
Book VI
SOLAR WARS
MER'KURI FALLS
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!
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
DEE DOWNING

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Preamble

The war that began in silence now screams across the stars.

The Draetheon armada; once hidden in myth, has emerged from the black void of exile, led by the Shallit'Biru and their distorted vision of rebirth through annihilation. Worlds tremble under their eclipse. Their flagships may have fallen, but their vengeance has just begun.

On Mer'Kuri, the Solari gather the last of their strength. The Two Suns; Kael'Ryn and Xal'Zirath, now legends in their own right, have retrieved the Crystals of Ra. But the ancient power they bear may not be enough to stop what's coming next.

Alliances born of desperation teeter on the edge of collapse. Mars and Venus remain divided by pride and blood. Jupiter's allegiance is uncertain. Tiamara looks to its oceans, blind to the fire in the sky.

And above them all, Draetheon prepares its final blow.

This is the final dawn of Mer'Kuri.

Before the sun sets... it will burn.

Princess Lysara of Venus has defied her world's ancient laws; fighting not only for survival, but for the future of a galaxy teetering on collapse. Her secret bond with General Vaelor Krynn of Mars, once unthinkable, now stands as the galaxy's last hope for unity. Yet even their devotion may not survive the storm to come.

General Krynn leads what remains of the Martian battalions he was provided, but with every loss, his command grows fragile. Shadows gather in the ranks; whispers of rebellion, mistrust, and betrayal. Some would rather see Mars burn than kneel beside Venus.

Vex, the combat-droid once cast out by Jupiter's Dominion, now walks a path no algorithm could predict; loyalty, sacrifice, and purpose. But with every scan, he sees what others do not; signals of war beyond comprehension, a frequency of doom humming just beneath the stars.

Councilor Alaric Thalos struggles to unite the fractured worlds under the Solari banner, even as Mer'Kuri itself fractures from within. Prophecies once spoken in riddles now unfold as fact. And beneath Mer'Kuri's sunlit surface, ancient secrets stir; waiting to be awakened… or unleashed.

Ra’s light dims. The Draetheon hunger.

And the fall of Mer’Kuri is only the beginning.

But for now, Mer’Kuri was victorious… Barely.

The first Draetheon invasion was repelled. At the edge of annihilation, Kael ignited the core of the Draetheon flagship *Obsidian Womb* with a final surge of Ra’s fury; intent on sacrificing himself to ensure the galaxy’s survival.

He would have perished…

Had it not been for Typhon.

In a moment of pure instinct; driven by love, Typhon raised her hand and unleashed a freezing beam of impossible energy. The blast semi-froze Kael and encased them both in a stasis shell of crystallized time and suspended light; just long enough for her to drag him off the doomed ship.

She didn’t know she could do it.

She still doesn’t understand how she did.

But it saved him. It saved them.

And now… Kael lives, if only by a long shot.

Meanwhile on Nautilara*,* Kael lies suspended in an underwater medical sanctum, surrounded by conduits of memory and light.

His body glows faintly beneath layers of healing fluid and solar resonance fields; his breath shallow, his pulse echoing like distant thunder.

Outside the chamber, the war pauses; but does not end.

Nautilara, one of a series of artificial moons that orbit Tiamara to contain the vast ocean world, traveled to Mer’Kuri to provide aid to Mer’Kuri and Tiamara’s solar reserves outpost on Mer’Kuri.

Councilor Alaric, Seraphina, Princess Lysara, General Krynn, Vex, and Xal are in the underwater medical facility, dressed in submersible attire, keeping a close eye on Kael’s progress.

Chapter 1: The Stillness of Ocean

The dining hall aboard Nautilara was carved from smooth glass stone; its translucent walls revealing the illusion of an endless blue-black ocean outside. Massive jellylike forms drifted past in the deep, glowing faintly with bioluminescent colors. It should have been beautiful.

Tonight, it only felt distant.

Six seats were filled at the long crescent table. Six meals had been prepared. None of them were eaten.

At the head sat *Councilor Alaric,* shoulders square, posture disciplined; though the weariness in his eyes betrayed the strain of the past week. He hadn't left Kael's chamber until the Tiamaran physicians ordered them all to rest.

Beside him, *Seraphina* held a warm cup of sea-leaf infusion; cradling it between her hands like a tether. Her gaze was steady but far-off. The silence pressed against her like water. Words could come later. Now, they sat.

Xal slouched in his chair across from her, staring at his plate of steamed root fish and kelp rice, untouched. His arms were folded tightly across his chest; jaw clenched. The food might as well have been ash. Every cell in his body was still in that med-chamber, standing over his injured brother.

Princess Lysara sat to Xal's right, poised but pale, her long fingers nervously fidgeting with a small silver clasp at her collar. The dark rings beneath her eyes betrayed her. She hadn't slept; not truly, since Kael collapsed into Typhon's arms. Her plate remained pristine; as untouched as her appetite.

At the end of the table sat *General Krynn;* posture rigid; face, the same. He'd made the fewest words today; but no one mistook his silence for apathy. Krynn was a soldier, always watching, always calculating. But his eyes lingered on Lysara longer than usual, and more than once they flicked to Xal with something bordering concern.

Then there was *Vex*.

The combat-droid stood behind an empty chair, across from Lysara; arms folded, glowing blue optics dimmed in a low-energy mode. He required no food. But he stood there regardless, included in the gathering like the rest. If machines could feel heaviness, this moment had given it to him.

Tiamaran servants moved gently throughout the room, their flowing garb like currents of living silk. They were humanoid but fluid in their movement, with smooth amphibian features and glassy sea-green eyes. They poured drinks, refilled plates, and offered smiles that were soft and sincere; but no one asked for anything.

The silence finally broke with **Alaric's** voice; low and steady.

"His vitals are stabilizing," he said, eyes on no one in particular. *"The physicians say the stasis did more than preserve his body. It's protecting him... helping him mend."*

No one responded at first.

Then **Xal** spoke, voice hoarse. *"He hasn't moved in six days."*

Seraphina turned to him; her voice soft but certain. *"He's alive, Xal. That's more than any of us expected."*

Xal shook his head; eyes hard. *"**Alive** isn't enough."*

Krynn's voice followed, calm and even. *"He made a choice. He saved all of us. Now **we** make one… What we do with the time he bought us."*

Silence fell again. Only the hum of the ship and the distant pulse of Nautilara's life-sustaining systems filled the chamber.

Then **Lysara** whispered, barely audible*, "What if he doesn't wake up?"*

No one had an answer.

Krynn, without thinking, reached over and gently took Lysara's hand. She didn't pull away.

Xal noticed. His eyebrow lifted, just slightly. The corners of his mouth twitched; then he leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms with theatrical casualness.

"While we're all waiting... Let's address the great big pink garalephant in the room."

All eyes turned to him; some confused, some wary.

Xal (pointing a thumb lazily at Krynn): *"General Krynn… as you've probably guessed… Everyone knows that Mars is an all-male society that abhors the very thought of females."*

He paused for dramatic effect, then leaned in…

… eyes narrowing playfully.

“So tell me, O Defender of Martian Virtue… How in the sol do Martians reproduce?”

Seraphina choked softly on her tea.

Lysara’s face turned a delicate shade of crimson.

Alaric sighed, massaging his temples.

“Timing, Xal… Impeccable as ever.”

Vex, ever observant, tilted his head slightly.

Krynn didn’t flinch. He calmly dabbed the corner of his mouth with a cloth, set it aside, and locked eyes with Xal; his voice as sharp as a command briefing.

“You want an answer?”

Xal, grinning: *“Unless it’s classified. I wouldn’t want to spark a planetary scandal.”*

Alaric: *“I always figured it involved cloning or some advanced genetic engineering.”*

A beat.

Krynn (flat): *“Not clones. And our tech’s not **that** advanced.”*

He leaned forward slightly; serious tone.

*“All I can tell you is… **We just do**.”*

A long pause.

Vex emitted a low mechanical sound; something between a static pulse and a chuckle.

Xal blinked, deadpan. *“Well. That clears everything up.”*

Krynn: *“Care to elaborate?”*

Xal: *“Just explains why you fight so hard… Desperate for affection, and nowhere to put it.”*

Lysara stifled a laugh behind her hand.

Seraphina looked away, shaking her head.

Xal turned, eyes twinkling.

“Don’t go quiet now, Your Highness… Same question applies. How do the women of Venus reproduce?”

Lysara, lifting her goblet with an arched brow: *“It must be classified… because the only answer I have is… **We just do**.”*

Sexual Healing

The chamber was silent, save for the distant calls of ocean life and the subtle, harmonic thrum of the Nautilara’s inner pressure field.

Soft blue light filtered through the thick, curved windows of the submerged medical ward. Outside, vast curtains of kelp waved lazily with the current. Bioluminescent creatures drifted past like stars beneath the sea.

Inside, the light danced along the rounded walls of organic crystal and coral-formed alloy, giving the room a serene, dreamlike stillness.

Kael now floated in a bio-suspension cradle; part tank, part living system. The stasis pod was a translucent, gel-like cocoon woven from oxygen-rich healing fluid and fine threads of photonic mesh. It breathed with him, softly pulsing with the rhythms of his slowed heartbeat, filtering light into his cells in measured waves.

Every few moments, a shimmer of solar energy moved across the surface, dancing like sunlight caught in deep water.

Typhon had never left his side.

She sat cross-legged just beneath the waterline, weightless in the low gravity of the moon’s aquatic core. Her long-sponge-like hair drifted freely around her like a halo. The pale, sleeveless gown she wore clung to her like sea-silk. Around her, the soft glow of the pod cast her dark skin in a muted iridescence; half real, half ghost.

She hadn’t spoken in hours. Maybe days. She’d lost track.

The healers had stopped trying to comfort her. But they never stopped watching her; curious, reverent, cautious.

A ripple disturbed the calm as one of them swam closer.

Dr. Naia; a tall, serene Tiamaran; moved with the grace of a gliding serpent through the water. Her eyes were pale violet, her hair trailing like dark ink behind her. She carried no data pads. The coral

node embedded into her wrist glowed faintly, interfacing silently with the medical systems.

After Typhon submerged, Dr. Naia stopped and gently touched her shoulder.

Dr. Naia: *"He's stabilizing."*

Typhon didn't look up. Her eyes remained fixed on Kael.

"Why isn't he awake?"

Naia floated beside her, her voice soft, like music filtered through a tide. *"The damage to his neural lattice was extensive. When he detonated that core, his internal solar stream short-circuited. It should have killed him…"*

"… Most of the regeneration is being handled at a sub-cellular level. The stasis mesh is slowing time around his vital systems, letting the light repair him without overloading."

Typhon's fingers curled slightly against the pod's surface. *"He called to the sun. And it answered. But it almost burned him alive."*

Naia paused briefly. *"Not sure what that means…"* She took a step back. *"You froze that fire… with your bare hand… That shouldn't be possible."*

Typhon finally turned to look at her. *"I know."*

Naia nodded; her expression secretive. Then she placed a hand over Typhon's and added softly: *"He's alive because of you. But when he wakes… he may not be the same."*

Typhon blinked. *"What do you mean?"*

Dr. Naia: *"His solar conduit didn't just surge. It evolved. There are energy signatures in his cells we've never seen before. The Ra within him… changed… It's up to him… whether that is for the good or for the…"* She smirks a little. "… *not 'good' at all."*

Typhon whispered: *"He gave it everything he had."*

Naia tilted her head. *"Or… he merely survived."*

The water shimmered as the pod gave another pulse.

Then; just slightly, Kael moved.

Naia looked down at her wrist. The coral node flared. *“Vital signs spiking. He’s coming back.”*

Typhon pressed both hands to the pod.

Kael’s eyelids fluttered. *“...You stayed…”*

Typhon: *“I’m not going anywhere.”*

Chapter 2: Ancient Wisdom

Xal leaned back in his seat, swirling his drink with mock suspicion. *"How could both of your worlds exist without anyone knowing how your species reproduce?... I don’t buy it."*

Seraphina, ever thoughtful, placed her glass gently down. *"Don’t your worlds have ancient myths? Stories? Beliefs about how your races came into being. Such stories may hold clues."*

Alaric: *"That’s an excellent approach. Oral traditions often preserve truths that science often overlooks."*

Krynn shifted slightly, setting down his fork; eyes scanning the table. *"Now that you mention it... I was never big on religion. But there is one Martian myth that comes to mind."*

He sat back and folded his arms.

Krynn: *"The Martian god of creation, Varron, created the first Martian. A male. His name was Adom (ah-DOHM). In the old tongue, it means: The one with red blood… Many believe this insinuates that* ***Varron*** *had something other than red blood."*

He glanced around the table.

Krynn: *"Some say it has to do with the literal color of Martian blood… Others think it refers to the redness of Mars itself… Then there are those who believe Martians were made from the red soil… Me?... If I had to choose… I’d say, ‘All of the above’."*

Xal: *"Adom, The Red Blood… Sounds intense."*

Krynn: *"He was placed in a Martian paradise. Isolated. Alone. According to the myth, he began to self-replicate. Asexual reproduction. No partner. No seed. Just division of self."*

Lysara, softly: *"That’s… unsettling. And yet oddly poetic."*

Vex: *"Efficient."*

Krynn cracked the faintest smirk at that. *"Yes. Very Martian… According to myth, this happened many, many ages ago."*

Xal: *"But why would the creator Varron settle on self-replication?"*

Vex: *"Like I said... self-replication is efficient. And it produces a population, faster."*

He tilted his head slightly, his voice steady and factual.

Vex: *"After Adom produced an offspring, those two produced offspring. Then those four. Then those eight. And so on and so forth. Within a short span of time, there were thousands of Martians."*

Xal: *"Martians multiply like solar bacteria. Got it."*

Krynn: *"Careful. Some of us bacteria still outrank you."*

That line hangs just long enough for Lysara to chime in.

*"Would you like **her** to jump in with a Venusian myth now?"*

Xal: *"I was just about to ask."*

Lysara: *"According to myth, the first Venusian the creator Shai'Lah made was a woman… Her name was **e'Ve'nus**, The First Mother."*

She spoke gently; her hands folded in her lap.

Lysara (continued): *"Like Adom of Mars, e'Ve'nus was placed in a Venusian paradise and instructed to multiply herself… to mother a new population, after in her image…"*

"… Then her daughters did the same… It was not long before Venus was populated with thousands of Venusian females."

Xal (under his breath): *"It sounds to me like Mars and Venus had the same god of creation."*

Seraphina (smirking): *"It's just as poetic as self-replicating Martians sweating out sons like spores."*

Alaric (murmuring): *"Interesting symmetry… Adom, made of red dust and fire. e'Ve'nus, formed of mist and light."*

Vex: *"Dual myths. Two creations. One solar system. And neither side knows how reproduction works now."*

The soft hiss of the chamber doors sliding open pulled everyone's attention from the myths of origin and into the present.

Typhon stepped into the dining hall, moving slowly, carefully. She was half-soaked; her hair still dripping with traces of the medical fluid that clung to her robes like a second skin. But it wasn't her condition that stole their focus; it was Kael.

He leaned on her shoulder, barefoot and shirtless beneath a draped medical cloak; his breathing slow but steady. A faint glow pulsed beneath the skin of his arms, like fire dormant beneath ice. His steps were shaky, but he was walking.

Everyone rose instinctively.

"Kael…" **Xal's** voice cracked with relief.

Kael managed a smirk. *"Hey brother... Miss me?"*

Xal rushed over and threw an arm around him, careful not to squeeze too tightly.

Alaric looked visibly stunned. *"You shouldn't be standing…"*

"The doctor said the stasis slowed the energy collapse," **Typhon** explained, her voice hoarse but steady. *"He's not out of danger, but... he wanted to see you."*

*"I **needed** to see you,"* **Kael** corrected, wincing as he sat, Typhon helping lower him into a seat between Xal and Lysara.

Vex stood and gave a respectful nod. *"Impressive. Most organics take longer to reboot after near-total vaporization."*

Kael chuckled weakly. *"Guess I'm not most organics."*

Lysara leaned forward. *"We were just discussing myths. About the first Martian. The first Venusian."*

Xal gazed at Kael and Typhon. *"You mean like the myth of the one who froze time to save her lover?"*

A hush fell over the table.

Typhon looked away; her lips pressed into a tight line. Then she said quietly, *"Well… I suppose we're writing **new** myths now."*

A beat passed before her voice shifted; becoming serious.

"But since we're on the subject… There's something you all should know… about the Sol… about all of us."

The table fell silent again.

"You are not the first populations to exist on your respective planets," she continued. *"On Draetheon, time functions differently. What **you** consider one thousand years... is barely one day there."*

Xal blinked. *"Wait… so on Draetheon, time virtually stands still?"*

Typhon nodded. *"Yes. In comparison, it moves so slowly that a single hour there could mean decades here. Draetheon has an elongated orbit…"*

"… It travels thousands of light-years beyond the Sol before swinging back every two or three thousand years."

Alaric leaned forward. *"So if I were to teleport there right now… and stayed for five minutes… **three and a half years** would pass on Mer'Kuri?"*

Vex confirmed with a subtle nod. *"That is approximately correct."*

Xal's eyes widened. *"Whoa."*

Krynn crossed his arms. *"Ra have mercy."*

Seraphina asked, voice low…

*"So… What exactly have **we** been fighting?"*

Typhon took a breath. *"According to ancient Draetheon legend… countless ages ago, each planet of the Sol system had completely different populations. Draetheon itself once had a sister planet… one that existed beyond Neptunia."*

Her voice lowered. *"It was destroyed. What remains are now the seven outer rim worlds… that virtually travel the same orbit… and enclose the Sol system."*

Seraphina gasped. *"Oh my stars…"*

Xal counted on his fingers. *"El'drath, Mynthor, Ophira, Thal'Zaruun, Vormar, Xirath, and Zha'ara…"*

"… all used to be one massive planet?"

Typhon nodded solemnly. *"Yes. Even Draetheon isn't sure what annihilated the Sol system. Whatever it was… it happened during one of Draetheon's long absences. When they returned, everything was different… everything was destroyed."*

Alaric leaned in; eyes sharp. *"Please… continue."*

“Thankfully,” **Typhon** said*, “a Draetheon scientist… brilliant and mad by most accounts… offered a solution.*

He believed he could repopulate the Sol… restore its vitality.”

She hesitated. *“The queen at the time granted him permission to try… And so he did.”*

Alaric nodded slowly. *“So that’s why asynchronous reproduction was used… to accelerate the process. Repopulate the planets in the fastest way possible.”*

“Exactly,” **Typhon** said. *“The same method was applied to every planet… But over a short period of time, the asynchronous system collapsed… The Draetheon scientists went back to the drawing board and separated the two sex systems and created a male and a female…*

Mer’Kuri was one of such planets… Mars and Venus, however, remained closest to their original designs.”

Seraphina: *“Even on Mer’Kuri, there is a small segment that still gravitates towards same-sex relationships.”*

Xal pointed at Krynn and Lysara. *“So you two… aren’t as unnatural as we thought?”*

Typhon gave a faint smile. *“Not at all. You are rare. But not wrong”… Either way, the system is not perfect.”*

Krynn exhaled deeply, tension slipping from his shoulders.

Then **Typhon’s** voice dropped to a whisper.

*“But now… Draetheon is ruled by a queen who wants to reclaim the Sol… Not to restore it… She wants to virtually destroy everyone and everything… and begin the process over using **her** DNA.”*

“… Although there are a few who disagree… They think the sol should be left in peace to become what it will... but this queen wants to bend it back under her control… Become the Queen of the entire Sol.”

Her gaze landed on Seraphina.

*“**She** is who you’ve been fighting.”*

Seraphina froze; eyes wide, her mind spinning in silent shock.

[**Silence**]

Xal broke the silence with a dry laugh.

“So we’re at war with the gods?”

Vex tilted his head. *"That's… one way to look at it."*

Kael, leaning towards Typhon, added,

*"I think I followed everything you said so far… and honestly, it fills in a lot of gaps… But… how did they even think of **asynchronous reproduction** in the first place?"*

Typhon's reply came without hesitation. *"That's simple. Asynchronous reproduction is a natural trait found in reptilian species. They've been doing it instinctively for ages."*

Lysara raised an eyebrow.

"So… we're all just lizards in fancy armor?"

Typhon gave her a wry look. *"I wasn't sure how to break that to you, sister… But not entirely… Reptilian DNA was spliced with the native genetic material found on each of your worlds…"*

*"… Your own science even shows that nearly fifty percent of your brain is **reptilian** in structure."*

Xal chimed in. *"Yeah… I've heard that one… On Mer'Kuri, we call it the '**Reptile-Complex**'… I always thought that was just a metaphor."*

"It's much more literal than most realize," **Typhon** said. *"Those reptilian genes… especially the neurological components… were necessary… They made self-sufficient life possible… so your species* could function independently."

*When reptiles self-replicate, it's called 'Asynchronous Reproduction'… Species like Mars and Venus do the same thing… But even a Mer'Kuri female can still self-replicate… Just activate the appropriate DNA marker… When that happens… and it has happened… we call it a '**Virgin Birth**'…"*

*"… The Mer'Kuri legends say… my father, **Ata'rai Raenor**, was born of a virgin."*

She paused and looked at Krynn.

*"To set the record straight… The first Martian was called 'Ado'M'ars'… In Draetheon it means: the red-blooded warrior of Mars"… The planet was at the same time renamed '**Mars'**…"*

*"… According to our records, the original name… or at least the one before its current name was… '**Ner'Galuun**'."*

Lysara sighed. *“It seems our myths and legends were only half the story.”*

Xal: *“This is all well and good… fascinating even… But now… tell us… What happened out there on the Rim that got Kael nearly killed?”*

Alaric gave him a sideways glance. “*Try not to sugarcoat it, Xal.”*

Typhon looked down, her voice trembling. She knew this conversation would eventually come up.

*“I admit it. This was **my** fault… All of it… I can’t apologize enough… I’ll spend the rest of my life trying to make it right.”*

Alaric shook his head. *“Typhon… You’ve risked your life more times than I can count… passing us classified intel, sabotaging the Draetheon and Eclipse… blowing half their operations to hell… You don’t need to prove anything to anyone anymore.”*

Kael, eyes shadowed; voice low: *“I’m still working on that.”*

Typhon drew in a shaky breath. *“I convinced Kael to infiltrate the Draetheon flagship, Obsidian Womb… to open a solar portal. I wanted him to meet my parents on Draetheon… But once the portal opened… the Shallit’Biru was there.”*

Xal’s face went pale. *“My stars… You tangled with the Shallit’Biru? We’re not ready for that… Are we?”*

Kael: *“No… We are not.”*

Typhon looked away. *“Kael thought I lured him there… that getting close to him was just a ploy to deliver him to the Shallit’Biru. And honestly? I can’t blame him for thinking that. Even **I** didn’t know what to believe. I was trying to contact **my father**…”*

Her voice faltered.

*“…And as fate would have it… the Shallit’Biru **is** my father.”*

Gasps echoed in the room.

Typhon raised her hand, her eyes wet. *“But Ra strike me down… **I** had no idea.”*

Seraphina frowned. *“How could you not know the Shallit’Biru is your father?”*

Typhon answered softly, *"The only father I've ever known is named **Ata'rai Raenor**."*

Alaric stiffened. *"Ata'rai Raenor…? But he vanished into the Ra ages ago."*

Typhon nodded. *"He opened a solar portal for the first time long ago… and stepped through it… In mere seconds, he traveled to Draetheon.*

But remember… time flows differently there. For him, it's only been a few weeks… a month, at most."

She looked around the room, voice steadying. *"And you should know this too… the Shallit'Biru isn't just one person. It's a mantle, a role. My father wasn't the first.*

*Someone wore the mask **before** him… and now he's searching for someone to wear it **after** him."*

Alaric exhaled sharply. *"That's why he's been after the Two Suns ever since they were born."*

Typhon: *"Yes. But as it turns out… he only needs one."*

Her eyes drifted to Kael.

"I don't know what effect he had on Kael… but I saw it with my own eyes. He became an instrument of destruction. He tore through the Obsidian Womb from one end to the other… cutting down elite Eclipse warriors like they were nothing."

"He became exactly what the Shallit'Biru always believed he could become. When he reached the core reactor… he was ready to detonate everything."

"I had to stop him… or we all would've died."

Typhon choked back a sob… then broke down.

*"This was all **my** fault. I tried to apologize. I tried to fix it… but I don't know how…"*

"Maybe it can't be fixed."

"I'm completely lost."

Her voice cracked as tears spilled down her face.

"Please… Try to forgive me."

Krynn blinked. *"Whoa… She really doesn't fight fair."*

Lysara gave a weak smile and nearly in tears, herself.

“Tell me about it.”

Xal slumped forward, the weight of it all sinking in. *“Ata’rai Raenor is the Shallit’Biru?... Then **all** is seriously lost.”*

Lysara and Seraphina moved to Typhon, wrapping her in a soft embrace.

Kael pushed himself to his feet. *“I just need to heal,”* he muttered. *“I **don’t** need to be fixed.”*

He limped silently from the room without a word.

Typhon started after him, but Lysara and Seraphina held her back. Instead, **Lysara** asked, *“Tell us… How did you **freeze** Kael?”*

Typhon hesitated. *“I don’t know… No one ever told me I had that ability... I just… knew I had to stop him before he killed us all.”*

She glanced at her hands, still trembling. *“I’ve heard rumors about elite Draetheon warriors who can manipulate the cold energy of the void, the way the Solari harness solar energy…”*

“… But those are full-blooded Draetheons… I am not.”

Lysara nodded thoughtfully. *“Still, I can see how that ability would come in handy.”*

Typhon shook her head. *“It was a fluke. If I ever want to control it, I’d have to **return to Draetheon** for special training...”*

*“… but we all know **that** is no longer an option.*

Chapter 3: Embers of Defiance

The throne spire of Draetheon pierced the ash-lit sky like a blade through dying embers. Beneath its vaulted dome, the Shallit’Biru stood alone at the apex of the war sanctum.

His high admirals knelt in shadowed alcoves below; breathing shallow beneath armored veils.

“The light we sent was not pure,” the **Shallit’Biru** murmured; his eyes fixed on the lingering solar echoes of the forlorn war.

“It flickered. It bent.”

A tremor passed through the chamber. Whether from tectonic unrest or the restrained fury of a godlike mind, none dared ask.

“We entrusted fire to fools,” he continued. *“And now, the children of Mer’Kuri walk among the ruins… unburned.”*

High Admiral Malreth Kaor lowered his head. *“They underestimated the Solari, my Shallit. Their control of Ra was... more complete than intelligence suggested.”*

The **Shallit’Biru** turned slowly.

“Then your intelligence was incomplete.”

The chamber dimmed further as a second figure stepped forward from the shadows; taller than the others, cloaked in layered metallic robes etched with sigils that pulsed faintly with solar residue.

“Permission to speak, my Shallit,” came the voice, smooth, serpentine; measured but bold.

The Shallit’Biru gave the faintest nod.

“**High Admiral Vaeth Saruun**,” he announced himself, glancing sideways at Kaor with something close to disdain.

“Let us not pretend Mer’Kuri resisted by strength alone. Something else moved among the Solari that day. A force... unaccounted for. Perhaps even unknown to them.”

Kaor’s jaw clenched. *“They were disciplined. And desperate. That is all.”*

Saruun gave a faint smile. *“Desperation does not nullify anomaly, Admiral.”*

The **Shallit’Biru’s** gaze narrowed to slits of molten gold. *“You believe something intervened.”*

“I do,” **Saruun** replied evenly. *“A flare in the Ra-field—beyond anything in our archives. It was not natural. Not tactical. It was... intentional. Directed.”*

A long silence followed, heavy as the molten air.

The **Shallit’Biru** stepped down from the dais. Heat rippled through the sanctum, causing the holograms to stutter.

*“**NONSENSE!**”*

The word cracked like thunder. The chamber froze.

He surveyed his admirals coldly, then spoke in a low, seething tone. *“Have any of you ever played **Zar’khul**?”*

(The Draetheon war-sport, where two teams channel solar bursts into shifting gravity wells to strike rotating cores.)

*“You don’t win every match. But when you lose, you learn. You study every failed strike. You reforge your tactics. And the next time **your opponent's strength** becomes your weapon.”*

He ascended back to the dais, gaze fixed on the burning image of Mer’Kuri.

“This is no different. We lost the first match. But we will not lose the war.”

High Admiral Saruun stepped forward; voice smooth but edged with calculation.

“With all due respect, my Shallit… How did we fail?... What do we reforge?... What is the Mer’Kuri strength?”

The **Shallit’Biru** turned slowly, then descended two steps with eerie calm.

“Tell me… How did you all become High Admirals?”

No one answered.

His voice rose, not in volume, but in force.

“We had Mer’Kuri at our mercy.”

He stormed back up toward the hologram, solar threads flaring red across the display.

“What we failed to anticipate… was her allies. Venusian stealth ships. Martian war doctrines. Even that discarded Jovian husk, the combat-droid. They came like crows to carrion.”

