who.”*

“None,” **Vex** confirmed. *“Only that they want the Draetheon war machine dismantled… and they know exactly where to strike.”*

Lysara stepped closer to Alaric.

“We came here because if Verge is real… and it’s anything like Nullveil… they’re already moving. And Mer’Kuri is still the target.”

Alaric took a slow breath, considering.

“And if this source turns? Or feeds you false data?”

“Then we die in a trap,” **Krynn** said simply. *“But if we don’t act… and they’re right… we lose our world.”*

Lysara: *“Yes… We learned while on the Abyssal Spire… that if Mer’Kuri falls… Venus and Mars are their next targets… So... We’re all in this… together.”*

A long silence passed.

Then **Seraphina** spoke, softer this time. *“Let us know what you find at Verge.”*

Lysara gave a faint nod.

“We will… If we make it back.”

Tower of Tiraxis - Level Five

The air was thicker here. Not hot, not cold; just heavy, like the gravity itself had been turned up a notch. Kael stepped warily into the chamber, his heartbeat a rhythmic thud in his ears.

The level opened into a circular arena. Metal pillars lined the edges, each carved with ancient Solari script. In the center stood a shadow, tall and unmoving.

Then the lights of the tower adjusted. And the shadow moved.

The warrior emerged: dark armor streaked with molten lines of orange, like veins of burning ore. Four arms. Each bearing a different weapon; none ornamental. The top left held a serrated war-axe. Bottom left, a crackling hook-blade. Top right, a solar cannon fused directly into the gauntlet. And bottom right, a long, curved sword etched with runes that shimmered with inner fire.

Kael’s breath caught. He’d faced elite Eclipse before; but never this.

The **juggernaut’s** voice was like stone breaking in half.

“You bear the mark of the Two Suns. They said you burned bright… You’ll flicker out here.”

No countdown. No signal. Just motion; a sudden lurch forward with speed that didn’t match the size. Kael barely sidestepped the axe before the hook-blade scraped across his side, tearing a clean gash into his armor.

He winced, spun, and slashed upward, but the solar cannon flared, forcing him back with a burst of searing heat.

The four-armed warrior advanced, unrelenting, all limbs working in brutal harmony. It wasn’t just strength; it was coordination. Like fighting four masters at once, sharing a single mind.

Kael deflected a blow from the curved sword but couldn’t avoid the sweeping axe that crashed into his shoulder, sending him flying into one of the pillars. His vision blurred.

His sword clattered across the floor.

Pain radiated through him.

“One down,” the **warrior** mocked. *“One to go.”*

Kael pulled himself up; blood in his mouth, vision spinning. He scanned the room; his sword… ten paces away. No time to get it.

But there was something else.

A control panel embedded near the base of a column; glowing faintly. He remembered level three, when the environment shifted mid-battle. Maybe…

He bolted… Not for his sword, but for the panel.

The warrior realized it too late. Kael slammed his hand on the glowing rune. The arena shuddered.

A series of metal plates slammed down from the ceiling, creating a makeshift obstacle course of walls and partitions. One dropped between Kael and the juggernaut, buying precious seconds.

Kael slid under another partition, scooped up his blade, and crouched in the shadows.

"Hide if you want," the **voice** growled, echoing through the maze. *"You'll die in pieces."*

Kael didn't answer. He closed his eyes. Slowed his breath.

Then moved.

He darted between cover, baiting the warrior into close quarters. The cannon arm fired… narrowly missing. Kael returned fire with a throwing blade from his bracer, catching the cannon's heat-vent with perfect precision.

The arm sparked. Malfunctioned. One limb down.

The warrior roared and charged, using the axe and sword now in combination. Kael deflected the sword, ducked the axe, and leapt onto the brute's back… driving his blade into a joint between neck and shoulder.

The hook-blade stabbed backward; catching Kael in the thigh. He screamed but held on, wrenching his blade free and slashing the top right arm clean off.

Two arms down.

The brute slammed back into a wall, smashing Kael loose. The young Solari rolled, barely avoiding the follow-up blade strike, and landed in front of a low-hanging energy line.

He got an idea.

He scrambled up the column beside it, just high enough to bait the warrior closer. The brute swung upward… and Kael jumped off the column, slicing the energy line as he dropped.

The exposed conduit snapped loose, arcing with energy…

Kael jammed it straight into the brute's exposed wound.

The power surged through him; causing the juggernaut's armor to overload in a cascade of electric fire. The remaining limbs twitched violently. Sparks exploded.

Kael hit the ground hard and rolled as the warrior stumbled, flaming from within… then collapsed, molten metal pooling beneath.

Silence.

Then the familiar hum.

The teleport pad activated at the far side of the room.

Kael limped toward it, panting, bloodied, but still alive.

"Level five…" he muttered, spitting out blood. *"After this… I can't imagine level six."*

The light consumed him; and he vanished to whatever trial lay next.

Chapter 6: The Verge

The Verge wasn't a place. It was a feeling; a fraying edge between law and lawlessness, where the stars flickered like dying embers and everyone carried secrets in their blood.

Outpost Zarrax, grafted onto the carcass of a long-dead warship, pulsed like a black-market heartbeat in the outer reaches of Eclipse territory. Half cantina, half intelligence broker's maze, it was no place for allies of Mer'Kuri to walk unmasked.

But they were here anyway.

Lysara moved through the crowd cloaked in a shifting shadow mesh; her bright eyes dimmed beneath its veil. She brushed past smugglers, mercs, and Eclipse loyalists; all too busy with their own schemes to notice the princess of Venus in their midst.

Behind her, Krynn slid along a different route, blending with a band of rogue bounty-hunters. His blade was hidden, his focus not. And

above them both, watching from a rusted catwalk, Vex stood like a statue; internal scanners sweeping for anomalies.

“Signal’s close,” **Vex** said through their secure link. *“A repeating pulse embedded in a decrypted shard wave... old Mer’Kuri code. It’s coming from a buried relay under the cantina.”*

“Then that’s our window,” **Lysara** whispered. *“We download and disappear. No engagements.”*

“I make no promises,” **Krynn** muttered, slipping through a maintenance hatch.

They descended through the skeleton of the station, ducking steam vents and forgotten corridors. Past broken storage vaults and decompressed bulkheads, they found it: a still-active transmission node tucked behind layers of forgotten wreckage. A single light blinked; a timed loop, waiting to be heard.

Vex interfaced. Data streamed into his core.

“Encrypted battle orders,” he confirmed. *“Draetheon fleet movements. They’re calling it Ra’s Eclipse... full-scale assault on Mer’Kuri. Both moons. Targeting Solari strongholds.”*

“When?” **Lysara** asked.

“Soon.”

A tremor shook the wall. Not mechanical. Not planned.

“They know we’re here,” **Krynn** said, voice sharp. *“We’ve overstayed.”*

Vex’s optics surged with red light. *“Multiple signatures inbound. Dropships. They’re deploying now.”*

Lysara’s voice was ice. *“Then we burn our way out.”*

Above them, the Verge began to awaken with fire.

Fortress of Sha'duun - Inner Spire

The door slid shut behind Xal with a cold finality, echoing like a tomb seal. The chamber was vast and circular, its walls ringed with dark jagged mirrors that distorted his reflection.

Braziers sputtered with flame; but not fire as he knew it. These burned black, casting negative light that made shadows seem brighter than flesh.

Xal's breath misted in the air. Not from cold, but pressure. Like something immense waited, watching.

He stepped forward slowly, eyes narrowed.

Then a ripple in the far end of the room.

A shape peeled itself from the wall. Same build. Same armor. Same face.

Him.

But wrong.

The shadow's skin was tinted ashen; veins pulsing with dull red heat like cracks in cooling magma. His eyes were empty pits of starlit void, lacking the flame of Ra; the passion that marked the Solari. He drew his weapon in perfect sync with Xal.

"You're not real," **Xal** said under his breath.

The shadow smirked.

And attacked.

The first clash rang like thunder. Their blades locked, identical but for aura. Xal's burned with focused heat; the shadow's seethed with frigid rage. Strike after strike, dodge for dodge, they moved as mirrored dancers in a war long rhythm. It was like fighting instinct itself.

"This is what I could've been," **Xal** realized between blows. *"If I had failed the Trials. If the Eclipse had taken me…"*

The memory of those grueling years with the Solari; the ascetic isolation, the pain, the brotherhood, flashed through him. He and Kael had forged themselves under pressure. But this... this version of him was the result of untethered power and bitterness.

The shadow fought without hesitation, without mercy.

It swept low and cut upward; Xal barely dodged in time, sparks flying. He spun, landed a hit to the doppelgänger's ribs, but it didn't flinch. Instead, it twisted into a vicious counter, slamming Xal's shoulder with the hilt of its blade and knocking him to the ground.

"Not enough," the **shadow** hissed, speaking in Xal's own voice. *"You're soft. Bound by code. By guilt."*

"No," **Xal** growled, pushing up. *"I'm bound by purpose."*

He flared his palms outward, channeling a radiant surge of Ra's energy; but the clone dispersed into smoke and reformed behind him,

slamming him face-first into a mirrored wall. The glass cracked; spider-webbing in spirals.

As he staggered, the mirrors showed flashes; moments of his doubt, his anger, his fear of failing his brother. Failing the Order.

“You are not enough,” the **shadow** repeated, voice now distorted, layered with echoing fragments of Eclipse whispers. *“Kael will surpass you. He already has. You are the lesser of the Two Suns.”*

Xal’s teeth clenched.

He let the anger rise; but didn’t let it control him. Instead, he used it as fuel, the way he’d been taught. The Solari didn’t deny emotion, they harnessed it. Elevated it.

The shadow charged again, aiming for the heart.

Xal didn’t block.

Instead, he sidestepped and pivoted into a brutal knee, knocking the wind from the duplicate’s chest. The momentum carried them both toward one of the braziers. Thinking fast, Xal feigned a stumble and kicked at its base, toppling the black flame into the mirrored wall.

The light ignited the mirror in a blaze of white-blue fire. The shadow staggered, its body flickering like a glitching hologram.

“You’re strong,” **Xal** said, panting. *“But you’re only ever going to be what I left behind.”*

With a shout, he drew Ra’s energy fully into his blade. His eyes glowed, his body radiant like a star.

One clean slash.

The shadow screamed as it fractured apart, unraveling in strands of darkness and ash, swallowed by the firelight.

The silence stretched as the last echoes of the shadow's scream faded into the void. Xal stood alone, chest rising and falling, sweat trailing down his brow.

Around him, the mirrored chamber was still ablaze with low-burning blue fire; each cracked surface glowing like the edges of an ancient scroll, revealing glimpses of time and self he didn’t understand. The flames licked upward without consuming.

Time felt wrong here.

Then… one of the mirrors twitched.

The one he had slammed against earlier.

Its glass rippled like disturbed water, and a figure stepped forward from within; not a shadow, not the corrupted twin, but… himself. Tired. Bloodied. Kneeling.

His reflection.

It raised its head, and their eyes met.

No malice. Just solemn acceptance.

In its open palm glowed a crystalline shard; blueish-silver, pulsing softly like a heartbeat.

A crystal of Ra.

Different than the one Kael and he found on Pheldhor; cooler in color, but unmistakably alive with power.

Xal didn't move at first.

"Why?" he asked aloud, voice hoarse.

The reflection tilted its head, then gave the faintest nod. Not as an answer. As an invitation.

He stepped forward.

Their hands touched; not warm, not cold. Just still.

As soon as Xal's fingers closed around the crystal, the mirror-Xal faded, shattering into drifting motes of light. The mirror went black, inert and lifeless.

The blue light in his hand flickered once. Then it steadied; syncing with his pulse.

"I guess my work here is done," he whispered.

He turned toward the newly opened passage.

He tucked the crystal into his satchel and disappeared into the next corridor, wondering how he would now escape the fortress.

Escape The Verge

They moved like shadows chased by flame.

Lysara led, cloak trailing behind her as she sprinted down the tight corridor, boots thudding against groaning steel. Krynn flanked her right, blade drawn, his eyes scanning every crevice for an ambush. Vex

sealed the rear, one arm transformed into a compact plasma shield, the other primed with a pulse cannon already hot.

Behind them, the Verge screamed.

Sirens erupted. Strobes blinked wildly. Steam vents ruptured. The forgotten bones of the station stirred with ancient, unwanted life.

"They've locked the upper passageways," **Krynn** called. *"We'll have to cut through Maintenance Tier Nine."*

"Too exposed," **Vex** said flatly. *"Recommend access tunnel F-13. Narrow. Defensible."*

Lysara didn't hesitate. *"Take it."*

They turned into a fractured junction. The walls trembled as dropships latched onto the exterior hull above them. Magnetic boots clanked. Armor plates clattered.

Eclipse squads were landing.

Gunfire spat from behind. **Vex** snapped his shield up and returned fire, his shots precise; no wasted energy, just collapsing armor and falling bodies.

"They're swarming every level," he said. *"Four squads on intercept vectors."*

Krynn tossed a charge behind them. *"Then we thin the crowd."*

Boom…

The corridor behind them vanished in flame, throwing debris and Eclipse bodies against the walls. The shockwave propelled them forward, deeper into the labyrinthine veins of Zarrax.

They descended a collapsed elevator shaft, cables hissing as they slid down into the sub-core tiers.

Lysara hit the deck in a roll, came up swinging, and gutted an Eclipse scout before he could raise his com.

"Tunnel's just ahead," **Vex** said, his sensors flashing warnings across his HUD. *"Short-range coms are down. Long-range jamming active. They want us blind."*

"But we're not," **Krynn** muttered. *"We've got the node."*

Lysara clutched the crystal transmitter now tucked in her belt pouch. It pulsed faintly with blue light; encrypted knowledge that might save a world, if they could get it out.

They reached Tunnel F-13; narrow, dark, half-collapsed.

“Go,” **Lysara** ordered.

They ducked inside just as plasma fire sprayed the corridor behind them. The shots struck the wall, carving molten gashes. Echoes of pursuit thundered after them.

The tunnel curved hard to the left, then dropped sharply. Vex dove first, using his internal mass dampeners to break the fall. Lysara and Krynn followed; an old waste chute repurposed for emergency escape.

They landed in the lower hangar, directly beneath the cantina deck. A freighter graveyard. Dust, broken hulls, rusted flight skiffs. No guards… yet.

“We need the Talon,” **Krynn** barked. “*Yesterday!”*

Vex’s optics scanned the bay and decloaked the Black Talon. *“The Black Talon is ready and waiting.”*

They sprinted for the vessel just as Eclipse troops swarmed the catwalks above.

“Go, go, go!” **Lysara** shouted.

Blaster bolts rained down. Krynn returned fire, keeping them back as Vex powered up the ship. Lysara hit the ramp and dove inside, slamming the controls. Krynn followed, panting, bleeding from a graze to the arm.

The ship screamed as it powered up. Eclipse troops leapt from the catwalks… too late.

The Talon roared to life and blasted from the hangar with a shockwave of ion fire.

Behind them, the Verge collapsed into chaos. Zarrax was burning. But they had what they came for.

And now… Mer’Kuri had to be warned.

Chapter 7: Unfair Affair

Kael emerged from the teleport light into a chamber unlike any other he'd seen in the tower. The air was thick with incense; sweet, spicy, ancient.

Exotic vines clung to arched walls of black stone veined with gold, pulsing faintly like a heartbeat. Crystalline lanterns floated in midair, casting shifting patterns of light across the marbled floor. The room was silent… yet alive.

At its center stood a figure.

Eclipse Commander Typhon.

She turned to face him with deliberate grace, a slow tilt of her head revealing dark braids cascading over ceremonial armor etched with the Eclipse sigil. Her eyes shimmered like molten copper; piercing, hypnotic.

There was no mistaking the heritage in her features: the angular cheekbones, the heat in her poise. She was Mer'Kurian, like him. But where Kael embodied discipline and resolve, Typhon radiated command, seduction, and something far more dangerous… belief.

Behind her, placed upon a mantle of black crystal, sat the final Crystal of Ra; or at least one of the three that the Solari require.

Kael saw it immediately. A warm golden light pulsed from its core, a subtle beacon just over her shoulder. In his peripheral vision, it hovered just to the left of Typhon's unwavering gaze. So close. So far.

Her lips curled into a smirk.

"I was hoping it would be you," **Typhon** said, voice silk over steel. *"Come, Solari. Let's see if you live up to your legend."*

Kael's muscles coiled, fists clenching as the heat of Ra surged to the surface of his skin.

He was ready to fight.

Ready to kill.

Typhon readied her stance, one foot sliding back, hands open… inviting. A slender spear materialized in her grasp, humming with violet energy. Kael matched her movements without hesitation, drawing his short sword in one hand, his forearm crackling as his energy shield flared to life.

Typhon's voice cut through the silence. "*Although I am Draethean by allegiance, my blood is Mer'Kurian. However... on Draetheon, I am royalty."*

Kael tilted his head, narrowing his eyes. *“I should’ve known. You’re beautiful enough.”* He smirked faintly. *“So beautiful that I hate to kill you.”*

Her eyes narrowed to blades. *“As a royal, my blood tells me when I find my life mate.”*

Kael frowned. *“Good for you... Why are you telling me?”*

The tension shifted. Typhon’s glare softened… not completely, but just enough for a crack of something deeper to show.

She sighed. *“The moment I saw you... just before the princess and I fought aboard the Abyssal Spire… before she blew it up… I knew you were the one. My blood boiled. My blood told me. But you ran off.”*

She stepped forward slowly. *“No worries. I had to kill the princess. Failed, I know. I also feared... feared you were promised to her. Then I really wanted to kill her.”*

Kael’s stance hardened. *“I will not let you kill my friend.”*

Typhon stopped. *“Is that all you got out of what I just said?”*

Kael’s brow furrowed. *“Enough talk. Let’s end this…”*

“… here and now!”

Typhon lifted her weapon… then let it fall with a soft clang.

Kael blinked. *“What are you doing?”*

Typhon said nothing. She took another step forward, then another… slowly… sensually… eyes locked on his like twin comets. Her hands moved to her armor clasps.

Kael stammered, raising his sword. *“Wait. Stop. You’re not fighting fair.”*

“I’m not fighting at all,” **she** said, voice low.

Her armor hit the floor in pieces. Kael froze. His shield flickered as if unsure whether to defend or surrender. In all his training, in all his trials… he had never been taught to fight like **this**.

And then she was upon him… bare, lithe, heat against heat… as she eased him backward into the plush surface of a strange reclining lounge curved like a crescent moon.

Kael’s weapon clattered from his hand.

“I… I have failed,” he whispered.

Typhon's breath was against his ear, her body eclipsing his.

The world vanished.

Fade to black.

And So It Begins!

The war chamber throbbed with low frequency pulses from the ship's core reactor. In the center of the room, where the command dais once stood, space itself was torn; folded into a churning rift of black flame and flickering light.

From it, the **Shallit'Biru** emerged… or rather, projected. Not as a full form, but as a towering silhouette of twisting shadows, crowned with horns of radiant starlight and wrapped in the sound of grinding stone.

Six molten eyes blazed like tiny dying suns, scanning the room from within the rippling anomaly.

Admirals dropped to their knees. Even Sarnak Quor averted his gaze, sweat trailing from his temples despite the chamber's cold.

The voice that came through the portal wasn't sound… it was pressure. A resonance that sank into bone and marrow.

"You dared summon me over failure?"

No one responded.

The **Shallit'Biru's** silhouette swelled, dark flames licking outward as the portal spat sparks across the command deck.

"Outpost Verge has fallen. My patience is shattered. You lost to a ragged handful of insurgents; a broken princess, and an over the hill general! You have made me bleed shadows in front of lesser gods."

High Admiral Quor found his voice. *"We are regrouping. Reinforcements are being rerouted from…"*

"Silence."

The flame in the rift flared with a sound like a collapsing mountain. One of the junior officers closest to the projection convulsed… and dropped. Dead.

The **Shallit'Biru** continued, his tone more restrained… but not calmer.

“You were meant to contain the rebellion. Now they spread. Now they inspire.”

He turned… if the shifting mass of him could be said to turn… toward the planetary grid. The holomap stuttered, then locked onto Mer’Kuri and its twin moons, now pulsing red with Draetheon targeting marks.

“No more skirmishes. No more games.”

The chamber lights flickered violently.

“Begin the assault on Mer’Kuri. Let the sun-blooded cowards know what darkness truly is.”

The portal began to collapse in on itself, sucking heat and sound into a swirling eye of oblivion.

As the rift finally vanished, only a faint black scorch remained on the deck.

And silence.

The After Glow

He lay on his back, breath shallow, eyes locked on the endless dark above… where a ceiling should be, yet none could be seen. Only shadows. Stillness. The echo of his own heartbeat.

Typhon’s lithe form rested across his chest, a sculpted silhouette against the void.

Kael’s voice was low, flat, hollow. *“I’ve failed. I know this wasn’t part of the plan… I don’t know what to do… You’ve won.”*

Typhon stirred. Gracefully, she rose from their bed; the alien curve of her body vanishing into the cool shimmer of the chamber’s dim light. Kael sat up slowly, the weight of shame draped around him like lead. His fingers curled unconsciously, as if expecting a reprimand from the gods of the Solari.

But instead, she returned.

Without armor. Without weapon.

She knelt before him, reverent… holding the Crystal of Ra in both hands, as though it were a sacred offering.

“Here,” **she** said softly. *“Take it, My Love.”*

Kael stared, unable to move.

Typhon’s voice dropped to a whisper. *“The moment you took my heart… you won.”*

The chamber was so still, he could hear the subtle hum of the crystal; alive in her palms.

Slowly, Kael reached out and accepted it. The radiant warmth surged through his fingertips and up his arm, pulsing like a second heartbeat.

He looked to her. *“Now what?”*

Typhon gave a small, tired smile.

“…Now we try to get out of here without getting killed.”

Chapter 8: Mer'Kuri Prime

Location: The Solar Conclave Hall: Council Spire Atrium

Constructed atop the Pinnacle of Radiance, the chamber is surrounded by a cascading prism of golden mirrors, channeling sunlight directly from Ra. The space, vast and circular, resembles an inverted amphitheater, with layered tiers descending to a central speaking platform surrounded by a levitating ring of twelve rotating councilor orbs; each pulsing with the sigil of its world.

A few hundred delegates; diplomats, generals, scholars, and seers, gathered in solemn tension, each planetary section color-coded by nation and cloaked in quiet rivalry.

At the center, *Councilor Alaric Thalos* of Mer’Kuri, voice calm yet urgent, addressed the sea of power.

Councilor Alaric: *“We stand at the edge of a silence too loud to ignore. Solar fluctuations. Deep-system anomalies. Eclipse movements no longer bound to rebellion but to something darker. I believe we are no longer alone in this system.”*

A murmur swept across the crowd. Some leaned forward. Others scoffed.

From the Martian gallery, where stoic warriors in crimson and steel lined the tiers, *General Malrik Kaelorn* stood.

General Kaelorn: *“Convenient tales, Thalos. And who gains from uniting the planets under fear? Mer’Kuri would burn bright as center sun in a war it stirs.”*

From the opposing side, a gleaming semicircle of Venusian scholars and warriors stirred. The leader, *High Emissary Lysavelle,* rose with grace, her voice like woven silver.

Lysavelle: *“Mars sees war in every shadow. We have intercepted encoded anomalies… patterns consistent with advanced stealth architecture... Draetheon may not be myth.”*

Alaric stepped forward, voice rising over the ambient light-hum of the dome.

“You all speak of fear. I speak of preparation. The signs point to an awakening… one that could unravel our system. Not here. Not Mars. Not Venus. But Tiamara.”

A collective inhale. Delegates turned as one toward the blue-caped representatives of the aquatic world. Among them, *Speaker Nai’tha Vey;* her hair adorned with living coral, rose slowly.

Speaker Vey: *“Tiamara is a world of peace and tides. We are not a target… We are a sanctuary.”*

The chamber echoed her words, but Alaric did not yield. He stepped closer to the center platform; his silhouette cast in molten gold from the overhead light mirrors. His voice sharpened… not in anger, but in unmistakable urgency.

Alaric: *“That is precisely why you must see. Draetheon does not seek conquest through armies and banners. They strike through lifelines… through the arteries that feed the Sol.”*

He turned slowly, letting his words press against every ear in the chamber.

Alaric (pressing): *“Mer’Kuri channels the solar currents… the lifeblood of energy across our system. Tiamara nourishes it with water, the fountain of all living worlds... Control Ra… control the Tides… and Draetheon controls the Sol itself.”*

Whispers became rumblings. Even the Jovians shifted uncomfortably in their seats.

Alaric (grimly): *“If Mer’Kuri falls, the light dims. If Tiamara falls, life withers. And the Sol becomes theirs to govern… or to consume.”*

For the first time, uncertainty flickered across Speaker Vey's normally placid features.

From Mars' side, General Kaelorn barked a harsh laugh.

***General Kaelorn**: "Or perhaps this is Mer'Kuri's ploy… Make us cling to them as saviors, as they stockpile the stars and seas for themselves."*

High Emissary Lysavelle responded coolly: *"Only a fool ignores the horizon until the storm breaks over his head."*

***General Kaelorn**: "Fool?... Who is this… **female**… calling a fool!?!."*

The tension coiled tighter. Mars and Venus were at each other's throats. Some delegates began murmuring among themselves. Others exchanged wary glances. A storm was gathering… not merely in the skies above… but here, in the heart of the Solar Conclave.

Alaric gripped the edge of the speaker's dais, feeling the weight of it all. This was no longer just about warnings.

It was about whether anyone would listen in time.

The Great Escape

The warmth of the Crystal of Ra still lingered in Kael's hands as he slipped it beneath the fold of his ruined Solari tunic. Typhon stood now at the chamber's threshold, dressed in borrowed Eclipse gear… not her usual armor, but enough to pass.

She looked back at him with something between mischief and mourning.

Typhon: *"Put these on. We'll play prisoner and guard. It's stupid… but stupid might work."*

Kael rose. The shame still clung to him like smoke, but he nodded. Wordlessly, he fastened the bindings she tossed his way, locking them loosely over his wrists.

As they left the chamber, the stillness behind them was swallowed by cold steel and echoing silence.

As they exited the chamber, twenty Eclipse soldiers stood blocking the far end of the corridor… arms raised, visors glowing crimson.

Not a word.

Just stillness.

Kael (dryly): *“Maybe it’s me… but I think they’re on to us.”*

Typhon narrowed her eyes.

Typhon (under breath): *“Damn it.”*

Her hand drifted toward her sidearm.

Typhon (loud): *“It was worth a shot…”*

In a blink, she drew and fired… crimson light bursting like lightning in the dark. Two Eclipse soldiers collapsed. Kael lunged into a roll as his bonds snapped apart. The hallway erupted.

Typhon (yelling): *“RUN!”*

They tore down a side passage just as gunfire screamed through the air behind them. Alarms wailed. Footsteps thundered in pursuit. Sirens painted red lines across the walls.

Kael ducked a blast that charred the ceiling above his head.

Kael: *“You said we’d sneak out!”*

Typhon: *“I lied! Welcome to Plan B!”*

A sealed blast door loomed ahead. Kael skidded to a stop, slammed his palm against the access panel. Denied.

Typhon: *“Move.”*

She slammed a pulse-charger into the door controls. It sparked, groaned… then hissed open just enough for them to squeeze through.

More shouts behind. Eclipse voices. They were being tracked.

As the door slammed shut behind them, Kael looked at her… breathless, wide-eyed, hair wild with heat and fury.

Kael: *“This is insane.”*

Typhon (grinning): *“So’s love.”*

She took his hand. Pulled him forward.

And they ran.

The halls narrowed as Kael and Typhon dashed through the lower levels, the architecture turning jagged and raw. Pipes hissed overhead. Old systems flickered in protest as if the fortress itself was waking up to stop them.

Behind them, boots pounded metal. Eclipse reinforcements.

Typhon: *“Down here!”*

She pulled Kael through a torn grate into a vertical shaft slick with coolant vapor. She leapt onto a ladder welded to the wall and began to descend without hesitation. Kael followed, the clamor behind them fading for a moment… replaced by the soft drip of leaking water and the buzz of fluorescent coils.

At the base of the shaft, Typhon ripped open a panel, revealing a short tunnel carved from bedrock. At the end: daylight.

Real daylight.

Kael (panting): *“Please tell me that’s not just another trick light.”*

Typhon (grinning through her breath): *“Not this time.”*

They burst into the open.

The wind hit them first… dry, electric, scorched with the smell of solar residue from the Khepra defense grid. The fortress loomed behind them like a black monolith, carved into the cliffside. Ash blew across the cracked plain.

About a hundred yards ahead, hidden in a half-buried ravine, Typhon’s sleek speed fighter sat cloaked in a shroud of adaptive mesh. Its engines hummed faintly, ready to ignite.

Typhon: *“There. We get in, we’re gone.”*

Kael: *“And if we don’t?”*

Typhon (already running): *“We die beautifully.”*

Blaster fire erupted behind them… Eclipse soldiers flooding from the side gate. Typhon fired back blindly as they sprinted across the open expanse. Kael dropped low, shoulder-rolling as shots seared past.

The fighter’s cockpit canopy began to open… responding to Typhon’s remote signal.

A blast scorched the ground inches from her feet.

Kael turned mid-run, pulled his short blade, and hurled it… pinning an Eclipse trooper clean through the shoulder. He kept running.

Fifty yards.

The whine of Eclipse skiffs screamed through the air above them… air support arriving.

Kael: *“We’re not gonna make it!”*

Typhon: *“Yes. We. Are.”*

She vaulted the last ridge, landed in the cockpit and spun the chair toward the pilot controls. Kael leapt in beside her just as the first wave of plasma hit the shielding.

Typhon (shouting): *“HOLD ON!”*

The fighter roared to life, lifted with a sonic boom, and peeled into the sky… leaving the fortress, the troopers, and the battlefield in a wash of fire and dust.

Chapter 9: Get Use To Disappointment

Rain; a rarity on Mer’Kuri, tapped lightly against the windows; the droplets shimmering gold beneath the refracted light of Ra. From the balcony of his highrise estate, Councilor Alaric stood alone, arms folded, gaze lost in the void between stars.

The summit was over. And nothing had changed.

Behind him, the soft clink of porcelain broke the silence. Seraphina, wrapped in a flowing robe of solar weave silk, set down a cup of steaming kelari root tea on the nearby table. She didn’t speak. She didn’t need to.

Alaric (low, bitter): *“A planetary summit with no unity. Mars and Venus nearly came to blows. Jupiter dismissed it all as superstition. Tiamara insists they’re a sanctuary, not a battlefield…”*

(he turned, his voice harder)

“They don’t understand. They won’t understand.”

He exhaled sharply, rubbing the bridge of his nose as if he could press the pressure out through his skull.

Alaric: *“The Draetheon threat is real. Every minute we waste arguing… we bleed time. And time is running out.”*

Seraphina stepped forward; her presence soft but unyielding… like the quiet before a solar flare.

Seraphina (gently): *“You’ve seen the signs longer than any of them. You’ve warned them… again and again. But sometimes… people need the fire to reach their skin before they believe it can burn.”*

Alaric looked at her, eyes tired.

Alaric: *“Do you have any idea what’s coming, Seraph?”*

She didn’t answer right away. Instead, she moved beside him, resting a hand lightly on the balcony railing. Her gaze drifted up… beyond the clouds, beyond the stars. Something distant shimmered in her expression. Something… knowing.

Seraphina (quietly): *“Not exactly. But I feel it.”*

Alaric (watching her): *“You always say that.”*

Seraphina: *“And I’m never wrong.”*

He smiled despite himself. Only she could do that… bring calm to a world unraveling. But the smile faded as he turned back to the sky.

Alaric (under his breath): *“We’re not ready.”*

Seraphina (almost to herself): *“No. But they are.”*

Alaric turned to ask what she meant… but she was already walking away, the silk of her robe trailing behind her like a passing comet.

Solari Sanctum

The chamber was quiet save for the low hum of solar conduits running through the polished walls. Glyphs etched in gold glowed faintly, pulsing with residual heat from the daystar above.

In the center of the chamber, beneath the Seal of Ra, stood Xal; cloaked in leisure garments, the two Crystals of Ra secured in a stasis field before him.

Across from him, seated cross-legged on a raised dais, was *Master Izen Varun;* his robes charred at the hem from a life too long exposed to fire and flame. He opened his eyes slowly, as if waking from the heat of a vision.

Xal (impatient): *“What are they? What do these crystals do, beyond glow and hum and make us targets?”*

Master Izen (calm): *“To ask what a Ra Crystal does is to ask what the sun itself is for. You are still thinking like a soldier, Xal…”*

“… You must begin thinking like a Solari.”

Xal (quietly): *“Then teach me.”*

Master Izen rose with surprising grace for a man of his age. He walked in a slow circle around the stasis field, his hand never quite touching it.

Master Izen: *"Each crystal is a pure core of condensed Ra energy; unfiltered, unshaped, unyielding. It can kill the untrained. It can sustain the worthy. With discipline, a gifted Solari warrior can draw endlessly from one crystal. But to master it… is another matter."*

Xal: *"You mean it can make someone… unstoppable?"*

Master Izen (stern): *"Only if their soul doesn't burn first."*

He stepped forward, eyes narrowing.

Master Izen: *"The training required to wield a Ra Crystal without external containment is unlike anything you have learned, thus far. Even among the Solari, there are fewer than a dozen who have survived the full path."*

Xal: *"Then teach me. I'm ready."*

The master didn't respond right away. He simply looked at him… for a long time. And then turned away, walking toward a tall, sealed chamber door adorned with three interlocking rings.

Master Izen: *"There is another use. One we do not speak of lightly."*

He touched the rings. The door hissed and parted. Inside, Xal could make out a massive, suspended structure; part weapon, part relic, humming with dormant power.

Master Izen: *"Three crystals… not one, not two, three… can awaken **Solburn**."*

Xal (quiet): *"What is that?"*

Master Izen: *"A weapon forged in secret by the first Solari masters. It draws its fire from the heart of the Ra itself. With three crystals, Solburn becomes more than a weapon… it becomes a judgment…"*

"… Enough to crack the hull of a Draetheon flagship… or reduce an entire moon to ash."

Silence stretched between them like a canyon of fire.

Xal: *"Why haven't we used it?"*

Master Izen: *“Because it requires not just power… but **will**. A Solari must remain inside to guide the energy stream. A living conduit. No one has ever volunteered…”*

He looked directly at Xal.

Xal: *“Why are you looking at me?.”*

The chamber doors slammed open.

A blast of wind and dust swept through. Xal was startled and jumped ready to defend…until they saw Lysara; cloak torn, stride in with a burn along her shoulder. Her eyes were wide. Focused.

General Krynn followed, bleeding and silent. And Vex, ever the sentinel, brought up the rear, his outer plating still sizzling from fresh contact fire.

Lysara (out of breath): *“They’re here.”*

Gasps rippled across the chamber as others entered.

Xal: *“What?”*

Krynn (flat): *“The Draetheon invasion has begun.”*

Vex: *“Primary armada sighted in warp-mirror space. Insertion points calculated. Target: Mer’Kuri, both moons. Coordinated assault.”*

Master Izen’s breath caught in his throat.

Lysara: *“Zarrax is burning. We barely made it out. Dropships, stealth fleets, full detachments of Ra’s Eclipse already in-system.”*

Xal: *“They’re already here…?”*

Krynn: *“And they’re not coming to conquer. They’re coming to cleanse.”*

Vex: *“Preliminary analysis suggests planetary-level purge. Likelihood of survival without mobilization: 4.3%.”*

A long silence fell over the sanctum. Even the Ra crystals slowed their orbit, their glow dimming, sensing the weight of what had been said.

Master Izen (quietly): *“We have waited too long.”*

Lysara (stepping forward): *“Then we don’t wait anymore. Call the banners. Summon the Suns.”*

She looked to Xal, her voice iron.

Lysara: *“Where’s your brother?”*

Rain Drops Keep Falling

Footsteps. Rushed. Heavy. No ceremony.

The door slid open without request.

His aide, **Miren**, entered with a data pad clutched in trembling hands.

“Councilor,” she said without preamble. *“Urgent communique. From Outpost Helix-Six. Outer rim sector.”*

Alaric turned slowly, eyes narrowing. He took the pad, scanned the decrypted feed. His brow furrowed. His lips tightened.

Alaric (under his breath): *“So it begins.”*

Seraphina reappeared silently in the doorway, as if summoned by the gravity in Miren’s words.

“They’ve already crossed into Mer’Kurian space?” she asked.

“**Miren**: *“Yes. Long-range optics picked up Draetheon capital ships breaching from subspace. Too many.”*

Alaric (grimly): *“They’re making no attempt to hide their approach.”*

Miren: “*Outpost command says it’s… a full war fleet. Fractal formations, stealth wings flanking both moons. And something else…”*

She hesitated. Alaric glanced at her sharply.

Alaric: *“Speak.”*

Miren: *“The outpost reports a vessel the size of a city… black, faceless. They believe it’s the one from the Zarrax sighting.”*

Alaric’s fingers curled into fists.

Alaric: *“Ra’s Eclipse.”*

He let the name linger in the air like a curse. Then he tapped a sequence into his console, opening a secure channel.

Alaric: *“Initiate global alert. Code Solaris Red. Council recall. Civilian shelters. Military mobilization… Immediately.”*

Seraphina: *“What about the other Councilors?”*

Alaric (quietly): *“They’ll convene when it’s too late. As always.”*

Miren stepped back, pale beneath the flickering wall-lights. The data pad buzzed softly; more updates flowing in, each one worse than the last. Alaric didn’t look at it. He didn’t need to.

The Draetheon armada had reached the Mer’Kuri outer rim near the void. The command room darkened as the alert protocols took over.

Red emergency bands slid across the walls, illuminating everything in pulses like a beating heart.

A map of Mer’Kuri and its surrounding space bloomed into view, covered in blinking red sigils that multiplied by the second.

Fortunately, this was speculation; projections of what to expect.

Seraphina moved closer to Alaric; her voice low. *“Do we have confirmation on planetary shields?”*

Miren: *“Helix-Six confirms moon side defenses are online, but they’re untested against Draetheon tech. If they deploy eclipse shells…”*

Seraphina: *“… we lose orbital control within hours.”*

Alaric: *“Less.”*

He turned from the console, his voice now sharp with command. *“Miren, relay to orbital command: Prioritize evacuation of civilian installations near the equatorial line. Use the magnetic rail if necessary. No delays.”*

Miren nodded and rushed back through the door, barking orders into her coms as it sealed behind her.

Seraphina folded her arms; eyes on the blinking map. *“They might target the moons first. Standard incursion pattern. Cut off satellite defenses, then drive the main assault down the gravity wells.”*

Alaric: *“That’s assuming they want to conquer Mer’Kuri.”*

Seraphina glanced at him, reading the implication in his tone.

Seraphina: *“You think they’re here to destroy it.”*

Alaric: *“No. I think they’re here to erase it.”*

The words were like ice. **Seraphina’s** jaw tightened. *“We need to reach the twins. Kael’s mission was on Tiraxis. Xal’s deep inside Khepra.”*

Alaric keyed in another code. *“Already dispatched a secure burst. If they’re still breathing, they’ll respond.”*

He paused.

“But if Ra’s Eclipse reaches Mer’Kuri, we may not have time to extract either of them.”

For now, the Mer’Kuri fleet is about to engage the Draetheon armada on the outer rim.

Alaric (to himself): *“We’re out of time.”*

Chapter 10: Secret Handshake

Bells shrieked across the sanctum. An alarm sequence once official, now urgent; piercing. The chamber’s golden glyphs dimmed to a crimson hue, pulsing in time with the station's heartbeat.

Lysara broke into a sprint, cloak fluttering like flame behind her. She reached the nearest wall console and slammed her hand against the rune-sensor, pulling up a tactical overlay. The image stuttered; static, distortion… before resolving into a fast-approaching vessel piercing low orbit.

Lysara: *“What is this? The Eclipse already? How did they breach this close… undetected?”*

General Krynn limped beside her, one hand pressed to his side where blood seeped dark and slow. His one good eye narrowed at the screen.

Krynn: *“No… not a fleet. Just one. A single fighter. Standard Eclipse frame… But the signature’s… wrong.”*

Vex moved like a phantom over her shoulder, optical sensors shifting. He scanned the readout in silence.

Vex: *“Design analysis confirms: Eclipse-class interceptor. But propulsion pattern is inconsistent. Lateral stabilizers are misaligned. Weapon systems… dormant. I detect no charge build-up.”*

Xal stepped forward. *“Let me see.”*

Outside, the fighter banked sharply, narrowly dodging the perimeter turrets. Warning shots streaked past its hull. It didn’t return fire; just kept weaving.

[Aboard the Fighter]

Typhon gripped the co-pilot console, eyes darting across flashing alerts.

Typhon: *“The Solari are firing! They think we’re Eclipse. How do we tell them otherwise? Communications were fried during the escape!”*

Kael snarled, ducking another burst that scraped the wing.

Kael: *“They’re behind us and ahead. Eclipse chasing, Solari attacking. Typical.”*

Typhon (with a dry laugh): *“Well. This was fun while it lasted.”*

Kael didn’t smile. He leaned forward; jaw tight.

Kael: *“Give me the controls.”*

Typhon blinked, then gave a short nod.

“They’re all yours, Twin Sun.”

[Sanctum, Moments Later]

Krynn squinted at the readout, tension rising. *“What is that ship doing? It’s flying erratic. Losing control?”*

Lysara’s fingers danced over the console. *“Maybe their navigation’s damaged. It’s flailing.”*

Xal stepped closer, eyes locked on the pattern unfolding across the display.

Xal: *“No. No, wait.”*

A silence fell over the chamber again.

Xal: *“Stop firing.”*

Vex tilted his head. *“Explain.”*

Xal: *“That’s Kael.”*

Everyone turned.

Xal: *“He’s flying a pattern… We came up with it years ago. In case we were ever caught flying an enemy craft without coms. It’s a code… like a secret handshake. A way to say, It’s me. Don’t shoot.”*

Lysara arched a brow. *“You really need to work on sharing this kind of information.”*

Krynn (muttering): *“I second that.”*

Xal turned to Master Izen, who was already reaching for a control crystal.

Master Izen: *“Stand down all batteries. Bring the fighter in.”*

The golden glyphs on the chamber walls rippled as his command reached the defense grid.

Outside, the turrets powered down. The fighter slowed, spiraling gently toward the landing pad atop the sanctum’s high spire. Steam hissed as it settled.

Lysara, Krynn, and Vex followed Xal out into the wind-swept light of the surface tower. The sky was darkening; sunset bleeding into the cloud line like the omen of war.

The cockpit hissed open.

Kael climbed out first, armor blackened; sweat pouring down his cheek. He looked half-dead, but his eyes locked on Xal’s the moment he emerged.

No words.

Just a nod.

Typhon (not recognizable in foreign armor) followed, coughing smoke, grinning like a crazy woman. *“Told you we’d make it.”*

Kael (quietly, to Xal): *“I’ve seen them. Up close. We’re not ready.”*

Xal: *“Then we get ready.”*

Kael looked over his brother’s shoulder… at Lysara, Krynn, the Ra Crystals spinning behind the stained-glass arches. At the tower that hummed like a living sun.

Kael: *“You’ve seen it too, haven’t you?”*

Xal nodded, the weight of it sinking in. *“Solburn... But it needs three Crystals of Ra to activate. We only have two.”*

Kael glanced down, then reached slowly into his cloak. From beneath the scorched fabric, he withdrew a crystal… the third. Its golden light spilled out across the chamber, brighter than the others, alive with intensity.

Kael: *“Not anymore.”*

For a moment, no one spoke. Then Lysara stepped forward first, placing a hand on Kael’s shoulder with a small, stunned smile.

Lysara: *“You insane, beautiful idiot.”*

Krynn grunted in approval and clapped Kael hard on the back, nearly knocking him forward. *“Took your time.”*

Even **Vex** tilted his head slightly, as if in robotic appreciation. *“Statistical odds of successful retrieval were low. You have exceeded them.”*

Master Izen approached last, his gaze lingering on the crystal, then on Kael himself. No words… just a solemn nod.

Xal moved beside his brother and exhaled with a grin. *“Told you we’d need that code pattern.”*

Kael smirked. *“Yeah, yeah. Next time you do the dance.”*

They all stood there a moment… shoulder to shoulder… beneath the Seal of Ra, the three crystals now casting light across their faces.

Finally… A glimpse of hope.

Bend A Knee

Steam hissed softly from the walls. Kael sat shirtless, rinsing grime and blood from his arms. Across from him, **Typhon** adjusted the straps of her borrowed armor, her hood still shadowing her features.