He turned again, cloak trailing solar embers behind him.

“We didn’t know she had any. Now that we do… we ensure they are too busy bleeding to offer her aid again.”

He raised one hand, and new holograms shimmered into focus; Venus. Mars. Jupiter. Tiamara. Each marked by Draetheon fleet movements along their borders.

“This is not conquest. This is containment. Disrupt. Distract. Divide. Let them scramble to defend their own worlds, while Mer’Kuri drowns alone.”

A beat passed. His voice dropped to a near whisper.

“Our goal remains unchanged: We take Mer’Kuri. Not because she is the final prize. But because she is our first foothold.”

The image of Mer’Kuri flared; then dissolved into solar flame.

Suddenly, the chamber doors parted with a bang.

A presence entered; not merely a figure, but a force that shifted the gravity in the room.

Queen Xyrrathis.

Monarch of Draetheon.

Sovereign of the Voidborne.

She drifted forward in silence, her dark mantle flowing like liquid shadow; the void steel crown upon her brow pulsing faintly with starlight.

Her eyes; black within black, gleamed with restrained fury.

The high admirals stood frozen, backs stiff, heads bowed. Even the Shallit’Biru descended from the dais and lowered his gaze.

Her voice; when it came, was a slow-burning nova:

*“**Rumor has it… We suffered a bloody nose**.”*

She surveyed the chamber.

*“**Report**.”*

The silence was a strangled thing.

Shallit’Biru straightened.

“A miscalculation, My Queen. The Mer’Kuri resistance…”

“***No***.”

Her gaze pinned him like a spear.

*“**A failure**.”*

Her gaze even sharper.

*“**Your words are clever**. **But our enemies do not bleed from miscalculations**. **Only strikes**. **And you, it seems**…”*

*“… **have struck nothing**.”*

Saruun dared not even inhale.

She took another step forward, and the temperature in the war chamber dropped sharply; opposite the Shallit'Biru's radiance.

She was not heat. She was the void.

"**Mer'Kuri was meant to fall in flame**. **Instead**, **it rises in defiance**… ***Why****?*"

The **Shallit'Biru** clenched his fists.

"Her allies intervened. Unexpectedly. Now accounted for."

Xyrrathis circled the dais slowly, her eyes never leaving him.

*"**Then let us un-account for them**."*

She paused, hand rising to touch the edge of the Mer'Kuri hologram, her long void metal claws disrupting its field.

*"Will one of you high admirals please explain… how I am going to erase everyone in the Sol… hit the reset button… and create it all over again… in **my** image… in **my** likeness… in **my** DNA… if all we have is constant failure?"*

Shallit'Biru: *"For us, failure means… We **rise** in triumph."*

Baiae Twilight

Beneath the soft amber glow of Mer'Kuri's setting sun, the domed sky shimmered with a filtered view of the heavens.

Outside the grand Alaric estate, the group stood in silence: Alaric, Seraphina, Lysara, Krynn, Kael, Xal, Typhon, and Vex. Even the wind seemed to hush for the moment.

Above them, the Nautilara; Tiamara's living moon-vessel, glided slowly away from Mer'Kuri's orbit.

The luminous spirals along its bioluminescent hull pulsed; it initiated its interplanetary drift back toward Tiamara.

It looked like a silver leviathan, part ship, part celestial being, vanishing into the void.

Lysara; watching it with a bittersweet expression. *"Hard to believe something that size can just… leave like that."*

Vex's eyes tracked the moon-ship, his voice a low modulation. *"Nautilara is not bound by conventional propulsion. She moves by will… and song."*

Xal squinted upward.

*“Did they really have to go? We could use another moon full of warriors… As a matter of fact… could use a **Battle-Moon** of our own.”*

Seraphina gave a faint smile. *“Tiamara offered what aid they could… but they won’t risk open war unless their waters are directly threatened. For now, their silence is their shield.”*

Kael (arms, on paining hips): *“Seems we’re always outnumbered. Outgunned.”*

Krynn: *“That’s where strategy comes in, not strength. You win by turning weakness into bait.”*

A beat.

The glow of the Nautilara dimmed as it slipped beyond visual range, leaving the stars untouched behind it.

Typhon, quiet until now, exhaled slowly. *“Let’s hope it’s not the last time we see them.”*

Alaric stepped forward, gazing upward. *“We may be fewer… but we are not alone. The Draetheon thought we were. That was their first mistake.”*

Seraphina turned to him. *“And their last?”*

Typhon: *“I hate to be the constant bearer of bad news… I just happen to be the authority on Draetheon tactics… I will continue to help you be prepared.”*

Alaric: *“Speak child.”*

Typhon’s voice carried no emotion; just certainty.

Typhon: *“Draetheon may have retreated for now… but it’s only to lick their wounds… recognize their mistakes… build a strategy around their weakness… and make our strengths… our own demise.”*

A cold silence settled over the group.

Xal frowned. *“What does that even mean?”*

Typhon turned to him, meeting his eyes with unsettling calm.

“We pride ourselves on unity. On honor. On protecting the weak. They’ll use those values. Exploit them. Turn one against the other. Make us choose between saving one life… or losing thousands.”

Kael scoffed slightly; though unease traced his features.

“Let them try.”

Typhon: *“They already are.”*

That stopped Kael cold.

Krynn narrowed his eyes; his Martian instincts kicking in. *“What intel are you sitting on?”*

Typhon: *“Not intel… Pattern… Behavior… The Voidborne do not fight to win battles… they fight to warp outcomes. To dismantle your confidence. They weaponize hope.”*

Lysara shifted uneasily. *“So what do we do? Lose faith in each other?”*

Typhon: *“No. You hold it tighter. Just don’t let it blind you.”*

Seraphina stepped beside Alaric; her tone thoughtful. *“So they study us… Every failure, every victory… feeding it into something cold and vast.”*

Vex spoke up for the first time in a while. *“They will adapt. But so will we.”*

Alaric nodded, gaze now on the darkening horizon.

“Then we meet cunning with clarity. And shadow… with fire.”

The stars above shimmered as the last traces of the Nautilara vanished into the void.

Somewhere out there, war was waiting.

But here, for now… the defenders stood ready.

Nautilara: Inner Sanctum

The soft, bioluminescent walls of the Nautilara pulsed like a living heart. Humming with a frequency closer to feeling than sound, the ship glided through the dark between worlds; an oceanic cathedral adrift in space.

In the heart of the vessel, beneath a dome of translucent coral and streaming light, Matriarch T’selari, commander of the Tiamaran diplomatic fleet, stood at a vast pool of flowing star map liquid.

The room shimmered with flickering echoes of the battles just past, projected like memory across water.

She watched as Mer'Kuri faded behind them, her eyes narrowed; not in doubt, but in grief.

T'selari: *"We should have stayed longer."*

From behind her, **Ambassador Vo'sheya**, older, voice like flowing water, approached with measured steps.

"We were not sent to wage war, T'selari. Only to provide medical aide. To listen. To learn."

T'selari: *"We watched them bleed. We watched children fight with fire against the cold of the Void. And now we abandon them?"*

The waters rippled at her agitation. A tendril of light curled upward from the pool, showing the outline of the Draetheon Womb ships coalescing in deep space. Still distant. Still hungry.

Vo'sheya: *"We have called the Circle. If Draetheon returns, Tiamara might not have a choice other than to answer… I believe Draetheon was merely testing the waters… Something Tiamara knows a lot about."*

T'selari: *"So we **will** go to war, if the currents demand it."*

Vo'sheya: *"I'm afraid so. And when we do… we'd better be ready"*

The chamber dimmed. In the quiet, the *Nautilara* sang; a sound like mourning through water.

A faint pulse lit up the side of the map. A private channel.

T'selari gestured, and a smaller figure entered; a younger Tiamaran envoy named **Peyekri**; eyes wide with urgency.

Peyekri*: "Matriarch… There is movement from the Draetheon perimeter. Not toward Mer'Kuri itself."*

T'selari: *"Then where?"*

Peyekri*: "Toward Khepra. Toward Tiraxis. Mer'Kuri's moons. They're not regrouping. They're repositioning."*

T'selari looked to Vo'sheya, jaw tightening. *"They're probing. Looking for weaknesses. That moon hosts an ancient Ra conduit. If they take it… or destroy it…"*

Vo'sheya: *"They won't. Not yet. They want Mer'Kuri first. They want it screaming before they silence the stars around it."*

T'selari's eyes narrowed. Her voice turned from grief to fire. *"They either plan to capture the moons… or annihilate the moons."*

She turned to Peyekri.

T'selari*: "Send word to the Undercurrents. Quietly. Tell them to prepare for the worse."*

Vo'sheya: *"The Undercurrents are not soldiers."*

T'selari: *"No… They're worse. They're survivors."*

She stepped back toward the star map, laying her palm on the spinning images of *Khepra and Tiraxis*.

And as the Nautilara continued its ghostlike trip towards home, its inner light dimmed, fading from gentle blue to the war-tones of violet and crimson.

Peyekri*: "Should we turn around… Go back… Tell Mer'Kuri what we've learned?"*

War was coming. This time the sol will burn.

Chapter 4: The Fire Beneath the Glass

The companions, minus Kael and Typhon, gather in the Thalos-War Room: walls lined with ancient Mer'Kuri banners; glowing maps projected in midair. A faint hum from the city's shielding dome vibrates in the distance, almost like a heartbeat.

Alaric (standing before a translucent planetary map):

"Although Draetheon struck first, we won… but barely. The Draetheon do not remain in retreat for very long. As a matter of fact, from what I understand, they don't retreat… they regroup… re-access."

Krynn (sharp): *"So where do they regroup? And when they strike next… where?"*

Seraphina (voice cool): *"They won't come for Mer'Kuri again. Not immediately. They'll want to isolate us… Cut off allies… Shake morale… Erode defenses."*

Vex (analyzing data streams in his palm):

"Agreed. I am tracking increased signal scatter from the void routes between the moons."

Lysara (quietly, eyes scanning the map):

“If they corrupt the moons... they encircle Mer’Kuri. We become the eye of the storm.”

Alaric: *“Then we defend the moons. We’ve done it once.”*

Seraphina (cutting in): “You’re on the right track but I think you’re a little off… Draetheon was defeated… Driven back into the Void… They won’t let that go, lightly…”

“… We should consider… from your perspective, they’ve been planning this assault for the past two thousand years… Even though it seems that they sent everything they had… According to Typhon… they didn’t even send half their fleet.”

Xal: *“So when we think they are just as crippled as we are… they really are not?”*

Vex: *“Correct… Their next assault will consist of an armada just as big as the first one they sent… If not bigger… They don’t just want territory… They want power conduits... Mer’Kuri moons have vaults… Ancient vaults... If they breach even one…”*

Alaric: *“They can destroy both moons.”*

Xal: *“Would they do that?... Why would they do that?”*

Krynn: *“Because you defeated them… As awful as that first assault seemed… they were being nice… This next time… expect that they will be vicious...”*

“They will destroy Khepra and Tiraxis… without hesitation...”

“They will bring Mer’Kuri to her knees.”

Xal: *“Well when you say it like that… ‘**surrender’** doesn’t sound so bad.”*

Vex (analyzing a flickering void-route projection):

“May I suggest a preemptive strike? A coordinated sabotage. Hit their flagships. Delay the second wave.”

Xal (to Vex): *“Typhon said it perfectly. They didn’t even send **half** their fleet. What if their real forces are nearby… just out there waiting?”*

Seraphina (tone heavy): *“Then you don’t just **fight** a war… you **race** one.”*

Alaric: *“Then let’s begin the race. Krynn, I want contingency plans for each moon. Vex, find me their launch corridors. Seraphina,*

send word to Tiamara… ask them how long until Nautilara returns to orbit."

A low chime reverberated through the chamber. The lights dimmed slightly as an incoming transmission forced its way through the secure channel; coded, urgent, Nautilara clearance.

Vex (scanning the signal):

"It's from the Nautilara… origin point… deep void perimeter. Tiamaran reconnaissance unit."

Alaric: *"Put it through."*

The central holo-projector lit up, revealing a blurred image resolving into *Admiral Raevius Sol,* commander of Nautilara's outer intelligence fleet. He looked haggard, his eyes shadowed by long, sleepless hours.

Admiral Sol (voice clipped, direct):

"Councilor Alaric. Princess Lysara. All of you… listen closely. We've intercepted Draetheon transmissions ricocheting across dark space relays. They're not retreating. They're rearming."

A static pulse rippled across the feed. Sol leaned closer, his voice dropping an octave.

"Their next objective is not conquest… It's extermination. Khepra and Tiraxis aren't to be taken. They're to be erased. No survivors. No structure. Just molten ruin."

Xal (under his breath): *"Typhon was right…"*

Admiral Sol: *"Our embedded source risked everything to get this to us. According to the intel, Draetheon considers the moons more than strongholds. They're gateways. Gateways to a sun-portal vast enough to transport an entire armada in an instant."*

Xal (eyes widening): *"That's how they'll invade the Sol System… Right through the heart of Ra."*

Alaric (jaw set, voice like steel): *"Then we hold the gates. With everything we have. With everything we are."*

Sol (solemnly): *"These are their blueprints for now… Let's hope they stay that way."*

The feed cut out with a soft chime.

Darkness reclaimed the chamber.

For a moment, no one spoke.

A silence deeper than any before settled like a weight.

Krynn (breaking it*): "So… the plan is to collapse Khepra and Tiraxis to activate some kind of astronomical portal… and drop an invasion force straight out of the sun?"*

Vex (flatly): *"Yes… It would seem,,, And that's in addition to the second armada massing at the Void-Rim… same vector as the last assault."*

Seraphina (shaking her head): *"We would never see this coming."*

Lysara (quietly, but with resolve): *"Then we stop them before they open it. We don't just hold the doors… We seal them shut."*

Throne Chamber of the Voidborne

The war chamber had grown colder since her arrival. Not from lack of heat; but from sheer presence.

Queen Xyrrathis stood at the apex of the dais. Shadows bowed to her will. Her crown, a lattice of burning onyx and fractured starlight, glimmered with restrained fury.

Her voice, smooth as poisoned glass, rang out like a blade:

"I demanded vengeance. Instead, I received excuses and smoldering debris."

Her glare swept across the gathered war council. No one spoke.

"You brought me failure. You brought me shame."

"Now bring me a plan… One that cannot fail."

The Shallit'Biru stepped forward, slow and composed. His molten eyes did not waver.

"My Queen, we have such a plan."

He extended a skeletal hand. The chamber darkened. A fiery projection ignited above them; a detailed rendering of the Mer'Kuri system, with its two moons rotating in stately orbit.

"We will strike from the Void Rim once more. But that assault is only the distraction."

He gestured, and a new vector arced across the map; a phantom wave blooming from the moons inward.

“Our true strike will collapse both Khepra and Tiraxis. We will trigger controlled core breaches using embedded gravity mines… rupturing their vaults.”

The hologram flared as the moons detonated; shattering into spirals of debris. In their place, a pulsing rift opened… feeding tendrils of solar energy into a vortex.

“The resulting collapse will tear open the sun-portal buried beneath the crust. A direct conduit to the Mer’Kuri star. Stable. Traversable.”

The projection showed wave after wave of Draetheon ships warping through the portal; emerging in Mer’Kuri’s lower orbit in seconds.

“The second armada; larger than the first, will pass through unhindered. They will bypass outer defenses. Appear at the gates of Baiae itself. Instantaneous war.”

A slow murmur of awe passed through the chamber. The plan was audacious. Terrifying. Brilliant.

Queen Xyrrathis narrowed her eyes, then descended a step, cloak trailing like liquid void.

“And if they resist?”

Shallit’Biru (bowing his head):

“They won’t have time.”

A slow smile curled across her lips, beautiful and venomous.

“Then make this happen.”

Queen Xyrrathis turned without another word.

Her heels clicked like war drums against the polished stone. As she swept from the chamber, her cloak rippled like smoke in the windless dark. The towering doors hissed open, swallowing her silhouette in a cascade of starlight and silence.

For several long breaths, no one spoke.

Then one of the high admirals; a grizzled tactician with void-metal threading his jaw, dared to break it.

High Admiral Kharvek: *“With all due respect, Great Shallit… How do we plan to collapse the two moons of Mer’Kuri? That is no minor task… even for us.”*

The Shallit’Biru remained motionless, facing the now-closed door through which his queen had vanished.

Slowly, he turned back to the council. His expression was unreadable; but his eyes burned with veiled satisfaction.

Shallit’Biru: *“I have a plan.”*

He paced toward the central projection, gesturing. The moons Khepra and Tiraxis reappeared, rotating slowly in the starlit display.

“Each of these moons contains a vault… ancient, sacred, and sealed. But their vaults were never meant to endure internal destabilization…”

He paused. A smirk tugged at the edge of his scarred lips.

“That is where my agent comes in.”

A few admirals straightened at that.

Kharvek: *“An agent… within Mer’Kuri?”*

Shallit’Biru: *“Closer.”*

He circled the projection, voice dipping into a conspiratorial growl.

“*Within the Solari ranks.”*

Kharvek: *“You planted a traitor among the Solari?”*

Shallit’Biru (flatly): *“Not yet… But I will.”*

He turned to the gathering; expression iron-clad.

“When the moons fall, it will be by Mer’Kuri’s own hand… and by the time they realize it, the sky will already be burning.”

On Second Thought

Xal leaned forward, arms folded tight.

“As scary as all of this sounds… How is Draetheon planning to collapse Khepra and Tiraxis when Draetheon is so far away?”

The room fell silent.

No one moved.

Not even Alaric.

The fire in the hearth crackled; mocking in its calm.

Still silent.

Still more.

Then…

Vex: *“The only way Draetheon can collapse the two moons… simultaneously… is to have agents already here. Among us.”*

His voice was steady. Precise. Unemotional. And it hit harder because of it.

Lysara straightened, her eyes narrowing.

“Infiltrators?”

Vex nodded.

“Not just spies. Saboteurs. Embedded in positions of trust. They would need access to the vault chambers… or worse… Keys to them.”

Xal: *“But how would they get in? The Solari are sealed. Every recruit is scanned. Every mission monitored.”*

Lysara glanced toward the arched window.

*“Unless they didn’t **infiltrate** the Solari…”*

She looked back at them.

*“…They were **born** into the Solari.”*

A stunned hush.

Then Alaric turned, voice grim and low.

“You’re suggesting one of our own?… Someone raised within the Solari has been compromised?”

Vex stepped forward, projecting a flickering schematic of the moons.

“Not just compromised. Groomed. The Draetheon wouldn’t leave this to chance. This betrayal will be personal.”

Krynn growled, rising to his feet.

“Then we need to vet every Solari operative… Every vault technician, every guardian, every whisper of command.”

Seraphina: *“That will take time we don’t have.”*

Lysara: *“We narrow it down. Whoever it is… we just need to flush them out before they open those vaults.”*

Xal: *“And if we’re wrong?”*

Alaric met his gaze.

“We can’t afford to be.”

The room grew heavier with each breath.

No one dared speak.

Even the hearth seemed to dim, as if the fire itself recoiled from what had been said.

Vex stepped back, eyes scanning the chamber. *“From this moment on, we treat this war not just as an invasion from beyond... but from within.”*

Xal stared at the holographic map of the moons, their ancient structures glowing like faint embers. *“What if they already have what they need?”*

Seraphina’s voice was quiet. *“Then we’re already too late.”*

Lysara’s gaze sharpened. *“Not if we move now.”*

Krynn: *“What do you propose? A silent sweep of every rank? It’ll raise alarms. Spook the mole.”*

Vex: *“We don’t flush them out. We bait them.”*

That caught everyone’s attention.

Alaric turned slowly. *“Explain.”*

Vex’s projection shifted; highlighting two glowing nodes on Khepra and Tiraxis. *“We feed disinformation. Create a false override key protocol. Leak it subtly. One that appears to grant instant access to both vault chambers… but is instead a lockdown trigger.”*

Seraphina: *“And the one who takes the bait…”*

Lysara finished for her. *“… reveals themselves.”*

Krynn: *“That could work.”*

Xal glanced around, eyes hard. *“But if they catch on… we’ll lose our only chance.”*

Alaric stepped forward, the fire behind him casting long shadows. *“Then we just make sure they don’t catch on.”*

A heavy silence settled again; no fear now, only resolve.

Outside, the wind howled across the high towers of Mer’Kuri. A storm was gathering.

And it wasn’t coming from the sky.

Chapter 5: Quiet Aftermath

The soft glow of Baiae’s domed skylight filtered through the translucent ceiling, casting pale gold light across the guest chamber’s curved walls. Outside, the city buzzed in low hums—distant hovercrafts, flickering energy conduits, and the gentle pulse of Mer’Kuri’s heart. But inside the room, silence held sway.

Kael sat at the edge of the bed, forearms braced against his knees, head bowed. His fingers clenched and released in a slow rhythm. **Typhon** stood across from him, arms folded, the weight of unspoken words pressing down on both of them.

“You haven’t said a word,” she whispered. Her voice, usually confident, wavered at the edges.

Kael didn’t look up. *“What is there to say?”*

“Everything,” **she** said, stepping closer. *“What happened aboard the Obsidian Womb… you haven’t processed it. You’re just pretending it didn’t change anything.”*

Kael shifted, wincing as his ribs pressed against the edge of his tunic. He sucked in a sharp breath through his teeth, trying to hide it. **Typhon** noticed.

“You’re still hurting,” she said gently. *“Why didn’t you tell me?”*

“It’s nothing,” **Kael** muttered, straightening with effort. *“Just a few cracked ribs. They’re mending.”*

“Kael,” **she** said, stepping closer, her voice low. *“You were nearly killed. That room… your body… wasn’t the only thing crushed.”*

He stood slowly; jaw tight. “*You think I don’t know that?”*

Typhon: *“I think you’re pretending it didn’t happen.”*

“I can’t pretend it didn’t happen,” **he** snapped, the heat rising in his voice. *“I see it every time I close my eyes. The black walls. The silence. The way your father looked at me… like I was already dead.”*

A pause.

He exhaled, trembling slightly, the pain deeper than his wounds.

Typhon softened. *“Do you believe me, Kael? That I didn’t know?”*

He turned to face her.

“I want to,” **he** said. *“More than anything. But the man who nearly crushed my lungs was your father. And I still don’t know what that makes you.”*

She recoiled like she’d been slapped. But instead of striking back, she stepped closer.

“It makes me someone who was lied to her whole life,” **she** said. *“Who chose to join the Solari because I believed in the light… not because I was planted here.”*

Kael said nothing, jaw clenching. His arm twitched as he tried to adjust, pain tightening his face.

She reached out, placing her hand gently over his side. *“Let me help you heal. Not just this,”* **she** said, nodding toward his injury.

“All of it.”

He looked down at her hand. Then slowly, reluctantly, placed his over hers.

“I don’t know how to heal,” he said, voice raw.

Typhon met his gaze, eyes glassy but steady.

*“Kael… I give you **all** of me.”*

Kael (feeling a little better): *“Again… You’re not fighting fair… and in my weakened condition… Oh… my… Raaa!”*

Fade to Black

A Sneaky Suspicion

The fire had dimmed to embers. Shadows leaned longer against the stone walls. The holo-map of Khepra and Tiraxis still hovered in the center, flickering faintly.

Xal stood apart from the others; hands on hips; jaw clenched in thought. The silence stretched until he finally broke it; quietly, almost like he regretted saying it before the words even left his mouth.

"…There's something we're not saying. And I hate that I'm the one saying it, because Kael's my brother and I know what he's been through but…"

(He looked up slowly.)

"What if he was right… the first time?"

Krynn turned, almost starring daggers.

"What do you mean?"

Xal: *"About Typhon."*

(He hesitated.)

*"She's the daughter of the Shallit'Biru. The architect of this entire war. We keep talking about infiltrators, agents planted long ago... What if she's the **only** one we need to worry about?"*

A heavy silence fell.

Seraphina looked down, uncomfortable, but not dismissive.

"That's a grave accusation, Xal."

Xal: *"I'm not accusing. I'm asking. Can we afford not to ask?"*

Alaric stood stiffly by the hearth; his face; crumbled.

"She's fought beside us. She's bled for us. And Kael… he trusts her now."

Xal: *"Trust can be manipulated. Especially when feelings are involved. If this betrayal is meant to be personal… who better to drive the dagger than someone you let get that close?"*

Vex stepped forward, arms behind his back like a sentry.

"Logic does not exclude the possibility. Her record is clean. Too clean, perhaps. But we have no evidence to support duplicity."

Krynn (with a growl): *"And no evidence to rule it out."*

Seraphina stood, eyes hardening.

"We tread dangerous ground here. If we start second-guessing each other without cause, we fracture ourselves before Draetheon even lifts a finger."

Xal: *“I’m not saying we cast her out. I’m saying we watch. Carefully. Quietly. Because if we’re wrong… we lose nothing. But if we’re right… and we ignore it…”*

Alaric: *“…Then the moons fall.”*

Silence again.

Finally, **Vex’s** internal systems clicked softly as he recalibrated a scan.

“I will monitor activity… Discreetly… If she is clean, it will remain between us… If not… You will know.”

Xal nodded, slowly.

“Kael won’t forgive me for even thinking it.”

Seraphina: *“Then let’s hope you’re wrong.”*

The chamber dimmed; the embers low. Outside, the stars over Mer’Kuri shimmered; distant, watching.

Night

Moonlight pours in thin sheets across the floor. Kael and Typhon lie tangled in a quiet, post-storm slumber. Her breath is deep and even peaceful. His is shallower; unsettled.

Suddenly, a soft whirring hum stirs the air.

A faint pinprick of light appears in the center of the room.

Pale.

Silent.

It expands slowly, like mist unfurling backwards. A swirl of golden static coils into itself… then begins to spin wider.

No noise.

No heat.

Just presence.

Kael stirs. His brow twitches. Then his eyes flutter open. He blinks into the dark room, spotting the phenomenon.

Not startled.

Not afraid.

Just… resigned.

He winces as he sits up, one hand instinctively moving to his still bruised ribs.

Still healing.

The swirling light stabilizes into a near-perfect disk. Barely off the floor. It pulses faintly.

Kael rises quietly, careful not to wake Typhon. She shifts slightly, but doesn't stir.

He stands before the light; arms limp at his sides. His voice is low. Flat.

"I was expecting you."

He turns briefly to check Typhon again. Her expression is serene, unaware.

A voice answers. Calm. Smooth. Timeless.

Ata'rai Raenor (Off Screen): *"She will not awaken."*

From within the disk, a form begins to take shape; not cloaked, not armored. Not the terrifying mask of the Shallit'Biru. Just a tall man with stark eyes, regally calm. His presence hums like quiet thunder.

Kael: *"Why aren't you wearing your scary costume?"*

Ata'rai Raenor: *"Because you're one of the few who know what's behind the curtain. Why bother with theatrics?"*

Kael's jaw flexes.

"Your own daughter didn't know?"

Ata'rai Raenor (with a ghost of a smile): *"As tough as she likes to act… she doesn't have the heart. I never told her."*

He steps forward slightly, into better light. His face is oddly serene.

Ata'rai Raenor (cont'd): *"But I was surprised when she brought you to meet me. That… I couldn't pass up."*

Kael (bitter): *"What do you want with Xal and me?"*

A pause.

Ata'rai Raenor: *"No. Just you."*

Kael's brow knits.

"Just me? Why?"

Ata'rai Raenor (softly): *"Because I watched you single-handedly destroy the Obsidian Womb."*

He exhales, faintly amused.

Ata'rai Raenor (cont'd): *"Not how I planned it… not even close. But I saw it. You didn't flinch. You adapted. You struck. You endured."*

He studies Kael's face expression; blank.

Ata'rai Raenor: *"I knew then. You had it in you."*

Kael narrows his eyes, not sure whether to feel anger, pride…or fear.

Kael: *"What exactly do I have?"*

Ata'rai Raenor: *"What it takes to become the next Shallit'Biru."*

Kael's breath caught.

His mind raced, disbelief washing over him.

Kael: *"Wha... I... I cannot be the next Shallit'Biru!"*

Ata'rai Raenor: *"That's exactly what I said when I was first chosen."*

Kael: *"Tell me."*

Ata'rai Raenor: *"It was nearly 7,000 years ago... I was the prophesied Solari champion of the Age of Leo…."*

"… They called me 'The Lion Heart.'…"

"… I had surpassed even the greatest Solari masters who trained me. I was invincible under the scorching Ra… walking on Mer'Kuri's surface as if untouched by the sun's fury."

He paused, his voice dropping, filled with awe and something darker.

Ata'rai Raenor (cont'd): *"One day, while wandering in the heat of the Ra inferno, contemplating the impossible… crossing the Ra itself… a sudden sun-portal tore open before me…"*

"… Without hesitation, I stepped through it... and found myself on Draetheon."

Ata'rai Raenor: *"On the other side was the Shallit'Biru... the one before me."*

Kael: *"Why does the Shallit'Biru keep changing?"*

Ata'rai Raenor: *"Because the role devours the soul. The Shallit'Biru is second only to the Queen herself. The job is demanding... and rewarding. And if you're not careful, it becomes... consuming."*

He paced slowly across the edge of the light, gaze distant.