She hadn’t realized no one had truly seen her. Not with the mask, not with the Eclipse-issued gear. She'd arrived as a ghost in someone else's skin.

But Princess Lysara wasn't fooled.

The door hissed open.

Lysara: *"I thought that was you."*

Typhon straightened, her eyes flicking up as Kael exited to the adjoining chamber, oblivious to the tension behind him.

Lysara (stepping forward): *"We still have unfinished business."*

Typhon: *"Princess... I'd love to play with you."* (a cold grin) *"But not anymore."*

Lysara (gritting her teeth): *"You're not getting off that easy. Arm yourself."*

In one fluid motion, Typhon drew two slender blades from seemingly nowhere.

Lysara pulled two crescent-bladed axes from her belt.

Typhon (smirking): *"Alright, Princess. Let's dance."*

The moment bristled. Then…

Kael re-enters. His eyes go wide.

Kael: *"Wait! What are you doing?"*

He throws himself between them, hands out.

Lysara: *"Move, Kael. This has nothing to do with you."*

Kael: *"It has everything to do with me. She's with me."*

Lysara (staggered): *"With you? She's a lizard! I hate lizards!"*

Typhon faltered. The fire in her stance dropped as her blades lowered. Her voice cracked; wounded.

Typhon: *"Is that it? That's why you hate me? Not the betrayal… not politics or spying on Venus… but that?"*

Lysara: *"I'm from Venus. I can smell a lizard a mile away. Now come on!"*

Typhon (softly): *"I never hated you, Princess. It was fun when I thought it was political..."*

She drops her blades, letting them clatter.

Typhon: *"I'm sorry I ever hurt you."*

Lysara (shocked): *"Wait… What?... You're not fighting fair."*

Kael (half-laughing): *"I know… Right?"*

Typhon stepped forward, slow and sure, then bent one knee before Lysara.

Typhon: *"Did you ever find the source of all that classified intel on Draetheon outposts?"*

Lysara (guarded): *"No. Why?"*

Typhon: *"That was me. My way of making up for what I stole from Venus."*

Lysara blinked. Her expression softened.

Lysara: *"Well… When you say it like that, I feel silly."*

Kael (grinning): *"I think I'm going to cry."*

Weapons forgotten, Lysara stepped forward and embraced Typhon.

Lysara: *"If you're going to kill me… now's the time. I'm defenseless."*

The door hissed again… **Krynn, Xal, and Vex** stepped inside, blinking at the unexpected sight.

Krynn: *"Are we interrupting something?"*

Lysara (clearing her throat): *"Everyone… this is Typhon. The mysterious source of the classified intel we've been relying on these past months."*

Krynn: Ooh…

Kael (whispering to Typhon): *"So you're a lizard?"*

Typhon (dry): *"The Princess was being dramatic."*

She glanced at Lysara with a smirk.

"My father is Mer'Kurian. My mother... Draetheon. The indigenous races of Draetheon are reptilian. So… Yes. I have reptilian blood."

She leaned a little toward Kael, conspiratorially.

Typhon: *"The Princess also has a nose like a zar'venka."*

Xal (grinning): *"Zar'venka? Those swamp hounds that can smell heat signatures through stone?"*

Typhon (nods): *"Exactly."*

Lysara (folding her arms, amused): *"I told you I could smell her before she even spoke."*

Krynn (stepping forward, reserved): *"Mixed blood or not... You risked your life passing us intelligence. That buys you some trust in my book."*

Vex (quietly, scanning): *"Her biometric signature checks out. She is who she says she is."*

Kael (smirking): *"Sooo… How did someone from Mer'Kuri wind up thousands of light-years away on Draetheon? We don't have anything that can ravel that far."*

Typhon: *"I'll tell you later."*

Chapter 11: Draetheon

There was a time before history splintered and the stars grew dim with war, when Draetheon ruled the Sol.

Older than Venus, older even than Mer'Kuri, the planet had vanished from sight for thousands of years; hurled into the deep void on its colossal oval orbit, lost beyond the reach of any telescope or probe. Most believed it a myth, a forgotten ghost of a world whispered about in ancient texts.

But Draetheon was no myth.

From the surface, the planet shimmered under a canopy of crackling auroras; not natural, but generated by orbital stations invisible to the untrained eye. Towering cities of black glass and metal rose from emerald forests, and labyrinthine strongholds burrowed deep into mountain ranges.

Everywhere, the mark of the Draetheon races; reptilian, ageless, and supreme, dominated the landscape.

The throne room of Draetheon was carved from onyx; its surface polished to a mirror-dark sheen that seemed to drink in the light. Massive columns twisted upward like petrified serpents, their scales shimmering under the cold, sterile glow of suspended orbs of light. The air was thick, heavy, saturated with the unspoken weight of millennia.

Upon the central platform sat **Queen Xyrrathis**, Monarch of Draetheon, Sovereign of the Voidborne.

Her scales, a deep, iridescent black, caught the light like molten armor. Eyes of burning gold watched the entrance with withering disdain, her clawed fingers resting lazily against the curved armrest of her throne. In her presence, even the walls seemed to bow.

A deep resonant chime echoed through the chamber.

The great doors parted, and through them moved a figure at once alien and familiar… **The Shallit'Biru**.

Shrouded in a flowing black cloak that seemed to devour the light around him, his form was thin and tall, gliding across the polished stone without a sound. No face was visible beneath the cowl, only a shadow; deeper and darker than the void beyond the stars.

A presence like cold death clung to him, as if he carried the breath of the grave wherever he went.

He stopped before the throne and lowered his head in a gesture that resembled a bow, though it felt more like the acknowledgment of two predators recognizing one another.

"Your Majesty," the **Shallit'Biru** intoned, his voice dry and hollow, as though spoken from behind a veil.

"The Draetheon Armada has engaged the Mer'Kuri fleet along the Void Rim. First blood is ours."

Queen Xyrrathis smiled; a thin, cruel smile that revealed the gleam of her venomous fangs.

"Good," she hissed, voice like crushed glass. *"Break them. Shatter their fleets. And when Mer'Kuri falls... the other planets of the sol will follow."*

Her eyes narrowed, gleaming like twin suns about to go supernova.

"And you, Shallit'Biru..." she whispered, almost tenderly, *"Fail me… and I will peel back the shadows you wear and see what truly lies beneath that darkness."*

The **Shallit'Biru's** cowl dipped fractionally lower, an unspoken vow.

"It will be as you command."

Queen Xyrrathis let the threat hang in the air like the coiled smoke of a dying fire, savoring the taste of it. Then, with a languid movement of her taloned hand, she beckoned the Shallit'Biru closer.

"Tell me," she said, her voice dropping to a low, almost purring cadence, *"How near are we to the Sol?"*

The Shallit'Biru raised his head slightly, though the abyss beneath his hood betrayed nothing.

"We remain distant yet, my Queen. Beyond the reach of their crude instruments. To them, we are little more than phantoms on the edge of thought."

Xyrrathis' fingers drummed against the black stone of her throne, each tap reverberating through the cavernous chamber like the heartbeat of some ancient leviathan.

"Phantoms..." she mused, the word rolling from her tongue like a blade through silk. *"Let them cling to their illusions. Let them believe they are still safe."*

Her golden eyes flared, a molten hunger burning deep within. *"But when we cross the veil… when we enter the Sol's cradle… will their blind watchmen not see us then?"*

The **Shallit'Biru's** voice, cold and immutable, answered. *"They will. But only if we wish it."*

At the slight tilt of her head, he continued, a dark reverence lacing his words.

"The Draetheon Cloak is ready, Sovereign. When the time comes, we shall wrap our arrival in shadow… beyond their primitive comprehension. Not even the probing eyes of their greatest seers or machines will glimpse our arrival."

He lowered himself fully now, kneeling upon the blackened floor, as if delivering a prophecy.

"They will know we have come only when we tear the heavens open above them."

Queen Xyrrathis' smile widened, predatory and beautiful in its malice.

"Good," she whispered, her voice the promise of extinction. *"Let them dream a little longer."*

The great throne room dimmed further, as if the very stars outside were already beginning to die.

The Mer'Kuri Rim

Beyond the shimmering boundary of Mer'Kuri's outermost defense perimeter; at the cold, lightless edge of the Void, the first salvos of war lit the darkness.

The Draetheon Armada emerged from the black like a swarm of ancient predators, their warships monstrous and silent, gliding forward with terrifying purpose. Each vessel was forged from dark alloys unknown to the Sol worlds, covered in spined armor that shimmered with faint, venomous hues.

Their shapes were angular, predatory, almost biological; like the great beasts of forgotten ages turned to metal and rage.

At the very brink of the Void; where the light of the Sol grew thin and the stars themselves seemed to cower, the Mer'Kuri fleet defined their line.

From the bridge of the flagship **Solaris Lance**, *Fleet Marshal Orien Vaas* stood tall, draped in the white and gold of Mer'Kuri's Solari defenders. His voice, amplified across the vacuum through powerful transmitters, rang clear and unyielding.

"Unidentified vessels, you have trespassed beyond the Mer'Kuri Sovereign Boundary. You are ordered to power down your engines and stand down. Failure to comply will be met with force."

The message was transmitted in every known frequency, across every standard communication protocol. It was the formal warning; as dictated by the ancient Codes of Solari Law.

For several tense moments, the Void answered only with silence. Then, across the black expanse, the Draetheon Armada stirred.

Their ships shifted formation like a school of predators scenting blood; dark monoliths reshaping into an offensive array. No reply came. No gesture of parley. Only the slow, inexorable advance of shadow-forged warships that drank in the starlight.

Fleet Marshal Vaas narrowed his eyes. He sang again.

"Unidentified vessels, you have trespassed beyond the Mer'Kuri Sovereign Boundary. You are ordered to power down your engines and surrender immediately. Failure to comply…"

He never finished.

Without warning, a spear of searing green energy burst from the forward ranks of the Draetheon Armada. It struck a Mer'Kuri frigate amidships, splitting the vessel apart in a brilliant, soundless explosion.

The Void, once cold and still, ignited into chaos.

Across the fleet, alarms blared, and command decks lit up in frantic activity. Solar lances charged to full strength, and return fire lashed out toward the encroaching shadow-ships.

The Draetheon Armada moved without hesitation, their formation tightening like a vice, dark warships pouring relentless, merciless fire into the heart of the Mer'Kuri defenders.

Fleet Marshal Vaas barked new orders into the coms; his face grim but unflinching.

"All units… Engage! Hold the line! For Mer'Kuri!"

The Capitol

Within the vaulted chambers of the Mer'Kuri High Council, the air crackled with tension.

Massive solar emblems shimmered overhead; golden wheels suspended in magnetic fields, each representing a district of the sun-born world. Their once-steady glow now flickered, casting fractured light across the assembly floor and etching anxious shadows across the faces of those gathered.

A low murmur spread like static among the representatives; district leaders, planetary envoys, and foreign observers, all watching the crisis unfold in real time.

Councilor Alaric stood at the center of the convocation floor, shoulders square beneath formal robed attire, though his face bore the wear of sleepless nights. Shimmering data-feeds spiraled around him, fed by grim-faced aides; holograms of outposts falling, disrupted satellite feeds, and red-alert codes blinking like dying stars.

The reports were worse than even his darkest predictions.

Across the marble amphitheater, delegates from Mer’Kuri’s major provinces broke into heated argument. Shouting rose above the usual decorum, a cacophony of panic and belated realization. Doubts about the Draetheon threat had evaporated. Now there was only fear.

“They’ve bypassed Tiraxis! How did they get past our outer defenses?”

“Who gave the order to pull back the orbital ring patrols?”

“You dismissed my motion to mobilize last week, Alaric!”

“What use is protocol when we’re being overrun?”

The council had become a storm of accusation and blame.

Suddenly, the chamber doors slammed open, admitting a rush of bootfalls. **Commander Saelen Dorr** strode in; his battle-worn armor still streaked with ash, helm tucked beneath one arm, his dark eyes fierce with urgency. He cut through the chamber like a blade.

“Councilor!” he barked, voice sharp and strained. *“The fighting’s begun at the Void Rim. Our fleet is fully engaged… but that’s not all.”*

He drew in a breath, as if bracing to deliver the next blow. *“The Eclipse. They’re moving. Armored divisions have been sighted advancing here… on the Capitol itself.”*

The chamber fell into stunned silence.

Even the bickering councilors froze, as if the words had stolen the breath from the room. The idea that the enemy would strike at the heart of Mer’Kuri; not just its moons, not just its outposts, was unthinkable… until it wasn’t.

Alaric’s jaw clenched, his face hardening into resolve.

“Sound the alarms,” he commanded. *“Evacuate the Senate sectors. Lock down the Skytrams. Ready the Capitol Guard.”*

Then he turned to face the stunned assembly.

“The Eclipse were never a scattered rabble,” he said, voice rising over the murmurs. *“They have been waiting for this. While we debated their relevance, they prepared for war.”*

Before another word could be spoken, the chamber lights flickered… then dimmed. Outside the tall crystal windows lining the dome, plumes of black smoke curled into view. Far below, within the grand avenues and solar terraces of the capitol, the battle had begun.

The Kurai; once dismissed as underground rebels, now battle-hardened freedom fighters, rose from shadowed alleys and long-abandoned bunkers. They met the Eclipse head-on in the very boulevards where peace parades once marched. Energy bolts flashed between statues of sun-kings. Buildings shook as pulse cannons thundered. Civilians fled through echoing corridors as militia forces mobilized from hidden barracks beneath the city.

The wide expanse of the Capitol Plaza, once used for open-air markets and council gatherings, transformed into a killing field. Solari-trained Kurai warriors clashed with Eclipse zealots whose faces were hidden behind masks etched with solar runes. It was not simply a battle of territory, but of belief; each side fighting not just for control, but for the future of Mer'Kuri's soul.

Above the chaos, from a rooftop overlooking the Senate spire, the banners of the Kurai unfurled once more. Black and silver. Stark. Defiant. Upon them, the ancient sigil of rebellion: a twin-headed serpent coiled around a sunstone. For the first time in decades, it flew openly over the Capitol.

And under it, the Kurai charged.

The skies above grew darker as smoke from distant fires reached the upper towers. Mer'Kuri; world of light, was being choked in shadow.

And still, from the heart of the High Council chamber, Councilor Alaric stood firm.

He did not retreat.

Not yet.

Chapter 12: Fractures of Light

The war-room deep beneath Council Spire buzzed with desperate energy. Holographic maps flickered and shifted across the vast circular table, bathing the faces of the six crusaders in shifting shades of gold and crimson. Each pulse of the display echoed the heartbeat of a world on the edge.

Beyond the reinforced walls, the first shockwaves of battle rolled in from the Mer'Kuri/Void Rim. The tremors were faint; but rising, like the footfalls of giants approaching through a long tunnel. Mer'Kuri stood alone. And grievously outgunned.

Princess Lysara paced with sharp, measured steps, the heels of her boots clicking like a metronome of urgency. Her hair shimmered in the low light, framing a face caught between fury and resolve. Every movement radiated tension barely contained.

Across from her, General Krynn stood rigid, one gloved hand resting on the pommel of his war-sword. His crimson mantle pooled behind him like a banner soaked in blood and pride, the ancient Martian sigil embroidered in ash-black thread.

"This cannot hold," **Krynn** said, voice low and grim. *"The Council plays politics while the Rim burns. If we don't bring reinforcements, Mer'Kuri will fall before the sun sets again."*

Lysara stopped cold, turning sharply.

"Then we go," she said. *"You to Mars... I to Venus... Our worlds must answer."*

A beat passed.

Krynn gave a short nod; a soldier's acknowledgment of a desperate mission, the kind only fools or heroes accepted.

Venus and Mars had little love for Mer'Kuri… and even less for each other. Convincing them would require more than diplomacy. It would take courage, leverage, and perhaps a miracle.

At the far end of the table, Vex stood like a silent sentinel, his metal frame reflecting firelight from the projected battlefronts. His glowing optics narrowed as they scanned the shifting conflict zones.

Beside him, Xal shifted restlessly. His fingers hovered near the hilt of his blade, not from fear, but from anticipation.

"We'll hold the line," **Xal** said, flashing a grim smile. *"Vex and I will stay and bleed with Mer'Kuri if we have to."*

Vex turned slightly, the faintest whir of servos accompanying the motion.

"With all due respect, Xal…" he said, voice laced with dry amusement, *"You're not the boss of me… But… I concur."*

Lysara allowed herself a faint smile. **Krynn**'s mouth twitched; close enough to a grin for a Martian.

"So do we," they said, nearly in unison.

A low chuckle rumbled from **Typhon**. She leaned forward; her gloved hands splayed against the glowing surface of the war-table. Her dark braids hung like cords as she glanced sideways at Kael.

"And Kael and I," she said, grabbing his hand in a firm, almost ritualistic clasp, *"have our work cut out for us, as well."*

Kael nodded; his eyes gleaming with the steady fire of one who had been forged in trial.

Typhon zoomed the map toward Tiraxis with a flick of her wrist.

The display bloomed into a topographical sweep of the moon's fractured surface; highlighting a fortified zone swarming with red Eclipse markers.

"There's a strategic outpost here," she said. *"They've dug in deep. But it's the best place to set up the Solburn. If we want to punch a hole in the Draetheon line, this is where we do it."*

Kael grinned. It was a hunter's grin; sharp and reckless. *"We just left there… barely escaped with our lives. Now we're going back?"*

His fingers flexed. *"I can't wait."*

Typhon: *"At least they won't be expecting us."*

A ripple of tension pulsed through the room, but it wasn't fear; it was resolve. Around them, Solari masters moved like living shadows, cloaked in layered robes of sun-etched fiber. They carried radiant crystals, each one pulsing with contained solar fury; the raw material for Solburn.

Weapons that could level cities… or light a dying world's last chance.

Above, the world trembled. Not from fear. But from awakening war.

Kael looked across the table to his brother, Xal, and gave a subtle nod.

"Let's make this hurt," he said.

Time pressed down on them all…

but none of them bowed.

Above The Rim

The battle at the Rim roared into full conflagration.

From the command deck of the *Solaris Lance*, the entire Void was a tapestry of fire and wreckage. The bright arcs of Mer'Kuri solar fire tangled with the jagged, sickly green bursts of Draetheon weaponry, each blast tearing new scars across the battlefield.

Fleet Marshal Vaas never flinched. His gaze was locked forward, calculating, relentless. His mind, sharpened by decades of Solari discipline, raced through probabilities faster than any tactical array. *"Detach Fourth and Fifth Wings… Bleed their flanks! Shield the core!"* he commanded, stabbing a gloved finger toward the holomap.

Even as he spoke, the battle lines bent under Draetheon pressure. The dark-armored ships pressed forward with mechanical precision, splitting into wedge formations that drove like daggers toward the Mer'Kuri carriers; the lifeblood of the fleet.

If the carriers fell, the defenders would be crippled.

The *Solaris Lance* thundered another volley, its solar batteries flaring like newborn stars. Three Draetheon warships were caught mid-maneuver, their angular forms shattering into molten fragments; but for every enemy slain, three more loomed from the black.

Through the fog of battle, a new shape loomed at the center of the Draetheon host; a massive warship unlike the others.

It was titanic, easily dwarfing even the *Solaris Lance*. Its hull was layered in jagged plates like the scales of some ancient serpent. From its prow jutted a massive cannon, still dormant but crackling faintly with coils of dark energy.

The bridge fell silent as the monstrous vessel drifted into view.

Vaas' breath caught for the briefest moment.

"By the fires of Ra..." whispered his **adjutant**.

The Marshal knew what it meant. It wasn't just a ship.
It was a breaker. A planet-killer, spoken of only in Solari nightmares.

The Draetheon weren't just trying to *win* the battle. They meant to annihilate any and all resistance.

"All forces," **Vaas** intoned, his voice low but unbreakable. *"Target the super-dreadnought. Break their spear, or all is lost."*

New orders flashed across the fleet. The Mer'Kuri defenders, battered and bloodied, rallied. Fighter wings altered course mid-strike, lancers pulled from skirmishes, and every surviving capital ship redirected their fury toward the nightmare rising before them.

The Void trembled as the defenders unleashed a full barrage, solar fire thick enough to blind even hardened warriors. Beams lanced across the dark; hammering the dreadnought's shields, shaking its monstrous frame, but the beast endured, shrugging off the blows as though they were little more than sand against steel.

Then the massive cannon along its spine began to stir.

The energy around it spiraled into a vortex, warping the space nearby, pulling loose debris and shattered ships into its maw. Lines of

green-black lightning crackled down the dreadnought's frame, and the prow began to glow with a sickly, rotting light.

"Impact imminent!" shouted the **sensor chief**.

Fleet Marshal Vaas turned his gaze one last time toward the enemy. *"If we fall,"* he murmured to himself, *"we fall in flame."*

He raised his hand in command.

"All units… Maximum burn. Strike the heart!"

The battle, already an inferno, reached its cataclysmic crescendo.

Just as the Draetheon dreadnought's cannon reached full charge; a howling vortex of death gathering at its maw, a piercing chime echoed across the fleet's com channels.

"New signatures inbound!" cried the tactical officer. *"Rearward vector… Sol-Blessed, They're ours!"*

Out of the shadowed curtain of space behind Mer'Kuri's moons, a second fleet tore into the Void; white and gold banners gleaming in the distant light of Sol.

The Second Solari Squadron, led by **High Captain Severin Drayke**, plunged into the chaos like a blade through darkened waters. At their vanguard sailed the battleship **Celestial Spear**, its prow crowned with a living fire of solar energy, a beacon against the encroaching darkness.

Their arrival was not silent.

Solar lances blazed outward, cutting into the Draetheon rear lines with merciless precision. Enemy cruisers, caught mid-maneuver, exploded into gouts of plasma and twisted metal.

Fighter squadrons launched in coordinated wings, sweeping into the Draetheon raiders harassing the Mer'Kuri flanks.

For the first time, the shadow-armada hesitated.

From the bridge of the Solaris Lance, Fleet Marshal Vaas watched the arrival with a fierce, wolfish grin. *"By the Light of Sol,"* he whispered, *"They're here."*

The coms burst to life.

"*Fleet Marshal, this is **Captain Drayke**. We're with you. Permission to engage?*"

Vaas didn't hesitate.

"Permission granted. Burn them from the stars."

The Void seemed to ignite.

Twin Mer'Kuri fleets; battered defenders and the fresh reinforcements, converged on the Draetheon host with the fury of a dying sun.