"It wasn't long before I believed I had evolved beyond everyone else on Mer'Kuri. Their struggles, their beliefs, their limitations... they no longer applied to me. The only values that matter are those of the Queen. ***Her will*** *is purpose."*

Kael's brow raised. Ata'rai's words didn't sound like madness. They sounded like conviction.

Ata'rai Raenor (cont'd): *"I had so much Ra power, I could shape reality around me. Bend light and burn time. There was nothing I couldn't do. Eventually, the old me vanished completely. I became someone else. Something else."*

He turned to Kael, the faint swirl of the light catching the glint in his eye.

"Draetheon... it's far larger than Mer'Kuri. A thousand times older. And when I'm not fulfilling my role as the Shallit'Biru, I live like a king. A home carved into a spectacular mountain. A wife who fears nothing. Children born of starlight and shadow. Wealth that flows like molten gold."

Kael swallowed, a strange chill settling beneath his skin.

Ata'rai Raenor: *"And though time feels no different… measured in sunrises and silences… it moves slower…"*

"… Much slower…"

On Draetheon, one day passing feels like any other... But here, in the Sol... in that same time span… one thousand years pass…"

Ata'rai Raenor: *"…Mer'Kuri will wither. Empires will fall… But on Draetheon... I remain."*

A long pause stretched between them, heavy with things unsaid.

Kael*: "How… old… is Typhon?"*

Ata'rai tilted his head, a slow, measured smirk forming.

“That’s a matter of perspective…”

He stepped back into the swirl of light, its glow curling around his form like mist.

“She was born on Draetheon… about 2,700 years ago.”

Kael’s breath hitched. He looked back at Typhon; still peacefully asleep, unaware of the shattering truth unraveling beside her.

Ata’rai Raenor (cont’d): *“But she came to the Sol... thirty years ago; Mer'Kuri time. I stopped doing the math a long time ago.”*

He looked at Kael one last time; something almost paternal in his gaze.

Almost.

Ata’rai Raenor: *“Pretty soon… Typhon… my own daughter… will be older than me.”*

A faint sadness bled into his voice, hard to read but undeniable.

*“In all honesty… and to answer your question… In this case, I just want her to come home… and have **you** become the Shallit’Biru.”*

Behind Kael, the blankets rustled.

Typhon stirred, brow furrowing as she shifted under the covers.

Ata’rai noticed. His voice lowered.

“We’ll talk soon.”

And with that, the light folded in on itself; quietly, cleanly, vanishing into nothing.

Kael stood there; mind screaming something along the lines of “Holy Shit”. He turned just as **Typhon’s** eyes fluttered open.

She blinked, confused.

“...Kael?” she whispered groggily, reaching for him. *“Were you talking to someone…?”*

He stood frozen in the moonlit hush of the room; eyes fixed on the space where the light had been.

He said nothing.

Not yet.

Chapter 6: THREE YEARS LATER

The hangar doors groaned open, revealing the gleaming rows of warships docked in the upper tiers of the Solari shipyards. What had once been a graveyard of shattered hulls was now a monument to Mer'Kuri's relentless will to survive.

Councilor Alaric stood at the edge of the observation deck; hands clasped behind his back, eyes sweeping over the rebuilt fleet.

"Two hundred and thirteen vessels operational. Another fifty slated for launch within the next rotation," he said quietly, almost to himself.

"Not bad for three years," **General Krynn** replied, arms crossed over his crimson uniform. *"Still a far cry from what we lost… but the backbone is here."*

Beside him, **Princess Lysara** observed the fleet with narrowed eyes. Her presence radiated the cold grace of Venusian royalty, though her voice held something warmer.

"Let's not pretend we rebuilt it alone. Saturn's alloy shipments. Uranius engineering. Even Neptunia lent their plasma cores."

"And still no sign of Ra's Eclipse," **Vex** said flatly, his mechanical tone cutting through the air like static.

"Three years of silence from Draetheon is unnatural. They didn't retreat to lick their wounds. They're planning… waiting."

Alaric nodded. *"That's what worries me."* He turned, facing the others. *"We've had reports from the fringe systems; El'drath, Mynthor, Ophira… even Zha'ara… Skirmishes. Not full invasions, not yet. But the outer rim worlds are stirring."*

"The reptilian clans," **Krynn** muttered, jaw tightening. *"Old bloodlines. Old grudges. They didn't side with Draetheon, but they've never been allies either."*

"They've been testing Neptunia's border patrols," Alaric continued. *"Uranius lost a trade convoy near Thal'Zaruun. And the twin planets of Saturn reported a stealth incursion last cycle."*

Princess Lysara raised a brow. *"Coincidence? Or are they being pushed from the shadows?"*

Alaric didn't answer. Instead, his gaze drifted back to the fleet below. *"Either way… we're running out of time."*

A low hum pulsed through the platform as a Leviathan-class dreadnought drifted into view, its hull glistening with fresh alloy plating and the etched glyphs of the Solari Forge. Unlike the older designs, this one bore angular fins and an obsidian trim; aggressive, predatory.

Krynn gestured toward it. *“The Vigilant Sun. Fastest in the fleet. Twin pulse drives. Shielding reinforced with Jovian tech.”*

“Experimental,” **Vex** added. *“Its reactor core runs hotter than protocol allows. I advised caution.”*

“You always advise caution,” **Krynn** muttered, smirking.

Vex's head turned slowly. *“Caution is why I’m still standing. And why we haven’t ignited half this moon with a mis-calibrated core.”*

Alaric ignored the exchange, his mind still on the reports.

“We’ve strengthened the core worlds, yes. But our outer defenses are brittle. If the rim worlds unite under a common cause…”

“They never have,” **Lysara** interrupted. *“Their rivalries run deeper than their alliances. The last time El’drath and Vormar agreed on anything, the stars were still cooling.”*

Alaric raised a brow. *“And yet, they're skirmishing in a synchronized pattern. Coordinated. Probing three sectors at once.”*

A pause fell.

Then **Krynn** spoke, voice low. *“You think Draetheon’s behind it.”*

“I think they’ve adapted. Manipulated the rim to test us from the shadows.” **Alaric’s** voice dropped. *“They lost a war. Now they’re learning how to win a quiet one.”*

From behind them, an **officer** approached and saluted.

“Councilor, Urgent communique from Neptunia. Governor Solen requests an immediate holocast. Priority sigil… Black.”

Alaric stiffened. A black sigil meant war, or something worse.

“Route it to the command chamber,” he ordered.

As the officer turned, Alaric looked to the others.

“If Solen’s calling a black sigil from Neptunia, this isn’t another border scuffle. Something’s changed.”

Vex’s ocular lenses pulsed with light. *“I’ll begin planetary scans. If a cloaked fleet is moving within our system, I’ll find it.”*

Krynn nodded. *“And if not… we prepare for worse.”*

Princess Lysara looked out once more at the *Vigilant Sun*, its armored hull casting a long shadow over the rows of smaller ships beneath.

“The silence is ending,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper; but heavy with knowing.

Beside her, **General Krynn’s** gaze sharpened. His jaw flexed as if biting back the truth he didn’t want to speak.

He turned slightly toward Vex, voice low and steady.

“We better make sure the Black Falcon is ready… for anything.”

Vex’s head tilted just enough to register acknowledgment.

“The Falcon was never designed for peace, General.”
He paused, scanners briefly pulsing beneath his eyes.

“Its wings are already primed.”

Krynn gave a grim nod. *“Good. Because I’ve got a feeling this time… they won’t wait for a declaration.”*

Lysara tore her gaze from the dreadnought and looked at them both. *“If the Falcon launches, it won’t be a message. It’ll be a warning.”*

Alaric stepped forward, the weight of his office pressing in around his shoulders.

“And warnings don’t mean much anymore… not in this galaxy... Not to them.”

For a long moment, the four stood in silence, watching as the Vigilant Sun completed its rotation and locked into position above the shipyards.

Then, somewhere deep in the station’s com grid, an alert chime sounded. Three tones. Sharp. Repeating.

“Incoming transmission,” a voice announced over the intercom. *“Neptunia Command. Governor Solen. Black Sigil confirmed.”*

No one spoke.

The silence that followed wasn’t empty; it was bracing.

The silence was over.

Deep Void

[Uncharted Coordinates - Draetheon-Controlled Space]

The stars here were dim ghosts, choked behind curtains of ion ash and gravitational drift.

Amid this cursed stretch of space hung The Maw; a fortress carved from a dead god's rib, if one believed the rumors. Its structure pulsed with life: not mechanical, not organic, but something in between. Ancient veins of black-crystal circuitry glowed faint violet, breathing in sync with a heart no one could locate.

At the inner sanctum's core, twelve shadowed figures formed a circle around the obelisk; its surface shifting like black oil under moonlight. Faint whispers echoed from it, too faint to translate but impossible to ignore.

The chamber's gravity was unstable, warping slightly as the obelisk pulsed. And yet, all twelve stood unmoved.

Then, from the darkness between columns, a figure emerged. Seven feet tall. Shimmering bone-plated armor flowed across his frame like liquid stone, glowing faintly with runes that predated written language.

Archon Dreth Malaan.

His voice echoed not from his mouth, but from the stone itself; low, layered, ancient.

"Three cycles of silence. The stars forget our name."

He raised his hand, and the obelisk responded; brightening slightly with each word.

"Let them forget. Let them rot in their peace. Because what comes next… will not be remembered. It will be engraved."

A smaller figure to his left; a **female**, draped in silken black threads and veiled with crystalline mesh, stepped forward.

"The outer rim claws at their borders. Just as you commanded. They suspect nothing."

"Good," **Dreth** said, though there was no warmth in the word. Only inevitability. *"But they are distractions. Pawns. Shadows of a shadow."*

One of the **other commanders**; a brute with jagged skin and burning orange eyes, snorted.

“The outer worlds grow tired of our leash, Archon. Vormar asks for weapons. Mynthor hungers for real blood. Why deny them?”

Dreth turned his helm slightly.

“Because the blade does not warn the flesh it will cut.”

He gestured toward the hovering projection now flickering beside the obelisk: Mer’Kuri’s orbital yard, its fleet shimmering in regal golds and silvers. But Dreth’s gaze fixed on a single spot, highlighted in blood red.

*“The Vigilant Sun carries more than firepower... It carries **our** echo.”*

“Project Eidolon,” whispered the **veiled woman**. *“Its core crystal is still stable. Phase two can be initiated with your word.”*

“No,” **Dreth** said sharply.

A ripple of silence passed through the others.

“Let them praise their new weapons. Let their princes and prophets sleep easier. Let them trust what they’ve built.”

He stepped closer to the obelisk. A faint hiss escaped as tendrils of light brushed against his armor, reading his aura.

“When the blade falls… it will be one they forged themselves.”

Behind him, a vast set of armored blast doors opened, revealing the hangar void beyond. Dozens... No, hundreds of sleek, alien vessels hovered silently in the darkness, their designs asymmetrical, jagged, as though grown rather than built.

At the heart of the fleet, a vessel unlike the rest; a monstrous wedge of black crystal wrapped in radiant glyphs, hung motionless.

The Revenant Star.

The dreaded flagship of the Draetheon.

It hadn’t moved in three years.

Until now.

As it stirred, the void seemed to breathe; deep, cold and final.

Dreth spoke without turning.

“Wake the Revenant Star.”

“And inform the Shallit’biru… The veil is thinning.”

Saturn Space

The rings of Saturn shimmered faintly behind the frozen ridgeline, their silent orbit like a golden noose around the throat of the system. Floating just beneath their cover, camouflaged by ion-static and silicate dust, a half-dozen Solari interceptors held formation.

Each one bore the curved sigil of the Two Suns. Xal's squadron.

Inside the lead fighter, **Xal** adjusted the solar dampeners on his gauntlet and narrowed his eyes at the readout.

"Steady," he said over coms, voice calm but firm.

"No sudden moves. We wait."

"For what?" came **Veyla's** voice; his second-in-command, a hotshot pilot with nerves of iron and the patience of a flare storm.

Xal: *"For a mistake."*

Below them, the wreckage of a Neptunian convoy drifted. Cargo crates were scattered across a low-orbit arc, rotating slowly; lifeless.

Static crackled faintly from one of the dead hulls.

Then… movement.

A sharp blip on the sensors.

Xal's eyes flicked to the proximity readings; six, no, seven faint heat signatures slipping through the shadow of Janara's moon.

Cold-blooded.

Reptilian.

Their engines were near-silent. They were waiting too.

"They're here," **Xal** said.

"Fan out. Veil your heat signatures and prepare for zero-burst response. No lasers unless they commit. We're not here to start a war."

"But we're definitely here to finish one, right?" **Veyla** said, already locking her thrusters into silent spread.

The enemy squadron began drifting toward the convoy wreck; slow, deliberate, as if trying to make it look like a scavenger run. But they weren't searching. They were scanning. Confirming kill.

“They're marking Neptunian supply lanes,” **Xal** muttered. *“And they’re not here for scrap.”*

One of the reptilian fighters broke formation; too fast.

“They spotted us.”

No warning.

The first shot came in the form of a kinetic slug, fired clean and fast toward the center of the Solari formation. Xal veered hard and spiraled down through the debris cloud. The rest of the squadron scattered on instinct.

“Engage!”

The stars lit up with streaks of plasma.

Xal looped beneath a shattered freighter hull and blasted upward, clipping the wing of a reptilian fighter with a burst of sunfire. It spun out, trailing smoke.

“Veyla, on me! Flank left!”

She didn’t need to be told twice; her ship arced up beside his in perfect synchronicity, their movements tight and clean.

Xal had trained them well.

“They’ve got Jirathi tech; partial phase shielding,” **Veyla** barked.

“Shots are bouncing unless they’re clean.”

“So make them count.”

Two enemy fighters locked on to Xal’s tail; his HUD flared with alerts. He corkscrewed down between chunks of frozen ring-ice, cut his main engine, and let inertia drift him between wreckage. One pursuer overshot. The other tried to match his dive…

Too late.

Xal’s ship flipped mid-drift and fired point-blank. The explosion shuddered the moon’s orbit line.

“Minus two,” **Veyla** called. *“I’ve got another chasing Rylen. He’s leaking coolant!”*

Xal: *“Cover him. Push them back into the gravity well.”*

Veyla: *“Then what?”*

Xal: *“Then we burn them.”*

Xal pushed forward, channeling solar energy into his thrusters. The light rippled off his hull in arcs of concentrated flare.

He could feel the fire.

Not just rage.

Purpose.

This wasn't just recon anymore.

The war had started again.

And this time, he wasn't running from it.

Chapter 7: Shadows Beneath Scales

The shuttle hissed as its landing struts compressed against the coarse soil. Heat vents shimmered along the hull before fading into the cool green twilight.

Above, jagged peaks loomed like the spines of a sleeping beast, and below them, the cracked plains of Xirath pulsed faintly with bioluminescent veins; the planet's skin alive with heat and hunger.

Kael stood at the base of the ramp, helmet in hand, scanning the horizon. His black Solari armor, matte-finished to avoid reflection, made no sound as he stepped onto the alien soil.

Behind him, Typhon adjusted the satchel on his shoulder and descended with slower, measured steps.

There was no reception party. No patrols. No movement at all.

Just a waiting silence.

Typhon let the quiet stretch between them before speaking.

"You ever wonder," **Typhon** said, her voice low and even, **"***if your family's hiding something from you?"*

Kael turned, not startled, but intrigued. He glanced back at her, brows drawn.

"You mean Lysara?"

"Her. Krynn. Even Vex. The three of them speak in silences more than words. It's not what they say… it's what they don't say."

Kael looked out across the jagged terrain. Mist rolled across the foothills in wisps of greenish steam.

“They’ve been through a lot,” he said. *“We all have.”*

“That’s not what I mean,” **Typhon** replied gently, stepping beside him. *“Something happened during the Draetheon war. Something deep. I’ve seen it in their eyes. It’s like they’re carrying the weight of a choice they regret.”*

Kael didn’t answer at first. He slid his helmet under his arm and let the silence settle between them.

“You think they’re compromised?”

“I think they’ve seen something… or done something… they don’t want anyone else to know. And if they’re hiding it… then maybe it’s bigger than we realize.”

Kael’s jaw tensed. He didn’t like the idea, but he didn’t dismiss it either.

“I trust them,” he said finally.

Typhon studied him a moment longer, then nodded, pulling a scanner from her satchel.

“Then let’s hope that trust holds.” She adjusted the device, its screen flickering with heat signatures and signal shadows. *“There’s something buried beneath the ridge… large… shielded… recent. Could be troop movement. Could be staging tech.”*

Kael’s eyes narrowed. *“They’re prepping for a strike.”*

“Starting with Neptunia, if the chatter’s right.” **She** holstered the scanner. *“But if Xirath is moving, the others won’t be far behind.”*

Kael placed his helmet on with a quiet click.

“Then let’s move. Before we find out the hard way which direction the blade’s pointing.”

Too late.

Behind them, footsteps crunched over fractured rock.

Kael turned just enough to glance over his shoulder. A squad of four Xirathi soldiers emerged from the dusk; reptilian eyes gleaming beneath bone-forged helms.

Their scales shimmered with subtle hues; sand-burnished bronze, deep jade, iron-black. The leader, a broad-shouldered warrior with a jagged scar across his snout, stepped forward with a rasping chuckle.

“Hmmm. Looks like someone’s stickin’ out around here like a sore thumb.”

The others grinned, tongues flicking. One raised a shock-lance. Another thumbed the safety off a plasma scatter-gun.

Kael and Typhon spun around, instinctively dropping into combat stances. The squad didn’t flinch; they fanned out, weapons raised.

“Who might you be,” the **leader** growled, *“and why are you sniffin’ around our dirt?”*

Kael stepped forward, defiant and unshaken, his voice like tempered steel.

“Who we are and what we’re doing… is none… of your… business.”

The soldiers hissed; a collective sound, part laughter, part threat. Claws flexed. The air thickened with the heat of impending violence.

The **leader’s** smile faded into a sneer. *“Wrong answer.”*

The tension snapped taut.

And then…

Typhon stepped between them, one hand raised, her voice sharp and resonant with unmistakable authority.

*“I am **Typhon Valeira Raenor**… High Princess of Draetheon and daughter of the Shallit’Biru!”*

Silence fell like a blade.

The Xirathi froze. Eyes widened. Weapons lowered just an inch; not from fear, but from awe.

The **leader** took a step back, gaze narrowing, reassessing.

“You…?” he muttered. “You do not look Draetheon.”

Typhon’s tone became cutting.

“Use your senses!”

The leader hesitated. For a moment, it was unclear if he would obey. Then, cautiously, he raised his snout slightly and inhaled; deep and deliberate. A strange hush fell over the squad as the air shifted. His nostrils flared.

His eyes squinted.

Recognition lit them like a flare.

“You have his blood.”

One by one, the soldiers dropped to a knee, heads bowed in sudden reverence.

The leader hesitated only a breath longer before lowering himself as well — not just in deference, but with a glint of something deeper in his eyes.

Fear. Or perhaps awe.

Kael leaned slightly toward Typhon, still processing what he’d just heard.

“Valeira?... Your middle name is ‘Valeira?”

Typhon didn’t look at him. Her eyes stayed on the kneeling warriors.

“Did you miss the part where I’m a High Princess?”

Kael exhaled, shaking his head with a half-laugh.

“Secrets always find their moment to reveal themselves.”

“Not secrets,” **she** replied coolly. *“No one ever asked if I had a middle name… They just assumed the extent of me ended with ‘Eclipse assassin.’”*

Kael stared; mouth slightly open.

Then, turning her attention back to the soldiers, her voice became command again; precise and royal.

“Rise. And take us to the nearest war quartermaster. We need access to your records… and your shadows.”

The leader stood, fists clenching at his sides.

“As you command, High Princess.”

The **leader** led the way; though more slowly, his expression troubled. *“We were not told the Shallit’Biru **had** a daughter; much less one walking among the stars.”*

Kael, still engaging, leaned in slightly, voice low. *“Daughter of the Shallit’Biru?... You played that card… Seriously?”*

Typhon’s lips curved into the faintest smile.

“Jealous?”

Neptunia Command

The holocast chamber dimmed as the lights dropped; a blue shimmer cascading across the chamber's dome.

Holographic lines twisted in midair, coalescing into the image of *Governor Solen;* lean, silver-haired, clad in the formal deep-cobalt armor of Neptunia's High Command. Behind him, the edges of the planetary war room flickered with data streams and hurried officers.

Governor Solen (urgent): *"Councilor Alaric, Princess Lysara, General Krynn… we're under silent siege."*

Krynn's brows knit. *"Clarify."*

Solen nodded grimly. *"We picked up gravimetric distortions two cycles ago… too precise to be natural. Our orbital sensors were then hit with a low-frequency pulse. No damage, but every array shut down for six minutes."*

Vex leaned forward, analyzing. *"EM dampening field. Precision strike. Coordinated disruption."*

Solen: *"We thought it was a rogue pirate fleet. Until this arrived."*

He turned and motioned to someone offscreen.

A new projection flickered to life beside him; a silhouette of a ship, massive, angular, alien… Draetheon in design, but with symbols none of them recognized.

Alaric (tense): *"That's not from the last war."*

Solen: *"No. This is something new. We managed to catch its shadow as it exited Neptunia's outer rings. Minimal EM trail. No transponder. It cloaked again… heading core ward."*

Krynn (darkly): *"They're testing their reach."*

Lysara (quiet): "*Or marking targets."*

Solen stepped closer in the feed. *"Councilor. We believe this was only a scout. There may be more. Neptunia requests immediate defense reinforcement and clearance to activate Protocol Seraph."*

The room went still.

Protocol Seraph hadn't been invoked since the fall of Tiraxis Base; a protocol authorizing planetary lockdown, full mobilization, and preemptive strike authority.

Alaric (low): *"You're sure?"*

Solen's jaw tightened. *"I'd stake my soul."*

Alaric turned slowly to the others. Each of them wore the same look: the quiet dread of confirmation.

Alaric: *"Then we answer. Prepare the Falcon. Ready the Vigilant Sun. And transmit the warning to the rim."*

Vex: *"Cloaked fleets don't scout… They map!..."*

A pause.

"… And mapping always precedes invasion."

The tension in the chamber thickened as Governor Solen's transmission faded. Alaric's eyes didn't leave the holocast projection, still shimmering faintly with the Draetheon warship's ghostlike outline.

His brow furrowed, mind working quickly, pieces snapping together.

Alaric (low, as the realization dawns):

"This isn't random… it's methodical."

He turned sharply to face the others, his voice carrying new weight.

"They're not just pressing from the rim… They're attacking the system from both ends… the furthest and the closest to Ra."

Lysara's brows drew together.

"Neptunia and… Mer'Kuri?"

Alaric nodded grimly.

"Think about it… Neptunia sits on the edge of the Sol… furthest from Ra... Cold... Isolated…"

"… A perfect staging ground for cloaked ships…"

"… Meanwhile, Mer'Kuri…" he trailed off, eyes darkening.

"...is the closest to the light… To power... To everything they once feared and failed to control."

Vex's voice was calm but sharp.

"Strike the ends... Collapse the middle."

Krynn added, jaw clenched:

"Meet at Tiamara."

A quiet beat passed.

Lysara (almost whispering): *"The Jewel of the Sol…"*

The words hung in the air, beautiful and terrifying.

Alaric stepped toward the center of the holomap, sweeping his hand to zoom out the projection of the solar system: Mer'Kuri near Ra, Neptunia in the icy dark, and Tiamara glowing with life in the middle; a vast ocean, abundant atmosphere, and peace treaties no one dared break… until now.

Alaric: *"They mean to squeeze us. Outward from the light. Inward from the dark. And where they meet… Tiamara… they'll shatter the system's heart."*

Lysara (soft but firm): *"It won't survive that... No one will."*

Krynn (cold): *"They're planning the death of the Sol itself."*

Chapter 8: The Blood of Shadows

The battle spiraled into chaos.

Reptilian fighters lanced through the debris field with precision, their dark hulls vanishing and reappearing like phantoms.

Xal and his squadron fought with the discipline of warriors born under pressure; but for every hit they landed, another came back sharper.

"Three more incoming from the moon's far side!" **Veyla** called out. *"Looks like reinforcements."*

Xal gritted his teeth. *"We're not equipped for a drawn-out brawl."*

Static popped in his coms as **Rylen's** voice cut through; shaky, winded. *"I can't hold altitude… I lost stabilizers…"*

"I got you," **Veyla** snapped.

Her fighter swept around with a burst of light, intercepting the enemy tailing him. The shot grazed the reptilian wing, sending it spinning; but not enough to kill.

On Xal's HUD, another two Solari ships blinked red.

Warnings.

Power drain.

Hull stress.

They were holding the line; but barely.

"Xal!" **Veyla's** voice returned. *"We're outnumbered and boxed in. Permission to break formation?"*

Xal locked eyes with the glimmering sigil on his control panel; the emblem of the Two Suns. They had done what they came for: confirmed Draetheon activity in Neptune's corridor.

No use getting killed proving it twice.

"Negative," he said. "We fall back. Everyone… rally on my signal. We ghost them."

"Copy that," **Veyla** answered, and she didn't sound happy.

Xal punched in the extraction coordinates and opened the squadron channel. *"All units, prepare for solar veil. Return to The Dawn Breaker. I repeat… Fall back."*

Behind him, one of the reptilian fighters pulled off, its engine sparking. The others slowed; hesitated.

They weren't pressing.

Not retreating.

Just… watching.

The Solari ships activated solar dampeners and peeled off one by one, veiling themselves in ion-static and glare shimmer as they ducked beneath Saturn's rings. The enemy didn't pursue.

Mutual respect. Or mutual calculation.

Either way, it wasn't over… yet.

The Dawn Breaker

The hiss of hydraulics filled the bay as the Solari interceptors touched down one by one, their scorched hulls hissing with dissipating solar charge.

Deck crews in flare-shielded gear sprinted out, guiding the fighters in and tending to coolant leaks and ruptured stabilizers.

Xal was the last to disembark. He dropped from the cockpit, boots clanging against the metal plating, his gauntlet still glowing faintly from combat charge. The solar fire hadn't fully left his system.

Across the hangar, *Captain Selis Marrik* waited with arms crossed, flanked by two command officers. His long grey coat bore the Solar insignia stitched across the shoulder.

A jagged scar ran from his jaw to the socket of his missing eye. The other eye; piercing and black, watched Xal approach like a hawk sizing up a storm.

"Report," **Marrik** growled before Xal even fully closed the distance.

Xal didn't hesitate.

"Neptunian convoy was already slagged. Draetheon scouts were marking the wrecks… confirming their own kills."

"You engage?" **Marrik** asked, already knowing the answer.

Xal nodded once. *"Minimal exchange. We held formation, pushed back two flanks, then veiled and withdrew. Their formation wasn't built for a full skirmish. They were probing supply lanes."*

Marrik's jaw tightened. *"Any sign of ground-side forces on Janara's moon?"*

Xal: *"Negative. This was recon-only. But they're mapping corridors through the outer colonies. They're preparing routes to Mer'Kuri. Or worse."*

Veyla joined them, helmet under her arm, a smear of coolant across her cheek. *"They weren't scavengers, sir. One of them had a Jirathi cloaking array spliced into its engine housing. Half their tech's hybridized."*

"*Meaning someone's building them newer toys,"* **Marrik** muttered.

He turned his single eye on Xal.

“And what about you, Commander? You look like you didn’t get enough of a fight.”

Xal’s gaze didn’t waver. *“We should’ve finished them. But I followed orders.”*

Marrik smirked faintly at that; respect, not sarcasm.

“Good. You’re learning command. Reckless courage gets warriors killed. Calculated restraint wins wars.”

He stepped in, lowering his voice.

“You’ll get your war, son. Sooner than you think.”

Xal blinked. *“Something else coming?”*

Marrik nodded once toward the lift bay.

“Briefing room. Councilor Thalos just transmitted a priority packet. Eyes-only for Solari command. You’re on the list.”

Xal exchanged a quick glance with **Veyla**.

“What kind of packet?” she asked.

Marrik’s expression darkened.

“The kind that smells like blood.”

Night Glow

The halls were carved from blackstone; ancient and veined with pulsing solar veins, streams of liquefied Ra-light that ran like blood through the bones of the stronghold.

It was warm here, almost unnaturally so; a direct contrast to the frozen peaks outside.

The Xirathi squad moved with renewed discipline, their earlier skepticism buried beneath duty. The leader, now identified as Commander Seruun, marched ahead with tense shoulders. Whatever doubts lingered in his mind, they didn’t show; yet.

Kael glanced around as they descended a wide spiral, footsteps echoing. *“This place… it’s not Eclipse-built.”*

“It isn’t,” **Typhon** said. *“The Draetheon outposts were seeded long before the Eclipse recruited them.”*

Kael: *“Then why keep them here?”*

She turned to him. *“Because Eclipse doesn’t always destroy what it doesn’t understand. Sometimes… it waits. Hoping to learn how to use it.”*

Commander Seruun slowed as they reached a massive steel gate at the end of the corridor. Runes flickered across it, reacting to Typhon’s presence. It unsealed with a seismic groan, layers of locking mechanisms grinding apart.