Spearhead formations punched through the enemy flanks. Boarding parties launched onto Draetheon cruisers. Carriers once under siege regained breath and unleashed new wings of interceptors into the fray.

The dreadnought, massive and terrible, tried to realign its cannon, but now, with fire lancing at it from multiple vectors, its shields flickered. Cracks spiderwebbed across its armored hide.

Fleet Marshal Vaas saw the opening. He slammed his fist onto the command console.

"Concentrate fire on their primary weapon! Bring it down!"

Solar lances from across the fleet converged, hammering the enemy dreadnought's weapon core. Armor shattered; a chain reaction of rupturing energy coils began to tear through the behemoth from within. Cheers erupted across the Solaris Lance's bridge. Officers who had stared into the mouth of death dared to breathe again.

But the Void had one more secret.

"New contacts!" screamed the tactical officer. *"Multiple... No… Hundreds! Rear-arc, high-velocity approach!"*

The bridge fell into a stunned silence as the tactical displays flared red. From the black beyond the broken wreckage, another host emerged… Even larger than the first.

A second Draetheon armada.

Vessels of nightmare construction, darker and more massive than their predecessors, slipped into view like leviathans born of the dark between stars. Their hulls seethed with strange, writhing energies; their forms shifting subtly, as if they were not wholly bound to the physical plane.

At their center loomed a ship unlike any the Mer'Kuri had ever faced; a colossal vessel, vast enough to blot out the starlight behind it.

Its silhouette was jagged and alien, crowned with a lattice of spiraling thorns that radiated a sickly crimson glow.

"By Sol..." **Vaas** breathed, his voice barely above a whisper.

The battered Mer'Kuri fleets, already bloodied, swung desperately to meet the new threat. Fighters wheeled around. Battlecruisers repositioned their firing lines.

High Captain Drayke's voice crackled across the channel: "*Marshal … We can't hold against that… Not without falling back to the Inner Line.*"

But retreat meant death for the colonies. For Mer'Kuri itself.

Vaas' knuckles whitened around the edge of the console. His gaze, unblinking, fixed on the monstrous fleet advancing toward them.

"No retreat," he growled. *"Not while we still draw breath."*

All across the shattered edge of the Rim, battered and outnumbered, the defenders of Mer'Kuri prepared to make their final stand.

The Void roared back to life.

Mer'Kuri Streets

Far below the burning stars, within the ancient crystal halls of the Solari Citadel, Councilor Alaric stood before the Grand Heliograph; an immense, circular array of mirrors and prisms that cast shimmering tactical projections into the air.

Around him, the war-room buzzed with tension. Advisors whispered. Strategists bent over glowing charts, arguing in low, urgent tones. But Alaric heard none of it. His sharp eyes were locked on the main display: a sea of flames and broken vessels drifting at the very edge of Mer'Kuri's sovereign sky.

A second projection flickered to life beside it; and this one showed something worse.

Within the capitol's own walls, chaos reigned.

Eclipse insurgents, bold and ruthless, clashed with Kurai defenders in the streets outside the Citadel. Bolts of solar energy sizzled through the narrow stone avenues; smoke billowed from shattered spires and broken barricades.

There was no clear victor. The balance tipped one way, then the other; a brutal, grinding struggle where even the mightiest could fall.

Seraphina moved silently beside Alaric, her silver and crimson robes whispering across the polished floor. She watched both battles unfold; above and below. Her face, a mask of iron restraint.

"They weren't ready," she said quietly. *"None of us were."*

Alaric's jaw flexed. He said nothing for a long moment. Then, his voice low and grim: *"They were never meant to win at the Rim. Only to buy us time."*

Seraphina turned sharply toward him, disbelief flashing in her eyes. *"You knew?"* she whispered.

Alaric nodded once, heavy with the weight of bitter foresight. *"I suspected. The Eclipse were only the prelude. The real war was always coming... from beyond the Void."*

He motioned toward the grand heliograph, where the Draetheon fleets advanced relentlessly, swallowing the stars.

"And now it is here."

Another tremor rocked the Citadel; distant but tangible, the thudding heartbeat of battle raging in the city beyond.

Seraphina's voice was tight with anger, with fear. *"What do we do?"*

Alaric turned to her fully then, placing a firm hand on her shoulder. *"The only thing we can do,"* he said. *"We gather what remains. We summon the Solari. We call upon every allied world, every lost bond, every ancient vow. If Mer'Kuri falls... there will be no one left to stand against what follows."*

Outside the Citadel's towering windows, the once-bright sky boiled with smoke and flame. The first tremors of the Mer'Kuri Void War had begun.

And Mer'Kuri stood alone.

Chapter 13: A Kingdom of Silence

The High Forum of Venus towered above the marble gardens of Tys'Maara; its translucent spires glittering like frozen lightning beneath the moonless sky. Within its vaulted heart, a hundred voices murmured,

cold and skeptical, as Princess Lysara stood alone upon the central podium.

The Circle of Matriarchs surrounded her; seated upon high thrones carved from pure white stone, each one draped in shimmering veils and robes that reflected their house's lineage. Their faces, ageless and aloof, were mirrors of centuries of sovereign pride.

No men stood here. No foreign emissaries. Only the ruling bloodlines of Venus, keepers of its sacred isolation.

And they were not pleased.

Princess Lysara lifted her chin. Her voice, when it came, was clear as struck glass; and carried to every corner of the chamber without strain.

"My honored Mothers. My sisters of the blood. I stand before you not as a child pleading for favor, but as your rightful heir, bearer of the Virael's Blaze, and sworn defender of Venusian sovereignty."

She paused… Let the words sink in… Let the murmurs quiet. Then she pressed forward.

"Today I come not with news of court intrigue or rivalry, but with a warning: the battle now raging at Mer'Kuri's Rim is not Mer'Kuri's war alone… It is ours."

A ripple of disdain crossed a few of the Matriarchs' faces. **Lady Virell** of House Kaela leaned forward; her voice laced with condescension.

"Mer'Kuri has always reeked of desperation. Their endless hunger for solar reserve tributes is their own doing. Why should Venus bleed for their greed?"

Soft laughter, bitter and approving, echoed through the chamber.

Lysara let it pass. She had expected this. She met Lady Virell's gaze unflinching. *"Because if Mer'Kuri falls,"* her voice sharpening, *"it will not be Venus who inherits the solar reserves…"*

The laughter died. Whispers filled the air like a rising storm.

"… It will be the Draetheon."

At that name, the room shifted. Even the most hardened Matriarchs stiffened visibly. The Draetheon; that ancient, half-whispered terror, the shadow beyond the Void, had not been seen in open war for

an age. But fear of them was woven into Venusian legend as surely as the names of their own founding Queens.

"You think they would bargain?" **Lysara** said; her tone now bitter. *"You think they would respect our sovereignty? If they conquer Mer'Kuri, they will control the Sol Wells, the radiation streams, the lifeblood of every world that clings to the Sun's grace. They would not sell it. They would not trade. They would starve the Sol."*

The High Matriarch herself, **Elysira Vaen**, lifted her head; an ancient figure draped in star woven silk, her voice slow and heavy with judgment. *"You speak of conquest without a single battle fought on Venusian soil. Starvation through strangulation. Slavery through dependence."*

Lysara bowed her head respectfully. *"I do, High Matriarch."*

The **High Matriarch** continued: *"And you propose what, daughter of Tys'Maara*? *To send our warriors into the abyss? To side with Mer'Kuri in their hour of desperation?"*

Lysara straightened; her blood burned with the fire of conviction.

"I propose," she said fiercely, *"that we act before the noose tightens around our necks. Send the **Vaedra**; our finest war maidens, to break the siege at Mer'Kuri's Rim…"*

"Strike while the Draetheon fleets are still committing to battle, still exposed in transit. We can cut off their advance, force them to scatter, deny them the momentum they seek."

Silence ruled the chamber. A heavy, trembling silence.

Lysara pressed harder, feeling the opening. *"If we act now, we fight beside allies of flesh and blood…"*

"… If we wait, we will fight alone against a foe that has already broken the Mer'Kuri front…."

*"… And if **we** fall, the other worlds… Tiamara, Mars, even distant Jupiter… will fall one by one… Some may even surrender without a fight."*

Her hand tightened into a fist.

"Venus will not survive by hiding behind walls of ivory and crystal. Not this time. We must rise, as our foremothers rose, when the Dark Blight threatened the stars. We must be fire… not embers."

Another tremor passed through the assembly; not of resistance, but of unease; of awakening.

The **High Matriarch** rose slowly to her feet. All others followed, a rustling like a thousand wings. Elysira Vaen stared long at Lysara, as if seeing her not merely as a princess... but as something more.

"You would risk all for this belief?" she asked quietly*. "Your throne, your life, your very soul?"*

Lysara drew herself up tall. Her eyes blazed with Venusian fire. *"I already have,"* she said. *"And I will again, if I must."*

A ripple of unease passed through the Circle. And then… a voice, cold and cutting, rose from the House of Vaethryn.

"Bold words," drawled **Lady Saevra**, her hair gleaming like a blade under the light of the crystal spires*. "But can we trust the loyalty of a princess who consorts with foreign men?"*

A stunned hush fell across the chamber. Lysara stiffened, her heart hammering against her ribs.

Saevra's lips curled into a cruel smile as she pressed her advantage. *"It is known you travel the Solarian corridors with a Martian general at your side. Seen entering outposts together... Exchanging secret councils in dark corners. Tell us, Princess Lysara… Do you fight for Venus, or for your own forbidden desires?"*

Murmurs flared into scandalous whispers. Several Matriarchs leaned forward with thinly veiled interest, like sharks scenting blood.

Lady Virell's voice chimed in, oily and eager.

"Perhaps," she said sweetly, *"the Princess has forgotten her place among us. Perhaps she has forgotten that the Rite of Queenship approaches… and that any taint of divided loyalty could bar her from competing."*

Competing… or surviving.

The **Virael's Blaze** was no mere ceremony; it was trial by blood. Thirty royal-blooded daughters would enter the arena… trained from birth to compete… trained from birth to kill… trained from birth to be the only survivor…

Only one… **one**… would emerge Queen-Victorious.

For Lysara, the right to rule was everything. Her honor, her birthright... her shield against those who would see her cast down.

High Matriarch Elysira Vaen remained silent; her face unreadable. The chamber waited, breathless, hungry for scandal, for punishment.

But **Lysara** did not flinch.

She stepped forward, her voice ringing like a drawn blade.

"I stand unbound. I did what I had to do in order to discover the serious threat that is upon us… No man holds my leash… No house claims my will. My loyalty lies with Venus… Now and always."

She turned her fierce gaze on Saevra and Virell alike.

"And if any doubt my worth," she said, her voice sharpening to a deadly whisper, *"they may find me waiting in the arena when the Virael's Blaze calls us."*

For a long, searing moment, no one dared speak. Then, slowly, the **High Matriarch** lifted her hand; signaling silence.

When she spoke, her words fell heavy as judgment. *"Let it be known: the Princess Lysara shall retain her right to compete.* Her fate, like all who bear the royal blood, shall be decided by sol and steel."

The chamber bowed as one, though many did so with narrowed eyes and bitter hearts. Lysara bowed last, a slow, defiant motion.

When she rose, she was no longer merely a voice pleading for aid. She was a contender; and every woman in the room knew it.

The Gathering Storm

The chamber trembled faintly; a distant reverberation running through the foundations of the Citadel. Beyond the walls, the fighting had worsened.

From the high balconies and windows, flashes of fire could be seen in the mist-wreathed streets. Kurai defenders clashed violently with Eclipse shock-troops; the gleam of plasma weapons and blades casting chaotic shadows across the courtyards.

The air rang with the sharp crack of rifles, the sizzling shriek of energy arcs, and the deep, concussive thud of demolition charges.

Somewhere nearby, a tower crumbled under focused assault, sending up a plume of shimmering dust that hung in the rose-tinted Mer'Kuri air like a ghost. The capitol itself remained secure; for now, but the siege was tightening like a noose.

Inside the war room, every thud of distant ordinance seemed to hammer a little harder against the heavy stillness between Alaric and Seraphina. But even as the weight of their grim conversation settled over them, the distant hum of approaching reinforcements filled the air.

Alaric's eyes shifted toward the eastern entrance, where a squadron of warriors was expected to arrive. This, however, was no ordinary platoon.

Xal, his armored form a gleaming silhouette against the growing chaos, stepped forward with his team of Solari warriors. Behind him, Vex loomed like a dark monolith, his piercing blue optics scanning the scene with a cold, calculating focus. The warriors were a force of perfect discipline, their movements sharp; synchronized.

They had come for Mer'Kuri.

"Councilor," **Xal** said, his voice firm and resolute, his gaze flicking to the tactical displays overhead. *"We're ready."*

Alaric didn't hesitate. He turned to Seraphina, his expression hardening. *"They were waiting for the right moment,"* he said. *"The Solari have come."*

Seraphina's lips twitched into a rare, tight smile. *"I never doubted them."*

Xal stepped forward, his Solari warriors fanning out to form a protective circle around the Grand Heliograph. Vex, ever the enigma, placed a hand on the terminal, interfacing with the station's systems as he quietly analyzed the incoming threats.

The war-room fell into a focused silence as Xal approached Alaric, his movements deliberate and measured.

"How do we proceed?" **Xal** asked, his voice low and purposeful.

"We fortify," **Alaric** said, his hand tightening on the control panel before him. *"We defend what remains of Mer'Kuri. We hold this ground until the others arrive. The Draetheon armada cannot be allowed to breach the heart of this world."*

Xal nodded, his gaze hardening; but his tone softening. *"Then we fight, to the last… Father."*

A sudden flash of light erupted from the eastern horizon, signaling a large-scale strike. The Eclipse insurgents had pushed into the heart of the capitol, and they were closer now than ever before.

Alaric's eyes flicked between the projections. *"Deploy the Solari to the streets. Seraphina, I need you to oversee the defenses in the capitol. I can't afford any more surprises."*

"I'm on it," **she** said, her voice steady, and she turned sharply, moving toward the war-room exit.

As she left, she turned to Xal; and with one last hug, *"Son… I love you… Now go kill them all."* **Xal** turned back to Alaric. *"And what of the reinforcements?"* he asked, a hint of concern in his tone.

Alaric: *"Son… **You** are the reinforcements… I have but one command… **You** kill **them**… Don't let **them** kill you."*

The city outside rumbled again, a reminder that the fate of Mer'Kuri; of all the sol, teetered on a knife's edge.

As the last Solari warriors took their places, the battle continued to rage. And Mer'Kuri's fate hung in the balance.

Chapter 14: Crimson Tribunal

The great hall of the Martian Council tower pulsed with heat and shadow. Crimson banners lined the high walls, bearing the sigil of Mars; twin swords over a burning sun, while war-chants from the outer barracks echoed faintly through the ironstone arches.

General Krynn stood alone at the center of the tribunal floor; a lone figure beneath the downward gaze of the High Lords. Their crimson robes flowed like blood from the tiered stage; silent and severe.

"I do not come with diplomacy," Krynn said, his voice calm but unflinching. *"I come with warning."*

A murmur stirred the chamber. The eldest, **Lord Strannis Vahr**, leaned forward. *"Warning of what? Another Venusian deception? You walk a narrow line, Krynn… one foot in war, the other in exile."*

"The Draetheon threat is real," **Krynn** replied. *"And if Mer'Kuri falls, Mars will not stand long behind it."*

A harsh clang echoed as **Lord Bael Drax** struck the base of his war staff against the floor. *"We've heard this tale already… from trembling Mer'Kurian diplomats…"*

"… Ghost stories of a hidden fleet and shadow-born invaders." He fixed Krynn with a glare. *"You're Martian. Speak like it… or stand aside."*

Krynn's jaw clenched. *"I am speaking like a Martian… by urging preemptive strength, not reactive slaughter. I have seen what's coming. You haven't."*

Lord Drax scoffed. *"What you've seen is a princess's bedchamber and a traitor's path."*

That drew a sharp intake from a few of the younger Lords. Even Vahr's eyes narrowed at Drax's bluntness.

But **Krynn** didn't flinch. "*What I've done was for Mars. I infiltrated their ranks. I earned their trust. And in doing so, I uncovered the truth: the Draetheon armada is no myth. They've already deployed stealth dropships. Ra's Eclipse is real… and it's moving."*

Lord Vahr raised a withered hand, quieting the others. "*And what do you propose, General Krynn? That Mars sends its sons to die for Mer'Kuri, based on intel gained while fraternizing with our enemies?"*

"I propose Mars survives," **Krynn** answered. *"By leading the defense. If we wait, we lose the high ground. We lose choice. And when the Draetheon come, it won't be to conquer… it will be to erase."*

A grim silence followed.

Lord **Ka'Ed Voln**, younger than most on the dais but already blood-tempered from campaigns along the Saturnine frontier, leaned forward. *"What proof do you offer us, Krynn? Beyond words."*

Krynn reached to his belt and activated a small holodisk. A three-dimensional image flickered to life, hovering over the chamber floor: jagged, alien vessels broke past the Mer'Kuri/Void rim, deeper into Mer'Kuri space. The fighting raged on.

"This transmission came from the moon Khepra, hours before contact was lost. That," he pointed at the central warship leaving the rim towards Mer'Kuri, *"is a Draetheon dreadnought… larger than any vessel in our fleet. Designed to consume solar radiation and burn entire atmospheres…"*

"… The battle began at the Mer'Kuri/Void rim… As Mer'Kuri stands alone… the Draetheon armada may soon reach the Khepra moon."

He let the image speak for itself as the room dimmed around it.

Lord Vahr's voice finally broke the stillness. *"If what you say is true… then Mars stands on the edge of a new war."*

“Exactly,” **Krynn** replied. “*The only question is whether we fight now… or wait for our Mer’Kuri ally to fall.”*

Lord Drax rose from his seat; his shadow stretching long across the tribunal floor.

“General Krynn...” he began; his tone like stone grinding against stone. *“Only because of the urgency of this matter are we putting your punishment on hold.”*

The chamber went still again, the unspoken judgment hanging in the air like smoke.

“You have disgraced yourself… not by treason, but by the basest betrayal imaginable. Bedding with a Venusian female...” He spat the word as though it burned his mouth. *“Any female. You disgust us.”*

Krynn didn’t move, didn’t flinch. He simply met Drax’s stare with the calm of a soldier who had already accepted every consequence.

“But for now,” **Drax** continued coldly, *“we will see if this Draetheon threat is real... or a ruse to cover up your outlawed urges.”*

He sat again, slow and deliberate.

The red banners overhead fluttered, stirred by the heat vents hissing through the walls.

No one spoke.

The session was over; but for Mars, the war was about to begin.

Fire and Stone

(Moon of Tiraxis: Eclipse Outpost Delta)

Ash clouds curled above the jagged ridges of Tiraxis, painting the sky in dull reds and fractured golds. The sun; still on the far side, diffused through the volcanic haze. Beneath the broken cliffs, **Kael** crouched behind a shale rise, the wind tugging at the scarf coiled around his armor.

“Visuals?” he asked quietly.

Typhon, her eyes scanning through a visor scope, didn’t look away. *“Minimal activity. Two guards on the north platform. Automated turrets on the ridge… but no aerials. Either they’re underestimating us… or hiding something.”*

Kael smirked. *“With the Eclipse, it’s always both.”*

Behind them, the platoon of Solari warriors stood ready… sun steel blades sheathed, armor matte black to match the terrain, their solar cores pulsing faintly with stored Ra. Each one trained in the ancient Mer'Kuri ways. Each one ready to strike.

Typhon adjusted the scope again. *"We have eight hours before this surface becomes too hot… We breach from the west. I'll take three… hit their power relay. You hit the coms."*

Kael nodded. *"No signals in or out."*

"Clean and fast," she added. *"We need that outpost before nightfall… or before they realize we're coming."*

He drew his blade. The solar etchings along its length shimmered in the light.

"*For Mer'Kuri,"* **Kael** said.

"For Ra," **Typhon** replied.

And with that, the Solari surged forward; silent fire moving through stone.

[Approach: Silent Fire]
Kael and Typhon split the unit. Kael leads half the platoon toward the eastern ridge, hugging the shadows, using the jagged landscape as cover. Typhon veers west with the others; eyes on the auxiliary power array.

Above, solar panels glint dimly through the haze; like fractured glass teeth jutting from the mountainside. The outpost itself is buried partially into the rock, its front guarded by two Eclipse soldiers in dark red armor, their rifles slung loose.

Kael signals… **Hold**. A brief flick of fingers, then the Solari vanish into motion, using phase-movement enhanced by the heat of the sun. In an instant, they're upon the guards. **Silent kills. No alarm.**

[Breach: Two Fronts]
Typhon reaches the outer generators and plants a Ra-disruptor. It pulses once; then surges, frying the perimeter's power field in a burst of golden static.

Inside the compound, alarms stutter but do not fully sound. The Eclipse haven't rebooted their systems yet.

Kael kicks in the western hatch just as a small squad of Eclipse reinforcements begin to mobilize.

"*Uh oh!*" **Kael** barks.

Solari blades ignite in bursts of searing light. Eclipse rifles open fire; but the Solari are fast, trained to dodge, redirect, and close the distance. In tight quarters, the Eclipse's advantage fades quickly.

[Resistance: Ghost Protocols]
Deeper inside, **Kael** reaches the communications relay chamber; only to find it already destroyed.

"Typhon… coms are slagged," he says, looking over the charred consoles. "*They wiped everything before we got here."*

Typhon's voice crackles through. *"Copy. Power's gone dark too. They knew we were coming."*

Suddenly, a scream came through the coms. One of Typhon's warriors is downed.

A new voice cuts through the static; low, modulated. *"The sun is not yours. It belongs to us now."*

Kael freezes.

"Ra's Eclipse," he growls. *"They left a sentinel."*

[Twist: The Sentinel Awakes]
In the command center, the walls split open; revealing a hidden chamber. A Draetheon techno-sentinel steps forward; towering, plated in black-glass armor veined with living gold. Its core glows with strong solar energy.

Kael steps forward. *"Form up!"*

The **sentinel's** voice is a jagged buzz. *"You walk in sunlight, but it is no longer your weapon."*

It raises an arm and fires a burst of searing plasma; one of the Solari is hit and flung into the wall. Kael ducks, rolls, then hurls a Ra-bonded disc that scorches across the sentinel's shoulder, leaving a glowing gash.

[Final Strike: Burn and Bury]
Typhon rejoins Kael mid-fight, slamming an eclipse charge into the wall behind the sentinel. She yells, *"Move!"*

Kael grabs the wounded warrior, pulling him back just as the charge detonates; burying the sentinel beneath tons of stone and molten conduit.

Silence.

Breathless, **Kael** surveys the ruins. *“They weren’t defending this place… they were abandoning it... Leaving bait.”*

Typhon nods grimly. *“And sending a message.”*

Kael activates a final scan of the wrecked console.

A single file survived; corrupted, but legible. It shows a star chart… and the *Obsidian Womb*, a massive Draetheon warship, en route to Mer’Kuri.

Kael’s voice lowers. *“We need to get this to Councilor Alaric… fast.”*

The siege had gone faster than anticipated; brutal, precise, without mercy. In about four hours, the Eclipse outpost was taken… or was it given.

The sentinel, entombed beneath molten stone and collapsed steel, twitched once… then died.

Kael surveyed the blackened remains of the command center, his breathing steady beneath his helmet. **Typhon** approached, her armor scorched and one vambrace sparking from a glancing plasma hit.

“Four hours,” she said, glancing at the solar gauge on her wrist. *“After that, the surface will be too hot to stand on.”*

Kael turned to the remaining Solari. *“Lock it down. No one in or out. If Draetheon tech is buried under there, we need it held a recovery team arrives.”*

The **lead warrior** saluted with a fist to his chest. *“It will be done.”*

Kael and Typhon moved toward their transport, still hot from orbital insertion.

Typhon looked over her shoulder. *“You think anyone else will believe what we found here?”*

Kael’s voice was grim. *“They’ll have to.”*

The sun crept higher; its fury already heating the glassy ridge. The last Solari sealed the outpost gates behind them.

In four hours, the surface would be too hot to breathe.

And still… that would be the least of their problems.

Martian Prejudice

Krynn stepped through the great iron doors into the outer corridor of the High Tribunal; his boots echoing against the marble-veined stone. The guards at either side didn't salute. They barely looked at him.

He didn't expect them to.

He kept walking; long strides, unhurried. The tension in his shoulders wasn't fear; it was something colder. Older.

A shout rang out from below the steps.

"Traitor!"

Another voice, angrier:

"You defiled your blood for her! For a thing!"

Krynn descended the stairs, jaw tight, eyes forward.

A small crowd had gathered at the foot of the tribunal; a dozen, maybe more. Most were soldiers off-duty, others just zealots in red tunics, fists clenched and eyes ablaze.

A rock sailed through the air.

It struck his shoulder with a dull thud.

Another followed; clipping his helmet. Then a metal cup. A torch staff. The mob surged forward with violent intent, screams rising above the hiss of steam from nearby vents.

"String him up!"

"Make an example!"

Krynn didn't break stride; but his hand slid toward the hilt of his shock-blade, still clipped to his belt.

He wouldn't draw it. Not yet.

Then the first one reached him; a soldier half his size, wild-eyed and screaming. Krynn moved like a ghost; sidestepped, twisted the man's wrist, and dropped him with a single blow to the gut.

Another lunged.

Krynn spun, striking low, kicking off the wall to vault over two more.

He could fight them. Kill them.

But that would only prove their point.

He broke through the edge of the mob, took a sharp turn down a steam corridor; vaulted a low pipe, and vanished into the shadows of Mars' lower tiers.

Behind him, the mob howled with rage and disappointment.

Above him, the tribunal bells rang once; cold and ceremonial.

He found cover beneath a rusted platform overlooking the forge spires of the Martian capital. His breath was steady. Blood ran from a split along his temple.

He wiped it away with the back of his glove.

They hated him. He knew that.

But they would hate the Draetheon more.

And when the sky burned, when war came to Mars; they would remember the man they tried to hang.

They would remember who warned them.

Chapter 15: Ashes in Orbit

The void trembled with fire.

The Draetheon armada; cold, angular leviathans forged beyond the veil of known stars, pressed deeper into Mer'Kuri space. Their hulls devoured light, cloaked in shimmering distortion fields that made them ripple like mirages against the black.

They advanced not in haste, but in certainty; unstoppable, implacable, a force of silence and shadow moving closer with every passing moment.

They hadn't reached the moons; but they were coming. And the skies between were soaked in fire.

Far ahead of Mer'Kuri's defense line, in the black between planets and moons, swarms of Solari speed fighters tore through the void like hornets; sleek, sun-forged vessels no larger than a transport pod, each one powered by a compressed shard of Ra.

Their pilots, some barely older than twenty solar cycles, moved with terrifying precision; tight spirals, inverted dives, barrel rolls around debris clouds.

A squadron of Flame Throwers broke formation just as a wave of Draetheon shock torpedoes lit up the sector.

“Cut starboard, cut starboard!” **Captain Meyna** shouted; her voice sharp inside the neural sync-helm. Her HUD flared; three bogeys locking onto her wingman. *“Raii, you've got tails… Flare now!”*

Three trails of solar flares bloomed like molten fireworks, scrambling enemy targeting for a blink; just enough time for Raii’s fighter to vanish behind the husk of a dead gunship. A Draetheon torpedo missed by centimeters, detonating against the wreckage with a silent inferno.

Meyna’s squad turned hard and dove; right toward the belly of one of the colossal invaders. It was a Draetheon dreadnought: dark as cooled lava, with spines like broken towers jutting from its hull.

The thing pulsed with alien life, glowing in unnatural patterns, its ventral cannons powering up for a full volley. If it fired, the defense lines near Khepra would be vaporized.

“Target the core vents,” she ordered. *“Stay under its eye!”*

Twelve Solari fighters dove like hawks, weaving through anti-air fire and magnetic shrapnel. The dreadnought spat out defense drones; bone-white orbs that split open mid-flight into spinning blades. One sliced clean through the port wing of Meyna’s second. No scream. Just a spark and silence.

Meyna closed the gap.

She dropped speed, inverted her craft, and spun into a tight roll between the dreadnought’s outer hull plates. Inside her cockpit, heat warnings blared. She felt the strain on her limbs, her vision tunneling as she locked onto a glowing lattice of plasma conduits under the surface.

With a final pull, she loosed her payload: three solar bombs streaked forward and vanished beneath the armor.

Impact.

A heartbeat later, the underbelly of the Draetheon ship ruptured in a flash of molten gold. Its stabilizers buckled. Not destroyed; but wounded. Slowed.

The Solari fighters scattered as the dreadnought listed, belching debris. One victory. Temporary.

But they would take it.

Above, in the command tiers of the planetary fleet, **Admiral Kantos** whispered, *“Make them bleed for every kilometer of space.”*

And the fighters obeyed.

Solari strike cruisers spun through tight formations, unleashing bursts of golden plasma; concentrated Ra-energy honed over centuries of warfare. Their beams collided with the Draetheon ships in brilliant arcs, lighting up space like electric storms.

Some enemy vessels buckled; exploding with pride; but every one Draetheon ship destroyed, two more emerged from behind them, ghostlike and unmarked.

Command frequencies were chaos.

“Shield banks collapsing on sector twelve!”

“Where are reinforcements from Tiraxis?”

“Hostile breach on deck five… Send everything!”

Aboard the Pyrian Lance, the flagship of Mer’Kuri’s outer defense fleet, **Commander Zelin Ghorn** wiped blood from his brow and watched a tactical screen flicker with red. He barely noticed the tremors from the hull anymore.

Every second was a calculation, every breath borrowed.

“They’re not retreating,” he murmured, more to himself than to the crew. *“And they’re not pressing forward anymore… They’re steering us… Herding us… into something… But into what?”*

Before anyone could respond, a sharp chirp broke across the command deck; an unauthorized channel override flashing across the main coms array.

“Unknown transmission,” barked the coms officer. *“It’s— scrambled, but the signature matches a Solari strike craft… designate: FlameThrower-7. It’s Captain Meyna!”*

“Patch her through!” **Commander Zelin** snapped.

The main screen flickered, static giving way to the blurred, smoke-streaked cockpit of a battered speed fighter. Sparks danced around her helmet. Her face was bloodied, eyes wild, breath shallow.

*“This is Meyna… FlameThrower-7… Do not, I repeat, Do **not** push deeper into Grid Theta!”* she shouted. *“It’s a trap!...”*

"… The Draetheon ships… some of them are decoys. They're drawing your formations into a gravitational net… disguised as wreckage. It's laced with phased singularities. I lost half my squadron before I realized!"

Gasps rippled across the bridge.

Zelin leaned forward. *"How far are they into the drift?"*

"*Too far,"* **Meyna** said grimly. *"The field's activating… We barely got out. You've got minutes, Pyrian Lance. Pull your ships back or they'll fold the whole sector inward."*

Static surged. Her signal cut.

For a second, no one moved.

Then **Commander Zelin** turned. *"Sound full retreat across the outer defense net. Redirect all energy to shielding. And find me a clean channel to Meyna's fighter… I want her alive."*

Alarms screamed across the bridge.

And in the cold black beyond, the Draetheon trap began to close.

Inner Sanctum of the Solari Temple

Deep underground, beneath the spires of Sol'Haran, Kael and Typhon strode shoulder to shoulder, their boots striking the lava-glass floor with purposeful rhythm.

The air smelled of scorched metal and sanctified ash.

All around them, Solari monks and warrior-scribes moved in coordinated silence, preparing the final stage of the mission. Cloaked figures carried crystalline conduits through glowing archways. Chant-prayers echoed through the vaulted ceiling, layered with the hum of containment engines firing up.

In the heart of the sanctum, it waited.

The Solburn.

Its core chamber was now ignited by the union of the three recovered crystals of Ra. Each one shimmered with distinct brilliance: one crimson-gold, one silver-blue, and one white as flame.

The containment rings crackled with heat as solar energy pulsed in perfect triad rhythm.

“Is it stable?” **Kael** asked, pausing before the containment port.

Typhon nodded; jaw tight. *“Stable enough. But it’s waking up… feels like it’s alive now. I've never seen the crystals resonate like this.”*

Kael glanced at the priests monitoring the chamber. *“That’s because it’s not just a weapon anymore. It’s a message.”*

“To whom?” **Typhon** asked.

Kael: *“To anyone left watching.”*

A grizzled Solari commander approached, his war-scared face etched with the discipline of decades. **Commander Tolaris Kade**, veteran of the Auric Rebellions, nodded sharply.

“Report.”

Kael stepped forward. *“The Eclipse outpost on Tiraxis is secure. We have a small garrison in place. If we move now, we can fortify the perimeter and have the Solburn in place before the Draetheon track our movements.”*

Commander Kade’s brow raised as he studied the glowing weapon. The crystals pulsed in sync, casting solar shadows across the chamber.

“Then let’s move. We’ll make sure it gets there.”

Kael glanced to Typhon, then back to Kade. “*You’ll lead the transport?”*

Kade gave a grim nod. *“It’ll get there. Even if I have to carry the damn thing across the moon myself.”*

Kael turned, already moving. *“Then we’re headed for Mer’Kuri. Xal and Vex are holding the southern front… barely. If the Draetheon break through there, Tiraxis won’t matter.”*

Typhon fell into step beside him, adjusting the solar-sigils on her vambrace. *“Transport’s prepped. I’ll pilot.”* She gave him a look; sharp, confident, familiar.

Kael offered a faint smirk. *“I wasn’t going to argue.”*

Kade grunted. *“Just get there in one piece. I’ll see this weapon delivered.”*

Kael paused at the threshold of the sanctum’s exit, casting one last look at the Solburn. *“If anything happens…”*

“I know,” **Kade** said. *“You’ll come back screaming justice.”*

Kael nodded.

As he and Typhon vanished down the corridor, the chamber behind them thrummed louder; crystalline, divine, and deadly.

But ahead of them, Mer’Kuri burned; and someone they both cared about was standing in the fire.

The Southern Front

The skies over Stygian Ridge burned with plasma contrails and falling ash. Jagged peaks jutted like blackened fangs against a blood-orange horizon, where the sun loomed low and furious through the war-churned atmosphere.

Xal stood atop a fractured rise, visor down, cape, torn and scorched at the edges. His blade, glowing with residual solar heat, hissed as he stabbed it into the red dust beside him.

“Twenty-four hours,” he muttered, watching smoke curl from the horizon. *“We’ve held this line for twenty-four hours.”*

Below, there was a graveyard of twisted wreckage and scorched metal; Eclipse drop mechs and Draetheon bio-walkers torn apart in brutal clashes. But more were coming.

Beside him, **Vex** crouched, scanning the terrain with his internal systems. His eyes; twin points of pale amber light, narrowed as his sensors flared.

“Enemy movement. North slope. Fast movers. Not tanks… skimmers.”

Xal’s knuckles whitened around the hilt of his blade. *“Flanking us?”*

Vex: *“Trying to. Not very subtly.”*

Xal: *“I prefer stupid enemies.”*

Vex: *“Then you’ll love what’s coming next.”*

Vex stood and extended the twin solar-shock blades from his forearms. The high-pitched whine of incoming speeders echoed across the valley, followed by the ripple of something heavier; Draetheon pulse mortars rumbling to life in the distance.

Behind them, a small cadre of Solari warriors held the trench-line, battered but unyielding. One of them sprinted up to Xal, helmet cracked and bleeding beneath his eye.

“Commander Xal! Our left flank is folding… We need reinforcements… Two days ago!”

Xal looked at **Vex**.

“I’ll take the ridge,” the combat-droid said.

Xal: *“I’ll hold the trench.”*

“You should be aware,” **Vex** added, voice even, *“that odds of survival have dropped another 12.4%.”*

Xal smirked behind his helmet. *“Then… we cheat.”*

With a surge of heat, he leapt down the ridge as Vex shot forward in a blur, solar-blades humming. Eclipse troopers crested the far slope; bulky, twisted in their exo-frames, faces hidden behind cracked black visors. The clash was seconds away.

The battlefield erupted.

Draetheon skimmers cut low across the valley, engines shrieking, unleashing barrages of blue-white plasma that scorched deep channels into the soil. The front trench exploded in a bloom of dust and flame, sending Solari warriors tumbling through the air.

Xal sprinted into the thick of it, deflecting a volley with his solar-forged blade. The heat around him surged as he drew from the energy banks in his armor, igniting the blade with a crackling golden flare.

He met the first wave head-on; leaping, spinning, slashing. Each strike released a burst of solar shock, vaporizing armor and shattering bones beneath.

From the ridge above, Vex launched into the center of the advancing skimmers, twisting midair and plunging both blades through the hull of the lead craft. It spun out of control, crashing into a second in a flaming arc. He landed, fluid and cold, and charged toward the next.

Behind them, Eclipse artillery lit up the sky. Projectiles screamed overhead, slamming into the secondary trench line. One of the bunkers collapsed in on itself. The coms crackled.

"The Black Line is collapsing!" a panicked voice shouted. ***"We're losing the ridge!"***

"No," **Xal** growled, voice tight with heat. *"Not yet."*

He activated his gauntlet and opened a command channel.

"This is Xal… Deploy the flare mortars now! Blind their targeting systems!"

Seconds later, a trio of deep thuds echoed behind him, and brilliant flares burst across the skyline; sun-white and blinding.

Draetheon fire sputtered and scattered; their optics overwhelmed. Xal didn't hesitate; he surged forward, rallying a handful of Solari at his side.

"Push them back! While they're blind!"

Vex rejoined him in a blur, armor scorched, one blade dragging sparks along the ground. *"Left flank is holding… Right's going to break."*

Xal wiped blood from his visor and met Vex's glowing gaze. *"Kael better get here fast."*

As if on cue, the sky above split with a sonic boom. Twin streaks of light descended toward the southern horizon; one golden, one crimson.

Vex tilted his head. *"Right on time."*

Xal exhaled, relief mingling with renewed fire. *"Let's hold the line until they hit dirt."*

They turned as the next wave crested the ridge; larger, meaner, and backed by Draetheon shock troopers in reinforced armor. But this time, the Solari weren't outmatched. They had light. They had purpose.

And reinforcements were falling from the sky.

Chapter 16: Capitol Flame

The chamber doors opened with a deep metallic groan, revealing the heart of Solspire's command; a vaulted room lined with thermal columns and polished walls that pulsed faintly with heat.

Kael stepped forward, his boots echoing on the polished stone floor. Typhon walked beside him, her posture poised but guarded, eyes scanning every detail with the instincts of someone trained never to let her guard down.

Councilor Alaric stood at the center. To his left, Seraphina waited in silence; her expression motherly; her hands folded neatly at her waist. Both watched as their son approached with someone, neither had expected.

Kael stopped at the edge of the dais and drew a steady breath. *"Mother. Father. This is Typhon."*

Typhon inclined her head in respectful acknowledgment, though her voice didn't waver. *"It's an honor."*

Alaric's gaze sharpened like sunlight through a lens. *"Typhon. of the Eclipse."*

"I was," she replied calmly. *"Now I fight to stop them."*

A heavy pause.

Seraphina descended one step, studying her closely. "*We've heard of you. A weapons specialist. Ghost unit. Classified under Eclipse Blackfire Command."*

Typhon nodded once. *"I defected after I learned the truth. About the Draetheon. About Ra's Eclipse. And about what they plan to do next."*

Alaric folded his arms. *"And what are we to believe? That an Eclipse assassin just... grew a conscience?"*

Kael stepped between them slightly. *"She didn't just grow one. She risked her life to save mine… more than once. She's the reason I made it back with the crystal."*

He glanced at Typhon, then back to his parents. *“And she’s the one who smuggled classified Eclipse intel to Princess Lysara and General Krynn. The warning about the Draetheon fleet? That was her. Without it, Draetheon would have conquered us by now.”*

Alaric’s expression tightened. That intel had changed everything; had bought them time, had saved lives.

Typhon spoke, steady and direct. *“I burned every bridge I had to get it into their hands. The Eclipse has merged with something far worse than expected... If we don’t act… united and fast… it won’t just be Mer’Kuri that falls.”*

A long silence stretched between them, tense as drawn steel.

Then **Seraphina** broke it. *“If what you say is true, then you’ve already risked more than most in this room ever will.”*

But **Alaric** wasn’t satisfied. *“And now you expect the council to take your word? To trust an Eclipse defector without…”*

Kael cut in, firm and resolute. *“We didn’t come for that.”*

Alaric blinked.

“Our platoon is waiting,” **Kael** continued. *“Typhon will once again prove herself. We’re here to join Xal and Vex on the southern front.”* He met his father’s eyes without flinching. *“What **more** can you ask?”*

The chamber went silent.

Alaric still wasn’t buying it. His lips parted, ready to voice another round of objections; but **Seraphina** stepped in. Her voice cutting through the tension like a blade of calm fire.

“Al… No… Stop.”

She turned toward her husband, her voice softer now, but no less firm. *“Don’t you see?”*

A pause. Then…

“He loves her.”

The words landed with the weight of finality. Alaric’s jaw clenched. He looked at his son… really looked. And for a flicker of a moment, the stern mask cracked.

Behind the seasoned councilor was a father staring at a young man who’d grown up faster than he ever intended.

Kael didn’t flinch. *“I do.”*

Typhon froze for just a moment, stunned. Her eyes flicked to him, searching his face. Whatever distance she kept around her heart; whatever scars she wore like armor; melted for just a breath.

She turned and slowly approached Alaric. Without a word, she took his hand, dropped to one knee, and pressed her lips to his hand.

Alaric's stern composure faltered.

"Wa… Wait… You're not fighting fair."

Seraphina smiled softly. *"No… She isn't."*

Kael shrugged, a wry grin tugging at his mouth.

"Welcome to my world."

Alaric gave a low, defeated sigh, then reached down and lifted Typhon gently to her feet. *"Rise, my daughter."* He kissed her cheek and pulled her into a brief embrace.

Seraphina stepped in, wrapping her arms around both of them. *"You'll always have a home here, Typhon. You've already earned it."*

Kael raised a brow, mock-offended. *"Hey… What about me?"*

Seraphina gave him a kiss on the forehead. *"Get in here."*

They shared a rare, brief moment of peace.

Then **Seraphina's** expression turned more serious as she looked to Typhon. *"You don't have to go, you know. You've done more than enough. Stay here. Help us prepare the defense. You'll be safe."*

Typhon's smile faded, but her eyes burned steady. *"My place is with Kael. I didn't come this far to sit on the sidelines."*

Alaric met her gaze. *"You understand what you're walking into."*

Typhon: *"I do… But Kael is with me."*

Kael stepped beside her, nodding. *"We leave at first light."*

Seraphina drew in a slow breath, pride and worry warring in her expression. *"Then may Ra's light burn the shadows from your path."*

As Kael and Typhon turned toward the exit, the chamber doors opened once more.

This time, there was no hesitation; only the steady stride of two warriors bound by love, walking into fire.

Near the Mer'Kuri/Void Rim

The bridge of the Solaris Lance hummed with cold, alien efficiency. Towering monoliths of circuitry pulsed with living fire; strange orange-red veins of energy coursing through conduits that spiraled like organic vines.

Outside the massive viewport, the Draetheon armada loomed like a swarm of silent leviathans, half the distance now between the Void rim and the twin moons of Mer'Kuri. Their distorted hulls shimmered with phase-shadow energy; each vessel cloaked in a subtle ripple that defied natural perception.

High Admiral Khorlan Saavh stood at the command center; his back to the doors as the chamber's temperature dropped slightly, signaling the arrival of the Shallit'Biru.

A whisper of air, like a dying breath, preceded the manifestation. The Shallit'Biru did not walk. It emerged; a silhouette of living void and flame. Its form ever-shifting, draped in threads that pulsed with solar glyphs not meant for mortal eyes.

"You summoned me, Ascendant One," **Saavh** said, head bowed, voice devoid of emotion.

"I do not summon," the **Shallit'Biru** replied, *"I subpoena."*

It moved toward the tactical projection; a hololithic map of the Void corridor, the Draetheon fleet marked in crimson trails of light. A faint pulse denoted the moons of Mer'Kuri; Tiraxis and Khepra, hovering like pale targets in the encroaching shadow.

"We are three cycles from orbital convergence," **Saavh** reported. *"Resistance is mounting. The Mer'Kurians have begun coordinated pushback. Draetheon strike units are active on both moons. Our infiltration cells report delays in ground signal relay."*

"And yet..." The **Shallit'Biru's** voice narrowed to a whisper, *"...the fleet remains divided. The Oblivion Night engages on the flank. The Vulture's Cradle was lost at the Rift Throat.."*

"… You are being tested, Saavh."