Int. Inner War Vault – Shadow Archives

They entered a chamber that felt like a relic of another age; half war room, half shrine. Hololithic displays hovered above stone altars, whispering data in Old Draethean script.

Black glass databanks lined the walls, humming with unspent knowledge. A large war table stood at the center; its surface alive with constellations, coded troop movements, and a vibrant pulsing map of Mer’Kuri space.

Seruun approached a control node and pressed his palm to it. The interface reacted immediately; symbols rearranging, confirming access.

“You’ll find what you need here,” he said, eyes flicking toward Typhon with renewed caution. *“But some records are sealed… protected by ancestral keys.”*

Typhon stepped forward. *“Then it’s a good thing I carry one.”*

She lifted her right hand; and from her palm, embedded beneath the skin, a lattice of luminous threads emerged.

The war table scanned it; and shifted. Locked data fragments unfolded like a flower opening to the sun.

Kael watched the table react, more impressed than he wanted to admit. *“You’ve been holding out on us.”*

“I’ve been surviving,” **Typhon** replied coolly. *“There’s a difference.”*

Seruun (defiantly): *“You are Draetheon… **He** is not!”*

Typhon: *“He is my most trusted and loyal servant!... When he is with me,,, he has clearance.”*

Seruun (humbled): *“As you wish, High Princess!”*

He steps away.

The table pulsed, resolving into a clear set of maps and files.

Red sigils marked Draetheon incursions across Mer'Kuri's moons and a central data node blinked at the center; *Ra's Eclipse*, the armada flagship.

Kael's eyes narrowed. *"That's it… that's their real objective."*

Typhon nodded. *"The armada isn't just posturing. They're gathering around a fixed point… a convergence."*

Seruun steps closer, frowning… suspicious.

"You speak as if you've seen this before."

Typhon: *"I have,"* she said, eyes cold. *"This isn't a war. It's a return. The Draetheon aren't just invading. They're reclaiming what was hidden… and what they lost."*

Kael turned to her; brow furrowed.

"And you…? What are you reclaiming?"

She met his gaze, steady. *"My place among them."*

A heavy silence followed.

Then **Kael** looked back to the glowing map, and for the first time, his voice was grim.

"Then we better make sure what they find is well-guarded."

The Twilight Deck

The stars outside the crystalline viewport shimmered like watchful eyes.

The sprawling Solari shipyards stretched below, a labyrinth of radiant steel and slow-moving warships basking in the dying light of Ra.

Princess Lysara stood alone, arms folded behind her back, head tilted slightly toward the endless void; lost in thought. Her reflection was faintly visible in the glass, but her mind was elsewhere.

Footsteps. Soft, deliberate. Familiar.

Seraphina approached slowly, stopping a few feet behind her.

Seraphina (gently, in Mer'Kuri):

"Vael'tari ne sun-ka?" (Penny for your thoughts?)

Lysara didn't turn right away. Her eyes remained on the stars.

Only when she was certain they were alone did she finally speak; her voice quiet, but charged.

Lysara: *"This war… I will gladly die fighting it… To protect my home… My family… My friends… But the more I think about it… I might not get that chance."*

Seraphina stepped closer, her tone shifting; softer, yet grounded in knowing.

"The Virael's Blaze."

Lysara nodded faintly.

"Yes."

"It's approaching faster than I imagined. Soon, I'll stand alone against twenty-nine others. All of them raised to rule, trained to kill. And only one will walk away… …the new Queen of Venus."

She finally turned to meet Seraphina's eyes.

Lysara (with a dry smile): *"I may be many things… But I don't think I was born to wear a crown made of blood."*

Seraphina let out a slow breath, her voice layered with equal parts teasing and sincerity.

"Is your participation mandatory?.. In my own selfish way, I was hoping you'd forfeit… Give up the throne… Give up your planet… Give up your legacy, your royal bloodline… and come live with us."

A sly smirk played at her lips.

Seraphina (softly): *"Imagine it. No thrones. No trials. Just sunlight, and gardens… and no one trying to stab you in the back."*

Lysara chuckled; but there was no mirth in it.

"It's tempting. But if I did that… I'd have to give up him too."

A long silence settled between them.

Seraphina (quietly): *"The General."*

Lysara nodded. Her hand grazed the glass, as though tracing a line between herself and a distant, unseen figure.

"We both knew our time was borrowed. No future. No promises. Only now. And yet somehow… he made me believe in more."

Seraphina: *“Do you love him?”*

Lysara: *“I don’t know if I’m allowed to.”*

Another silence; thicker now. Deeper.

Seraphina stepped beside her; shoulder barely touching.

“Then maybe… it’s time we stopped letting others tell us what we’re allowed.”

Lysara let her fingers drift down the cool glass, as if the stars beyond could offer a different answer than the one already heavy in her chest.

“If only it were that simple.”

Seraphina didn’t push, but she didn’t flinch either. Her voice came quiet, resolute.

“I know… it’s not that simple… But you do have an out.”

Lysara’s spine stiffened almost imperceptibly.

Her breath hitched.

She knew exactly what Seraphina meant.

And still… she needed to hear it.

She turned her head; eyes shadowed with dread.

Lysara (barely above a whisper): *“Go on… Say it.”*

Seraphina: *“Tell your home world about your affair with General Krynn… They’d never allow you to take part in the Virael’s Blaze… not with that kind of scandal… A Venusian royal consorting with a Martian warlord?”*

(She shook her head slowly.)

“They’d disqualify you before the sun rose again.”

The words hung there; sharp and unyielding.

Lysara looked away, her jaw tight. For a moment, she said nothing. Then…

“I could do that… I could burn everything down with just a sentence.”

Her voice trembled.

“But it would have to be a mutual decision…The General and I… our lives are entwined in secrecy…”

“… If Venus finds out… Mars will too… And when Mars learns one of their own has been compromised… by me… General Krynn’s life would be in jeopardy.”

She looked Seraphina dead in the eyes now.

“They’d tear him apart for betrayal… Strip his command… Brand him as a traitor to the Martian code.”

Her voice faltered then; just slightly.

Lysara (barely audible): *“I won't be the death of him… not after all he’s risked for me.”*

Seraphina's eyes softened. She reached out, placing a hand gently over Lysara’s.

“Then don’t forfeit your throne… Win it… Change what it means to be Venusian… And make sure no one ever has to choose between love and duty again.”

Lysara’s eyes glistened.

A breath caught in her throat.

But for the first time since she stepped on the observation deck… a spark of resolve lit in her chest.

Chapter 9: Branded

The halls of the Vigilant Sun vibrated with distant engine hum as General Krynn moved through the upper command corridor, Vex at his side.

Word of the Neptunia transmission still echoed in his bones; ghost fleets, mapping strikes, Protocol Seraph. But the report waiting for him now struck deeper… and closer.

A Martian fugitive had been apprehended outside the Solari shipyards on Mer’Kuri. No name given. No resistance. Only one request: speak to General Vaelor Krynn.

Vex’s voice broke the silence. *“It could be a trap. An Eclipse lure. Or worse… Draetheon projection tech. We can’t assume…”*

“I’m not assuming,” **Krynn** muttered, eyes cold. *“I remember.”*

They reached the auxiliary brig. A pair of Solari guards stood at attention. **Vex** gave them a curt nod but blocked Krynn's path.

"Let me question him first."

Krynn's voice cut sharper than a vibroblade. *"Stand down."*

He keyed the door.

Inside, a lone Martian sat shackled at the wrists, red armor scorched and patched. His head was shaved close, jaw set, eyes hollow from days on the run. But the moment he looked up, recognition sparked like a match in the dark.

Krynn stepped forward.

"…Korin."

The prisoner straightened, disbelief softening the rigidity of his posture. *"Sir."*

Lieutenant Korin Thale. Once Krynn's most reliable field commander during the Siege of Cindar Vale. Tactical prodigy. Loyal to a fault. Until he disappeared after the Martian Purity Decrees were passed.

"You shouldn't be here," **Krynn** said quietly.

Korin's voice cracked. *"Didn't have a choice. They branded me deviant. Because I… because I don't hide who I am."*

He glanced toward the floor. *"Because I cared for someone they didn't approve of."*

Krynn exhaled slowly.

Korin met his eyes again. *"They're coming for you too."*

Vex shifted beside the door; posture stiffening.

Korin continued, urgency rising. "*Word spread through the lower colonies. You've… changed. The Council suspects. They've been watching your missions. Your movements. Your…"* he hesitated,

"...associations."

A beat passed between them.

Heavy.

Raw.

Krynn broke it first, stepping closer. *"How long?"*

“Long enough to know they’ve prepared an official decree. Your ‘deviance’ will be announced publicly. They’ll arrest you. Strip your command.”

Vex’s optics pulsed with a low flicker. *“How did you get here?”*

Korin: *“Stowed aboard a freight carrier bound for the inner system. I broke contact with my handlers three moons ago. I had to get to you before the order reached Mer’Kuri. They want to make an example out of you. Martian Command is coming.”*

Krynn stared at him; this man who had saved his life more than once, now hunted for the same silent truth they both carried.

Vex’s voice was low, unreadable. *“You said they’re en route?”*

Korin nodded. *“I don’t know the timetable. Could be hours. Could be less.”*

Krynn turned to Vex. *“Double security at the shipyard gates. Pull Solari command from the inner ring and reposition them to perimeter duty. Quietly. No alarms. No broadcasts.”*

“And the prisoner?” **Vex** asked.

Krynn looked back at Korin.

“He’s not a prisoner.”

The council doors hissed closed behind them, but the tension lingered like static in the air. Princess Lysara walked briskly, her long stride mirroring the chaos in her mind.

Seraphina kept pace beside her, silent but pensive; until the imposing figure of General Krynn rounded the corner ahead.

He was moving fast, eyes distant, his posture unusually rigid.

“Krynn,” **Lysara** called out, halting in her tracks.

He froze at her voice, eyes flicking up to meet hers.

For the briefest moment, she saw it; something flickered behind them. Worry. Guilt.

She stepped forward. *“What is it? What happened?”*

“Nothing you need to worry about,” **he** said, almost too quickly.

Lysara narrowed her eyes. *“Vaelor. Don't insult me. What did Korin say to you?”*

Krynn glanced toward Seraphina, who raised a brow but said nothing. After a long beat, he sighed and leaned in, dropping his voice.

"Korin pulled me aside. Mars is coming for me," he said bluntly. *"The Council of Blades suspects everything. My loyalty. My movements. And if they find out about us… they'll brand me a traitor and strip me of my command."*

Seraphina let out a slow breath and folded her arms.

"Well. That makes three of us with a problem."

Lysara blinked. *"Three?"*

Seraphina glanced at her with a knowing smirk. *"I've known about you two for a while now. I'm not blind."*

Lysara flushed slightly, but the weight of what Krynn said pressed harder. *"They're targeting you... because of me."*

Krynn shook his head. *"They're targeting me because I'm not playing their game anymore. But yes… if they find out about us, it'll only make it worse."*

Lysara exhaled, pacing a step away before turning back, her voice barely above a whisper. *"I was just telling Seraphina… I don't know what to do."*

"About Virael's Blaze." Seraphina gently added.

Lysara nodded. *"Thirty of us. One crown. One survivor. If Venus finds out I've broken protocol… fallen for a male, and a Martian no less… I'm disqualified. Disgraced. Eliminated."*

Krynn stepped closer.

"Then don't say anything. Let me take the fall."

Lysara looked up sharply. *"No. I won't let you be destroyed for something we share. We both knew the risks."*

Seraphina stepped between them. *"This isn't coincidence. We were just talking about it. About whether she should come clean to Venus. And now you tell us Mars is sniffing the truth on their end? What are the odds?"*

Lysara's face was pale, but determined. *"It's forcing my hand. Either I fight in Virael's Blaze and possibly not survive... or I speak the truth and give up my birthright… give up Venus."*

“You don’t have to decide now,” **Krynn** said. *“But whatever you choose…”*

“I choose us,” **she** whispered. *“But I need time to figure out how.”*

Seraphina nodded solemnly. *“And I’ll help you. Both of you. But first, we have a bigger problem…*

A heavy step echoed down the corridor. They turned as **Vex** approached, his voice calm, mechanical, but laced with weight.

“Draetheon.”

All three turned toward him, startled.

“What?” **Lysara** asked.

Vex stopped beside them. *“Ever since General Krynn spoke with Korin, I’ve been recalculating the timelines. Cross-referencing movements. Statements. Intent.”*

His glowing eyes locked on Lysara and Krynn. *“I believe Draetheon may be using your forbidden relationship to neutralize you both… without ever firing a shot.”*

Seraphina’s brow furrowed. *“What do you mean?”*

“You two were instrumental in turning the tide during their first assault,” **Vex** continued. *“Their failure forced a retreat. They lost strategic ground, ships, and morale. You embarrassed them.*

Now, I believe they’re manipulating Mars and Venus to disqualify you… remove you from the war entirely.”

Krynn’s jaw clenched. *“They’re removing key players…”*

Lysara stared ahead, then let out a bitter laugh*. “Ain’t that some **#@$%**. They think of everything!”*

The four stood in silence for a moment, the weight of the realization pressing down like a storm front. Their enemies weren’t just attacking from the skies. They were burrowing through the cracks in trust, culture, and law; using the truth as a weapon.

Seraphina broke the silence, her voice sharp with resolve.

“Then we’d better make damn sure we’re still standing when their next move hits.”

Vex tilted his head slightly.

“Oh… One more thing… The Martian frigate Ravager's Claw just appeared on our scans. Estimated time of arrival: under one hour.”

A beat of silence.

Krynn turned slowly to face him.

*“Vex… Next time, you might want to **lead** with that news.”*

Shadow Archives

Dim lighting bathed the chamber in an otherworldly glow.

Kael and Typhon moved with measured precision; their footsteps muffled on the ancient stone floors. They weren’t just exploring; they were hunting.

Kael crouched near a console, carefully scanning war files while keeping one eye on the entrance. *“This place gives me the creeps. Like a tomb full of thinking ghosts.”*

Typhon moved along a wall of data obelisks; her fingers tracing glyphs carved in forgotten dialects. *“It’s more than that. This is where Draetheon hid truths they didn’t want even their own to find.”*

Kael smirked. *“Well, lucky for them, we’re here to help liberate some of that truth.”*

Typhon paused at a sealed interface, its lock glowing faintly. She pressed her palm against it; nothing. Frowning, she reached deeper into her coat and pulled a tiny black chip, jacking it into a hidden port.

Kael leaned closer. *“You sure we should be poking this hard?”*

“We need proof,” **Typhon** whispered.

“Something to warn Mer’Kuri. Something real. Not rumors or ghost stories.”

The interface hummed. A series of encrypted files opened.

“Got it,” she said, voice low but sharp.

“These are records of the armada’s deployment patterns… ship names… commanders…”

Kael whistled. *“And that… What’s that?”*

He pointed to a flashing node marked in deep crimson.

Typhon’s face hardened. *“Ra’s Eclipse. Their flagship.”*

Just then, the terminal flared red. Symbols began to flicker, shifting violently.

PING. PING… PING-PING-PING.

Kael tensed. *“What the hell’s happening?”*

Typhon’s eyes widened. *“No—no, no, no… I used my clearance code. It should’ve been buried, off-grid…”*

From behind them, **Seruun** rushed in, eyes blazing with horror. *“You… You used your own credentials?!”*

Alarms *shrieked*. Lights turned blood-red. Overhead, Draethean sigils pulsed like warnings from the dead.

Seruun jabbed a finger at her. *“You triggered a planetary security net! You’ve been flagged… identified!*

You’re a fugitive of Draetheon!”

Kael drew his blaster. *“You wanna run that by me again?”*

Seruun shouted, *“Arrest them!”*

Doors hissed open; heavily armed guards poured in.

Typhon’s expression went cold. *“Time to go.”*

Blaster fire erupted as Kael grabbed Typhon and dove behind the war table. Red bolts sizzled overhead, chipping ancient stone.

Kael (grim): *“Well… so much for subtle.”*

He returned fire, dropping two guards with precise shots.

Typhon spun, raising her palm instinctively… *SHOOM!*

A sudden burst of frost-blue energy blasted from her hand. Three guards froze mid-charge, locked in a shimmer of ice. They collapsed like statues, their armor frosting over.

Kael blinked.

“You're getting good at that.”

Typhon stared at her palm, stunned.

“I still don't know how I’m doing it… it just happens.”

From across the room, Seruun stumbled back, eyes wide.

“Careful…”

“… She’s trained in the deadly Draetheon art of Varkesh Tal.”

Everything stilled for a beat.

Kael (sarcastic): *“That sounds lovely. Is it the kind of art that freezes people solid?”*

Typhon didn’t answer; another squad charged in. She and Kael rose together, moving with terrifying efficiency.

Typhon (low): *“We need to get to the hangar.”*

Kael: *“Then let’s paint our way out of here.”*

They moved; cutting a path through stone corridors, the chill of Typhon’s strange power trailing behind them.

Explosions echoed as Kael and Typhon burst into the hangar bay. Sirens wailed. Dozens of sleek Xirathi starfighters were docked; sleek vessels pulsing with dark energy.

Kael (grinning): *“Tell me you know how to fly one of these.”*

Typhon: *“I was raised to command them.”*

They sprinted toward the nearest craft. Typhon slammed her palm on the hull; another embedded sigil lit beneath her skin.

The canopy hissed open.

Kael: *”Convenient.”*

They vaulted in. Typhon fired up the controls, fingers moving faster than Kael could track. The fighter thrummed to life with a high-pitched growl. Dock clamps released. The hangar doors began to open.

Control Tower (Coms): *“Unauthorized launch… Lock them down!... Lock them…!”*

Too late.

The sleek black fighter *screamed* out of the hangar like a shadow slicing through starlight.

Behind them, alarms howled as four Xirathi interceptors gave chase; engines flaring red.

Kael checked rear scans.

“You stole their fastest bird, and now they’re angry.”

Typhon: *“Let them come. They won't catch us.”*

Kael (grinning): *“Remind me never to doubt you again.”*

As the stars stretched before them and weapons locked behind, the hunt was on.

Smash To Black.

Chapter 10: The Blaze Beckons

Venus shimmered in tranquil defiance of the chaos engulfing the system, her radiant skies and crystalline cities untouched by the war drums beating across neighboring worlds. Yet within the sacred chambers of the Aetherium Spire, the heartbeat of the planet faltered.

Queen Avalyne, ruler of Venus and sovereign matron of the Solar Crown, had fallen ill; stricken by an unnamed affliction that spread through her luminous veins like a shadow.

The High Healers labored in silence, but the whispers had already escaped the palace walls: she would not survive the turning of the cycle.

The High Council of Venus convened in haste, their robes a blur of silver and violet as they debated in hushed panic. The decision was unanimous.

The Virael’s Blaze must begin.

The sacred rite to determine the next heir to the Solar Crown; part trial, part revelation, had been accelerated. All eligible bloodlines would be summoned. None could refuse. Any absent candidate would be disqualified by default.

Among them: *Princess Lysara.*

Far across the void, on the dusty outskirts of the Solari shipyards of Mer’Kuri, Princess Lysara sparred beneath a sky of fire.

Her staff met Vex’s blade with a sharp clang, light flaring at the impact. She moved with grace, yet held nothing back; her strikes were precise, even aggressive, as though chasing clarity through motion.

Nearby, Krynn watched with crossed arms, offering silent critique with every shift of his expression.

From the gantries above, Seraphina observed it all, arms folded behind her back. She had remained unusually quiet during this training session; more alert than usual. It wasn't long before the reason arrived.

A Venusian transport, sleek and gold-veined, descended beyond the outer perimeter of the yard. It bore the House Avalyne seal, and with it, urgency.

Moments later, the perimeter guards ushered the delegation forward. The **lead emissary**, draped in Venusian formal garb, approached Seraphina with a bowed head.

"*My Lady Seraphina,"* she said, her voice laced with tension, *"We come with grave tidings. Queen Avalyne has fallen deathly ill. Her condition worsens by the hour. The High Council has declared the commencement of the Virael's Blaze."*

Seraphina's expression darkened. *"So soon…"*

The envoy nodded. *"All qualified descendants have been summoned to return at once to the Aetherium Spire for judgment. This includes Princess Lysara."*

Behind them, Vex paused mid-spar. **Lysara** lowered her staff slowly. *"What happens if I don't return?"* she asked, already knowing the answer.

"You forfeit your birthright," the envoy said plainly. *"And Venus chooses a new queen without you."*

The shipyards fell silent.

Suddenly, the clang of metal rang through the Solari shipyards as Lysara twisted beneath a sweeping arc of Vex's blade. Sparks danced where her staff caught the blow, the shock reverberating down her arms. She countered, launching a swift strike aimed for his side, but the Jovian combat-droid pivoted with inhuman speed, neutralizing her momentum.

"Again," **Vex** intoned, resetting his stance.

Lysara nodded, sweat glinting at her brow. She welcomed the distraction; needed it, even. But the moment had shattered with the arrival of the Venusian delegation and the heavy truth they carried.

Now, standing beneath the shipyard canopy with the golden sky bleeding into twilight, Lysara's grip on her staff tightened. The words still echoed in her ears:

Virael's Blaze. Return now. Or forfeit your claim.

The metallic footfalls of Vex faded as he stepped back, recognizing the weight of the moment. It was then that General Krynn approached, expression hard and eyes sharper than ever.

"You won't survive it," **Krynn** said bluntly, no greeting, no ceremony.

Lysara turned, still catching her breath.

"You doubt me now, Vaelor?"

"I don't doubt your strength," he replied, voice low. *"But Venus isn't like Mars, and this isn't combat. The Blaze isn't a trial of blades… it's a crucible of politics, prophecy, and betrayal. You walk into that chamber, and you become their pawn… or their casualty."*

Seraphina approached behind him, silent and grave.

"But if I don't walk in," **Lysara** said, *"I lose the throne."*

"Maybe that's the only way you survive," **Krynn** growled. *"They'll eat you alive in there. And you know it."*

Lysara's eyes flicked to Seraphina, searching for some steadiness.

But it was **Vex** who spoke, his voice hollow but certain.

"If survival is your only metric, Princess, then you are already unfit to rule."

That landed hard.

Lysara inhaled slowly, lifting her chin.

"Venus will not choose my future. I will."

Seraphina finally broke her silence.

"Then choose wisely. Because the next time you see Venus... it may not welcome you home."

Crimson Warden

Captain Dravik Thorne stood over the central holo-table, arms braced against its edges as the Crimson Warden slipped into Mer'Kuri approach vector. The projection of the planet shimmered in the air, flanked by Martian legal symbols and an active warrant file.

"The tribunal has confirmed it," he said, voice low and cold. *"General Krynn is to be taken into custody on sight. Article VII, Section Two: Intimate Collusion with a Foreign Adversary. Treason."*

Major Vale leaned back in his chair, exhaling slowly.

"Never thought I'd see the day. Vaelor Krynn… Warhound of the Inner Belt… brought down by a Venusian siren."

"She's not just any Venusian," **Dravik** snapped. *"She's royalty. The Virael's heir. Do you know what that means?"*

Vale raised an eyebrow. *"That he's either a fool, or a liar."*

"It means," **Dravik** continued, ignoring the quip, *"that Krynn may have compromised more than his loyalty. He may have given her access… to war maps, fleet signatures, protocols."*

"Or maybe just his heart," **Vale** said, then grinned darkly. *"Which would be the graver crime on Mars."*

The room went silent.

Cold.

Dravik turned to the junior officer manning the long-range sensors.

"Notify Solari control that we're requesting a secure landing pad. Say we're here under diplomatic protocol."

"Understood, Captain."

Vale stood and adjusted the bracers on his arms.

"And when we get there?"

Dravik's eyes narrowed.

“We retrieve him. Alive if possible. The Tribunal wants a public hearing. Something to remind the younger officers what happens when you forget your blood oath.”

He looked out the viewport at the approaching crescent of Mer’Kuri. His voice dropped.

“He may still be our general… but after today, he’ll answer to Mars.”

Asteroid Cavern

The asteroid drifts like a forgotten godstone; jagged, tumbling, half-cored with scars from ancient mining. Flashes of starlight occasionally illuminate its irregular surface.

It’s a dead rock... but not empty.

A low hum builds in the void as Xirathi fighters sweep past, methodically scouring the rock with scan bursts and thermal pings. Their searchlights flash across the asteroid’s surface, probing for life signs or energy trails.

Int. Asteroid Caves – Narrow Passageways – Later

Within the honeycomb of tunnels, darkness reigns. Sharp-edged walls glint with mineral veins. The heat from Kael and Typhon’s ship has dissipated. Their footprints are long since lost in the dust and shale.

Breathing lightly, Typhon moves through a narrow corridor with a flickering glowrod. Her jaw clenched, eyes scanning every turn, every crevice. She pauses at a junction, glancing back.

Typhon (quietly, to herself): *“Kael… where did you go?”*

She had split from him earlier; each seeking cover, knowledge, or possibly a way out. Now her concern has shifted into something else.

She chooses a path.

The cavern opens wider, curving downward. Strange glyphs shimmer faintly along the walls; residual energy from something old.

Something **deliberately hidden**.

Int. Ancient Chamber – Deeper Within The Asteroid

The cavern opens before her like the hollowed heart of some dead colossus. Pillars of crystal erupt from the stone, glowing faintly with residual energy. Dust hangs in the air like mist.

Kael is there, at the center; kneeling, silent, one hand outstretched toward a hovering stone etched with radiant glyphs.

A low hum vibrates the chamber. The light of the stone is growing, shimmering as a holographic figure forms; blurred but tall, regal, draped in command. Though indistinct, the voice is unmistakable to Typhon:

FLASH!

A sudden surge of light bursts from the crystal, flooding the room as Typhon steps into view.

The hologram blinks; flickers, dies.

Gone.

The chamber is silent again, save for her sharp breath.

Typhon (stunned): *"Was that… was that my father?"*

Kael doesn't move at first. Then he rises slowly, brushing dust from his hands, keeping his eyes averted.

Typhon: *"How long have you been in contact with him?..."*

"… And why did you never tell me?"

Kael (quietly): *"We've been in contact with each other... ever since you introduced me to him."*

Her voice cracks, disbelief and anger rising.

Typhon: *"Have you decided... to take his place?..."*

"… This can't be!"

Kael finally turns to her; calm, but not cold.

Kael: ***"****Who says this can't be?... No... I haven't decided… But I no longer think he's as evil as I once thought.*

Typhon: *“Even after he just betrayed us to the Xirathi?”*

(beat)

Typhon (hurt, incredulous): *“The moment I reject my father... you accept him?... What does this mean for us?”*

Kael (turning slightly, scanning toward the cavern mouth):

“Sounds like the Xirathi have given up their search. We better get out of here.”

Typhon (stepping in front of him): *“Don’t change the subject! We need to finish this!”*

Kael (sharp, almost bitter): *“Finish this? We’re already finished.”*

(he pauses, jaw clenched, then looks her in the eye)
“*For the past three years my mom, dad, Lysara, Krynn, Vex, and Xal… we’ve been hunting a deeply planted mole within our ranks. And the first suspect on each of their lists… was you.”*

(he lets the words settle)
“Whether you like it or not… we’re in this together.”

Typhon (shaking her head, voice low and cutting): *“I take it they don’t know that the Shallit’Biru and you have become such good friends…”*

(*steps closer*)
“… Because if they did…”

“… **I** would **not** be the first on each of their lists.”

(beat)

Kael (coldly): *“That’s what I keep wondering.”*

(a tense silence falls between them)

(far off, a low rumble; perhaps the Xirathi pulling back, or something deeper shifting in the asteroid crust)

Typhon (quietly, almost to herself): *“So… who are you really fighting for?”*

Kael: (turning to leave): *“Let’s get moving.”*

Chapter 11: Blaze

Red klaxons screamed through the narrow corridors of the Dawn Breaker; their shrill chorus barely audible over the roar of fire. Flames poured like liquid through the ceiling panels, licking across consoles and melting wall panels into slag. Crew members screamed as the inferno moved with unnatural speed; alive, vengeful, and deliberate.

At its center walked the source: a man-shaped silhouette bathed in fire.

Blaze.

He didn't run. He strode. The heat parted around him like a cloak of divine authority. His armor was etched in char, glowing along ancient Eclipse runes that pulsed in time with his heartbeat. Around his neck, a thin chain shimmered; at the end, a scorched Solari insignia, twisted and broken in half.

A crewman rounded the corridor with a plasma rifle; Blaze raised one hand. The flames around him surged, then lunged forward like a serpent. The man didn't even have time to scream before his weapon melted in his hands and he crumpled in a heap of ash.

Blaze kept moving. His voice, when he spoke, was like dry wind through cracked stone.

"The fire cleanses. The fire reveals. The fire remembers... what you tried to forget."