"I welcome the trial," **Saavh** replied without hesitation. *"We have advanced farther than the Abyssal Spire ever did… That High Admiral lacked vision… I do not."*

The Shallit'Biru moved again; closer now, shadow wrapping around Saavh like an eclipse. *"Vision means nothing without precision.*

The moment approaches. The Two Suns are now on Mer'Kuri. This is an unexpected opportunity... Take them alive... Bring them to me."

Saavh stiffened. *"Alive?"* The word left his mouth like a curse.

"Their deaths would serve the war," the **Shallit'Biru** intoned, voice now low and reverberating. *"But if they were to serve **me**... the war would end before it truly begins."*

Saavh remained silent, the implication sinking in like a blade. The chamber's lights dimmed, shadows curling around the Shallit'Biru's shifting form as its presence grew heavier, more primal.

"They are conduits," the **Shallit'Biru** continued, voice now layered; many tones overlapping as though ancient voices now spoke.

"Two Suns... bound to Ra, yet unshaped. I would forge them into something far greater than this crumbling resistance. They are not weapons. They are vessels."

Saavh's brow crooked. *"You believe they can be turned?"*

The **Shallit'Biru** let out something between a laugh and a whispering scream. *"Not turned. Transcended. I will pour into them the wisdom of the First Flame. Their minds will shatter. Their wills will be rebuilt. They shall kneel... or burn screaming."*

Saavh nodded once, slow and measured. *"Then I will deliver them. Alive. Broken, if necessary."*

"Whole," the **Shallit'Biru** corrected sharply. *"Their spirits must bend, not break. Damage the vessels, and you defy me."*

The **Shallit'Biru** began to unravel again, atoms bleeding into tendrils of solar energy and void. *"The war is a distraction. The moons are merely stages. But they... they are the altar."*

And with that the Shallit'Biru was gone.

Saavh stood alone in the smoldering silence, jaw clenched, breath tight. His command staff watched from the lower decks, uneasy; none daring to speak.

"Dispatch the Shadow Reavers." he ordered coldly. *"Authorization: Eclipse Protocol Nine. Engage non-lethal capture. Maximum force permitted short of termination."*

He turned toward the void, watching as the twin moons of Mer'Kuri loomed ever closer.

“The gods want vessels?” **Saavh** whispered. *“Then I’ll hand them the twins... gift-wrapped in chains.”*

The Reavers

Xal's chest heaved as he ducked behind a half-toppled pillar, plasma fire scorching the air overhead. The ground beneath his boots trembled with distant detonations, and the air stank of scorched alloy and lunar dust. Vex crouched beside him, his synthetic frame leaking sparks from a gash across his left side.

“We’re running low on everything,” **Xal** muttered, checking the dying charge level on his gauntlet. *“Ammo, backup cells, even solar draw… This whole sector’s been stripped.”*

“Telemetry confirms it,” **Vex** replied, voice calm despite his state. *“Local sun nodes are inactive. Something’s siphoning Ra-flux from orbit. We’re fighting in the dark.”*

Xal cursed under his breath. *“They’re prepping for something big.”*

A shriek echoed from across the ruins; alien, mechanical. Then silence. And then…

A sonic boom cracked the sky above. A shimmering light descended from the cliffside, fast and burning bright. Two silhouettes emerged from the blinding drop; Kael and Typhon, their boots slamming into the stone with righteous force, followed by a column of fresh Solari troops in full radiant armor.

Their banners flared with golden sigils as they surged forward, forming a wall of heat and steel around the embattled pair.

“Miss us?” **Kael** grinned, tossing Xal a fresh solar cartridge.

Xal snapped it into his gauntlet with a hiss. *“Took your time.”*

“Had to bring a proper entrance,” **Typhon** said, flanking Vex with two medics. *“And friends.”*

Before they could regroup fully, the wind shifted; wrong. Still air twisted into a spiral of pressure. Shadows pulled unnaturally toward the eastern ridge.

Vex stood first. *“Something’s coming.”*

Then they hit.

The first Reaver dropped from the sky without a sound; tall, wrapped in matte-black armor etched with glyphs that shimmered like void fire. Its eyes were twin slits of molten gold. It moved like liquid death, striking down a Solari trooper before the alarm even sounded.

Dozens followed, emerging from shadow, phasing into existence with no warning. They tore into the outer perimeter with lethal precision, avoiding fatal strikes, disabling limbs, subduing rather than killing.

“They’re not trying to wipe us out!” **Typhon** shouted, parrying a Reaver blade that curved mid-strike like it had a will of its own. *“They’re targeting…!”*

“Kael! Xal!” **Vex’s** voice boomed, sharp and immediate. *“They’re here for you!”*

Kael’s eyes narrowed as he cleaved through a Reaver with a burst of solar flame. *“Then come and get me.”*

Xal ignited both his blades, backing into formation with his twin. *“No more running.”*

Above them, the clouds roiled unnaturally, a dark disc forming overhead; the Draetheon drop gate.

The Reavers were just the distraction.

The battlefield dissolved into chaos.

Smoke curled through fractured stone as plasma bursts lit the ruins like a strobe. Screams echoed, metal clashed, and somewhere above, the whine of atmospheric rupture signaled more drops incoming.

"Vex… Left flank!" **Kael** shouted over the com static, slicing a Reaver down the middle as its body collapsed into a pool of liquified shadow.

Vex pivoted, sensors locking on the incoming wave. *“Six more closing in… Fast. They’re boxing you in.”*

“Then we break the box.” **Kael** jerked his head toward a shattered archway near the ridge. *“This way!”*

Without waiting, he sprinted; Vex at his side, solar bolts ricocheting around them as the Reavers adjusted. Kael’s aura flared brighter; unintentionally, instinctively, drawing their attention like a beacon. The shadows shifted. The hunters followed.

Across the battlefield, Xal watched the move; eyes narrowed.

“They’re splitting us,” **Typhon** growled, deflecting a jagged blade aimed for her throat. *“We can’t let them isolate Kael.”*

“They want us split,” **Xal** said, breath tight. *“So let’s give them exactly what they want.”*

He ducked a strike, rolled under it, and swept his solar blade low; disabling the Reaver’s leg before hurling a sunburst grenade to blind the others.

“Typhon… East corridor. There's a tunnel network. We disappear into it.”

“You’re thinking bait.” **Typhon** grinned grimly. *“I like it.”*

With the signal given, Xal launched a solar flare into the sky; a coded burst only Kael would recognize: *Split confirmed. Stay ahead.*

Kael glanced back just long enough to catch it, nodded, and surged forward.

Now divided, the twins moved like mirrored storms in opposite directions, their respective allies at their sides. Behind them, the Reavers howled; not in rage, but in satisfaction.

The hunt was working… or so they thought.

The Upper Ridge

Kael’s boots struck the gravel-strewn path with speed and precision, breath syncing with the rhythmic hum of his charging gauntlet. Vex ran beside him, each stride effortlessly inhuman; servos hissing under the strain of lunar terrain and rising tension.

Behind them, the Reavers advanced like ghosts; silent, tireless, and unrelenting.

“We need altitude,” **Kael** barked. *“Can’t outpace them forever.”*

“There’s an outcrop ahead,” **Vex** replied, scanning the ridge with a quick thermal sweep. *“Narrow path. One entry point. Defensible.”*

Kael smirked. *“A bottleneck. Exciting.”*

They reached the rise moments later; an overlook of shattered columns and ancient Solari architecture, half-buried in dust. Kael vaulted a ledge and turned just as the first Reaver crested the rise.

He didn’t wait.

A blast of solar flame erupted from his gauntlet, hurling the Reaver back into its pack. The shockwave sent stones tumbling down the incline. Two more came leaping through the smoke, blades drawn, eyes like glowing slits.

Vex met them head-on.

The first strike he deflected with a forearm shield that rippled blue from impact. The second, he caught mid-swing and twisted; dislocating the Reaver's arm with mechanical precision before slamming it into the stone hard enough to shatter its visor.

Kael turned to cover him, unleashing a volley of radiant bolts into the approaching line.

"More are circling beneath us," **Vex** warned, scanning the canyon floor. *"They're flanking."*

Kael growled, eyes scanning the horizon. *"Then we don't make a stand here. We lure them further in."*

"To what?" **Vex** asked flatly.

Kael smiled, heat coiling in his palms. *"To their error in judgment."*

With a fierce leap, Kael bounded from the overlook onto a lower slope of broken ruins, skidding to a stop and igniting the sigils along his forearms. Solar power surged into him, setting the dust aglow in a pulsing ring around his feet.

Vex dropped beside him, his voice low. *"You're planning something unstable."*

Kael: *"I'm improvising."*

From the canyon mouth ahead, six more Reavers emerged, their movements coordinated, deliberate; an execution unit.

"Just buy me thirty seconds," **Kael** muttered, crouching low. *"Then get clear."*

Vex hesitated.

Kael looked up; eyes blazing. *"Go."*

Vex moved; launching into the air with a thruster burst, drawing fire away as Kael reached into the depths of his training, pulling every ounce of light and heat the moon's atmosphere would yield.

Kael knelt in the dust, one hand pressed to the fractured ground, the other raised skyward as if calling down judgment. His breath came slow but deep, steadying as the solar sigils along his arms and chest flared with searing light.

The dust around him lifted, swirling in concentric rings, drawn upward by the radiant vortex forming at the center of his being.

From the canyon mouth, the Reavers hesitated. Their lead unit halted mid-stride, tilting its head like a predator sensing something wrong with its prey.

It was already too late.

Kael opened his eyes; twin suns.

The ground beneath him cracked outward in a blazing halo. Then, with a roar that shook the cliffs, he released it.

A pillar of solar energy erupted from his core; pure, unfiltered Ra-force surging skyward before curving down and out in a cascading ring of flame.

The canyon lit up as if dawn had broken through the moon's crust itself. Reavers caught in the blast were vaporized mid-step, their armor warping and dissolving in an instant.

The concussive wave that followed tore through the narrow ridgeline, hurling bodies; stone, metal, and ash, into the air like scattered leaves. The sky itself seemed to recoil.

Kael staggered to his feet, smoke curling off his armor. His skin shimmered with lingering light, and the very air around him distorted from heat.

His gauntlet flickered.

His strength was fading.

But the Reavers had stopped.

The survivors; few, stood at a distance now, not advancing. Just watching.

Waiting.

Kael narrowed his eyes.

"They're not afraid of me," he muttered, barely above a breath. *"They're testing me."*

A shadow passed over the ridge; large, winged, not a ship. Something *else.*

His com clicked on. **Vex's** voice crackled through. "*Kael… something new just entered the sector. I don't know what it is, but it's not Draetheon tech. It's worse."*

Kael exhaled and turned toward the rising shape.

"Let's find out who.. is crashing the party."

Beneath the Ashen Span

The flickering lights of Typhon's shoulder-lamp barely cut through the darkness. The tunnels were older than any Solari records; humming faintly with energy that shouldn't exist beneath a dead moon.

Xal moved like a shadow, blade drawn, steps silent. His senses were sharp. Every footfall echoed longer than it should have. Every corner loomed with the threat of ambush.

"They're herding us," **Typhon** muttered. *"This place wasn't on any map. Not even the old Solari charts."*

Xal nodded. *"They want us separated, not dead. At least not yet."*

Typhon: *"You sure about that?"*

Xal paused, crouching low at a fork in the path. He touched the stone. It was warm. Wrong.

"They're after me and Kael," he said quietly. *"They don't care about the rest. This…"* he glanced around, *"… this is a trap built for us."*

Typhon's hand hovered over the haft of his spear. *"Then let's spring it before they're ready."*

Xal smirked. *"That's the Solari way."*

Suddenly, the stone above them groaned.

A deep, grinding sound; like tectonic plates shifting, echoed through the cavern. A section of ceiling retracted in a circular motion, revealing a vertical shaft bathed in flickering red light.

Then they heard it: the whispering.

Not words. Not language. Something older. Something designed to be felt.

Xal's pulse quickened. *“Back,”* he hissed.

Too late.

A shape dropped into the tunnel with a sound like tearing silk; tall, thin, draped in shifting black alloy that looked fluid but struck like steel. Not a Reaver. Not Eclipse.

Draetheon-bred; but different.

Its face was a mask of swirling lava with twin horizontal slits for eyes, glowing violet.

Typhon lunged; spear extended, only for the figure to vanish mid-motion.

“Behind!” **Xal** shouted.

The thing reappeared behind Typhon, slashing with a blade made of void light. Typhon barely blocked, sliding back from the force of the hit. Sparks flew.

Xal moved on instinct, vaulting off the tunnel wall and striking from above. His blade met the void weapon midair; white flame against black shimmer. The tunnel shook with the clash.

The figure hissed. Not in pain. In recognition.

“They know us,” **Xal** said, landing beside Typhon. *“They’re not hunting Solari. They’re hunting the prophecy.”*

“And they think it’s real,” **Typhon** added grimly, eyes locked on the figure.

A second shape dropped into view.

Then a third.

The tunnels weren’t a place of escape anymore.

They were the crucible.

Xal and Typhon stood back-to-back, surrounded by three of the void-born warriors. The tunnel pulsed faintly with alien energy, the floor beneath them humming with every motion their foes made. The air itself had grown colder, thinner; tainted by the presence of whatever these things truly were.

“Three on two,” **Typhon** growled. *“That’s fair.”*

Xal didn’t smile. *“Only if we don’t die.”*

Then they moved.

The void-creatures attacked in perfect silence. The first swept low at Typhon's legs while the second came down from above on Xal with its blade gleaming black-violet.

The third vanished from sight; again.

Typhon met the strike with her spear, deflecting and twisting to slam the butt-end into his attacker's side. The creature staggered slightly, its armor rippling rather than cracking. Typhon followed through with a spinning slash, carving a glowing line across its torso; but the wound sealed almost immediately.

"Regenerative," **Typhon** spat. *"Of course."*

Xal had no time to think. He was already mid-dodge, the second attacker cutting the air where his head had been. He channeled heat into his blade and struck low, slicing through its leg at the joint. The limb buckled; but the thing didn't fall. It merely shifted its stance unnaturally and slashed again, forcing Xal into a defensive roll.

And then; impact.

The third creature reappeared mid-strike, plunging its void blade toward Xal's exposed back.

Typhon moved without hesitation; leaping between them. Her shoulder armor took the brunt of the blow, cracking under the pressure, but it saved Xal's life.

She retaliated instantly, jamming her spear into the attacker's side and detonating the solar charge embedded in the shaft. The explosion rocked the tunnel, flinging all three creatures backward.

"Xal!" **Typhon** roared. *"Now!"*

Xal pushed off the wall, spinning into a rising slash that cleaved into the downed creature's neck. Heat burst from the blade as he roared, driving the cut clean through.

The head rolled, sparking; and **this** time, the body didn't move again.

"One down," **Xal** breathed.

The remaining two circled, more cautious now.

"Go for the heads," **Typhon** muttered. *"Don't hold back."*

Xal nodded.

Together, they surged forward; Typhon jabbing with brutal precision while Xal danced in firelight, his blade singing with Solari heat.

Each movement was a blur, each strike perfectly timed, each counter lethal.

The second fell under Typhon's spear; pierced through the eye-slit and pinned to the wall like a crucified shadow.

The third tried to fade again, but Xal anticipated it. He closed his eyes and felt the heat displacement in the air, the flicker of wrongness behind him. He turned and drove his blade straight into its chest as it reappeared; twisting with a final burst of radiant energy.

The tunnel went silent.

All three void-warriors were down. Dead. This time, truly dead.

Xal and Typhon stood panting; weapons smoking, the energy around them beginning to dissipate.

"You all right?" **Xal** asked, glancing at Typhon's cracked armor.

Typhon nodded, grimacing. *"I've had worse. What the hell **were** those things?"*

"Not Eclipse. Not Reavers," **Xal** said, voice low. *"Something... Perhaps Draetheon."*

Typhon turned her head, listening. Distant tremors echoed through the tunnel. Above them, the battle still raged.

"Then we're out of time," she said. *"We find Kael.."*

Xal wiped blood and ash from his blade. *"Let's finish this."*

Chapter 17: Dark Shadows

Kael exhaled; his breath a plume of heat that briefly shimmered in the air. He turned his gaze back toward the towering shape now descending from the sky, its outline dark against the dimming moonlight.

It was massive, cloaked in shifting shadow, its form more like an immense, living construct than any machine he had encountered.

The hair on the back of his neck stood up, the hairs of his solar sigils prickling with warning. This was no ordinary weapon of war. There was something wrong about it, something… unnatural. He reached up, clutching the hilt of his blade.

Vex's voice crackled through again, sharper this time. "*Kael, it's… it's not alive, but it's not like anything... It's beyond Draetheon tech. I can't get a clear read.*"

Kael's jaw tightened. *"You're saying it's not Draetheon? Then what the hell is it?"*

"I don't know," **Vex** replied; the uncertainty rare in his voice. *"But it's not here for us. But I don't think it's friendly."*

Kael's gaze narrowed. The thing in the sky had stopped. Hovering now, it seemed to pause as if assessing the ground below. Its massive form shifted again, then split apart; pieces of the structure separating like the jagged wings of some enormous insect. A beam of red light shot from it, lancing downward to strike the terrain ahead.

Kael moved forward; footfalls silent on the scorched earth. His eyes flicked toward the canyon walls, calculating. *"Whatever it is, we're about to find out."*

He snapped his fingers, a subtle but effective signal. The glowing sigils across his body dimmed as he entered a focused state, heat radiating from his form, channeling Ra's power within him.

His mind was already working, anticipating what might come next. The moment the unknown craft made its move, he would strike.

But then… there was movement beneath him. His boots slid across the rocky surface, and he felt the ground tremble slightly beneath his weight.

A low growl echoed from behind, and Kael whipped around.

A creature; tall and slithering, climbed up from the ravine's edge. Its body was shuddering with unnatural speed. The scales along its back shimmered like glass, reflecting the eerie red glow of the descending ship.

"More of them," **Kael** muttered, preparing for another attack.

His com buzzed again, **Vex's** voice laced with urgency. *"Kael, you need to get out of there… Hurry…*"

"… *This isn't just a distraction. That thing's a signal. It's calling them. They're coming."*

Kael didn't hesitate. His stance shifted. He leaped; his power erupting beneath him as his blade surged with white-hot light, cutting through the approaching creature in one fluid motion.

The beast crumbled to dust, but the sheer force of the blow sent a shockwave through the surrounding rocks.

"Stay focused," **Kael** muttered to himself.

The craft above began to descend again, its massive form blurring the already dimming sky as it neared the surface. Kael turned back toward the rising shape, now closer than ever. He could feel the tension rising, a palpable pressure in the air.

And then, he saw it.

A sleek, metallic figure dropped from the craft; its form outlined in shimmering blue. Its silhouette was humanoid, but something about it was wrong. The skin was smooth, metallic, and the eyes glowing with an eerie, unnatural pulse. Its movements were unnervingly fluid, like liquid metal shifting in and out of its solid form.

"What the hell are you?" **Kael** muttered.

The figure did not speak. Instead, it held up one hand, and from its palm, a stream of dark energy shot toward Kael. He barely had time to react, diving to the side as the beam struck the ground where he had been standing, sending plumes of rock and dirt into the air.

The creature's eyes locked onto him.

"Kael!" **Vex's** voice came through again, sharp and urgent. *"You can't win this fight! Fall back. We need to regroup with the others.*"

But Kael wasn't listening. His mind burned with a single thought: *I'm not backing down.*

His blade flared once more with a burst of solar energy, the light blinding in the gloom of the moon's surface. Kael surged forward; his body powered by the strength of the sun itself.

The creature's gaze never wavered.

The Citadel Spire

The sky over Khepra fractured with fire.

From the surface, it looked like the stars themselves were bleeding; amber streaks rippling across the atmosphere as the first wave of Draetheon fire breached the high orbital line.

Defensive satellites blinked out like snuffed candles. A solar tether array ruptured in a silent bloom of golden gas; its burning coils twisting as they fell toward the moon's surface.

Above, the Pyrian Lance shuddered under the weight of retreat.

Commander Zelin braced against the rail as inertial dampeners failed again. *“Divert emergency power to the ventral thrusters,”* he snapped. *“Get us above the pull line before…”*

A concussive tremor rippled through the hull. The gravitational net had reached them.

Half a dozen ships along the outer defensive grid began to sheer apart, folding in upon themselves like warped glass under pressure. Not destroyed; disintegrated.

Silent, cold implosions as micro-singularities blinked them from existence. No explosion. No time to scream. Just vanishing light.

“Get us out of this field!” **Zelin** roared.

From behind the Lance, a formation of Solari carriers ignited full burns, trying to clear the drift before the gravity traps realigned. Two made it. One was caught mid-jump; ripped in half, its glowing spine flaring out like a broken comet.

And still, the Draetheon dreadnoughts advanced.

Like titans from myth, they moved in unison, unbothered by the chaos, their hulls unharmed by solar blasts or kinetic shells. Their weapons; dark prisms embedded in their hulls, were charging.

A low, tremoring frequency began to pulse across all channels. Not sound. Not light. Something deeper. A vibration in the bones.

“They’re targeting the moons,” Zelin realized. “*They're bypassing us.”* His blood ran cold.

On the tactical display, the trajectory of the enemy ships shifted; vectoring directly toward Tiraxis and Khepra.

“Get me Councilor Alaric!” **Zelin** barked. *“We’re past defense. This is evacuation protocol. We need ground shields at full capacity. Launch everything. We’ll hold them as long as we can.”*

He turned to the forward screen; and watched the stars begin to black out as the largest of the Draetheon ships crossed into visible orbit.

It eclipsed the light of Ra.

Inside the Citadel Spire on Mer’Kuri Prime, alarms shrieked through the marble halls like banshees.

Councilor Alaric stood frozen before the panoramic view pane, watching the blackened sky ripple with fire. Beyond the haze of atmospheric distortion, he could see it; that shadow, that impossible silhouette from a distance.

A Draetheon dreadnought. No, something larger.

His lips parted. *“They’ve breached the lunar line…”*

Behind him, **Seraphina** burst into the chamber.

“The emergency channel from the Pyrian Lance just cut off,” she said, breathless. *“Zelin's last transmission confirms it… They’re moving past the fleet. They’re targeting the moons directly.”*

“We expected the moons to be strategic,” **Alaric** said grimly. *“We didn’t expect them to skip us.”*

“Because they’re not just after ground assets,” **Seraphina** replied, her voice sharp. *“They’re after the crystals... The temples... The twins.”*

Alaric’s hands clenched. *“Get me direct coms to both moons. I want Kael and Xal extracted.. Fast... If the Draetheon manage to fold either of those sites into phase collapse…”*

The room trembled.

Far below orbit, shielding towers flared gold, forming a defensive lattice over the cities, but Alaric barely noticed. His gaze locked on the rising spires of flame over Tiraxis; the sacred tower still visible through the view pane as a thin silhouette on the distant horizon.

He opened a secure channel*. “All planetary forces: initiate Ra-Shield Protocol Seven. Evacuate all non-military personnel from Khepra and Tiraxis. Launch counter-offensives where possible… But nothing gets within ten klicks of the temples without my word.”*

A pause. Then, quietly: *“Prepare the failsafe. If the crystals fall into Draetheon hands… we cannot allow them to leave the system intact.”*

Seraphina turned sharply. *“You would detonate a crystal of Ra? On our own moon?”*

“I’d rather lose a moon,” **Alaric** said, eyes steel, *“than the entire sol.”*

Seraphina didn't argue. She reached for her own coms panel. *"I'll contact Commander Kade. He's nearest to the moons. If anyone can reach the twins in time, it's him."*

Lightning flashed against the shield dome; red and unnatural. The sky above Mer'Kuri cracked like a fractured mirror.

And the first Draetheon weapon made landfall.

The Creature

Kael's muscles burned as he charged; blade crackling with solar fury. The air around him shimmered with heat, a sharp contrast to the chilling darkness of the unknown creature before him. His every step felt like an eternity as the distance between him and the figure closed.

The creature raised its hand again, and this time, Kael was more focused. He leapt forward, spinning in midair as the dark beam shot past him. His blade came down in a searing arc, aimed at the figure's center mass.

But it wasn't there.

The creature melted into a liquid form, shifting like mercury, and Kael's strike sliced through nothing but air.

He landed hard, but his momentum carried him forward, pivoting quickly to face the creature. The figure reformed, solidifying in a blur of metallic limbs and glowing eyes, and Kael felt the unmistakable pressure of danger radiating from it.

Then it lunged.

Faster than he could react, the creature slammed into him, sending him crashing backward, his breath leaving him in a sharp gasp. The weight of it was crushing, and for a split second, Kael wondered if this was it; if this was the end.

But then, his sigils flared bright, and he forced himself up, his body heated with the power of Ra. He grabbed the creature by its fluid arms, his fingers pressing into the cold, metallic skin. He could feel it resisting, shifting; like trying to hold water in his grasp.

He snarled and pushed harder, using every ounce of solar strength to drive his blade into the creature's side. The metal screamed as it tore; but the figure didn't flinch. Instead, it turned its face toward Kael, its eyes pulsing brighter, as though it were analyzing him.

This wasn't a fight; it was something unexpected.

Kael’s vision blurred for a moment, his body protesting against the strain. But he knew he couldn’t back down. Not now.

With a final roar, Kael channeled all his energy into a single, desperate thrust, driving his blade deep into the creature’s chest. It froze, mid-motion, the molten-like material beginning to crack and fracture under the pressure.

For a moment, there was only silence. Then the creature’s body spasmed, and a violent surge of energy erupted from it, pushing Kael back with a force that sent him flying across the rocky ground.

Kael’s vision flickered. His head spun, but he managed to regain his footing, grimacing in pain. The creature remained standing; its form still holding together, despite the brutal damage.

But it was weakening.

“Kael!” **Vex’s** voice boomed in his ear, a final warning.

“Fall back!”

Kael's chest heaved as he took in the sight of the creature. It was still standing, but it was no longer moving with the same fluid precision. It was weakening. The dark energy from its body flickered in and out, and Kael could feel the pressure in the air lifting.

With one last surge of strength, Kael moved forward, this time without hesitation. His blade burned with the full fury of the sun, channeling every ounce of his power into the strike. He thrust forward; straight into the core of the creature.

The reaction was immediate. A blinding light erupted from the creature, its form splitting apart in violent flashes. Kael shielded his eyes, the heat of the explosion searing his skin.

When the light faded, the creature was gone; disintegrated into nothingness.

Kael dropped to his knees, chest heaving as the adrenaline began to fade. He looked around, scanning the ruined landscape, but there was nothing left of the creature.

He breathed heavily into the silence, the only sound now the hum of his blade, still glowing softly in the quiet aftermath of the battle.

"Kael...?" **Vex’s** voice crackled again, faintly through the com. *"Report. What happened?"*

Kael wiped the sweat from his brow, glancing toward the horizon. He didn't answer right away.

"They're not just here for us, Vex," he muttered under his breath. *"They're here for the prophecy."*

A sudden coldness settled over him as the implications sank in. They weren't dealing with an enemy anymore. They were dealing with something far worse.

"Get to Xal," **Kael** ordered, voice tight.

"Tell him this is more than we expected."

Chapter 18: The First Eclipse

Typhon stood near the edge of the shattered ridge, her blackened armor glinting faintly in the dying firelight. The winds howled around her, carrying the scent of scorched ground, charred metal, and blood. Her glaive was still drawn, its edge gleaming with crimson.

Though her stance had relaxed, there was tension in her shoulders; coiled, alert.

Below the ridge, the battlefield smoldered. Craters and collapsed trenches stretched into the fog, where enemy combatants lay strewn like shattered dolls. The silence was not peace; it was aftermath.

Xal stumbled toward her from the smoke, limping, his silhouette distorted by heat shimmer. Ash and blood streaked his face, drying in cracked lines down his jaw and neck. One gauntlet hung loose from his forearm; his blade was broken halfway down the shaft.

He looked up at her with a tired, crooked grin.

"You always hold the line."

Typhon turned, slowly. Her eyes swept over him, then softened; not that she'd admit it. She sheathed her weapon with a practiced motion and crossed the broken ground in three long strides.

"Someone has to," she said. *"You look like hell."*

He chuckled, then immediately winced, pressing a hand to his ribs. *"Someone has to… Feels worse than it looks."*

She caught him before he could fall again, sliding beneath his arm and bracing him with silent strength. Her grip was steady, and despite the smoke and exhaustion, her presence anchored him.

“Then let’s not waste time.”

A low thrum broke the silence, deep and mechanical, like a heart beating in metal. The haze split as a hover pod roared toward them, its engines glowing pale-blue beneath the scorched surface. Dust and debris swirled in its wake, and from the cockpit, Kael’s silhouette emerged; rigid with urgency.

Beside him stood Vex, motionless as a sentinel, his optics scanning in precise arcs.

The pod hissed as it descended; repulsors steaming against shattered stone. Kael didn’t wait. He vaulted down before it had fully landed, boots crunching onto debris. His eyes darted from Typhon to Xal, drinking in the sight of them like a man come back from the brink.

“About time,” **Typhon** muttered, smirking despite herself.

Kael pulled her into a tight embrace. He pressed his forehead to hers briefly, grounding himself. The contact was fleeting, but it said everything. Relief. Gratitude. Need.

“Didn’t think I’d find you both still breathing.”

“We’re stubborn like that,” **Xal** rasped… as Vex moved forward, one arm sliding beneath his to help him aboard.

“Correction,” **Vex** said, his voice as calm and sharp as always, *“He’s stubborn. You two are reckless.”*

Typhon smirked. *“Same difference.”*

Vex’s optics pulsed once, then turned toward Kael. *“Reinforcements are inbound. Draetheon scan probes are already in low orbit. We have approximately eight minutes before their first sweep.”*

Kael gave a single nod. *“Then we move.”*

He helped Typhon aboard as Vex secured Xal in the medical cradle. The pod’s rear doors sealed with a hydraulic hiss, and they lifted off, skimming low over the ruined ridge.

Below them, the battlefield receded; an ocean of scorched stone and lifeless steel. The remains of the fallen glittered faintly in the red dusk, like broken constellations scattered across black sand.

Above, the setting Ra hung low in the sky, casting long shadows and a pale, weary light across their path.

Kael stood at the viewport, one hand braced on the frame, the other wrapped around Typhon's. His voice was low, meant only for her.

"Typhon… we can't go back to base. Not yet."

She didn't flinch. *"Where to?"*

He turned; eyes grim.

"To Forge Valley. We have a new a lead… and it may be a way to finally end this war."

Her eyes widened; just a flicker, but she nodded. *"Then let's get to it."*

Kael: *"Vex… Typhon and I have another destination,.. Take us to a shuttle."*

The pod banked north, engines pushing against gathering winds.

Together again. For now.

And the war was far from over.

Family Matters

The cockpit lights dimmed to red as Typhon adjusted their course to avoid known orbital patrol routes.

Outside, streaks of light flashed like falling stars; Draetheon drop-pods, descending toward Mer'Kuri.

Kael leaned forward in his seat, checking the tracking board. The secret Solburn convoy was on its way to Tiraxis.

"Commander Kade's cutting it too close," **Kael** muttered. *"That dreadnought gets a lock, it's over."*

Typhon didn't answer right away. She was staring ahead, jaw tight, knuckles resting against her lips in thought.

"You okay?" **Kael** asked.

"I've been thinking…" she began slowly, eyes still forward. *"You introduced me to your parents… I want to return the gesture… Introduce you to **my** parents."*

Kael blinked. *"You want to do this now?... Ty... your parents are way on Draetheon."*

Typhon: *"Exactly."*

A beat of silence.

Then **Kael**: *“That’s one hell of a commute.”*

Typhon smirked faintly. *“There’s a way. A sun-portal. My father taught me how to attune one…”*

“… But it only works with Draetheon technology. It needs their solar harmonics at the rear of the armada.”

Kael straightened, tone sharper. *“That’s the biggest warship I’ve ever seen… You’re saying we sneak aboard **that** dreadnought… the one waaay behind the armada**...**”*

“… and open a direct line to my father,” **she** finished.

“He’s not like the others, Kael… If I can speak to him, show him what the Eclipse has become... Maybe he helps us… Maybe he stops this war before it gets worse.”

Kael exhaled. *“Or maybe he turns you in and we both die screaming in a solar crucible.”*

“Maybe,” **Typhon** admitted. *“But if he listens… we could end this before the Solburn has to be used.”*

Kael studied her face. *“Why now?”*

Typhon's voice softened. *“Because I can’t watch both sides of my lineage destroy each other.”*

She held out her hand; steady, unapologetic. *“Are you in?”*

Kael stared at it. Then took it.

“Always...”

“… But if things get out of hand… If things go sideways… we destroy that dreadnought.”

Typhon: “*Destroy that dreadnought?...Sounds like you’ve been hanging out with the princess waaay too long...”*

Kael: “*… Agreed.”*

The Darkside Pass

The convoy shimmered like a trail of solar embers, gliding through the shadowed orbit of Tiraxis. Three Solari drop-cruisers flew in formation, engines dimmed to stealth-mode. Between them, caged in a

gravitational lattice, the Solburn pulsed; its three crystals of Ra glowing in synchronized rhythm.

Inside the lead cruiser, **Commander Kade** stood at the forward viewport, hands clasped behind his back; jaw clenched.

"ETA to surface breach?" he asked.

"Six minutes," replied his **pilot**. *"If we're not…"*

A blaring pulse interrupted her. Red runes flashed across the tactical display.

"Contact. One dreadnought. 20 degrees spin ward. They just broke cloak."

Kade's eyes narrowed. The dark mass of the Draetheon flagship Khora'thal emerged from the blackness like a wounded leviathan; engines blazing, weapon ports unfurling like flower petals soaked in blood light.

"Shields up," **Kade** ordered. *"Redirect reactor feed to solar ghosting. Full ECM spread."*

"They'll burn through that in thirty seconds, sir," the **coms officer** said.

Kade: *"Then we only need twenty-nine."*

The convoy banked sharply, the lattice surrounding the Solburn groaning under gravitational stress. A burst of solar countermeasures flashed behind them, dazzling the dreadnought's sensors.

The Khora'thal opened fire; twin sun-lances arcing through space like gods dragging whips of fire.

Kade's voice was calm, steady. *"Launch decoy transports. Transmit false payload signatures. Scatter pattern gamma-six."*

Three smaller craft peeled off, mimicking the Solburn's energy signature. One exploded moments later; vaporized by a lance strike. But two others drifted outward, still broadcasting.

The dreadnought adjusted course… momentarily confused.

"NOW," **Kade** barked. *"Invert orbit and dive!"*

The convoy plunged toward the moon's surface, shields screaming as they entered Tiraxis' thin atmosphere. Behind them, the Khora'thal fired a final volley; one of the decoys exploded, the other clipped and sent spiraling.

INT. LANDING CRUISER - MOMENTS LATER

"*Solburn integrity at ninety-four percent,"* the **engineer** reported. *"Containment stable."*

Kade exhaled through his nose, finally easing his stance. *"Then we're still in this."*

The forward screen cleared just in time to reveal the plateau; a scorched black mesa overlooking the jagged crystal fields of Tiraxis.

Solari engineers were already in position, guiding the transport lattice toward a waiting platform engraved with old glyphs.

The ship's landing struts hissed.

EXT. TIRAXIS SURFACE - CONTINUOUS

Dust spiraled as the Solburn descended into its cradle. The three crystals of Ra pulsed in slow harmony, syncing with the moon's natural solar resonance. Energy columns ignited around the platform; phase-locking the weapon into place.

Kade stepped out; boots crunching against mawkish grit. His armor glowed faintly, still hot from the atmospheric dive.

A **Solari monk** approached. *"Is it… ready?"*

Kade looked toward the skyline, where the Khora'thal hung like a vulture in orbit, unable to descend through the interference.

He nodded once. *"It is now."*

The Solburn thrummed; alive, awake, and watching.

Shadow Gate

Mag-clamps hissed as Kael and Typhon clung to the darkened underbelly of the Draetheon dreadnought Obsidian Womb, cloaked in the ship's own thermal shadow. Their forms blended against the hull plating, camo-shields bending the light around them.

Kael eyed the access port ahead. *"You're sure this is the only way in?"*

Typhon clipped a tether into place and began overriding the hatch's solar-lock with her vambrace. *"Unless you want to ask the front gate."*

A spark, a click, and the panel irised open.

They slipped inside.

INNER MAINTENANCE SHAFTS

The interior was worse; corridors pulsed with a sickly amber glow, laced with black spires of living circuitry. The ship breathed. Every wall felt like it was listening.

Kael whispered, *“This place wasn’t built by any known engineers.”*

Typhon nodded grimly. “*Draetheon tech fuses crystal, code, and bone. Half of this dreadnought is alive.”*

A Draetheon warden passed below; a towering figure draped in solar-forged armor; its face hidden behind an obsidian helm inscribed with runes.

Kael and Typhon froze against the ceiling lattice, hearts silent.

When the warden vanished, **Kael** glanced at her. *“Still think this is a good idea?”*

“I never said it was a good idea,” **Typhon** retorted. *“Just the only idea on the table.”*

SUN-COMMUNION CHAMBER

They emerged into a chamber unlike any of Mer’Kuri design.

A spherical sanctum of transparent crystal floated at the core; its interior lit by a swirling miniature sun suspended in containment. Solar lines pulsed outward, forming a halo of star-script and memory-threads.

Kael stepped forward. *“Is that…?”*

Typhon touched the outer wall. Her sigils flared.

“*The Sun-Communion nexus. My father encoded a path here. I can open a portal directly to Draetheon from this ship.”*

Kael raised an eyebrow*. “So your father’s really on Draetheon.”*

Typhon: *“Yes… You doubted me?”*

She stepped inside. The swirling solar sphere dimmed… then flared.

A vertical slit of golden-white light ripped open. Through it, an ancient chamber appeared; piled with books, relics, and radiant glass. A cloaked figure knelt at its center.

He turned.

Kael saw **Typhon's** eyes soften, her breath catch.

"Father."

The figure stood; tall, lean, wrapped in a black robe; his eyes burning like twin flames.

Kael stepped back; eyes open wide, he muttered…

"The Shallit'Biru."

Chapter 19: Crimson Threshold

The crystalline towers of Mer'Kuri's capitol city shimmered under the fractured sunlight, casting refracted halos across the high council chamber. **Councilor Alaric** stood at the window; eyes narrowed toward the darkening horizon.

"You stood before the Martian High Command," he said without turning. *"Is military aid coming?"*

General Krynn; towering and clad in polished crimson armor dulled from travel, let out a breath and glanced to Seraphina, who sat silently at the long black marble table. Then, to Alaric: *"I gave them our intelligence on the Draetheon. I spoke of their fleet; the shadow cast over Tiraxis. I told them this war isn't theoretical anymore."*

Alaric: *"And?"*

Krynn's jaw tightened. *"They were... more interested in my reasons for being here. Not strategy. Not solar deployments. Just questions about my connection to Princess Lysara."*

Seraphina's eyes flicked up at that, her voice cool. *"So they suspect?"*

"They suspect something," **Krynn** said. "*Enough to stall them. Enough to make me doubt if they'll come at all."*

Alaric finally turned; his expression difficult to read. *"Then Mer'Kuri stands alone."*

Krynn's voice dropped, quiet but steady. *"Not if I can help it."*

As the chamber doors slid open, all eyes turned as **Princess Lysara** stepped into the council chamber, flanked by two armored Venusian Sentinels whose presence drew hushed whispers from the

surrounding aides. Regal and composed, she moved with a grace that belied the tension etched in her face.

“Councilor Alaric,” she greeted with a nod, her voice echoing slightly against the high stone walls of the Mer’Kuri capitol.

“Princess Lysara,” **Alaric** replied, his tone respectful but strained. *“You bring news?”*

She inhaled through her nose, glancing at General Krynn briefly before speaking. *“I’ve returned from the Summit of Matrons. If Venus is to offer support, it won’t be soon... or easy. Many believe the Draetheon threat is a Martian fabrication… a ploy to draw us into another war.”*

Krynn scoffed under his breath, folding his arms. *“They would rather deny the fire at the gates than admit Mars was right.”*

Lysara’s eyes flicked toward him, her tone cool. *“Your council didn’t believe you either.”*

Krynn didn't answer.

Seraphina broke the silence. *“So neither of your worlds are ready to stand with Mer’Kuri?”*

Lysara lowered her gaze. *“The High Matrons are divided. I tried to convince them, but... I may have lost favor. My ties to Mars were raised more often than the Draetheons themselves.”*

Councilor Alaric nodded slowly; his expression grim. *“Yes… We stand alone... For now.”*

“Not alone,” **Lysara** said, lifting her chin. *“Not while I still draw breath. The Draetheons are real. And I intend to fight them… with or without the will of Venus.”*

Krynn glanced at her with something between gratitude and regret. *“That makes two of us.”*

Then Krynn stepped toward the princess; his voice lowered but firm. *“Tell me, Lysara… are your Sentinels aides… or spies?”*

The question hung in the air like a blade mid-swing. The two Venusian guards stiffened, their grips tightening subtly around their long glaives. **Lysara** didn’t flinch.

“They are sworn to my protection,” she replied coolly. *“But yes... I imagine at least one will report back to the Matrons with more interest in my alliances than my safety.”*

Krynn's eyes narrowed. *"Then we shouldn't be having this conversation in front of them."*

"I agree," **Lysara** said, and turned to the Sentinels. *"Wait outside."*

The two women hesitated. One; a tall, ash-blonde with a hawk's gaze, shifted her weight slightly, reluctant.

"That's an order," **Lysara** added, more sharply.

With synchronized nods, they exited in silence, the chamber doors sliding shut behind them.

Krynn folded his arms. *"So they're watching you, just like my council watches me. We're both viewed as compromised."*

Seraphina muttered, *"Because you are."*

Lysara gave her a sidelong look, but smiled faintly. *"She's not wrong. But the real threat is out there, not between us. And neither Mars nor Venus will act until they've seen it with their own eyes… or until someone makes them."*

Alaric stepped forward; voice tight. *"Then that someone must be us. We can't afford to wait for consensus while the shadow of Draetheon spreads."*

When Twilight Falls

Above the twin moons of Tiraxis and Khepra, space boiled with unnatural light.

It churned like a sea of broken stars, streaked with violet fire and fractured radiation, as if reality itself recoiled from the arrival of the Draetheon armada. They descended not as mere invaders but as an extinction event; a dark tide of predatory precision. Elegant and grotesque, their shadow-forged warships unfurled like wings of a vast celestial predator, blotting out starlight in their wake.

At the center of this storm loomed the *Wyrmspire*; a dreadnought of impossible scale, shaped like a serpent coiled through dimensions. It pulsed with void-light in slow, malevolent rhythms, sending tremors through the fabric of orbit.

Each surge rippled across the lunar surfaces, disrupting defense grids and orbital satellites, cloaking the moons in a false twilight that confused sensors and drowned natural light in abyssal hues.

Then came the dropships.

Jagged, blade-like vessels tore through the atmosphere in perfect synchrony, screaming down from the heavens like divine retribution. When they struck, the impact birthed eruptions of ash, fire, and molten metal, reshaping landscapes in seconds.

From the smoldering craters emerged the Draetheon foot soldiers; towering beings clad in armor that drank in light, their forms flickering between substance and shadow. Their weapons radiated a cold flame, and their voices; when they spoke, seemed to echo from deep, forgotten hollows in space.

Flanking them were the Eclipse warriors, their allegiance burned into their flesh and soul. Sun-etched helms masked their faces; their eyes glowed like twin stars locked in eternal fury. They moved with the zeal of true believers, whispering ancient chants as they advanced, each step echoing with sacrilege.

On Tiraxis, the sacred sand-temples; monuments older than recorded history, trembled beneath the bootfalls of desecration. Blacker than black smoke curled into the crimson sky. But from behind sunlit columns and windswept dunes, the Solari emerged: cloaked in robes woven to absorb all light, their staffs humming with radiant energy pulled directly from the solar wellspring.

Silent, resolute, and unwavering, they formed a living bulwark against the oncoming tide.

Meanwhile, on Khepra's frozen plateaus, the Kurai resistance rose like frostbitten ghosts. They struck from crevices and hidden trenches, their blades whisper-quiet and deadly, vanishing before counterstrikes could land. Among them moved Mer'Kuri's planetary militia; outgunned, but defiant, rallying behind former Eclipse defectors who now burned with the conviction of the redeemed.

The first true clashes of war ignited.

Explosions shattered the high ridges. Fire rained from the clouds. The sky wept debris and shattered steel. Plasma bolts lanced through the darkness, and shrieks of the dying mingled with the battle cries of those who refused to yield.