He stopped before a sealed pressure door. Inside: the central navcore.

He raised his burning hand…

… and caught a blur of motion from his right.

A figure slammed into him shoulder-first, knocking him off balance. The heat recoiled. For the first time, the fire hissed in retreat.

Xal.

He landed between Blaze and the sealed door, steam rising from his pauldrons where the fire had kissed him. His eyes locked on the burning assassin with a cool fury.

"You've burned enough," Xal said flatly.

"Try lighting up someone who fights back."

Blaze chuckled; a dry, echoing rasp.

“Ah… the Twin who walks in shadow. I was hoping it would be you.”

The flames around Blaze surged again, coiling like living creatures.

Xal dropped into a low stance, the air around him distorting; not with heat, but pressure. His Solari gauntlets began to glow, not with fire… but with raw, tempered light. The same light that could cut through darkness; or purify it.

A beat passed.

Then the firestorm lunged.

Xal took one step back; not in retreat, but in anticipation. Something shifted in the corridor behind him.

Four Solari warriors emerged from the smoke like avenging spirits, armor scorched but blades gleaming, their cloaks snapping in the heat-warped air. Without a word, they surged forward, weapons drawn in disciplined formation, surrounding Blaze like a noose tightening.

The fire-wrapped assassin stopped.

Smirked.

“Finally,” **Blaze** murmured, voice hushed with something close to reverence. *“Real opponents.”*

The Solari struck; blades arcing in precise, radiant sweeps. One went low, another high, the remaining two flanking him in a blinding pincer. Their movements were fluid, synchronized, each hit meant to end it quickly.

But Blaze…

He moved like fire made flesh.

Effortless.

Brutal.

With a sweeping spin, he erupted outward; his flames spiraled into a shield, then became lashes.

One Solari’s blade struck true; but it melted on contact. The warrior screamed as Blaze drove a burning elbow into his gut, igniting the armor from within.

Another was caught mid-lunge; Blaze grabbed his wrist and *twisted*. There was a sickening crack, then an explosion of fire that hurled the man across the corridor like a rag doll.

The last two pressed the attack, combining Solari discipline with desperation; but it was no use.

Blaze let one get behind him; only to whip around and jam his hand against the warrior's chest plate. There was a pulse of molten heat, and the armor turned red-hot before bursting.

The man fell, crumpling into steam and screams.

The final Solari tried to flee; Blaze reached out with his hand, clenched a fist. The corridor lit up with searing light as the retreating warrior combusted mid-stride, collapsing to the floor in silence.

Then… stillness.

Only two figures remained.

Xal stared at the bodies. Not one had lasted more than five seconds.

Blaze turned, embers trailing from his cloak of flame. His voice was colder now, stripped of performance.

"They lacked conviction. Do you?"

Xal didn't answer.

He stepped forward again.

No hesitation.

No anger.

Only resolve.

"No one else dies today."

The corridor lights flickered. Blaze extended his arms.

"Then come, Solari. Let's see how long you burn."

Elsewhere

[Beyond the asteroid ring of Lysithea Prime]

The polished hull of the Venusian delegation craft shimmered like a silver crescent as it sailed through the void. Inside, the

atmosphere was tense but quiet. Princess Lysara stood near the viewing pane, arms folded, her reflection fractured by stars.

She hadn't slept.

Couldn't.

Not with the Virael's Blaze awaiting her return.

Behind her, aides murmured. Venusian attendants; ever loyal, ever silent, floated between control consoles and data displays, maintaining course for home. She should have felt relieved, safe. But something gnawed at the edges of her thoughts.

A pressure.

A warning.

Then it came.

Impact.

A violent lurch threw her forward. The stars outside skewed. Alarms screamed.

"Shields failing… Unknown ship approaching on attack vector!"

"Brace for!"

The next blast sent the entire craft into a barrel roll. Lysara slammed into a support beam as gravity destabilized. Panels burst overhead. Sparks rained down. Through the viewport, a jagged grey shape loomed larger; a massive asteroid, rotating slowly in the black.

The **pilot's** voice was barely audible through the distortion.

"We're going down!"

The stars were replaced by rock.

Then silence.

Minutes later…

Smoke drifted through the wreckage. The delegation craft lay in ruin, partially embedded in the craggy surface of the asteroid. Pieces of Venusian tech crackled with dying energy.

From the wreckage, a figure pulled herself free; dust-covered, bruised, but alive.

Lysara.

Her breath came in short bursts. Her silver gown was torn, her hair pinned awkwardly against her cheek with soot and blood. But her eyes; sharp as ever, scanned the terrain. Her crew… scattered, maybe dead. The crash hadn't been random. It was coordinated.

And then… the sound.

Boots. Metallic. Not Venusian.

She darted behind a half-buried engine core just as the enemy craft descended overhead; sleek, obsidian, unfamiliar. It hissed open. Shadows emerged. Armored figures. No insignia. Silent.

They weren't here to finish the wreck.

They were here for *her*.

Lysara pressed a hand to the cold asteroid stone and whispered to herself: *"Who sent you…?"*

Was it House Selvra, the ancient rivals of her bloodline? A preemptive strike to bar her from the Virael's Blaze?

Or had the Draetheon learned who she was; and where she was headed?

She wouldn't wait to find out.

Footsteps drew closer.

Lysara turned and ran.

The Chase…

Her lungs burned. The air was thin. The asteroid's surface offered no grace; just craters, razor-sharp ridges, and shadowed crevices that plunged into blackness.

Lysara sprinted, cloak torn and fluttering behind her, boots scraping along uneven terrain. She ducked beneath a low outcrop just as a beam of red light hissed over her shoulder, scorching the rockface.

It didn't matter who they were; mercenaries, Draetheon, or Venusian traitors, they were well-trained. Organized. They moved in a staggered formation, cutting off escape routes as they advanced.

"Target is on foot. Confirmed… female. Bio-signs match. Orders?"

A pause. A crackling voice over comms. Lysara strained to listen as she flattened herself against a cold mineral wall.

“Capture. Alive.”

She exhaled slowly.

“*So I am the prize,”* she muttered bitterly.

A glint caught her eye; metal half-buried in the rock: a shard of one of the ship’s antenna fins. Jagged, but solid. She took it without hesitation, clutching it like a blade.

Below, one of the soldiers stepped too far ahead of the others. Lysara dropped.

With surprising speed, she landed silently behind him and drove the makeshift blade into the gap beneath his helmet. He buckled with a grunt; she caught him as he fell and rolled his body into the shadows.

Now she had a weapon: his sidearm. Lightweight, Venusian tech; ironic. Although she hide the body, the body wasn’t dead. Merely unconscious. Regardless, Lysara continued, *“Forgive me,”* she whispered over the body. *“I’ll need this more than you.”*

Shouts erupted.

She was spotted again.

Lysara fled deeper into a narrow canyon that slashed through the asteroid’s surface like a scar. The wind; if it could be called that, swept fine dust into her eyes, stinging and blinding.

Then came the hum.

Above; a drone**.** Sleek. Scanning.

She leapt between boulders, barely avoiding the searchlight beam. The drone slowed, hovered… then continued past her position. But the soldiers were gaining ground.

Think, Lysara. You're not Kael. You don't win in a fight… You win by turning the board sideways.

Her eyes tracked a thin crevice in the wall to her right; barely wide enough to squeeze through. She took it, pushing herself between jagged edges that scraped her arms and shoulders. The tunnel descended. Steep. Almost vertical.

She didn’t stop.

Belowground.

The crevice opened into a narrow cavern; humid, dimly lit by natural bioluminescence along the walls. And… warm?

Strange. Asteroids didn't have geothermal cores.

Lysara glanced behind her, then deeper into the tunnel.

"This isn't natural," she whispered.

And she was right.

Because further down the corridor, hidden in the shadows, was a structure. Ancient. Forgotten. Its architecture alien, etched in glowing spirals. A vault? A tomb?

Or a trap?

Footsteps echoed above; distant now. The chase had thinned. But it wasn't over.

Not by a long shot.

Lysara took one last look at the dim light of the crevice above… then turned toward the glowing ruin.

"If you want me," she said under her breath, *"then come and get me."*

Time To Go

The Vigilant Sun had gone dark.

General Krynn stood at the edge of the hangar bay, helmet in hand, jaw clenched as the blast doors rolled open. The Martian warship, *Ravager's Claw*, was already descending into the upper atmosphere; a shadow against the crimson clouds, flanked by two interceptor wings.

"They're early," **Krynn** muttered.

Behind him, Vex secured the final clamps on the *Black Talon*. The fighter's matte-black hull shimmered beneath flickering dock lights, its jump thrusters already cycling a low hum. No lights. No ID beacons. They'd be ghosts before the Martians even touched the tarmac.

"*They bypassed standard arrival channels,"* **Vex** said. *"No coms. No customs. Straight to interdiction. They're not here to negotiate."*

Krynn's eyes didn't leave the warship above.

"No. They're here to make an example."

From the other side of the hangar, Councilor **Alaric** approached, flanked by two Solari guards. He offered no salute, only a tight nod and a quiet urgency.

“I bought you a thirty-minute delay by rerouting their transponder query through Tiamara control. That clock’s up.”

Krynn glanced over. *“You shouldn’t be seen here.”*

Alaric smirked. *“I’m not here. And this conversation never happened.”*

Krynn: *“Understood.”*

They locked eyes; two men caught between duty and truth.

“Vaelor,” **Alaric** added, voice lower. *“If I’m ever in your position… I hope I find the same kind of courage.”*

Krynn gave a slight nod, then turned and boarded the Black Talon. Vex was already in the pilot’s seat, hands hovering over the manual control panels.

“Launch vector plotted,” **Vex** said. *“Stealth trajectory through the Zephos Belt. If we time the drift window, we can break orbit clean.”*

Krynn strapped in. *“Take us out.”*

The Talon shuddered as it lifted, retracting landing gear and gliding silently across the hangar floor. As the blast-doors opened, a shriek of wind roared past them; Mer’Kuri’s sky stretching wide and furious above.

Behind them, red alert sirens flickered. The *Ravager’s Claw* was coming in hot. **Vex** throttled the Talon forward, angling into the upper thermals. *“They’ve locked the bay. Interceptors inbound.”*

Krynn: *“Then we punch through.”*

They rocketed through the lower atmosphere like a bolt of shadow, slipping under the first scan net before the Martian trackers could adjust. Turbulence rocked the hull, but the Talon held steady; fast, quiet, deadly.

Vex’s scanners flared red.

“Two ships tailing. Mark-9 velocity. Closing fast.”

“Burn the drift coil,” **Krynn** ordered.

“That’ll leave a signature…”

“We won’t be around for them to read it.”

A whine tore through the cabin as the Black Talon flared, its modified drift coil erupting in a cone of ionized fire. The stars around

them bent; warped, and then exploded into black as the ship tore free of Mer'Kuri's gravity well.

The Black Talon vanished from sight.

Elsewhere.

In the Martian command chamber aboard the Ravager's Claw, a **red-clad officer** stared at the flickering holo-screen, watching the Talon's residual signature scatter into cosmic haze.

"Target vessel… Gone, sir."

A tall figure stepped into frame; crimson cape draped across his shoulder, helm shadowing his face.

"Then widen the net," the High Inquisitor ordered coldly. "General Vaelor Krynn will not elude us forever."

Chapter 12: Fight

The corridor shook with fury as Xal leapt forward, light crashing from his gauntlets like twin meteors. Blaze met him head-on, and the hallway exploded in a fury of clashing elements; heat against force, flame against light.

Xal drove a fist into Blaze's side. The impact rocked the corridor wall, slamming the assassin through a bulkhead panel. But Blaze caught himself mid-roll, landing in a crouch. Smoke hissed from the tear in his armor; but no blood.

Only flame.

Blaze countered with a gout of fire that spiraled into a living lance. Xal braced his arms in an X-guard, channeling radiant energy into a dome-like shield. The flame struck and wrapped around it, screaming in protest as light defied heat.

Then Xal dropped the guard and vanished.

A burst of Solari shadow-step.

He reappeared above Blaze, dropping with a war cry and bringing both fists down like hammers of judgment. Blaze raised an arm just in time. The corridor beneath them cratered. Deck plating peeled like paper.

But Blaze didn't go down. He rose, even as Xal's pressure crushed around him. His armor flared, Eclipse runes igniting like starfire.

He surged up with a roar, grabbing Xal mid-air and slamming him into the wall. The impact left a dent two feet deep.

Xal coughed, drove a knee into Blaze's chest, and rolled away, gasping. His gauntlets flickered. Not from damage; fatigue. His Solari core was straining.

Blaze wasn't winded.

"You're the best opponent I ever had," Blaze sneered, walking toward him, flames dancing from his boots. *"But you lack his fire."*

Xal stood slowly. *"Then you're not ready for the other."*

He launched forward with a streak of compressed air, catching Blaze with a feint; then delivering a full-body spin-kick to the head. Blaze staggered, helmet askew, a snarl escaping his lips.

Now Xal pressed the attack. Strike after strike. Radiant jabs. Tactical sweeps. Solari forms taught by the masters of Virelun. Each move chipped away at Blaze's rhythm.

Until Blaze flared again.

A backdraft explosion of pure heat. Xal was hurled backward, crashing through a sealed door and into the navcore chamber.

Sparks danced. Fires raged. Xal rose slowly, bleeding now; small tears in his armor, burns on his neck.

Blaze entered like a god of old.

Slow.

Measured.

"You're better than the others," he admitted.

"But still not enough."

He raised his hand for the killing blow…

… and paused.

Xal was kneeling.

His head bowed.

Not in surrender. In defiance. His hands were pressed together in the old Solari invocation. Light bloomed between them.

Blaze flinched.

Xal spoke.

Quiet.

Final.

“Let this light bear witness.”

He thrust his hands forward and the energy surged into a single beam, white-hot, ripping through the air.

Blaze roared as it struck him full in the chest. His body arced backward, armor cracking, flames sputtering. He slammed into the far wall, flames dimming.

Silence.

Then Blaze laughed.

Not mockery.

Respect.

He rose, cracked knuckles, and nodded.

“You’ll be ready next time.”

With a burst of fire, he vanished, disappearing in a vortex of flame through the broken wall.

Xal collapsed to one knee.

Alarms still wailed.

The navcore was intact.

Barely.

But **Xal** knew one thing. He wasn’t strong enough.

Not yet.

He stood, teeth gritted, blood dripping.

“I need the Solari Masters.”

He turned, dragging himself down the corridor. Toward the old light. Toward the next level.

Toward becoming more than a warrior.

A guardian of flame and shadow.

The Captured Star

Dust stung her eyes as she slid behind a jagged ridge.

Above, the whine of repulsor boots grew louder.

Closer.

Princess Lysara pressed herself flat against the asteroid's surface, heart hammering against her ribs.

She'd been running for what felt like hours.

Her delegation craft had gone down hard. A precision strike; coordinated, deliberate. Now her crew was scattered or dead, the wreckage smoldering in the crater behind her. Whoever these black-armored soldiers were, they hadn't come for war.

They'd come for her.

Another red scan beam swept the rocks above.

Lysara held her breath.

She gripped the stolen sidearm tighter. One shot left. No shield. No allies. The asteroid offered little more than shadows, and even those were shrinking.

She bolted.

Boots scraping rock. Blood streaked her ankle. Her breath came in ragged gasps as she ducked into a narrow ravine. She'd memorized the terrain; what little she'd seen. If she could reach the ridge, maybe she could signal…

A sudden thrum; and then silence.

She took another step… her legs gave out.

A translucent stasis field snapped around her. Weightless. Paralyzed. The weapon slipped from her hand and clattered to the dust.

"No…" she whispered, but her voice didn't carry. Everything inside the bubble was soundless.

From the canyon above, the figures descended.

Silent.

Masked.

Black gold armor. No emblems. No words.

She thrashed.

Futile.

They hoisted her like a relic, floating her across the crater floor toward a rising hatch in the rock face. A structure folded open beneath them; ancient stone peeled back to reveal polished steel.

Not a tomb.

A transit point.

An extraction.

The last thing she saw before the hatch closed was the remains of her ship, flickering with dying light in the distance. Her attendants. Her guards. Her freedom.

Gone.

Hours Later

Princess Lysara awoke not in a prison cell, but in a lavish, dimly lit chamber.

Soft lights glowed behind pearl-veined panels. The air was warm, scented faintly with something floral and ancient. Her bed was impossibly soft. Silken sheets. Cushioned walls. No chains. No guards. Her wounds had been cleaned and bandaged. Her torn gown replaced with a new one; royal in cut, but unfamiliar in fabric.

She sat up cautiously.

The door opened with a soft chime.

In stepped three figures; two attendants in dark robes and, between them, a woman. Tall, composed, with dark bronze skin and a crown of short, coiled hair. Her eyes gleamed like moons. She wore flowing robes that shimmered like starlight and carried no weapon.

The woman offered a calm smile.

“You are safe now, Princess Lysara. I apologize for the manner in which you were retrieved. It was… not how I intended our meeting.”

Lysara’s voice was cold, steady.

"You attacked a diplomatic vessel."

"I intercepted it," the woman corrected gently. *"Before others could."*

"And who are you?" **Lysara** asked.

The woman bowed her head slightly. *"I am **Velis'Ana**… the host of this station."*

Lysara studied her. *"Where am I?"*

"Far from where anyone will look," **Velis'Ana** said. *"But near enough to affect the course of everything."*

Before Lysara could ask more, the attendants stepped forward.

"If you would allow us," **Velis'Ana** said, *"We've prepared a proper welcome. You're not a prisoner here, Lysara. You're a guest. And a key to something far greater than you've been told."*

Lysara was too weak to fight. But her mind raced. If they weren't killing her… they wanted something.

She rose.

Later - The Throne Room

Cleaned; robed and escorted through gleaming corridors, Lysara felt like she was walking through a dream; or a trap.

Doors of violet alloy parted before her, revealing a wide, circular chamber.

High columns lined the walls, etched in spiraling light. At its center: a crystalline throne atop a rising dais. And on that throne…

Lysara stopped cold.

Her breath caught in her throat.

Sitting calmly, one leg crossed over the other, was a woman she *knew*.

Not a noble.

Not a warlord.

But a Solari.

A warrior; played at being a servant.

The aide who had brought her tea and tended her minor wounds during her brief stay at the Solari stronghold after Kael and Xal had first rescued her from the Eclipse.

Now she sat like a ruler.

Head high.

Eyes locked on Lysara's.

She smiled.

"Hello again, Princess," **she** said, voice richer, a little older, filled with command. *"I trust your accommodations were acceptable?"*

Lysara stepped forward slowly, voice shaking.

"You… You were just a servant."

"No," **she** said. *"I was watching. Waiting. Preparing. And now, you are here; on time, exactly as the stars foretold."*

Lysara's knees nearly buckled.

The attendants knelt behind her.

Lysara rose and stepped forward in disbelief. *"Tephra?"*

She rose from the throne slowly.

Her dark Solari armor glinting beneath the chamber's aurora-like lights. Her hair was longer than Lysara remembered, braided in coils. Her bearing had shifted from attendant to commander; but her eyes were the same: clear, steady, and honest.

The Solari warrior bowed her head respectfully.

“Princess Lysara. It has been some time.”

Lysara looked from her to Velis’Ana, who stood calmly beside the throne, hands clasped in a way that made her look like both a priestess and a general.

“What is this place?” **Lysara** demanded.

“Why am I here? And why you?”

Tephra’s voice was calm, but carried the weight of a truth long held back. *“Because your delegation was never going to make it to Venus.”*

Lysara blinked.

“Even if you had,” Tephra continued, *“you were never guaranteed to survive the Virael’s Blaze. The outcome was already being decided… by factions who feared what you represent.”*

The **princess** narrowed her gaze. *“And what exactly do I represent?”*

Tephra stepped down from the dais.

“Hope. Defiance. Change.”

She paused.

“Danger.”

Lysara scoffed. *“Danger to who?”*

“To everyone who profits from the old ways,” **Velis’Ana** said, stepping forward.

Tephra gestured to the throne. *“This throne is not mine, Lysara. It never was. It’s yours… if you want it.”*

Lysara hesitated.

“This place,” **Tephra** said, her voice softening, *“is called A-9. The name… is temporary. We’re working on something with more flare. But what’s more important is what it represents: a sanctuary… a home.”*

She turned, slowly circling Lysara as she spoke.

“It’s a cloaked installation in deep orbit beyond Lysithea Prime. Donated, secretly, by elements within Jupiter who believe in our cause.”

“… It houses a society… secret and growing. Thousands of your own countrywomen… Venusians who secretly desire lives beyond the throne games. Many who love Martians and other races… and many Martians who’ve sought refuge here from persecution.”

Tephra stopped and met Lysara’s gaze.

“And all their significant others. Even outcast Xirathi. Out here, in the cold of the void, we’ve built something new. Something dangerous. Something alive.”

Lysara’s breath caught as the magnitude of it all settled in.

“I’m like you,” **Tephra** admitted, her voice lowering. *“I fell in love with a Martian. Even though I am free to love whomever I please, he is not. And when I told the wrong person… Well… Here we are.”*

Lysara was silent. Her hands trembled slightly.

Tephra took a step closer. *“We are in desperate need of leadership. Of a voice that the Sol will listen to. One that can unite instead of divide. Someone strong enough to hold the weight of history… and reshape it.”*

Velis’Ana added gently, *“I nominated you. The council agreed.”*

Tephra gave a faint smile. *“At least here, Your Highness, you won’t have to kill twenty-nine of your own countrywomen for the right to wear a crown.”*

The room fell still.

And for the first time in days, Lysara didn’t feel hunted… or endangered… or alone.

She felt seen.

Her eyes drifted to the throne.

Not just a seat.

A choice.

Chapter 13: The Voice Beneath the Veil

The amber light of Mer'Kuri's setting sun spilled across the marble floors of the estate; stretching long shadows through the chamber as if time itself were holding its breath. Within the main hall of House Thalos, silence sat heavy; familiar, but uneasy.

Typhon stood near the tall windows overlooking the courtyard, her silhouette framed against the crimson petals of the flowering Ilyss vine. Her cloak, stitched in Solari silver, hung from one shoulder, the other exposed to the dimming warmth of the Ra.

Her fingers grazed the window's edge, as if anchoring herself to something tangible; because the words she was about to speak might very well tear lose everything else.

Behind her, Councilor Alaric rose from his seat near the hearth, brows slightly furrowed. Lady Seraphina remained seated, her hands folded neatly in her lap, but the subtle tension in her shoulders betrayed a mind already bracing for unwelcome truth.

"I need to speak plainly," **Typhon** said, her voice low but clear.

"For three years, I have trained beside your warriors, stood watch over your borders, and bled for Mer'Kuri's soil. I have broken bread in this house and sworn my blade to your cause. But I am not blind to what lingered beneath it all."

Alaric exchanged a quick glance with Seraphina but said nothing.

Typhon turned slowly to face them. *"I know I was suspected. That somewhere in your circles, someone whispered: She came from the wrong direction. She speaks too carefully. Too much of her past is missing."*

"Typhon," **Seraphina** interjected gently, *"You were welcomed here."*

"You did," **she** agreed.

“And for that, I am grateful beyond words.”

She stepped forward, placing one hand lightly on the edge of the long pitch-black table between them.

“But welcome and suspicion are not strangers. Not in times like these. You’re leaders. You’re survivors. You’ve seen what betrayal can do. I would’ve been more afraid if you hadn’t questioned my loyalty.”

Alaric finally spoke. *“Then why bring this up now?”*

“Because I want you to understand why I’m saying what I’m about to say,” **she** replied.

Her voice softened. *“I didn’t stay here just to serve your cause. I stayed because I love this place. Your people. Your son.”*

Seraphina’s lips parted, but the words didn’t come.

Typhon lowered her gaze, steadying herself.

“Kael gave me hope when I had none. He sees the good in everyone… even in me, when I didn’t deserve it. And maybe that’s why I’m the one who has to say this. Because if you trust me… if you love him… you need to know.”

She stepped out from the shadows of the windowlight, now standing clearly in front of them, bare emotion flickering beneath her composed mask.

“Kael has been communing with the Shallit’Biru.”

Seraphina stiffened. Alaric’s brow darkened.

“Privately.”

“Repeatedly.”

Typhon went on. *“He says they speak to him not with words, but with images… feelings. He believes they’re not the threat we’ve always assumed they were. That there’s something deeper… a truth no one has told us.”*

Alaric’s hands clenched at his sides, the way they did when war strategies teetered toward madness.

“I’m not here to accuse him,” **Typhon** added quickly. “*I’m not here to cast him as traitor or pawn. But if you once felt it necessary to doubt me, then I ask you—shouldn’t you now consider him?”*

“Kael is our son,” **Seraphina** said, rising from her chair, voice calm but trembling beneath the surface. *“He has always been guided by his heart. Sometimes… too much so.”*

“I know,” **Typhon** whispered. *“That’s what worries me. Because his heart… it may have opened to something that none of us can truly understand.”*

Silence fell again. The fire crackled softly, casting flickers of shadow across Seraphina’s face as she looked toward her husband.

Alaric’s eyes remained locked on Typhon; an unreadable storm of fear, anger, and something else: a father’s disbelief, wrapped in the weight of duty.

“And if what you say is true,” **Alaric** said, voice low and rough, *“what do you suggest we do?”*

“Speak to him,” **Typhon** replied. *“Ask him to his face. Look into his eyes. I did. And what I saw there…”*

She paused, her voice faltering for the first time.

“…was someone I love with all my being. But someone who’s already begun to drift away.”

A sudden voice broke the silence like a whisper through glass.

Kael: *“Hello, everyone.”*

They turned as one.

Kael stood in the archway of the chamber, bathed in the fading amber light that poured through the corridor behind him.

His presence was quiet; unannounced, unhurried, but it struck the room like thunder.

His expression was calm.

Too calm.

Seraphina rose fully now, hand lightly on her chest.

Seraphina: *“Kael... When did you arrive?... Why weren’t you announced?”*

Her voice trembled; not from fear, but from something deeper; motherly instinct clawing at the edges of dread.

Alaric hadn’t moved; eyes fixed on his son as if trying to determine whether the figure before him was flesh or phantom.

A slow breath escaped him.

Alaric: *“You weren’t seen at the gates. No guards reported…”*

Kael: *“I only just arrived.”*

His voice was warm. Familiar. But laced with something else; a distance. Not cold… just untouchable.

Alaric: *“How… did you just arrive? None of the staff knows you’re here.”*

Kael took a step forward, his boots silent against the polished stone.

Kael: *“It’s a little trick I’ve learned.”*

A pause.

The room was thick with silence again.

Typhon’s throat tightened. Her eyes searched his face, her heart begging for the boy she loved; the man she trusted, but the shadows beneath his gaze said otherwise.

Seraphina: *“From the Solari?”*

Kael didn’t answer. He looked to Typhon.

Typhon: [Barely a whisper] *“No… not from them.”*

Her voice cracked as she turned toward Alaric and Seraphina.

Typhon: *“From my father… The Shallit’Biru.”*

A hush swept through the chamber, deeper than before; an emotional stillness that settled over them like dust after a collapse.

Kael’s eyes, filled with something both ancient and sorrowful, met Typhon’s. And for the first time since he’d entered… he seemed vulnerable. Not out of fear, but out of resignation.

Kael: *“I never meant to deceive you. Any of you.”*

Alaric: *“Then help us understand. Because right now… I don’t recognize the man standing before me.”*

Kael looked away, toward the fire.

Kael: *“Maybe that’s because I’m only just beginning to recognize him myself.”*

The Flame That Would Not Burn

The sun hung low above the Solari stronghold, their golden light reflecting off the darkened spires that pierced the sky like blades forged in heaven. At the compound's entrance, Solari banners rippled in the thermal winds, bearing the twin-glyph sigil of light and will.

Xal stepped through the arched gate, his cloak worn and singed at the hem. The journey had been long, and though his posture remained upright, the subtle stiffness in his gait revealed the weight he carried; not just in his muscles, but in his mind.

Waiting just beyond the entrance was **Master Tareth**, a seasoned Solari instructor whose silver hair braided down his back gave the illusion of calm serenity. But his eyes, pale gold and always watchful, betrayed a mind forever calculating.

Master Tareth: *"Xal. You return to us as a storm brews. The Ra flows strangely around you."*

Xal: *[bowing slightly] "It flows heavier than I can hold. That's why I'm here."*

Before Tareth could respond, a younger Solari acolyte rushed into the training yard, breathless and clutching a sealed data pad.

Acolyte: *"Master Tareth … Urgent news. Another Solari compound has fallen. Northern sector, near the Delos Ridge."*

Kiren: *"By whom?"*

The acolyte hesitated.

Acolyte: *"They call him… Blaze."*

The name struck Xal like a blade through fog. He took a step forward.

Xal: *"I've faced him."*

Both Tareth and the acolyte turned to him.

Xal: *"He moves like fire without flame. Every strike… measured. Every word… weighted. I tried to stop him… I couldn't."*

There was no shame in his voice, only truth.