Upon a ridge of Tiraxis, where the sacred wind met the scorched air of war, a Solari commander raised his staff toward the eclipsed heavens. The tip flared with captured solar flame, and his voice cut through the chaos:

"For Ra… For Mer'Kuri… HOLD THE MOONS!"

At once, the field roared to life. Blades ignited in bursts of light. Cannons howled. War cries echoed across canyons and crater-rims.

And so, Tiraxis and Khepra; the twin moons of Mer'Kuri, became battlefields carved between light and shadow, honor and oblivion, where destinies would rise, and legends be written in fire.

Temple Hollow: Outer Ridge

The sacred ground of Mer'Kuri was no longer silent.

Explosions rippled through the dunes as Eclipse artillery hammered the hillside. Shattered stone from ancient temples rained down on the defenders' position, and smoke choked the narrow pass that led to the upper ridge.

Xal drove his blade into the earth beside him, ducking behind the scorched remains of a fallen pillar. *"They're pushing harder this time,"* he growled, sweat streaking down his ash-dusted face.

"Observation: they've tripled their numbers since last volley," came the even, metallic voice of **Vex**; crouched beside him with his energy rifle braced to his shoulder. *"Recommendation: reduce enemy volume by sixty percent."*

Xal smirked despite himself. *"Then let's get to it."*

Vex surged forward, his armored frame absorbing a barrage of plasma fire as he charged into the open. He dropped to one knee, locked onto the nearest Draetheon shock trooper, and unleashed a precise tri-burst to the chest. The soldier crumpled mid-lunge.

Behind him, the brigade of Solari, Kurai, and Mer'Kuri defenders surged forward with renewed momentum. One Kurai fighter, masked and cloaked, leapt over a collapsed wall, slicing through an Eclipse zealot with a cry of defiance. Lucky.

A new sound shrieked through the air; Draetheon War-Rollers; combat chassis atop ground-wheel tracks of black alloy and molten veins, crested the ridge above. Their eyes flared crimson as they locked onto Xal's position.

"Xal… Scatter!" **Vex** shouted.

Too late.

The nearest ground-roller fired a twin beam of void light. Xal dove, barely avoiding the blast, which carved a molten trench into the cliffside. Rocks exploded behind him as he rolled to cover.

“That thing’s tearing us apart!” **Xal** yelled. *“Ideas, Vex?”*

Vex: *“Plan: Overload its sensory node with solar interference. Execution: You distract. I detonate.”*

Xal groaned. *“I hate your plans.”*

Vex: *“You survive them.”*

With a deep breath, Xal launched himself forward; flaring his Ra-glyphs with a burst of golden light. He zig-zagged between boulders, drawing the walker’s attention. It turned to track him, its limbs adjusting…

… until Vex launched himself from a hidden ledge, landed on the ground-roller’s back, and rammed a solar grenade into its central node.

KA-KROOM!

The ground-roller exploded in a sunburst of searing light and ash. Vex landed hard, shielding his head as flaming debris rained down. **Xal** stumbled over and helped him up. *“One down.”*

Vex turned toward the next wave of enemies closing in. *“Hundreds to go.”*

Xal ignited his blade once more. *“Let’s make it count.”*

Temple Hollow: Lower Ridge

The air reeked of scorched stone and ozone. The once-quiet temple basin below the ridge was now a cratered battlefield, where Draetheon drop-pods still screamed down in intermittent streaks, slamming into the ground like divine hammers.

Each one burst open, releasing fresh squads of Eclipse zealots and Draetheon enforcers, their armor pulsing with unnatural heat.

Xal slid down a ridge of broken masonry, landing hard behind a scorched Kurai emplacement. *“Report?”*

A bloodied Kurai captain looked up. *“They’re trying to encircle the hollow. We’ve been holding with hit-and-fade, but they’re flanking with those cloaked Reapers.”*

Xal’s brow. *“Reapers?”*

As if summoned, the shadows near the cliffside shimmered; and three Draetheon Reapers phased into view, their jagged cloaks billowing like smoke, wielding crescent-shaped glaives laced with void fire. One impaled a Kurai soldier before vanishing again.

"*Vex!"* **Xal** called over coms. *"We've got phase units near the hollow. I can't track them… They blink out."*

"Countermeasure deploying," **Vex's** voice responded.

A pulse of blue light surged outward from the cliff above, where Vex stood with a shoulder-mounted emitter extended. *"Sonic phase disruptor engaged."*

The Reapers flickered; momentarily visible, long enough for Solari archers on the outer ridge to target and unleash concentrated beams of solar-infused energy. Two Reapers fell in mid-leap. The third vanished again; then reappeared behind Vex.

Xal's breath caught. *"Behind you!"*

But the droid was already in motion. Vex spun, caught the Reaper's wrist mid-strike, and crushed the armored limb with a twist. He followed with a brutal elbow that cracked the Reaper's helm; and finished with a close-range energy burst to the chest.

The Reaper dropped, unmoving.

"All targets neutralized," **Vex** confirmed, but his optics flickered. *"Correction: new signal incoming."*

Xal turned, squinting at the horizon.

From the far ridge; opposite the hollow, a massive Eclipse war-banner had risen. Around it, a formation of elite warriors began to emerge; gold and black armor, their helms bearing the mark of the Solar Crown, a rank reserved only for the fanatical high guard of the Eclipse.

Xal's stomach dropped. *"Those are command units. They're not here to skirmish. They're here to finish it."*

The hollow fell quiet for a beat—long enough for the sound of distant drums, rhythmically pounding from Eclipse lines, to reach their ears.

Vex stepped up beside him, scanning. "*Tactical shift detected. Eclipse intends to collapse the hollow… Total eradication."*

"Then we hold the line," **Xal** said grimly. *"Or die on it."*

He raised his blade high, calling out to the scattered defenders around him; Kurai, Solari, and Mer'Kuri soldiers all turned toward him.

"This ground is sacred. We hold it together… ***for Ra! For Mer'Kuri!****"*

Little did the Draetheons realize, this was all a distraction.

While the skies above burned and ground forces clashed in bloody defiance, the true objective lay hidden beneath the chaos.

Deep within Tiraxis' crust, in a sealed Solari vault known only to the High Circle, the Solburn stirred; its activation required the three crystals of Ra to synchronize with the moons' alignment and a precise window of celestial silence.

The Solari had gambled everything on this moment: the invasion, the resistance, the losses. All to buy time.

As the Wyrmspire closed in, casting its doom-shadow across Tiraxis and Khepra, the final sequences initiated.

But will this distraction be enough?

Chapter 20: Revelation

The figure rose from the kneeling posture like a shadow peeling itself off the floor; tall, lean, his black robe flowing as though caught in a solar tide. Twin embers glowed where his eyes should have been, fixed upon Kael with ancient recognition.

Kael stumbled back, voice barely above a breath…

"The Shallit'Biru."

The figure smiled, though there was no warmth in it…

… only revelation.

Shallit'Biru: *"Well done, my daughter. Thank you... for bringing one of the Two Suns to me… Something my highest admirals and best trained Eclipse assassins have not been able to accomplish"*

Typhon's limbs locked. Her face drained of all color.

Kael turned toward her, voice cracking with fury and heartbreak.

*"You.. your father is the ever-lovin' freakin' **Shallit'Biru**?..."*

*"… You made love to me. You said you loved me. You fought beside me! Bled with me! And all of it was just… What? A setup? A trick to hand me over to him?... You really **don't** fight fair."*

Typhon's lips parted, but no sound came at first. She shook her head slowly, eyes wide.

"I... This... is not my father…"

The Shallit'Biru chuckled softly, stepping down from the crystalline dais, the floor beneath him rippling like disturbed light.

"Of course I am. I raised you, child. Trained you… since you were strong enough to wield twin solar daggers. I molded you into what you are."

Typhon: *"No! That was... He never showed me this! Never told me who he truly was…"*

Kael: (snapping) *"You lied! You said your father was a defector, not the monster behind the entire damn war!"*

Shallit'Biru: *"Calm yourself, Kael. Like I know you can. Before you make a rash decision… listen to what I have to tell you."*

Kael's voice rose with the heat building in his palms; solar threads starting to glow across his arms.

"No! I'll never listen to you! From the day I was born, you've hunted my family… tried to murder my parents, kidnap my brother and me, slaughtered those I love…"

Typhon: (tears breaking) *"Kael, please… Let me explain, I didn't know…!"*

Shallit'Biru: (snaps) *"Silence, child."*

Kael's stance widened. His breath slowed; controlled. Solar energy spiraled around his fists like miniature flares.

Kael: *"By the power of Ra… I call upon the spirit of Ata'rai Raenor… and I will destroy you."*

The Shallit'Biru raised both hands.

And stepped forward.

Calmly.

Out of the swirling portal.

His flesh began to glow… unravel… shift.

Dark robes fell away like ash. Beneath them emerged a figure of burning clarity; hair like flowing starlight, skin a lattice of solar markings, and eyes now radiant orbs of living fire.

Shallit'Biru: *"Kael… that's what I've been trying to tell you…"*

*"… **I am Ata'rai Raenor**."*

A beat of silence. Then…

Typhon: (sobbing) *"Kael… **This** is my father… '**Ata'rai Raenar'**… I didn't bring you here to meet the Shallit'Biru... I never meant to deceive you... I didn't know."*

Kael: (backing away) *"No… No, this can't be true. You're lying… both of you. You're trying to deceive me."*

Shallit'Biru/Raenor: (voice echoing like twin suns colliding) *"No, Kael. This is who I truly am. And I offer you a choice… Join me… and I will teach you secrets lost to time itself… Power… beyond anything the Solari ever dreamed."*

Kael clenched his fists tighter. The solar fire around him cracked like lightning.

Kael: (still backing away) *"Noooo!"*

Typhon: (stepping forward, reaching for him) *"Kael… Please… listen to me…!"*

Kael turned and ran.

Through the chamber.

Past the solar conduits.

Past the portal.

The air behind him warped as the solar nexus pulsed violently.

He didn't stop to look back.

He didn't want to see the truth.

Because if he did; he might never stop running.

The Final Hour I

The war-sirens never stopped.

A low, mournful howl reverberated through the crystalline walls of the capitol, echoing the agony of a dying world. The once-proud sky above Mer'Kuri was scarred with fire; columns of descending black vessels blotting out Ra's light.

The Draetheon armada had arrived.

And the moons… were burning.

Councilor Alaric stood at the viewing platform, robes disheveled, fists pressed against the reinforced glass as he stared toward the heavens.

Flaming debris from orbital stations trailed across the sky like falling stars. But there were no wishes left to make.

Behind him, Seraphina moved with rigid grace, her expression hopeless; eyes fixed on the holographic display flickering beside them; red blips spreading like a bloodstain across the planetary map.

Seraphina: (in a low voice) *"Tiraxis is gone. Khepra's bastions fell within the hour. The surface installations are under siege. We've lost nearly all communications with the outer provinces."*

Alaric didn't turn.

"The moons were our shields… our warning line. We always believed if they fell, we would have time to mount a defense. We were wrong."

A long silence passed between them.

The great city hummed below; its power grid struggling, its citizens evacuating in waves. But where could they run?

Seraphina: (quietly) *"We should've heeded the signs."*

Alaric: (turning finally, voice sharp) *"I brought them together. The Martian. The Venusian. Jupiter. Tiamara. I believed in the prophecy. In the Raenor Legacy. But prophecy doesn't fight a war…"*

",,, Soldiers do."

Seraphina stepped closer, the flames from the skyline painting orange reflections across her pale features.

Seraphina: *"Then we buy them time."*

Alaric: (skeptical) *"With what army? What fleet? The Solari are scattered. The planetary defenses… crippled. We are alone."*

Seraphina: *"No. We're not."*

She activated a secured panel on her wrist. A deep frequency pulsed out, barely audible, but resonant; ancient. Forgotten.

Alaric: (staring at her) *"What did you do?"*

Seraphina: (softly) *"I signaled someone."*

She faced him fully now, her gaze hard.

“If Mer’Kuri falls… it will not fall in silence. The Shallit’Biru wants a legacy. Let him choke on ours.”

The Final Hour II

The sky burned red.

Explosions pocked the horizon like dying stars, and black ash rained down over the jagged cliffs of Fortress Ridge. The eastern front was fractured, overrun in some sectors, held by sheer will in others.

Amid the chaos, Xal stood shoulder to shoulder with the last of the Solari battalion; bloodied, dust-covered, eyes lit with the fire of Ra.

His twin blades crackled with solar charge, the air around him distorted by heat and desperation.

Behind him, Vex loomed tall, unyielding, his plating scorched and dented, one arm hanging limply from a severed actuator.

But his eyes; glowing amber ports, still scanned with precision, still calculated survival.

The Draetheon infantry surged forward again; silent shadows in exo-armor, wielding spears of dark light and phase blades that tore through matter like mist.

Their forms shimmered, flickering between dimensions, hard to track; harder to kill.

Vex: (voice distorted, calm as ever) *“Enemy wave… Seventy meters and closing. Estimate: Thirty-seven hostiles. Minimal cover. Suggest preemptive incineration.”*

Xal: (grim) *“Do it.”*

Vex’s chest whirred, then split open as a core chamber pulsed and released a wide solar burst, sweeping across the battlefield in a cone of blinding heat.

Draetheon soldiers screamed; some vaporized mid-charge, others blown back in scorched ruin.

But more kept coming.

They always kept coming.

Xal: (turning to his remaining troops) *“This is it! This ridge falls, and the capital goes with it. So we hold! We hold or we die! Either way, they remember our names!”*

A battered Solari warrior; his face half-burned, let out a hoarse yell:

"FOR RA!"

The others echoed it. Swords lifted. Shields locked. The battalion braced.

Then… ***THOOM***…

A heavy shockwave slammed down from above.

Draetheon dropships pierced the clouds, deploying massive siege walkers; black-legged constructs with glowing undercarriages that hummed with unholy power.

Their cannons began charging, lighting up the dusk with pulses of death.

Vex: (flatly*) "New threat detected. Siege-class war walkers inbound. Conventional weapons… Ineffective."*

Xal: (breathing hard, muttering) *"Then we go unconventional."*

He reached down; yanking open a sealed container embedded in the ground. Inside… a shard of pure solar crystal, glowing like a captured sunrise.

Vex immediately scanned it.

Vex: *"Warning: That is a Raenor-class core. Unstable. Detonation radius… Total annihilation within one kilometer."*

Xal: *"Exactly."*

He held the crystal high, eyes blazing.

Xal: (to Vex) *"Get the survivors back. I'll buy you time."*

Vex: (stepping forward) *"No. I will carry the crystal."*

Xal: (grabbing Vex's arm) *"Vex…"*

Vex: *"I am not alive, Xal. But you are. And they will need you."*

For the first time, Xal faltered. His throat tightened. He gave a slow, reluctant nod.

Xal: *"Then let them know it was a Jovian who lit the dawn."*

Vex took the crystal, turned toward the war walkers, and began walking into the fire.

The Final Hour III

Sirens blared. Emergency lights pulsed red across the steel veins of the ship. Kael stormed down the corridor like a solar tempest unleashed; his blades glowing, eyes aflame with fury and betrayal.

Draetheon soldiers dropped like shadows in his wake; disintegrated, incinerated, cast aside.

Behind him, **Typhon** gave chase, breathless and torn.

"Kael!... Kael, stop… Please!... You're going the wrong way!"

Kael didn't answer. He wasn't heading for the hangar.

He'd passed it.

Typhon's heart dropped. She knew.

Typhon: (whispers) *"…The Reactor."*

The door burst open. Kael entered like judgment itself. Three Draetheon techs inside turned in alarm.

Draetheon Officer: *"Seal the core… Get reinforcements!"*

Too late.

Kael extended both hands. Solar energy surged from his palms like twin suns collapsing.

BOOM.

The room lit with a flash. When the smoke cleared, nothing remained of the guards but scorched armor.

He stepped toward the reactor; a towering, humming, crystal heart encased in containment rings.

Kael: (focused, dark) *"I end this... for everyone you've taken."*

He raised his hand, channeling every drop of power. Light poured from his chest, his veins, his eyes.

Then…

Typhon: *"Kael!!"*

She stumbled in, face streaked with tears, hands trembling.

"Please! Don't do this!"

Kael: *"Why shouldn't I?! You betrayed me! Led me to him! You're his daughter!"*

Typhon: (pained) *"I didn't know… I swear to you, I didn't know!"*

Kael: *"You lied… And now I'll finish what we started. If I die taking this cursed ship with me, so be it."*

He fired a solar ray; aimed straight for the core.

But before it connected…

Typhon: (screaming) *"No!"*

Her arm moved on instinct. A pulse of strange energy; *not solar*, fired from her palm, striking Kael mid-blast.

ZAP.

He was frozen. Mid-motion. Mid-roar.

Paralyzed in ice.

Typhon: (gasping) *"…What… What was that?!"*

The reactor began to shriek. His partial blast had destabilized the core. She didn't need a readout to know; this ship had less than five minutes before...

She rushed to him, placing her forehead to his.

Typhon: (softly) *"I will save you… Even if you never forgive me."*

Then suddenly… **VAHBOOOOM!!!**

Shallit'Biru: *"He is ready!"*

The Final Hour IV

The walls trembled slightly from distant cannon fire. Councilor Alaric stood at the center of the war room, eyes fixed on Seraphina, who had just lowered her wrist device, its signal pulse fading into silence.

Alaric (staring at her): *"What did you do?"*

Seraphina (softly, but firmly): *"I signaled someone."*

Within the sacred mountain sanctum on Tiraxis, the ancient Solari weapon; the Solburn, awoke with a deep solar hum. Its inner gyros spun, building a concentrated beam of Ra-energy.

Lights pulsed in rhythmic solar codes as its great dish swiveled; locking onto a distant signature: the Draetheon flagship, Khora'thal.

Solari Overseer: *"Target locked... By the Light of Ra... Fire!"*

A beam like the wrath of a dying sun lanced through the void.

The Khora'thal didn't stand a chance. The beam struck dead center. In a split-second, the monstrous warship ruptured. A halo of fire and debris expanded outward like a collapsing star. Then, silence.

Xal paused mid-strike, looking skyward as the shockwave flickered across the clouds.

Xal (in awe): *"By the stars…"*

He turned, rallying what few soldiers remained of his battalion. Meanwhile, Vex was still enroute to explode the solar crystal among the Draetheon ranks.

Xal (over coms): *"Vex!... Abort!… The Khora'thal is gone! The flagship is destroyed!"*

But the numbers were still staggering. Outnumbered. Surrounded. Then…

WHOOOOM!

The horizon behind them burst open with sonic booms. Gleaming armor. Wings of mirrored steel. Dozens, then hundreds, then thousands; Venusian warriors flooded in formation. Their battle cry rang through the air.

Xal (raising his blade): *"Venus is here!... FORWARD!"*

They charged, the sky above igniting with blue energy blasts. Above them, what remained of the Mer'Kuri fleet reformed under new banners, rallying beside the Venusian armada. The Draetheons scrambled in disarray.

Just as a retreat vector was plotted, red streaks tore across the black; Mars had arrived. Sleek warships, all angles and fury, lit up the flanks.

The Martian fleet slammed into the Draetheon escape corridor, cutting off every path. On the moons, Martian ground forces thundered in drop-pods, unleashing fire and steel.

Alaric and Seraphina stood side by side as the holo-table updated. Draetheon positions blinked red. Then flickered. Then vanished.

A door slid open…

Princess Lysara entered first, radiant despite the soot on her armor. Behind her, General Krynn; eyes blazing with adrenaline.

Lysara (smiling): *“You saw the sky?”*

Krynn (grinning): *“We thought we’d come deliver the good news... but I see you already know.”*

Seraphina turned to Alaric; her eyes moist.

Seraphina: *“The tide has turned.”*

Alaric (quietly): *“Ra help them all… We may just survive this after all,”*

He turned toward Lysara and Krynn, narrowing his gaze, his voice edged with curiosity.

“Say… What changed the minds of Mars and Venus?”

Krynn stepped forward, his scarred jaw clenched with the weight of diplomacy and war alike.

“Well... We both managed to convince our respective worlds that if we don't send military aid to Mer'Kuri… and at least protect our solar reserve outposts… we’ll eventually go to war with each other.”

He exchanged a glance with Lysara, who nodded gravely.

Krynn (cont’d): *“Which, of course, is exactly what Draetheon wants.”*

Lysara (stepping closer): *“They’ve been playing us for decades… seeding fear, stirring hatred, turning our ancient grudges into blinders. But the moment they came for Mer’Kuri… we both realized something.”*

Seraphina: *“That **you** were next.”*

Lysara (softly): *“We just hadn’t realized it yet.”*

Alaric leaned back slowly, exhaling. His shoulders sagged with both relief and dread.

“Then perhaps... the true solar alliance begins now. Not forged in peace... but in fire.”

Krynn gave a short nod, his gauntlet tapping against the console as a notification blinked to life on his wrist. He glanced down, then straightened; voice clipped and steady.

"All stations have reported in. The Draetheon have been driven back. Every front… secured."

Seraphina (softly, eyes narrowing): *"Forgive me for being a mother… but where are Kael and Xal?"*

Lysara (gently): *"Xal is safe. He's regrouping with my ground forces… He's fine… He's surrounded by women."*

Seraphina (tenser now): *"…And Kael?"*

A beat of silence. Then slowly… everyone turns; drawn by something unspoken. Eyes lift toward the vaulted dome above, where the last sparks of battle flicker in the sky.

A strange quiet settles in the chamber.

Far Beyond the Fire Trails and Drifting Wreckage

As she takes one last look out the portal, Typhon grips the helm of a battered transport, several clicks away from the doomed Obsidian Womb; her hands trembling.

Across from her, inside a slowly thawing cryopod, Kael lies unconscious; frost clinging to his brow, his chest rising in shallow, steady breaths.

A soft chime echoes through the cockpit.

System: *"Course set: Mer'Kuri."*

Typhon wipes a smear of tears from her cheek, steadies her breath, and locks her grip on the controls.

"You stubborn fool," she whispers.

*"**You** were supposed to save **me**..."*

"…Just hold on… Please… My Love."

With a shudder, the thrusters ignite. The ship veers away from the burning aftermath of the Obsidian Womb, en route to Mer'Kuri…

… fading into the stars.

The End… Again… For Now

Thank you so much for reading this book two adventure. I hope you enjoyed it so much that you will read the third installment:

Solar Wars: Mer'kuri Falls.

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