Xal: *"For an enemy… he was noble. He didn't kill me when he could've. Said it wasn't the time. He left me alive to fight another day."*

He looked directly at Master Tareth now, his tone shifting from reflective to resolute.

Xal: *“Which is why I’m here. I need a way to defeat Blaze.”*

Tareth studied him for a long moment, then motioned toward the inner sanctum of the compound.

Tareth: “You’ve outgrown the battlefield, Xal. What you seek now lies not in strength, but in precision… *in understanding.*”

Xal: “Then teach me.”

Tareth: *“Not I. What you ask requires more than I can offer. You need the guidance of a Sage Master… One who knows how to train a Solari to wield the Ra crystal itself.”*

Xal: *“Then send me to him.”*

Tareth: [quietly, gravely] *“Not him… Her.”*

Xal blinked, as if he hadn’t heard correctly.

Xal: *“Her?... There are women Masters?”*

Tareth: [smirking faintly] *“Some of the best. The path of the Solari does not belong to men alone. Especially not at the level of the Sage Masters.”*

He turned and began walking toward the inner courtyard, where light refracted off floating prism stones in rhythmic pulses; energy harvesting in motion. Xal followed, still processing.

Xal: *“And Blaze… He’s more than a soldier, isn’t he?”*

Tareth: *“He’s an apprentice of the Shallit’Biru. That’s not a title handed out lightly. It’s a privilege reserved for the most gifted warriors… those who can survive their methods.”*

Xal: [bitterly] *“Then it makes sense. That’s why he was so determined to get his hands on me and Kael.”*

He paused, jaw clenched.

“Well… looks like he found someone else… Someone better.”

Tareth stopped walking. He turned to face Xal directly, his eyes narrowing, not in scorn; but in challenge.

Tareth: *“Not necessarily better, Xal.”*

He stepped closer.

Tareth: *“Just better trained. That’s a difference the galaxy often forgets… but one you’ll come to understand.”*

Xal looked up, something lighting behind his gaze.

Tareth: *“You have the strength. The will. What you lack… is the refinement. You’ve been forged in battle, but now it’s time to be shaped. You will soon find yourself his equal.”*

Xal: [quietly] *“And if I’m not?”*

Tareth: [softly, but unflinching] *“Then you will become something greater.”*

Master Tareth led Xal down a quiet passage that spiraled beneath the main training complex; an ancient corridor carved of luminous stone; its walls etched with faded Solari runes.

The further they descended, the more Xal could feel the pressure of energy thickening in the air. The Ra wasn’t just present here; it was alive.

At the base of the stair, a vaulted doorway stood partially open. Light spilled through it in soft waves, gold and violet intertwining like slow-moving fire.

Tareth paused at the threshold.

Master Tareth: *“She does not take apprentices lightly. Do not speak unless spoken to. Listen more than you answer.”*

Xal: [nodding] *“Who is she?”*

Tareth’s voice lowered with reverence.

Master Tareth: *“Her name is **Sage Miralyth**. One of the last who trained under the First Radiants… Those who could channel Ra without a crystal. She has walked the inner rings of Saturnii. She has stood before the Star Altar. She will see what lies beneath your strength… and if she finds it lacking, she will send you away.”*

He stepped aside.

Master Tareth: *“Enter.”*

Xal swallowed the lump rising in his throat and stepped through the doorway.

The chamber beyond was unlike anything he expected.

Soft sand covered the floor, patterned with flowing glyphs that moved as though breathing. At its center, seated atop a smooth disc of crystalized Ra, was a woman cloaked in white and silver. Her hair, long and braided in loops, shimmered like woven starlight. Her eyes were closed, but the moment Xal entered, they opened; and he felt as though the room itself leaned in to listen.

She looked no older than thirty; and yet her gaze held the weight of centuries.

Sage Miralyth: *"Xal'Zirath."*

Her voice was calm, melodic. It echoed inside his chest more than in the air around him.

Xal: [bowing instinctively] *"Sage Miralyth."*

Miralyth: [still seated] *"You seek a way to defeat the one they call Blaze."*

Xal looked up, startled. She hadn't been told; he hadn't spoken, and yet she knew.

Xal: *"Yes. He… spared me. And I need to know how to stop him next time."*

Miralyth: [tilting her head slightly] *"You wish to stop him… and yet you admire him."*

Xal: [reluctantly] *"He's noble. But dangerous."*

Miralyth stood slowly, her feet gliding across the glyph-covered floor without disturbing the sand.

Miralyth: *"Then you already know the first truth of the warrior's path: Respect is not the same as allegiance. And love… is not the same as mercy."*

She extended her hand.

Miralyth: *"Come. Let us see if your fire can burn without consuming you."*

Chapter 14: The Burning Choice

The room had gone quiet; too quiet.

Lysara stood before the crystalline throne of A-9, heart still pounding, **Tephra's** final words echoing in her ears.

“At least here, Your Highness, you won’t have to kill twenty-nine of your own countrywomen for the right to wear a crown.”

And then…

A chime.

A shift in the room’s hum.

New energy.

Velis’Ana glanced toward the archway behind the throne; eyes narrowing slightly, but not surprised.

A shadow crossed the threshold.

Two, in fact.

Boots clicked sharply against the gleaming floor as a tall, armored figure entered without ceremony, followed by a second; slighter in build, cloaked in worn Solari robes but walking like a predator.

Lysara’s breath caught. *“No…”*

“General Krynn,” **Tephra** said, with careful neutrality.

“And Vex,” **Velis’Ana** added, her tone neutral.

The **Martian general** pulled back his hood, crimson eyes flicking toward the throne, then to Lysara.

“Still standing, I see,” he said dryly. *“Wasn’t sure they’d give you a choice.”*

Vex said nothing. His stare settled on Lysara; sharp, assessing, almost protective.

Lysara stepped back slightly. *“How are you here?”*

Krynn ignored the question. *“You want truth, Princess? I’ll give you mine. The Martian authorities stormed the Solari shipyard not an hour after you were taken. They were looking for me. For Vex. For answers.”*

He glanced toward Tephra. *“We were burned the moment your ship went down.”*

“Why?” **Lysara** demanded. *“Why would the Martians care about…”*

“Because they didn’t do it,” **Vex** cut in, voice low and rough. *“Someone else did. Someone who needed you off the board.”*

Lysara's hands balled into fists. *"And now you're here to put me back on?"*

Krynn took a step forward. *"No. I'm here because you're the only one left who hasn't picked a side."*

Velis'Ana arched a brow. *"And yet you came all this way."*

Krynn ignored her. His gaze remained fixed on Lysara.

"You want to go back to Venus?" he asked. *"Fine. Go. Put on a ceremonial dress. March into the Virael's Blaze. Hope your sisters don't slit your throat before sunrise."*

Silence.

Tephra didn't interrupt. She didn't have to.

Krynn continued. *"Or… stay. Claim the throne of A-9. Rule something new. Something alive. But if you do…"* He paused. *"There's no going back. Not to Venus. Not to the old guard. You'll be the traitor queen. The one who walked away."*

Lysara turned her back on them all.

Her voice came soft, almost broken. *"So I'm either dead… or damned."*

Vex moved to her side, his voice quieter. *"Or… free."*

She looked at him. *"You think that's real?"*

He didn't answer. He didn't have to. His silence said it all:

He didn't know.

Krynn folded his arms. *"Make your choice, Lysara. Just make sure it's yours."*

Lysara looked again at the throne.

The throne of blood and tradition behind her.

And the throne of shadow and rebellion before her.

A crown either way.

But not the same kingdom.

Not the same war.

She closed her eyes.

And breathed.

Suddenly, a low tremor rumbled through the floor.

Soft at first.

Barely more than a shiver beneath her boots.

Then stronger; vibrations rippling up the crystal pillars. A hush fell across the chamber as everyone turned.

Velis'Ana's eyes narrowed. *"That's not from within."*

Another tremor; sharper now. Lights flickered.

Lysara instinctively braced herself, her royal composure cracking. *"What was that?"*

Vex moved to the nearest panel, hands dancing over a series of symbols encoded in Solari glyphs. A circular map of the sector unfolded in light above the dais.

A fleet.

Dozens of crimson signatures; advancing.

Vex's voice dropped to a growl.

"It's the Draetheon armada."

Lysara's blood turned cold.

Tephra was already moving, issuing commands through a barely visible com-line. *"Shields holding. No scans have penetrated the cloak."*

"No worries," **Vex** added, though his expression stayed grim. *"There's no indication they've detected us."*

Krynn's jaw clenched. *"No pressure, princess…"*
He gestured toward the growing formation on the display. *"But where do you think they're headed?"*

Silence.

Then **Vex**, voice clipped: *"We need to find out."*

He turned toward Velis'Ana and Tephra. *"Dispatch shadow probes; silent, passive tracking. We can't break cloak, but we need eyes beyond this station."*

Tephra nodded and strode to a console.

Lysara stared at the armada's formation; serpentine, hungry, and unmistakably intentional.

"They're not wandering," she said. *"They're converging."*

Krynn glanced sideways at her. *"On what?"*

Velis'Ana muttered under her breath, calculating. *"They're on trajectory to exit Jupiter's shadow. That puts their path…"*

She trailed off.

Vex finished it for her. *"On course for Venus."*

Lysara staggered back a step.

"No…" she whispered.

Krynn didn't blink. *"You wanted to know what mattered. That's what. The kingdom you just left might not survive the week."*

Tephra looked to Lysara now; not as a leader, but as a soldier watching her commander hesitate.

"We don't have time to debate bloodlines or thrones. Decide, Lysara."

Another tremor.

The room dimmed again, like the station itself was holding its breath.

Vex spoke low and clear. *"We're either witnesses… or we act."*

Lysara's breath came shallow. She was standing in the safest place she'd ever known; yet her home, her sisters, even her enemies, were in the path of fire.

And she…

She had the power to vanish.

Or to return.

And burn.

Lysara stared at the display as if it might offer a different answer if she looked hard enough.

"Why…" she whispered, her voice cracking. *"Why are they headed to Venus?"*

Silence.

Even Tephra; so composed, so sure, had no answer.

Krynn looked between them all, his usual confidence dulled by something heavier.

But then…

BEEP-BEEP-BEEP.

A harsh tone erupted from the console, flashing urgent crimson across the holomap.

Vex moved fast, eyes scanning the update. His brow furrowed.

"That's… not a lone fleet."

He tapped the display; new arcs formed, illuminating in deep amber.

"According to this, the armada heading to Venus is just one of three."

He expanded the map.

"The second armada's moving toward Mer'Kuri."

"And the third…" he paused, locking eyes with Krynn*, "is on approach to Mars."*

Lysara's heart sank as the meaning settled in.

Krynn exhaled sharply and folded his arms.

"So their primary target is still Mer'Kuri."

He turned toward the others, voice cold and tactical now.

"They just want to keep Mars and Venus too busy to interfere. Tie up their forces. Distract their leaders. And make sure no one comes to Mer'Kuri's aid."

Vex nodded grimly. *"Divide and overwhelm. Classic Draetheon doctrine. Hit the outposts, stretch the defense lines, then crush the center."*

Lysara backed away from the display, head spinning. Venus. Mars. Mer'Kuri.

Every place that had shaped her… now in the crosshairs.

She looked to the others; Tephra, Krynn, Vex, Velis'Ana. Outlaws. Rebels. Traitors to some. And yet, the only ones who had seen this coming.

A-9 trembled again, as though it, too, felt the urgency of what was unfolding in the void.

Tephra spoke, her voice steady despite the rising stakes.

"If we wait, we lose the initiative. If we move too soon, we expose the station."

Krynn's tone darkened.

"If we do nothing, we let the Draetheon shatter the Sol from three sides and choose who lives and who burns."

Vex looked to Lysara.

"You asked why, Princess. The better question now is: what do we do about it?"

Lysara's gaze drifted once more to the crystalline throne; cold, luminous, unyielding. Not a symbol of power, but of burden. Of direction.

Three worlds.

Three armadas.

And a war no one was ready for.

She inhaled slowly. Her shoulders straightened.

"I swore an oath to Venus," she said softly, *"but **they** never swore one to me."*

Tephra watched her; silent but hopeful.

"I was raised to protect my sisters, not slaughter them at the Blaze. I was groomed to serve a crown soaked in tradition, not truth."

She stepped forward, toward the throne.

"I won't let the Draetheon decide our future. Not while I still have a voice."

Krynn tilted his head. *"So what are you saying, Princess?"*

She turned to face them all, her voice clear, resolute.

"I accept."

The room fell still.

"I will take the crown of A-9," she said. *"I will speak for those who can't. I will lead… not in Venus's name, but in the name of every soul caught between the flames."*

Vex gave a slow nod, his usual sarcasm quieted by respect. *“Well,”* he muttered, *“Guess we’re officially following royalty now.”*

Tephra smiled; genuinely this time, and bowed her head.

Velis’Ana knelt first, then the attendants, then Krynn and Vex in their own way.

And Lysara… turned to face the throne.

She climbed the steps.

Each one heavier than the last.

And when she reached the top, she didn’t sit.

Not yet.

She placed a hand on the crystal armrest, letting the light pass through her fingers.

Her voice rang through the chamber like a promise.

“This station is no longer A-9.”

“We are Elaris Prime. The first light of what’s to come.”

The lights of the chamber pulsed in response, as if the station itself recognized its rebirth.

“Tell all the others... Elaris Prime has a queen now.”

Chapter 15: The Enemy We Raised

Kael looked away, toward the fire.

“Maybe that’s because I’m only just beginning to recognize him myself.”

The flames crackled, their light dancing across the chamber’s marble walls. Then…

A low hum.

Not from the fire.

From the air itself.

The chamber's torches flickered. Shadows twisted.

And then…

FWWOOOM

The center of the room split open, not like something torn, but unveiled; folding in on itself like layers of light collapsing inward. A golden vortex bloomed in midair, swirling with solar brilliance, and from its center…

A voice.

Low.

Commanding.

Ancient.

It spoke as if through stars.

Shallit'Biru: *"Enter, my son."*

The portal pulsed.

Silence.

Every breath in the chamber stopped. Everybody frozen. Every eye fixed on the impossible.

Kael turned slowly, his expression calm.

He took one long look at Typhon.

At Seraphina.

At Alaric.

Then he stepped forward…

… toward the sun.

At the threshold, he paused. The light shimmered around him, casting rippling gold across the floor. He turned his head, just slightly, as if he might say something more… but didn't.

Then he stepped through.

And the portal folded closed behind him…

… vanishing with a whisper of heat and light.

Silence crushed the room.

No one spoke.

Typhon took one step back, then two. Her knees gave out.

Alaric moved fast, catching her before she fell fully. Her breath came in shallow bursts, her hands trembling in his grip.

Seraphina (barely a whisper):

“Was that… the Sha… l-leet… Buh…”

Alaric (still staring at the space where the portal had vanished):

“Yes… That was him.”

Seraphina: *“But how did he…?”*

Alaric: *“…enter our home?”*

He looked down at Typhon, whose eyes fluttered open, glassy with shock but lucid.

Typhon: *“My guess is… he came with Kael.”*

The silence cracked; not with words, but with a sound far older and far more human.

Seraphina broke.

She turned away from the fire, from the vanished portal, from the echo of the Shallit’Biru’s voice…

and crumbled.

A sob tore from her throat, sharp and sudden. She covered her mouth, as if that might contain the rest. But it didn’t.

Seraphina: *“Al… Al…”*

Her voice fractured under the weight of panic.

“What does this mean…? What does this mean?”

Alaric held Typhon with one arm, but his eyes went to his wife, stricken.

Seraphina: *“Is our son now the enemy? Tell me! Is Kael… our Kael… on their side now?”*

She stumbled to the black stone table, bracing herself against it as tears streamed down her cheeks. Her voice grew higher, more frantic.

“Are we supposed to kill him now?... Alaric, answer me!... Will we send ships after him?... Aim blades at his throat?”

She pounded the table with both fists, once.

Twice.

Seraphina: *“He was just here. I saw him! He looked at me… like a stranger!... Like a stranger…”*

Her hands trembled as she turned toward Alaric again.

Seraphina: *“What if he never comes back? What if we’ve already lost him?”*

Alaric didn’t move.

Didn’t speak.

He stood stone-still, holding Typhon, but his jaw twitched, clenched against words he didn’t want to say.

Typhon stirred in his arms, voice hoarse.

Typhon: *“He did come back, Seraphina.”*

Seraphina looked at her; eyes wild with grief.

Typhon: *“He came back… to say goodbye.”*

That broke her.

Seraphina collapsed to her knees beside the throne dais, face buried in her hands.

Seraphina: *“Then we have lost him…”*

Alaric (quietly, darkly): *“No.”*

He finally spoke, but his voice was heavy. Grounded in war, not hope.

“We haven’t lost him yet. But the next time we see our son…”

He looked at Typhon, then at the empty air where the portal had closed.

“…he might not be the boy we raised.”

The Crystal Will Not Obey

The chamber felt… unstuck from time.

Gravity bent in gentle pulses, as if breathing. Threads of light curled upward from the stone, and ancient glyphs shimmered along the curved walls; each one glowing faintly in rhythm with some unseen

force. At the center, a platform of black glass floated above a still pool of energy, and around it: a slow orbit of dust and light.

Fragments of Ra; crystalline, weightless, humming in the silence.

Xal stood at the platform's edge, shoulders taut, breath uneven. His cloak was gone, stripped for ceremony. Bare arms bore the subtle scars of training past, but this was something new. This wasn't sparring or technique. This was surrender.

Across from him, cloaked in silver-white, stood **Sage Miralyth**. Still. Watchful. Radiant.

"The Ra is not a weapon."

Her voice echoed, not in volume; but in depth. It resonated in the bones, like a truth too ancient to be questioned.

"It is a reflection. If your mind wavers, it will burn you. If your will fractures, it will flee."

One of the shards drifted closer, floating just above Xal's outstretched palm; small, faceted, and glowing with internal fire. It pulsed once, as if sensing him.

Xal reached for it.

Not with fingers, but with focus.

A tug.

A draw.

The crystal flared; then snapped away, flickering like a candle caught in wind.

Gone.

Xal's breath hitched. His hands clenched at his sides.

Miralyth: *"You reach too hard. That is fear. Fear will always chase power. And power will always run."*

He closed his eyes.

Reset.

Tried again.

The shard returned; tentative, curious. But the moment he extended his mind toward it again; it shied away like a wounded animal.

Xal: *“It won’t listen.”*

Miralyth: *“It’s not meant to. You do not command it. You meet it. Speak without sound. Reach without want. Invite.”*

He opened his eyes.

“Still your thoughts. Let them settle. You do not grasp the Ra… you become its mirror.”

Time passed.

Not in minutes.

In days.

There was no sunrise here. No hunger. No sleep. Only breath. Focus. Silence.

And failure.

For three days, Xal stood before the crystal.

Each time he tried, it flinched.

Each time he reached, it vanished.

He screamed once. Loud enough to send glyphs rippling. He struck the air. Dropped to his knees. Tried again.

And again.

On the third day, something shifted.

He exhaled. Not in frustration. But in stillness.

He stopped trying to make the crystal come.

He simply *was*.

And it came.

A soft light. Barely a flicker.

The shard drifted forward; hovering above his palm, weightless, warm. Its glow pulsed. Once. Twice. In rhythm with his breath.

Xal's eyes opened.

Miralyth (quietly): *"Good. Now… we begin."*

Trial of Flame and Stillness

The chamber darkened, save for the soft, radiant hum of Ra glyphs dancing across the walls; living etchings pulsing in sync with Xal's breath. Or so it seemed, until the breath caught in his throat.

Sage Miralyth raised her hand, her voice calm as a still lake.

"You must hold serenity while surrounded by fire."

She closed her fingers in a slow motion, and suddenly…

WHHHSSSH.

A storm of razor-thin Ra splinters; hundreds, lifted into the air around Xal, orbiting him in blinding arcs. Each shard shimmered like molten glass, sharp enough to shear flesh from bone. Only a faint veil of Solari energy; his training field, stood between him and ruin.

Miralyth: *"To wield the crystal, you must be untouchable inside… even when chaos claws at your skin."*

Xal's eyes tracked the motion. Too many. Too fast. His breath sped up, and…

SLICE.

A flash of pain across his forearm. The veil held, but barely. The shard nicked the edge.

He tried to center himself. Another breath.

SLICE.

This time across his cheek. The veil hissed in protest.

He staggered, frustrated.

Xal: *"What's the point if I can't control them?!"*

He lashed out, sending a pulse of raw Ra outward; disrupting the formation. The shards scattered for a moment… then reformed around him, faster, closer.

Miralyth said nothing.

She simply watched.

Xal: *“I’m trying…”*

She remained silent.

Only when he fell to one knee, gasping, bleeding, did she speak again. And only three words:

Miralyth: *“Then stop trying.”*

Xal blinked through sweat and pain.

And stopped.

The blades still swirled.

But now, he watched them; not as enemies, but as motion.

Pattern.

Rhythm.

He breathed slower. Deeper.

One shard curved toward him; he didn’t flinch.

Another passed by his temple; he exhaled.

Soon, the blades’ path changed.

Not because he commanded them.

But because he no longer resisted them.

He stood.

Calm.

Present.

The blades slowed.

Then… stopped.

They hung around him like frozen sparks, suspended in stillness. Not tamed. Aligned.

Miralyth: *"Now,"* she said, stepping forward, her voice a low thread of approval, *"You begin to understand."*

Xal didn't answer.

He only breathed.

And this time… the Ra breathed with him.

Chapter 16: A Glimpse Of The Blaze

The command chamber of Elaris Prime thrummed with tension, its crystalline walls glowing faintly with the pulse of distant star systems. Queen Lysara stood at the center, her gaze sharp as the holomap flickered before her; a tapestry of blazing red markers spreading like wildfire across the Sol system.

General Krynn's voice broke the silence, grim and steady. *"Venusian stations along the Virael Belt have fallen. The Martian compounds report breaches at three key facilities. The Solari outposts near the asteroid fields are under relentless assault."*

Vex leaned forward, fingers tapping a rapid rhythm on the console. *"And it's not just the inner worlds. Reports just came in from the outer rings; Jupiter's moons are seeing incursions. Saturnia's mining operations compromised. Uranus and Neptunia assets are being hit with precision strikes."*

Tephra's eyes narrowed, shadowed beneath her battle-worn hood. *"All by the same hand… Blaze."*

Lysara clenched her jaw. *"He's not just a soldier. He's a force tearing through our defenses with calculated fury."*

Krynn's fist slammed lightly on the table. *"He's trying to cut us off… isolate us. Divide and conquer. We're bleeding across every front."*

Vex's voice dropped low, edged with urgency. *"If this keeps up, the Sol won't hold. We need to find him… and fast."*

Lysara's gaze hardened, steeling herself. *"Then we make him see there's nowhere to run. Blaze will learn that burning the Sol only fans the flames of rebellion."*

The holomap shifted, zooming in on the glowing cluster of attacks; a challenge issued in fiery red.

“We move,” she said. *“And we fight…for every world, every soul.”*

Tephra’s voice cut through the tense air, calm but resolute.

“With all due respect, My Queen, rushing to confront Blaze would be reckless.”

She stepped closer to the holomap, pointing at the scattered red markers.

“Look at the damage he’s done. It’s staggering.”

Her eyes darkened with concern.

“And most of it… was carried out by just one man. No backup. No battalion. No battle group. Just him.”

A hush fell over the room as her words sank in.

“We don’t know how to fight him.”

General Krynn’s jaw tightened.

“He’s more than a soldier. He’s a force of nature.”

Vex crossed his arms, a grim smile flickering.

“Like fighting a wildfire with bare hands.”

Lysara’s eyes never left the map, her voice steady.

“That means we need a new way. New tactics. We can’t meet Blaze with brute force.”

She turned to Tephra.

“What do you suggest?”

Tephra’s gaze met Lysara’s with fierce conviction.

“We study him. Understand his patterns. His methods. His weaknesses.”

“We prepare for when he chooses to strike next… and we strike first.”

She nodded toward the nearest star system flickering on the map.

“And we take back every world he’s set ablaze.”

The chamber fell silent, the weight of their burden settling in. Lysara inhaled deeply, voice low but unwavering.

Before Lysara can respond, a young messenger bursts into the chamber, breathless and urgent.

Messenger: *“Your Highness, an encrypted transmission just arrived from one of your loyalists in the Venusian Fleet Command. The Virael’s Blaze competition is broadcasting live now… they hacked a secure feed for your viewing.”*

Lysara exchanges a look with the others, then nods sharply.

“Bring it up. We watch. Everyone, focus.”

The room’s holoscreen flickers on. The scene shifts.

Setting: The Virael’s Blaze arena, a colossal circular chamber aboard a Venusian battleship, bathed in shifting amber and crimson light. The air thrums with energy and anticipation as the final 22 candidates face off in the gauntlet.

The sharp hum of energy fields crackled through the com unit. Queen Lysara sat before the holoscreen in the command chamber of Elaris Prime, eyes narrowed as the transmission flickered to life.

Voiceover (Virael Announcer, distant but clear):

“Welcome to the Virael’s Blaze. Twenty-two candidates remain; each fighting for honor, legacy… and survival.”

On the screen, combatants circled one another, their armor gleaming under the arena’s pulsating lights. Sparks flew as energy blades clashed, plasma bolts zipped between cover, and the roar of controlled explosions echoed through the chamber.

Lysara’s fingers tightened on the armrest. Her gaze sharpened on one figure; a lithe combatant moving with deadly grace, eyes burning with fierce determination.

Lysara (whispering*): “Only twenty-two made it this far… far fewer than last cycle.”*

The camera zoomed in on the challenger’s face; a mixture of grit and fear, before cutting to a scoreboard tallying the dwindling competitors.

Suddenly, a loud explosion rocked the arena as one candidate was blasted through a reinforced barrier, sliding across the floor in a shower of sparks.

Tephra (standing beside Lysara, voice low):

"The Blaze isn't just a competition… it's a crucible. They break the weak, and forge the strong."

The transmission cut briefly, then returned; showing two combatants locked in a fierce duel, energy blades sparking violently as they exchanged blows.

Vex (leaning forward, voice rough):

"Looks like this cycle's going to test every skill we've got. Someone out there is going to surprise us all."

Lysara nodded, voice firm.

"Let them see what we're made of. But stay ready; the real fight is still ahead."

The transmission ended, the room settling into tense silence.

Transition: The scene shifts. No longer watching on a screen, the characters are now inside the arena itself, the hum of energy and the glare of shifting light surrounding them.

The camera pans through the colossal chamber. Combatants sprint across the glowing floor, dodging razor-thin energy blades, leaping through walls of plasma, each movement a deadly dance.

The roar of the crowd was muffled beneath the pulse of combat; a thundering heartbeat that matched the rising adrenaline in every fighter's veins. At this point, twenty candidates remained; each a master of their own deadly style, and all focused on surviving the merciless crucible of the Blaze.

Across the arena, a lithe woman darted forward, her movements a blur. Energy daggers hummed in her hands; twin shards of crackling plasma that flickered like fireflies. She vaulted over a wall of solid light just as it snapped into place, landing with the grace of a panther. Her eyes locked on a towering opponent, whose heavy armor absorbed a rain of bolts from another combatant.

With a swift, fluid motion, she slid beneath the armored warrior's sweeping strike, driving her blades into a weak joint beneath the breastplate. Sparks exploded, but her strike was precise; not to kill, but to disable.

Nearby, a grizzled veteran wielded a massive energy hammer.

Each blow shook the floor, sending ripples through the crystalline surface and shattering nearby barriers. His bellow echoed through the chamber, a war cry as he pressed forward, forcing younger fighters back.

One candidate, small and wiry, avoided the hammer's sweep with effortless agility. She countered with a whip-like plasma lash, wrapping it around the hammer's shaft and yanking hard. The veteran stumbled, caught off balance; and the agile fighter sprang up, delivering a swift kick that sent the hammer crashing into the floor, shattering the glowing panels beneath.

High above, a pair of combatants clashed mid-air, leaping from platform to platform; their movements weaving a deadly dance. Their weapons sang; beams of pure Venusian cosma lancing out and meeting in a brilliant clash that sent sparks scattering in every direction.

The scent of ozone and heated metal filled the air. Smoke curled from scorched armor plates. The sounds of grunts, shouts, and the sharp zing of energy weapons wove a chaotic symphony.

From her vantage point on the command deck, Queen Lysara's gaze narrowed as she watched a young candidate; no more than a teenager, face down two veterans at once. Her hands glowed with raw Venusian cosma, flickering and pulsing with unstable power. The older fighters exchanged a glance, underestimating the youth's desperation.

But with a roar, the young girl unleashed a sweeping blast, knocking both opponents back. The crowd gasped; a rare moment of triumph born from raw will rather than polished skill.

Lysara's lips pressed tight. *"Impressive… but reckless."*

Tephra leaned close, voice low and calm. *"The Blaze tests not only strength and skill… but heart. That young woman might be a spark or a wildfire."*

On a new battle; two combatants locked in a deadly embrace, their energy blades locked as if fused together. Sweat and blood mixed on their brows, but neither yielded.

Vex muttered from beside Lysara, voice rough with admiration. *"That's the kind of fight that makes legends."*

Lysara exhaled slowly, her eyes never leaving the brutal ballet below. *"One will walk away. The others… will burn."*

The arena's lighting shifted again, and the next round began.

As the fierce battle unfolded on the holoscreen, the command chamber on Elaris Prime suddenly quaked beneath their feet.

The crystalline floor rippled like a disturbed pond.

Lysara's eyes snapped from the transmission to the glowing platform beneath her feet.

A low, resonant rumble vibrated through the air; growing steadily stronger.

General Krynn's hand instinctively went to the console as alarms blinked to life.

Vex's voice cut through the tension, sharp and urgent.

"That's not from the arena."

Tephra's gaze narrowed, scanning the external sensor feeds.

"The station's cloak is holding, but the tremors aren't internal."

Velis'Ana appeared at the doorway, her expression grim.

"Draetheon armada, on approach. Silent, but massive."

Lysara steadied herself, voice calm but resolute.

"Pull the feed. Full alert across all decks. Prepare Elaris Prime for battle… "

The arena feed cuts to black.

Warning glyphs flash crimson across the walls. A low tremor hums through the station; distant, like thunder held in orbit.

Lysara stands firm, gaze locked on the holomap displaying the Draetheon armada's trajectory. Dozens of crimson sigils sweep across the Void, converging.

Lysara (commanding): *"What is Elaris Prime's military complement? Can we even engage the Draetheon armada?"*

Velis'Ana steps forward, hands gliding across a glowing interface. The display fractures into tactical layers; squadrons, drone bays, shielding arrays, orbital rail platforms.

"Three strike wings. Two shadow squadrons equipped for cloak-and-intercept. Five heavy rail batteries with planetary range. Our shields are Solari-grade but optimized for stealth, not siege."

Krynn crosses his arms, eyes scanning the intel.

“Enough to sting them. Not enough to break them. If they’re serious, we’ll be overrun in hours.”

Vex (dryly)*: “We could disable a few ships. Maybe spark confusion. But a full engagement? We’d burn out before we hit their flank.”*

Tephra keeps her voice even, but her hands are clenched at her sides. *“They’re not attacking yet. Just passing. Probing. But if they detect us…”*

She doesn’t finish the thought.

Lysara turns slowly, taking it all in.

“Are we cloaked against fleet-grade sensors?”

Velis’Ana: *“Yes, but their signal sweeps are intensifying. It’s only a matter of time before they triangulate the station’s signature.”*

Krynn: *“So we wait? Hope they miss us?”*

Lysara steps toward the center of the room, her voice steady but sharp.

“No. We prepare. Bring weapons systems to standby. Ready all fighters. But hold position. We will not reveal ourselves unless provoked.”

The others exchange tense glances.

“If they come for us, we strike with everything. But if they pass… we stay hidden. There is too much at stake.”

She looks again at the holomap. Venus. Mars. Mer’Kuri. All under siege.

“There is more than one war happening. And we may be the last to choose how it ends.”

Emotional Confrontation

The chamber’s ambient glow dims, the swirling glyphs along the walls flickering like fading stars. At the center, the ring of crystal dust pulses softly, a single shard lifting from the circle and floating before Xal’s chest.

Sage Miralyth steps close, her voice steady but gentle.

“Close your eyes, Xal. Let the Ra guide you beyond the veil of memory.”

Xal inhales deeply and closes his eyes. The shard's light intensifies, filling his mind with warmth and then sharpness—a piercing flash that cuts through his defenses.

Suddenly, images flood him:

Kael, standing alone under a blood-red sky, eyes heavy with defeat. The Shallit'Biru's voice echoing through the void as Kael lowers his weapon, surrendering not just his blade, but his spirit.

Kael's whispered words, trembling yet resolute: *"I have no choice. Not yet."*

Then, another memory, one buried deeper: Xal himself, years younger, reaching out as Kael turns away. The moment stretches, fragile as glass, before shattering into silence.

Xal's chest tightens. His own voice, angry and desperate, screaming silent accusations in his mind: *"Why didn't I stop him? Why wasn't I there?"*

The shard flares violently, matching his turmoil. The chamber trembles, dust shaking loose from the walls as the glyphs sputter like dying embers. Miralyth's hand grips his shoulder, grounding him.

"The past is a storm," she says, her voice cutting through the chaos. *"But you are the eye within it. Stand firm."*

Xal grits his teeth. The visions shift again; this time, not just Kael's fall, but his own. The battles fought in anger, the allies he pushed away, the moments he let fury blind him. Each memory is a weight, a chain he has carried without realizing.

Miralyth's voice softens, but her words strike deep.

"Only by facing your shame can you wield power without becoming its servant."

A choked sound escapes Xal's throat. Tears spill down his cheeks, but his hands do not tremble. The fire within him burns not with rage, but with acceptance; with grief, yes, but also understanding.

Kael had his path. And Xal has his.

He exhales, long and slow, releasing the weight he carried for so long.

The shard's violent light softens, its radiance steady and calm as it drifts back into the floating ring. The glyphs along the walls brighten once more, their patterns shifting into harmony.

Xal opens his eyes. The world is sharper, clearer, as if a veil has lifted. His muscles are loose, his mind unburdened.

Miralyth studies him, then nods. *"You see now."*

Xal flexes his fingers, feeling something new; not just strength, but purpose. No longer running from the past, but carrying it forward, tempered.

"I'm ready," he says.

And for the first time in years, he believes it.

The First Channeling

The chamber is silent; eerily so. The floating ring of Ra fragments rotates slowly above the polished platform, casting golden reflections across the stone like liquid sunlight. The air hums with latent energy, a vibration just beneath the threshold of hearing.

Xal kneels in the center, eyes closed, breath steady. His heartbeat is slow, deliberate, in perfect sync with the pulse of the chamber. The final shard, smallest of them all, hovers before him; quivering slightly, as if sensing the shift in him.

Sage Miralyth stands at the edge of the platform, her voice a soft whisper carried on the hum of the Ra.

"You are no longer reaching."

"You are no longer resisting.

Invite it."

Xal lifts his hand, palm open. Not demanding, not grasping—simply offering.

The shard answers.

It drifts toward him; not forced, not summoned, but welcomed. For a moment, it lingers just above his skin, as if savoring the connection. Then, with a grace that feels almost sentient, it descends.

A single pulse of light.

Then, contact.

The shard fuses with his energy field, phasing through his skin without pain.

Instantly, lines of radiant light ignite across his forearm, spiraling upward like living circuitry. The glow surges across his chest and down his spine, illuminating the glyphs along the chamber walls in sympathetic response.

The ancient symbols flare to life, their meanings whispering at the edges of Xal's awareness; secrets, histories, truths he isn't yet ready to grasp, but *feels* all the same.

But Xal does not cry out.

He does not burn.

He glows.

Golden light pulses in rhythm with his heartbeat, a living extension of his will. Power sings through him, but does not overwhelm. It is not a flood, but a river; flowing *with* him, not against him. For the first time, the Ra doesn't reject him; it recognizes him.

Miralyth watches, her expression unreadable at first; until the faintest curve of a smile touches her lips.

"Now…" she murmurs, her voice barely audible over the chamber's resonant hum. *"You begin."*

Xal exhales, and the light responds; dimming slightly, settling into his skin like a second breath. He flexes his fingers, watching as the luminous veins shift with his movement. There's no strain, no struggle. Only belonging.

Then, something unexpected.

A whisper; not from Miralyth, not from the chamber, but from within. A voice, distant yet familiar.

"Xal."

His breath catches.

Kael?

But the presence fades as quickly as it came, leaving only the warmth of the Ra and the quiet certainty of Miralyth's gaze.

Xal rises to his feet, the light still thrumming beneath his skin. He meets the Sage's eyes, and for the first time, he does not see doubt reflected back at him.

Only anticipation.

The path ahead is still shrouded.

But now, he carries the light to walk it.

Chapter 17: The Shatter Beneath

Dim emergency lights flickered above the circular chamber. Holo-runes danced across the room's central table, forming glowing orbits of Tiraxis and Khepra, rotating slowly over a projection of Mer'Kuri's surface.

Tactical overlays blinked red. Data feeds scrambled, looping.

Alaric stood with arms crossed; tension coiled in every muscle. **Seraphina** hovered near, her gaze fixed on the orbit map. She spoke first, quietly:

"He's avoiding every sensor grid, every patrol pattern. It's like he knows exactly where we won't be looking."

Alaric (muttering): *"Because he does. He's Kael… He and Xal grew up running around those ancient corridors."*

A beat.

Seraphina: *"You still think he's one of us."*

Alaric: *"I think I don't know what he is anymore."*

The doors slid open with a low hiss.

Typhon strode in, flushed and disheveled from field reports, still limping faintly from her collapse the night Kael vanished. Her eyes scanned the room; then locked on the map.

“What’s happening?”

Alaric stepped forward.

“He’s here, Typhon. On Tiraxis. Appeared inside the inner tunnels. No signs of breach or entry. He just… appeared.”

Typhon’s eyes widened.

Seraphina (grim): *“And he’s doing something. Tapping into Ra conduits. We think Khepra’s next.”*

Typhon’s breath caught.

Typhon (staggering back): *“No… No, it can’t be!”*

Alaric (alarmed): *“What can’t be?”*

Typhon looked between them both; then to the moons above the hologram. Her voice trembled.

“There’s a myth… old as the Solari archives. Before the moons were fortified… before Mer’Kuri was what it is now.”

She moved to the console, spinning the map to show the moons’ mirrored sub-crustal structures; two cores, once dormant, now humming.

“The moons were said to be twins… built—not formed. Crafted by hands no one remembers. The legend said if both entered the same orbit and collapsed simultaneously…”

“… imploded inward in perfect synchrony… it would unleash enough Ra to tear open a gate between planes…”

“… Perhaps, a permanent one.”

Seraphina (whispering): *“A Ra portal?”*

Typhon: *“No. A conduit. Large enough to bring an entire armada through… Does Kael know how to do that?”*

Alaric: *“Draetheon?”*

Typhon nodded grimly.

“My father… the Shallit’Biru knows… And by now… so does Kael… If he triggers this collapse, it won’t just break the moons… it’ll turn Mer’Kuri into a gateway.”

Alaric (darkly): *“Not a world. A landing zone.”*

A chilling silence filled the room.

Seraphina (softly): *“That’s why we couldn’t track his purpose. He’s not trying to escape…”*

She looked at them both.

“He’s preparing for an invasion.”

Typhon: *“Not unless someone stops him… I’m going to try.”*

Seraphina: *“How will you even get to Tiraxis? He’s past security… past every fail-safe.”*

Alaric: *“There’s a Solari teleportation system… deep tech. Buried beneath HQ. It probably hasn’t been used in cycles.”*

He moved to the control panel, bringing up a faded access node; coordinates flickered across the screen: TIRAXIS: Sub-Cavern Entry Point.

“You’ll arrive outside Mer’Kuri’s security gate. It’s fast… but I’ll give you clearance... No escort. No surveillance. And no exit route.”

Typhon’s eyes flashed with purpose.

“Then I won’t need an exit.”

Seraphina: *“Typhon… If he’s doing what you say, if he’s already started… you might be walking into the collapse itself.”*

Typhon (stepping forward): *“Then I better hurry.”*

She grabbed a field cloak from the wall, throwing it over her shoulder, her voice a low growl of resolve.

“If there’s any part of Kael still left in there… I’ll find it. If not…”

She didn’t finish the sentence.

Alaric moved beside her, entering a final authorization into the console. (quietly): *“Good luck.”*

The wall behind them split open, revealing a narrow corridor of pulsing Ra circuitry; gold and violet streams running along the curved walls. A teleportation pad gleamed in the center.

Alaric: *“This is my personal short-range teleport. It’s the fastest way to HQ. There, you will find the long-range to the jump-pad in orbit… and from there, you’ll teleport to Tiraxis.”*

Seraphina (softly): *“Come back to us…”*

Typhon (entering the corridor): *“I’ll try.”*

Stepping onto the pad, a pulse of light built beneath her feet.

Then…

FLASH.

She was gone.

The chamber dimmed.

Alaric and Seraphina stared at the empty pad in silence, the war map of Mer’Kuri flickering behind them; Tiraxis and Khepra spinning like loaded dice on the edge of annihilation.

False Front

A shrill tone sliced through the silence.

Alaric turned sharply as the chamber lights pulsed red.

Voice over intercom (filtered, urgent):

“High Commander. Mer’Kuri Defense reports multiple fleet movements. Draetheon warships emerging from the void… vectoring in from quadrant six. Mass displacement confirms armada scale.”

Seraphina’s head snapped up.

“They’re early.”

Alaric approached the holo-table as it updated in real-time; blinking icons spilling across the void perimeter.

“Not early... Distracting.”

Seraphina: *“You think this is a decoy?”*

He studied the formation: too symmetrical, too exposed. They weren’t striking; they were *being seen*.

Alaric: *“If Kael succeeds in collapsing the moons… the real fleet won't need to fight their way in. They'll just walk through the front door.”*

He stabbed a command into the panel. A separate feed lit up: planetary defense forces mobilizing; cruisers rising from Mer’Kuri's lower orbit, Warhawks forming triangular formations above the high sky layers.

Alaric (low, clenched): *“They want us watching the stars… while the ground beneath us comes undone.”*

Seraphina: *“Then we need to split command. Send a defense force to intercept; delay them. But keep someone here to monitor the moons.”*

Alaric (already nodding): *“I’ll stay. You're going to the orbital array. Link with the outer sensor net… see if any other forces are hiding behind the decoys.”*

Seraphina hesitated.

“If Typhon fails…”

Alaric met her eyes.

(grimly): *“Then we lose Mer’Kuri.”*

A beat.

Seraphina: *“Not if we collapse the moons first.”*

Alaric looked at her sharply.

“You’re suggesting we detonate them? Beat him to it?”

Seraphina: *“Collapse them in disharmony. Interrupt the synchrony. It might stop the portal… or at least warp the coordinates.”*

He turned back to the map; staring at the twin satellites, still rotating perfectly toward one another. A cosmic trap slowly snapping shut.

Alaric (quietly): *“I’ll need permission from the Conclave.”*

Seraphina: *“No time. You’re the High Commander. Act like it.”*

Silence.

Then Alaric tapped the command interface, locking in a Level Red Directive.

Alaric: *"Authorize contingency protocol Theta-Vault: Moon Severance Option… but hold until my final word…"*

"… If Typhon fails… then we break the moons ourselves."

Suddenly, the chamber lights cut out; plunging the room into darkness. A low hum pulsed through the walls.

Then…

THWIP.

THWIP.

THWIP.

Three sharp streaks of violet energy zipped through the air, striking the perimeter guards just outside the command hall.

The doors exploded inward in a burst of cold light. Figures cloaked in shadow poured through; sleek, armored silhouettes with mirrored helms and razor-thin plasma blades humming at their sides.

Seraphina (drawing her blade, voice fierce): *"Eclipse."*

Alaric (raising his arm to shield against the glare): *"How did…?"*

A beat.

"Never mind."

Seraphina (eyes narrowing): *"The Shallit'Biru... strikes again."*

A figure stepped through the breach; taller than the rest, marked with crimson sigils glowing faintly across matte-black armor. Her helmet retracted with a hiss, revealing a face painted with pale ash lines and emotionless eyes.

Eclipse Squad Leader: *"That's right, High Commander."*

She motioned, and the others fanned out; locking onto Alaric and Seraphina with precision aim.

"You won't get the chance to make that final word."

Alaric's jaw tightened.

(quietly): *"Then this is it."*

The leader stepped closer.

Eclipse Squad Leader: *“You’re fortunate…”*

“… Our orders are not to kill you.

She glanced at the flickering holo-map behind him; still displaying Tiraxis and Khepra inching toward orbital alignment.

“Just sit tight, and all will be well.”

Seraphina (sarcastically): *“Define well.”*

Squad Leader (coolly): *“Your moons collapse. A gateway opens. Our fleet arrives. You surrender. The war ends.”*

She smiled faintly.

“Much cleaner than the alternative.”

Alaric slowly lowered his hand from the console. His eyes never left the moons.

(under his breath, to Seraphina): *“If I go down… you finish the sequence.”*

Seraphina (murmuring back): *“I was about to say the same to you.”*

Suddenly… BOOM!

The wall behind them shattered inward; Ra surging like a wild flame.

A single figure stepped through the smoke; **Master Tareth**, clad in flowing Solari robes that shimmered with energy. His staff sparked at both ends; but he held it low, unthreatening.

The Eclipse squad turned, blades raised, weapons primed. But Tareth lifted a single hand.

Master Tareth (calmly): “Wait… wait… wait… I’m not here to fight you.”

The Eclipse hesitated.

Squad Leader (narrowing her eyes): *“And why not? Do you finally see the light…? Are you here to join us?”*

A pause.

Master Tareth smiled faintly, but there was no warmth in it.

“No. I’m not here to join you…”

(beat)

“…and I’m not here to fight you.”

The Eclipse exchanged puzzled glances.

(softly, stepping aside): *“He is.”*

From the smoke behind him, a second figure emerged; taller now, his once-boyish stance sharpened into something otherworldly.

Xal.

His cloak flowed like living shadow, trimmed with faint, pulsing glyphs. A curved blade; etched with Solari sigils and Ra circuitry, hung at his back. His eyes glowed faintly with Ra light, but his face was set in stone.

Xal (to the Eclipse): *“Your shadows don’t reach here anymore.”*

Squad Leader (startled): *“You…?”*

(snarling)

“You’re just a student.”

Xal: *“Not anymore.”*

He raised one hand, fingers curling in a strange, fluid gesture; Ra flowing into his palm like coalescing flame. The lights in the chamber flickered as the energy bent toward him.

Master Tareth took a step back, arms folded, watching.

Master Tareth (to Alaric and Seraphina, quietly):

“Let him try.”

Xal’s blade ignited with a pulse of molten gold.

Squad Leader (raising her weapon): *“Eclipse… Reform! Take him down!”*

But none of them moved.

Something in Xal's presence froze them. His energy wasn’t just *powerful*; it was ancient. As though the Ra wasn’t flowing through him… it was answering *to* him.

Xal (to the room): *“You came to silence the commander. To stop the moons from being severed. But you forgot something.”*

(beat)

“I was forged on Tiraxis. Raised in its shadows. Trained beneath its surface.”

He stepped forward, blade at his side.

(quietly): *“I’m not here to fight you. I’m here to end this.”*

Chapter 18: Echoes in the Core

The teleportation pad dimmed behind her, its final pulse flickering out like a dying star.

Typhon crouched low, cloak trailing against the damp black marble floor of the Tiraxis sub-caverns. The air was thick with heat and ionized dust. Every breath tasted like fire.

Above her, ancient conduits pulsed; streams of Ra flowing through glass-like veins that shimmered in rhythmic sync with the moon’s trembling core.

Something was happening.

Something deep.

She moved fast, silent.

Every turn of the winding tunnel led her closer; to him.

Kael…

Ra-light flickered along the walls, casting shadows in strange patterns; some of them too slow, as if time itself was stalling in his presence.

Then…

A sharp hum from down the corridor.

A vibration that wasn’t natural.

Typhon pressed to the wall, peering around a corner; eyes widening.

In the vast chamber ahead, Kael stood alone.

He hovered just above the ground, suspended in the center of a triangulated platform; Ra glyphs spinning around him in slow orbit. His eyes were closed, and his body emitted pulses; each one surging

through the chamber, triggering massive conduits that fed directly into the moon's crust.

He was syncing with Tiraxis.

Attuning himself to its core.

Just as Typhon feared…

He was preparing the synchrony.

Her voice was a whisper; but it carried.

Typhon: *"Kael."*

His eyes opened slowly.

He didn't turn around.

Kael (softly): *"You shouldn't be here."*

Typhon (stepping forward): *"Then stop… And I'll leave."*

A long silence.

Kael finally turned to face her. He looked older; hardened. Not by time, but by purpose. The golden hue in his eyes was stronger now.

Too strong.

"It's too late, Typhon. Tiraxis is awake… and Khepra is next."

Typhon (pleading): *"You can stop this. Whatever they promised you… whatever the Shallit'Biru showed you… it doesn't have to end this way."*

Kael tilted his head slightly.

"They didn't show me anything. I remembered… who we are. Where we came from. What Mer'Kuri was always meant to be."

Typhon: *"A gateway?"*

(she steps closer)

"You'd turn our world into a thoroughfare for the enemy?"

Kael's expression flickered; pain, maybe. Or regret.

"Not the enemy. Not to all of us."

Typhon: *"You think this is destiny? That tearing open the fabric of space so they can march in is some kind of spiritual fulfillment?"*

Kael took a slow breath.

“You don’t understand. I tried to explain it once… no one listened. Not even you.”

(beat)

“I thought I’d have to fight my parents… Alaric... Seraphina… But not you, Typhon.”

Typhon stepped onto the edge of the platform.

“Then listen now. Please. Whatever they did to you… whoever you think you are now… I know you. And somewhere in there… you still know me.”

Kael’s hand lowered slightly from the control matrix. For a moment, the Ra-light pulsing through the glyphs dimmed.

Then…

A deep tremor rumbled through the moon.

The glyphs surged to full brightness.

A low chime echoed from the platform:

"Khepra phase alignment: 87%."

Kael’s face hardened again.

(quietly): *“I’m sorry, Typhon. I wanted you to see it… not stop it.”*

He raised his hand—and the glyphs whirled faster.

Typhon reached back; drawing her weapon, just as the chamber began to shift around them.

(steady): *“Then you’ll have to go through me.”*

Typhon fired.

A bolt of concentrated plasma tore through the air; bright, fast, direct. But Kael didn’t flinch.

With a flick of his wrist, a ripple of solar energy curved outward; snatching the blast mid-flight and dissolving it like mist in flame.

Typhon’s eyes widened.

Kael (coldly): *“I warned you.”*

Then… he fired back.

A streak of searing solar energy erupted from his palm; white-hot and blinding. It wasn't a warning shot. It was lethal.

But Typhon's instincts took over.

Her hands moved before she could think, thrusting forward; palms open, and from them burst a wall of crystallized *ice* energy, jagged and shimmering, snapping into place just in time.

BOOM.

The solar blast struck the barrier with a violent detonation, sending shards of molten frost and fire through the air.

The chamber shook.

Ra conduits sparked overhead. A pulse of raw force flung debris across the platform.

For a moment… everything was smoke.

Kael stood motionless, eyes narrowed, scanning the haze. The light from his glyphs illuminated the swirling dust in golden strands.

He squinted.

And then…

A silhouette began to form.

Typhon.

Rising slowly.

Brushing ash from her shoulder. Her cloak torn. A streak of blood at her temple. But alive.

Kael (stunned, softly): *"…That shouldn't have held."*

Typhon (wiping her brow): *"Maybe you don't know me as well as you think."*

The glyphs behind Kael pulsed, now faster; like a ticking countdown.

Chime: *"Khepra alignment: 91%."*

Kael (more forceful): *"This isn't your fight anymore, Typhon. You should've stayed behind."*

Typhon (steadily): *"I should've left you behind. When I had the chance… but I didn't. Because I believed there was something left in you worth saving."*

(beat)

“Don’t prove me wrong.”

Kael’s expression hardened.

The glow around him intensified; Ra now radiating in waves, his outline barely visible behind the veil of power.

“Then stop me.”

Typhon took a step forward; weapon raised again, ice already beginning to spiral around her fingertips.

“OK!”

The Clash

Eclipse Squad Leader (snapping):

“Engage!”

The chamber erupted.

Xal moved first.

A shockwave burst from his stance; not outward, but inward; pulling the Eclipse inward for a half-second as if gravity itself had bent around him. Their formation cracked, their footing staggered.

Then he struck.

His blade; no longer just metal, but a fused channel of Ra-light and crystal, sang as it cut through the air. Not with heat, but with resonance, like a tuning fork inside the bones of space.

He moved faster than the eye could follow; a blur of curved motion and energy arcs, weaving between attackers.

One Eclipse lunged with twin daggers; each blade laced with anti-Ra disruptors. Xal leaned backward mid-run, blade flashing upward; shattering one dagger and driving his elbow into the assassin’s chest, sending him skidding across the room.

A second Eclipse leapt from above, spinning in the air; firing a cluster of Ra-nullifier darts.

Xal caught them mid-air with a snap of his hand; and reversed their charge. The darts flipped backward and struck their wielder, dropping him with a pulse of redirected force.

Alaric and Seraphina stood motionless; jaws dropping.

Master Tareth stood proud; grinning.

Squad Leader (shouting): *"He's channeling the crystal! Focus on his core… shatter it!"*

Three more Eclipse charged in perfect sync; blades humming, movements sharp and surgical. But as they closed in, Xal's body glowed; his veins pulsing with crystal light, the lines of Ra running across his skin like living glyphs.

He breathed in, slowly.

Then… he released.

RAAA-KAAOOM!

A wave of crystalline energy burst from his chest; not destructive, but disruptive. The Eclipse assassins' weapons fizzled; Ra-drives shorting out, visors glitching.

The entire squad was thrown back; slammed into the far wall with a burst of shattering glass and steel.

Their formation… broken.

Alaric and Seraphina still watching; now from behind cover, wide-eyed.

Seraphina (under her breath): *"What… what is he?"*

Master Tareth (quietly): *"Something different… Something new."*

Xal (to the squad): *"Still think I'm just a student?"*

One of the assassins; a hulking enforcer with a curved glaive, roared and charged again, unfazed. His armor was heavier, reinforced against energy surges.

Xal didn't flinch.

He raised his hand.

The Ra around him sharpened; hardened, and coalesced into a second blade, this one forged entirely of crystal light.

Double-bladed.

Xal (calm): *"Let's end this."*

He spun forward.

His blades crossing in a blur, meeting the glaive with a strike so precise it split the haft mid-spin and sent the weapon clattering to the floor.

Xal pressed the twin blades to the assassin's neck.

He froze.

The others hesitated.

Squad Leader (coughing, rising): *"This isn't over."*

Xal (steady, glowing): *"No. But you are."*

He pressed his palm to the floor. The glyphs pulsed outward, locking the remaining Eclipse into stasis cages; Ra-crystal walls forming around them in real time.

"Since you did not come here to kill, then neither will I."

Alaric emerged from cover, lowering his pistol.

Xal: *"Mom… Dad… How've you been?"*

Alaric (to Xal): *"Remind me never to spar with you, son."*

Xal (breathing heavily): *"I'm still learning."*

Seraphina runs over and smothers Xal with hugs and kisses.

Eclipse Squad Leader (moaning from inside cage):

"Great family moment!"

Master Tareth (smiling faintly): *"I truly wish I could brag that I taught you everything you know…"*

"… Then may the galaxy tremble when you graduate."

Suddenly, the chamber doors hissed open.

Not blasted.

Not breached.

Just… opened.

A single messenger, clad in standard planetary liaison robes, entered at a brisk pace; then froze mid-step.

His eyes swept across the devastation: the smoking walls, fractured columns, sparks dancing from shattered ceiling panels, and the gaping hole in the wall where Master Tareth and Xal had made their

dramatic entrance. And near the center of it all… seven Eclipse assassins, bound in crystal stasis, flickering faintly as Ra-tech kept them immobilized.

The messenger blinked once.

Then adjusted his collar and stood straighter.

Alaric (snapping): "*Report!*"

That snapped the young man out of it. He stepped forward quickly, voice shaking but clear.

Messenger: "High Commander… It's begun! The seven outer worlds; El'drath, Mynthor, Ophira, Thal'Zaruun, Vormar, Xirath, and Zha'ara, have broken neutrality. The planets form a crescent beyond Neptune; each end converging on either side of Jupiter. They've combined their fleets and initiated coordinated assaults on Neptunia, Uranius, Saturnia, and Jupitoria."

Alaric's expression darkened as the names fell like hammer blows. (grimly): *"It's unfolding as I suspected…"*

He turned to the holomap still flickering behind them. With a command gesture, he dragged the projection outward, expanding the sector view; revealing not just the Mer'Kuri system, but the orbits beyond.

Red flares marked the new conflict zones.

*"The planets beyond **Tiamara** are under attack…"*

He tapped the blinking Mer'Kuri node; now glowing with unstable readings from Tiraxis and Khepra.

(quietly): *"…And on this end, Mer'Kuri is just the beginning."*

He looked up, voice tightening.

*"**Mars** and **Venus** are next on the Shallit'Biru's list. He's splitting the system. Pulling our forces toward the edge… so when the hammer falls on the Core Worlds, we'll be too scattered to respond."*

A tense silence fell over the room.

Xal (stepping forward): *"Then we stop him here. Before the moons fall. Before the gate opens."*

Master Tareth (to Alaric): *"Permission to lead a strike team to Khepra. If Kael is syncing both moons, the second one may still be vulnerable."*

Seraphina: *“And if it’s already aligned?”*

Alaric: *“Then we detonate them before he can open the door.”*

Messenger (nervously): *“High Commander, if I may… With the outer worlds attacking, the Council requests immediate guidance. They want to know if Mer’Kuri will stand… or fall.”*

Alaric looked around at the chaos, the wounded, the sparks, the flames… and then at the three most dangerous allies he had in the room; Seraphina, Tareth, and Xal.

He turned back to the messenger, steel in his voice.

“Tell the Council: Mer’Kuri stands…”

“… And so do we.”

Chapter 19: Thrones in Motion

The stars drifted like silent witnesses beyond the observation ring of Elaris Prime, the cloaked artificial moon moving smoothly through the void; its engines low, its signature buried beneath layers of phased Ra shielding.

Within its command deck, a holo-table projected the vast battlefield ahead.

Queen Lysara stood at its edge, arms behind her back, eyes locked on the ghostly shapes of the Draetheon armada moving in formation toward Mer’Kuri. The enemy ships appeared as dark spires against the galactic backdrop; like a floating graveyard made of shadow and spite.

Vex hovered beside her, optic sensors spinning as scans updated every second.

General Krynn loomed on the other side, helmet under one arm, jaw tight.

Vex: *“They still don’t know we’re here. Stealth matrix is holding.”*

A pause as more data filtered in.

“Mer’Kuri defense fleet is in motion. They’ve launched intercept formations. Estimated engagement in under an hour.”

Queen Lysara’s violet eyes narrowed.

“So Alaric took the bait…”

Krynn (low): *“He had no choice. He couldn’t have known it was bait.”*

More alerts flickered across the display.

Red markers flared at the edges of the system; then multiplied.

Vex: *“New reports just in. Simultaneous incursions confirmed on four fronts: Neptunia, Uranius, Saturnia, and Jupitoria. Multiple assault signatures… consistent with Draetheon deployment patterns.”*

Lysara (stunned): *“Four worlds? All Outer Alliance strongholds...”*

Krynn: *“They’re not distractions anymore.”*

He stepped forward, tapping a control on the edge of the holo-table. The map zoomed out; revealing planetary alignments stretching from the outer system all the way inward.

He pointed to the flaring indicators.

“These were never decoys. They’re coordinated invasions. And look at the path... straight toward the core.”

He tapped again. Two additional red vectors appeared; thin, direct, deliberate.

(grimly): *“Draetheon strike groups breaking from the main force. Trajectories… heading for **Mars** and **Venus**.”*

A silence fell across the command deck. Even Vex paused, for once, without a quip.

Lysara (softly): *“The inner worlds…”*

Krynn (finally admitting): *“I was wrong. This isn’t misdirection. It’s a warpath.”*

(beat)

“And Mer’Kuri is the keystone. If they take it… the rest falls like stonework.”

Vex: *“Advising immediate engagement or coordinated retreat. If they detect Elaris, we lose our window to strike anything.”*

Lysara (steeling herself): *“No… We hold position… for now.”*

(beat)

“We’re not ready to reveal ourselves… Not yet.”

The stars outside continued to drift. But closer now; far too close, Mer'Kuri loomed, and beyond it, the shape of something ancient rising in Kael's wake.

The Sable Dominion

The skies above Neptunia were no longer blue.

They shimmered violet and black, streaked with fire; burning trails of re-entry as ships fell through the upper atmosphere like spears hurled from the void.

The once-pristine towers of the Neptunian capital; Thalassar's Crown, shook with every distant explosion. Emergency sirens howled across the icy cityscape as civilians fled into underground shelters carved beneath ancient glaciers.

Above it all, a command ship of the Sable Dominion descended; its hull shaped like a dark colossal fang. Glyphs of the outer worlds pulsed along its flanks in cold white light; El'drath. Mynthor. Zha'ara.

Inside the warship's command deck, Lord Malrek of Vormar stood with hands clasped behind his back, watching the devastation through a transparent viewport.

Tactical Officer: *"Resistance is collapsing. The Neptunian fleet never regrouped after Saturnia's retreat. Forward legions have breached all three orbital shield hubs."*

Malrek (quietly): *"As expected."*

He tapped a control, bringing up a shimmering holomap of the outer solar territories. Red markers blinked across Neptunia, Uranius, Jupitoria, and Saturnia.

He touched Neptunia.

The red blink faded. It was now solid crimson.

Malrek (to his lieutenants): *"Phase one complete. Begin data-scrape of local Ra caches. Seize the high-temporal core beneath Thalassar. Burn the rest."*

Lieutenant: *"And the civilians?"*

Malrek: *"We are not here to rule Neptunia. We are here to make it irrelevant."*

The viewport shimmered as orbital strikes resumed.

Columns of fire erupted in the distant landscape. The ice shelf that held the northern defense array shattered and dropped into the sea below.

A voice crackled through Malrek's communicator:

"This is Zha'ara High Command. Vormar Legion reports success. Neptunia is silent."

Malrek turned, eyes glowing faintly beneath his helm.

"Then we move to Uranius."

As the ship banked hard to port, its engines flaring with violet Ra, the symbol of the Sable Dominion burned into the star-scape behind it; a swirling ring of seven sigils, locked together in perfect symmetry.

And Neptunia…

vanished beneath the…

Suddenly…

the stars above the Dominion warship shattered with movement.

Out of folded space, through uncharted drift corridors and cold voids unclaimed by charts or maps, a fleet emerged; massive, silver-shelled, angular and glinting with ice light.

At its center: the Neptunian flagship, Virellion Ascendant, bristling with pulse cannons and Ra-plated shields scorched from retreat… but intact.

The bridge of the Sable Dominion command vessel shuddered with proximity alarms.

Tactical Officer (staggering): *"Unknown vector! Fleet incoming! They bypassed our outer blockade!"*

Malrek whipped around.

His eyes narrowed as the Neptunian crest lit up across the forward enemy vessels; etched into hull plating and glowing blue in the darkness: the sigil of the Leviathan Star.

Tactical Officer: *"That's the… It's the civilian squadrons. Mining rigs, atmospheric lifters, exo-harvesters… they've weaponized everything!"*

Malrek (growling): *"They're not retreating…"*

The view shifted as the Neptunian fleet split into tri-formations; military cruisers up front, flanked by massive, converted cargo craft.

From the civilian vessels came waves of ion fire, jury-rigged turret arrays, and precision-cutting lasers; desperate, chaotic… but devastating.

And in the center of it all; broadcasting across all channels, came the voice of a woman, fierce and unwavering.

*"This is **Admiral Hessa Virell** of Neptunia. The Dominion struck first. We strike last..."*

"Neptunia will not fall. We are the storm beneath the ice…"

"… And we are still here."

Malrek turned away from the viewport, fuming.

"So… they chose defiance."

He looked toward his officers.

"Then let them drown in it."

The Dominion fleet rotated to meet them, weapon arrays igniting like wildfire across the void.

And then…

battle erupted.

All at once, space became thunder. Missile trails lit the atmosphere like comet-fire. Civilian freighters smashed into Dominion hulls with plasma-charged rams. Miners in reinforced exo-rigs launched boarding hooks onto dreadnoughts; and climbed.

Neptunia hadn't vanished.

It had returned.

Angry.

Burning.

United.

If Neptunia was going to fall… she was going to fall hard… on the Sable Dominion.

The battle raged on into the perpetual night of space.

The Edge of the Spiral

Emergency klaxons wailed through the Mer'Kuri Command Nexus.

Screens flashed red. Dozens of Ra-conduits pulsed irregularly. A digital storm of intercepted transmissions buzzed through the comm-net, many of them overlapping, incomplete, or simply screams.

Alaric stood at the command hub, his jaw tight, surrounded by a swarm of officers and Solari aides. Seraphina paced nearby, relaying status updates to outposts in orbit.

Xal stood quietly off to the side, still radiating residual energy from the battle with the Eclipse; his new crystalline aura barely dimmed.

Officer: *"High Commander! Khepra's mantle is destabilizing. If the synchronization completes…"*

Alaric (cutting in): *"We know what happens. Focus on preventing it."*

A nearby tech shouted: *"Outer planetary links are down! Zha'ara and Vormar just went dark!"*

Seraphina (grimly): *"The Sable Dominion is cutting communications before every strike."*

Alaric: *"They want isolation… panic... fracture."*

Xal (stepping forward): *"Then we give them unity. Tell me what to do."*

Alaric turned to him, studying him; not as a student, but as a weapon, newly forged.

"Tareth has gone to Khepra ahead of you. But he won't be able to sever the conduit without a second anchor point."

He tapped the map; showing both Tiraxis and Khepra nearing critical proximity.

"You'll have to enter the convergence field manually. Shut down the Ra core from within. That means stepping into the same space Kael's trying to breach."

Xal (quietly): *"I can handle it."*

Seraphina: *"No one can handle what's about to happen."*

A silence.

Then a new alert rang out; deep, sonorous. A system-wide priority pulse.

AI Voice: *"Solar Convergence Alignment: 97%. Estimated temporal sync in 14 minutes."*

Xal's eyes narrowed.

"Then we're out of time."

Alaric: *"You'll be teleporting to a phased layer of Khepra… off-map, pre-Ra war era. You'll enter through a dimensional rift at node Theta-9."*

Seraphina (handing him a gauntlet): *"This will let us track you, until the storm begins… After that…"*

She doesn't finish.

Xal (clasping the gauntlet): *"Tell Typhon I'm coming."*

Alaric (softly): *"If she's still alive, she'll feel it."*

He steps back.

Xal steps onto the Ra launch pad; his crystalline blade pulsing at his back, his eyes steady.

A flare of light.

A rush of silence.

And then… he was gone.

The chamber dimmed again, as if the energy that had pulsed through Xal moments ago had taken the light with it.

Seraphina stood still, her hands slowly lowering. The soft glow of the launch pad faded beneath her boots, and for a moment, all she could do was watch the empty space where he'd stood.

Her shoulders dropped.

Her breath caught.

She looked… defeated.

Alaric noticed it; stepped forward, arms crossed, voice quieter than usual.

"Dare I ask what's wrong?"

Seraphina didn't answer immediately.

Her gaze drifted to the Ra map still hovering nearby; where two crimson moons spun ever closer.

Then, softly:

“Haven’t you considered it?”

Alaric (quietly): *“Yes…”*

(a long pause)

“I was just trying not to think about it.”

He looked away, jaw clenched, eyes distant.

“Kael and Xal… brothers by bond, not blood… one carrying the weight of a prophecy, the other… the burden of betrayal.”

He turned back to her.

Alaric (grimly): *“They might be headed for a fight to the death.”*

Seraphina (softly): *“One of them may not survive this.”*

Alaric (solemn): *“Whatever happens…”*

“… neither one of them will survive this.”

A beat of silence hung between them, too heavy for words.

Then Seraphina’s shoulders trembled.

Her breath broke.

And for the first time in years… she wept.

Alaric didn’t speak.

He didn’t move.

He just stood with her…

as the world inched toward annihilation.

Chapter 20: This Trilogy Ends

The stars held their breath.

Suspended in the deep black between Tiamara and the Rim, the last great fleet of the Outer Worlds formed a wall of fire and defiance.

Vessels from Uranus, Saturn, and Jupiter held position in a triple-tiered formation.

Their hulls gleamed in the eerie violet glow spilling from the fractured edge of space.

Above them, Saturnian sky forged dreadnoughts shimmered with rings of plasma, their massive solar lances charging with a low, thrumming hum.

Below, Jovian war-cruisers drifted into locked formation, slow and deliberate, like ancient behemoths waking from slumber.

And in between, flanking both, the ships of Uranus hovered like shadows made flesh: sleek, angular, cloaked in refractive alloys that bent light and space alike.

Together, they formed the last shield between the Sable Dominion... and Tiamara.

Inside the command deck of the Uranian flagship Azure Wake, **Admiral Virel** stood silent, her pale features calm beneath the shifting glow of the tactical array. The room was still, except for the low chorus of warning tones and distant chatter from bridge officers.

“Status?” she asked.

“Saturnian lances at eighty-seven percent,” replied **Commander Hale**. *“Jovian rail fields are primed. Stealth wings from Uranus reporting full sync.”*

Virel nodded once, her voice steady. *“Hold your fire until I say. If this is where we end... let it be with purpose.”*

A pulse echoed across the void; a sickening ripple, like a scar being torn open in space. All eyes turned toward the rift forming beyond the edge of their array.

Light bent.

Matter groaned.

And then, they came.

The second Sable Dominion armada spilled from the breach like a swarm of black locusts. Massive, angular vessels edged in obsidian and bone. Their formations were chaotic; asymmetrical, unnatural, but moved with unnerving coordination.

At the center of the wave loomed a monolithic flagship, darker than the void itself, its core pulsing with violet entropy.

The Dominion hadn't come to conquer.

They had come to extinguish.

On the outer deck of the Azure Wake, the tremor of enemy warp signatures shuddered through the hull. Soldiers watched from viewing bays, hands gripping rails and prayer tokens alike.

On Jupiter's carriers, war chants began to rise.

Saturnian captains issued final telemetry locks.

And the Uranian phantoms; unseen by most, slid forward to their attack vectors like blades into shadow.

A channel opened.

The voice that came through was distorted, hollow; as though it spoke from within a deep tomb.

Dominion Warlord (cold, amplified):

"Surrender your line. Or burn with it."

The words echoed across every command bridge in the fleet.

For a moment, there was silence; not from fear, but from collective defiance, held tight in a single breath.

Admiral Virel didn't flinch.

She turned toward the forward display, raised her hand; and with steel in her voice, answered:

"Let them come."

A storm of light and metal erupted across the stars.

Saturnian lances fired first; searing arcs of condensed fusion that carved through the darkness. Jovian rail fields lit up like meteor storms, hurling slugs the size of freighters toward the enemy vanguard. Uranian stealth wings broke cloak mid-flight, diving straight into Dominion clusters, unleashing crystalline torpedoes with terrifying precision.

The Sable Dominion answered with silence; and then fury.

Deep-dark warships folded space in jagged leaps, appearing within the outer flanks of the allied line. Antimatter arcs lanced across the void, turning a Saturnian destroyer into a silent fireball.

Gravity wells collapsed around Jovian flanks.

Uranian interceptors scattered, reforming around their wounded.

The wall was holding.

But the center would not hold forever.

The Rising Flame

Far from Tiamara, in the cold silence beyond the Kuiper fold, another war had begun.

The Mer'Kuri fleet surged forward; a constellation of Solari cruisers, rebel Venari gunships, and shadow cloaked carriers from the hidden moons of the Belt. They cut through the void with graceful aggression, blades of starlight and vengeance.

At their head flew the Dauntless Dawn, its hull inscribed with solar glyphs and ancient Solari symbols pulsing like embers before a storm.

Master Tareth stood at the prow of the Dawn's command bridge; arms folded behind his back. Around him, the lights of battle shimmered through the curved glass canopy as formations adjusted, and energy signatures flared across the scanners.

"The Draetheons are forming a wedge," said **Commander Relek**, voice sharp with urgency. *"Three dreadrakes leading, fractal cruisers behind. They're not holding back."*

Tareth nodded. *"They know what we carry."*

And then… they struck.

The Draetheon vanguard came on like a black tide: warped ships of jagged crystal and liquid metal, shifting mid-flight with an almost biological fluidity. Their energy weapons distorted the vacuum itself, warping time, shredding sensors.

At the fleet's center loomed a massive vessel; part temple, part engine, part living thing, the Ra Convergence Nexus.

The Dawn led the charge.

Solari beam lances streaked ahead, punching holes through the first wave of Draetheon skirmishers. The Venari fighters dove and twisted in synchronized fury, laying down mines and shatter blasts that caught the enemy in swarms of radiant fire.

Even as Draetheon retaliatory bursts tore through the outer ranks, the Mer'Kuri fleet pressed on; tight, coordinated, relentless.

And then… the stars bent.

A ripple in the dark.

A golden flare.

Elaris Prime arrived.

The cloaked artificial moon decloaked with a low-frequency pulse that rolled across the sector like the heartbeat of a titan. Its twin crescent arms unfolded like wings, revealing pulse arrays and shield domes that shimmered with solar energy.

From its heart, a transmission blazed across the fleet:

Queen Lysara (calm, commanding): *"This is Queen Lysara of Elaris Prime. All Mer'Kuri vessels, form on me."*

The enemy faltered.

The arrival of Elaris wasn't just tactical; it was psychological.

The Draetheons had not expected another moon-sized war platform, let alone one powered by Solari cores and Venari ingenuity.

Dozens of fighters launched from its hangars. The Black Talon was among them.

Elaris's main cannon charged, gathering energy from solar threads braided between internal cores… but she did not fire yet.

Aboard The Black Talon

The Black Talon knifed through the void, its hull aglow with deflected fire and half-burnt debris.

The battle roared around it.

Allied and enemy ships interlocked in a vast, spiraling melee. Dominion cruisers swarmed like insects, moving in erratic, unnatural patterns, their weapons lashing out with arcs of black ion and siphoned

starlight. But the *Talon* was relentless; faster, smarter, forged from a thousand scars of war.

Inside the bridge, **General Krynn** leaned forward in his command chair, eyes locked on the forward display.

“Evasive Pattern Gamma. Lock our trajectory to grid delta-seven. Push through.”

Vex didn’t need to ask why. He was already adjusting thruster output, fingers dancing across the controls.

“They’re adapting faster this time,” he said. “*We’re seeing fractal shielding patterns, shifting formation algorithms. This isn’t the same fleet that hit Mer’Kuri.”*

“It’s not,” **Krynn** said flatly. *“It’s worse.”*

A Dominion destroyer dropped in ahead of them; too close. **Vex** reacted instantly, firing a triple-burst from the underbelly cannons. The blast split the destroyer in two. Wreckage spiraled past the viewport.

“Damage report?”

“Shields at sixty-two percent. Minor scarring on lower hull. Engines steady.”

Krynn stood. *“We’re not breaking off. I want to see what they’re guarding back there… That central flagship’s feeding commands to the entire swarm.”*

“Cut the head,” **Vex** said quietly, *“and see what bleeds.”*

Krynn gave a grim nod. *“Exactly.”*

A soft chime pulsed on the main console; incoming transmission. Encrypted. Local origin. Elaris Prime.

“Put her through.”

Lysara’s voice filtered through the static, calm but resolute:

(over comms): *"Krynn. The flagship. We need it intact… If we can reach its core, we might shut down their relay network. That gives us a chance to turn this tide.”*

Krynn paced. *“No guarantees. This whole armada’s behaving like a hive… but we don’t know where the queen is.”*

Queen Lysara: *“Then let’s find out together.”*

He didn't answer immediately. Outside, the flagship loomed; a twisted mass of jagged hull plating, spines like broken obsidian, engines burning with violet flame.

Vex looked up. *"Orders?"*

Krynn's gaze was hard, focused.

"We board it. Slice it open. Whatever's inside... we make sure it doesn't reach Mer'Kuri."

The Black Talon angled down and accelerated; its wings folding inward for speed as it plunged toward the Dominion flagship, engines flaring brighter than a dying star.

A moment later, Elaris fired; not a beam, but a pulse. A resonant shockwave of light that shattered the Dominion flagship and dispersed the surrounding cruisers like leaves in a storm. The Black Talon flew right through the debris.

Cheers broke out across the Mer'Kuri fleet.

Master Tareth allowed himself a breath.

"She's claiming her throne," he said quietly.

They thought the battle was over… until **this** happened.

The Fires of Sol

Location: Mer'Kuri; Solari Command Nexus

The war echoed through every console, every screen, every flickering hologram suspended in the room.

Inside the Solari Command Nexus buried beneath Mer'Kuri's surface, Alaric stood before a wall of light; projections of every known battlefield across the system, from Mercury to the outer reptilian stretch beyond Neptunia.

Ships burned like fireflies. Defense grids blinked with damage. Signal bursts erupted like storm waves, one after the next.

Behind him, Seraphina watched in silence, arms crossed, her features lit with the pulsing amber of a nearby Solari artifact. The chamber itself; ancient and half-organic, hummed softly, as though the room itself mourned what was coming.

Alaric's voice broke the silence. Low. Rough.

“The Sable Dominion and Neptune are locking horns... Urania, Saturnia, and Jupitoria are holding their own against a massive Dominion armada... Mars and Venus each battle their own Draetheon armadas... and Mer’Kuri...”

He paused.

His brow furrowed.

“And now Queen? Lysara of Elaris Prime are engaging a third Draetheon armada near the void.”

He turned to Seraphina, his eyes darker than before.

“The entire Sol is at war.”

For a long moment, **Seraphina** said nothing. Her gaze drifted across the chaos unfolding in the projection; lives blinking out like stars going dark.

Then she whispered:

“And Kael and Xal might kill each other.”

The words lingered; heavier than the war, heavier than the sky.

Outside the bunker, the ground trembled; not from battle, but from something deeper. The Solari core beneath Tiamara stirred, awakened by the clash of ancient forces across the system.

A subtle harmonic tone began to rise through the floor; a warning only those attuned could hear.

Alaric closed his eyes.

“We’ve run out of time.”

Shadow at the Core

Location: Lower Levels of Tiraxis; Solari Chamber Ruins

The air was thick with heat and silence.

Xal descended the final corridor into the ruined depths of Tiraxis; where the Solari energy pulsed erratically through shattered conduits and flickering glyphs on the walls. The floor trembled beneath his boots, an echo of power unleashed far beyond its limits.

He found Typhon lying motionless amid the debris; her armor scorched, her body still.

Xal dropped to his knees beside her, pressing two fingers to her throat. A pulse; weak, but steady.

He closed his eyes, drew in a slow breath, and placed a hand gently to her temples. A soft golden light radiated from his palm, threading a solar pulse into her neural pathways. The warmth surged outward like morning light through fog.

Typhon's eyes flew open.

She gasped, then sat up with sudden clarity.

"Xal!"

He steadied her. *"What happened here?"*

Typhon coughed, pushing herself upright against a cracked pillar. Her eyes were wild; not from panic, but from something close to disbelief.

"I tried to stop Kael from linking the two moons," she said. *"I don't know how to reverse what he did… so, I had to fight him."*

Xal's gaze sharpened. *"Kael did this to you?"*

She shook her head slowly. *"No. Actually… I was winning."*

A beat.

"Then a portal opened, and Kael ran through it."

Xal leaned closer. *"A portal? Where did it go?"*

"I don't know," **she** said. "I was about to follow him... but then…"

Her gaze hardened.

"Blaze exited the portal."

Xal froze. *"Blaze?"*

Xal went still. Not in fear; in memory.

A different corridor. Another battle. Fire and light colliding. A war between two forces not meant to coexist.

He'd barely survived.

Typhon nodded. *"Yes… We fought... For all of five seconds… He's fast... He's strong.... And..."*

Her eyes flicked behind Xal.

“...he’s still here.”

Xal turned, slowly rising.

From the far side of the fractured chamber, where fire danced in serpentine streams, a figure emerged; smooth, slow, deliberate.

Cloaked in blackened armor traced with Eclipse runes. Flames licked from his boots. And his voice cut through the air like molten glass.

Blaze.

““Are you ready to pick up where we left off?”

Xal’s gauntlets hummed, radiant light flickering to life across his arms.

He didn’t speak.

He didn’t bow.

He just stepped forward.

Ready.

Typhon struggled to her feet behind him.

“Xal, don’t… he’s…”

He raised a hand without looking back. Calm. Controlled.

Xal: *“Go, Typhon. This is going to get explosive.”*

She hesitated; then nodded.

Limped toward the emergency corridor.

Xal rolled his shoulders. Light pulsed across his Solari gauntlets; steady, honed, measured.

Blaze smirked, cracking his knuckles. *“So what now, little sun? Think your new training makes you a god?”*

Xal: *“No. It makes me ready for you.”*

Blaze roared and lunged, flames erupting from his limbs. Xal met him head-on, and the chamber exploded in light and fire.

They collided midair; a supernova of radiant fists and molten fury.

Blaze struck like a meteor, his Eclipse runes flaring with dark flame. But Xal didn’t flinch; his movements flowed like water and light,

channeling every Solari form he'd mastered during his three-year training in the time-shifted dimension.

Their first clash left a crater.

Their second cracked the ceiling.

Blaze swept a leg, igniting the floor in a ring of fire; but Xal leapt clear, twisting midair to deliver a radiant pulse-kick straight to Blaze's chest. The assassin staggered; not much, but enough.

Blaze: *"Not bad..."*

He summoned a lance of black fire; threw it. Xal caught it mid-flight, spinning the energy like a wheel, redirecting it into a spiral of light and hurling it back. Blaze deflected, but the blast sent him flying into a broken pillar.

Xal didn't let up.

He shadow-stepped in; reappeared behind Blaze, and struck three times in a blink.

Chest.

Spine.

Solar plexus.

Blaze coughed smoke, stumbling.

"You've improved," he growled. *"But I'm not done."*

He flared; a dome of fire bursting outward in a volcanic shockwave. **Xal** stepped through it.

Calm.

Eyes glowing white-gold.

"You taught me to burn brighter."

He raised his hands; and the chamber dimmed.

From his core, a sphere of radiant energy built into his palms — Solari light compressed, harmonized, pure.

Then he struck.

The beam shot forward; not chaotic like before, but *precise*. Focused. It hit Blaze full-on, cracking his armor and slamming him back against the far wall. He collapsed, flames sputtering, gasping for breath.

Silence.

Dust settled.

Xal stood tall; bruised, burned, but whole.

Blaze looked up, dazed, blood trailing from the edge of his mouth.

(hoarse): *“Do it.”*

Xal walked toward him, light still glowing in one hand. But as he reached the edge of the broken crater, he stopped.

He looked down.

And powered down the light.

“No.”

Blaze blinked. Confused. *“What?”*

Xal: *“You let me live once. Now we’re even.”*

He turned his back.

Blaze: *“Mercy won’t save you.”*

Xal lowered his glowing hand, *“It’s not mercy.”*

He glanced back over his shoulder.

“It’s a warning.”

Blaze chuckled; low, rough, almost... satisfied.

He rose to one knee; shoulders smoking.

(calmly): *“Speaking of warnings... This fight?”*

He looked up. Flames still danced in his eyes.

“It was a distraction.”

A beat.

“I suggest you get off Tiraxis before she collapses.”

Xal froze.

“What...?”

The ground beneath them groaned. The glyphs along the walls began to crack. A deep, planetary tremor rumbled from the core.

A Ra portal snapped open behind Blaze; its black and gold swirl casting eerie shadows through the room.

Then… Blaze's flames extinguished.

His armor powered down.

He reached for his helm.

And removed it.

Xal staggered back a step, eyes widening in horror.

The face beneath the mask was familiar.

Too familiar.

Xal (barely whispering): *"Kael?..."*

He dropped to his knees, trembling.

"You... You're Blaze?!"

His voice cracked.

"But... Why?"

Kael/**Blaze** looked down at his brother, calm, nonchalant.

"Here. I'll make it easy for you."

Another Ra portal opened beside Xal.

"Step through. Back to Mer'Kuri. The moons are collapsing."

Xal's breathing stuttered. His mind was shattering, but instinct prevailed. He rose slowly, staggered, and stumbled toward the portal.

Just before stepping through, he turned.

Kael was already halfway into his own portal.

Kael/**Blaze** (softly): *"Next time, my brother."*

And he vanished.

Both portals collapsed in tandem.

A heartbeat later; Tiraxis groaned. The trembling intensified. Light shattered from the walls. The entire structure buckled.

Cut to: Mer'Kuri: Solari Landing Zone

A blinding burst of light; and Xal tumbled from the portal onto solid ground. He gasped, smoke trailing from his armor. Typhon was already there, kneeling beside the arrival pad.

She turned; and her eyes widened at the sight of him.

Before she could speak, the ground shook violently.

They both looked skyward.

Cut to: Command Center: Tiamara

Inside the ancient nexus, Alaric and Seraphina watched as holograms displayed Tiraxis and Khepra.

Both moons were trembling. Energy cracked from their cores. Deep tectonic faults ripped across their surfaces.

Seraphina (whispers): *"No…"*

Alaric: *"It's too late."*

Cut to: Orbit: Mer'Kuri Fleet

The combined forces of Mer'Kuri, Solari, and Elaris Prime watched in stunned silence as the twin moons collapsed in real time.

First Khepra; shattering inward like a dying star.

Then Tiraxis; imploding in on itself, a vortex of light and debris.

The system went quiet.

Dust and fragments scattered.

Hope flickered.

Until…

A low ***thrummm*** echoed across every sensor array.

From the dead heart of the void...

The Ra portal awakened.

Final Shot:

The portal widened.

Slowly.

Purposefully.

Through it emerged the true Draetheon armada; far larger than the others. A fleet the size of a world.

Dark.

Silent.

Endless.

Ships with hulls like obsidian cathedrals. Engines of living stone and flesh. Weapons not built; grown.

The portal pulsed again.

They had arrived.

Mer’Kuri stood defenseless.

The beginning of the end.

Mer’Kuri has fallen.

The End… Of This Trilogy!

Thank you so much for reading this book three adventure.

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